Creative Interpolations in Mythical Narratives: a Study in Girish Karnad’s

The Fire and the Rain

Pratima Chaitanya,

Department of English,
Jagat Taran Girls’ PG College,
University of Allahabad
Allahabad (U.P.)

Abstract

In his plays, Girish Karnad reworks and analyses myths, folklores and history so as to lay bare their hidden, dissembled themes and motifs and make them apparently visible to the eye. Karnad’s principal aim in writing seems to gain force from the motivating idea to contemporize tradition. From the tradition of myths, the historical tradition and the colourful world of the folklores, everything seems to capture the playwright’s attention. However, the playwright is not one of those who picks up or chooses a myth or legend only to break it or de-center it so as to make it speak of modern sensibility. What he seems interested in is to provide a bird’s eye view of the whole episode, to probe and explore it so deeply that its entire hidden agenda is laid bare for our inspection. It is for this reason that Karnad adds new characters and alters the story line of his plays. He intends to deepen the connotative richness and make all the explicit and implicit aspects of the plot to surface up. Karnad’s pen always touches near concerns and it is this very quality in the playwright to contemporize tradition by the touch of his pen, which happens to be filled with a contemporary ink, which makes his plays so very popular.

The traditional techniques and themes deployed by the playwright ooze contemporary echoes. The present paper attempts to study in the creative interpolations made by the original myth of Yavakrita which occurs in the Forest Canto of the Mahabharata on which the play The Fire and the Rain by Girish Karnad is based.

Keywords: Myth, Creative Interpolations, Contemporaneity
In his plays, Girish Karnad reworks and analyses myths, folklores and history so as to lay bare their hidden, dissembled themes and motifs and make them apparently visible to the eye. Karnad’s principal aim in writing seems to gain force from the motivating idea to contemporize tradition. From the tradition of myths, the historical tradition and the colourful world of the folklores, everything seems to capture the playwright’s attention. However, the playwright is not one of those who picks up or chooses a myth or legend only to break it or de-center it so as to make it speak of modern sensibility. What he seems interested in is to provide a bird’s eye view of the whole episode, to probe and explore it so deeply that its entire hidden agenda is laid bare for our inspection.

It is for this reason that Karnad adds new characters and alters the story line of his plays. He intends to deepen the connotative richness and make all the explicit and implicit aspects of the plot to surface up. Karnad’s pen always touches near concerns and it is this very quality in the playwright to contemporize tradition by the touch of his pen, which happens to be filled with a contemporary ink, which makes his plays so very popular.

The traditional techniques and themes deployed by the playwright ooze contemporary echoes. The playwright mentions the importance of mythology for an Indian audience in an interview: “The element of myth and history is common to most audiences in India—it is to mine. Most myths have a strong emotional significance for our audiences.” (Rajinder Paul, Enact, 2) The present paper attempts to study in the creative interpolations made by the original myth of Yavakrita which occurs in the Forest Canto of the Mahabharata on which the play The Fire and the Rain by Girish Karnad is based.

The Fire and the Rain was written originally in Kannada (Agni Mattu Male) but was rendered immediately into English for a workshop with professional actors at the Guthrie, and the entire process of change and revision took place in English. The production at the Guthrie did not materialize due to Garland Wright’s departure from the theatre, but in Kannada, Hindi and English, The Fire and the Rain has chalked up perhaps the most extraordinary performance record and range of reader responses among Karnad’s plays.

Karnad found his subject in the rather obscure myth of Yavakri(ta) that he had encountered decades earlier in C. Rajagopalachari’s prose retelling of the Mahabharata. To put it in the words of the author himself:
The myth of Yavakri (or Yavakrita) occurs in Chapters 135-8 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. I have met Sanskrit scholars who were unaware of the existence of the myth: It is easy to lose track of a short narrative like this in the tangled undergrowth that covers the floor of that epic. I first came across the story of Yavakri and Paravasu, while still in college, in C. Rajagopalachari’s abridgement of the Mahabharata.

(Karnad, *Collected Plays*, 289)

The original myth is about the story of two sages, Bharadwaja and Raibhya and their sons. Both the sages are very learned and endowed with spiritual powers. But it was Raibhya who was appointed the royal priest by the king. This infuriated Yavakri, Bharadwaja’s son, who nursed a grievance against the family for he felt that his own father did not receive proper accord and recognition which was his due. So he went into the forest to do a rigorous penance to please the king of Gods, Indra, to grant him Universal knowledge. Indra however told him that knowledge could only be gained over the years from a “guru”; he asked Yavakri to go back but the latter was adamant and continued with his penance. This coerced Indra to grant him his wish.

When Yavakri came back, proud of his achievements, Bharadwaja warned him against delusions of omnipotence. But his fears came to be true, for the first thing the jealous and aggrieved Yavakri did was to corner Raibhya’s daughter-in-law in a lonely spot and molest her. Yavakri’s misdemeanour incensed Raibhya. He invoked the kritya spirit. He tore a hair from his head and made oblation of it to the fire. From it sprang a woman who was a look-alike of his daughter-in-law. From another hair, he similarly brought forth a rakshasa (demon). Then he sent the two to kill Yavakri. While Yavakri was having his mid-day meal, the female spirit went to him and seductively stole the urn which contained the consecrated water which had the power to make him invulnerable. The rakshasa then pursued him. Yavakri needed water to invoke his powers, but every spot with a bit of water dried up at his approach. Finally, he tried to enter his father’s hermitage, but the blind man who guarded his father’s hermitage blocked his entry. The rakshasa who was behind him killed him with a trident.

When Bharadwaja learnt that his son had died, he was utterly distressed. Though he knew his son was at fault, he could not control himself and in a fit of rage cursed Raibhya that he would die at the hands of his elder son. Later he was shocked at his folly and in repentance immolated himself. His curse took its effect. Raibhya’s two sons, Paravasu and Aravasu (spelt
Arvasu in Karnad’s version) were conducting a fire sacrifice for the king. One night when Paravasu was visiting his home, he mistook his father, who was wearing a black deer skin for some wild animal and unintentionally killed him with an arrow. When he realized what he had done, he cremated his father, requested his brother Aravasu to do the penitential rites for Brahminicide and went back to the sacrificial enclosure to carry on the sacrifice. Aravasu did as was commanded to and later when he went back to the fire sacrifice, Paravasu accused him of patricide and Brahminicide and asked the king’s guards to throw him out of the sacrificial area, lest he might desecrate it. Aravasu kept protesting loudly that he was innocent but to no avail.

Aravasu retired to the jungle and prayed to the Sun God. When the gods appeared, he asked them to restore Yavakri, Bharadwaja and Raibhya back to life and make Paravasu forget his evil act. The gods granted him the boon. When Yavakri came back to life, the gods reprimanded him on his folly and asked him to pursue knowledge in the right manner. (291-293)

Karnad, as has already been stated, does not blindly follow the mythological story but makes improvisations and adds to the original plot, characters and moulds situations which would allow a deep probing into the story and make all its aspects surface up. Unlike the myth, Bharadwaja and Raibhya in Karnad’s story are not just friends but brothers, and so their children are cousins. This makes the whole Yavakri-Vishakha episode, an episode of incestuous love. In the original piece, Vishakha is forcefully molested by Yavakri, but in Karnad’s reinterpretation, incapable of holding onto her sexual desires which have remained unquenched because of her seven-year long separation with Paravasu (who has gone to the fire-sacrifice as the Chief Priest), she submits herself to him willingly. The look-alike of Vishakha in the original myth, who spills over the consecrated waster is replaced in Karnad’s play by Vishakha herself who goes to Yavakri to inform him of the Brahma-Rakshasa whom her father-in-law had sent to kill him. Karnad even adds a pre-marital love episode to the story of Vishakha and Yavakri and the reader is told that Vishakha married Paravasu under compulsion. The story of their adolescent sensual love affair comes to us by their conversation. As Yavakri says:

…Ten years ago I had come to your house to bid you good bye. And you led me quickly to the jack-fruit grove behind your house. You opened the knot of your blouse, pressed my face to your breasts, then turned and fled. I stood there stunned…The smell of your body. Ten years later I opened my eyes and I knew I was hungry for that moment. (Karnad, The Fire and the Rain, 14)
Like a vengeful woman Vishakha deliberately empties the urn of water so that Yavakri is left completely vulnerable. Yet her act appears to be more unconsciously done, so she cannot be actually charged of consciously taking revenge on Yavakri.

In Karnad’s plays, there hardly occurs any curse-episode, neither does Bharadwaja figure anywhere in the play. Paravasu in the original myth killed his father unintentionally but here he kills him intentionally, because he disturbed the fire-sacrifice by killing Yavakri and also because he molested his wife. Then, he poses in front of his brother that he mistook him for a wild animal—“In the dark, I—I mistook him for a wild animal—” (34) The intentional killing of one’s blood relation in Karnad’s play seems to be a pointer to the speedily and remorselessly growing sins in the contemporary world.

What makes the play even more interesting is that there is a reference not to one myth but also to another which parallels and reinforces the first. The second myth used in the play, as Karnad tells us, is the Indra-Vritra myth. (Karnad, Collected Plays, 296) Indra is the king of gods, the lord of rains and the wielder of the thunderbolt. The slaying of the demon Vritra by Indra is one of the archetypal myths of India. We find it in the Rig Veda; it appears again with variations in the Mahabharata nearly a thousand years later.

The play however is based on a version recorded in the Mahabharata. Indra has lost his central position in the Hindu pantheon; the sectarian gods Vishnu and Shiva now hold sway. Indra has two other step brothers, Vishwarupa (born out of his father, Brahma or Tvastri’s mating with a human being) and Vritra (born out of his father’s mating with a demon woman).

Vishwarupa becomes a popular and righteous king of humans and Indra is anxious that he might overthrow him from his throne. He therefore destroys Vishwarupa treacherously by asking him to come to attend a fire sacrifice organized in the name of their father, Brahma. He is accompanied by Vritra who is stopped to enter the sacrificial area on account of being a demon’s son (the popular belief is that demons might desecrate a holy place). Taking advantage of this opportunity, Indra corners Vishwarupa and kills him. When Vritra comes to know of this, he attacks Indra. Indra, unable to overcome the new enemy, again has to resort to ignominious trickery to survive. Fratricide and the fear of brother destroying brother form the crux of both the Indra-Vritra myth as well as the Paravasu-Aravsu episode. Karnad was deeply intrigued by the self-reflexivity of the myths as he did not have to make any special efforts to find another myth to parallel the first:
One of the fascinating aspects of dealing with myths is their self-reflexivity. A myth seems 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 conduit to a third one while illuminating the one you started with. (297)

The parallel between Indra and Paravasu, Vishwarupa as also Arvasu and Vritra and the Brahma-Rakshasa is structured skillfully.

The addition of Nittilai in Karnad’s story and the multifarious dimensions associated with her character, give the play a unique flavour and lend to it a novel perspective. Her presence brings to surface two polarities in Indian society and in ideology as a whole—the brahminic culture characterized by discipline, rigour and asceticism and the tribal culture characterized by simplicity, humanity and agnosticism. Karnad evidently privileges the latter over the former. As can be expected, at the end of the sacrificial ritual, it is not ritualistic brahmin Paravasu but the simple-minded Arvasu who experiences the revelatory epiphany of Indra.

The myth regarding the origin of the natyas also finds mention in the play. In *The Fire and the Rain*, Karnad notes a close parallel between *yagnya* and theatre—in both there was a fear of forgetting lines or mantras and both could result in a failure if there were any external disturbances. (Mukherjee, “In His Own Voice”, 45-46) The play also recalls the story of the creation of drama which is enunciated in the Bible of dramaturgy, the *Natyashashtra*. The origin of drama in India is considered to be an outcome of divine grace and is said to be created by the Lord Brahma himself who handed out the art to his son Indra, who in turn gave it to a mortal named Bharata. Hence along with rituals and various ceremonies to please Indra, the permission for the play is granted by Paravasu because of the ingrained belief in the divine origin of drama.

An Indian playwright like Karnad, who is known to delve into the glory of Indian past richness—whether they be those of myths or folklores or history—seems to retell the contemporary Indian audience the importance of drama in the Indian society by referring to the origin of *natyas* or the dramatic art in ancient India.
References


About the Author
Dr. Pratima Chaitanya is an Assistant Professor in the Department of English at Jagat Taran Girls’ PG College (University of Allahabad) at Allahabad in India. She is a prolific writer and has published a score of articles in National and International Journals and Books. Her poems have appeared in leading journals and magazines including Eastlit, United Kingdom, IJELLS, Langlit and The Creative Launcher, India. Also she has an anthology of poems, entitled, Explorations published. She has been vociferously associated with the Theatre for Peace group of University of Allahabad. She has a book on drama, entitled Reinterpreting Myths, Folklores and History published by Lambert Publications, Germany, 2016. She can be reached at pratima.chaitanya@gmail.com.

Office Address: Jagat Taran Girls’ PG College, 32 Hamilton Road, Allahabad, Uttar Pradesh
Residential Address: 4A/8N, Malviya Road, George Town, (Next to Swami Vivekanand School, Allahabad)