

NEW ORIENTATIONS



*Girish Karnad's Plays*  
*Performance and Critical Perspectives*

*Edited by*

T U T U N   M U K H E R J E E

This volume both interrogates and celebrates the outstanding achievement of Girish Karnad as a dramatist, engaged in reinventing the Indian theatre traditions over the past forty-five years. Jargon-free and insightful, the book probes Karnad's inclusive dramaturgy manifested in his deft handling of various literary tropes and stage props. All major plays of the distinguished dramatist are explored and revaluated in their larger socio-cultural, historical, gender, caste and performance contexts, preceded by a long and rewarding conversation with the playwright, many of them supported by photographs of productions. The thirty-two contributors to this definitive study belong to the top shelf of drama/theatre critics and *sahardayas* from India and abroad.

# GIRISH KARNAD'S PLAYS

## Performance and Critical Perspectives

Acknowledgements

This anthology is inspired by Girish Karnad's exceptional achievement of a full and vibrant performance tradition and sincere thanks to him for his kind and generous response to my questions, for providing the texts of the plays, for his production skills to fill the gaps in tracing the history through photographs, his warm hospitality that made my stay in his abode so pleasant, and for his generous and kind assistance in the editing process.

This volume has taken several years to structure. I thank all the contributors whose faith in my work has kept me motivated to keep their papers to remain in my hands. Some have also written the new plays on short notice. Their papers engage and challenge the reader and explore social, political, and cultural issues. I thank each one of them for their insightful and generous contributions. I am responsible for any shortcomings that may be present.

I thank Girish Karnad, my friend and mentor, for his kind and generous response to my questions, for providing the texts of the plays, for his production skills to fill the gaps in tracing the history through photographs, his warm hospitality that made my stay in his abode so pleasant, and for his generous and kind assistance in the editing process.

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**Pencraft International**  
Delhi-110052

*Published by Anurag Jain for*

**Pencraft International**

**Sales Office:** 4262/3, Ansari Raod,  
Darya Ganj, New Delhi-110002

**Head Office:** B-1/41, Ashok Vihar II,  
Delhi-110052

**Phones:** 23277084, 27120156, 27443784

**e-mail:** pencraft@nda.vsnl.net.in **Fax:** 27443784

**website:** www.pencraftinternational.com

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Literary Criticism

First Edition : 2006

ISBN 81-85753-71-7

*Laser typesetting by*

Mukesh Aggarwal

WZ-526, Nangal Raya, New Delhi-110046

*Printed at*

D.K. Fine Art Press (P) Ltd.

A-6, Nimri Commercial Centre, Ashok Vihar IV, Delhi-52

## Acknowledgements

This anthology is inspired by Girish Karnad's plays and celebrates his exceptional achievement of a forty-five year dedication to the performance traditions and theatres of India. I express my deep gratitude and sincere thanks to him for the quality time he gave me to talk about his work, his patience with innumerable and surely repetitive questions, for providing the texts of the unpublished plays, for production stills to fill the gaps in tracking performance history through photographs, his warm hospitality that made it possible for me to watch plays in Bangalore. Discussion with him stimulated new ideas and made old ones clearer. Indeed, I can not thank him enough for his generosity and kindness.

This volume has taken several years to structure. I thank all the contributors whose faith in the project gave me the time to develop the anthology to keep pace with the dramatist's work. Some have allowed their papers to remain with me for a while; others have written about the new plays on short notice. Their papers engage with the twelve Karnad plays and explore social, political, regional, gender, caste, and performance contexts. I thank each one of them and record my appreciation for their insightful and interesting essays. I alone am responsible for any shortcomings that remain.

I thank Mahesh Dattani, Arundhati Nag, Arjun Sajjani, Prasanna, M. Nagabhushana Sarma, and Sunil Kothari for sharing their views on the different aspects of 'doing' theatre. They made it possible for me to understand the way the domains of drama and performance overlap.

I thank National School of Drama, New Delhi; Sangeet Natak Akademi, New Delhi; Rangayana, Mysore; and Arjun Sajjani for permitting the use of production stills and Vijay Seshadri for procuring some of them.

I thank my friends B.T.Seetha, C.Murali Krishna and P. Jayalakshmi for sharing my enthusiasm for drama and theatre. Their unstinting

support made it possible to watch plays together and organize play reading sessions, discussions and student performances at Nizam College. They enlivened the process of putting this volume together. The friendship of Seetha, Murali, Jaya, Maya Pandit, Jasbir Jain, Meera Manvi and Mamta Sagar is valuable to me.

My sincere thanks to Professor Kashi Ram, the Principal of Osmania University Nizam College for the help and encouragement he has given for all the academic work.

The process of bringing a manuscript to print is an arduous one as all engaged in the publishing sector would know. I acknowledge with gratitude the patient care and alert attention to detail that Dr. S.P. Jain, Shri Anurag Jain and their team at Pencraft International, New Delhi, have devoted to this volume. I knew that the manuscript was in good hands when Pencraft International accepted it for publication.

I thank my family for being the source of my strength, always.

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## Woman as Director: Re-Reading *The Fire and the Rain*

*Mala Renganathan*

Directing is often considered as an act of 'gazing', where the director is the 'prime gazer' who prepares the artistes for the final moment of 'viewing' and then transfers his/her power of gazing to the spectator. The director as the master spectator or the first audience enjoys much power in the realm of theatrical production. In the theatrical institution that has been patriarchal, the director's power in theatre centres on his power of gazing. It makes him see women as sexual objects meant to satisfy the male sexual ego. The director views himself as the subject and the woman as the other to be scrutinized, manipulated and constructed by and for the male gaze (Case, 118). The privilege of gazing has not been associated with women, until perhaps the latter half of the twentieth century. In the largely patriarchal theatrical pavilion, the female artiste has no definite space. The female director encounters discomfiture in commanding authority especially over her male actors.

When I directed a play called "She and Shakespeare", I faced difficulty in convincing the male actor playing King Lear what masculine gestures/emotions of anger/pride/arrogance he could show in the scene where he banishes Cordelia. He was, however, greatly relieved when my husband intervened and suggested the acting techniques. This incident brought home to me the fact that while it is accepted as normal for a male director to assume both male and female emotions, a female director is considered incompetent to interpret male emotions. A male director is accepted with his 'twinning' capabilities, but a female director is taken to be culturally uni-dimensional. A male director is marked by independence; the female director remains a symbol of dependence, and is actually expected to depend on the male members for her theatrical interpretations.

Such assumptions have their roots in Greek Dionysian times when women were distanced from the public sphere and confined within the private sphere. This discrimination of women continued in the West and gradually spread to the colonized countries all over the world. With women completely marginalized from the public sphere, life and art became conceptualized and directed from the patriarchal point of view. Women could not express themselves fully in such theatres dominated by the male perspectives.

In recent times one can see changes taking place in theatre at two levels. At one level, women-centered subjects have become attractive even for male dramatists and directors. At another level, women artistes are gradually making their presence felt in theatre, not only as actors but also as technicians, producers and directors. Despite these positive developments, we can still see theatre disabled, as it is yet to overcome its limitations of patriarchal thinking. Not only the progressive minded male dramaturges but also a majority of the female artistes and directors consciously or unconsciously take a position that remains in conformity with the patriarchal values and practices. Hence there is the need to develop a critical feminist perspective of plays which appear to be progressive at one level but still work within the parameters of male-centered artistic tradition. It is in the light of the above perspective that an attempt is made in this paper to examine women's status in Girish Karnad's plays, especially in his *The Fire and the Rain*, to see what it says about women's existential dilemmas.

Karnad puts his women protagonists in an Ibsenian complex that appears to challenge patriarchal tradition. He revises traditional folk tales and myths in order to create heroines enmeshed in the crossroads of tradition. But he tends to present women as 'cardboard characters', as persons torn between the ideal and the pragmatic or between the illusive and the real. Their dilemmas do not seem to transform them into mature or triumphant individuals, but to only lead them either to their death or to their survival as victims of conflicting forces. Padmini in *Hayavadana* has to live and die with the real and the unreal 'husband' – torn asunder by her sexual desire. Rani of *Nagamandala* chooses to play the role of an ideal 'loyal' wife as the safer option rather than acknowledge her adulterous relationship with her snake lover. Vishakha and Nittilai in *The Fire and the Rain* also follow similar trends.

While Karnad's presentation of the woman is romantic, the solutions offered in his plays for the woman's dilemma is realistic, with

patriarchal overtones. The woman character seems destined to hover between the man-made paradigms. Karnad's characterization has an overtly male orientation that places the women within a male romantic perspective. Hence, there is an urgent need for his plays to be directed from a woman's point of view in order to give the marginalized female characters their proper gender balance. This paper attempts to interpret the play *The Fire and the Rain* from a woman's perspective and explore the possibilities of adopting a feminist mode of directing the play.

## II

*The Fire and the Rain* is commonly viewed as a myth retold from a modern perspective. Karnad makes a very intelligent use of the Yavakri story and the Indra-Vritra story from the *Mahabharata* – the two complementary myths on the brotherhood betrayal issue – by converting them into plays performed at the precincts of the fire sacrifice. With such a Hamletian 'play within a play' device staged by one brother against another, Karnad creates two opposing binaries – brothers, one of whom is Brahminical and the other not; one who is disciplined, orderly and shrewd, the other romantic, wayward and simple. As the play progresses, the binary oppositions deepen and the play sets up a nuanced reading of several hierarchical relationships within which power operates – Brahmin versus Sudra, ascetic versus actor-performer, god versus demon, *yagnya* versus *natya* and so on. Thus the binaries create opposing life paradigms – of discipline versus spontaneity, convention versus romance, modern versus postmodern. Parvasu's betrayal of Arvasu is compared with Indra's betrayal of Vishwarupa and both these acts of betrayal and bloodshed take place in the sacred enclosure of the *yagnya*. By showing how power and corruption work at the human and the superhuman level, Karnad makes both earth and heaven complementary to each other in terms of their sub-human behaviour. Karnad's re-reading of the myths helps achieve three things: first, it projects fratricide as an Indian and at the same time a universal reality; second, it offers a romantic perception of the formula of success; finally, it aims at a postmodernist toppling and demolition of monolithic structures.

Karnad's postmodernist attempts to highlight and romanticize the suppressed categories (such as the lower castes, the demons, the artists), are not effective with woman's question. The two women characters – Vishakha and Nittilai – become victims of the male paradigmatic struggles. Both get caught between the real and the romantic, and they are reduced to nothingness, one to insanity and the

other to death. Vishakha is exploited by her husband, father-in-law and by her lover. She becomes a sexual weapon in the hands of the male to avenge each other and the male search for knowledge and power suffocates her. While Vishakha gets trapped in the power struggles between cousins and has to bear with her father-in-law's 'curdled lust' (FR,33), Nittilai becomes 'a lamp into the hurricane' (58), or the hunted of her hunter tribe. Whereas Vishakha suffers from brahminical patriarchy, Nittilai becomes a victim of another kind of patriarchy, the tribal patriarchy. The brahminical patriarchy in the play reduces the woman to sexual exploitation and neglect by men vying with one another for knowledge and power. Simple as it may appear to be, the tribal patriarchy also proves to be lethal towards women who do not abide by the community rules framed by the male elders.

The *Mahabharata* myths are reworked only to present the male paradigms and their conflicts, whereas the havoc such conflicts thrust on the women characters of the play is not given serious attention. Karnad's preoccupation with the male characters and their struggles makes his women figures stereotypical. He presents either discontented women characters like Tennessee Williams' Blanche du Bois or idealistic characters like Arthur Miller's Linda Loman. The two women characters of *The Fire and the Rain* represent the romantic and sensuous aspect on the one hand and the caring and nurturing qualities of Nature on the other. For Yavakri, Vishakha's body emanates "The sweet sick smell of the jack-fruit, the maddening hum of a fly" (FR, 14). Nittilai is shown as the nurturing and guiding mother of the jungle, who is in commune with Nature and with herself and who is capable of taking joy and suffering in the same spirit.

However, Karnad does project his women characters as voices of wisdom, which the male counterparts fail to attend to. The deaths due to jealousy, rivalry and violence could have been averted if the male characters had listened to female wisdom. When Parvasu asks his brother to perform the penitential rites for their father, Vishakha tries to convince Arvasu not to involve himself in his brother's personal atonement. She entreats him to live his own life and not do what his brother prescribes for him. Similarly, Nittilai is only partially successful in dissuading Arvasu from the act of vengeance. Nittilai does not hesitate to admonish him: "Look at your family. Yavakri avenges his father's shame by attacking your sister-in-law. Your father avenges her by killing Yavakri. Your brother kills your father. And now you in your turn want vengeance – where will it all end?" (47). She is able to stop Arvasu initially from joining the violent fraternal/paternal game. But

once the 'mask takes over', Arvasu is unable to control his thirst for vengeance, which finally takes its toll in Nittilai's life.

The initial romantic mystification of women gives way to their demystification when Karnad finally leaves them as passive victims or spectators of the male-centred struggles for knowledge and power. At the end, Vishakha is reduced to a life of nothingness; Nittilai, who dissuades her lover Arvasu from the path of violence, becomes the victim of violence. Karnad does not neglect the women characters totally. He projects their sufferings and dilemmas and also makes them raise fundamental questions concerning the use of knowledge and the goal of human life. Yet, to him, women characters are only secondary to the male. The paradigm of romanticism, which is projected as a challenge to that of tradition, ends up with Arvasu ultimately accepting God Indra's reasoning and forsaking his prayer for Nittilai's life. The Brahma Rakshasa's logic convinces Arvasu that Nittilai would not be happy to be reborn at the cost of a suffering soul. Arvasu's decision to sacrifice the particular for the general cause leads him to relinquish the suppressed woman's cause for the benefit of the suppressed male. Arvasu's new-found wisdom pleases Indra, frees the Brahma Rakshasa and brings grace in the form of rain to redeem the parched earth. But all those acts of sacrifice fail to address the problems and sufferings of the two protagonists – Vishaka and Nittilai. They become scapegoats for the male pursuit of universal good and wisdom. Nittilai at least manages to secure lip sympathy from Parvasu for her sacrifice, Vishakha's end is unsung by the dramatist.

The title of the play, *The Fire and the Rain* reinforces the above argument because it suggests a closure of meaning in terms of its male romantic perception: 'Fire' symbolizing solemnity and 'Rain' simplicity. According to Karnad, 'fire and rain' suggests 'the elevated and the mundane' or 'the sacred and the secular' (Notes to FR, 63). The play seems to convey the message that rain rather than fire brings prosperity to life. While the analysis of the 'fire' and the 'rain' shows them to be part of the masculine discourse represented by the two brothers, their extended analysis reveals that they are also made to hierarchize the male discourse over the female.

### III

How should a woman seeking to direct such a play plan to proceed? In my view, the woman's directorial attempt to restructure the play *The Fire and the Rain* should start from where Karnad left Vishakha and Nittilai. As Elaine Showalter would argue, the woman director should

re-interpret the women characters by aiming at a radical alternation of our vision. We need to see meaning in what has previously been empty space. As the 'orthodox plot' recedes, 'another plot, hitherto submerged in the anonymity of the background', should be brought out 'in bold relief like a thumbprint'. The women characters should emerge out of the shadow and become the central focus of the play. They should become active subjects; not mere objects of cultural production. The shadowy women characters should be brought to the fore through the shifting of the dramatic focus from the men's to women's lives and experiences.

There are enough clues within the text to carry out such an interpretation through performance. Let me elaborate the experiment I carried out at Pune University during a Refresher Course. With the help of a few fellow participants, I directed the reading of selected scenes from the play to bring out the kind of interpretation I hoped to highlight. The actor playing Parvasu brought out the sense of a worldly-wise and detached sage whose calm demeanour could break into calculated violence anytime. The actor playing Vishakha offered the right vision as to how to view the women characters and their behaviour/response towards the male conflicts. In her presentation, Vishakha became the motif for the sexually exploited woman. She is exploited by her husband, father-in-law and lover. The actor reading Nittilai projected the hunter girl as the sacrifice in the conflict between the opposing brothers, Parvasu and Arvasu.

A woman director needs to discover the methodology and assumptions of patriarchal production and delineate them or protect her performance from them. Even Arjun Sajnani's productions (both film and play) seem to have operated only at the level of merely projecting the story of power, love, lust and sacrifice. Vishakha, known for her articulation and rebellious nature, could be effectively used to question and challenge the relevance of both the traditional and romantic paradigms. The woman director needs to emphasize the passages in the text that help to rip open the patriarchal notions of beauty, knowledge and power. For instance, the male romantic perception of the woman as a sensuous object is to be opposed with the woman's own de-romanticized and de-idealized self-perception. The suggestion of such a point of view is contained in Vishakha's words: "You're still lost in the fragrance of the jack-fruit, Yavakri. I have known what it is to grow heavy, burst open, drip and rot, to fill the world with one's innards" (FR, 16). The germ of the idea contained in these words can be developed by a sensitive woman director to frame

a feminine discourse of use and abuse of women in patriarchal societies.

Apart from deconstructing the play in order to examine the 'fiction of the woman' in Karnad's play, there is also the need to highlight women's search for identity and emancipation. Vishakha, known for her articulation and rebellious nature, can be effectively used in order to question and challenge the relevance of both the traditional and romantic assumptions regarding wisdom, knowledge, universal interests, and the private and public spheres.

The woman's directorial enterprise could progress through deconstruction to the re-construction of the play with an explicit objective of empowering the women characters to search for ways out of the suffocation and subjugation of their bodies and minds in the patriarchal world. Many assumptions regarding wisdom, knowledge, universal interests and questions of private versus public spheres could be challenged by activating the female characters in the play. For example, regarding the objective of the pursuit of knowledge, four types of perceptions occur in the play: divine, idealist, instrumentalist, and ambitious. The divine conception of knowledge is seen in Indra's words that "knowledge involves control of passions, serenity and objectivity" (23). Andhaka's belief that knowledge leads one to "inner knowledge" (11) can be considered as the idealist interpretation. The instrumentalist view like of Yavakri holds: "I want knowledge so I can be vicious, destructive" (23). The ambitious dimension of knowledge is revealed in Parāvasu's claim: "I shall confront Indra in silence. As an equal" (33). All these notions of knowledge are expressed by male characters and questioned by the female protagonists. Nittilai makes a pragmatic statement about knowledge when she expresses the desire to question Yavakri thus:

My point is since Lord Indra is their God of Rains, why didn't you ask for couple of good showers? You should see the region around our village. Parched. Every morning, women with babes on their hips, shrunken children, shrivelled old men and women gather in front of my father's house – for the gruel he distributes. No young people. They have all disappeared! And Father says all the land needs is a couple of heavy downpours. That'll revive the earth. Not too much to ask of a god, is it? (FR, 10).

Similarly, power and corruption which the male characters are in mad pursuit of are criticized by the female characters. From patricide to fraternal betrayal and family destruction – nothing stops the male

characters from lusting after more power. The same desires pervade the human and the superhuman levels, thereby making both earth and heaven complementary to each other. Parvasu's betrayal of Arvasu finds parallel in Indra's betrayal of Vishwarupa. Both these acts of betrayal and bloodshed take place in sacred enclosure for the fire sacrifice. Parvasu who seems to be better than his father and his cousin initially, eventually murders his father and frames his brother and tries to get him killed without manifesting any remorse for his action. Vishakha's speech emphasizes the woman's point of view of the male pursuit of knowledge and power which does not respect any limit and which makes each of them as bad as the other:

Yavakri and you. How much you resemble each other. You both go away when you feel like it. Come back without an explanation. As though Indra is explanation enough! He isn't. Not for me. Why did you go away like that? (FR, 31)

A woman director can thus create an alternative performance based on the feminine axis that would be at once critical of the hidden patriarchal priorities and assumptions in the play in particular and the theatre in general.

### Note

*She and Shakespeare* was a pastiche drawing upon Shakespeare's women characters. Directed by Mala Renganathan, it was performed by the post graduate students of the English Department of Assam University, Silchar, in 2000. The play highlighted the female students' re-reading of Shakespearean women like Lady Macbeth, Rosalind and Cordelia as strong women characters. Even a female Prospero was imagined to demonstrate how the magic of Shakespearean theatre could be projected through the woman's creative vision.

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*from the book*

I had never fancied myself a dramatist. In fact, I had tried my hand at writing poetry. When I was at Dharwad, which was the cultural capital of Karnataka, having produced writers like Bendre, Gokak and so on, I would very often pass by the famous Kannada publishing house Manohara Granthamala and wonder if my work would ever be published by them! During the weeks of preparation for my departure to England – which were as I said quite stressful for various reasons – I found myself writing a play. This was *Yayati*. Though I had trained myself to write in English, I found myself writing the play in Kannada. The story of King Yayati is from the “Adiparva” of *Mahabharata*. At the prime of his life, the king is cursed with senility because of a moral transgression. Concerned only with himself, he pleads with his sons to exchange their youth with him and only the youngest son Puru agrees. Puru takes upon himself the curse of the father and becomes old, older than his father. I wrote the first draft of the play and showed it to G.B. Joshi of Manohara Granthamala. He read it and said, ‘Yes, good’ and nothing more. I was crestfallen but carried the manuscript with me. I reworked the script during my trip to England.

**Girish Karnad**

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