

## DE/RE-CONSTRUCTING MYTH: KARNAD'S THE FIRE AND THE RAIN-TEXT AND CONTEXT

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### Abstract

In this paper, I have tried to ventilate my views on the concept of myth, its work on various aspects of life, and how in *Fire and the Rain*, Girish Karnad reworks on the actual myth taken from *Mahabharata* and adds contemporary attachments with it. On the basis of this reconstruction of mythology, Karnad provides some modernity to the text covering some important facets of psychology within the characters. The area of complexity becomes enhanced when the author uses dramatic techniques to merge some parallel myths and drags them into one single idea. Thus, the myths of Vritra- Indra, Arvasu-Paravasu, and that of the same name in the new text converge by giving birth to the characters who are constantly driven by their drives and conflicts, and the situations that are being moulded by the crisis and ultimate symbolic resolutions. Karnad 'Deconstructs' the ancient myths only with a view to reconstructing them into new wholes, formulating and re-formulating them to attain modern predictions.

In 'The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory', J.A. Cuddon defines 'Myth' as "a term of complex history and meaning". The English term has been derived from the Greek *muthos* meaning 'anything uttered by word of mouth'. He further notes that a myth is "a story which is not 'true' and which involves... supernatural beings- or at any rate supra-human beings".<sup>1</sup> Myth is always concerned with creation. It explains how something came to exist. Myth embodies feeling and concept. They are, sometimes, the primitive explanations of the natural order and cosmic concepts. A myth is often associated with legends, having its well-known reputation among all. It is the all known beliefs, superstitions and obviously some truths that create a myth. In his article, "Indian Mythology" Professor R.N. Dandekar says:

"If philosophy attempts to discover the ultimate truth, mythology must be said to represent the human effort to attain at least the penultimate truth, of which all experience is the temporal reflection...Philosophy is often described as the foundation of religion, ritual its super-structure, and mythology as its detailed decoration. In case of Hinduism...mythology is its essential constituent factor...Mythology represents some of the

distinctive features of Hinduism, tolerance broad sympathy, liberal outlook and dynamic assimilative and at the same time elevating power”.<sup>2</sup>

But during ages, the fundamental outlook becomes continuously changing. So, it is the primary duty of a writer who wants to work with myth, to make it novel and contemporary. It is a kind of ‘re-mythification’ or reworking of myth that makes it ultimately modern. And we must have to acknowledge the fact in this regard that in Karnad’s hand, this myth has got a new dimension; it becomes more contemporary than mythical.

Critics largely locate Karnad’s ‘uniqueness’ in his subtle reflections on the contemporary Indian socio-political-cultural scenario through the idiom of the past. A write up in Indian Express (1999) highlights that Karnad projects “the conflict of the modern man through symbols and tales which are almost ‘puranic’, but which have acquired meaning as Karnad re-told and re-interpreted them”.<sup>3</sup> Reflecting on Karnad’s frequent use of myth and history, Lakshmi Chandrashekhar, a member of Kannada Theatre Association, says, “Karnad has been accused of escaping into the past. But the use of mythology in most modern literature validates individual experience and universalizes it. And ...Karnad has been able to do that.”<sup>4</sup> Other critics, however, are with the view that Karnad actually belongs to the generation of English educated Indians who self-consciously alienate themselves from the ancient Indian value system that fosters Indian myths, legends and forms the baseline of Indian culture. Prof. Nila Das in her discussion aptly points out that these critics think, moreover, that Karnad’s “venture at re-reading Indian myths and history in terms of contemporary issues in dramatic forms has been done with an eye to projecting the Indian past from the Western perspectives”.<sup>5</sup>

In his ‘Preface’ to the play *The Fire and the Rain*,<sup>6</sup> Girish Karnad acknowledges and admits that he has taken the story of the play from the myth of ‘Yavakri’ (or Yavakrida) which occurs in Chapters 135-138 of the ‘Vana Parva’ (Forest Canto) of the Mahabharata. It is narrated by the ascetic Lomasha to the Pandavas as they wander across the land during their exile. The story of Yavakri and Parvasu, however, has been taken from C. Raja Gopalachari’s abridgement of Mahabharata. But there is no denying the fact that the basic story of the myth has found its new outlook in the hands of Karnad. In the ancient myth of Yavakrida, we find him as the son of Bhardwaja who lived with Raibhya and his two sons Parvasu and Arvasu. In the myth both Parvasu and Arvasu are eminent scholars like their father. But Yavakrida was very jealous regarding their success and tortured his own self and with the performances of austerities tried to acquire the knowledge of the Vedas directly from Indra. Multiple times Indra warns him to choose the right means to get knowledge but fails. And then, he himself descends to give him the lesson. Ultimately, Yavakri becomes successful to get a boon from Indra that if he study Vedas, he will become learned. Yavakri studies and ultimately becomes learned. But still, he nurtured the very jealousy within him against Arvasu and Parvasu. One day driven by his lust, he rapes Parvasu’s wife and in return Raibhya sends two persons to him- one, a beautiful woman and another, a Brahma Rakshasa. The woman steals the life-saving ‘kamandalu’ and the Brahma Rakshasa chases him and ultimately kills him. When he is running in search of an escape from the Rakshasa, a half blind man bars his way not recognizing him properly. When Bhardwaja finds the corpse of his son, he unconsciously and unwillingly curses Raibhyu that may he be killed in his own son’s hand. Accordingly, Parvasu unknowingly kills his father taking him as an animal in the darkness. Parvasu asked Arvasu to perform all the expiatory rites and he did this accordingly. And when he returns to the temple Parvasu mischievously throws all the guilt on Arvasu. Arvasu is thrown out of the village and retreated to the forest in despair of finding justice in the world and betook himself to rigorous austerities. And when he got the boon, he

with his wisdom only prayed that his father might be restored to life, and that his brother might be freed from wickedness and the sins he had committed.

Karnad, in his *The Fire and the Rain* has deconstructed this myth to suit his own plot. And this myth is deliberately transformed to justify it in the contemporariness of the society. “In view of the theorists of Negative Hermeneutics”, writes Prof. Nila Das in her discussion on *The Fire and the Rain*, “the purpose of interpretation of an ancient text is not to manifest or restore the text’s ‘past meaning’ in its own terms, but rather to use modern concepts to question, demystify and undermine its meaning. It contests the very idea that an ancient text is a revelation of meaning inherited from posterity. It is a message or proclamation addressed to the audience.”<sup>7</sup> In his *The Fire and the Rain*, Karnad certainly toes the line of negative interpretation right from the beginning. In Mahabharata, the myth had been told to the Pandava brothers so that they understood the difference between good and evil; knew about the values on which everything is structured in India. Sage Lomasha narrated the tales in expectation that the Pandavas would have the knowledge they gather from the myth and attain virtue.

In contrast, *The Fire and the Rain* presents a myth as portraying unrestrained desires, unleashed jealousy, anger, hatred, revenge and malaise through which the individuals assert their self identity, and seek their relationships to life. The characters, some mythical and some, creations of the dramatist’s imagination, defy the socio-ethical mores. They view the traditional hierarchical, familial and social set up with the caste and class divisions, as a persistent pressure on their life, a suffocating barricade to the free flowering of their personality. Adultery, avarice, heinous betrayal and gruesome deaths mark the course of the play. Human instincts have a language of their own. Karnad’s play catches the language, highlights the significance of emotions and passions, and thus roots the play and the myth to the concrete reality of life.

There is another myth in the play, the myth of Indra and Prajapati Tvasta which is used in the play in a meta-theatrical context. The myth of Indra, Visvarupa and Vritrasura is retold by Karnad in his play by giving it an altogether new dimension. The slaying of the demon Vritra is one of the archetypal myths of India. It is there in the Rigveda, it appears again in the Mahabharata with some variations. In the Rigveda, Vritra, the ‘shoulderless’ serpent swallows rivers and hides the water inside him. Indra, by killing Vritra, releases the waters. Though Indra is considered to be the ‘Vritrathan’ or the slayer of Vritra, yet a passing reference in the myth to how Indra, frightened, fled ‘like a falcon across ninety-nine rivers’<sup>8</sup> suggests that even the Rigvedic version probably had elements not entirely complimentary to Indra.

In his ‘Notes’ Karnad writes:

“[B]y the time we come to the version recorded in the Mahabharata, Indra has lost his central position in the Hindu pantheon. The sectarian gods, Vishnu and Shiva, now hold sway. In the later version of the myth, Indra is anxious that Vishwarupa..., son of Tvastri, may dislodge him from his throne. He therefore destroys Vishwarupa treacherously. Tvastri then gives birth to another son, Vritra...and tells him to kill Indra. Indra, unable to overcome the new enemy, again has to resort to ignominious trickery to survive. Having killed Vritra, he suffers from the guilt of Brahminicide”.<sup>9</sup>

The myth can be seen as expressing a deep anxiety which informs the whole of Indian mythology, the fear of brother destroying brother. In Mahabharata, this fear is perceptible with its sheer nakedness between Pandavas and Kuru clans; in Ramayana, it is there the same anxiety among Rama and his brothers, in the betrayals of Sugriva and Vibhishana. Karnad writes:

“The tale of Aravasu and Paravasu fascinated me as an unusual variant of this Indian obsession with fratricide and it seemed logical too that Yavakri should be their cousin, though the Mahabharata does not explicitly say so....years later, while re-reading the original version, I was astonished to find that right at the beginning of the tale of Yavakri, Lomasha mentions that the whole story took place on the banks of a river in which Indra bathed to cleanse himself of the sin of killing Vritra!”<sup>10</sup>

One of the fascinating aspects of dealing with myths is their self-reflexivity. “A myth”, Karnad writes, “seems complete in itself and yet when examined in detail, contains subconscious signals which lead you on to another myth which in turn will act as a conduit to a third one while illuminating the one you started with”.<sup>11</sup> The story of Aravasu and Paravasu and that of Indra and Vritra is interfused into a single one. We got overwhelmed when we find Arvasu in Vritra’s musk chasing Indra for causing harm. It is obviously his own unconscious mind that at once he fails to detach himself from the assumed character.

All the characters in the play have been coloured in a fresh tone, giving a useful outlook. The story becomes more vibrant with these alterations; the characters become more life-like, and obviously, the spectators or readers can find multiple sources of the contemporariness. The play, thus, becomes more contemporary than mythical.

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