

Contemporary Relevance in Girish Karnad's Yayathi

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Abstract

Girish Karnad play Yayathi mainly focussed on the contemporary view. It has original source in the first chapter of Mahabharata 'Adiparva'. Girish has slightly changed some concepts from Mahabharata. The story is about king Yayathi's love for eternal youth. Yayathi forsake his life of sensual delights only after indulging in it for a thousand years. But in Yayathi, Girish makes Yayathi to repent for his mistake and accept the natural, normal life in this world. Father-Son relationship in the play is remarkably stressed. As a father, Yayathi is failed and as a son Pooru is passed. The play Yayathi is based on the theme of responsibility. Though the play retells the age old story of the mythical king, Karnad has given the traditional tale a new meaning highly relevant to today's life.

KEYWORDS: Immortality, Myth, Accord, Demoralize, Endowed.

Girish Karnad, perhaps the most renowned media personality in the contemporary India, is India's leading playwright and an adept practitioner of the performing arts. His plays are primarily written in Kannada and then are translated into other languages. The English translation of his plays is his own. They have brought him international recognition as a pre-eminent contemporary playwright. To his credit Karnad has Yayathi Tughlaq, Hayavadana, Naga-Mandala, Tale-Danda and The Fire and The Rain. He has been widely acclaimed by both the theatre and drama critics for certain aspects of his plays: plot construction, characterisation, song, symbolism, use of myth and folktales, reinterpretation of history, projection of contemporary social and psychological problems.

In this paper, an attempt has been to examine critically Karnad's depiction of contemporaneity in his play, Yayathi. By exploiting myths and legends, he tried to show how they are quite relevant in portraying a modern man's dilemma. In other word, the myths and legends provide him ample scope to take up significant issues like problems of identity, patriarchy, man-woman relationship and pervasive sense of alienation.

In Yayathi Karnad has taken the traditional Puranic themes but has given a fresh interpretation to it. The play has pioneered a style, which blends the elements of indigenous theatre. It is a story from the history of the unknown past but problem discussed in the play are not modern one. Karnad employed myth in the play.

In classical Greek, "mythos" signified the story whether true or invented. In its central modern significance however a myth is one story in a system of hereditary stories of ancient origin which were once believed to be true by a

particular cultural group, and which were once believed to be true by a particular cultural group, and which served to explain the world and things happen as they do, to provide a rationale for social customs and observances, and to establish the sanctions for the rules by which people conduct their lives. Most myths are related to social rituals –set forms and procedures in sacred ceremonies but anthropologists disagree as to whether rituals generated myths or myths generated rituals (Literary Terms , P 230).

The function of myth is to transcend its own factual case by magnifying it, elaborating upon it, refining it and then enriching itself at each telling and retelling. The myth of Yayathi has been reported time and again. It traverses the generation, it has liberated itself from time frames and spatial constraints. Karnad use this myth in theatre within the three unites of time, space and action. In this way universal and most modern qualities of the myth have been exposed to the audience. In this regard Veena Noble Dass opines that : “ By using these myths, he tried to show that absurdity of life with all its elemental passions and conflicts and man’s eternal struggle to achieve perfection (1990,P44).

Yayathi retells the age-old story of the mythical king who in his longing for eternal youth sought to borrow the vitality of his own son. Karnad has borrowed the myth from the Mahabharata. Karnad has given the traditional tale a new meaning and significance highly relevant in the context of life today. The symbolic theme of Yayathi’s attachment to life and its pleasures and also his final renunciation are retained. As the play opens, Sutradhara informs the audience that it is a mythical play-a page from the history of 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 time as well. Sutradhara says that neither a scholar nor an ordinary person can escape the burden of responsibility where in lies the joy of life. Whether it is an old man in search of lost youth or a saint lost in the darkness or the mute. Sutradhara brings forth the theme of responsibility.

The play starts on a quiet note, with Swarnalatha complaining to Devayani against Sharmistha. Though Devayani defends Sharmistha, she does not accord proper respect to Devayani because she knows too well that Yayatyhi married the latter as she was the daughter of Shukracharya who could bless him with immortality. When Sharmistha and Devayani have an argument Sharmistha tells Devayani :

“Sharmistha : Except that he is not lusting for you. You poor darling , he lusts for immortality. Your father ‘s art of Sanjeevani “. (Yayathi 2008 , Pg 11)

When Devayani insists that Yayathi did not know her identity when he married her , Sharmistha sarcastically comment : “ Sharmistha.....even with prostitutes picked off the street , the first thing a man does is ask her name. And you say with you , the king dispensed with even that formality ? You knew what would happen if you didn’t act quickly . I mean , you didn’t want the Kacha experience again”. (Yayathi 2008 , Pg 13)

Despite the on going conflict between Devayani and Sharmistha , Devayani does not order the latter to go away from the palace. Thus she is the one who is responsible for Sharmistha in the palace. When the crisis in the life of Yayathi comes, 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 Yayathi . When Yayathi learns that Shukracharya has cursed him with old age he does not accept the responsibility of what he has done. The curse demoralize Yayathi . Yayathi loses control on himself and does not know how to handle the situation. Sharmistha tries to pacify Yayathi by asking him to accept what has come his way . Yayathi gets violent and refuses to accept old age. He remains adamant. He goes to the extent of saying that Pooru must be celebrating the occasion for it gives him an opportunity to assume the mantle of King immediately.

When Pooru comes back and informs that Yayathi’s curse can be redeemed if some young person accepted his old age. Yayathi is jubilant. Again when Pooru informs Yayathi that nobody is ready to accept the curse, the later does not believe it. Pooru ask Yayathi to accept the curse, the latter does not believe it. Pooru ask Yayathi to accept his old age and go to the forest but in return Yayathi cries bitterly and with folded hands begs at Pooru. He decides to accept the curse of senility inflicted on his father. When Pooru proposes that the curse given to Yayathi should be transferred to him, Sharmistha tries to dissuade him. She then reminds him of his responsibility towards his wife. But Pooru doesn’t resist from his decision. Yayathi, thus succeeds in transferring his old age and his sins to Pooru. 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 the truth.

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. Pooru wants her support for the responsibility he has undertaken. Chitrlekha gladly extends her support. But when she sees the face of old Pooru, Chitrlekha realizes what has befallen her. She gets frightened. She curses herself for not being as great as her husband, for turning her husband out. She requests Pooru to reconsider his decision but to no avail. Even Yayathi tries to console Chitrlekha.

Contemporaneity of the play is wonderfully depicted in Chitrlekha – Yayathi dialogue. Chitrlekha is not a modern woman but she is endowed with energy which she tries to use for a place in a male-dominated world. Patriarchy has been justified by Yayathi when he consoles Chitrlekha by saying that she should accept the ‘old’ Pooru happily to oblige Bharata family. When she refuses, he exercises his authority as her father-in-law and as a king. The male has voice, presence and power, whereas the female is silent, absent and powerless. Women are supposed to be taught to repress their desire. Thus when Chitrlekha refuses, Yayathi exercises his authority as her father-in-law and as a king and orders to obey him. When Chitrlekha says to leave the kingdom he scolds her saying:

“Yayathi: Do you remember the vow you took

not so long ago-with the gods as your witnesses,
to the walk in the path marked by his foot

prints whether home or into wilderness....”(Yayathi 2008,
Pg 62).

Chitrlekha adds ironically : “ Or into the funeral pyre?”(62). This irritated Yayathi because he expected that patriarchy would speak through her but she is a bit away from the others. Chitrlekha sees Yayathi as a male only, a male belonging to Bharata dynasty. She says that, she cannot wait for years for her husband to come back to his youth. Life does not move with the calendar. She proceeds further in her argument and exposes the reality with a statement, which is most modern in assertion:

“ Chitrlekha: I did not know Prince when I
married him. I married him for his youth, for
his potential to plant the seed of the Bharata’s in my
womb. He has lost potency now. He

doesn’t possess any of the qualities for which I
married him. But you do”.(Yayathi 2008, Pg66) Chitrlekha
thinks Yayathi as the man who is bestowed with masculinity and
authority. She offers herself to Yayathi. He is shocked. He rebukes her
and accuses her of harbouring such low thoughts. But she feels a sense
of incompleteness and vacuum within herself. She feels meaningless.
Chitrlekha seems to be in search of a man who would define her and
provide her some recognition in a society ruled by males. Finding
herself in such a sad plight, she says to Yayathi. “You have taken over
your son’s youth. It follows that you should accept everything that
comes attached to it”.(Yayathi 2008,Pg66) She seems to be ‘New
Women’ not in the sense that she challenges the patriarchy but in the
sense that she challenged the social obligation and moral laws. She says
that morality is the fabrication of the human mind. In this statement
she is very close to absurdities.

Her rebellious is very much like that of western
absurdities, who also thought that morality is human fabrication.
Chitrlekha’s approach to life is an integrated one. Ugliness,
Destruction, Beauty and Creation for her are part of truth. She remains
a rebellious figure within the male dominated world. Yayathi exploits
female community for the cheap sense of ‘self ‘, Sharmistha accuses
Yayathi:

“Sharmistha: 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. our Majesty. A woman
dead, another gone mad, and a third in danger of he life”.(Yayathi,Pg67-68)

Even though the play is motivated by their own concept of the opposite sex, they do consequently try to seek their identity and being within those parameters.

It is widely held that while one's sex as a man or woman is determined by anatomy the prevailing concepts of **gender** – of the traits that are conceived to constitute what is masculine and what is feminine in temperament and behaviour are largely, if not entirely, social constructs that were generated by the pervasive patriarchal biases of our civilisation.(Literary Terms,Pg125)

It is true that their quest for completeness is achieved through each other, yet the passage of time had resulted into changes in situation and character make it at least allusive, temporary if not impossible.

Further Karnard attempts to interpret the Yayathi-myth on the theme of responsibility and invents some new relationship applicable to modern sensibilities. Karnard restructures the story as an ironic drama of discontent, futility and death. Yayathi is a self-centred epicurean who invites the curse because he cannot overcome his desire for Sharmishtha although Devayani has warned him about the destructive consequences of his choice. Karnard's interest does not lie in recreating ancient myths but reinterpreting them to suit his artistic purpose.

Yayathi deals with the theme of responsibilities. Yayathi the king of Hastinapur tries to neglect his responsibilities. Fully engrossed in sensual pleasures, Yayathi 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 the contemporary society a common man is also found busy with material and carnal pleasures. With his genuine artistic touch Karnard refashions the mythic theme to make a contemporary statement. Karnad projects the ancient king as a selfish father demanding his son's youth in exchange for his curse and this selfishness of Yayathi becomes conspicuous.

Though the character, the incidents and circumstances are related to the ancient times, the reality delineated in the play is applicable to contemporary life as well. When Yayathi comes to know about the false of the curse, he loses his self control and totally fails to handle the situation. He is not ready to accept the responsibility of his own misdeed. On the other hand Yayathi has a strong attraction for life and fear of the curse. To him temptation of sensual pleasure is too hard to resist.

When preparation to welcome the newly married couple, Pooru and Chitrlekha are being made, Yayathi is engaged in making love to Sharmishtha. The amorous instincts prevent him from thinking of his son's happiness. When he is informed that the curse will not have its effect on him if a young man agrees to take it upon himself, he is very much delighted without knowing who is going to accept the curse. Without thinking of the pros and cons Pooru accepts his father's

curse. Karnard's depiction of domineering father and weak-willed son relates mythical story to contemporary situation of father-son relationship.

Thus, the play depicts Yayathi as the champion of patriarchy and his attitude to women. He feels that a woman should not violate the norms determined by patriarchy with his masculinity and authority, he treats women as those who are made for fulfilling his carnal whims, but he is unable to rule totally over woman. Karnard does not appreciate the suppressed and subordinated position of woman, on the contrary, he creates her as a complementary to man.

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