



About Us: <http://www.the-criterion.com/about/>

Archive: <http://www.the-criterion.com/archive/>

Contact Us: <http://www.the-criterion.com/contact/>

Editorial Board: <http://www.the-criterion.com/editorial-board/>

Submission: <http://www.the-criterion.com/submission/>

FAQ: <http://www.the-criterion.com/fa/>



---

ISSN 2278-9529  
Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal  
[www.galaxyimrj.com](http://www.galaxyimrj.com)

## Re- Representation of Myth in Girish Karnad's *The Fire and the Rain*

**Dr. V.Meenakshi**

Assistant Professor of English,  
Bharathidasan University Constituent College for Women, Orathanad.

Girish Karnad's concern is with the life of the modern man that is very complex and lacks in wholeness. The employment of the old tales is to focus on the absurdity of modern life with all its elemental passions and conflicts. The historical events in Karnad mirror the current political, religious and social happenings. Through the play *The Fire and the Rain* Karnad had tried to focus the egotism prevailing in the contemporary society by associating it with the mythological stories of the past. This play is a superb example, in which Karnad has succeeded in surmounting the cultural barrier post by English. This play inscribed the human condition linking the present with the eternal and the contemporary with archetypal, projecting new meaning in every generation.

Influence working on Girish Karnad's playwriting is varied in nature. His first – hand experience with the western culture as also his having roots in the mythological past mark his plays with a distinction mood of tension and dilemma. This is further strengthened by the joys and challenges of independent India that saw not only the end of the colonial empire but also the beginning of a new nation. The joy of freedom brought with it new fears and challenges. If it was a departure from the past; it was also continuity with the old. Soon the joy of independence began to give place to disillusionment. The dreams of justice, equality and prosperity began to wither away and new problems like communalism, dishonesty and treachery sprang up. The economic, political, psychological and scientific developments on the national and international scene have driven Karnad into a fix. Hence he goes back to the mythological past, but only with reference to the contemporary realities.

The practice of going back to mythology is not totally new in Indian English drama. The playwrights before Girish Karnad have drawn stories from mythology and interpreted them anew. As a critic observes, "some people right from Michael Madhusudan Dutt's *Sharmishtha* (1859) up to Girish Karnad's *Yayati* (1961) and *Hayavadana* (1975) illustrate the growth of the playwright's desire to give a modern interpretation to mythology". Karnad, too, realize that the relationship between theatre and mythology is very close. As the function of theatre is to reflect society: best signified in myths; their best reservoir is the epics, "the repositories of the ethnic memory. They are taken out of archetypal myths and become a part of the collective unconscious of the people. So they reflect the ethos and the psyche of a group of people, not only in a given temporal frame but have a universal human context". It is thus impossible for a writer like Karnad to depict reality of human experience without drawing upon the epics. The division, which we generally make of time into present, past and future exists only on the conscious level. At the sub – conscious or the unconscious level, there is no such compartmentalization. That's

why myths, being the representatives of our sub-conscious and unconscious mind, never get old. In the Indian context, The Upanishads, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata and the popular puranas like the Bhagavata have entered into the very fabric of the Indian society. We find our culture best portrayed in them. The author of the great Hindu epic, The Mahabharata, says with genuine pride, "That which cannot be found here exists nowhere." Moreover, there is technical advantage for a writer to draw his material from mythology i.e. it gives him veiled freedom to comment upon the subtle issues which otherwise, because of their religious and social sensitivity, are difficult to tackle. During the British days when direct critique was not possible, historical or mythical stories were employed by the playwrights as a cover to give the message of revolt to the Indians against the British. In this respect, Girish Karnad does not stand alone. What makes him distinctive from the others is the fact that unlike any of his predecessors or contemporaries, Karnad's concern with the past is more psychological than social or religious or political. In the old stories he finds the depiction of modern man's behaviour with all its intricacies. The mythological and the historical characters have strong affinity with modern experience as regards its psychological and emotional dilemmas. As a critic holds, Karnad "went back to myths and legends, and then made them a vehicle of a new vision. By using these myths he tried to show the absurdity of life with all its elemental passions and conflicts and man's eternal struggle to achieve perfection."(Gill 16)

The present for Karnad grows out of the past and cannot be dealt with in isolation and viewed as a separate entity. Past for Karnad never dies but lives through the legends and folk tales. Because these mythical tales are the stories of elemental human passions, in every narration they get a new meaning. As regards the historically true incidents, Karnad again seems to believe in the notion that history repeats itself. The historical incidents are also eternal in character as they occur and recur with agents different in name only.

The playwright's immense interest in past, which is loaded with mythology, is there because it remains an integral part of the living culture of India. The deities of the Indian pantheon are part and parcel of the day-to-day life of the people. Because of their long association with the deities. The supernatural world is more a fact than fiction. Hence, living in the age of reason and science, Karnad doesn't lose touch with tradition. Mythology and history remains a repository of ideas for him. *The Fire and the Rain* provides another illustration. In the preface to the play, Karnad comments on the origin of the plot. "The myth of Yavakri (or Yavakrita) occurs in Chapter 135-138 of the Vana Parva (Forest Canto) of the Mahabharata. It is narrated by the ascetic Lomasha to the Pandavas as they wander across the land during their exile." Thus the play, emerging from a minor myth in the Mahabharata, examines some dominant rituals of Hindu religion:

The basic metaphor of the play is of a 'Yajna', the fire sacrifice, exposing them inside out: for the sake of rain. The complicated plot is one of the subsidiary stories of the Mahabharata. It does not have the main characters. It delves upon Lomashatya- one of the rishis the Pandavas came upon during the Vanavasa. It is probably my most complex to date. What

interested were the norms of Hindu religion like tapas, doing penance or the fire sacrifice to please the gods.

Karnad's play *The Fire and the Rain* deserves special mention when we talk of regeneration of classical myths in the contemporary English drama. It was commissioned by the Guthrie Theatre of Minneapolis, Minnesota (USA) and as are all Karnad's written originally in Kanada and then was translated into English. The story of the play is based on an episode from the Mahabharata the big cultural reservoir of Indian ethics. The play has several thematic threads, which sometimes run parallel and has a play – within the – play. All this makes it a very complex play but then it is mastered by none other the Girish Karnad who transforms it into a masterful piece of drama by depicting conflicting human emotions through the characters. Signifying the relevance of myths, Mircea Eliade states: "traditional cultures participate in mythical / cyclical time by revivifying certain myths or sometime by attributing archetypal meaning to worldly events" (Eliade,20). Modern cultures, notes Eliade, have a historical / linear view of time.

The popular myth on which the play is based goes on like this: The land has been in the grip of ravaging drought for 10 years. In order to appease the Lord of Gods, Indra, custodian of rain a grand fire sacrifice is being conducted at the palace under the guidance of the chief Priest Parvasu.

Yavakri is a Brahmin youth who does hard penance in order to attain Brahmgyan. But in spite of this he is not made the chief priest of the elate. Instead one big loss that he has to suffer when he is away is that his love Vishakha is married to Parvasu, his cousin who is made the chief priest as well. But Yavakri takes the vengeance by molesting Vishlha. Another significant character is Aravasu who is the younger brother of Parvasu and has two loves; theater, and the outcast tribal maiden Nittilai whom he yearns to wed despite her father's distrust of Brahmins.

When Raibhya, the father of Parvasu and Aravasu learns about the incest done by Yavakri through the mouth of Vishakha herself, he gets enraged and charging a pot of water with the power of mantras he extracts one of his own hairs and forms it into a Brahmarakshsa. But Yavakri's knowledge comes to his rescue and he makes his own mantra charged water pot that can keep the demon ingot bay. It is after Vishakha's enlightenment of the real intentions of Yavakri that she overturns his pot, permitting the rakshasa to slay him; Aravasu is kind enough to console his blind uncle Andhak who ultimately dies of grief at the death of his young son and cremate his cousin. While doing these duties, he becomes late to the tribal conference where he has to present himself before Nittilai's father in order to marry choosing between his loves and releasing from ghost hood, a Brahmin, soul condemned to be a Brahmarakshasa. Human kindness gets victory over personal love and Aravasu opts for the release of the monster. At that very moment the much – awaited rain arrives, saving the land from famine.

There is also a play within the play. As the seven –year penance to appease the God Indra comes near its end; a troupe of actors arrives and seeks the permission to enact a drama. The play has its theme as the slaying of water – hoarding serpent Vritra by God Indra. The leader of the troupe suggests that only the fire sacrifice is not enough to appease the gods, entertainment is also vital for their persuasion. But the crux is: he requests that the role of Vritra be performed by none other than Aravasu, a fallen Brahmin accused of the unspeakable crime of patricide. To everyone’s surprise Paravasu consents to both requests. The grim tale of Yavakri and his associates is hardly the most accessible of Indian legends but Karnad has successfully made use of the divine element with the Gods, and the final result of the rain pouring on a drought-ridden land.

As a literary creation demands, Karnad makes certain variations in his plot as against the original episode of Mahabharata. He invents Nittilai as the love interest of Aravasu in order to expiate how caste boundaries oppress people. The leitmotif of the original story is the danger of knowledge without wisdom. The play also shows that surely there are varied planes of reality but each of restricts it according to his own disposition –personal, national, cultural racial. For without that, the present becomes all –absorbing hence the protest and the commitment. Ultimately, Nittilai’s brother who resents this love of hers for an alien Aryan kills her. But there is one alteration that Karnad makes in order to make the symbolism stronger. In the Mahabharata story when Yavakri violates the sanctity of Vishakha, the whole lake dries up while in the play Karnad makes the entire land afflicted with drought as a result of Yavakri sin.

As the title of the play *The Fire and Rain* suggests the play focuses both on the negative and positive human emotions- jealousy, betrayal, deceit as well as selfless love. Thus the fire is the fire of revenge, lust, anger, envy, treachery, violence and death. The rain, on the other hand, symbolizes self-sacrifice, compassion, divine grace, forgiveness, revival and regeneration.

The play is based on the myth of Yavakri, which appears in the ‘vanaparve’ of the Mahabharata. Lomasha, a rishi narrated the myth to the Pandavas. Lomasha’s objective was to impart the teaching regarding the dangers of false knowledge and the evils resulting from lust, pride, jealousy and anger. Karnad did not have the Kristevan concept of intersexuality in mind when he wrote *The fire and the Rain* but his rewriting of myth fulfills the basic ambition of intersexuality by ensuring that none of the characters and events in the play are unknown and new to world. There have been many representations of myths in the art and literature but, whenever, a story from the Mahabharata appears, it reflects the qualities and temperaments of our predecessors. Dr. N. V. Krishnamachary, in the introduction to his own book Mahabharata an English version, extols the virtues of the ancient text:

The intellectual majesty of Mahabharata depicting the eternal drama of human existence, with all its ironies and intricacies and complexities and cadences and

susceptibilities, psychological heights, and emotional depths, is equally unrivalled in the range of world literature. ( Krishnamachary 146)

The figure of Mahabharata can never be confined to a single text, instead they exist in an intersexual web because of their ever – recurring quality. Epic itself is based on real historical accounts and myths like Yavakri’s signifies its moral significance.

Our reading or understanding of *The Fire and the Rain* depends on working knowledge of other texts. The incident, on which the play is based, is a myth within a myth a short narrative within Mahabharata. Karnad does not talk directly about the experience which human beings have of the world but he makes the play, “a tissue of quotations drawn from innumerable centers of culture”. (Khatri 146). Interlacing Indra-Vritra legend and description about origin of drama in the ‘Prologue’ of the play conforms that he has drawn it from innumerable centers.

The original myth in Mahabharata, as Lomasha narrates deals with two sages, Bharadwaja and Raibhya, who were good friends: Raibhya is a learned man who lives with his two sons while Bharadwaja concentrates on his ascetic practices. Yavakri, Bharadwaja’s son, complaints against the world for he feels that his father did not receive the respect and recognition which he deserves. He, therefore, goes for a ‘tapasya’ so that he can obtain the knowledge of Vedas from the gods. Through God Indra appears to him but to tell him that there are no short cuts, one has to obtain it from a guru only. Yavakri still remains adamant with his demand and ultimately Indra grants him his wish.

Bharadwaja, being a wise man apprehends the danger and warns Yavakri not to go against the omnipotent. He narrates a myth, of Baladhi to make him understand the law of nature. But his fears unfortunately prove to be true. For Yavakri molests Raibhya’s daughter-in-law Vishakha. Enraged by this Raibhya invokes a male spirit ‘Kritya’ and a female spirit ‘Krityaa’ to kill Yavakri. Kritya in taking form of Vishakha approaches Yavakri and steals the urn which contains water that guards him from danger. This loss of water makes him unarmed and demon Kritya chases him. Yavakri runs towards a lake in search of water, but the lake dries up at his approach. At last he is killed by Kritya. When Bharadwaja learns that his son has died, he becomes distressed. He knows that it was the fault of his son; still, he curses Raibhya that he would die at the hand of his elder son. But then he realizes his folly in curing a friend enters into fire and destroys himself.

Meanwhile, Raibhya’s sons, Parvasu and Arvasu conduct a fire- sacrifice for the king. One night when Parvasu visits his home, he mistakes his father as a wild animal and unintentionally kills him. Realizing what he has done, he cremates his father and returns to the sacrificial enclosure. There he assigns his brother Arvasu to go and perform the penance for Brahminicide on his behalf, as he, Arvasu, alone is not capable to carry on the sacrifice. Arvasu follows his brother’s order whole –heartedly. But when he returns to the fire-sacrifice

after perfuming the penance Parvasu betrays him. He professes him killer of a Brahmin and asks the king to keep him away from the sacrificial altar. The king promptly orders his servants to throw Aravasu out, although he keeps protesting. Aravasu, distressed by the betrayal, leaves for the jungle and prays to the sun God. Sun God along with other gods appears and makes Aravasu the chief priest of the fire –sacrifice and throws Parvasu out from there. After such favors gods ask him for some other blessings. Aravasu generously requests them to restore Yavakri, Bharadwaja and Raibhya back to life and make Parvasu forgot his evil act. All that happens and Yavakri is warned to reprimand his folly and pursue knowledge in the right manner.

Though unconsciously, but as a true practitioner of intersexuality. Karnad has adopted, worked and contemplated upon the myth for thirty- seven years. He says, “For the moment I read the tale, I knew it has to be turned into a play. For the next thirty –seven years, I struggled with it, trying to fit all the ramifications of the myth within some sort of manageable shape”. (Karnad Intro iv). He reworks and builds castles out of the debris of what was once a social discourse and is still a reality. Intertextual awareness leads us to examine the function of those images Karnad has taken for his rhetorical orchestration. He reshapes the myth, introduced and sub- plot in the play which deals with Nittilai.

Nittilai, a character, purely created by Karnad, is a soft-hearted girl, stands in contrast with these high-caste Brahmin and their rituals. She loves Aravasu because of his humanism and criticizes the secret manners of Brahmins. She says:

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. (Karnad 10)

She pertinently raises the point, “If Indra appeared to Yavakri and Indra is their God of rains, why didn’t Yavakri ask for a couple of good showers”/? (Karnad 10) This addition of Nittilai in the plot reveals so many facts. It is the false –knowledge of Brahmins that causes so many problems. Karnad emphasizes that Brahminism is not Goodish. He dwells on the merits of Brahminic qualities, but condemns the devilish priesthood and in human acts of fire sacrifice at the cost of slaying blood- relations. To add to his condemnation he has created Nittilai, an ideal icon of humanity, who loves Aravasu. Aravasu is a very devoted brother and son in the myth is a lover too in the play. He loves Nittilai an outcaste, a savage. For her, he can do anything but his Brahmanism does not allow him to do so. He is caught up by his own brother in a trap which surprises the reader as well as Aravasu himself. His ideal character provokes Karnad to make him a lover of humanity, and a hater of dogmas. When Parvasu, his elder brother, warns him, “If you value your brahminhood, don’t act on shape” (Karnad 30) But for the sake of Nittilai, Aravasu accepts the challenge, “All I want is to dance, and sing and act” (Karnad 7).

Karnad also changes the purpose of fire-sacrifice in the play. In Mahabharata the purpose of fire- sacrifice is not mentioned but Karanad supplies a motive behind it. In the play, King is performing the sacrifice to please Indra, the God of rain, as the country is suffering from a draught for seven long years. Idea of famine, it seems, emerges from the source text where Yavakri dies because he did not get water to purify himself. In this way he moulds the myth to create his plot.

Parvasu, a villain in the myth and also in the play, too, is depicted by Karnad in a different angle. He leaves his wife alone, kills his father mistakenly, and treacherously puts the blame on Aravasu. This betrayal of the brother facilitates the writer to make him, a real devil in the play. A priest cannot do such heinous act of asking his brother to perform the penance meant for himself and his devilish act reaches to its zenith when he orders to throw Aravasu out of the sacrificial enclosure. One may observe in the play that how one by one, those who stand equal to Parvasu are giving way to him. Raibhya, his father, Yavakri, his cousin, Braradwaja, his uncle and now only Aravasu is left an innocent competitor of his. Interpreting the depth behind all these incidents, Karnad has re- drawn parvasu's character in this form.

The entire play deals with much violence like bloodshed, betrayals, jealousy; pride, false-knowledge and anger. Ascetic Lomasha, in the myth imparts knowledge to the pandavas and Karnad imparts it to the world by writing it. He finds the myth very relevant to the contemporary society. Misuse of knowledge which is rampant nowadays is leading the world towards destruction. Writer has adopted the myth to make, it a medium to warn the society.

There is another warning, which deals with brother destroying brother in Indra- Vritra legend. Karnad has unconsciously added it in the form of a play within the play, through there is a hint of it in the beginning of the narrative in source text Mahabharata. Writer himself accepts that sometimes unconsciously writing becomes a reception. To quote from his notes:

I cannot remember when I decided to incorporate the India- Vritra legend in my plot, but years later, while re-reading the original vision, I was astonished to find that right at the beginning of the tale of Yavakri, Lomsha mentions that the whole story took place on the banks on river in which Indra had bathed to cleanse himself of the sin killing Vritra! One of the fascinating aspects of dealing with myth is their self reflexivity. A myth seem complete in itself and yet when examined in detail, contains subconscious signals which lead you on to another myth which in turn will act as a third one while illuminating the one you started with. (Karnad 69)

In this way Indra – Vritra legend is intertextual with Aravasu – Parvasu myth. Here, when writer is telling one, another is ready to be told. This ever- recurring nature leads us to the next retelling in the play that is the part of actor manager and his plight. This episode in the play is Karnad's tribute to his profession of play writing. *The Fire and the Rain* opens with a

description of the nature of drama and its importance through the dialogues of actor- manager, when he says:

Sirs as is well known to you, Brahma, the Lord of all creations extracted the requisite elements from the four Vedas and combined them into a fifth Veds and thus gave birth to the art of Drama. He handed it over to his son, Lord Indra, the God of Skies. Lord Indra, in turn, passed on the art to Bharata, a human being, for the gods cannot indulge in pretence. So, 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 along with it.(Karnad 3)

*The Fire and the Rain* resolves around revenge, futility of knowledge and fragileness of human nature. The play is based on the myth of Yavakri and Paravasu from the Mahabharata sages Bharadwaja and Raibhya, both very learned and having the spiritual powers, were fighting for their supremacy. Raibhya was appointed as royal priest who made Bharadwaja's son, Yavakri angry, for he felt that his father had not been given prominence that he deserved. This made him to go to the forest to do tough penance to please lord Indra. After being pleased by the penance of Yavakri, Lord Indra blessed him with the knowledge of the Vedas. This very knowledge becomes the source of his proud. The very knowledge of Yavakri cannot free him from the bondage of selfhood. This very knowledge makes him even more miserable, wretched and boosts his pride and desire for revenge. Yavakri's purpose is to destroy the happiness and reputation of Raibhya and his son Paravasu. He carries his inward wrath everywhere.

In The Bhagwad Gita, it is said that the penance performed for the purpose of ruining others is known as 'Tamasika'. Yavakri in his vicious desire one day cornered Raibhya's daughter-in-law and forced her to have sex with him. This act of Yavakri made Raibhya to invoke two spirits-one a 'Rakshasa' and another a look- alike of his daughter-in-law and send them to kill Yavakri. The death of Yavakri made Bharadwaja to curse Raibhya that he would be killed by his own son.

Jealousy and ego- the two important human aspects dominate the play. Filled with the grief of his son's death Bharadwaja cursed Raibhya that he would be killed by his own son; and then he immolated himself. Paravasu mistook his father for a wild animal and shot him dead. Paravasu intentionally killed his father to get rid of him. He disclosed the death of his father to Aravasu and asked him to perform penitential rites. Aravasu, who had worshipped his brother as a father-figure for his great scholarship, was deeply hurt by his brother's rude behavior in public, when he went to sacrificial sites for patricide on behalf of Paravasu. Paravasu asked the others to throw his brother as a demon encroaching into the sacred site. After performing the task when Aravasu returned to the sacrifice, Paravasu asked the king not to allow his brother to enter the sacrificial enclosure because he was a Brahmin killer. The tussle of supremacy between the brothers shows the brother, shows the brother – hatred theme in *The Fire and the Rain*. Karnad has presented Paravasu as the symbol of supreme egotism. Paravasu through the fire sacrifice

was trying not to seek blessings from Lord Indra but to equal him. Paravasu lost all human sentiments in his effort 'to shed all human weakness', and to become' a diamond uncatchable'. There is a great difference in the attitude and sentiments of Paravasu and Aravasu. What Paravasu lacks, Aravasu has full to the brim – a zest for life and a love for others.

Karnad's plays are deeply rooted in the Indian dramatic tradition. He revives the ancient tradition by the use of archetypal myths, for their significance never dies. Karnad makes Bharadwaja and Raibhya brothers, instead of fiends to show the theme of treachery between brothers. Through the interpretation of myth, Karnad advocates that knowledge without love, compassion, understanding and humanity can lead to inflated egos, jealousy and complete destruction.

“A text consists of multiple writings and writings which are drawn from of discourses already in circulation in some form or other” (Gill 140). Analysing in the light of this statement, Karnad's *The Fire and the Rain* can be read as a best of the version of myths. He selects elements of his text by transposing other texts and reworks upon them to suit his purpose. He is like a critic who gives a critical interpretation to a text. Such re-writing may take different forms and have different effects but a characteristic feature that follows it, at least provisionally to be distinguished from other forms of cultural mimicry, is that it consists of a particularized attachment to a single textual precedent, such that its departure from the original must be measured in terms of its dependence upon it. This dependence on the pre-existing texts makes a work intertextual. Without knowing the contexts of incorporated myths one may not apprehend the purpose of Karnad in the play. The age old ethos of myth in our society is being cherished by using the devices of retelling of myths. To conclude, it would be suitable to say that, Karnad, a matured artist has used such device in the most appropriate manner.

### Works Cited:

- Karnad ,Girish. *The Fire and the Rain*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009.  
Gill, L.S. *GirishKarnad's Hayavadana- A Critical Study*. New Delhi: Asia Book Club, 2005.  
Khatri, C.L & Sudhrk .Arora. *Thunder on Stage : A Study of GirishKarnad's Plays*, 2008.  
Krishnamachary, N. V. *Mahabharatha*. Trimula, T. T. D Publication series, 1983.  
Iyengar, K.R.Srinivasa. *Indian Writing in English*. New Delhi : Starling Publishers, 2010.  
Kaushik, AbhaShukla. *Post Modern Indian English Fiction : Some Perspectives*. Jaipur :Aadi Publications, 2012  
Mukherjee, Meenakshi. *The Perishable Empire : Essay on Indian Writing in English*. New Delhi : OUP , 2002