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## Voice of Woman on Irrational Religious Acts: An Observation on Girish Karnad's Play Bali: The Sacrifice

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### ABSTRACT

Karnad has penned his plays in Kannada translated them into English. 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 way. This paper talks about the Woman in the play Bali: The Sacrifice. It deals with the concept of woman emancipating herself in questioning the patriarchal rules. The woman here raises her voice on the irrational traditional patriarchal acts in the name of religion.

**Keywords:** Cough Dough, Brahminism, Irrational Traditions.

### INTRODUCTION

Girish Karnad's works in the theatre reveal two outstanding qualities: a continuous experimentation with dramatic form and a deep involvement with the human condition in its contemporary as well as universal manifestation. His plays explore the human psyche and its social environment sometimes taking for their theme traditional historical themes. His plays reveal a healthy tension between tradition and contemporary. His return to the roots is a reaction to the usual social irrelevance of modern Indian Drama.

This paper is about how Girish Karnad presents the drastic results of the orthodoxy of the religious nature in the multi-cultured and diverse country like India. In a country like India, with competing for religious and cultures, religious and cultural tensions leading to satisfactory compromises are expected. Girish Karnad focuses on such religious tension and the resulting ruin condition of characters, therefore, he tries to show that compromises are very important in family and society.

Dramatist had used characters as a vehicle to convey the thoughts and values; thus the language of characters plays a vital role, as it may give clues to their feelings, personalities, backgrounds, and change in feelings, etc. In drama the characters live out a story without any comments of the author, providing the audience a direct presentation of characters life experiences.

Karnad's more focus is on Re-examining and re-reading the historical stories, myths, and legends. Karnad succeeds in redefining his women characters. Unlike Henrik Ibsan's character Dora in 'Dolls House' who takes a radical changing decision by moving outside the home in midnight by leaving her husband and children, Karnad's

all most all characters oppose the social structure with all cultural biases which upholds the male dominancy being within the structure. In some of his plays, he introduces two types of characters. One represents the tradition of patriarchal society and the other represents 'educated' woman of the period of women empowerment. That is how women in Karnad's plays are rational more in deeds than in words.

Indian culture has a variety of traditions that have been accompanied since ancient period. There were other orthodox cultures which differentiated society among different sections and one among them were women which were considered as mere subordinate to men. Another example is Religion. Most people on earth swear allegiance to one religion or another, one God or another. The degree of irrationality in religious beliefs varies from religion to religion.

In India as well as all over the world, even the most educated and accomplished people behave in an irrational manner. Thousands of examples of mindless behaviours, regarding religious rites and rituals had a very good reason in the past. The only problem is that the reason has no relevance to the current reality. As such irrelevant rituals were imposed on a woman by the patriarchal society. The dramatist portrayed his woman characters to raise their voice against such improper religious acts in his play *Bali: The Sacrifice*.

*Bali: The Sacrifice* is the translation of Girish Karnad's Kannada play, *Hittina Huja*, 1980. It deals with the sacrifice of 'the cock made of dough' and takes up the issue of non-violence to discuss. This play is a 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. The practice of offering animal sacrifices to gods is repugnant. This myth is presented through the conflict between the idea, represented by the Queen mother, and the Jain principle of non violence represented by the Queen. The play gives the message that practice of the continuance of offering "miniature figurines, made of dough", which "were substituted for live animals", is also obnoxious and must be relinquished. It shows that the actual violence has been replaced by violence in action. Its theme has been derived from the thirteenth century Kannada epic *Yashodhara Charite* by Janna.

As Professor Sumita Roy rightly says the play is viewed in different perspectives. "It is this skill that makes the play acquire myriad levels of meaning: holding confrontation in abeyance and giving scope to the possibility of viewing the play from many different perspectives." ([www.academia.edu/3705157/Negotiating\\_Ideological\\_Spaces\\_Girish\\_KarndsBali\\_The\\_Sacrific](http://www.academia.edu/3705157/Negotiating_Ideological_Spaces_Girish_KarndsBali_The_Sacrific))

e) An especially woman in the play is focused on broad view. These woman characters represent the woman in modern time. Queen, the protagonist of the play stands as a voice of woman against irrational rites and rituals which are in favour of patriarchy.

In *Bali: The Sacrifice* woman has become bold, assertive and blatantly selfish. The woman here, voiced through the character of the Queen, has laid bare the inner recesses of her heart, and more importantly of her body, her desire for sexual gratification for her own sake and not as conscious attempts to produce children, has come to the fore. The sexual ferocity and vibrancy of the audacious woman are referred to the play very strongly. While Vishaka in "Fire and Rain" and Padmini in *Hayavadana* indulge in an extra-marital relationship, they do not express their desires openly. By supernatural aids, both these women are able to satiate their desires.

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 was treated as a 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 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 the sacrifice of animals and birds to God. She boldly resists the idea and damns it as irrational. She admonishes her husband, the King.

Jainism is an Indian religion that prescribes a path of non violence towards all living beings. Its philosophy and practice emphasize the necessity of self-effort to move the soul toward divine consciousness and liberation. Unlike the Hindus who look upon marriage as a sacrament, Jain treats the institution as a contract. Friendship and marriage are considered to be a worldly affair and marriage are recommended so that the children born to the couple would also follow the same religion. Its purpose is to make sex licit within a family ironically Queen crosses her Jain principles which she teaches to her husband.

Queen belongs to Jain religion and firmly believes in the principles of pity, love, kindness, and compassion of Jainism in her life. She has gone through inter-religion marriage with King who belongs to Hindu religion. Here we have to accept the bold attempt of the Queen who marries a man apart from her community. She loves her husband from the bottom of her heart. Even she describes her husband as Queen: *Marvellous person, affectionate, gentle and trusting, he is the best of men. (Collected Plays; Volume One; P.195)*

Queen presents her bold and dominant nature. It is significant to note that most interesting fact about her is that, like other female characters of Karnad's play's she does not regret her betrayal of her husband. Instead, she justifies her betrayal as an accident in her life. When King asked about her betrayal she replies:

Queen: *I do not regret anything that has happened. I will not disown him or anything he gave me. ...because it just happened. Without my willing it. It just happened. That's all.... I want to come back to you. I feel fuller. Richer. Warmer. But not ashamed. Because I didn't plan it. It happened. And it was beautiful. (Collected plays: volume one. P.234)*

Queen keeps much understanding and respect to her family. Even she does not like any person using bad words for her husband or her family. When Mahout doubts King's ability at that time Queen reacts angrily and shows her love towards her husband. But she is very self-possessive woman character created by the dramatist. She controls and dominates her husband. She has managed to convert her husband into Jainism. Also, she controls his state affairs. It is evident that Karnad presents his woman to participate in political discussions. Certain qualities of her prove to be a New Woman. She makes him forbid in all kinds of bloodshed in the state. Even she does not allow her mother-in-law to celebrate her joy at the Queen's pregnancy. Thus she tries to have control over the family.

It is very evident that social standing hardly seems to affect the condition of the woman. Queen comes from a royal family. At the end of the play, her guilt of extra-marital indulgence is atoned through her death. Thus, the woman in the society, whether of high or low social standing is always looked down upon by virtue of being a woman and ill-treated by the man. Whether a Queen or a maid, women are always relegated to forming a marginalized group in the patriarchal order.

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 made of dough instead of a live one. But to that proposition also, the queen is deadily opposed and refuses to take part in it. Out of his love for his queen, the king adopts Jainism and it's principle of nonviolence. The queen mother accuses him of betraying his religion for the love of a woman.

Her refusal to sacrifice the cock made of dough stems not so much from her nonviolence as from the fact that she did not consider sex with the Mahout as harmful or sinful. It is not so much a matter of sacrifice to her; she would have declined any rite or ritual for her act. As she says unyieldingly *"I'm sorry. If this rite is going to blot the moment out, that would be the real betrayal. I'll do anything else."* C.N. Ramachandran makes the point more explicit in his article and says that *"The batter-cock in the play is also a symbol of the queen's dark yearnings and sexual pleasures. Hence, she forbids him to sacrifice it."* (Ramachandran, C. N. *"Girish Karnad: The Playwright in Search of Metaphors,"* The Journal of Indian Writing in English.P.33). She even argues with her husband against the absurd act; that is sacrificing a cock made of dough. For Queen animal sacrifice to God is one kind of

brutal violence the below discussion with the King proves her to be a New Woman in questioning the irrational religious acts.

King: *This is the offering. A sacrifice of dough. A substitute for a live fowl....all you have to do is place your right hand on the back of my fist. Like this. 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! Do 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 sense if you believe in bloodthirsty gods. But this...you can't knowingly fool yourself. (Collected plays, volume one P.227)*

It is explained that blood-sacrifice is a very tradition of the family. Mother Queen is worried that the King has no child. Mother Queen has kept different kinds of animals to sacrifice and she has sacrificed some of them to the Goddess praying for a child to her son. But King has denied worshipping the gods by offering 'Bali' and it is the denial of her mother's principles of Hinduism. But Mother Queen asks all family members to follow the principles of family tradition. Mother keeps commanding nature and wants to control her son. Even she is very orthodox, and bold enough in her behaviour. When King confesses Mother Queen that Queen has an illicit relationship with the Mahout, Mother Queen becomes very angry and wants to punish her. So Mother asks her son: *Mother Queen: Has she fallen so low? The whore. And you. How can you stand here like? I should cut her piece...feed her wolves and vultures. Do it, son, now! King: Don't be hysterical, Mother. (Collected Plays; Volume One; p.223)*

For instance, the dramatist had shown the ideology of blood sacrifice as an irrational act, which has been strongly opposed by one of his female characters. The play revolves around violence and nonviolence, tradition and modernity, relationship status among the woman in a family, religion, and spirituality. Karnad exemplifies the clear notion of animal sacrifice as an exotic act and he discloses this through his woman character.

Aparna Dharwadker explains that how the theme of the play and character of Mother Queen is interrelated each other as:

*Karnad also chooses to address not the public and political carnage of war and conquest, but the legitimating of violence in ritual practices that individuals (such as the queen mother) regard as private acts of faith and worship. The central 'problem' in the play is thus not the queen's adultery but the deep spiritual rift between her Jainism which aligns itself with compassion, mercy, and non-violence-and the traditional Kshatriya ethos of her husband's family. (Aparna Dharwadker: Introduction of collected plays; p.xvi)*

Unlike the heroines of the earlier plays, Queen Amritamati's act appears sheer betrayal, as she has no reason to betray her husband. It appears more impulsive than her dissatisfaction in the family. Perhaps she is tired of the King's obeying nature. But the poor King is caught in an unalterable hell like situation. The Queen wants to impose her principle of non-violence upon the King and the Mother Queen, and in the beginning, she succeeds. However, after her adulterous act, the Mother Queen gains ground. She makes the King insist the Queen upon involvement the act of sacrificing the dough cock. Finally, she pushes the Queen mad and at the end, the Queen offers herself as a sacrifice. In other words, the Queen kills herself. Though the Queen dies, she led her life on her wish in being nonviolent, self-possessed and bold.

In the modern age, women are still considered pathetic and weak. Also, it is believed that men have to protect them in society. The growth of literacy and awareness of social conditions should have brought greater awareness among women. Most of the women in modern age believe the principles of patriarchy and they are following without any complains. Therefore it may be the reason that the dramatist focuses on the female character, Mother Queen and Queen in relation with traditional orthodox principles of religions and how they have been following though they came in tragic problems in their life. And Girish Karnad points out the problems like woman's ego, search for completeness, selfishness etc.

Women as a whole are a repressed category and their coming together is a kind of revolt against or subversion of patriarchy. Girish Karnad criticizes traditional patriarchal norms which exploit women from very ancient times to

modern. I here remark the patriarchal moral code, which emphasizes loyalty of a woman to her husband but does not question the frailty of a man. Though men commit the worst sexual crimes, only women are accused of violating the moral codes of society.

## **CONCLUSION**

The women in this play of Karnad seem to be aware of their oppression and repression in the patriarchal order but also know that they cannot do much about it. Whenever they attempt to cross their defined limits, like the Queen in Bali, they meet with disaster. It matters little which class they come from, the women of all social strata seem to suffer more or less equally.

The woman in the Indian society, whether of high or low social standing is always looked down upon by virtue of being a woman and ill-treated by the domineering patriarchy. Whether a Queen or a Maid, women are always relegated to the background forming a marginalized group in the patriarchal order.

Stepping out of marital bonds or claiming their rights, whichever the case, the result is always a disaster, the death of the female initiators. The playwright seems to convey is that it is difficult to escape the oppression of patriarchal order; a revolutionary attempt more often than not ends in a disaster.

Their suppression is more because they tried to cross the threshold in the male dominated social structure. The male has voice, presence, and power, whereas the female is silent, absent and powerless. For some extent Karnad succeeded to reduce the great injustice is done to women in patriarchal society by providing strength, to follow their internal words by opposing social norms, rites, rituals in a deep rooted male dominated social structure. With the suggestions by Amartya Sen in his "*more than hundred million women are missing*" to improve the status of women in male dominated society. He says only through gainful employment outside the home could be increased her status. Her suggestions are welcomed in family affairs. By becoming a part of the bread-winner role, she could have equality to male gender; slowly society would turn towards the woman with high respect and equality. All the cultural biases favourable to patriarchal order should vanish.

Some of the rituals are currently clueless in all these and the following factors become evident:

1. All current irrational behaviours are based on a good reason sometimes in the remote past.
2. Both these were reinforced by an authority figure such as a parent, a priest, a Swami or a Guru. These authority figures had vested interest in perpetuating these behaviours even though these behaviours were irrelevant now.
3. The person indulging in the irrational behaviour does not have a clue as to why he is behaving in this way. In fact, he does not think of his behaviour as irrational at all even though he cannot explain the rationale for it.
4. He has now become a mindless creature of dead habit, incapable of independent thinking and rational behaviour.

There are few such people in this modern world like Mother Queen who still are under the norms of such acts. One has to recheck the traditional and superstition acts before they perform. Giving a blood sacrifice only causes a death of an animal ironically this act cannot give birth to a human child. Upon all these Queens stood as a voice of all woman in questioning these religious practices where woman are undergoing and being forced to do these irrational ritual acts

These religious fanatics are living in India for the past two thousand five hundred years. They do not realize that the Dharma they should protect now is the Constitution of India. The ancient term, "*Dharmo Rakshathi Rashathah*" means "*The Law protects him who protects Law.*" These fanatics have no idea that in the modern world this means, "*The Constitution protects him who protects the Constitution.*"

Within the overarching framework of patriarchy in the religious and social sphere, the core issues that emerged were: violence against women and, sexuality and the politics of gender. India, with its diverse religions and cultures, has defined feminine roles, marriage, and sexuality in various ways. Today though with modernism and

newer view-points a large number of older views are dwindling away and a modern and flexible outlook over on irrational ritual acts has taken over.

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