

Pure Heart as Real Oblation of Yajna: A Critique of Girish Karnad's *The Fire and the Rain*

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Abstract

Girish Karnad's *The Fire and the Rain* (1994) is mainly about the drought affected people of the ancient India. The people are suffering from a severe drought and earth is thirsty for water and rain. A very horrible picture of a drought affected region has been drawn by the playwright. A number of efforts are being done to propitiate the god of rains. Fire sacrifice (Yajna) is being conducted by the Brahmins and scholarly people. An enactment of a play *The Triumph of Lord Indra* is being done by common people and socially outcaste actors.

The play is full of elements of carnival and inversion as the rain is brought not by efforts of high and scholarly people but by the efforts of common and uneducated people. It is based on a myth from the *Mahabharata* and in many ways it is a microcosm of the world of the *Mahabharata*: the rivalry between the family members of two brothers Bhardwaja and Raibhya unleashes intense emotions of hatred, revenge, evil desires, incest and bloodthirstiness. Only a few characters in the play are good by heart whose Karma absolves others of their guilt.

The play is full of resonances of the carnival: the revered ascetics with their ultimate knowledge and divine power prove to be devils while the simplicities of the outcaste and socially inferior people turn out to be a boon for the welfare of humanity; gods turn out to be evil-minded devils while the actions of demons are virtuous and god-like; austerity and *tapa* prove to be mere instruments of destruction and violence.

Keywords: *Pure Heart, Yajna, Fire, Rain, Guilt, Tapa, Propitiate*

Pure Heart as Real Oblation of Yajna: A Critique of Girish Karnad's *The Fire and the Rain*

Karnad's *The Fire and the Rain* (1994) is mainly about the drought affected people of the ancient India. The people are suffering from a severe drought and earth is thirsty for water and rain. A fire sacrifice (Yajna) is being conducted to bring to please Indra (god of rains) and thereby bring the rains for the thirsty earth and good harvest for the hungry people. The playwright has drawn a very horrible picture of a drought affected region. A number of efforts are being done to propitiate the god of rains. Fire sacrifice (Yajna) is being conducted by the Brahmins and scholarly people. An enactment of a play *The Triumph of Lord Indra* is being done by common people and socially outcaste actors. The play is full of elements of carnival and inversion as the rain is brought not by efforts of high and scholarly people but by the efforts of common and uneducated people.

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The Fire and the Rain was first staged in Minneapolis, USA in 1994 and was published in 1998. Originally it was written in Kannada and was translated into English by the writer himself. The action of the play revolves around a seven year

long fire sacrifice (Yajna) designed to save humanity from drought and famine. The conducting priest Parvasu is the husband of Vishakaha, the former beloved of his cousin Yavakri. Yavakri has just returned from his ten years' *tapasya* in the deep forest. He is determined to avenge himself on Parvasu's family that has done injustice to his father Bharadwaja. Bharadwaja is a learned man but his brother Raibhya overshadows his personality and enjoys all the privileges of being a learned man in king's court. In order to invoke the anger of Parvasu's father Raibhya, Yavakri seduces Vishakha. Raibhya is incensed when he comes to know the fornication of his daughter-in-law by Yavakri. He conjures a supernatural power Brahma Rakshasa and sends it to kill Yavakri. Yavakri is equally arrogant and confident of his superiority in supernatural powers. But he is deluded by magical powers of Raibhya and consequently he is killed by Brahma Rakshasa. At this, Parvasu gets angry as he thinks that his father killed Yavakri only to disturb him and blacken his reputation as the Chief Priest. Vishakaha arouses his anger by revealing that his father often forces her to have sex with him. He kills Raibhya and orders his brother Arvasu to cremate him and do penance for patricide. Later on, he accuses innocent Arvasu of patricide and excommunicates him by declaring him to be a demon. Arvasu is made the scapegoat by his cousin Yavakri as well: he could not marry his soul mate Nittilai as he remains engaged in obeying Yavakri and meeting him at the appointed place. However he finds his Nittilai back as she forsakes the whole world for his sake. But this company does not last long as Nittilai is killed by her husband and brother. In the meantime Arvasu gets a chance of playing the role of demon Vritra in a play enacted in the honour of seven year long fire sacrifice. His personal grievances find their full outlet when he forgets that he is merely playing the role of Vritra and starts really hitting and chasing Indra (the Actor Manager). Pleased with his acting the god Indra appears and fulfils his wish of welfare of humanity. Consequently it starts raining and people start rejoicing.

As in *Hayavadana*, Karnad in *The Fire and the Rain* also breaks away from a number of established beliefs and cultural constructions through the recreation of an ancient myth into modern play. In India Brahmins and ascetics have always held the most reverential place in society; it is universally acknowledged that these learned

people with their super-consciousness have mastered their passions and transcended earthly desires. But Karnad shows that the so-called great priests and ascetics like Parvasu, Raibhya and Yavakri actually have no control over their passions. Parvasu's patricide and his use of Vishakha's body for selfish quest of spiritual knowledge are really acts of not an enlightened soul but an evil mind. His false denunciation of Arvasu is equally devilish. His crude denial of giving any help to Brahma Rakshasa reveals his ruthlessness and inhuman attitude. His father Raibhya is also a learned but cruel Brahmin. Even in his old age he is so ambitious that he cannot bear the fact of his own son Parvasu's becoming the Chief Priest. He has no cultural and moral qualms; he forcibly pours his curdled lust on his daughter figure Vishakha. No sap of human love runs into him. When he comes to know about Vishakha's seduction, he beats her brutally and sends Brahma Rakshasa to kill Yavakri. Yavakri has acquired the highest state of asceticism but still he is slave of his passions. Even after gaining ultimate knowledge, he has not been freed of his teenage fantasies, sexual longings and anger. In his violent mood, he looks like Duryodhana of *Mahabharata*. His speech to Vishakha reveals his obsessive intensity and unbridled anger:

One night in the jungle, Indra came to me and said: "You are ready now to receive knowledge. But knowledge involves control of passions, serenity, objectivity." And I shouted back: "No, that's not the knowledge I want. That's not knowledge. That's suicide! This obsession. This hatred. This venom. All this is me. I'll not deny anything of myself. I want knowledge so I can be vicious, destructive".

(Karnad in *Collected Plays* Vol. 2 2005: 131)

Thus we find that in *The Fire and the Rain* all the major characters are dominated by some or other desire and this desire (Trishna) is the root cause of their tragic fate. Parvasu, Raibhya and Yavakri all are in search of knowledge / power, only to dominate one another and have the egoistic sense of being supreme. And all of them use a woman's (Vishkha's) body as an instrument to their will to power. Parvasu copulates with Vishakha only to gain experience that will complement his Tantrik practice. Raibhya subjugates Vishakha sexually to gratify his rage and perverted

physical hunger. Yavakri seduces Vishkha to satisfy his long cherished sexual desire and to take his revenge on his enemy Raibhya. Vishakha is thus a site of erotic desire as well as violence. Her life with Paravasu has been an ordeal of silent suffering. Her sexuality is used /abused by Paravasu as an instrument of his mystic Tantrik experiment. As Tripathi observes:

Reduced to being an instrument serving Paravasu's mystic goal, Vishakha's narrative tells the story of her victimization. Her account tellingly enacts the condition of elite Brahmin and Kshatriya women in the ancient India who were fettered by the laws of the society, forced to put up with the contradictions of being coveted, desired, worshipped as well as abused and exploited.

(Tripathi, 2004: 155)

Karnad's artistry breaks down both the orthodox cultural constructions and restrictive theoretical forms in order to recreate a new order. His *The Fire and the Rain* enacts a consummate theoretical experience and endeavours to give the Upanishadic message of Datta (to give), Dayadhvam (to sympathise) and Damyata (to control). In contrast to Paravasu, Raibhya and Yavakri, Arvasu and Nittilai are simple, clear hearted and full of love for humanity. Arvasu forsakes his high caste and community for his love of Nittilai, a girl belonging to hunter tribe. But he cannot be completely free of his cultural obligations; he fails to reach in time to marry Nittilai as he remains engaged in observing the Brahmanical rituals at the death of his cousin Yavakri. Nittilai is equally full of human love. She loses her life for the sake of Arvasu. She embodies the ascetic ideals of predominantly non-Brahmanical tradition as she is instinctively full of love and compassion for everyone. She does not approve of the mystic and repressive practices of Brahmins. In her conversation with Andhaka and Arvasu she casts doubt on the relevance of asceticism:

My point is, since Lord Indra appeared to Yavakri and Indra is their God of Rains, why didn't Yavakri ask for a couple of good showers? You should see the region around our village. Parched. Every morning women with babes on their hips, shrunken children, shrivelled old men and women gather in front of my father's house— for the gruel he distributes. No young people. They have all disappeared! And Father says all the land needs is a

couple of heavy downpours. That'll revive the earth. Not too much to ask of a god, is it? (Karnad in *Collected Plays* Vol. 2 2005: 117).

Like Nittilai, Arvasu is also a simple and down-to-earth person. He does not have any scheming slyness either of his father Raibhya or his brother Parvasu. Unlike them, he is not interested in Vedic or ultimate knowledge; he has rather deep concern for the fellow human beings. When he is banished from the Brahmin community, it seems as if he were released from some prison-house. Now he is free to fulfil his urge of acting and live happily in the company of Nittiali. As he says, "I'll never be learned like father or uncle. I shan't ever conduct the royal sacrifice like Parvasu or perform penance like cousin Yavakri. All I want is to dance, sing and act. And be with Nittilai" (113). In the play *The Fire and the Rain* (1994), he chooses to play the role of a demon called Vritra because in Vritra he sees his own image: like Parvasu Indra also betrayed his two brothers Vritra and Vishwarupa. While chasing Indra (Actor Manager) on the stage, Arvasu starts rushing towards the real sacrificial enclosure in order to burn down the sacrifice and take his revenge upon his brother Parvasu. But Parvasu immolates himself in the blazing enclosure of the sacrificial fire. Ultimately he learns the value of compassion and philanthropy. Though he wavers between the personal and the common good, he sacrifices his happiness (love and company of Nittilai) for the release of a tormented soul. Along with Brahma Rakshasa, the host of suffering souls is released. The earth is purged off its accumulated sins and it starts raining.

With multiple and diverse theatrical devices regarding the script, the arrangement of events, the stage setting, costumes, sound, light, music, participation of audience and the play within play, *The Fire and the Rain* proves to be a complete theatrical experience. The play within play is its most important feature. Karnad's journey from myth to meta-theatre is relevant in contemporary context. In the Prologue, Actor-Manager focuses light on the origin, nature and aim of drama:

Sirs, as is well known to you, Brahma, the Lord of All Creation extracted the requisite elements from the four Vedas and combined them into fifth Veda and thus gave birth to the art of drama. He handed it over to His son, Lord Indra, the God of the Skies. Lord Indra, in turn, passed on the art of Bharata, a human being, for the gods cannot indulge in pretence. So if

Indra is to be pleased and bring to an end this long drought which ravages our land, a fire sacrifice is not enough. A play has to be performed with it. If we offer him entertainment in addition to the oblations, the god may grant us the rains we're praying for (107).

Thus, the play is full of resonances of carnival and inversions. The fire sacrifice (Yajna) cannot bring rain but an enactment of democratic play can do it; Great priests Paravasu cannot bring rain but pure hearted Arvasu can do it. The Yajna (praying for rains or good harvest) is a sacred performance; but it is not accessible to the common and downtrodden people as it involves restriction, repression and distinction. On the other hand as theatre under the open sky is free of these prohibitions, it is more democratic and life-oriented. The enactment of *The Triumph of Lord Indra* in the play is full of the elements of popular folk theatre. In Prologue Actor-Manager also points out that the sons of Bharata were the first actors in the history of theatre. They lost their high caste because theatre was considered to be the profession of low and degraded people. This is why Actor-Manager himself is instructed to keep his distance from the sacrificial enclosure so that he may not pollute it. Only priests and virtuous Brahmins can join the ritual of fire sacrifice. But theatre by its very nature is democratic and open to all and sundry without any discrimination. When Arvasu intrudes into the real sacrificial ground, the weak and hungry villagers also lose their patience and start eating the food kept for the gods. This is the moment when gods are pleased and people find relief from long drought and famine.

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