



## Telling It Through A Mask: The Mask of Vrita in Girish Karnad's *The Fire and the Rain*.

Labiba Alam

Research Scholar Department of English, Gauhati University Assam, India

### Abstract

*As opposed to the western notion of representation which attributes little significance to 'spectacle', the same becomes an indispensable imperative in Indian dramaturgy. The birth of Bharata's Natyashastra throws ample light on the rich Indian dramatic tradition that finds itself illustrated in the classical Sanskrit plays. The Natyashastra is believed to be the first ever Indian treatise on dramaturgy, dance and music. It incorporates all the elements like abhinaya (acting), mukhabhinaya (facial expression), gestures, natya, nart, with the feelings or states of mind (bhavas) and the sentiments born out of these feelings (rasas). However, the authorship of this treatise is still a debatable issue. Although traditionally sage Bharata Muni is attributed with its authorship, the Natyashastra is believed to be divinely conceived by Lord Indra. It is he who, in order to maintain order in the cosmos, sought Brahma's help to compile such a text that would not only entertain the people on earth, but also instruct them in the most convincing way. If one looks at the authorship of this text, it indicates that the roots of drama in the Indian context are*

*shrouded with myths. This first ever text on dramaturgy is born out of Lord Indra's anxiety of a chaotic world, deprived of any sort of amusement and sunk in despair, gloom and ignorance. The gods identify the reason behind such discord as the outcome of ignorance among the low-born and their dissatisfaction at being deprived of the four Vedas. The gods, headed by Indra, approach Brahma, and speak these words (as translated into English and edited by Manomohan Ghosh):*

We want an object of diversion, which must be audible as well as visible. As the Vedas are not to be listened to by those born as Sudras, be pleased to create another Veda which will belong to all the color-groups (Varna) (Ghosh 3).

Thus, the *Natyashastra* theorised the act of mimicry into something 'audible' (shravya) and something 'visible' (drishya); no wonder, Indian drama is replete with songs and dances, along with mimicry. At the request of the gods, especially Indra, Brahma goes into a state of meditation, and brings to his mind all the knowledge that is in the four existing Vedas. The plan was to 'instruct' the

unprivileged section of the cosmos in the most convincing manner, through amusement.

The recitation (pathya) he took from the *Rgveda*, the song from the Saman, Histrionic Representation (abhinaya) from the *Yajus*, and Sentiments (rasa) from the *Atharvaveda* (and) thus was created the *Natyaveda* connected with the Vedas [...] (Ghosh 4).

In stark contrast to the importance given to ‘spectacle’ in the *Natyashastra*, we have a whole chapter in Aristotle’s *Poetics* attributed to tragedy and how it ought to be represented on stage. It appears that Aristotle emphasised more on the art of rhetoric to stir the emotions of ‘pity and fear’ among his spectators, than on spectacle. For him, a tragic scene that is dependent on spectacle rather than the persuasive quality of its rhetoric is a poor representation of the tragedy. To quote from Aristotle (in Butcher’s translation):

Fear and pity may be aroused by spectacular means; but they may also result from the inner structure of the piece, which is the better way, and indicates a superior poet. For the plot ought to be so constructed that, even without the aid of the eye, he who hears the tale told will thrill with horror and melt with pity at what takes place. ... But to produce this effect by the mere spectacle is a less artistic method, and dependent on extraneous aids. Those who employ spectacular

means to create a sense not of the terrible but only of the monstrous, are strangers to the purpose of Tragedy; for we must not demand of Tragedy any and every kind of pleasure... (Butcher 49)

We can dissect the above passage into different segments, and posit each against what is there in Bharata’s *Natyashastra*. The acknowledgement of spectacle by Aristotle as a secondary dramatic device stands in contrast to the principle in traditional Indian drama. The multilingual and multicultural theatre traditions in India depend heavily on spectacle (preksa). The two basic components of traditional Hindu drama are representation (rupaka) and spectacle (preksa). One is incomplete without the other. The brightly-painted faces, the gaudy costumes and the heavily decked up artists in traditional Indian performance genres exemplify the colourful spectacles that India is already familiar with and no less fascinated with. Spectacles become another character in indigenous theatre traditions in India, and what seem as ‘extraneous aids’ to Aristotle, are intrinsic stage devices in the *Natyashastra*. Let us look at the following passage from the Indian treatise that recalls the first play enacted by Bharata and his hundred sons, and that amused the pantheon of gods who came forward, each with a

different stage property (in the treatise, they are all ‘tokens of that filled their mind’:

First of all the pleased Indra gave his auspicious banner, then Brahma a Kutilaka (meaning in the footnote, ‘a curved stick fit to be used by the Jester) and Varuna a golden pitcher... Surya (the sun-god) gave an umbrella, Siva success (siddhi), and Vayu (the wind-god) a fan. Visnu gave us a lion-seat (simhasana), Kuvera a crown, and the goddess Sarasvati gave visibility as well as audibility (Ghosh 9—10).

It clearly acknowledges the importance of stage property that constitutes the dramatic spectacle in any representation. The mask, if we consider the classical as well as the popular performance genres of India, is one of the powerful stage properties that constitute the ‘preksa’ or the ‘spectacle’. However, in modern Indian drama that has witnessed experimentation at every possible level, ranging from subject matter to form, from the thematic to the theatric, the mask becomes an interesting stage device that not only adds an element of ornamentation to the stage but also carries subtle political and psychological bearings that are otherwise difficult to project through the actor’s bare face. Quoting Peter Brook in *The Empty Space*, Karnad says that unlike modern western drama where the ‘mask is used only as a contrast to the actual face... in Indian traditional theatre, as in the Greek, the mask

is only the face writ large’ (Karnad 1989 346). Karnad further acknowledges the ‘magical’ power generally attributed to the masks:

The mask is the face, is the man, in fact is more, for in folk rituals, the mask represents the spirit by whom the dancer seeks to be possessed. Putting on the mask—or mask-like makeup—is the first step to be possessed. (Karnad 1989 346)

Girish Karnad stands out as an authentic Indian voice employing and subverting myths in his plays. The retelling of mythical histories of Yayati and Yavakri in his two plays *Yayati*, and *The Fire and the Rain* does more than repeating the ancient episodic narratives from the *Mahabharata*. *Bali: Death by Sacrifice* is another mythological theme that interests Karnad. His other plays like *Hayavadana* and *Naga-Mandala* explore the richly fabricated world of folktales. Again, plays like *Tale-Dande*, *Tughlaq* and *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan* are a dig into the complex socio-political history of the nation.

Karnad has made an extensive use of masks and dolls in his plays like *Hayavadana*, *Nagamandala*, *Bali: The Sacrifice* and *The Fire and the Rain*. This article aims to project the mask of Vrita that enters the discourse of the play *The Fire and the Rain* and what purpose it serves to the playwright

as well as the character that wears it, namely, Arvasu.

Karnad's *The Fire and the Rain* is inspired by his reading of C. Rajagopalachari's abridged *Mahabharata* when Karnad was still in college. He feels grateful to Rajagopalachari for having included the myth of 'Yavakri' in his 'abridgement... [of] the world's longest epic to about four hundred pages'. He feels that the myth often escapes the notice of 'Sanskrit scholars' because it is 'a short narrative [...] in the tangled undergrowth that covers the floor of that epic'. It is Karnad's handling of the issues in the myth that turns the 'peripheral tale' into a full-fledged play. According to Karnad, it took him 'thirty-seven years... to fit all the ramifications of the myth within some sort of a manageable shape' (Karnad 289). In his Appendix to the play, Karnad already gives us sufficient information of the myth of Yavakri and the insistence of attaining knowledge in the correct way. However, as the play proceeds, one is able to see the crucial changes that Karnad has made in the myth and made it into a critique of not only the brahminical order but also of 'the divine origins of theatre' (Dharwadker xix).

The mask, discussed above as a conventional stage property in traditional dramatic performances, acquires a different meaning

in this play. We are first introduced to it in the Prologue where Arvasu is seen 'carrying a mask' but does not wear it at that time (Karnad 109). The mask is a poignant metaphor for a false identity and does not remain a mere extraneous stage property. However, ironically, the false identity that is so worn by Arvasu through the mask of Vrita actually allows him movement and the liberty to vent his anger against the wrongs done to him by his kinsmen.

Aparna Dharwadker is right in calling this play a 'metatheatrical commentary' or a theatre about theatre origins, and we see the play proceed in the play-within-a-play technique. The role of Vrita actually begins towards the end of the play, in the 'Epilogue', and we see a repetition of the motif of a brother betraying a brother. In the cover story, it is Parvasu who is a power-hungry, lusty individual, who shifts his blame of patricide on his younger brother, the naïve and ever-obliging Arvasu. Simultaneously, at a different level, this motif is seen in Indra, who is jealous of Vishwarupa, his half-brother, conceived by Brahma and a female mortal. In order to protect Vishwarupa from the insidious schemes of Indra, Brahma begets another son with a woman from the nether world, a demon—Vrita. And Vrita and Vishwarupa are inseparable. Indra envies both—one, the

Lord of the World of Men (Vishwarupa) and the other, the Lord of the Nether World (Vrita). Indra meticulously plans Vishwarupa's murder by inviting him over to a fire-sacrifice or 'yajna'. Vrita, as is obvious, wants to follow Vishwarupa but according to Indra, since Vrita is a demon, he might desecrate the fire sacrifice and hence, he is prevented from entering it. Vishwarupa also believes Indra and bids Vrita to wait outside the premises of the sacrifice. As he sits down and starts offering oblation to the holy fire, Indra conjures up a thunder bolt and stabs him from behind. His screams startle Vrita and he is consumed with revenge.

Previously, in Act Three, when the Actor-Manager hands over the 'mask of Vrita' to Arvasu, he advises him to wear it with caution, because, he says, 'once you bring a mask to life you have to keep a tight control over it, otherwise it'll try to take over' (165). But this is what exactly happens in the Epilogue when Arvasu (disguised as Vrita) chases the Actor-Manager (disguised as Indra) (170—171). The motif of a brother betraying another brother is repeated in this play-within-the-play, and for Arvasu, the two scenes are identical. He finds himself being betrayed a second time by Parvasu just as Indra is seen betraying his brother Vishwarupa (168—169). The mask is

already worn by Arvasu. It makes him chase the betrayer (here, the Actor-Manager disguised as Indra) and thus there is a great commotion resulting in the stampede of several villagers who had gathered at a distance to watch the play. Here, the 'mask of Vrita' worn by Arvasu brings in the element of representation which means to 're-present' something or somebody which/who must have appeared earlier but now is absent. Representation also means to make something visible in the 'present'. Karnad makes Arvasu a submissive and docile character, but after wearing the mask, he is enabled to 'present' his aggressive self, although temporarily, which is a requirement in the play. The mask helps Arvasu unravel his ugly, aggressive side which becomes imperative to seek revenge against the wrongs done by his elder brother, Parvasu. He first becomes an actor that distances him from his caste and his brother, and his role of a demon, a representative of the Nether World, distances him further from his Brahmin roots.

Whether it is the mask that is making him engage in the violent acts like desecrating the fire sacrifice and chasing Indra (the Actor-Manager in disguise) or it is his own repressed anger making him stand up for the first time against his brother—is a debatable issue. We see the two selves of Arvasu

engage in a conflict when two or three guards try to stop him from ravaging the fire sacrifice by chasing the Actor-Manager (disguised as Indra). Arvasu/ Vrita pulls out a dagger and warns them:

I am a Brahmin. If you try to stop me, I'll kill myself. And the sin of killing a Brahmin will be on your heads. I am a Rakshasa! And I'll kill anyone who tries to stop me— (Karnad 171).

Thus, the two personas within the same individual merge into one—one cannot be distinguished from the other. Whether Arvasu was conscious of this transformation of identity or was it under a trance that he becomes so violent are questions to be mulled over. The mask, thus, instead of remaining a mere external stage property becomes a powerful device that tampers with the psychological aspect of the character on the stage. It serves a dual purpose—first, it hides the submissive, almost bovine personality of Arvasu; second, it brings out, almost forcefully, the repressed anger and apathy of a person who has suffered injustice all his life from his own kind. After the sacrilege of the fire sacrifice, Parvasu willfully enters the flames and commits self immolation. Thus, it can be said, somewhat wearily, that Arvasu finally achieves a cathartic result after destroying the yajna that

would have empowered Parvasu. After his revenge is sated, Nittilai removes the mask from his face. Eventually, it is his anger that pushes the play towards its climax and the sacrifice of Nittilai, the daughter of a lower caste village tribesman and not a Brahmin, brings rain to the parched land.

#### **Work Cited:**

- [1] Butcher, S.H., trans. *The Poetics of Aristotle*. London: MacMillan and Co. Limited, 1922. Print.
- [2] Dharwadker, Aparna Bhargava. 'Introduction' to *Collected Plays Volume Two*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005. Print.
- [3] Ghosh, Manomohan. (Trans.) *The Natyasastra: A Treatise on Hindu Dramaturgy and Histrionics Ascribed to Bharata-Muni Vol.I (Chapters I-XXVII)*. Calcutta: The Royal Asiatic Society, 1951. Print.
- [4] Karnad, Girish. 'Theatre in India' in *Another India*. Source: Daedalus. Vol. 8, No. 4. Fall, 1989, pp 330—352. Web. 25 November, 2011.
- [5] ---. *The Fire and the Rain in Collected Plays Volume Two*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005. Print.
- [6] ---. Appendix I Note on *The Fire and the Rain*. Print.