

# Mythical Reworking in Girish Karnad's *Yayati*

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## Abstract

*Yayati* is one of the remarkable plays of eminent playwright Girish Karnad. This exceptional play is an ancient mythological portrayal of desires one has in one's life. Myths are identified as idealistic moral standpoint from a different angle. The significance of myth is enormous not only in history but also in literature, philosophy and numerous facets of human life. Myths have played an important role in oral, written, as well as visual story telling for thousands of years. That is why they have been a part of mankind's entire history. Every Indian child has grown up by listening mythological stories of gods and goddesses. Mythological stories are integral part of cultural studies too. *Yayati* is also a mythological story present in our Indian culture. *Yayati* is a retelling of mythological story depicted in *Mahabarta* from the perspective of ancient king Yayati and his desires. The present paper attempts to re-evaluate the presentation of myth of Yayati. The study aims at mythical reworking of social, religious and philosophical aspects present in modern society.

**Keywords:** *Yayati*, Girish Karnad, myth, Indian culture, desire, Identity crisis]

## Introduction

The Indian English drama depicts deep rooted beliefs and values of the Indian soil and Indian Sensibility in modern context. Indian English literature portrays diffidence of literary stalwarts like - Rabindranath Tagore, Sri Aurobindo and Harindranath Chatopadhyay, Girish Karnad, Mohan Rakesh, Badal Sircar, Mahesh

Dattani, Uma Parmeswaran and Vijay Tendulkar. Girish Karnad was not only a great playwright but also an actor and a film director. He has received *Jnanpith* award, the highest literary honour bestowed in India, in 1998 for his contribution in literature. His plays have marked the coming of age of modern Indian plays.

Girish Karnad has brought a major change of direction by projecting myth and modern predicament of man and contributed a lot in Indian English literature. In modern world absurdity and meaninglessness of life has engulfed human psyche. Thus even writers like Girish Karnad represents, altruism, humanity, day-dreaming and longingness and many other things. Girish Karnad has taken liberty with the myth to knit multifaceted dimension to create a story in modern context and thus sketched a new plot. He has used a novice approach to draft historical and mythological characters to undertake modern subject matter such as absurdity, existentialism and crisis of modern man through characters locked in psychological and philosophical conflicts. Through his writings playwright has depicted the past mythical, historical and oral tales.

*Yayati* was published in the year 1961, when Girish Karnad was just 23 years old. The source of the play is *Mahabharata*. The play is based on the story of King Yayati, one of the ancestors of the Pandavas, who was cursed into premature old age by his preceptor, Shukracharya, who was infuriated at Yayati's infidelity. The present paper aims at reworking of myth in *Yayati* in context with Conventional and modern sensibility that deals with the problems of identity, social, religious and philosophical conflicts, patriarchy, self-interest and invasive sense of isolation.

Reworking of myth is not new in literature as relatively ancient English writers have represented themselves through mythical stories. Through their writings they have painted a colorful world where gods and goddesses possessed human qualities. M.K. Naik expresses: If Indian English drama wishes to go ahead, it must go back first, that is, only a purposeful return to its own roots in the rich tradition of ancient Indian drama, both in Sanskrit and folk drama in Prakrits, can help it shed its lean and pale look, and increase its artistic haemoglobin count, and make it cease to be the 'sick man' of Indian English Literature (43-44).

Girish Karnad through the play *Yayati* has attempted to relate the old myth of *Mahabharata* in modern framework. Girish Karnad has added new characters to rework on the already existed myth and deal with the modern themes as desire, alienation, social and religious conflicts, existentialism *etc.* Yadava adds, "...new characters to deepen the connotative richness of the play as he gives it a contemporary appeal."(14). The new characters introduced in the play are: Swarnalata, the servant of Devyani, and Chitrlekha the wife of Pooru. Swarnalata is a strong character as she gives insights in between the play. She tells Chitrlekha that your husband, "...agreed to take on his father's old age."(57) On the other hand Chitrlekha, wife of Pooru, in the end kills herself which brings change in Yayati's sensual desires. She is true embodiment of self-sacrifice due to philosophical conflicts present in society. In Mahabharata Devyani had two sons Yadu and Tarvasu while Sharmistha had three sons Druhyu, Anu and Pura on the other hand in the play of *Yayati*, the playwright mentions Pooru the only son of Yayati and Devyani.

*Yayati* is a mythical play which was written in Kannada language and then translated in English by the writer himself. S. Ramaswami adds: ...by using imagination and creativity, he transformed myths and legends into a folk narrative style (278).

*Yayati* is the story of King Yayati who was cursed by his own ancestors to old age. Yayati, in turn, asks his sons to sacrifice their youth for him, and one of them agrees too. The play depicts the ironies of life through myriad layers unfolded in due course of the story.

The major characters in the play are: Sharmistha, Devayani, Yayati, Pooru and Chitrlekha. *Yayati* is a play with complex relationship between Devayani, Sharmistha and king Yayati. Devayani and Sharmistha, were friends, One day they both went to river to take bath. All of a sudden a strong wind started blowing and they quickly came out of the river and put on their cloths. However, hurriedly Sharmistha wore Devayani's cloth. Devayani didn't like it and they started fighting. Sharmistha pushed Devayani into the river and went away. At the same time king Yayati was passing by, helped her to come out of the river by

holding her right hand, accidentally. Eventually, Devayani and king Yayati got married and Sharmishtha came out as a dowry in marriage. Sharmishtha develops secret relationship with Yayati who on the revelation of the relationship is cursed by Shukracharya with old age. Yayati doesn't want to accept this premature old age. Yayati depicts: 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 laying on your pyre, child, burning for life, while I sink slowly in this quagmire, my body wrinkleless and grasping, but unable to grasp anything (68). These lines illustrate the dilemma of Yayati in modern context. He is not able to see darkness of material and sensual pleasures. He is not able to find spiritual delight which can help him to find the true meaning of life. He is engulfed in worldly sensual pleasures which are leading him towards disaster. Karnad finds the case of Yayati his own case in a different context. He says, "I think looking back at that point, perhaps it seemed to me very significant that this was what was happening to me, my parents demanding that I should be in a particular way, even when my future seemed to be opening up in another. So you see, it was the play, where the myth in some ways gave exact expression to what I was trying to say but the form is entirely borrowed from the West." (5)

When Yayati came to know that curse can be taken by someone and he can get back his youth, his joy knew no bounds. He embraces the fact and says: "That is good news. That is good news indeed. So I don't loose my youth, thank God."(45) He even tells Sharmishtha, So you see Sharmishtha. You were asking me to accept to curse as though that was the end of everything.(45-46) He requested to the people of his kingdom to exchange his old age with youth but unfortunately no one agrees. In the end, Pooru, the youngest son of Yayati, agrees to come forward to accept the king's curse though he was recently married. Then Chित्रलेखा, Pooru's wife, who is the new character added in the present play depicts the valiant characteristic and doesn't accept the decision of her husband at first. Girish Karnad has portrayed the theme of

subsistence during reworking of the story through Chitrlekha. In one of the interviews with Tutun Mukherjee, Girish Karnad says, “My attempt was to emphasize the calm acceptance of grief and anguish. Pooru’s old age is a sudden transformation and not the eventuality of life. It brings no wisdom and no self-realization. It is a senseless punishment for an act he has not committed. I was also intrigued by the idea that if Pooru had a wife, how would she react? So I introduced Chitrlekha. Every character in the play tries to evade the consequences of their actions, except Sharmistha and Chitrlekha.” (Tutun Mukherjee 31)

Chitrlekha even offers herself to Yayati. She questions Yayati about her existence in the palace. She even questions her father-in-law, “...what about your duty to your son. Do you think twice before foisting your troubles on a pliant son”? (62) In the end she takes poison and puts an end to her life. This act makes Yayati realize how mean he has been to his son. He pleads his son to take his youth back : “Take back your youth, Pooru. Rule well. Let me go and face my destiny in the wilds.” (69) He then goes with Sharmistha to forest and lives his life as hermit. However, in Mahabharata after the incident Yayati lived happily with Devyani for several years. One day, he realized that he had wasted his life running after insignificant things and had not ever thought of life’s most valuable aspiration of spiritual enlightenment. He made up his mind to detach himself from the transit enticing world and take to the part of Godliness. Here, in the play, *Yayati*, Girish Karnad has dealt with social conflict in modern context. Whereas, in *Mahabharata*, Yayati the prosperous king gave all his property to his sons and went to forest to live a life of renunciation with Devyani and Sharmistha, but in the play *Yayati* after the death of the daughter-in-law Yayati and Sharmistha went to forest and lived there as hermit. He has chosen the path of renunciation after sacrifice of courageous Chitrlekha who has shown mirror to the grand emperor.

*Yayati* is a narrative of an old aged king who has taken his son’s youth in exchange of old age to remain youthful forever. However, in this progression Pooru, is transformed from a obedient and noble son to a person confronted with the meaningless of life.

Girish Karnad has depicted in the play that Pooru wants to accept the old age as he is not as valiant as his father. He is not ready to take the responsibilities of a huge kingdom and that's why he finds it easy to escape from all the duties towards his kingdom. Yayati himself tells Chitrlekha, "Pooru lacks the experience to tackle...problems...Actually more than the experience he lacks the will, the desire. Instead of welcoming the responsibilities if a king-and of a householder-he has welcomes sanity..."(64)

Girish Karnad 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."

In fact, Pooru is not a self-obsessed man like his father. He has sacrificed his youth but he has not expected anything in return from his father as a reward. He is true epitome of 'Yayati Complex.' According to Devdutta Pattaniak, in Hindu mythology there is a famous 'Yayati Complex', that is, parents expecting sacrifices on the part of their children to fulfill their selfish motives. Chitrlekha too says, "His gentleness is like waft of cool breeze."(64) He even does not imagine the consequences of this action and how his wife will feel. He has gained no knowledge or experience along with the old age. He is facing an existential crisis whereby the happy life with his wife Chitrlekha seems to hold no meaning for him. Sharmishtha too persuades Pooru that he should not exchange his youth with old age as 'the pride of sacrifice is also a kind of poison.' Pooru is a changed man now Chitrlekha says, I thought he was an ordinary man. What a fool I have been! How utterly blind! I am the chosen one and I ... which other woman has been so blessed? Why should I shed tears? (56)

In the due course of the play Pooru classifies sons under three categories and says, three are three types who can be called

sons. One, who rises to the expectations of the father without being prompted, occupies the top most position and finds the ultimate goal of life. Second is the son who obediently helps on request. The third grudgingly agrees to help. He gladly accepts his father's curse and hopes that he will gain knowledge of the meaning of life. He finds himself in a world in which old spiritual values have been entirely swept away and the new spiritual values are yet to be discovered. It was Pooru's sacrifice which has made Yayati realize the fallacy of his reasoning and he finally takes back the curse from Pooru as an attempt at salvation. However in the end Pooru comes near the dead body of Chitrlekha and says: "We brought you here only to die. But our senses are blighted and we shall never grasp the meaning of what you taught us.(69) Pooru too has redeemed the meaning of responsibility. Sutradhar of the play *Yayati* too feels happy as this is for the first time that Pooru had asked a question which is a step forward to become a philosopher king.

Thus, to conclude we can say that Girish Karnad has given a new meaning and significance to an age old story. He has transferred the themes of alienation and existentialism through his characters like Chitrlekha and Pooru. Prem Sagar and R. Varshney observe: The play remains an existentialist predicament, showing in definite terms how a person's 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) *Yayati* too has realized futility of life and understands the inconsequence of worldly obsessions. His one desire to remain young and enjoy sensual pleasures has shattered lives of many. As Chitrlekha dies an untimely death and Pooru lost his loving wife. In the *Mahabharat*, Yayati distinguishes the nature of desire and passions himself while in *Yayati* he understands the same after the suicide of Chitrlekha. He disapproves sensuality and accepts responsibility. *Yayati*, deals with the theme of social responsibility which has been realized in the end by the father and son as well. Both, of them have realized that one is responsible for all his actions and deeds and unlimited desires can not be fulfilled.

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