
**FROM THEATRE TO CINEMA: A STUDY OF
THE FIRE AND THE RAIN AND AGNIVARSHA**

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ABSTRACT:

Indian cinema's engagement with literature and theatre is not a new phenomenon. Some Indian filmmakers have mastered the art of making stories rooted in culture and tradition reach a wider audience by adapting plays, myths, and literary texts into films. This paper examines the adaptation of Girish Karnad's play *The Fire and the Rain* into the film *Agnivarsha*, directed by Arjun Sajani, to understand how theatre transforms when it enters the space of cinema and popular culture. The paper looks at how the move from theatre to cinema changes the way the story is told through visuals, music, performance, and narrative structure. While the play depends largely on dialogue, symbolism, and the audience's imagination, the film presents these elements through landscapes, song and dance sequences, and visual scenes. The paper discusses how these cinematic additions make the story more accessible and engaging for contemporary audiences, while also altering the depth and meaning of certain moments from the original play. Special attention is given to the treatment of mythology, caste concerns, emotional conflicts, and character development in both the play and the film. The paper also highlights how some symbolic and philosophical aspects of the play are simplified in the film version to suit cinematic expectations. By comparing the play and its film adaptation, the paper shows how cinema reshapes theatrical works to reach a wider and more popular audience. It highlights adaptation as an important cultural practice that reshapes literary works to suit changing audiences and media forms.

KEYWORDS:

Indian cinema, theatre adaptation, mythology, popular culture, Girish Karnad.

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Indian Cinema has a rich tradition of adapting literary works into films. From ancient epics like Mahabharatha and Ramayana to the plays of Vijay Tendulkar and Girish Karnad, filmmakers have often turned to literature and theatre for inspiration. These adaptations not only honour the original works but also make them accessible to a wider audience. Indian cinema, in this sense, has always functioned as a powerful cultural medium capable of reaching audiences beyond the limited spaces of theatres and literary circles. While plays and literary texts often remain confined to readers and stage audiences, cinema allows these stories to travel across regions, languages, and social backgrounds.

By adapting works rooted in mythology and culture, filmmakers ensure that traditional narratives continue to remain relevant in a rapidly changing society. Adaptation thus becomes not merely a creative choice but also a cultural necessity, helping stories survive by reshaping them for new audiences. Girish Karnad's play 'The Fire and the Rain' is one such work that has made its way from the stage to the screen. Deeply rooted in Indian mythology, the play explores human flaws, desires, and moral dilemmas, using the backdrop of a drought-stricken village and a fire sacrifice to tell its story. Arjun Sajani's film 'Agnivarsha', adapted from the play, brings this complex narrative to life through visual imagery and performance, preparing the ground for a shift from theatrical storytelling to cinematic expression.

When a drama is adapted into a film, it undergoes significant changes. A drama is written to be performed live, relying heavily on dialogue and symbolic staging. The audience is expected to use their imagination to visualize the setting and connect with the emotions of the characters. However, in a film, these elements are shown more explicitly. For instance, 'Agnivarsha' vividly portrays the parched, barren landscapes of the drought-stricken village, the grandeur of the fire sacrifice and many more. These visual elements give the audience a more immersive experience, something a stage play, with its limited set design, cannot always achieve. This shift

from imagination-driven engagement to visual representation marks one of the most important differences between theatre and cinema. In a stage performance, meaning is often suggested through dialogue and action rather than shown visually, allowing audiences to interpret scenes in multiple ways. Cinema, on the other hand, guides the audience's perception through carefully constructed visuals, camera angles, lighting, and sound. As a result, the film version of a play tends to offer a more fixed interpretation of the narrative and its emotional moments.

Another major difference observed between the play and the film is the inclusion of song and dance sequences in *Agnivarsha*. These sequences not only cater to the traditional style of Indian Cinema but also enhance the storytelling. For example, the love and longing between Arvasu and Nittilai are beautifully shown through a dance sequence, which also reflect their love for dance. Similarly, Vishaka's happiness in the early years of her marriage is depicted through a sensual song, adding layers to her character. Even the terror and strength of the Brahmarakshas are expressed through a dramatic dance. In Indian cinema, most songs and dances typically function as emotional extensions of the narrative rather than mere entertainment. They allow characters to express feelings that may otherwise remain unspoken. In *Agnivarsha*, these sequences help translate inner emotions into visible movement, making the story more engaging for a popular audience. At the same time, these additions also change the tone of the original play, shifting it towards a more cinematic experience that relies on spectacle and emotional immediacy. While these additions make the film engaging for a modern audience, they also shift the focus slightly, giving the story a more cinematic flavor than the original play.

The film also transforms some of the play's dialogues into visual scenes. In the play, Yavakri talks about the hardships he faced in the forest to Vishaka and Nittilai describes the drought to Andhaka. These moments, presented as a spoken dialogue in the play, are shown as actual scenes in the film. This change not only

helps audiences understand these experiences more vividly, but also alters the narrative flow, focusing more on visual storytelling than on Karnad's original dialogue. This transformation from spoken narration to visual depiction reflects the fundamental nature of cinema as a visual medium. By showing rather than telling, the film invites the audience to witness suffering and hardship directly. However, this also means that the poetic intensity and reflective quality of Karnad's dialogues are sometimes overshadowed by visual representation. The balance between language and image thus becomes one of the central challenges in adapting a play into film.

One of the ways in which this challenge becomes visible is in the transfer of the play's symbolism and deeper meanings in the adaptation of 'The Fire and the Rain' into 'Agnivarsha'. While the film captures the broad outline and emotional intensity of the story, some of the rich symbolic layers present in the play are either simplified or weakened. When the play is encountered as a text or within a theatrical form where language dominates, the reader or spectator is encouraged to pause, reflect, and engage more deeply with the ideas expressed through dialogue. Cinema, however, presents these moments within a continuous visual flow, leaving little space for such contemplation. For example, when Nittilai repeats her father's warning to Arvasu that "These high-caste men are glad enough to bed our women but not to wed them" (Karnad, 1999), it carries a deeper meaning in the play. Read within the text, the line reflects the exploitation of lower-caste women, a father's anxiety for his daughter, and the harsh realities of caste hierarchies. The language itself demands attention, forcing the reader to confront the social criticism embedded within the dialogue. The symbolic weight of the line lies not only in what is said but also in the opportunity it offers for reflection. In the film, however, this line can come across as humour to some audiences, depending on its delivery and the viewer's familiarity with the play. Surrounded by visual movement and narrative progression, the dialogue risks being absorbed into the larger cinematic moment rather than standing out

as a point of social critique. This shift shows how cinema, despite its visual power, can sometimes reduce the reflective depth that language holds within a theatrical text.

Another instance where this loss of symbolic depth becomes evident is Andhaka's grief upon discovering Yavakri's death. In the play, Andhaka cries, "Yavakri! Child! What happened to you? – I didn't recognise your steps – Why, why couldn't I recognise your steps?" (Karnad, 1999). Encountered within the play as a text, this dialogue highlights Yavakri's tragic transformation. His obsession with revenge and knowledge has altered him so completely that even his foster father fails to recognise him. The repetition in Andhaka's words intensifies the emotional impact and invites the reader to dwell on guilt, loss, and moral failure. When read in the play, this moment feels deeply emotional and tragic, allowing space to absorb Andhaka's sorrow and self-blame. In the film, however, the scene feels rushed, and the actor's performance lacks the emotional weight needed to convey the depth of Yavakri's transformation. The rapid movement of the cinematic narrative leaves little room for the audience to pause and fully register the tragedy of the moment. Parvasu's character also loses some of its complexity in the film. In the play, there is a powerful moment of repentance in the epilogue when Parvasu tells the Brahmarakshas, "I'll help you. I can. Come back demon!" (Karnad, 1999). Within the play, this line marks a crucial moral turning point, revealing Parvasu's desire for redemption and his willingness to correct past wrongs by helping this 'brother' figure. The language of the dialogue carries ethical and emotional significance that unfolds gradually. The film, however, does not include this exchange, thereby missing an important stage in Parvasu's moral journey. As a result, his inner conflict appears less developed, and his character arc feels incomplete. The omission simplifies the ethical complexity that Karnad carefully constructs through language in the play.

The epilogue of the play, which connects the story of Arvasu and Parvasu with the myth of Indra, Vishwaroopa, and Vritra, is

another element that the film simplifies. This section is one of the most profound moments in the play, demonstrating Karnad's ability to intertwine mythology with contemporary moral concerns. However, it appears that the filmmakers were unable to fully translate the depth of this epilogue into *Agnivarsha*. This difficulty points to a broader challenge faced by many cinematic adaptations of literary and theatrical works. While cinema excels at visual representation, it often struggles to accommodate philosophical reflection that depends heavily on language. As a result, the symbolic richness of the play remains more powerful when encountered within its textual and theatrical framework than in its cinematic adaptation.

Despite these challenges, *Agnivarsha* excels in certain areas, especially in its casting and performances. Milind Soman, as Arvasu, perfectly captures the innocence, kindness, and moral strength of his character. His portrayal makes Arvasu relatable and endearing, allowing the audience to connect with his sense of duty and compassion. Through his performance, Arvasu emerges as the emotional centre of the film, embodying hope and ethical responsibility in a world marked by desire and conflict. The film's visual grandeur also deserves appreciation. The depiction of the fire sacrifice, the drought-stricken landscape, and the terrifying presence of the Brahmarakshas create a strong visual impact. These images contribute to the mythic atmosphere of the film and help translate the epic scale of Karnad's narrative into cinematic form. For audiences who have not read *The Fire and the Rain*, the film offers an engaging blend of mythology and drama. The use of visuals, music, and performance helps sustain interest and emotional involvement. Cinema, in this sense, functions as a medium that brings complex narratives to a wider audience, allowing them to experience stories rooted in culture and tradition without the need for prior familiarity with the text.

However, for readers of the play, the film may feel somewhat incomplete. While *Agnivarsha* succeeds in recreating the external

world of the play, it occasionally falls short in conveying the internal conflicts and philosophical depth that Karnad achieves through language. The reduction of symbolic moments and the omission of key dialogues affect how certain characters and themes are understood. This difference highlights the inherent tension between literary depth and cinematic immediacy. This tension is not a failure unique to *Agnivarsha* but a broader challenge faced by most adaptations of literary and theatrical works. A play or a book relies heavily on language, imagination, and reflection, allowing readers to pause and engage deeply with ideas. A film, on the other hand, must balance visuals, performance, pacing, and audience expectations, often sacrificing subtlety for narrative flow. Adaptation, therefore, becomes a process of negotiation rather than direct translation.

In the end, both *The Fire and the Rain* and *Agnivarsha* possess their own strengths. The play offers a layered and symbolic exploration of human emotions, moral dilemmas, and social realities, inviting readers to reflect deeply on its themes. The film brings these elements to life through powerful imagery and performance, making the story accessible to a wider audience. Together, they demonstrate how narratives evolve when they move from theatre to cinema, gaining new forms while also revealing the limitations of each medium. Through this comparison, the adaptation of *The Fire and the Rain* into *Agnivarsha* highlights both the possibilities and the compromises involved in transforming theatrical works into cinematic experiences.

Reference:

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