

## The Play ‘Yayati’: An Experimentation with Myth

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### Abstract:

*The present paper delves deeper into the experimentation with myth in the play Yayati. Myth in common is intricately attached with the tradition, culture, custom and society. And hence it is very difficult to unfold it as its structure is supposedly a bit complex. But concealed in its unfolding are the secrets of these myths. This fact cannot be denied that several playwrights in the world have tried to decipher its interpretation, at the same time we must endorse the fact that Girish Karnad's name emerges on the forefront when it comes to reinterpretation of the myths in the sphere of drama. A playwright par excellence, Karnad is credited to have meticulously worked to unravel the different layers of myth. His strongest contribution lies in projecting the myths in such a fashion as if it's just a picture in reality in the various streams of social, cultural, political and psychological aspects especially in the context of Yayati.*

### Keyword: -

Yayati,  
culture,  
Karnad,  
myth,  
experimental,  
psychological,  
tradition

### An Overview of Myth

Before we proceed it would be better for the readers to understand the basic idea and information regarding the myth. Thus, I hereby quote some of the scholars so that it becomes easier to comprehend the concept of myth.

Myth is basically a tale which is self-evident. In a broader sense we can take myth as a belief or credo. Claude Levi-Strauss talks of a structure of the myth but that structure too is basically conveyed through a story. (Segal 4-5).

A well-known literary theorist Jose Manuel Losada, who is having specialization in the field of myth criticism, has defined myth in these words:

“A relatively simple oral narrative of an extraordinary event with a transcendent and personal referent, theoretically lacking historical evidence and comprising a ritual, a series of constant components, and a conflictive, functional, and etiological nature”. (Losada 4).

From the above definitions of myth, it may be deduced that myth covers myriads of stories which are not only confined to gods and goddesses. It also elaborates cultural ethos, moral values, philosophical tenets, human psychology. Myths are strongly affiliated with oral tradition and gets transferred from one generation to the other.

### Girish Karnad as a playwright

Girish Karnad as a playwright has a stature that is unrivalled. He perfectly fits as one of the four major pillars of Modern Indian playwrights, alongside Badal Sircar (Bangla Theatre), Mohan Rakesh (Hindi Theatre) and Vijay Tendulkar (Marathi Theatre). Girish Karnad is credited to have chosen an uncharted territory where Indian myth played a pivotal role and he successfully carved a niche in the spectre of drama. He is remembered for his major works namely *Yayati* (1961), *Tughlaq* (1964), *Hayavadana* (1971), *Nagamandala : Play with a Cobra* (1990), *The Fire and the Rain* (1995), *Bali: The Sacrifice* (2004), *Wedding Album* (2009) etc.

Even his playwriting career has an interesting tale. He shares his experience in his own words about the interesting twist of his career as a playwright in the Author's Introduction to *Three Plays*:

“While still preparing for the trip, amidst the intense emotional turmoil, I found myself writing a play.....But here I was writing a play and in Kannada..... A greater surprise was the theme of the play, for it was taken from ancient Indian mythology from which I had believed myself alienated”. (Karnad 2-3).

When we come to analyze his above mentioned quote then it becomes apparently clear that his first play was an outcome of his own emotional crisis while going abroad for higher education. He found himself emotionally attached to Kannada language and Indian myth which were almost alien to him at that point of time but the genius in him provided the chance to prove his mettle. When he plans to address his intense emotional predicament, he finds solace in writing a dramatic piece and finally a play ‘*Yayati*’ comes into being. It was quite surprising for Karnad to make an analysis how he had landed up in the territory of myths because this realm was an alienated terrain for him. But this is the fact that his unconscious and instinctive choice of myth turned him a playwright who could handle the complex nuances of myths in a more meaningful way.

### The myth of Yayati and its restructuring

The myth of king Yayati has been borrowed from the ‘*Adiparva*’ of Mahabharata. Yayati was known for his conquest and might, who had successfully been able to expand his territory on a large scale. He was married to Devyani, the daughter of Shukracharya who was the most revered sage of that time. Devyani once finds Yayati and Sharmishtha, the Asura princess and slave of Devyani, in a compromising position and makes a complain to her father. Outraged over it, Shukracharya curses Yayati to grow senile prematurely. Shukracharya had made a precondition that the influence of the spell will not be over unless a young one agrees to get it transferred to him. Yayati approaches his all the five sons to own the spell but unfortunately four of them flatly refused to acquiesce to do as their

father's willed but his youngest son Pooru agreed to take on the mantle. As a result, Yayati regained his youth and get rid of the spell of the curse. Almost thousand years later when Yayati grows old, he hands over the reign to his son pooru in fact as a reward for his obedience and loyalty. This myth depicts the relation between father's authority and son's obedience. (Dharwadker xv).

Though Karnad has taken the raw material from the myth just as a power to take off but the wings and flight require for successful take off came into being through his own creative and imaginative vision. Through the familiar terrain of the myth Yayati, Karnad seems to bring the portrayal of a king's lust of retaining eternal youth and power and doesn't hesitate in making even his son a scapegoat.

Karnad has not tampered with the fundamental premise of the myth Yayati but has intentionally added some more characters to make the play even more meaningful and purposeful. The addition of the characters Chitrlekha and Swarnalata in the form of Pooru's wife and the maid of Devyani respectively, is an outcome of the sole imagination of the playwright. He not only introduced Chitrlekha but gave a solid voice, and waves the character in such a way that she doesn't even feel shy of or frightened of confronting father-in-law with regard to the duties, a king is supposed to dispense. Her traits differ completely with that of Pooru who kowtowed his father without thinking of his self and the repercussion. This is the reason that she summons up her courage to raise question before her father-in-law Yayati and asks:

Chitrlekha: "What about your duty to your son? Did you think twice before foisting your troubles on a pliant son?" (Karnad, "Yayati" 62).

Karnad himself talks about the introduction of the character Chitrlekha in an interview with Tutun Mukherjee in this fashion:

"I was also intrigued by the idea that if Puru had a wife, how would she react?  
So, I introduced Chitrlekha. Every character in the play tries to evade the consequences of their actions, except Sharmishtha and Chitrlekha". (Karnad 31).

On the one hand Karnad doesn't even think twice to take the raw materials from the ancient text, but on the other hand he beautifully executes his presentation draped in modern thoughts and sensibilities. It can be traced back from his interpretations that he never shies of taking concrete and bold step to clothe his characters in innovative way, as it can be seen with his introduction of the character Chitrlekha and Swarnalata. He sheds light on the man-woman physical relationship in his dramatic universe that are quite relevant and seem to be the voice of the contemporary world.

Karnad knew that he was encountering the known ancient text but at the same time he was not oblivious of the fact that he was not in a position to alienate himself from the contemporary philosophy. This is the reason that he could not dispensed himself from the Existentialist philosophy that is conspicuous by its presence in this play, and so in the context of existential philosophy in *Yayati* he says in the same interview that:

"It is true that Existentialism was the persuasive philosophy of the time.

My attempt was to emphasize the calm acceptance of grief and anguish.  
 Puru's old age is a sudden transformation and not the eventuality of life.  
 It is a senseless punishment for an act he has not committed". (Karnad, "In his Own Voice" 31).

Thus, Karnad took the text from the ancient myth and presented the tale in his new avatar, where he is seen dealing with the modern dilemma, philosophy and tragedy. *Yayati* is remembered for a man's wish to remain ever youthful, mighty and powerful.

### **Chitrlekha's chequered journey**

With the addition of the character Chitrlekha, Karnad seems to have undoubtedly given a new dimension to the play. Chitrlekha seems to have become a victim of Yayati's unending desire of remaining at the helm of affairs. Chitrlekha is a victim, yet she doesn't appear to be a silent one, rather she is a vocal one and hence takes the center stage by outrightly refusing Yayati's proposal to accept Pooru in decrepitude. Chitrlekha is in no mood to get involved in a crime that she didn't commit. Yayati sort of rebukes and orders her to come to terms with reality, accepting it as a destined reality. But all these arguments fail to dampen her spirit and she is rather found to be confronting an arguing with the king Yayati and raises a question that 'Until Pooru regains his youth I will not allow him to enter my bedroom. Pooru has his old age with him and you with your youth Where I am supposed to fit under these complex environs?' (Karnad, "Yayati" 66).

Taking a rebellious attitude Chitrlekha neither wants to sacrifice her youth nor wants Pooru to accept as husband in his decrepitude. On closely scrutinizing Pooru's wizened face she boils with rage and tells him not to touch her. She seems to be making further advances towards Yayati by giving a proposal to choose her, referring that she had chosen Pooru in his youth which he has lost, now as you are young it seems justifiable for you to accept me. Thus, it appears to be an acid test of Yayati's machoism and sensuality and Chitrlekha's selfishness on the other hand. Chitrlekha seems to be adamant and doesn't relent from her stand, she sticks to it throughout her life and finally ends her life by consuming poison.

It was the moral responsibility of Yayati to have understood the sense and sensibilities of the newly married couple (Chitrlekha and Pooru), rather he acts like a selfish man since convincing Chitrlekha to own Pooru in his decrepitude as her destiny, which she was vehemently opposed to. Chitrlekha, being a woman of modern times is averse to the idea of submitting to the whims of a patriarchal society. Argumentatively she reminds Yayati of the sentiments and emotions of a woman bringing home the point that a woman is supposed to be respected and if it doesn't happen the fabric of social justice and balance will be in tatters. Chitrlekha is not a woman who is either rude or arrogant rather she is a woman of substance and is one who is always appears adhering to her own stand. Yayati's sensual pleasure even in his advanced age can't in anyway be termed as justifiable, whereas Chitrlekha's own carnal desire seems to be a natural one which should not be curbed. Woman of modern times can only be expected to bring a change or halt to the long existing patriarchal mindset, and for such a

cause some women of this ilk may have to sacrifice their life as Chitrlekha is appeared to have shown.

### **Caste and Class conflict**

In the play *Yayati* the caste and class conflict also get reflected through Sharmishtha and Devyani. Both are close friends. Sharmishtha belongs to an Asura clan whereas Devyani belongs to a Brahmin family. The former is a daughter of Asura king and the latter is a daughter of revered sage Shukracharya. All their close ties of friendship come to a tragic end when they go for a bath in a nearby lake with their blouses getting exchanged. Sharmishtha was engrossed in a sweet dream, amidst which she was woken up by Devyani who says that our blouses seem to have been exchanged. Sharmishtha reciprocated by saying that I was in the midst of a beautiful dream but you have ruined it all. Devyani responded by saying that

‘You poor people. You only have to get into a piece of Arya attire. And you start fantasizing’. (Karnad, “Yayati” 20).

Sharmishtha was taken aback by Devyani’s words that pieced her heart and she found herself in utter disbelief. Thus, in a fit of rage Sharmishtha forcibly holed Devyani’s lock and pushes her into a dry well where coincidentally Yayati comes and saves her by holding her right hand and finally gets married. This was the day when their friendship was not only broken but turned into a bitter hostility. Here Karnad is seen reflecting the offended love and ego emerging out of the pain and anguish of a lower caste woman. This reason led Sharmishtha to tell Yayati that you Aryans have so immaculately filtered out things which has made us perplexed and put us in doldrums. (Karnad, “Yayati” 18).

It is felt that Sharmishtha is always on the lookout for enticing Yayati and his found to have a craving for him but in my opinion, this seems to be a figment of imagination and a misconstrued idea. The pivot of Sharmishtha still revolves around Devyani and her stand has remained unchanged even with the passage of time and she is still seen carrying the burden laden over her by Devyani’s offensive remarks. Her entity still appears to be burning the inferno of revenge. This reason seems to be enough for her not to get ready to leave the royal palace even though her term of slavery is approaching towards the end. Here the conflict of an Asura princess and an Aryan woman surfaces to the fore which has been marvelously depicted by these two dramatis personae. There is nothing new with regard to the hostilities between the upper and lower castes as it is deep rooted among the ancient Indian societies and its existence can still be found in the modern scenario too. Thus, the playwright has left no stone unturned to meticulously transform the old myth into a new version by establishing the class conflict of the friends’ turned foes.

**Conclusion:** The play *Yayati* is not only an attempt to bring to the fore the exchange of age between father and son but also represents myths, class conflict, man-woman relationship and several other facets of life in the light of present context. Karnad has made a successful attempt to show the absurdity of life taking the help of myth and his unending desire in such a fashion

as if to bring a halt to time. With the addition of Chitrlekha, Karnad has given voice to Pooru's silence and has waved majestically the character of Chitrlekha making it a force to reckon with. By adding the imaginative character in his play, Karnad has not only pitch forked *Yayati* on to a high pedestal but at the same time got himself immortalized in the contemporary world of theatre and is revered as iconic stature not only in India but across the globe.

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