

Girish Karnad's Plays: A Reworking of Mythology and Folklores

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Abstract

Girish Karnad's is known for the beautiful blend of the traditional with the modern themes in his plays. All his plays reveal the Indian collective past - the racial, mythical, legendary and the historical and they have a strong contemporary significance. By using these myths he tried to disclose the irrationality of life with all its elemental passions and conflicts and man's eternal struggle to achieve perfection. The themes and characters from the Indian Mythology, Legends and Folklores not only make his plays persuasive but also help him to emphasize the central problem of human existence in a world of tangled relationships. In his plays the artistic reworking of the Mythology and the folklores results in giving an independent traditional-modern distinctiveness and uniqueness to his dramas. He takes the myths and folktales only in parts and the rest he supplements with his imagination.

Keywords: myth, folklores, legends, imagination, traditional-modern, relationships

Girish Karnad, the versatile playwright from India writing in English has captured the fundamental nature of the Indian mythology to surface a way for the new world. He has been awarded by Padmashri, Padmabhushan, Sahitya Academy Award, Jnanpeth Award and several other awards. This proves his might in the literary world. He is an alluring writer with an identity of giving an Indian essence to his modern plays translated in English language. Karnad has added this tang to the Indian cinema as well through his acting in cinema and television serials. As a playwright he has left an everlasting impact on the history of contemporary Indian drama. His plays have redefined the form and structure of drama. Tughlaq, Hayavadana, Yayati, Nagamandala: Play with Cobra, Fire and the Rain, Bali : The Sacrifice, Tale Danda Wedding Album, Boiled Beans on Toast, Crossing to Talikota, are his iconic and memorable plays translated in English from Kannada. In this article Karnad's play Yayati will be discussed with respect to the use of myth and folklores and the message the dramatist tries to convey through the use and reworking with these myths and folklores in his plays.

"A traditional story, especially one concerning the early

history of people or explaining some natural or social phenomenon, and typically involving supernatural beings or events." (<https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803100220460>)

"a usually traditional story of ostensibly historical events that serves to unfold part of the world view of a people or explain a practice, belief, or natural phenomenon" (<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/myth>)

In the broadest sense Myths can be said to be the traditional stories about the Gods and legendary kings or heroes. They tell tales of Gods creating men and their purpose behind the creation and provide a moral code for human beings by which to live. And myths treat the lives of heroes who represent the ideals of a society. In short, myths largely deal with the significant aspects of human and super-human existence. They have a certain dignity and eloquence and are generally stories that have been handed down for generations; popular tales that embody a collective knowledge. Some of these may have originated with shamans, priests, or poets, myths belong to a primitive or pre-scientific people as their cultural heritage and have been shaped by the folk imagination.

Myths represent the learning of a society, its accumulated knowledge and wisdom done through narrative memorable stories. Scholars divide the subject into three principal categories: pure myth, heroic saga, and the folk tale. Myths use logical interpretation, relating the strange to the common by means of resemblance through which man comes close to the realization of his roots. A genealogy of gods, kings, and heroes is the most important aspect of the myth. Legends show the direction of a culture by educating and channelizing the energies of the young. Besides the pure myth and the saga there is another type of story common in primitive cultures: the folk tale or fairy tale; a story told for sheer pleasure without any pretense to being factual. In a sophisticated society myths may be conscious and symbolic creations designed to embody an abstract idea. Many of the myths have lasted for thousands of years, remaining as fresh as when they were first written down.

Yayati is based on a story found in the Mahabharata. In

the original story Yayati's story begins with his wife, Devayani, the beautiful daughter of Sukracharya, the Guru of the Asuras (Demons). Before her marriage, Devayani was insulted, slapped, and thrown into a (waterless) well by Sharmistha, the daughter of the king of Asuras. Yayati, who happened to pass by, had rescued Devayani by holding her right hand and pulling her out of the well. Devayani had then asked Yayati to marry him. However, the prevailing custom of the day forbade a Kshatriya to marry a Brahmin girl (this was called the Pratiloma marriage); Yayati refused, stating the Pratiloma rule as the obstacle for their marriage. Seething with rage, Devayani complained to her father about Sharmistha. Sukra, who loved his only daughter dearly, told the king that he would leave the kingdom if his daughter were not appeased. Devayani set her condition for revenge. Sharmistha had to be her Dasi (handmaid) and serve her in the house she would occupy after her marriage. Sharmistha approved in order to save her father's honour. Yayati later married Devayani after Sukra agreed to make an exception to the Pratiloma rule. In the meantime, Sharmistha was attracted to Yayati and asked him to marry her. Yayati could not resist and married her without Devyani's acquaintance. Before long, Devayani discovered the secret and complained bitterly to her father. A furious Sukracharya cursed him with old age. This is the vital point in time of Yayati's story. Yayati who is an extremely sensual king, believed in enjoying all pleasures of life which a king can afford. This curse left him distressed. Later he mollified Sukra on which the sage told him that if anybody could exchange his old age, his youth would be as before. Yayati approached each of his sons and wives but no one agrees. Only the youngest son by Sarmishtha, Puru agreed and completes the transfer by embracing him. Puru became an old man in his young age while Yayati regains his youth. And continues enjoying his youth but the more he indulged, the thirstier he grew. He realises that no object of desire-corn, gold, cattle, and women-nothing can ever satisfy the desire of man and only mental poise can lead to Peace. Yayati retires to the forest for penance and returns back Puru's youth and offers him the kingdom. The story of Yayati and Devyani virtually ends.

Karnad's Yayati re-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, 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 issues of man coiled within a web of desire. In the Puranic lore, as it has been discussed in detail earlier, Yayati marries Devayani and takes Sharmistha as his wife, as required under certain niceties of dharma. His marriage to Sharmistha infuriates Devayani that brings the curse of old age upon Yayati. He wishes to exchange old age for money, land and even a part of his kingdom. Only Puru his youngest son with a great sense of filial obligation and respect for his father offers his youth for his old age and takes the curse on him. Puru has just returned home with newly wedded wife Chitrlekha (an invention of the dramatist) and the nuptial bed is being prepared for them but the same now used for Yayati to celebrate his wedding night with Sharmistha, his second wife. However, Puru's great sacrifice brings disastrous results. Puru's newly married wife, Chitrlekha, who wants to bear a child, is unable to bear her husband's old age. She wishes to offer herself to Yayati but, then, commits suicide out of shame. Yayati is horrified to see the disastrous results of his action. He finally takes back the curse from his son in a moment of remorse.

Karnad's Yayati is similarly stricken with an overwhelming desire for indulgence. However, because Karnad decides that he is an Existential king, he alters Yayati's character. Not content, he casts Puru in a similar mold: the eternal conflict-torn drama protagonist who in this play, vacillates between the desire to reclaim his youth and fulfilling his duty as a son. In Karnad's Yayati, the importance is skewed heavily in favour of Puru-not Yayati-which is a perversion of the original. In the original, Puru's role begins with accepting his father's old age with respectful dignity, and ends with returning it. Puru never thinks twice, he does not crib and not is not in the throes of dilemma whether he made the right choice. However, Karnad's Puru is despondent about his loss of youth. He is as said earlier, in the throes of a dilemma, which desperately needs an outlet. He does vent in a few monologues, and asides.

Chitrlekha (Karnad's imaginary Character), materializes as Puru's wife-a character absent in the original. Take away Chitrlekha from Yayati and it falls flat. Chitrlekha commits suicide in the play when she learns that Puru has traded his youth for old age. In Karnad's Yayati, confession of Yayati that indulgence does not lead to peace and happiness is also missing. Karnad's hero is Puru, not Yayati. 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. He has had his fill but remains unfulfilled which is what plods him to seek a non-cyclical happiness.

In the original, neither Yayati nor his son suffers from any kind of confusion or existentialist disease. They are aware of their motivations, their choices, and have great assurance and feel no guilt or remorse. In Yayati Karnad takes liberty with the original myth and invents some new relationships to make it acceptable to modern sensibility. In Karnad's play, Yayati has already married Devayani, and marries Sharmistha during the action of the play. Karnad invents two characters - Puru's wife Chitrlekha and confidant Swarnalata. In Karnad's play, the whole action takes place in one night. Puru is shown coming home after his marriage and the bed is being prepared for the newly wedded couple. The same bed is used for Yayati to solemnize Sarmishtha. The curse falls and Puru loses his youth and suddenly grows old. Chitrlekha, who wants to bear a child, is disillusioned. She decides to offer herself to Yayati and then she commits suicide. This shakes Yayati and act as a revelation. In a moment of genuine remorse, he takes back the curse from his son. The playwright has given this traditional tale a new meaning and significance highly relevant in the context of life today.

Like Yayati of the Mahabharata, the common man of today is groping in the darkness of material and sensual pleasures. He finds himself in a world in which the old spiritual values have been entirely swept away and new spiritual ones are yet to be discovered. Blind pursuit of pleasure has become the supreme religion in his life in the modern times.

What can thus be observed in Karnad's plays is a reworking of myths on contemporary lines, the myth serving as a parallel and limited to the individual characters but encircling complete epochs. Karnad therefore carefully edits out those aspects of myth not

conducive to his purpose and makes deviations in detail. Although the myths have traditional and religious sanction, they pave the way for the questioning of human values. Yayati, his play reveals the essential ambiguity of human personality which is apparently shaped or shattered by the human environment. Fundamentally like the incomplete and imperfect, human beings searching and yearning for attaining the unattainable ideal of completeness and perfection. It leads the seekers to tragic or comic ends. Chitrlekha, for instance ruins herself and all her relations.

Added to this Karnad believes that the various folk conventions like the chorus, the music, the mixing of human and non-human worlds permit a simultaneous presentation of alternate points of view. Thus, the myth acquires new dimensions in the creative hands of Karnad, and the play unfolds rich strands of meaning. What Karnad tries to do in this play is to reveal the archetypal structure of the society. Myths and folktales always interpret human life, and in the contemporary context they interpret modern sensibility or the modern consciousness. In this way by exploiting myth and folktale in Yayati, Karnad presents various problems of contemporary society. Karnad's attempt is to give a new implication to the times of yore from the point of view of the present.

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