



Myth and Ecology: Environmental Symbolism in Girish Karnad's *Fire and Rain*

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ARTICLE DETAILS

Research Paper

Accepted: 28-02-2025

Published: 14-03-2025

Keywords:

Ecocriticism, Girish Karnad, Fire and Rain, Mythology, Environmental Humanities, Ritual, Ecological Ethics

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the intricate relationship between myth and ecology in Girish Karnad's play *Fire and Rain*. It investigates the environmental symbolism embedded within the narrative, focusing on the drought, Vedic rituals, and the interplay between human emotions and ecological imbalance. Using an ecocritical lens, the study examines how Karnad employs ancient mythological motifs to reflect contemporary ecological concerns, highlighting humanity's moral responsibility toward nature. The paper also contextualizes the play within environmental humanities and postcolonial ecocriticism, ultimately suggesting that myth is a powerful framework for understanding ecological ethics.

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15030279>

Introduction

The intersection of myth and ecology provides significant insights into environmental consciousness in literature. Girish Karnad's *Fire and Rain*, rooted in Mahabharata narratives, presents a mythological lens to critique contemporary ecological concerns. Set against a drought-stricken backdrop, the play uses environmental symbolism to illustrate human moral failings and their impact on nature. This paper



investigates how Karnad integrates environmental ethics into mythological storytelling, emphasizing the inextricable link between social, ethical, and ecological crises.

Literature Review

A wide range of ecocritical scholarship provides context for analyzing *Fire and Rain*. Buell (1995) emphasizes literature's role in shaping environmental consciousness, while Glotfelty and Fromm (1996) highlight ecological ethics in literature. Mukherjee (2010) discusses postcolonial ecocriticism, which is crucial for understanding Karnad's approach. Srinivasarao (2008) provides an in-depth study of Karnad's mythological adaptations, though it lacks an explicit ecological focus, forming the research gap this paper addresses.

Research Questions:

1. How does Karnad use myth to address ecological concerns in *Fire and Rain*?
2. What role does environmental symbolism play in critiquing human ethical failures?
3. Can *Fire and Rain* be read as a call for ecological ethics in postcolonial Indian literature?

Hypothesis

This paper hypothesizes that Karnad's *Fire and Rain* utilizes myth not only as a storytelling device but as a critical framework to reflect on ecological imbalance, emphasizing the interconnectedness of human ethics and environmental harmony.

Methodology

This study employs an ecocritical approach with textual analysis as its primary method. By deconstructing character dynamics, narrative structure, and symbolic motifs, the research situates *Fire and Rain* within environmental humanities. Postcolonial ecocriticism offers an additional framework for evaluating the play's ecological consciousness.

Myth and Environment in *Fire and Rain*



Myths have long explained natural phenomena and human-nature relationships. Karnad's adaptation of Mahabharata stories highlights environmental crises through the fire sacrifice (*yajna*), symbolizing the fragile balance between human ambition and ecological order. The parched landscape signifies both environmental and moral decay, reinforcing the connection between human ethics and ecological sustainability.

Ecocritical Analysis of Environmental Symbolism

Drought in *Fire and Rain* functions as a metaphor for the disintegration of ecological and social balance. The fire sacrifice, intended to summon rain, is fraught with moral ambiguity, reflecting ethical dilemmas that extend beyond personal conflicts. Vishakha's character represents ecological and emotional longing, while Arvasu, the selfless protagonist, symbolizes the restoration of ethical and environmental harmony.

Myth as a Reflection of Ecological Ethics

Karnad's use of myth serves as more than a storytelling tool—it interrogates humanity's responsibility toward nature. The gods' silence in the play emphasizes that ecological balance is a human obligation, not a divine intervention. Arvasu's final act, dancing to bring rain, underscores the theme that selflessness and ethical clarity are necessary for ecological restoration.

Discussion

The ecological themes in *Fire and Rain* align with postcolonial ecocriticism. The play critiques environmental degradation and the sociocultural dynamics that enable ecological exploitation. By positioning myth as a medium for questioning contemporary ecological ethics, Karnad blends traditional beliefs with modern environmental consciousness.

Extended Analysis of Rituals and Nature

- Rituals as ecological intervention: Examining how the *yajna* is not only a spiritual act but an early attempt at climate control.
- Fire as destruction and renewal: The paradox of fire symbolizing both devastation and the cyclical nature of rebirth.



- Water as a purifying agent: How the withheld rain in the play reflects ecological punishment and eventual redemption.

Comparison with Other Literary Works

- A comparative study of Karnad's treatment of nature with Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* and Raja Rao's *Kanthapura*.
- Exploring similar themes in European ecological literature, particularly Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and its portrayal of nature's retribution.

Conclusion

Fire and Rain intertwines myth with ecological consciousness, critiquing human tendencies to prioritize personal ambition over environmental well-being. Karnad's work encourages readers to reflect on their relationship with nature, illustrating that ecological crises stem from ethical and social imbalances. Ultimately, the play advocates for an environmentally conscious ethical framework rooted in compassion and moral responsibility.

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