
An Investigation of Marginalized Masculinity in Girish Karnad's Play Bali: The Sacrifice Sathish Kumar T.¹ & Mallya, Ambika G.²

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ABSTRACT:

This paper investigates the notion of marginalized masculinity in Girish Karnad's *Bali: The Sacrifice* (1980), with particular attention to how patriarchal power structures simultaneously privilege and constrain male identity through ritual, desire, and moral anxiety. Drawing upon R.W. Connell's theory of hegemonic and subordinated masculinities and Judith Butler's concept of performativity, the study explores how Karnad's male characters—especially the King and the Mahout—embody the contradictions of masculine power in a ritualized moral universe. The King, though outwardly a figure of political and social authority, is emotionally dependent and morally conflicted, reflecting an internalized emasculation that undermines his hegemonic status. Conversely, the Mahout's marginal position exposes the intersections of class, desire, and subaltern masculinity. By situating these portrayals within the broader socio-cultural context of Indian patriarchy, the paper demonstrates how Karnad subverts traditional gender hierarchies, revealing the inherent fragility and performative instability of masculine identity. The sacrificial motif serves as a critical framework through which the text dramatizes the tension between moral purity and masculine agency, illustrating how patriarchal systems ultimately destabilize the very identities they seek to uphold. The analysis concludes that *Bali: The Sacrifice* not only critiques the moral violence embedded in ritualistic orthodoxy but also redefines masculinity as a site of vulnerability and ethical self-interrogation rather than dominance and control.

KEYWORDS:

Marginalized Masculinity, Hegemonic Power, Gender
 Performativity, Ritual, Indian Drama.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Girish Karnad's *Bali: The Sacrifice* (1980) reimagines a Jain legend to question the violence underlying human morality and religious orthodoxy. The play depicts a King, a Queen, a Mahout, and a Mahaprajapati locked in a moral and emotional conflict that culminates in ritual sacrifice. While much of the scholarship emphasizes the Queen's assertion of will and moral agency, the male figures remain strikingly subdued, disoriented, and morally conflicted.

This paper investigates these portrayals as instances of marginalized masculinity—a condition where male identity is displaced, rendered fragile, or subordinated within structures that seemingly privilege it. Applying Connell's (1995) theory of hegemonic and subordinated masculinities and Butler's (1990) performativity framework, this study explores how *Bali: The Sacrifice* deconstructs the patriarchal assumption that masculinity naturally equates to dominance.

2. OBJECTIVES

- To analyse the representation of male identity in *Bali: The Sacrifice* through the lens of marginalized masculinity.
- To examine how ritual and morality contribute to male subordination within a patriarchal framework.
- To explore the interplay of power, desire, and guilt in constructing fragile male identities.
- To evaluate Karnad's use of myth and symbolism as tools for critiquing gender hierarchy.
- To situate *Bali: The Sacrifice* within broader discourses on postcolonial and gendered subjectivity.

3. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Behera (2011) emphasizes that Karnad's dramaturgy reworks Indian myth and folklore to interrogate the relationship between ritual and power. Banerjee (2005) views Karnad's plays as sites where personal desire collides with social morality, producing crises of gendered identity. Jain (2009) and Dasgupta (2011) underscore the vulnerability of male protagonists in Karnad's theatre, who often struggle to reconcile emotion with societal expectations.

Connell's *Masculinities* (1995) identifies marginalized and subordinated masculinities as those excluded from hegemonic norms due to class, emotional dependence, or moral deviation. Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990) argues that gender is performative—a series of acts repeated within cultural discourse. In *Bali: The Sacrifice*, these theories illuminate how the King's moral conflict and emotional fragility enact a performative masculinity that fails to align with patriarchal ideals.

4. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This qualitative study employs a textual and interpretive analysis of *Bali: The Sacrifice* (1980).

Primary Text:

Karnad, Girish. *Bali: The Sacrifice*. Oxford University Press, 1980.

Secondary Sources:

- Scholarly essays and monographs on Karnad's dramatic corpus (Dharwadker 2005; Nayar 2009).
- Foundational works on masculinity (Connell 1995; Kimmel 2006).
- Theoretical frameworks from feminist and postcolonial studies (Butler 1990; Behera 2011).

Methodology:

Close reading of dialogue, characterization, and ritual

symbolism; interpretation through masculinity studies and performativity; comparison with patriarchal myth and cultural codes.

5. DATA PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS

The King and the Failure of Moral Authority

The King's internal conflict between his wife's desires and the moral strictures of non-violence reveals a paradox of masculine power. His adherence to idealized virtue renders him indecisive and emasculated. Though a monarch, he becomes a passive participant in the moral drama orchestrated by the Queen and the ritual priests. His silence and hesitation reflect a masculinity undermined by its own ethical rigidity—what Connell calls a “subordinated masculinity” subjected to the dominance of ideological codes rather than physical force.

The play serves as both a political and spiritual allegory, while also delving deeply into the vulnerabilities of masculine authority. Drawing inspiration from a 10th-century Jain narrative, the play showcases Karnad's ongoing exploration of the interplay between myth and contemporary issues. The male figures in Bali epitomize a fractured sense of masculinity, revealing their powerlessness, anxiety, and performative behavior in response to the assertiveness of female characters and the constraints of religious tradition.

“I am a Jain. I do not kill. I cannot touch blood.” (Karnad, 2002, p. 33)

This proclamation, delivered with a sense of pride, conceals profound sexual and political inadequacy—a recurring theme that underscores the King's tenuous position as a masculine figure.

The Mahout and the Marginal Body

The Mahout, representing the working class and animalistic impulse, embodies an alternative masculinity excluded from royal and moral discourse. His physicality and sensual energy contrast with the King's ascetic restraint, yet he remains marginalized

due to caste and class hierarchies. His interaction with the Queen foregrounds a tension between bodily desire and social taboo, marking his masculinity as both threatening and suppressed. Karnad uses this figure to expose how patriarchal systems police male bodies as rigorously as female ones, containing alternative masculinities within moral boundaries.

He, an outsider and servant, embodies sexual agency and an instinctive charisma that directly confronts the King's rigid notions of masculinity. However, as a member of a lower caste, his expression of masculinity is further marginalized; while the Queen celebrates his qualities, the court harshly condemns him.

“He made love as though the world would end.” – The Queen (Karnad, 2002, p. 57)

He embodies a raw, sensual masculinity that stands in stark contrast to established power structures. His physical form serves as a canvas for both pleasure and punishment, representing the repressed sexual energy that exists within a rigid societal framework.

Ritual, Power, and Male Displacement

The sacrificial ritual that dominates the play functions as an apparatus of control, displacing individual agency. The King's complicity in the ritual, despite moral objections, signifies his submission to institutional authority—an emasculation through obedience. Butler's notion of performativity elucidates how his repeated acts of moral compliance reconstitute him as a subject of subordination rather than mastery. The bali (sacrifice) thus becomes both a literal and symbolic enactment of male marginalization within rigid systems of purity.

The play contrasts Jain principles of non-violence with Hindu sacrificial rituals, using this tension to critique religious orthodoxy and its role in sustaining marginalization. The Mahout's low-caste background and his connection with the Queen challenge the revered nature of these rituals, exposing their role in upholding social

hierarchies. The Queen's decision to abstain from the sacrificial rite further emphasizes this critique:

“I’m sorry. If this rite is going to blot the moment out, that would be the real betrayal. I’ll do anything else.” (Ramachandran, 2010, p. 235)

Her position challenges religious norms while simultaneously reflecting the marginalized status of the Mahout, underscoring the complex relationship between individual autonomy and systemic oppression.

The Queen as Catalyst of Masculine Crisis

While the Queen's assertiveness challenges patriarchal norms, it simultaneously exposes male fragility. Her transgressive agency forces the King and Mahout to confront their limitations—ethical, social, and emotional. Rather than being portrayed as a threat, her dominance reveals that patriarchal structures themselves generate the conditions for masculine marginalization, trapping men within moral paradoxes they cannot resolve.

The Queen, while not male, plays a pivotal role in revealing the vulnerabilities inherent in masculinity. Her longing is not rooted in malice or chaos but stems from a fundamental human need that remains unmet due to the King's emotional distance. Her relationship with the Mahout serves as both an act of defiance and a stark illustration of the King's fragile sense of masculinity.

“I was a woman who desired. What else could I do?” (Karnad, 2002, p. 49)

Her longing challenges the King by questioning his celibacy, revealing the falsehood of ascetic masculinity. This power is emblematic; she dismantles the myth that masculinity must be characterized by stoicism, purity, and emotional detachment.

6. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis demonstrates that *Bali: The Sacrifice* portrays

masculinity as contingent and conflicted rather than stable or hegemonic. The King's moral paralysis, the Mahout's social exclusion, and the overarching dominance of ritual authority collectively dismantle the myth of male omnipotence.

Karnad's dramaturgy suggests that patriarchy does not simply oppress women—it also alienates men from their emotional and ethical selves. By positioning both royal and subaltern masculinities at the margins of moral power, Bali transforms the sacrificial ritual into an allegory for the annihilation of autonomous male identity. The play thus advances a nuanced critique of patriarchal ideology, exposing the shared vulnerabilities of gendered existence.

7. CONCLUSION

Girish Karnad's *Bali: The Sacrifice* redefines masculinity through marginality, guilt, and displacement. The King's subordination to moral law and the Mahout's exclusion from social legitimacy reflect two facets of marginalized masculinity—one constrained by virtue, the other by class and desire. Karnad's use of ritual, myth, and psychological tension illustrates how patriarchal systems sustain themselves by fragmenting masculine identity as much as they constrain female agency.

Through this lens, *Bali: The Sacrifice* stands as a critical intervention in postcolonial Indian theatre, revealing that the pursuit of purity and moral order often demands the symbolic sacrifice of male subjectivity itself.

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