

Girish Karnad's *Yayati* and *Bali: The Sacrifice*: A Study in Female Sexuality

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Gender issues seem to be suffused in most of the plays of Girish Karnad. In his plays, Karnad very dexterously pictures the condition of a typical Indian female, ruled by the patriarchal order bounded by tradition, but whose spirit remains unbounded. Although the playwright is not an out and out feminist like Henrik Ibsen, the playwright of *The Doll's House*, but the problems of a female in a prejudiced, biased patriarchal society are referred to in most plays by the playwright. The issue of the gender-bias in society and the oppression of women by the patriarchal order happen to form an important part of Karnad's plays. At the same time, Karnad depicts women enthused with feminism, fighting the unjust norms of the patriarchal order. Also more often than not such a direct encounter with patriarchy leads the women to death or disaster. The present paper undertakes to study the treatment of female in two plays of Karnad based on myths, namely *Yayati* (1961) and *Bali: The Sacrifice* (1980; rendered into English in 2004).

Karnad has borrowed the myth of *Yayati* from the "Adiparva" of the *Mahabharata*. *Yayati* re-tells the age-old story of the king who in his longing for eternal youth does not hesitate to usurp the youth and vitality of his son. Karnad takes liberty with the myth and weaves complex dimensions into the plot borrowed from the *Mahabharata*. To the mythical story of *Yayati* he adds new characters and alters the story-line so as to deepen its connotative richness which gives it contemporary appeal. In Karnad's *Yayati*, king *Yayati* is married to *Devyani*, an "Aryan" princess and during the course of the play, develops an illicit relationship with *Sharmishtha*, an "Anarya", and openly expresses his desire to marry her. *Puru*, here figures as the son of another of the king's spouse, who again like *Sharmishtha*,

comes from the “Anarya” or the “rakshasa” clan. The two novel characters introduced by Karnad in the plot are, Puru’s wife Chitrlekha and the maid confidant, Swarnalata. Karnad invests new meaning and significance for contemporary life and reality by exploring the king’s motivations. In the *Mahabharata*, Yayati understands the nature of desire itself and realizes that fulfillment neither diminishes nor eliminates desire. In the drama, Karnad makes Yayati confront the horrifying consequences of not being able to relinquish desire.

Bali: The Sacrifice was first brought out into Kannada in 1980 by the name of *Hittina Hunja*, but was not translated in English at that time. The source of the play is an ancient Kannada epic, *Yashodhara Charite*, which itself draws on several other sources. The play is one that has multiple ideological issues. Though based on an ancient Kannada epic, the story, characters and incidents are often overshadowed by overt ideological concerns as relevant today as they were many centuries ago. The play is a treatise on the viability of violence and non-violence in the present scenario. The plot of *Bali: The Sacrifice* comprises of four characters, the Queen, the King, the Queen-Mother and the Mahout. The Queen is a Jain and she marries a Hindu King. Out of love for his spouse, the King converts into Jainism but is unable to come to terms with the new faith. Jainism dictates non-violence and Hinduism believes in the practice of sacrifice or *bali*, which means violence. The Queen-Mother is a devout Hindu who believes in sacrifices. The King vacillates from one end to the other, from Hinduism to Jainism, from the Queen-Mother to his wife but is unable to come to terms with any faith. In the climactic event of the play, the Queen enchanted by the beautiful voice of a low caste ugly, Mahout, the Elephant-Keeper, mates with him. Soon after the incident comes to the knowledge of the King and the Queen-Mother. Being a Jain, the King cannot indulge into violence by killing the Mahout and avenging the wrong of desecrating the sanctity of marital bond. The question which haunts the King and the Queen-Mother is how to placate the gods and goddesses for this act of sin. Finally the Queen-Mother tells the King that to

placate for the sin committed, a sacrifice has to be made. The Queen does not want to indulge in this mock sacrifice but is forced to by the King. Since no real blood can be shed, a dough-cock is decided to be sacrificed, which suddenly comes alive. The sacrifice of the dough cock turns into the sacrifice of the Queen herself and she dies. The question posed is whether intended violence is as offensive as real violence—whether the thought of mock-sacrifice is equivalent to actual sacrifice?

In *Hittina-Hunja*, the Kannada version of *Bali*, as in the original myth, the Queen did not actually commit adultery but only intended to, while in Karnad's *Bali*, she actually does commit adultery.

(a) The Oppression of Women

In *Yayati*, the issue of gender is highlighted especially in the way Yayati treats women in the play. C.N. Ramachandran feels that in Karnad's plays choice and consequences of choice were dissociated and the one who suffered the most due to the choices of others was always a woman. In most plays of Karnad, "the worst sufferers are women . . . who are caught up in a whirlpool of Hindu patriarchy, and are sucked down helplessly." (Ramachandran 28)

Karnad, in order to present the situation of a newly-wed female (had she been in the original mythical story) adds the character of Chitrlekha which throws more light on the gender-bias of society.

The desires of a woman are always curbed in a patriarchal order; here it makes little difference whether she belongs to a high class/ caste or a low class/ caste. Chitrlekha in *Yayati* is an Aryan princess, the protagonist in *Bali: The Sacrifice* is a queen and Vishakha in *The Fire and the Rain* is a Brahmin; all these women belong to a higher social order but suffer at the hands of the unjust patriarchal order. The character of Chitrlekha as has already been said is Karnad's creation. "Through her Karnad explores the futility of being born a princess who finds reality too much to bear and kills herself". (Raju 84)

Chitrlekha suffers first at the hands of her husband, Puru, who does not think of his wife even once before acceding to the supreme sacrifice of giving up his youth and vitality to serve his father's idiosyncrasies which serves no purpose but to fill up the void in his own life. Chitrlekha finds it hard to live up to the expectations of a royal Aryan woman or to put it in general terms, of an Indian wife who accepts all the decisions of her husband with a smile and never dares to question his authority. When the maid confidant Swarnlata informs Chitrlekha that Puru has accepted his father's curse of old age, the latter has the courage to say—"Do you know I had greatly wronged the Aryan prince. I thought of him as a coward and cursed my fate for being his wife. But I am indeed very lucky Swarna!" (Karnad, *Yayati* 73)

But as soon as Puru confronts her and she sees her husband transformed from a youth full of vigour into a shriveled old man, all her idealism withers away and she cries out in terror and panic—"Don't come near me...go away from here...Don't touch me!" (75)

Yayati comes to picture and consoles Chitrlekha and asks her to behave in a fashion befitting a royal princess. Here the schism between the behaviour expected of a man and a woman in a traditional Indian society surfaces up. While Yayati flouts the rules of morality with ease, develops an illicit relationship with Sharmishtha and even has the cheek to tell his wife in her face that he would marry another woman, the newly married Chitrlekha is expected to exhibit devotion and morality and remain a dutiful wife.

Chitrlekha, unwilling to submit to the patriarchal order and with no hope of emancipation from the mesh, commits suicide. She feels her life is a waste and there is no point in going on with it. Her anguish is expressed in the following speech:

Neither will you return Puru's youth nor will you accept me! . . . Of what use am I to your garland of victories? All of you have achieved your objectives. Who needs me now? You have your youth; Pururaj has his self-sacrifice, but what am I to do? (87)

She expresses the plight of women in Indian society who find themselves completely

out of place in a world ruled by men. Finally Chitrlekha commits suicide, rather the society forces her to commit suicide like it had forced Padmini in *Hayavadana* to perform *sati*, Nittlai in *The Fire and the Rain* to be murdered and the Queen in *Bali: The Sacrifice* to sacrifice herself.

The death of Chitrlekha makes Sharmishtha comment at the exploitative patriarchal set-up, which crushes and oppresses women and offers them not even an infinitesimal hope of emancipation. Sharmishtha accuses Yayati of Chitrlekha's death—"This is the foundation of your future life: One woman [Chitrlekha] has become a ghost; the second [Swarnalata] mad; and the third [Sharmishtha] a fallen woman." (88)

A very significant portion of the play is devoted to the study of the decisions of the patriarchal set-up that expects women to surrender to the will of the male decision makers without protest. This fact is further illustrated through another relationship enunciated in the play: the Swarnalata episode. Swarnalata was jilted by her husband who thought that she had a relationship with a Brahmin boy before their marriage. Swarnalata tried her best to prove her innocence to her husband but failed. His husband became miserable and Swarnalata who loved her husband very much, could not bear his condition. She decided to give him peace of mind by lying to her that indeed the Brahmin boy had violated her. This freed her husband of the dilemma and he went away never to return. The narrative reiterates the concept of chastity and virginity which holds a place of prominence in the Indian society. A woman whose virginity has been violated is looked down upon, but the men are never called to question. Sita in *The Ramayana* too had to take an ordeal to prove her innocence and Rani in *Naga-Mandala* was also expected to testify herself at the behest of her indulgent husband in front of the whole village. Swarnalata's narrative once again scrutinizes the patriarchal norms of the society that expects a woman to prove her innocence. She is never taken on her own worth.

(b) Condition of Women Unaltered by Caste/ Class/ Race

In both *Yayati* and *Bali*, it is very evident that social standing (caste/ class/ race) hardly seems to affect the condition of the woman. Chitrlekha is an Aryan princess, born into a royal family and coming from a privileged clan, the Aryans. Despite her caste and class superiority, she has to undergo oppression and suppression at the hands of men. She finally commits suicide for she sees no other escape from the unjust patriarchal order, where she has to unduly repress her feelings and desires in the name of *pativrata* (dutiful and dedicated wife).

In the same play, there is another character Swarnalata, the maid confidant, who comes from a low class and who too like Chitrlekha does not receive the love of her family and husband, because the latter believes her to be unchaste. A woman in Indian society is considered good only if she is chaste. Though Swarnalata is chaste, she cannot make her husband believe her and finally in order to free her husband from the dilemma, she falsely acquiesces to the lie.

Devyani and Sharmishtha, both come from royal family, but the former is an “Aryan” princess while the latter an “Asura” or an “Anarya” princess. Sharmishtha is made to serve Devyani, but Devyani’s condition is no better; her husband seems more interested in Sharmishtha than her and finally she leaves her family out of a feeling of insult. Thus she too, like Sharmishtha becomes deprived of the security of family and love.

In *Bali*, the 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 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.

(c) The New Woman

Chitrlekha in *Yayati*, rebels against the unjust and gender-biased norms and strictures of the Indian patriarchal society. Though she finally ends up committing suicide, she becomes a vehicle to demand the rights of a woman, which are so easily crushed in the patriarchal order.

Chitrlekha does not give in to Yayati's persuasion to accept her husband's old age nonchalantly, and stands unmoved and unconvinced. Then Yayati exercises his authority as a king and as a father-in-law and orders her to accept her decrepit husband. To this, Chitrlekha who has by that time taken her stand as a rebel—a rebel against the patriarchal set up and the rituals which treat women not as subjects but as objects, replies with ferocity:

You are the one who has taken my husband near the funeral pyre; not I. And on the top of it you have come to preach to me! Without understanding my grief you are giving me lectures! What have you done ? You have got an idiot as your son on whose shoulders you have transferred the burden of your sins and then you come to give me lectures on duties of a female as a woman and wife! (81)

Yayati asks Chitrlekha to become a great woman and rise above petty considerations—"Be extraordinary Chitrlekha, you should become extraordinary." (83) Female for the Eastern and for that matter to the Western world could not have any other façade than these two—she is either elevated to the level of goddess—the cult of perfect *Tulsis* and *Parvatis* of our recent tele-serials, sacrificing all for their children and husband or denigrated as whores—the immaculate vamps of our films, oozing out enormous negative energy. It seems that womanhood could have no other façade. The same is the case here. The selfish king wants a supreme sacrifice from a young newly married princess while he himself indulges in sensual pleasures, unabashed. In *Naga-Mandala* too, Rani was brought to the Village Council by her indulgent husband as a whore to whom punishment had to be meted out for her adultery. She is only accepted back as a goddess by the villagers. Indian society fails to accept woman as a human being with natural desires. She cannot win people's hearts

with love but only by performing miracles and being a goddess.

So is the case with Chitrlekha who is expected to forgo all her desires, her needs— emotional and sexual, and become a *devi* of supreme sacrifice. But Chitrlekha crosses the limits of all the so-called “morality” and hypocrisy and claims directly for her sexual rights. She says that since Yayati has taken her husband’s youth, he should also take his place in her life. This would ensure that she would bear the child of the Bharata family. She declares that in choosing Puru, she “had chosen his youth...The qualities that I had chosen in him are not present in him any longer...instead, you possess those qualities now. . . .” (85)

Yayati is shocked and accuses Chitrlekha for harbouring such “low” thoughts. Though he himself is not ashamed to delve in sensual pleasures with his consorts, he expects a young girl to become an epitome of resistance and penance. Unable to see any escape from the trap closing in around her, Chitrlekha is desperate and finding no escape from the patriarchal order, she commits suicide rather than leading a life of oppression.

Karnad’s female seems to have marked an apogee in *Bali*. For the first time the emboldened female desires seem to cut through the patriarchal order unabashed and unashamed. In *Bali*, femininity has become bold, assertive and blatantly selfish. The female here, voiced through the character of the Queen, has laid bare the inner recesses of her heart, and more importantly of her body, her need for flesh, her desire for sexual gratification for its own sake and not as conscious attempts to produce children, have come to the fore. The sexual ferocity and vibrancy of the audacious female is referred to in the play in this conversation:

MAHOUT:...But I tell you. I have known a few women. They say there are six types of women...

KING (gravely): And what about the seventh?

MAHOUT (stumped): I only thought there were six.

KING: No one’s written about her. While she sinks her teeth into the man and drinks blood, plucks his entrails like strings, the man’s head only laughs and sings. (Karnad, *Bali*. 232)

The Queen seems to testify Karnad's statement that "if womanhood finds fulfillment in love that happens to be outside marriage, why should that be considered wrong ? Radha's love for Krishna was such." (Mukherjee 43)

The Queen in *Bali: The Sacrifice* has close parallels with the woman protagonist in Terence Rattigan's *The Deep Blue Sea* (1952) where a wife of a judge belonging to a high class, determinedly breaks social rules by having a passionate affair with a bluff, down-at-heel RAF officer and by desperately attempting suicide.

While Rani in *Naga-Mandala* and Padmini in *Hayavadana* indulge in an extra-marital relationship, they do not express their desires openly. By supernatural aid, both these women are able to satiate their desires. But the Queen in *Bali* is unembarrassed, bold and resolute. She has the cheek to leave the King lying next to her and slip away from the palace, past the gardens, and make her way to a ruined temple to mate with an Elephant-keeper, a man from a low-class/ caste at the middle of the night and then confront her husband in the face and refuse to profess guilt and to atone for it through a propitiatory ritual. She describes her love-making to her husband as natural, spontaneous and "beautiful". She says; "I wanted 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." (Karnad, *Bali*. 235)

Bali: The Sacrifice is a treatise on the choice between non-violence and violence. The Queen takes the non-violent stand. She is a Jain and sacrifice is strictly prohibited in her religion. But her refusal to sacrifice the cock of dough stems not so much from her non-violence 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." (235)

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." (33)

Although the Queen does make excuses for her extramarital sexual encounter and boldly tells the King about it, she is clever and crafty enough to manoeuvre and manipulate the patriarchal order and win the situation to her advantage. Till the time she could not conceive, she did not make any exquisite demands but as soon as she became sure of her pregnancy, and became aware that she was carrying the heir of the royal family in her womb, she used it as a tool to win her husband on her side to humiliate her mother-in-law. She intelligently asks him to remove the shed of animals, which was the Queen-Mother's property for the exercise of her devotional practices, from the palace precincts because she could not bear the thought of animals being taken for sacrifice—"You sleep through it. You've grown up with those sounds. I haven't. They often wake me up—keep me awake. But I've pretended I didn't mind." (Karnad, *Bali*. 212)

In *Bali*, it appears as though the woman has emboldened enough to openly express her desire. At the same time, she knows how to preserve her identity and breaks the centuries long patriarchal custom to convert into her husband's religion. Her power can be acknowledged from the fact that she makes her husband convert into her religion, thus thrashing the norms of patriarchy.

(d) The Mahout: A Symbol of Female Liberation

S. Subash Chandran asserts that in *Bali*, the non-violent saviour and the blood-thirsty goddess, representing the Apollonian and the Dionysian order respectively seem to have their earthly emissaries in the form of the Queen-Mother and the Mahout, whose mission is to continue waging war in human heart and mind. The Queen-Mother has an uncanny way of realizing the truth while the divine music of the Mahout can mesmerize its listeners. (299) By mating with the Mahout, the Queen feels herself liberated from the bondage of patriarchy

imposed by the Apollonian order. She, by communion with the Mahout, lets the Dionysian principle rule supreme which emancipates her from hackneyed patriarchal traditions.

In *Naga-Mandala*, the Naga liberates Rani from a world of sterility to that of liveliness and fecundity. The Mahout here emerges as the Queen's saviour. Burdened for fifteen years to bear a child for the royal throne, amidst the mock whispers and the giggling of the palace maids, the ridicule of the Queen-Mother and the desperation of her husband, the Queen has completely forgotten the creative aspect of her sexuality. It has only become coterminous with the birth of the child and the barren Queen's all endeavours were focused at childbirth. As she reveals in her talk with the king:

QUEEN: Can you men even imagine what it feels like? To pretend you are unaware of their gaze as they scrutinize the roundness of your belly, the stain on your thigh! Line after line of carrion crows, watching, waiting, ready to caw at the palmful of blood that spurted. And spurt it did—every month—every bloody month. How I hated myself when that happened. (Karnad, *Bali*. 211)

But the Mahout comes as a saviour whose divine, inebriated voice enchants the Queen far-off from her palace to a ruined temple with “absent deity” and only the “feet surviving”. The presiding deity here appears to be the Mahout—the representative of the Dionysian aspect of life who rejuvenates the Queen, fills her with warmth and gratifies her without any burden of conceiving. How the Queen desires for sex for the pure pleasure of it, is evinced in her following conversation with the King:

QUEEN (*suddenly laughs, tousles her hair*): Yes, I can. For you. You could have taken another wife. You didn't.

KING: Of course I didn't.

QUEEN: Sometimes I wished you had.

KING: You did.

QUEEN: Yes, purely for bearing children. Then I could make love to you—for its own sake—to make love. You don't know how I have pined for that. And now I can look forward to it. (211)

The traditional Indian woman is burdened with the idea of bearing a child, more especially a son, for her family. A barren woman in an Indian society is looked down upon.

Women themselves have a deep-rooted notion to bear an heir for their family. But here emerges a modern woman, unfettered and free who wishes to make love merely for pleasure and for its own sake.

The women in the aforementioned plays 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 did Chitrlekha in *Yayati* and 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. Chitrlekha and the Queen from superior class/ race, and Swarnalata and Sharmishtha from the lower class/ caste/ race, undergo suffering. 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 pessimistic message that 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.

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