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RECONSTRUCTION OF MYTH IN INDIAN ENGLISH DRAMA: A STUDY OF GIRISH KARNAD'S BALI: THE SACRIFICE

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Abstract

Girish Karnad introduced innovative techniques in the form and content of his plays by bringing in the rich Indian past and appropriating it to the present context. His attempts to align the past with the present show the recurrence of similar human situations that transcend the space of time. This paper presents how Karnad in his play "Bali The Sacrifice"(1980)deals with the myths of chastity and purity associated with a woman and reconstructs them in a new light by subverting these myths and appropriating them in the modern context. The first half of the paper will attempt to show how Indian English playwrights made a wide use of the historical past to foreground a national identity. The second part of the paper will try to show how Girish Karnad reconstructs and appropriates the ancient myths of the past in the present context.

Keywords: Indian English Drama, Reconstruction, Myths, Modern Context

The post Macaulay generation in India exposed the Indian writers towards English literature and henceforth, Western literature found their way in the homes of English educated Indians. Wood's Educational Despatch of 1854 implemented Macaulay's agenda by stating "the diffusion of the improved arts, sciences, philosophy and literatures of Europe". (Mukherjee: 4). The Indian intelligentsia in the latter half of the nineteenth century were engaged in a redefinition of the past as a mode of resistance to colonialism. It was important to create a national identity. The urgency of the moment required a public form of expression which had to reach out to the people. In the "Wretched of the Earth" Franz Fanon says: "It is drama rather than poetry or the novel that advocates as the best means of raising the consciousness of people involved in an anticolonial struggle."

This paper presents the reconstruction of myths in Girish Karnad's play "Bali : the Sacrifice." (1980). The first half of the paper will attempt to show how Indian English playwrights made a wide use of the historical past to foreground a national identity. The second part of the paper will try to show how Girish Karnad reconstructs and appropriates the ancient myths of the past in the present context in his play "Bali".

Indian playwrights like writers in other genres were using literature as a form to disseminate a national identity. Enterprising Indians have for nearly a century occasionally attempted drama in English but it was seldom for stage production. (Iyengar:226) Indian writers like Michel Madhusudan Dutt, Sri Aurobindo, Rabindranath Tagore, Vasudeva Rao adopted themes from Indian history to create a national identity.(ibid) In Michael Madhusudan Dutt's dramas *Sharmistha* (1859), *Tilottama*(1860), *Nildarpan*(1861) and *Meghnad Badh Kavya*(1861)Indian stories were performed in Western forms. Although the content glorified the past, the forms were very much influenced by Western theatrical traditions. William Shakespeare's plays were widely translated and adapted in Indian languages. The attempts of these playwrights were not successful in stage as, after all, drama gets its life in the theatre. Besides, the use of English in the dialogues of the common people sounded unconvincing. The British introduced their own brands of theatre, based on London models to provide entertainment to British soldiers and citizens serving in an alien land and climate. They used the form of the theatre to extend their own ideas, tastes, morals and values. The expected audiences were the foreigners and the native English- educated people. (Mehrotra:339)

In 1831, Prassana Kumar Thakur established the "Hindu Rangmanch" at Calcutta and staged Wilson's English translations of Bhavabhuti's Sanskrit dramas *Uttar Ramacharitam*. This can be termed as the beginning of the modern theatre in India. Performed in a host of regional languages, several styles and techniques, theatre became a more realistic



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reflection of the existing Indian environment. Soon, along with the Bengali theatre, Marathi, Kannada, Oriya and Hindi theatre also developed. Theatre started to reflect the daily life, social-political, economic issues of the country. Vishnu Das Bhave's contribution to Marathi theatre like *Sita Swayamvar* (1843) and his first Hindi drama *Raja Gopichand* resulted in the formation of many professional groups. The Theatre group in Bombay have successfully produced plays in English by Indians. In 1852-1853 the famous Parsi theatre was launched in Bombay and staged a play *Rustam Zabuli and Sohrab*. In an interview with Gurucharan Das, R Parthasarathy said: "English theatre in India will have to project a kind of hybrid English interspersed with Indian expressions". The Indian English playwright's task had to either confine his characters to the elite English educated task or to classical, mythological or historical themes.(Merhotra)

The 1960s saw a suitable mixing of various style and techniques from Sanskrit, medieval folk and Western theatre. (Mehrotra:340) Several plays originally written in regional languages have been translated into English. There arose a group of talented playwrights and directors who deliberately chose English as the medium of expression. Some of the Indian English plays like Gurucharan Das's *Mira* (1971), Pratap Sharma's *A Touch of Brightness* and Asif Carrimbhoy's *The Dumb Dancer* have been staged in the West by employing dance, folklore, songs rituals and oral codes on stage. Indian theatre from the 60s shows a break from the colonial subjection to a fresh start in cultural production. The practitioners of postcolonial theatre sought to reclaim classical precolonial Indian traditions.

GN Devy has referred to the issues and problems concerning what he calls the "cultural contexts of the conflict" between the mother tongue and English. Devy says that the only way the Indian critic can redeem himself is by turning to literature written in modern Indian languages. Devy views that "the otherwise regrettable colonial legacy can play a vital role by functioning as the Target language (TL) to which the literature in the modern English languages can be translated." (Paranjape:145) Gandhi says in *Hind Swaraj* that nothing will be gained merely by driving the British away from India as long as we do not regain our selfhood.

Girish Karnad (1938-2019) who initially wrote his plays in Kannada and then translated them into English, is one of the Indian dramatists who have used themes of history, myth and folklore to explore the present. Initially Karnad wrote his plays in Kannada and later translated them into English himself. Karnad also apprehended that translation from different modern English languages would be fruitful to cater to a pan Indian audience. Karnad translated his plays written in Kannada to English, as *Tughlaq*, *Yayati*, *Bali*, *Nagamandala*, *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan*, *Hayavadana* into English.

Indra Nath Choudhuri has referred to the terms *Kula* and *Shila* in Indian situation as explained by Niharranjan Ray.(Paranjape:2) He argues that while *Kula* is heredity, inheritance and tradition, *Shila* is the making of a man, his demeanour and personality which are conditioned by his Kula. He explains that '*Shila*' in its own time and space goes on discarding elements of *Kula* which have lost their potency and in the process generates new modes of thought and action and thereby ensures continuity of a culture which, in turn enriches and invigorates the *Shila* making modernity sharp and effective.

Playwrights like Girish Karnad believe that the elements of modernity are to be sought not in a Western culture but in our roots and traditions. A living culture signifies not only the roots but also the wings that are equally important for continuity. In his plays, Karnad modifies some of the myths so as to adopt them to the modern context. He questions some of the past traditions to make them viable in the present.

Girish Karnad (1938-2019) is one of the Indian dramatists who have used themes of history, myth and folklore to explore the present. Initially Karnad wrote his plays in Kannada and later translated them into English himself. Girish Karnad introduced innovative techniques in the form and content of his plays by making use of the rich Indian past. Through his plays, Karnad reconstructs the past to explore the present. His attempts to bring in the past to the present show the recurrence of similar human situations which transcend the space of time. Karnad reconstructs in a new light the myth of Sita as the representation of chastity and purity in his play "*Bali The Sacrifice*". The Queen who is the protagonist in this play becomes the voice of the 'New woman' who subverts the traditional image of Sita. Girish Karnad made use of historical



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, mythical and legendry themes in his plays. He also used indigenous cultural representations on the stage like dance, folklore, songs, rituals and oral codes to question the hegemony of Western drama. Karnad's appropriates in his plays folk and epic resources in the modern context. The impenetration of India's pluralistic cultural tradition with the new elements of contemporary Western civilization is to be obtained for our modernity to define its place in a fast changing world. Karnad links the past with the present, the archetype with the real.

Karnad's play *Bali The Sacrifice*, comprises of four characters- the Queen, the king, the Queen – Mother and the Mahout. The Queen enchanted by the beautiful voice of a Mahout, the elephant keeper, spends a night of sexual gratification with him. Soon after, the incident comes to the knowledge of the king and the Queen mother. Converted to Jainism, the King cannot indulge in violence by killing the Mahout and avenge the wrong of desecrating the sanctity of marital bond. The queen mother wants that a sacrifice is to be made to atone for the queen's sins. Considering the fact that the queen is a Jain and against bloodshed, the Queen mother settles that a 'cock of dough' should be sacrificed by the queen to atone for her sins. The queen opposes to the sacrifice of even the cock of dough as the intention of the sacrifice is there even if there is no bloodshed. At the end of the play, the dough cock to be sacrificed turns into sacrifice of the Queen. Karnad's representation of the queen shows how woman in the modern context have responded to the myths of the nation. Karnad shows how the Queen accepts, subverts, resists and transforms the myths of the past to voice her own selfhood. When the play begins the Queen, is being driven by a sudden impulse of love when she hears the Mahout's song and goes to meet him in the Temple. She says: "I want the company of your voice." The queen's desire is so intense that he comments, "You've almost scratch my skin off." (Bali:78) When he goes on to ask her about her reactions about his performance and hints at the lesser vigour of her husband she reacts sharply and defends her husband: "How dare you". She doesn't allow any questions to be raised against her husband, the king. She firmly affirms that her husband is "marvellous, affectionate, gentle and trusting." (Bali:79)

The act of the queen mating another man defies the myth of the "Prativratanari", or the chaste woman. Hindu traditions have foregrounded the image of the chaste wife. The virtue of chastity imbued women with spiritual power and transformed her into a goddess. In Hindu mythology, woman's sexuality if contained within the paradigm of the chaste wife is auspicious. But, outside the marital status female sexuality was deadly and destructive. Girish Karnad shows in this play how these women-oriented myths which glorify the virtue of 'chastity' have been seen by women in the modern context. In this play Karnad shows how the Queen defies the myths that glorify woman's chastity. Here in the modern context, we have a real woman, in the figure of a queen who refuses to contain her sexuality as in the mythical representation of the chaste woman.

The Queen does not regret her act as an act of betrayal. She refuses to see her act as a betrayal and does not in any way regret about it. When the king asks about her betrayal, she replies, "Queen: I do not regret anything that has happened. I will not disown him or anything he gave me.... because it just happened. Without my willing. It just happened. That's all.... I want 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". (Bali :119)

The queen boldly lays bare the desires of her heart and more importantly her body. She expresses her desire of sexual gratification for her own sake and not being driven by the conscious attempt of begetting an heir to the throne. She openly confides to the king her desire of making love with the mahout as natural, without being obsessed by the worry of producing an heir.

The refusal of the queen to sacrifice the cock made of dough shows that she declines the atonement of her sin in any form, even be it a symbol in the 'cock of dough' image. She does not consider having sex with the mahout as sinful as she denies to blot the moment of her experience with the mahout out. 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." (Bali:119)



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The queen's refusal to allow the sacrifice of the cock of dough shows that she refuses to atone for what the Queen mother and king sees as a sin. This recalls us to the incessant tests women are being subjected to. Like Sita, who feeling insulted escaped to the bosom of mother, the Queen also ends her life by piercing the sword inside her womb. The Queen remains unyielding and uncompromising to the very end and even sacrifices her life for her own principles.

In the figure of the Queen, we see how a woman subverts the myths of 'chastity' and how she asserts her own selfhood by rebelling against customs and traditions. Girish Karnad in his play Bali The Sacrifice" reconstructs the myths of chastity associated with a woman in the modern context.

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