



Use of Mythology: A Study of Girish Karnard's Play *Yayati*

Parvesh Dahiya, Assistant Professor,

VAKM College, Bahadurgarh, Jhajjar.

Girish Karnad's first play *Yayati* is based on a story from the *Mahabharata*. *Yayati* was written in 1961 and won the Mysore State Award in 1962. The play is based on an episode in the *Mahabharata*, where Yayati, one of the ancestors of the Pandavas, is given the curse of premature old age by his father-in-law, Shukracharya, who is incensed by Yayati's infidelity. Yayati could redeem this curse only if someone was willing to exchange his youth with him. It is his son Puru, who finally offers to do this for his father. The play examines the moment of crisis that Puru's decision sparks and the dilemma it presents for Yayati, Puru and Puru's young wife. Karnad had experienced the control of patriarchy in his family and this has a close bearing on his play *Yayati* Karnad says:

The myth had nailed me to my past. At the most intense moment of self-expression, while my past had come to my aid with a readymade narrative within which I could contain and explore my insecurities, there had been no dramatic structure in my own, tradition to which I could relate myself. (Swarup 51)

As the play opens the Sutradhara declare that the play is a page of history from the unknown past, the characters, the incidents and circumstances are related to the old times. However the reality depicted in the play is applicable to modern times as well. The core of the play – the major issue that is explored – is the burden of responsibility wherein lies the joy of life. The Sutradhara elaborates.

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. (Suneel 106).

Implicit in the issue of responsibility is the question of one's choice which Karnad explores and articulates through the mythical framework. Karnad also inserts the issue of gender and sexuality in the play. He has crafted a complex interplay of an interpersonal situation. Karnad has retained the mythical end of yayati's story, his renunciation. But within the mythical format he crafts the postcolonial concerns of race, class and gender. The women, like the dominated caste, are marginalized. Whether they belong to a middle caste (i.e. the Brahmin Devyani) or to the lower caste (i.e. Sharmistha), they are located on the periphery. Karnad also makes an existential statement while bringing to the fore the fractures in the psyche of Yayati and Puru.

The play opens in the inner chamber on the first floor of king Yayati's palace where Devayani is sitting on a large bed and her maid Swarnalata sitting on the floor. This opening is set against the background of news that "king's son, Puru, is returning home today after many years of absence. He has successfully completed his education in the hermitage under renowned guru, and is bringing home with him his bride, Chitrlekha, the princess of Anga" (Karnad 6). Crowd has gathered in the ground around the place. They are eager to see the royal couple and hope that the couple would create for themselves "the magic kingdom of love, ambition, and power" (Karnad 6). Puru will have children and fight wars. The news of Puru's expected return looms large over the action till he actually enters the palace, and also remain alive the prospects of his married life.

In the opening scene we find Swarnalata spewing venom against Sharmistha, who is otherwise Devayani's slave.

Swarnalata: That spiteful whore – I would have torn her hair out if you hadn't stopped me. Taught that fiend a proper lesson. The rakshi. (Karnad 7)

Devayani is trying to calm Swarnalata and advising her to ignore her. The hostility between Devayani, who is king Yayati's wife, and Sharmistha, who is otherwise slave of Devayani, is established right in the beginning, and it only casts shadow over the coming events but will in fact shake king Yayati's kingdom to its foundation and create an unprecedented moral crisis for him to face. Which is the core of the play. The hostility between Devayani and Sharmistha has to be accounted for before we proceed because from her action will take off Sharmistha recounts to Devayani:

Sharmistha: Don't you remember? ... I was the princess of rakshas you were the offspring of a destitute Brahmin, dependent upon my father. I had everything. Beauty, wealth, everything except birth – an Aryan pedigree.

What was your worth ? That your father knew the Sanjeevani's spell. That is all. I worshipped you. No, I loved you. To me, the most wonderous power I possessed seemed to be my ability to shower gifts upon you – things you hadn't asked for but which you gracefully accepted. My personal jewellery, my mother's diamonds, precious stones from the treasury. Some even stolen... I opened my eyes. You had become the queen of the Arya race. Wife of king Yayati. And I was your slave. My eyes had no lids now I live staring at you, unflinchingly. Like the fish. No, like the gods. No, more a corpse, its eyes wide open. As the king Crawls into your bed night after night, I want you to remember, I am here, hovering around

Devayani: You made me sick.

Sharmistha: For what ?

Sharmistha (smiles): I don't know. But when the moment arrives, I shall recognize it and seize it. And you will know too you won't be able to shut your eyes to it.

Devayani: And you would see only one thing in my eyes. The reflection of his majesty's face...

Sharmistha: Really ? And what would you see in his Majesty's eyes ? Have you ever dared examine those eyes and acknowledge the lust burning there ?

Devayani: And why not ? That's what I am here for. To be lusted for by his majesty.

Sharmistha: Except that he is not lusting for you, you poor darling, he lusts for immortality. Your father's are of 'Sanjeevani'.

Devayani: Shut up. (Karnad 9-10)

The reason of hostility between the two is not because of caste factor or gender factor, or the status factor one is mistress and the other is slave. It is sexual jealousy which is working ceaselessly in Sharmistha. She knows that she had beauty, education and wealth, and she is extremely desirable. She deserves the best companion – the youthful robust, attractive son of royal family for her fulfilment. How can she tolerate Devayani who was once her inferior, and who has received love and gifts from her. It is difficult to tolerate when the king crawls into her bed night after night, and she is left hovering around. Sexual jealousy is the motive, which will work havoc later Karnad could have here gone into the inner working of Sharmistha's mind projecting her suffering of the flesh. That would have

made a greater impact. Her jealousy becomes acute when she knows Yayati has married Devayani not for her beauty, or his love for her but for his selfish reason.

She tells Devayani:

Sharmistha: Yayati, the scion of the Bharata dynasty. He is not short of woman, is he ? Women of his own kind. Sensuous Kshatriya maidens, virgins reared for him. But he chooses you. Why ? you know the answer. You, only you, could lead him to the ultimate goal : a sanctuary beyond the reach of death... the, timeless thrill of it. (Karnad 11)

It is Devayani's father, the great Sukracharya who has mastered the art of eternity, and can lead Yayati to eternity. That is what Yayati lusts for and not for Devayani's beauty or sensuous body. Sharmistha's speech at once reveals her existential burden which she carries and also Yayati's pleasure loving royal temperament in a society whose sensuous and virgin women are available for him just for the asking. He could have had Devayani and left her. When he rescued her from the well. But when he came to know whose daughter she was, he married her for his lust for 'Sanjeevani', for his lust for eternal youthfulness. Sharmistha knows it well, rather knows it too well, so does she know his weakness for pleasures of flesh. She has always been on the lookout for an opportunity and at the first opportunity she shares him. And he glides into her trap like a mesmerized bird. Her bait has been threat to kill herself by taking poison for being slave she takes the poison-vial to her lips, he rushes to her to snatch it and in the scuffle, they both drop themselves into the coitus. Two important points get concretized after the act. One that he cannot stand the idea of death, the very idea of death digs at his nerve. This point will bear for reaching significance towards the end of the play. The second point is that he is epicurean, devoted to women, dance, and celebrations and to his people in the kingdom. Yet, Sharmistha is apprehensive of their act, apprehensive of Devayani's father's ire, if she complains and tells him:

Sharmistha: ... let me first just warn you that by spending this half an hour with me, you have already lit the fire better douse it before it explodes into conflagration. (Karnad 24)

At the same time she tells him that if he does not care, he is mistaken:

Sharmistha: you see yourself as awesome, a demigod if not god himself. You are so busy visualizing grand design of life; you have no sense of traps and

snare waiting in the grass. You have no sense of how illogical suffering can be and therefore how terrible.

(Pause)

you don't know what a disaster you could be. (Karnad 24)

The dispel her fears of future consequences, he decides to marry her and make her queen. His liaison with Sharmistha has been going on against the expected arrival of his newly married son, and against the presence of large crowd of people in the premises of the palace and also against the decoration being done in the bed chamber of the couple. Devayani is not simply averse to his decision, she is horrified. She even suggests to Yayati to let her go away since he has had her, and can have as many concubines as he likes, even can have as many wives as he wants, but not this 'reptile' Sharmistha. This is pure sexual jealousy. So, it is not Yayati's sexual demeanor or sexual transgression which is the cause of his cause as most of the critics comment. It is the sexual jealousy in both Devayani and Sharmistha. It is permissible in that society for a king to sleep with any woman, and discard her or even take any number of wives he wishes.

Devayani has been persistently asking Yayati to send Sharmistha away since he had his fill, and he has been persistently refusing to do so, is rather, so much enamoured of Sharmistha that he tells Devayani that he wants Sharmistha:

Yayati (Calmly): Because I feel bewitched by her. Even now at this, moment, I want her. I have never felt so entranced by a woman. What is, it? Some secret sorcery ? I can feel youth bursting out within me again. Her beauty, her intelligence, her wit, her abandon in love. Not to marry her is to lose her, don't you see ? I must have her I have to keep her with me. Please try to understand. (Karnad 30)

The relationship turns out to be explosive and fulfilling. And Yayati thus persists to keep Sharmistha in the palace as his wife. He finds nothing wrong morally or socially in doing so. The society permits it; even Devayani's father Sukracharya approves it. But Devayani can not suffer it; her resentment grows to crescendo and she refuses to welcome the Prince Puru as he reaches the palace gates with his entourage. Instead she tears the marriage thread from around the neck and flings it on the floor alongwith other pieces of jewellery. She is wearing Swarnlata's suggestion that his majesty is like a child, will forget that woman once he finds another toy has no effect, but she goes away from the palace, but not before declaring to Sharmistha that she will not be able to sleep a wink while the King's

hands caress her body. Her predicament parallels the predicament of Swarelata whose husband left for must the same reason.

This is a crucial stage in the play. The questions of one's choices and one's responsibilities, which are inherent in the situation are now emerging. And these questions have ironic ramifications. What Sharmistha has achieved by winning over king Yayati will boomerang upon her. What is fulfilling for Yayati will be disastrous. The palace of happiness Puru has entered will become a palace of his senseless misery. By marrying a Bharata prince to become the Empress of Aryavarta, Chitralckha has her destination otherwise.

In conversation with Puru, Yayati tells him about Puru's mother who was a Asura woman.

Yayati: ... I met her on one of my military campaign. I had never seen anyone so beautiful ethereal. She seemed one of the greatest, most loving creatures one could imagine. Everyone loved her and I married her. She gave me a son and I made her my senior Queen. And then, suddently she changed to scream and curse as though she had gone mad, when actually she hadn't. (Karnad 32).

Symbolically Yayati's calm and beautiful life has been overtaken by a curse brought about through his contact with Ashura woman Sharmistha. Sharmistha infact brings in an agitated state of mind the news of Sukracharya's curse on Yayati with a caveat at Puru's intervention later. Sharmistha explains that Devayani's father, Sukracharya, has placed curse on 'His Majesty' by which he will lose his youth and become decrepit by nightfull. Yayati is baffled, and is told that he has humiliated Devayani. But he says that he cannot humiliate her because she is the own. He feels terribly angry, and finds himself like "a man falling into a bottomless pit, facing the deafening rush of emptiness" (Karnad 42). Puru later brings the news that curse will not work not only if some young man agrees to take it upon himself and after his youth to him in exchange. But the stark reality that stares in the face of Yayati is that no one in this world is willing to offers his youth. It was Yayati's choice to cohabit with Sharmistha, and it is now his responsibility to face the consequences of his choice.

Sharmistha persuades him to accept the curse, to go into the forest and she promises to accompany him. He is horrified to lose his youth and life of pleasure. He cannot detach himself from the life of youthfulness and abandon. He is a self-centered and epicurean kind who has invited the curse because he cannot overcome his desire for Sharmistha, inspite of

the fact that Devayani has warned him about the destructive consequences of his choice. But Puru takes the curse upon himself as if to validate the father's authority and the son's obedience. He is otherwise philosophical.

Puru: I want to root myself back in my family. I want to realize the vision that drove my ancestors. (Karnad 44)

The conflict here is in the mind of the Puru, the presentation of his, qualities foreshadows the future. That, is the turning point. Puru remembers his mother's Ashura blood and feels unsettled by the questionable legitimacy of his birth, and oppressed by the weight of dynastic tradition. When the curse starts working, he accepts it because he thinks that the sacrifice of his youth would counteract his feeling of unworthiness, and enable him to fulfil his destiny as a Bharata Prince Chitrlekha, who is in another chamber of the palace, looks outside and finds the crowd quiet and the drums which were thundering have suddenly fallen silent. She also finds a broken pendant and the marriage thread of a Bharat queen and a vial of poison. Ominously she sees the reflection of her shattered life coming to the fore conversing with Swarnalata, Chitrlekha is started by the sudden thunderous eruption of the drums and couch shells, but Swarnalata bursts into tears, as if, the crowd normally in a myth welcomes the birth of a prince after having quietly for so long. The irony is intense. Chitrlekha is told that her husband Puru has agreed to take on his father's old age. That is why these celebrations are taking place. At first she accepts it as a matter of pride, but the truth dawns upon her when she actually sees Puru's decrepitude, and she recoils, screams and drops the lamp on the floor in horror Yayati consoles her :

Yayati: This is no time for recriminations. My heart goes out to you. But you are an educated woman, versed in the arts, trained in warfare you should have displayed more control. Now act in a manner worth of an Anga princess and Bharata Queen. Act so that generations to come may sing your glory and Puru's.

Chitrlekha: I do not know Prince Puru when I married him. I married him for his youth. For his potential to plant the seed of Bharatas in my womb. He has lost that potency now. He doesn't possess any of the qualities for which I married him. By you do..... you have taken over your son's youth. It follows that you should accept everything that comes attached to it. (Karnad 47-48)

Yayati's reaction is that he is horrified at the invitation of cohabiting with his son's wife. Then Chitrlekha picks up the vial of poison and commits suicide. This is the same

vial of poison by which Sharmistha allured the king into her trap, and this is the same vial by which Chitrlekha allures death into her trap. In the very presence of Yayati who hated death and loved life. So before killing Chitrlekha, a strong character, reminds Yayati that incestuous adultery between them would be the logical implication of his assumption of Pooru's youth. As for Puru he has the pride of senseless sacrifice.

Here Yayati is shaken, he tries to atone for his action by restoring Puru's youth and withdrawing into the forest, but Sharmistha points out to him the inescapable foundations of his future: a corpse, a lunatic, a fallen woman. In any case, Yayati undergoes a moral transformation and gains wisdom "like the effate figures in Eliot's poem 'who had the experience but missed the meaning', Puru ends the play on a note of stark bewilderment, unable to comprehend the point of what he has endured" (Girish Karnad I: XVI).

Karnad has structured the story of Yayati as an ironic drama of discontent, futility and death. Girish Karnad has given traditional tale a new meaning and significance highly relevant in the context of life today. Karnad's originality lies in working out the motivations behind Yayati's ultimate choice. In the *Mahabharata*, yayati recognizes the nature of desire, itself and realizes that fulfilment does, not diminish desire. In Karnad's play, however, Yayati recognizes the horror of his own life and assumes his moral responsibility after a series of symbolic encounters.

The existentialists like, Sartre and Camus put a great stress on choice and responsibility. In *Yayati*, Sutradhara says that neither a scholar nor an ordinary person can escape the burden of responsibility wherein lie the joy of life. The play has pioneered a style which unites the elements of traditional Indian theatre, such as 'yakshagana' and strikingly modern sensibility for contemporary socio-political realities. The symbolic theme of Yayati's attachment to life and its pleasures as also his final renunciation are retained. Girish Karnad takes refuge in the Indian myths and legends and makes them a vehicle of, new vision. By using these myths, he tries to show the absurdity of life with all its elemental passions and conflicts, and man's eternal struggle to achieve perfection.

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