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## ***BALI: THE SACRIFICE: UNDERSTANDING THE NATURE OF VIOLENCE***

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The first version of Bali: The Sacrifice was published in Kannada under the title– Hittina Hunja in 1980 and was performed in both Kannada and Hindi. However, Karnad rendered the play in English, when he was commissioned by the Leicester Haymarket Theatre, England to write for them. This English version was performed at the theatre in 2002 and was published in 2004 along with The Dreams of Tipu Sultan by the OUP.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

The plot of this play is taken from the thirteenth century Kannada epic *Yashodhara Charite* by Janna which in turn refers back to the ninth century Sanskrit epic *Yashastilaka* by Somadeva Suri. The story of the play revolves round the Jain myth of the cock of dough. The play is strewn with religious tensions and discussions on the dynamics of psycho-sexuality. Karnad, very artistically, juxtaposes the sexual issue with the psycho-religious tensions born of violence. The King, in the play, is a follower of the *Shakti*-cult which permits animal sacrifice. When the Hindu Kshatriya King falls in love with a Jain girl, he converts himself to Jainism which prohibits violence of any kind. But the King is devastated to discover that his queen is involved with the Mahout, an elephant-keeper of his palace. In order to avert the evil consequences of her infidelity, the King's mother asks him to sacrifice a hundred sheep. But he is a Jain by conversion, and non-violence is the basic tenet of the Jain-faith. Finally, as a compromise, it is decided to substitute a cock made of dough. The King compels his wife to join him in the symbolic sacrifice and also forces her to satisfy him in the temple in the presence of the Mahout. It is an act of downright violence against his wife's mind and body. Expressing her views on the thematic issues of the play and the intrinsic tendency of the King, Aparna Dharwadkar rightly observes: "The central 'problem'

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in the play is, thus, not the queen's adultery but the deep spiritual rift between...Jainism– and the traditional Kshatriya ethos of her husband's family..." (Dharwadkar xxxv)

In *Bali: The Sacrifice*, along with the major issue of violence versus non-violence, Karnad has dwelt upon several problems of love, sex, morality, superstition, etc. prevalent in the contemporary society. All the characters in the play are used as symbols and they represent their own points of view. S. Subhas Chandran rightly remarks: "Karnad introduces a discourse on 'violence' to unsettle the moral complacency of societal orthodoxies by dramatizing the case of a queen's adultery and the subsequent chain of reactions." (Chandran 294)

The play has a very simple plot. It consists of just three actions: Queen's adultery with the Mahout, Queen Mother's demand to perform the ritual of sacrifice and the Queen's sacrifice for the principles of her Jain religion.

The play starts with the Queen's song. When the curtain rises, the inner sanctum of a ruined temple is noticed. As the play begins, the stage is dark. The two indistinct figures inside the sanctum: the Mahout and the Queen are displayed sitting apart from each other. The King is noticed sitting on the outer steps of the temple with a torch in his hand. Through the dialogues, the Queen's adultery with Ashatavakra, the palace Mahout is revealed. The heavenly voice of the Mahout has lured the Queen out of her bed and has brought her to the singer in the deserted temple.

The Queen is neither curious about the Mahout nor is she inclined to disclose her identity. Actually, she is trying to escape from the situation to keep the incident secret. The Mahout is clever enough to guess that she must be from the upper class of society. To extend her stay, he narrates to her the story of his birth. The King sits on the outer steps of the temple. The two in the inner sanctum are unaware of his presence. Later on, both the Queen and the Mahout notice some movement in the courtyard. Hearing the knock at the temple gate, they are greatly terrified. In order to drive out the strangers standing outside, the Mahout produces sounds of love-making. At last, the King comes into the temple with a torch in his hand searching for the Queen. He calls out and the Queen presents herself before him. The Mahout is stunned to know that the woman with whom he was making love is none other than the Queen herself.

The Queen is least guilt-conscious. She informs the King that she is being seduced by the music even before submitting to a physical association. She quite frankly tells him: "I was sleeping by your side. His singing woke me up. The song... (he) caressed me, enveloped



me.... 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.” (119)

The Mother Queen is suspicious of her daughter-in-law’s fidelity and, therefore, asks the King about the temple incident. Due to the constant persuasion of mother about his distraught state, the King answers her: “...I had a dream. It woke me up. ... in the dream... I saw that the royal swan in our garden had got caught in mud...” (103)

More penetrating questions of the Mother Queen compel the king to reveal the fact. The disclosure of the direct, the false move makes her violent. She displays her horror and demands of him to perform the sacrifice of a hundred sheep to her goddess to acquit the Queen of her sinful act, which is bound to have its adverse impact upon the well-being of her son and the kingdom. Being a Jain now, the King refuses to perform the act of violence. So, the mother, by way of compromise, suggests to him to offer the substitute, that is, the cock of dough. The Queen exhibits her intense disliking for her mother-in-law’s conventional ways of propitiating gods and goddesses. That is why she refuses to join in performing the ritual sacrifice of the artificial cock made of dough as demanded by her mother-in-law. However, her love and loyalty to her husband make her to participate in the symbolic sacrifice. She says, “I am making you suffer. We are here. I love you. I don’t want you to suffer. I agree to the sacrifice.”(239) When she joins the King to pierce the sword into the cock, she imagines that the cock of dough begins to crow. She gets horrified. The King tries to cool her down. But a cock crows outside. So, the King turns to the door. The Queen drives the point of the blade into her womb and falls on the sword. At last, at the point of death, she falls into the King’s arms. Making compromise with her principles hurts her heart and the staunch upholder of non-violence ends her life in suicide, that is, by resorting to violent means.

Though the play has a little dramatic action, the playwright throws light on the past life of the characters through the flash-back technique. In this connection, S. Subhash Chandran says: “Though the play’s present has only the denouement of the Queen’s action to be dramatized, the playwright provides the history of the King and the Queen from the day of their first meeting and child-marriage till the night of the adultery with the help of an expository dialogue and two flashback scenes” (Chandran 297). The childhood friendship culminates into a married life. When they get married, he has been a prince of twelve and she has been the princess of eight. He is the Kshatriya and she is the Jain. Their deities are also different. Actually, they are the true contrasts of each other: his goddess, clothed in silk robes, is thirsty for blood and hers is the naked Jineswara who could never hurt a living being. The King, in accordance with the condition of the Queen for marriage besides his love for her, adopts Jainism. Naturally, he follows the principle of non-violence. This conversion creates hurdles for him in two ways: His mother accuses him of forsaking his religion for the love of a woman. Similarly, it is not easy for him to forget his Kshatriya antecedents. Although he tries

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his best to accept the path of non-violence, the culture of Kshatriya practices always remains submerged in his subconscious.

Conjugal life proves somewhat difficult for both of them. They remain childless even after completing fifteen years of married life. The young couple is always under tremendous psychological pressure to produce an heir to fulfil their duty to the kingdom. Their love for each other gives them strength to face the moments of humiliation and pain. While facing insults and hostility from others, especially after her miscarriages, they stand together and survive external onslaughts. Subhash Chandran rightly observes: “The ruthless scrutiny about her inability to bear a child may have pushed her to a breaking point. Continuance in the similar manner would easily have led them to old age and peaceful death. But discontent and disharmony lurk beneath the surface of their seeming conjugal ‘bliss’ and the thin layer of make-believe ‘harmony and affection’ is vulnerable to pressure.” (Chandran 297)

The main thesis of the play is developed with the help of the four characters: the two women characters namely the Queen and the Queen Mother, and the two male characters—the King and the Mahout.

The women characters in Karnad’s plays are very bold and dominating. Symbolically, they are the representatives of “new women” in society. Instead of being dictated by their men, they dictate them and compel them to follow their decisions. The two women characters in the play, the Queen and Mother Queen best exemplify Karnad’s new women. The action of the play revolves round these two women characters: the former represents Jainism, that stands for non-violence and the latter Kshatriya dharma that stands for violence.

The play starts with two songs—the first one sung by the Queen and the second by the King. Both the songs are meaningful and suggestive for the development of the main argument of the play. The Queen sings: “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.”(189)

The two orbs of the world refer to the two sections of the human souls— dark (evil instincts) and bright (good instincts).The King’s song depicts his mental agony and helplessness and also throws light on the further development of the action in the play. “... 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.” (190) Here, the King himself plays the role of a *sutradhara* and unfolds the story of the play. The power of music brings the Queen to the temple where she both physically and emotionally surrenders herself to the singer. In this union, she experiences the ecstasy of love. Everything happened so spontaneously that she did not

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hesitate to think what would be the repercussions of her action. The low-born status and ugly figure of the Mahout do not become the hindrances to their mating. Quite frankly, she tells him the purpose of her visit: “Your looks don’t matter to me. I came here, because I heard you sing. You have heavenly voice.” (194) In spite of the repeated requests of the Mahout, she remains reluctant to disclose her identity. She tries to keep her private life and public life intact. Although she enjoys the ecstasy of love with the Mahout, mentally she is faithful to her husband. When the Mahout proudly tells her that he is better than the King in love-making, she bluntly tells him. “My coming here has nothing to do with my husband. He is a marvellous person— affectionate, gentle, trusting.” (195)

The Queen’s association with the unknown person raises conservative eyebrows. The play defies the matrimonial norms of Indian culture that a woman should be loyal to her husband and, therefore, has to keep herself away from any kind of illicit, sexual attraction. The King’s virility is dubious and hinted at so several times in the play. It can be noticed that she has been criticized for not having a son for fifteen years. The Queen Mother constantly expects from her a son, an heir to the dynasty. Ignoring the established norms of society, she responds to the call of her heart. She gets what she desires. The bonds of conventional morality and the codes of fidelity are swept away by the pull of the flesh. Through the character of the Queen Amritmati, Karnad has portrayed a bold, new woman who unhesitatingly confesses to her extramarital relationship and plainly admits that whatever happened was very ‘beautiful’ and charming. Karnad here seems to give a message that purity that is guiltlessness of mind matters more than that of physical relationship even in the case of adultery. Neither the Queen feels guilt-conscious and considers it a sinful act nor does the King blame her for it, outwardly or inwardly, out of their mutual love for each other.

In the introduction to the play, Aparna Dharwadkar states: “In *Bali*, the queen is childless, and although this lack is an inescapable point of reference in her life, it is not (at least for her) a source of obsessive guilt or shame. Aroused by the Mahout’s song, she seeks him out for an anonymous coupling that violates the boundaries of caste and class, but when challenged, refuses to profess guilt for her action or to atone for it through the propitiatory ritual. More than any other female character in Karnad’s drama, she is transgressive presence, deprived of conventional feminine roles by chance and circumstance, but self possessed and cerebral enough not to surrender to the presence of conformity.” (Dharwadkar xxxiv)

The union of the Queen with the Mahout results in her pregnancy. Both, the queen and the King are highly delighted. However, the Queen Mother expresses her happiness cautiously, for she has some reservations in her mind. The Queen’s pregnancy establishes her fertility and the King’s impotency.



The character of the Queen is depicted with utmost care. It symbolizes the image of a 'New Woman'. Ignoring the social norms, she follows the dictates of her mind and heart. She does not feel guilty or even ashamed of her extra-marital relationship with the Mahout. She is a sincere practitioner of Jainism and takes pride in her creed. She has no faith in the existence of God and believes in the principle of love, compassion, and non-violence. She makes a compromise to satisfy her husband by joining the ritual but is not happy about it, for she owes allegiance to her religion alone. She refuses to play false to it; that is why she commits suicide. Apparently, for all others, it is suicide but for the Queen it is the sacrifice that she performs on the altar of her faith. She is, thus, an example of woman's honesty and integrity and attains martyrdom for the cause of her religion. Sumita Roy comments: "Sacrifice in the true sense would mean reaching towards nothingness, not by depriving oneself but by willing renunciation which is followed through with total conviction. ...Here sacrifice and surrender are seen as synonymous and the Queen uses it to "sum up" her life, from her subjective point of view." (Roy 290)

From the traditional or conservative point of view, there is something paradoxical on the part of the Queen here. On the one hand, she talks about love, compassion and non-violence and on the other, tortures her husband mentally by imposing her own will on him. She defiles the inner sanctum of the temple by having sex with the Mahout. Thus, she commits the sin of sacrilege. She is extremely good-looking and thereby conquers the world by her bewitching beauty. The king is so enmeshed by her love that her illicit relationship does not affect him in the least. But such a type of criticism cannot go uncontested, for the Queen's serenity of mind is juxtaposed with her adultery— to establish a woman's privilege to motherhood. Actually, the Queen appears to be the mouthpiece of the playwright.

Through the contrasting characters of the the Mother Queen and Queen (since they are foils to each other) Karnad represents the age-old conflict between violence and non-violence, respectively. Aparna Dharwadker is justified, when she states: "More broadly, the Jain-Hindu debate of the pre-modern period casts an ironic light on the endemic violence of the postcolonial present in India— a problem addressed directly in both *Tughlaq* and *Tale-Danda*" (Dharwadker xxxv). The message of the play may be summed up thus: Intended violence is as offensive as actual violence and the adultery committed on the mental plane is equivalent to that committed on the physical plane.

The play deals with the psychological study of the two warring women representing their own religious creeds. The play, as the title suggests, centres around the theme of sacrifice. The Queen Mother seems to be a very imposing character in the play. She exerts tremendous influence on her son. Since the King's conversion to Jainism shocks her to a great extent, she criticizes him saying: "You were not born a Jain. You were born my son. But you betrayed



me and my faith.” (214) She strongly believes in rites and rituals, gods and goddesses. She honestly feels that the bad effects of evil spirits are eliminated by performing the ritual. As a mother-in-law, she always wishes to have a grandson as an heir to the dynasty. However, the news of her daughter-in-law’s pregnancy does not please her, since it gives her the awareness of the impotency of her son. She makes fun of the Jain philosophy of non-violence. What she wants to tell her daughter-in-law is that shedding of blood is necessary while giving birth to a child; without some kind of violence, life is not possible. She considers her daughter-in-law’s relationship with the Mahout as an illicit one and, therefore, disastrous to the royal family. In order to avoid the evil consequences which the family would face in the aftermath, she asks her son to sacrifice a hundred sheep in the ritual. When the King shows his reluctance to it, she suggests to him an alternative, i.e., offering of a cock of dough. Her constant persuasion to purify the Queen by performing the symbolic sacrifice at least becomes the cause of a ruffle in the King’s familial life. Through the character of the Queen Mother, Karnad represents the conventional mother-in-law of the orthodox Indian society, for whom the personal ego is more important than the marital bliss of her son’s life. In this connection, Aparna Dharwadkar observes: “What alienates her from the barren and unfaithful queen is not only a mother’s possessiveness and anger, but fundamental differences of belief that insert larger cultural questions into their personal antagonism. ...The familiar narrative of the two women vying for the upper hand in relation to a man becomes in *Bali*, a destructive dance in which there are no winners, only losers.” (Dharwadkar xxxiv)

The king is the central character in the play. Originally, he belongs to the Kshatriya community but after marriage, he converts himself to Jainism. The childhood friendship of the prince and the princess develops into a marital partnership and the King accepts the Jain religion for the sake of his sweet heart. The Queen describes him as “a marvellous person – affectionate, gentle, trusting.”(195) He seems to be rather weak and passive in comparison with the other characters in the play. He is emotionally attached to both his mother and his wife as well. Therefore, his personality is overshadowed by those of the two women. He is always swayed away by the vagaries of their desires, whims and fancies. Very helplessly he tells his wife: “I can’t bring myself another mother. She can’t get herself another son. ...I won’t look for another wife.”(211) The King, due to his hesitancy and the consequent divided mind, is unable to take his own decisions. Crushed under the two strong-willed, rather obstinate women and heated verbal exchanges on their respective creeds, his life gets ruffled. Consequently, he becomes miserable a sad picture of himself.

The male characters in the play are foils to each other. The Mahout represents the practical side of life whereas the King represents the mediating force between the two warring women and their ideologies. The Mahout is a low-born elephant-keeper. He is aware of his ugliness and very often talks about his physical deformity. Though low-born, he knows his importance



to the royal family. He is conscious of caste/class conflict in the society. He is a self-seeking opportunist. Through him, Karnad brings to light the role of physical lust in man's nature. To have sex with women is his regular practice. Quite frankly he tells the Queen that he has already enjoyed sex with six women and she is the seventh one. It is noticed that he is not at all concerned with social norms or cultural values. He is interested neither in the philosophical deliberations nor in the concept of sin. He makes fun of rites, rituals and outdated practices. While speaking about the characterization in the play, Aparna Dharwadkar states: "The two male characters in the play, in contrast, are arranged in relations of perfect antithesis and hierarchical reversal: the cultivated, sensitive, and valiant but impotent king versus the crude, amoral, and cowardly but potent Mahout with his irresistible song. ...the radical disparities between the Mahout and the royal couple underscore not an egalitarian message about the union of a queen and her servant, but the eventual irrelevance of that act to the long-term disequilibrium of the royal marriage." (Dharwadkar xxxiv-xxxv)

The other important themes of the play are the conflict between the mother-in-law and the daughter-in-law and the futility of blind beliefs and out-dated ritual practices. The dispute between the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law is presented in glaring light. When the Queen Mother discovers her daughter-in-law's treachery, she reacts furiously and asks her son to "throw her bones to the dogs. She has betrayed you..." (223) Through the character of the Queen Mother, Karnad has portrayed the mother-in-law of the orthodox Indian society, who always intervenes in the affairs of her daughter-in-law.

Through the mythical story, Karnad represents the issues of the contemporary society. Symbolically, the characters in the play are like men and women encountered in our day-today lives. Although the King does not lay any blame on the shoulders of his wife, he is greatly shocked to see his wife in the arms of the elephant keeper. The Queen describes the King as a marvellous, loving and caring husband but he shows his hatred and jealousy for the Mahout and for his wife by humiliating her in the temple in the presence of the Mahout. The King forgets the fact that the real conjugal relationship is not only based on high ideals but also on the mutual union of the mind and the body. He fails to recognize the biological necessity of his wife. He adheres to the established norms in the patriarchal society which are always one sided, never taking into cognizance the true desire of a woman.

Thus, the characters portrayed and the situations depicted go beyond time and place. In the portrayal of his characters, Karnad remains a detached, dispassionate observer. Each character in the play is the combination of strength and weakness, good and bad. The King first appears to be loving and caring but later on turns out to be ruthless, contemptuous and revengeful but remains totally passive, confused, and dominated by the two stubborn, warring women. The Queen seems to be defiant, aggressive, adamant, and a staunch follower of Jainism but her love for her husband compels her to make compromise with her cherished

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principles. The Queen Mother is also very adamant, superstitious, a hard-core believer in the tradition and is always engrossed in propitiating her goddess with rites, rituals, and sacrifices. However, she appears quite helpless, when the King marries against her wish and also adopts Jainism. The Mahout is an opportunist, completely practical minded with no regret or repentance for his actions, straightforward and critical of the people belonging to the upper class of society.

The play deals with a debate on violence and non-violence which is deftly interlinked with man-woman relationship and thereby exposes meaninglessness and hollowness of courtly life. It relentlessly throws light on the futility of observing superstitious beliefs and out-dated practices for they bring no solution to the problem presented in the play. The dramatist aims at bringing to light some of the most complex and vital issues of our existence. “In the Preface, Karnad describes violence as ‘the central topic of debate in the history of Indian civilization’— a debate in which Hinduism has been ranged against Buddhism on the one hand and Jainism on the other. Karnad also chooses to address not the public and political carnage of war and conquest (which led, for instance, to the emperor Ashoka’s conversion to Buddhism), but the legitimization of violence in ritual practices that individuals (such as the Queen Mother) regard as private acts of faith and worship.” (Karnad 69; Qtd in Dharwadkar xxxv) To quote Dharwadkar again, “The central ‘problem’ in the play is thus not the Queen’s adultery but the deep spiritual rift between her Jainism and the traditional Kshatriya ethos of her husband’s family. The King has embraced Jainism in principle, but his instinctive propensity for violence is evident in every scene, .... When he compels the Queen to join him in the symbolic sacrifice so that his desire for atonement may be satisfied, her imagination breathes life into the sacrificial object and leads to her own death.” (Dharwadkar xxxv)

Karnad shows his protest against the established conventional norms and values. He suggests that society should be reconstructed on the basis of a new code of conduct and morality. The title *Bali: The Sacrifice* signifies paradoxical connotations. The true meaning of sacrifice implies renunciation of one’s own happiness or cherished principles for the well-being of the persons concerned or for the preservation of eternal values of life.

Thus, to sum up, we see that the play *Bali: The Sacrifice* has multiplicity of themes such as man-woman relationship, women’s position in male-dominated society, violence and non-violence, love and sex, tradition versus modernity, hatred, treachery, superstition, etc. The essential feature of Karnad’s plays is that they present a perplexing, distressing and complex situation in all seriousness and manifest his strong dissatisfaction with the existing social order and *Bali: The Sacrifice* is no exception to it.



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