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TRIBAL ETHICS VS BRAHMINICAL DHARMA: READING GIRISH KARNAD'S *THE FIRE AND THE RAIN*

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Abstract:

Girish Karnad's *The Fire and the Rain* (1998) stages a fundamental conflict which takes place between two ethical systems: the textual, and patriarchal dharma of the Brahminical order and the lived, and inclusive ethics of the tribal community. The major critical attention and predominant focus is mainly on the male Brahmin protagonists – Yavakri, Paravasu, and Raibhya – and their crisis of knowledge and power. But this paper shifts focus to the tribal character Nittilai as the centre of an alternative moral vision. Drawing heavily on subaltern theory (Spivak), feminist ethics of care (Tronto), and the Indian discourse of dharma as both shastra and loka; this article makes a deep and close textual analysis of the play's central confrontations and the contexts where they take place.It argues that Karnad does not merely portray the tribal as victim.Instead, the emphasis is on the tribal ethics that is characterized by choice, forgiveness, labour, and care. This censures the instrumental and vengeful nature of Brahminical ritualism which has an important role in the play. Cultural reconstruction is possible through the life and death of Nittilai. Thereby it offers a model of dharma that sustains life rather than demanding sacrifice.

Keywords: Girish Karnad, Tribal Ethics, Brahminical Dharma, Nittilai, Subaltern, Cultural Reconstruction, Ethics of Care, The Fire and the Rain

Introduction: Two Dharmas, Two Worlds

It may be noted that Girish Karnad's return to the Mahabharata in *The Fire and the Rain* is not an attempt to glorify it. He has his own plan- to interrogate it from the margins. To begin with, the play is set during a severe drought, lasting tenyears. A yajna, is organized by a brahmin Paravasu to please God Indra, god of rain. The

yajna is the centre of Brahminical power. This is the privilege given to Brahmins-only initiated Brahmins can enter it; male, Sanskritized, and exclusionary. Marred by pride, ego, jealousy, and violence .

Karnad, here creates a parallel world outside the yajna where there are the forest, the village, the theatre, and the tribal hamlet. This world is impure, female, oral, and inclusive. It is lived by Arvasu, who loves acting, Andhaka, the blind Shudra, and most importantly, Nittilai, the tribal girl. 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. Contrary to the elite Brahmins consumed by ambition and rivalry; Nittilai personifies love and empathy.

The thesis of this paper is that the play is not about whether the yajna will bring rain in the end but about which dharma deserves the rain :whether it is the Brahmin's textual dharma or the tribal's lived ethics. Karnad gives a clear answer: the tribal ethics.

Defining Terms: Brahminical Dharma and Tribal Ethics

For the purpose of analytical clarity, operational definitions of the two terms have to be examined.Brahminical Dharma in the play is referred in a different style as dharma as it is defined by the Dharmashastras – duty determined by birth, gender, and ritual knowledge. Three features can be seen in Karnad: (a) Knowledge is considered and used for dominance, not liberation; (b) Ritual is a type of transaction – giving blood thereby you get boon; (c) Purity is demanded and maintained by the exclusion of women, Shudras, and tribals.

Tribal Ethics refers, in other way,to dharma as practiced by Nittilai's community – duty determined by lived need, care, and human relationships. It keeps three counter-features. They are ☹a) Knowledge is acquired through the hands – "We have only our hands to work"; (b) Relationship is unconditional – Helping the other because someone is in need of help; (c) Purity is required in the life and in intention, not in birth.

This binary is not Karnad's invention and exists in Indian philosophy itself as Shastra-Dharma (text) vs Loka-Dharma (folk practice).

1. Critical analysis on Brahminical Dharma as Revenge

Firstly it is to examine how Karnad deconstructs Brahminical dharma through three male characters.

3.1 Yavakri: Knowledge as Revenge

The play presents Yavakri who is denied Brahma-Jnana because he is not disciplined in life . He performs regular and severe penance, practices and directly aquires knowledge of the Vedas from Indra. But a basic question is :what does he do with this knowledge? He uses in malicious way-to seduce Vishakha, Paravasu's wife. Then he takes revenge for his father Bharadwaja's humiliation by Raibhya years ago. Karnad writes: "I obtained knowledge so that I could show them what knowledge means." Knowledge here in the play used is not for self-realization. It is a malicious weapon. This is the first failure of Brahminical dharma.

3.2 Paravasu: Ritual as Revenge

Paravasu, brahmin,is the chief priest of the yajna.Chief priest should be a man of prayers. He should be able to give God's message to the people. Thereby he is supposed to be the most selfless. Yet he leaves his young wife Vishakha alone for seven years to become chief priest. He later admits the fact that he did it with a view to prove others that he was greater than his father Raibhya and his brother-in-law Yavakri. At the crucial moment and height of the yajna, he even kills his own father Raibhya. Ritual is turned to exploit the situation and others.Ritual, becomes a tool to mask patricide. The fire that burns for seven years does not bring rain because the intention behind it is impure.

3.3 Raibhya and the System: Purity as Violence

Raibhya out of rage curses Yavakri to die. Besides he molests Vishakha, and declares Arvasu impure because he thinks Arvasu acted in a play and loves a tribal girl. Purity becomes violence.Hence anyone outside the system – woman, actor, tribal – is declared polluted.

Thus, Brahminical dharma as it is presented in the play creates drought – both literal (no rain) and moral (no compassion).

2. Tribal Ethics as Alternative: The Character of Nittilai

Nittilai is a tribal girl who loves Arvasu. She represents tribal ethics. Nittilai offers three ethical interventions.

4.1 Ethics of Choice and Agency

Nittilai, an important character in the play,is first introduced as a girl already engaged to another man in her tribe by her father.As the prevailing custom dictates, her father and brother want her to marry within the tribe. She refuses. She says: "I

have given my word to Arvasu. I will keep it "Compared with Vishakha, Nittilai sounds different. Vishakha has no choice in her world. She is married off to Paravasu and abandoned to solitude. On the contrary Nittilai, in her world,exercises choice.She stands bold. Feminist scholars like Butler argue agency is not freedom from structure, but ability to act within it. Nittilai shows that.

It is considered that her choice is double-risky: she risks tribal punishment and Brahmin rejection.Even then she chooses. This can be seen as her first act of dharma – keeping one's word, satya, which is greater than tribal or Brahmin law.

4.2 Ethics of Forgiveness and Care

Ethics has an important role in man's life.Ethics is the most powerful aspect. The Brahmin world has its thinking and living pattern. Every brahmin lives with his own memory of insult. Yavakri keeps in memory his father's insult for 10 years. At the same time Paravasu remembers his father's dominance for 10 years. Nittilai does not think in terms of revenge. When Arvasu is beaten by villagers for being an actor and for loving her, she does not tell him or incite him to take revenge. She says: "Come, let us go to another village. We will make a hut. We will live. What do we need this village for?"

The character of Nittilai is evident here. Her own solution to humiliation is not retaliation.She strongly upholds relocation and rebuilding a life. This is kshama – forgiveness – which the Bhagavad Gita lists as the highest dharma, but which no Brahmin in the play practices.

Further, she keeps and upholds an ethics of care. She is the only one who takes care of Andhaka, the blind father of Arvasu. She cooks for him. Then she brings him out and protects him from the yajna fire. It is to be noted that when Brahmins are busy chanting mantras for rain, she is busy feeding a blind old man. Karnad makes a clear statement: real yajna is not in fire, but in feeding the hungry.

Her famous dialogue summarizes her philosophy: "We tribals, we don't have mantras. We have only our hands. Our hands to work, to feed, to hold." This rejects Vedic oral authority. Thereby it establishes labour and care as sacred ritual in human life.

4.3 Ethics of Death as Critique

Nittilai's death is the most misread moment. She is killed by her own husband and brother.This death takes place according to tribal law, for adultery – for staying with Arvasu. She knows she will be killed. Amidst she comes to save Arvasu from self-destruction.

Her death is structurally opposite to the deaths in the yajna. The yajna demands sacrifice. One must kill something to get something. It is called transactional dharma.But Nittilai's death gives nothing in return. She dies to save Arvasu, without asking for anything. It is unconditional dharma. It is nishkama karma – action without desire for fruit.This is what Krishna preaches but which only the tribal girl practices. Therefore, her death can not be considered as a defeat. It is the final censure. Her death shows that both Brahminical and tribal patriarchal systems kill women who choose.

Conclusion: Cultural Reconstruction through the Tribal

Cuture is reconstructed at the end. Karnad's act of cultural reconstruction lies here. He does not reconstruct Indian culture by going back to a pure Vedic past. He reconstructs it by bringing the tribal to the centre and gives them voice.

At the end of the play, Arvasu is granted a boon by Indra to bring back any one dead person.He does not ask for his father, his brother, or his guru. He asks for Nittilai. The Brahmin actor who was given divine power, chooses the tribal ethic over his own lineage.

As a matter of fact Indra does not bring Nittilai back. He brings rain. The symbolism shown here is precise: the gods can end drought, but only human beings can bring back Nittilai's ethics. The rain at the end is not because of the yajna. The rain is because Arvasu finally learned Nittilai's dharma – compassion.

Thus, tribal ethics vs Brahminical dharma is not a side theme. It is the central and moral aspect of The Fire and the Rain. The fire is Brahminical knowledge, the rain is divine grace, but what connects them is Nittilai – the tribal, the woman, the human. Nittilai plays a vital role.Without her, fire remains barren and rain remains absent.

For contemporary India there are several discourses on various themes and topics like discourses of caste, indigeneity, and gender justice Karnad's positioning

of the tribal woman as the ethical centre remains a powerful dramaturgical intervention. It suggests that any cultural reconstruction that excludes the tribal and the woman is bound to remain in drought.

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