

Sexuality and Violence: Folklore in Kambar's *Jokumarswami* and *Siri Sampige*

Dr. Angshuman Mukhopadhyay

It is generic of folk theatre, perhaps anywhere in the world, that it should have two conspicuous valences, the social and the psychological, as much as they are a part of the anthropological. In fact, one may even consider them as the strongest imperatives for folk theatre, although the exploration of the dimensions in the ambit of the genre is not necessarily formulaic. Folk theatre's engagements with the issues are unlike what we experience in several other forms of theatre which juggle with the social and the psychological questions in their content mostly as requirements of the mimetic mode adapted to the framework of realism or naturalism. Since the study of the 'anthropos' includes among many things the study of its social and cultural developments from their origin in collective and ritualistic practices, folk theatre proceeds through an appropriation of the instinctual responses of man to things around him and the socio-psychological implications of those rituals in a society that has evolved with time. When urban theatre moves on the folk route, the symptom may be read as an expression of a sense of genuine displeasure and discontentment with the urban civilization among its people or as a search for the archetypes and the roots of various social gestures, which must have necessitated the cultivation of both folk content and folk form. More often than not, the dimensions of psychology and sociology of a civilization remain responsible for catering to this craving for the folk elements. In the process we also learn to appreciate another issue which lies at the base/core of folklores and folk literature in any form: sexuality and violence largely define human behavior, and there are many avenues to approach folk theatre's trysts with them. In this article, we would like to read in Chandrasekhar Kambar's *Jokumarswami* and *Siri Sampige*, two texts dealing with folk stories and abundant violence and sexuality, folk theatre's involvement with the twin concerns.

Kambar in his reflection (he reiterates the views in another interview as well) on folk theatre says, "I belong geographically to a village and sociologically to what was considered to be an oppressed, uneducated class. I am therefore a folk person and honestly cannot become anything else. The first long poem I wrote

‘Helatena Kela’, that is, ‘listen to me’ was entirely drawn from my soil” (*Twist in the Folktale* 148). Even though Kambar himself looks askance at an increasing tendency of urban theatre to adopt folk form and folktales as slightly pretentious, it is more a sociological gesture which betrays an attempt to reconcile with the ritualistic past of drama as such. In fact, it is usually in the folk form that ritual and theatre seem to converge; otherwise the two have their different audiences. H. S. Shivaprakash mentions in the chapter titled “From Rituals to Theatre” in his book called *Traditional Theatres* (a part of the series, *Incredible India*), “A ritual is sacred theatre whereas the theatre is secular ritual. The audiences of the two are also different. So are the spaces.” (10) At the root of the search for a folk theatre is, therefore, a desire to find a possible conflation of the two, and also to trace the reasons behind an emphasis on certain human propensities like sexuality and violence in the genre, the melting pot for rituals and theatre. Both *Jokumarswami* and *Siri Sampige* have their fair share of aggressivity and sexuality, and they relate to the fertility cult involving sex, procreation, death and/or a ritual murder, the question of love, animosity and self effacement. Quite naturally, Rajeev Taranath found it striking, as he wrote in the Foreword to the edition of Kambar’s *Two Plays* (*Rishyashringa* and *Mahmoud Ghawan*), “Kambar’s writing confronted me at a time when I was strongly involved with a Kannada version of the familiar Eliot/Lawrentian mode of modernism. . . . The myth of the fisher king and Tiresias, scholar writing on mythology like Jessie Weston and James Frazer, and many other characters and authors of this Euro-American literary discourse were strong presences in my mind.” (ix) Although there is no denying the fact that this Eurocentric understanding of the resurgence of a folk tradition as a part of the modernist movement is a kind of blindfold, the repertoire of Indian folk theatre and that of the western cannon have a few things in common; the most significant of the commonalities is this desire to look for the archetype of the clash between life and death in rituals and folk traditions and beliefs. Moreover, Kambar himself mentions about a folk retaliation of the colonial cultural: “We were awestruck by the grandeur and the resonating foreign music. We slowly began to incorporate this music into our songs and folk theatre. While the entry of the hero was signaled by Indian music, the entry of the rakshasa or demon was announced with military band music!” (*Two Plays* xii).

The first production of *Jokumarswami* took place in 1972. It is a play based on the story associated with a phallic god whose worship ensures fertility and rain. As far as the ritual is considered, “an annual festival which normally occurs in August-September, Jokumar Hunnive (full moon night), is named after him. . . . Women belonging to the castes of fisherman, washerman and lime-maker make phallus-shaped idols of Jokumarswami out of wet clay” (*Twist in the Folktale* 3). This story of course sounds similar to several other stories of the birth-death-resurrection of the fertility gods in different mythical stories and folk beliefs across the globe. Eliot, drawing profusely from Frazer and Weston alludes to the dying and resurrected gods associated with the life force in *The Waste Land*. In fact, the ritual of death, more often than not involves a violent death; for instance, Thammuz, Adonis, all have a bloody death. Jokumarswami’s association with Shiva on the one hand and death on the other gives him the status of a ‘mortal god’ familiar in the European classical mythological construct. When Kambar uses the story of Basanna as a modern counterpart to the folk narrative of Jokumarswami, Basanna becomes a symbolic representation of the archetypal Jokumarswami, the phallic god. Basanna, the virile, rebellious figure establishes himself from the beginning as the most convincing and loudest voice of opposition to Gowda, a deceitful feudal lord who robs all his ‘subjects’ of their lands, a pot bellied man who has touched all women but has not quite touched them for real. He is childless in his own life and his sexual impotency is complemented by his violent assertion of his power in all other spheres of life. Gowda, a perennially evil man is a symbolic representation of the destructive force, and Basanna of the life force. They are bound to clash, and in their clash rests, the meaning of the life of the people in the village. When Gowdathi the wife of the Gowda, keen on getting pregnant goes to the prostitute Shari’s abode for the totemic snake gourd, she learns that Gowda may not be entrusted with the act of impregnating her for the obvious reason that he is impotent. Interestingly, the conflictual nature of Basanna and Gowra’s relationship becomes all the more disturbing when the latter’s popularity among women becomes a threat to Gowda and many other men. Basanna’s sexual union with Gowdhati is the culmination of the conflict between the two of them. Ananda Lal in the ‘Introduction’ to the collection of the plays *Twist in the Folktales* (henceforth TITF) writes,

Obviously the Dionysian figure in *Jokumarswami* is Basanna, so he must become the sacrificial scapegoat at the end in order that the village may prosper. This link is established

fairly early, when his rival Gowda admits, “Which woman has not been touched by Basanna?”. . . .As we already know that land equals woman and woman equals land, Gowda tried to speak metaphorically. . . .’ (ix)

The problem of Jokumarswami can be interpreted on one hand in terms of the tussle between Eros and Thanatos, to use two Freudian terms, and on the other in terms of the Girardian, principally anti Freudian, mimetic desire leading to violence and the phenomenon of scapegoating. Basanna even identifies himself as Jokumara in one of his speeches: “The lips of all the girls/Have only my name on them,/The girls call me/Come, uncle Basanna. . ./They stammer, they stutter/Come, Jokumara” (*TITF* 45).

Towards the end of the play, when Gowda and the men of the village come to take revenge on Basanna, kill him, the folk story of Jokumara’s death comes alive and is reenacted like a ritual. “The scapegoat mechanism is central to Girard's theory of religion which, he maintains, legitimizes or sacralises a certain social or cultural configuration” (Chris Fleming 62). Gowda considers everything around him to be owned by him; unfortunately, he fails to understand that his relationship with Basanna is aggravated the moment they start desiring the same thing and it is not restricted to the land that Gowda has pilfered from Basanna’s father and many others. And the final precipitation of their rivalry takes place when Basanna sexually desires the wife of Gowda. Girard’s mimetic desire and the concept of violence pitted against Freud’s ‘death instinct’ or ‘death drives’ identifies the root of violence into a sense of rivalry growing between two persons who are mimetically desiring the same thing: “Two desires converging on the same object are bound to clash. Thus, mimesis coupled with desire leads automatically to conflict” (Girard 155). A ridiculous foil to the rivalry between Gowda and Basanna is Gurya and Gowda’s power-equation; even when Gowda desires Gurya’s land and Ningi the girl Gurya likes, their rivalry is never fully fledged for Gowda violently curbs Gurya’s power of desire, his right to desiring an object. In fact, violence is perpetuated by Gowda to make the mimesis of desire almost impossible for the people of the village. Basanna subverts the power structure but is not completely successful. He has to be sacrificed for perpetuating both, the life and the power structure in the village. When all the men join hands with Gowda for killing Basanna, a ritual sacrifice, their violence is born out of a sense of rivalry, for Basanna has allegedly ‘touched’ all the women in the village. However, it seems more a facile logic for justifying the sacrifice than anything else: “Slay, slay the village rascal! Son of a whore

Basanna, get up!./ Gowdhati is calling./Luring girls/With a talking parrot,/Claiming all the fields as his--/ Let's make mincemeat out of him/With one blow" (*TITF* 55).

Basanna's association with sexuality, abundant vitality or sexual energy symbolically presents him as a Dionysian character: "A comparison with Euripides's *Bacchae* is in order", as Ananda Lal points out (*TITF* viii). Interestingly, the Girardian concept of violence presents the divine as a fusion of the contraries – the beneficent and the maleficent: "If we understand the interplay of violence in primitive societies, the origins and structure of all mythical and supernatural beings becomes clear. As we have seen, the surrogate victim meets his death in the guise of the monstrous double. All sacred creatures partake of monstrosity, whether overtly or covertly; this aspect of their nature can be traced to the monstrous double." (Girard 256) Gowda and Basanna in the context of the play are like the two facets of the divine – one is powerful, in command but necessarily evil and sterile which is the maleficent form of the divine, and the other, subversive with his constructive, regenerative ability, fertile, but almost uncontrollable and therefore, ironically, the latter becomes the victim.

In *Siri Sampige*, an acute expression of mimetic desire again creates the occasion for tension and violence. The story, based on a folk tale highlighting the mind-body duality along with an intricate probe into the vanity of human desire, is complex and layered with the main and the sub plot dealing largely with the same tropes. *Siri Sampige*, the English translation of which came out as late as 1991 tells us the story of a prince whose life bears resemblance to the mythical Narcissus; one may say, *Siri Sampige* is Kambar's take on the myth of Narcissus. The minor plot transforms the profound psychological underpinning of the main plot, from the level of abstraction to something obvious, mundane and even gross. Awali and Jawali, the twins fall for the same woman named Kamala, and their initial brotherly closeness transforms into rivalry. In their newly discovered enmity, Awali goes to the extent of killing his brother Jawali. The murder however, is justified by Awali in view of his brother's transformation into a snake and mating with Kamala. This story of sexuality and violence in the minor plot is a mirror image of what happens in the main plot. Kambar works on these parallel stories that have the same trajectory of motion. In the main plot, Sivanagadeva whose mother wants him to get married to avert the dangerous prophetic utterance about his life desires to get united with the lamp maiden appearing in his dream. Unfortunately, his dream turns out to be a strange illusion as he eventually splits himself into two thinking that the woman resides in him; but the other manifestation emerging from this

split is the charming, wily, yet majestic snake, Kalinga. The meaning of this miracle is perhaps understood in terms of an objectification of the subject: the narcissistic Prince gets to see the object of his desire in a tangible form, and since the fantastic vision of the lamp maiden precipitates into something else, an intriguing narrative unfolds the true nature of his self-love. The deaths of Awali and Jawali in the sub-plot and that of the Prince and Kalinga the serpent in the main plot can be seen as a consequence of violence rooted in mimetic desire. Nevertheless, violence is not the ultimate end in the story, and not even an end in itself; it is rather the precipitation of a self-annihilating attempt since the Queen, like Narcissus's mother learns from a prophecy that the prince's life will be in danger when he sees his own reflection. In the main plot, the process is a complex one, whereas in the sub-plot it is vivid. When Awali comes back in the life of the married couple after his penance, the two brothers recognize each other with surprise as if realizing for the first time that by desiring the same woman they became rivals, although they are basically the same individual:

Awali: Mirror, mirror have you an eye, too?/ Or, has my eye become a mirror now?

Jawali: Is that you seeing me?/ Or, is this I seeing you?" (*Modern Indian Drama: An Anthology* 360)

A perfect instance of the Lacanian gaze, Awali and Jawali look at each other only to discover the gaze being turned on them from the opposite end! In fact, the connection between narcissism and aggressivity is well established in Lacan in his *Ecrits*; "Aggressivity", Lacan writes, "is the correlative tendency of a mode of identification that we call narcissistic, and which determines the final structure of man's ego and of the register of entities characteristic of his world" (qtd. in Woodward 74). Kathleen Woodward in her study, "The Look and the Gaze: Narcissism, Aggression, and Aging", moreover, proposes to bring in René Girard in connection with her reading of Lacan's arguments about aggression and narcissism. She thinks, Girard might be critiquing Freud, but his position regarding narcissism is fundamentally Lacanian (82). In Kambar's play, the main plot with the Prince and his 'monstrous double' (in the Girardian sense), Kalinga too are bound by a gaze. While the lamp maiden's feminine identity in his dream and Kalinga's male identity as his 'other' problematizes the Prince's desire, it is Siri Sampige in whom we see the desires converging in the later part of the play. Kalinga entices her successfully as her own husband seems to drift away from her in search of his lost self. The snake consummates with her just Awali saw Jawali doing in the form of a snake with Kamala. After their confrontation in the battlefield, when the Prince kills Kalinga, he learns to his dismay that his own existence

was intricately enmeshed with his 'other' half's life. However, as the Queen mother remained witness to the initial split, Siri Sampige witnesses the union of the selves in death. In the final scene the servant reports Awali's death by drowning, who was attempting to kill his own reflection in water thinking it to be Jawali, thereby, provides the narrative with a comprehensive closure.

The concerns of sexuality and violence thus constitute a continuum, a single framework of related, as well as causally connected human responses; in both plays, sexual desire and the object of desire for that matter create the possible tension and rivalry. 'The adulterous vitality of *Jokumarswamy*' (*Two Plays* x) combines with a violent episode of killing Basanna who seems to be a metaphor for a scapegoat sacrificed for restoring fertility to the land. Nevertheless, there is a transformation from ritual violence to original acts of violence, and there is a subtle difference between the two: "The original act of violence is unique and spontaneous. Ritual sacrifices, however, are multiple, endlessly repeated. . . . The ritual process aims at removing all element of chance and seeks to extract from the original violence some technique of cathartic appeasement" (Girard 107). Basanna's violent death in the hands of the village folks and Gowda is an original act of violence that gets a ritual status the moment we understand that he is our *Jokumarswami*, a Dionysian figure. On the other hand, *Siri Sampige* focuses on a desire that is destructive; a self-effacing desire that develops from a narcissistic attraction for one's own self through a splitting of the self to objectify the subject and then a growing animosity between the two selves for desiring the one and the same thing/being. *Siri Sampige* deals with a much more complex psychological process than what we get to see in *Jokumarswami*; sexual desire in the former is even counter-productive, that is, intricately fused with aggressivity. Ananda Lal in his 'Introduction' quotes Kambar's opinion of folk theatre while pointing out in the same breath Kambar's rather uncritical position regarding organized religion. However, Kambar's personal faith may be beside the point; nevertheless, his insightful projection of modern audience's interest in folk theatre is absolutely adequate: "the folk theatre includes dance, drama, narration, song, sex, death and religion. . . . A Londoner finds his dance, song, drama and religion at different places. A man from my village looks for all these things together" (*TITF* xv). Within the fold of folk theatre therefore, a consistent blend of the elements of sexuality and violence becomes an objective; it addresses the need to understand the growth of human civilization in the perspective of the basic tenets of emotions and responses to certain things. Chandrasekhar Kambar therefore, explores the

characteristic features and intricacies of folk theatre to the fullest to emphasize sexuality and violence as essential markers of the civilization and also as the zone of convergence for rituals and theatre.

Works Cited

- Fleming, Chris. "Mimesis and Violence- an Introduction to the Thought of Rene Girard." *Australian Religion Studies Review*. Vol 15:1, 2002. Web. <https://openjournals.library.sydney.edu.au/index.php/ARSR/article/view/8964>
- Girard, René. *Violence and the Sacred*. Translated by Patrick Gregory. London and New York: Continuum, 2005. Print.
- Kambar, Chandrasekhar. Author's Note. *Two Plays* by Chandrasekhar Kambar. Trans. Krishna Manavalli. India: Penguin Random House India, 2020. Print.
- . Interview by Samik Bandyopadhyay. *Natya Shodh Sansthan*, 2 Dec. 1987. Web. <https://sites.google.com/view/nssheritagelibrary/home>
- . A Note on Jokumarswami. *Twist in the Folktale*. Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2004. Print.
- . "Jokumarswami". *Twist in the Folktale*. Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2004. Print.
- . "Siri Sampige". *Modern Indian Drama: An Anthology*. Edited by G. P. Deshpande. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2000. Print.
- Lal, Ananda. "Introduction". *Twist in the Folktale*. Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2004. Print.
- Shiva Prakash, H. S. *Traditional Theatre*. Incredible India. New Delhi: Wisdom Tree, 2007. Print.
- Taranath, Rajeev. Foreword. *Two Plays* by Chandrasekhar Kambar. Trans. Krishna Manavalli. India: Penguin Random House India, 2020. Print.
- Woodward, Kathleen. The Look and the Gaze: Narcissism, Aggression and Aging. *SubStance*, Vol.18.1, Issue 58, 1989: 74-88. Jstor. Web. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3685030>

About the Author

Dr. Angshuman Mukhopadhyay is an assistant professor of English at Prafulla Chandra College, Kolkata, India. His area of interest is British drama; he obtained his Ph.D from the University of Calcutta. He has published in journals and has contributed book chapters. He has presented papers in national and international seminars.