

THE MYTH OF WEAKNESS IN KARNAD'S *THE FIRE AND THE RAIN*

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Abstract

The research paper undertakes to study Girish Karnad's play, *The Fire and the Rain*, and identify element of reality in its mythical and fictional structure. The paper intends to examine and explore the myth of weakness, with reference to the female characters. Karnad makes extensive use of myths in *The Fire and the Rain*, myths, which are replete with human and divine weakness. The paper aims to study human weakness beyond the peripherals of its mythical characterization- as universal, eternal truths transcending the boundaries of culture and space. Karnad portrays characters who are disabled by their weaknesses when pitted against strong patriarchal forces and social prejudices. Their weakness is identifiable in the thoughts, actions, and attitude of the characters in the play. The myth of gender is real and integral to human society. The paper examines how Karnad arms his females to deal with their debilitating weaknesses. The paper thus undertakes to examine the playwright's depiction and justification of human weakness as a reality and not a myth.

Keywords: feminism, Karnad, *The Fire and the Rain*, myth, weakness, tradition, women.

Full Paper

The Fire and The Rain is based on the myth of Yavakri which occurs in Chapters 135-38 of the VanaParva (Forest Canto) of the *Mahabharata*. The ascetic Lomasha narrates it to the Pandavas during their exile. Sumbul Nasim defines myth as:

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 . . ." (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. (407).

The myth of Yavakari is about two friends, Raibhya and Bharadwaja. Raibhya's sons Parvasu and Arvasu are highly acknowledged Vedic scholars. Bharadwaja's son Yavakri holds a grudge against the world, and especially Raibhya's family, because he believes that his father did not get due recognition as compared to Raibhya. He therefore, goes to the forest to practice penance and acquire the knowledge of the Vedas, directly from the gods. After ten years of penance, Lord Indra grants Yavakari the knowledge he desires but Yavakari becomes arrogant. He molests Raibhya's daughter-in-law, to challenge Raibhya and Parvasu. Raibhya invokes the 'kritiya' spirit and creates a lookalike of his daughter-in-law and a *rakshasa*. While the former steals Yavakri's container of the sanctified water which could save him from any attack, the latter chases him to death. Yavakari tries to enter his father's hermitage, but the blind Shudra gate-keeper, refuses him entry. The *rakshasa* kills Yavakari. Bharadwaja soon realizes the gravity of his mistake in cursing his friend, and out of remorse he immolates himself, without realizing that the curse is infallible.

Raibhya's sons are conducting a fire sacrifice for the king. One night when Parvasu is visiting home, he mistakes the deer skin which his father is wearing for a wild animal and kills him. Parvasu goes back to conduct the sacrifice and asks Arvasu to return to the hermitage and perform the last rites of their father. Arvasu obeys his brother, but is shocked when on his return Parvasu put the blame of his own sin of patricide and brahminicide, on him. Arvasu is thrown out. He retires to the jungle to pray for the restoration of the lives of Yavakri, Bharadwaja, and Raibhya, and also to make Parvasu forget his evil

doings. The gods grant Yavakari's wishes and ask him to pursue true knowledge without being lured by shortcuts.

Karnad does not use the myth simply as it exists, rather, he modifies and reworks it to suit his creative demands. He makes several changes, the first being the presentation of Raibhya and Bharadwaja as two brothers instead of two friends. By doing so highlights the theme of estrangement between families and brothers. He also highlights the issue of fratricide. The same significance is carried by the myth of Indra-Vritra used in the play-within-the-play in the Epilogue. By the use of this myth, Karnad shows that the evils of jealousy, betrayal, rivalry, and fratricidal wars raging between brothers on earth, also plague the divine world.

Another significant change brought by Karnad, is the elaborate character sketch of Parvasu's wife, Vishakha. The details of Vishakha in the original myth are scanty but Karnad develops Vishakha's character and makes her stand out in the play. By doing this he highlights the women's question and shows the suffering of women in Indian society. Similarly, Nittilai does not appear in the original myth but is Karnad's creation. This deviation from the original myth is deeply significant. Nittilai belongs to the tribe of hunters, a girl from the lower caste. Through her, and her love story with a Brahmin boy, Karnad depicts the existence of the caste system and its repercussions on the Indian society.

Karnad also makes changes in the characterization of the Brahma Rakshasa. In the original myth his only job was to kill Yavakri. In the myth, the *rakshasa* gets born when Raibhya invokes the 'kritya spirit' and creates two demons—one, the lookalike of his daughter-in-law and the other, a *rakshasa*. The *rakshasa* is depicted by Karnad as a Brahmin soul trapped in limbo. In the play he not only kills Yavakri, but plays an instrumental role in the purification of Arvasu and the resultant rain. Karnad uses him to give moral and humanitarian lessons.

Karnad also uses the myth of Yajna (fire sacrifice). In the original myth, Parvasu and Arvasu were shown as conducting the fire sacrifice, which continued for twelve years, but the reason is not mentioned. The play starts by mentioning that the mythical Indra- Vritra act performed in the fire sacrifice is a myth, and the story of Arvasu, Parvasu, Vishakha, Nittilai and the others is a real one. A myth is something which has not been proven as reality. The essential characteristics of the Raibhya- Bharadwaja story picked up from the Mahabharata and modified by Karnad are very similar to the Indra- Vritra myth. Both the stories deal with the theme of weakness in action, thoughts and attitude. Human weakness is a reality, an eternal truth which remains a myth as long as the person suffering from it denies its existence or defends it.

Arvasu is a Brahmin scholar who loves Nittilai, a tribal girl of fifteen. As per tribal rules, he has to propose to her before the tribal gathering. The tribals believe in raw and bold declaration of love and potency rather than the refined mannerisms of the civilized upper classes in society. For Arvasu, a Brahmin, it is difficult to come out so brazenly with his intentions and feelings. His attitude depicts the weakness and the inability of the privileged classes to expose their true selves. The process of civilization makes people reserved, secretive, and calculative. A person who is a product of civil society, learns to hide his intentions and feelings for the sake of social decorum and to serve his selfish motives.

Arvasu projects how the hymns and sacrifices of the Brahmin tradition become powerful masks, to disguise the weakness of the individuals who adorn them. He says to Nittilai, "Nothing, yes. For the young men of your tribe! But I am a Brahmin. To say all that in plain loud words to a smirking, nudging, surging multitude. No hymns to drown out one's voice. No smoke to hide behind" (Karnad 110; act 1). Nittilai is open about her affair, but not Arvasu. He hesitates in acknowledging his love because he knows that his upper class society will not accept a bride from the tribal class. Karnad depicts the tribals as honest, innocent, and truthful when compared to the witty and calculative civilized classes. Here Karnad also highlights the war of classes, for power and dominance. Upper classes do not hesitate to misuse the lower castes for their benefit.

Nittilai refrains from allowing Arvasu to touch her, because tribal customs prohibit sexual relations before marriage. She says: "It's a nice custom. Worth observing" (Karnad 112; act 1). Nittilai is disciplined and sensible. Her respect for her tribal and cultural norms rise from trust, not fear. This is the strength of her character. Nittilai is able to transcend her weaknesses and shine like a star. She is raw, natural, earthy, and fearless, like *Shakti*.

Arvasu is also restricted from getting intimate with a low caste girl, but overcome by his sexual desires, he is willing to break rules. Karnad shows that this urge for physical intimacy is a natural human weakness since eternity. Myths and mythological stories, epics and folk tales, have shown kings, ascetics and even gods being carried away by lust. Very few men of character are able to restrain their physical needs, and fewer still have the heart to accept their inherent weakness.

Nittilai bares the hypocrisy of the upper class men who seek sexual gratification from low born women, but question their birth and social status in marriage. Karnad thus comments on the moral and ethical weaknesses of society, whose value system is based on duality, low value expectation from self and high values expectation from others. The weakness or aspiration of the ruling class to modify norms for their own comforts is a reality, not a myth. Politicians, bureaucrats, businessmen, and other policy makers defend their policies, deviation from norms, and weak decision making as the need of the hour. No one is willing to accept his weakness and greed for money. The stories and characters created by writers like Karnad can be fictitious, or mythical, but the human virtues and vices that are portrayed are a part of the experiences that an author gathers in the process of civilization and socialization. Myths have been created and propagated by real people over centuries, and cannot be divorced from the reality elements they carry.

Arvasu says that because of the famine, there is a dearth of suitable girls and hence no one cares whom he marries. He painfully admits being neglected and uncared for. Karnad reveals the gaping holes in the familial fabric. He reveals the weakness and reality of shallow and loveless relationships. Arvasu's personality is overshadowed by his dynamic brother. Karnad shows the urban reality, where most families value only those members who are achievers. Human beings have a weakness for materialistic growth and this weakness cannot be dismissed as a myth.

Drama, known as the Fifth Veda, was regarded as an imitation of reality and hence, a subordinate art, unsuitable for perusal by the upper classes. It is still considered lowly in many societies. Arvasu wants to sing, dance, and act, but his high-class society does not approve of it. Most parents want children to focus on academics rather than excel in sports, or performing arts. Karnad shows the reality that acquisition of knowledge is associated with intelligence, a virtue which is attributed to the elite classes. This lopsided division of learning and arts into high and low, depict the weakness of a society carried away by narrow, prejudiced perceptions. These prejudices have a real and contemporary significance.

Yavakari, observes ten years of strict penance in the jungle to gain universal knowledge, which the gods finally grant. This part of the story can be mythical, as science cannot explain a how one's limbs can be offered to god and then attached back to the body, along with gifts of supreme knowledge and supernatural powers. Since this phenomenon cannot be proven, it may be rejected as myth.

Nittilai questions how the details of Yavakari's penance and the related incidents occurring in the remotest forest become public, by asking, "Then how does everyone know what happened in a remote corner of the jungle- miles away from the nearest prying eye?"(Karnad 115; act 1). Certainly Yavakari must have boasted about it. If he achieved 'Universal Knowledge', did he not acquire the wisdom that boastfulness is not a characteristic of a wise man? He is not yet free of the materialistic hunger for recognition. This proves the hollowness of his newly acquired knowledge. Yavakari's vanity is a weakness, plaguing men since ages. Knowledge becomes Yavakari's weakness rather than his strength. It makes him arrogant.

The play then moves to Vishakha, Parvasu's wife. She longs for companionship and looks around furtively. Perhaps she is waiting for Yavakari, her lover before marriage. Vishakha still has a weakness for Yavakari, and is desperate to meet him, but her desires are camouflaged. Yavakari blocks her path and says, "Stay Vishakha- please. There's no one there in your house. Your father-in law has gone out. Your brother-in law is never home. What's the hurry?"(Karnad 118; act 1).

Yavakari acquires knowledge, but no wisdom. He is yet to conquer his passion. The moment he ends his penance, his thoughts wander to the intimate moments shared with Vishakha behind a jack- fruit grove. Consumed with his sexual fire, Yavakari acknowledges to Vishakha that he gained, "some knowledge, but probably little wisdom, I know now what can't be achieved. That itself is wisdom, isn't it?"(Karnad 120; act 1).

Vishakha is in wedlock, which in Indian culture implies that she cannot be coveted by another man. Marriage has a sanctity in India, which no other culture can boast of. Indian traditions associate marriage as a unification of two souls, but this definition seems meaningless in Vishakha's case. Vishakha is married to

Yavakari's cousin, and therefore Yavakari's lust is a blasphemy by Indian standards. Vishakha reminds Yavakari, "I am a married woman" (Karnad 118; act 1), but she stays put, talking to Yavakari and hinting at her weak moral perseverance. Marriage has not reoriented her feelings, nor mellowed her impulses. She is an efficient actor who uses marriage as a mask to disguise her wild cravings. A tribal girl like Nittilai forbids Arvasu from getting close, but a high born Vishakha has no qualms about enjoying pre- marital sex and desiring the same after marriage. Vishakha is a feeble, sex- starved woman pretending to be moralistic.

Karnad depicts the crisis of values in society and individuals, and the loopholes in the institution of marriage. Extra- marital affairs are not myths, they are a social reality. It would be wrong to accept Vishakha as a weak, subjugated, and abused woman. She is bold enough to demand and enjoy sexual gratification. She is an infidel. The absence of Parvasu has parched her sexually, but there is a probability that she might have been lured to Yavakari even if her husband was present. The weakness for bodily pleasures, the unfulfilled desires of an abandoned wife, the interference of a pleasure seeking lover, are not myths but a harsh reality in contemporary world. Vishakha fails to rise above her materialistic desires and move towards higher aims. Karnad shows the true state of society full of self indulgent pleasure seekers.

Vishakha is married to Parvasu against her wishes, depicting a harsh Indian reality. A huge number of Indian parents particularly in rural areas still arrange their daughter's marriage without taking their will into consideration. A number of unsuspecting girls end up marrying undeserving fellows. In Karnad's *Naga-Mandala*, an innocent Rani is married to the wild Appanna, who is bewitched by a concubine and treats his wife like a slave.

The subjugation of women begins before birth, when parents attempt female foeticide to prevent a woman from being born. After birth, a girl child is in danger of murder or abandonment. If this is not the case and if the girl child happens to be a product of a financially restrained family, she faces discrimination in education, nutrition, and health facilities, as compared to her male sibling. Child marriage is another atrocity committed on women to secure a groom and do away with her hastily, with as little 'dowry' as possible. As an adult a woman faces subjugation and harassment in her husband's home, where her 'dowry' becomes an issue. Cases of burning women for dowry were an everyday reality, and the incidents continue to be reported in the media in the garb of 'accidents' and 'casualties'. As a widow, Indian women were encouraged to perform 'sati' and end their lives with the entire society as witness. A woman also suffers bias in inheritance rights, both in the parental as well as the marital home.

When Karnad, and innumerable literary figures talk about these evils of society, they are not imagining situations, they are portraying actuality. Though a number of these evils are banned by law, the patriarchal powers continue to discover new ways to practice their favourite trade. Women's oppression is a social reality, a major weakness and challenge for a fast developing nation like India. A nation cannot move forward if one half of its population is suppressed and disabled.

For Vishakha, too patriarchal domination continues after marriage. Her marital relationship exists only on the physical plane, with no room for companionship or commitment. Karnad depicts the hollowness of marriages in modern, urbanized societies. Lack of warmth, happiness, and harmony in relationships are real concerns and weaknesses of a consumerist society. They are not myths. Vishakha's and Parvasu's failed union signify that physical attachment alone cannot lay the foundation of a healthy relationship.

Vishakha is used as an instrument by her lover as well as her husband. She is abandoned by both and left to rot in isolation. While men move on, women continue to feel the pain. Vishakha remembers her hurt but Yavakari can think only of his sexual adventures. Vishakha, Yavakari and Parvasu exist in the real society. Their story is socially and culturally relevant. Their predicament, feelings, actions are human and real. Girish Karnad, a post-independence playwright is aware of the evils of contemporary society. His plays focus on the female desire for completeness, and her struggle for her rights and identity. In the words of P.D. Nimsarkar:

Karnad is outstandingly liberal in portrayal and development of women protagonists in his plays. His mind is conditioned in the ambience typical in the Hindu society and human relationship that the orthodox families and society have nurtured through the generations...Karnad's heroines take care of their desires and to achieve them, find their own ways. (20)

Through Vishakha, Karnad shows the repeated victimization of women in a male-dominated society. In the original myth Vishakha is not even named and it is told that Yavakari molested 'Parvasu's wife', but Karnad weaves different relationships around Vishakha and makes her an important character in the play.

An abandoned Vishakha becomes “parched and wordless, like a she-devil” (Karnad122; act 1). After Parvasu goes away, she is left behind at the hermitage with her father-in-law, Raibhya, who exploits her mentally and sexually. Yavakri uses Vishakha’s body in order to challenge her in-laws. She is shattered to know that Yavakri used her to take revenge on her in-laws. Tortured and frustrated with her life that she begs Parvasu, “Kill me. For all your experiments you haven’t tried the ultimate. Human sacrifice! ” (Karnad 142; act 2).

Vishakha stands for any typical Indian woman sufferer in a patriarchal world. Yet Karnad presents her as a modern and strong woman who despite ceaseless suffering, struggles to assert her freedom and her rights as a human being. She unhesitatingly offers her body to Yavakari, asserting her right to her sexuality. By encouraging a lover outside marriage, she challenges centuries of patriarchal regulations. She boldly declares in front of her father-in-law that Yavakri had come to see her alone, even when she knew it would infuriate him. She fearlessly instigates Arvasu to let Parvasu repent for killing his father and says, “live your own life” (Karnad 145; act 2). She finally leaves the hermitage to live life on her own terms. Karnad empowers her and hints at her emancipation. A myth connects the past and the present and Karnad’s tale shows that the oppression of women has been a reality in all ages.

Vishakha is the cause of several problems in the play. Because of her, Raibhya curses and gets Yavakari killed. Yavakari’s father dies out of shock. Arvasu fails to reach the tribal gathering, and his marriage to Nittilai stands cancelled. Yavakari curses Nittilai. Yavakari is aware of Nittilai’s intellect, and is vexed when she finds him in a compromising position with Vishakha. Most men in the patriarchal society are like Yavakari. They have a flaw- the inability to accept women as intellectually, morally, and spiritually superior to them. Yavakari feels insecure because Nittilai questions the truth behind his acquisition of knowledge. Because of his fear and guilt of exposure Yavakari curses her with death. Fear and guilt are human weaknesses, not myths. History and politics is replete with examples of conspiracies to kill those who are a potent threat. Patriarchal societies all over the world have trampled women who tried to rise and progress. It’s a man’s weakness that he cannot tolerate a woman who question’s his deeds, thoughts, or actions. The inability to accept women as equal or superior proves that society suffers from short-sightedness.

Vishakha is instrumental in Raibhya’s death. She incites Parvasu against his own father. Karnad depicts the human weakness of allowing impulsiveness ride over rationality. Many dramatists have depicted women as the cause of destruction in the family. Manthara and Kaikeyi, are two such examples from the epic *Ramayana*. Parvasu does not care to verify Vishakha’s allegations. Maybe he is also driven by other motives. Raibhya kills Yavakari, and Parvasu believes that he might further disturb the fire sacrifice, so he kills her. The weakness for power plagues the entire human civilization. Vishakha is the cause of brahminicide and fratricide. The result of these events is that Parvasu cheats his innocent brother, Arvasu and implicates him in the false charge of fratricide. Brothers begin to hate each other. Families are shattered and trust is broken.

Arvasu leads a pitiable life. Ignored, betrayed, and uncared for by his family, he loses Nittilai, the only person to love him. Arvasu becomes a victim of his brother’s intrigue. He is so simple and trustful, that he keeps his words to Vishakha and goes to meet Yavakari, when he should have departed for Nittilai’s village. Caught in a web of vicious minds, Arvasu makes wrong judgements. Innocence, poor decision making, and misplaced trust become his weakness and shatter his life.

Andhaka, Bharadwaja’s blind but trustworthy guard fails to recognize Yavakari’s footsteps, because Yavakari is now a changed man. The knowledge he acquires has become a tool for destruction. Pride and jealousy which are universal human weaknesses, victimize him. Mythological stories portray gods committing vile deeds, under the influence of these vices. Strengths and weaknesses are integral to human nature, and define an individual’s personality. Karnad, shows the disintegration of values at the intellectual level. There is an intellectual vacuum in society where knowledge is not an end in itself, but a medium to gain materialistic mileage. The intellect in modern society is more critical than creative.

In the play, staged by Arvasu at the site of the fire sacrifice, 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. The act is similar to the incident in which Parvasu, jealous of his brother’s simplicity and innocence, has him treacherously excommunicated. Indra is unable to accept a human being as his half- brother, just as the Brahmins and other high caste people in the play look at the lower castes with disgust. The Vritra’s

heart-wrenched outcry, “Why, Brother? Why, why, why? Brother, why? Why?”(Karnad, The Epilogue 170), at Indra’s betrayal is an echo of Arvasu’s outcry on Parvasu’s betrayal. There is a strong parallel between the play within the play and the real story. Myth mingles with reality, as there is similarity in action, thoughts and intentions.

The Fire and the Rain portrays the estrangement between brothers—between Bharadwaja and Raibhya, between Arvasu, Parvasu and their cousin, Yavakri, and eventually between Arvasu and Parvasu. The friction and clash of interest in families is relevant to the Indian society in any age. The joint family structure of Indian society has gradually disintegrated owing to selfish individualism.

Indra is pleased by Arvasu’s act and grants him a boon. Arvasu wants to resurrect his beloved Raibhya, Parvasu, Nittilai and the others. It is only human to have a longing to bring back to life all those who are a part of one’s life. Arvasu is no exception. In a moment of weakness, he wants all his loved ones back. Finally, it is the Brahma Rakshasa who puts Arvasu in an ethical and humanitarian dilemma and helps in his evolution as a human being.

Karnad thus says that human beings can overcome their weaknesses and correct their faults, that humanity is by far the only virtue worthy of being possessed. Human beings, the supreme creations of God, have in them the potential to realize and correct their shortcomings.

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