

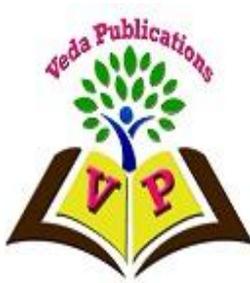


## DECONSTRUCTION OF MYTH IN KARNAD'S *BALI: THE SACRIFICE* – A CRITICAL STUDY

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### ABSTRACT



Mythology is an enormous record of historical and cultural documentation of civilization. To portray the mystic wonders of myths in any literary piece in a creative yet persuading way, the writer needs to have a keen insight and deep intellect of that imaginary world. Girish Karnad, a leading contemporary Indian English playwright exercised myth as his most favorite contemplation for a very long time. He has perhaps given the most genuine stage for Indian mythology by carrying legends and folk-tales from epic like the Mahabharata into a contemporary context. In his play *Bali: The Sacrifice*, he invites an open discussion on the topic that planned violence as reprehensible as the action itself. The utter thought of bloodshed or barbarous is as dangerous as the deed is. The play serves as a window to peep into our ancient world, indicating that Jainism is one of the nicest religions around, disputed to violence and materialism, friendly to animals and every living creature, honest and crystal clear as sun rays. It also displays a clash between the two diversified sects of philosophies – one based on spiritual traditions; other – upholding the rational views.

**Keywords:** *Bloodshed, Materialism, Spiritual Traditions, Rational views.*



History, Folk forms, Myths and Legends act as important elements of present-day Indian playwrights who always include the cultural province over a period by moving back to the past in a transformative sense, to restore our ancient traditions by presenting them in their dramatic productions. Karnad is a playwright whose writings grow in the soil of Indian tradition. Myths are the typical examples of the shared past experiences of a culture retold from one generation to the other generation, renewing national identity through culture and art. Karnad restores the ancient tradition with the powerful use of typical legends, myths, history, to showcase a world of powers, uncertainties and vulnerabilities. He totally does not stick to the laid conventions and the norms of society. Gill observes,

“As a modern playwright, Karnad is always engaged in the act of deconstructing myths. He takes up mythical and legendary tales from his own culture and unfolds them in the light of modern sensibility. This deconstructing myth becomes an act of self – searching for the playwright” (38).

Karnad's play *Bali: The Sacrifice*, published in 2004 is drawn profoundly on the mythical sources. In majority of his plays Girish Karnad uses the narrative of myth, history and folklore to induce an ancient or pre-modern world that echoes in contemporary contexts. It deals with Jain ideals of non-violence. Jains have long embraced belief that violence in any form is atrocious and even thinking of it is itself an act of violence. The play seems to invite an open discussion on the topic that planned violence as reprehensible as the action itself. The utter thought of bloodshed or barbarous is as dangerous as the deed is. *Bali: The Sacrifice* serves as a window to peep into our ancient world, indicating that Jainism is one of the nicest religions around, disputed to violence and materialism, friendly to animals and every living creature, honest and crystal clear as sun rays.

This One-Act play is about the dispute between Vedanta and Jainism. It depicts the relationship of man and woman in detail. It excites our thinking regarding the numerous universal themes of alienation, family, ambition, personal

freedom, duty, compassion treachery, infidelity, loneliness, love, aversion, bigotry, forgiveness, complex nature, and enigma of beliefs. The play was enacted for the first time at the Haymarket Theatre, Leicester on 31<sup>st</sup> May, 2002. *Bali: The Sacrifice* is the result of a brief provided to Karnad by Vayu Naidu, the authorized director of the play. It made him to discuss the global influence of India's partition on the current civilization. Karnad in turn, chose to rework his play *Bali*, in which he had, explored the theme of violence and religion through a mythological Jain story. He holds violence as

“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.” (Collected Plays 316)

*Bali: The Sacrifice* is depicted in the light of human plight inside the system of post-structuralism. The story is about a Hindu king who gets attracted towards a Jain young woman and weds her. She changes over him into Jainism and in this manner restricts the deep-rooted family convention of animal sacrifice as a way of assuaging the divine beings. One night, she hears a wonderful voice of a revolting Mahout, and follows him into the forested areas, submitting infidelity. To deflect the evil consequences of the issues the King needs to forfeit a cockerel to the divine beings, yet the issue is he is currently on the way of peacefulness. To discover an exit plan, he substitutes a bird prepared of dough, which thus, conveys surprising results prompting the demise of Queen, eventually discharging her from mortification and agony. The play flourishes on layers of nuances that makes us to sit down and clear up the numerous thoughts it incites.

The play is lavishly soaked with the tune of six excellent melodies. It starts off in the ambience of two successive tunes - the first song by the Queen and the second by the King. This One-Act play begins



to race in the way of ancient Greek plays, where chorus plays out the prologue indicating at the imminent happenings of the play; here, this demonstration is performed by the Queen and the King -who additionally takes up the role of 'Bhagavata'. The first melody advances the central theme that a pull always exists in between good and bad forces; both trying to carve a slot for themselves supporting their particular stands simply like the division between the two parts of heart and brain of a modern person who always battle to come out from the debate on life, "To be or not to be," in terms of finding a solution. The tune of the Queen at the beginning of the play sets a philosophical tone and unfurls a world stacked with the division of viciousness and peacefulness. The next song by the King portrays the public beliefs and the condition of the King and the Queen. This song mirrors the custom, beliefs and desires of Indian feelings and sentiments where the King and the Queen are treated as Gods and Goddesses striving for the benefit of the people. Unexpectedly, this deception is broken in the next lines where King is shown as sitting alone on the steps hurling out painful moans while the Queen is associated with having intercourse with the Mahout.

The plot is developed on all the four characters (the King, the Queen, the Mahout and the Queen Mother). They all experience the ill effects of gloom and meaninglessness in their lives. They are estranged from themselves and the society around them. The religious convictions, social traditions and the emotional hurdles further add to this complication. Jha depicts,

"This is an emotionally explosive play. And each actor has explored the characters through his or her personal experiences and brought in his or her own approach." (3)

The song of the King uncovers his misery and anguish. He is shown as a frail character, struggling between society's desire and doubts of his own spirit; sandwiched between the interference of two women throughout his life and his Kingly responsibilities, he constantly lost in the clash of "do or undo" strife. At the point when Queen finds out about his presence and all long waiting outside the sanctuary while she was inside with Mahout, the King

poorly says 'what else would he be able to do? Sheer out of her affection, dismissing his Kshatriya dharma, he adopts Jainism. Ironically, towards the end he needs to accomplish the entire fulfillment and delight by performing the act of Bali. Though he is very affectionate in nature the Queen isn't satisfied with him. She is vexed of the royal grandeur and show. When she hears the heavenly voice of Mahout she gets attracted to him and forgets everything. The queen feels her life as a caged soul. Craving for an opportunity she overlooks everything and surrenders to his melody. She was over all regret. She generally expected a supportive role from her better half which he neglects to give. In this way, the queen's self-made psychological bondage motivates her to end her life. Her unpleasant anguish for her encompassing and her disappointment forever is clearly presented in her words,

"You can be surrounded by people who are talking-fawning on you-and you can be lonely. So lonely you are terrified."  
(Collected Plays 198)

Her words refer to the interest of a modern individual for the passionate and moral help, the sort of consideration which is difficult to get in the present mean and narrow-minded society. The Queen Mother has a lot of complaints against her daughter-in-law and her son. The Queen affirms that her mother-in-law has hated her from the day she stepped into that palace. Her entire life is affixed around in reciting prayers, in appeasing the almighty.

The play evidently probes at the idea of "Infidelity" and "Sin," as perceived by the society. The play outlines a fractional perspective of the dictatorial Indian culture where everyone expects women to stick to certain norms laid by the patriarchal society. The play simply explains that infidelity is a myth. The queen has done adultery when she heard the sweet voice of Mahout and followed him through the woods. The rest that happened was only the result of her thoughts. Karnad challenges the word "Sin" and mocks at it. The play uncovered the viciousness and mercilessness of Indian culture which esteems ladies only to raise the family. The Mother Queen is always shown of expecting heir i.e. a grandson. She blesses the Queen – "May you beget a son whose greatness



blinds the eight directions." (Collected Plays 210) The Queen-Mother always loathes and insults the Queen, however when she hears the news about her daughter-in-law pregnancy, she unexpectedly turns into a perfect mother-in-law and shows affection. Her sudden changed behavior shocks Amritamati - The Queen, again she is similarly stunned when nobody approaches to help her or even to confide in her about her miscarriage. She feels quite insulted when her femininity and her poise are tested. The young queen outbursts in anger –

"Sometimes I've felt....I had to abort to prove to you I was pregnant. To show you the proof...." (Collected Plays 230)

Karnad seems to propose that marriage system is established only for the psychological contentment of the individuals.

The play unveils the social evil of Child-Marriage practice. Early marriage grabs away the innocence and virtue of a child under the loaded responsibilities and expectations of the whole family. The comment of King about the Queen needs notice here:

"She was still a child then. She knew practically nothing. She was under such strain to deliver a child. Her period was deferred by a few weeks and everybody went to town about her being pregnant. She was also carried away." (Collected Plays 215-216)

Socio-Cultural system with regards to male centric moral code is very much depicted with the remarkable lucidity and exactness by the writer in the play. In case if a woman is controlled sexually and stays quiet the manliness is defended, otherwise the confidence of the man flounders. When the King is declared impotent by his mother he was inflamed and disturbed and decides to take revenge on his wife. He starts to undress the queen in front of the Mahout to show him that she belongs to him and no one else. He screams as:

"Don't be afraid. Let him wake up. Let him see. What does it matter? Let the whole world see. We are coupled in the eyes of God. We need not be ashamed of anything. We must strip ourselves of any sense of

shame. Become naked like our Saviors." (Collected Plays 236)

The King overlooks the fact that the relation between a man and woman cannot be limited only to presumptuous beliefs but also to the feelings of the heart and needs of the body. The main reason behind his eagerness to offer the Goddess the dough is not truly based on the religious customs but also on his dual nature of mind. He wants to make the Mahout and the Queen experience the pain and also to make them learn that their association was a deception of a sacred relationship.

The Mahout is another remarkable character of the play and he serves as a balance between the indifferent King and the contemptuous old Queen. Though he is born in a low-caste, he is not embarrassed of his background instead he gains the adoration of everyone in the play with his practical insight and a proper understanding of the ordinary world. He may not have a face that is extraordinary but has an appealing voice that can comfort weeping souls and awaken the dormant desires. His fate of meeting with the Queen becomes coincidental and his frank nature, affable attitude and his ability to empathize her feelings, the knowledge of movements of body change the queen not only into an admirer but also a lover who cruises her ship directly against the limitations and regulations of an imperial life. The meeting of the Queen with the Mahout leaves a mesmerizing experience for both. The Mahout tries to explore the identity of the woman and fails to get the information. He uses his presence of mind making a very sharp observation:

"...You're no bazaar woman. I can see that. You are from the upper floors. Arid you haven't done a day's work. That's for sure. Those nails are for a dainty life." (Collected Plays 194).

The Mahout was not hesitant to reveal his true identity while the Queen is much deliberate of hiding her own. When the Mahout makes a right estimate of the Queen's background, she at once shirks and admits the fact that she is from a high society.

The Queen's act of covering her face makes him even more doubtful. But he also feels delighted to remember the amazing experience he had with the woman. He is artful in developing a



conversation and also attacks the treatment given to their community by high caste people in the society. He says that he is a low-caste mahout, the King's elephant attendant. But he is a man with great self-esteem and he is not guilty of his position. He makes us all understand the value of all low-born and low-caste people whose presence in this world take an essential role in the selfless being of these so-called incredible individuals. We find a harsh sting in what Mahout remarks:

“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 splendor. No processions. No kings! Ha!” (Collected Plays 196).

The people like Mahout and many others face identity crisis but are very influential in protecting and adding value to other's personality. The Mahout is glad of his low origin but still maintains integrity. He is a responsible individual and he does everything that he could to save the respect of the woman with whom he had the pleasure. When the King knocks on the temple door, he prepares himself to face the consequences but is shaken to see the Lord and his mother outside the sanctuary. He senses the danger and stays quite modest and cooks a story though in an artful manner. He begs the King to forgive him but that cannot be treated as his timidity. He is trembled to know that the lady with whom he went through the night was none other than the Queen; however, the next acts of Mahout show no regret and sadness. Instead, he boldly explains everything. He doesn't prefer to be quiet, he says:

“If I shut up, Your Majesty, how will you know? I mean...you must hear me out. You could have me beheaded. Cut to pieces. Trampled under an elephant's foot. But that would be wrong, sir. Very wrong. I didn't do anything. A bat flew into the elephant stables last night, so I came here to sleep for a night. And I was singing by myself alone. I do that often. And she came. I didn't know who she was. It was dark. I was sitting here,

singing, and she came in and she came to me and...” (Collected Plays 198).

Mahout's judiciousness is seen when he giggles to see the King offer a sacrifice of dough to the deity instead of a live fowl. His giggle symbolizes an insult of all high society people who blindly believe in rituals, conventions and have devised mean ways of appeasing gods and goddesses. The actions of the King and also of his mother are totally foolish and provide some relaxation in the boring atmosphere of the play. The playwright too attacks the might of the elite class. The Mahout is quite balanced and he neither has any hostility against the Queen nor against the King. Whatever he says, he says reasonably. He discovers that the King is incapable of understanding the actual needs of the Queen which makes his royal pomposity pointless. The Mahout, intoxicated though, turns into a witness to the episode for valor being shown by the King to impress the Queen of his unfathomable love. However, he becomes anxious and loses balance when the King attempts to rule over the Queen physically compelling her to strip and undress. The bustle and the fight between the couple stirs up the Mahout who blasts out in a violent attack of anger, he overcomes all obstacles and challenges the King of his fake love and his false advances:

“Enough I say. I've had enough. I won't put up with any more. The insults. The abuses-no more. Now pick up that toy of yours and get out of here. Out! You may be the royalty. You may cut me to pieces tomorrow. But tomorrow's tomorrow. But now I tell you what to do. Pick that up and get out of here.” (Collected Plays 237).

His reaction discloses that women need to be treated with respect and are not meant for exploitation. The Mahout acts rationally even though he receives lot of appreciation by the Queen. Though the Mahout is provoked by the Queen, loved and hated by the King himself, and shunned by the old queen the Mahout, the attendant of elephants is aware of his boundaries. He does not pass over the barrier and suggests the couple to take the Queen to a witch doctor and deal with her problem. He declares that he is leaving the town to allow the King and the Queen lead their life happily.



In the play *Bali: The Sacrifice*, we come across various instances of the prevailing shades of evils in the form of encouraging bribery by the rulers themselves gliding on the screen. The Queen tries to offer her necklace as an inducement to Mahout to keep silent, but he rebuts. The play also alludes all - extensive disorder and mutual animosity that result in the downturn and reduction of spirituality and internal reflection. The ruined state of temple shows the lack of interest of modern individuals in religious practices as they are much occupied in spending time in smoking, plundering, mating, drinking, gambling and other unethical deeds. The play introduces a sharp differentiation between the 'Conventionality' and 'Modernity' with the examples of its two-woman characters. The Old Queen is the believer of the fixed religious practices; whereas the Queen represents the rising awareness of modern Indian psyche. Amritamati (The life-giving elixir) is a lovely combination of thinking capacity and commonsense. Her virtue of heart did not permit her to sacrifice a cock made of dough at the cost of her marital bonding. She was unable to oppose her outpouring emotions and finally prefers to give up her own life so that it might stop the killing of various other lives. Anshuman Khanna writes on this episode,

"The play begins with her song that touches upon the consciousness of two different shades of life. The play ends also with her song. It is her journey through the play that ends with her death – a journey from the knowledge of apparent contradictions to the point of resolution in favor of life of conscience that deserves celebration." (52)

Thus, we notice that *Bali* is an evidence of experimental approach across a saga of myths. It displays a clash between the two diversified sects of philosophies – one based on spiritual traditional; other – upholding the rational views. The playwright has splendidly crafted the horizons of wrong supported by various religious promoters and their clients just to satisfy their personal interest. The religious Gurus are much acclaimed with great respect and adoration for their path of spirituality. But the actual situation is quite reversed to it. The so-called religious proponents are actually involved in assorted crimes and have endured through legal

skepticism and enquiries. There is an enormous list of such gurus who have been implicated of several horrifying crimes including rape, bribery, sexual molestation, etc. The play having a limited number of characters has aided the playwright to echo his voice of reason often.

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