CHAPTER III

FEMINISM IN THE FIRE AND THE RAIN

I INTRODUCTION: About The Fire and the Rain Rama Nair notes that “Published in 1998, The Fire and the Rain is Karnad’s trans-creation in English of the Kannada version of his play titled “Agni Mattu Male”. Karnad translated Agni Mattu Male into English for a workshop with professional actors at the Guthrie. Never the less the scheduled production has not materialized due to Garland Wright’s departure from the theatre. Aparna Bhargava Dharwadker writes about its success thus: “in Kannada, Hindi, and English, Agni Mattu Male has chalked up perhaps the most extraordinary performance record and range of reader responses among Karnad’s plays”.

About Karnad’s source for his The Fire and the Rain P.Jayalakshmi observes that “From among the innumerable tales that fill the Mahabharata, Girish Karnad finds a fit subject for the plot of his play The Fire and the Rain in the narrative of Paravasu, Arvasu and Yavakri.” Since the author has adapted the myth from the Mahabharata in The Fire and the Rain, it is proposed to examine the play with reference to the adaptation of the myth. By creating play from a text which exists already, the play presents its perspective on the contemporary situation in India. However this chapter is divided into five parts. Part I introduces the task of this chapter. Part II providers the plot of the play. Part III presents a brief note on the source of The Fire and the Rain. Part IV studies The Fire and the Rain with reference to feminism. Part V concludes the study in this chapter.

II PLOT: The plot of The Fire and the Rain is woven around the two Sages Raibhya and Yavakri respectively and the brothers Paravasu and Arvasu. Yagna for rain is the backdrop of the play. The king has proposed to conduct a fire ritual to pray Lord Indira for rain but it has not rained for many years. Paravasu is appointed as the Chief Priest and has been performing the fire ritual for the past ten years. When the ritual is about to
be concluded, Yavakri returns from his ten years’ penance in the forest with a boon from Lord Indira.

He happens to meet his past lover Vishakha, who is the wife of Paravasu now, Arvasu, who is in search of Yavakri, discovers it and tries to protect his sister-in-law from his father who is already antagonistic about Vishaka. On learning Vishaka’s incest with Vishaka he becomes furious and creates Brahma Rakhsha to destroy Yavakri who is endowed with a boon that as long as he is in the possession of sanctified water he is invulnerable. Unfortunately, Vishakha pours out the holy water from his Kamamdala in her assured of safety of life. When Vishaka is prevented by the blind servant, Andhaka, from entering the hermitage, Vishaka is destroyed by the Brahma Rakshasha.

Simultaneously at the ashram of Raibhya, Vishaka conspires the destruction of her father-in-law. When Paravasu arrives at home, she coaxes that Raibhya has been trying to seduce her during his brother’s absence. As a result, Paravasu kills him with his arrow. He persuades his brother to perform the last rites to his father since he has got to be in the cite of Fire Ceremony. When Arvasu returns to him after the completion of the last rites, his brother alleges that he is a sinner of patricide and hatches a plot to keep him away from the Fire Ceremony.

Arvasu has been already deprived of the marriage with his tribal beloved Nittilai. In the ensuing struggle with the relatives of Nittilai he is badly hit due to which he loses his consciousness. Nittilai manages to escape from her settlement and nurses Arvasu back to normal. At this juncture, they come across a drama troupe and Arvasu is given the role of Indira in the drama to be performed in the palace on the concluding day of the Fire Ceremony. Indira and other gods are impressed by the performance of Arvasu and appear him to grant any boon Arvasu aspires. When the people force him to ask for rain, he pleads for the resurrection of Nittilai who has been brutally killed by her husband and brother. Arvasu is made to realize that when the wheel of time is moved backward to resurrect Nittilai, all those who have died during that period will also be
resurrected. When Arvasu does not give in and insists on the same boon, Lord Indira agrees to grant it.

At this moment the Brhma Rakshsha, who has been released from the cycle of life and death, appears before Arvasu and appeals to him to endow him with Mokhsha. Arvasu requests Lord Indira to grant that boon which results in the suspension of his earlier demand. At this moment it begins to rain to the gratification of the people who have been deprived of rain for several years. With this the play comes to the end.

III. The summary of the source text of The Fire and the Rain: The Fire and the Rain is an adaptation of the Yavakrida episodes in the Mahabharata. The author himself acknowledges that the plot derived from the Mahabharata as:

The myth of Yavakri (or Yavakrita) occurs in chapters 135-38 of the Vana Parva (Forest canto) of the Mahabharata. It is narrated by the ascetic Lomasha to the Pandavas as they wander across the land during their exile. I have met Sanskrit scholars who were unaware of the existence of the myth: it is easy to lose track of a short narrative like this in the tangled undergrowth that covers the floor of that epic.

I first came across the story of Yavakri and Paravasu, while still in college, in C. Rajagopalachari’s abridgement of the Mahabharata. That Rajaji, confronted with the stupendous task of abridging the world’s longest epic to about four hundred pages, should not have discarded this seemingly peripheral tale is a tribute to his sensitivity and judgment.

It was fortunate for me that Rajaji did not do so, for the moment I read the tale, I knew it had to be turned into a play. For the next thirty-seven years, I struggled with it, trying to fit all the ramifications of the myth within some sort of a manageable shape.

Since the plot of The Fire and the Rain has been modified from that of the original to a considerable extent and it has been proposed to drive home that The Fire and the Rain subverts its original text which is not only a meta narrative but also a tool of patriarchy, it is prerequisite to provide a brief summary of the original episodes of
Yavakri in *Mahabharata*. As the author has stated, Lomasa to the Pandavas narrates this peripheral narrative when they reach the hermitage of Raibhya on the banks of the Ganga during their exile in the forest. It is the place where Yavakrida was destroyed.

In that place two eminent brahmans – Bharadwaja and Raibhya – lived in their respective hermitages. They were close friends. While Raibhya and two sons, Paravasu and Arvasu devoted themselves to the learning of the Vedas and became learned scholars, Bharadwaja indulging himself wholly in the worship of God. His son is Yavakrida. He was so wicked that he developed jealousy and hatred on the Brahmins who paid no respect to his father as they did to the learned Raibhya.

In order to outdo Raibhya, Yavakrida practiced hard penance by torturing his body with austerities. When Lord Indra appears before him, he asks for the boon of the knowledge of all Vedas directly without undergoing the process learning through a *guru*. But Indira reminded him that his approach was wrong and advised him to learn through the tradition of *asrama*. Yet he was so adamant that he continued his austerities with more vigour. On that occasion also, Indira suggested to him that she learns the Vedas by study only.

Again Yavakrida pursues his penance; Indira manifested himself to him in the form of an old man when he went to the *Ganga* for his bath. On seeing the old man throwing handfuls sand laboriously into the water, Yavakrida asked him what he was doing. The old man replied that he was going to build a dam across that river so that people could cross the river with ease. On the old man’s question whether it was useful deed, Yavakrida laughed at him saying that it was his foolishness to think that he could build a dam across that mighty river with his handfuls of sand only and asked him to pursue some other useful works. At this juncture the old man reminded him that his act of mastering the Vedas rather by austerities than by study was not less foolish than his work. Yavakrida learnt that the old man was none other than Lord Indira. So he begged him earnestly to grant learning as a personal boon and it was granted to him.
Subsequently he studied the Vedas and became learned. But he thought that he
had acquired the knowledge of Vedas through the boon of Indira and not through human
tutelage. His father had not like his son’s attitude and was alarmed lest the grant of boon
was a trap. Therefore he tells his son a story of one Madhavi who met with destruction
by the illusion of boon in order to give a solemn warning to cultivate self-control.

As his father anticipated, Yavakrida lost his self-control seeing Paravasu’s wife
alone in the garden near the hermitage of Raibhya. As a result he accosted her and
taking the brutal advantage of her fear and shame and bewilderment, he dragged her to a
lonely spot and violated her person.

When Raibhya returned the hermitage, he learnt what had happened to his
daughter–in-law and was seized with implacable anger. Immediately, he created a ghost
and a female spirit like his daughter-in-law and ordered to destroy Yavakrida. They
reached the place where Yavakrida was performing the morning rite and the maiden
managed to take the water jug away. The water jug contained the sanctified water,
which could guard him from any danger. On seeing that the ghost rushed towards him
with the spear, he looked for his water jug and on finding that it was missing, he ran
towards the pond but it was also found dry. Then he was trying to reach the sacrificial
hall in his father’s hermitage. There also the misfortune awaited him in the form of the
half-blind man who was guarding the hermitage. The half-blind man stopped him, as he
could not recognize Yavakrida so that his friend arrived there and killed him with his
spear.

When Bharadwaja returned and found the son’s corpse, he thought that his son’s
disrespect must have caused that cruel fate to his son. In his depression, he curses that
Raibhya who had cursed his only son to death might be killed by one of his own sons.
Later he realized that he had committed wrong by cursing his friend and companion and
committed suicide by throwing himself on the pyre of his son itself.
During the following days Hing Brihadyumna, a disciple of Raibhya, wanted to perform a great sacrifice at which he requested his teacher to send his sons Paravasu and Arvasu to officiate. With their father’s permission, both had reached the site of the sacrifice. While the preparations for the sacrifice were being arranged, Paravasu set out for his hermitage to see his wife. On reaching the place before dawn, he saw in the gloaming what seemed to him to be a beast near the hermitage. At once he killed the same by hurling his weapon. Then he discovered that what he killed was not any beast but his own father who was clad in skins. Realizing it was the effect of Bharadwaja’s curse, he carried out the funeral rites and returned to the place of sacrifice. There he narrated everything to his brother and asked him to undergo the expiation on his behalf of his committed in ignorance.

Arvasu agreed readily and went ahead with the necessary expiatory rites. After its completion, he returned to the court to assist his brother. But the sin of Paravasu was not washed off because expiation is not acceptable through a substitute. Hence his mind was tainted with wicked designs due to which he accused Arvasu that he had committed the sin of killing a brahmana so that he should not the holy sacrificial place. All Arvasu’s protests and explanation that it was only his brother who had killed their father were rejected and he was treated as a liar as well. Hence he was expelled from the hall of the great sacrifice.

Dejected Arvasu retreated to the forest and betook himself to rigorous austerities. Subsequently, his penance was answered by the appearance of gods. On the gods asking him to seek the boon, Arvasu only prayed that his father might be restored to life and that his brother might be freed from wickedness and the sin that he committed. The gods granted his prayer.

Lomasa concluded the story and asked the Pandavas to bathe there and wash off their passions in that holy river. He pointed out to the Pandavas the wisdom of the story as follows:
Arvavasu and Paravasu were both sons of a great scholar. Both of them learnt at
his feet and became eminent scholars themselves. But learning is one thing and virtue is
quite another. It is true that one should know the difference between good and evil, if
one is to seek good and shun evil, but this knowledge should soak into every thought
and influence every act in one’s life. Then indeed knowledge becomes virtue. The
knowledge, that is merely so much undigested information crammed into the mind,
cannot instill virtue. It is just an outward show like our clothes and is no real.5

IV Feminism in The Fire and the Rain: Feminism in The Fire and the Rain:
Feminism is found in Karna’d The Fire and the Rain in the action and reaction of
Vishakha and in the portrayal of Nitilai. Vishka is the wife Paravasu. As stated earlier,
Paravasu’s wife’s name is mentioned in the Mahabharata. Karnad has christened her as
Vishakha and also created a love story between Yavakrita and Vishakha before her
marriage with Paravasu. Love before marriage itself is against the patriarchal ideology.
Then the behaviour of Paravausu with Vishakha as her husband is example of
patriarchal tendency of treating woman as object of sex. Karnad has made a very
important change in the characterization of Raibya. Vishakha alleges that he has tired to
seduce her by taking the undue advantage of her being alone in the hermitage. To
Vishakha, Paravasu, Yavakri and her father-in-law are identical in their lust towards
her. The details of these factors are presented to trace feminism.

The Hindu tradition and moral value system does not allow premarital love
either with her prospective husband or otherwise. In the Mahabharata, Paravasu’s
wife’s premarital life is not narrated. But in Karnad’s The Fire and the Rain, Yavakri
and Vishakha are lovers before she is married to Paravasu. In despair that his father is
neglected, Yavakri decides to leave for the deep forest for penance for the boon of Lord
Indira. Before he sets out, he meets Vishakha and the scene of their meeting shows their
love as: ... you led me quickly to the jack-fruit grove behind your house. You opened
the knot of your blouse, pressed my face to your breasts, then turned and fled. I stood

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stunned. The trees were loaded with fruit. Many were ripe and spilt open and the rich golden segments poured out. The sweet sick smell of your body. Ten years later I opened my eyes and I knew I was hungry for that moment.[Act I, 17] The patriarchal prescription and prohibition of premarital love for woman is defied in the above instance which is a mark of feminism.

The institution of marriage has been very oppressive of woman. Man treats woman as an object of fulfilling his sexual desire and procuring his offspring. Her likes and dislikes are ignored and neglected. This aspect of patriarchal exploitation of woman is depicted in the husband-wife relationship between Paravasu and Vishakha. In the *Mahabharatha*, there is feud and ill-will between Paravasu and Vishakha. She is sexually abused by Yavakrida while Paravasu is away in the fire-ritual as a priest in the palace. But in Karnad’s *The Fire and the Rain*, Paravsu uses Vishakha as a use and throw object of sex. Vishakha narrates his oppression thus:

VISHAKHA: ... I was married off to Paravasu. I didn’t want to, but that didn’t matter. The night of the wedding, my husband said to me: ‘I know you didn’t want to marry me. But don’t worry. I’ll make you happy for a year.’ And he did. Exactly for one year. He plunged into a kind of bliss I didn’t know existed. It was heaven –here and now—at the tip of all my senses. The on the first of the second year of our marriage, he said: ‘Enough of that. We now start on our search.’ And then—it wasn’t that I was not happy. But the question of happiness receded into the background. He used my body, and his body, like an experimenter, an explorer. As instruments in a search. Search for what? I never knew. But I knew he knew. Nothing was too shameful, too degrading, even too painful. Shame died in me. And I yielded. I let my body be turned inside out as he did his own. I had a sense he was leading me to something. Mystical? Spiritual? We never talked. ... Then one day he received the invitation from the King. To be the Chief Priest of the fire sacrifice. And he left. The site of the fire sacrifice is only a couple of hours away from here. But in all these seven years he hasn’t come back. I know he
can’t. But I look forward to having him home once the seven years are over. Alone, I have become dry like tinder. Ready to burst at a breath. To burn things around me down at the slightest chance – [Act I, 18-19]

The patriarchal attitude towards woman is very evident in Pavarasu’s behaviour with Vishakha. The first feature of it is that he neglects Vishakha’s willingness in the courtship. He states that he knows that she has not wanted to marry him. Yet he is ready to indulge in love-making with her. The second feature is that he treats conjugal love like a business contract by stating that he would make her happy for one year. The third feature is that he stops his husbandly relationship with her in the courtship exactly after one year and treats her like an object of sex experiment in the name of mystical search. This causes shame and degrading to her. In the male chauvinist society, woman is constantly put to shame and degrading and Vishakha’s depiction testifies it. The last feature is that her husband leaves her abruptly and accepts the position of chief priest in the fire sacrifice. Though the distance is not too much for to visit her, he never visits her for seven long years. This desertion is typically male-chauvinistic. In *Yayati* Swarnalata’s husband disappears from her abruptly like this. These experiences have generated fury and vengeance in her and she is waiting for his return to react. She states that Yavakri is not different from Paravasu as far as their sensuous attitude towards her. They have devastated her body in such way that she looks like an old woman. She does not fail to remind Yavakri about it. She states: My husband and you! He left no pore in my body alone. And you – you think a woman is only a pair of half-formed breasts.” [Act I, 19]

She also points out that her father-in-law is a seducer equally. In the *Mahabharata*, Raibiya is a learned vedic scholar and is respected by all for his vedic scholarship. He is very perfect as father and father-in-law. He creates two demons to kill Yavakrida for his misconduct with his daughter-in-law and succeeds in it. But Karand has changed it in *The Fire and the Rain*. Vishakha complains her husband that she is
secured in the hut with her father-in-law in the absence Pavarasu and Avarasu. She reminds her husband about it thus:

We’re three of us here. Your brother’s never home. That leaves me and your father. (Pause) Something died inside your father the day the King invited you to be the Chief Priest. He’ve been drying up like a dead tree since then. No sap runs in him. (Pause) On the one hand, there’s his sense of being humiliated by you. On the other there’s lust. It consumes him. An old man’s curdled lust. And there’s no one else here to take his rage out on but me. (Pause) At least Yavakri was warm, gentle. For a few minutes, he made me forget the wizened body, the scratchy claws, and the blood, cold as ice. And he paid for it with his life. (raibhya’s steps are heard in the distance, as he returns.) Here it comes. The crab! Scuttling back to make sure I don’t defile the Chief Priest as I did Yavakri,[Act II, 37-38]

The strong tendency of feminism is perceived in Vishakha’s protest against her oppressors. She commits adultery with Yavakri purposely as a mark her protest against Paravau who has treated her like object of sexual experiments. Yavakri returns from his penance successfully after ten years. On his way home, he sees Vishakha carrying water in a pot to her house. Yavakri follows and waits for her response to him for three days. Then both of them interact with each other narrating their past. At the end Vishakha yields to his plead and they indulge in the courtship in the open ground. It is depicted as follows:

VISHAKHA: I’ll give you the knowledge Indira couldn’t give you. My body—it’s light with speech now. (They go behind a dry champak tree on the bank. Long pause, Nittilai and Arvasu enter) ... (He (Arvasu) goes behind the champak tree into the bushes. Suddenly exclamations, etc. Arvasu rushes out, followed by Vishakha. Her clothes are torn. He back is covered with mud. She runs to the hermitage ...)[Act I, 19-20]
Her father-in-law comes to know what must have happened. He becomes furious on learning that Yavakri has seduced Vishakha. He wants to kill him not as a father-in-law. He feels jealous of Yavakri and thus sends a demon in the form of Vishakha to kill him. The true Vishakha tries to rescue him but in vain. Vishakha becomes angry with her father-in-law and plots for the death him. It is her protest against her father-in-law’s oppression. She coaxes her husband believes that his father has shown the hints his lust for her and provokes him kill him. Consequently, Paravasu kills his own father. This is feminist protest against her oppressor. Thus both Pavarasu and his father are punished by Vishakha.

Karand has incorporated the Dalit issue in one way or the other in some of his plays. In *Yayati*, he has done so in altering the character of Sharshmitha. In *The Fire and the Rain*, he has created a character which belongs to a tribal community. Arvasu is a brahmin lad and Nittilai is a tribal lass. They have fallen in love. In the *Mahabharata* such a story is not there. Karnad has created tribal girl in Nittilai and has shown them that they have in love with each other. This is a typical Karnadian characteristic as he has incorporated inter-caste issue in almost all his plays. He has introduced the inter-caste love at the very out like this:

**NITTILAI:** Oh! Don’t go on about it! I told you! There’s nothing to worry about. The elders will gather under the big buynyan tree and ask a few questions. You answer the ......

**NITTILAI:** You are a fuss- pot. You’ve known them for years. And after all, every young man about to get married goes through it. Just declare--

**ARVASU :** Yes. I know: Just stand there and say: ‘I want to take her as my wife. I am potent. I can satisfy all her needs ...’

**NITTILAI (shyly)**: Yes, more or less that!

**ARVASU :** And in public!

**NITTILAI :** Of course. What’s the point of saying it to yourself?
(Laughs)

Don’t worry. It’s nothing...

ARVASU : Nothing, yes. For the young men of your tribe! But I am a Brahmin. To say all that in plain, loud words to a smirking, nudging, surging multitude. No hymns to draw out one’s voice. No smoke to hide behind. It’s dreadful. It’s dreadful. I hope there won’t be too many people there --- [ Act One, 6]

Both of them are willing to get married. Nittilai takes Arvasu to her village to get the approval of the jury of her village for their marriage. Arvasu suggests that they should meet Yavakri and take his blessings before they go to the village. While they are moving to meet Yakari, they interact with each other in which their cultures and the tradition untouchability are very subtly hinted. Ths illustration of this factor is provided here:

ARVASU: Ashamed? Let me show you – here!

(Grabs her hand and pulls her near)

NITTILAI (scandalized): Let og of me! Let me go! What’ll everyone say?

ARVASU: Why? Don’t have my rights----?

NITTILAI: Not until we’re married. Until then the girl is not supposed to touch her husband-to-be. That’s our custom---

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

NITTILAI: It’s a nice custom. Sensible. Worth observing.

ARVASU: All these days I couldn’t touch you because Brahmins don’t touch other castes. Now you can’t touch me among hunters, girls don’t touch their betrothed. Are you sure someone won’t think of something else once we’re married? [Act One, 7-8] But it fails and they could not get married. It is representation of the age old Hindu norm that the marriage between a brahmin boy and non-brahmin girl is prohibited. She
is forcefully married to her own cousin. It is a gender injustice as the victim is a woman.

Karnad has not kept quite about this gender injustice. He moves a step ahead and creates a protester against it in Nittilai. She leaves her husband and attempts to return to Aravasu. She is chased by the members of tribe and killed subsequently. She is defeated in her attempt to violate the patriarchal norms of her community. At the end, Aravasu asks Lord Indira to grant him a boon to resurrect Nittiali. Karnad reflects the prohibition of inter-caste marriage imposed by the caste-system in the Hindu religion. This prohibition is gender biased in nature and deed. It affects only women.

Karnad’s feministic tendency is very clear in the characterization of Vishakha and Nittiali. In the characterization of Vishakha, the marginalization, exploitation of woman and the consequent revolt against such factors are presented. In the characterization of Nittilai, the marginalization of a tribal (Dalit) woman is represented.

Karnad has adapted the three tales i.e., XXXII Fruitless Penance: Story of Yavakrida, XXXIII Yavakrida’s End and XXXIV Mere Learning is not Enough in making his play The Fire and the Rain. There are several modifications of the original myth in the play.

To begin with, Karnad has altered the story of Arvavasu in his play. There is no mention about Arvavasu other than that he is one of the two scholarly sons of Raibhya in Fruitless Penance: Story of Yavakrida and Mere Learning is not Enough contains Arvavaus’s story considerably. King Brihadyuman requests his preceptor Raibhya to let his sons Paravasu and Arvavasu to officiate the sacrifice. On one day Paravasu returns home during night to visit his wife and due to darkness he mistakes his father for a beast owing to which he happens to shoot him with an arrow to death. He performs the funeral rites in hurry and returns to Arvavasu and persuades him to complete the remaining rituals regarding their father’s funeral. Arvavasu obeys to his elder brother and returns home and completes the whole procedures of his father’s last rites and returns to the king’s court to join his brother.
Paravasu realizes that his sin has not been washed off since he has not undergone the expiation himself. Besides he becomes wicked due to jealousy on noticing the radiance on Arvavasu’s face and coaxes the king to believe that Arvavasu is guilty of patricide. He raises objection to his entering the holy sacrificial place. When Arvavaus denies it, he is regarded as a liar. Therefore he resorts to severe austerities in the wild forest. The gods respond to his austerities and grant him a boon to fulfill his prayer for the restoration of his father and release his brother from his sin and wickedness. Lomasa narrates the story of Paravasu and Arvavasu to teach them the difference between learning and virtue.

Karnad has altered the story of Arvavasu in great deal in *The Fire and the Rain*. He portrays that Arvasu is in love with a tribal girl called Nittilai who is the author’s imaginary creation. He aspires to marry her and in that regard he makes efforts to meet her father and the people of her community. He fails to be present in the Council Meeting due to which she is denied to him and her marriage is fixed with someone else. It is a major deviation from the source text with reference to the episodes of Arvavasu in Karnad’s *The Fire and the Rain*.

Later, Nittilai leaves her husband and returns to Arvasu who has been dismissed by his brother from the court where the fire sacrifice and is now found lying amidst the starving villagers at the outskirt of the town. Nittilai nurses him back to normal condition. Arvasu joins the troop of actors and participate in the rehearsals for the play to be performed in the royal court. In the actual show, he plays the role of Vritra and impresses Lord Indra. He is ready to grant boon. In the original the boon Arvavasu asks for is described thus:

The gods were gracious and asked him: “O virtuous soul, what is the boon you seek? “ High thinking and deep meditation had in the meantime cleansed his heart of all his anger at his brother’s conduct; and so, he only prayed that his father might be
restored to life and that his brother might be freed from wickedness and the sins that he had committed.\(^6\)

In Karnad’s *The Fire and the Rain*, the notion of austerity and god appearing is ridiculed. It is reflected in the play when Indra appears before Arvasu Thus:

**INDRA:** Arvasu, son, do not grieve. We are pleased with you. Ask any boon and it shall be granted.

**ARVASU** (*Baffled*): Who’s that? Who’s that?

**INDRA:** I am Indra, the Lord of gods. Know that all the gods are pleased with me.

**ARVASU:** Indra? But what do I have to do with Indra? I didn’t seek Indra, or any other god. Yavakri did. Paravasu did. I seek only death. Why are here?\(^7\)

However Arvasu seeks a boon not for the restoration of his father and redemption of his brother’s wickedness and sin as in the original. The author has changed it as shown below: “**ARVASU:** (Slowly.) Lord Indra, I want Nittilai back. Alive. That’s all I want in my life. Grant me that. Nittilai – my gentle Nittilai – I killed her. I want her back.”\(^8\)

Another change in the portrayal of Arvasu in *The Fire and the Rains* is that he is lover of acting and dance. He has got an irresistible passion for acting. It must be noted that the Brahmins are prohibited to act. The author has ridiculed two social taboos in the episodes of Arvasu. Firstly, he has mocked the prohibition of inter-caste love in the depiction of Arvasu as being head over heel in love with Nittilai a tribal girl. Secondly, he has ridiculed the objection to brahmain to pursue the career of acting by depicting Arvasu as being lover of acting. He excels in dance so much so that even the professional artists admire him.

The author has incorporated changes in the characterization Vishakha. In the tales of C.Rajagopalachari, the first appearance of Vishakha is rendered like this:It was
spring time. The trees and creepers were beautiful with flowers and the whole forest was gorgeous with color and sweet with the song of birds. The very earth seemed to be under the spell of the god of love. Paravasu’s wife was strolling alone in the garden near the hermitage of Raibhya. She appeared more human, in the sweet union in her of beauty, courage and purity.\textsuperscript{9}

Vishakha’s personality is not the same in \textit{The Fire and Rain} as in the source text. Her first appearance in the play is described thus:

\textit{Lights come up in another part of the stage, representing the hermitage of Raibhya, father of Arvasu. Vishakha, aged about twenty-six, is filling water in a metal urn. She has scooped out water from holes dug in the wet sand and collected it in the pot. She must have been an attractive person once, but looks angry and haggard.}\textsuperscript{10}

In the subsequent conversation with Yavakri, she expresses her frustration over the loss her charm during the ten years of his absence. She says “... my breasts hang loose now.”\textsuperscript{11} The author has made the change in the depiction of Vishakha in order to provide an alternative perspective to the notion of the state of womankind is in the perpetual bliss. In other words, she reveals later that her husband, Pavarasu, has enjoyed her for a year without paying heed to her likes and dislikes and after one year he has become indifferent to her because of which her personality has been affected. She looks older than her real age.

It paves way for detecting another difference in the episode of Vishakha in \textit{The Fire and the Rain}. There is nothing in the source text to suggest that there was a difference of opinion and disharmony between Parvasu and Vishakha. But Vishakha is depicted as a disappointed wife in \textit{The Fire and the Rain} thus:

\textbf{VISHAKHA :} Yes, Father was happy. I was married off to Parvasu. I didn’t want to, but that didn’t matter. The night of the wedding, my husband said to me: ‘I know you didn’t want to marry me. But don’t worry. I’ll make you happy for a year’. And he did exactly for one year. He plunged me into a kind of bliss I didn’t existed. It was heaven –
here and now – at the tip of all my senses. The on the first of the second year of our marriage, he said: Enough of that. We now start on our search.’ And then – it wasn’t that I was not happy. But the question of happiness receded into the background. He used my body, and his own body, like an experimenter, an explorer. As instruments in a search. Search for what? I never knew. But I knew he knew. Nothing was too shameful, too degrading, even too painful, Shame died in me. And I yielded. I let by body be turned inside out as he did his own. I had a sense he was leading me to something. Mystical? Spiritual? We never talked.\(^\textbf{12}\)

The death of Raibhya is altered from its original in *The Fire and the Rain*. In the original, Pavarasu happens to mistake his father for a beast in the dark and thus kills him accidentally. C.Rajagopalacharya narrates the death of Raibhya thus:

While arrangements were being made for the sacrifice. Paravasu desired one day to go and see his wife and, walking alone all night, he reached his hermitage before dawn. Near the hermitage, he saw in the gloaming what seemed to him a beast of prey crouching for the spring and, hurling his weapon at it, killed it. But to his horror and grief, he discovered that he had killed his own father clad in skins, mistaking him for a wild denizen of the forest. He realized that the fatal mistake was the effect of the curse of Bharadwaja.\(^\textbf{13}\)

But the author changes this factor and presents in *The Fire and the Rain* that Vishakha cajoles her husband to do that deed. Paravasu returns home after the incidents of the Yavakrida’s intercourse with Vishkha and Raibhaya’s revenge on him subsequently. Vishakha feels hurt by the act of her father-in-law and when her husband arrives home, she alleges that her father-in-law has tried to misbehave with her. Paravasu who was already unhappy with his father thinking that he has killed Yavakri to disturb him in the last stage of the sacrifice, takes undue advantage this allegation and kills his father. It is shown in the play thus:

VISHAKHA: … All right. Then do me a favour before you go back. Please.
She takes his bow and arrow, puts them in his hands with the arrow pointing to herself. Then lies down on her back in front of him

I’ll lay myself open to you as a devoted wife.

PARAVASU: You want me to kill you?

VISHAKHA: At last, a question from you.(Pause)

We’re three of us here. Your brother’s never home. That leave me and your father.(Pause) Something died inside your father the day the King invited you to be the Chief Priest. He has been drying up like a dead tree since then. No sap runs in him.(Pause) On the one hand, there’s his sense of being humiliated by you. On the other, there’s lust. It consumes him. An old man’s curdled lust. The there is no one else here to take his rage out on but me. … Here it comes. The crab! Scuttling back to make sure I don’t defile the Chief Priest as I did Yavakri. Grant me this favour, please. Kill me. For all experiments you haven’t tried the ultimate. Human sacrifice! You could now.

PARAVASU: You are right. I must.(Pause) You are still my guru.(He aims his arrow at her. A long silence as they wait. Then a low cough is heard from Raibhya. Instantly Paravasu moves the arrow around so that it points in the direction of Raibhy, shoots an arrow. Raibhya collapses without a sound. Vishakha gasps. Pause.)

VISHAKHA: Now You’ll never know if I told a lie. (Pause)

PARAVASU: You didn’t need to. He deserved to die. He killed Yavakri to disturb me in the stages of the sacrifice. Not to punish Yavakri, but to be even with me. I had to attend to him before he went further.¹⁴

The author has modified the original episodes of Vishakha in his play to address the subjugation to which woman has been subjected to from time immemorial. Through the adaptation of the myth, he throws light on how woman is denied her right to choose her husband. Vishakha. She has loved Yavakrida but her father gets her married off to
Pavaraus marries her with the knowledge that she has been in love Yavakrid but fails to provide her the conjugal love consistently. He uses her as a tool for his sexual cum spiritual experiment. Then he suggests that woman may not remain submissive and tolerant of the injustice meted out to her in depicting Vishakha to plot the murder of her father-in-law. Since it may amount to becoming derogatory factor on Vishakha, it is further modified according which Paravasu kills his father not because of his wife instigation but because of his own sense of revenge.

The adaptation of the episodes of Yavakrid in The Fire and the Rain is remarkable. It suggests that the change aims at ridiculing the notion of austerity. In this regard, it is very significant to observe that Yavakrida and Vishakha are not portrayed as having loved each other before Vishakha’s marriage. Indeed, the tale mentions nothing is about Vishakha’s life before her marriage. It only depicts that she is a graceful wife of Paravasu and gets forcibly seduced by Yavakrida. The depiction of Vishakha ends with these aspects only.

On the contrary, the author shows that Yavakrida and Vishakha were lovers before her marriage with Paravasu. Yavakrida meets and hugs Vishakha before he sets out for austerity. Yavarida recounts it as given below:

Ten years ago, I had come to your house to bid you goodbye. And you led me quickly to the jack-fruit grove behind your house. You opened the knot of your blouse, pressed my face to your breasts, then turned and fled. I stood there stunned. The trees were loaded with fruit. Many were ripe and had split open and the rich golden segments poured out. The sweet sick smell of the jack-fruit, the maddening hum of a fly. The smell of your body. Ten years later I opened my eyes and I knew I was hungry for that moment.  

In the myth, there is a reason for Yavakrida to undertake penance. His father, Bharadwaja and Raibhya were good friends. While Raibhya’s sons Paravasu and Arvavasu learnt the Vedas and became eminent scholars, Bharadwaja devoted himself
completely to the worship of God. Yavakrida discovers that the brahmanas did not respect his father so much as they respected Raibhya due to which he developed jealousy and hatred towards the family of Raibhya.

As a result, Yavakrida practiced hard penance to gain the grace of Indra so that he outdo his enemies with regard to public respect.. He was very sincere and committed in his penance that Lord Indra appeared thrice before him and advised him that he should learn the Vedas by study not by way of boon from him. Since Yavakrida was very resolved and was not ready to give up his practice of penance, Lord Indra granted him the boon and also advised him to study the Vedas. Accordingly he studied the Vedas and became learned. What is important to notice in this episode is that Yavakrida’s austerity was real and it is narrated in Mahabharata thus: “Yavakrida practiced hard penance to gain the grace of Indra. He tortured his body with austerities and thus awakened the compassion of Indra.”

But Karnad ridicules the notion of austerity and penance by suggesting in the depiction of Yavakrid’s penance that it is human construct without any practical truth in it. It is reflected in the dialogue between Vishakha and Yavakri thus:

VISHAKHA: They say that pleased with your rigorous penance, Lord Indra has granted your Universal knowledge, I don’t feel equal to the task of --

YAVAKRI: Universal Knowledge! What a phrase! It makes me laugh now. But do you know it was in order to some such grandiose prize that I went into the jungle? You put it so simply in that one sentence. So beautifully. You go into the jungle. You perform austerities in the name of some god. You stand in a circle of fire. The pressure of your austerities forces the god to grant to you your wish. And you get ‘Universal knowledge.’ Victory! (Pause) It wasn’t like that you know.

VISHAKHA: (Gently) Why?
YAVAKRI: For a start, life in the jungle is sheer hell. Flies, giant ants, beetles, leeches attacking at the suspicion of moisture, vipers lurking in bowls of dust. The relentless heat. Not demons but mosquitoes to torture you –

VISHAKHA: Perhaps that’s how the gods test one.

YAVAKRI: One would expect the appearance of a god to be a shattering experience. Concrete. Indubitable. Almost physical. But though I think Indra came to me several times, I was never certain. The first time he appeared he said, ‘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.’ I said, ‘No, I must have it. Grant me all knowledge.’ He laughed and said: ‘You are being silly.’ That’s it! Common dialogue. Not very profound. And when the god disappeared, nothing was left behind to prove he had ever been here. I looked around. The same old black scorpion. The same horned chameleon. The shower of bird-shit around me. So was it all a hallucination caused by something I’d eaten that morning? Or fever working on my brain? So I go on. Another year. Or perhaps two. The god comes again. ‘Why are you being so stubborn?’ he chides. ‘You can’t cross a full stream on a bridge of sand.’ I insist that my demands are met –another trite exchange of words—

VISHAKHA: But you did win in the end?

Yavakri: Yes, one day I decided I had won. So I have come back. I have no clear recollection how I arrived at that conclusion. (Laughs) Some knowledge, but probably little wisdom. I know now what can’t be achieved. That itself is wisdom, isn’t it? But I mustn’t complain. I think I have some mystical powers I hadn’t before. Mastered a few secret arts. Got a few mantras at my finger-tips.17

Karnad has altered the instance of the seduction of Vishakha in his play. In the source text, Yavakird happens to see her graceful Vishakha on his return from the ten years austerities in the forest and gets provoked by her charm. Then he seduces her by force. It is narrated in the source book like this:
Yavakrida came there and was so overwhelmed by her loveliness that he completely lost his sense and self control and became as a ravening beast with lust. He accosted her and taking brutal advantage of her fear and shame and bewilderment, he dragged her to a lonely spot and violated her person.\(^{18}\)

On the contrary, Yavakri does not assault Vishakha sexually. They were lovers ten years ago before he had gone to the forest for penance. He tires for three days. Yet she remains indifferent towards his approach until she hears the story of his ten years penance. Then she reciprocates to his request for lovemaking. They make love with mutual willingness which is testified in the words of Vishakha in the play as follows: “I’ll give the knowledge Indira couldn’t give you. My body – it’s light with speech now. (They go behind a dry champak tree on the bank. Long pause. Nittilai and Arvasu enter.)\(^{19}\)

Then the end of Yavakrida is modified in *The Fire and the Rain*. In the source book, Raibhya becomes furious on leaning that Yavakrida has sexually abused his daughter-in-law. As a result, he used his power and creates two supernatural figures by plucking and offering two hairs from his head to the sacrificial fire. While one looks like her daughter-in-law and the other is a terrible ghost. Then he ordered them to go and kill Yavakrida. Accordingly, the female figure removes the water-jug, which provides him security from any danger, and the other ghost kills him when he is in front of his father’s hermitage as being prevented by the half blind man from entering his sacrificial hall.

In *The Fire and the Rain*, Raibhya becomes angry on discovering that Yavakrida and Vishakha have made an intercourse. It means that he has been also trying to seduce her and when Yavakri has made love to her he feels angry. As a result, he also invokes the Brahma Rakshasa and sends to kill Yavakir. Vishakha reaches Yavakri and informs that her father-in-law has the Brahma Rakshasa to destroy him and urges to escape the death by entering his father’s hermitage. In the meantime, she happens to empty the
water in the _kamandalu_ mysteriously. When the Brahma Rakshsa chases him, he tries to run and enter his father’s hermitage but unfortunately stopped by Andhaka. Then Brahma Rakshsa kills Yavakrida then and there.

Lastly, it is observed that the end of myth has also been altered in _The Fire and the Rain_. In the Yavakrida myth, Paravasu deceives and gets rid off Arvavasu from the royal court where the sacrifice has been performed. Being hurt by allegation that he has committed patricide, he goes to the forest and indulges in the hard penance. Lord Indra appears before him and grants him the boon for restoration of his father and redemption of his brother’s sin.

But in _The Fire and the Rain_, Arvasu asks Indra for the boon for the restoration of his beloved Nitillai. At this juncture, the Brahma Rakshsa pleads with him to release him from the bondage. Arvasu is ready to consider his request as well. But Indra expresses his helplessness in not being able to fulfill both. He explains that the release of Brahma Rakshsa is later than the restoration of Nittilai, Therefore, to do both the wheel of time has to roll backward and forward which is impossible at a time. However, the Brahma Rakshasa persuades Arvasu to get him released while Nittilai remains dead only.

**V CONCLUSION :** _The Fire and the Rain_ is created out three episodes i.e., Fruitless Penance : Story of Yavakrida, Yavakrida’s End, and Mere Learning is not Enough which appear in the _Mahabharata_. In the course of When the Pandavas reach the hermitage of Raibhya in their course of wanderings, Lomasa narrates these stories to them in order to remind them of the importance of translating knowledge into virtue. The first story throws light on the futility of penance without learning the Vedas. The second story throws light on the consequence of using the boon immorally. The third story asserts that knowledge without being soaked into every thought and influence the act in one’s life. Finally, Lomasa instructs them to bathe and wash off their passions in
the holy river. In other words, the aim of these stories to educate the Pandavas give up passions as it is required for accomplishing their mission.

Karnad has carved *The Fire and the Rain* on these stories. Karnad has adopted these stories as the basis for his play but altered the very spirit of these stories. Though there has not been any love relationship between Yavakrida and Vishaka in the original stories, Karnad depicts that they have been lovers in his play. While Yavakrida undergoes penance earnestly in the original stories, the same is shown as false in *The Fire and the Rain*. Yavakrida seduces Vishakha by force in the original stories; whereas in *The Fire and the Rain* Yavakrida makes to love to her with mutual consent and interest. The depiction of the death of Raibhya is different in The Fire and the Rain from that in the original episodes. In the later, Paravasu happens to kill his father by mistake. But in the former, Vishakha coaxes him to kill him. The end of the stories has also been modified in the play. While Aravasu uses the boon given to him to get his father restored to life so that his brother is freed from his wickedness and sins, Arvasu in *The Fire and the Rain* seeks the restoration of Nitilai’s life at the beginning and withdraws this demand realizing that when Nitilai is restored, all those who were dead during her death would also be restored to life. Karnad has also made innovation in the adoption the stories of the *Mahabharata*. He has added a tribal community to the stories. In doing so he has exposed the social taboo regarding the inter-caste marriage in the depiction of the love between Aravasu and Nitilai. Vishaka experiences exploitation in her married life. Her husband treats her as object of sexual experiment. She shows her protest in committing adultery with Yavakrida willingly. Nitilai is denied the right to marry Avarasu. She shows her protest in leaving her tribal community and returns to Avarasu. Thus it shows the tendency of feminism in *The Fire and the Rain*

Notes:


Rajagopalachari, Mahabharata, 121.


Karnad, The Fire and the Rain, 119.

Karnad, The Fire and the Rain, 12.

Karnad, The Fire and the Rain, 14.

Karnad, The Fire and the Rain, 16.

Rajagopalachari, Mahabharata, 120

Karnad, The Fire and the Rain, 32-33.

Karnad, The Fire and the Rain, 14.

Rajagopalachari, Mahabharata, 116.


Rajagopalachari, Mahabharata, 119.

Karnad, The Fire and the Rain, 17.