

KARNAD'S YAYATI: A RECAST OF MYTH SUITING MODERN SENSIBILITIES

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Abstract

Yayati is the first play of Girish Karnad. He borrowed the story of the play from the Mahabharata, made some changes in the story and presented it as a story of a modern man's disillusionment. This paper deals with the study of Myth of Yayati from the Mahabharata and tries to trace the ways in which Karnad has presented the modern sensibilities. Karnad goes back to myths and legends and makes the study of myths and legends to present a new vision. He aims at presenting the absurdity of life with all its elemental emotions, struggles, conflicts and man's desire to achieve perfection. Karnad uses symbolic theme in the play to present, the king Yayati's attachment to his life and its pleasures and his final renunciation through disillusionment. In the Mahabharata Yayati's act of renunciation was the result of his acknowledgement of the nature of desire itself and the realization that desires do not end through fulfilment, they keep occurring. On the other hand in this play, Yayati's act of denial occurs through his recognition of the truth of his own life and the assumption of his moral responsibility towards it. Yayati's episode of exchanging of Ages between the father and the son throws light upon the modern sensibilities where man is caught between two choices, either pleasures of life or the moral responsibility. The theme of choice, responsibility, disillusionment and alienation are majorly focused upon by Karnad in this play. Yayati a play based on myth and with the touch of modern vision represents Yayati and Puru as the disillusioned modern men, facing alienation and at the same time, are bound with sense of responsibility.

Keywords: Alienation, Conflict, Disillusionment, Modern Sensibility, Responsibility

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Mythology is the study of myths. A myth is a story that has significance to a culture, a story which addresses fundamental and difficult questions that human beings ask as; "who and what am I, where did I come from, why am I here, how should I live, what is the right thing to do, what is the universe, how did it all begin?" Therefore, Myths are those stories that are composed upon great men and women; upon forces of good and evil; upon animals, large and small; upon trees, the sea and the wind; and upon giants, gods and other supernatural beings. Literature and myths have a strong connection as several writers make use of mythological stories as the base of their storyline in their literary works and try to relate those myths to contemporary situations in a society. Eugene O'Neill, William Shakespeare, Girish Karnad are some of the famous dramatists who have borrowed the plots of their plays from myths, history and legends.

Girish Karnad's first play *Yayati* is based on an episode from Indian mythology only. The renowned Indian playwright, Girish Karnad was born in 1938; he is a playwright, an actor, film director and a writer who predominantly works in South Indian Cinema and Bollywood. He has been composing plays for four decades in Kannada and translating his plays into English. He often makes history and mythology to deal with the contemporary issues related to the life of modern man. For his contribution to Indian cinema and Literature, he received Padma Shri and Padma Bhushan by the Indian government and won Film Fare Awards. Karnad's well known plays are, *Yayati* (1961), *Tughlaq* (1964), *Hayavadana* (1975), *Tale-danda* (1990), *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan* (1997), and *Fire and the Rain* (1998). This study is based on Girish Karnad's three plays, *Yayati* (1961), *Tughlaq* (1964), and *Hayavadana* (1975).

Yayati is a story of a King, found in the *Mahabharata*, Yayati was a purnaic king who marries sage Shukracharya's daughter Devyani and brings Sharmishtha as Devyani's attendant. Karnad's play *Yayati* is based on a myth but he makes several deviations from the original story. The story of Yayati appears in the nineteenth chapter of book nine of the *Bhagavata Purana*. Yayati was a Puranic king and the son of King Nahusha. Yayati had conquered the whole world and was

the Chakravartin Samrat. Devyani was the daughter of the sage Shukracharya and after her failed relationship with Kacha she married Yayati. Sharmishtha, the rakshas princess, who was Devyani's childhood friend, came along with Devyani as her attendant and Yayati's mistress on her request. Sharmishtha loved Yayati and she subjected herself to a lot of physical and mental torture for love. A son was born to her out of her clandestine liaison with Yayati. Yayati, who was blinded by his insatiable thirst for sensual pleasure, was cursed of premature old age by Shukracharya. Puru, Sharmishtha's son offered to exchange his youth for the age of his father. When Yayati realized his mistake and became enlightened, he gave his throne to Puru and went for retirement in the forest to lead a life of renunciation with Devyani and Sharmishtha.

In the play *Yayati*, Karnad gives this traditional tale a new meaning and significance which is highly relevant in the context of modern life. He restructures the story as an ironic drama of dissatisfaction, futility and death. Yayati is shown as a self-centred epicurean who invites the curse of premature old age because he cannot overcome his desire for Sharmishtha, although Devyani warns him for the destructive consequences of his choice. Puru is shown as a son of Yayati and his mother is dead whereas in mythology Puru is the son of Yayati and Sharmishtha. Puru is a philosophical but he has self-hatred and feels unsettled by the questionable legitimacy of his birth and is burdened with dynastic traditions. When the curse is announced Puru accepts that curse. Karnad introduces a fictional character in this play and that character is Chitrlekha, the Anga princess. She commits suicide as she feels betrayed by her husband, Puru who shows carelessness and irresponsible attitude towards his newlywed bride. Chitrlekha's death becomes a lesson to Yayati and he takes back his curse from Puru and retires to forest with Sharmishtha.

In *Yayati*, Karnad takes the symbolic theme of Yayati's attachment to life and its pleasures as his final renunciation. In the *Mahabharata*, Yayati recognizes the nature of desire itself and realizes that desires do not diminish or finish, in fact they increase with time. In the play, *Yayati*, the character of Yayati recognizes the horror of his own life and realizes his moral responsibility after several symbolic encounters as Chitrlekha's death was a great lesson for him. The play deals with the theme of responsibility as the Sutradhara brings forth this theme in the beginning of the play: 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. Let us stick to the morals of the grandmother's stories that we heard in our childhood. This is the sad story of life. (Reddy. 129)

Karnad's *Yayati* gives a portrait of an overbearing patriarch and a weak wiled son and paints a displaced expression of his resentment against the element of 'emotional blackmail' in family relations. Karnad gives a picture of modern time where there are complex relations in family as through the father-son relationship, between Yayati and Puru he presents that emotional pressure on a son to continue the legacy in his family and maintain the traditional rituals in a family. Puru always feels burdened with dynastic traditions. As Puru says to Sharmishtha when he accepts curse as, "I want to root myself back in my family. I want to realize the vision that drove my ancestors" (*Yayati* 50).

Karnad also presents the patriarchal set up of the society where women are subordinate to man as Devyani, Swarlatana and most importantly Chitrlekha become victim of the harsh rules of patriarchy. The father-daughter relationship is also been projected through the character of Sharmishtha and her father as for her father's wish she became Devyani's attendant. Through their conditions and situations Karnad shows that this patriarchal set up of society has always been an integral part of Indian culture even in the ancient time and in modern India as well.

Through the character of Devyani the Brahman queen and Sharmishtha the slave princess Karnad allegorizes the hierarchical divisions of caste. The hierarchical divisions of caste can be seen even in the present time. Another instance in the play which shows the modern sensibility through this myth is the gender conflicts as Chitrlekha rejects the king's authority over her, and sees no reason why, "my life existence [should be] immolated at the altar of some empty bubble in the future" (Act IV). She becomes a tool in the hands of the dramatist as Karnad hints at the futility of Yayati's desire for youth.

Therefore, by borrowing the mythological story in the play Karnad not only makes some deviations from original story in fact he presents a philosophical question in front of his audience as Puru asks, "What does all this mean, O God? What does it mean?" the play presents the conflict between illusion and reality. The play deals with the theme of choice, theme of alienation and the theme of responsibility. In the modern age, the modern man suffers from alienation, disillusionment, and the very idea of meaninglessness of human existence on the earth haunts the modern man. Yayati, a self-centred person and always desires for youth learns a great lesson of life and death as he says:

YAYATI: I thought there were two options – life and death. No, it is living and dying we have to choose between. And you have shown me that dying can go for all eternity. Suddenly I n see myself, my animal body frozen in youth, decaying, deliquescing, and turning rancid. You are laying on your pyre, child, burning for life, while I sink slowly in this quagmire, my body wrinkles and grasping, but unable to grasp anything. (*Yayati* 68)

Thus, mythical tales are the tales of elemental human passions and in every new literary work they give a new meaning. Karnad's *Yayati* not only presents a story of human passions and their desires but also the consequence of their choices and it also offers opportunities for philosophical reflections without the constraints of realism or any necessity of contemporary setting.

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