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Masking and Unmasking: A Study of Girish Karnad's *The Fire and the Rain*

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Abstract

Girish Karnad was a versatile genius. He was a prolific Kannada writer, a brilliant playwright, a fantastic actor, a talented film director and a meritorious scholar. His long stay in Europe has confirmed him that the Western theatre has nothing to provide him. Therefore, in search of a new mode of expression, he has used ancient Indian myths and history to represent the contemporary issues. *The Fire and the Rain* is one of the most successful drama of Karnad. In this drama, Karnad has made a brilliant and innovative use of mask. In Indian dramatic culture, masks were used frequently to represent the dramatic characters. But in *The Fire and the Rain*, mask is both a stage-prop as well as an important tool for the dramatist, by which he has successfully been able to expose the brahminical society. In this paper I will focus on how Girish Karnad has used the mask to unmask the upper-caste Brahmins.

Keywords- Myth, Drama, Innovation, Mask, Human Values

In *The Fire and the Rain* (1998), a trans creation of the Kannada play *Agni Mattu Male*, Girish Karnad has made a brilliant use of the mask. In Indian dramatic tradition masks were used in dramatic performances to represent the dramatic characters. The drama, at that time, was mainly either about the Gods or about the characters of The Mahabharata and the Ramayana. It was then a simple presentation of mask used to provide an idea about the dramatic characters so that the poor illiterate audience could relate the characters with the mythic ones. Girish Karnad has used this tradition to brilliant effect, for it is not only used as a stage prop but also as a lethal weapon for unmasking the Brahminical society. The dramatist has successfully been able to present and criticise issues like the essence of true knowledge, wisdom, and sacrifice; issues on which the Brahminical society claims to have their absolute dominance.

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This paper is an analysis of how Karnad has exposed the foppery and façade of the high class Hindu Brahmins by traditional yet innovative use of an ancient stage prop, the mask.

In *The Fire and the Rain*, Arvasu wears a mask at the end of the play to play the role of Vritra in a dramatic performance which was arranged, as a form of recreation, in the middle of an ongoing seven years long fire sacrifice. But as the Actor-Manager points out, such a performance is not arranged only as a form of entertainment but also to satisfy the rain god Lord Indra. He says, "...So if Indra is to be pleased and brings 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. If we offer him entertainment in addition to the oblations, the god may grant us the rains we're praying for." (Karnad, 3)

And in the performance, Arvasu plays the role of Vritra which is very significant as during those days Brahmins were not allowed to take part in dramatic performances, for the actors were thought to be the outcastes of the society. "The last chapter of *Natyashastra*- admittedly a later addition- tells us of another performance, again staged by the sons of Bharata. This time it is the Brahmins who are offended and they curse the actors to be outcastes" (Karnad83).

And Arvasu, the brother of the chief priest of the sacrifice, is well aware of the tradition as he says; "...The sons of Bharata were the first actors in the history of theatre. They were Brahmins, but lost their caste because of their profession. A curse plunged them into disrepute and disgrace. If one values one's high birth, one should not touch this profession" (Karnad, 4).

Yet he wants to perform the role of Vritra there by risking himself to be an outcaste. Therefore the obvious question is what prompts Arvasu to risk his own life? The answer to this 'why' lies in his next statement: "...But today I am a criminal. I have killed my father, a noble Brahmin. I already stand tarnished. I may now become an actor. This follows from your own words. So please do not bar the way" (Karnad, 4).

These words are addressed to his elder brother Parvasu, the chief priest of the sacrifice. Arvasu is an unfortunate victim of his brother's cunning strategy. Parvasu has killed his own father in the middle of seven years long fire sacrifice as a revenge but he has put the blame subtly on Arvasu. So the above statement is a direct threat as well as a pathetic plea to his brother for his heinous crime.

In an interview with Toton Mukherjee, Girish Karnad has said that in India the mask represents the spirit by whom the actor seeks to be possessed. The Actor Manager warns Arvasu before the performance: "Here . This is the Mask of Vritra the demon. Now surrender and pour life in it. But

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remember, once you bring a mask to life you have to keep a tight control over it, otherwise it'll try to take over... Prostrate yourself before it. Pray to it. Enter it. Then control it. (Karnad 61). But Arvasu in the mask of Vritra becomes so violent and ferocious that it surprises the Actor Manager who concludes; "It's the mask—it's the mask come alive. Restrain him or there'll be chaos" (Karnad 67).

But Arvasu loses his control and violently chases the Actor- Manager. But to the utter surprise of everybody, the chief Priest of the sacrifice silently enters into the sacrificial fire and commits suicide. Therefore, the valid question is what leads him to commit such an irresponsible act? Here lies the brilliance of Karnad, for the mask provides Arvasu as well as the dramatist certain freedom from restrictions provided by the society. The chase turns out to be a psychological chase for Paravasu, who has killed his own father, and the fear of being exposed by his own brother compels him to commit such an act. And with this, the hypocrisy of the brahminical society comes to the fore. Indeed the play presents a big dichotomy between the real knowledge and the claim of thebrahmins to possess it, between real sacrifice and the ritualistic false sacrifice, and between the so called higher caste and lower caste.

Yavakri is the most knowledgeable person in the entire Brahminical society, for he has received knowledge, as he himself claimed, directly from the Lord Indra. But in reality, whether Lord Indra has really granted him boon or not, is a matter of great suspicion . He comes back with nothing but as he wanted power and position in the society, he scatters a fairy tale that he had attained knowledge directly from Lord Indra. But the hypocrisy comes to the fore, and ironically he attains true knowledge when he realises his earlier folly: "Yes, one day I decided I had won. So I have come back. I have no clear recollection how I arrived at that conclusion" (Karnad 16).

Patience is the essence of knowledge. But Yavakri seems to be oblivious of this truth. He was eager to get knowledge quickly, forgetting that knowledge comes with time and experience: "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" (Karnad 16).

Knowledge leads to self-emancipation. It makes someone wise, to whom the entire enigma of nature becomes clear. A wise man achieves serenity above everything, a peace of mind. He can see beyond the materialistic world, and can perceive the vast drama of nature and existence. But in case of Yavakri, he neither attains wisdom nor can understand the mystery of nature. So later on, he himself criticises his own success: ". . . Universal Knowledge! What a phrase! It makes me laugh now" (Karnad 15).

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The fragile nature of his attained knowledge comes to the fore when he molests Vishakha, the daughter-in-law of Raibhya to take revenge on Raibhya, as there is an ancient enmity between the two families- the Bharadwaja and the Raibhya. Yavakri went to the jungle to attain knowledge not for the greater cause of the human-beings, but for his own personal interest. He wanted to attain knowledge in order to climb up to the social hierarchy, so that he can counter Raibhya. The selfish, narrow-minded, cocooned world of the Brahminical society has been exposed by Nittilai, the hunter girl: "...My point is since Lord Indra appeared to Yavakri and Indra is their God of rains, why didn't he ask for a couple of good showers" (Karnad 12).

This 'why' has a tremendous power which separates a poor, innocent, low-caste, illiterate hunter girl from the so called knowledgeable, high-caste Brahmins who are always in search of 'universal knowledge', of power, of social position.

Parvasu, the other Brahmin who claimed to have knowledge, is also a victim of deadly sins like jealousy and carnal desires. First he marries Vishakha to take revenge on Yavakri, as Vishakha was the beloved of Yavakri. When Yavakri went to the jungle to attain knowledge, Parvasu marries Vishakha, and after satisfying his carnal appetite, he abandons her and joins the sacrifice as a chief-priest. But ironically Parvasu is totally unaware of the noble cause of the sacrifice. To him, the sacrifice is only a ritual through which he wants to climb the social hierarchy, for being the chief-priest of the royal sacrifice itself brings fame and glory.

In a world governed by power politics, human relationships bound to suffer. As being the chief priest of the noble sacrifice leads someone to the top of the social hierarchy, both Raibhya and Parvasu- the father and the son- cherished the dream to be the chief priest, and even tried to surpass each other by hook and crook. The latent jealousy of Raibhya comes to the fore when his son was selected ahead of him as the chief priest of the royal sacrifice. He expresses his frustration: "...I told the king, 'Mark my words, my son defecates wherever he goes. And he will defecate in your sacrifice'" (Karnad 34).

Parvasu tried to console his father by telling him that he was not selected as the chief-priest of the sacrifice considering his old age. As the sacrifice was to continue for some years, and Raibhya was already an old man, they thought of Parvasu, a young man, as the chief priest. This explanation makes Raibhya even more furious. He angrily says: "I see. So you measured my life-span, did you-you and your king? Tested the strength of my life-line? Well, the sacrifice is almost over and I'm still here. Still here.

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Alive and kicking. Tell the king I shall outlive my sons. I shall live long enough to feed their dead souls” (Karnad 34).

Raibhya even tried to cause hindrance in the sacrifice by killing Yavakri. Although Raibhya has killed Yavakri apparently as a revenge for molesting her daughter-in-law, actually, as Parvasu knows very well, he has done it to disturb Parvasu. He never wants Parvasu to complete the sacrifice as the chief-priest. Thus the murder of Yavakri is a well-planned act to disturb his son. Parvasu, knowing his father’s intention, comes back home secretly at night to stop his father before he commits another such act. Therefore he stops his father by killing him: “You didn’t need to. He deserved to die. He killed Yavakri to disturb me in the last stages of sacrifice. Not to punish Yavakri, but to even with me. I had to attend to him before he went any further” (Karnad 38).

And after the heinous act of patricide, Parvasu, like a seasoned criminal, remains steady and orders his brother Arvasu to perform the essential duties. Innocent Arvasu obeys his brother, being totally oblivious of his brother’s cunning plan. Parvasu fears Arvasu and wants to entrap him. Vishakha, sensing the trap, warns Arvasu: “Refuse. He killed his father. Let him atone for it. Don’t get involved in it. (Karnad 41). But the simple-minded, innocent Arvasu thinks for the bigger cause, for the noble cause of sacrifice where there is a need of Parvasu as without him the sacrifice will not be completed and the rain will not come.

The real face that has so far been consciously hidden under the mask of a benevolent brother comes out when Arvasu reaches to the sacrificial place. On being asked by his brother, Arvasu replies that he is coming straight from the expiation as his father has died last night. Arvasu does not realise that gradually his brother is leading him to the fatal trap.

PARAVASU: Yes, you! Who are you?

ARVASU: Me? I---

PARAVASU: Yes, Tell us.

ARVASU: I’m Arvasu, son of Raibhya.

PARAVASU: And where have you come from?

ARVASU: My father died. I’ve just completed his obsequies—and the expiation.

PARAVASU: Why the expiation? Tell us. Why?

ARVASU: He was killed.....

PARAVASU: At whose hands?

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(Long pause)

ARVASU: At the hands of his son.

PARAVASU: Patricide-patricide! What is he doing in these sanctified precincts ? Throw him out- out! Out! Demon! (Karnad 44).

As the chief-priest was not expected to visit home while the Sacrifice is going on, crowds take it for granted that Arvasu has killed his own father. Now poor Arvasu has realised that he is in a fatal trap and only cries out in agony: “But why, Brother, why? ...Why?” (Karnad 44)

Another important issue, something which is an integral part of ancient Hindu culture and religion, that Karnad wanted to discuss, is the tradition of sacrifice. In the great epics like *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata*, we also come across such ritual of sacrifice. What is the essence of sacrifice? The aim of sacrifice, to quote from Aurobindo’s *The Synthesis of Yoga*, is not to be mistaken as ‘self-immolation’, but as ‘self-effacement’; “it’s object is not self-effacement; its method not self-mortification: But a greater life...”. The entire process of the sacrifice is very spiritual in nature and it makes someone wretched. The aim of it is self-expansion by sacrificing our selfish, cocooned self for the greater cause. And the moment we think beyond our individual world, the ‘rain’, a symbol of fertility, of rebirth and regeneration, pours down to bless the perched land. But unfortunately, the chief-priest of the noble sacrifice, betrays the essence of it by using this for his own selfish purpose. He expresses his actual intention to Vishakha: “I went because the fire sacrifice is a formal rite. Structured. It involves no emotional acrobatics from the participants. The process itself will bring Indra to me. And if anything goes wrong, there’s nothing the gods can do about it. It has to be set right by a man. By me. That’s why when the moment comes I shall confront Indra in silence. As equal” (Karnad 37).

And no wonder, such a sacrifice can never bring rain. Even the self-immolation of Paravasucan not be considered as a true sacrifice, for his death is not a sacrifice but a suicide, committed at the fear of being exposed by the Vritra mask. It is the death of Nittilai, and through her death, the ultimate sacrifice caused by Arvasu, that brings rain. Having lost his father, his own caste and being treacherously betrayed by his own brother, Arvasu takes shelter in his beloved Nittilai, the hunter-girl. But later on, when Nittilai was also killed by her husband and her father, Arvasu lost his only source of life. Later on, Arvasu has the option to bring Nittilai back to life as Lord Indra gives him a chance to beg only one boon. But then, to the utter surprise of everyone present, Arvasu prays Indra to release Brahma Rakshasa. This the real sacrifice, where the protagonist sacrifices his only source of life for the cause of humanity, a sacrifice

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which makes the man wretched. And only when we think of others, of the bigger world, rain pours down to bless us: “What’s that? –You smell that? –Yes. Yes. The smell of wet earth. Of fresh rains. It’s raining. Somewhere. Nearby. The air is blossoming with the fragrance of earth. It’s raining- It’s raining- Rain! The rain!” (Karnad 72). These words echo the last words spoken by Raju in R.K Narayan’s *The Guide*: ‘Velan, its raining in the hills. I can feel it coming up under my feet, up my legs’- (Narayan 247).

Raju, who was so far been extremely selfish and opportunist a character, performs fasting to bring rains for the poor villagers, and it is his selfless sacrifice, his concern for the others that brings rains to the perched land. With the exposure of the two ‘great men’, the play also exposes the entire Brahminical society, who demands superiority over other caste, and utilize the ignorance, unquestioned faith, and superstitions of the poor villagers for their own sake. Gulsan Das and Ms. TanjeemAra Khan observe; “Karnad emphasizes that Brahminism is not Godism. He dwells on the merits of Brahminic qualities, but condemns the devilish priest-hood and inhuman act of fire-sacrifice at the cost of slaying blood-relations. To add to this condemnation he has created Nittilai, an ideal icon of humanity” (Das and Khan 198).

She is more knowledgeable than any other character of the Brahminical society, for she possesses wisdom which enables her to use her knowledge. She is more humane, more concerned, more sympathetic and more devoted than the so-called knowledgeable Brahmins. She exposes Yavakri when she asks, “My point is since lord Indra appeared to Yavakri and Indra is their God of Rains, why didn’t Yavakri ask for a couple of good showers? (Karnad 12)

The difference lies in the fact that she thinks for the bigger world, for the people around herself. Why Yavakri didn’t ask Lord Indra for rain is a big mystery to Nittilai. Being totally ignorant of the prevalent power-politics, Nittilai can’t understand how a knowledgeable Brahmin can let such an opportunity go. If Arvasu makes the ultimate and true sacrifice, it is Nittilai who has taught Arvasu the essence of sacrifice. She is married to a boy of her own hunter community and she has got everything a girl of her community wants- a good family, a lovely husband and a descent social and economic status and as he herself says, “I liked him. Very much. He’s always smiling. I might have been happy with him. (Pause) “If another girl had done what I have done. I’d be the first to thrash her in the village square. But when I heard what’d happen to you-” (Karnad 47).

Nittilai loves Arvasu, and it is for him that she has rejected all her comforts. Nittilai knows very well that eloping with another person means inviting death for her. But here lies the greatness of Nittilai, for she is willingly sacrificing her own life for the cause of others. She inspires Arvasu to unmask the

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hypocrisy of the upper-class Brahmins but never instigates him to take revenge. She watches the violent chase of Vritra and it is when Parvasu enters into the fire, she rushes out to rescue Arvasu from causing further disturbances. The aim of the chase is to unmask the hypocrite Brahmins, and when it is done, she throws out the Vritra mask. Nittilai symbolizes the essence of human-beings long before Brahma Rakshasa has said it to Arvasu.

The supremacy of the Aryan gods over the Asuras has been challenged by Nittilai. She does not subscribe to Andhaka's view that the Hindu 'gods are mightier' than the tribal gods and goddesses. She challenges Lord Indra when she says; "He is im-mortal. When someone doesn't die, can't die, what can be known to anything? He can't change himself. He can't-can't create anything. I like Vritra because even when he's triumphant he chooses death. I always wonder- if flowers didn't know they were to fade and die, would they ever blossom? (Karnad 60)

Here she utters the basic principal of Indian philosophy which suggests that death is not an end of life but a beginning of the cyclic process of our existence. But Indra, the mighty god, has not changed the world, as there has been a ten years long drought. If Indra really cared for his devotees, he should have bring rain to this parched land. The fire sacrifice which is arranged to satisfy Lord Indra, has not by itself brought rain, it is the ultimate sacrifice made by the people like Arvasu which brings rain to the earth. Nittilai also criticises the secretive nature of the Brahmins, who always keep everything in secret: "But what I want to know is why are the Brahmins so secretive about everything?" And as P.D Nimsarkar pointed out, "the phrase 'so secretive about everything' has enormous power that dismantles the Brahminical culture and mindset, the combination that has contiously been dominating the internal make up of the Indian Society and religio, extending it in politics and politicking" (Nimsarkar 160).

The mask of Vritra is not only a stage-prop, but also a brilliant innovation by the ingenious dramatist. The mask of Vritra enables Arvasu to expose his brother in a subtle way, which can never be done, and would seriously bring disaster for Arvasu had he tried this normally. The sub-conscious, which was so far been suppressed, takes control as Arvasu begins destruction. In his personal life, Parvasu, his own brother, has always feared him and has caused him much trouble. But Arvasu could not take revenge on his brother because of his own humanity, of the social restrictions which forbid him to do so. But the feeling of injustice was very much there with in Arvasu, and when, for a brief period of time, Arvasu lost his control over his consciously maintained social self, the sub-conscious begins to dominate, and he violently chases his brother. Thus, in *The Fire and the Rain*, Girish Karnad makes a brilliant, innovative

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and resourceful use of mask to unmask the brahminical society, their claim to possess universal knowledge, their selfish world and their false sense of caste superiority.

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