



Mythic Dimension and Modern Consciousness in Girish Karnad's *Yayati*

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Abstract

Of all forms of literature, drama is the most popular and effective medium of entertainment, education and instruction. It appeals directly to the audience and make them think of the reality. It is best medium for raising contemporary social issues. Girish Karnad is one of shining stars in the galaxy of Indian English drama. He has borrowed the plots of his plays from myths, folktales and historical events. He has reinterpreted the themes of this his plays in modern perspectives. Karnad's plays are the reflection of his vision on the contemporary social issues. Karnad does not take the whole myth for his plays. He takes only small and complicated segments of myths and completes it with the help of his imagination. Yayati is Karnad's first plays based on the theme of responsibility. The plot of the play has been taken from the "Adiparva" of the Mahabharata. The present paper endeavors to present a comprehensive study on the mythic dimension and modern consciousness.

Keywords:

Myth; consciousness; dimension; folktales; vision; vogue; complicated; segment

Girish Karnad (b. 1938), a pioneering and distinguished contemporary playwright, has given new dimensions to Indian English drama both thematically and technically. He wrote his plays in Kannada and later on himself translated them into English. In his plays, Karnad has created modern consciousness while interpreting ancient myths and legends. He has enriched Indian English drama with his unique literary creative genius.

Karnad was born on 19 May, 1943 at Matheran in Bombay. He spent his childhood in Sirsi, a small village in Karnataka where he had first hand live experience of indigenous folk theatre. In his childhood Karnad would go to see Natak Company performances which left lasting impressions on his mind. Karnad went through diverse influences during his formative years. He was exposed to a literary phenomena where there was a direct clash between Western and native traditions. During the decades of fifties and sixties in India there surfaced two streams of thought in all walks of life - adoption of new modernistic techniques, legacy of the colonial rule and adherence to the rich cultural past of the country. Karnad adopted a unique way to reach the heights his literary career. Karnad had three distinct dramatic traditions- classical Sanskrit, regional or folk theatre and Western theatre to learn and experiment various theatrical techniques. Karnad is a great contributor to the development of Indian English drama. He has taken Indian English drama to a new height by employing new trends of modern theatre.

Mythic dimension and modern consciousness are the two qualities of the play which make it unique in the tradition of Indian English drama. The term "consciousness" has been defined in many ways by different theorists. Consciousness is the quality or state of awareness, or, of being aware of an external object or something within oneself. It has been defined as: sentience, awareness, subjectivity, the ability to experience or to feel, wakefulness, having a sense of selfhood, and the executive control system of the mind. Despite the difficulty in definition, many



philosophers believe that there is a broadly shared underlying intuition about what consciousness is. As Max Velmans and Susan Schneider wrote in *The Blackwell Companion to Consciousness*:

Anything that we are aware of at a given moment forms part of our consciousness, making conscious experience at once the most familiar and most mysterious aspects of our lives. (Velmans and Schneider: 2007).

In literature the term “modern consciousness” implies breaking away from the established rules, traditions, and conventions both in theme and techniques, in form and style. Literature itself is the most celebrated form of expressions of our consciousness. In the twentieth century the development of science and technology has changed the mindset of people to view literature. Modern writers go deeper into the well of consciousness to deconstruct it as scientists do in various fields of their study. Modern literature is an attempt to fathom and to recreate the state of an individual’s awareness. In classical Indian writings such as the Upanishads, consciousness is thought to be the essence of Atman, a primal, immanent self that is ultimately identified with Brahman, a pure, transcendental, subject-object-less consciousness that underlines and provides the ground of being of both man and nature. Due to changes in knowledge about the world and the use of new technologies which emerged from this knowledge, our reflection of these changes in art, literature, and architecture have become radically new. Art emerges from creative genius of human beings, from some mysterious stratum intermingled with consciousness in ways which sometimes elude direct awareness. Art that is purely intellectual and calculated rarely finds as large audience as did modernism in all of its manifestations. Both literature and science express a kind of truth. As regards literary truth, it is based on perception and

experience, whereas scientific truth is based on facts and results.

Karnad has faithfully adhered to the concept of modern consciousness in his plays. This concept has enabled him to interpret the plots of his plays from contemporary angle. In Indian English drama, playwrights have profusely exploited myths to give a new meaning. As Vanshree Tripathi has said:

Literature and myth merely dramatize, heighten and highlight what is theoretically possible in nature and science. (Tripathi: 2004)

The term “Myth” originated from Greek word “Mythos”, meaning story or plot. Literary historians and critics have defined myths according to their own interpretations. In classical Greek, it signified a story or plot, whether true or invented. Defining the myths, M. H. Abrams says:

In its central modern significance, however, a myth is one story in a mythology—a system of hereditary stories of ancient origin which were once believed to be true by a particular cultural group, and which served to explain (in terms of the intentions and actions of deities and other supernatural beings) why the world is as it is and things happen as they do, to provide a rationale for social customs and observances, and to establish the sanctions for the rules by which people conduct their lives. Most myths are related to social rituals—set forms and procedures in sacred ceremonies—but anthropologists disagree as to whether rituals generated myths or myths generated rituals. If the protagonist is a human being rather than a supernatural being, the traditional story is usually not called a myth but a legend. If the hereditary story concerns supernatural



beings who are not gods, and the story is not part of a systematic mythology, it is usually classified as a folktale. (Abrams: 1997).

Lillian Fedger defines myth as under:

Myth is a story involving human limitation and superhuman strivings and accomplishments which suggests through action—usually of a ritual ceremonial, or compulsive nature – man’s attempt to express and thus control his own anxiety about those features of his physiological and psychological make-up and his external environment which he cannot comprehend, accept or master. The character of myth may be gods, men or monstrous creatures with the qualities both, but narrative material, the portrayal of conflict and sorrow, and the resolution or revelation are all reflections of human concerns. (Feder: 1977).

Myth is not a story told as history, but a history told as story. Myth is a short narrative which has no specific writer. It orally passes from one generation to the other. Literary critics and historian have divided myths mainly into four groups: Cultural Myths, Ritual Myths, Nature Myths and Creation Myths. “Cultural Myths” deals with the culture of hero’s bringing to man the arts, foods, devices, inventions, and usages beneficial to him. “Ritual Myths” refers to activities related to religious ceremonies, closely associated with primitive forms of it wherein man seeks to win favour or appease the anger of a god. “Nature Myths” deals with the origin of natural phenomena such as changes of seasons, day and night, occurrence of rain, thunder, storm and lighting etc. “Creation Myths” deals with the creation of world, the origin of men and animals, and the births of god. Apart from this division; critics have suggested other types of

myths on the basis of subject, such as Psychological Myths, Political Myths and Social Myths. Myths have provided a rich source for literary creation. Writers of Greek and Roman drama have extensively used myths in their plays to deal with the themes of universal human values. Indian English playwrights have tried to deal with philosophical view, religious convictions, political issues, social problems, psychological matters, etc. through myths, legends, historical events, and day-to-day happenings. Rabindranath Tagore, Sri Aurobindo, T.P. Kailasam, H.N. Chattopadhyaya and Bharati Sarabhai are some noted playwrights of pre-Independence phase of Indian English drama, who have used myths in their plays. Rabindranath Tagore’s *Sannyasi or the Aseetic*, *The King and the Queen*, *Sacrifice*, *Chitra*, *The King of the Dark Chamber*, *Gandhari’s Prayer*, and *Karna and Kunti* all are based on mythical themes and characters. Sir Aurobindo’s play *Perseus the Deliverer* is based on Perseus myth. Girish Karnad, Badal Sircar, Uma Parameswaran are the contemporary playwrights who have used Indian as well as foreign myths in their plays.

Yayati (1961) is Girish Karnad’s first attempt in the field of playwriting. The play was originally written in Kannada and later on translated into English by the writer himself. The play has received wide popularity and acclaim due to its contemporary appeal and relevance. In the play Karnad retells an ancient myth taken from the “Adiparva” of the *Mahabharata* in modern perspectives. Karnad has tried to bring forward the absurdity of life with all its elemental passions, conflicts within the man and his eternal struggle to achieve fulfillment of desires. Myths, legends and folktales are in fact the embodiments of cultural ethos and represent the underlying values and principles of life, the shared experience of the race, the rules and the codes



of the society. The play has been interpreted in the light of contemporary concepts.

Yayati is one of the six sons of king Nahusha. Devayani is the daughter of sage Sukracharya and Sharmishtha is the daughter of king Vrishparva, the Asura king. Devayani and Sharmishtha are childhood friends. Once they had a dispute over a minor issue. Sharmishtha pushed Devayani into a nearby dry well. Fortunately king Yayati happens to pass by the well he heard the cries of Devayani and rescued her by taking out from the well. Devayani falls in love with Yayati. She offers to marry with him. Yayati, being a Kshatriya prince, initially showed his inability to marry a Brahmin girl. However, with the consent of sage Shukracharya the marriage was solemnized. Sharmishtha, as result of punishment, was sent with Devayani as her maid servant. Sharmishtha also falls in love with Yayati. Yayati's relationship with Sharmishtha infuriates Devayani. In her anger and jealousy, she goes to her father Shukracharya and complains of this illicit relationship to him. Shukracharya curses Yayati of senility and decrepitude. 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 pleasure, asks the people of his kingdom and at last in desperation to his sons to 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 pleasure only after indulging in it for a thousand years. Yayati is the representative of modern man. Modern man is drifting towards his uncontrolled desires. Despite receiving much happiness in life, modern man is adopting unmoral and unethical means of success to satisfy his desires. Here in the play, king Yayati remains restless and discontented

despite having all sources of pleasure in materialistic world. When king Yayati is cursed of premature old age by sage Sukracharya, he is worried about his fate because he does not want old age or decrepitude so soon. Sharmishtha suggests Yayati that no one can escape old age. She requests Yayati to accept it and go to the forest. She assures him to accompany him to the forest. When Sharmishtha advises him to accept this old age, Yayati defends her forcefully. Yayati says:

Solitude? What are you talking about? 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. If I have to know myself, Sharmishtha, I have to be young. I must have my youth. (Karnad: 2008. 43).

He is not satisfied with his present status instead wandering to gain more sensual pleasure. Karnad adds new characters to deepen and evolve richness of his drama and gives it a contemporary appeal.

Karnad's re-working of the myth is different from the original myth. Pooru is a not the son of Sharmishtha as shown in the original myth. He is the son of another queen who died when Pooru was a child. He is a philosophical youth; but self-hating outsider who is distraught by the questionable legitimacy of his birth. His acceptance curse is not mediated by obedience, but in an attempt to overcome his feelings of unworthiness. Karnad's version questions the patriarch in Yayati and brings a transformation in him. In the *Mahabharata* Yayati recognizes the nature of desire himself, whereas in Karnad's play Yayati realizes his mistakes only after the tragic end of Chitrlekha. He is deeply worried and restless to know that Chitrlekha has committed suicide by consuming poison. Sharmishtha is the representative of modern woman who is less affected by the patriarchal pattern of society.



She is frank and outspoken. She did not refrain from telling Devayani that Yayati married her not because of her beauty but because of her father's 'Sanjeevani Vidya', the magical power of immortality. Karnad through Sharmishtha endeavors to prove that women with education and understanding do not yield to the pressure or demands of patriarchy. She possesses strength of mind and thus cannot bear any insult or dishonour from male domination. She does not give way to stimulate or excite tenderness and gratify the arrogance and pride. Yayati knows that Sharmishtha's way of behavior is unfamiliar to Bharata family. When Yayati threatens Sharmishtha to expel her from the palace, she tells Yayati that she can't go anywhere because the palace is her home. And her father has given Devayani's father his word that Sharmishtha shall be Devayani's slave. She also knows that slavery transfers a person into an animal, a domesticated animal and once ready to act is destroyed due to slavery.

Sharmishtha brings turmoil in the life of Yayati. It is because of her that Devayani falls into the well and Yayati appears on the scene and saves her. Sharmishtha explains how she had in fact worshipped Devayani during the days of their shared childhood. Devayani seemed completely unconscious of the fact that she belonged to a superior race. Sharmishtha loved and was proud of Devayani's friendship. Sharmishtha's narrations of the past things indicate how much she is disturbed in present because no one tries to understand her. Everyone knows that due to her Devayani falls into the well but nobody knows what made her to do the act. The intolerable remarks of Devayani agitated Sharmishtha and she misbehaved her friend. Sharmishtha has come to the conclusion that there won't be happiness in her life of the palace because she has to serve Devayani as a slave. Her father has given her a vial of lethal poison and she tells Yayati that she was thinking of killing Devayani, but now she has decided to kill herself. Yayati does not allow her to drink the poison. Later, this

poison is drunk by Chitrlekha. In the second Act of the play, Sharmishtha takes revenge on Devayani by making Yayati to flirt with her. Due to the sexual relationship between Yayati and Sharmishtha, Devayani becomes very angry and she wants to prove her superiority to the daughter of the Asura race. It leads to a complex clash. When Devayani comes to know about the relationship, she suggests Yayati to expel her from the place and to this Sharmishtha reacts:

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. (Karnad: 2008. 29).

Yayati is attracted towards beauty and physic of Sharmishtha. He has no other alternative than to marry with Sharmishtha. This raises more anger in Devayani to such an extent that she fears the marriage thread from around her neck, snatches pieces of jewelry and throws them. She asks Swarnalata the whereabouts of her father, Shukracharya. She joins her father who is resting in the 'Shambhu Shrine' and narrates him the things happened with her. Pooru is Yayati's beloved son who has stayed away from the palace for a long time and now he is back with his bride, Chitrlekha. However, Pooru fails to execute his responsibilities and accepts old age from his father under obligation.

As the play *Yayati* is based on the theme of responsibility. Yayati himself is responsible for his downfall. But he hesitates to take the responsibility of the things which have come to him as reactions to his own actions. Pooru is sent to convince Shukracharya to take his curse back. In Act three of the play, Pooru returns from Shukracharya and informs Yayati that the curse will not have its effect on Yayati, if a young man admits to take it upon himself and offers his youth to Yayati in exchange. Yayati is confident that any young person will



be ready to accept his curse. But Pooru informs him that no one is ready to do so. If someone accepts the curse, Yayati is ready to give a lot of wealth to the person. Pooru also suggests that Yayati should accept the curse and behave as Sharmishtha suggests. At last Pooru tells Yayati that he is ready to sacrifice his youth for his father. Act IV opens with the acceptance of old age by Pooru. Swarnalata and Chitralekha are sharing their views. Chitralekha has found a pendant from the marriage thread of Devayani. Chitralekha tells Swarnalata about her maid at her mother's home. She wants to know more about Swarnalata's life. Swarnalata tells Chitralekha that her husband has left her and gone away as he was tired of life. As Swarnalata is telling more about her married life, there is thunderous eruption of the drums and conch shells. It indicates the arrival of Pooru. Swarnalata informs Chitralekha about what Pooru has done.

The King Yayati comes to meet Chitralekha by listening to her screams. Yayati tells Chitralekha that she should display more self-control. She has to behave like Anga princess and Bharata queen. If she behaves boldly, the people will be grateful to her. Yayati also tells to Chitralekha that as it is the palace of Bharata's he can order her not as her father-in-law but as her ruler. He also reprimands her about the vow she has taken during the marriage. Chitralekha blames Yayati because he has pushed his son into the funeral pyre. Later Chitralekha shows him two things which she finds there. One is pendant and another is vial of poison. Yayati requests Chitralekha to help him in the situation. As Yayati has taken Pooru's youth, now it is the responsibility to accept everything that comes attached to it. She has married Pooru for his youth. For his potential to plant the seed of Bharata's in her womb. As Pooru has lost it, the responsibility goes to Yayati. Yayati blames Chitralekha and calls her a beast. When Chitralekha comes to know that Yayati cannot return her husband back nor can he accept her

logic end. She picks up the vial of poison and swallows the poison. Chitralekha dies without realizing marital bliss as her husband has become old in the prime of his youth. Yayati is transformed when he sees the dead body of Chitralekha. 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-centered and shifting his own responsibilities to others. Girish Karnad's plays are concerned with the life of modern man who is very complex and not complete in it. He employs the old myth to focus on the absurdity of modern life with all its elemental passions and conflicts. In the hands of Girish Karnad, the mythic story has become medium for communicating the predicament of modern man. Being influenced by Marxism and Existentialism there is a fundamental change in his outlook.

The sub plot of the play is Karnad's own creation. Through the subplot he has deepened the significance of main story. The subplot moves around 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. With a single affair of his wife Swarnalata's 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 Chitralekha thinks in a rational way. Pooru is married with Chitralekha and the young married couple has arrived into the palace. On the nuptial evening itself Pooru accepts the old age of his father and when he regains his youth

Chitrlekha is no more. Pooru does not think of his responsibility towards his newly married wife and he accepts the old age of his father. Yayati craves for power and youth. When Sharmistha suggests that Yayati should accept the old age and go into solitude, he is not ready to sacrifice his throne. He loves his youth and throne and is ready to sacrifice anything for his youth. He sacrifices his son's youth for his personal advantage. The struggle between Devayani and Sharmistha is also for power. Devayani does not want that Sharmistha should enter and encroach on her relationship with Yayati. Devayani is angry with Sharmistha because she is worried about her influence on Yayati. At the end of the play the father in Yayati is awakened and he hands over all the power as well as youth to his son Pooru and goes in solitude with Sharmistha.

In the play Karnad has brilliantly dealt with the contemporary social issues such as class distinction and the caste distinction which take the society to violence. Sharmistha, being disturbed by the comments of Devayani, pulls her with her long hair, takes her to a well and throws her inside. Sharmistha's behaviour is violent whereas Devayani's words are violent. In order to take revenge on Devayani, Sharmistha seduces Yayati. Being psychologically disturbed by Sharmistha's behaviour 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 has created Chitrlekha's character on his own. It is due to Chitrlekha's death Yayati's mind changes.

Karnad has introduced another subplot in the play. The episode of Swarnalata and her husband is an additional plot which comments on the suspicious behaviour of male community. The actions around which the play moves are the curse of Shukracharya, Pooru's acceptance of old age, Chitrlekha's suicide and at last Yayati's acceptance of the curse. There are some actions which are narrated in

the play. Sharmistha's throwing Devayani in the well, Shukracharya's curse, Swarnalata's husband's behaviour—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 Sharmistha and goes in isolation. Karnad's plays are particularly concerned with the psychological problems of dilemma and conflicts experienced by modern man. The story of *Yayati* has close similarity with the situation as Karnad himself had to face in his life when he was planning to go abroad for higher studies. As Karnad says :

While I was writing the play, I saw it only an escape from my stressful situation. But looking back, I am amazed at how precisely the myth reflected my anxieties at the moment, my resentment with all those who seemed to demand that I sacrifice my future. By the time I had finished working on *Yayati*- during the three weeks it took the ship to reach England and in the lonely cloisters of the university-the myth had enabled me to articulate to myself a set of values that I have been unable to arrive at rationally. Whether to return home finally seemed the most minor of issues: the myth had nailed me to my past. (Karnad : 1999).

The inexhaustible lore of myths, parables and legends that pattern and define our culture offers immense scope for Indian dramatists. Karnad as a playwright is preoccupied with the idea of reinterpreting of Indian myths, legends, folklores and history. Karnad has tried to explore a symbolic form out of tension between the archetypal and mythical experience and a lively response to life and its value in his plays. Karnad concerns



himself with the problems of existence of self, search for identity and problems of isolation and frustration in the modern perspectives.

Yayati is an embodiment of typical modern man, who in spite of having much pleasure of life, is dissatisfying and impatient. He is blindly in pursuit of pleasure. He takes the youth of his youngest son Pooru in order to satisfy his physical needs. By doing so he suppresses the value and morality of his character. Each and every individual should bear the responsibility posed by the family and society. It is pathetic that king Yayati and his son Pooru realize their responsibilities only at the cast of one's life. The dramatist portrays the selfless nature and the helpless plight of the Indian woman who, by willingly sacrificing their lives, make the members of their family realize their nobility.

Girish Karnad's plays are embedded in Indian mythology and history, be it myths from the epics, folktales and historical events, he has endeavored to relate the past with the present to make a convincing blend of fact and fiction. Indeed Karnad has felt the challenges posed by these two realities. In the Indian theatre tradition, there has been a strong impact of mythology and history in literature. Karnad was aware that this tradition has an amazing potential, as the elements of myth and history

are very common to Indian audience. So he makes use of such myths and legends as metaphors for contemporary situations. He treats history as myth rather than writing a strictly factual history play he gives it symbolical reshaping to reinforce the contemporary issues.

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