

HOW FAR DOES GIRISH KARNAD DEVIATE FROM THE ORIGINAL MYTH IN HIS PLAY 'THE FIRE AND THE RAIN'? - A CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract:

The play 'The Fire and the Rain' is written by one of India's foremost playwrights, Girish Karnad. It is based on a myth of Yavakri which appears in the great Indian epic, the Mahabharata. Karnad's recurrent use of myth in his plays suggests the enormous amount of significance he attaches to the stories of the past. He shows how the stories of the ancient past are still relevant to our present day life. In 'The Fire and the Rain' he uses multiple myths. This paper is an attempt to analyze the play to see to what extent the playwright deviates from the original myth and its relevance to modern times.

Key words: Contemporary Contexts, Enmity, Myth, Parallelism, Portrayal, Revenge

1. Introduction

The Indian playwright, Girish Karnad, is noted for making extensive use of myth, history, and folk-tales in his plays. Karnad attaches a great deal of importance to the stories of the past. However, he remolds the existing myths to achieve his dramatic purposes. He trims and polishes them to suit his requirements and ultimately succeeds in presenting a touching tale most suitable to modern times. His famous play 'The Fire and the Rain' which appeared in 1995 draws hugely from a myth adopted from the *Mahabharata*, which is known to the readers as the Myth of Yavakri.

The origin of the word ‘myth’ can be traced to Greek word ‘mythos’, which means “anything uttered by the word of the mouth”. A myth is a story which is usually not ‘true’ and it involves supernatural elements and beings. Myth is generally concerned with creation. In a myth what is significant is not the outer shell but the ‘kernel’ of the story. It is the kernel which describes and exposes typical human behaviors, emotions and certain psychological aspects. This feature of myths ensures their universality and timelessness. A myth establishes a connection between the past and the present and thus makes it relevant across time. An outstanding feature of Girish Karnad’s plays is the liberal use of myth to portray human nature. His use of myth is evident in his well-known plays such as *Yayati* (1961), *The Fire and the Rain* (1995), and *Bali: The Sacrifice*, (2002). He uses myths to show how the stories of the past are still relevant in modern times. Writing about Karnad, Aparna Dharwadker says, “The majority of his plays employ the narratives of myth, history, and folklore to evoke an ancient or pre-modern world that resonates in contemporary contexts because of his uncanny ability to remake past in the image of present.”

2. A Brief outline of the play

The play derives its stuff from the myth of Yavakri (or Yavakrita) which is found in the ‘Vana Parva’ of the *Mahabharata* which is narrated to the Pandavas by Lomasha. The storyline of this myth runs as follows:

Two learned sages, Raibhya and Bharadwaja, were close friends. Raibhya had two sons, Parvasu and Arvasu, who studied Vedas and became great scholars. Yavakri, Bharadwaja’s son, possesses grudge towards the family of Raibhya, as he had the feeling that his father did not receive his due recognition because Raibhya became the centre of focus in everything. He went to the forest and succeeded in gaining the knowledge of the Vedas directly from the Gods. After ten years of stringent penance, he was granted the “Universal Knowledge” by Lord Indra. This achievement instead of making him humble and matured, made him arrogant. After some time, he molested Raibhya’s daughter-in-law, as he thought that neither Raibhya nor Parvasu would be able to challenge him. But Raibhya who became angry, invoked the ‘Kriya’ spirit and created a look-alike of his daughter-in-law and a Rakshasa. Raibhya stole Yavakri’s ‘kamandalu’ which contained the sanctified water which would save him from any attack. Yavakri’s attempt to enter his father’s hermitage, was prevented by the blind gate-keeper, a Sudra. It was then that he was killed by a Rakshasa with a trident. When Bharadwaja came to know about how his son died,

he cursed that Raibhya would die at the hands of his son. But soon, realizing the extremity of what he had said about his friend and how it affects him, Bharadwaja was driven by remorse and burnt himself. However, his curse soon became a reality. Raibhya's sons were busy in performing a fire sacrifice as per the orders of the king. Parvasu was returning home one night in the darkness and he mistook the deer skin worn by his father. He misconceived his father to be a wild animal and killed him. Coming back to the sacrifice, Parvasu asked Arvasu to go back to the hermitage and perform the penitential rites for their father as he did not have a natural death. Arvasu obeyed his instructions but when he came back to the place of sacrifice Parvasu put the blame of his sin of patricide and Brahminicide on Arvasu and had him thrown out of the place. Going to the jungle, Arvasu prayed to the Gods. Gods were pleased to grant his wish and restored life to Yavakri, Bharadwaja, Raibhya, and made Parvasu forget all his evil deeds. In addition, the Gods advised Yavakri to pursue knowledge genuinely and not to follow any shortcuts.

3. Karnad's deviation from the original myth and its relevance to the present day society

Karnad does not use this myth as it is. He employs a method of redesigning the existing myth. The first major change he has made is presenting Raibhya and Bharadwaja as 'two brothers' instead of 'two friends'. In this way, the very common tendency of hatred among brothers and the theme of hatred among blood relatives is presented.

Similarly, the myth of Indra-Vritra is used in the drama as 'play-within-the-play'. Indra, the King of Gods, who is extremely jealous due to the popularity of his younger brother Vishwarupa, the King of Men, kills him. There is a strong parallelism between the Arvasu-Parvasu plot and the storyline of the play-within-the-play. The events of the play-within-the-play throw light on the events of the main plot and add force to the theme of hatred among brothers.

Another instance where Karnad significantly deviates from the original myth is in his introduction of the role of Vishakha, Parvasu's wife. Karnad develops Vishakha's character as a noteworthy female character. By making this modification, he throws light on the issue of the suffering of women in Indian society.

Vishakha is Parvasu's wife in the original myth. However, Karnad succeeds in weaving different relationships around Vishakha and making her a significant character just like any other male character in the play. She is portrayed as the adolescent lover of Vishakha and Yavakri develop a passionate relationship but the latter abandons her and goes to the jungle seeking to fulfill his ambition of revenge and to gain "universal knowledge" from the Gods. Because of this incident, her father is left with no other option than to marry her off to Yavakri's cousin Parvasu though it is quite against her wish. She is forced to lead a sensual life with her husband after marriage because that is all her husband could give her in a marriage devoid of love. Parvasu explores her body as an experimenter. There is nothing emotional between the husband and wife. Like Yavakri, Parvasu also abandons her to fulfill his ambition. He leaves her in order to be the Chief Priest of the fire sacrifice and never tries to see his wife and for seven years. Thus Vishakha is abandoned both by her lover and her husband and becomes helpless. In the absence of Parvasu, she lives in the hermitage with Raibhya, her father-in-law, and Arvasu, her brother-in-law. While Arvasu is never at home, Raibhya exploits her mentally and sexually. Raibhya uses her for his "old man's lust" and also ill-treats her. Thus Vishakha becomes a victim of betrayal. Yavakri uses her in his game. He comes back to her after ten years of penance, rekindles her emotionally and sexually, and uses her body 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 shattered to find out that Yavakri did all these to take revenge on her in-laws. Eventually, she undergoes such a torture and frustration with her tragic life that she pleads Parvasu to kill her. Thus Vishakha represents any typical Indian woman who becomes a victim in a male-dominated cruel world. Karnad presents her as a strong woman who struggles to gain her freedom as a human being and as a woman.

Nittilai is another worth-noting character created by Karnad. Though there is no such character in the original myth, Karnad introduces her in the play. She belongs to a tribe of hunters and hence she belongs to 'low caste'. A Brahmin boy, Arvasu, falls in love with her and has the intention to marry her. But Arvasu loses Nittilai forever when he reaches the tribal's elders' meeting only half an hour late because his late arrival humiliates their sense of honor and pride. Arvasu raises his voice against this injustice only to invite the violent actions of Nittilai's brother. Her tribe also believes in honor-killing and she is murdered mercilessly. However, when compared to the

learned but vengeful Brahmins like Parvasu, Yavakri, and Raibhya, Nittilai becomes symbolic of virtue, humanity, simplicity and selflessness. This stands in direct relation to the caste-ridden Indian society.

The myth of Yajna (fire sacrifice) is also used by Karnad. He depicts the land as being affected 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. Parvasu's becoming the Chief Priest creates friction in his own family—Vishakha is abandoned, Raibhya is humiliated and jealous, and Yavakri gets one more reason to hate him. 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 sacrifice rather because of Arvasu's selfless love and care for others.

4. Discussion and conclusion

Karnad, in "The Fire and the Rain", deals with different ancient myths in a sensible manner, without taking away their real significance. Karnad however, retains revenge as the central theme for his play, which helps him to bring out the futility of knowledge and delicateness and fragility of human nature.

The readers can observe different layers of treachery between brothers-between Bharadwaja and Raibhya, between Arvasu and Parvasu, and their cousin, Yavakri. The enmity which prevails between these brothers at different levels is most relevant to present day society. We witness several instances of spiteful acts of individuals against their own blood relation in Indian society.

Through the portrayal of Vishakha, the dramatist shows the pitiable condition, oppression, victimization, and physical, emotional and psychological exploitation of women in a male-dominated society.

Yavakri, who could attain "universal knowledge" through easy methods but failed to rise above his vengeful desires and evolve himself, meets a tragic end ultimately. Through his portrayal, the dramatist shows that anyone who gains just knowledge but no wisdom is bound to fail in practical life. This dichotomy between 'knowledge' and 'wisdom' is quite relevant today as people gain lot of knowledge in the information society which is driven by technology but fail to show wisdom in practical life.

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