

GIRISH KARNAD'S *THE FIRE AND THE RAIN*: A TEXTUAL INTERPRETATION

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Myths are the eternal source of inspiration for the creative writers. 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 his psyche in the form of images. Since they are the first images, they are called archetypes of the collective unconscious.¹

Among the modern Indian writers, Girish Karnad may be said to be one of the leading writers who have made the use of myth in their creative works. In his play "Yayati" he found the story of king Yayati from the *Mahabharata* providing a very powerful emotional equivalent to what he desired to communicate. In "Hayavadana" he has made use of the ancient myth of the transposed heads. In "Nagamandala" there is the employment of the ancient folk tale of the naga who loved a woman. Girish Karnad has found myths a powerful vehicle to carry the complex ideas of the modern times. Besides, the use of myths enables him to link the continuity of emotions from the beginning of the civilisation to the present age. Thirdly, he is able to interpret the past in terms of the present and *vice versa*. The following remark of Hazel E. Barnes is relevant in the context of Girish Karnad.

In a period when values are relatively stable, authors tend to use the classical 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.²

The play *The Fire and the Rain* was first staged in Minneapolis, USA in 1994 and was published in 1998 and is the translation of his Kannada play, *Agni Mattu Male* by the writer himself. The action of the play moves round a seven-year long fire sacrifice conducted to propitiate the rain god, Indra, to end a devastating spell of drought. Here is woven a complex story of hurt egos, terror-inspiring spiritual powers that are harnessed only to serve envious ends, and all encompassing love which raises a man above the plane of a mere mortal. In this way through a relatively less known myth of Yavakri and Paravasu from the Mahabharata, Karnad has been able to provide a power and universality to some of the basic human sentiments and emotions.

The myth of Yavakri and Paravasu takes place in the Chapters 135-138 in the "Vana Parva" of the *Mahabharata*. It is stated by the ascetic Lomasha to Yudhishthir the Pandava Prince, when they (the Pandavas) were roaming across the land during their banishment. This story belongs to two sages—Bharadwaja and Raibhya as well as their sons. Although both the hermits were endowed with spiritual powers, it was Raibhya who was appointed the royal priest. He had two sons Paravasu and Aravasu and they were also able priests. The son of the sage Bharadwaja, Yavakri had a complaint against the universe, especially against Raibhya and his sons since he realised that his father had not been accorded the repute and recognition that he had in the real sense. So he went to the jungle in order to do a hard penance to please the king of gods, Indra. As a result of his hard penance, Indra himself presented before him. Yavakri made a request to grant him the knowledge of the Vedas but Indra told him that this kind of knowledge could be acquired over the years from a 'guru' and so asked him to return but he continued with his penance; this forced Indra to satisfy his desire.

After his coming back as he (Yavakri) was proud of his achievement, Bharadwaja warned him against delusions of omnipotence. He specially warned him not to interfere with Raibhya who was known for his fury (anger). His fears, however, proved true as Yavakri one day cornered Raibhya's

daughter-in-law and forced her to have sex with him. When Raibhya knew it, he was so furious that he invoked the 'Kriya' spirit. By making oblations of the strands of his hair he invoked two spirits one a 'rakshasa' and another a look-alike of his daughter-in-law and sent him to kill Yavakri when Yavakri was taking his mid-day meal, the female spirit went to him and stole his pot of consecrated water. The 'rakshasa' then pursued him. Yavakri required water to invoke his powers but at every spot water dried up. Ultimately he made efforts to enter his father's hermitage, but the blind man who guarded his father's hermitage, did not allow him and the rakshasa behind him killed him with a trident.

Bharadwaja cursed Raibhya that his own son would kill him and was shocked at his own shortcoming and so he immolated himself. Although Bharadwaja knew that his son Yavakri would meet his end due to his evil deeds, yet his son's death made him uninfluenced by reason and logic. Raibhya's sons Paravasu and Aravasu were conducting a fire sacrifice for the king. One night Paravasu came to his cottage. He mistook his father who was wearing a deerskin for a wild animal and shot him dead with his arrow. When he realised what he had done; he cremated and came back to his sacrificial enclosure. He told his brother about his father's death and asked him to go and perform the penitential rites prescribed for Brahminicide because he could not perform the fire sacrifice alone. Meanwhile he would conduct the sacrifice. Aravasu did the same. But when he came back to the sacrifice, Paravasu asked the king that he should not be permitted to enter the sacrificial enclosure as he was a Brahmin killer.

Though Aravasu made his protest and told everybody that it was a lie and Paravasu had killed his father, nobody listened to him and so he was thrown out by the King's guards. Aravasu went to the forest and prayed to the sungod for help. The sungod obliged him and the king came to know that Aravasu was innocent and it was Paravasu who had killed his father. The king asked Paravasu to go away and invited Aravasu to conduct the fire sacrifice. Later on, the sun god restored Yavakri, Bharadwaja and Raibhya back to life at the

request of Arvasu and made Parvasu forget his misdeed. When Yavakri came back to his life, he was rebuked by gods for his flaw and asked to follow knowledge in the right way.

Girish Karnad had come across this myth in C. Rajagopalachari's abridgment of the *Mahabharata* while he was still in college. He was attracted by it and the myth continued to come back to him but it took him more than three decades to shape it into a play. He writes:

For the next thirty-seven years, I struggled with it, trying to fit all the ramifications to the myth within some sort of manageable shape.³

Further he tells in his Notes to the play, "Thirty-seven years is a long time to live with a myth for a company. It inevitably grows and changes with one."⁴ In some significant aspects Karnad's story certainly is different from the original myth. Bharadwaja and Raibhya in his story are not just friends but brothers and so their sons are cousins. Karnad makes Yavakri and Vishakha, Raibhya's daughter-in-law, lovers and in this way gives a deviation to the story. In the myth, Raibhya creates a look alike of his daughter-in-law and sends her to facilitate the killing of Yavakri. In the play, Vishakha goes to Yavakri to warn him against the Bramha Rakshasa whom her father-in-law has asked to kill him. She deprives Yavakri of his consecrated water, but the situation this time is different. Raibhya as conceived by Karnad in the play, is completely different from the Raibhya of the myth. In the myth Parvasu kills his father without thinking but in the play he does so knowingly. In the myth Bramha Rakshasa after killing Yavakri goes to live with the female spirit created by Raibhya but in the drama he wants liberation from his state of limbo between life and death. This provides a new dimension to the play. The greatest alteration that Karnad has brought about in the myth is in the character of Arvasu (pronounced in the play as "Arvasu") unlike the myth, Arvasu of the play is not a learned priest. On the other hand, he is a young man of eighteen who loves dancing and acting in the drama, something which was prohibited for Brahmins. Not only that, he is madly in the love with a tribal girl, Nittalai and is bent upon

marrying her. Nittalai is a creation of Karnad and through the love of Arvasu and Nittalai he has given meaning to the myth. An important addition to the myth in the play is the story of Indra and Vritra presented through the playlet enacted by the troupe of actors and Arvasu to recreate the priests at the fire sacrifice.

The killing of the demon Vritra by Indra is one of the Archetypal myths of India which appeared for the first time in the *Rigveda* and much later with variations in the *Mahabharata*. It is the *Mahabharata* version of the myth that Karnad uses in the play. In this version Indra, Vritra and Vishwarupa are brothers—all sons of Bramha. Indra feels threatened by the popularity of Vishwarupa and kills him treacherously while Vritra tries in vain to save him. Karnad's incorporation of the Indra-Vritra myth in the play reinforces one of the central themes of *The Fire and the Rain*—the treachery of a brother against another, Karnad says about it:

The 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 Kuru 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 another facet of the same anxiety with the betrayals of Sugriva and Vibhishana (interestingly in the cause of the ethically correct side) marking the counter point.

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 though the *Mahabharata* does not explicitly say so, I cannot remember when I decided to incorporate the Indra Vritra legend in my plot, but 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 had bathed to cleanse himself of the

sin of killing Vritra! One of the fascinating aspects of dealing with the myths is their self-reflexivity.⁵

The brother hatred theme in *The Fire and the Rain* is incorporated in Yavakri-Parvasu clash though Parvasu is not directly in the conflict and Yavakri meets his end not through Parvasu but Raibhya. Karnad shifts the focus of the conflict from the first generations—that of Bharadwaja and Raibhya—to the second generation that of their sons...by removing Bharadwaja from the scene. In the play, when Yavakri returns from his ten-year long 'tapasya' he finds that his father Bharadwaja is already dead. Whatever Yavakri does; is a calculated move to provoke Parvasu. He is burning with a desire to insult Parvasu and the members of his family. He says to Vishakha:

Grievances! you do not even flatter me with the word 'hatred.' But it doesn't matter. What matters 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 Parvasu, 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 Parvasu on the honour, embrace and bless him.⁶

Therefore he fixes everything; his meeting with Vishakha and his sexual act with her. Later he tells her that if she had not agreed with it of her own desire, he would have taken her by force. So this becomes known to everybody he calls Raibhya back a day earlier than his fixed coming back. He even determines the time of his deed and tells Arvasu to meet him particularly at that time. He waits for the challenge from the other side so that he might prove his power by despairing their challenge. It is Raibhya and not Parvasu who accepts the challenge and ruins him.

Girish Karnad has presented Parvasu as the symbol of Supreme egotism who is trying through the fire sacrifice not to seek blessings from Indra but to equal him. He considers Yavakri so mean that he cannot be an object of his hatred. He says to Vishakha:

One can practice austerities like your fool, Yavakri, to coerce the gods to bend to one's will. Stand in a circle of fire. Torture oneself. So many techniques, all equally cross to make the gods appear. And when they give in what do you do? Extend the begging bowl. Give us rains. Cattle sons. 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 on ones own to face that moment. Become a diamond, unscratchable.⁷

This statement throws light on the character of Parvasu and gives us a clue to the slaying of his father and his betrayal of his brother. In the myth Parvasu kills his father by mistake because of the curse of Bharadwaja. In the play he does it knowingly. Just before he kills him, Vishakha has been blaming her father-in-law of sexually abusing her so she thinks that due to this accusation he has been killed by Parvasu and tells him that now he will never know whether she told him a lie. In response Parvasu tells her:

You didn't need to. He deserved to die. He killed Yavakri to disturb me in the last stages of sacrifice. Not to punish Yavakri but to be even with me. I had to attend to him before he went to my father.⁸

He could not allow anyone to disturb the fire sacrifice which was nearing completion and herein lies the reason of his betrayal of his younger brother who doted on him and who followed blindly whatever he told him. Arvasu is baffled at Parvasu's behaviour and so the only thing that he keeps shouting at the sacrificial enclosure when Parvasu accuses him of Patricide and he is being thrown out by the guards is.... "But, why, Bother, why? Why? Tell me why, please."⁹

In his effort to 'shed all human weakness' and to become a diamond unscratchable, Parvasu loses all human emotions

and sentiments that make human beings so lovable and respectable. The Brahma Rakshasa comes to him for his release from his limbo. He explains that since Raibhya had created him, he is his brother but Parvasu is not interested. He tells him that he does not need any more brother.

On the other hand, Aravasu has all those qualities what Parvasu is devoid of. Aravasu has an enthusiasm for life and love for other human beings. At the end of the drama Indra appears before him. He asks him to demand what he wishes. People request Arvasu to ask for rain. Brahma Rakshasa requests him to ask for his release or freedom, he himself desires Nittalai back to life. But when Bramha Rakshasa tells him that his Nittalai would not like life at the cost of someone suffering permanently. Aravasu is deeply influenced. He requests Indra for the release of Brahma Rakshasa and this brings rain to the parched land.

So we can say that it is the interpretation of the myth that any knowledge which does not have the human values like compassion, generosity, proper understanding, goodwill, love and humanity can lead to envious hearts, egos and ultimately all ruin and destruction and that makes *The Fire and the Rain* very important and influential play in the modern time.

References

1. C. Jung, "Archetypes of Collective Unconscious" *20th Century Criticism*, ed., H. West Brook, 130.
2. Hazel, E. Barnes, ^{quoted} by A.S. Phand, *Essays on Comparative Literature* (New Delhi: Sterling Publisher, 1984), 110.
3. Girish Karnad, Preface to *The Fire and the Rain* (Delhi: OUP, 1998).
4. Girish Karnad, *The Fire and Rain*, 74.
5. *Ibid.*, 68-69.
6. *Ibid.*, 22.
7. *Ibid.*, 31-32.
8. *Ibid.*, 33.
9. *Ibid.*, 38.