



Male-Bonding in Amrutha Someshwar's Tulu Play *The King's Horseman*

Dr Sylvia Rego

Associate Professor

Department of English, St Aloysius College (Autonomous) Mangaluru

Date of Submission: 11-09-2026

Date of Acceptance: 21-09-2026

Abstract

The Tulu play Raya Ravuthe or The King's Horseman combines Tulu cultural and folkloristic practices with the narrative of the legendary medieval figure of Kumara Rama, worshipped in many temples in Uttara Kannada, and found in the epic Ramanatha Charithre by the Kannada poet Nanjunda. The play is a fascinating story of love, intrigue, deception, and loyalty. The world of rituals, battle, and sports overlap here in the form of hegemonic masculinity. It excludes many from the inner circle, and fosters a homo-social sub-culture exclusive to young men. This paper attempts to see the ways in which the sacral, the sportive, and the martial worlds overlap here in a demonstration of male-bonding.

Keywords: homo-social, hegemonic masculinity, ritual, martial, sportive, folk, Tulu

The play *Raya Ravuthe* can be studied from the perspective of masculinity at the intersection of nationalism, or rather, regional nationalism and class, or the ruling class. Set against the historical background of Portuguese attempts at invading the Chouta kingdom at Ullal, and often referring to other regional invaders from the South, the play highlights the working of race and the power institutionalised in the office of the king. The playwright Someshwar adapts the story of the old Kampila king who orders the death of his son Kumara Rama at the behest of his young wife whose overtures of love were spurned by the prince. The narrative is grafted on to the Chouta kingdom at Ullal, well-known for rebuffing the Portuguese attempts to overpower it. Though he had the historical model of the *veerangana* Rani Abbakka who had on several occasions defeated the Portuguese, the playwright chooses the story of Gandugali Rama. The young queen Neelamma feels incarcerated within the palace, a 'parrot in a gilded cage', and falls in love with the young prince Somanath while watching him participate in the folk-sports. She finds the old king unattractive. She

is excluded from the inner circle of the young men around the palace who form a close-knit group sharing common interests and roles.

One such role is as protectors of the weak. Somanath undertakes the task of saving women in distress when cornered by hoodlums attempting to rob them of their gold ornaments. Men in the play are often in the *garodi* or gymnasium, for, a fit male body alone could withstand ordeals. The *garodi* permeates the consciousness of Tuluvas through the legend of the folk-heroes Koti-Chennaya recited in *paddanas*. The male body thus feels a rush of adrenaline that keeps it going against all odds. The men in the play experience freedom of mobility – unchallenged freedom to roam around the kingdom – the price for enacting the role of protectors.

Eve Sedgwick traces the ways in which the western world has actively suppressed a link between the homo-social and the homo-sexual in the case of men while such a strong sense of opposition does not mark the feminine world of desire and bonding. She writes that "the emerging pattern of male friendship, mentorship, entitlement, and hetero- and homosexuality was in an intimate and shifting relation to class, and that no element of that pattern can be understood outside of its relation to women and the gender system as a whole" (1985: 1). There is an uneasy silence in the Tulu literary works on the correlation between homo-sociality and homo-sexuality despite the prevalence of at least the latter in the culture of the sub-continent. But Sedgwick's reading of the inter-relation between male friendship, gender, and the category of women, if not class entirely, can be useful in the interpretation of the homo-social in the play *Raya Ravuthe*. Michael Ross and Alan Wells are of the opinion that "homo-social behaviour, including a wider range of male resources, may lead to enhanced survival." They say that while marriage might mean procreation and family life in India, it does not necessarily have to include attraction and emotional love. Rather than a sense of the individual self, it would be ideas of kinship and the collective identity that would be of significance, they say, in India.



They deduce from Sudhir Kakar's work on sexuality in India that since women are feared as contaminating, the homo-social bond between men could imply a strong emotional bond between men "to provide mutual support and protection." For Ross and Wells, the homo-erotic, in India, could then also be a by-product of the homo-social (Ross and Wells 2000). The strong bond between the young men in the play can thus be conducive to group-survival, and is also embedded in the larger collective matrix of kinship and community identity. The fear of the contaminating woman is evident also at the cultural level in *Raya Ravuthe* as also in the narrative of Kumara Rama.

There is a closing of ranks between men in the play. They form a strong homo-social group and share similar interests, especially when they belong to the same age group. The camaraderie and the code of honour require rejection of barriers that divide them. When, for instance, Manjana addresses Somanath as 'Prince', the latter is quick to object:

"Look here, Manjana, I have told you so often that I am prince only in the palace! You must never call me that! As members of a group playing sports, the son of the king, that of the army general, and of the steward are all equal. Do you understand?"

Even when age divides them, as in the case of the king and the prince, a shared male honour prevents transgression. A woman young enough to be one's wife, is seen as a maternal figure, in order to uphold the older king's claim over his wife.

As observed by Sedgwick, the homo-social world of men cannot be understood adequately unless one sees the gender dynamics at play, and the role of women as perceived by them. Right in the beginning of the play, it is evident that there is a tacit male understanding about the spaces to be granted to women. Neelamma has never had a real opportunity to even set eyes on Somanath, who spends most of his time in male zones inaccessible to women. She says,

"I have never had too many opportunities to see him. That's why I couldn't recognise him from afar."

After seeing Somanath Neela becomes even more conscious of her life as a 'creeper' forced to climb up a 'rotting tree'. *Raya Ravuthe* demonstrates this twin male fear - of ageing, and of female inconstancy in love as a result, despite the backing of immense wealth and power. Old age and women are both to be dreaded. The homo-social world of young men in the play can be seen as furthered by the fear of the contaminating figure of the woman. It is also an upholding of the collective

identity, and the tacit bond of support of one another in this homo-social world.

To understand the central idea of the homo-social bond between young men in the play, one needs to look at the world of sports a little closely. The male world of sports and feats of physical prowess is an exclusive one in the play *Raya Ravuthe*. Women can be silent onlookers as in the case of the young queen Neelamma and her maid Chennamma, and feel thrilled and get 'goose-flesh', as the maid says. When the young queen manipulates Somanath's friend, and gets the ball they are playing with to land in her chamber, she tries to hold Somanath back when he comes up to collect it. However, he strains to escape from her. He tries to retrieve the pearl-ball that has shot into her chamber, and return to the scene of action down below in the open ground. He says,

"My young friends are waiting down below; don't restrain me, *Chikkammaji*. You do not know the pleasure of playing that game. My mind is entirely on the playground now."

The game, and the ball mean more to him than anything else. Neelamma asks:

"Your ball has become more important than me, hasn't it?"

Somanath replies with evident masculine pride, "This is no common ball. They say my maternal uncle Sankanna Chouta and my grandfather Chinnaraya Chouta have played with it! They say it is a ball with great supernatural powers!"

Again, men – all of them warriors as well - are bound seamlessly to one another down generations through games sanctified by the almost divine ball. This again is an extension of the precious ancestral ball in the narrative of Kumara Rama. Michael Meuser uses Bourdieu's assertion that masculinity is constructed within the 'serious games of competition' that have a ritualised character. Meuser avers that competition is the "mechanism of distinction and conjunction", and is the generating principle of the homosocial construction of masculinity. While creating hierarchies, these games are also a source of "comradeship, solidarity, and mutual affection", the competition involved, notwithstanding. He says that refusing to play these games "generates doubts on one's masculinity" and leads to feelings of habitual insecurity (Meuser 2007: 38-51). By this understanding of hegemonic masculinity and sports, Somanath and his friends then, must prefer male company, show a mutual love that comes easier than expressing hetero-sexual love, and prefer the bonding of ritualised sports to exclusion from this magical male circle.



The folk-sports that include boxing, wrestling, sword-fighting, lifting of heavy stones, mock-fights, and flinging of coconuts, are contests that bring out the 'valour and pride of the hot-blooded youth', as Chennai tells Neelamma.

The gaze here is reversed. It is an admiring gaze. Women watch, comment on, appreciate the feats in the male world of sports, feast their eyes, fall in love. The thrill of playing, being the cynosure of all eyes, and the power that goes with it is a masculine order. But it has to be repeated every time in order to keep notions of masculinity alive. Male prowess, here, in folk-sports, needs to be continuously proved. Young men have to play and keep up notions of masculinity that must set them off from not only women, but also from older men and little children as well. Being agile, competing fiercely, and asserting one's skill in the playground is actively linked to aggression and valour in the battle-field. The two go hand in hand in creating desirable male bodies, lusted after by sequestered women. Here, most of the players are from a commonly shared social and political structure, being children of generals and other martial leaders. Being male here is being a particular kind of male - supremely confident, valiant, and competent in the two arenas of sports and war. Most of all he is young. The zones of war and sports overlap. One cannot be good at war if one does not assert dominance in the sporting arena as well. Social approval hinges on the smooth gliding between the domain of ritual-sports and display of valiant violence in war. In using biological and psychological evolutionary theories to understand territoriality, sports, and war, Lewis Barker says that the symbolic positions of defence and attack taken on sports fields reflect similar strategic positions in the battlefield, and can be traced back to early hunter-gathering male activities of defence of the group (2017). Barry et al trace the ways in which boys are trained during competitive sports to remain stoical and display no visible sign of pain, fear, and discomfort. This is linked to notions of male toughness that included aggressiveness, fortitude, and competitiveness (1976: 92-93). Though these studies apply largely to the West, and can be limited in scope, they can be judiciously used to study literary representations as in the current paper on masculinity. Fortitude and toughness can be gleaned from the play at hand as necessary for sports and war, though, as mentioned earlier, could be extended to understand *veerangana* figures as well. The startlingly close relationship between war and

sports has also been explored here at the semiotic level as well.

Kumara Rama, whose story inspires and animates Someshwar's play, is credited with winning several battles for his father. The playground becomes the battle-ground, and the war-zone has to be mastered playfully. When Chennai introduces the young prince Somanath, this permeation of the borders of games and battles becomes evident: "When is he ever in the palace? He is either waging wars in the battle-field or is to be found in the gymnasium." Building the youthful male body by rigorous training in the gymnasium prepares it for both domains - sports and war, toughens them, and makes them stoical to pain and discomfort.

But these two spheres must and do merge with a third one - the world of the sacred. Games, including ritual folk-games are nothing if not also linked inextricably to the sacral. Several temples that have deified Kumara Rama prove the overlap of the profane and the sacral. When the old king orders the minister to get Somanath secretly killed for seemingly attempting to violate Neelamma, the minister links the crown-prince to Lord Rama, and also equates the political, the religious, and the ritual world of folk-games:

"A kingdom sans Somanath is like Ayodhya without Rama. A kingdom's fort without the main gate. A buffalo-race field minus the ornamental ritual pole."

Masculinity includes the role of protector. The minister's fear for the kingdom indicates helplessness on the part of old men past their prime. The tiger-metaphor is used several times in the play. Dastardly enemies are akin to foxes:

"When our enemies find an opportune time and attack our kingdom, who is the great hero that bravely puffs out his chest and protects the glory and honour of our kingdom? There will be a time when other kings and lords come forth transgressing all limits and clamour and raise a cry at our border like the heightened mischief caused by spineless foxes in a forest devoid of tigers and leopards."

Again, when the Portuguese ships attack the Banga kingdom in Kudla, the Chouta king, an old man who once led 'bloody battles' as Neelamma observes, is loath to wage a war against the 'white-faced' foreigners. Neelamma chides him for what she says



is his 'indolent' attitude, and urges him to join the Banga king in battle. The old king replies, "The time when I would fight on the battle field is long past. Nonetheless, if the queen tells me to, I will take up the sword again."

The old king might go on a few hunting expeditions to be reminded of his earlier vigour, but his reluctance to fight now is evident even as he gives in to the young queen. He tries to summon up some remnant male valour to prove his love for the young Neelamma, in whose eyes he must rise.

Though literary and mythological instances of old men leading wars exist, it is largely on the shoulders of young men that the safety of the entire kingdom rests. Adulation of men who must kill or be killed is a social need for survival of a group. One can see traces of regional nationalism here. The young warriors of Tulunadu could stand up to mighty imperial forces, and embodied the past glory of the region. Somanath is symbolic of purity, sacrifice, and is almost divine. He had pledged his life to uphold the sovereignty of the Chouta kingdom. The minister says of him,

'He is the fruit of the auspicious tree in our kingdom, the door to our fortune, the very flag of justice!'

This kind of masculinity that was tied to the heroic, was thus also perceived as divine. Divine sanction legitimised earthy rule, and implied the approval of the Agamaic and folk deities. There is a point in the play where the human and the divine merge, and Somanath represents the cosmic and the divine elements which are shown as converging in order to defend the weak subjects of the beleaguered kingdom. Somanath, presumed dead, then has to go around incognito, as the king's horseman, and manifest human and divine traits in rescuing helpless people caught in a rule on the brink of disorder and lawlessness. Heroism gains a halo here. While western societies moved away from notions of divine rule, the play taken up in this paper reveals the divine aura of the local hegemonic figures like the landlord as well, who for all purposes, were akin to kings.

Cults, worship, rituals, and festivals are also expressed through these folk-games embodied in masculine figures. The same can be said of the heroic zone of battles. The kingdom needs healthy, vigorous, and brave young men to ward off the threat of alien races. Divine grace is invoked in battles. The rock at Someshwar symbolises Rudra, or Shiva. The local temple of the kingdom is dedicated to Someshwar. The protagonist, Somanath, as the name suggests, is born with the blessings of the deity. Even the Daiva going forth to

protect the weak subjects of the kingdom groaning under the assaults of dacoits and thieves, melds with the figure of prince Somanath, who then ventures on horseback, and defeats the anti-social elements plaguing the kingdom. In the war against the Portuguese, the local deity would be invoked. The martial, the sacral, and the sportive are related, and unite in the corporeality of the male body. The onus of protecting the motherland falls on the shoulders of young men, who must be prepared to kill and be killed. Such a body needs to be primed, and prepared for the rigours and the ardour of war. It is to be imbued with heroic traits with traces of the divine. The protector has to be ever-ready to sacrifice his own life if necessary. The folk-sports prepare the men for larger battles. In a conversation with the new queen, this is what the maid, Chenni, has to say about the exploits of Prince Somnath:

'Akka, it is he who slipped off the bangle proudly displayed by the king Baira. He absolutely defeated the army of the Kerala community in the south. It was a crushing defeat.'

The enemy has to be 'crushed' and his defeat has to be 'absolute'. The desirable male body has to constantly and consistently crush opponents in the two arenas of sports and war.

Hunting is yet another male preserve that elicits triumphalism and chest-thumping, especially if it is perceived as being related to killing man-eaters. As protectors, Somanath and others belong to this homo-social, or homo-martial group. The tiger is eighteen feet long, more gigantic than the forty others that Somanath has hunted – a feat that therefore warrants a *Pili-madime* or literally, 'tiger-marriage' – symbolically between the tiger (now dead) and its hunter, Somanath. In a display of male strength, Somanath whirls and flings down the carcass of the tiger, much to the amazement of his friends. They refer to the blood splattered on all of them as a 'ritual squirt of crimson water', and crow, 'That gargantuan Bengal tiger seemed like a mere bag of cotton in our Somanath's hands!' Being a real man here is to triumph over nature and make it seem ridiculously easy. The feral, animistic forces of nature can connote the feminine spirit, now tamed by the man of culture, and symbolically contained through the *pili-madime*. Controlling and civilising the chaotic, primal, and instinctual feminine spirit of nature is a common archetype involving the bringing about of order and structure by the masculine cultural figure. Susan Griffin writes that 'man does not consider himself as part of nature, but indeed considers himself superior to matter'. The woman, she says, is seen as 'both inferior to him



and closer to nature' (1978). Carolyn Merchant refers to the historic taming of organic life through agriculture, and writes that the upturning of the soil and planting of new seed is 'akin to the taming of the wild body, bringing an unruly organic realm into the measured grid of masculine order' (1980). As Val Plumwood says, hegemonic masculine structures justify dominance through binary oppositions of mind/body, culture/nature, and male/female. She says that 'oppression is reinforced by applying these binaries where the wild feminine is cast as chaotic matter needing governance' (1993). In the play, killing the tiger is warranted, for it has turned man-eater. Somanath says:

"When we were assigned the duty of looking after the welfare of the kingdom, such things should not have been allowed to happen. The tiger had attacked a poor old man walking on his way somewhere.... The tiger's time is up, but for us it's time to entwine the hair-tuft with the tiger's whiskers we yanked off!"

Again, masculinity inheres in youth, which is alarmingly ephemeral. Old men are like women and children, and are in need of protection, as seen in the above dialogue. They do not count as real men anymore. Yanking off the tiger's whiskers and entwining the hair-tuft with it is surcharged with heroism, and is symbolic of domestication of a magnificent creature, now contained on, and containing a man's tuft of hair. The semiotic significance of male-hood inhering in the moustache of a brave man, and the transference of a similar strength from the whiskers of the tiger is evident here. Man and beast – both heroic – are integrated at one level, while at another, the beast is now downgraded and serves as a feminised trophy.

The transgression of the tiger is also compared to that of other kings like Baira and the one in Kerala. Both need to be punished. Here, *dharma* is evoked in imparting a swift defeat on those who are seen as trespassing.

According to Manjana, a prominent member of the homo-social group engaged in hunting tigers and other male exploits, 'The house one dwells in must be strong. Cleverness shown by way of meddling in the affairs of others will surely invite a fitting response in the form of punitive measures.' Somanath replies, 'You are right, Manjana. Those are the very tenets of our *Dharma*. By the grace of Lord Somanath there should be no hindrance on the path we walk along.'

The metaphor of the transgressing male as being akin to the mauling tiger continues throughout the play. The aggressor -as tiger and as fox – must be tamed, and therefore obliquely share the femininity found in nature and in women. When the prince is seen as going against his dharma as a son and is assumed to lust after the step-mother Neelamma, he becomes the ungrateful kitten turning into a dangerous tiger. The metaphor is turned around when the minister tries to save Prince Somanath from his father's wrath by making it a positive one.

The homo-social world of men is thus a hegemonic sphere, notwithstanding noble acts of protection and valour, or perhaps because of them. After killing the man-eater, Somanath says,

"It has been quite a while since we had a bath in the sea. It's only when we bathe in salt water that our arms will grow strong. We also need to wash off the blood of the tiger. Let us swim four lengths along the point where the large rock juts out at Someshwar, then have a dip in the temple pond before we climb the steps of the temple."

The homo-social world thus includes an invigorating and daring swim in the sea – particularly dangerous at Someshwar, hunting of tigers and washing off of its blood in a feeling of accomplishment, and offering of prayers. Thus the sacral and the ritual here cannot be separated from the world of sports and of war of *dharma* on kings who invade alien territories. The joy men feel in the company of other men, and the intersection of gender with the divine, the playful, and the martial, are reiterated yet again by Lakkana, a dear friend and comrade of Somanath. He pours forth to Chenni who would like to spend some time with him:

"I was engrossed in the hustle and bustle of the temple feast. When I go to fight on the battle field and see the bloodbath there, I forget everything here. When I am at the gymnasium out-house I am wrapped up in the physical exercises. Somanath has great trust in me. Being in his company is such a joyous and festive thing."

The intense bond of joy and trust men share in the play includes the capacity to die for one another. When the old king orders that his son Somanath be put to death and that his head be brought as proof, a



young friend who resembles the prince, insists on substituting himself – offering up his own head instead of that of the prince. The ministers speaks of this supreme sacrifice of one man for another: “The noble man kept smiling even as he offered up his own head!”

The play *Raya Ravuthe* thus reveals the ways in which masculine camaraderie and bonding intersect sports, domestication of wild femininity of nature, rituals and the sacral, shedding of blood, killing and laying down of one’s life. Thus the entire play is dense with signifiers revolving around the homo-social world of strong and courageous young men ready to kill and be killed to uphold Dharma. They participate in folk-sports, swim in dangerous seas, hunt man-eaters, protect weak subjects from hoodlums, and keep aggressive aliens at bay in battle. All the predators and prey occupy the feminine space shared by women and nature, and are in need of order and structure through the logic of the homo-social masculine domain. They form an exclusive group bound by love, joy, and admiration for one another. There is therefore a degree of gate-keeping in such heroic masculinity, and is to be kept in its inviolate form to distinguish it from the feminine, from which the members originated in the first place, and from children and old men. The young heroes have, through various rites of passage, moved up from the world of the former, and would also be painfully aware of slowly sliding into the world of the old.

References

Primary Source

- [1]. Someshwar, Amrutha. *Gondolu and Two other Plays of Amrutha Someshwar*. Trans. Sylvia Rego. Karnataka Tulu Sahitya Academy 2026.

Secondary Source

- [2]. Barker, Lewis. “ Evolutionary Echoes in Sports and War.” *Sports and Understanding Organisations*. Ed. Daniel J. Svyantek. Emerald Publishing Limited 2017.
- [3]. Barry, H. et al. “Traits Inculcated in Childhood: Cross-cultural Codes.” *Ethnology* 15: 466-505. 1976.
- [4]. Griffin, Susan. *Woman and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her*. Harper and Row, 1978.
- [5]. Meuser, Michael. “Serious Games: Competition and the Homo-social Construction of Masculinity.” *Norma Nordic Journal for Masculinity Studies*. Vol 2 Issue 1 2007 pp 39-51.

- [6]. Plumwood, Val. *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*. Routledge, 1993.
- [7]. Ross Michael, and Alan Wells. “The Modernist Fallacies in Hono-sexual Selection Plumwood, Val. *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*. Routledge, 1993.
- [8]. Theories: Homosexual and Homosocial Exaptation in South Asian Society.” *Psychology, Evolution, and Gender*. 2.3 December 2000. Taylor and Francis pp 253-262.
- [9]. Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homo-social Desire*. Columbia University Press, 1985.