

## **Myth and Ritual on Girish Karnad's Bali: The Sacrifice**

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### **Abstract:**

Girish Karnad's active career as a playwright has spanned between the emergences of modern theatre in the sixties till the second decade of the twenty-first century. His playwriting as a whole shows an oscillation between the demands of modern realism and pre-modern non-realistic traditions. His early plays like *Tughlaq*, *Yayati* and *Sacrifice* are firmly set in the mould of realism though the latter two plays return to mythology for the material. Soon by mid-seventies Girish Karnad is writing *Hayavadana*, a completely nonrealistic play. He follows this up with *Naga-Mandala*, a non-realistic play again. When he wrote *Tale-Dandain* early nineties, it was written with realism once again. After this he wrote an unusual play that dramatizes his characteristic tension between ritual and realism, myth and history. It may be mentioned in passing that Karnad's later plays, *Broken images*, *Flower and Marriage Album*, are much less powerful than earlier ones that dramatise the creative tension between the opposite poles of realism and non-realism. Myth and Rituals are adaptive from the point of view of the society in that they promote social soil deity, enhance the integration of the society by providing a formalized statement of its ultimate value attitudes, affords a means for the transmission of much

of the culture with little loss of content – thus protecting cultural continuity and stabilizing the society.

**Key words: realism, mythology, pre-modern, non-realistic**

Myth constitutes the system of stories, beliefs and world views collectively held by a community in their collective unconscious, rites and rituals. Ritual leads to myth what performance is to a text. Rites are sacred performances affected at crucial stages of each member of the community whereas the rituals are practiced to put the member back in tune with the community, the ancestors and the cosmos at large. Myth and ritual are spacio-temporally distinguished from the time and space of everyday experience. The events narrated in the myth do not happen in historical time. The birth and death of Gods, the victory of divine beings over forces of anarchy happen in a time before time. Correspondently rituals happen in a space marked off from everyday space. Thus shrines and places of worship in different cultures are considered sacred and repositories of great magical power.

Bali, is a ritual intended to propitiate the Gods. The play *Bali: The Sacrifice* dramatizes the ritualistic practice of transforming the actual violence into violence inintention. Karnad takes liberties with the original myth to project the relationship between the cruelty of the psyche and the passive alteration of the sacrifice. By dramatizing the conflicting ideologies of Hinduism and Jainism, the dramatist illustrates how infidelity is forbidden in all religions. Thus the dual moral code of the patriarchal system is questioned and the basic human nature is analysed.

The struggle of the man to find out a balance between his/her nature and the social obligations also forms an important strand of the theme of the play, *The Queen, Amritamati*, has to rise up to the public expectations and reject her personal interests. Once again Karnad presents an existential dilemma in his character – the need to choose between the private self and the public self. That she is also a human being is something everybody also can forget, but she can't escape from the existential burden. But Karnad makes his character bold enough to break the mould and assert her individually. By forcing the King to take up her religion, she can prove her cultural domination. But she has to shed the royal burden in order to prove that she is not barren woman.

The Mahout who provides psychological, emotional, conceptual and physical gratification at the cost of ethical elitism is developed into a symbol of Dionysius spirit which is as essential as the Apollonian spirit for the continuation of life and the sustenance of the world. He is presented as “ugly bandicoot” who has very sweet voice only to show the two sides of the reality.

Karnad’s use of lyrics enhances the ritualistic nature of the play. He uses a few songs in the other plays also, but they are all translation of Kannada songs by the other. But in *Bali: The Sacrifice*, he writes many songs which, besides adding to the ritualistic nature of the play, serves as a dramatic device to attach the various episode together. Instead of dividing the play into acts Karnad simply uses the songs in such way that they signify the division and at the same time uniting the scenes by a harmonious way. The songs are at once a relief and also passage from one scene to the other. The seven songs interlocking the seven scenes together glorify the intricacies of the myth and by using the rhetoric enhances the understanding of the audience. The first song sung by the Queen discusses the two sides of the world, the light and the shadow. The split of the ‘orb’ signifies the duality the play discusses, the violence and non-violence, loyalty and passionate inclination and responsibility and desire.

The Queen simply uses him to her personal interest of keeping the royal heritage intact. She evades all his questions by telling lies. Though she opposes the animal sacrifice, she is prepared to use the Mahout as a scapegoat of a different sacrifice. Thus Karnad poses a fundamental question: Is it possible for a man to sacrifice his basic instincts like ego, lust and ambitions? The song of the Mahout which is sonorous is also a symbol of the spell of the basic instincts which are crude and barbarous. When she encounters him, she is happy to shed all the superficial gadgets and hypocrisies cherished in populated among the higher circles. She declares that she got fed up with the sycophants and that she needs truth. Her yearning for a child is symbolized of her need for a truth as she got disgusted with miscarriages and fickle wombs. She seems to have chosen a Mahout for her conception so as to keep it a secret and she takes all precautions to hide the secret forever. But the sexual gratification she receives from the crude and barbarous Mahout makes her fallen, richer and warmer. Though the king gets infuriated by her infidelity in the beginning, he realizes that she tries to save him from public humiliation and

sympathizes with her. So he tells her, “We are coupled in the eyes of God. We need not be ashamed of anything. We must strip ourselves of any sense of shame. Became naked like our saviours”.

Karnad is an adept in transforming the physical things into symbols. The Queen and the Mahout indulge in sex in the sanctum sanctorum of a temple in which the Mother Queen wants to sacrifice the dough-animal. The deity of the temple is not in proper state. The feet of the standing deity survives as the other part is destroyed. From the realistic point of view, it presents the way that the status of the Hindu Gods were destroyed by the Jains (And the Jain temples were destroyed and transformed into Hindu Temples afterwards). But symbolically it denotes the fragments of the reality that the human being cherishes and worships.

The play is full of parallels and juxtapositions. The nature of the Mahout provides a foil to the character of the king who is a symbol of sophisticated culture. He is not tempted by the jewellery offered to him by the Queen. When the king tries to use his power to coerce him, he gets prepared to leave his patronage and declares that the pomp and the power of a king is meaningless without the servants like him.

The feign signs and heaves the Mahout and the Queen produce to deceive the people outside the temple are also like the dough animals ironically representing the innermost recesses of the human psyche. Though the main characters are the King and a Queen, the dramatist presents them as typical human beings. The Queen proclaims, “Only the song. It felt like a flame burning bright, Pure. When I came to my senses, I was here. By his side.” and the king also tells, “I opened my eyes, saw you press yourself against the window and listen. And then slip away. I followed.”.

Karnad makes his characters humane by means of using animal imagery and by stressing the physical side of the reality. He never hesitates to present the human craving for sexual gratification and presents their physical indulgences without inhibitions. The Mahout tells the queen, “I am probably bleeding all over. There you have almost scratched my skin off. Such long nails....”.

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The fourth important character of the play, The Queen Mother, has a significant role in the dramatization of the ritual, the mock sacrifice. In her the anxiety of a mother to see that her son begets a child, the power of a Queen to keep her respectability intact and the arrogance of a woman to control her sister-in-law are combined in a curious way. She is clever enough to find out the truth though her son tries to evade it. She is prepared to sacrifice hundred fools to the Goddess. Unlike her son who is vacillating between the sacrifice-prone Hinduism and non-violent Jainism she has strong belief in a God who is attired in silk robes, eats chicken and craves blood.

The play reaches the zenith when the Queen openly declares to relinquish the King and prepares to go to Mahout. The King gets devastated as he can't decide whether to tolerate his wife's infidelity or to accept his mother's intention to sacrifice animals. The infidelity of the queen and its consequences tarnish the relationship between the king and the queen and the mother and the son. They became perplexed as they are unable to come out with an answer that satisfies them. The Queen Mother is not happy with her son who embraces the religion of her daughter-in-law and then gets prepared to pardon her infidelity. The Queen on the other and prepares to leave with the Mahout. The King finds himself in a fix as he can't provide justice to either one. He has to face even a question regarding his „manhood“ also. He cries, “Is there no way to escape this hell?”. The Psyche of a man that gets only pacified by the killing of animals and the spilling of the blood has to be analysed impassionately and perceptively. The Queen who

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insists that all kinds of non-violence has to be forbidden is not able to find out the violence in her nature. As Karnad observes, insists that all kinds of non-violence has to be forbidden is not able to find out the violence in her nature.

The Mahout is not merely the reason for the Queen's transgression, he symbolizes the belief in a listening, logical God. The Queen believes that salvation comes from living a life of compassion, and the Queen Offer follows a Goddess who needs to be satiated with blood to be benign. In between is the King who has forsaken the faith he grew up into embrace Jainism and is now torn between guilt and confusion about the right path.

Karnad makes a strange paradox of Bali, which synonymous with a person's sacrificing of another living being to propitiate the devine and giving up something as a prize which the king does with his religion for his love. Thus *Bali: the sacrifice*, present the myths which are closely bound with the rituals – Bali: the sacrifice prove what finally asserts about the nature of the myth and the rituals: 'ritual is an obsessive repetitive activity – of a symbolic dramatization of the fundamental 'needs' of the society, whether 'economic' 'biological' 'social' or 'sexual'. Mythology is the rationalization of these same needs, whether they are expressed in overt ceremonial or not. Someone has said every culture has a type conflict and a type solution. Ceremonials tend to portray a symbolic resolvment of the conflicts which external environment, historical experience and selective distribution of personality types have caused to be the characteristic in the society. Myth may be confined to the past but the rituals are continued even new and one can surmise that many myths pass on to the present in the form of rituals. By using these popular aspects of the society, Girish Karnad creates a play that spell binds the audience and also make them think of the crucial issues of their existence.

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