

Impact Factor: 5.47

ISSN: 2278 -9529

GALAXY

International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

Refereed and Peer-Reviewed
Open Access e-Journal

Vol. XI, Issue - 2 (March 2022)



www.galaxyimrj.com

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Thematic Study of Girish Karnad's Play *Yayati*

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Article History: Submitted-20/03/2022, Revised-27/03/2022, Accepted-30/03/2022, Published-31/03/2022.

Abstract:

Girish Karnad is one of the greatest playwrights of contemporary Indian writing in English. To reveal social reality, Karnad has used myths, folktales, legends and history in his dramas. He was fully immersed in Indian mythology and with an amazing touch, he has brought forth characters like Yayati on the contemporary stage. The character has been taken from the Indian epic the *Mahabharata*. In the modern context, the ancient myth has been reinterpreted. Karnad used Indian myths as a tool for creating a new vision. In this play, Yayati perceives horror of his own life and after many symbolic realisations of reality, he takes up moral responsibility. To create modern sensibility, Karnad has invented new relations and characters. He aims to explore futility of human life with lower passions, the incessant struggle of man for perfection, evasion from responsibility and self-sacrifice, desire and dreams, the crises of identity and sufferings of women. This paper is a thematic study of Karnad's play *Yayati* keeping in view the present-day reality of society. Through mythical character, Karnad has discussed contemporary issues.

Keywords: Conflict, Horror, Pleasure, Responsibility, Sacrifice, Sufferings.

Girish Karnad is one of the foremost playwrights of India. His first play *Yayati* was written in 1961. It retells the Hindu myth on the theme of responsibility. Karnad had interest in myths, histories, folk stories and legends. He borrowed narratives from the past not just to reinterpret them through the eyes of the present but to indicate the fluidity of the narrative themselves. Girish Karnad sensed the need of visualizing theatre on the basis of native Indian traditions. T.S. Eliot has said in "Tradition and Individual Talent", that no writer lives in isolation. Every writer who is writing or creating something is bound to reflect the traditions

in which he has lived. He can never detach himself from his traditions. In his own words from *The Sacred Wood*:

...the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order. This historical sense, which is a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional. And it is at the same time what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his contemporaneity.¹

Accordingly, Karnad too has reaffirmed the theory of tradition of Eliot in all his plays by projecting the Indian traditions and society in an artistic rich and impressive way. Karnad's play *Yayati* is a self-consciously existentialist drama on the theme of responsibility. The theme of the play is based on the *Mahabharata* where Puru as an obedient son accepts his father's old age. It was indeed a great sacrifice. But the old age brings no knowledge, no self-realisation, only the senselessness of a punishment meted out for an act in which he had not even participated. The father is left to face the consequences of shirking responsibility for his own actions. The play is about preserving otherness. The struggle of Sharmistha and Devyani, Yayati and Puru, Yayati and Chitrlekha are result of ranking of society. Sharmistha states that very clearly to Devyani, "I am a born assura woman. This palace belongs to the Kshatriyas. Again, a Brahmini like you!"²

Karnad continues the theme of Yayati's deep attachment to life, his preoccupation with sensual life and his ultimate rejection of all. Karnad's originality lies in working out motivations behind Yayati's ultimate choice. In Karnad's play, however, Yayati recognizes the horror of his own life and assumes his moral responsibilities after a series of symbolic encounters. Punam Pandey rightly remarks,



Karnad finds man at the centre of universe. His choice of freedom becomes a turning point in his life. He becomes a maker of himself. His individuality and inwardness leads him to the state of loneliness, agony, alienation, rootlessness, purposelessness, absurdity, outsiderism and strangeness of situations. His individual alienation keeps him away from his self and loss of his world. He is always in search for identity and quest for completeness.

Therefore, Karnad's characters who are a victim of existential sufferings and predicaments appear like a lonely figure, a divided self and a split-personality.³

Despite the exchange of age, *Yayati* does not prove to be glorious. The issue of caste, class and gender are raised to politicise the play. In this play, Karnad has taken traditional themes but has given a fresh interpretation to it. His play has pioneered a style which unites the elements of traditional Indian theatre, such as 'yakshagana' and strikingly modern sensibility for contemporary socio-political realities. Tutun Mukherjee observes, "In Karnad's plays, the worlds of reality and fantasy or illusion meet in such a way that poetry is created."⁴ Karnad was given a state award for *Yayati*. In 1972, he received the prestigious Sangeet Natak Academy Award.

Iros kumar Vaja comments, "*Yayati* was a big success on the stage."⁵ In the *Mahabharata* the story runs thus: Yayati was one of the six sons of king Nahusha. Devayani marries Yayati to spite Sharmistha who is deeply in love with Yayati and subjects herself to a lot of physical and mental torture for love. Yayati and Sharmistha's relation led to the birth of a son. Yayati's sensual pleasures are unquenchable and so he fears old age. It is Sharmistha's son Puru who agrees to take the old age of his father and give him his own youth. Ultimately Yayati gains true knowledge and repents. He leaves his rule, gives it to his son, chooses a life of penance with Devyani and Sharmistha and goes to forest.

A new meaning and significance are given by Karnad to this traditional tale. It gains significance in contemporary context. The symbolic theme of Yayati's attachment to life and its pleasures as also his final renunciation is retained. In the *Mahabharata*, Yayati recognises the nature of desire itself and realises that fulfilment does not diminish or finish desire. In

Karnad's play, *Yayati* recognizes the horror of his own life and assumes his moral responsibility after a series of symbolic encounters.

Girish Karnad read a lot the existentialists like Satre and Camus who put great stress on choice and responsibility. The story of *Yayati* seemed to link up with it. It is the character of the Sutradhara who presents the theme and purpose of the play. With the opening of the play, the audience is informed about the play to be mythical. The audience come to know that it is related to past history. The characters, the incidents and circumstances are related to the old times. However, the reality depicted in the play is applicable to modern times as well. The Sutradhara says that neither a scholar nor an ordinary person can escape the burden of responsibility wherein lies the joy of life. Whether it is an old man in search of lost youth or a saint lost in the darkness or the mute actress following him – everyone carries a tree of responsibility all along one's life journey and finally hangs from it. The Sutradhara brings forth the theme of responsibility. It is rightly said of Karnad's art,

Karnad is not impulsive by temperament, and does not resort to writing just at the flash of an idea. ... the classical qualities of balance and restraint are true of the person of Karnad too. He is a genius as a writer, man of excellent disposition. And one in whom all the four elements, to use a Renaissance analogy, are so well-mixed that Nature may stand up and say - here's a man.⁶

In the beginning of the play, we find that Devayani is being instigated by Swaranlata against Sharmistha. Devayani opposes it but we come to know that they both do not have coordination. Sharmistha does not accord proper respect to Devayani because she knows too well that Yayati married the latter as she was the daughter of Shukracharya who could bless him with immortality. When they have an argument, Sharmistha tells Devayani, "Expect that he is not lusting for you, poor darling, he lusts for immortality, your father's art of 'Sanjeevani'." (11) Turmoil is brought in the life of Yayati by Sharmistha. She is the reason behind Devayani's fall into the well to whom Yayati saves. He says that he had taken her out by pulling her right hand. He says, "I was enchanted by you and you were not exactly disinclined." (14) The conflict between Devayani and Sharmistha projects their class conscious status. Sharmistha says, "When I closed my eyes, I was the princess of the rakshasas. You were



the offspring of a destitute brahmin, dependent upon my father. I had everything. Beauty, education, wealth. Everything except birth - an Arya pedigree.... I opened my eyes. You had become the Queen of the Arya race.” (10) As Yayati refuses to part with Sharmistha, there comes crisis to his life. Devayani doesn't want Sharmistha in the palace and bluntly asks her to leave. But Yayati does not agree to this. He says in a decisive voice, “If I want to have peace, I will have to be with her.... I was feeling old, Sharmistha has enthused me and returned my youth to me; I cannot leave her.” (35) Despite the on-going conflict, Devayani does not take a strong stand to send away Sharmistha from the palace. Thus, she is responsible for Sharmistha's presence. When the crisis in the life of Yayati comes, instead of owing up her responsibility, Devayani leaves the palace. She refuses to yield and the result is the curse of premature old age on Yayati.

Initially there is no acceptance of responsibility of his actions when Yayati gets to know of his curse of old age by Shukracharya. The curse demoralises him. He refuses to believe that his son Puru would be of any help in saving him from the curse. He loses control on himself and does not know how to handle the situation. When Sharmistha asks him to keep calm, he protests. She tries to pacify him to accept what has come his way: “No one can escape old age. You have just hastened its arrival. Let us accept it. Let us go away from the city. I'll come with you. I'll share the wilderness with you”. (42) Yayati gets violent and refuses to accept old age. He remains adamant: “If I have to know myself Sharmistha, I have to be young, I must have my youth”. (43) Sitting on the bed, he behaves like an insane. He says, “I am trying to recapture my youth, moments when I handed out pain, moments when I slaughtered enemies, razed hostile cities to the ground, made my queens writhe in pain and demanded that they laugh and make love to me in gratitude....” (43) he goes to the extent of saying that Puru must be celebrating the occasion for it gives him an opportunity to assume the mantle of the king immediately. Puru informs that Yayati's curse can be redeemed if his old age is accepted by a young man. He says that as he had saved Devayani, “Shukracharya has relented and said that the curse of instant decrepitude will not have its effect on you... the curse will not have its effect on you if a young man agrees to take upon himself and offers his youth to you in exchange.(45) Yayati gets jubilant. But here he fails to understand the seriousness of his actions and accuses Sharmistha and Puru of not being happy in his happiness. When Puru informs Yayati that nobody is ready to accept his old age, the latter does not believe it. Yayati thinks that all his subjects would come forward and readily accept his old age. “Surely, that is not a serious question. ... They are my people. They love me. Surely, they will not hesitate to step forward.”

(46) It is Sharmistha who brings him to senses. Although she is just a mistress, yet she is ready to share all his problems like a wife and gives him the right advise and says: "Why should they? Why should they take upon themselves the curse you have brought upon yourself? Please, Sir. Let us not look around for the fool or the yogi who is seeking holy martyrdom. Let us go...." (46) Henceforth Yayati is brought to senses by Sharmistha.

Yayati cannot believe his ears and protests. Yayati even proposes to take back his old age after five or six years. Everybody is at his wit's end to make Yayati accept the responsibility for his action. Puru also asks Yayati to accept his old age and go to the forest. Yayati cries bitterly and with his folded hands looks at Puru. At this point, Puru decides to accept the curse of senility inflicted on his father. When Puru proposes that the curse given to Yayati should be transferred to him, Sharmistha tries to dissuade him. "No, no, no, you can't. That is utter stupidity! Pooru the desire for self-sacrifice is a rank perversion." (50) For Puru, it is not a sacrifice but a son's duty towards his father. "I want to root myself back in my family. I want to realize the vision that drove my ancestors... I am like an infant on the brink of birth. Please don't shove me back with name." (50) The Sutradhara in the play thus discusses theme of responsibility:

Sometimes when we are walking along a path, we see two paths in front of us. We can take only one road and feel that we are fulfilling our life's purpose. However, we are always conscious of the inaudible voice which says: 'What would have happened if we had walked on the other road' Yet let the untrodden road be untrodden and let its secret remain buried.⁷

Suddenly Puru starts feeling weak and is about to fall when Sharmistha helps him. When asked by Sharmistha that what had happened, Puru replies: "The curse, mother. The spasms of imminent birth" (50). Although old age and sin are successfully transferred to Puru by Yayati, but this process leads to give the experience to him of loss of faith and shatter his disillusionment. The argument that he puts forward is that his people need him as a king and therefore he is doing this. He says that Puru lacks experience. He further says that it is not only lack of experience but lack of will and desire too. "Instead of welcoming the responsibilities of a king - and of a householder - he has welcomed senility within a fortnight of his marriage." (64) But to his own self, it is clear that this is not the truth.

The final recognition of the horror of the situation comes to Yayati through Chitrlekha, Puru's young wife, who finds reality too much to bear and kills herself. She poisons herself in order to be relieved from the miserable condition in which she has been living. Initially, when



Swaranlata gives Chitrlekha the news that Puru has accepted his father's old age, she is absolutely stunned but takes courage. She adds that old age as a curse has come to him at the right time, otherwise she would have cursed her husband and her luck like a mad person. Now she can curse her foolishness. When Puru asks for forgiveness, Chitrlekha replies, "I was a fool, blind to your greatness. I didn't realize my good fortune". (57) Puru wants her support for the responsibility he has taken. She gladly extends. But when she offers to leave the kingdom to her father-in-law, he scolds her: "Do you remember the vow you took not so long ago - with god as your witness, in the presence of the holy fire? That you would walk in the path marked by his foot prints; whether home or into the wilderness.....(62) Chitrlekha ironically says, "Or into the funeral pyre?"(62) This irritates Yayati and he scolds Chitrlekha for wishing death for her husband.

Chitrlekha holds Yayati responsible for pushing Puru towards death. Yayati tries to idealise Chitrlekha's sacrifice. He says that individual is not important. "We are talking of the future of our entire people." (65) He further says, "Rise above trivialities, Chitrlekha."(65) He asks her to be superhuman. His arguments do not bend Chitrlekha. To come out of this net, Chitrlekha puts a proposal before Yayati. She would like Yayati to take the place of Puru in her life so that she can bear a child of the family: "I didn't know Prince Pooru when I married him. I married him for his youth. For his potential to plant the seed of Bharatas in my womb. He has lost that potency now. He does not possess any of the qualities for which I married him. But you do." (65) She further says that he has taken the youth of his son and further says, "It follows that you should accept everything that comes attached to it."(65) Yayati is shocked when Chitrlekha offers herself to him. He accuses her of harbouring such low thoughts. But Chitrlekha cannot see any light in her future life. She tells Yayati, "You have your youth. Puru has his old age. Where do I fit in?" (66) Chitrlekha can see only one solution to this problem which is to end her life. "Through her Karnad explores the futility of being born a princess who finds reality too much to bear and kills herself."⁸

However, after taking poison, she is not willing to die. When Yayati sees the dead body of Chitrlekha, he repents. Sharmistha uses sarcasm and says that Yayati has won with her death. She says that it does not matter to him that who she was. She says, "You destroyed her life." (67) She says that the king did not pay attention to her requests. She sarcastically says that this death is the foundation of his glorious future. "A woman dead, another gone mad, and a third in danger of her life." (68) In most plays of Karnad, "the worst sufferers are women."⁹ Women have been sufferers in Hindu patriarchal society.

Yayati is brought to his senses with Chitrlekha's suicide and the responsibility of his actions is taken up by him. He asks Puru to take his responsibility: "Take back your youth Pooru, Rule well. Let me go and face my destiny in the wilds." (69) He asks Sharmistha to accompany him to the forest before the nightfall. He says that sins can be washed by doing penance in the forest. His youth was spent in the city but his old age will be spent in the forest. After regaining youth, Puru repents for Chitrlekha. He says, "We brought you here only to die. (69) He says that their senses have been ruined as they shall never be able to comprehend her teachings. He says, "What does all this mean, O God? What does it mean?" (69)

Liberty is taken by Karnad with the original myth in *Yayati* and for the acceptance to modern sensibilities new relationships have been invented by the playwright. He invents two characters, Puru's wife Chitrlekha and confident Swaranlata. Karnad's unheroic hero Puru is a challenging experience. Karnad places the individual person at the centre of his picture of the world and shows that each man is what he chooses to be or makes himself. Karnad has deep insight into human psyche. He gives concepts which greatly awaken human consciousness. This play is about preserving otherness. The conflict between Sharmistha and Devayani, Yayati and Puru, Yayati and Chitrlekha are products of social hierarchies. The play operates upon the binary oppositions of Brahmin Devayani and rakshasi Sharmistha, Kshatriya king Yayati and his unshatriya son Puru. Chitrlekha's anxieties are also a product of caste and gender differences. These differences can be perceived in terms of a centre and a periphery. Karnad's play shows a constant shift. The play shows Sharmistha's empowerment as she moves centre stage and Devayani leaves the palace. At another level are Yayati and Puru. Puru is a disappointment to his valorous, aggressive father. Kshatriya masculinity is epitomised by king Yayati, but Puru lacks ancestral the sexual prowess and heroism too. The issue of class, caste and gender are raised to politicise the play.

The myth of king Yayati appealed to the young Karnad. When Yayati was cursed with old age, he transferred it to his son Puru, who was born of Sharmistha. Consequently, Puru fails as a husband for Chitrlekha who commits suicide owing to his irresponsible and callous behaviour. Thus, the episode of Yayati is useful in bringing out the theme of responsibility in the modern context. Paternal loyalty is a fine gesture but it can be ruinous in the nuclear family today when it is misappropriated. There is something eccentric in Yayati who does not want to shoulder his responsibility and shifts it to his son.

Karnad in his plays tries to evolve a symbolic form out of a tension between the archetypal and mythic experience and a living response to life and its values. Karnad has not taken the myth as it is. In *Yayati* he has taken the myth partially. In the myth, Puru's acceptance



of his father's old age smoothly resolves the story. But Karnad's play uses this only as a starting point. If the young Puru had a wife, how would she feel about his extraordinary decision, becomes the starting point of his exploration of the problem raised by the mythical story. "In fact, Karnad has given a twist to the story, for he places the individual in the centre as a representative of whole mankind, whose desires are never dead.... Karnad shows that each man is what he aspires to be or makes himself."¹⁰

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