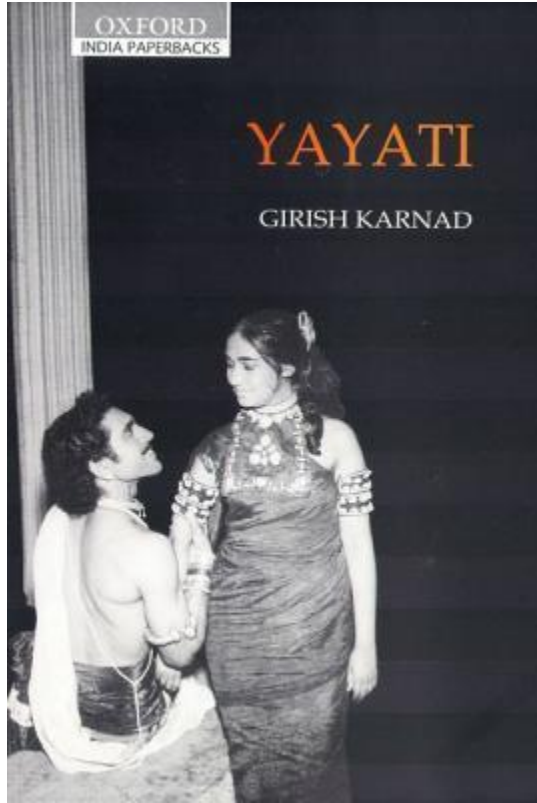


Theme of Responsibility in Girish Karnad's *Yayati*

L. Rani, M.A., M.Phil., B.Ed.

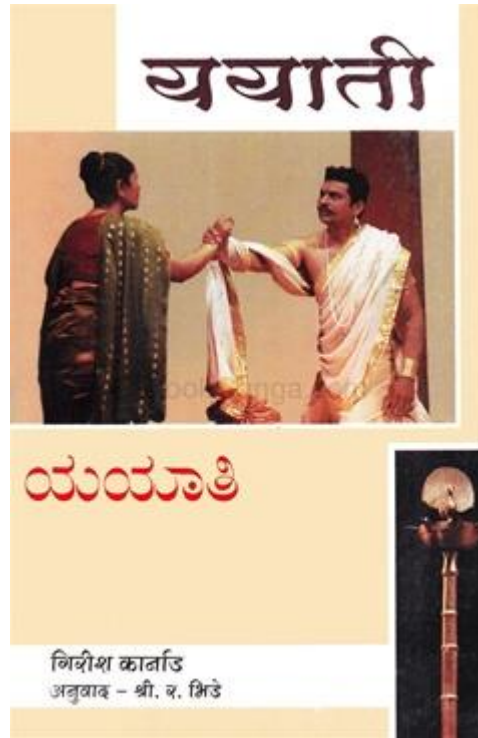


Abstract

Drama is the oldest literary art which is meant for stage and action. Many Indian English dramas are found to explore the original ancient folktales and myths. Girish Karnad reshapes the theme, content and thoughts of ancient myth for readers and spectators of contemporary literature. His plays put forward different problems, the identification of a human being in this world of strange relationships. In *Yayati*, Karnad deals with the theme of responsibilities and deals with the exchange of personalities between the father and his son. In *Yayati*, all the characters are irresponsible. The protagonist, Yayati, is an irresponsible king and father. Pooru though a considerate son, shirks his responsibility as a husband. Chitrlekha irresponsibly chooses to commit suicide by consuming poison, but doesn't want to die at the very last minute. A thematic analysis of Karnad's plays based on myths and folktales reveal the fact that Karnad very convincingly gives voice to the ambiguous concerns of the post-

colonial age. Karnad adopts the western techniques, but employs them in his theatre through indigenous narrative techniques. He has maintained his distinction in the thematic selection. Karnad proves himself as a true post-colonial playwright both in terms of themes and character presentation, and metaphoric portrayal of mythical elements

Keywords: Yayati, Girish Karnad, Responsibility, Folktale Themes, Indigenous Narrative Techniques.



Art of Girish Karnad

Among all the literary forms, drama is an important audio-visual medium of expression. Girish Karnad is the most renowned media personality in contemporary India, leading playwright and very skillful practitioner of the performing arts. In the dramas of Girish Karnad, myth is not merely a ritual or a structural device. It is a means of exploring the modern outcome of a traditional situation. Karnad tries to establish a 'dialectical relationship between tradition and modernity' which is a central theme in contemporary Indian society. Karnad does not employ the myths in their entirety. He picks up threads of legends and folk tales that he finds useful. He uses his imagination to construct the plot to suit these tales.

Yayati

Yayati (Yayaati) retells the age-old story of the mythical king who in his longing for eternal youth does not hesitate to usurp the youth and vitality of his own son. Karnad has

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 16:1 January 2016

L. Rani, M.A., M.Phil., B.Ed.

Theme of Responsibility in Girish Karnad's *Yayati*

borrowed the myth from the *Mahabharata*. He attempts to interpret the *Yayati*-myth on the theme of responsibility. He has given the traditional tale a new meaning and significance, highly relevant in the context of life today. The symbolic theme of Yayati's attachments to life and its pleasures and also his final renunciation are retold.

Swarnalata's Complaint

The play starts on a quiet note, with Swarnalata complaining to Devayani against Sharmistha. Though, Devayani defends Sharmistha, we soon learn of the on-going conflict between the two. Sharmistha does not accord proper respect to Devayani, because she knows too well that Yayati married Devayani since she was the daughter of Shukracharya who could bless him with immortality. When Sharmistha and Devayani have an argument she tells Devayani, "Expect that he is not lusting for you, your poor darling, he lust for immortality, your father's art of 'Sanjeevani'". (11)

Sharmistha and Yayati

Sharmistha brings turmoil into the life of Yayati. It is because of her that Devayani falls into the well and Yayati appears on the scene and saves her. "I had pulled you up by your right hand. I was enchanted by you and you were not exactly disinclined. So."(14) He knows that his problems are due to Sharmistha's presence in the palace, but he does not have the heart to tell her to go away. Even Devayani does not do so and Yayati is conscious of the fact of life. The crisis in the life of Yayati is precipitated by his refusal to part with Sharmistha.

Devayani and Sharmistha

Despite the on-going conflict between Devayani and Sharmistha, Devayani does not order Sharmistha to go away from the palace. Thus she is the one who is responsible for Sharmistha being in the palace.

When a crisis comes in the life of Yayati, instead of owning up her responsibility, Devayani leaves the palace. She refuses to yield and the result is the curse of premature old age on Yayati. When Yayati learns that Shukracharya has cursed him with old age, he does not accept the responsibility of what he has done. He accuses Sharmistha for this: "Old age! Decrepitude! By nightfall! And then? Then what? Sharmistha. You she-devil! You are the

cause of all this. You are responsible. You trapped me, with your wives”. (42) The curse demoralizes Yayati. He refuses to believe his son Pooru would be of any help in saving him from the curse. He loses control of himself and does not know how to handle the situation.

Sharmistha tries to pacify Yayati by asking him to accept what has come his way: “No one can escape old age. You have just hastened its arrival. Let us accept it. Let us go away from the city. I’ll come with you. I’ll share the wilderness with you”. (42)

Refuse to Accept Old Age – Trying to Recapture Youth

Yayati gets violent, adamant and refuses to accept old age. He has great inclinations toward the world of beauties and bounties, when Sharmistha, the rakshsha kanya asks him for solitude: “If I have to know myself Sharmistha, I have to be young, I must have my youth”. (43) Sitting on his bed he looks here and there like a mad man and looks for something on the bed.

He says,

I am trying to recapture my youth, moments when I handed out pain, moments when I slaughtered enemies, razed hostile cities to the ground, made my queens writhe in pain and demanded that they laugh and make love to me in gratitude.... (43)

Way for Redemption and Regaining Youth

When Pooru informs him that Yayati’s curse can be redeemed if some young person accepted his old age, Yayati is jubilant. He fails to understand the seriousness of his actions and accuses Sharmistha and Pooru of not being happy in his happiness. Again when Pooru informs him that nobody is ready to accept old age, Yayati cannot believe his ears. He dreads old age and the decrepitude it brings. He feels very hurt when nobody comes forward to take upon himself the curse of the old age. It is Sharmistha who brings him to his senses:

“Why should they? Why should they take upon themselves the scourge you have brought upon yourself? Please, sir. Let us not look around for the fool or the yogi who is seeking holy martyrdom. Let us go.....” (46).

Yayati is ready to give, whatever one wants in return.

Pooru's Offer and Motive

Pooru also asks Yayati to accept his old age and go to the forest. Yayati cries bitterly and with folded hands begs Pooru. Pooru decides to accept the curse of senility inflicted on his father.

When Pooru proposes that the curse given to Yayati be transferred to him, Pooru undergoes a sense of tension and a conflicting mode between cognition and perception: to go back to his roots is to realize the genealogical branches of the tree. Sharmistha, again, asks about the future conditions of Chitrlekha when he bears the curse of his father. His remark becomes a fine piece of the conflicting conditions about his birth and parentage: "I am like an infant on the brink of birth. Please don't shove me back with that name" (50). Pooru proves himself as a great symbol of sacrifice. He accepts the imposed old age of his father and becomes a ripe old man in his formative years while Yayati regains his youth. However, in another sense, Pooru becomes the victim of his father's hysterical desire for sensuality. Suddenly Pooru starts feeling weak and is about to fall when Sharmistha helps him. When asked by Sharmistha what has happened, Pooru replies: "The curse, mother. The spasms of imminent birth" (50).

As stated earlier, Karnad's Pooru does not offer his youth to Yayati to express his love for his father, but to escape from the royal responsibilities, for which he considers himself unworthy. All the time a mysterious consciousness fills him with the feeling of inferiority that he is a misfit among the Bharata dynasty. It becomes obvious that Pooru wants an escape from the possible responsibilities of the state, as he is the crown prince. Sacrificing his youth for his father appears as an easy and honourable excuse for him. Yayati is aware of this trait of Pooru's being. Yayati tells Chitrlekha about it:

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

Shattering Disillusionment and Loss of Faith

Yayati succeeds in transferring his old age and his sins to Pooru, but in the process he experiences shattering disillusionment and loss of faith. The argument that he puts forward is that his people need him as a king and, therefore, he is doing this. But to his own self, it is clear that this is not truth. Now Yayati wants Chitrlekha, the newly married wife of Pooru, to understand what a great sacrifice Pooru has made for the sake of his kingdom and tells her she should support her great husband in his crisis. He tries to justify his own act and to convince her that he accepted Pooru's youth to settle the issues threatening the state.

Chitrlekha

The final recognition of the horror of the situation comes to Yayati through Chitrlekha, Pooru's young wife, who finds reality too much to bear and kills herself. She poisons herself in order to be relieved from the miserable condition in which she has been living. When Swarnalata gives Chitrlekha the news that Pooru has accepted his father's old age, she is absolutely stunned, takes the courage to accept the situation by consoling herself to be a lucky person.

Chitrlekha adds that old age as a curse has come to him at the right time; otherwise she would have cursed her husband and her luck like a mad person. Now she can curse her foolishness. When Pooru asks for forgiveness, Chitrlekha replies. "I was a fool, blind to your greatness. I didn't realize my good fortune". (57) Pooru wants her support for the responsibility he has undertaken. She gladly extends her support.

Enforcing 'Responsibilities' and 'Duties' of a Wife

Yayati tries to console Chitrlekha by saying that she should display self-control to face the situation and advises her to accept the old Pooru. Further he tells her that her sacrifice would be remembered with gratitude and be recorded in golden words in the annals of history. He even advises her to behave in a way befitting the daughter-in-law of the Bharata family. It is really ironic that Yayati who shuns responsibility, advises her about the 'responsibilities' and 'duties' of a wife.

When she refuses, he exercises his authority as her father-in-law and as a king, and orders her to obey him. When she offers to leave the kingdom, he scolds her:

“Do you remember the vow you took not so long ago - with god as your witness, in the presence of the holy fire? That you would walk in the path marked by his foot prints; whether home or into the wilderness..... (62)

Chitrlekha adds ironically, “Or into the funeral pyre?” (62) This irritates Yayati and he rebukes Chitrlekha for wishing death for her husband. She then accuses him for her plight.

Chitrlekha, a Creation of Karnad

As a matter of fact, we must understand that Chitrlekha, a creation of Karnad, in the highest sense, stands for futility of life even though she was born as a princess. She marries Pooru because of his youth and dynamism, but Pooru accepts the decrepitude of his father without consulting her. Meanwhile, Yayati asks her to be patient and to rise above such inconsequential consideration. He also asks her to be a great woman. Karnad takes a memorable turn here, and his Chitrlekha tries to cross the threshold of patriarchy. She boldly has a proposal for Yayati, she would like Yayati to take the place of Pooru in her life, so that she can bear a child of the family.

Karnad has succeeded in portraying Chitrlekha’s character by creating her image as an ‘asking woman’. She thinks Yayati as the man who is bestowed with masculinity and authority. To fulfill her desire to have a successor to the Bharata dynasty, she offers herself to Yayati. Yayati is shocked by her immoral demand. He rebukes her and accuses her of harboring such low thoughts in her mind. However, Chitrlekha as a representative of the modern woman asserts her individuality and fights for her right to love and family-happiness. She courageously argues and directly challenges Yayati to accept her as he has taken Pooru’s youth. So “Chitrlekha seems to be in search of a man who would define her and provide her some recognition in a society ruled by males”. (Pandey 51) Finding herself in such a plight, she says to Yayati. “You have taken over your son’s youth. It follows that you should accept everything that comes attached to it”. (66)

Existential Husband and a Realistic Wife

Karnad creates Chitrlekha as a desperate figure who suffers extreme aloofness and coldness from every human being around her. Ultimately, she finds one way open to her and

she commits suicide by taking a vial of poison to end her unbearable misery. However, after taking poison, she is not willing to die. Sharmistha accuses Yayati of forcing Citralekha to end her life:

What does it matter who she was? You destroyed her life. I pleaded with you but you were drunk with your future So here is the foundation of your glorious future, your majesty. A woman dead, another gone mad, and a third in danger of her life. (67-68)

When Yayati sees the dead body of Chitrlekha, he repents and he feels very sorry. Sharmistha sarcastically calls Chitrlekha's death as "the first victory of Yayati's new life". Chitrlekha's suicide that brings Yayati to his senses and he owns up responsibility for his actions. He suggests to Sharmistha to accompany him to the forest. When Chitrlekha dies, Pooru is stunned but does not cry. It is only when he regains his youth that he repents for what he has done: "We brought you here only to die. But our senses are blighted and we shall never grasp the meaning of all that you taught us. What does all this mean, O God? What does it mean? (69)

As a genuine humanist, Karnad asks his readers/spectators, though indirectly, to think seriously over the predicament of Chitrlekha in the play. The portrayal of her character seems to be authentic from the modern point of view. By yoking an existential husband and a realistic wife together, Karnad tries to bring out the pathetic plight of Chitrlekha.

Portrayal of Man-Woman Relationship

The existential version of reality and reality of man-woman relationship is very effectively portrayed in the play. (Pandey 48) Yayati's premature old age poses the problem of existence. It is noted here that Yayati after being cursed, tries to avoid his responsibility and holds Sharmistha responsible for his decrepitude. In fact, it was his choice to indulge in worldly pleasures by marrying Sharmistha and that was responsible for his curse. So he must prepare himself to face the consequences. Along with a sense of freedom, the chooser should become conscious of his responsibility. According to Surendra Verma, 'Choosing is always painful. It involves besides a sense of freedom, anguish and responsibility that weigh heavily upon the chooser' (Kumar 49).

Yayati Complex

According to Devdutta Pattaniak (2006 article: Myth theory), 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. He termed it as ‘reverse Oedipus Complex’. In Greek mythology, there are numerous tales depicting a son responsible for the death of his father. For example: the famous tale of Oedipus Rex. However, in Hindu mythology we have the reverse situation i.e. a father destroys his son to fulfill his ambitions. Whether it is Bishma, Rama or Pooru, they have to sacrifice for the sake of their fathers.

Swarnalata is also a creation of Karnad who suffers at the hands of her husband and gets no human sympathy as well, and thus a symbol of modern lost man. Swarnalata’s character like that of Chitrlekha, is invented and runs parallel to the disenchantment experienced by the latter. She has also lost her husband and thinks that death brings peace, ‘the deliverance from uncertainty’. However, she repents her proposition when she finds Chitrlekha, taking cue from her speech, commits suicide. Just as Swarnalata’s husband deserted her when he learned about her relationship with her teacher, Devayani too deserts Yayati after he makes love to Sharmistha. Swarnalata’s married life is Karnad’s addition to the original tale.

Theme of Responsibilities

Yayati deals with the theme of responsibilities. Yayati, the king of Hastinapur tries to neglect his responsibilities fully engrossed in sensual pleasures. He fails to understand his duties as a king and a father. He always tries to find new ways and means to quench his insatiable thirst for sensual pleasures. Similarly in contemporary society a common man is also found busy with material life and carnal pleasures. With his genuine artistic touch Karnad refashions the mythic theme to make a contemporary statement. ‘In fact, Karnad has given a twist to the story, for he places the individual in the centre as a representative of whole mankind, whose desires are never dead..... Karnad shows that each man is what he aspires to be or makes himself’. (Gupta and Sharma 34)

Almost every character except Sharmistha is irresponsible. Yayati who is cursed for his adultery transfers the burden most irresponsibly to his son. Pooru, 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. Each and every individual, whether he is an old man in search of lost youth or a saint lost in the wilderness or whoever he may be, must have a sense of responsibility in his journey of life.

Works Cited

- Berde, R. T. "Karnad's Yayati: A Tale of an Old Man's Lechery and Unheroic Filial Scarifice." *Critical Essays on the Plays of Girish Karnad*. Delhi: Creative Publications, 2009. 16-26. Print.
- Berde, R. T. and N. Dadhav. "Girish Karnad's Chitrlekha in Yayati: A King Yayati." *Critical Essays on Indian English Drama*. Kanpur: Sahityayan, 2012. 94-96. Print.
- Dodiya, Jaydipsinh. *The Plays of Girish Karnad: Critical Perspectives*. New Delhi: Prestige Books, 1999. 101-129. Print.
- Gupta, Jyoti and Sushma, Sharma. "Existentialism in Girish Karnad's Yayati." *Thunder on Stage: A Study of Girish Karnad Plays*. Ed. C. L. Khatri and Sudhir K. Jaipur: Book Enclave, 2008. 34. Print.
- Karnad, Girish. "Introduction to Three Plays." *The Plays of Girish Karnad: Critical Perspectives*. Ed. J. Dodiya. New Delhi: Prestige, 1999. 5-25. Print.
- -. *Yayati*. New Delhi: OUP, 2008. Print.
- Kumar, Nand. *Indian English Drama: A Study in Myths*. New Delhi: Sarup & Sons, 2003. 49. Print.
- Myles, Anita. *Contemporary Indian English Drama An Overview* New Delhi: Sarup Book Publishers, 2010. 1-83. Print.
- Pandey, Manoj K. *The Plays of Girish Karnad and Tradition*. New Delhi: Adhyayan Publications, 2007. 48-51. Print.
- Pandey, Punam. *The Plays of Girish Karnad : A Study in Existentialism* New Delhi: Sarup Book Publishers, 2010. Print.
- Raju, B. Yadava. "Race and Gender in Yayati." *Girish Karnad's Plays: Performance and Critical Perspectives*. Ed. Tutun Mukherjee. New Delhi: Pencraft International, 2008. 81-87. Print.

- Sharma, Pratibha. Sanjit Mishra, and Arun Kumar Sharma. "Girish Karnad: A Contemporary Perspectives." *Research Spectrum* 3.1 (Feb 2012): 14-22. Print.
- Sinha, A. K. "Girish Karnad: Thematic Concerns and Technical Features." *New Directions in Indian Drama*. Ed. Sudhakar Pandey and Freya Barua New Delhi: Prestige Books, 1994. 105-123. Print.
- Suneel, Seema. "Girish Karnad's *Yayati* Reconsidered." *New Directions in India Drama*. Ed. Sudhakar Pandey and Freya Barua. New Delhi: Prestige Books, 1994. 124-136. Print.
- Wale, N. G.. "The Use of Myths in Karnad's *Yayati*." *The Quest* 25. 1 (Jun 2011): 42-48. Print.
- War, Tasleem A. "Retrieval of Indian Culture and Tradition in Girish Karnad's Plays." *Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal* 1.1 (Jan 2012): 1-7. Print.
-
-

L. Rani, M.A., M.Phil., B.Ed.
2/409 Bose Colony, 2nd Street
Naranapurum Road, Sivakasi East
Sivakasi-626189
Tamilnadu
India
[raniumaa1988@gmail.com](mailto:raniemaa1988@gmail.com)