

## Research Paper

## Social Reality in Girish Karnad's The Fire and the Rain

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### ABSTRACT

*The present paper entitled Social Reality in The Fire and the Rain examines Girish Karnad's mythical play through nativistic point of view. Social Reality is one of the most invaluable values and important insignias of Indian literature and civilization. We find its seed in native, non-vedic tradition of Buddha, Jain, Veershaiva, Varkari, Mahanubhava cult etc. It is nothing but a self-realization or inner voice of human beings.*

Mahatma Gandhi, a true votary of truth, preached the gospel of truth and non-violence and observed them in his teachings as an eternal principle. He says, "I claim to be a votary of truth from my childhood. It was the most natural thing to me. My prayerful search gave me the revealing maxim 'Truth is God', instead of the usual one 'God is Truth' (Galtung, Johan:1992:151, Harijan, 9.8.1942). It means that Gandhiji sedately believes in the selfless search of truth which leads towards the path of light, life, goodness, existence, love and God. It is sovereign principle, religion and Bhagavata Gita for him. Biswas, S.C. says, "A religion of Truth and pursuit of Truth through ceaseless toil – this is the Gita of Gandhiji" (1990:391). The seekers of truth like Buddha, Jesus Christ, Mohammad Paigambar, Phule, Gandhi, Ambedkar etc. professed and practiced Truth as Religion and tried to set up it before the society; particularly they equated truth with reality.

As far as the literature is concerned, every writer has a moral responsibility to search reality or truth and present them before the society. S/he should not ignore social reality but should write for the good of people and tell the truth to society like Jotirao Phule who dedicated his books for the good of the people. The same truth is told by Bhalchandra Nemade, he who feels that literature acquires serious meaning when it reflects social reality in all aspects and areas of life of bahujan samaj. In this regard, he says, "Realism means acceptance of the objective experience of the universe independent of the individual's existence; and the primary condition of the realism in literature is the acceptance of the individual society relationship from this perspective" (1986:40). It means that Nemade accepts social reality as social truth not a critic's term. As truth-teller the writer should present reality as a native moral value of social life. Thus Nemade rejects the impractical, visionary and materialistic western realism of Camus, Kafka, Satra, Beckettee etc. and suggests that the writer should remain neutral and throw light on all the spheres of life for bringing out the truth before the society. Indeed, Reality is a powerful weapon in the hands of writers and critics; therefore, they should admit and use this valuable virtue as their religion.

Jnanpeeth Awardee, Girish Karnad is an ambassador of Indian culture and the most outstanding dramatic genius of the Post-Independence Period. His yemon-service in the

field of drama gives him an unflinching place in the annals of Indian dramatic literature like his contemporary playwrights namely Babal Sircar (Bengali), Mohan Rakesh (Hindi), and Vijay Tendulkar (Marathi). His mythical play The Fire and the Rain is the play par excellence. It is a critical commentary on social evils like casteism, age-old and unequal attitude to women, vain knowledge of priestly class with their possessiveness, jealousy, malice, mistrust, competition, treachery, revenge, power-conflict, adultery and their meaningless sacrifice without social concern.

1 At the outset, the play describes the dreadful reality of the rain-affected land. There is no rain for nearly ten years. This drought condition has gripped the land which resulted in losing the fertility of the land. Consequently people are suffering, dying of starvation and fleeing away from the famine province. It means that famine, deaths and migration of families are the consequences of absence of rain in the kingdom. Under this critical situation, the selfish and religious-minded King is performing the fire sacrifice in order to please Lord Indra, the god of rain for sending rains. Infact he is offering all kinds of material to fire sacrifice instead of giving them to the starving subjects.

2 The play sharply criticizes the false notions of Vedic society, particularly the priestly class and the tribal class. Parvasu, the eldest son of Raibhaya, belongs to priestly class. He is appointed as a Chief Priest of fire sacrifice by the King instead of his father – Raibhaya, who claimed himself superior intellectual and cultural caliber than his son. The father is burning in jealousy due to his son's growing prosperity and prestige, therefore, Raibhaya is looking for an opportunity to disturb and disgrace his own son – Parvasu. Jealousy between father and son for earthly power and prestige shows that there was no healthy relation between them.

Yavakri, son of Sage Bharadwaja, makes a strenuous penance for ten years in order to get Universal Knowledge from Lord Indra directly. He gets divine knowledge without studying at the feet of guru. Indeed revenge is the main aim of Yavakri's search for knowledge. Dr. Vaja, Iros remarks, "Yavakri's sole purpose is to destroy the happiness and reputation of Raibhaya and his son

Parvasu" (2010:130). There are other reasons for his full-blooded jealousy about Raibhaya family. First of all, he thinks that his father-Bharadwaja did not receive respect and social recognition for Brahma Vidya. Secondly, Raibhaya family enjoys social prestige and priestly honours. And thirdly his youthful love – Vishakha's marriage with Parvasu, who has been appointed as the chief Priest of the fire sacrifice instead of his father – Bharadwaja. It means that his Absolute Knowledge does not help him to get rid of his evil nature but compels him to live in the world passion, cruelty, hatred, jealousy and revenge. So his first move after he returns from penance is to molest Vishakha, Parvasu's wife, as a part of organized scheme of revenge, intended to disrupt the fire sacrifice. He avenges his jealousy by seducing Vishakha, the former beloved of Yavakri. Seven years separation and abandonment from her husband, Vishakha falls an easy prey to Yavakri's vile design. Her willing submission to Yavakri is out of demands of lust of the two men" (2006:256). When Raibhaya learns Vishakha's adultery, he beats her and uses abused language against her, which is against the cultural norms are concerned. Then he creates Brahma Rakshsa from his sacrificial act and ordered him to kill him outside the hermitage of Sage Bharadwaja. Thus Yavakri meets more miserable and tragic death despite of his Absolute Knowledge. His superficial knowledge cannot save his life because it was full of falsehood, pride, lack of control of passions and serenity, and desire of revenge.

Vishakha's infidelity compels Parvasu to return home secretly by defying the sanctity of ritual. Infact Parvasu is not an ideal or virtuous character in his private life. Though Parvasu is highly learned Vedic scholar and a representative of Aryan community, he is self-centered, hypocritic and power-greedy person. He treats his wife like an object of his experimentation. He completely neglects his duty towards home and more particularly to his young wife after the appointment of Chief Priest. Verily Parvasu is responsible for Vishakha's moral degradation. He realizes his weaknesses as a man and kills his father instead of his adulterous wife. He thinks that his father 'deserved to die' who killed Yavakri to disturb him in the last stages of the sacrifice (P.33). Then this dangerous demon asks him younger brother – Arvasu – to perform the funeral rites and expiation of his father. When Arvasu attends the fire sacrifice after performing funeral rights, Parvasu accuses him of patricide. He asks King to throw him out of the sanctified precincts. Thus Arvasu becomes a victim of his brother's ruthless and sinister plot.

On the other hand, Nittilai exposes the hollowness, vanity and meaninglessness of sacrifice and penance. She logically distinguishes between Brahmin life and tribal life. She asks Adhanka, "But What I want to know is why the Brahmins are so secretive about everything?..... You know, their fire sacrifices are conducted in covered enclosures. They mortify themselves in the dark of the jungle. Even their gods appear so secretly. Why? What are they afraid of? Look at my people. Everything is done I public view there. The priest announces that he'll invoke the deity at such and such a

time and such a day. And then there, right in front of the whole tribe, he gets possessed. And the spirit answers your questions. You can feel it come and go. You know it's their. Not mere hearsay" (10). Thus Nittilai exposes the reality of priestly class and her tribal class. She further asks Adhanka, "What is the use of all these powers?" if they cannot solve day-to-day problems. She thinks that if the acquired knowledge cannot save the dying children, then it is useless. Indeed Nittilai's reasonable doubts are the doubts of every Dravidian about Aryan rituals, customs and beliefs. It is true that the individual attainment of knowledge has no value unless it is conjoined with human concern and social betterment. On the whole, the play criticizes the hypocritical life-style of priestly class and underlines the plain, straight forward and simple life of tribal class.

3 Power-politics within the knowledgeable persons presents the bitter reality of ancient society. Raibhaya, 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 Raibhaya 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 Raibhaya family. Finally he is punished by Raibhaya 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 Raibhaya and Bharadwaja family in general and Brahmin community of Vedic period in particular.

4 Casteism is perpetual problem of Indian society. Girish Karnad tries to criticize the false notions of caste-system in this play. Infact Arvasu and Nittilai are the victims of this rigid and cruel system. Both belonged to two different classes, namely priestly and tribal class. Though they love each-other but social customs and convictions do not permit them to be united as husband and wife. As a Brahmin, Arvasu's love for a tribal girl, his passion for performing play, acting and dancing are considered as an irreligious activity and below the dignity of Brahmin community. Consequently, he is banished from his caste.

The other dark side of this Vedic society is that the low-caste people were not allowed to enter the holy places

like temples or sacrificial enclosures. The caste-discrimination is clearly reflected in Karnad's *Natya-Myth*. According to this myth, Brahma, the Lord of All Creation, created drama as the fifth Veda, which handed it to Indra, who in turn, passed it on to Bharata, a human being. "The sons of Bharata were the first actors in the history of theatre. They were Brahmins, but lose 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" (P.3). Thus Vedic society considers profession of acting as an irreligious activity and actors as outcastes or low-caste, who were the direct sufferers of such rigidity of caste-consciousness.

The Epilogue shows that the world of gods, too, was not free from caste-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. Infact 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. Nand Kukar writes, "In the name of ritual sanctify and rules he bars Vritra's entry to a sacrificial precincts" (2003:174). Despite Vritra's warnings, the innocent Vishwarupa accepts Indra invitation saying that "one must obey one's brother" (P.55) and killed by Indra treacherously when he was offering oblations to the gods. Indeed this brotherhood betrayal and fratricidal violence is similar to the betrayal story of Arvasu and Parvasu. Infact Parvasu kills his own father but imposes the act of patricide on his innocent brother – Arvasu and destroys his life. On the whole Vishwarupa and Arvasu are the victims of caste – consciousness aspects and brotherhood hatred. In this regard, Nand Kukar remarks, "The Epilogue very significantly presents the myth of slaying of the demon Vritra by Indra. Through the dramatization of the mythological episode of Arvasu's love for a tribal girl of hunting community, Karnad very significantly condemns and ridiculous the caste system which has been social stigma for ages" (2003:179).

5 An inferior and secondary status of women in Vedic society is a fine example of social reality. This unequal treatment in patriarchal pavilion is a typical feature of traditional society which expects that women 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 women lies at the central of such society. The play presents Vishakha and Nittilai as the representatives of this oppressed class, though they belonged to two different social groups, castes and systems, but both are equally ill-treated and exploited.

Vishakha is an upper-caste Brahmin woman of learned family. But she has no freedom and separate identity in the society and in her hermitage. Her husband – Parvasu – treats her like a slave and used her body like an experimenter in a search. When he is appointed as a chief Priest, Parvasu abandons her for seven years. Thenafter she starts suffering from loneliness and frustration in a confined hermitage. She becomes a parched tree due to absence of a drop of love and communication. Silence surrounds her life. She regretfully commends on her life when she says, "I live in the hermitage, parched and wordless, like a she-devil" (P.15). When she

meets her former lover Yavakri, who had abandoned her for the sake of gaining knowledge, Vishakha opens her heart before him and willingly submits herself to the incestuous behest of Yavakri. Indeed she is hungry for words and physical appetite. In this regard Budholia, O.P. remarks, "The departure of her husband to be the chief Priest left her alone with her pangs of isolation and separation. Her long isolation in the hermitage bites her and she becomes a psychosis patient who desires for her immediate wish fulfillment with no concern for logic, morality, time-sequence, casual connections, or the demands of external reality" (2002:152). It is Vishakha's misfortune that her former lover – Yavakri – used her as an instrument of vengeance without remembering the past love. On the other hand, Raibhaya, the father-in-law of Vishakha, becomes angry when he learns Vishakha's adultery. He angrily grabs her by her hair and beats and kicks her. Even he uses obscene language against her and calls her 'whore', 'roving whore'. When she reveals the truth to her husband, Parvasu leaves her to suffer from a spur of adultery. Thus Vishakha suffers from Brahminical patriarchy. She is exploited not only from her husband and father-in-law but from her former lover also. This is deplorable condition of Vishakha which is common everywhere in India. Infact her tragedy in a learned family is unjustifiable when she leads her to death as secretive as her life in silence.

Nittilai, a hunter girl, is a 'noble savage' and Karnad's own creation. She, too, is persecuted in her community for demanding her right to choose her spouse. Indeed this noble-principled girl loves Arvasu devotedly. But she follows the traditions, customs and convictions of her community sincerely. Unfortunately she marries with another man. However the news of mortally wounded Arvasu makes her rush to him and to nurse him. But she does not try to disgrace the name of her husband, though she started living with Arvasu. She calms down Arvasu's feeling for revenge and explains the reality of Parvasu, Raibhaya and Yavakri who destroyed their lives for the sake of worldly power, prestige and revenge. Even she gives food to the starving children of Actor-Manager. Such a noble principled and humane Nittilai, "a lamp into hurricane" (P.58), is murdered by her husband and brother who did not tolerate her relationship with Arvasu. Thus she becomes a victim of tribal patriarchy. Indeed she is an emblem of goodness, true love, humanity and sacrifice. It is true that innocence and good is destroyed by the evilsome and ignorant society.

On the whole, Vishakha and Nittilai are the victims of brahminical and tribal patriarchy respectively. The former becomes a sexual weapon in the hands of male to avenge each other whereas the latter is punished for crossing the community rules framed by the male elders. Verily both become a prey to male paradigmatic struggles which resulted in Vishakha's insanity and Nittilai's death.

In sum, Girish Karnad, a staunch follower of non-vedic tradition, presents social, cultural, moral, religious and political culture of vedic society. As a truth-teller, Karnad exposes all evilsome aspects alongwith good points of then society. Indeed *The Fire and the Rain* is an excellent example social reality.

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