

Power and Myth in Girish Karnad's *The Fire and the Rain*

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Abstract:

Power, the most significant phenomenon that is ruling over the world since its construction and even before that. It has a universal appeal that is enthralled by all the species over the universe and even beyond that. Nothing is possible without this 'power-operation' either in terms of construction or destruction. It is a tool that operates the world in a hierarchical way, where nothing is left from the smallest insect to the giant being. Everything is arranged in a way of 'power-hierarchy' sometimes by the Invisible-Power that operates and sometimes by the society that demonstrate. Society has created so many tools like, knowledge, myth, gender, caste, class, religion etc to operate its domination. Myth is also one of the most powerful tools that are used by the society to operate power over human psychology. This paper studies Girish Karnad's *The Fire and the Rain* using the lenses of Foucault's concept of 'Power and Knowledge'.

Keywords: myth, power, knowledge, caste, gender

Michael Foucault, an influential French theorist, provided a fresh understanding of power that challenged the traditional notion that power can only operate through outright acts of coercion. Instead, according to Foucault, power acts through "regimes of truth", the constant negotiations to settle on what should be regarded as the "truth" (Foucault, *Foucault Reader*). Foucault here is referencing to the postmodern idea that 'truth' is not absolute, that it is created or established. He writes:

Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its regime of truth, its "general politics" of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true (*Foucault Reader*, 77-73).

These "regimes of truth" are established and reinforced by religious institutions, education systems and economic reality. Through these rituals of truth, power produces reality itself that makes the use of violence a secondary requirement in maintaining the status quo because of the social control established through internalisation of institutionally manufactured truth.

Girish Karnad, one of India's finest dramatists, was well renowned for his ability to use stories from Indian mythologies in a unique way that not only brought insight to contemporary social issues but also drew attention to their roots in the way our society was organised in the past. He provides a critical

perspective through this link between the past and the present while offering a way to transform the future for the better. This paper will attempt to elucidate how Karnad succeeded in doing so, after having an insightful reading of his play, *The Fire and the Rain* (2005), in light of Foucault's theory of 'power and knowledge'. It will further try to reveal how Karnad's play not only shows the operation of power according to Foucauldian philosophy but also offers methods of resisting it.

The plot of the play, *The Fire and the Rain*, is based on the story of the two sages (Raibhya and Bharadwaj), narrated by Sage Lomash to Yudhishthira in 'Vanaparva' (Chapters 135-8 in *The Mahabharata*). Girish Karnad reconstructs the original story by adding new characters: Nittilai, the Actor-Manager and his limping brother. The plot contains the story of a small region in Ancient India that is facing the problem of drought for nearly ten years. The King plans to have a seven-year long fire sacrifice to appease Lord Indra with the belief that Lord Indra will be pleased with this sacrifice and will send rain to the parched land. The present paper applies the theories of power and myth, and deeply looks for the interplay in *The Fire and the Rain* by Karnad.

The institutions of religion and culture in the play show a certain "regime of truth" according to which the value of a human being is decided by his/her caste and gender. The actors need permission from the ruling and priestly caste to perform on stage during a religious ceremony that is being conducted. Another character in the play, Nittilai, who belongs to the tribal caste, is excluded from the society and all decision making processes despite possessing knowledge about how to negotiate the drought and leadership skills. Arvasu, a Brahmin by birth, loses all social capital because he refuses to comply with the role ordained by his upper-caste.

Karnad's play is concerned with the deplorable practice of casteism that has plagued Indian society since time immemorial and unfortunately continues to do so in the present too. T. K. Oommen in his essay, "Social exclusion and the strategy of empowerment", made a comparison between ancient Indian and ancient Greek's practices of casteism, where he claimed:

Even in the much acclaimed direct democracy of ancient Greek city states the slaves were completely excluded, the plebeians were grudgingly included, and only the patricians were fully included in the decision making processes. Ancient India's patricians were caste-Hindus consisting of Brahmins, Kshatriyas and Vaishyas, the plebeians were today's Other Backward Classes; the Shudras above the pollution line. The untouchables of those days were worse than slaves, totally excluded from all aspects of public life (Oommen, 22).

Karnad opens his play by showing this in the opening scene of the play. The king and the priests, the patricians who were completely included in all decision making processes, are performing sanctified fire sacrifice in order to appease Lord Indra. A courtier, member of the ruling class, comes with the Actor- Manager, belonging to the actors' caste, who are regarded as lowly due to the caste hierarchy. The courtier is allowed to enter the sacrificial precincts, but the Actor- Manager is not allowed to enter the precincts and is made to stand away from the precincts. He is allowed to speak about his plan for the performance of a play from a distance to the sacred fire. While speaking about his plans, his face faces in the opposite direction to the sanctified fire in the sacrificial precinct as per the courtier directive, "You may shout out whatever you have to say, but please face away from the sacrificial enclosure so you don't pollute it" (*TFTR*, 107).

The courtier is echoing Apastambha Dharmasutra, "Pollution will occur if untouchables are touched, conversed with or even looked upon" (*TFTR*, 29). This is the 'truth' emanating from a series of

intersecting ‘truths’ promoted by the priestly class and now internalised by all Indians, such as the Doctrine of Creation, Chaturvarna Scheme, Varnashrama Dharma and the theory of Karma and Rebirth.

There are other ‘truths’ that are founded on this same network that exercise power on women in the play. Vishakha shows a great aptitude for Vedic knowledge far better than her husband Parvasu and her old lover Yavakri, but she is not allowed to pursue education for being a woman. She is, instead, reduced to a sex object only by both the men. She is not even allowed to give water to Arvasu, her brother-in-law, for a ritual bath. The misogyny can be traced back to *Manusmriti*, an ancient Indian text of social codes that states, "By a girl, by a young woman, or even by an aged one, nothing must be done independently, even in her own house" (*Manusmriti*, 82).

A key feature of Foucault’s conception of power, is that, how pervasive and disembodied it can be. Therefore, the misogyny can be seen operating as powerfully amidst the tribals, who lack any written code, as it does in places where codes of behaviour are well documented. An example of this in the play is Nittilai’s dependence on procuring her father and brother’s – the patriarch’s of the house – permission before she marries anyone. Though she has been a community leader during the period of distress yet she lacks the power to reverse her father’s decision when he rejects Arvasu on account of being half-an-hour late. Actor-Manager acknowledges Nittilai’s adept skills before Arvasu in this way, “I’m grateful to her because my babies were starving when she came and now they get a bite to eat everyday. Where she gets the food from I don’t know- but she knows the woods. We would have moved out of this town the day the old man died, except that we’ve become dependent on her. For food. For nursing. For laughter” (*TFTR*, 156-57).

The delay in itself is caused by what Foucault would call "discursive practice", a term that he used in his book, *Discipline and Punish: the birth of a prison* (Foucault, 194). Discursive practice can be understood as an internalised set of behaviour that produces what we regard as normal or acceptable. Arvasu has left his caste behind when he decides to marry Nittilai and yet he cannot let go of the custom of bathing after cremation before doing anything else. It has been displayed well in the play:

Half an hour! Half an Hour! But I stopped to bathe on my way to your village- to dig for water so I could wash myself before coming to you. I knew it was getting late, but I had just cremated a dead body. I couldn’t bear the thought of touching you with those unclean hands. An untouchable wouldn’t have cared. An outcaste wouldn’t have cared. But cursed caste wouldn’t let me go...To think you would have been mine. Half an hour! (*TFTR*, 143).

This is even after the knowledge that his brother Parvasu was using the custom of purity to delay him, and stop his marriage to Nittilai. He says:

It’s a conspiracy, don’t you see, it’s all planned- because I wanted to marry you. Because I was ready to reject my caste, my birth. Can’t you see it? I wanted to strike out my own. So, first a corpse curls itself round my ankles. Yavakri. Then it’s father. Bodies drenched in blood. Like rats that pour out during the plague and die vomiting blood (*TFTR*, 154).

Arvasu further explains this conspiracy, “Listen. It’s clear to me. Yavakri is dead. Father is dead- and Parvasu is alive. So he must know. He must be behind it all- my brother knew I would marry you even if he forbade it. So he- and his wife- and all those priests- yes, they planted those corpses in my way” (*TFTR*, 154).

In Foucault's philosophy, power might appear to be irresistible, but Foucault offers ways for action which depend on the recognition and questioning of socialized norms and constraints. It is contingent on "detaching the power of truth from the forms of hegemony, social, economic, and cultural,

within which it operates at the present time" (*Foucault Reader*, 75). One available site of resistance is 'discourse' which offers scope to "evade, subvert or contest strategies of power" (Gaventa, 03). Foucault writes thus about his theory of 'discourse' in his famous book, *The History of Sexuality: The Will to Knowledge*:

Discourses are not once and for all subservient to power or raised up against it... We must make allowances for the complex and unstable process whereby a discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy. Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart (Foucault, 100-1).

In this play, it takes the form of the performance of the play itself. The very idea that the conclusion of a sacred ritual is dependent on the performance of the outcasts who are not even otherwise allowed near the sacred precinct is ironical and undercuts the logic of social exclusion from the inside. Furthermore, the actors in the play use their newly acquired agency to put forward a contrapuntal reading of one of the myths in *Rig Veda*, the oldest and the longest surviving Sanskrit text. Actor-Manager playing the role of Indra and Arvasu playing the role of Rudra enact a story from *Rig Veda*. According to the original myth, Indra defeats Rudra, but Arvasu frustrated by the loss of Nittilai refuses to follow the script. He plans to destroy the sacred fire as revenge on his brother, but the mask that he has put on for the play takes on a life of its own and Rudra, the demon king, is incarnated on the stage giving chase to Indra. Nittilai somehow manages to get the mask off.

The priestly caste and the king are angry at the players for desecrating the sacred fire, but Indra, entertained by the changes in the original myth, is intrigued and comes on the stage and offers Arvasu a boon. Thus, the ritual which would have proved futile had it stuck to accepted institutional truth becomes fruitful because of what the ruling class regarded as sacrilegious, and thus their power is challenged in the play.

To reiterate Foucault's point as stated in his book, *The History of Sexuality: The Will to Knowledge*, "Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart" (Foucault, 101). It can be assumed with the present analysis that power works with its universal subverting techniques to uphold and retain its status and structure. Myths become tools in the hands of power wielder and it never believes in giving and sharing its crux of existence.

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