

A Critical Reading of Girish Karnad's Mythological Play "Yayati": A Contemporary Perspective

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Abstract – This paper intends to bring out the elements of contemporariness in Girish Karnad's popular mythological play "Yayati". The main plot of the play "Yayati" written by Girish Karnad, an Indian playwright, is adopted from the 'Adiparva' of Mahabharata. Yayati, a powerful king of Kuru dynasty, has a strong obsession towards youthfulness and worldly pleasures. He marries Devayani, Shukracharya's daughter, but in a fit of lust, he molests Sharmishtha. This makes Shukracharya angry and a curse falls on him that he would lose his youth and become decrepit. The idea of losing his youth is extremely painful for him to bear as he cannot resist the temptation of sensual pleasure. However, the intensity of the curse is lessened when Puru, his son, visits Shukracharya. If any person is ready to give his youth to Yayati, in exchange of his old age, he could enjoy the everlasting youthfulness again. Puru, the youngest son of Yayati accepts his old age in exchange of his youth but this decision forces his wife Chitrlekha to commit suicide. The death of Chitrlekha awakens the sense of rationality in Yayati and he again takes back his old age from Puru and restores his youthfulness. Karnad skilfully relates the characters, incidents and circumstances of the ancient myth to contemporary society. To conclude, we can say that Karnad weaves the web of the ancient mythological story in modern social context. Like Yayati, even the modern man has extreme fascination for material and sensual pleasures. In his pursuit of worldly pleasures, he ignores spiritual values and morality.

Key Words – Contemporariness, Curse, Lust, Myth, Rationality, Sensual Pleasure

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I. INTRODUCTION

Girish Karnad, a renowned Indian playwright, has made notable contribution to the Indian English Drama. Through his first play 'Yayati' (1961), he projected himself as a playwright worthy of recognition. His simple but creative style of presenting ancient, well-known themes from a different perspective had a phenomenal effect on the spectators. The thematic novelty in his plays received a great response from the audience. 'Yayati' depicts the complex nature of relationship between Devayani, Sharmishtha and Yayati on one side, and Puru and his wife Chitrlekha on the other side.

The plot of Yayati is adopted from 'Adiparva', the first chapter of the popular Indian epic, 'Mahabharata'. The major milestones in the play are: The curse of Shukracharya on Yayati, Puru's acceptance of his father's old age in exchange of his youth, Chitrlekha's decision to end her life and Yayati's eventual acceptance of his inevitable old age which is the result of Shukracharya's curse.

II. A BRIEF OUTLINE OF THE PLOT

'Yayati' is the story of a powerful king of Kuru dynasty who has an obsession for eternal youthfulness and worldly pleasures. He is indulged in sexuality and wants to be young forever. He has many queens and the complexity in the relationships arises due to these sexual relations. In the play, his three wives are referred to: Devayani, Sharmishtha and Puru's mother. The sexual relations of Yayati among these characters are quite significant in the play. Devayani was actually in love with Kacha. But under certain circumstances, she was compelled to marry Yayati. Yayati's lust forces him marry Devayani. Her father, Shukracharya, has the knowledge of 'Sanjeevani Vidya'. Sharmishtha, who belongs to Raksha cult is Devayani's slave. Devayani is angry with Sharmishtha because she is worried about her influence on Yayati. Sharmishtha seduces Yayati so as to take revenge on Devayani.

Devayani does not approve Yayati's sexual relationship with Sharmishtha as she belongs to Rakshasa cult and the relationship of a Bharata

king with a woman of Rakshasa cult is not acceptable. Being disturbed by Sharmishtha's behaviour, Devayani approaches her father to tell him about Yayati's immoral sexual relationship with Sharmishtha. On hearing this, Shukracharya becomes enraged and curses Yayati. As a consequence of his curse, Yayati would lose his youth and become worn out. Yayati is utterly shocked by this incident. The very thought of shedding his youth is so painful and unbearable for him. Sharmishtha tries to console him saying that no one on earth can escape old age. She pleads Yayati to accept his old age and leave the kingdom with her. She assures him that she would accompany him. But Yayati, who has a strong obsession for youth and worldly pleasures, is unwilling to accept old age. However, when Puru, Yayati's son, visits Shukracharya, the intensity of the curse is lessened. Shukracharya says that if somebody is ready to exchange his youth with Yayati, he could again enjoy everlasting youthfulness. Puru, the youngest son of Yayati is willing to accept Yayati's old age. But Puru has just married Chitrlekha, who is greatly shocked to see her husband becoming prematurely aged.

Yayati tries to convince Chitrlekha saying that she being an educated woman, trained in warfare, must display great deal of self-control. She must display qualities of boldness befitting Anga Princess and Bharata queen. But she says, "I will not let my husband step back into my bedroom unless he returns as a young man." But Yayati tells her that he can order her as her ruler and she is bound to obey the orders of the king. He also reminds her of the oath that she has taken during her marriage. Chitrlekha, however, does not yield to Yayati's arguments. Her logic is that since he has taken Puru's youth, it is his responsibility to accept everything that is associated with it. She has married Puru for his youth and his potential to plant the seed of Bharata's family in her womb. As Puru has now lost it, the responsibility ultimately goes to Yayati. On hearing this, Yayati severely criticizes Chitrlekha and calls her a beast. When Chitrlekha is convinced that Yayati would not return her husband's youth, she finally commits suicide by swallowing poison. Sharmishtha decides to leave Yayati because his future ahead, however glorious, is based on the demise of an innocent woman. Yayati is finally transformed when he sees the lifeless body of Chitrlekha. A sense of rationality awakens in him. At last, he accepts his old age by embracing Puru. Puru once again becomes young but at the cost of his beautiful bride on the nuptial night when he was supposed to meet her.

III. DISCUSSION

The play, though seemingly deals with a myth, has a great contemporary appeal. Girish Karnad, in his 'Collected Plays' (2005), states:

"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 employs the mythological stories to bring out the pointlessness of modern life with all its complexities and conflicts. Yayati represents the modern man who is self-centered and obsessed with unreasonable desires. Yayati is so much obsessed with sexual pleasures that he even does not have any hesitation to take away the rightful youth and vitality of his son. However, his desire does not materialize and he finally yields to circumstances and the law of nature. He has to accept the inevitability of old age. In the original myth, he accepts old age, however, after enjoying youthfulness and sexuality for a long period of one thousand years. However, in Girish Karnad's 'Yayati', he accepts it immediately after the death of Chitrlekha. Deeply affected by the death of Chitrlekha, Yayati recognizes the horror of his own life and realizes his moral responsibility. However, in the original myth, Yayati notices the absurd quality of human 'desire' itself and realizes that desire does not diminish even after a thousand years.

IV. CONCLUSION

Girish Karnad's play "Yayati" throws light on the life style of typical modern man which is very complex and intricate, bound by unlimited desires which can never be fulfilled. 'Yayati' can also be interpreted as a play dealing with the theme of responsibility. A man should be ready to accept the responsibility of the outcome of his own actions. But Yayati, the king, himself is not ready to shoulder his responsibility when things go against his will. The play also shows how the real father and son relationship should be. The playwright introduces new characters to deepen the impact of his play and give it a contemporary colour. The characters, Swarnalatha and Chitrlekha, which are not found in the original myth, are Karnad's own addition.

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