

Intricacies of Manhood in Girish Karnad's *Bali: The Sacrifice*

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Abstract

Girish Karnad through Bali: The Sacrifice shows the possibility and consequences of challenging established system. Bali: The Sacrifice also projects two different perceptions of manhood in two different religious cults, namely, Hinduism and Jainism. Jainism doesn't believe in violence. Even intended violence is condemned in Jainism, let alone the actual act of violence. Girish Karnad complicates the matter by adding complexities of sexuality to this fundamental difference between the two religions. Karnad shows the King as 'impotent'. King's conversion from Hindu to Jain religion and his impotency has ruined his life. He is a king but cannot use arms. He is a husband but cannot satisfy his wife. He is a son but cannot fulfill his duty as a son towards his mother. All these are the consequences of his transgression of the principle of hegemonic masculinity. King suffers because he is being judged by the standards set by the traditional society.

Key Words: Manhood, Masculinity, Hegemonic Masculinity, Jainism

Bali: The Sacrifice is the English translation of the Kannada play *Hittina Hunja* (1980). The play is translated by Girish Karnad himself. Source of the play is the thirteenth century Kannada epic, *Yashodhara Charite*, by Janna. The play was first presented at the Haymarket Theatre, Leicester, on 31 May 2002 and published later in 2004 as *Two Plays*. It is a story of a Hindu King converted to Jainism to marry a Jain Queen and its consequences on the King's masculinity. It is also a narration of how one suffers when he transgresses hegemonic masculinity. It is also a record of the masculine concept of two different religions in India, and the consequences one has to face when one slightly changes to behave according to these concepts. It is a story of psychological turmoil and suffocation of a male caught

between his duty as a King, a husband and a son. The King's impotency and his challenge to hegemonic masculinity adds to his suffering.

The play starts in the middle of a night in a dilapidated temple wherein a Mahout –an elephant-keeper and the Queen are engaged in sexual intercourse. The Queen has come to the temple after hearing the sweet voice of the Mahout. She satisfies her sexual hunger. The King has seen all this by sitting on the stairs of the temple.

The King has accepted Jain religion – the Queen's religion – by leaving his own Hindu religion aside, out of his love for the Queen and the truth he found in the principles of Jain religion, such as compassion and non-violence. In order to satisfy the Gods, the Queen Mother (who is a devoted follower of Hindu religion) is offering a hundred fowl to goddess in sacrifice to keep away from her wrath. As a Jain, the Queen is strongly against the animal sacrifices.

Ultimately, the Queen Mother decides to sacrifice a cock of dough as a substitute for living fowl and, somehow, the Queen agrees to the sacrifice. When the King and the Queen try to plunge the sword into the cock, the cock begins to crow. The Queen starts laughing and tries to feed grain to the dough cock. Screaming, the King picks up the dough and squashes it into a mass. The Queen picks up the sword in her hand and lunges at the King to stab him. They stare at the sword in her hand. Cock crows outside indicating dawn. Karnad suggests two endings to the play. He leaves it to the actors to explore any of these endings. Either the Queen could stab the King or, repelled by her own violence, kills herself with the sword.

The play focuses on two different ideologies of two different religions regarding masculinity, violence, and sexuality. Masculinity varies according to religion and culture. Hindu culture, the most dominant culture of India, has been shaping minds of millions of people regarding what is masculine and what is not masculine, explicitly or implicitly. For Indian psyche, King has to be brave, courageous, often has many wives, strict, commanding, violent, stoic, unemotional, and powerful. According to the Hindu culture, a King's duty is to protect his subjects, invade others' territories, to expand his Kingdom, fight wars only to win, hunt animals to showcase his bravery, and so on. Thus, violence is an indispensable part of his duty as a king. One or the other way, King has to indulge in violence if he has to be a successful king. The King's characteristics and duties are stamped on every Indian child through various means.. As a child, the King tells the Queen that,

KING. Why should a king solve riddles? He must rule. He must fight wars. He must make proclamations. He has other things to do. (90)

On the contrary, Jainism doesn't allow violence. Intention of violence is not allowed in Jainism, let alone the act of violence; whereas, characteristics such as, keeping control on one's sensual organs, strictly following non-violence, not even intending violence, being compassionate to every living creature, etc., are regarded masculine in Jainism. What is

regarded masculine in Hindu religion is not regarded masculine in Jain religion. In Hindu religion, King is supposed to be brave and in order to prove his bravery he has to hunt lions and tigers – the bravest of the brave animals. But Jain religion, based on non-violence, doesn't allow killing of animals, so this is regarded as non-masculine. As a child, the King kills a bird with a stone to prove his bravery, and thereby his masculinity; the Queen doesn't like this killing. Actually the King had killed the bird to please the Queen. As said earlier, scriptures shape the psyche of both men and women in India. In Hindu religion according to *Manusmruti* it is the husband's duty to safeguard wife's chastity to produce clean, pure progeny. Wife's chastity becomes a criterion to judge the husband's masculinity. It is so ingrained in Indian psyche that yielding to the societal pressures God Rama had to banish Sita in order to prove her chastity. Wife is regarded as the property of husband and it is the husband's duty to look after her and her 'purity'. If he fails to keep control over his wife, he is regarded non-masculine. Men often keep control over their wives through violence. Male violence in marital relationship is considered essential and even desirable.- So, beating wife is one of the tenets of hegemonic masculinity. Some sort of general agreement exists in the society regarding the male behaviour in a particular situation. There are ways of behaviour to act manly in a particular situation. If wife commits adultery, as per the hegemonic masculinity, either she is killed or thrown out of the house. The Queen Mother in the play asks the King to "...cut her to pieces...feed her to the wolves and vultures...Kill the harlot and her lover." The King does nothing of the kind perhaps because of his strict adherence to the principles of non-violence. It may also be attributed to his guilt resulting from his inability to satisfy the Queen. But in the eyes of the society, failing to control his wife and doing nothing to punish her (cutting her to pieces, killing), the King has demonstrated his weakness, effeminacy. So, he becomes vulnerable to further exploitation. The Queen Mother insults the King saying,

MOTHER. What kind of a man are you? You have lost your manhood.
You impotent.... (108)

On top of that she contemptuously spits on his face. This is the worst kind of insult a man can face from a woman. This insult is almost more severe than death itself for any man.

Man's masculinity is validated only when he is able to produce progeny. As Mahout says, "a man of dough" cannot 'satisfy' the Queen. Perhaps, social pressure to produce an heir to the royal family and the King's inability to produce progeny, might have lead the Queen to choose a 'macho' like Mahout over the compassionate, affectionate, gentle, trusting, non-violent, and socially powerful but 'impotent' King. Karnad here seems to go with hegemonic masculinity by letting the Queen choose violent, sexually aggressive and experienced, courageous and bold Mahout regardless of his way of thinking and social status and caste. Violence, womanizing, heterosexuality and bravery mark Indian hegemonic

masculinity. Mahout has had plenty of women. He is violent, short tempered, and has “beaten women black and blue”. He has a muscular body and has “knocked the teeth of a couple of fellows out!” He drags and throws the Queen into the corner to moan. The Queen has never experienced this. Mahout says to the Queen when she says she has hurt him by almost scratching his skin off in the intercourse,

MAHOUT. That’s all right. I liked it. I like everything about bed. Everything. That’s why I am good. I am good. Aren’t I? Better than your husband? (78)

The Queen doesn’t think of her act as adultery nor does she repent over her act.

QUEEN. ... I feel fuller. Richer. Warmer. But not ashamed. Because I didn’t plan it. It happened. And it was beautiful. (119)

Tortured by this insult to his manliness, the King tries to prove his masculinity by forcing sex on the Queen in the temple itself in the presence of the Mahout. This impotent fury of the King is nothing but an attempt to cope with the existing toxic hegemonic masculinity.

Apart from his duty as a husband and a King, the King in the play is further tormented because of his duties as a son. King is entangled between his duty as a son and as a husband. Both the women in the play adhere to their religious ideologies so much that it has become a herculean task for the King to balance his roles as a son and a husband. Being a man, he can’t even show his suffering to any of the women in the play. In the power struggle between the mother and the wife, who represent the Hindu and Jain belief respectively, the King has to suffer. Whenever he tries to please his wife he unintentionally hurts his mother and vice versa. Both women represent totally different ideas and beliefs. Even if he wishes, he cannot stop his mother from sacrificing animals. He has to make alternative arrangements outside the palace for the Mother and her sacrificial animals. Still, the Queen is not satisfied because every word about the sacrifice makes her angry. The Mother Queen knows that the more the Queen will refuse to the sacrifice the more the King will suffer. She says,

MOTHER. Twist the knife in his wound. Let him flagellate himself, revel in self-hatred. He is the offering, don’t you see? Make him bleed. It’ll please the gods. (116)

Sometime later she says again: “[t]wist the knife in his wound, let him suffer, make him bleed” (122).

The King’s conversion to the Jain religion has deprived him of a special weapon of hegemonic masculinity, i.e., violence. But at the end both, the King and the Queen indulge in violence. The King indulges into violence by trying to force himself on the Queen without her consent. The Queen also turns to violence in her act of picking up the sword and lunging at the King to stab him. Karnad has deliberately left the end of the play to actors’ choice. He

gives two endings to the play; alternatively “the Queen could stab the King or repelled by her own violence” she kills herself. Ultimately both the Queen and the King turn to violence. In any of the endings it is the King who is going to suffer the most severely. In the first ending the King is to be murdered by the Queen and in the second ending the King has to live alone by losing his beloved wife and tolerating the insults on his manliness from the society.

Karnad in *Bali: The Sacrifice*, through the character of the King, portrays the plight of a man who doesn't meet the requirements of hegemonic masculinity. However, Karnad doesn't explicitly advocate hegemonic masculinity; he just unveils the social truth. A slight deviation from the social norms of masculinity causes trouble to men. King in the play is tormented psychologically because he is caught in his role as a King, a son and a husband.

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