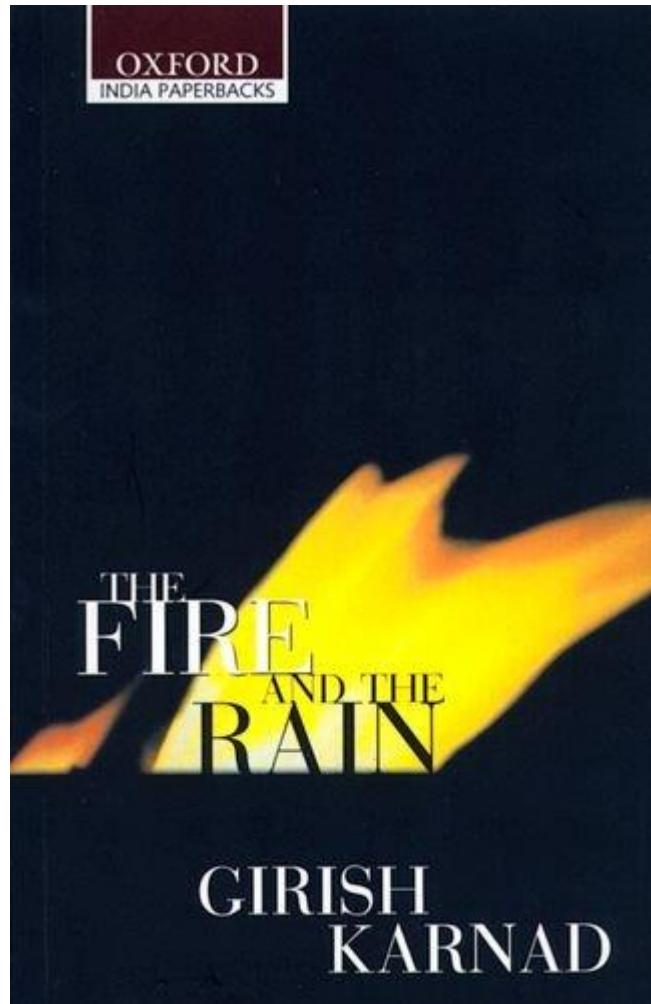


Patriarchal Elements in Girish Karnad's Play *The Fire and The Rain*

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Abstract

This work is constructed on the frame of the famous Indo -Anglian writer Girish Karnad's translated Kannada play *The Fire and the Rain* which heavily borrows from the myth of Yavakri from VanaParva of the Mahabharatha. This paper attempts to reveal the male hegemony that surface in Girish Karnad's play. This story revolves around a seven year long sacrifice which is to be conducted by Paravasu who is the Chief Priest of the village. The paper highlights the pathetic condition undergone by the women characters in the play, Vishakha and

Nittilai. Their oppression at the hands of the men forms the crux of this study. We can also visualise how the patriarchal order undergoes subversion by these tormented women.

Keywords: Girish Karnad, *Fire and Rain*, Patriarchal order, *ekdosis*, honour killing, social recognition, sexual slavery, subversion, vengeance, liberation.

Introduction

It has been noted that women can acquire dignified positions today but they still cannot adorn religious positions like the post of priests performing religious ceremonies in the temples, churches or mosques. There are many cases where they are denied entry into holy places. They are pushed away from roles that claim social recognition and they are always treated as inferior objects whose sole purpose is to enhance men's lives. Women are used as ladders by menfolk to reach the pinnacle of their selfish motives or goals.

All through the play, we come across instances of the superior position enjoyed by men folk. The scene of the priests offering oblations to the fire may not hinder the smooth reading of common readers but a deeper thinking urges one to wonder why only men are found suitable to sing hymns or carry out sermons. The sacred thread is worn only by men. Reciting or chanting prayers and conducting fire sermons become their sole right. Doesn't it convey a message? Doesn't it try to indicate the desire of man to be himself treated as the closest to God and woman to be considered as a mere slave created only to assist him in his serious venture?

The King Holds All Authority

In the play, Paravasu is the Chief Priest who is appointed to conduct the fire sermon and the King presides over the ritual while the Queen has no role at all in these religious practices.

“King (Explodes): No impossible! It’s not possible.”[pg.1 Prologue, *The Fire and the Rain*’]

The King shows his authority by exploding. The play further exhibits a scene where the boys are at play and not a single girl is visible. This scene also intends to drive home a message regarding the partiality shown towards the male gender which allows these boys to play and relax while girls are relegated to the confines of the kitchen. Further, we also come across the mention of Lord Brahma who is believed by Hindus to be the lord of all creation and he too is of the masculine gender. There is also the belief that Lord Brahma had handed over the Art of

Drama to his son, Lord Indra who is the God of the skies and that he had in turn handed over the art of Drama [the Fifth Veda] to Bharatha,a human being. It at once strikes the mind of the reader that responsible and serious task are entrusted only to those of the male sex.

Woman as a Source of Entertainment

During the play conducted by the acting troupe, a couple of women provide music which conveys the message that women are harbingers of entertainment. Karnad's satire of the male hegemony of society is revealed. The first woman character is the hunter girl Nittilai ,the lover of Aravasu. He is about to go to Nittilai's village in order to speak with her elders about their marriage. He tries to pull her near to him and she stops him lovingly telling that he has no right to do so till they were married .Here, Nittilai voices the rule imposed by men over women from time immemorial that reminds us of the traditional Indian custom which restrains a girl from touching her would be before marriage. But Aravasu has no such inhibition, him being a man.

We also learn of the other woman character in the play, Vishakha who is Paravasu's wife. Her meaningless life uncovers itself before the readers from her brother in law's description about her.

“My sister in law lives wrapped up in a world of her own.”[Act 1 .Pg.8
‘The Fire and the Rain’]

The play further unfolds how the women characters are treated as objects of entertainment and also as means to satiate men's vengeance.

Injustices Meted Out to Women

From time immemorial, many communities have witnessed women as objects of exchange .They are considered as objects that enable to maintain a friendly relation between two families or clans. According to Sue Ellen Case, women were often pledged for loan purposes and the process was termed as ‘Ekdosis’.

Vishakha's father in law, Raibhya treats her with cruelty. He is very interrogative and possessive about her. He inquires as to where she was and with who she was. Doubting her to be going around with someone, he beats her brutally. He grabs her hair, and kicks her. He does not

behave as a man behaves to his daughter in law. Instead of protecting her in her husband's absence, he subjects her to his sexual lust. The abusive language that he uses to belittle Vishakha may have successfully given vent to his wrath but it makes the readers totally ashamed of the father figure. He insults her by calling her a whore. She is ill-treated not only by her husband and father in law but also by her former lover, Yavakri. Vishakha is seduced by Yavakri as part of his revenge towards her husband's family. He exploited her ten years of solitude from her husband and that invokes her anger. Yavakri is brutal and unjust in his treatment towards Vishakha. When she understands his foul play, she retorts making the following comment:

“Vishakha: “Enough, Yavakri. Don’t say anything more. I don’t want to know. It’s my fault. I shouldn’t have yielded to you. I.....”

(Pg.23,Act 1)

Yavakri: It was fortunate that you yielded .If you hadn’t I would have had to take you by force.”(Pg. 23, Act 1)”

Belief That He Can Have His Ways with a Woman as He Pleases

The man’s belief that he can have his ways with a woman as he pleases is reflected in his words. This invokes not only Vishakha’s anger but also the reader’s indignation. The audacity that he shows in treating a woman as a doormat is exhibited here. Nittilai’s brother and the elders of the village wait for Aravasu’s arrival, but when he doesn’t turn up, they get wild. Her father feels humiliated and gets offended. This unpunctuality on the side of Aravasu gives Nittilai’s father the feeling of being the laughing stock in the eyes of the villagers. In a fit of rage, he fixes her marriage with another young man of their tribe. This event illustrates that decisions made in a patriarchal set up are not bound to change. Men folk pretend as if both they and their decisions are as rigid and immovable as the age old mountains.No amount of apology can appease the Elders or the Council. Nittilai’s father comments:

“This daughter of mine has made me a laughing stock in the eyes of the world’, I’m willing to marry her off to anyone who’ll take her.”(Pg.27,Act2)

Patriarchy Is Not Just Confined To Gender

After a thorough perusal of the play, we realise that patriarchy is not just confined to gender; it is also related to caste and class. Here, Nittilai belongs to a lower caste and an inferior social class which explains the reason for her father's humiliation. He has failed to understand Aravasu's nobility and sincerity in love.

Aravasu treats his sister in law with due respect. It is he alone who does not possess a selfish or biased mind in this play. The modern mind of an educated and equality loving civilised man is seen here. On the contrary, Raibhya abuses his daughter in law. On knowing that Vishakha was with Yavakri, the old man curses the latter to be killed by the Brahma Rakshasa, the product of his own wrath. Vishakha still loves Yavakri and is loyal to him. She tries to save his life- the life of her lover. Yavakri's over confidence does not allow him to run away from the Brahma Rakshasa in order to save his life.

In spite of Vishakha's warning; he is unmoved because he has the pot of magical water with him. Vishakha's hatred for Raibhya reflects in her words to Yavakri:

"You only have to be in your father's hermitage- the Brahma Rakshasa can't touch you there! Once you are safe, I'll happily watch that living corpse burn" (Pg.22, Act 1)

Subversion of Patriarchy

Yavakri yearned for knowledge from Indra so that he could be vicious and destructive. He uses Vishakha as an instrument to work out his revenge towards his more privileged uncle, Raibhya. He seduces her and asserts himself on her. When she realises that he had trapped her for his selfish motive; she turns violent and says: "It's my fault; I shouldn't have yielded to you."

She is totally offended since she has been belittled by the very person whom she had loved before marriage. Vishakha avenges her insult by draining out the magic water from the *kamandalu*. It was the magic water alone that could save Yavakri from death. Yavakri's over confidence that he has triumphed over Indira, the Lord of gods, symbolises man's greed for patriarchal domination.

Yavakri's desperate nature towards the end makes him dig for water, but with no avail. Yavakri meets his death just because he humiliated a woman. The patriarchy has been subverted in this context. Vishakha also challenges her husband Paravasu by admitting of her fornication. Seeing him after a long period of ten years, she pours out her pain of forced separation by uttering the following sarcastic words: 'How are you, Husband?'

A subversion of the patriarchal structures is brought about by this act of hers. She inverts the scenario by having her way out. Both Paravasu and Yavakri were selfish men who approached her for sexual gratification and went away when they felt like doing it. They came back without any explanation. She fought both of them in her own way. She taught Paravasu a fitting lesson by being infidel to him and Yavakri by depriving his source of pride and overconfidence. Raibhya's wretched life also comes to an end when he is shot down by his own son Paravasu by mistaking him for an animal. We also come across the bold step taken by the idealistic Nittilai. Inspite of getting married to the boy of her clan, she is haunted by Aravasu's memories. She elopes and unites with her lover. She spends her time loving and caring for him. Within a short period, her husband and brother find her out and she is slaughtered by her husband. Honour killing is a common phenomenon followed in any patriarchal community.

Though she is killed, she died a happy death because she could spend atleast a small time with the person of her choice. Here, Nittilai's death may be an end of her physical life but it is truly just the beginning of her spiritual life. She is free from the harsh and prejudiced patriarchal society.

Conclusion

The various aspects of patriarchy are visualised in this work. The patriarchal structures stand up as an eminent power when a matter of dispute or decision making emerges. They cannot tolerate even the slightest of prudence from others. Decisions are almost every time in favour of the male gender.

Karnad's women in *The Fire and the Rain* are forced to tolerate social relations which subordinate their interests. The family is identified as the key instrument in the oppression of both Nittilai and Vishakha. Nittilai was subjected to death by her husband and the latter was

forced into sexual slavery by her father-in-law. Delving deep into this topic, one may come to the same conclusion as Tharu in “Women in Girish Karnad’s plays: A Critical Perspective”.

“Women are responsible for their pathetic condition as they have directly or indirectly submitted to a culture of silence and helped to the perpetuation of patriarchy.”

The solution to patriarchy lies in freeing oneself from men and their rules. Living life to one’s own desire by keeping oneself within the limits of decency and righteousness and by equipping oneself with sufficient education and a regular vocation can liberate women to the paradise of happiness. Liberation from this male hegemony may be achieved either by death or living life boldly.

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