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Unveiling cultural depths: A comparative study of rituals and symbolism in Girish Karnad's 'Sacrifice'

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Abstract

Girish Karnad, an outstanding, highly acclaimed and is among one of the notable playwrights of the younger generation, has given the rich and the remarkable contribution in the field of Indian English drama. He is popularly known as the great historical dramatists of contemporary Kannada stage and also actively worked in the world of Indian cinema as an actor, director and screenwriter, in Hindi and Kannada cinema, and has earned numerous awards. The narrative of "Bali: The Sacrifice" draws its inspiration from the myth of Cock of Dough. According to this myth, various Vedic gods exhibit preferences for different types of animal meat. For instance, Agni favors bulls and barren cows, Rudra prefers red cows, Vishnu opts for a dwarf ox, Indra leans towards a bull with droopy horns and a mark on its head, and Pushan favors a black cow. The play's theme is rooted in the thirteenth-century Kannada epic "Yashodhara Charite" by Janna, which, in turn, references an eleventh-century Sanskrit epic by Vadiraja and the ninth-century Sanskrit epic "Yashastilaka" by Somadeva Suri. The narrative delves into the clash between violence and non-violence, as well as Brahminism and Jainism. This exploration not only unravels the tensions within and between Hindu and Jain perspectives on sacrifice but also delves into the intertwined complexities of power, sexuality, and intention. Through the play, Bali: the Sacrifice, the writer tried to portray the issues of contemporary society that are still present in our society in the name of culture, religion and tradition. Multiple themes have been compiled to depict the issues between two different cultures and religions of Hinduism and Jainism.

Keywords: Brahmanism, Jainism, violence, non-violence, sacrifice, myth, culture, tradition etc.

Introduction

Girish Karnad, as a versatile genius and talented playwright, has enriched the Indian literary scene by his remarkable contribution to art, culture and drama and received international recognition because of his certain merits. He has employed the devices of dialogue, contrast parallelism and irony for character portrayal and also aims at reconciling paradoxes, psychological problems, dilemmas and conflicts experienced by the modern men and women in their different situations. Besides, he has successfully paraphrased some typical Indian expressions into pure English. Numerous authors, including R.K. Narayan, Omprakash Valmiki, Ruskin Bond, and Premchand, have portrayed the innocence of animals in their works. In the contemporary era, playwrights such as Badal Sikar, Vijay Tendulkar, Rabindranath Tagore, and Girish Karnad have brought a new level of creativity and depth to drama. They have demonstrated the rejuvenation of Indian drama in English by drawing inspiration from ancient drama, showcasing how myths and history can be potent tools for dramatizing present-day situations. In Rabindranath Tagore's "Sacrifice," the play explores conflicting interpretations of the Goddess Kali. One perspective envisions her as a wish-granter, requiring the sacrifice of animals for her favour, while the other views her as the embodiment of love and compassion, vehemently opposing the shedding of blood.

Girish Karnad's love for the theatre led him to embrace the role of a playwright in his early twenties. Throughout his career, he penned a total of 15 plays, with notable works including his debut, "Yayati," followed by others such as "Tughlaq," "Hayavadana," "Nagamandala," and concluding with his final piece, "Rakshasi Tangadi." Regarded as a renaissance figure in Kannada theatre, Karnad earned acclaim for his willingness to confront themes that were previously considered off-limits. His distinctive approach involved drawing inspiration from epics and other mythological texts, skilfully weaving allegorical references to shed light on contemporary issues and realities.

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Karnad's audacious storytelling breathed new life into theatre, providing audiences with thought-provoking insights into societal challenges. His plays, marked by thematic depth and narrative intricacy, stand as a testament to his artistic bravery and his commitment to pushing the boundaries of traditional storytelling. His legacy as a playwright transcends mere entertainment, as he used his craft to challenge norms, prompt reflection, and explore the complexities of the human experience. Karnad's ability to fuse traditional and modern elements in his works ushered in a new era for Indian theatre, solidifying his position as a luminary in the world of dramatic arts.

The play focuses on multiple themes like social representation, customs traditions between two different cultures, family drama, myth and rituals, religious and communal but here the aim of the present paper is to focus on the theme of sinful crime and sacrifice of innocent and muted animals. The theme of the play is animal sacrifice and the story tell that the sacrifice is ultimately a sacrifice, be it that of a living being or an animal made of flour, whether it is in the act of wielding a sword, not in who it is fired at. This subjective, nuanced and evocative analysis of violence is done by Girish Karnad on the basis of a legend he has taken from a Kannada epic of the thirteenth century. The concept of time and space traditional style of performance, the ability to transform space into many places are some qualities of Karnad, which can be discussed at great length. The story of the play interrogates the notion of violence about which the playwrights talks in an interview:

“It deals with the idea that violence is pervasive, lying just beneath the surface of our everyday behaviour and is often masked by conscious efforts. It also posits that human thought, intention and action are all interlinked. It debates the Jain notion that intended violence is as condemnable as the action itself. The mere thought of bloodshed or brutality can condemn one as much as the deed would. The play debates the conflict of faith.”

By writing the monologue, he has proved his genius that he can be successful in writing monologues and always underline the eternal conflicts of civilization, this play is no exception. Brahmins adopted animals of dough for sacrificial rituals. They adopted dough as it is edible and can be taken as Prasad of gods and goddesses. Though at some places in India, the statues of animals made of gold, silver and copper are offered in the temples, dough was used because an offering makes sense only if it is meant as food for gods and is, therefore cooked and consumed by the devotees. However, it is a fact that the majority of Indian Hindus reject animal sacrifice and the consumption of meat, aligning with the prevalent Hindu principle of ahimsa or nonviolence. This perspective is not widely shared among Balinese Hindus, as a significant number, ranging from students to high priests, in the contemporary era support animal sacrifice. They believe that this ritual contributes to the animal's rebirth in human form.

In the play "Bali: The Sacrifice," the dramatization revolves around the ritualistic act of transmuting real violence into an intention for violence. Karnad deviates from the original myth to highlight the connection between the brutality of the psyche and the subtle transformation of the sacrificial act. Through the depiction of the conflicting ideologies of Hinduism and Jainism, the playwright underscores the

universal prohibition of infidelity across all religions. People sacrifice animals to Goddess Kali, as Goddess Kali is considered in the scriptures as Rudhira Paana Priya, it means one who is fond of drinking blood. But here blood does not mean the blood of innocent animals but the demonic forces of nature called Asuras, sacrifice of human / animals is strictly prohibited in Hindu scriptures like- Vedas, Bhagavad Gita and other holy books like- Kabir bijak Gyan Ganga Jeene Ki Raha books etc. Kabir Das, a 15th-century Indian mystic poet and saint, whose writings influenced of Hinduism's Bhakti movement and his verses are found in Sikhism's scripture Guru Granth Sahib, Satguru Granth Sahib of Saint Garib Das and Kabir Sagar emphatically asserted the continuity or sameness of humans and animals in the middle ages. And it was not a matter of faith alone but of practical scientific reasoning with him and was unequivocal in expressing his belief about the equality of animals and humans.

“Beast meat and man meat are the same, both have blood that is red... For gods and goddesses of clay, you slaughter living beasts! If your God is real, why can't he go to the field and have his feast!” (Kabir, Bijak)”.

He is therefore critical of slaughtering of animals, even for religious rituals in the name of God and preached humane treatment of animals. This was a very radical idea for that time and to a great extent is a progressive idea even in the present times. Kabir was unequivocal in expressing his belief about the equality of animals and humans. In his view, this can only be achieved through 'Bhakti', devotion and affection of people towards God. It was quite clear that Kabir is also not in favour of having a hierarchical government which ends up oppressing people and reinforcing feudal structures of power.

The play intricately navigates the complexities of human relationships, particularly as Queen Amritamati grapples with conflicting emotions. Despite her commitment to her husband, she is unwilling to forsake the physical connection she shares with the Mahout. The portrayal of this intimate aspect is intensified to an extreme level, pushing it into the realm of illegality due to its extramarital nature. Girish Karnad, through this dramatic exploration, raises poignant questions about the conventional social institution of marriage.

In Karnad's narrative, marriage appears to lack inherent social validity and spiritual obligation. The playwright challenges the traditional notion that marriage is a sacred institution, instead positing it as a construct rooted in the convenience of societal norms. The storyline unfolds to reveal the Queen's adulterous relationship with the Mahout, an elephant keeper, in a secluded temple. Karnad employs a flashback technique to revisit pivotal moments from the King and Queen's childhood, offering multiple perspectives on the concept of sin.

The King, deeply troubled by his Queen's affection for an unconventional figure like the Mahout, grapples with the emotional toll. Through this exploration of forbidden love and societal norms, Karnad prompts reflection on the nature and foundations of marriage, suggesting that it may be more about societal convenience than genuine spiritual commitment. The play delves into the complexities of human connections, challenging preconceived notions about love, fidelity, and the institution of marriage.

Utilizing his skill and artistry, Karnad skillfully portrays the clash between two worlds and beliefs in his play, "Bali: The Sacrifice." The play features six songs, each reflecting aspects of Indian tradition, culture, beliefs, wishes, hopes, superstitions, and the overall Indian sense and sensibility. Commissioned and initially presented by the Haymarket Theatre in the U.K., the storyline follows a king who, devastated by the discovery of his queen's involvement with an elephant-keeper, resorts to sacrificing a cockerel to appease the Gods and avert potential consequences. However, being a follower of Jainism where non-violence is a fundamental principle, he grapples with the conflict between the sacrificial tradition and his faith's rejection of violence. In his desperation, he substitutes a dough bird, leading to unexpected consequences.

The dual moral code of the patriarchal system is questioned and the basic human nature is analysed. The play consists of only four characters, which can all be regarded as major and rounded characters. They are well moulded by the playwright with their own strong ideologies and values. They are- The King who is the only son of the Mother Queen, The Queen who is Jain, does not believe in gods and goddesses.

“Queen: I don't want to hurt her. She can live by her beliefs. But we are Jains. Our son will be a Jain. He will have to uphold the principle of compassion for all living beings, of non-violence. Should we allow a blood rite to mark his arrival. It would be terribly wrong.”

The Mother Queen embodies traditional values, demonstrating loyalty to her family and religious beliefs. She staunchly believes in religious rituals, convinced that they can ward off the negative influences of evil spirits. When the Queen interprets a suggestion that her miscarriage could be linked to their deviation from the sacrificial practices of the King's mother, she takes offense. Despite being raised in his mother's tradition, the King, too, remains drawn to the allure of sacrifice, sensing that there may be some inherent purpose in it.

“Queen: But now it concerns our child. What offerings will be considered worthy of a royal birth, do you think? (No reply.).

They say when you were born every inch of the earth for miles around was soaked in blood.”

The play also delves into alternative notions of sacrifice, particularly examining how a wife might perceive that, in order to meet societal and familial expectations, she has had to forgo the life she might have otherwise embraced. The Queen's belonging to Jainism made her firm in her decision not to surrender for sacrifice even at the cost of being blessed for a mother but her strong determination forced the king also to oppose animal sacrifice. Presents her broken heart to the king in the following way.

“Queen: Yes, you're right. I shouldn't be complaining about the scale. Just the thought. Of bloodshed. Even a single drop of blood.

I don't want it. Not in the name of our child.”

King (calmly): I know how you feel. But look at it this way. She has accepted the fact that we will not be party to

her violent rites. And she carries them out in her own separate shrine. In her shell. Let's leave it at that”

Another remarkable feature of Karnad's plays is that they have a socio-cultural concern despite being mystical and metaphysical. They show how Karnad is deeply rooted in his soil and how he evokes the sensibility of the present-day audience. The Queen becomes captivated by his coincidental presence, drawn to his candid nature, friendly demeanour, and his empathetic understanding of her feelings. His knowledge of bodily changes further transforms the Queen, turning her into not just an admirer but also a lover. She steers her ship directly against the limitations and regulations of an imperial life. When the queen is opposed to animal sacrifice and convinces her husband that he can never be part of animal sacrifice as he has converted himself to Jain dharma from Hindu Dharam, even he cannot think of bloodshed too. Meanwhile queen mother remarks,

“Mother: What do you know of violence? Or of pain? You seem so averse to blood that I wonder if you didn't prefer to remain a virgin. For many years I was childless. Then-one day-I became pregnant.”

Mahout, the fourth character of the play, is a low-caste elephant keeper, who is the representative of the masses among the royalty, staying in the temple because a bat has entered the stable. Despite being conscious of his perceived ugliness and frequently alluding to this physical flaw, he earns the admiration of everyone in the play through his practical insight and a deep understanding of the ordinary world. While he may lack an extraordinary face, his appealing voice has the ability to comfort weeping souls and awaken dormant desires. Well-versed in the humorous aspects of life, he embodies practicality and seizes opportunities without remorse. Serving as a balance between the indifferent King and the contemptuous old Queen, he defies any embarrassment about his low-caste background. This becomes evident in the conversations between the Queen and the Mahout within the play. The Mahout remarks;

“Mahout: I'll accept that I am not very good at certain things. Like counting. I was lucky I was born in my caste. We only have to deal with elephants-and the elephants don't mind an ugly, misshapen man-who can't count.”

He further curses his birth in following words

“I am so ugly? I was born on a full moon. There was an eclipse. As you know, the worst thing you can do to yourself is to be born during an eclipse. The sun or the moon-the god whose eclipse it is-is already in the grips of the demons. She was lying there on a torn piece of mat and she heard sparrows chirping. In the middle of the night? She looks up and what does she see?”

The encounter between the Queen and the Mahout creates a mesmerizing experience for both. The Mahout attempts to uncover the identity of the woman but is unsuccessful in obtaining the information. However, he relies on his quick-wittedness to make a keen observation. The Mahout and the Queen Mother embody the Apollonian and Dionysian

principles. "Bali" not only serves as an Indian word but also encapsulates an Indian belief. Jainism and Buddhism are not distinct religions but rather extensions of Hindu beliefs. Violence, though contrary to our commitment to non-violence, occasionally emerges in fleeting moments.

Conclusion

The myth prioritizes the morality of substitution over the direct depiction of violence, allowing violence a broader and more adaptable role by concealing its genuine essence. Rooted in numerous aspects of ancient epics, the play's characters and narratives retain relevance in the modern era. For instance, exploring the dichotomy between violence and non-violence in today's context could serve as a mythical lens to comprehend various phases of an individual's life. The play delves into themes of violence versus non-violence and the conflict between Brahmanism and Jainism. Particularly contentious is the issue of animal sacrifice, encompassing extensive ethical, political, and religious implication. To please their gods and goddesses, sacrifice of animals is an age-old tradition in Brahmanism, the Hindus used to offer animals like sheep, goat, buffalo, cock etc., but as soon as Jainism and Buddhism came into existence, they raised voice against the killings of animals and birds as offering for gods and goddess.

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