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## Karnad's *Yayati* : A Study in the Eternal Conflicts of Mankind.

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### ABSTRACT

With Vijay Tendulkar and Badal Sirkar, Girish Karnad is among the three greatest dramatists of post-independent Indian theatre. His most notable plays are *Yayati*, *Nag-Mandala*, *Hayavadan* and *The Fire and the Rain*. *Yayati*, his first play, was written initially in Kannad in 1961. For this play he received the Karnatak State award.

Karnad was not a simple entertainer. His plays serve to instruct, entertain and enlighten, but there is also a purpose. Through his plays he tries to give his audience an exalted sense of duty with happiness, peace of mind and upliftment of moral values. In Karnad's view, only then can a human being be relieved of the sorrow and pain that he is subjected to in his endless run for pleasures. To achieve it, Karnad draws from the rich store of Indian mythological stories and the collective wealth of inherited culture and recreates the characters and old stories in a new way. He presents them as they originally are and also changes them completely. His genius for fusion of the mythology and modernity is unparalleled. The *Yayati* of Karnad is the best example of his creative concern, purpose and dramatic art. The human heart is never satiated; its endless craving for more and more pleasure leads it to tragedy. One fine example of this predicament is the story of king *Yayati*. The present paper would endeavor to study some important aspects of Karnad's *Yayati* in comparison with the original mythological story as also with the novel of same name by Vishnu Saktharam Khandekar.

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According to the original story as mentioned in the Adiparv of the great Indian epic *Mahabharata*, Yayati was tenth in the line of the Brahma's family. He was the king of Hastinapur. He had all the qualities but his desire for carnal pleasures was insatiable. During a hunting expedition, he met Devyani who had fallen in a well during a quarrel with her friend Sharmishtha. Devyani was the daughter of a great Sage, Shukracharya, who was the guru of the demon king, Vrishparv. Sharmishtha was the daughter of king Vrishparva. Sharmishtha and Devyani were friends but Devyani was jealous of Sharmishtha as she thought that the power of the demon king was dependent upon her father Shukracharya's pleasure, yet she being daughter of a hermit, did not have the pelf and glamour that Sharmishtha, the princess, enjoyed.

When Yayati rescued Devyani and fell for her beauty, she readily married him and became the queen of a powerful king. She wanted to take revenge from Sharmishtha. To punish her, Devyani demanded that Sharmishtha be sent with her to Hastinapur as her lifelong slave. The demon king had no option but to accept the cruel demand as Devyani was the cynosure of Shukracharya's eyes and Vrishparva could not afford to displease him.

King Yayati felt sympathy for Sharmishtha as she too was a princess once upon a time. Carried away by his sympathy for the slave of his queen, as also attracted towards her beautiful feminine qualities, Yayati entered into a sexual relationship with Sharmishtha. When Devyani came to know about it, she complained to her father who cursed Yayati to become old and decrepit by the end of the day. But despite having lived a lustful life, Yayati's hunger for carnal pleasure was still unquenched. He did not want to become old so

soon. The only way for his redemption was that if someone willingly exchanged his youth for Yayati's old age, then Yayati would be young again. But despite great offers, no one in his kingdom or family was ready to make this sacrifice. Then moved by the pitiable mental state of his father, and the filial emotions, Yayati's newly wedded son, Puru made this sacrifice. He exchanged his youth with the old age of his father.

This story and the character of Yayati has been quite popular in the collective memory of the Indian masses. Several authors have drawn from it, directly or indirectly. In the process, the story has been recreated repeatedly by different writers and dramatists.

#### **Relevance of *Yayati* to modern times :**

Why is the old mythological character embedded in the collective memory of our society? In his essence Yayati represents a common human being. He becomes relevant to the contemporary audience because he portrays and shares the same aspirations, desires, and failures. Above all Yayati shares the common man's inability to take responsibility for his failures. This sums up the main problem of the story. A common man seeks perfection in pleasure and becomes a victim of eternal conflicts of passions.

#### **Issues in Karnad's *Yayati***

Karnad's *Yayati* is completely different from the original mentioned in the epic. Karnad shows the contradictions of the modern psyche through the ancient symbols. Yayati is also relevant to modern man as he represents the alienation that a man suffers despite being in the midst of pleasure and worldly things. Apart from the eternal conflict between desire and acceptance of the reality, there are many complex issues in our culture that Karnad wanted to dissect in his play. One among these is the burden of filial bondage and the limit of duty of a son towards his father. And no less intense is the predicament of the women who suffer owing to the complexities of the conflicts between culture and desire.

Karnad tried to perceive and present this predicament of women through Puru's young wife who had committed no crime yet who suffered owing to the filial duty of her husband. When Puru exchanges his youth with the old age of his father, and becomes old, then a natural question emerges that how would his young wife react. Karnad for this purpose, introduces the character of Chitrlekha.

Karnad's play begins on the day when Yayati's son Puru returns home after many years at Gurukuls. He is accompanied by his newly wedded wife, Chitrlekha. But before the nuptial night, Puru exchanges his youth for the old age of his accursed father. When she, sees her husband's face which has become wrinkled and old, she swoons and falls down. Yayati comes to his daughter-in-law and tries to convince her to accept him as he has the youth of her husband.

Then Chitrlekha commits suicide. Her suicide is the climax of the story which shocks Yayati and then he realizes the burden of his deed. Tormented by his conscience, unable to bear the burden of borrowed youth of his son, a disillusioned Yayati requests Puru to take back his youth.

Please help me, Puru. Take back your youth. Let me turn my decrepitude into a beginning (YY 69).

One major ideal of the human race is devotion to duty towards parents, especially the father. In a patriarchal culture, father represents the God. Mythologies present numerous stories of sacrifice by sons to please their fathers. Parents demand sacrifices from their sons. An ideal son has to fulfill the desires of his father even if the demand is

unjust. The mythological stories of *Ramayan*, *Bible*, Greek gods and the *Mahabharat* are replete with such examples of ideal sons. The desire of Yayati is no different, though more intense, from the desire of king Shantanu to please whom his son Bhishm Pitamah vowed to lead a life of celibacy.

According to Rajinder Paul : the protagonist in *Yayati* asks for eternal youth which his son sacrifices at the altar of paternity, a very Indian theme of a self-denying son indulging the whim of his unreasonable father (41).

Shocked at the decision of Puru, his wife commits suicide and then Yayati gets disillusioned about his carnal desire. It is the justifiability of unreasonable desires of parents, that Karnad leaves his audience to ponder upon. Is every traditional ideal really worth following or do we need question its rationality and assess it?

Family and filial relationship are valuable and its ideals are indeed important but that does not mean every demand made by the parental figure is right. From Karnad's presentation, we may infer that a selfless and duty-bound son may destroy the life and happiness of his wife by catering to the unreasonable desire of his parents.

This filial obedience to patriarchal ideals has caused painful conditions for the Indian women who in turn, bound by the same ideals sacrifice their lives and happiness at the altar of the family relationships.

By adding the episode of Chitrlekha's suicide and making it the climax of his plot, Karnad Portrays the aspects of selfish paternal authority and blind filial loyalty.

#### **Irresponsibility causes Tragedy.**

Yayati acts irresponsibly and so does his son Puru. While Yayati is driven by his desire, Puru is misguided by a misplaced filial ideal. They both realize their misdeed only when Chitrlekha dies. Similarly Devyani is also driven by jealousy and the superiority complex as she is the daughter of a Brahmin sage while Sharmishtha is the daughter of a demon. In order to show her down, she brings Sharmishtha to Hastinapur as her slave.

Again driven by jealousy and anger, she attracts the curse upon her husband. Both these acts of Devyani show that she is irresponsible and becomes irrational under the spell of devastating emotions.

Not only Devyani, almost every character except Sharmishtha, behaves in an irresponsible manner and tries to escape from the consequences of such emotional irresponsibility.

Every character in the play tries to evade the consequences of their actions, except Sharmishtha and Chitrlekha (Tutun Mukherjee 31).

According to the original story, Sharmishtha is married with Yayati and Puru is her son. But in Karnad's play, Puru is the son of another rakshasi.

#### **Khandkar's *Yayati***

Here we find a similarity between the story line adopted by renowned Marathi novelist Vishnu Sakharam Khandkar and Girish Karnad. Khandkar's novel of the same name, was awarded with Gyanpith. Khandkar's *Yayati* finds her first love in Alka, a maid servant in the palace of Hastinapur. This love has no carnal dimensions and it is as pure as that of a brother and sister. Even before Yayati could recognize his love, the poor girl is married off to someone and goes away from his life. With the passage of time, Yayati marries with Devyani for whom this marriage was a means to gain power. She looks down upon her husband as she is the daughter of a great sage; criticizes Yayati for not being a great Brahmin as was her father. Insulted by his wife, a frustrated Yayati starts living

separately and indulges, with a vengeance in lust. But he is never satiated. Towards the end of the novel, it becomes clear that in his subconscious, Yayati is still hankering for his maiden love, Alka. One feels sympathy for Khandkar's Yayati.

In Khandkar and also in the original story, Devyani too was in love with Kach, a disciple of Shukracharya. But her love remained unfulfilled as Kach belonged to the enemy camp and had come to Shukracharya on a secret mission to learn Sanjivani vidya. He rejected the love of Devyani as he was duty-bound. The rejection caused angry reaction in Devyani.

One may infer that every character in this story behaves in an irrational manner because he/she has been denied and rejected. Such portrayal of characters and their psycho analysis in Khandkar's *Yayati*, evokes sympathy for every one of them. They are all victims first and then victimizer. Every character tells his or her own story. This technique gives every character a full scope to allow the reader delve into his or her inner recesses. The reader gets acquainted with their driving compulsions.

The reasons of those compulsions become more clear and pronounced in Karnad's presentation. These reasons are based in caste, gender and class discriminations that create power struggles between all relationships. The hollowness of this power is also laid bare in Karnad. In his play, when Devyani comes to know about the relationship between her husband and her slave Sharmishtha, she wants Yayati to oust her from the palace. This suggestion is derided by Sharmishtha who says :

Me his concubine? You must be joking.....Yes, I got him into bed with me. That was my revenge on you. After all, as a slave, what weapon did I have but my body? Well, I am even with you now. And I am free. I shall go where I please (29).

There is no other alternative to Yayati than to marry her. Karnad studies the socio psychological nature of men and women and their inter-personal relationships.

According to Khandkar's rendering, Yayati suffers because his craving for original love remains unfulfilled. In search of Alka, 'the girl with golden hairs', he wanders through irresponsible, rather cruel, sexual relationships. But he finds no anchor. He tries to find a meaning in his existence but finds none. Existence is tormented not only by a vacuum but also by a fear of death. This is the predicament of all human beings. I Karnad's Yayati, though there is no Alka, but the same quest for meaning of existence is there :

There is an eternal quest for meaning and value, freedom and truth that can sustain us in this chaotic and apparently meaningless world (Gupta, Sharma 36).

The inter relationship between the women characters is marred by jealousy, anger and revenge. Their love is eclipsed by power politics. The best example of this power politics that results in complete devastation is, the relationship between Devayani and Sharmishtha. It is that of master and slave. Devyani has enslaved Sharmishtha and Sharmishtha takes revenge for her insult by entering into sexual relationship with Devyani's husband, Yayati. Sharmishtha knows, she is beautiful and educated, but her self respect is injured on many counts. She is conscious of her inferior race.

The drama argues that the Class-distinction and the caste distinction create violence in society. Chitrlekha is the representative voice of the playwright. It is due to Chitrlekha's death that Yayati's mind changes. According to the original story in *Adiparv*. Yayati forsakes his life of sensual delights only after indulging in it for a thousand years (Raju 80). But in Karnad's play the Sutrdhar in the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> Act, tells the audience that just like Sanskrit drama the play must have a happy ending. Puru ruled long and wisely and



was hailed as a philosopher king (YY 70). According to U. R. Anantha Murthy, Yayati is a self-consciously existentialist drama on the theme of responsibility (143).

### **Proper play to Puru**

The character of Puru despite its immense importance for the theme and tremendous scope as a dramatic character, has not been given full play either in the original story or in that of Khandkar. It is Karnad who has given him full shape as a loyal son who sacrifices his youth to please his father and sacrifices himself at the altar of the socio-cultural ideals of filial bonds. But while sacrificing for one ideal, he sacrifices the happiness and life of his wife who suffers for no fault. This is the most complex crisis situation for a son. He is torn between the devil and the deep sea.

Puru has returned to the palace after a long Time. Here again the issue of race is raised as he is Yayati's son from a woman of the Rakshas community. When Puru asks Yayati about his mother, Yayati says :

She seemed one of the gentlest, most loving creatures one could imagine....I made her my Senior Queen. And then, suddenly she changed...It was in her last few moments that she told me the truth. She was a Rakshasa woman. The Aryas had destroyed her home and hearth. She was bent on vengeance and the inferno she had created was her way of celebrating her success. She had made sure that the crown prince of the Bharatas had Rakshasa blood in him. The Aryas would be ruled (YY 39-40).

Puru's blood is a mixture of Aryas and Rakshasa family. When Sharmishtha informs that on Devayani's complain Shukracharya has cursed Yayati and he would lose his youth by the night fall, Yayati holds Sharmishtha responsible for all these things. She in turn requests Yayati to accept his old age. But afraid of old age and death, Yayati reacts :

I don't want solitude. I can't bear it. I want people around me. Queens, ministers, armies, enemies, the populace. I love them all. Solitude? The very thought is repulsive. ... I have to be young. I must have my youth (YY 43).

Karnad, here, uses the Sutradhara to narrate his message in which he says that neither a scholar nor an ordinary person can escape the burden of responsibility. According to Karnad, every character in the play seeks escape from the consequences of its actions. Sharmistha is the only character who accepts the consequences of her action. (interview with Meenakshi Raykar, 340)

In the mythological story, Yayati promptly accepts Puru's offer. He remains young and indulges once again for another lifetime into sensual lust. At the end of his second youth, borrowed from his son, he realizes that all the women and all the gold in the world is not sufficient for a single man driven by desire. Then he forsakes his life of sensual pleasure.

Karnad's Yayati realizes his folly immediately after the suicide of Chitrlekha. For this purpose Karnad added new plot and new characters and sharpened his analytical message. The technique has resulted in a great dramatic appeal to his contemporary audience. This appeal is clarified and consolidated in the beginning itself when the Sutradhara says :

Our play deals with an ancient myth. But... it is not mythological. ...A mythology aims to plunge us into the sentiment of devotion.(Prologue to *Yayati* 34).

...Our play has no gods. And it deals with death. ...and the art of reviving the dead, which promises release from the limitations of the fleeting life this self is trapped in (Prologue to *Yayati* 42).

Karnad portrays the pitiable plight of the common Indian woman, crushed by the

patriarchal culture. Gender issue happens to be central in all his plays. But he does not spare the women for their hankering for power and politics they play. Though enthused with feminine qualities, they fight the patriarchal order on the one side and the injustice done to them on the other. The uneven fight leads them invariably towards tragic death or more alienation. In Karnad's play all the female characters, Devyani, Chitrlekha and Sharmishtha, face this inescapable predicament. Even Swarnlata, the maid of Chitrlekha, tells the story of her own alienation from her husband. Karnad's women are caught up in a whirlpool of Hindu patriarchy, and are sucked down helplessly. The women suffer under patriarchy, irrespective of their class, caste or race.

When Swarnlata informs Chitrlekha that Puru has exchanged his youth for old age of his father, then Chitrlekha feels proud of him. Swarnlata tells her :

The Prince, madam. Young Puru. Your husband. He has agreed to take on his father's old age. That's why these revelries, madam, this flourish and fanfare... these, these (YY 55).

Chitrlekha replies that she should not cry because she thought, Puru was an ordinary man. But now Puru has proved that he is extra-ordinary. Puru enters and tells Chitrlekha about what had happened. Till then Chitrlekha does not realize the impact of his idealistic sacrifice but when he sees his wrinkled face, then terrified she screams and swoons.

Hearing her screams Yayati enters and blames Chitrlekha. She replies :

*I did not push him to the edge of the pyre, sir. You did. You hold forth on my wifely duties. What about your duty to your son? Did you think twice before foisting your troubles on a pliant son (YY 62)?*

#### **Disillusionment of Yayati**

When Chitrlekha commits suicide, Yayati says :

*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 lying on your pyre, child, burning for life, while I sink slowly in this quagmire, my body wrinkleless and grasping, but unable to grasp anything (YY 68).*

Yayati then accepts his old age and Puru once again becomes young. The king who longed for eternal youth; was afraid of death; was indulging in unbounded sexual pleasures, so much so that he snatched the youth of his son, is transformed when he encounters the inevitability of the result of his irresponsible actions. He represents the common and irrepressible human impulses and their ultimate futility. Karnad uses the old lore to focus over the futility of uncontrolled impulses which also torment the modern man. Yayati in the hands of Karnad serves to bare and dissect the complexes and conflicts of the contemporary life. In that *Yayati* is a study in those elements of human nature which are modern, mythical and eternal simultaneously.

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