

BALI-THE SACRIFICE: RE-CONTEXTUALIZING THE PAST

Mudasir Ahmad Shah

Research scholar

Department of English

University of Kashmir, Srinagar,
Jammu and Kashmir

ABSTRACT

As a Postcolonial writer, Karnad evinces an uncanny ability to remake the past within contemporary vision. He holds up a mirror to the present incorporating elements from the past. Like African writers who use myths and legends to comment on their contemporary situations, Karnad has done a commendable job in dealing with the issues that need to be addressed for the betterment of this country. In this play Indian past is an important factor or has the central place around which the whole argument revolves. He has not only raised the issues of majority-minority religions but has also given vent to intra-religious problems like caste system. He wants people to shun the caste barriers and work collectively for the betterment of Indian nation. Although he delineates the issues of both inter-religious and intra-religious problems, he advocates a non-violent and need based ideology without giving privilege to any one of them. He is of the view that there is a need to learn lessons from the past as our past prefigures our present and myths resonate in modern experience.

In *Bali-The Sacrifice*, Karnad has again revisited the Indian past. He has selected an ancient Jain myth of the thirteen century—Kannad epic *YashodharaCharite* by Janna which refers back to a ninth century Sanskrit epic *Yashastilaka* by SomadevaSuri. In this short one-act play, Karnad offers a fresh perspective on rational, social, moral and religious structure of an individual's faith. In an interview, Karnad says:

It deals with the idea that violence is pervasive, lying just beneath the surface of our everyday behavior and is often masked by a conscious effort... 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. (Mukherjee 2006: 33)

Karnad debates the Indian culture which is full of complexities. In the play, we see Jainism and Hinduism against each other. The play in its social, moral and cultural ramifications presents a great philosophical thinking on the Indian tradition and ideological contents about values, moral conflicts and dilemmas. The play has four characters. Queen has a Jain faith and believes in non-violence. King has renounced Hinduism and accepted Jainism because of its philosophy of non-violence. Queen Mother is an upholder of Hindu tradition and believes in sacrifices. Mahout is a low caste man and looks after king's elephants.

In the play, we see two faiths being practised in one family. This creates havoc in the family and the whole family set-up gets destroyed. The play becomes a site for struggle between personal authority and popular culture of cruelty. In the beginning of the play, we see Queen not alienating herself with the Rigvedic practice of animal sacrifices. She says to her husband:

All these years I've been pretending that it does not exist. That I couldn't hear the bleat of sheep being taken out at night. For slaughter... You sleep through it. You've grown up with those sounds. I haven't. They wake me up— Keep me awake. But I've pretended I didn't mind. (Karnad 2006: 212)

Karnad dramatizes the Rigvedic practice of animal sacrifices where “the animals are graded according to their occasion. Poultry is offered at daily rites. Sheep, goats for more important rituals” (212). The Queen in the play goes for an illicit relationship because she is pressurized by the Queen Mother for not being able to give birth to a child. But this moral debauchery is not committed by the Queen intentionally but unintentionally. In order to avoid frightful consequences of this act, the Queen Mother decides to sacrifice hundred fowls to placate her goddess. Karnad criticizes the violent tradition of the Indian culture through the speech acts of his characters. The following conversation between husband and wife shows this:

King: You know that's been a family tradition.

Queen: Weren't human beings also offered in sacrifice to the goddess once?

King: Yes. But that was generations ago.

Queen: So you see, a tradition can be given up. Or at least changed.
(212-213)

Karnad wants us to understand and think over the dynamics of Indian socio-religious culture “where the spirit of religion is often relegated and rituals are highlighted in individuals belief in superstition and personal ego” (Nayak 2011: 74). Queen Mother as a symbol of past tradition feels as if she owes it to her ancestors. Queen does not accept the tradition of sacrifices especially on the birth of his child. She says:

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 wrong... Terribly wrong! (213)

If the child can be taken as a symbol of Indian future, then Karnad definitely does not want violent rites to prevail in the days to come. However, in a multicultural and multi-religious country like India, it is a hard and vibrant issue to negotiate between violence and non-violence. Queen Mother wants to take forward the violent tradition and says, “You are denying me the right to my worship” (214). Karnad presents the dilemma of the King who is caught in the crossfire between two religions. Though brought up as a Kshatriya, the King has converted to

Jainism on humanitarian grounds. The reasons given by the King can be understood from this conversation:

King: Try and be sensible, Mother. No one is stopping you from worshipping your goddess or from your own form of worship. But I am a Jain—a Jain King. I cannot have his birth greeted with the infliction of death.

Mother: You were not born a Jain. You were born my son. But you betrayed me and my faith. Instead of choosing the woman and bringing her to your faith, you chose hers.

King: I accepted the faith because I found truth in it and compassion for the world in pain. I don't want to add to the pain. I will not let anyone do it. Certainly not in the name of my son. (214)

In the circumstances of this rivalry between the two religions, the King persuades both the Queen and the Queen Mother for the sacrifice of cock made of dough. The Queen does not want to interfere in the Queen Mother's belief in the sacrifices. She says, "I don't want to hurt her. She can live by her beliefs..." (213). The Queen Mother also does not budge away from her belief and makes clear that: "I shall live away from the palace, in a corner of my own. And there, I shall live as I please. With my gods. My sacrificial animals. No further interference from you two" (215). The Mahout performs the role of a catalyst and relieves the Queen from various stresses. He warns the Queen and the King of the consequences of sacrificing the cock of dough. He says to them, "Stop playing with these things, these forces... These things can eat into you" (238). The husband and wife do not listen to Mahout's call. They go ahead in their act to perform the sacrifice. When the King plunges sword into the cock of dough, the cock begins to crow. The Queen at last looks at the King in hatred and she "presses the point of blade on her womb and impales herself on the sword" (240). Therefore, the violence in thought has led to the violence in action. In an interview, Karnad says:

The mahout is the catalyst who releases the repressions of the different characters in the play, especially the Queen... She is seduced by his music and in forgetting all inhibitions and barriers of decorum, commits adultery in thought even before their physical union. Likewise she is shocked to realize that, not necessarily through explicit behavior, one can be violent in intent or thought. (Mukherjee 2006: 50)

Karnad discusses the violence that is perpetuated in the name of religion or faith. He has beautifully portrayed the Indian culture with its negative and positive aspects. He has used the context of the play for "integrating religious communities, sects and beliefs for nation building" (Nayak 2011: 74). It is evident from the King's statement: "There will be no bloodshed. We'll compromise" (225). Even when Queen Mother and Queen compromise for the sacrifice of cock of dough, it costs Queen's life. It implies that violence in thought is as condemnable as the violence in action.

Karnad wants to free the nation from religious fanaticism which creates hatred and dissensions in human relationships. He has not provided any solution in the play. Karnad was influenced by Brecht's 'alienation effect' where audiences are expected to come to their own understanding of the situation. So, like Brecht, Karnad debates the issue of conflict in faith between violence and non-violence and leaves it to the audience to come to their own understanding. It gets clear from Karnad's preface to this play where he praises the "astuteness

and sensitivity of Mahatma Gandhi who saw... clearly the importance of non-violence to the cultural and political survival of India” (Quoted in Roy 2006: 283). Karnad wants us to shun the notions of violence. Karnad retrieves India’s conflicting religious and cultural ethos, and has successfully debated various issues before us.

Work Cited

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