

Space, Time and Destiny : An Analysis of *The Fire And The Rain*

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The *Natyashastra*¹ specifies that drama has a role of integration of the three worlds - the physical, the emotional, and the spiritual. Abhinav gupta elaborates it and states that drama should direct one's mind toward the realization of the *Purushartha*²- *dharma, artha, kama and moksha*. Similarly, Girish Karnad manifests a unifying purpose (setting, scheme, structure and symbols of the play)- integrating time and space, that contributes to the author's aim - interpreting the past in order to reform the present which is suffering from social evils like casteism, ages-old and unequal attitude to women, vain knowledge of priestly class with their possessiveness, jealousy, malice, mistrust, competition, treachery, revenge, power-conflict, adultery and their meaningless sacrifice without social concern.

Girish Karnad is a writer who has been deeply influenced by the modern concepts of the West but he also possesses a strong sensibility of being an Indian, which implies consciousness of a rich heritage of cultural tradition, ancient history, the *Vedas*, etc. While writing *The Fire And The Rain* he was constantly reminded of parallels with that of Aeschylus's *Oresteia*;

he writes :

There are of course only external similarities but the shape of a myth cannot be isolated from its meaning and once I saw the parallel, I was irresistibly drawn to delve deeper into the *Oresteia* and then the rest of Aeschylus. A deeper appreciation of that joyous genius has been one of the major benefits I have personally derived from writing *The Fire And The Rain* (Karnad 74).

Dramatic expanse is a space created by the playwright. It runs through minds and distances are calculated in terms of time, which perhaps does not exist, because man can act or anything can happen only in space not in time. Space is larger than what appears physically. Destiny is nothing but space only understood as sequence. The dramatist imagines one large space in which he builds an imaginary centre and ideational bodies around it. The main theme in *The Fire And The Rain* (the myth whose centre lies in Vishakha's character) along with playwright's avowed notions and objectives (modern viewpoint) serve as the overall space; intervening situations (famine and *Yajna*) and incidents (tribal life) are ideational bodies. The interrelationship among these creates multiple meanings depending upon the space covered and to the extent of ideational lingering - game of power, caste-consciousness, status of women. As all activity takes place in the space, whatever is on the surface is obvious, but whatever is not, causes confusion; such space is mental or notional, which further interferes with situational contexts and produces multiple meanings. If the dramatic expanse includes uncalculated time, it can lead to construction of a space within space (Epilogue- stage play) which is joined by a streak of playwright's objective.

However, the centre and the theme remain one and the same as it is in *The Fire and The Rain*. It is Vishakha, who occupies the largest space. She is on the mind of all

important characters. She is instrumental in Yavakri's destruction, Parvasu's disturbance and willful defilement of the rules of the sacrifice, Raibhya's murder, Arvasu's delay in reaching Nittilai's village on account of performing funeral rites for Yavakri, who is destroyed by Raibhya only because of Vishakha. Revenge, jealousy, casteism, egoism, religious orthodoxy or pretensions cover the space in the form of Vishakha. Karnad here builds up a notional body based on modern viewpoint, which interferes with most aspects of the myth and also extends the theme to explore the contemporary social problems, nature of drama and the significance of fire sacrifice—all combined through a stage play—a mythic line interfered with imaginative cast of the dramatist, which is done to unify his purpose as well as integrate space and time.

Karnad has chosen his space; he is fond of using and also appropriating ancient myths as cultural messages as well as flaws (if seen from the modern viewpoint) of the given society. In *The Fire And The Rain* he employs mythical, historical and folk theme as a frame of this play in which he fits in the universal theme of love, jealousy and isolation and conveys a message to the contemporary world. He explores the universality of emotions and sentiments just to achieve his unifying purpose on the one hand and conform to the classical specification of integrating the three worlds on the other. For Karnad drama seems to be a means of self experience as well as production of meaning. He draws from the *Mahabharata* the myth of Yavakri as setting followed by the scheme of illustrating the *Natyashastric* tradition of dramatic performance as a striking parallel with *Yajna* symbolizing entertainment as well as theatre but he makes certain structural changes in the myth in order to achieve his purpose of making the past relevant to the present.

Obviously, Karnad is influenced by modernism and his approach comes closer to modernity than Enlightenment, which, in fact, was responsible for shaping the modernity point of view that rejected both, the ideology of realism and the lingering 'certainty' of the Enlightenment thinking as well as the idea of compassionate all-powerful Creator of the universe. He imbibes modernism as a socially progressive trend of thought that affirms the power of human beings to create, improve and reshape their environment. As modernism encouraged the re-examination of every aspect of existence with the goal of finding that which was 'holding back' progress, and replacing it with new ways of reaching the same end, Karnad concentrated on Indian cultural tradition and used myths as elements of culture for revitalizing culture by infusing into them the progressive elements on rational ground, which, finally becomes the dramatic expanse.

The growth of modernity symbolizes rise of specially capitalism, industrialization, secularization, Marxism, existentialism and new values arising from wide-ranging changes in traditional social structure of the Western society reflecting a concern that if the tradition has become outdated, it has to be refreshed or made new. As such it is a process of realizing the need for change—change in action, opinions, beliefs, conventions, modes of thinking, social behaviour, social structure and other values just to wash away the stigma and eradicate virtual backwardness and social evils. As it is a course of social change, it evolves as a way of life that elevates human dignity and achievement. With a background of such formative elements Girish Karnad

deploys the Yavakri myth with precision and expands it through time to the desired destiny (as controlled by the dramatist), which is different from the source of origin.

The play begins with the description of the dreadful reality of the absence of rain for nearly ten years. This resulted in the loss of the fertility of the land. The people are dying of starvation and fleeing away from the famished province. The *dharma*-conscious King is performing the fire sacrifice in order to please the god of rain, Indra for sending rains. Here Karnad seems to question the practice- the fire sacrifice requires all kinds of material (food for gods) and the King instead of giving them to the starving subjects, is offering all to fire.

Karnad sharply criticizes the notions of Vedic society, particularly of the priestly and the tribal classes. Parvasu, the eldest son of Raibhya has been appointed as the Chief Priest of fire sacrifice by the King instead of his father, Raibhya, who claimed himself to be superior in intellectual and cultural calibre to his son. The father becomes jealous of his son's growing prestige, therefore, Raibhya is restless and perhaps he is looking for an opportunity to disturb and disgrace his own son, Parvasu. Jealousy between father and son for earthly power and prestige shows that there was no healthy relation between them. Jealousy and revenge overtake Parvasu and he kills him:

He deserved to die. He killed Yavakri to disturb me in the last stages of the sacrifice. Not to punish Yavakri, but to be even with me. I had to attend to him before he went any farther (*The Fire and the Rain* 33).

Vishakha's infidelity compels Parvasu to return home secretly by defying the sanctity of ritual. Parvasu is neither ideal nor virtuous though he is a highly learned Vedic scholar and a representative of Aryan community, yet he is self-centred, hypocrite and nurtures ambition for power. Irony lies in Parvasu being regarded as one sanctified and possessing true knowledge, yet like Yavakri he is not free from vices. He treats his wife as an object of experiment and completely neglects his duty towards home and personal needs of his young wife. As a matter of fact, he is responsible for Vishakha's moral degradation. He knows his weakness as a man and out of frustration and perhaps enraged by his father's outburst:

(to Parvasu) Tell the King, I shall outlive my sons....the swarm of dogs sniffing around my daughter-in-law's bottom keeps me in good shape" ...you and that bitch of yours... (*The Fire and the Rain* 29).

he is led to suspecting his father having some design towards Vishakha.

Later Vishakha tells Parvasu about Raibhya:

on the one hand, there's his sense of being humiliated by you. On the other, there's lust. It consumes him. An old man's curdled lust. There's no one else here to take his rage out on but 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.... Here it comes. The crab! Scuttling back to make sure I don't defile the Chief Priest as I did Yavakri. Grant me this favour, please, kill me. For all your experiments you haven't yet tried the ultimate. Human sacrifice! You could now.

And Parvasu replies, as if he were convinced:

You're right. I must...You are still my guru (*The Fire and the Rain* 32-33).

Parvasu thinks that his father 'deserved to die' because he nurtured lust for Vishakha and who killed Yavakri to disturb him in the last stages of the sacrifice. Hence, Raibhya is killed deliberately; human sacrifice is made to be understood as a penance for defecating the sacrifice. This also reveals the level of sexual morality. Vishakha without remorse or shame accepts what she did with Yavakri. Extra-marital sex was perhaps no offence during that time.

Later, having killed his father Parvasu, as if some demon had possessed him, asks his younger brother – Arvasu – to perform the funeral rites and expiation of his father. After performing funeral rights, Arvasu goes to the site of fire-sacrifice, then Parvasu calls him a demon, accuses him of patricide. He asks the King to throw him out of the sanctified precincts. Thus Arvasu becomes a victim of his brother's heartless and sinister design.

Yavakri, the son of Sage Bharadwaja (Andhaka), being jealous of the reputation of Raibhya's family, undertook 'tapasya' (penance) for revenge and to destroy the happiness of Raibhya's family by attaining knowledge of the Vedas or getting Universal Knowledge from Lord Indra directly. He gets divine knowledge without studying at the feet of *guru*. There are also other reasons for his jealousy. First, he thinks that his father, Andhaka did not get as much respect and social recognition for *Brahma Vidya*³. Secondly, Raibhya's family enjoyed social prestige and priestly honours. And thirdly, his youthful love, Vishakha was married with Parvasu, who was appointed as the chief Priest of the fire sacrifice instead of his father, Andhaka. It implies that his Universal Knowledge did not absolve him of his evil nature rather he continued to live in the world passion, cruelty, hatred, jealousy and revenge. So the first thing he planned after his return from penance was to molest Vishakha, Parvasu's wife, as part of an organized scheme of revenge, intended to disrupt the fire sacrifice. He avenges his jealousy by seducing Vishakha. Seven years of separation from her husband and secluded atmosphere lures Vishakha to fall an easy prey to Yavakri's vile design. She allows all reason, moral sense to drown in her wish for fulfillment. Craving for satisfaction because of demands of body rather than love, she submits to Yavakri willingly. Indeed she is starved for a drop of love and speech. She had become a parched tree due to absence of a drop of love and communication. Silence surrounds her life

She says, "I live in the hermitage, parched and wordless, like a she-devil" (*The Fire and the Rain* 15).

Karnad exposes the male hypocrisy. Her destiny has an ironical setting - relationship with Parvasu is only a compromise and she tries to erase the memories of her former lover, Yavakri, but fails and it is revived as she confronts him after his return from 'tapasya'. Both Yavakri and Parvasu abandoned her in their quest for knowledge or prestige and she became the victim of lust of the two men. When Raibhya learns Vishakha's adultery, he beats and abuses her, which is against the cultural norms. From the power gained from 'tapasya' Raibhya creates a *Brahma Rakshsa*⁴ and orders him to kill Yavakri. Thus Yavakri meets a miserable death despite possessing Universal Knowledge. An ironical space has been created. He is said to have got knowledge but it was no true knowledge for he never gained it at the feet of his Guru, who alone could

purify his character from malicious elements like falsehood, pride, hatred for others, jealousy, lack of control of passions, desire for revenge. As such any amount of superficial knowledge cannot become a sustainable force for life.

On the contrary unlike Vishakha Nittilai covers a small space (incidental space) but she along with Arvasu represents the playwright's point of view. She thinks that sacrifice and penance are empty words; they (the rituals) are hollow, meaningless, marks of vanity.

She asks Adhanka,

But, What I want to know is, why the Brahmins are so secretive about everything?..... You know, their fire sacrifices are conducted in covered enclosures. They mortify themselves in the dark of the jungle. Even their gods appear so secretly. Why? What are they afraid of? Look at my people. Everything is done in public view there. The priest announces that he'll invoke the deity at such and such a time and such a day. And then there, right in front of the whole tribe, he gets possessed. And the spirit answers your questions. You can feel it come and go. You know it's their. Not mere hearsay (*The Fire and the Rain 10*).

Nittilai compares between the practices of the priestly class and her tribal class. She further asks Adhanka, "What is the use of all these powers?" (*The Fire and the Rain 11*) if they cannot solve day-to-day problems. She thinks that if the acquired knowledge cannot save the dying children, then it is useless. Indeed Nittilai's reasonable doubts are the 'modern' doubts (or Karnad's own doubts under the influence of Modernism) about religious, traditional rituals, customs and beliefs. Truly speaking, it is always unjust on the part of present generation to judge the past on their grounds and apply such yardsticks as could never be thought of then. Whether it is done by an author or by a critic, it only remains a narrow, sectarian approach.

The play criticizes the hypocrisy entrenched in the life-style of priestly class and underlines the plain, straight forward and simple life of tribal class. But this is a modern sensibility. Nobody could think like this in those days. Human weakness apart the Vedic rituals and life-style have revealed tremendous knowledge. If all was hypocrisy, perhaps we would never have any reason to be proud of our culture- the Vedic culture. However, it is true that the individual attainment of knowledge acquires value when it is conjoined with human concern.

The game of Power is an ideational space revolving round the centric space involving knowledgeable persons, which is an all-time reality of human nature; the ancients were no exception but their sensibilities, set-up and life-style were very different even far from our imagination. Raibhya, Parvasu and Yavakri are such people who have high ambitions to get power, prestige and social recognition by following even unethical means as Parvasu does. He aspires to become equal with Indra and he removes all hurdles and people who come in his way, including his own father, brother or wife.

The power game is a significant ideational space that depends upon activity of jealousy, rivalry and competition and ultimately results in the death of all the three characters. The playwright highlights the state of Vedic community in general and the

Brahmin of the period in particular. But as said in the preceding pages any reevaluation of the past from the yardstick of the present is totally unjustified. Of course, it can be said or portrayed that if such thing were an affair of the present, the dramatist would see it in this or that way.

Class consciousness is another ideational space- a perpetual problem of Indian society. Girish Karnad conveys his concern to the reader about the false notions of caste-system in this play. Arvasu and Nittilai are the victims of this rigid and cruel system. Both belonged to two different communities- the priestly and the tribal class. They loved each-other but social customs and conventions did not permit them to be united as husband and wife. As a Brahmin, Arvasu's love for a tribal girl, his passion for performing as an actor in a play, acting and dancing were considered irreligious activities and below the dignity of the Brahmin community. Once he decided to fulfill his desire he was declared an outcaste.

The class consciousness was very strong in (though in the present day it is regarded as a dark side of) the Vedic society because the classes had been categorized on the basis of occupational / professional skills. The low-caste people were not allowed to enter the holy places like temples or sacrificial enclosures because they would not be able to maintain the sanctity of rituals or follow a practice properly for want of knowledge or understanding of the significance of any act. There were examples when anyone belonging to a lower caste had attained sufficient knowledge, he would be included in the upper class like rishi Vishwamitra.

Girish Karnad gives an account of the birth of drama which includes the category of actors. Brahma, the Lord of All Creation, created drama as the fifth Veda (the *Natyaveda*), and handed it to Indra, who in turn, passed it on to Bharata, a human being. The sons of Bharata were the first actors in the history of theatre. They were Brahmins, but lost their caste because of their failure to perform as per Vedic sanction. Parts of *Natyaveda* were taken from other Vedas, hence, it was the fifth Veda, therefore it was required that things should have gone accordingly. But it did not happen so the Brahmins were offended and they declared the actors (Brahmins, sons of Bharata) as outcastes. The profession required such activities as were not in conformity with brahmanic traditions. Therefore, if one valued one's high birth, one should not enter this profession. Thus, Vedic society considered acting an irreligious activity and actors outcastes (or lower-caste).

The Epilogue represents the space within space; it is related to stage-acting. That the world of gods, too, was not free from caste-consciousness is evident from the account of the birth of drama as given in the *Natyashastra*. Lord Indra, the king of gods arranged a *Yajna* in the honour of his father Lord Brahma, the creator of the universe. Indra invited Vishwarupa, the King of Men to perform the ritual. Infact, Indra wanted to kill Vishwarupa, who had become a challenge to his sovereignty by his wisdom and gentleness. He allowed Vishwarupa to enter the sacrificial enclosure but never allowed Vritra, his brother from the nether world. It was in the name of sanctity of rituals and prescription of *Shastras* that Indra barred Vritra's entry to a sacrificial precincts mainly because Vritra would foil Indra's plot to kill Vishwarupa. Despite Vritra's warnings, the innocent Vishwarupa accepts Indra's invitation saying that

“one must obey one’s brother” (55) and ultimately gets killed by Indra treacherously when he was offering oblations to gods. Such fratricidal violence is similar to the betrayal story of Arvasu and Parvasu. Infact, Parvasu kills his own father but imposes the act of patricide on his innocent brother, Arvasu and destroys his life. Both Vishwarupa and Arvasu are good, gentle and kind. Their goodness is feared most by those who enjoy higher social status but harbour evil designs in heart. Hence, first they are declared as belonging to lower caste and then they are destroyed. Apparently it symbolizes hatred for the lower caste but, in fact, it is a case of jealousy and rivalry. The Epilogue very significantly presents the myth of slaying of the demon Vritra by Indra. The dramatization of Arvasu’s love for a tribal girl of hunting community exposes the caste system on the one hand and the fear of a brother destroying the brother on the other. The *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* do illustrate this mythological space very clearly. Karnad condemns and ridicules this social stigma- caste system.

Status of women in the Vedic society is yet another space in the play. According to Karnad the Vedic society granted only secondary status to women for they were considered inferior to men. This unequal treatment in patriarchal set-up expected that women should follow all moral codes of conduct without expecting any kind of freedom and any right. Vishakha and Nittilai are such examples. Though they belonged to two different social groups, castes and systems, yet both were equally ill-treated and exploited. Karnad attacks on double standards, hypocrisy, snobbery and egoism of the male dominated society where exploitation of women was the central norm of society.

Vishakha belongs to an upper-caste Brahmin family. But she has to live under the watchful eyes of her husband and father-in-law. Freedom and separate identity in the society or her hermitage are foreign to her thought. Vishakha suffers from Brahminical patriarch. She is exploited not only by her husband but also by her former lover and her father-in-law looks on her with lust. The deplorable condition of Vishakha finds several parallels in India today. Infact, she lived a miserable life and she disappeared as secretly as she lived her life in silence.

Nittilai, a hunter girl, a ‘noble savage’ and Karnad’s own creation is persecuted in her community for demanding the right to choose her spouse. She loved Arvasu, who was treacherously treated by his brother Parvasu, who called him a demon and falsely accused him of patricide and got him mercilessly beaten out of sheer selfishness. Perhaps there is no obvious reason; if there is any, it is Arvasu’s goodness and innocence. Being hurt Arvasu swears to take revenge on his brother but Nittilai calms down Arvasu’s feeling for revenge and explains the reality of Parvasu, Raibhya and Yavakri who were themselves the cause and invited their own destruction just for worldly power, prestige and revenge. On the contrary Nittilai is noble, principled and humane “a lamp into hurricane”, but she is murdered by her husband and brother who did not tolerate her relationship with Arvasu. Thus, she becomes a victim of tribal patriarch. In the play she bears the finest mark of goodness, humanity sacrifice and true love. But the forces of darkness and ignorance destroy innocence and goodness.

Thus, *The Fire And The Rain* nearly, if not completely, vindicates the playwright’s unifying purpose. The Fire stands for the burning rage, hatred, and Jealousy, that

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never end, it also stands for the fire sacrifice. The rain stands for the quietude, passion controlled, appeasement of the gods and reward. Vishakha is in the centre of all kinds of fire- physical and emotional. Conversation between Paravasu and Vishakha in Act Two is ample evidence how she fumes with indignation, hatred and revenge. She also symbolizes the parched land and craving for water (love). Arvasu (with Nittilai) represents rain, quietude and the source of soothing effect and smoothening of elements.

As far as the integration of the three worlds- the physical, the emotional and the spiritual- is concerned, Karnad's modernist attitude does not help him achieve the perfect end. Vishakha and the famished land represent the physical, Paravasu's willing and silent walking into the blazing enclosure symbolize the spiritual (the vices must be burnt away) and Arvasu-Nittilai's emotional struggle culminating in release from attachment specifically move towards integration, however, they fall short of the desired level. But the modernity point of view to make something new, the existential drive of characters and secularization of traditional practices get fairly illustrated. The destiny has its own course; it is sequential and dependent on the dramatist's technique of unifying purpose. The largest and the smallest spaces are eternally lost much in the same way they are created. Nothing goes 'nowhere', they become virtual space but Karnad succeeds in creating his space.

Notes

1. M.M.Ghosh (tr.), *The Natyashastra*, The Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1961- an ancient Indian text on dramaturgy by Bharata Muni
2. *Purushartha*- Indian sages defined four ethical goals of existence: they are Four Spheres of human life: 'dharma' is related to the spiritual sphere, 'artha' to the realm of political and economic power and 'kama' to sexual or aesthetic gratification, and 'moksha' to final liberation from human bondage (the cycle of birth and rebirth), the supreme goal of life that relates the human being to the Absolute. It implies that the harmony of the first three may act as a means to realizing the fourth.
3. Supreme knowledge about the Reality.
4. Demon.

Work Cited

Karnad, Girish. *The Fire And The Rain*. OUP. New Delhi, 2009.