

Karnad's Yayati: A Saga of an Un-heroic Filial Sacrifice and Existential Dilemma

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Abstract

Yayati is transcription of the play of the same name in Kannad by Girish Karnad. It is the young writer's juvenile enterprise. Karnad was just 22 year old, inexperienced writer when he wrote the play in his mother tongue (1960) and he himself translated the play in English (2008) when he was 69 year old, matured, acclaimed artist and playwright. Many of his plays are transpositions in which the original narratives are adapted with the 'aesthetic convention'. Karnad derived his plays from various sources as Shakespeare did and adapted them for dramatic purpose, filling it with entirely new colours and perspectives of his own. The theme of the play in question has been taken from Adi Parva of Mahabharata, the famous Indian epic.

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Karnad has attempted to reinterpret the myth psychoanalytically. He discovered the immense possibilities for exploration of psychological and physiological needs and social obligations of human beings in the myth of Yayati. It has been a popular myth and it has adapted by many playwrights and novelists in India. Moreover, Yayati story has been made into films. Yet, the adaptation by Karnad holds a unique place and importance in the numbers of adaptations. In the play, Karnad has invented the character of Chitrlekha through whom he questions the very moral authority of parents as she questions the authority of Yayati in taking over her husband's youth on the very first night of their marriage. Karnad also added the character of a maid servant Swarnalata. The mythical story forms the plot of the play but Karnad adds, "...new characters to deepen the connotative richness of the play as he gives it a contemporary appeal." (Yadava 14). With his masterly adaptation, he has shown that "the ancient Indian myths can be harnessed to address the modern sensibility of loss of individuality" (Boratti 62). The playwright is aware that by linking past to present a kind of continuity can be assured and human predicament can be established. In the words of Aparna Dharwadkar, the play established that "...myth is not merely a narrative to be bent to present purposes, but a structure of meaning worth exploring in

itself, because it offers opportunities for philosophical reflection without the connotations of realism or the necessity of a contemporary setting." (27)

Karnad has shown his dexterous observation in understanding the relationship of characters. The relations between characters appear complex but are very subtle to correlate and understand. The play presents complex relationship between Yayati, Devyani and Sharmistha as well as between Pooru and his wife Chitrlekha. When the play opens Yayati is already married to Devyani, the daughter of Shukracharya, the guru of demons. Sharmistha acts as a slave to Devyani as it was agreed on between Shukracharya and Vrushparva, the demon king and the father of Sharmistha. There grew up a relation between Yayati and Sharmistha and they get secretly married in spite of the warning of Shukracharya. When the truth is licked out the angry Shukracharya cursed Yayati with decrepitude. After much regret and pleading Yayati has given a relaxation in escaping from the curse, provided that if any young man agrees to take it upon himself. Yayati requested to people of his kingdom to his old days but no one agreed. After his four sons turned his request down, the fifth son, Pooru comes forward to accept the king's curse though he was recently married. Chitrlekha dies by taking a poison. Eventually, the King realises his mistake, re-exchange the youth of Pooru and himself goes to forest to practice austerity.

Interpolation, as we know, is a common feature in adaptations. While in original myth Yayati is symbolic of higher ideal, Karnad's Yayati come to us as mere pleasure monger. His long chase after sensual pleasure and eventual realisation indicate the futility of chasing happiness though indulgence. The more one get into indulgence it merely increases. In original tale neither Pooru nor Yayati did have any existentialist crisis. Karnad's Yayati comes across as pretty straightforward when he expresses his desire to enjoy sensual pleasure and even tries to justify his own act. He attempts to Yayati tries to justify his own act and attempt to convince Chitrlekha to understand the great sacrifice of Pooru, her husband for the sake of kingdom. But Chitrlekha

bluntly questions the filial duty. She asks Yayati "What about your duty to your son? Did you think twice before foisting your trouble on a pliant son?" (Yayati 62). With her interrogating spirit Chitrlekha put a cross questions to Yayati, questioning the moral authority of him in taking her husband's youth for his sensuous pleasure, she suggests Yayati to take over the role of husband.

Chitrlekha: I did not know Prince Pooru when I married him. I married him for his youth. For his potential to plant the seed of the Bharatas in my womb. He has lost that potency now. He doesn't possess any of the qualities for which I married him. But you do.

Yayati (flabbergast): Chitrlekha!

Chitrlekha : You have taken over your son's youth. It follows that you should accept everything that comes attached to it.

Yayati : Whore! Are you inviting me to fornication? (65-66)

This straightforward suggestion by Chitrlekha moves Yayato to realise his grave folly and her suicide forces him to bestow the youth of Pooru back on him. Swarnalata's married life is also an addition to the original tale that provides a new dimension to the man-woman relationships in the play. Prem Sagar and R. Varshney rightly observe:

The play remains an existentialist predicament, showing in definite terms how a person rendered rootless and alienated becomes revengeful. This makes it a psychological study of those who are awarded severest sentence for no fault of theirs. (96)

The merit of Karnad's treatment of myth lies in the fact that it loses its traditional value system. It appears a tale of racial consciousness, the royal lust, female jealousy and last but not the least, existential escape. The play is a self consciously existentialist drama on the theme of responsibility. Karnad's interpretation of the "familiar old myth on the exchange of ages between father and son baffled and angered my conventional critics, but for other, who were trying to root their contemporary concerns in old myth...Puru was a great experience" (Murthy 7). He has also conveyed that every woman has her own grace. Devayani leaves Yayati for never returning back, Chitrlekha's suicide in the very front of her husband and Yayati clearly indicates the eternal blow to realise their unforgivable sin wipe out just mythical dimension of the play.

Karnad not only take the mythological charisma of Yayati but also deprives Pooru of traditional glory of sacrifice. His Pooru does not surrender his youth out of his love and duty towards his father, adhering to the dictum of Pitru Devo Bhava (father is god) but to escape form royal responsibilities to which he considers himself unworthy of. He is seen haunted by mysterious consciousness and feeling of inferiority. He actually admits to Yayati that:

The great mystery then surely is how this glorious bloodline produced a specimen like me. I had not the slightest inclination to follow in the steps of my illustrious forefathers. I found their deeds pompous. I was bored by the hermitage, unembarrassedly, I wanted to run away, from all that it represented: that history, those triumphs those glorious ideals. (35)

It is obvious that he wanted an escape from the possible responsibilities that his princely place implied. It is therefore, sacrifice of his youth, appeared an easy route and an honourable escape. Talking to Chitrlekha, Yayati estimates Pooru in following words:

Pooru lacks the experience to tackle these problems (pause). Actually, more than experience, he lacks the will, the desire. Instead of welcoming the responsibilities of a king - of householder- he has welcomed senility within a fortnight of his marriage (64).

The face saving policy of Pooru comes to fore when Yayati narrates the lineage of his mother. According to Yayati, Sharmistha the demon princess married to him because the Aryas has destroyed her home and hearth. She wanted a revenge on Aryas and therefore made sure to borne a child meant to crown prince of the Bharatas who has the blood of rakshasas (demons) in him. She thus succeeds in polluting the blood of the Aryas as Pooru would be next king. By knowing this, instead of appropriate reaction takes his escapist act as a revenge on his father. He tells Sharmistha, "And I Came rearing to meet you, to join in your rebellion against this stuffy palace". It is, therefore, explicit that Pooru cannot be attributed with the mythological glory of sacrifice he is associated with. On knowing the voluntary acceptance of decrepitude Sharmistha reacts that, "This is sheer stupidity! Pooru, the desire for self sacrifice is a rank perversion" (50).

Undoubtedly, the play is existentialist one as it is based on the theme of responsibility. Moreover, it shows the impact of Sartre, Camus and others existentialist writers. In an interview with Tutun Mukherjee, Karnad admits that:

It is true that Existentialism was the persuasive philosophy of the time. My attempt was to emphasize the

calm acceptance of grief and anguish; Pooru's old age is a sudden transformation and not the eventually of life. It brings no wisdom and no self realization. It is senseless punishment for an act he has not committed. It was also intrigued by the idea that if Pooru had a wife, how could she react? So I introduced Chitrlekha. Every character in the play tries to evade the consequence of their actions except Sharmistha and Chitrlekha. (Mukherjee 31)

Karnad's play, thus, refutes the traditional and popular interpretations associated with it and emerges as a tale of stupid escape in the name of filial sacrifice. His Yayati makes the reader rethink about the myths, mythologies and folklores.

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