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Between Tradition and Modernity: A Cultural Critique of Desire, Duty, and Identity in Girish Karnad's *Yayati*

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Abstract

Girish Karnad's *Yayati* reinterprets the mythological narrative from the Mahabharata to examine the tensions between traditional values and modern concerns. This paper seeks to analyze the manner in which Karnad resolves the issues related to the conflict between desire, duty, and identity in order to unravel the cultural nuances involved in such choices. Additionally, it looks at the dynamics between patriarchy, hierarchy, moral obligation, inter-generational conflicts and the repercussions of indulgence of unbridled desire. Through the characters of Yayati, Pooru, Devayani, and Sharmishtha, Karnad explores the nature of the conflict between aspirations and duties in order to demonstrate the conflict between personal freedom and inherited obligation. The method involves a critical reading of the play along with contextualization of Indian myths and culture. The complexity of the theme and maturity of the characters make it possible to analyze the issue of desire in the context of society and family.

Keywords: Girish Karnad, *Yayati*, Theatre, Myth, Culture, Modernity, Tradition.

"Myth embodies the nearest approach to absolute truth that can be stated in words" (Coomaraswamy 9).

INTRODUCTION

Mythology forms an important part of Indian cultural heritage and religious history. Hinduism, a major religion in India, is full of mythological stories, depicted in the sacred texts like the Vedas, Upanishads, Puranas, Aranyakas, and the two great Indian epics, Ramayana and Mahabharata. Girish Karnad is a major playwright of postcolonial India who has used myths extensively in his plays. *Yayati*, his earliest play, written when he was just 22 years old, makes use of one such myth, mentioned

in the Adi-parva of the *Mahabharata* and also finds mention in the *Bhagavat Purana* and *Matsya Purana*. Girish Karnad's dramatic oeuvre is deeply rooted in the rich resources of Indian myths, folklore, and classical traditions. As Budholia puts it,

Girish Karnad derives the resources of the myths and folkloristic devices from the epics of India; he also works out the ideologies of the Vedic culture and the principles of *Natyashastra* in some of his plays. Apart from the derivation of abstract and visionary speculations from Indian poetics and aesthetics, Karnad makes the balancing application to tradition and modernity (2).

Both tradition and modernity in Karnad's theatre engage in a fruitful conversation. On one hand, tradition encompasses the accumulated cultural memory of the Indian people with its classic theatrics and mythology, whereas modernity implies the impact of Western drama, contemporary ways of representation, and modern critical perspective. Karnad succeeds in combining these two diametrically opposed concepts, reviving the traditions and at the same time modernizing them. As a result, he establishes a unique form of theatrical language that combines cultural traditions with current issues. His plays thus serve as an arena for not only remembering the past but also critically analyzing it from the modern perspective. Karnad, just as William Butler Yeats, revisits mythological narratives not merely to exalt the past, but to address the complexities of the modern age. In their literary works, both authors use the myth as a symbolic construct through which contemporary anxieties, social conflicts, and questions of identity can be explored. Karnad remarks that "The myth enabled me to articulate to myself a set of values that I had been unable to arrive at rationally" (5). He recasts the myths from the Indian epics and classical literature in order to explore modern themes of power, sexuality, gender politics, social stratification, and moral conundrums. Through placing the concerns of the modern age into the mythological framework, Karnad makes the myths into arenas of critique and reflection on tradition. For him, "the energy of folk theatre comes from the fact that although it seems to uphold traditional values, it also has the means of questioning those values, of making them literally stand on their heads" (Karnad 2). Therefore, the use of the myth in the plays of Karnad is not an escape from reality but a creative engagement with it. He states, "At seven or eight in the evening it felt like midnight, so we read or told stories, fairytales, and mythology. Mothers recounted stories...I have never bothered what tale to invent, I dip into my mind, into our culture" (Dhanavel 4). Karnad is highly related to his roots, and he draws an Indian sketch of his India with Western colours and Indian taste (Babu 56). The broader implication of this study is that myth in postcolonial Indian drama should not be understood as a nostalgic return to the past but as a critical and dynamic mode of cultural inquiry. The mythic mode was earlier used by writers like Tagore as an effective tool for criticizing the dehumanizing trends of modern civilization. In his play *Red Oleanders*, Tagore taps into the resonances of the *Ramayana* and recasts the mythological setting of Yakshapuri as a modern reflection of the golden city of Lanka (Swarnalanka). Instead of treating the myth as a sacred text that needs to be safeguarded, Tagore uses it as a structure that he can use to unveil the exploitative nature of modern industrial capitalism, the logic of mechanization, greed, and the domination of man by materialism. Like Tagore, Karnad does not reproduce myth for nostalgic celebration; instead, he reinterprets the myth to interrogate contemporary concerns. The myth of Yayati becomes a vehicle for examining the destructive consequences of unchecked desire, the abuse of patriarchal authority, intergenerational exploitation, and the conflict between individual autonomy and inherited obligation.

Yayati is the story of king Yayati, an emperor, belonging to Chandravamshaⁱ, regarded as the progenitor to the Yadavas and Pandavas. Yayati's story has fascinated many Indian playwrights and many writers have written stories around it, like Marathi writer Vi Sa Khandekar wrote the popular

ⁱ Chandravamsha (Candravamśa) refers to the Lunar Dynasty in Hindu mythological and epic traditions.

novel *Yayathi*, for which he got the Jnanapith award. In Kannada, Sriranga wrote a play called *Sanjivani* and there are several plays in Hindi. King Yayati is believed to have conquered the three worlds and was the 'chakravarti'ⁱⁱ. He married Devayani, daughter of Shukracharyaⁱⁱⁱ and later also married Sharmishtha, daughter of the Asura king Vrishaparvan. Sharmishtha was cursed to become the maid of Devayani. To take revenge on Devayani, Sharmishtha seduces Yayati, who promises to make her his queen. Devayani complains to her father, upon hearing of this relationship of Yayati with Sharmishtha. Shukracharya curses Yayati to old age and decrepitude, but later allows him to exchange his old age with any of his five sons and at last, his youngest son, Pooru, agrees to exchange the old age with his father. Girish Karnad makes use of this myth of king Yayati in this play, with certain modifications to make it more compact and adaptable to stage, like, instead of five sons in the original mythical story, King Yayati in the play has only one son, Pooru; Pooru is not the son of Sharmishtha, but an unnamed rakshasa woman, whose 'home and hearth' were destroyed by the Aryas; Girish Karnad creates two new powerful woman characters for the play, Chitralekha and Swarnalata. Chitralekha is the newly married bride of Prince Pooru; Swarnalata is the maid servant in Yayati's palace. The whole play takes place within a duration of one day: the day Prince Pooru arrives at the palace with his newlywed bride Chitralekha, after being away for thirteen years for his education at a rishi's hermitage. The play's characterization is so perfect that one can feel the significance and appropriateness of each character's role within the overall structure and artistic design of the drama. It reminds us of T. S Eliot's remark that "... a character, to be living, must be conceived from some emotional unity. A character is not to be scattered observations of human nature but of parts which are felt together" (121). So far the functional aspect of his character drawing is concerned it reminds us of Northrop Frye's remarks, "In drama, characterization depends on function; what a character is follows from what he has to do in the play. Dramatic function in its turn depends on the structure of the play; the character has certain things to do because the play has such and such a shape" (171-172). In this paper, an attempt is made to critically analyse the play *Yayati* through a cultural studies lens. Although the plot of the story is very ancient, belonging to the time period of the epic the *Mahabharata*, the story asks existential, moral questions which are very relevant to the post-independent Indian times, precisely, 1961, when the play was originally written. Problems like patriarchy, class struggle, oppression of the marginalized, conflict between desire and duty, cultural identity and conflict between tradition and modernity, role of myths in shaping our cultural consciousness, etc. are addressed by taking the example of the characters in the play, keeping the situation they face in the play as the context. Although earlier studies have looked into the work from the points of view of existentialism, mythology, and postcolonial studies, there has been relatively little study of the way in which the work is dealing with issues of caste, gender, and power together. This study adopts a qualitative research methodology based on close textual analysis and interpretive cultural analysis to examine Girish Karnad's *Yayati*. Close reading serves as the primary analytical method, enabling a detailed examination of the play's dialogue, symbolism, stage directions, and dramatic structure in order to uncover the cultural and ideological meanings embedded within the text.

Cultural hegemony

Antonio Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony explains how a dominant class maintains power not merely through direct coercion but by establishing its own values, beliefs, and worldview as common sense within society. Domination is made to seem natural and even right by the use of cultural institutions and social practices by the dominant class on subordinate classes. This has been elaborated further by Louis Althusser in the theory of "Ideological State Apparatuses," where he states that institutions such as education, religion, family, mass media, and culture are mechanisms for reproduction of the dominant ideology. In *Yayati*, Karnad exposes how these ideological structures

ⁱⁱ "Universal Monarch" or "World Emperor"

ⁱⁱⁱ Guru of Asuras

influence characters like Pooru, who internalizes the expectation of filial sacrifice, while Yayati's pursuit of desire reveals the contradictions within traditional moral systems. In Indian society, parents are the dominant group and the children are the subordinate class. It's always the parents who are the aggressors, and children have to give consent to the parents' demands. We can see many examples of these in our myths like that of prince Pooru accepting his father Yayati's curse of old age and decrepitude and in turn giving away his youth; Bhishma promising celibacy so that his father Shantanu can marry Matsyagandha; Lord Shiva punishing Ganesha because he did not allow him to enter Mother Parvati's bathing space and Rama facing 14 years exile just because of a promise made by his father, King Dasharatha to his wife Kaikeyi. In Western society, children are the aggressors over the parents; for example, the Oedipus complex is a boy's unconscious sexual desire for his mother and rivalry with his father, while the Electra complex is a girl's similar unconscious desire for her father and rivalry with her mother. In this play, Prince Pooru is duty-bound as a son to accept his father's curse as his own and sacrifices his youth so that his father can continue to enjoy his sexual life and pleasures. In Indian society, we are conditioned to be docile, obedient to our parents' orders and accept them without questioning. As Foucault puts it:

The human body was entering a machinery of power that explores it, breaks it down and rearranges it ... It defined how one may have a hold over others' bodies, not only so that they may do what one wishes, but so that they may operate as one wishes, with techniques, the speed and the efficiency that one determines. Thus discipline produces subjected and practiced bodies, "docile" bodies. (138)

Prince Pooru in Girish Karnad's *Yayati* can be examined through Michel Foucault's concept of the "docile body". Bound by the ideology of filial duty, Pooru accepts his father Yayati's curse as his own and sacrifices his youth so that his father can continue to pursue worldly pleasures. His act reflects how traditional structures of authority transform the individual body into an instrument of obedience. In Indian social imagination, the ideals of respect, sacrifice, and unquestioning obedience towards parents often shape individual identity and behaviour. Foucault explains that disciplinary power produces "subjected and practiced bodies, 'docile' bodies" by regulating individuals according to established systems of power and expectation (138). Foucault also puts it, "Discipline 'makes' individuals; it is the specific techniques of a power that regards individuals as objects and as instruments of its exercise" (170). Thus, Pooru's sacrifice can be read as the result of a cultural discipline where the body becomes a site upon which familial duty, royal responsibility, and patriarchal values operate. Karnad, however, complicates this act of obedience by revealing its psychological consequences: Pooru's sacrifice preserves his father's desire but creates a crisis of his own identity and agency.

Gender bias and Patriarchy

Women have historically been subjected to gendered discrimination and oppression through the patriarchal structure that regulates the body and sexuality of women, and controls their freedom, choices, and power. As a structural system rather than individual instances of oppression, patriarchy is the domination of masculine hegemony in family, society, and culture, which keeps women in a state of subjugation. Girish Karnad's play *Yayati* raises this issue of patriarchal oppression through a re-look at a mythological story, as it uncovers how women suffer from the decisions taken by men in the context of their desire, duties, honor, and power. Many scholars have noted that the characters of women created by Karnad are often defying gender stereotypes while at the same time showing how women are limited by patriarchal constructions. Chitrlekha is one of the most important characters that sheds light on gendered issues of consent and marital agency. Traditionally, Prince Pooru accepting his father Yayati's curse and exchanging his youth for his father's age is an example of filial devotion and self-sacrifice. Karnad complicates this interpretation of heroism by bringing up the issue of consequences of Pooru's sacrifice on his wife. Pooru's act is constructed as self-sacrifice within a masculine ethical

code that places the emphasis on the father-son relationship while ignoring feelings and existential experience of the bride. Being denied of involvement in an extremely important life decision, Chitrlekha is deprived of her status of an independent person with her own feelings and choices, and becomes the subject of decisions of her husband.

Thus, Chitrlekha's tragedy is not a personal failure, but the tragedy of the patriarchal order that devalues the agency of women in favor of masculine ethical standards. Her suicide is a result of an extremely severe psychological experience of becoming an object of the competing claims of men like Yayati's craving for youth and Pooru's romantic view of self-sacrifice. Karnad challenges the glorification of self-sacrifice as long as it is attained through erasing the other person's agency. In a similar way, the scene with Swarnalata reveals how the regulation of women's sexuality and chastity is used as a means of patriarchal control. The suspicion of her husband about her connection with the Brahmin boy who educated her before marriage shows how a woman's intellectual development and private life are interpreted through the lens of sexual norms. Swarnalata's innocence does not mean anything, as she alone should prove her purity, while male sexuality remains immune to such moral standards.

Thus, in *Yayati*, Karnad depicts the uneven moral economy of patriarchy in which women are supposed to be loyal, sacrificing, and pure, whereas the behavior of men is explained by ideals such as duty, desire, and power. A feminist reading of the play shows that Karnad does not depict women as passive victims but shows them as being conscious and emotionally complex. Nevertheless, their situation shows the deep roots of patriarchal structures that hinder female independence. Therefore, *Yayati* becomes a critique of gendered power relations as it effectively reveals how personal choices are largely shaped by cultural systems. His reinterpretation of myth challenges traditional narratives of masculine heroism and aptly redirects our attention toward the silenced experiences of women whose lives are affected by patriarchal ideals of duty, honour, and sacrifice. Again, it scrutinizes the patriarchal system that legitimizes male faults, transferring the burden of failure on women. As Yayati tells Sharmishtha, "You she-devil! You are the cause of all this. You are responsible. You trapped me with your wiles" (42), it becomes evident that there is an inherent cultural practice to portray women as temptresses and seductresses, who corrupt men through their nature. Though Yayati himself is the one whose desire for pleasures and immortality brings about a situation of crisis, he chooses not to take the responsibility and shifts the blame on Sharmishtha. This act shows how in patriarchal politics men manage to retain their agency by casting women in the role of creators of desire and corruption. The cultural perception of women as sinners and sexual offenders is contradicted in this play since in fact Yayati's fault lies in his male desire. Thus, Sharmishtha can be viewed not only as an example of gender oppression in a patriarchal society but also as a manifestation of the social mechanisms, which deprive women of freedom of choice while making them suffer from the mistakes and actions of men.

Cultural Legacy and Generational Conflict

A cultural legacy is the inheritance of values, traditions, beliefs, practices, passed on through generations. Prince Pooru is born in the great lineage of the Chandravamsha dynasty where his great grandfathers, grandfather Nahusha and even his father Yayati were great warriors, emperors who ruled rich, prosperous kingdoms. He was under extreme pressure to carry that legacy forward whereas in reality, he wanted to lead a simple life. He was over-burdened by his family legacy. In Act Two, while having a conversation with his father, Pooru says, "I had not the slightest inclination to follow in the steps of my illustrious forefathers. I found their deeds pompous. I was bored by the hermitage, unembarrassed. I wanted to run away from all that it represented: that history, those triumphs, those glorious ideals" (37). And further he says, "My forefathers were the great eagles, keen eyed, hovering regally in the clouds. I shall seek to be a worm" (37). These lines express the frustration of Pooru at not being a worthy successor to his family's legacy. He struggles under the burden of his family legacy to prove his capability. He deems it fit to accept his father's curse on himself as a way of escaping from

his future responsibilities of leading the vast kingdom. The characters of King Yayati and Prince Pooru seem to be two extremes, where Yayati lusts for power, wealth, women and eternal youth to enjoy all these, whereas Prince Pooru wants a simple life, away from the glitter, glory, and power of his kingdom. Again, there is always a hostile relation between the father and son as Yayati confesses, "Whenever we talk to each other, there erupts a quarrel. Why is it so? This I have not been able to know so far" (Karnad 49). Pooru "vomits fire" (49) seeing him.

The Role of Myth in Shaping Cultural Consciousness

In a country like India, where religion plays a central role in an individual's life and to be born as a Hindu, where Hinduism is full of mythical stories, we grow up with the thinking of leading our lives according to Dharma, to take lessons from mythical characters from the sacred Vedas, Upanishads, Puranas, epics like The Ramayana and The Mahabharata. We are taught to be an ideal son like Shravanakumara, an ideal husband like Maryada Purushottama Rama, an ideal wife like Sita, Savitri, etc. These myths and the great characters in them, like those of Danaveera Karna, Pitamaha Bhishma, Dharmaraja Yudisthira, etc., form a part of our consciousness, and we are conditioned to be ready to carry out sacrifices when required, like those great mythical characters.

Prince Pooru was also conditioned through his education in the hermitage to follow the footsteps of his great forefathers, try to become a worthy successor to the legacy of great rulers. When he realized that he was in no means equal to them in his power, valour, and dominance, he thought of becoming worthy through his sacrifice for his father. Even King Yayati expects his daughter-in-law Chitrlekha to follow the great tradition of *sadhvis*^{iv} who sacrificed their lives for their families. The society expects women to sacrifice their own happiness willingly for others. He expects Chitrlekha to accept her husband's old age and act in a manner worthy of an Anga princess and Bharata queen.

Intersectionality

The concept of intersectionality given by Kimberlé Crenshaw can be used to examine how multiple systems of power operate simultaneously. It provides a very significant framework to understand the play through the characters of Devayani and Sharmishtha, as their experiences in the play are shaped by overlapping and intertwined dynamics of caste/class, gender, social hierarchy and power structure. Their conflict cannot be reduced merely to a personal rivalry over King Yayati; rather, it emerges from the intersection of gender, varna hierarchy, class privilege, social status, and patriarchal power structures. Devayani, as the daughter of the powerful Brahmin sage Shukracharya, possesses symbolic authority derived from Brahmanical privilege, while Sharmishtha, despite being a princess and possessing wealth, education, and royal status, is marginalized because of her Asura identity within the Arya-centred social order. Thus, the play complicates the idea of female oppression by showing that women do not experience patriarchy in identical ways; their experiences are mediated by caste, class, and inherited social power. In fact, she has more power and freedom than Sharmishtha, the daughter of the Asura King, who is forced to become a maid/slave to Devayani when she marries Yayati. As Sharmishtha says: "I was the princess of the rakshasas. You were off spring of a destitute Brahmin, dependent upon my father. I had everything. Beauty, education, wealth. Everything except birth – on Arya Pedigree" (13). Sharmishtha's marginalization, therefore, cannot be understood merely through the lens of gender oppression; rather, it emerges from the intersection of patriarchal authority, social hierarchy, and inherited systems of privilege. Her assertion that she possessed "beauty, education, wealth" but was denied recognition due to the absence of 'Arya pedigree' reveals the constructed nature of social hierarchies, where lineage and birth are privileged over individual merit and accomplishments. Through Sharmishtha's predicament, Karnad exposes how identity within a stratified society is not determined by personal qualities but by oppressive structures that assign value

^{iv} It denotes virtuous, chaste, or pious women. The term derives from the Sanskrit word *sādhvī*, the feminine form of *sadhu*.

and status based on inherited categories of power. Thus, he exposes the arbitrary nature of hierarchical identity systems, where birth becomes a determining factor of social worth. Karnad demonstrates that power is not distributed through a single axis; rather, gender oppression intersects with caste and class hierarchies to produce different forms of marginalization. Therefore, A feminist reading of the play moves beyond viewing women only as victims of patriarchy and examines how women themselves occupy different positions within structures of privilege and disadvantage. *Yayati* thus ultimately critiques a social order where both women's oppression and women's struggles for power are shaped by the interconnected forces of patriarchy, hierarchy, and cultural identity.

Devayani has a dominant position in the society because of her superior caste, since she is the daughter of revered Asura guru Shukracharya. Through her marriage with the Kshatriya King Yayati, her societal position is further elevated to that of a queen. Devayani's higher societal position gives her the power to make her friend, the daughter of an Asura king, Sharmishtha, her slave and also to curse King Yayati for being disloyal to her. She makes both Sharmishtha and Yayati vulnerable because of being the daughter of Shukracharya. Although Devayani has higher societal status due to her Brahminical identity and queenly status, she remains a victim of patriarchal constructs. She is always defined by her relationships with men (first her father, then her husband), and her rights as a wife are jeopardised by Yayati's adultery.

Sharmishtha is an Asura princess, placing her in a lower social class/caste in the play's context compared to Devayani's Brahmin status. Her initial social disadvantage is further aggravated when Devayani uses her father's influence to force Sharmishtha to become her slave. Sharmishtha undermines the social order by seducing Yayati and taking revenge on Devayani, challenging the class discrimination she faced. Sharmishtha uses the patriarchal, misogynistic system to gain social rights, ultimately becoming Yayati's queen and gaining higher social status, from the Asura, lower class to the Kshatriya, royal class, that displeases Devayani. In this sense, it is also an act of challenging the established societal norms. However, she is quite proud of her Rakshasa status as she proudly remarks, "I could have spewed out nectar but we leave those things to namby-pamby Brahmin girls. I am a rakshasa woman. We have our code" (17). She is not a vulnerable passive female subject at all, as she told Devayani that "I got him into bed with me. That was my revenge on you. After all, as a slave what weapon I have but my body? Well, I am even with you now. And I am free. I shall go where I please" (29). During the 1970s, essays like Audre Lorde's "The Uses of the Erotic" argued that women's sexuality is a vital source of empowerment and an essential component of their liberation. Here, she subverts the typical narrative of victimization. In her relation with Yayati, she is not a passive being who had something done to her but rather stresses her own volition. Through the use of the verb "got", Sharmishtha takes a proactive position, implying that she made conscious use of the only available avenue for resistance in a patriarchal and hierarchical society. Her sexuality stops being merely an object that is manipulated by the men but an agent in its own right. Sharmishtha understands that the patriarchal society has weakened her position by making her a slave of Devayani. However, rather than resign herself to helplessness, she converts her body into a weapon. Dharwadker aptly remarks:

the most remarkable feature of *Yayati* ...is its quartet of sentient, articulate, embittered women, all of whom are subject in varying degrees to the whims of men, but succeed in subverting the male world through an assertion of their rights and privileges (xvii).

The play uses the characters of Devayani and Sharmishtha to illustrate that women's experiences of marginalization are not uniform, but are intensely shaped by the intersecting variables of their social identities. Again, when Yayati reveals that Pooru's biological mother is a Rakshasa woman by saying, "She had made sure that the crown prince of Bharatas had rakshasa blood in him", To this, Pooru reacts "say it. A half caste. A mongrel. And that is me?" (40). The terms 'half caste' and 'mongrel' are significant because they reduce a human being to a biological mixture. Karnad uses this language to reveal how social systems create ideas of purity and pollution. Pooru's suffering does not

come from his actual origin but from the meanings attached to that origin by society. The stigma attached to an Asura passes onto him. Karnad thus critiques a system where women's identities and children's worth are judged through patriarchal ideas of blood and inheritance. Karnad is here not merely adapting the myth; he is rewriting it to point out the conflict between Aryan power and the Rakshasa/Asura world.

Pooru becomes a child of the conquered community, making him both an insider and an outsider in the Aryan royal household. It is for this reason that Pooru's sacrifice is not only about a filial bond but about how historically, the oppressed classes were exploited by the dominant class. That Pooru's mother is never named is a political choice of representation since history tends to remember kings and queens but never the oppressed women.

The characters of Swarnalata and Chitrlekha were not part of the original Yayati myth from the Mahabharata. These characters are also forced to suffer even though they are innocent. Swarnalata's husband abandons her because of his self-inflicted doubt about her chastity, and Chitrlekha has to suffer because Prince Pooru decides to accept his father's curse. They have to suffer because women don't have a voice of their own in a patriarchal society. In this regard, Chitrlekha symbolizes another dimension of intersectionality. While Chitrlekha arrives at the palace as a young girl hoping for happiness through marriage, she is promptly turned into a victim of a patriarchal decision made by two men, namely Yayati and Pooru. The oppression of Chitrlekha results from the intersection of gender, age, marriage, and dynasty. Despite being part of the royal family, her privileged position is of no avail in saving her from patriarchal power. Her right to have control over her married life is taken away from her due to the loss of her husband's youth in order to fulfil the wishes of his father. Chitrlekha is invented specifically to highlight that invisible victim of patriarchal sacrifice, the woman whose life is ruined by a decision taken on the grounds of filial responsibility. Chitrlekha can be seen as Karnad's "new woman" because she questions patriarchal ideology and challenges Pooru's sacrifice before dying tragically. As Singh puts that "she emerges as a new woman who boldly challenges the decision of Pooru and false rhetoric of Yayati. She doesn't allow Pooru to enter into her bedroom – who accepts the curse of his father for his moral transgression and becomes old" (3). She confronts her father-in-law, 'You are the man to push him (Pooru) near funeral...and you are advising me without knowing my grief' (73-74). As a wife, she is forced to become an unwilling pawn of the desires of Yayati and the obedience of her husband Pooru. The act of her committing suicide is both a tragedy as well as a criticism of patriarchal values. On the other hand, Swarnalata extends the intersectional framework by foregrounding the combined effects of gender, class, and domestic violence. Through the tale of Swarnalata, Karnad brings out the male fixation with the purity of women. It is not any wrongdoing committed by Swarnalata but her husband's suspicion that ends up destroying their marriage. As she fails to convince her husband of her innocence, Swarnalata eventually succumbs to false accusations so that she may regain the sanity of her husband, who in the end leaves her. The case of Swarnalata enriches the intersectional analysis of the play as she brings out the nexus between gender oppression and class oppression. Swarnalata, as a maid servant, does not have the necessary social power to protect herself from being accused of misconduct and her husband's unfounded accusation is enough for her to decide her future. Her abandonment illustrates that patriarchal control over female sexuality operates across social hierarchies, affecting both royal and non-royal women alike.

Agency and the Ethics of Desire

In Girish Karnad's play *Yayati*, the concepts of agency and consumption are intricately linked to the exploration of human desire, responsibility, and existentialism. The characters' actions, driven by their desires, highlight the consequences of prioritizing endless consumption over moral duty and the impact of individual choices on others.

Agency refers to the capacity of individuals to act independently and make their own free choices. In the play, characters exercise agency, but their choices often lead to suffering and moral crises. King Yayati exercises his agency by choosing to satisfy his 'insatiable desires' and lust rather than accept the natural progression of life and old age. When cursed with premature decrepitude for his infidelity to Devayani, he uses his power as a king and father to demand a monumental sacrifice from his son, Pooru, to exchange their ages. This action is a profound evasion of responsibility for his own misdeeds, showing a misuse of agency to continue a life of self-indulgence at the expense of another. Pooru, in a display of filial duty (or a form of weakness and self-evasion in Karnad's modern interpretation), exercises his agency by agreeing to take on his father's curse. This seemingly altruistic choice, however, is portrayed by Karnad as a complex and tragic decision that ultimately destroys his own life and that of his new bride, Chitrlekha, thus highlighting the devastating consequences of certain choices. The character of Chitrlekha, a new addition by Karnad not found in the original myth, represents a powerful assertion of female agency in a patriarchal society. She refuses to accept the unjust situation imposed upon her by the men's choices, demanding her rights and identity as a wife and a human being with desires. Her ultimate act of agency is her suicide, a desperate act of protest against a system that denies her a meaningful existence and forces her into a life of repression and humiliation.

Consumption in *Yayati* extends beyond material goods to the relentless pursuit and absorption of sensual pleasures, youth, and life itself, without regard for the consequences. Yayati embodies the modern man trapped in a cycle of endless desire and dissatisfaction. He "consumes" his son's youth to prolong his own worldly pleasures, believing that happiness lies in external gratification, not realizing that desire is never truly fulfilled by indulgence. The more he consumes, the emptier he feels, leading to an existential crisis and "afflicted consciousness". The act of Pooru giving his youth to Yayati is a symbolic representation of the older generation's "consumption" of the younger generation's vitality and future. Yayati's selfish consumption of life forces others, like Pooru and Chitrlekha, to bear the burden of his actions and face ruin. It is only after the tragic death of Chitrlekha that Yayati is confronted with the horror and futility of his actions and the hollow nature of his "consumption"-driven life. This realization forces him to renounce his pursuit of sensual pleasures, return Pooru's youth, and accept his moral responsibility and the inevitability of old age and death, transforming his understanding of life from endless consumption to meaningful existence. In essence, *Yayati* critiques a life driven by unrestrained desire and a refusal to accept the consequences of one's actions, demonstrating that the misuse of agency for the sake of boundless consumption ultimately leads to tragedy, not only for the individual but also for those in their orbit.

Dramaturgical Craftsmanship

One such quality that makes *Yayati* stand out among others is the fact that Karnad has written this play not only for readers but for the audience as well. This is because, as opposed to a literary adaptation of the episode in the *Mahabharata*, *Yayati* takes on meaning through performance whereby dialogue, silence, gesture, and space assume significant roles within the context of the play's criticism of culture. Through his drama, Karnad has converted the myth into an experience that forces the audience to grapple with ethical quandaries instead of consuming a mythic narrative. The dialogues written by Karnad make the play even farther from conventional mythological drama. First, the characters of the play are not archetypal moral types; on the contrary, they have psychological dialogues full of doubt, contradiction, irony, and self-control. The speeches of Yayati reflect his efforts to make sense of his desires rather than be an embodiment of royal virtues, whereas the dialogues of Chitrlekha reveal the cruelty which lies behind patriarchal ideals of duty and sacrifice. Such a form of dialogue provokes the audience to think about conventional moral principles rather than to identify themselves unreflectively with heroes. It is also important to note that Karnad makes use of the spatial dimension of his plays as well as economy in his theatrical approach. Minimal scenic requirements in

the play shift attention from external action to internal conflict, allowing gestures, pauses, silences, and bodily positioning to communicate power dynamics that cannot be conveyed in words. Emotional distance between characters is often reflected in their physical distance on stage, and moments of silence take on a symbolic role as signs of guilt, estrangement, and concealed resistance. In his speech on "The Structure of the Play", Girish Karnad has aptly compared a playwright to a carpenter in his endeavor to highlight the craftsmanship involved in making a play. The task of joining the different pieces of the story together, just like a carpenter who cuts, joins and nails the wood pieces together to make some object, is assigned to the playwright in the words of Girish Karnad. He says that transforming any pre-existing piece of work, whether a myth from the *Mahabharata* or a long novel, requires carpentry on the part of the writer. This means compressing time by bringing all those things that have happened within a period of years or many pages into one continuous two-hour performance. Furthermore, Karnad says that playwrights have to take into account the physical constraints of the stage, adding that "the capacity of our bottom muscles" imposes the restriction that the play can last no longer than about two and a half hours. Taking the metaphor forward, Karnad compares the writing of a play to the construction of a house, where everything is built for a purpose and has to go through some kind of architectural evolution from one part to the other in the play, just as in the house. Apart from this simple carpentry involved in editing and compressing matter, Karnad feels that the writer has to overcome much greater technical difficulties such as giving valid reasons for characters' behavior. He goes on to say that the playwright Arthur Miller had himself said that one of the reasons for his success was his past experience as a carpenter, as joining of parts and fitting them properly were the same for playwriting too. In *Yayati*, Karnad uses many theatrical devices to condense a huge myth into a tightly knit drama of two hours duration. For him, the use of these devices is akin to a kind of "carpentry" and "architecture," where each scene and each character is meant to be structurally functional. Time telescoping is one of the main methods used by Karnad in his play. Time telescoping is achieved through the condensation of lengthy narrative durations found in the *Mahabharata* epic into stage action. For instance, while the characters of *Yayati* and *Devayani* have several meetings in the myth over a large time span, Karnad telescopes the events to make them get married instantly after *Yayati* rescues her from the well. He also relies on compact plotting and character reduction, eliminating four of *Yayati*'s five sons and retaining only *Pooru* in order to create a compact play centered on the essential conflict between father and son. Another equally significant technique is 'dialogue as persuasive action'. Karnad stresses that the theatrical dialogue needs to be more than a mere reproduction of the ordinary language because it has to convince the audience and disclose character at the same time. Therefore, the whole drama occurs in the acts of persuasion, like *Yayati*'s attempt to convince *Pooru* to take his senility. Moreover, he manages to reveal characters through a special technique of character motivation which Karnad calls 'technical solution'. In other words, he creates a situation in which *Sharmishtha* tries to commit suicide with a *vishi kupi* (poison vial) in order to prove that she has become *Yayati*'s wife because of that action. Another character whom he introduces to make a dramatic culmination possible is *Chitrlekha* who does not exist in the original myth. Being a bride of *Pooru*, *Chitrlekha* is horrified with the old age of her husband and commits suicide. Furthermore, Karnad develops the subplots and parallel plots through other characters like *Dasi*, who too, shares the experience of being married to an abusive husband, and whose story further reinforces the conflict. Her existence also lends credibility to other events in the play, such as giving the poison to *Chitrlekha*, making her actions realistic rather than just a simple plot device. Karnad uses 'visual effects' and 'sensory imagery' as well to create a greater theatrical impact. The *arti* is an essential theatrical device used by Karnad in the final act of the play *Yayati*. It symbolizes the climactic point of the play because it helps reveal the true face of *Pooru*, which the audience finds horrifying. Due to the fear of showing the horrifying picture of the hero's transformation, the palace is in "pitch darkness." Despite the horror of seeing his husband turning old, *Chitrlekha* still decides to bring *arti* as a symbol of welcoming her husband who sacrificed himself to the benefit of others. Nevertheless, the moment

when the light of the arti shines on the face of Pooru becomes the moment of exposing the reality, and the young woman realizes that the man whom she adored was actually looking like a “wrinkled,” “crabby” and “ugly” creature. In other words, when the truth about her husband becomes obvious, Chitrlekha starts screaming, dropping the arti in her hands and expressing disgust towards her “ugly spider” of a husband. Chitrlekha’s physical and emotional collapse, triggered by what the lamp reveals, ultimately leads to her suicide, which becomes the decisive catalyst forcing Yayati to confront the consequences of his selfish actions and reclaim the curse. Thus, the ritual lamp functions as the instrument of truth, exposing the anguish and irreversible human cost concealed beneath the idealized notion of sacrifice.

CONCLUSION

According to A.K. Ramanujan, Indian epics have many ‘tellings’ rather than a single authoritative version. Therefore, Yayati by Karnad is part of a long-standing tradition of retelling and creative interpretation rather than mere adaptation of the Yayati myth in the *Mahabharata*. Again, G. N. Devy's emphasis on the plurality of Indian literary traditions enables us to read *Yayati* not as a departure from the epic but as one legitimate expression within India's diverse literary heritage. In *Yayati*, one sees an intricate web of criticism that is addressed towards socio-cultural structures that have been and continue to be the basis of human relations and ethics. Reworking the myth of the *Mahabharata*, Karnad does not stop merely at re-telling the story but tries to question the socio-cultural system of oppression and inequality that is built in Indian cultural consciousness. According to Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, "Myth embodies the nearest approach to absolute truth that can be stated in words" (9). Instead of viewing myth as an imaginative or outdated story, this view takes the form of a means by which philosophical and ethical truths are conveyed symbolically. Girish Karnad's *Yayati* is a good example of this view in that he converts the *Mahabharata* story into a drama about desire, duty, sacrifice, and moral accountability. The play shows how myth is not just an archive of the past but also a living cultural debate that can question modern human problems. The first thing that comes to mind when speaking about cultural aspects in the work of Karnad is hierarchy, which governs the behavior of all the main characters. Hierarchical relations are expressed through age, gender and power difference, and in most cases result in exploitation of weak individuals. For example, in *Yayati*, the exploitation of generations is vividly revealed. It shows the tendency of the dominant group to use their privilege at the expense of marginalizing another generation. At the same time, in order to depict the power of patriarchy, Karnad shows the way women characters are treated and the limitations they face due to the cultural system. The problem of desire in contrast to duty can also be considered one of the most important issues reflected in the play and rooted in cultural anxiety. While Karnad condemns uncontrolled pursuit of desires, he also criticizes traditional concepts of moral duty that do not allow for any flexibility, like dharma. In such a way, the playwright manages to challenge fixed moral binaries and offers the audience a chance to see the complexity of human motives. It should be noted that Karnad's interpretation of traditional myth represents the postcolonial approach, which means that tradition in his works is both continuous and contested. In other words, *Yayati* represents the reality of a society that faces challenges and pressures of modernization and the modern world while still being bound to its cultural traditions. Thus, *Yayati* is a culturally rich play that raises the problems of the interaction of power, gender, morality and identity through the prism of myth.

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