

ISSN: 0976-8165

The Criterion

An International Journal in English

Vol. 7, Issue- 3 [June 2016]

7th Year of Open Access

Editor-In-Chief: Dr. Vishwanath Bite

The Criterion



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ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

www.galaxymrj.com

The Apotheosis of Nittilai in Girish Karnad's *The Fire and the Rain*

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Abstract:

Girish Karnad's play *The Fire and the Rain* (1995) encompasses an array of human emotions and passions. It deals with characters from upper and lower stratum of society. Karnad juxtaposes the tribal girl, Nittilai with the learned Brahmins (particularly Raibhya, Parvasu, and Yavakri) who are revered because of their social status and learning. But despite being well-versed in Vedas, their character suffers from many flaws and infirmities while Nittilai hardly possesses any infirmity or distortion of character. Karnad makes her a towering figure because of her infinite goodness. She upholds bravery, wisdom and all the humanitarian values, while the Brahmin pundits are crude, self-centred, and a mockery of their learning. Despite their learning, they keep burning in the fire of human desires. This paper shall attempt to show how Karnad apotheosises Nittilai in comparison to the other characters of the play.

Keywords: learning, burning, wisdom, humanity, character flaw, apotheosis

In Girish Karnad's play *The Fire and the Rain* (1995), the main characters of the play belong to two different communities—Brahmin and the tribe of hunters. Amid the gigantic male figures of learned Brahmins, Karnad presents a small tribal girl, Nittilai and apotheosises her. She is in stark contrast to these Brahmins who are proud of their lineage and learning but are completely devoid of any feeling of love and compassion whereas Nittilai stands for fellow-feeling and self-sacrifice. Raibhya, Parvasu, and Yavakri are presented with distortions of character and are full of infirmities while Nittilai has hardly any distortion or imperfection of character, and hence Karnad apotheosises her, and presents her as worth emulating. In a world full of metaphysical ideas, like fire sacrifice, Universal Knowledge, Lord Indra, Brahma Rakshasa, etc., Karnad upholds the value of human acts and human goodness, and this he does through Nittilai's character.

Father of Parvasu and Arvasu, Raibhya is an old learned Brahmin sage but his great learning and knowledge of the Vedas have failed to teach him any moral, ethical, and humanitarian values. Though a pundit, he is still burning in the fire of jealousy, envy, malice, hatred, lust, ambition, and ego. Yavakri holds a grudge against him because he hogged all the limelight, undermining the worth of his own brother Bharadwaja. According to Yavakri, he competed with his own brother in the rat race of fame and name, and ultimately got it. He calls him an "unscrupulous brother of him [Bharadwaja]" (22). Raibhya is in competition with not only his brother but also with his son Parvasu. The fact of Parvasu becoming the Chief Priest of the seven-year long fire sacrifice hurts his ego, honour, and self-dignity. Instead of being happy in his son's achievement and honour, he feels humiliated because though he was more senior and deserving than Parvasu to be the Chief Priest, the King does not choose him. Vishakha tells Parvasu about the inward jealousy and mental suffering of Raibhya ever since he became the Chief Priest: "Something died inside your father the day the King invited you to be the Chief Priest. He's been drying like a dead tree since then. No sap runs in him" (32). He has been jealous of him. Even Parvasu is aware of it as he accuses

him by saying: “He killed Yavakri to disturb me in the last stages of the sacrifice. Not to punish Yavakri, but to be even with me” (33).

Since Arvasu is not in the same profession as that of Raibhya, there is no jealousy or competition with him. Still Raibhya is not a good father to Arvasu too. In the beginning of the play, we get to know that Arvasu has not told his family about his desire to marry Nittilai because “no one cares!” (7). He says that he will tell it to only Parvasu because to his father he is almost non-existent. About his relation with his father, he says, “It doesn’t matter a flake of cowdung to my father whether I’m alive or dead” (7). Arvasu considers Parvasu his parent/guardian which suggests that Raibhya has not been an influential and impressive father to him. Hence, about his marriage proposal, he does not deem his father important enough to even consult him.

Raibhya is a terrible and staunchly patriarchal father-in-law also. He treats the only woman of his family (his daughter-in-law, Vishakha) in a very demeaning manner. He oppresses her mentally, physically, and sexually. Though an old Brahmin sage, he is burning in the fire of lust and uses none other than his own daughter-in-law to satisfy himself against her will. He rapes Vishakha when her husband Parvasu is away from home. Vishakha tells of her plight: “For a few minutes, he [Yavakri] made me forget the wizened body, the scratchy claws, and the blood, cold as ice” (33). Raibhya upholds all the values of patriarchy. When Vishakha transgresses the sexual mores set up by patriarchy for women and tries to assert her sexual freedom through fornication with Yavakri, he is incensed at this breach in patriarchy’s solid wall. When Vishakha and Arvasu try to hide Yavakri’s visit from Raibhya by lying to him, he at once suspects them of their untruthfulness and exerts more authority on Vishakha. Showing his utter prejudice, he lets Arvasu go, grabs her by hair, and starts kicking her. He is mad with fury and blurts out: “Where can she go? I want the truth and I’ll kill her if necessary” (20). Raibhya is prone to use vulgar language to and for Vishakha. He calls her a “whore” (20). On another occasion, he tells Parvasu, “Tell him [the King] the swarm of dogs sniffing around my daughter-in-law’s bottom keeps me in good shape” (29); and again, to Parvasu, he says, “You disgust me. You and that bitch of yours” (29).

After dealing cruelly with Vishakha, he is quick in punishing Yavakri. Raibhya is also devoid of any feeling of forgiveness and mercy. Since his sense of patriarchal pride and honour are injured because his daughter-in-law, his ‘property’, was touched by another man who is not her husband (though Raibhya himself does so, and that too against Vishakha’s will), he instantly punishes him. Using the power of his learning, he invokes the ‘kriya’ and sends Brahma Rakshasa to kill Yavakri which he does with a trident. In the whole play, if we ever see him using his learning it is when he uses it to kill Yavakri. Thus we see that Raibhya is a person who is totally contrary to what a sage of his stature should be. He is neither a good father nor brother nor uncle nor father-in-law nor a sage.

Parvasu is bestowed the honour of being the Chief Priest of the fire sacrifice. But like his father, his actions also deviate far from the person he is expected to be because of the halo surrounding his profession and social status. Parvasu’s evil is very calculative and poised—outwardly he remains very calm and composed but beneath this veneer is a horrifying villain. Like Yavakri, he, too, has become proud of his learning. He says that he went to the fire sacrifice in order to confront Indra as “an equal” (32). Not just this, but to be even superior to gods because in this type of ritual, if anything goes wrong, it can be fixed by only a man, and since he is the Chief Priest, by him only. Dr. G. A. Ghanshyam and Raj Rekha Singh comment: “Karnad has presented Parvasu as the symbol of supreme egotism. Parvasu through the fire sacrifice was trying not to seek blessings from Lord Indra but to

equal him” (186). We see that his very motive for going to the sacrifice is selfish, blasphemous, and tinged with overweening ambition. Though a learned Brahmin, he did not go to the sacrifice for the welfare of people but for his own personal motive.

In the Prologue, when Karnad introduces Parvasu, he writes that since Parvasu is the Chief Priest “[i]t is his responsibility to see that there are no errors, either of omission or of commission, in the performance of the sacrifice” (1). But the readers are dumbfounded when one night he arrives his home breaking the rule because a Chief Priest is not supposed to go anywhere until the sacrifice is over. When Raibhya questions him as how he can be there, his reply “I felt like coming home” (29) is unbelievable coming from the mouth of a priest of his calibre. When Raibhya further rebukes him, his excuse is, “If I am back there before dawn, no one need know” (29). He is not concerned about the gods knowing and their subsequent punishment; he is not afraid of his sacrilegious act. Deliberately he kills his father because he knows that his father had been jealous of him ever since he became the Chief Priest and hence gets rid of him in cold-blooded murder. After the murder, he has the audacity to return to the sacrifice and resume presiding the rituals. With such acts, Parvasu totally corrupts and defiles the holy yajna.

Parvasu is also a failed husband to Vishakha. With her, he has bodily relation only; there is no verbal or emotional communication between them. He does not bother to talk to her or even answer her questions. She complains: “I shouldn’t ask. I should be silent. And you, in any case, will be silent. My silence again followed by yours. Silences endlessly repeated” (32). On the night of their wedding, he promises to give her sexual happiness only for exactly one year and he does that. After that he starts using Vishakha’s body “like an experimenter, an explorer. As instruments in a search” (16). Vishakha narrates: “Nothing was too shameful, too degrading, even too painful . . . I had a sense he was leading me to something. Mystical? Spiritual? We never talked” (16). He never tells Vishakha for what kind of experiment he is using her body, and then one day he leaves her behind to become the Chief Priest while she has to suffer his father’s ruthless treatment of her. Like the sacrifice, Parvasu contaminates the sacred relation of marriage also by limiting it only to sexual intercourses.

Parvasu is a treacherous brother to his younger brother Arvasu who worshipped him. Arvasu had put him on a pedestal and Parvasu betrays him. Being jealous of the simple and innocent nature of Arvasu, treacherously, Parvasu puts the blame of patricide on him. He calls him a “Demon” (38), has him thrown out of the sacrificial precincts and beaten mercilessly. He is quite indifferent to his another brother Brahma Rakshasa also (since Raibhya had given him a new birth by plucking him out of limbo state and putting him in time). Since Parvasu is a learned priest and inherits Raibhya’s position after his death, Brahma Rakshasa seeks his help to get him release from limbo state and Parvasu’s response is, “I don’t help anyone” (36). Hence we see that Parvasu fails in every relation he has. Though he has great learning of the Vedas, his actions disqualify him as a Chief Priest.

Raibhya’s nephew, Yavakri is also presented with a distorted character. He suffers from so many flaws. Yavakri is the third Brahmin in the play whose learning does not manifest itself in his actions. He too has crammed his head with knowledge but has not learnt how to use it in his day-to-day practical life. He burns in the fire of lust, jealousy, ambition, malice, revenge, and hatred, and ultimately this fire consumes him totally and he dies a tragic death. Through Andhaka’s mouth, we get to know that in the eyes of the general populace, Yavakri is a victor, almost haloed, because he got the Universal Knowledge directly from Indra. But his very way as well as his whole concept of gaining knowledge is wrong and

distorted. He does not opt for the normal usual and correct method of gaining knowledge, that is, studying at the feet of a guru; instead he chooses shortcut. Also, about the fruit of his penance, he says that he has gained “[s]ome knowledge . . . but probably little wisdom” (14). He indeed has learned nothing from his penance because he fails to overcome his passions and evil desires. Ten years of rigorous austerities have hardly transformed him into a human being who is in control of his desires. Unaware of the irony, Vishakha aptly assesses his character when she says: “I can’t believe it! The whole world may be singing your praises. But you haven’t grown up! These ten years have not made any difference to your teenage fantasies” (14).

His whole concept of knowledge is also warped. When Indra told him that knowledge is all about restraint of desires, he had replied: “ ‘No, that’s not the knowledge I want. That’s not knowledge. That’s suicide! This obsession. This hatred. This venom. All this is me. I’ll not deny anything of myself. I want knowledge so I can be vicious, destructive!’ ” (23). Yavakri does not want to overcome his human frailties; he does not seek to evolve into a better human being through his knowledge. All he wants is the power which comes with knowledge so that he can make himself superior over others, and be powerfully malignant. His motive for gaining knowledge is totally corrupt. It is not for the sake of learning merely but to take revenge on Raibhya and his family, to humiliate, defeat, and destroy them because he nourishes a grudge against Raibhya that he did not let Bharadwaja (Yavakri’s father) receive his due recognition. Yavakri himself tells Vishakha: “*He* [Bharadwaja] was one of the reasons I fled to the jungle” (22). After returning from the jungle, the very first thing he does is to plan skilfully his revenge. Like an adept schemer, he lays his whole scheme. He asks Arvasu to meet him not at his house but at Arvasu’s house at a particular time because at that time he would be making out with Vishakha; tactfully he also calls Raibhya back home so that both Arvasu and he are the witnesses of his transgression. Yavakri wanted to provoke Raibhya and he is successful in it.

Apart from being a malignant nephew and cousin brother, Yavakri is also a cruel lover to Vishakha. In their adolescence, both Vishakha and Yavakri loved each other but Yavakri left her in the lurch when he went to the jungle for ten years to satisfy his revenge, and ultimately she was married off to Paravasu. Ten years later, he comes to meet her but only to use her as a pawn in his struggle with his uncle’s family. With her, he plays his cards intelligently. He knows that she would be too angry to talk to him, hence he sets trap by saying, “Vishakha, after ten years in solitude, I am hungry for words” (13) because he knows she has been leading a silent and forlorn life. In no time, Vishakha’s heart melts and she herself gives her body to him whereas he had planned to even rape her if she would not have given herself easily. Vishakha is shattered to know that he used her body to challenge Raibhya. Cruelly he tells her: “I love you, Vishakha . . . But that you happened to marry Paravasu is not my fault!” (24)

For his pathetic end, he himself is responsible. Being proud of himself, he throws challenge at Raibhya with full confidence that he would defeat him but things go awry (for which also he himself is responsible because he breaks Vishakha’s heart and in anger she throws away his sanctified water) and he is killed by Brahma Rakshasa. After all his austerities, self-mortifications, and direct encounter with God, he remains the same evil person. He too has not gained wisdom and understanding.

In contrast to these so-called learned Brahmins, Karnad puts Nittilai. She is presented with most of the perfections of character compared to the distortions of these three Brahmins. She is lively, loving, sympathetic, altruistic, caring, brave, intelligent, and wise. She is the

solver of so many crises of the play. She is the adviser of Arvasu; his every act is guided by her wise counsel. Throughout the play, Karnad apotheosises her by attributing her all those qualities which are expected to be present in those Brahmins because of their learning. Dr. (Mrs.) Gulshan Das and Ms. Tanjeem Ara Khan say that Nittilai is created as “an ideal icon of humanity” (198). She is presented as a strong, individually opinionated person also. While the general populace is chanting praises of Yavakri, only she is brave enough to question the very purpose, the way of attaining his Universal Knowledge, and the grand story surrounding his penance in the jungle. According to her, if Yavakri’s knowledge does not help people with their basic and acute problem of drought, it is useless. She is more for human beings than some abstract enlightenment. Also, though she is a victim of patriarchy, bravely she keeps trying to protest against it. Dr. Krishna Singh comments: “She is handed over to a tribal boy and married against her wishes. She has no say. Her protest touches climax when she runs away from her husband, family and everything for the sake of love” (10).

Nittilai is presented as the guardian angel of Arvasu. She helps Arvasu retain his good character. When Arvasu insists on taking revenge on Parvasu, he is on the verge of losing his goodness but Nittilai saves him by advising not to go after revenge because revenge has never set things right. Rather her intelligent advice is to act in the play because Parvasu will be present there and in this way he can channelize his pent up anger, proving the play cathartic to him. Nittilai can never compromise with goodness since, according to her, to be eunuch is better than being an evil person. She believes in creating their own but truthful world. When Arvasu worries about his reputation since the whole world considers him a murderer, her only advice is to abandon such a judgemental world which, without knowing the truth, labels anyone as a murderer: “We don’t need this world. We can find our own” (44).

Another aspect of her apotheosis is that she is presented as a perfect mixture of tradition and individuality. Though Karnad presents her as a bold woman who takes individual steps, she has not altogether rejected her roots and traditions. She is not a senseless bold woman who tramples the sensible and insensible things of her community alike. Though she breaks her tradition by deciding to marry someone outside her caste, she maintains other traditions like she tells Arvasu not to touch her because according to the tribals’ custom “the girl is not supposed to touch her husband-to-be” (6). Also, though she runs away from her husband, she is aware of the hurt she has caused to him and hence tells Arvasu not to have a sexual relation with her because she does not want to hurt her husband anymore.

In contrast to the trinity of the selfish Brahmins, Nittilai possesses a selfless and caring nature. She nurses Arvasu back to life; provides food to the starving Actor-Manager’s family; cures Actor-Manager’s brother’s foot with herbs from woods. It is because of her care for Arvasu that she sacrifices her life. Brahma Rakshasa uses the reference of Nittilai’s compassionate and caring nature in order to remind Arvasu that Nittilai would have asked Indra for Brahma Rakshasa’s release. Towards the end, once again, Arvasu is on the verge of becoming selfish like his three Brahmin relatives, but Brahma Rakshasa’s reminder of Nittilai prevents him. He chooses Brahma Rakshasa’s release because “Nittilai would have wanted it so” (61). By sacrificing the chance of getting his love back, Arvasu is saved from destroying “what made her [Nittilai] such a beautiful person—” (61). We can say that Nittilai is behind the release of Brahma Rakshasa as well as the ultimate rain since Arvasu’s sacrifice (which he has learnt from Nittilai) makes Indra grant rain. Of course, an unholy and villainous man like Parvasu could have never brought rain; it rains when Arvasu acts on the lesson taught

by Nittilai, when he follows in the footsteps of Nittilai. Hence Karnad presents Nittilai as the solver of the main crisis of the play also. Here the apotheosis of Nittilai is complete.

Nittilai's death is another aspect of Karnad's apotheosis of hers. Her death is as if an expected end because a character like Nittilai is a misfit in a world which is full of people like Parvasu, Raibhya, and Yavakri as Arvasu aptly says at her death, "Serves you right! Who asked you to meddle with this world? You plunge in—like a lamp into a hurricane" (58). Being too full of goodness, Nittilai has no place in a world too full of evil. Amzed Hossein writes: "Once she decides to cross the boundary of custom—for whatever benevolent purpose it may be—she invites her doom . . ." (96). As it has always happened in history, the good people pay with their lives for their good deeds, leaving behind only the message of love, mercy, and self-sacrifice, and so it happens with Nittilai.

As far as Arvasu's character is concerned, he is presented as too simple and innocent, to the extent of being plain and stupid as he himself says, ". . . I have been an ignorant fool all my life. My stupidity contributed to that tragedy—fuelled it on" (60). His character is neither full of imperfections nor perfections. He does contribute to the actions of the play but not directly, not solely on his own, but as an agent used by other powerful characters, namely, Raibhya, Parvasu, Yavakri, and Nittilai. As for Vishakha's characterisation, through her, Karnad's main concern is to bring forth the issue of the women's suffering at the hands of patriarchy, and how despite that she exhibits individuality occasionally.

Hence, we can say that amid all characters, Nittilai is apotheosised. She has not gained Universal Knowledge but she is better than those who are proud of possessing Universal Knowledge. She is not learned like Raibhya, Parvasu, and Yavakri but she rises above them because of her innate goodness. Because of such centrality given to Nittilai, generally Karnad is assumed to be taking sides with tribals and critiquing the Brahmins but Aparna Dharwadker's comment is apt in this context: "The play thus associates brahminism with mind-games, egocentrism, sterility, and ruthlessness, and shudra culture with love, compassion, freshness, and hope, although the contrast is not simplistic or absolute" (xviii).

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