

Myths and Mythopoeia in Girish Karnad's *The Fire and the Rain*

SumbulNasim

Full-time Contractual Lecturer

Bidhan Chandra College, Asansol

India

Abstract

The multi-talented contemporary Indian playwright Girish RaghunathKarnad (b. 1938) is famous for making extensive use of myth, history, and folk-tales in his plays. The play *The Fire and the Rain*(1995) is also based on a myth taken from the *Mahabharata*, that is, the myth of Yavakri. The recurrent use of myth in several of his plays suggests the enormous amount of significance Karnad attaches to the stories of the past. However what is striking in this play is Karnad's mythopoeic method through which he appropriates and remakes the existing myths in order to fulfil his dramatic purposes and to make the play at once relevant to our modern contemporary society. Here Karnad does not use the myths (specifically, the myth of Yavakri and the myth of Indra-Vritra) in their primitive form rather he makes significant changes here and there. He moulds and remoulds, trims and polishes them and ultimately presents a moving tale, deeply embedded in our present modern times. Hence this paper attempts to bring to the fore Karnad's superb mythopoeic method in his handling of the myths in this play.

Key words: myth, mythopoeia, past, present, relevance

The word ‘myth’ comes from the Greek ‘mythos’, meaning ‘anything uttered by the word of the mouth.’ J. A. Cuddon defines ‘myth’ in these words: “In general a myth is a story which is not ‘true’ and which involves (as a rule) supernatural beings—or at any rate supra-human beings. Myth is always concerned with creation. Myth explains how something came to exist . . .” (525-26). In a myth, the outer shell of the narrative is not important rather the kernel of the story is important. It is the kernel of the story which explains certain archetypal human behaviours, feelings and emotions and hence myths retain their universality and timelessness. About myth, K. Raghavendra Rao in his article “Myth as Modes of Human Experience: *Bhyrappa’s Kannada Novel, ‘Parva’*” writes:

The function of the myth is to serve as an imaginative and symbolic structure yielding normative sustenance to a society. As it were, it offers the moral paradigms which the individuals and groups within the community try to decode as answers to their own pressing, existential moral needs. They acquire the status of being exemplary, emulative and heuristic. People tend to understand their situations in terms of the myths and use them to validate or condemn their as well as people’s actions. Thus they are heavily charged with didactic implications. (116)

A myth connects past and present. Through the use of myths, a writer shows the continuity and universality of human feelings and emotions, their deeds and misdeeds. The use of myths in literature affirms the fact that the stories of the past are not passé, and that ‘past’ itself is not something ineffectual and profitless.

The use of myth in his plays is a distinctive feature of Girish Karnad (b.1938), one of the foremost contemporary dramatists of India. In Indian dramas in English, his is a name to be reckoned with. Karnad played an important role in changing the post-Independence theatre scenario. To Karnad, Indian mythology, history and folklore have always provided raw material for his plays. He started using myth with his first play *Yayati* (1961), continued in *Hittina Hunja* (The Dough Rooster, 1980; rewritten in English as *Bali: The Sacrifice*, 2002) and *The Fire and the Rain* (1995). He uses myths to show how the stories of the ancient past are still relevant in our present modern context. However in *The Fire and the Rain*, Karnad does not use merely a “myth” rather he uses “myths”, namely, the myth of Yavakri, the myth of Indra-Vritra, and the myth of Yajna.

The play is primarily based on the myth of Yavakri (or Yavakrita) which occurs in Chapters 135-38 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. According

to this myth, Raibhya and Bharadwaja, two learned sages, were good friends. Raibhya lived with his two sons Paravasu and Aravasu who learnt Vedas and became famous scholars while Bharadwaja's son Yavakri held a grudge against the world, and especially Raibhya's family, for he felt his father did not receive the recognition which he deserved because Raibhya grabbed all the attention. He, therefore, went to the forest and started practising hard penance in order to obtain the knowledge of the Vedas directly from the gods. Ultimately after ten years of austerities, Lord Indra granted him the "Universal Knowledge" and this made him arrogant. He molested Raibhya's daughter-in-law, believing that neither Raibhya nor Paravasu would be able to challenge him. But Raibhya invoked the 'kriya' spirit and created a lookalike of his daughter-in-law and a rakshasa. While the former stole Yavakri's kamandalu which contained the sanctified water which would save him from any attack, the latter chased him and when Yavakri tried to enter his father's hermitage, he was held by the blind Sudra gate-keeper of the hermitage. At that moment the rakshasa killed him with a trident. When Bharadwaja learnt how his son died, he cursed that Raibhya would die at the hands of his own son. But soon realizing the extremity of what he had said about his friend, Bharadwaja felt remorse and immolated himself. On the other hand, after some time, his curse turned out to be true. Raibhya's sons were conducting a fire sacrifice for the king. One night when Paravasu was visiting home, in the dark he mistook the deerskin which his father was wearing to be a wild animal and thus killed him. Coming back to the sacrifice, Paravasu asked Aravasu to go back to the hermitage and perform the penitential rites for their father since he did not have a natural death. Aravasu obeyed but when he returned to the sacrificial enclosure, Paravasu put the blame of his own sin, that is, of patricide and Brahminicide, on Aravasu and had him thrown out. Aravasu went to the jungle and in lieu of his prayers, gods granted him what he sought, that is, restored life back to Yavakri, Bharadwaja, Raibhya, and made Paravasu forget his evil deeds. Also, the gods reprimanded Yavakri and advised him to pursue knowledge in the correct manner and not to use shortcuts.

Notably, Karnad does not use this myth simply as it is rather he kneads and sifts it according to the demands of his dramatic and creative self, and to enrich the play with various pertinent issues. Karnad employs his mythopoeic method. Mythopoeia means the reworking of an existing myth or the creation of a myth, and here in Karnad's case, it is the former. The first major change he has made is to present Raibhya and Bharadwaja as two brothers and not as two friends. In this way, the estrangement between their families brings to the fore the very common issue of the estrangement between brothers and the themes of "brother hating brother" and fratricidal horrors are highlighted. Hence, in the play, we see

different layers of estrangement between brothers—between Bharadwaja and Raibhya, between Arvasu, Parvasu and their cousin, Yavakri, and eventually between Arvasu and Parvasu. The friction found here between these brothers at different levels is at once relevant to the Indian society in any age. The same significance is carried by the myth of Indra-Vritra used in the play-within-the-play in the Epilogue of the play. Here, too, using his mythopoeic method, Karnad makes alterations and compresses two different versions of the Indra-Vritra myth—one found in the *Rigveda* and the other, with some variations, found in the *Mahabharata*--and ultimately what he presents is his own version of the Indra-Vritra myth. By using this myth, Karnad shows the reiteration of the same jealousy, betrayal, rivalry and fratricidal horrors between brothers by the superhuman creatures in the realm of the divine too. Here Indra, the King of Gods, being jealous of the popularity and gentle nature of his younger brother Vishwarupa, the King of Men, treacherously kills him just as Parvasu, being jealous of Arvasu's simplicity and innocence, has him treacherously excommunicated. A strong parallelism runs between the Arvasu-Parvasu plot and the plot of the play-within-the-play. Actually the events of the play-within-the-play throws light on the events of the main plot and reinforces the theme of "brother hating brother". Vritra's heart-wrenched outcry, "Why, Brother? Why, why, why? Brother, why? Why?" (56) at Indra's betrayal is an echo of Arvasu's outcry earlier in Act Two at Parvasu's betrayal. Actually we can say, throughout the play, there is a strong resonance of Vritra's this dialogue as is suggested by the fast-paced chain of events of the play.

Another significant departure from the original myth is the elaborate character sketch of Parvasu's wife, that is, Vishakha. From the scanty details of Parvasu's wife in the original myth, Karnad takes his raw material and develops Vishakha's character as an important female character of the play. By making this change, he brings to the light the issue of the suffering of women in Indian society. Through Vishakha's portrayal, the playwright shows the pathetic condition, oppression, subjugation, repeated victimization, and physical, emotional and psychological exploitation of women in a male-dominated society, and how their lives are strongly fettered with patriarchal bonds. In the original myth, Vishakha is not even named and we just get to know that Yavakri molested "Parvasu's wife." But here Karnad interestingly weaves different relationships around Vishakha and makes her as important as any male character of the play. She is never on the periphery of the action. Actually she is the only character who is related with both the Bharadwaja and the Raibhya family. In the play, Karnad presents her as the adolescent lover of Yavakri. They have a passionate relationship but Yavakri abandons her and goes to the jungle to fulfil his ambition

of revenge and to gain “Universal Knowledge” from the gods. As a result, her father marries her off to Yavakri’s cousin Paravasu against her wishes as she says: “I didn’t want to, but that didn’t matter” (16). At her father’s home, she has no voice in her life’s decision. Unfortunately the patriarchal domination in her life continues even after marriage. After marriage, she leads a thoroughly sensual life with her husband because that is all her husband is capable of giving her in a loveless marriage. Paravasu uses her body and his own “like an experimenter, an explorer. As instruments in a search” (16). Even worse, Vishakha does not know what this search is all about since they never talk because to Paravasu, verbal and emotional communication with his wife is not important. With him she lives in a universe of endlessly repeated silences. Paravasu does not bother to answer her questions. There is no emotional, tender attachment between the husband and the wife. Their married relationship is reduced to mere mating and coupling. And, like Yavakri, Paravasu, too, abandons her in order to fulfil his own ambition. He goes away to be the Chief Priest of the fire sacrifice and in seven years never tries to see his wife. Vishakha is abandoned both at the hands of her lover and her husband, making her “parched and wordless, like a she-devil” (15). Nevertheless, her suffering at the hands of male does not stop here. After Paravasu goes away, she is left behind at the hermitage with her father-in-law, Raibhya and brother-in-law, Arvasu. While the latter is never at home, the former exploits her mentally and sexually. Raibhya uses her for his “old man’s curdled lust” (32-33), beats her and even abuses in harshest language.

Vishakha is a victim of betrayal also at the hands of her ex-flame, Yavakri who uses her in his game of deep-seated malice. He comes back to her after ten years of penance, rekindles her emotionally and sexually, and uses her body in order to challenge her in-laws. Her body becomes a mere pawn in Yavakri’s game, just a ‘thing’ to be used. While she thoroughly enjoys her time with Yavakri, she is totally shattered (once again!) to find out that Yavakri did all these to avenge her in-laws. Ultimately she is so tortured and frustrated with her life that she begs Paravasu to do her “a favour” (32), that is, to kill her. Thus Vishakha stands for any typical Indian woman who suffers in a patriarchal world, both pre- and post-marriage. Hers is a prototypical story of prolonged suffering caused by male species. Yet Karnad presents her as a strong woman who despite being shackled from all sides ceaselessly struggles to gain her freedom, her rights as a human being and as a woman. When she meets Yavakri after ten years, she herself offers her body to him and thus asserts her right to her sexuality and her sexual choice. By taking a lover outside marriage, she challenges centuries of patriarchal norms which try to regulate woman’s sexual decorum. Not only this, she even

boldly declares in front of her infuriated father-in-law that Yavakri had come to see her alone, even when she expects the worst reaction from him. Eventually, taking responsibility of her own life, she leaves the hermitage and goes away to live life on her own terms as is suggested by the stage direction: “The hermitage is empty. In a corner he sees the water pot, covered with cobwebs” (37). Ultimately Karnad empowers her and hints at her emancipation and thus pleads for emancipation of all such subjugated women. A myth connects past and present and what Karnad here suggests is that the oppression of women has occurred in all the ages--it happened in the past (in the original myth, Yavakri molested Paravasu’s wife) and it happens in the present too.

Nittilai does not appear in the original myth but his mythopoeia allows Karnad to include her in the play. This deviation from the original myth also carries weighty significance. Nittilai belongs to a tribe of hunters; she is a ‘low caste’ girl and thus it helps Karnad append the theme of caste system in Indian society, along with other themes of the play. Arvasu, the Brahmin boy, loves Nittilai and intends to marry her but both his and her castes have their own strict dictates regarding marrying outside their respective castes. While Arvasu will have to lose his badge of Brahminhood (which he is ready to do), Nittilai’s whole tribe must be wooed by Arvasu before they consent to their marriage. Through Nittilai, Karnad presents a strong critique of ‘high-caste’ Brahmins because her good nature makes their vicious nature even more glaring and exposes their false sense of pride. By putting her in stark contrast to them, he debunks the mythical grandeur generally associated with the high-caste people. While the whole world is going berserk over Yavakri’s gain of “Universal Knowledge”, she questions it because according to her Yavakri should have asked Indra for rain when everyone is suffering from drought instead of something so abstract and personal like “Universal Knowledge.” If Yavakri cannot make it rain and “save dying children” (11) with the help of his boon, then such a boon is useless to her. She also subscribes to her father’s views that the “high-caste men are glad enough to bed [their] women but not to wed them” (8) and thus exposes the hypocrisy and lustfulness of the Brahmins. It is Nittilai, the so-called low-caste tribal girl, who always acts and loves others selflessly compared to the so-called high-caste Brahmins who are at loggerheads with each other and are hurting and killing each other for their personal gain. In stark contrast to the malicious learned Brahmins like Paravasu, Yavakri, and Raibhya, Nittilai stands for virtue, humanity, simplicity, selflessness and gentle nature. But Karnad does not criticise the Brahmins only rather through the inclusion of Nittilai, he shows the insensitivity and brutality of the tribals as well. Arvasu loses Nittilai for ever when he reaches the tribal’s elders’ meeting only half an hour late

because his late arrival humiliates their sense of honour and pride and when Arvasu raises his voice against this injustice, Nittilai's brother is quick to be violent with him. Nittilai's tribe also believes in honour-killing as she is murdered callously by her husband because she defies the established norms of her tribe. Hence Karnad highlights how inveterate they are as a tribe in the matters of their traditions and customs just as Brahmins are inveterate in their own way. Thus the caste problems Karnad shows here is a very pertinent and burning issue of our society. These problems at once relate with our caste-ridden Indian society and including the subplot of Arvasu-Nittilai in the myth of Yavakri only enriches the texture of the play.

With regard to the characterisation of Brahma Rakshasa also, Karnad employs his mythopoeic method to make him serve some important dramatic functions, unlike the original myth where his only job was to kill Yavakri. Of course, Karnad takes his staple from the myth of Yavakri but then moulds it in a new way. In the myth, Brahma Rakshasa gets his birth when Raibhya invokes 'kriya spirit' and creates two demons—one, the lookalike of his daughter-in-law and the other, a rakshasa. This rakshasa becomes 'Brahma Rakshasa' in the play. He is a Brahmin soul trapped in limbo. Here, too, he kills Yavakri but towards the end of the play, he plays an instrumental role in the purification of Arvasu and the resultant rain. At a crucial juncture, Brahma Rakshasa puts Arvasu in an ethical and humanitarian dilemma and thus helps in Arvasu's evolution as a human being. Apart from this, through his dialogues when he reminds Arvasu of the beautiful nature of Nittilai and of the superiority of human beings compared to either spirits or gods, "I don't forgive. I can't. But you are a human being. You are capable of mercy. You can understand pain and suffering as the gods can't—" (61), Karnad teaches the readers simple moral lessons which is his primary concern in the play.

One of the chief concerns of the myth of Yavakri was the dichotomy between knowledge and wisdom. In the myth, Yavakri, through shortcuts, attained "Universal Knowledge" but failed to evolve himself, to rise above his evil desires and thus had a tragic end. He gained knowledge but not wisdom. In the play, Karnad retains this aspect of Yavakri because this dichotomy between knowledge and wisdom is as relevant today as it was in the past. The applicability of this motif was never more apt than in our modern, materialistic, commercial, technologically advanced age where anyone can stuff their heads with knowledge through shortest means but remain devoid of wisdom.

Here Karnad also uses the myth of Yajna (fire sacrifice). The myth of Yajna seamlessly fits in with the myth of Yavakri, providing an appropriate background to the action of the play where a majority of characters burn in their own fire of passion and desires.

About the myth of Yajna, Karand says in the Notes appended in the play: “The duration of a fire sacrifice varied and some stretched over years. The *Mahabharata* opens with a sacrifice that was to go on for twelve years” (67). In the original myth, we only hear that Parvasu and Arvasu were conducting fire sacrifice when the former went his home and mistakenly killed his father. The reason for this sacrifice is not mentioned but in the play Karnad states the reason in the very first lines of the play. He presents the land as ravaged by drought and hence a seven-year long fire sacrifice is being held at the king’s palace, presided by Parvasu as the Chief Priest. As with other changes which have made the play more enriched and engrossing, this change, too, adds to the action of the play in various important ways, like, Parvasu’s becoming the Chief Priest creates frictions in his own family—Vishakha is abandoned, Raibhya is humiliated and jealous, and Yavakri gets one more reason to hate him. Apart from these, it also gives Karnada chance to include Indra-Vritra myth. As per the custom of the Yajna, the Actor-Manager’s troupe comes to stage its play (which is based on Indra-Vritra myth) during one of the breaks of the fire sacrifice, and thus leading to Parvasu’s remorse. Then by making the land struck by drought, Yavakri is made to meet his end when he does not get any drop of water after Vishakha throws away his sanctified water. Above all, the fire sacrifice is the central action of the play. The play starts and ends at the sacrificial enclosure. But Karnad ends the play differently than the original myth. The play ends with the arrival of the much-awaited rain but Karnad suggests that it does not arrive because of the seven-year long ritualistic sacrifice rather because of Arvasu’s altruism, that is, asking Indra for the release of the Brahma Rakshasa instead of the resurrection of his dead love, Nittilai. Thus, by opting for this end, Karnad upholds humanity and selfless love and care for others. Amzed Hossein comments: “. . . Girish Karnad has ended his play in a completely different way from how the *Mahabharata* myth of Yavakri ended. The transformation of the conclusion of the myth in his play is commensurate with his own weltanschauung” (99).

Hence, we can say that using his mythopoeic method, Karnad, in *The Fire and the Rain*, deals with different myths sensitively and sensibly, without tampering their original essence. Though he makes several alterations, none of the alterations and additions can be called the arbitrary whim of the playwright rather they are more like the fittings in the holes and gaps of the mythical tales which make the play immediately congruent and apposite to our contemporary society and its various issues. About Karnad, Aparna Dharwadker writes: “The majority of his plays employ the narratives of myth, history, and folklore to evoke an

ancient or premodern world that resonates in contemporary contexts because of his uncanny ability to remake past in the image of present” (ix).

Works Cited

- Cuddon, J. A. *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*. London: Penguin Books, 1999. Print.
- Dharwadker, Aparna Bhargava. Introduction. *Collected Plays: Volume One*. By Girish Karnad. New Delhi: Oxford U P, 2005. vii-xiii. Print.
- Hossein, Amzed. “Myth in Karnad’s *The Fire and the Rain*.” *Discourses on Indian Drama in English*. Ed. AnkurKonar. Memari: Avenel Press, 2013. 88-99. Print.
- Karnad, Girish. *The Fire and the Rain*. New Delhi: Oxford U P, 1998. Print.
- Rao, K. Raghavendra. “Myth as Modes of Human Experience: *Bhyrappa’s Kannada Novel, ‘Parva’*.” *Indian Literature: Sahitya Akademi’s Literary Bi-monthly XXXI*. 1 (1988): 115-122. Print.