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## Re-reading of Girish Karnad's *The Fire and the Rain*: A Surrealistic Approach to the Culture of Fire Sacrifice and the Agroecological Practice of the Local Tribes of Northeast India

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### ABSTRACT

Girish Karnad's *The Fire and the Rain* (1998), speaks about fire sacrifice that is not merely a saintly or a god-pleasing act arranged and performed by the men belonging to the highest status in the social hierarchy. Instead, the absolute realization comes when the fire burns out all the crude aspects of humankind for regeneration and common good supported by an ecofeminist tribe. Contextually, the tribes of Northeast India, especially the Mizos living in Mizoram have their own agricultural practice of fire sacrifice that is performed to fertilize the soil and for natural vegetation and soil nutrients to produce food. However, this age-old agroecological practice of the local tribes appears to have been weakened in recent times because of the neocolonial development that arises from such a model which is rooted in the patriarchal assumptions of homogeneity, domination and centralization that underlie dominant models of thought and development strategies.

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Girish Karnad's *The Fire and the Rain* (1998) is a story of sacrifice (Fire) and re-generation (Rain). The story of the play revolves around a fire- sacrifice that is performed to please God in order to get rain in a drought- ridden area. In Hinduism, fire is considered as a sacred element that is seen as a messenger to



God. Therefore, fire- sacrifice is essentially related to sacred knowledge that is all about human liberation. Here the play is set in a place where people are facing ecological and spiritual crises that are inter-connected. In this drought- ridden space of jealousy, ego and violence that the male characters of this play fail to understand, the eco- feminist voice of a tribe living in a ghetto orientation, has become a voice of wisdom. The culture of fire- sacrifice is not only relevant religiously but this culture is ecologically relevant too that speaks of human re- generation. The tribes of Northeast India, especially the Mizos living in Mizoram have their own agroecological practice of fire- sacrifice that is performed to fertilize the soil and for natural vegetation and soil nutrients to produce food that supports humanity and re-generation. Literally this surrealistic correspondence between Karnad's imagined world of *The Fire and the Rain* and the tribal world of Northeast India is discussed in this brief paper to uncover the latent inter- connections among every form of domination, which means domination of caste, class, gender or the most importantly domination on ecology and to support the possibilities and accessibilities of sustainable principles.

Girish Karnad's *The Fire and the Rain* is a translation of *Agni Mattu Male*, a Kannada play which is based on *the Mahabharata's* Myth of Yavakri. The story states the enmity between brothers, Bharadwaja and Raibhya; and between their sons, Yavakri and Parvasu. Yavakri leaves his house and childhood beloved, Vishakhain his youth to attain universal knowledge. Parvasu gets a chance to be the chief priest of the king's fire- sacrifice because of his young age. Parvasu leaves Vishakha who is forced to marry him after Yavakri leaves her. Parvasu's achievement to become the chief priest is not accepted by his own father, Raivya who loses this opportunity not because of his ritualistic knowledge of fire- sacrifice but of his old age. All these ego, jealousy and enmity lead these male characters to involve in patricide and fratricide. Yavakri wants to take revenge by seducing Raibhya's daughter-in-law and Parvasu's wife, Vishakha but dies in the hands of Brahma Rakshasa created by Raibhya. Parvasu kills his own father who gets jealous of Parvasu's success and mistreats Vishakha when she is alone in house. Here Parvasu's brother, Arvasu is a man who is torn between moral righteousness, love and duty. Thus, the generous, charming, good- natured Arvasu is intended to be a counterpoint or a foil to orthodox intransigent upper caste characters like Parvasu and Yavakri. On the other hand, Nittilai as belonging to the hunter tribe is made to question the discourse of Brahminical power. Through the mythological settings of the play, Karnad takes us into the ancient world, the primordial soil of the *Mahabharata*: the deep forests where the hermits and the demons wandered, the gods and the demons fought, where the ordinary human beings lived happily with simple joys and sorrows related to ethical



consciousness” (Saha 226). In the end, Arvasu fires at the pavilion. Parvasu dedicates himself to the fire- sacrifice. Nittilai warns Arvasu that he should be stable. Nittilai’s brother and husband kill Nittilai and for this sacrifice Lord Indra blesses the drought- ridden place rain and saves humanity.

For Girish Karnad, cultural performances are not only meant to communicate meanings but also to have the possibilities to change society. Fire sacrifice is a cultural performance in many religions including Hinduism. Fire is considered a divine element that aids in creation, sustenance, and destruction of the universe. In Girish Karnad’s play *The Fire and the Rain*, the fire sacrifice is central to the story because apparently it is a way to please God Indra in order to bring rain to a land that has been drought- ridden for ten years but Karnad speaks about the fire sacrifice which is not merely a saintly or a God- pleasing act that is arranged and performed by the men belonging to the highest status in the social hierarchy of a particular region. Instead, he vindicates the absolute realization of a fire sacrifice when the fire burns out all crude aspects of humankind for regeneration and common good. Karnad knows that the revival of earth brings regeneration and the humans have all the capabilities to grow and be prosperous. Therefore, in this play, Karnad initiates an intimate tribe-nature relationship that stands face to face with the existing hegemonic culture.

Karnad’s main concern of sacrifice comes from Vedic culture where the performer has to shed his ego and offer whatever God has given to others without expecting any returns. He says that the actual sacrifice is of the evil qualities within the individual self that resembles animals in behavior. Karnad talks about humanity. He always supports to go green and breathe clean in all senses. Therefore, in this play, he introduces a tribal community who lives in the lap of nature and acknowledges the beauty and the benefits of mother-nature. Karnad creates his own tribal character, Nittilai who is an eco- feminist. She has her roots in nature and has rich qualities like love for humanity that she learns from nature. Nittilai’s proposal of bringing rain is devalued by Bharadwaja: “Such powers shouldn’t be used to solve day to day problems. They are meant to lead one to inner knowledge” (Karnad 117). Nittilai questions Yavakri’s attainment of universal knowledge that is supposed to utilize for mankind. She believes in mother-earth and questions: “My point is 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. Every morning, women with babes on their hips, shrunken children, shrivelled old men and women gather in front of my father’s house- for the gruel he distributes. No young people. They have all disappeared! 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?” (Karnad 117). Nature creates and gives birth to. Nittilai



knows that only nature can teach us a greater knowledge which is above this universe. Nitillai believes in the true solutions to the problems of drought than the ostensible fire- sacrifice of seven long years. She dares to ask a Brahmin sage Yavakri's choice of having universal knowledge from God, Indra instead of rains to help common people.

Girish Karnad is a post- colonial dramatist. He involves the merging of post- colonial ecocriticism and feminism into one analytical focus, because the recognition of the limitless utilization of nature and the marginalization of the subalterns is essentially associated with notions of class, caste, race, locality and other factors. In *The Fire and the Rain*, Girish Karnad talks about a tribal community of a particular drought- ridden region where they are indoctrinated as ghetto and subordinate to the people who belong to the high and powerful status of the broad hierarchical structure. However, Nitillai is not only a voice of a subjugated woman but she is a voice from a particular marginalized community of a locality who argues for adapting sustainable principles.

This Karnadian concept finds equivalence in a farming practice of North Eastern tribes of India and provides an example of extending Karnad's study. The Mizos are an ethnic group native to the state of Mizoram in Northeast India. They have their own agricultural practice of fire sacrifice that is performed to fertilize the soil and for natural vegetation and soil nutrients to produce food for people. This age-old agroecological practice of the local tribes of Northeast India is called Jhum Cultivation. Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations describes agroecology thus:

Agroecology is a holistic and integrated approach that simultaneously applies ecological and social concepts and principles to the design and management of sustainable agriculture and food systems. It seeks to optimize the interactions between plants, animals, humans and the environment while also addressing the need for socially equitable food systems within which people can exercise choice over what they eat and how and where it is produced. ('Agroecology')

This type of slash-and-burn farming has many benefits. It helps to restore soil fertility by recycling nutrients lost during agriculture. The ashes from burned vegetation act as a natural fertilizer. It is an organic farming method that provides nutrients to crops. Jhum cultivation is a sustainable method of farming that can help ensure food security. It also helps to preserve biological diversity and helps to sustain the local climate. However, this agroecological practice has been weakened in recent times because of the neo- colonial development that is oriented centrally and is far away from the



marginalized local histories, traditions and situations. Natural causes of forest fire are rare. Forest fires are usually related to human activities that can be managed by the local community support as Jhumming has been an entrenched practice for the Mizos, the community has evolved its methods around this tradition.

Karnad shows that when man worships nature he gains but when he breaks the rule of nature by crossing his limits of passion, he ruins himself. He knows that not only women suffer by the ecological crisis but also all the human and non- human of any region especially of the Third World country where nature and agriculture are of great importance. He addresses the hidden inter-connections among every form of domination, which means domination of caste, gender, or the most importantly domination of ecology. In the end of the play, Karnad makes sense to all the sacrifices and the earth gets rain to rejuvenate again.

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