

Use of Myth and Symbol in *Yayati*

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Yayati is a well-known play by Girish Karnad, published in 1961. Karnad has taken the story of this play from the myth of the *Mahabharata*. In *Yayati*, Karnad has taken the traditional Puranic theme but has given a fresh interpretation to it. “*Yayati*, the first play of Girish Karnad, published in 1961, reinterprets an ancient myth from the *Mahabharata* in modern context” (Joshi 112).

Myth

The Oxford Dictionary defines myth as “**a traditional story concerning the early history of people or explaining a natural or social phenomenon and typically involving supernatural beings or events**” (Pearsall 944).

In Indian English drama, myths have played a very significant role. The Indian English dramatists have made a frequent use of Indian myths in their writing. There are four vedas, the Upanishads, the *Mahabharata*, the *Ramayana* and the *Puranas* in Indian mythology. These myths are the eternal source of inspiration for the Indian playwrights. According to Carl Jung,

Myths are expressional of the primordial images in the collective unconscious of man. In the beginning, man had certain experiences and received them in his psyche in the form of images since they are called archetypes of the collective unconscious. (Jung 130)

One of the reasons for the invention of tales and myths is that they act as a vehicle for relieving boredom. They are sought by people all over the world and at all times, not only in modern western culture. This is often marked as something

that seems more worthy. Myth is imaginative and it is defined as that which has no real existence in French language. Northrop Frye asserts, **“Myth is primarily a certain type of story... The things that happen in myth are the things that happen only in stories: they are in a self contained literary world”** (Frye 163-64).

Generally, a myth is a tale or a narrative with a symbolic meaning. Human, non-human and super-human characters appear in myths. Karnad was aware of the problems and challenges that Indian playwrights had to face after independence. Karnad says in his ‘Introduction’ to *Three Plays*-

They had to face, a situation in which tensions implicit until then had come out in the open and demanded to be resolved without apologia or self-justification; tensions between the cultural past of the country and its colonial past, between the attractions of Western modes of thought and our own traditions and finally between the various visions of the future that opened up once the common cause of political freedom was achieved. This is the historical context that gave rise to my plays.
(Karnad *Three* Intro.)

Karnad as a playwright is preoccupied with the retelling of Indian myths legends, folklores and history. Of his eleven plays, seven are based on myths and legends and three on history, and only one on contemporary experience. Regarding the story of his plays it is well known that Karnad is happy when he works with a famous myth or legend. The reason why Karnad chooses myths and legends is not very difficult to fathom. As Jung points out-

Myths and legends embody themselves in the form of motifs and symbols, certain recurring patterns of collective human behavior and certain archetypal human experiences. Myths express certain archetypal social relationships. These relationships could be of father and son, husband and wife, or of brothers. Secondly myths have the power to affect us even without our being aware of it. (Mukherjee 57)

In *Yayati* Karnad has taken the story of Yayati from 'Adiparva' of *Mahabharata* and reshaped it by giving it a modern touch. Karnad has given the traditional tale a new meaning and significance highly relevant in the context of life today. The symbolic theme of Yayati's attachment to life and its pleasures and also his final renunciation are retained. As the play opens, the Sutradhara informs the audience that it is a mythical play-a page from the history of the unknown past. Karnad use this myth in theatre within the three unites of time, space and action. In this way universal and most modern qualities of the myth have been exposed to the audience. Karnad, in his *Collected Plays*, writes-

The story of King Yayati that I used occurs in the Mahabharata. The king, for a moral transgression he has committed, is cursed to old age in the prime of life. Distraught at losing his youth, he approaches his son, pleading with him to lend him his youth in exchange for old age. The son agrees to the exchange and accepts the curse, and thus becomes old, older than his father. But the old age brings no knowledge, no self realization, only the senselessness of a punishment meted out for an act in which he had not even participated. The father is left to face the consequences of shirking responsibility for his own actions. (Karnad *Collected* 303)

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 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.

As the play opens, the Sutradhara informs the audience that it is a mythical play-a page from the history of the unknown past. The characters, the incidents and circumstances are related to the old times. However the reality depicted in the play is applicable to modern time as well. The Sutradhara says that neither a scholar nor an ordinary person can escape the burden of responsibility wherein lies the joy of

life. Whether it is an old man in search of lost youth or a saint lost in the darkness or the mute. The Sutradhara brings forth the theme of responsibility.

In the *Mahabharata*, Yayati was one of the six sons of King Nahusha. Devayani, whose love for Kacha remained unrequited, marries Yayati to spite Sharmishtha for whom she nurses a childhood jealousy. Sharmishtha is deeply in love with Yayati and subjects herself to a lot of mental and physical torture for love. A son is born to her out of her clandestine liaison with Yayati. Consequently, Devayani brings a curse of old age upon him. Yayati blinded by his insatiable thirst for sensual pleasure, dreads old age. Pooru, Sharmishta's son offers to exchange his youth for the age of his father. Enlightened at the end, Yayati gives up the throne and retires to forest to lead a life of renunciation with Devayani and Sharmishtha.

Girish Karnad has given this traditional tale a new meaning and significance highly relevant in the context of life today. The symbolic theme of Yayati's attachment to life and its pleasures and also his final renunciation are retained. In the *Mahabharata* Yayati recognizes the nature of desire itself and realizes that fulfillment does not diminish or end the sexual desires. In Karnad's play, however, Yayati recognizes the horror of his own life and assumes moral responsibility after a series of symbolic encounters with reality. Thus the playwright takes liberty with the original myths and invents some new relationship to make it acceptable to modern sensibilities. Karnad seems to have used this myth with a view to exposing the absurdity of life with all its elemental passions and conflicts, and also to show man's eternal struggle to achieve perfection. His Yayati, on the one hand, rejects passionate attachment to sensual pleasures to which the King is a slave and on the other hand, pleads for a life of responsibilities and self-sacrifice as represented by the King's son Pooru in the play. Chitrlekha's proposal to Yayati, who has become young by exchange of ages, to accept her may be a test to Yayati's sensuality on the one hand and on the other hand it may be Chitrlekha's own selfishness. Thus Karnad's *Yayati* successfully conveys his message of disapproval of improper sensuality as well as performance of duty and acceptance of responsibility. Karnad's handling of the sources in the plot makes it abundantly clear that his interpretation of the ancient Indian story not only differs substantially from the originals but also indicates a bold attempt at investing an old legend with a new

meaning, which is quite relevant to present day thinking about man and his universe.

The actions around which the play moves are the curse of Shukracharya, Pooru's acceptance of old age, Chitralkha's suicide and at last Yayati's acceptance of the curse. There are some actions which are narrated in the play. Sharmishtha's throwing Devayani in the well, Shukracharya's curse, Swarnalata's husband's behavior –all these actions are not shown on the stage but those are narrated. But these actions are very significant because these are the causes of the further actions. The action of drinking a poison on the stage is a melodramatic action. There is a good relevance in all these actions which lead to the final action of the play that is the old Yayati takes Sharmishtha and goes in isolation.

A theatre is a place where the spectators are transformed into a magic world, and so there is an extensive use of songs, dance and mask in his plays for spectacular effect. When Shukracharya curses Yayati of old age, he accuses Sharmishtha and loses hope over his sons. It is a fantasy that Pooru comes back and informs that Yayati's curse can be redeemed if some young person exchanged his old age and the decrepitude it brings. In reality nobody will opt to accept the burden of old age but, quite unbelievably, his son Pooru willingly comes forward to exchange his youth. After the exchange, Pooru starts feeling weak and is about to fall when Sharmishtha holds him. Ultimately Yayati succeeds in transforming his old age and his sins to Pooru. When Sharmishtha tells Chitralkha the news that Pooru has accepted his father's old age, though she gets absolutely stunned, courageously she declares that she is lucky to be honored. When Pooru wants her to support him for the responsibility he has undertaken she gladly extends a helping hand. It is a fantasy that so far she is not able to realize the reality but only after seeing his face she understands the misfortune which has befallen her. She gets scared and tells him not to touch her or even come near her. Finally she requests Pooru to reconsider his decision but to no avail. Karnad through this imaginative plot makes his audience feel free from boredom and monotony. Though women are held compactly by the patriarchal society, she does not accept her husband's sacrifice of his youth in the name of filial loyalty. All this could never happen in reality. Karnad breathes into the mythical story a new consciousness, which is

contemporary and highly imaginative.

Karnad has treated feminine sensibility by the characters like Chitrlekha and Swarnalata. The mythical story of Yayati forms the basic plot of the play but the dramatist adds new characters to deepen the connotative richness of the play as he gives it a contemporary appeal. Girish Karnad has written a prologue to his first play Yayati. In the prologue the Sutradhara enters on the stage and addresses the audience. The Sutradhara tells the audience that the play which is to be performed deals with an ancient myth but it is not a mythological play because a mythological play aims to plunge us in to the sentiment of devotion. The plot is to move around Sanjeevani Vidya but no gods are there in the play. At the end of the fourth act once again Sutradhara enters on the stage and tells the audience that just like Sanskrit drama the play must have happy ending and he tells - **“Pooru ruled long and wisely and was hailed as a philosopher king”** (Karnad *Yayati* 70).

Karnad knows that by linking the present to the past, a kind of continuity can be ascertained and human predicament, in the light of the present, in the lap of the past, can be established. The myths, legends and folk forms are reflectors, of the racial and cultural unconsciousness and all ritualistic performances. A delighted Yayati pursued all manner of pleasure with a renewed zest. The original Mahabharata tells us that the more he indulged, the thirstier he became. At the close of years and years of such reckless indulgence, Yayati finally realized the futility of pursuing sensual pleasure. And so, he called Pooru and said-

My dear son, sensual desire is never quenched by indulgence any more than fire is by pouring ghee in it. I had so far heard, and read about this. Now, I've realized it: no object of desire—corn, gold, cattle, and women—nothing can ever satisfy the desire of man. We can attain peace only by an adopting mental poise that goes beyond likes and dislikes. This is the state of Brahman. Take back your youth and rule the kingdom wisely and well. (Karnad *Yayati* 68)

The *Bhagavata Purana* and the *Harivansa* tell the story, but with variations. According to the latter, Yayati received from Indra a celestial car, by means of

which he in six nights conquered the earth and subdued the gods themselves. This car descended to his successors, but was lost by Janamejaya through the curse of the sage Gargya. Yayati, after restoring his youth to Pooru, retired to the forest with his wife and gave himself up to mortification. Abstaining from food, he died and ascended to heaven. He and his five sons are all called Rajarshis. (Yayati)

Symbol

The *Oxford Dictionary* defines symbol as- **“things generally regarded as typifying, representing, or recalling something”** (Elliott 780). Of the various meanings of the term ‘symbolism’, the most common is that when a word or phrase or any other literary device begins to suggest or evoke something more than what it is, a symbolic pattern emerges. A symbol performs two functions in a poem or play. First it provides an emotional centre around which a pattern may emerge. Second, it places in focus emotional attitudes towards important questions of all kinds.

Generally, a myth is a tale or a narrative with a symbolic meaning. Drawing his source from the mythological character of Yayati in Mahabharata, Karnad depicts the contemporary dilemma of everyman caught between the contradictory pulls of pleasure and responsibility, materialism and renunciation.

The characters are no doubt interesting and realistic. Yayati is the king and symbolizes a person who is interested in sex and lust. For his carnal desires he is ready to sacrifice the happiness of his own son, Pooru. Devayani symbolizes the superego in mind of women who come from upper class community whereas Sharmishtha is representative of lower class community.

Karnad’s *Yayati* comes across as merely a pleasure-monger while in the original; his character is symbolic of a higher ideal that of striving for truth and eternal happiness. Yayati’s long span of sensual indulgence is a symbol that indicates the futility of chasing happiness in things that have a definite end. Indulgence only begets more indulgence, it sate it. Every climax of happiness ends with a feeling of dejection that it is over so soon, followed by a craving to renew, to repeat the pleasure. Therefore, Yayati’s disillusionment becomes complete only

when he reaches a point of saturation. He has had his fill yet still remains unfulfilled. This is what plods him to seek non-cyclical happiness

Karnad keeps at centre the psychological thesis of the modern man at the centre while writing the play. His protagonists always suffer and the root cause of their suffering is the complexity of human relationships. His characters suffer from alienation and they are alienated from themselves and the people around them.

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"** (Karnad *Yayati* 69). Thus, Yayati's disillusionment is complete only with saturation. He has had his fill but remains unfulfilled.

Chitrlekha in *Yayati*, rebels against the unjust and gender-based norms and strictures of the Indian patriarchal society. Though she finally ends up committing suicide, she becomes a vehicle to demand the rights of a woman, which are so easily crushed in the patriarchal order. Chitrlekha does not give in to Yayati's persuasion to accept her husband's old age nonchalantly, and stands unmoved and unconvinced. Then Yayati exercises his authority as a king and as a father-in-law and orders her to accept her decrepit husband. To this, Chitrlekha who has by that time taken her stand as a rebel—a rebel against the patriarchal set up and the rituals which treat women not as subjects but as objects, replies with ferocity.

Game of Chess which Girish Karnad first used in his play *Yayati* is a recurrent symbol in the play. In the play the game of chess stands for existential feeling of alienation and complexity of human relationships. Pooru proves himself as a great symbol of sacrifice. He accepts the imposed old age of his father and becomes a ripe old man. Pooru becomes the victim of his father's desires of sensuality. Pooru seeks Chitrlekha's help, his wife to lead rest of his life in solace

and calm with him. He says- **“This is no ordinary old age, devi. This is decrepitude. The sum total of father’s transgressions. The burden of the whole dynasty, perhaps. I couldn’t take it on without your help”** (Karnad *Yayati* 57).

Earlier Chitrlekha admired her husband’s decision and felt herself honored and lucky for being his wife. She is a symbol of admiration. Yet when she looks at the old and ragged face of her husband, she realizes that a treachery has fallen over her. She cries to look at his face and utters to Pooru, **“Please, don’t come near to me. Go out. Please, please don’t touch me”** (Karnad *Yayati* 58).

Thus, the play depicts Yayati as the champion of patriarchy and his attitude to women. He feels that a woman should not violate the norms determined by patriarchy with his masculinity and authority, he treats women as those who are made for fulfilling his carnal whims, but he is unable to rule totally over woman. Karnad does not appreciate the suppressed and subordinated position of woman, on the contrary, he creates her as a complementary to man.

Conclusion

Many modern writers have employed myths and legends to convey their sense and view life. In a way, this practice itself, like myth, is a recurrent pattern. In ancient India and Greece, myths served as the source material for drama, and the re-telling or the re-enactment of old myths in modern terms underline the universality of the experience that is embodied in stories. Thus, an ancient myth acquires new dimensions in the creative hands of Karnad, and the play throws up diverse meanings.

We can see the myth from Mahabharata in this play, *Yayati* and it has symbolical characters. Thus Girish Karnad brings out new meaning to the ancient Indian story, which is relevant to present day scenario about man and his universe. Girish Karnad has used this myth with apperception to exposing the life with all its conflicts and passions. Yayati’s words are expressive of the dramatist’s purposes and message- **“We should wash our sins by doing penance in the forest. I have spent my youth in this city but will spend my old age in the forest”** (Karnad *Yayati* 70).

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