

Myth, An Eternal Quest for Self-Renewal in Girish Karnad's *Yayati*

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Abstract— Myths have always been an inspiration to writers as they symbolize man's eternal quest for self-renewal and the revitalization of the world. In the twentieth century, there has been an unprecedented fascination with myths, which might be attributed to modern man's deep realization of his spiritual emptiness. Although scientific and technological advancements have been significant, they have only highlighted man's spiritual anguish. To reintroduce moral and spiritual values into human life, writers frequently employ myths as a rich and imaginative form of storytelling. The vast repertoire of myths not only provides ideas but also serves as a technique, a fresh perspective for comprehending and reacting to reality. This paper is an attempt to explore the mythical elements in Girish Karnad's play Yayati.

Index Terms— Myth, Self-Renewal, Spiritual Anguish

I. INTRODUCTION

Myths have always been an inspiration to writers as they symbolize man's eternal quest for self-renewal and the revitalization of the world. In the twentieth century, there has been an unprecedented fascination with myths, which might be attributed to modern man's deep realization of his spiritual emptiness. Although scientific and technological advancements have been significant, they have only highlighted man's spiritual anguish. To reintroduce moral and spiritual values into human life, writers frequently employ myths as a rich and imaginative form of storytelling. The vast repertoire of myths not only provides ideas but also serves as a technique, a fresh perspective for comprehending and reacting to reality. Myth has always had a significant position in psychology and society. The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English defines myth as "a story handed down from olden times, especially, concepts or beliefs about the early history of a race, explanations of natural events, such as the seasons."

Originating from Greek 'Mythos', myth has passed through various stages of explanation and interpretation. Explaining myth and its character Lillian Feder observes:

Myth is a story involving human limitation and superhuman strivings and accomplishments which suggests through action usually of a ritual, ceremonial, or compulsive nature - man's attempt to express and thus control his anxiety about those features of his physiological and psychological make-up and his external environment which he cannot comprehend, accept or master. The characters of myth may be gods, men, or monstrous creatures with the qualities of both, but even in myths dealing with immortals the narrative material, the portrayal of conflict and sorrow, and the resolution and revelation are all reflections of human concerns. (112)

There are four main types of myths: Culture Myths, Ritual Myths, Nature Myths, and Creation Myths. Cultural myths revolve around the cultural hero who brings arts, food, inventions, devices, and other beneficial items to humans. Ritual Myths are ceremonies that are closely associated with primitive forms of religion, in which humans seek to win the favour of or appease God. Nature Myths explain the origin of natural phenomena, such as the changing of seasons, and the occurrences of day and night, rain and snow, storm and flood. Creation Myths deal with the creation of the world, the origin of men and animals, and the births of Gods.

Karnad is a modern Indian dramatist who uses myth in his plays in a very expressive way. He admits that myths have helped him articulate a set of values that he was unable to arrive at rationally. Indian myths bind people to their family, linguistic faith, and ethnic communities while also connecting them to the past to

provide moral values and emotional and social security. Karnad recreates and adapts mythical stories with universal themes and applies them to various spheres of life. These myths are envisioned to promote human welfare and harmony in society. As myths are rooted in collective unconsciousness, their significance endures. As a conscious dramatist, Karnad prefers myths, parables, legends, and folktales because they provide immense scope for life. He presents myths about human conditions and links the present with the archetypal. Maya rightly remarks:

Karnad links the past and the present, the archetype and 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 the 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. (23)

The creation of his first play *Yayati* was very sudden and unpremeditated. R.K. Dhawan summarizes the occasion and process of its writing as follows: "When Karnad was preparing to go to England amidst the intense emotional turmoil, he found himself writing a play. One day as he was reading *The Mahabharatha* just for fun, he read the story of Yayati. It clicked in my mind. It came as a play" (95). Karnad's play *Yayati* is based on the myth of Yayati, which is borrowed from the 'Adiparva' of the Mahabharatha. The play retells the age-old story of Yayati who, driven by his insatiable desire for youth and vitality, does not hesitate to usurp those of his son. During Karnad's stay in England, he felt alienated from his family and friends. The story of Yayati helped him to relax and cope with the stressful situation. He says in an interview: "I saw it as a way to escape the stressful situation. But when I recall the time, I'm amazed at how closely the myth reflected my anxieties and uncertainties, and my resentment at all who seemed to demand that I sacrifice my future but it did serve as an outlet for my doubts and provided me with a set of values" (85).

The story of Yayati goes like this in the epic: King Yayati was the tenth descendant of Brahma's family. Once, Devayani, the daughter of Shukracharya, the guru of the Asuras, and Sharmishtha, the daughter of Vrishparva, the king of the Asuras, had a difference of opinion. Sharmishtha pushed Devayani into a well and left. Fortunately, King Yayati came by the well, saw her, and helped her out. At that moment, Devayani fell in love with Yayati, and as punishment, Sharmishtha and her maids were sentenced to serve Devayani forever. Devayani later proposed marriage to Yayati, who, as a Kshatriya, could not marry her because she was the daughter of a Brahmin, Shukracharya himself. However, with Shukracharya's consent, the marriage was allowed, and Sharmishtha was also sent to King Yayati's kingdom as punishment. Devayani had two sons, Yadu and Turvasu, while Sharmishtha had three sons - Druhya, Anu, and Pooru - through her liaison with Yayati. Devayani discovered this and complained to her father, who cursed Yayati to become old at that moment. Yayati pleaded with him to lessen the curse. Shukracharya said that he could exchange his old age with someone else's youth if he wanted. Yayati asked all his sons and subjects to give him youth and take away his old age in return. Only Pooru agreed, becoming old and giving Yayati youth. Yayati enjoyed sensual pleasures for thousands of years more until he realized their meaninglessness and returned the youth to Pooru, taking his old age back and going to the forests.

Karnad's interpretation of this traditional tale gives it new meaning and significance relevant to life today. His *Yayati* rejects the passionate attachment to which the king is a slave and advocates a life of responsibilities and self-sacrifice as represented by Pooru in the play. He uses the myth to expose the absurdities of life with all its elemental passions and conflicts and to show man's eternal struggle to achieve perfection.

The play begins with the Sutradhara's appearance on stage, revealing to the audience that it is a mythical play. The characters, incidents, and circumstances relate to an ancient time, but the message conveyed through them is relevant to modern times as well. The Sutradhara emphasizes the theme of responsibility and pleads for action and responsibility in the performance, which brings joy to life. Sukracharya

was the preceptor of the Asuras, and the Asura king Vrishaparva greatly respected him because he knew the secret of Mritasanjibani, a drug that brought the dead back to life. Devayani was Sukracharya's only daughter and was spoiled by her father's indulgence.

One morning, Sharmishtha, the Asura princess and daughter of Vrishaparva, visited Sukracharya's hermitage with her friends. She asked Sukracharya to allow Devayani to join them for a bath in a nearby lake and left their clothes on the bank before getting into the water. Suddenly, a storm blew up and scattered their clothes. The girls quickly came out of the lake and got dressed. By mistake, Princess Sharmishtha wore Devayani's clothes, which angered Devayani. An argument ensued, and as a result, Sharmishtha pushed Devayani into a dry well and left the place. While hunting in the forest, Yayati, the scion of the Bharata dynasty, found the well and was surprised to see Devayani lying at the bottom. Devayani introduced herself and said that she fell into the well. She then asked the king to pull her out, which he did. Devayani demanded that Yayati marry her because he held her right hand when he helped her out of the well. However, Yayati refused her request because he belonged to the lower Kshatriya caste, and Devayani was a Brahmin maid. Yayati left, and Devayani continued to sit under a tree.

Sukracharya went in search of her and found her under a tree, crying. She told him everything, hiding her faults. She refused to return to the kingdom because she was badly insulted by the Asura Princess, Sharmishtha. Sukracharya left the Asura kingdom, announcing that he was leaving because of his daughter Devayani's unhappy conflict with Princess Sharmishtha, but Vrishaparva begged him to stay. Sukracharya left the decision with his daughter Devayani. Vrishaparva begged for forgiveness for his daughter, and Devayani agreed to return on one condition: Sharmishtha should be her handmaid for the rest of her life. Sharmishtha agreed for the sake of her father, the king.

One day, King Yayati passed by and Devayani introduced Sharmishtha as her maid. She reminded Yayati to marry her. Devayani took Yayati to her father, who gave his blessing on their marriage. They were soon married and led a happy life. Devayani had

two sons. Sharmishtha was given a place to live in a shaded glade called Ashok Vatika. One day, Yayati happened to pass by Ashok Vatika where Sharmishtha lived. Sharmishtha confessed that she too was in love with the king and wanted to marry him. Yayati agreed, and they wed in secret. Yayati had two sons from Devayani, named Yadu and Turvasu, and three sons from Sharmishtha, named Druhyu, Anu, and Puru. When Devayani found out about Yayati's relationship with Sharmishtha and their three sons, she felt shocked and betrayed. Sharmishtha's words added fuel to the fire.: SHARMISHTHA. "Me his concubine? You must be joking. Yes, I got him into bed with me. That was my revenge on you. After all, as a slave, what weapon did I have but my body? Well, I am even with you now. And I am free. I shall go where I please" (2.29).

Devayani went to her father Sukracharya, who was displeased with the king, and cursed that he would lose his youth and become an old man. His curse could not be taken back and added that the only concession he could give was that if Yayati wanted, he could give his old age to someone and take his youth from him. Yayati requested all his five sons one by one to give their youth to him to enjoy worldly happiness. All the sons, except Pooru, rejected his demand. When his wife, Chitrlekha came to know about her husband's decision from Swarnalatha (maid), she felt happy that he was not just an ordinary man and had taken such a great decision. Then she realized that Pooru's decision was wrong and began to hate him. Having no other way Chitrlekha committed suicide. Yayati realized his mistake when Chitrlekha committed suicide. Yayati stood staring at the dead body of Chitrlekha and spoke to himself:

YAYATI. I thought there were two options and death. No, it is living and dying we have to choose between. And you have shown me that dying can go on for all eternity. Suddenly, I see myself, my animal body frozen in youth, decaying, deliquescing, turning rancid. You are lying on your pyre, child burning for life, while I sink slowly in this quagmire, my body wrinkleless and grasping, but unable to grasp anything. (3.68)

After returning to the forest, Yayati spent the rest of his days in austerities, meditating upon Brahman, the ultimate reality and he attained heaven. Yayati represents the common man who, despite experiencing various forms of happiness, remains discontented and constantly seeks new pleasures and enjoyment. Unfortunately, the pursuit of pleasure has become the supreme religion and the ultimate goal in life. Every individual, regardless of their age or position in life, must take responsibility for their journey. It is unfortunate that King Yayati and his son Pooru only realized the error of their ways at the cost of Chitrlekha's life. Her protest is an attack on male chauvinism and patriarchy.

Every individual is an architect of his future. He is expected to perform his task. To be a man is to be responsible. Shirking responsibility leads to drastic consequences. This is the prominent message revealed by Karnad through his plays. In *Yayati*, almost 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, though irresponsibly chooses to commit suicide by consuming poison, doesn't want to die at the very last minute. Ultimately Yayati is forced to lead a life of renunciation with Devayani and Sharmistha. While Pooru appears to be great in sacrificing his youth for the sake of his father, he drives his wife Chitrlekha to death. Chitrlekha mocks both Pooru and Yayati for their ingenious notions when she commits suicide. She affirms life by her death.

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