

Mythic reworkings in Girish Karnad's *Yayati and The Fire and the Rain*

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Introduction Postindependent Indian drama/theatre saw the rise of four major playwrights who were pre-occupied with crafting a national identity as well as handling modernity. For the purposes of this paper, suffice it to say that whereas modernity refers to the impact of Enlightenment ideals, the rise of democratic nation-states and individualism, modern sensibility means an urban¹ sensibility. Although it is realized that the debates are intense, a brief understanding of the term myth is provided by Northrop Frye who claims that myth “is a certain type of story ... like the folktales it is an abstract story-pattern. The characters can do what they like, which means what the story-teller likes”(1974: 163-164). Reiterating the tradition of Indian theatre based on myth, Karnad proclaims that “Most myths have a strong emotional significance for our audiences. I like to play on that too ... The audience already has a set of responses to the particular situation I’m dealing with”(Enact, 1971). It emerges that a key feature of myth is the ‘confrontation’ between the familiar world/s or sensibilities of the author and the audience.

Based on a close textual analysis of the plays, the first part of the paper will examine *Yayati* (2007- English) which visits the Yayati myth in the *Adiparva* of the *Mahabharata* and deals with the father-son exchange of ages and the theme of responsibility. The second part will examine *The Fire and the Rain* (1998-English commissioned by the Guthrie theatre) which returns to the Yavakri myth and the parallel Vritra myth in the *Vanaparva*, the third book of the *Mahabharata* to explore Brahmin power-struggles and fratricidal anxieties. It is necessary to clarify that this paper refers to C. Rajagopalachari’s version² of the *Mahabharata*, comprising of 107 stories.

A.K. Ramanujan aptly observes that the *Mahabharata* is “not a text but a tradition” and that substories reinforce “repetitions” which “are a part of a total world-view”(1999: 161, 178). For instance, the Yayati story, told as a model and precedent when Bhisma gave up his sexual and political life so that his father could remarry, is retold in the *Ramayana* by Rama when he was exiled by his father. A brief recapitulation of the story evoking the classical, collective Indian (Hindu) world-view of a devoted son is apt. Yayati, for a moral transgression he has committed, is cursed to senility. Wanting to prolong his pleasures, he asks each of his five sons to transfer their youth to him and the elder sons refuse. Pooru who accepts his father’s curse, receives great honour, inherits Yayati’s kingdom and becomes well-known as a wise ruler.

In the light of the above, while attending to Karnad's reworkings, notwithstanding the numerous alterations, the father-son exchange of ages is theatrically appealing and made more poignant through two crucial changes - Yayati's adulterous union with Sharmishtha and Pooru's acceptance of his father's curse – take place on the eve of the arrival of the new couple (crown Prince Pooru and his wife Chitrlekha) on their nuptial night. In contrast to Rajagopalachari's version, wherein Pooru's wife is not mentioned, these twists engender a subversive reading in tune with modern sensibilities i.e. the overthrow of an aggressive father. The Sutradhara's direct address to the audience in the Prologue and at the play's end helps in framing the story.

The father-son (Yayati-Pooru) conflict echoes the conflict between tradition and modernity. Yayati is proud of his Aryan lineage, believes in hierarchy and rituals, indulges in wars and is keen on fulfilling his duties as a householder and King. In contrast, Pooru reconciles himself to his hybrid lineage, interrogates irrational rituals (*Swayamvara* and waiting for an auspicious moment to enter the palace), feels burdened by dynastic expectations and resents the duties of a King and householder. Expecting his subjects to be like (sacrificing) soldiers, Yayati promises glory to anyone who accepted his old age while Pooru, representing the democratic citizens, points out that the people paid taxes and preferred death. Spurred by excessive lust and patriarchal aggression instead of parental obligations, Yayati chooses to retain his youth and rejects old age; Pooru prefers self-sacrifice (self-glorification?) over his conjugal duties and chooses to give up his political and sexual potency. The resultant crisis in the lives of Pooru and Chitrlekha hints at the generational conflict and draws audience-attention to the demands made by the elders as also the consequences results of (unrestrained) patriarchal power.

In particular, Rajagopalachari describes Pooru's sacrifice as "moved by filial love" and enumerates that "As soon as he touched his son, Yayati became a youth. Puru, who accepted the old age of his father, ruled the kingdom and acquired great renown" and after many years, Puru was "made king by Yayati who retired to the forest"(1999: 31, 32). In contrast, Karnad questions this unnatural reversal of the cosmic order; Yayati does not ask Pooru but Pooru accepts the curse "to emphasize Puru's personal choice of self-sacrifice, rather than as atonement for his father's sin"(Crowe, 1996: 138). Apparently, in giving more stage-space to elaborating the exchange of ages, the play questions the conflict-free end of the Yayati story, wherein Yayati realizes that there is no end to *kama* (desire) after a long life of pleasure.

For the audience, it is Chitrlekha's onstage death which emphasizes the grave implications of Yayati's self-centredness and Pooru's filial devotion bringing home the crucial insight that "Puru's old age is a sudden transformation and not the eventuality

of life. It brings no wisdom and no self-realization. It is a senseless punishment for an act he has not committed” (Karnad, *Notes on Tughlaq, Hayavadana and Naga-Mandala*, 2011:303). Yayati is led on the path of self-realization, aptly captured in his soliloquy, after witnessing the tragic death (sacrifice? or murder?) of his young daughter-in-law Chitrlekha. Yayati returns Pooru’s youth and retires to the forest with Sharmishta. Pooru’s agonized cry on seeing his wife dead is made more ironic with the return of the Sutradhara who reinforces that Pooru was a wise ruler and subverts traditions and provokes the spirit of questioning. In other words, the Yayati myth has been reinterpreted to challenge the perpetuation of its inherent power-structures i.e. the power of the aggressive patriarch over a submissive son and foreground contemporary (individual) concerns³.

In the second part, I will examine how the Yavakri and Vrita myths have been reworked. Lomasha tells Yavakrida’s story to the Pandavas who reach Raibhya’s hermitage on the banks of the Ganga, and Lomasha remarks that “Indra⁵ was cleansed of the sin of killing Vritra unfairly by these waters.” Interestingly begins the story thus: “Yavakrida, the son of a sage met with destruction in this very place” (Rajagoapalachari, 1999:144). Karnad depicts Bharadwaja and Raibhya as brothers rather than friends, reworks Arvasu’s character to symbolize ritual/theatre and the presence of Arvasu, Nittilai, Parvasu, the people and the invisible brahmarakshasa in the precincts of the fire-sacrifice in the prologue and the epilogue is crucial for reinforcing *rta*⁶. In contrast to being a famed scholar officiating at the fire-sacrifice with Parvasu, Arvasu is a simpleton, a passionate actor who does not act in deference to Parvasu’s advice, and who loves a tribal girl Nittilai. In the Prologue, he is permitted to act in a play titled *The Triumph of Lord Indra* during the seven-year long fire-sacrifice to procure rains; in the epilogue, he debates with Indra and the brahmarakshasa on love, duty, and the natural order of time.

In Act I, Yavakri returns after 10 years and through Andhaka (the blind grandfather of Sudra caste) the story of his penance (tapasya) to acquire Vedic knowledge directly from Indra is retold; however, through Nittilai, Karnad interrogates if there were any witnesses and Yavakri himself admits to Vishaka the hardships faced in the forest and his own self-realization as to what could not be achieved. Yavakri wants Vedic knowledge without a guru or hard work and misuses his powers by challenging Raibhya and Parvasu, however, Vishaka, the Chief Priest Parvasu’s wife (who is depicted as Yavakri’s former lover), is not molested but yields to him. On her return, she is beaten and kicked by her father-in-law Raibhya. Both Arvasu and Vishaka witness Raibhya invoking a ghost (brahmarakshasa) to kill Yavakri. Vishaka rushes to Yavakri, learns of his challenge and pours out the water. Yavakri rushes to his father’s hermitage, is stopped by Andhaka and meets his end at the hands of the brahmarakshasa. A quick

look at further deletions⁴ is vital. Bharadwaja is dead; Arvasu, conditioned by his brahminical upbringing, finds Yavakri and Andhaka dead and performs their last rites. As a consequence, he reaches the tribal council late to find that Nittilai's father has given her hand to her cousin.

In Act II, Parvasu who wants to meet Indra as an equal and bring rains through yagna, returns home after six years, intentionally kills his jealous father and knowingly corrupts the yagna but instructs Arvasu to perform the expiatory rites. Arvasu witnesses the familial (brahminical) power-struggles and acts in accordance to the wishes of his elders. Arvasu chooses to resolve differences with Yavakri and performs his death rites; despite Vishaka's warning, he chooses to perform the expiatory rites for his father Raibhya. The parallels drawn between Parvasu-Arvasu and Indra-Vritra are of significance. When Twastha's son Vishwarupa is killed by Indra, Twastha invokes Vritra who is also killed by Indra through deceit. Likewise, Parvasu falsely accuses Arvasu of brahminicide and patricide and has him thrown out half-dead. In Act III, a near-dead Arvasu is rescued by the Actor-Manager and nursed back to health by Nittilai who has run away from her husband. Through her, the play calls for a stop to the cycle of vengeance.

In the epilogue, Arvasu, with the Vritra mask, loses control, chases Indra (the actor-manager) and questions the deceit. Parvasu sees the enactment of the fratricidal theme and remorsefully walks into the fire. Arvasu is pulled back by Nittilai who throws off the mask but is killed by her husband and brother. Grief-stricken, Arvasu enters the fire with Nittilai's body but Indra, pleased with Arvasu's acting skills, appears and grants him a boon. In contrast to Arvasu performing penance to please Indra who grants Arvasu's wish to revive dead relatives, the audience is witness to the ethical choices confronted by Arvasu. Indra reiterates that the wheels of time can either roll back bringing back to life all the dead or move forward to release the brahmarakshasa, who incidentally pinpoints to Arvasu that Nittilai would have wanted his release. Arvasu initially maintains that the experience would make everyone wiser and disregards Indra's warning that history would repeat itself; however, through the brahmarakshasa who pinpoints that the compassionate Nittilai would be unhappy, Arvasu is made to introspect. He then asks Indra for the release of the brahmarakshasa from his intermittent state between life and death and procures rains in tune with the natural order. The play thus subverts traditions, reiterates the irreversibility of death, and brings home the significance of compassion and human-welfare. As Erin Mee observes, the play does not espouse "Brahmin ideals" but "exposes the hypocrisy and brutality of Brahmin priests and the failure of religion"; demonstrates how jealousy can lead to familial violence and "breaks the cycle of vengeance and revenge and brings release from anger"(2001:5).

This paper began with the claim that Karnad has reworked ancient myths to suit modern sensibilities. As already demonstrated, the audience can discern that the mythic alterations and reinterpretation of the mythical characters in the two plays depict their reworkings in the manner in which they question traditions - for instance, Pooru's (blind) filial devotion or Arvasu's (blind) familial affiliations; likewise, Nittilai's questioning spirit and humane gestures are counterpoised with (brahminical) power-struggles among Raibhya, Parvasu and Yavakri. The plays bring home the injustice inherent in the demand made by elders that the young generation should sacrifice their lives, and highlights the message that actions guided by sentiments of human welfare are superior to those guided by self-interests, and reaffirms the efficacy of sacrifice (not blind but rational) in the larger interests of humanity.

Notes

1. B.V. Karanth, a modern playwright and director enumerates that "modern Indian sensibility ... is an urban sensibility - a sensibility that connects one region with another in this culturally diverse country because it has had exposure to the west, to the Independence movement, to industrialization"(qtd in Subramanyam, 2002:14).
2. Karnad has mentioned in the *Notes on The Fire and the Rain* that he read Rajagopalachari's version during his college days.
3. Karnad maintains, "Whatever modernity the play has might have been due to my young age and the influence of the European modernists whom I had read. I would like to discover my own state of mind in his character. I had secured a Rhodes Scholarship and I was to leave for England for higher studies. My parents were happy but ... began to put certain conditions—that I should return to India soon after my studies and then marry a girl from my own community, etc. I did not like their meddling in my affairs. I thought that I was the master of my destiny"(Contemporary Indian Theatre, 1989).
4. Bharadwaja finds Yavakri dead, curses Raibhya that he would be killed by one of his sons, regrets his anger, cremates Yavakri's body and throws himself into the funeral pyre.
5. M. Hiriyanna explains that Rta means "cosmic order" meaning "preserving the world from physical disorder and moral chaos" and willing the right ; second, ritualism referring to sacrifices forcing gods to do what the sacrifice wanted to be done; third, "sacrificial correctness" similar to "natural law and moral rectitude"(2005:12, 23).
6. M. Hiriyanna observes that the deity Indra represents both valour and forc but also as vain and boastful and called as "thunder-god" and "the liberator of the waters by slaying the demon of drought"(2005:11).

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