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MYTH AS THE MIRROR OF MODERN SOCIETY: EXAMINING GIRISH KARNAD'S ADAPTATION IN *THE FIRE AND THE RAIN*

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Abstract:

Literary adaptations uniquely reflect the modern world which contributes greatly. This study highlights a mesmerising Indian literary work of adaptation from the great epic, Mahabharata where deviation from the myth is prioritized for shake of modern perspectives and performance. How far does myth reflect the modern societal circumstances through Karnad's adaptation in The Fire and the Rain? Following this research question, a detailed analysis and observation are drawn upon Girish Karnad's illuminating play, The Fire and the Rain to make this objective successful. Karnad willingly deviates from the 'myth of Yavakri' to transform the story through his newly developed characters and creates several twists in the plot and climax. Also, symbolically and rhetorically this play is highly cerebral and enriched with intellectual interpretations. His approach of feminism and gender equality in this play is appeared from stunning actions of heroic characters. At the ending, his message about restoring peace in human world through love and sacrifice seems significant life-lessons. From myth to modern play, it seems a journey, where his interpretation truly creates a revolutionary effect on the stage. So, in reality, the impact of this play is able to clean and change human psyche towards positivity.

Keywords: *Adaptation, Performance, Myth, Interpretation, Modern play, etc.*

Introduction:

For multidisciplinary accessibility, nowadays literature is closer to people's heart rather than a specific elite class. Everyone can dive into the realm of literature and the possibility is drawn by innovative technique of adaptation and interpretation; through performance, different languages, fusion and amalgamation literature is being blended with other art forms. Using chromatic palate, Narratives are now illustrated on the canvas of music, drama, dance, film and others; as a fruit of this innovation, literature knocks every door of universal thoughts. So, literature is truly the mirror of society; each reflection holds different story; shedding lights upon darkness of society, untold, unheard worlds are highlighted from hidden alleys. In this way, universal society can recognise the hell and the heaven within own existence. Walking in the waves of those never-ending tales, the objective of this paper highlights a mesmerising Indian literary work of adaptation from the great epic, Mahabharata where deviation from the myth is prioritized for presenting modern perspectives and performance. On the background of universal themes - alienation, loneliness, love, family, hatred, this deviated work excellently approaches feminism, gender equality and contemporary issues of modern society through stunning actions of heroic characters. A detailed analysis and observation are drawn upon India's renowned playwright and actor, Girish Karnad's



illuminating play, *The Fire and the Rain* to make this objective successful. The research question of this paper is: How far does myth reflect the modern societal circumstances through Karnad's adaptation in *The Fire and the Rain*? Original story of the myth and Karnad's adaptation both are critically studied and appreciated, exhibiting his deviated and recreative portions that proves the confidence of this creative genius. His adaptation from the 'myth of Yavakri' transforms the essence of original story through newly developed characters whose contribution brings few more colours in the plot and climax.

The study of Girish Karnad's *The Fire and the Rain* has drawn significant attention in the domain of Indian literature and theatre, particularly for its innovative approach to mythological reinterpretation. Scholars such as Aparna Dharwadker and Rakesh H. Solomon have explored how Karnad blends ancient myths with contemporary themes, emphasizing their relevance in the modern socio-cultural context. Karnad's use of the 'myth of Yavakri' has been critically analysed for its exploration of human emotions, gender dynamics, and existential dilemmas. The theoretical framework for this research leans on postcolonial and feminist literary criticism, emphasizing Karnad's subversion of traditional patriarchal norms and his commentary on power dynamics within gender and caste structures. This perspective draws insights from theorists like Homi K. Bhabha, who discusses hybridity and cultural negotiation, and Judith Butler, who critiques gender as performative.

However, a notable research gap exists in the detailed examination of how Karnad's adaptations directly address and resolve modern societal concerns, particularly in light of intersectionality and representation. Previous studies have predominantly focused on either the mythological fidelity or the theatrical elements, leaving room to explore the socio-political commentary embedded in the narrative. This research seeks to bridge this gap by critically analysing Karnad's adaptation as a tool for reimagining traditional myths through the lens of feminism and social equity.

The scope of this study extends beyond a textual analysis of *The Fire and the Rain*. It examines the performative aspects of the play, considering its cultural and social impact on Indian theatre and society. By addressing the interplay between myth and modernity, the paper aims to contribute to ongoing discussions about the adaptability of classical texts in contemporary times and their potential to challenge and reshape societal norms. This dual focus on textual fidelity and innovation will shed light on Karnad's unique ability to navigate the boundaries between tradition and transformation.

The Myth of Yavakri, Original Story in Mahabharata:

Yavakrita or the myth of Yavakri occurs in chapter 135-38 of the Vana Parva (Forest Canto) of the *Mahabharata*. It is narrated by ascetic Lombasha to the Pandavas as they wander across the land during exile. The story begins with two important characters, Bharadwaja and Raibhya, two sages who are good friends. Raibhya is a learned sage who lives with his two sons while Bharadwaja engages himself on ascetic practices. But Yavakri, Bharadwaja's son feels unfair for his father as he thinks his father never gets enough respect and recognition which is his due and with this feeling, he nurtures anger and desire in his bosom. So, going off to the forest, he starts penance (tapasya) so that he can obtain the knowledge of the Vedas from the gods directly. After a rigorous ascetic practice of him, Indra, the lord of gods appears to him and tries to make him understand that there are no such short cuts to knowledge because knowledge has to be obtained by studying at the feet of a guru. But with stubborn, Yavakri convinces him that Indra ultimately



let him have his wish. Being a wise man, Bharadwaja becomes anxious about his son and cautions him against delusions of omnipotence. But Yavakri doesn't obey anything; at first, he pretends to love Raibhya's daughter-in-law in a lonely spot and molests her. His mischievous behaviour incenses Raibhya. Then invoking 'kritya' spirit, Raibhya tears a hair from his head and makes an oblation of it to the fire. From another hair he similarly brings forth a 'rakshasa' (demon). After that, they are sent by him to kill Yavakri. He is seduced by the spirit in the form of daughter-in-law, who steals his urn through seductive approach and the urn contains the water that makes him invulnerable to danger; the 'rakshasa' then violently chases him. Yavakri runs towards the lake but it dries up and every spot with a bit of water becomes dry at his appearance. Finally, he tries to enter his father's hermitage but a blind man of Sudra caste, who guards the gate, bars his entry and at that moment the 'rakshasa' kills him. Bharadwaja gets to know entire incident of his son's death from the Sudra and being distressed, he curses Raibhya that he would die at the hand of his elder son although he knows that the death of his son is blamed to himself and after that he realizes his folly in cursing a friend so he enters fire and immolates himself. Raibhya's two sons, Parvasu and Arvasu were conducting a fire sacrifice for the king and one night Parvasu visits his home and mistakes the black deerskin as a wild animal which his father wears and unintentionally kills him. Realizing what he has done, he cremates his father and returns to the sacrificial enclosure. Doing a conspiracy, he throws entire allegation of Brahminicide and patricide to his brother, Arvasu and turns him a killer and culprit to the king; then Arvasu is thrown out by the king's order although he screams and protests that he is innocent. After that Arvasu shelters himself in the forest; he prays to the Sun God and when the gods appear, Arvasu asks them to restore lives of Yavakri, Bharadwaja, Raibhya and make Parvasu forget his evil act. The gods grant his prayers and when Yavakri comes back to life, the gods reminds him about his folly and advises him to pursue knowledge, walking on the right path.

Girish Karnad's Adaptation and Deviation:

Following the preface of Girish Karnad's play, *The Fire and the Rain*, his experience before making this play is found that he has met Sanskrit scholars who are unaware about the existence of this myth because a short narrative can be easily lost from the track and be hidden under the floor of the epic. So, from C. Rajagopalachari's abridgment of the *Mahabharata*, he first gets to know the story of Yavakri and Parvasu. Being inspired from Rajaji's splendid work, Karnad writes *The Fire and the Rain* in 1993 for a commissioned work, given by the Guthrie Theatre, Minneapolis, USA and in 1994, the script is succeeded through the stage-worthy performance by professional American actors. In India, this play was first presented at the Chowdiah Memorial Hall, Bangalore in 1999. But his excellent adaptation from the myth is originally a Kannada play, *Agni Mattu Male*; 'Agni' is the Sanskrit word for fire and 'Malè' is a Kannada word for rain, pure and simple and 'Mattu' means and in spoken Kannada. The title of the play gets more relevance through his fusion work between two types of languages, Indo-Aryan (Sanskrit) and Dravirian (Kannada), between two perspectives, Pan-Indic and regional, between the classical 'marga' and the less elevated 'desi' traditions. Redesigning the existing myth, he changes the story according his perspectives; first major change is that he presents Bharadwaja and Raibhya as 'two brothers' instead of 'two friends'. Similarly, he uses the myth of Indra-Vritra as 'play-within-the-play'. Indra, the King of Gods kills his younger brother, Vishwarupa, the King of Men from jealousy, due to his brother's popularity and this is strongly parallel between the Arvasu-Parvasu plot and the storyline of the play-within-the-play. Introducing the role of Vishakha, Parvasu's wife,



Karnad significantly deviates from the myth as he presents her as an essential female character, going through a modification. Vishakha is Parvasu's wife in original myth but here she is appeared with several relations which makes her significant character just like other male characters in the play. Karnad's creation of Nittilai, another essential character, proves him as a true creative genius as there is no such character in the actual myth. He introduces her in the play as a girl, belonged to tribal hunters, 'low-caste'. A Brahmin boy, Arvasu (Aravasu in original myth) falls in love with her and has an intention to marry her. But Arvasu loses the chance of marrying Nittilai forever to reach at the place of tribal elders only half an hour late. He protests against this injustice but that only creates trouble for him and his beloved, Nittilai. Karnad also uses the myth of Yajna (fire sacrifice); he shows that the land is suffering in drought and hence seven years long fire sacrifice is being held in king's palace where Parvasu is the Chief Priest. For his respected position, Raibhya is humiliated and jealous and Vishakha is abandoned; also, Yavakri gets one more reason to hate him. At the ending of the play, much awaited rain comes but Karnad shows that this is not happened for the seven years long fire sacrifice but because of Arvasu selfless love and care for others.

From Myth to Modern Society, an Invisible Connection:

Karnad's deviation draws a connection between the myth and the modern society with a fine invisible thread, weaving through his own perspectives. Presenting Bharadwaja and Raibhya as 'two brothers' instead of 'two friends', he presents the theme of hatred among blood relatives, common issue of brothers in several families. He symbolically raises the problems in modern families where brothers agree to swim in the pool of blood for fulfilling own desires, grabbing own possessions through the filthy game of power. Another hand, the scenario between Arvasu and Parvasu is similarly dark; unintentionally Parvasu kills his father, Raibhya and blames his younger brother, Arvasu and makes him evil in front of the king. This kind of darker humiliation is still happened for human's selfishness. The impact of the power-hunger attitude in human being is shown more prominently through few modifications from original myth. Karnad's development of Vishakha is crucial here, excellently approaching feminism. He shows that Vishakha has a secret love with Yavakri in their adolescent period; they enjoy beautiful moments and dreams about a good future but Yavakri's ambition from false sense of pride, egocentricity and misconception becomes higher than his love for her so he leaves her company and goes off in forest for penance in the last ten years. After that when they meet, Yavakri pretends to love her with a revenge motif to her father-in-law, Raibhya; he uses her body and emotion for his own purpose. Also, Raibhya makes an illegitimate relation with Vishakha, forcing her from his wild lust, hunger and desire for seven years when her husband, Parvasu leaves the home to attempt the fire sacrifice in king's palace as the chief priest. She is mentally and physically tortured and dominated by the perverted mind of Raibhya. Vishakha expresses her traumatic experiences to her husband, "An old man's curdled last. And there's no one else here to take his rage out but on me. At least Yavakri was warm, gentle. For a few minutes, he made me forget the wizened body, the scratchy claws, and the blood, cold as ice. And he paid for it with his life" (Karnad, 1998, p. 38). Her words show how dark those seven years were for her. Earlier, Parvasu already uses her body for years as a tool of experiment to fulfil his own sexual desires, after giving happiness and beautiful moments only for one year. So, Vishakha is symbolically presented as fire that absorbs everything. Though women are victimised still now, going through numerous domestic violences but here Karnad does not properly victimise Vishakha, as absorbing everything, she somehow



becomes eternal with her suffering, pain and desire for true care and love in heart; Yavakri, Raibhya, Parvasu, all of them are died sequentially for their Karma. Karnad's creation of Nittilai proves his approach of feminist revolution and gender equality. Audience's questions are raised through this character; her questioning attitude makes a strong feminine impression. About Yavakri's penance, she questions, "Then how does everyone know what happened in a remote corner of the jungle - miles away from the nearest prying eye" (Karnad, 1998, p.11)? She also asks, "But I want to know is why are the Brahmins so secretive about everything (Karnad, 12)? She adds more her points, "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 (Karnad, 12)? She also wants to question Yavakri about his knowledge, "What is the point of any knowledge, if you can't save dying children and if you can't predict your moment of death (Karnad, 13). Nittilai's appearance brings the essence of gender equality in the text, as not being submissive, she expresses her words logically with an argumentative motif which creates her significance just like other males; Arvasu and Nittilai equally loves each other and she runs back out of love from her husband and brother to Arvasu and encourages him as a true companion, for taking the decision about acting in the play, *The Triumph of Lord Indra*. But she is killed at last by her brother and husband in a name of honour killing; Arvasu prays badly to save her life but ultimately, he has to sacrifice his love. Through these heroic stances of two lovers, bravery of Nittilai and equal projection of them, Karnad innovatively draws gender equality and feminism with a revolutionary intention. His adaptation similarly reflects the image of patriarchal domination among all the classes of society; male and female, all individuals equally suffer under this darkness. "I was dancing with the hunters and you said: 'Bharata's sons lost caste because of the stage.' I haven't acted on stage since then" (Karnad, 35), Arvasu shares his feeling to his elder brother, Parvasu with a repressed agony as he loves to act but being a Brahmin he has to resist himself to pursue his passion as it is forbidden to their class and Bharata, the creator of 'Natya-Shastra', the fifth Veda, can't save his sons also from being outcaste as they would perform on the stage. So, from an unknown fear of losing dignity of family, Arvasu restricts himself. Another hand he loses the chance of marrying Nittilai for just being half an hour late as elders of her tribal cult don't believe him. They belong to a lower caste and similarly suffer for basic needs of life, being dominated by higher caste like Brahmin; their girls are used enough by those high-caste men whether they are treated like untouchables. Patriarchal domination touches the roof when Nittilai is killed and Arvasu can't reverse the incident for a fair judgement, so, he has to sacrifices everything. Karnad presents the major social problems – caste discrimination, individual's suffering in orthodox society and others through every angle of this play with an intention of highlighting the hidden truth from the darkest core of Indian society. After the entire analysis, the key finding follows the relevance of myth because it seems all mythological stories keep hidden messages for further generations as if they can learn the knowledge of living in life from ancient wisdom; though somebody always raise questions on the relevance of those myths, with proper intelligence, Girish Karnad illustrates his adaptation, creating a deep connection between myth and modern society as if people of modern eras can recognise every reflection of their time on the mirror of the ancient myths.

The study of Girish Karnad's *The Fire and the Rain* thrives on its inherently interdisciplinary nature, blending literature, mythology, theatre studies, sociology, and cultural anthropology. By interpreting the myth of Yavakri through a modern lens, Karnad integrates traditional literary narratives with contemporary social commentary, making his work a fertile ground for exploring gender studies, performative arts, and philosophical inquiries into human



relationships and morality. Theatrical performance, as an interdisciplinary art form, further amplifies the narrative by intertwining textual analysis with visual storytelling, music, and stagecraft, offering a holistic approach to understanding cultural discourses. This study also draws from psychology to examine the inner conflicts and motivations of characters, providing deeper insight into the universality of human emotions and their societal implications. Karnad's fusion of myth and reality demonstrates how ancient texts can be reimagined to address pressing contemporary issues, including gender inequality, alienation, and systemic social hierarchies.

However, the study is not without limitations. While the interdisciplinary approach enriches the analysis, it also risks diluting the focus on the textual core of the play. The complexity of synthesizing multiple perspectives may lead to challenges in maintaining a cohesive argument. Additionally, the scope of the research is confined to Karnad's *The Fire and the Rain*, which may restrict the comparative evaluation of similar mythological adaptations in Indian literature and theatre. Finally, the performative aspect of the play, although integral, may not be fully captured through textual analysis alone, as the live dynamics of audience engagement and cultural nuances in performances are difficult to quantify or reproduce in scholarly discourse. Despite these limitations, the study aims to illuminate Karnad's contribution to the evolving landscape of Indian literature and its intersection with social and cultural narratives.

Conclusion:

Apart from Karnad's adaptation, this play has also been presented on the big screen in Bollywood through Arjun Sajnani's *Agnivarsha*. The film adaptation further reinforces the narrative's timeless appeal by translating its themes into a visual medium, enabling a wider audience to engage with its layered storytelling. The journey of *The Fire and the Rain* from an ancient myth to a modern play and eventually to cinema underscores Karnad's brilliance in reimagining traditional tales while addressing universal themes of love, hatred, jealousy, alienation, and redemption. This adaptability highlights the enduring relevance of the play and Karnad's creativity, which bridges cultural and temporal boundaries, bringing him global acclaim. Karnad's work does more than entertain; it offers a transformative experience for audiences by shedding light on the darker recesses of human behaviour while inspiring a shift toward introspection and positivity. By addressing critical societal issues like gender inequality, familial discord, and the consequences of unchecked ambition, *The Fire and the Rain* becomes a mirror that reflects and critiques contemporary human experiences, fostering empathy and self-awareness. This profound impact on the human psyche ensures that the play's relevance will persist across generations, making it a cornerstone of Indian literature and theatre. Through his masterful integration of text, performance, and interpretation, Karnad succeeds in creating a work that resonates deeply with both Indian and global audiences. The grandeur of his vision is not confined to the stage or the page; it extends to a broader cultural and intellectual discourse, proving the universal power of literature to challenge, transform, and heal. Karnad's contribution to Indian literature and drama, marked by his ability to weave modernity into myth, remains a testament to his unparalleled genius and ensures his legacy as a luminary in the world of storytelling.

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