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## Applicability of Ancient Myths and Cultures used in the play *Yayati*

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### Abstract

Girish Karnad was among the most prolific playwrights of modern India. He took birth in the reign of British India, witness the independence of our country, learnt from the motherland of English, came back to his motherland only to become English poet, but ended up writing plays only in his native language, using the core of Indian origin in his pen. He had the best farsightedness of life which he projected very sharply in his plays. Each of his plays are enriched with the diverse forms of Indian cultures and myths. Although, it has never been mentioned of him studying psychology in a professional manner but his plays has always has the capacity of comforting or at least focusing the flaws of mankind. The main objective of this research paper is to highlight the ancient myths and culture used in one of the Karnad's play *Yayati*, and its relevancy in the present scenario.

**Keywords:** Myths, Ancient Indian Cultures, Mahabharata, Puranas, Sanjeeveeni Vidya, Existentialism, Sutradhara, Absurdity of human behaviour, Greek mythology, Oedipus complex

Yayati was the first play written by Girish Karnad. He made his writing debut with this play. Karnad was interested in poetry and always wanted to become a poet. The play was a spontaneous reaction of Karnad who was suffering from a dilemma. He wanted to write poems in English. But his fate had already pushed him in the field of play writing. When Karnad wrote this play he was just twenty two and was living in a kind of dilemma. The dilemma was between choosing his dream or family's wish. Girish Karnad had got the scholarship from Oxford University. His family was against his foreign journey. They were afraid that he would never return to his own country after his departure for a foreign land. Hence, Karnad was caught in between family pressures and his dream. It's a dilemma of choosing whom, family or his dream. It was the period when Karnad immersed himself within this play. He wrote this, in his native language i.e. in Kannada. Somewhere Karnad has expressed himself through this play. He wrote it in the year of 1961. Later, he himself has translated it into English after its huge success.

Girish Karnad has borrowed the theme of the play from the great epic *Mahabharata*, from the first chapter of *Adi-Parva* to express his dilemma and compose it with some changes. The myth of King Yayati is very famous, and it is found easily in Puranas. The source of the story is from *Adi-Parva* in *Mahabharata*. Although, Karnad has clearly rejected this and through the mouth of the Sutradhara in his play, he says that there is no such connection between his play and the Puranic's. In the very beginning of the play, the Sutradhara rejected any kind of connection with the mythology and says that it is mainly a myth and nothing more than that.

In Girish Karnad's *Yayati*, Yayati was the King of Bharata Dynasty. He married Devayani just to get her father's 'Sanjeevni Vidya' so that he can become immortal and can enjoy his youth forever. Yayati wanted to make Sharmishtha his second Queen. Devayani got furious on this and requested her father to curse him. Shukracharya cursed him that Yayati will lose his youthfulness and will become senile. Later, he also amended that if someone will exchange his youth to Yayati, he can be saved. Puru accepted this and gives him his youth and he became very old. Puru's newly married wife killed herself because of this. It is after the suicide of Chitrlekha, that Yayati realizes his mistake for his attachment to life and sensual pleasure; he returned Puru his youth and throne and went back to forest.

Girish Karnad has definitely been influenced by Sartre's existentialist concept. His play *Yayati* indicates Sartre's influence. At the time of writing this play Karnad was reading about Jean Paul Sartre and other leading existentialist, which helps him to structuralize the play in a more modern way.

Girish Karnad has taken the exact plot of Yayati myth with little bit of alteration to make his play more contemporary. He departs his story in many forms from the original as the relationship between Puru and Sharmishtha, and the death of Chitrlekha. Puru's mother's identity was made a little blurry to justify his depressed and dejected behavior. And the most

important change which Karnad has made is the tragic end of the play with deaths and sacrifices.

While writing, Karnad has followed Aristotle's three dramatic unities i.e. Unity of Time, Unity of Action and Unity of Place. The original plot is in epic form, runs almost one thousand years of Yayati's life, which Karnad has made in drama form and the whole story occurs in between a day. The mother of Puru was not clearly defined except that she was a rakshasi, like Sharmishtha. The play ends with the death of Puru's wife Chitrlekha and Yayati's self realization of his mistake unlike the original text in which Yayati enjoys his son's youth for the next thousand years and then gave it back.

Karnad has talked about the culture of 'Man Dominance over Women' or 'the Male Oriented Society' which is very ancient. Even in Mahabharata we can see that women were used as an object and were exploited. This culture is parallel to the modern world and it can be seen in both in Karnad's play and in Puranics. The females were always the silent creature accepting everything. The nature of exploitation is still the same. The only difference is that unlike Mahabharata's females, Karnad's female characters are more outspoken, bold and confident. They didn't accept easily and raised their voices also.

The custom of marriage is also shown by the playwright. For a woman marriage is the only option for living. The structure of our society is constructed in such a way that woman can't live alone. She has to take the support of the men with high power to survive because the earthly power is made only for Male world. In the play, Devayani and Chitrlekha have the support of male world. On the other hand Devayani wanted to be the wife of Yayati, to be the 'Queen'. She has taken the support of King Yayati. Chitrlekha wanted Puru to have all the quality of prince. Among the four female characters, two of them i.e. Devayani and Chitrlekha were married and has their powerful husband's support. Sharmishtha and Swarnalata were alone. They have no support and they have to survive on others pity because one of them was slave and the other one was the maid. Sharmishtha's position is the most shocking one as she was the Princess of Rakshasa tribe. Being a princess doesn't stop her of becoming a slave of Devayani.

Chitrlekha's character was so much strong that she represents the new woman of post modern era. She has shown the boldness and courage which no other has shown. She rebels against the social customs. About her B.V.Karant's describes as:

The character of Chitrlekha is very remarkable one. There are only two suicides in the Mahabharata. Both the suicides are to bring some points to light. The one is of Amba and the other of Chitrlekha. Chitrlekha prefers to kill herself because she has been denied the right of conceiving the would-be prince of the Bharata dynasty...(49) Karnad has used plenty of cultures, in the play some of them even exist today.

It seems that Girish Karnad has tried to point out the absurdities of human behavior. His quest of achieving, sensuous pleasure, his struggle to achieve eternal youth and his passions and conflicts. Yayati on one hand represents the man who is slave of his own desires and wanted to achieve all the happiness of life, on the other Puru shows the courage and sacrifices. Yayati's last message in the play expresses the whole objective of playwright as,

“We should wash our sins by doing penance in the forest. I have spent my youth in this city but will spend my old age in the forest” (69).

This play also gives moral that every individual has some responsibility and no one can escape. Everybody is connected to each other in some way or the other. No one in this world is free. If anyone will avoid his duties then he will face some similar situation like Yayati. Yayati also symbolizes as the man of own will but his action leads him to ruin not only his life but also of those who were attached to him. The Sutradhara in the very starting warns the audience by his speech on the stage. He brings forth the theme of responsibility as:

Sometimes when we are walking along a path we see two paths in front of us. We can take only one road and feel that we are fulfilling our life's purpose. However we are always conscious of the inaudible voice which says: What would have happened if we had walked on the other road... Yet let the untrodden road be untrodden and let its secret remain buried. Let us stick to the morals of the grandmother's stories that we heard in our childhood. This is the sad story of our life. (9)

Yayati was an archetype but Karnad has made him another type of man with complex. Karnad has given the counter part of Oedipus Complex as Yayati Complex. Son competes with father is very popular but father competing with son is a very unique concept. While Greek mythology is full of stories in which a son is responsible for the death of his father or a father figure, tales in Hindu Scriptures suggest a reverse- Oedipus, or Yayati Complex. In this case the father destroys the son in order to have his way.<sup>13</sup>

Girish Karnad has presented this mythical tale with a very inspirational meaning for the contemporary life style of modern world. The symbolic theme of Yayati can be said as his attachment to life and orientation towards sensuous pleasure and its renunciation are retained. However, Karnad's greatest contribution in the play is the matter of choice, for Yayati. Karnad has made Yayati realize his fault after a series of tragedies. Mahabharata's Yayati realizes it without any flaws. In Karnad's play however, “Yayati recognizes the dreadfulness and horror of his own life and assumes his moral responsibility after series of encounter” (104) especially his encounter with the royal women, Devayani, Sharmishtha and Chitrlekha. However, the play also indicates towards the upper class of the society of modern age who has indulged themselves in sensuous desires. The play can play the role of an eye opener to those modern ‘mongering people’ and reminds them that the Hindu concept of sexual control. (62)

Karnad has brought the reality on stage while rejecting the myth itself. Actually myth is not that of King Yayati's existence but the myth of believing that one can live on sensuous pleasure, without thinking about others. Karnad has warned us through this play that if someone believes that king Yayati actually lived for thousands of years enjoying his youth and life and he can also live like that, rejecting all his duties then it is a myth for himself. He shows that every human being is related to other directly or indirectly and has some responsibility for each other. If he will avoid his responsibility and do actions according to his ‘Id’ then what the result can be! In short Karnad has borrowed the myth just to destroy myth.

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