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## ***The Fire and the Rain***

**Deriving Meaning for Modern Life from Myths**

**Megha Trivedi, Ph.D. Candidate**

# *The Fire and the Rain* Deriving Meaning for Modern Life from Myths

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## Introduction

In *The Fire and the Rain*, Girish Karnad deals with the universal theme of Love, Jealousy and Isolation. He tries to interpret the past in terms of the present and *vice versa*, by exploring the universality of some basic human emotions and sentiments.

Like his other plays, *The Fire and the Rain* has the influence of folk tales and different traditions. Karnad employs mythical, historical and folk theme as a frame of this play as well, and through this he conveys a message to the modern-day world.

## Myth in Karnad's Plays

According to Jung,

Myths are expression of the primordial images in the collective unconscious of man. In the beginning, man had certain experiences and received them in their psyche in the form of images. Since they are the first images they are called archetypes of the collective unconscious. (Jung 130)

Karnad said in one of his interviews with *The Hindu*:

Drama is a means of self experiences for me. Dramas can be a production of meaning also... The function of artist is to create the world for the story to happen and then, if possible to interpret it.

The remark of Hazel E. Barnes is most appropriate in relation to the use of Myth by Karnad in his plays:

In a period when values are relatively stable, authors tend to use the classic myths merely allusively, enriching the poetic quality of their work with layers of older connotations. In an age more obviously transitional, there is likely to be more of new interpretations. (Barnes 110)

## Karnad on *The Fire and the Rain*

In *The Fire and the Rain* Girish Karnad gives some focus to the betrayal of a brother against another. He says:

Myth can be seen as expressing a deep anxiety which informs the whole of Indian mythology the fear of brother destroying brother. This fear branches out fully and nakedly in the Mahabharata where the bonding of brothers within the Pandava and Karu clans is as close as the enmity between the cousins is ruthless and unrelenting. In the Ramayana the fraternal bonding in the Raghu family Rama and his brothers-expresses other facets of the same anxiety with the betrayal of surgical and vibhishana (interestingly in the cause of the ethically correct side) marking the counter points. The story of Arvasu and Parvasu fascinated me as unusual variant of this Indian obsession with fratricide and it seemed logical too that Yavakri should be their cousin through the Mahabharata does not explicitly say so, I cannot remember, when I decided to incorporate the Indra-Vitra legend in my plot, but years later, while rereading 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 had bathed to cleanse himself of the sins of killing Vitra! One of the fascinating aspects of dealing with the myths is their self reflexivity. (F&R 68-69)

Karnad uses mythology, history, legends to project a world of intensities, uncertainties and unpredictable devour. He believed that there is a unique energy in the Indian Folk tales and there is every possibility of using them in the modern context. In his interview with 'The Hindus', he has said:

I go in for stories that are exciting. I think these are better stories than I will be able to botch up. At least in the want of originality I am perhaps as good or as bad as Shakespeare.

### **The Myth behind *The Fire and the Rain***

*The Fire and the Rain* is based on a little known myth from the Mahabharata.

*The Fire and the Rain* is originally written in Kannada, titled 'Agni Mattu Male'. It was first staged in Minneapolis, USA in 1994. According to Karnad:

Agni is the Sanskrit word for fire. And being a Sanskrit word, it carries, even when used in Kannada, connotation of holiness, of ritual status, of ceremony, which the Kannada word for fire (benki) does not possess. Agni is what burns in sacrificial altars acts as a witness at weddings, and is lit as cremations. It is also the name of god of fire (F & R 63).

Karnad's views about incorporating the Indra-Vitra legend in his play are:

I cannot remember when I decided to incorporate the Indra-Vitra legend in my plot... A myth seems complete in itself and yet leads you on to another myth... illuminating the one you started with... (F&R 69).

## **Action in *The Fire and the Rain***

The action of the play revolves around a seven year fire sacrifices intended to persuade the god of rain, Indra to send rain. The sacrifice is to end the devastating curse of famine. The play is full of unremitting tensions like betrayal, assassination and reduction enmeshing the characters who live out their destinies in the mayhem of elementary obsession with its philosophical underpinning. The play illuminates the universal theme of Love, Jealousy and Loneliness as it sweeps towards an unexpected denouement.

The play begins with the prologue when the King says:

A fire sacrifice is nearing completion. We have conducted it without a blemish for nearly seven years...Let it rain...Once it rains, we can have as many plays as we like. As a sacrifice approaches completion, demon gathers in the shadows. The danger of disruption increases... (F &R 1-2).

The prologue explains the purpose of Yagna (Sacrifice) and the dilemma of Arvasu.

## **Two Sages and Their Sons**

The story revolves around two sages - Bharadwaja and Raibhya and their sons. Both were priests gifted with profound spiritual supremacy but only Raibhya was chosen as a Royal Priest. Raibhya has two sons. Parvasu was the eldest son. Parvasu had forsaken all worldly pursuit, his wife (Vishaka) and his brother (Arvasu) for the fire sacrifice which he had performed for seven long years. The fire sacrifice was to appease the gods and get rain for the drought-ridden land. Parvasu was very confident but was a bit ambitious. He officiated as the chief priest for the sacrifice. This humiliated his father Raibhya. Vishaka, his wife, noticed the humiliation felt by her father-in-law (Raibhya).

According to Vishaka:

Something died inside your father the day the King invited you to be the chief priest. He is been drying up like a dead tree since then. No sap runs in him. On the other hand, there's his sense of being humiliated by you. On the other hand there is lust. It consumes him. (F&R 32)

Parvasu's dignified position as a Chief Priest of the sacrifice created dispute and hatred within his own family, from his father Raibhya to his cousin Yavakri. Yavakri was Parvasu's cousin as well as his opponent. He was the son of Bharadwaj. He had the grievance against the world that his father did not receive the respect and appreciation which was his due. He returned home after ten years of meditation, armed with the boon of eternal knowledge bestowed upon him by the Lord Indra.

Ten years of rigorous penance. And still lord Indra would not oblige. Finally, Yavakri stood in the middle of the circle of fire and stated offering his limbs to the fire... and that's when the god appeared, restored him the limbs, and granted him the boon... (F&R 9)

Yavakri wanted to take revenge at any cost. He made a penance and gained knowledge as the boon from Lord Indra. He said to Vishaka:

Yes, one day I decided I have won... some knowledge, but probably little wisdom I know now that can't be achieved. That itself is wisdom, isn't it? (F & R 4)

He admitted:

No, that's not the knowledge. That's suicide! This obsession. This hatred. This venom. All this is me. I'll not deny anything of myself. I want knowledge so I can be vicious, destructive! (F&R 23)

On the other hand, Parvasu's younger brother — Arvasu, was in love with a tribal girl called Nittalia. He wanted to challenge his upper caste Brahmin norms and marry her. But his Brahmin background did not allow him to get away from the manipulations of his brother Parvashu, his cousin Yavakri, and his father Raibhya. He was forced to choose between love and duty.

### **Vishaka – a Central Figure**

Yavakri seduced Vishaka — his past lover and now Parvasu's abandoned wife. Vishaka elaborated:

I live in this hermitage, parched and wordless, like a she-devil. And words are like water-precious. I was afraid to bath. Now I want to drown. (F&R 18)

The love of Yavakri and Vishaka was left unfulfilled due to the marriage of Vishaka with Parvasu. Yavakri was shattered when he heard the news of their marriage after his return from meditation. He recalls the moment, he had come to bid farewell to Vishaka:

The sweet sick smell of the Jack fruit, the maddening hum of a fly. The smell of your body. Ten years later I opened my eyes and I knew I was hungry for that moment. (F&R 14)

Vishaka told Yavakri about her marriage:

Vishaka: I am a married Woman.

Yavakri: I know you are. The first piece of news to greet me on my return was that you have married Parvashu. And I was shattered. But this was silly of me not to have expected it....

Vishaka: Why is life so contrary, Yavakri? One thinks one has stepped onto a bit of solid ground- a little heaven – and the earth gives way. ( F&R 22)

He complained to Vishaka that his father should have been invited as the chief priest at the sacrifices instead of Parvashu:

Grievances! You do not even flatter me with the word ‘hatred.’ But it doesn’t matter, what matter is that I hate your husband’s family. My father deserved to be invited as the chief priest of the sacrifice. But that too went to Paravasu, your husband. Even in the midst of my austerities I wept when I heard the news for I knew father would refuse to take offence. I knew he would go and congratulate Paravasu on the honor, embrace and bless him ... (F&R 22)

Vishaka tried to convince him. She wanted him to forget all the things which keep hammering him. But Yavakri busted out by stating:

The past isn’t gone. It’s here inside me... This obsession, this hatred, this venom, all this is me. I’ll not deny anything of myself. I want knowledge so I can be vicious, destructive. (F &R 23)

She told Yavakri that Parvashu:

... used my body, and his own body, like an experiment, an explorer. As an instrument in a search for what? I never knew...you are still lost in the fragrance of the jack fruit, Yavakri, I have known what it is to grow heavy burst open, drip and rot to fill the world with one’s innards. (F&R 16).

She further added, “Alone I have become dry like tinder ready to burst into the flames a breath. They burn things around, me down at the slightest chance.” (F&R 16).

She was seduced by Yavakri. She admitted: “It’s my fault. I shouldn’t have yielded to you.” (F&R 23). She was guilty of betraying Parvashu and admitted it by asking him to kill her.

### **Raibhya and His Fury**

Raibhya was known for his fury. He wrought his own vengeance on Yavakri by unleashing upon him a demon - the Brahmarakshas. When he came to know about the act of Yavakri seducing his daughter-in-law, he invoked the ‘Kritya’ spirit and sent it to kill Yavakri. The Rakshasa invoked by Raibhya killed the Yavakri with the trident.

Bharadwaj was upset by the death of his son-Yavakri by Raibhya and cursed him that he will be killed by his own son. It proved to be true at the later part of the story. Paravasu mistook his father who was wearing a deer skin for a wild animal and shot him dead with an arrow. The arrow was shot in the direction of his father, instead of Vishaka.

Parvasu went ahead with his duty and was not guilty for the act of killing his father instead of his wife. According to Parvashu, his father killed Yavakri because he wanted him to be disturbed in the last stage of the sacrifice. According to Parvasu:

He deserved to die. He killed Yavakri to disturb me in the last stages of the sacrifice. Not to punish Yavakri, but to be even with me. I had to attend to him before he went any further. ( F&R 33)

Parvasu told Vishaka about Yavakri:

One can practice austerities like your fool, Yavakri, to coerce the gods to bend to one's will. Stand in the circle of fire. Torture oneself. So many techniques, all equally cross to make the god appear. And when they give in what do you do? Extend the begging bowl. Give us rains. Cattle son. Wealth. As though, one defined human beings by their begging. I despise it. I went because the fire sacrifice is a formal rite structured. It involves no emotional acrobatics from the participants. The process itself will bring Indra to me and if anything goes wrong there is nothing the gods can do about it. It has to be set right by a man. By me, that's why when the moment comes, I shall confront Indra in Silence. As an equal for that is essential that one shed all human weakness. Be alone, absolutely as one's own to face that moment. Become a diamond, unscratchable. (F&R 31-32)

### **The Role of Arvasu**

He involves Arvasu to perform the rites on the death of their father - Raibhya: "You. As the son, it's your prerogative and your duty. Cremate the body right now and then concentrate on the penitential rites" (F&R 35). Parvasu betrayed Arvasu and accused him of patricide in front of the king and other Brahmins. Parvasu uttered, "Patricide-Patricide! What is he doing in these sanctified precincts? Throw him out! Out! Demon!" (F&R 38).

Arvasu screamed at Parvashu and asked him: "But why, Brother Why? Why? Tell me why please" (F&R 38). He was upset by the act of Parvasu in front of all everybody.

### **Nittalia, the Peace Maker**

The role of Nittalia in the play stands out to promote peace, humanity and love. She changed the way Arvasu was thinking about Parvashu and persuaded him to arrange for a play. She forces Arvasu to play the role of Vitra. She advised him that revenge is of no use, "where will it end?" (F&R 43).

She further added: "I'm sure that the play will wash off the fear, the anger." (F&R 51).

### **A Drama within Drama**

The troupe of actors decided to stage Indra-Vitra legend. The scene between Indra and Parvashu, Vishwarupa and Arvasu and Vitra and Brahma Rakshasa was woven skillfully in the play. Vishwarupa was struck from behind by Indra's thunderbolt while entering Indra's fire sacrifice. Parvashu immediately jumped to his feet when he saw the enactment and rebuked Indra for his treachery. Vitra (played by Arvasu) was restless, unmanageable and runs for Indra's life. Everybody along with the actor manager thought that the mask of Vitra worn by Arvasu has come alive. There was stampede as the crowd started rushing here and there.

Parvashu was called by the chief priest to get the situation under control. Parvashu carried on with the fire sacrifice and finally went up in flames. Arvasu stood there watching everything. Parvashu enters the fire to redeem for his sin and showed a step towards renunciation. The final scarifies of Parvashu made Indra appear and asked Arvasu for the boon.

*The Fire and the Rain* begins at the place where the fire sacrifice was being held and the play ends at the same place.

### **The Epilogue**

The Epilogue of the play also highlights the role of Nittalia - the lover of Arvasu. She dies in Act III for the sake of humanity and completely changes the vision of Arvashu towards everybody. She was in love with Arvasu but fortune had other things in store for her. She was married to the tribal of her own tribe. She betrays her husband after hearing the plight of Arvasu. She was killed by her husband like a scapegoat. Her husband slashed her throat with a knife. "She lies there, her eyes open, bleeding, dying like a sacrificial animal..." (F&R 58) Nittalia demonstrated love, humanity and beauty by her deeds in the play.

### **Indra's Appearance**

Arvasu's dialogue with the Indra leads him to assume responsibility and seek spiritual growth, through sacrifice. Indra grants him the boon. He chooses to release Brahma Rakshasa, who was caught up for evil by Raibhya. Arvasu demonstrated humanity at large in the final act of the play. He learnt forgiveness and compassion at the hands of Nittalia. He tells Lord Indra that:

Lord I have been an ignorant fool all my life... But after what I have been through, I am wiser. I can now stop the tragedy from repeating itself. I can provide the missing sense to our lives... (F&R 60)

He does not ask his Nittalia back to life from Indra. Suddenly, there was thunder and lightning and rain started. People could smell the air blossoming with the aroma of the wet earth. They started dancing and rolling in the mud. Here, the Rain symbolizes the washing away of malevolence, hatred and annoyance from the minds and hearts of people. The fire sacrifice in the end brings the rain. The love of Arvasu for Nithilia finds its victory as the dried up land is granted rain and its people the deliverance.



## A Complex, Lesser Known Puranic Myth

A lesser known puranic or mythic story gets a brighter and benevolent treatment in the hands of Girish Karnad. “Petty” squabbles are turned into significant episodes for uplifting human soul. Frozen or fossilized symbols come alive in the narrative and action. Girish Karnad has effectively employed all the dramatic devices to give the story a productive meaning.

The chapter on Arvasu and Nithilia has a special significance in the play because the play begins with them and ends with them. They sound more like folktale characters. And this lends a helping hand to the readers and audiences not familiar with the story to follow this complex mythical story. Karnad uses them as storytellers, Chorus, Commentators and, above all, as our contract with the protagonist. As in other plays of his, Karnad uses myth to weave it into a modern play by including significant issues like love and hatred, faith and deceit, power and lust and unethical practices. Karnad has used mythology as a source to explore the hidden meaning of the complex life, a modern man and woman is forced to face.

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