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MYTH AND REALITY IN GIRISH KARNAD PLAY YAYATHI

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ABSTRACT

Girish Karnad play is the most significant playwright of Post independence literature and his plays has been become a byword for imagination and innovation. He was folktales and myth in her plays to reveal the social reality.

This paper is mainly approached on the contemporary of Karnads's play "Yayathi" translated is the first dramatic venture by Girish karnad, written first in Karnad in 1961 and translated and translated by the dramatist himself into English language in 2008. Thus, right from the beginning of his dramatic career Karnad immersed himself in Indian mythology of his motherhood and brought to life such mythical characters like Yayathi on the stage with an amazing touch of contemporarily.

Karnad has taken this from *Mahabharata* with a view to explore the absurdity of human live with all its elemental passions and conflicts, man's eternal struggle to achieve perfection , escapism from responsibilities and self sacrifice, dreams and desire, identity crisis and women predicaments. The present research paper is a study of myth in the play of "Yayathi" and reality of the contemporary society.

**Key words:** Myth, reality, feminism, absurdity, selfishness, identity crisis, religion, caste, existentialism.

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INTRODUCTION

Girish Karnad in Kannada theatrical background brought to Indian dramatic literature, once again after centuries, the status of creative work. It is a well known fact that Karnad is a reputed film actor, director and script writer yet he finds himself comfortable in a playwright's suit. Karnad has transcribed six plays into English and has written three plays originally in English. It is the first play of Karnad, published in 1961. It interprets as ancient myth from the 'Mahabharata' in modern context. It is an existentialist play on the theme of responsibility. Karnad takes liberty with the myth and weaves complex dimensions into the plot borrowed from the *Mahabharata*.

Girish Karnad, perhaps, the most renowned media personality in the contemporary India's leading playwright and an adopt practitioner of the performing arts. His plays are primarily written in Kannada and

then are translated into other languages. The English translation of his plays is his own. They have brought him international recognition as a pre-eminent contemporary playwright. He has been widely acclaimed by both the theatre and drama critics for certain aspects of his plays: plot construction, characterisation, and symbolism, use of myth and folktales, reinterpretation of history, projection of contemporary social problems.

In this paper, an attempt has been made to examine critically Karnad's depiction of contemporaneity in his play, "Yayati". By exploiting myths and legends, he tried to show how they are quite relevant in portraying a modern man's dilemma. In other words, the myths and legends provide him ample scope to take up significant issues like problems of identity, patriarchy, man-woman relationship, selfishness and pervasive sense of alienation.

To the mythical story of Yayathi he adds new characters and alters the story-line so as to deepen its connotative richness and gives it contemporary appeal. Karnad's *Yayatire* tells the age-old story of the king who in his longing for eternal youth does not hesitate to usurp the youth and vitality of his son. In the *Mahabharata*, Yayathi understands the nature of desire itself and realizes that fulfillment neither diminishes nor eliminates desire. In the drama, Karnad makes Yayathi confront the horrifying consequences of not being able to relinquish desire; and through other characters, highlights the issues of caste/ class and gender coiled within a web of desire *Yayati* plays upon the theme of responsibility. This theme directly seems to link up with the philosophy of existentialism. Every character in the play, and more prominently Puru, evades responsibility. After venturing into the mythical world, Karnad moves ahead into the world of tradition to take up themes and fictionalize characters from history.

Yayathi is the first play written by Girish Karnad. Karnad was just twenty-two years old when he presented his own interpretation of the play *Yayati*. This play established Karnad's reputation as a dramatist in Kannada Literature and launched him on his celebrated career in the Indian theatre. *Yayati* has been translated into many Indian languages and has continued to be performed all over country. Priya Adarkar translated Girish Karnad's Kannada plays *Yayati* into English. But Karnad was not happy with this Translation and he translated his own play *Yayati* into English.

The theme of *Yayati* is taken from the first chapter of the *Mahabharata* 'Adiparva'. In Puranic lore *Yayati* marries *Devayani* and also takes *Sharmishtha* and 'asura girl' as his wife. *Devayani* is a daughter of sage *Shukracharya*. *Yayati's* relationship with *Sharmishtha* infuriates *Devayani* and in her anger and jealousy *Devayani* goes to her father *Shukracharya*. *Shukracharya* curses *Yayati* of senility and decrepitude. But however there is a saving clause, if *Yayati* is able to persuade someone else to bear the curse on his behalf then he would enjoy everlasting youth. *Yayati*, who is indulged in the sensual pleasures, asks the people of his kingdom and at last in desperation to his sons exchange their youth with him. Only *Pooru*, the youngest son willingly offers his youth in filial devotion. *Yayati* promptly accepts *Pooru's* offer. He remains young while his son turns into a weak and senile man. *Yayati* forsakes his life of sensual delights only after indulging in it for a thousand years. Karnad adopts the mythical story of *Yayati* as the plot of his play. He adds new characters to deepen the commodative richness of his drama and gives it a contemporary appeal.

*Yayati* is written in the style of *Yakshagana* and due to the tradition of *Yakshagana* either *Sutradhara* or the *Chorus* is to enter on the stage. *Yayati* opens with *Sutradhara* and he is addressing the audience. "Our play this evening deals with an ancient myth. But, let me rush to explain, it is not a 'Mythological'. Heaven forbid! A mythological aims to plunge us into the sentiment of devotion." (Prologue to *Yayati*) The *Sutradhara* also adds, "Our play has no gods. And it deals with death. A key element in its plot is the 'Sanjeevani Vidya' – the art of reviving the dead, which promises release from the limitations of the fleeting life this self is trapped in." (Prologue to *Yayati*)

**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 on for all eternity. Suddenly, I 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 wrinkleless and grasping, but unable to grasp anything." (Karnad68)

At last Yayati accepts his old age by embracing Pooru. Pooru once again becomes young but he has lost his beautiful bride on the nuptial night when he was to meet her. Yayati is the story of a king who longs for eternal youth. He is involved in sexual pleasures in such an extent that he does not hesitate assert the youth and vitality of his son. Yayati is the representative of the Modern man who is self-entered Girish Karnad's plays are concerned with the life of modern man which is very complex and not complete in it. He employs the old tales to focus on the absurdity of modern life with all its elemental passions and Conflicts. In the hands of Girish Karnad, the folktales become vehicles for modern living being influenced by Marxism and Existentialism there is a fundamental Change in his outlook.

The interpersonal relationship in Yayati is very complex. Being the king, he is allowed to marry with many women. He has many wives and many sons. In the play it his three wives are referred to, one is Pooru's mother, then Devayani and at the last Sharmishtha. Generally, the queens do not object the king's remarriages and ex-marital relationships. Then the question is why does Devayani object Yayati's ex-marital relationship with Sharmishtha? The answer is perhaps the race because Sharmishtha belongs to Rakshasa cult and the relationship of a Bharata king with a woman coming from Rakshasa community is highly objectionable. Yayati likes and loves beautiful women; he does not bother about their cult. He marries Pooru's mother because she is beautiful. He loves Sharmishtha too but he hesitates to share the responsibility of his love.

"Karnad's Yayati reveals the afflicted consciousness of a broken man like Yayati who tries to find a meaning in existence. Out of sorrow and humiliation Yayati is unable to understand the meaning of life till he is rid of old age. But contrary to his expectation Chitrlekha's suicide leads him to expiate his desire. He projects the image of an existential character and shows that no man has the courage to choose whole-heartedly either right or wrong. He is himself an amalgamation of self-evasion and vanity, self condemnation and humility. Thus, there is an eternal quest for meaning and Value, freedom and truth that can sustain us in this chaotic and apparently meaningless world." (Dr. Jyoti Gupta and Dr. Sushama Sharma 36).

#### **Characterization in the Play**

Karnad takes a deep insight into Yayati's character and shows Yayati's passion for the enjoyment of life, which ultimately turns into detachment and aloofness. Yayati is a true ambassador of modern common man, who in spite of having much pleasures of life, still feels impatient and dissatisfied. Yayati takes the youth of Pooru, his youngest son, but soon realizes the impropriety of his shallow action and feels like an alienated common man. Yayati feels cataclysmic disillusionment and loss of faith in life. His torment and burden for Pooru's youth is revealed in the following words;

"Please help me, Pooru. Take back your youth. Let me turn my decrepitude into a beginning."

Now comes to the character of Swarnalata. Her husband thinks that before marriage Swarnalata was in love with her teacher. In order to take revenge on her he indulges himself in many women and drinks. Means humane relationships have no value. With a single affair of his wife Swarnalata husband is disturbed. But he does not think of Swarnalata and her mind, what would have happened to her by his many affairs? In mythology women's freedom is curtailed and the same happens in Karnad's "Yayati" also. The male characters suppress the women. Only Chitrlekha thinks in a rational way. Pooru is married with Chitrlekha and the young married couple has arrived into the palace. Chitrlekha suffers first at the hands of her husband, Pooru, Who does not think of his wife even once before acceding to the supreme sacrifice of giving up his youth and vitality to serve his father's unconventional behavior which serves no purpose but to fill up the invalid in his own life. Yayati himself is a warped image because Yayati recognizes the horror of his life and assume his moral responsibility after symbolic encounter of Chitrlekha.

Karnad's "Yayati" is based on the responsibility of a person. It is based on the sentiments of the man. Class-distinction and the caste distinction take the society to violence. Sharmishtha, being disturbed by the comments of Devayani, pulls her with her long hair, takes her to a well and throws her inside. Sharmishtha's behavior is violent whereas Devayani's words are violent. In order to take revenge on Devayani, Sharmishtha seduces Yayati. Being psychologically disturbed by Sharmishtha's behavior Devayani goes to her father and makes him to curse Yayati. Pooru's acceptance of old age is responsible for the death of Chitrlekha. The most

violent thing in the play is Chitrlekha's death. Karnad created Chitrlekha's character on his own. It is due to Chitrlekha's death Yayati's mind changes. Indirectly Yayati was the main reason of her death in this play.

In "Yayati" it is very evident that the social standing hardly seems to affect the condition of a Woman. Chitrlekha is an Aryan princess, born into a royal family and coming from a privileged clan, the Aryans. Despite her caste and class superiority, she has to undergo oppression and suppression at the hand of men. In the same play, there is another character Swarnalata, the maid confident, who comes from low class and who too like Chitrlekha does not receive the love of her family and husband, because the latter believes her to be unchaste. Thus the woman in Indian society, whether of high or low social standing is always looks down upon by virtue of being a women and ill-treated by the domineering Patriarchy, whether a Queen or a maid, woman are always relegated to the background forming a marginalized group in the patriarchal order.

The play is replete with the appearance of various typical themes, including the question of the reality of experience itself; the search for a ground of meaning in a world without God; the critique of the traditional values of the culture; the loss of hope and the meaning in the modern world and an exploration of how this loss may be faced, and the clash between materialism and spiritualism. A modern character undergoes through all these tribulations, and Karnad rightfully captures those turbulences. Yayati is representative of the age old tradition of kingship and materialism, his world revolves around the well-being of his subjects and his bravery and chivalry. While Pooru, his son, is more contemplative, he reflects on the past and questions the age old notions of culture, heroism and kingship. In Act II, he says;

Pooru: "I am scared of my own existence...I see nothing when I look within me, it would be adequate even if I mustered the courage to ask questions, father" This apart it is also an exploration of various strands of the father-son relationship. Yayati speaks for every father in the contemporary age, when he says, in Act II; Yayati: "Yes it is my entire fault. I never took the initiative to understand you."

There is also constant reference to the 'devilish' nature of man in the play. Words like 'Asura' and 'Rakshasi' (both meaning 'devil'), abound in the play. Sharmishtha, the 'Asura-Kanya', the daughter of the devil, is portrayed as 'Chandalin' (the witch) or 'Pishaach' (devil) or "Bhoot" (ghost). She is juxtaposed to Devyani, the 'Arya Stri' (Aryan Woman), and 'Brahman-Kanya' (the daughter of Brahmin). The contrasting of both characters makes the tussle between them very poignant.

#### **Use of myth and reality in the play**

Karnad wrote this play on existential lines. When he wrote Yayati, he was under the influence of Sartre and Camus. The story which he read in Adiparva of the Mahabharata influenced him and made him to write the play. In his interview with Rajinder Paul he says, "I was excited by the story of Yayati, this exchange of ages between the father and the son, which seemed to me terribly powerful and terribly modern. At the same time, I was reading a lot of Sartre and the Existentialists. This consistent harping on responsibility which the Existentialists indulge in suddenly seemed to link up with the story of Yayati" (Rajinder Paul 113).

Karnad has taken the plot of the play Yayati from the first chapter of the Mahabharata in which Yayati is cursed by Shukracharya and Sharmishtha's son Pooru rescues Yayati from the curse. Yayati is a play on the theme of responsibility where Yayati himself is not ready to shoulder his responsibility. At last he accepts it, after enjoying youth for one thousand years. In Girish Karnad's Yayati, he accepts it only after the death of Chitrlekha.

"Karnad's Yayati retells the age-old story of the king who in his longing for eternal youth does not hesitate to usurp the youth and vitality of his son. Karnad invests new meaning and significance for contemporary life and reality by exploring the king's motivations. In the Mahabharata, Yayati understands the nature of desire itself and realizes that fulfillment neither diminishes nor eliminates desire. In the drama, Karnad makes Yayati confront the horrifying consequences of not being able to relinquish desire; and through the other characters he highlights the issue of class, caste and gender coiled within a web of desire." (B.Yadav Raju 18).

Karnad's originality lies in working of the motivations behind Yayati's choice. In Karnad's Yayati, Yayati recognizes the horror of his own life and xxxviii assumes his moral responsibility only after symbolic encounter

of Chitrlekha. Chitrlekha is Karnad's own creation. In the Mahabharata, Yayati recognizes the desire itself and realizes that fulfillment does not demolish even after a thousand years.

Girish Karnad is a playwright who gives stress on existentialism. Particularly in his plays Yayati and Tughlaq when he wrote Yayati, he was under the influence of Sartre and Camus. The main plot of the play is taken from the first chapter of the Mahabharata –Adiparva. Yayati, the king of Kuru dynasty is a mighty, invincible hero of the play. He is indulged in sexuality and wishes himself to be ever young. His lust for youth makes him to marry Devayani whose father Shukracharya knows Sanjeevani Vidya. But in a fit he molests Sharmishtha. For which he is cursed by Shukracharya that he will lose his youth and become decrepit. However when Pooru visits Shukracharya the intensity of the curse is minimized. If anyone is ready to exchange his youth to Yayati, he could enjoy the everlasting youth. Pooru, the youngest son of Yayati accepts Yayati's old age and his wife Chitrlekha commits suicide. The death of Chitrlekha awakens Yayati's rational and he exchanges his old age from Pooru.

Though the plot is taken from the Mahabharata, Karnad has taken liberty in showing the relationships and he adds some new characters like Chitrlekha. In his interview with **Tutun Mukherjee**, Girish Karnad says, "My attempt was to emphasize the calm acceptance of grief and anguish. Pooru's old age is a sudden transformation and not the eventuality of life. It brings no wisdom and no self-realization. It is a senseless punishment for an act he has not committed. I was also intrigued by the idea that if Pooru 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 Sharmistha and Chitrlekha." (Tutun Mukherjee 31) ixix Karnad has introduced another subplot in the play. The episode of Swarnalata and her husband is an additional plot which comments on the suspicious behavior of male community.

Associated with the idea of time, play is a reflection of past and future. Karnad has given a lot of thought to both of these concepts. There is a profound sense of disillusionment with the past in the play. This disillusionment spreads, not just to the self, but to the society, the nation and the whole human race. And that acceptance is our responsibility. Disillusion apart, Karnad speaks through the narrator that; "In spite of the fact that this story is about our ancestors, we do see our reflections in it, and it is our responsibilities to accept this fact too. None can escape this responsibility-neither the lover nor the scholar."

Karnad has given ample space to all his characters. In an emphasis on plurality, Karnad has devoted a lot of time to all round development of his characters. While the title indicates that the play is the story of king Yayati, it hardly seems so. This play is as much about Swarnalata, or Devyani or Sharmishtha, or Chitrlekha, as much as it is of Yayati and Puru. These characters do not merely serve the purpose of carrying the narrative forward; they present a complete story in themselves. In a play of four acts, it is indeed a commendable job. There is no single hero or heroine, all characters have equal importance. At the same time, they are carriers of ideologies.

Though the characters, the incidents and circumstances are related to the ancient times, the reality delineated in the play is applicable to contemporary life as well. When Yayati comes to know about the false of the curse, he loses his self control and totally fails to handle the situation. He is not ready to accept the responsibility of his own misdeed. On the other hand Yayati has a strong attraction for life and the fear of the curse. To him temptation of sensual pleasure is too hard to resist. When preparations to welcome the newly married couple, Pooru and Chitrlekha are being made, Yayati is engaged in making love to Sharmishtha. The amorous instincts prevent him from thinking of his son's happiness. When he is informed that the curse will not have its effect on him if a young man agrees to take it upon himself, he is very much delighted without knowing who is going to accept the curse. Karnad's depiction of domineering father and weak-willed son relates mythical story to contemporary situation of father-son relationship.

### Conclusion

To conclude that in '*Yayathi*' Girish Karnad inspires us to rethink about the myths, mythologies and folklores he has profoundly used in his plays, with the contemporary life and elements infused in them. He interprets the ancient theme in modern context. Like Yayati, the common man of today is grouped in the

darkness of material and sensual pleasures. He finds himself in a world in which old spiritual values have been entirely swept away and the new spiritual values are yet to be discovered. Karnad's interpretation of the old myth on the exchange of ages between father and son puzzled and enlightened readers and critics appreciated it for its modernity.

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