

Cultural Dualities: Tradition and Modernity in Karnad's *Bali: The Sacrifice*

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Abstract

Girish Karnad, a prominent personality in Indian theatre, literature, and cinema, is renowned for his significant impact on contemporary Indian drama. In *Bali: The Sacrifice*, Karnad explores the intersection of tradition and modernity, capturing the complexities of cultural and ethical dilemmas within an evolving Indian society. It is set against a backdrop of ancient ritualistic beliefs, the play delves into the conflicts between traditional values, represented by religious and cultural practices, and the modern, humanistic ideals that challenge these norms. Through the tragic unfolding of a royal family's dynamics, Karnad raises profound questions on the role of violence, spirituality, and the nature of sacrifice. The theme of sacrifice serves as a metaphorical lens to examine the collision of two cultural paradigms. The ritualistic sacrifice, deeply rooted in traditional beliefs, symbolizes the unwavering adherence to established norms. In contrast, the Queen's rejection of the sacrificial act and her embrace of an egalitarian love with the Mahout reflect the aspirations of modernity, advocating for individual agency and the questioning of age-old hierarchies. However, the interplay of these forces reveals not a simplistic binary but a dynamic, often painful negotiation of values. The characters grapple with their desires, duties, and ideologies, which often clash with their ethical beliefs, portraying the enduring tension between adherence to ancient customs and pursuing personal autonomy. By interweaving mythological elements with contemporary moral debates, *Bali: The Sacrifice* sheds light on the psychological turmoil brought by the collision of old and new paradigms, revealing Karnad's critique of rigid orthodoxy and his exploration of India's complex identity.

The present research paper explores the symbolic elements of the play, such as the ritual of sacrifice and the characters' internal conflicts, to highlight the broader implications of this intersection for contemporary audiences. The paper also examines how Karnad's nuanced portrayal of this intersection not only reflects the inner conflicts of individuals but also serves as a metaphor for the broader societal struggle in reconciling tradition with modernity.

Keywords: Tradition, Modernity, Cultural Conflict, Ritual and Symbolism, Gender Roles, Postcolonial Literature.

Girish Karnad, a stalwart of Indian theatre, literature, and cinema, is renowned for his significant contributions to modern Indian drama. A playwright, director, and actor, Karnad's works often explore themes of identity, morality, and cultural conflict, making him a vital voice in Indian literature. Writing primarily in Kannada, Karnad adapted his plays into English, thereby reaching a diverse audience and bridging cultural gaps. His unique approach

blends mythology and folklore with contemporary socio-political issues, addressing universal human concerns rooted in Indian tradition.

One of his notable plays, *Bali: The Sacrifice*, epitomizes Karnad's ability to interrogate complex moral and cultural dilemmas through the lens of Indian mythology. *Bali* is inspired by an ancient Jain story about a royal couple and the moral and ethical ambiguities surrounding ritual sacrifice. The play explores the intersection of religious duty, personal conviction, and the struggle between tradition and modern values. Set in an ambiguous historical period, it reveals the psychological turmoil of its characters: a devoted Queen, a sceptical King, and a High Priest torn between tradition and emerging ethical concerns. Karnad questions the sanctity of religious rituals, particularly animal sacrifice, and its place in a modernizing society, asking whether such rituals are essential to faith or if they are relics of an outdated mindset.

Karnad employs layered symbolism, stark dialogue, and minimalistic settings to draw attention to his characters' emotional and intellectual struggles, making the play resonate with modern audiences. *Bali: The Sacrifice* urges audiences to examine their beliefs by questioning the compatibility of tradition with rational humanism. Karnad in his note on *Bali: The Sacrifice* rightly quotes Professor Bimal Krishna Matilal, and writes:

Great epics, apart from being the source of everything else, constitute an important component of what we may term as moral philosophical thinking of the Indian tradition... professional philosophers of India over the last two thousand years...have very seldom discussed what we call moral philosophy today... The tradition itself was self-conscious about moral values, moral conflicts and dilemmas, as well as difficulties of what we call practical reason or practical wisdom. This consciousness found its expression in the epic stories and narrative literature (Karnad, Appendix, 2)

Indian tradition encompasses a rich tapestry of cultural, religious, and social practices that have evolved over millennia. It is deeply rooted in ancient civilizations, these traditions are characterized by their diversity and complexity, reflecting the country's pluralistic society. From the Vedic rituals and spiritual philosophies of Hinduism to the ethical and ascetic principles of Jainism and Buddhism, Indian tradition weaves a narrative of profound spiritual exploration and moral discourse. Traditional arts, including classical dance forms like Bharatanatyam and Kathak, and music genres such as Carnatic and Hindustani, continue to

thrive, preserving the aesthetic heritage of the past. Additionally, though evolving, family structures and social customs retain a deep respect for hierarchical relationships and communal harmony. This enduring respect for tradition in contemporary India highlights the dynamic interplay between maintaining cultural identity and adapting to modern influences. Gusfield writes,

Great Tradition of the urban world in India has by no means pushed aside the “little tradition” of the village as they made contact. Interaction has led to a fusion and mutual penetration. (Gusfield, 351-362)

The interaction between the "Great Tradition" of urban India and the "Little Tradition" of rural India has indeed resulted in a fascinating cultural fusion rather than an outright displacement of the latter. The Great Tradition, often characterized by formal, literate, and pan-Indian cultural elements—like organized religion, classical music, and literature—reflects the influence of urbanization and globalization. In contrast, the Little Tradition, deeply rooted in local customs, folklore, oral storytelling, and agrarian practices, reflects the daily lives, beliefs, and practices of village communities.

Modernization in India can be observed through significant structural transformations and cultural shifts. This process can be traced back to the period of colonization, which marked India’s first direct encounter with the modernizing forces of the West. Traditionally, Indian society was structured around a rigid caste system—a closed, hierarchical framework based on concepts of purity and pollution. Under colonial rule, new instruments of modernization **were** introduced, including Western education, bureaucracy, civil rights systems, and a modern state and economic superstructure. These "change agents" played a central role in fostering a new political culture and sense of nationalism. Ramakrishnan, and et.al writes,

Modernism in Indian literature, like Indian modernity, resists tidy definitions. Just as experiences of modernity outside the Western world have prompted accounts of ‘alternative,’ ‘colonial,’ or ‘vernacular’ modernities, literary modernism in India calls for a recognition of historical and locational specificities. A perplexing diversity of languages, communities and literary cultures, the continued life of oral traditions and uneven levels of literacy, and complexities of political and economic realities in postcolonial India confront attempts to chart modernism’s career in India. The

category itself is Protean, displaying multiple meanings and accents in various regions and contexts; what follows is no more than a preliminary map aimed at an initial orientation.

Modernism in Indian literature, much like the experience of modernity in India itself, resists clear-cut definitions because it encapsulates diverse historical, cultural, and social realities. Unlike the largely unified trajectory of Western modernism, Indian modernism reflects a multitude of experiences shaped by India's colonial past and its ongoing negotiation with both traditional and contemporary forms. This diversity can be seen through "alternative," "colonial," or "vernacular" forms of modernity, where regional, linguistic, and cultural variations contribute unique perspectives on what it means to be modern in India.

Bali: The Sacrifice explores modernist themes by questioning traditional beliefs and exposing the complex, often contradictory, human emotions entangled in religious and social practices. Set against the backdrop of a medieval Indian kingdom, the play examines the consequences of ritualistic violence and the moral dilemmas that accompany faith. By centering the plot around the practice of animal sacrifice and the interactions between a Jain queen, a Hindu king, and an outcaste woman, Karnad critiques the notion of purity and impurity, and how it is manipulated to sustain hierarchies within religion and society.

Karnad's use of myth allows him to address the modernist concern of existential angst and the search for individual morality within the confines of societal norms. In *Bali*, the characters are not simply representatives of faiths but are deeply human, struggling with desires and conflicts that transcend religious boundaries. The play's central conflict, where the queen's insistence on non-violence collides with the king's devotion to sacrificial tradition, underscores the modernist challenge to established structures. This clash forces characters to confront personal guilt, repression, and inner turmoil, reflecting modernism's interest in psychological depth and moral ambiguity. Karnad said in his interview,

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, 33)

Karnad explores the intricate complexities of Indian culture in the play, where the ideologies of Jainism and Hinduism are set in opposition. The narrative delves into the social, moral, and cultural dimensions, offering profound philosophical reflections on Indian traditions, values, and the moral conflicts they evoke. The play features four characters: the Queen, a devout follower of Jainism, adheres strictly to the principle of non-violence. The King, having renounced Hinduism, embraces Jainism for its emphasis on non-violence. The Queen Mother, on the other hand, staunchly upholds Hindu traditions and advocates for the practice of sacrifices. Lastly, the Mahout, a man of low caste, cares for the King's elephants.

The play portrays a family where two conflicting faiths coexist, leading to chaos and ultimately dismantling the family structure. It becomes a battleground for the clash between personal beliefs and the prevailing culture of cruelty. At the outset, the Queen distances herself from the Rigvedic tradition of animal sacrifices, expressing her dissent directly to her husband with conviction. In the play, Queen says,

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 often wake me up— keep me awake. But I've pretended I didn't mind. (Karnad, 212)

Karnad brings to life the Rigvedic tradition of animal sacrifices, detailing how animals are chosen based on the significance of the ritual—poultry for daily ceremonies and sheep or goats for more prominent occasions. In the play, the Queen finds herself entangled in an illicit relationship, driven by the Queen Mother's relentless pressure over her inability to conceive. However, this act of moral transgression is not a deliberate choice but an unintentional consequence of her circumstances. To avert the dire repercussions of the Queen's actions, the Queen Mother resolves to sacrifice a hundred fowls to appease her deity. Through the dialogues and actions of his characters, Karnad sharply critiques the violent traditions embedded in Indian culture.

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.

King: Mother will not agree to give up her practices. You know that. She feels she owes it to our ancestors. We've been through all this before.

Queen: But now it concerns our child. What offerings will be considered worthy of a royal birth, do you think?

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

King: People exaggerate.

Queen: Yes, you are right. I shouldn't not 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. (Karnad, 212-213).

Rituals and religion are deeply woven into the fabric of Indian literature, reflecting the country's diverse spiritual traditions, cultural heritage, and social structures. In Indian literature, both ritual and religion often serve as more than mere themes; they function as fundamental narrative frameworks that shape characters, influence conflicts, and reflect the complexities of human experience. These elements provide insight into India's collective consciousness, where spirituality and ritual inform identity, values, and the moral underpinnings of daily life.

Ritual is frequently depicted as a powerful but often ambivalent force, representing both continuity and constraint. Rituals can connect individuals to a sense of tradition and belonging, linking them to ancestral customs and offering a structured way to engage with the divine. For example, in epics like the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, rituals and religious practices are both cultural and transformative, often marking pivotal moments in the narrative. Ritualistic acts can be seen as rites of passage, tests of loyalty, or paths to self-discovery, yet they can also be sources of conflict and suffering. In Girish Karnad's play *Bali: The Sacrifice*, for instance, the ritual of animal sacrifice is a powerful metaphor for the conflict between tradition and personal ethics, revealing the tension between inherited practices and individual conscience.

It's a play about a conflict of beliefs. The Mahout is not merely the reason for the Queen's transgression, he symbolizes the belief in a listening, logical God. The Queen believes that salvation comes from living a life of compassion, and the Queen Mother

follows a Goddess who needs to be satiated with blood to be benign. In between is the King who has forsaken the faith he grew up in to embrace Jainism and is now torn between guilt and confusion about the right path. (Umachandan, *The Hindu*)

The Mahout, a character symbolic of the rationalistic approach to religion, brings in the idea of a God who is accessible through logic and reason—a deity who listens and responds, challenging the established belief systems around him. His presence in the Queen’s life does not merely catalyse her transgression; he embodies the notion of a compassionate, listening God, contrasting with the rigid doctrines of other characters.

On the other hand, The Queen represents the path of compassion as the way to attain salvation. Her belief in empathy and non-violence aligns with the principles of Jainism, to which the King has recently converted. Her faith emphasizes kindness and respect for all life, embodying an approach that transcends mere ritual, focusing instead on humane values. This conviction, however, stands in sharp opposition to the Queen Mother's devotion. The Queen Mother’s belief system is rooted in a bloodthirsty Goddess who demands sacrifice to be pacified—a faith that necessitates appeasement through blood to ensure divine goodwill and protection. Her convictions bring a sense of urgency and peril, reminding everyone of the consequences of deviating from traditional worship.

Religion is portrayed in Indian literature as a deeply intimate and often contradictory force. Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Sikhism, Jainism, and various indigenous beliefs are depicted not only as organized systems but as lived experiences, influencing the way individuals interpret the world and make sense of life’s challenges. Religion often appears in Indian literature as a source of guidance, inspiration, and comfort. However, it can also be depicted as a mechanism for social control, especially when religious norms and hierarchies conflict with personal freedom and social justice. In her conversation with the Mahout, the Queen remarks:

Mahout: Several times I have asked God—Oh! Do you ever talk to God?

Queen: No.

Mahout: Believe in one?

Queen: No. Though I have often wished He was there.

Mahout: But. He is there. If you don't believe in Him, who do you believe in?

Queen: The Saviour.

Mahout: Ah! You are Jain, then. No God, but twenty-four Saviours! Never could understand that. Who do you talk to when you are lonely—when you are in trouble?

Queen: They're all there.

Mahout: But no God, eh? Funny what people will come up with. But believe me, there is God... (Karnad, 196-197)

It reflects a deep moral questioning within *Bali: The Sacrifice* about the nature of religious rituals and the ethical implications of violence carried out in the name of faith. The Queen confronts the contradiction inherent in practices deemed "holy" yet involving harm to innocent beings. By challenging the sanctity of such acts, the line opens up a broader critique of ritual sacrifice, questioning whether genuine holiness can be achieved through actions that contradict compassion and empathy.

Cultural conflict arises when differing values, beliefs, traditions, or practices between two or more cultures clash, often leading to misunderstandings, tension, or even violence. In literature, cultural conflict frequently reflects larger societal struggles between traditional and modern values, colonizer and colonized, or indigenous cultures and foreign influences. In postcolonial contexts, such as in Indian literature, cultural conflict is often depicted through the struggle of indigenous cultures to maintain their identity and traditions in the face of colonial imposition or Westernization. This tension is particularly evident in Girish Karnad's works, where he explores the collision of ancient, mythological traditions with the demands and challenges of modernity. In plays like *Bali: The Sacrifice*, Karnad highlights the complexities of cultural conflict, where characters are torn between upholding traditional values and adapting to new systems of thought.

What kind of man are you? You have lost your manhood. You, you imponent ... I am becoming decrepit—and still I haven't learnt to control my temper. All right. You won't shed blood. Then throw her out. Get yourself another wife. (Karnad, 224)

The play underscores the inescapable influence of history and tradition on the present. It suggests that no matter how much one may wish to break away from the past, the cultural and

ancestral heritage remains embedded in the identity and actions of individuals and communities. In the context of the play, this statement highlights the tension between the ancient rituals and modern sensibilities, suggesting that the weight of historical practices, especially those involving sacrifice and violence, cannot be easily discarded. Even as characters attempt to confront or adapt to contemporary values, the legacies of their forebears continue to shape their choices, actions, and societal structures. This line emphasizes the conflict between the desire to move forward and the unyielding pull of tradition, creating a cyclical struggle that defines the play's exploration of cultural conflict.

Gender roles encompass the societal norms and expectations that shape how individuals are expected to act, think, and feel based on their gender. These roles are deeply rooted in cultural, social, and historical frameworks and are perpetuated by institutions such as the family, education systems, religion, media, and workplaces. Traditionally, gender roles have been viewed through a binary lens, assigning distinct duties and behaviors to men and women. Men are typically associated with traits like strength, authority, and involvement in public spheres, whereas women are linked to caregiving, household responsibilities, and private life. These norms are upheld by patriarchal systems that often privilege men while marginalizing women. Simon de Beauvoir writes,

One is not born, but rather becomes a woman...femininity is a natural nor an innate entity, but rather a condition brought about by society, on the basis of certain psychological characteristics. (Beauvoir, 18)

Femininity is not an innate quality but a social construct. The idea challenges the traditional notion that gender is biologically determined, instead positing that society plays a pivotal role in shaping an individual's identity as a woman. Cultural norms, social expectations, and psychological conditioning contribute to developing what is perceived as femininity. From early childhood, women are socialized into specific roles and behaviors deemed appropriate for their gender, often limiting their autonomy and reinforcing stereotypes.

In *Bali: The Sacrifice*, Girish Karnad delves into complex gender roles that reflect the tension between traditional societal expectations and the evolving dynamics of power and agency. The play offers a critical examination of how gender roles are constructed and reinforced within the cultural and ritualistic framework of the community.

At the heart of the play is the sacrificial ritual, which demands that a man, typically a warrior or hero figure, must give his life for the well-being of society. This sacrificial duty, ingrained in the tradition, places women in a passive role as both the symbolic markers of the community's continuity and the repositories of cultural values. Women, especially in the context of the play, are portrayed as secondary figures whose agency is limited by the overarching structures of religious and cultural practices. They serve as catalysts for male action or sacrifice but rarely possess the power to dictate or challenge the ritualistic norms themselves.

The character of Bali, who is chosen to undergo the sacrificial act, also highlights the gendered expectations of heroism, valor, and sacrifice. While the play primarily features male characters in active roles, women's roles are often portrayed as the sacrificial customs that govern their world. Yet, Karnad subtly critiques this dynamic by showing how the rituals ultimately serve the interests of the patriarchal system, where men are expected to sacrifice themselves for the survival and honor of the community, often without questioning the validity of such demands.

KING: If anything has to be done, it'll be done by me. Promise. Not you. Nor anyone else. Mother, whatever's happened, concerns me, my wife. And I need her. I can't let her go.

MOTHER: All right. Go to her. I'll come there with the offering. There'll be no bloodshed.

KING: Thank you. (Karnad, 225)

It reflects themes of personal responsibility, familial relationships, and avoiding violence. The King asserts his agency and responsibility, emphasizing that decisions concerning his wife and their relationship rest solely with him, not others, including his mother. His determination to protect his wife and their bond underlines his sense of duty and love. The Mother, in response, agrees to support the King's decision, signifying a compromise that prioritizes peace and ensures no bloodshed. It highlights the tension between tradition and personal agency while advocating for resolution without violence.

Bali: The Sacrifice presents the deeply entrenched patriarchal view of gender roles in traditional societies. It emphasizes the limited and reductive expectations placed on women,

relegating them to the private sphere of home and family, with their worth measured primarily through domestic labor, obedience to their husbands, and their ability to bear children. This perspective denies women agency beyond these roles, positioning them as secondary to men and reducing their identities to mere caretakers and reproducers.

Conclusion

In *Bali: The Sacrifice*, Girish Karnad explores the tension between tradition and modernity, illustrating how the two forces collide and interact within the context of ritual, sacrifice, and societal expectations. The play, set in a community entrenched in ancient practices, scrutinizes the continuing relevance and impact of age-old customs in a rapidly changing world. Through the characters' struggles with their roles in the sacrificial ritual and the broader socio-cultural forces at play, Karnad reveals the complexities of navigating the intersection of tradition and modernity.

The ritual of sacrifice, which serves as the play's central motif, symbolizes the tension between the ancestral past and the evolving values of the present. On one hand, the sacrifice represents a connection to the past, a deep-rooted belief in the necessity of maintaining cultural continuity. On the other hand, as the characters question the ritual's purpose and relevance in contemporary society, it comes to embody the struggle of reconciling outdated practices with the demands of modern life. Karnad's characters, particularly the priest and the protagonist, wrestle with these contradictions, illustrating the emotional and psychological toll that adherence to tradition can inflict on individuals, especially when those traditions no longer seem to serve the same functions or reflect current realities.

The play also highlights the theme of power—both political and personal—within the context of tradition. Rituals, such as the sacrifice, are not merely cultural expressions but mechanisms of control, and this dynamic comes under increasing scrutiny in modern society. The conflict between the priest's insistence on following the established ritual and the more progressive perspectives that challenge its relevance exemplifies the larger cultural and ideological clash between the old and the new. The play critiques the gendered nature of tradition, where women are often relegated to passive roles, bound by societal expectations of domesticity and subservience. As the characters confront the personal and cultural costs of adhering to traditional roles, the play offers a profound commentary on the intersection of tradition, gender, and power.

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