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The Dominance of Power in *The Fire and the Rain*

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Abstract

The play *The Fire and the Rain* occurs in a small region of India long ago that has experienced a lack of rain for ten years. The king proposed to propitiate the Gods through fire sacrifice. So that God would be pleased and send rain to the parched land. In this fire sacrifice Paravasu the son of a learned Brahmin Raibhya, was appointed as the Chief Priest. And the play deals with this appointment and the disappointments of certain other characters. One disappointment definitely with reference to the father going by ancient Indian tradition, a lot of emphasis was put on age seniority i.e. age has always been respected. Older people have always been considered wiser because of their wider experience. Going by this tradition the learned Raibhya should have been appointed as the chief Priest but for practical reasons longevity of life span, the King chose to appoint Paravasu, the elder son as the Chief Priest. This appointment had disappointed and agonized the senior. The high priest of the temple, Paravasu is eager to perform a ceremony to bring rain.

Keywords: Dominance, sacrifice, Tribals, Tradition, Folk theatre,

The play *The Fire and The Rain* opens with the representative of an actor's group expressing their desire to give a dramatic performance as a means of entertainment for the Gods. After much discussion the group is given permission to perform at the fire sacrifice. The play performed by this group of actors has a dual audience. First group performing the fire sacrifices as well as the survivors of the drought stricken kingdom. Second group the actual audience watching the play. In this sense the play performed by the group of actors is the play incorporated within the main frame of the play, *The Fire and the Rain*. Meanwhile, Paravasu's younger brother Aravasu is romancing Nittali. Aravasu is a Brahmin, but Nittalai is of a lower cast, and there is a difference between Brahmin and Tribal customs. Tribals are

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more free, more open in making a marriage proposal or declaration. Declaration of being fit normal and willing to marry had to be made in front of the entire village as per tribal customs. Aravasu a Brahmin was unaccustomed to this idea and was both nervous and embarrassed about following this tribal custom. Aravasu has very clear idea about his position with reference to his family that he is inferior and therefore considered quite worthless by everyone. He is also clear about the one thing that he wanted in his life is to dance, sing, act, and be with his beloved Nittilai.

Paravasu has marital problems of his own, having abandoned his spouse Vishaka, who is establishing a liaison with Yavakri, Paravasu's first cousin. Yavakri, who has just returned from ten years of meditation, believes that Paravasu is unfit to be the high priest. His actual behavior and words are far from those of a purified and enlightened person. After all the penance and sacrifice he has done with God, he continues to be a victim of lust and desire something not acceptable from an enlightened monk. Thus the reality turns out to be that Yavakri is not very different from what he was 10 years. For all the apparent 'knowledge' he is said to have acquired, is as ignorant and uncontrolled and coarse as he was before. He does not have the mastery of controlling his emotions and desires. All his knowledge is incapable of making him realize what was inappropriate in speech and acts. Through this the playwright raises the issue of knowledge versus wisdom.

Blind Rabiya the father of both Paravasu and Aravasu, summon a demon to kill Yavakri, and asks Vishaka to save her lover by asking him to remain in his house for the whole day. After hearing her father-in-law words, Vishakha seeks Aravasu's help. When Aravasu reaches the place of Yavakri to save him from demon, demon kills Yavakri. After finishing the funeral rites of Yavakri, Aravasu reaches the place of Nittilai's village. That is the day Nittilai's father has summoned the villagers to meet Aravasu in order to approve of their marriage. Because of cremation duties and other family matters delay Aravasu's arrival in Nittilai's village, her father loses patience and hands her off in marriage to the first volunteer.

There is a conflict between father and son, selection of Paravasu at the fire sacrifice instead of the father who is senior in knowledge, experience, wisdom and age. Father's opinion about the King's choice is very bad of worsens after he sees the son's behavior returning home when there is still a month left for the sacrificial rite. Paravasu has responded Rabiya that if he returns back to the ritual in the morning no one would know. The father was shocked at this response because of the foolishness of the response during sacrificial rites were more for the sake of self and God and not for the public.

Paravasu: The king often says he would have preferred you to be the Chief Priest. But it was a seven year rite. They thought a younger man safer. (29)



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Raibhya: full of anger, is full of contempt on the son`s and King`s behavior.

Raibhya: if you want to be alone with wife, send that fool somewhere else. I don`t need him .It`s not the wild beasts one has to watch out for ---it`s the human beings (30)

Soon, Paravusu kills Raibhya because he disrupted the sacrifice by killing Yavakri and he had behaved indecently with his daughter-in-law Vishakha. Hence according to Paravasu, Raibhya his father deserved to die. He asks Aravasu that he has to return to preside over the yajana and cannot leave the precincts of the sacrifice before the completion of the tenure. Arvasu complies with the orders of his brother which results in his being accused of murder and beaten almost to death. A dying Aravasu is rescued by the actor manager and nursed back to health by his beloved Nittilai.

The care and concern shown by Nittilai in his hour of need lends a healing touch to Arvasu who had been wounded emotionally and physically by his brother. Arvasu wanted to take revenge for the betrayal by his brother because he was convinced that the chain of events that had occurred recently happened because he was about to reject his caste by getting married to Nittilai. The two deaths and their outcome had driven him away from Nittilai. Paravasu revenges his brother in two ways, one by denying his permission to act and by creating circumstances in which he could not get married to Nittilai. Nittilai who belonged to a hunter tribe that was very close to nature was full of practical common sense. She dissuaded Arvasu from the idea of revenge, because she sincerely thought that there would only be more bloodshed if Arvasu tried to take revenge. This would only lead to more sorrow and suffering. The bloodshed of revenge did not have the capacity to set right or change in any way anything that had gone wrong. Her advice was to leave things as they were so that suffering might be minimized.

When Aravasu regains his strength, he performs in a play wearing a mask in front of Paravasu, the priest, and the villagers. At a dramatic point in the play, Aravasu deviates from the script to burn down the temple, killing Paravasu, while villagers from Nittilai find her in the audience and slay her. With dying Nittilai in Aravasu`s arms, the God Indra suddenly appears, offering to grant Aravasu a single wish. Although he could ask to rain, Aravasu clearly wants Nittilai alive. Indra says that such a wish would reverse time, but ultimately the same events would repeat. Then the demon who killed Yavakri appears, begging Aravasu to ask Indra for his release from a condition in which he can neither live normally nor die peacefully. Aravasu then asks Indra for the demon`s freedom, reasoning that Nittilai would have made the same decision. Rain falls in abundance.

In *The Fire and the Rain*, Karnad treats the problem of a moralism in contemporary life. It is a criticism of the Brahmin society on the one hand, while on the other hand, his



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approach is realistic and existential. He has artistically and beautifully handled the power of myth. In the Prologue, Arvasu declares, "... this is a fiction, borrowed from myths" (Prologue 4). It is a re-enactment of a puranic myth from the Mahabharata of Indra's destruction of his brother out of jealous fury. Arvasu's cry, "But why, Brother, why?" (2.38), rings throughout the play frequently voicing the puzzled fury and heart-rending agony of betrayal by a worshipped brother. The play has a complex framework with a central myth assuming the form of a framework of the story of Arvasu's betrayal by his brother Parvasu, the chief priest performing a yajna to bring rain to the drought-stricken land. The Indian mythology, according to Girish Karnad, expresses a deep concern over "the fear of brother destroying brother where the bonding of brothers within the Pandava and the Kuru clans is as close as the enmity between the cousins is ruthless and unrelenting." (246)

It is a play, which is based on the myth of Yavakri, Indra and Vritra. The eternal conflict of good and evil continues from the period of the Mahabharata to the modern contemporary society. The myth of Yavakri is a story of ambition to achieve the universal knowledge directly from the Gods but not from the human gurus, which is unjustified and immature. Knowledge without experience is dangerous to humanity is the message passed on by Gods to Yavakri as well as to human beings on earth. The mythical play within play is enacted in the last section of the play and depicts Indra's attempt to destroy Viswa, his stepbrother, in order to be unrivalled in all the domains. Indra considers himself to be the legitimate son of Brahma; he cannot tolerate the existence of Viswa, the son of Brahma from an earthly woman or Vritra. It is a fight for supremacy. Viswa is played by the theatre manager; Vritra by Arvasu. Arvasu is a character in the original play and his task is to protect humanity. He is severely wronged by his elder brother Parvasu and falsely accused by him as their father's murderer.

Parvasu, the chief priest of the seven years' fire sacrifice conducted in the King's palace in order to propitiate God Indra, represents Indra in the play. The drama of real life runs parallel to the myth. The play underlines the need for supreme human quality, that is mercy and compassion represented by Nittilai, the beloved of Arvasu, who belongs to the Shudra class—the tribe of hunters. Nittilai as a 'lamp into hurricane' symbolizes the rains of human love. The play illustrates the use of myth in a powerful way. The game of trickery and treachery adopted by Indra in order to kill Vritra in self-defence is the story of modern politicians in the realm of reality. They are much superior to Gods even in their art of treachery, deceit and cunningness. The myth of the Mahabharata is the story of modern hero of every family and the play through the myth of Yavakri, an elitist Brahmin, tells the sad aspect of jealousy, power politics, and neglect of woman.



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Myth mirrors the contemporary reality of existentialist society. The context of the mythical play in *The Fire and the Rain* is relevant, morality-oriented and thought provoking. It possesses the merits of morality with shades of reality and ideology. Fire is used as a myth in *The Fire and the Rain*. Fire, that is, 'Agni', is worshipped as a deity in Indian mythology. All the rituals and rites are to be performed in the presence of this deity. In this play, it is presented for various purposes, such as for penance in the case of Yavakri, for warning Nittilai and for cremation of Raibhya. And Rain is also equally important in this play.

From the beginning to the end it is Indra, that is rain, who plays the most vital role in the story of the play. Whether it is Yavakri or Parvasu or anyone else like the King or the Action-Manager, all are seen trying their best to please Indra who grants the last will of Arvasu and gives rain to the world. In the plot dealing with the myth of Yavakri, Karnad has very intelligently incorporated the Indian myth of the slaying of the demon Vritra by Indra. Significantly enough at the end of the play rain occurs only when Arvasu's mask of Vritra is removed from his face. This is in conformity with the Indra myth found in the Rig Veda as well as in the Mahabharata. Summarizing this myth, Karnad in his "Notes" to the play says, In the Rig Veda, Vritra, "the shoulderless one (a serpent) swallows rivers and hides the waters inside him. Indra, by killing him, releases the waters and 'like lowing cows', the rivers flow out. The importance of this deed to the Vedic culture is borne out by the epithet, 'Vritrahan' or the slayer of Vritra, by which Indra is repeatedly hailed. (68)

Thus Indra is the source of all actions in *The Fire and the Rain*. Yavakri undertakes penance for ten years and Parvasu for seven years in order to please Indra, the God of Rains. The Epilogue very significantly presents the myth of the slaying of the demon Vritra by Indra. Through the dramatization of the mythological episode of Arvasu's love for a tribal girl, Karnad very significantly condemns and ridicules the caste system, which has been a social stigma for ages. The mythical Parvasu represents modern man, who, because of his self-centered materialistic approach to life, seeks progress even at the cost of his own father and brother. Thus Karnad in *The Fire and the Rain* has made use of myth for social, religious and philosophical purposes.

In *The Fire and the Rain*, Karnad focuses on the evil of caste war. This play mirrors the growing war between saints, rishis, Brahmins and low-caste people, actors, hunters and man-made classification of caste war as a tool of achieving the height of superiority and power. He also concentrates on 'purusharthas' like 'dharma', 'artha', 'kama' and 'moksha' as the four ethical goals of human existence. 'Dharma' governs the spiritual sphere, 'artha' relates to political and economic power, 'kama' to the sexual and aesthetic gratification and 'moksha' to the final liberation from human bondage from the cycle of births and deaths.



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The characters Bharadwaja and Raibhya, the two saint friends, propound the quest for supremacy of knowledge. But their 'dharma' becomes 'adharma' for achieving the post of chief priest of the fire sacrifice, a symbol of 'artha'—political and economic power. Parvasu and Yavakri are also a part of such political ambitions. Yavakri is involved in fulfillment of his 'kama' with the wife of Parvasu and finally, they all deviate from the moral standards of purusharthas, which creates a hellish world for them and to repent as cursed beings. Unable to find any liberation from human bondage, they become victims of their attitudes. These characters represent the men of contemporary society who are trying to achieve their goal of political heights without caring for dharma.

Yavakri is a symbol of an ambitious person who wants to get knowledge without maturity and experience, not "knowledge from human gurus" (9) but "knowledge from the Gods, direct" (1.9) and "the whole world is at its feet" (1.10). Such short-cut of knowledge for supremacy is a dangerous act and it may lead humanity to disaster. Even Indra has appeared before him and has said that, "No, Yavakri, you can't master knowledge through austerities. It must come with experience. Knowledge is time. It is space. You must move through these dimensions" (1.13). The Gods again come and suggest, "... you can't cross a full stream on a bridge of sand" (1.14). Yavakri represents the contemporary scholar of knowledge who tries to remove all ladders of experience and to reach the peak of knowledge and seat of learning with less experience and less knowledge.

The story of Yavakri is a lesson to people that knowledge should be acquired in the right manner. It is a story of modern pundits of the intellectual society that Karnad has beautifully narrated through Yavakri in *The Fire and the Rain*. *The Fire and the Rain* is, on the one hand, a criticism of the Brahminic society while on the other hand, Karnad's approach is to realism and existentialism. The prevailing evil in man is a natural vice, which doesn't spare anyone. It is not caste that upholds the society, but virtue that maintains the quality of life on earth.

This moral consideration is greatly important as it has ensnared mankind from the onslaughts of evils. It is immorality or vice which is attacked and criticized, and after the rehabilitation of values, the face of contemporary society emerges in its triumphant design of richer human and moral values. In this play, Karnad emphasizes that 'Brahmanism is no Godism'. He deals with the merits of Brahminic qualities such as goodness, gentlemanliness, truth and sacrifice, but condemns the evils like priesthood and inhuman acts of fire sacrifice at the cost of human life. Parvasu, Yavakri, Raibhya, Bharadwaja and Arvasu belong to a high Brahminic class and their quest for spiritual power and universal knowledge does not bring them to the state of supremacy as they are involved in the sub – human, sub-standard and un-Brahminic acts of jealousy, power hankering, and ruthless curses for total ruin of



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each other. Brahmins are considered to be the torch-bearers of society but they themselves are lost and misguided in the way of ignoble deeds. The greatest tragedy in the contemporary society is that the educated, talented and meritorious people of the upper strata of society exploit the underprivileged men and women.

Arvasu, the son of Raibhya, a superior Brahmin in the play, the brother of Parvasu and the chief priest, propounds the values of love, kindness and humanity as the rarer virtues of mankind. Nittilai, Andhaka, Sudra and state-manager represent the greater virtues of goodness, humanity, love, kindness, broad mindedness and sense of human touch and human belonging in the play. These minor characters are represented as the makers of a humanistic society while major characters represent a class of higher status who lack impassioned hearts.

Arvasu forgets and forgives everybody and on his prayer to Sun God, everybody including his father Raibhya, brother Parvasu, cousin Yavakri are revived. Finally, after the sacrifice of Arvasu and Nittilai all condemned souls are released and 'moksha', the ultimate desire of man on earth takes place because of 'purushartha' of Arvasu and sacrifice of Nittilai. It is a great sacrifice of Arvasu and Nittilai for the sake of humanity. Rain falls like gentle mercy and kindness, and all fires of sex, hunger, power and jealousy are defeated, shattered and condemned as evil acts. The final note of the play is the quest for humanity since, according to Ambika Ananth, the Blood which runs in humans is devoid of humanity. No elbow-room for love and emotions of a mother, lover, sister or son. All are same, rulers are same in the game of gunning pandemic violence.

The Fire and the rain is the sixth successful drama of Girish Karnad. It is based on mythology, for which the dramatist has relied heavily on an episode in the *Mahabharata*. *The Fire and the Rain* is the translation of his Kanada play *Agni Mattu Male*. *Agni* is the Sanskrit word for fire and acts as a witness at weddings and cremations, and it is also the meme of god of fire. *Mattu* means "and" a spoken Kannada word, *male* means "rain," "pure" and "simple."

The dramatist has used various devices like – slokas, mask, wind instruments, drums, music, curtains, flashback technique, light, mock laments, the play within a play, the presence of gods, demonic souls, supernatural elements, fire etc., very effectively. These devices are instrumental in creating an atmosphere suitable for a mythological plot. The plot of the play is not as simple as that of Karnad's earlier plays. It is picked from the *Vana Parva*, the forest canto, of the *Mahabharata*.

Karnad presents problems of class system in Indian society by using myths, folklore. In *The Fire and the Rain*, Vishakha, is related to upper class of society and Nittilai is related to lower caste tribe. Karnad presents how Nittilai is forced to marry within her tribe. The researcher feels Karnad uses myth of Yavakri, Indra, Yajana to present how lower caste people prohibited to attend the Fire Sacrifice. It is believed from very ancient times to



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modern times some events related to Gods like pelage to God, penance of God must be done by only upper class people. Karnad used prologue and epilogue in *The Fire and the Rain* to present the co-relationship between dramatic theme and myth to know audience.

In prologue it is explained that the ritual begins for a seven years long fire sacrifice. It is explained in the prologue that in which condition and what reason the King and the chief priest performing the Fire Sacrifice. At the end of the play epilogue is given to explain that how Arvasu puts on the mask. There is a roar of drums and then a sudden silence. Arvasu gives a roar and jumps up. He dances violently. The play is on. The Actor-Manager dressed up as Indra enters from one side. The Actor playing Vishwarupa enters from the other and conversation between Vishwarupa and Indra begins. This information is presented in Epilogue. So it is one of Karnad's dramatic characteristics to present his prologue and epilogue to interlink or relate to the main theme of the play and audience should be aware about it.

The play begins with the dominant myth Yavakri. It places the action that follows in the realm of the mythical and the elemental. The quest for personal and social meanings through the myth contributes to the cohesive structure of the play. It involves the nature of the world analysis of the concept of morality and emotion which leads one to the essentiality of human experience itself. The myth of Vritra and Indra acts as catalyst to free Parvasu and Arvasu from the human bondage of fear and vengeance. The prologue and the Epilogue are inevitably conjoined to project a holistic view of life.

Thus, researcher feels that Karnad's use of prologue and epilogue are inevitably conjoined to project a holistic view of life to present the moral lesson or teach some moral to audience. So it is one of the dramatic characteristics of Karnad to use prologue, epilogue and myths in his plays.

In *The Fire and the Rain*, the fire sacrifice is a symbol of power and that of spiritual and intellectual peak of knowledge for Brahmins as priests. The fire sacrifice represents self-gratification, self-examination and self-purification of jealousy, envy, power politics and supremacy of their sectarian attitude. Karnad has beautifully displayed the game of spiritual power as political activity prevailing and society as a contemporary reality. Brahmins are being attacked not as liberators or well-wishers of society but as pretenders and culprits of the contemporary world and they are worst-hit.

In *The Fire and the Rain*, Karnad emphasizes that Brahminism is no Godism. He dwells on the merits of Brahminic qualities like goodness, gentlemanliness, truth and sacrifice, but condemns the devil-like priesthood and inhuman acts of fire sacrifice at the cost of human life. Parvasu, Yavakri, Raibhya and Bharadwaja belong to a high Brahminic class and their quest for spiritual power and universal knowledge does not bring them to the state



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of supremacy as they are involved in the sub-human, sub-standard and un-Brahminic acts of jealousy, power-hankering, ruthless curse for total ruin of each other. It is the greatest tragedy of the modern society that the educated, talented and meritorious people of the upper strata of society are exploiting the privileged men and woman present.

The other characters involved in the quest for knowledge and superiority mirror their meaner qualities in fires of sex, anger, politics and jealousy. Politics- power within the knowledgeable person present the bitter reality of ancient society. Raibhya, Parvasu and Yavakri are the representatives of this society who wanted to get power, prestige and social recognition by hook or crook, particularly by following the unethical ways and means. They invest their energies in the possession of power which made them isolated from society. First of all, Parvasu has gained priestly honours, name and fame but still he was dissatisfied with it. His ambition is to become equal with Indra. So he crushes or kills those who came in his path, including his own father and wife.

Raibhaya claims superior intellectual and cultural caliber than his son, Parvasu. His unrest wish is that he should be appointed as the chief priest of fire sacrifice. But the king appoints Parvasu as the chief priest which made Raibhya jealous. His jealousy results in killing of Yavakri at sacrificial time, particularly for disturbing Parvasu in the last stages of sacrifice. Indeed the father feels jealousy about the prosperity of his own son.

Yavakri, the power greedy person is disturbed by the growing prestige of Raibhaya family. Parvasu's marriage with his former beloved, Vishakha and his appointment as a chief priest instead of sage Bharadwaja creates vile designs in Yavakri's mind. Therefore he deliberately molests Vishakha in order to disgrace Parvasu and disrupt the fire sacrifice. Thus he uses his former beloved as a tool to exercise his vengeance upon Raibhya family. Finally he is punished by Raibhya for his dark deed.

On the whole, the game of power politics results in the extermination of these characters. Indeed their deaths are due to jealousy, rivalry and competition. Thus they become the victims of power-struggle game. It is criticism of power politics of Raibhya and Bharadwaja family in general and Brahmin community of Vedic period in particular.

That the world of gods, too, was not free from cast-consciousness. Lord Indra, the king of Gods, prohibits entry of Vritra, who was his brother from the nether world, near to fire sacrifice. Indra thinks that Vritra is a demon, therefore, a demon would not be allowed into the ritual enclosure as per the *Shatras*, which was arranged in the honour of Lord Brahma. In fact Indra wants to kill Vishwarupa, the king of men, who created a challenge to his sovereignty by his wisdom and gentleness. He invites Vishwarupa and asks to enter the sacrificial enclosure but never allows Vritra there. Despite Vritra's warnings, the innocent



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Vishwarupa accepts Indra's invitation saying that "One must obey one's brother" (34) and killed by Indra treacherously when he was offering oblations to the gods.

Indeed these brotherhood betrayal and fratricidal violence are similar to the betrayal story of Aravasu and Parvasu. In fact Parvasu kills his own father but imposes the act of patricide on his innocent brother Aravasu and destroys his life. On the whole Vishwarupa and Aravasu are the victims of caste consciousness and brotherhood hatred.

An inferior and secondary status of woman in Vedic society is a fine example of social reality. This unequal treatment in patriarchal pavilion is a typical feature of tradition society which expects that woman should follow all moral codes of conduct without expecting any kind of freedom and right. Karnad violently attacks on double standardness, hypocrisy, snobbery and egoism of male dominated society. Exploitation of woman lies at the central of such society. The play present Vishakha and Nittilai as the representative of this oppressed class, though they belonged to two different social groups, castes and system, both are equally ill-treated and exploited.

Some clear messages are conveyed through the play that cannot be overlooked: that Brahmins, in spite of their loud claims about possessing the "Knowledge of the Brahmin," have like common men the propensity to jealousy, revenge, rape and incest with their consequent vicious effects; and that the individual attainment of knowledge has no value unless that knowledge is conjoined with human concerns.

As can be expected, at the end of the sacrificial ritual, it is not Parvasu but the simple-minded Aravasu who experiences the revelatory epiphany of Indra. Only the innocent and kind Nittali and the generous Aravasu have in them the potential to redeem the parched land, since they know what it is to be human. They are "capable understand pain and suffering as the gods can't" (FR 61), and unlike the others. They are able to forgive and live or die for the larger good of mankind. In short, the meaninglessness of sacrifice and penance for selfish gain and the need for transcending human weaknesses to have one's intellect to "Become a diamond. unscratchable" (FR 32) is stressed. The play clearly emphasizes that compassion for the oppressed is what makes a person "beautiful" and "wise.

The point that must be borne in mind is that the journey of life is itself a like ritual, into which one's ego and desires such as *Kama*, *Krodha*, *Lobha*, *Moha*, *Mada*, and *Matsarya* have to be sacrificed. As it can happen in a sacrifice, the journey of the human soul toward enlightenment too can be disrupted either through human agency or through the intervention of the Brahma Rakshasa, that lies within the mind, or it can take the shape of a "Yavakri". In this human drama, the role of the gods who seem to be mere witness to the enactment of human strife and suffering cannot be overlooked. They appear to grant boons to people like Aravasu and Nittilai.



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The aim of sacrifice, to quote from the synthesis of Yoga by Sri Aurobindo, is not to be mistaken as “self-immolation” (as in the case of Parvasu) but as “self-effacement” (exemplified by Nittilai). The subjectivity is not withdrawal from active life but the attainment of higher spiritual life through a process of transformation of the self, making it sacred. Yet in the play, only the ritualistic concept of sacrifice pervades with a persistence which nullifies other interpretative possibilities. The ritualistic sacrifice that is performed for egotistic and materialistic gain – for riches, strength, power, children, gold, horses, cows, etc...and of the more violent objective of slaughter and plunder of enemies and the destruction of rivals – is naturally malevolent.

The Fire and the Rain and which also invites extensive discussion, that which creates reverberations in the play is the politics of power functioning within the grid of caste and gender. Such politics is by no means new to Indian theatre but the dramatic scale of their presentation in the play with accompanying tensions of subjugation and division among people, especially the treatment of women character, adds deeper dimensions to the action that appears to revolve around the male characters.

Any discussion, therefore, of the condition of Vishakha and Nittilai involves an examination of two simultaneous formulations – the understanding of their historical and cultural status as women and the conceptual distinctions that separate them from the male character’s in terms of power. The social and cultural contexts determine their action and invite the spectators to re-orient and revise inherited opinions about them. In this, they offer immense scope for analyzing complexities and contradictions that arise in their relationship with life and society around them. Since belonging to two opposing social groups, they represent a resistance to a coherent meaning.

Another major concern at the heart of these two polarized patterns is that all the male characters in the play invest their energies in coalition of historical power that cuts across class and caste boundaries.

The lives of Vishakha and Nittilai are organized around issues that favour male domination. Their oppression and tragic end is inscribed by the power struggle among the male characters of the upper caste as well as their domination in the marginalized community and in proportion to their lack freedom to control their destinies.

The identity of the two female characters is also problematic and illustrative of the anonymity they suffer as individuals. Vishakha belongs to an upper-caste Brahmin family and is dominated by learned men. Her social position does not privilege her in any way that is different from that of Nittilai, a tribal girl from a family of hunters. Though they represent two contesting representational social systems, both are subjected equally to violent displacement and silencing.



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Thus both Vishakha and Nittilai, though belonging to a homogenized group as women, represent different backgrounds, one familial and another social, that determine their reactions and responses to life. The patriarchal system denies them both a subject-constitution that the male characters so easily claim as their historical, cultural and hegemonic privilege. They are thus pushed within the confines of object-formation; one cannot help nothing that the male oppressors are all imprisoned in their selves, victims of their own narrow pursuits in life and the women become inevitable victims of power struggle.

Nittilai seems to suffer double marginalization, as is often the lot of communities divided on lines of caste and colours. She is marginalized from the mainstream as belonging to Sudra cast. Nittilai being part of nature, is hardened by marginalization and oppression but that is not the case with Vishakha. Vishakha, though surrounded by learned men, suffers from the repression of emotions and desires, and lacks the freedom even to communicate with her husband. Her sexuality becomes conterminous with her subjection as an oppressed woman. Her relationship with Paravasu is one of compromise through which she tries to erase the memories of her former lover Yavakri, who had abandoned her in his quest for easy knowledge. When Paravasu is called to be the chief priest for the sacrifice, she is abandoned again. Consequently, she becomes the victim of lust of the two men. Left unprotected and vulnerable within her circumscribed role, she finds herself exposed to sexual exploitation by her father-in-law Raibhya, for whom she is “a roving whore,” “a buffalo that’s been rolling in mud”(FR 20)

The nature and purpose of knowledge attained by men like Raibhya, Paravasu, and Yavakri leads neither to disciplined life dedicated to common good nor forward the absolute Brahmin. Characters such as they stand as instances of life and energy wasted in pursuit of personal gain. Nittilai’s query “Why didn’t Yavakri ask for a couple of good showers?”(FR 10) or her emphatic statement “What is the point of any knowledge, if you can’t save dying children” (FR 11)

Their pursuit of knowledge does not help them transcend caste and gender bias. They carry around them the hellish and wretched state of their ill gotten power. The words of Nittilai’s father “These high-caste men are glad enough to bed our women but not to wed them” (FR 8) are damning and expressive of the deep distrust that his community has of the Brahmins.

Despite Vishaka’s indomitable will, reason and intelligence, she fails to realize her full potential since she is forced to exist in a male-dominated and exploitative. She cannot even hope to enjoy the kind of freedom that Nittilai has. Her character exemplifies stunted intellectual growth and her consciousness is of the withdrawing, reticent kind that consumes and weakens her being.



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Nittilai alone of all characters progresses towards self-definition by emphasizing her difference and by reflecting an evolving consciousness. She grows from an innocent tribal girl wandering in the forest, observing and tracing animal foot-prints and its flora and fauna, to questioning the goal of sacrifice and ritualistic religion, to attain the status of a benevolent nurturing archetype of universal motherhood tending to the hungry and nursing the sick. “Liberate and dynamic, creative and effective” (FR 117), an assertion of her joy and freedom.

In contrast we notice in others, including Vishakha, a total reversal of this they fail to transcend the physicality of their existence. The slow and gradual rise of Nittilai’s personality is rendered complete with her reification through tragic death. Her death, though dastardly, takes place in front of her tribe as an honor killing, an act of appeasement for the men of her family. In her death she is also the “sacrifice” offered to appease the unrelenting rain gods Indra and Vritra: “She lies there, her eyes open, bleeding, dying like a sacrificial animal” (FR 58).

The two qualities that help Nittilai to tower above the male character with their foolish pride in their knowledge are: her ability to recognize and appreciate goodness in people around her: and of placing social responsibility above the personal. She defines her position continually in relation to men, family and society.

In contrast, Vishaka remains till the end of the play an object of male desire and manipulation, despite being privileged as an upper-caste Brahmin woman that falsely invokes caste superiority as fair, beautiful, powerful, knowledge, etc. Nittilai’s firm words to Aravasu, “kick that world aside” indicate her determination to set up a good and innocent world beyond the present one. Aravasu recognizes this quality only in her death, to “provide the missing sense of our lives” (FR 60), not remain “an unregenerate sinner in the eyes of the world” (FR 44).

Girish Karnad has consummate command over English and he has successfully and artistically nativized it for expressing Indian ethos and sensibility. His diction is apt. His words are suggestive and reveal both character and situation. Economy and precision, clarity, and lucidity characterise his style. For example, the following dialogue between Aravasu and Nittilai brings to light the fundamental difference between the Brahminical and the Tribal social orders.

Nittali : Not until we are married. Until then the girl is not supposed to touch her husband. That’s our custom.

Aravasu : Mother of Mine ! I’m about to jettison my caste, my people, my whole past for you. Can’t you forget a minor custom for my sake?



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Aravasu: All these days I couldn't touch because Brahmins do not touch others castes. Now you can't touch me because among hunters girls don't touch their betrothed. Are you sure someone won't think of something else once we are married. (44)

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