A City Born of Welcome, Governed by Conditions: Hospitality and the Making of Strangers in Girish Karnad's Boiled Beans on Toast

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***Abstract*—Bangalore remembers its beginning as an act of kindness. A lost and hungry king is fed boiled beans by an old woman, and the place takes its name from that meal. Girish Karnad's Boiled Beans on Toast (2014) carries this legend in its title, yet the city it stages is a global metropolis of migrants, domestic workers, aspirants and anxious employers. Existing studies have read the play through urbanization, ecology, changing relationships and the lives of servants. They have rarely asked what kind of welcome the city now offers. Using Jacques Derrida's distinction between unconditional and conditional hospitality, Sara Ahmed's account of how strangers are made, and Saskia Sassen's idea of the global city, this paper offers a close reading of the play. It argues that Karnad turns Bangalore's founding gift into a critique of conditional belonging. The old woman's meal asked for nothing. The modern city admits strangers only so long as they serve, work or prove useful. Its domestic workers create hospitality for others, while their own welcome stays fragile. The major finding is that the metropolis has not abandoned hospitality. It has put a price on it.**

***Index Terms*—Girish Karnad; Boiled Beans on Toast; Hospitality; Strangerhood; Domestic Labour; Migration; Bangalore**

I. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Karnad's Bangalore

Most of Girish Karnad's major plays look backward. They borrow from epic, folk tale and history to question the present. Boiled Beans on Toast looks straight at the city he lived in. First written in Kannada as Benda Kaalu on Toast and published in English by Oxford University Press in 2014, the play follows a loose crowd of Bangaloreans. Anjana Padabidri is a well-off woman whose house runs on the labour of servants. Vimala and Muttu are two of the women who keep that house going (Das 45). Prabhakar, a young man from the Western Ghats, works in the software industry and hopes to rise (Kalra). Around them move families strained by ambition, money and distance. Like Wedding Album, the play belongs to the last phase of Karnad's career, when he turned from the past to the urban middle-class present. No single plot holds these lives together. The city does. The title deserves attention. It recalls the popular legend of Bangalore's naming, in which a lost king, faint with hunger, is fed boiled beans by an old woman in the forest. Grateful, he names the place after the meal. The publisher's description of the play reads this story as an emblem of welcome for a tired traveller ("Boiled Beans on Toast"). Karnad sets that emblem beside toast, the breakfast of a westernized, globalized middle class. The joke is light. The question beneath it is not.

1.2 Research Problem

A city founded on the feeding of a stranger is now full of strangers. Migrants arrive for work. Women from distant towns and crowded settlements cook and clean in houses that are not theirs. Young professionals rent rooms and wait for promotions. Each of them enters Bangalore. Few of them are welcomed without conditions. This study therefore asks how Karnad transforms Bangalore's founding myth of hospitality into a critique of conditional belonging in the contemporary metropolis. It argues that the play measures the modern city against its own legend and

finds a quiet reversal. The old woman's gift asked for nothing in return. The modern city receives strangers on terms. They may stay as long as they serve, work, consume or contribute. Bangalore thus emerges as a paradoxical host. It needs strangers, and it keeps producing them as outsiders.

1.3 Objectives

This study has four aims. First, it reads the founding legend as an ethical promise that the play calls up. Second, it examines how domestic service turns hospitality into paid and supervised labour. Third, it studies how migrants and workers are made into strangers within the city. Fourth, it proposes conditional belonging as a frame for reading Karnad's late urban drama.

1.4 Research Questions

This study is guided by the following four questions:

1. What ethical idea does the legend of the boiled beans bring into the play?
2. How does domestic service change the meaning of hospitality?
3. How does the city turn its migrants and workers into strangers?
4. What kind of belonging does the modern metropolis offer?

The paper moves in five steps. A review of criticism is followed by a brief theoretical framework. Three analytical chapters then move from the legend, to the household, to the city. A conclusion returns to the old woman and her meal.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Criticism on Boiled Beans on Toast is still young, but it has already mapped several routes into the play. Most studies agree that the city is the true centre of the work. They differ on what the city does to its people. Rather than summarizing the criticism source by source, this review groups it into three debates.

2.1 Urbanization and Its Costs

The largest group of readings treats the play as a study of urban growth. Bharatsingh Rao finds in it Karnad's concern with unchecked urbanization in cities like Bangalore, a growth achieved at the cost of ecology and one that widens the gap between rich and poor. Yathish Kumar and Avinash read the play's episodic form as a portrait of the urban middle class, in which career-driven lives loosen family bonds and spread alienation across classes. Both readings are persuasive. Both, however, treat the city mainly as a pressure that acts upon people.

2.2 Relationships and Needs

A second group turns to human relationships. K. Meghana asks whether the play's changing patterns of love, marriage and family loyalty signal decline or simply the natural evolution of a society. M. Maria Clastin Dias and C. Bibin Sam apply Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs to the characters. They trace the servants' struggle for food and shelter and the employers' hunger for affection and esteem. These studies take inner life seriously. They do not ask how the city decides who belongs.

2.3 Domestic Labour and Subaltern Lives

The study closest to the present paper is Jolly Das's reading of servants in Karnad's Wedding Album and Boiled Beans on Toast. Das shows that the women who work in these homes are essential to their employers and yet treated with distrust (42). She notes that the servants keep their own internal hierarchy and politics (45), and she reads the title as indigenous culture placed upon an imported way of life (45). She also observes that the uniform English of the published text hides the many languages that divide the city's classes (49). Das gives the servants a voice. She does not, however, read their position through the idea of welcome. Across these debates, one question remains open. Critics have examined the social costs of urban growth and the hard lives of the city's marginal residents. Little attention has been paid to the ethical structure of welcome itself: who is received, on what terms, and what service is demanded in exchange for belonging. The play's own title points to this question. This paper takes it up.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 Derrida and Conditional Hospitality

The main lens of this study is Jacques Derrida's Of Hospitality. Derrida separates two ideas that usually share one word. Absolute, or unconditional, hospitality opens the home to the unknown other without asking for a name, a contract or anything in return (25). It says yes to whoever arrives, before any

identification (77). Conditional hospitality is the hospitality of laws, rights and duties. It assumes that the host is master of the house and sets the terms of entry (55). The two forms need each other, yet they never fully agree, and every real act of welcome has to negotiate between them (79, 135).

For this paper, the distinction is simple. The legend of the boiled beans stands close to the first kind. The old woman feeds a stranger she does not know and asks for nothing. Modern Bangalore practises the second kind. It opens its doors, but on conditions.

3.2 Ahmed and the Making of the Stranger

Sara Ahmed's Strange Encounters adds a second insight. For Ahmed, the alien or stranger is not simply someone we have failed to identify. Such a figure has already been identified, in the very act of being named as alien (2). To treat the stranger as a figure with a life of its own is to cut it off from the histories that produced it (5). This helps explain the play's servants and migrants. The city does not fail to recognize them. It recognizes them too quickly, as a type: the maid, the migrant, the single woman, the boy from the village.

3.3 Sassen and the Global City

Saskia Sassen's work on the global city provides the context. Cities that join the global economy concentrate high-income professionals, and these professionals depend on a large, low-paid service workforce (Global City). Sassen notes that this workforce, from cleaners to nannies and domestic workers, is drawn heavily from migrant women and minorities. It is essential to the corporate economy, yet it stays invisible within it ("Other Workers"). Bangalore's rise as a centre of the information technology industry fits this pattern closely.

Together, these thinkers allow a working definition. In this paper, conditional belonging means a place in the city that depends on usefulness, social conformity and class position rather than on presence alone. It can be granted, narrowed or withdrawn. Boiled Beans on Toast, as the following chapters show, is a study of such belonging.

IV. THE GIFT THAT FOUNDED A CITY: BANGALORE'S MYTH OF HOSPITALITY

Every city tells a story about itself. Bangalore's story begins with hunger. In the legend, a king loses his way in a forest. He is tired, far from his court and without food. An old woman takes him in and gives him what she has, a simple meal of boiled beans. The king survives. Out of gratitude, he names the place after her food. The roles in this story are worth noticing. The king is the stranger. He is lost, hungry and dependent on someone else. The old woman is the host. She is local, poor and domestic, and she owns almost nothing. For a moment, power runs the other way. The powerful man needs the powerless woman, and she does not bargain. She asks for no payment, no proof of identity, no promise of service. She does not even need to know that he is a king. In Derrida's terms, her act comes close to unconditional hospitality, a welcome offered before any question of who the guest is or what he can give (25, 77).

Origin stories are never only about the past. A city repeats its legend every time it says its own name, and in doing so it reminds itself of what it hopes to be. The gender of the host matters as well. The legend gives the role of host to a woman, and Karnad's Bangalore is still kept running by women. What has changed is their standing. The woman at the stove is no longer the one who decides who is fed. This is why the legend matters to the play. It is not a piece of local colour. It is an ethical promise, carried in the city's very name. Bangalore, in this story, is the city that feeds the stranger. Karnad's title holds that promise up for inspection. As Das notes, the pairing of benda kaalu with toast places an indigenous inheritance beside an imported way of life (45). The title also asks a sharper question. What happens to the old woman's meal when it is served on a foreign plate, in a city now organized around markets?

The play gives an early answer. When Muttu's brother Shankara answers back after Vimala scolds him over some unfinished ironing, Vimala turns to Muttu: "Is that your brother? I should ask him to learn a little civility. This isn't your backwoods, you know. This is Bengaluru. We can do with less rudeness here" (Karnad 9). The line is small and comic. It is also a reversal of the legend. Here the city speaks as a host with rules. Entry now requires manners, and the young man from the backwoods must learn them before he is tolerated. The irony deepens when we notice who is speaking. Vimala is not a rich householder. She is a servant herself, a woman whose own place in the city will soon prove uncertain. Yet she has learned the city's terms so well that she enforces them on someone

newer. Her choice of word matters too. She says Bengaluru, the Kannada name that still carries the memory of the beans. The name of welcome has become a password. In the legend, a poor woman fed a lost man. In the play, a poor woman guards the door. The founding promise has not vanished. It has changed hands, and it has changed its rules. From this point on, the play measures modern Bangalore against the old woman's meal, and the distance between the two becomes its real subject.

V. FROM GIFT TO SERVICE: THE COMMODIFICATION OF HOSPITALITY

The old woman offered hospitality. The women of Karnad's Bangalore provide it for a living.

5.1 The Work of Welcome

In Anjana Padabidri's house, comfort rests on the labour of servants. Vimala holds authority over the other workers, and Muttu works beneath her (Das 45–46). Between them, they keep the house running. When Anjana receives friends and visitors, it is their work that makes her home hospitable. Yet they are neither guests in that home nor its hosts. They stand between the two roles, producing welcome for others while receiving very little of it themselves.

The house also reveals how unevenly knowledge flows. Employers know their servants' work in close detail. They know how a shirt should be ironed and when the floors were last washed. They know far less about the servants' own lives. Vimala gave Anjana one address years ago; she later names another, in a slum on the city's edge (Das 46). Anjana knows how Vimala keeps her house. She does not know where Vimala sleeps. Sassen's account of the global city explains why such women are needed. A city of high earners requires a large class of low-paid workers to cook, clean and care ("Other Workers"). Bangalore's new wealth depends on them. The play makes this dependence visible inside a single house.

5.2 Trust on Terms

Need, however, is not the same as welcome. Derrida reminds us that conditional hospitality begins with the host's mastery over the house (55). The employer decides who enters, how long they stay and under what rules. The servant is a guest who must work for her place. That place is always conditional, and the play shows how quickly the conditions can change. Vimala has worked for Anjana for eight years, and Anjana believes she knows her. Then a woman named Saroja Kunigal accuses Vimala of stealing her mother's gold chain (Das 46). At the police station, years of service count for little. Trust turns into suspicion almost overnight. Vimala's reply goes to the heart of the matter: "You ladies who're educated, you can only think of dirty things the moment you see a single woman" (Karnad 39). She does more than plead innocence. She names the condition under which she is being judged. A woman who lives alone, who works in other people's homes and who has no husband to vouch for her is already suspect. Her account of herself must work twice as hard to be believed.

The point is not that Vimala is innocent. Karnad refuses to make his servants simple victims, and Das rightly notes that the play shows their lies, their slyness and their opportunism (48). Vimala's name, religion and address shift from one telling to the next (46–47). But the play also lets us see where such habits come from. Those who are welcomed only on conditions learn to manage the conditions. Concealment becomes a way to survive.

5.3 Rising by Usefulness

Muttu's story shows the other side of the same economy. When the household's cook becomes unavailable, Muttu offers to step in, if Anjana will accept food cooked by a Mudaliar woman. In the same move, she quietly undercuts the absent Vimala (Das 48). Anjana, a modern employer without caste inhibitions, agrees. Over time, Muttu takes full charge of the housekeeping (48–49).

The caste condition in Muttu's offer is worth pausing over. In many Indian homes, the kitchen has long been guarded by rules about who may cook and who may be fed. The legend never mentions the old woman's caste, and the king never asks. Muttu, by contrast, must raise the question herself before she can serve.

This looks like progress, and in part it is. The modern city has loosened some old barriers. Yet the terms of Muttu's rise are telling. She advances by being useful, and partly by displacing another worker. Her welcome grows as her service grows. Hospitality has become a ladder, and the servants compete for its rungs. Anjana is not cruel. She volunteers at a hospice (Kalra), and the play does not mock her kindness. That is exactly what makes the pattern so hard to see. Nobody in the

house refuses hospitality. It is rationed, measured and earned. The modern city has not abolished hospitality. It has commodified it. The servant creates welcome for others, yet she rarely receives the security that being welcomed should bring. The old woman's meal was a gift. In Anjana's house, every meal has a wage behind it and a condition attached.

VI. THE STRANGER WITHIN: CONDITIONAL BELONGING IN THE METROPOLIS

From the household, the play widens to the city. Here the line between inside and outside becomes harder to draw. Vimala is inside the affluent house every day. Socially, she remains outside it. When the police take up her case, the constable sees no point in arresting her, and his reason is revealing: "Bengaluru's bursting with women like her. Where they live, how they live, how they move around it's all a mystery. Impossible to pin them down. Like scorpions, you know. They only have to see a slab of stone and they'll crawl under it and set up a house" (Karnad 44). Ahmed's argument helps us read this moment. The constable does not fail to know Vimala. He knows her already, as a type, one of many women the city has learned to recognize and dismiss (Ahmed 2).

The image of the scorpion completes the work. It turns poverty into instinct. Such women hide, the constable implies, because hiding is their nature, not because the city gives them nowhere secure to live. The irony is bitter. Vimala spends her days keeping a comfortable house for others. In the constable's eyes, she can only set up house under a stone. This is how strangers are made. They are not unknown. They are known too quickly, and that knowledge cuts them off from the history that shaped them (Ahmed 5). Read in this light, Vimala's shifting names and addresses are not proof of a deceitful nature. They are the marks of a life lived without secure belonging (Das 46–47).

The pattern reaches beyond Vimala. Muttu's family came to Bangalore from Tamil Nadu (Das 49). Muttu has found a place in Anjana's house, but her brother Shankara drifts to the city's margins. He drives an auto-rickshaw, hides his whereabouts from his family and lands in hospital after a fight (49). His work says much about his position. An auto-rickshaw driver crosses the whole city every day, carrying others to their homes and offices. He knows its roads better than most residents. Yet he belongs to none of the places he reaches. When their mother worries, Muttu calls him a brute and makes little effort to find him (Karnad 75). The city has made Shankara a stranger even to his own people. Belonging, in this family, has been divided by usefulness. The sister who serves is kept. The brother who does not fit is let go.

Middle-class migrants are not exempt. Prabhakar enters Anjana's world as an awkward outsider (Kalra). When he gives up a permanent job, his wife's anxiety shows how much their place in the city rests on it (Dias and Sam). His welcome is softer than Vimala's, but it follows the same logic. He belongs as long as he performs. Taken together, these figures suggest what may be called conditional urban citizenship. The phrase is not meant in a legal sense. It names a belonging that depends on economic usefulness, social conformity and class position. Nobody in the play is simply inside or outside the city. Each person's place can widen or shrink. Bangalore, in Karnad's hands, becomes a host that keeps producing strangers within its own walls. Even the form of the play refuses closure. A reviewer of Lillete Dubey's production observed that its many conflicts are left unresolved (Kalra). That openness suits the subject. Conditional belonging is never settled once and for all. It is renegotiated every morning, at every door.

VII. CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that Boiled Beans on Toast turns Bangalore's founding myth into a critique of conditional belonging. The legend imagines a city born from an unconditional gift: a poor woman feeds a lost stranger and asks for nothing. Karnad's modern Bangalore reverses that order. It needs strangers to cook, clean, drive and write code, but it admits them only on terms. Its servants create hospitality for others while their own welcome remains fragile. Its migrants are recognized at once, and recognized as outsiders.

This reading adds to existing criticism in two ways. First, it moves the discussion from urban alienation to the ethics of welcome. Earlier studies have shown what the city costs its people. This study asks what the city offers them, and on what conditions. Second, it shows how Derrida's distinction between unconditional and conditional hospitality can open up Indian urban drama, where the home, the servant and the migrant meet every day. The play does not ask for a return to a lost village innocence. The legend is a

legend, and Karnad treats it with gentle irony. Its value lies elsewhere. It offers the city a measure, a memory against which the present can be judged.

The old woman welcomed the lost king because he was human before he was useful. Contemporary Bangalore has learned to reverse that order. Karnad's title keeps the memory of the gift alive, if only to show how far the city has travelled from it. The tragedy of the modern metropolis is not that it has forgotten how to welcome strangers. It is that it has learned to welcome them selectively.

VIII. SCOPE FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Several paths open from this study. A comparative reading of Boiled Beans on Toast and Wedding Album could examine domestic service as a recurring structure in Karnad's late drama, extending the dialogue that Das has begun. The play's stage history also deserves attention, especially the way productions such as Lillete Dubey's English staging represent the speech, class and region of servants (Kalra). A study of the Kannada text could recover the linguistic divisions that the English version smooths over, since Karnad imagined his characters speaking Konkani, Kannada and Tamil (Das 49). Finally, the frame of conditional hospitality could be extended to other literary portraits of India's globalizing cities.

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