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Perspectives on Thematic Concerns in Girish Karnad's *Yayati*

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Abstract

Girish Raghunath Karnad is the most influential playwright of present times, who deals history and folktales in his plays to express the Indian tradition for the themes and techniques. Karnad has been awarded with the Padma Bhushan and was honored the prestigious Jnapith Award. His plays were originally written in Kannada and later on were translated into several other languages. *Yayati*, which was first written in Kannada in 1961, it was also the first dramatic work by Karnad and later was translated the dramatist himself into English. Karnad has extracted history and traditional elements from the Mahabharata to reveal the inanity of human life with all its essential attachment and to highlight contemporary social issues in the Post-Independence literature. The research paper contains view on thematic concerns in Girish Karnad's *Yayati*. While doing so, my attempt would also be focused on contemporary social issues in the post-colonial scenario of the Indian society in the modern context.

Keywords-*Indian tradition, Culture, Man-woman relationships, Existential Concerns*

Introduction

Girish Karnad is the most influential playwright in the contemporary India who deals the Indian tradition for the themes and techniques in his plays. His plays are originally written in Kannada language and then are translated into other different languages. Karnad has also presented the Indian civilization and tradition through the use of native concepts, myths, folktales and ideologies in his works. Aprana Bhargava Dharwadker writes about the influence of Indian myth, tradition and history upon Karnad:

“The dominant presence of the ancient and medieval past Karnad's drama is a result of both personal and cultural compulsions...Karnad belongs perhaps to the last generation of the *urban*

Indian writers who encountered the ‘great’ and ‘little’ traditions of myth, poetry, history, legend, and folklore at first hand in their earliest childhood, and internalized them deeply enough to have their about authorial selves shaped by them.” (Karnad, Collected Plays, vol.1, 10)

In the present paper, an attempt has been made to study Girish Karnad’s *Yayati* with the thematic point of view, and to highlight contemporary social issues and bring out their relevance in the post-colonial scenario of the Indian society in the modern context.

Karnad has been extensively praised by both the cinema and play critics for some phase of his plays: characterization, plot construction, traditions of myth, history, legend and folktales, protrusion of contemporary social issues in the Post Independence literature. His plays are not mere costume and masks plays, but there are invested with contemporary relevance in the post-colonial scenario of Modern India. Karnad himself uttered in an interview:

I had never fancied myself a dramatist. In fact, I had tried my hand a writing poetry. When I was at Dharwar which was the cultural capital of Karnataka having produced writers like Bedre, Crokak and so on, I would very often pass by the famous Kannada publishing house Manohara Granthamala and wonder if my work would ever be published by them! During the weeks of preparation for my departure to England- which were as I said quite stressful for various reasons- I found myself writing a play. This was *Yayati*. Though I had trained myself to write in English, I found myself writing the play in Kannada. (Mukherjee, 30)

Yayati is the first dramatic work by Karnad, which deals traditions of myth, history, legend and folktales from the Mahabharata in the modern context in the contemporary scenario. It deals the Indian tradition and culture from the past, but focused on contemporary social issues in the post-colonial scenario of the Indian society in the modern context. Karnad embarked on what was going to be a splendid set of contribution to the Indian English Drama through his play, *Yayati*. It would be fit that he had the cognoscente eye in observing and building the undergoing currents in the relationships of the characters. This would appear complex in display but were simple to correlate and comprehend. The power of express ideas, thought and feelings that his characters gulped from his outstanding but simple style of creation had an extraordinary effect on the audience and the reader. *Yayati* presents the complex creation of relationship between the threesome of Devayani, Sharmistha and Yayati and others are Pooru and Chitrlekha.

The play opens when Yayati is married to the daughter of demons’guru, Sukracharaya, named Devayani. Sharmistha is the daughter of the demon king, Vrishparva, is presented as her slave. Yayati was excited with a wave of feelings to find cheerless plight of Sharmistha and secretly married her in spite of the warning by Sukracharaya that he should never permission Sharmistha share his bed.

When Sukracharaya came to know about this, he said his curse to Yayati to become an old man. Sukracharaya also uttered the only relaxation he could give his old age to someone and take the youth from him.

In his play *Yayat*, we can easily observe that Karnad tries to illustrate the tradition myth from the Mahabharata in the modern context. *Yayati* is a self-conscious existentialist play, based on the theme of responsibility. Karnad himself accepts basically impact of the existentialist writers on his play, "I wanted to tell people I had read Sartre, Camus and others."

Karnad replied when Tutun Mukherjee asked him about the existential concerns in *Yayati*:

It is true that Existentialism was the persuasive philosophy of the time. My attempt was to emphasize the calm acceptance of grief and anguish; Pooru's old age is a sudden transformation and not the eventually of life. It brings no wisdom and no self realization. It is senseless punishment for an act he has not committed. It was also intrigued by the idea that if Pooru had a wife, how could she react? So I introduced Chitrlekha. Every character in the play tries to evade the consequence of their actions except Sharmistha and Chitrlekha. (Mukherjee 31)

Karnad attempts to show the inanity of life with its fundamental affections and conflicts, and also to expose person's immortal fight to get superiority. On one hand, *Yayati* refuses hypersexual fondness and carnal pleasure to which the king is a thrall and on the other hand, asserts for a life of responsibilities and self immolation as represented by Pooru. Chitrlekha's proposal to Yayati, who has become young by exchange of ages, to accept her, can be Chitrlekha's deep feelings. Yayati stunningly imparts his message of disapprobation of indecorous sensually as well as acceptance of responsibility and performance of duty. It is obvious from the conversation between Chitrlekha and Yayati :

Chitrlekha: Four or five! Do you think it would make a difference if it were only one or two? This morning I was the mistress of all that I had yearned for. But within half a day- no, within half an hour actually- half a century has driven across my bed and crushed the dreams on my pillows. And you would like me to wait...

Yayati: This is not merely a question for an individual. We are talking of the future of our entire people.

Chitrlekha: I am here, this minute, sir. And I cannot interest myself in your unborn future.

Yayati: This is a time when we are being put to test. Not just the time to come but even our past is watching us. Judging us. There has never been a crisis like this before.

Nor is there ever likely to be once again. Rise above trivialities, Chitrlekha. Be superhuman. (Karnad, *Yayati* p. 65)

Yayati deals the question of a woman but in a changing way where the family relationships and social rights are questioned, interposed and re-constructed to shift the situation of a woman in the post-colonial scenario of the Indian society. The interpersonal is very complex in the play. The king himself is allowed to marry with many women and has many wives and sons. He roles as a king, as a father, as a husband and as a lover are trespassed by his own sexualwish and feminine domain. Normally, the queens do not protest the king's re-marriages and extra marital relationships with the other women. Here is the question, why does Devayani protest Yayati's extra marital relationship with Sharmistha? The question is the race, because Sharmistha belongs to Rakshasa family and it is highly objectable when the relationship of a king with a woman coming from Rakshasa cult. It is obvious when Yayati says to Devayani:

Yes, but you don't need to worry, devi. Your position will not be touched. You will remain the senior queen. You will share my throne. You will be at my side in all public celebrations. That goes without saying. She can never be a threat to your position, you know that, because of her race. (*Yayati*, Act Two, p.28)

In the past, glory of her friendship with Sharmistha has been revealed through the latter's mouth to Yayati and the readers too. Now the completely divided state of Devayani's mind can be clearly observed through following dialogue, "Please, take as many wives as you want. I don't care. But not this reptile. Not her." (*Yayati*, Act One, p.10)

A friend who cannot enjoy the company of any other person except Sharmistha, in the past now is not ready to have her as an inseparable part of her husband's life. She is ready to share her husband with anyone in the world but not with Sharmistha. The jealous, hateful, egoistic, Devayani is revealed. Her vehement opposition to Sharmistha continues when she says to the king, "Sir, I have never asked any favors of you in these two years. I implore you now. I too can bare my fangs. I too can draw blood. Don't provoke me on account of the woman." (*Yayati*, Act One, 11)

Yayati loves and likes stunning women; he does not bother about their community that they belong to lower community. He marries Sharmistha because she is very beautiful and attractive. It can be clearly observed through the conversation between Devayani and Yayati:

“Devayani: If you had deserted me after we first made love, left me on the bed of leaves, no one would have blamed you. Kings are used to women throwing themselves at them. I too would have kept silent from fear and shame. Why then did you marry me?

Yayati: Because you are most beautiful woman I know. And at that moment you were an apportion of kind I had never seen before: dirty, disheveled, ravishing. All at once.”
(Yayati, Act One, p.14)

Dr. Jyoti Gupta and Dr. Sushma Sharma write about the play:

“Karnad’s *Yayati* reveals the afflicted consciousness of a broken man like Yayati who tries to find a meaning in existence. Out of sorrow and humiliation Yayati is unable to understand the meaning of life till he is rid of old age. But contrary to his expectation Chitrlekha’s suicide leads him to expiate his desire. He projects the image of an existential character and shows that no man has the courage to choose whole-heartedly either right or wrong. He is himself an amalgamation of self-evasion and vanity, self condemnation and humility. Thus, there is an eternal quest for meaning and value, freedom and truth that can sustain us in this chaotic and apparently meaningless world.” (Dr. Jyoti Gupta and Dr. Sushma Sharma, 36)

Yayati’s conflict begins with the vengeance taken by Sharmistha, against her friend Devayani. The cultural orientation and class difference lie at the centre of strife. Sharmistha compels Yayati to indulge in physical relationship with her. This act on the part of Yayati, is surely a violation of the marital norms and an act of betrayal against his queen, Devayani. Being a male representative, Yayati betrays his wife, Devayani. Gender constructs in the Indian cultural scenario, depicts the superiority of the male over the female and yields the former with the illegal and unholy authority to have multiple sexual partners. It debars the female from her fundamental marital rights. Gender constructs project the woman as a suffering soul, who sacrifices her life for the man and then becoming an object of exploitation. Sharmistha exploits the tradition and culture to challenge the class discrimination and she faced being a low class an Asura princess. But she makes indirectly Devayani a victim of the patriarchal constructs of the tradition and culture.

Sharmistha claims her right to become the queen though belonging to the lower class, while Devayani achieves her right to become the queen through dharma. Class and culture show the existential condition of the woman in favor of the male discourse. Talking to Meenakshi Raykar about his play *Yayati* in an interview Karnad says, “Every character in the play tries to seek escape from the consequences of its actions. Even Puru does that. Yayati, Devayani and Puru all of them try to avoid facing the consequences. Sharmistha is the only one character who accepts the consequences of her action.” (Raykar, 340)

Karnad makes an effort to get an highly impart object of the tradition and culture. The Indian culture and tradition are largely dictated and the male is used as an instrument by Sharmistha to displace the phallic centre. In that sense, Sharmistha has got her right as a woman and has succeeded in destroying the class difference. Sharmistha’s act is against the Indian tradition and culture. But if we

consider that the point of individual right, Sharmistha's act stands justified. Yayati seems to be doing no wrong in rendering her with her womanly right. Dr. Flaguni P. Desai says in this regards,

Devayani thought Yayati had violated his dharma, when he married Sharmistha. She was right in her own way. But if a man is blogged by a woman for Dharma's sake to pour in the seed he must do so, as a king and a kshatriya Yayati followed his Dharma in doing so... Sharmistha asks from Yayati her ritual right, ritual embrace so that her ritual may not be in vain and in such circumstances Yayati rightly follows his dharma and grants an offspring by practicing world.

Culture and social colonization are the native culture. By the chief foreign influence has not only resulted in unprecedented change in social and ethos of India, but it has also accompanied by an attrition of the economic development of our nation. The worst affected are the traditional art and crafts, because Karnad make an endeavor in their writings to expose a 'cultural renaissance' on the Indian literary scene.

Karnad has a definite purpose in his mind to exploit the Indian mythology. Indian mythology is based on a written textual tradition that has made through time and foreign influences and attempts at institution. Though, the traditions and folktales that mirrored the social and tradition ethics of the nation are infused in an oral tradition that needs immediate concentration and preservation to save the extinction.

Karnad has contributed to a great extent the part of the Indian culture and tradition through the use of myths, legends and folktales and the form of folk theatre. He has proved helpful in re-affirming and establishing the national identity firmly on the contemporary ground of foreign culture influences and invasion. Investing the myth, Karnad introduces us the Indian ancient tradition and culture which tells us hope and consolation. D. Maya rightly said:

Karnad links the past with the present, the archetype with the real. Issues of the present world find their parallels in the myths and fables of the past which lend new meanings and insights through analogy, reinforcing the theme. By transcending the limits of time and space, myths provide flashes of insight into life and its mystery. They form an integral part of the cultural consciousness of the land, with their associative layers of meaning, their timelessness and relevance to contemporary issues. (D. Maya 2001, p.68)

Karnad has enhanced the Indian fictional setting by his involvement to culture, art, play and theatre. But the most important contribution which he has made to Indian English drama is his effort to get back the cultural and mythological rich tradition of the Indian past. In Karnad's play we find that he goes back to the roots and tries to renew the local culture and tradition. India has its own distinctive culture and colonial histories in the post-colonial scenario. It is also multicultural in

character that it has a strong presence of Indian traditions, culture and morality which are unfortunately submerged and dominated by the imported culture of Europe. It is Girish Karnad who makes an attempt to recover the treasure of culture and tradition in the Post Independence literature.

To sum up, Girish Karnad is the most influential playwright and gifted dramatic craftman, very skillful fractioned of the performing arts in the Post Independence literature. *Yayati* is a literary work that includes his intensity of thought, potential sensibility and reinterpretation of ancient myth in the modern context in the postcolonial Indian society. The play deals different issues like traditions, culture, women identity, morality and different other perspectives that are highly relevant in the postcolonial scenario of the Indian society. Aparna Bhargava Dharwadker writes about the play:

“The most memorable feature of *Yayati*- and a striking accomplishment for a twenty two year old author- is its quartet of sentiment, articulate, embittered whom are subject in varying degrees to the whims of men, but succeed in subverting the male world through an assertion of their rights and privileges... *Yayati* establishes at the outset of Karnad’s career that myth is not merely a narrative to bent to present purposes, but a structure of meaning worth exploring in itself because it offers opportunities for philosophical reflection without the constraints of realism or the necessity of contemporary setting. (Aparna Bhargava Dharwadkar, *Introduction to Girish Karnad, Collected Plays*, 2005)

On the basis of above description, we can say easily that *Yayati* is precious regarding man-woman relationship, tradition and existential concerns. Karnad thinks over the complications of man-woman relationship that he has found fellowship with every character to discuss the present day dilemma. *Yayati* is very rich in terms of the human complications; Devayani, Sharmistha, Swarnlata and Chitralakha with *Yayati* and Pooru have their own parity of relationships. Therefore, the play is very wealthy the perspectives on thematic concerns.

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