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Girish Karnad's The Fire And The Rain A Tribute To Tribal Community

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Abstract:

Girish Karnad's play *The Fire and the Rain* (1994) is a complex exploration of power, sacrifice, and human desire, drawing inspiration from the Mahabharata. While the play primarily revolves around themes of ambition, revenge, and spiritual redemption, it also offers a subtle yet powerful tribute to the tribal community through the character of Nittilai. Nittilai, a tribal woman, stands in contrast to the rigid, hierarchical Brahmanical society depicted in the play. Unlike the elite characters, who are consumed by personal ambition and rivalry, Nittilai embodies values of love, compassion, and egalitarianism. Her tribe's customs, particularly the rejection of caste barriers and emphasis on mutual consent in marriage, highlight an alternative societal model—one that values community over rigid social structures.

The play's central conflict arises from a grand yajna (fire sacrifice), where Brahmanical priests seek divine intervention for rain. In contrast, the tribal traditions, represented through Nittilai, emphasize a more harmonious relationship with nature and human emotions. Karnad thus critiques the hypocrisy of the elite while showing the tribal way of life as more grounded in humanity. Nittilai's tragic fate—being killed by her own people for breaking tribal norms—demonstrates the oppression that even tribal societies can inflict. However, her selfless love and sacrifice stand in stark contrast to the ruthless power struggles of the priestly elite. Karnad uses her character to highlight the dignity of the tribal community while also critiquing its flaws.

Introduction

Though Globalisation is an international phenomenon, in the Indian context it can be viewed distinctly since the beginning of economic reforms and free trade policies, two decades ago. Thanks to the global readership and global publishers, Indian literature is witnessing a sea change. The writers of today being exposed to a wider scope - Indigenous to Intercontinental--, are more globally oriented.

The ripples of globalisation have left behind, on the Indian literary soil, several new trends both in themes as well as in theories. Adapting the age old classical and mythological stories and characters to fit into the mindset of the global readers of the day, and to do so in a different and new technique is a remarkable global style or feature of contemporary Indian writing in English.

Girish Karnad is one of the leading Indian playwrights in English, who is known for his novel and radical treatment of Indian mythology and history. He modifies the stories to fit them in the modern, global context, to fit into the globalised mindset of today's readers. His Tughalak, Dreams of Tipu Sultan and Tale Danda, for example, present historical events in a new colour. 'Nagamandala' and 'Yayati' are adaptations of Indian folklore and mythological storytelling respectively. 'The Fire and the Rain', originally written in Kannada as 'Agni matthu male' is his most talked about play mainly because of its experimentation with traditional notions, themes and theories. Here, Girish Karnad takes liberty with the original story of Yavakrida from Mahabhartha and transforms many characters and events. Chapters 31,32 and 33 of Vana Parva in Mahabharata narrate the story of Yavakrida son of sage Bharadwaja.

Yavakrida acquires the knowledge of the Vedas from Indra after years of penance, but uses it to molest the daughter - in - law of sage Raibhya, whom he resents. Raibhya creates a demon and a spirit in the form of his daughter - in - law, both of whom pursue Yavakrida and kill him. Bharadwaja places a curse on Raibhya that he will die at the hands of his own son, and then kills himself in remorse. Some time later Parvasu mistakes the deer skin that his father Raibhya is wearing for a wild animal and kills him. Involved with his younger brother Aravasu, in a fire sacrifice, Parvasu initiates another cycle of evil when he falsely accuses his brother of patricide. Aravasu then begins his own penance to the Sun God, and when granted a boon, asks for Yavakrida, Bhardwaja, and Raibhya, to be restored to life. Lives that were destroyed due to human lapses are restored through divine intervention.

Girish Karnad brings about many changes in the story as well as characters.

Yavakrida becomes Yavakri, Raibhya's unnamed daughter-in-law is given a beautiful name Vishakha. Vishakha is portrayed as a bold character who avenges the betrayal of her love while the original one is a silent sufferer who does not appear after her seduction. In the original story Parvasu unknowingly kills his father, whereas in 'Fire and The Rain' he commits patricide deliberately.

Similarly the character of Raibhya is also altered. In the original story he is a dignified and learned man who kills Yavakrida as a revenge on behalf of his daughter-in-law, whereas he is portrayed as a selfish egoistic man in 'Fire and The Rain'.

There are many changes in the story also.

In a more radical move, Girish Karnad constructs a parallel story of a tribal girl, Nittilai who was not there in the original story of Yavakrida. Hers is a story of love, passion, loss and sacrifice. She is depicted as a victim-not only of the circumstances, but also of the brahminic orthodoxy that prevents her marriage with Aravasu. Aravasu, with all his love and commitment for Nittilai, is unable to free himself from the shackles of orthodoxy at a crucial moment---he is unable to present himself in front of Nittilai's community on time, because he is held back to perform the last rites for his cousin Yavakri and Nittilai's people give her away to another man. Thus Nittilai is made to sacrifice her love. Even after her marriage with a man of her community, Nittilai rushes to nurse Aravasu when he is thrown out of his society. She is a constant comfort for him even when she herself is in the threat of being 'hunted' by her people. She is kind and courageous, always helping Aravasu even though she has to pay with her life for such transgression.

Later, in the story, Nittilai loses her life because she cannot resist her human impulse to rush to Aravasu's aid when the place of Yajna is caught in flames, even though she is in hiding from her tribe. In this drama of sacrifice and expiation Nittilai sacrifices her life for the sake of love. The redemptive act that ends the crisis is not the performance of either the Yajna or the inner play, but Aravasu's real-life decision to sacrifice his happiness that is, Nittilai for the sake of common good. The play's capacity to move the readers and the audience certainly lies in the tragic and heroic character of Nittilai. It appears, Girish Karnad has paid a tribute to the tribals through her character.

The character of Nittilai also acts as an antithesis to the world of the ascetic brahmins - Raibhya, Paravasu and Yavakri'. After the prologue the very first act opens with the character of Nithilai. It begins with her conversation with Aravasu. Nithilai is persuading Aravasu to meet her tribal elders so that they would be engaged. Aravasu is very nervous and annoyed because according to the tribal custom he has to stand in front of the tribal crowd and declare that he is potent and can keep Nithilai happy. If he fails to comply to this custom, Nithilai will be given away to another man. While Nithilai feels there is nothing to be nervous about it, Aravasu, being a brahmin, feels it dreadful" to say all that in plain loud words to a smirking nudging, surging multitude. No hymns to drown out one's voice. No smoke to hide behind. It's dreadful"

[p. 100, The Fire and The Rain]

The very first dialogue of the play thus brings forth the underlying difference between the two communities to which Arvasu and Nithilai belong. While the brahmin community believes in concealing, the tribal community reveals all by practice. The same is expressed by Nithilai when Andhaka proudly talks of Yavakri's penance in the forest for ten years. Nithilai says to Andhaka

"what I want to know is, why are the brahmins so secretive about every thing?..... You know, their fire sacrifices are conducted in covered enclosures.

They mortify themselves in the dark of the jungle. Even their Gods appear so secretly. Why? What are they afraid of?. Look at my people. Every thing is done in public view there. The priest announces that he'll invoke the deity on such and such a time on such and such day. And then, there right in front of the whole tribe, he gets possessed. And the spirit answers your questions. You can feel it come and go. You know it's there. Not mere hearsay" P.No.116 Ibid).

By calling Yavakri's experience a hearsay, Nittilai doubts its truth. Later when Yavakri meets Vishakha, the readers or the audience come to know that Nittilai is right in doubting the truth of what people say about Yavakri's experience with Indra. In her simple argument Nittilai also throws light on the futility of such a penance even if it is true. She says,

"...since Lord Indra appeared to

Yavakri and Indra is their God of Rains, why didn't Yavakri ask for a couple of good showers?. You should see the region around our village. Parched 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 ?" [PNo. 117 Ibid]. When Andhaka replies that Brahmins do not use divine powers for solving day-to-day problems, but for attaining inner knowledge, Nittilai retorts " what is the use of it? When I meet Yavakri I would ask him two questions. Can he make it rain ? and then ,can he tell when he is going to die". [P.No. 117 Ibid].

According to her there is no point in gaining any knowledge if one cannot save dying children and if one cannot predict one's moment of death. Girish Karnad here is giving a clear picture of the futility of brahminic customs and practices , and at the same time, presenting it all from a tribal's point of view.

The character of Nittilai stands out as purely heroic, while others are all contaminated by their egocentrism. Nittilai grows from an innocent tribal girl wandering in the forest, observing and tracing animal foot prints and its flora and fauna, to questioning the goals of sacrifice and the ritualistic religion, to attain the stature of a benevolent nurturing archetype of universal motherhood attending the hungry and nursing the sick. The slow and gradual rise of Nittilai's personality is rendered complete with her reification through tragic death.

Girish Karnad views Nittilai and her tribal community from a new perspective - as representing the life of instincts and emotions as against the life of intellect and discipline. The split between nature and culture, body and mind, is expressed as an explicit opposition between the tribal and the brahmin, with Aravasu functioning as the connective link between the two worlds. The ascetic brahmins are carried away by their ambition to gain knowledge and power which drains out their moral values. Nittilai who represents tribal culture, on the other hand is an emodiment of love ,compassion, innocence and commitment. Girish Karnad thus reverses the traditionally accepted notions about the brahmins as virtuous and the tribals as ruthless. Thus it can be concluded that, a place of honour and heroism has been secured for the tribals through the character of Nittilai .

Conclusion:

Girish Karnad's *The Fire and the Rain* pays a poignant tribute to the tribal community by presenting it as a contrast to the rigid Brahmanical order. Through the character of Nittilai, Karnad highlights the values of love, compassion, and egalitarianism that exist within indigenous traditions. While the play critiques the limitations of both elite and tribal societies, it ultimately portrays tribal culture as being more in harmony with nature and human emotions.

Nittilai's tragic fate underscores the deep-rooted social injustices that persist across different communities. However, her character remains a beacon of selflessness and moral strength, emphasizing that wisdom and humanity often reside in marginalized groups rather than in those who claim religious or intellectual superiority.

By weaving mythology with social commentary, Karnad challenges hierarchical structures and invites the audience to recognize the dignity, resilience, and cultural richness of the tribal community. In doing so, *The Fire and the Rain* serves as a powerful reminder of the need to respect and preserve indigenous traditions in an evolving society.