

THE THEME OF SIN AND SACRIFICE IN *BALI* : *THE SACRIFICE*

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Karnad is a brilliant playwright who can sweep you along with his words and his imagination. [Bali] is the kind of play that thrives on layers of subtleties that make you want to sit down and sort out the zillions of thoughts it stirs up a powerful play that stays with you along after you have finished the last line.

- *The Hindu*

ABSTRACT

*Karnad has penned his plays in Kannada translated them into English. His play **Bali: The Sacrifice** (2004) is English translation of his play **Hittina Hunja** (1980). The play is based on the myth of 'Cock of Dough', which he came to know during his teenage. It deals with the theme of violence versus non-violence and Brahminism versus Jainism. The play is considered as a tribute to Mahatama Gandhi, the father of our Indian nation. The act of sacrificing animals and birds is an age-old tradition in Brahminism. They offer animals and birds to please and propitiate gods and goddesses. Buddhism and Jainism condemn violence in any form. The playwright takes up the issue of non-violence in a unique but controversial way.*

KEYWORDS: *Brahminism, Jainism, Sacrifice, Non-violence, Cock of Dough*

Karnad's concern is with the life of the modern man that is very complex and lacks in wholeness. The employment of the old tales is to focus on the absurdity of modern life with all its elemental passions and conflicts. In this way the folk-tales become vehicles for the modern living under the impact of western ideologies and systems of knowledge viewing



human behaviour from different angles. Every play of Karnad is the story of a new problem of the modern man. Conflict is an ingredient of all dramas but Karnad is more prone to it. In each play the dramatic plot shows a tussle between two forces reflecting the playwright's complex thinking. *Bali: The Sacrifice* does not portray the multiple aspects of life as *Yayati* and *Hayavadana* have done earlier.

The play externalises the internal quest of human being. In the play Karnad explores and defines man-woman relationship in clearer terms. The play has taken its plot from a seventeenth century Jain work *Yashodhara Charitra*. The play is an English translation of Karnad's play *Hittina Hunja* written in 1980. Like his first and last plays—*Yayati* and *The Fire and the Rain*, the present play is based on a thirteenth century Kannada epic named *Yashodhara Charitra* written by Jnana. It, in turn, refers to a ninth century Sanskrit epic, *Yashastilaka*, by Somadeva Suri through an eleventh century Sanskrit epic by Vadi Raja. *Bali: The Sacrifice* projects many divergent ideological stances without attempting to privilege any one over the others, making the dramatist (and, by extension, the characters, too) masters of negotiation. This makes the play acquire myriad levels of meaning: holding confrontation in abeyance and giving scope to the possibilities of viewing the play from many different perspectives. The play has strong ideological overtones. The play is based on an ancient Kannada epic recreated from an earlier Sanskrit epic. The play subsumes one dominant ideology- that of non violence. The curtain rises with the queen's song:

*As the world is divided
Into two orbs:
One lit up by the sun
the other hid in the shade,
so also the human soul,
the habitation of gods,
is split into two realms—
one of the spirits that adore
the blood and gore
of the bright, shining blade
slicing smoothly
through the lamb*

*and the other
ruled by the spirits that bid
you pause
before you use
the knife on a sapling
or clap in the air—
lest you harm a life.*

(p.73)

The song goes on to describe the two sections of the human soul, one driven by violence and the other shunning it. The dilemma between the urging of the two halves of the human soul is what the play dramatises. Karnad has dramatised the story part of the myth with niggling alterations. There are four principal characters in the play: The King, The Queen, The Mahout and The Queen Mother. The King and Queen are married for fifteen years but remain childless. The royal couple are under tremendous psychological pressure for an heir to fulfil their obligation to the kingdom. The Queen Amritamati, in the sanctum of a ruined temple, opens herself in the arms of an ugly Mahout and calls shame upon her. The headless idol is the witness to their lovemaking, but the Queen refuses to have committed adultery. She is neither ashamed nor does she regret what happened. In the night the Queen is unaware of his presence inside the temple when the mahout deliberately produces the sounds of lovemaking to send away all unwelcome strangers. In a dream reality, the king narrates his spatial suffering as if in the self of a common man and narrates his mind before the Queen:

At midnight, he started singing in the distance. I felt you wake up. I felt you slide out of my bed. You got up. Left. I opened my eyes, saw you press yourself against the window and listen. And then, slip away. I followed. Through the biting chill and you didn't even have a shawl on... You went out of the royal garden... into the street. You entered this ruined temple. The singing stopped. Those noises began. Those horrible, animal noises of copulation. I couldn't... breathe.
(pp.101-102)

The king follow the Queen into the garden and then into the temple. But what he watches in morbid interest is a sordid sight. He discovers to his surprise that there is sin in the holy place. It is seen in Mahout's words:

*Yes, yes, pant. Heavy breathing. You and me—(He pants heavily.)
Let them think something's going on...that we're making love here. You see
what I mean? Sin in the inner sanctum. They'll slap themselves on their cheeks,
say what's the world coming to, curses and go away. Come on... pant... heavy...
(p.85)*

The play deals with the necessity and virtuosity of adultery and sacrifice. It raises questions on ethical, spiritual and philosophical hypotheses. In the play man-woman relationship is examined in various forms of relation. B.V.Karant's words deserve mention here:

*In this play man-woman relationship is of great importance. Man-woman
relation as mother and son, as husband and wife, but above all as a man and a
woman.¹*

The play explores the multiplicity of human relationship while the Queen Amritamati wants to remain loyal to her husband, she does not want to miss the body of the Mahout. The physical aspect of the relationship has been emphasised to the level of extremity and it is made illegal since it is extramarital. Karnad seems to question the age long social institution of marriage. In this play marriage has been devoid of any social validity and spiritual obligation. Karnad seems to focus on the point that marriage is an institution founded on the convenience of the people. The King is pained to see his Queen in love with an ugly Mahout-an elephant keeper. Slowly the act of Queen's adultery with the Mahout, in a deserted temple is revealed. There is a flash back technique that re-enacts incidents from the childhood of the King and the Queen and explores the definition of the sin from many perspectives. The audience learns how the song of the Mahout has lured the queen out of her bed and has brought her to the singer in the deserted temple. She admits being seduced by the music even before submitting to a physical liaison with the man. The Queen explains:

*I was sleeping by your side. His singing woke me up. The song was so—don't
know how to describe it. But suddenly the notes caressed me, enveloped me.
They carried me away. For a brief moment, nothing mattered. The palace. Me.
You. Only the song. I felt like a flame burning bright. Pure. When I came to my
senses, I was here. By his side. That's all there is to it. It just happened.
(p.119)*

The Mahout is ugly and crude. It does not seem to bother the Queen. His song mesmerises her into the temple of the absent deity. The Queen feels that the experience is beautiful. The Queen is not aware of the presence of her husband, the King. The King has followed her. He sat in a shocked stupor on the steps of the temple. The Mahout and the queen are in the inner sanctum and are not aware of the King's presence. The King says:

*So we begin our tale—
And in any tale
The King and the Queen
Sitting on the throne
Should merge into one
--she on his lap
Become half his royal frame
or entwined in bed, tangled together
they must turn
into a four-armed deity
thrashing and moaning
for the good of the land.
But
Woe betide the times
Where the king sits alone
Outside on the steps
Racked by sighs
While the queen is trapped
In her lover's thighs.
(p.74)*

The Mahout produces the sounds of lovemaking to send away all the unwelcome strangers. Unable to bear it anymore, the king runs to the garden and is discovered there by his mother who has just completed the worship of her goddess. The King answers his mother's persistent questioning about his distraught state. Their conversation goes on like this:

MOTHER: Don't try to fool me. I know you. The moment I saw you from there, I knew.

Even

in the dark. There's something wrong, isn't there? Very wrong.

*KING: What do you want me to say? I told you there's nothing wrong. I felt like a walk
in the open—*

MOTHER: Give me your hand.

(She takes his hand and places it on her own head.)

*If you don't tell me what's on your mind, let my skull splinter into a thousand
shards.*

KING: Mother, why are you hounding me? Why don't you leave me alone?

*MOTHER: You are telling lies. You are trying to hide something from your own
mother. Must be something really serious.*

(Pause. Fiercely.)

Tell me. Tell me. I can't help you unless you tell me.

KING: Around midnight, I had a dream. It woke me up.

MOTHER: Yes? What was it?

*KING: In the dream... (Pause.) I saw that the royal swan in our garden had got caught
in mud and was flapping its wings.*

MOTHER: It was asking for help.

KING: I don't know. I suppose so...

MOTHER: It was caught in mud. Trapped. And crying out for help?

KING: Yes.

MOTHER: Then?

KING: Nothing. I woke up. Felt wide awake. So I came out for a walk.

MOTHER: And you came to check if the swans were all right?

KING: No. Not really. I don't know. Perhaps yes. It was a vivid dream. I felt real.

(Laughs.)

Anyway the swans are there, safe, fast, asleep. That's all. Are you happy now?

MOTHER: No, I am not.

KING: I've told you the truth.

MOTHER: I know. And I'm glad you told me. It's a bad dream.

KING: Now, Mother...

MOTHER: It doesn't augur well.

KING: Don't start on that, Mother.

MOTHER: Dreams speak to us. They come to warn us.

KING: Now you know why I was reluctant to tell you about it.

MOTHER: Dreams have spoken to me. And whenever I ignored them, I suffered. Like when I lost your father. I was warned. You know that. I still blame myself. A dream like this is like an epidemic. The longer you ignore it, the more it spreads. Eats into more of the family and the populace. It's fortunate I came to know right now.

(He makes a dismissive gesture.)

You go back to your bed. Or wander around the garden. But then take this shawl. Leave the dream to me.

(pp.103-104)

The King, at last confesses the truth to his mother. The ruthless scrutiny about her inability to bear a child may have pushed the Queen Amritamati to a breaking point. Her discontent and disharmony lurk beneath the surface of their conjugal bliss and the thin layer of make-believe harmony and affection is vulnerable to pressure. The King embraces Jainism to please his wife. The Queen abhors the violence of the Kshatriyas. The infidelity of his wife, Amritamati seems a matter of shame since it raises the questions about his virility. His mother spits at him in anger:

KING: Calm down, Mother. Please—

MOTHER: What kind of a man are you? You have lost your manhood. You, you impotent...

(Spits in his face. He reels back. But that action suddenly calms her. She suddenly realizes what she has done. Quickly moves forward and wipes his face.)

Forgive me. Forgive me.

(They look at each other. Their deep fondness for each other is clear in that look.)

I am becoming decrepit—and still I haven't learnt to control my temper.

(He smiles.)

All right. You won't shed blood. Then throw her out. Get yourself another wife.

(He does not respond. Incredulous)

Surely you are not going to... forgive her? Continue as though nothing has happened?

KING: I don't know what to do.

MOTHER: You love her. But such love is meant for harlots. She has drowned our family in sin. She has called out to demonic forces.

KING: Mother, please. Please, help me.

MOTHER (gentle): Do you think I like tormenting you— my only child, the light of my life?

KING: Help me. Please.

(Pause.)

I am lost--

(p.108)

Amritamati feels fuller, richer and warmer. She is not ashamed of her guilt as it was not planned by her and it was just a passion. She likes no tongues wagging against her in the palace and in the kingdom, and by becoming pregnant she desires to see the entire kingdom rejoice with the news with festivities and celebrations. She knows that she is in despair for motherhood. The king realizes the queen's desire for motherhood at the cost of her royal honour and the personal ethics in an attempt just to save her from public humiliation. The queen bribes the mahout with her jewellery and persuades him to leave the place which he refuses. In anger and anguish the king threatens him to establish his own right of authority. But the mahout, the subaltern, speaks challenging the king's patronage and his pomp and power in social life:

People mock at mahouts. Call us 'low-born'. But where would all your princes and kings be without us, I want to know. What would happen to their elephants? No elephants. No army. No pomp and splendour. No processions. No kings!
Ha!

(p.80)

The mahout reminds them about his elemental contribution to the royal glory. In Karnad's biblical motif the Queen is projected with her renouncing of royal inhibitions when she surrenders to the mahout in a sensual obsession. She is torn between her royal virtuosity and moral perfidy. She is sophisticated, yet primitive in her passion and instinct. She loves her royal identity, but struggles to dispel its vain glory embedded in superstition that encompasses

orthodox practices and beliefs. She knows that she is appreciated misleadingly in public life but insulted in private life for her miscarriage. To avoid the probable catastrophe, the Mother Queen suggests offering sacrifice, to which he has agreed. But his Jain wife, to whose faith he has become a convert, objects and reminds him of the Jain tenet of non-violence. The king finds himself oscillating, like every husband is destined to, between his mother and the wife. After a long heated argument, the Mother Queen finds a solution—to sacrifice a cock of dough instead of a live one. But to that proposition also, the queen is deadly opposed and refuses to take part in it. Out of his love for his queen, the king adopts Jainism and its principle of non-violence. The queen mother accuses him of betraying his religion for the love of a woman. Neither is it easy for him to forget his Kshatriya antecedents and in spite of his avowals of non-violence, the culture of Kshatriya practices remains submerged in his subconscious. Karnad is of the opinion that the play is a tribute to Mahatma who observed non-violence throughout his life. Karnad says:

It is tribute to the astuteness and sensitivity of Mahatma Gandhi that he saw so clearly the importance of non-violence to the cultural and political survival of India. Violence has been the central topic of debate in the history of Indian civilization. Vedic fire sacrifices, conducted by Brahmin priests, involved the slaughter of animals as offerings to the gods, which the Jains found repugnant. To the Jain, indulging in any kind of violence, however minor or accidental, meant forfeiting one's moral status as a human being. Later, the Buddhists too joined the debate, arguing for non-violence, but from their own philosophical standpoint.

The dialectic found some resolution when the Brahmins renounced blood sacrifice. Miniature figurines, made of dough, were substituted for live animals, a practice that continues to this day. Still, the Jains argued that this was no solution. Although no animals were slaughtered and no meat consumed, these figures of dough, mimicking the forms of real animals, clearly carried the original violent impulse within them. And why dough rather than say, mud or chalk? Because an offering makes sense only if it is meant as food for gods and is, therefore, cooked and consumed by the devotees. Thus the priests had merely replaced actual violence with violence in intention, which, said the Jains, was no

less dehumanizing. This argument gave the debate a much more complex ethical twist. The Jain position raises the question: if intended violence condemns one as surely as actual violence, that is, if one is morally responsible for merely intending to commit an act one has not actually carried out in real life, is one not shutting oneself up in a solipsistic world, a bleak, guilt-ridden existence with no hope of absolution? ²

The practice of offering animal sacrifice to the gods is repugnant. This idea is presented through the conflict between the Brahminical order, represented by the Queen Mother and the Jain principle of non-violence, represented by the queen. The practice of the continuance of offering miniature figurines which are made of dough which were treated as substitution for live animals is also obnoxious and must be relinquished. It shows that the actual violence has been replaced by violence in intention. In the play the Queen Mother is traditional and orthodox. She believes in superstitious rites and rituals. She is irrational and thrusts her unreasonable wishes on other members of the family. Her daughter-in-law, Amritamati represents the voice of sanity and rationality. The king married Amritamati, a Jain, against the wishes of the Queen Mother who despises her daughter-in-law considering her defiant and rebel against time honoured family traditions. She often rebukes her son for marrying a Jain. Amritamati detests her mother-in-law's celebration of the news of her pregnancy. She does not reconcile to the idea of offering sacrifice of animals and birds to god. She boldly resists the idea and damns it as irrational. She admonishes her husband, the King. The conversation of the queen and the king deserves mention:

(He turns and looks at the Queen. Trying to make it all sound normal, he holds the sword over the cock.)

All you have to do is place your right hand on the back of my fist. Like this.

(Demonstrates by placing his left hand on the back of his right.)

And I'll push the blade into this lump of dough. We will, together. That's all. That'll be the end of it.

QUEEN: This is a temple! You want to violate it?

KING: But it's only dough. There's no violence in it.

QUEEN: But... but... this sword. This plunging in of the blade. The act... its violence.

KING: There's no bloodshed.

QUEEN: Then why are you doing it? Why? Blood at least makes you sense if you believe in

bloodthirsty gods. But this... you can't knowingly fool yourself.

KING: It's a small thing. A symbolic gesture...

(The Queen looks at the King, almost with compassion. He stares at her numbly.)

QUEEN: You have taken this on to save me, haven't you? To ensure that your mother doesn't contaminate me with her violence?

(Pause.)

You are a good man. I have always known that.

(Pause.)

Perhaps, I don't deserve you.

KING (softly): I want you back. I can't live without you.

QUEEN: Nor can I. (p.111)

The King finds himself oscillating between these poles. But he feels like offering sacrifice, though he does not have rational explanation for it. He appears to be under the immense pressure of his wife. He persuades his mother from celebrating the news of the queen's being pregnant. The queen makes him act on her dictates. The king is unable to punish her for her adultery and her lover, the mahout. In order to avoid the disaster invited by the infidelity of the queen, the mother suggests sacrificing a cock of dough. It is to be done by the King and the Queen to gather but the later refuses to participate in the ritual. Even though he tries to convince her by sacrificing that it does not involve bloodshed, she strongly opposes it and has her objections. Finally she agrees to partake of the act of sacrifice but the very dough-cock appears to her as a live cock crowing, which is her hallucination, externalization of her inner fear, her obsession with feelings associated with non-violence. At the end of the play she seems to have accepted both the sin of adultery and the meaning of sacrifice. She dies falling on the same knife brought for sacrificing the dough-cock. Finally she becomes the real sacrifice.

Aparna Dharwadker says:

*Karnad has shown us how the matter of the myth and legend resonates in modern experience... and how the past history of the nation prefigures its present.*³

At the end of the play, the queen goes mad. She kneels in front of the cock made of dough and picks a palm full of grains from the tray and holds it cup for that dough-cock. She says:

Here. Have some. Come on. Eat. Cluck... Cluck...

KING: Stop it! Stop it!

QUEEN: Come on, please, eat. Have some.

KING (screams): Amritamati!

QUEEN: Cluck... Cluck...Have some.

KING: Have you gone mad? It isn't alive! Its dough—

QUEEN (ignoring him): Come, Cockoo... Have shum...

KING: I said stop it—Look!

(He picks up the dough and squashes it into a mass.)

It's dough. Plain and simple! Dough.

(The Queen looks up at him in sudden hatred, picks up the sword and lunges at him to stab him. She freezes. She stares at the sword in her hand, horrified.

A cock crows outside. That takes the King by surprise. He turns to the door.

Suddenly, she presses the point of blade on her womb and impales herself on the sword.

Collapses into his arms.

The king holds her, uncomprehending, listening to the cock's crowing. It's dawn.

The queen is lit by a beam. She stands up and they both sing.)

(p.124)

Bali: The Sacrifice is a voice of reason against the irrational rites and rituals. It depicts the ideological conflict between Brahminism, which observed animal sacrifice to propitiate gods, and Jainism which opposed it. The characters, who represent these two diametrically opposed ideologies, express this conflict. Karnad came across the myth of the cock of dough when he was in his teens. The playwright has given contemporary contextual direction and new dimension to myths, folklore, legends and history. Karnad's plays are rich with potentials for performance. Outside India, Karnad and his plays represent the canvas for Indian heritage available in the form of history, myth and folklore. In other words, his plays are embassies of Indian culture. P. Dhanavel appreciates this aspect of his writing and praises him:



Karnad is the first Indian dramatist to reflect really typical Indian characteristic in his plays, as he has consciously resisted the influence of the western theatre, which fails to take cognizance of the Indian milieu in its entirety.⁴

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