



THE FIRE AND THE RAIN: A STUDY OF SYMBOLISM

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ABSTRACT



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A story drawn from the Mahabharata is deeply implicated in mythological ritualistic matrix and psychological significations. Girish Karnad's rebuilding of the past liberates the contemporary consciousness from the shackles of the present. In rediscovering myths, Karnad makes our journey into the ancient world, not viewing the ancient from the outside but from inside. The self reflexivity of myth can be found in brother-brother relationship, the *Mahabharata*. *The Fire and the Rain*, a myth retold, infuses the old myth with new revelations while it follows the prototype in responding to the complexity of the human condition by splitting the characters into two unequal halves, centering on two primal topics: sex and death. Achieving the goal of dreams, it also draws us to a profound moral message – reawakens us to the world of the past and connects us with the secret regions of our psyche which have been a terrain of repressed anxieties and contradictory impulses.

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Girish Karnad gives the Indian theatre the richness that can probably be equated only with his talents as an actor and director. His contribution goes beyond the theatre as he represents India in the foreign land like an emissary of art and culture. He in all his plays moves away from the tradition. He borrows various themes and techniques for his plays from history, myths, folk tales, folk and classical theatre while he contemporarily relies on contemporary themes and techniques. His uniqueness lies in the revival of the ritualistic and symbolic aspects of drama involved in the role playing rituals in all cultures have a purpose toward off and purge the community from all evils. Dressing,

singing, dancing and all are aspects of rituals. The researches in anthropology and culture emphasize in intrinsic relation of drama with civilization mores across cultures.

The ritualized actions in the form of chanting of hymns in *yajna*, the play within the play, Yavakri water as a magic saviour the mating of Vishaka and Yavakri Raibhyas creating a Brahma rakshasa to kill Yavakri the performing of funerals, expiation, penitence for the unnatural death. The final act, epilogue creates the impression of events piling up a tidal wave of circumstances and emotions sweeping over the characters. In the culminating action the ritualistic design is taken to its final teleological

ending with Nittilai's bloodshed bleeding, dying like a sacrificial animal.

'The Fire and the Rain', is the sixth successful drama of Girish Karnad. It is based on mythology, for which the dramatist relies heavily on an episode in the *Mahabharata*. *'The Fire and the Rain'*, is the translation of his Kannada play "Agni Mattu Male". The plot of the play is not as simple as that of Karnad's earlier plays. It is picked from the *Vana Parva*, i.e. the Forest Canto, of the *Mahabharata*. *'The Fire and the Rain'* is Karnad's play of jealousy for power, politics, sexual, exploitation, humiliation and isolation of characters. Everybody is anybody's enemy in the name of power and jealousy. Raibhya, Parvasu, Aravasu, Nittilai, Andhaka and Vishakha are incomplete in some or other way. Parvasu wanted to be supreme; Aravasu, a character of humanness, is exploited by his brother; Vishakha as a wife of Parvasu is neglected and isolated housewife. The drama of incompleteness continues in the play and is existential in approach.

The Fire and the Rain takes Karnad's vision about the quest for completeness forward and exhibits him in serene hues as Shakespeare appears in his later work, *The Tempest*. He seems to accept the sanctity of the marital bond as Shakespeare ever does. Nittilai in the *Fire and the Rain* is an innocent as Miranda in *The Tempest*. Whereas Miranda's innocence is protected by Prospero throughout the play, right from her encounter with Caliban to the encounter with Ferdinand. It revolves around revenge, futility of knowledge and frugality of human nature. Through this play Karnad tries to focus the egotism prevailing in the contemporary society by associating it with the mythological stories of the past. The play inscribes the human condition linking the present with the eternal and the contemporary with archetypal, projecting new meaning in every generation.

The Fire and the Rain plays a symphony of desires in its matrix no single rhythm as no single character dominates anything. Their speech controls with silence the volcanic and anarchic humanity contrasts tranquilly and serenely. The ambiance in a range of variations engages us in diverse notes: the Brahmin's chanting hymns, the tranquil music of the innocent romance of Nittilai and Aravasu, the

rapturous ecstasy and the tragic trend of Yavakri-Vishaka relationship and the catastrophic explosion of Raibhya's revenge.

The Fire and the Rain is the story about Aravasu, a Brahman by caste, who becomes a performing actor and who is wronged and misunderstood. He loves Nittilai, a tribal girl, who reciprocates his love, but seeks the approval of her father and her village elders before marrying him. Parvasu, Aravasu's brother, conducts a major prayer ceremony to appease Devraj Indra so that their region may get rain. Aravasu's father is Raibhya who dislikes both his sons and wishes that he cremates them before his death. Raibhya suspects Vishaka, Parvasu's wife, of having an illicit affair with Yavakri and detests her. Yavakri loves Vishaka, but leaves her to worship; and prays to Devraj Indra for ten years, and on his return finds her being married to Parvasu who lives with her happily for three years, before leaving her to conduct the prayer ceremony for Devraj Indra. On finding that, Vishaka meets with Yavakri as an enraged Raibhya summons Brahman Rakshas, a demon to kill Yavakri.

The demon does so and Aravasu has to cremate him. This delays his appointment with Nittilai's dad and her village elders and as a result she is married to someone else. When Parvasu hears of the death of Yavakri, he kills the father and subsequently blames Aravasu for this and he is badly beaten up and left for the dead. When Nittilai hears of this, she comes to the rescue of Aravasu and finds that she is hunted by her husband and her brother who wants to kill her on sight. Sutradhar arranges and acts to entertain the Devas, and as a result Aravasu goes out of control. Nittilai exposes herself and is killed by her husband; Parvasu admits failure and cremates himself. Thus one by one, whoever, was close to Aravasu is dead. Finally appeased, Devraj Indra appears and Aravasu is allowed a wish of his choice.

The only thought in Aravasu's mind is to bring Nittilai back to life, but doubts if Devraj Indra turns history around to help Aravasu. As the kingdom is in the grip of a ravaging drought for ten years, a grand fire sacrifice is conducted at the palace under the guidance of the chief Priest, Parvasu to appease the Lord of Gods Indra, the divine custodian of rain.

As this sacrifice draws to its close, the play begins. Paravasu is the elder son of the great sage, Raibhya. For seven years, he has watched over the holy fire, forsaking his wife, family and every earthly pleasure. Paravasu's young brother, Aravasu, is in love with a tribal girl, Nittilai and prepares to marry her outside his Brahmin cast – but for this, according to the tribal custom, he has to present himself before Nittilai's Village elders. Paravasu's cousin and bitter rival Yavakri has just returned triumphant after ten years of practising austerities in the jungle, with the gift of universal knowledge from the gods. To seek revenge, Yavakri seduces Paravasu's lonely wife Vishakha. This sets off an irrevocable chain of events that lead to Aravasu losing his love, Paravasu desecrating the great sacrifice, the creation of a demon and the deaths of Yavakri and Raibhya. Finally, the purity of Aravasu and Nittilai's love brings salvation to the land.

Jealousy and ego – the two important human aspects dominate the play. Filled with the grief of his son's death, Bharadwaja curses Raibhya that he will be killed by his own son; and then he immolates himself. Paravasu mistakes his father for a wild animal and shoots him dead. Paravasu intentionally kills his father to get rid of him. He discloses the death of his father to Aravasu and asks him to perform penitential rites. Aravasu, who worships his brother as father – figure for his great scholarship, is deeply hurt by his brother's rude behaviour in public, when he goes to sacrificial sites for patricide on behalf of Paravasu, Paravasu asks the others to throw his brother as a demon encroaching into the sacred site. After performing asks the king not to allow his brother to enter the sacrificial enclosure because he is a Brahmin killer. The tussle of supremacy between the two brothers shows the brother the hatred theme in *The Fire and the Rain*.

The Fire and the Rain is written by Girish Karnad, one of India's foremost playwrights. Its theme is derived from the myth, "Aranyaparva" of the great Indian epic, the *Mahabharata*. It re-enacts the entire theme of the epic in a different and precise way. The purity of Aravasu and Nittilai's love brings salvation to the land while Paravasu and Yavakri fail in their endeavour. Karnad's recasting the myth of *The Fire and the Rain* by showing Yavakri – Paravasu- Aravasu

in contemporary times brings us to a new level of the theatre experience that embraces both tranquillity and chaos: freedom and determinism, freedom and responsibility, love and hate, and demonic and rational. The meta-reality of the myth by describing the value to stir the entire civic culture into combating suffering and learning to survive

It is another feat of Karnad's existentialist play where a conflict of jealousy, rivalry, ambition and treachery can be found. The struggle is not only between a friend and a friend, between father and son, between brother and brother but also between a husband and his wife. For the sake of becoming the chief Priest, Raibhya and his son, Paravasu, are at war; Paravasu and Yavakri are a victim of jealousy while Paravasu and Vishakha as a husband and his wife are estranged and isolated. But Aravasu and Nittilai are the living idols of humaneness and love which brings the rain and makes the world happy. It is a play of power politics and sex intrigues where characters are at war and divided. But individually, all the characters in some or other way are the lonely, divided-self, split-personality, stranger and outsider to their world. It is the pathetic, experiential as well as existential situations and predicaments of characters which make the play interesting and thought-provoking.

The Fire and the Rain is the sense of fulfilment seems to be accompanied with the sense of realization of the guilt. The world has been accepted by remaining character without any want to change. And it appears that Karnad's vision about human relationship has been mellowed and broadened to accept the reality as truth.

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