



## THE CONTEXT OF 'YAYATI' PLAYS OF GIRISH KARNAD

\*A.Vyshnavi Devi

M.A. (English), (B.Ed),

UPGC,Subedari,Hanamkonda,

Kakatiya University, Warangal(T.S.)-506001

### Abstract

Girish Karnad the proponent of secularism, multi-culturalism and the freedom of expression. Popularly known as a renaissance man, Karnad, is one of the set light to bearers to Indian dramatists. In the dominion of contemporary drama his place is remarkable. He has directed and acted in many films in Kannad, Marathi and Hindi. He has found a new approach in Indian drama by drawing historical and mythological sources to tackle contemporary themes. As a multifaceted dynamic writer he has a historic vision but a contemporary voice. He is one of the most prolific writers of Indian drama writing at the beginning in Kannada and translating himself his plays into English. The present paper focus on Karnad's Yayati, (1961) initially written in Kannada, conveys the message of performance of duty and acceptance of responsibility. In this play, Karnad presents the age-old story of the mythological King Yayati who was the tenth in the line of the Brahma's family.

**Key words:** *Indian myth, secularism, multi-culturalism, Yayati drama etc.*

### **Introduction:**

Girish Karnad was born in Matheran, hailing from a Saraswat Konkani family, Girish Karnad (1938) spent his early years in the rural parts of Maharashtra, watching, enjoying and internalizing Yakshagana and the *Natak Mandali* performances in his village. After graduating from Karnataka College, Dharwad in 1958, he moved to Mumbai for his

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postgraduate studies. At the end of his studies there, he received the Rhodes scholarship and went to England and completed his Masters in Arts in Philosophy, Politics and Economics from Oxford. He cultivated a keen interest in art and culture and on his return from England he joined Oxford University Press, Madras in 1963. He was appointed as the Director of Film and Television Institute, Pune in 1974. Almost after a decade and a half, in 1987, he was awarded Fulbright Scholar-in-Residence at the Department of South Asian Languages and Civilizations, University of Chicago.

His journey from a small village of rural Maharashtra to international institutes of repute shaped Karnad as a proponent of secularism, multi-culturalism and the freedom of expression. Popularly known as a renaissance man, Karnad, is one of the torch bearers to Indian dramatists. In the realm of contemporary drama his place is noteworthy. He has directed and acted in many films in Kannad, Marathi and Hindi. He has found a new approach in Indian drama by drawing historical and mythological sources to tackle contemporary themes. As a multifaceted dynamic writer he has a historic vision but a contemporary voice. He is one of the most prolific writers of Indian drama writing at the beginning in Kannada and translating himself his plays into English. *The Tribune* has praised him as: Far from being an introvert, as most writers are, Girish Karnad enjoys the reputation of being an articulate thinker. In fact, he has been a man of many parts and a man of all seasons — a mathematician, a Rhodes Scholar, a great performer on stage and screen, a TV compeer, a filmmaker, and a cultural administrator who has headed such prestigious institutions as the Sangeet Natak Akademi in Delhi and the FTII at Pune. His stature in the Indian culture and his knowledge of the media at home and abroad lend to his views a touch of authority. (The Tribune, 1999)

### **Career**

Karnad made his acting as well as screenwriting debut in a Kannada movie, *Samskara* (1970), the first President's Golden Lotus Award for Kannada cinema, based on a novel by U. R. Ananthamurthy and directed by Pattabhirama Reddy. Over the years he had acted in a number Hindi and Kannada feature films, and worked with directors like Satyajit Ray, Mrinal Sen and Shyam Benegal. Best among his appearance on the silver and well as the small screens is his role of Swami's father in TV series *Malgudi Days* (1986–1987), based on R. K. Narayan's books. He made his directorial debut with *Vamsha Vriksha* (1971), based on a Kannada novel by S. L. Bhairappa, which won him National Film Award for Best Direction along with B. V. Karanth, his co-director. Later, Karnad directed several movies in Kannada

and Hindi, including *Godhuli* (1977) and *Utsav* (1984). He has made number of documentaries, like one on the Kannada poet *D. R. Bendre* (1972), *Kanaka-Purandara* (English, 1988) on two medieval Bhakti poets of Karnataka, Kanaka Dasa and Purandara Dasa, and *The Lamp in the Niche* (English, 1989) on Sufism and the Bhakti movement. Many of his films and documentaries have won several national and international awards. Some of his famous Kannada movies include *Tabbaliyu Neenade Magane*, *Ondanondu Kaladalli*, *Cheluvi and Kaadu* and most recent film *Kanooru Heggaditi* (1999), based on a novel by Kannada writer Kuvempu. His Hindi movies include *Nishaant* (1975), *Manthan* (1976), *Swami* (1977) and *Pukar* (2000). He has acted in *Iqbal* (2005), *Dor* (2006), *8 x 10 Tasveer* (2009) and *Aashayein* (2010). He has also acted in Kannada movie *Aa Dinagalu*. He served as the Director of the Film and Television Institute of India during 1974-1975, as the President of Karnataka Nataka Academy during 1976-1978, as the Indian Co-chairman for the Joint Media Committee of the Indo-US Sub-Commission on Education and Culture during 1984-1993, and as the Chairman of the Sangeet Natak Akademi during 1988-1993.

Karnad's plays reflect remarkable influence of Ibsen, Shaw and Shakespeare on one hand, on the other, his plays are highly characterized by trends in Kannada literature and he used legend, history and myth for the plots of his plays. Karnad established himself as a noted and talented dramatist after the publication of *Yayati* (1961) and *Tughlaq* (1964). His creative currents went on and as a result, *Hayavadana* (1971), *Anjumaliga* (1977), *Hittina Hunja* (1980), *Naga-Mandala* (1988), *Tale-Danda* (1990) and *Agni Mattu Male* (1995) were published. These plays, originally written in Kannada and after their translation by Karnad himself, became rich contributions to Indian English Drama. He himself translated *Tughlaq*, *Hayavadana*, *Naga-Mandala*, *Tale-Danda* and *The Fire and the Rain*. His plays are equally appreciated in India and abroad and they received universal praise in the European countries as well as in the United States of America. *Tughlaq* was translated into Hungarian and German languages. *Hayavadana* was directed by Vijay Mehta and presented at the Berlin festival of Drama and Music in Germany. It was renamed *Divided Together* and was staged in New York in 1993. *Naga-Mandala* was staged at Leipzig and Berlin for the Festival of India in 1992. Guthrie Theatre in Minneapolis performed his play *The Fire and the Rain* in 1993. His plays deal with the themes of Indian myths, history, traditions, folklore and theatres. and are a vehicle for communicating man's desires, jealousies, madness, quest for perfection and completeness, eternal conflict of passions and are successful in giving a local habitation and a name to man's aspirations and desires.

## Awards

Major awards that Karnad received include the Mysore State Award for *Yayati* (1962), the Government of Mysore Rajyotsava Award (1970), Presidents Gold Medal for the Best Indian film for *Samskara* (1970), the Homi Bhabha Fellowship for creative work in folk theatre (1970-72), the Sangeet Natak Academy (National Academy of the Performing Arts) Award for playwriting (1972), the Kamaladevi Award of the Bharatiya Natya Sangh for the Best Indian play of the year for *Hayavadana* (1972), the National Award for Excellence in Direction for *Vamsha Vriksha* (shared with B.V. Karanth - 1972), the Mysore State Award for the Best Kannada film and the Best Direction for *Vamsha Vriksha* (1972), the Presidents Silver Medal for the Second Best Indian film for *Kaadu* (1974), the Padma Shri Award (1974), the National Award for the Best Kannada film for *Ondanondu Kaaladalli* (1978), the Karnataka Nataka Academy Award (1984), the Nandikar, Calcutta, Award for Playwriting (1989), the Golden Lotus for the Best Non-Feature Film for *Kanaka Purandara* (1989), the National Award for the Best Non-Feature Film on Social Issues for *The Lamp in the Niche* (1990), the Karnataka Sahitya Academy Award for the Most Creative Work for *Naga-Mandala* (1992), the Karnataka Sahitya Academy Award for Best Play for *Taledanda* (1992), the National Award for the Best Film on Environmental Conservation for *Cheluvi* (1993), a Special Honour Award from the Karnataka Sahitya Academy (1994), the Sahitya Academy Award for *Taledanda* (1994), the Jnanpith Award (1999) among the others.

## Plays of Girish Karnad

Karnad's plays are characterized by myths, legends, and folktales and histories not only for literary purpose but also as a surrogate to portray the contemporary situations. In order to attain deeper insight to study and analyze Karnad's plays, it would not be incongruous to discuss how he has employed myths, legend and history in his plays.

As literature reflects the society, playwrights like T. P. Kailasam and Harindranath Chattopadhyaya has made use of the sociological aspects, which motivated Karnad to portray the society in his plays. In this respect, Karnad was a dramatist with a difference as his plays were exclusively written for the stage. Karnad makes use of such myths and legends as metaphors for contemporary situations and this has induced the present researcher to make a study of his plays. Regarding the use of myth Hazel E. Barnes' remark is very pertinent, —In a period when values are relatively stable, authors tend to use the classical myths merely allusively, enriching the poetic quality of their work with layers of older connotations. In an age more obviously transitional there is likely to be more of new interpretation. (1984: 110)

Karnad uses myth in arguably the richest and the most complex ways. He explores the resources of myth, folklore, legend and history to construct his dramatic universe. *Hayavadana*, *The Fire and the Rain* and *Yayati* are rooted in Indian myth. *Bali* is based on both myth and folklore. *Naga-Mandala* draws on folklore, while *Tughlaq* and *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan* are inspired by history and legend. Karnad uses myth and history from the vantage point of the present and to view the present in a better light. Myth and history in the hands of Karnad are not just instruments to visit the past, but are used also to contemplate the possibilities which the future seems to hold. He taps myth and folklore, the hidden sources of shared meaning in the community for which his plays are meant to disturb some of the prevailing perceptions of this community. According to Karnad, —The energy of folk theatre comes from the fact that although it seems to uphold traditional values, it also has the means of questioning those values, of making them literally stand on their heads! (The Tribune: 1999)

Based on his serious explorations of folklore, mythology and history, the subject of his plays reflect the problems and challenges of contemporary life, and endeavour to forge a link between the past and the present. The creative intellectual that he is, he obviously views the subjects of his plays from his own perspective, develops them in the crucible of his own imagination and personal experiences, and employs them as a medium to communicate his own-independent and original-feelings, thoughts and interpretations. Diverse influences have formed Karnad’s mind as he came across literacy scenes where there was a direct clash between Western and Indian tradition. He, though highly influenced by his contemporaries, differs from them to a great extent, as he understood that the purpose of literature is essentially the enhancement of life and the propagation of human values. Karnad’s aim is to bring about a co-existence between man and all creatures. In order to achieve his target, he took refuge in the myths and legends and made them the vehicle of a new vision. His childhood exposure to street plays in Karnataka villages and his familiarity with western dramas staged in Bombay have induced him to retell the secular legends of India to suit the modern context. A vigorous vitality that combs the past for apt myths to analyze the present has been the hallmark of Girish Karnad, the pre-eminent Indian playwright in the Kannada language.

Karnad’s creative genius lies in taking up fragments of historical-legendary experience and fusing them into a forceful statement. By using the ‘grammar of literary archetype’, Karnad links the past and the present, the archetypal and the real. By using these

myths he tried to reveal the absurdity of life with all its elemental passions and conflicts and man's eternal struggle to achieve perfection Karnad delves deep into the traditional myths to spell modern man's anguish and dilemmas that are created in his mind. For instance, in *The Fire and the Rain*, he employs one of the archetypal myths of 'slaying of the demon Vrita' referred in the *Rig Veda* and again with some variation in the *Mahabharata*. Karnad incorporates this myth in the play to reinforce one of the central themes of the play. He states:

The myth can be seen as expressing a deep anxiety which informs the whole of Indian mythology, the fear of brother destroying brother. This fear branches out fully and nakedly in the *Mahabharata*, where the bonding of brothers within the Pandava and the Kuru clans is as close as the enmity between the cousins is ruthless and unrelenting. ... The tale of Arvasu and Parvasu fascinated me as unusual variant of this Indian obsession with fratricide and it seemed logical too that Yavakri should be their cousin, though the *Mahabharata* does not explicitly say so, ...A myth seems complete in itself and yet when examined in detail contains subconscious signals which lead you on to another myth which in turn will act as a conduit to a third one while illuminating the one you started with. (Preface 1998)

Noticeably, Karnad does not take the myths in their entirety; he takes only fragments that are useful to him and the rest he supplements with his imagination to make his plots interesting. His interest was not in recreating old myths and legends but in representing them to suit his artistic purpose. Karnad takes leap from the original story and develops it further. This further development is the play of the artist's imagination and it challenges the glib solutions offered in the original stories. In fact, Karnad has taken this leap in order to provide new meaning to the myths and legends and has examined them from the vantage point of the present. Karnad himself has justified that he has gone back to the old myths, histories and oral tales not because he does not have an amazing inventive power, but because they are very much relevant even in the present context. The purpose of drama is solely to depict the life of the whole universe and Girish Karnad through the element of myth has effectively portrayed the contemporary world making his portrayal universally appealing. There is no wonder that he has been hailed as one of the most appealing and successful dramatist of the contemporary Indian theatre. The fusion of the past and the present is also a technique of Girish Karnad to make his historical plays relevant to the present-day situation as we find it in *Tale-danda*. As he mentions, —I wrote *Tale-danda* in 1989 when the 'Mandir' and the 'Mandal' movements were beginning to show again how relevant the questions posed by these thinkers were for

our age. The horror of subsequent events and the religious fanaticism that has gripped our national life today have only proved how dangerous it is to ignore the solutions they offered. (*Tale-danda* —Preface)

### **‘YAYATI’ PLAYS OF GIRISH KARNAD**

Karnad’s *Yayati*, (1961) initially written in Kannada, conveys the message of performance of duty and acceptance of responsibility. In this play, Karnad presents the age-old story of the mythological King Yayati who was the tenth in the line of the Brahma’s family. Once a conflict arises between Devayani, the daughter of Shukracharya, the guru of the *asuras*, and Sharmistha the daughter of Vrishparva, the King of the *asuras*, and the latter pushed Devayani into a well and escaped. Fortunately, King Yayati who came there saved her. Since then, Devayani started loving Yayati and Sharmistha was punished with serving Devayani forever along with her maidservants. With the consent of Shukracharya the marriage between Devayani and King Yayati was solemnized and Sharmistha as a result of her punishment was sent to King Yayati’s kingdom along with his bride Devayani. But Sharmistha develops secret relationship with Yayati and when Devayani comes to know this she complains to her father, who in turn, curses Yayati to become old. Yayati is unable to bear this; he loses control over himself, becomes violent, adamant and refuses to accept the old age. When his son Puru informs that Yayati can be redeemed if some person accepts his old age, he becomes very happy. But when Puru informs that nobody is willing to take up his old age, he is unable to accept the reality as he is of the wrong notion that all his subjects would readily accept his old age. Karnad has portrayed the contours of the real world, i.e. when you laugh the world will laugh with you, but when you are in sorrow you will be alone, deserted even by your kith and kin. Yayati feels very much disheartened because old age had not come to him in its normal course but by a curse. So he feels that if somebody accepts it at present he would relieve him from his old age within five or six years. Puru proves to be the best son as he gladly accepts the curse inflicted on his father and willingly exchanges his youth for the old age of his father. Though Yayati succeeds in transforming his old age and his sins to Puru, he acts in the most irresponsible way by usurping the happiness of his son and daughter-in-law. Rajinder Paul has commented that —the protagonist in *Yayati* asks for eternal youth which his son sacrifices at the altar of paternity, a very Indian theme of a self-denying son indulging the whim of his unreasonable father.¶ (Radhai, 2006: 26) In the

process he feels disillusioned and loses faith. Though his sub-conscious mind tells him that it is not fair on his part, he justifies that it is only for his people he is doing like this. In actuality King Yayati exchanges his old age with the youth of his youngest son for the satisfaction of his own youthful urges. In the end Puru's wife Chitrlekha commits suicide. Through this action the dramatist makes Yayati to accept his responsibility for the sin he had committed.

Yayati asks Puru to take back his youth and be a good king as he felt that there could be no better lesson than Chitrlekha's death. He also asks Sharmistha to accompany him to the forest, as he has to wash his sins by doing penance in the forest. He finally says that he has spent his youth in the city but will spend his old age in the forest. When Chitrlekha dies, her husband Puru is astonished, but he does not shed even a drop of tear. Only when he regains his youth he repents for the disastrous blunder he had committed. It is pathetic that King Yayati and his son Puru realize their evil deeds only at the cost of a life, Chitrlekha. The dramatist portrays the selfless nature and the helpless plight of the Indian women who, by willingly sacrificing their lives, make the members of their family to realize their nobility. Thus Indian women serve as a contrast to Indian men. The dramatist, through the portrayal of the character of Yayati, focuses on the theme of attachment to life and its pleasures. Yayati realizes the horrors of his selfish action of exchange of youth in the later period, only after the suicide of his daughter-in-law and he readily owns the responsibility for the havoc that befell the family and returns the youth of his son Puru and retires to the forest as a hermit. Through the life of Yayati, the dramatist brings out the fact that selfish paternal authority and blind filial loyalty could bring ruin to a family when it is misappropriated. Almost every character except Sharmistha is irresponsible. Yayati who is cursed for his adultery transfers the burden most irresponsibly to his son. Puru, his son, who is married to Chitrlekha and owes a dharmic responsibility to ensure her happiness, equally irresponsibly vitiates her marital bliss by exchanging his youth with his father for the sake of preserving the latter's happiness. He is caught between the devil and the deep sea -filial loyalty and conjugal felicity, and whichever he chose; he would still be caught in the web of irresponsibility. Devayani acts impetuously, brings a curse upon her husband King Yayati, and runs away irresponsibly when he is visited by the ugly consequences of the curse. The on-going conflict between Sharmistha and Devayani dovetails the course of the play. At one point Sharmistha says:

Yayati hopes for only one thing: nectar to be immortal. (14)



Who does not want to be immortal? He accepted you in the hope of immortality. As soon as he came to know that you were Devayani, he had an urge to conquer death. (15)  
When Devayani insists that Yayati did not know her identity when he married her, Sharmishtha comments:

Yayati asked your name only after your marriage? Even a prostitute's name is asked beforehand! Without bothering about your virginity, he would have passed you by. (16)

Sharmishtha is responsible for the turmoil in Yayati's life. The character of Chitrlekha, an invention of Karnad's imagination, plays a catalytic role and shapes the end of the novel. In the course of time, Chitrlekha, unable to bear the consequences of her husband Puru's exchange of youth with his father, commits suicide instead of fighting to restore her rights. The only character that is willing to accept the responsibility for the consequences of what she does is Sharmistha. The purpose and theme of the play are revealed through the character of the Sutradhara. The Sutradhara says that neither a scholar nor an ordinary person can escape the burden of responsibility. Karnad himself in his interview with Meenakshi Raykar has revealed, —Every character in the play tries to seek escape from the consequences of its actions. (2009: 25)

**At another place he says:**

The story of King Yayati that I used occurs in the *Mahabharata*. The king, for a mortal 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 accepts the exchange and 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. While I was writing the play, I saw it only as an escape from my stressful situation. But looking back, I am amazed at how precisely the myth reflected my anxieties at that moment, my resentment with all those who seemed to demand that I sacrifice my future.... Oddly enough the play owed its form not to the innumerable mythological plays I had been brought up on, and which had partly kept these myths alive for me, for me, but to Western playwrights whom until then I had only read in print ... (Karnad 2009: 23)

Thus in the moment of self-expression and an attempt of exploring his insecurities, Karnad has given this traditional tale a new meaning and significance highly relevant in the context of life today. The symbolic theme of Yayati's attachment to life and its pleasures and also his final renunciation are retained. In the *Mahabharata* Yayati recognizes the nature of desire itself and realizes that fulfillment does not diminish or end the sexual desires. In Karnad's play, however, Yayati recognizes the horror of his own life and assumes moral responsibility after a series of symbolic encounters with reality. Thus the playwright takes liberty with the original myths and invents some new relationship to make it acceptable to modern sensibilities. Karnad seems to have used this myth with a view to exposing the absurdity of life with all its elemental passions and conflicts, and also to show man's eternal struggle to achieve perfection. Karnad's interpretation of the familiar old myth on the exchange of ages between father and son seems to have baffled and even angered many of the conventional critics, states A. K. Sinha. According to him, —But to others, who are trying to root their contemporary concerns in old myths. Karnad's unheroic hero Puru is a challenging experience. Karnad places the individual person at the centre of his picture of the world and shows that each man is what he chooses to be or make himself. In his psychological exploration, the playwright shows an impressive insight and introduces concepts which greatly extend the area of moral self-knowledge and self-awareness. (2009: 56)

### **Conclusion:**

Girish Karnad (19 May 1938 – 10 June 2019) was an Indian actor, film director, Kannada writer, playwright and a Rhodes Scholar, who predominantly worked in South Indian cinema and Bollywood. His rise as a playwright in the 1960s, marked the coming of age of modern Indian playwriting in Kannada, just as Badal Sarkar did in Bengali, Vijay Tendulkar in Marathi, and Mohan Rakesh in Hindi. He was a recipient of the 1998 Jnanpith Award, the highest literary honour conferred in India.

For four decades Karnad composed plays, often using history and mythology to tackle contemporary issues. He translated his plays into English and received acclaim. His plays have been translated into some Indian languages and directed by directors like Ebrahim Alkazi, B. V. Karanth, Alyque Padamsee, Prasanna, Arvind Gaur, Satyadev Dubey, Vijaya Mehta, Shyamanand Jalan, Amal Allana and Zafer Mohiuddin. He was active in the world of Indian cinema working as an actor, director and screenwriter, in Hindi and Kannada cinema, and has earned awards. He was conferred Padma Shri and Padma Bhushan by the

Government of India (in the UPA Government regime) and won four Filmfare Awards, of which three are Filmfare Award for Best Director – Kannada and the fourth a Filmfare Best Screenplay Award. His famous novel is "Yayathi". He was a presenter for a weekly science magazine programme called "Turning Point" that aired on Doordarshan in 1991. After suffering from poor health, he was admitted to a hospital in Bengaluru, India, and ultimately died on 10 June 2019.

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