

## Elements of ‘Carnavalesque’ in Girish Karnad’s *The Fire and the Rain*

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### Abstract

The objective of this research paper is to examine the elements of carnivalesque in Girish Karnad’s play *The Fire and the Rain*. This paper can be divided into three parts. The first part is meant to emphasize the work and place of Girish Karnad in the literary world. The second part highlights the origin and place of the concept of carnivalesque in literary theory and its implications to literature. Finally, the third part tries to trace out carnivalesquian elements in the targeted text, not only on the surface level but also on the deep philosophical level. Thus, this paper is a conscious attempt to fight against fabricated assumptions and hypothetical dominant authorities by using Bakhtinian seminal concept.

**Keywords:** genre, parody, pastiche, hierarchy, carnivalesque, mockery, antiquity

### Introduction

Girish Karnad is not only one of the major playwrights of Kannada literature but also has a distinguished place among the English dramatists in India. He is a dramatist of post-modern era who fascinates us with the marvelous world of his plays. He was awarded with Padmashri in 1974 and Padma Bhushan in 1992 and Gyanpith award by Government of India for his literary contribution to theatre and literature. He has significantly contributed to the literary tradition of Indian English drama. He published eight plays, originally written in Kannad and later on, translated into English. His dramatic career began with the publication of his maiden play *Yayati* in 1961. He re-narrates the myth of *The Mahabharata* very skillfully to highlight contemporary issues and concerns. He explores human psyche and its environment in his mythical plays- *Yayati* (1961), *Hayavanda* (1964), *Naga-Mandala* (1988) and, *The Fire and the Rain* (1998) in innovative ways. Karnad is deeply influenced by the Indian myths, tradition, and history. As a creative artist, therefore, he concentrates on Indian myths, history, tradition, folklore, legends and theaters and carves out a new face of modern man struggling for a new horizon with a new identity. Karnad derives the material for his plot from history and mythology but interprets the past in the context of contemporary relevance. He always questions the view of Indian culture performing art and continuity of culture. For Karnad folk theatre is the continuity of tradition. He has specific ideas in his mind. He is able to combine the subjective interests with the general literary and cultural interests.

Before analyzing the basic rudiments and critique of cultural aspects of this play, let’s have an overview of the play. The play *The Fire and the Rain* is based on the myth of *The Mahabharata*. The story revolves around a seven year long fire planned to influence the Gods to send rain on the planet. Fire sacrifice has been performed for seven years as there has been a long drought. The king proposed to propitiate the Gods through fire sacrifice so that God might

be pleased and send rain to the parched land. In this fire sacrifice Parvasu, son of learned Brahmin Raibhya, is appointed as chief priest.

In this remarkable play, Karnad follows Indian classics to focus on Indian primitive culture and society. All characters of this play represent human behavioral patterns, belief systems, principals and ways of living which manifest richness of Indian mythical culture and heritage. Karnad takes as his subject the chain of murder, revenge and jealousy in the families of Raibhya and Bharadwaja. Karnad’s *The Fire and the Rain* presents different cultural symbols. He is fascinated towards the rich Indian folk mythic culture. In the play, Karnad draws heavily upon the rich resources of the native folk theatre. Thus, in the play the folk forms and its different elements as well as supernatural machinery play a significant role. He, therefore, very frequently, uses the conventions of folk tales and motifs of folk theatre as masks, curtains, mime, songs, the commentator, narrator, dolls, horse-man, and story within a story.

In this play, Karnad has followed the old Indian classics as the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, as a base to highlight the Indian culture. Arvasu is used as the connective line between the two worlds. In spite of having saintly qualities Yavakri, Raibhya, and Parvasu have a will to get supreme power. Parvasu’s false denunciation of Arvasu is of course an act of deliberate evil. On the contrary Arvasu sacrifices himself to love and community. He is ready to renounce his born status, for the sake of Nittilai. Thus, the play associates Brahmanism with mind games, ego, and ruthlessness and shudras culture with love and compassion, freshness and hope. As Karnad himself points out that among the Brahmanism Vishakha is chastised but not punished, whereas among the hunters Nittilai pays with her life for choosing Arvasu over her husband. Ironically, Arvasu loses Nittilai on account of his inability to leave orthodoxy.

The identity of Arvasu as an actor further

complicates the treatment of Brahmanism. Because in terms of both origin and practice of theatrical performances compliment the Vedic rituals. In the note of the play Karnad argues that “Theatre as theorized and practiced in antiquity is not a secular counter point to a Yajna but a parallel performance that can ever offer a welcome diversion from the recourse of rituals.

In *The Fire and the Rain* Karnad explores a tangled relationship between representation and reality of the fictional characters. Parvasu corrupts the fire sacrifice by his act of murder and betrayal. With the help of various such incidences, the distinction between fact and fiction has been erased. Arvasu assumes the demonic role in the play and temporarily becomes his real self. It leads to the desecration of the Yajna site and the death of Parvasu. A little after, Nittilai loses her life because she cannot oppose her human impulse to rush to Arvasu’s help. The crisis ends within the community. It is nothing but Arvasu’s real life decision to sacrifice his own happiness. All these inter linked elements make *The Fire and the Rain*, Karnad’s most ambitious meta theatrical play in which performance is not just a framing device but a thematic preoccupation and an intrinsic part of main action.

Mikhail Bakhtin propounds the concept of ‘carnavalesque’ in his two seminal books *Rabelais and his World* (1965) and *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* (1972). Bakhtin strives to trace the occurrence of the carnivalesque in ancient, medieval, and renaissance writers and attempts to demonstrate that the prehistory of novelistic discourse begins with the carnivalization of genres. Bakhtin’s notion of carnivalesque, therefore, has deep roots in antiquity. Bakhtin is of the opinion that the structure of the novel had originated from carnivalesquian tradition, which is found universally in all cultures and throughout the ages. Thus, the novelistic structure begins to build up into a distinct genre by incorporating other forms to the original carnivalesque form. Bakhtin emphasizes that novel is and always will remain an amalgamation of diverse forms of literature. For him, novel is a dynamic, vibrant, and inherent form of literature because it has acquired the capacities within itself to transform and upgrade constantly. Consequently, in the novel the elements of carnivalesque turned up with the mixing of serio-comic elements. Since, before the advancement of novel in the world of literature they were dealt in isolation. It means that those genres which were serious in nature refrained from using the comic and humorous elements. As comic and humorous events and things were regarded inferior for its subject matter as well as something that has to do with common people or masses in those days. With the help of the concept of carnivalesque in literature, Bakhtin attempts to subvert the authoritarianism of literary genres that support the grave and serious elements.

Therefore, for Bakhtin, carnival is an expression of ‘folk laughter’ and ‘folk humour’ within a literary work that mocks and challenges the very existence of serious and official cultural manifestations. The fact of the matter is that in every century at every place the ‘folk’ always occupies a secondary place. It is considered something that is the work of lesser degree, crude, or unsophisticated. But in reality it is a popular folk based culture which is defined by its so called

coarse and unrefined subject matters or themes which demonstrate a derisive antipathy to the official and hierarchical structures of everyday. It mocks, ridicules, derides, and subverts the very foundation of the official culture and literature. M. H. Abrams and G. G. Harpham gives an excellent observation on the nature of carnivalesque. They are of the view that,

This literary mode parallels the flouting of authority and temporary inversion of social hierarchies that, in many cultures, are permitted during a season of carnival. The literary work does so by introducing a mingling of voices from diverse social levels that are free to mock and subvert authority, to flout social norms by ribaldry, and to exhibit various ways of profaning what is ordinarily regarded as sacrosanct (86).

Furthermore, in Bakhtin’s *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin sees carnival as a great social leveler, bringing together people from every section of society in a “free and familiar” manner. During the carnival, existing social hierarchies of daily life as well as all ready-made truths are profaned and upturned by marginalized voices. Thus, carnival is a model of the world where everyone has a chance to participate and to express his/ her identity. As a result, the elements of carnivalesque in text attempt to create a world that is beyond hierarchies, religious dogmas, and code of beliefs, official norms, and prohibitions. As Bakhtin writes while discussing the characteristics of the carnivalesque that,

All *distance* between people is suspended, and a special carnival category goes into effect: *free and familiar contact among people*. This is a very important aspect of a carnival sense of the world. People who in life are separated by impenetrable hierarchical barriers enter into free familiar contact on the carnival square (123).

In short, carnivalesque refers to a literary form that subverts the dominant style or authoritative atmosphere of text using humor and chaos as potent tools. In relation to highlight the importance of this radical concept, Bakhtin claims,

carnivalization of literature, Proved remarkably productive as a means for capturing in art the developing relationship under capitalism, at a time when previous forms of life, moral principles and beliefs were being turned into” rotten cords” and the previously concealed, ambivalent, and unfinalized nature of man and human thought was being nakedly exposed (150).

However, carnival, in Bakhtin’s words, is “the temporary suspension of hierarchical rank,” a celebration of the liberation from the “established order”. During the carnival everything conventional and official is mocked and reversed and seen as happily grotesque. Hence, “no dogma, no authoritarian, no narrow-minded seriousness can coexist ” during the carnival because this is a “second world” that provides relief from the oppression of institutionalized hierarchy by rejecting and defying the very institutions that proliferated cultural standards. In Bakhtin’s view, as observed, laughter and parody are the basic elements of carnival and are subversive of authoritative discourses. In Bakhtin theory of carnivalesque, the festivities are the occasion for collapsing the strict boundaries of social

hierarchies. During these carnivals, the people from different social class use the language of humor and satire for creative use of language and also for the social changes. As during medieval period, usually among all cultures, there used to happen “feast of fools”, during which an atmosphere of irreverence is cultivated or created. And all the sacred or holy things, respected or revered are mocked and profaned. Thus, it becomes clear that there are certain basics elements of a carnivalesquian text which are: inversion of authority, parody, crowning- decrowning, reversal, upside-down, profanities, laughter, grotesque, mockery, pastiche, birth-rebirth, death- rejuvenation and so on.

Firstly, Inversion of authority is a remarkable element of carnivalised text. It is quite discernible in the play. Breaking social codes is considered to be a tremendous inversion in society. One is supposed to follow rules and regulations made by certain people and castes. More specifically, there are several hypothetical, predetermined, pre-established, pre-assigned dominant sets of social conduct, constituted by people of different castes and creeds, which are not considered to be transgressed. If anyone dares to encroach it, he or she is excluded from so called anthropologic system. In this play, Arvasu and Nittali break the moral code of the society, subvert orders and rules imposed or implemented by social authority. Karnad represents a tremendous inversion in the novel through the characters of Arvasu and Nittali. In the beginning of the play Karnad casts Arvasu and Nittali as two characters to subvert dominance of casteism in Indian society. He shows the contrast between Brahminism and tribal culture. Arvasu, a born Brahmin, is a connecting link between Brahminism and tribals. But Nittali, a tribal girl of fourteen, is beautiful, wise, rational and intelligent. She is the daughter of a hunter. In this way Karnad represents characters from two different castes. One is Brahmin which is considered as a high caste of society and the other is hunter which is accepted as a low tribe of social system. Despite their castes they truly love each other. Thus, Karnad challenges cultural authorities which discriminate between people on the grounds of caste, creed and religion.

In addition to it, in Indian society women are not allowed to do anything independently, even in house. In childhood a woman is supposed to be under the control of her father, in youth under her husband and when her husband is dead under her son. She has not been given independence and a woman is expected to follow rules and norms or symbolic codes. Therefore, they are expected to live within the four walls of the house and perform domestic chores. Karnad breaks such symbolic order of society by presenting the character of Vishakha, who is twenty six in age and although married to Parvasu, sage Raibhya's elder son, goes out of house and makes illicit relationship with Yavakri. Vishakha's marriage with Parvasu is not in fact a union of two souls and hearts but is a means of sexual gratification. The illegitimate relationship of Vishakha and Yavakri is reflective of breaking of social codes by Karnad.

Vishakha: My husband and you! He left no pore in my body alone. And you- you think woman is only a pair of half formed breasts.

Yavakri: Enough now.

Vishakha: I'll give you the knowledge Indra could

not give you. My body- its light with speech now

(Karnad 19; act 1).

After this cordial conversation she feels her body light and agile. They go behind a champak tree on the bank. In this way Karnad places the character of Vishakha as the wife of a Brahmin but who does not care for it and indulges into restricted activities. She denounces being a woman of culture which goes against social language.

Karnad attempts to explore female sexuality through the character of Vishakha and Nittalai. Vishakha is from upper class while Nittalai is from lower class. Both strive to step beyond the imposed rules and regulation and show a clear departure from the established order where female characters are not given the place to show their desires.

Secondly, reversal of role is another remarkable element of carnivalesque. It is a change of role circumstances, and moving direction of narrative. Like other narratives, in this play it is quite visible. For instance, at one place Nittali tries to make Arvasu understand not to be worried about the matter of their marriage. She tells him that the elders will gather under the banyan tree and would ask him a few questions. He should answer them. In the play conversation goes like this,

Nittali: Oh! Don't go on about it! I told you! There is nothing to worry about. The elders will gather under the big banyan tree and ask a few questions. You answer them...

Arvasu: I could not sleep a wink last night! Woke up in a cold sweat every time I thought of your elders... (Karnad 7; act 1).

The caste system divides Indian people into four main sections - Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and the Shudras.. Brahmins are considered to be the uppermost class and others are treated as lower sections of society. This is a reversal of role because Nittali, as mentioned in the play, is daughter of a hunter by tribe and Arvasu is a Brahmin, who is not supposed to be questioned by the so called lower caste people. So an upper class individual is expected to be questioned by lower class. It shows absolute reversal of role and circumstance.

Thirdly, the Upside and down of situation is also an important rudiment of carnivalesquian text. It is visible in the text. Parvasu, a saint who has forsaken her wife for seven year for the sake of imploring Lord Indra to give rain on the earth has failed in his motive, *yajna* or fire sacrifice has failed to implore lord Indra for rain. It is only through the playing character of Vritra by Arvasu, that lord Indra becomes happy and gives rain to the drought hit village. It shows a complete upside-down situation in the play where a saint through a rigorous exercise have failed to gain grace of God while so called down caste peoples or troops of actors along with Arvasu make god happy with a forbidden thing. One can also make them happy using other ways such as by artistic or creative ways those are thought to be improper and inferior in a society where everything is defined by predetermined codes.

Sacrilegious activities are also important rudiments of carnivalesque. It is disgustingly irreverent towards most respected and revered things and the events have been a significant way to profane and disrespect sacred and

honored things for contemporary writers. This is also a deconstructive way to invert stereotypical dominant authorities. In this play, Karnad tries to show how yagaya which is not supposed to be stopped and held up, is replaced or supplanted by performance of the play. In these last moments of play, a play is performed and it appears as a brilliant way to appease God.

Finally, Mockery is a significant element of Carnavalesque text. It can be defined as contemptuous action or dialogue made by any character of the story. It is used by writers to mock fabricated traditions and assumptions. In reality, it is employed by the author to subvert pretended dominant exploitative authorities. Karnad also uses this device to mock the fake sainthood of many people of India who puts on the dress of holiness and spirituality for their personal advantages and gains and try dominates over the minds of masses. He tries to unmask contrived and fabricated facades of sainthood and spirituality. He criticizes multitudes of saints who differentiate between the world of propagation and the world of reality through their actions and deeds. Karnad makes indirect expressions of the stark fact that fake saints preach that principle and mandates, they do not execute themselves. Hence, he tries to unmask the fictitious nature of fake Sadus in the garb of religion in Indian. Basically, being a saint is considered to be a matter of reverence in Indian civilization and culture. It is a high stage of man to get salvation but in the play, the Brahmins-Yavakri, Raibhya and Paravasu hanker after power by the misuse and misapplication of knowledge. Brahminism is characterized by egocentrism, sterility, ruthlessness, hypocrisy, selflessness, jealousy and mistrust.

In conclusion, the carnivalesquian elements are convincingly discernible in the course of *The Fire and the Rain*. In the carnivalesque game of inverting official values, Bakhtin sees the anticipation of another utopian world in which openness, anarchy, relativity, ridiculing dogmas, anti-hierarchism, questioning of authority and syncretism are permitted. An abnormal reality demands an abnormal literary form and language. Karnad tries to show the inadequacies in the modern society particularly attacking and highlighting the fake spirituality, superstitions, poverty, illiteracy, dogmas, and so on so forth.

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