

The Psychological Deterioration of Characters and Elements of Myth in Girish Karnad's Play Yayati

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Abstract

This paper attempts to study the psychological degeneration of characters and the presence of mythical elements in the play Yayati. Karnad traverses through unfathomable depths of old Indian mythology to make the social and cultural problems that reflects the traditional Indian society. He portrays a modern context of characters by the amalgamation of symbols. His plays are usually found very close to common people with a very realistic approach towards the issues of humans. He used not only myths to frame the plot but also to pinpoint the human psyche and cultural practices in the society. He took mythical elements from the Mahabharatha with an intention to examine the ludicrousness of life with all its fundamental passions and crisis. The play focuses on man's eternal struggle to achieve perfection, dreams and desires.

Key Words: Myth, Psychology, Revisionist Retelling

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Girish Karnad is associated with the 'Navya Movement' in Kannada Literature. He is also an actor and film producer who has won national distinction. He, along with many other writers, created a new ambience in the Kannada theatre which had run to seed, basing itself on set conventions and formulae. He is bold enough to explore newer combinations from traditional structures for effective communication. Karnad, in Eliot's terms, is a writer who is 'conscious of the presentness of the past.' He holds the view that there is no such thing as 'complete originality' owing nothing to the past. He writes:

While I was writing the play, I saw it only as an escape from my stressful situation. But looking back, I am amazed at how precisely the myth reflected my anxieties at that moment, my resentment with all those who seemed to demand that I sacrifice my future. By the time I had finished working on Yayati during the three weeks it took the ship to reach England and in the lonely cloisters of the university - the myth had enabled me to articulate to myself a set of values that I had been unable to arrive at

rationally. Whether to return home finally seemed the most minor of issues; the myth had nailed me to the past. (Karnad 74)

In all his plays he falls back on the past for his theme such as folklore, mythology, legends and history. For example, Yayati is a tale taken from the Mahabharatha, Tughlaq is a tale of one of the notable kings of the medieval Indian, known as the 'wise fool' in history, Nagamandala takes its plot from Kannada folklore, Hayavadana is derived from the sixth story of Vetala Panchavimyalats (Katha Saritsagara of Soma Deva Bhatta) etc.

Myth and Psychology

A myth is a traditional, rudimentary narrative by which every culture validates itself. Myths usually deal with the origins of human and natural phenomenon. Myths generally involve a considerable body of supernatural, fantastic and imaginative elements. In the field of literature and arts, myths are not merely 'false' or 'unreliable' but stories that contain deeper truths about life, existence, death, divinity and the cosmos.

The psychological theories developed by Sigmund Freud and C.G. Jung had drastically

changed the study of myths, legends, folklores, and religion. Now myths are seen as expressions of universal human condition and desire. Moreover, these studies reveal more rewarding information about human nature and society. Prior to the beginning of the twentieth century, the world witnessed the dissemination of psychological commentaries on the anatomy of myths. Scottish anthropologist James George Frazer's *The Golden Bough* (1890) presented a vast body of information about myth, folklores, and rituals around the world. Other works like Andrew Lang's *Myth, Ritual and Religion* (1887), Edward Burnett Taylor's *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Language, Art and Custom* (1871) and Max Muller's *Sacred Books of the East* (1879-1910) were precursors to the changed perspectives on myth. The advancement in the field of psychology paved the way for the use of psychological concepts in anthropological researches to define the belief system and religious system in modern human societies.

Indebted to the pioneering work of Freud in uncovering the pathological relationship between myths and dreams and of Jung in exposing the role of myth in understanding the archetypal basis of the collective unconscious, later researchers into the unconscious have taken the fundamental insights of the founding fathers of psychoanalysis in different, and sometimes contrary, directions. (Burnett IX)

The prominent of the figures who approach the concept of myths from a psychological perspective are Sigmund Freud and Carl Gustav Jung. Freud's psychoanalytical approach and Jung's depth psychology contributed much to the reinterpretation of established myths across cultures. Mythology can best be defined as a belief system constituted by ideas about a concept that is

imparted to the members of a group. According to Jean Rudhart, myth is a story that "signifies differently than conceptual speech and contains a deep meaning that is distinct from its surface meaning" (Rudhart 177).

Myth and literature have been interwoven with psychoanalysis since Sigmund Freud's celebrated use in *The Interpretation of Dreams* of Sophocles' telling of the fate of Oedipus. This alliance is not surprising, for, like myth and literature, psychoanalysis is largely about narratives of that which cannot be approached more closely or conveyed more vividly by other means, and in psychoanalysis, as in myth and literature, the stories told are often carried by and imbued with metaphor and other tropes. In turn, psychoanalysis, in its various guises, has contributed substantially to the understanding of creative work and, in particular, literature and literary language. (Burnett xiii)

The Myth of Yayati

The myth of Yayati is a story found in the Mahabharata. Yayati's tale is intertwined with the story of his wife Devayani who is the daughter of Sukracharya, the chief priest of the Asuras. Sharmishta, the daughter of the King of Daitya clan of Asura once humiliated and threw Devayani into a well. It is Yayati who rescues Devayani by holding her right hand and pulling her out of the well. Devayani asks Yayati to marry her. However, the existing custom of Pratiloma restricts a Kshatriya from marrying a Brahmin. This refusal enrages Devayani. She complains to her father about Sharmishta and Yayati. Yayati, then, is told to leave the country and Sharmishta is given the punishment of serving Devayani after her marriage. After Sukracharya makes some amendments in the Pratiloma custom, Yayati is able to marry Devayani. Sharmishta agrees to serve Devayani considering her father's honour. Besides, it is

Devayani's irresistible beauty that also attracted Yayati. He says, "Because you are the most beautiful woman I know. And at that moment you were an apparition of the kind I had never seen before: dirty, disheveled, ravishing. All at once" (Karnad 14).

Gradually Sharmishta gets attracted to Yayati and entices him that results in their marriage without the knowledge of Devayani. Having realized Yayati's disloyalty, she again complains to Sukracharya, who then curses Yayati with premature old age. This is a significant point in Yayati's myth. As a highly sensual man this curse makes him thoroughly disappointed. After numerous requests, Sukracharya gives him a solution - if anyone is willing to exchange for his old age, he will be able to regain his youth. Finally, one of his sons, Puru, agrees and gives up his youth for his father. As a result of the action, Puru becomes an old man while Yayati obtains his youth. Yayati pursues worldly pleasures with a revived interest. But the more he consumes it, the thirstier he grows.

Finally, he realizes the vicious effects of untamed and never-ending desire. He becomes aware of the true nature of happiness and peace. So, he withdraws to the forest to perform penance.

Girish Karnad's Reinterpretation of the Myth of Yayati

Yayati (1961) is Karnad's first play. In his retelling of the story, Karnad infuses the age-old Yayati myth with new meanings and psychological insights. Karnad's play is a psychological exploration of human desire. In the play Karnad blends the issues of class, caste, gender, and desire. Karnad's Yayati goes through a series of horrible consequences. The play is also a reflection on the existential crisis and moral and psychological deterioration of man. Karnad focuses on the adverse effects of Yayati's

moral transgression. The very nature of Yayati is visible when Sharmishta asks him to come with her:

Solitude? What are you talking about? I don't want solitude. I can't bear it. I want people around me. Queens, ministers, armies, enemies, the populace. I love them all. Solitude? The very thought is repulsive. If I have to know myself, Sharmishta, I have to be young. I must have my youth. (Karnad 43)

He introduces some new characters into the narrative (Chitrlekha and Swarnalatha) to establish his point. Puru's wife Chitrlekha, who wants to have a child, finds it difficult to accept her husband's old age. Despite her wish to offer herself to Yayati, commits suicide due to humiliation. Yayati is horrified to see the unfortunate events followed by deed. He finally decides to return the favour to Puru in a moment of regret.

In his revisionist strategy, Karnad focuses his attention mainly on the conflict-torn Puru than Yayati. In the source text Puru willfully accepts his duty. He does not think twice. But Karnad's Puru is torn between the duty of a son and the desire to regain his lost youth. He is desperate to escape from this dilemma. To make the conflict of Puru more visible, Karnad brings the character of Chitrlekha to the scene, who is the wife of Puru. At one point Chitrlekha says: "I will not let my husband step back into my bedroom unless he returns a young man" (Karnad 61). Karnad's Yayati is not a truth-seeker and a

spiritually reformed man as we see in the original story. His long span in the pursuit of happiness in finite things reveals the futility of human chase after desire and gratification. The search for material pleasure always ends in sorrow, disappointment, satiety and disillusionment. Yayati says:

I thought there were two options -life 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. (Karnad 68)

In the source text, both Yayati and Puru are free from existential crises. They are well aware of their motivations and choices. They don't suffer from any guilt or remorse. The play advocates the principle that each individual is what one chooses to be or make one self. The individual is placed at the centre of the scene in Karnad's craft.

In his interview with Tutun Mukherjee, Girish Karnad says:

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

According to Harry Levin, "myth, at all events, is raw material, which can be the stuff of literature" (229-230). By using literary archetypes, Karnad connects the past and the present, the archetypal and the real. Myths form an indispensable part in the formation of the cultural consciousness of a land. As a believer in the Jungian collective racial consciousness, Karnad's plays are literary

investigations of the Indian past in its collective format. According to Clyde Kluckhohn, the borrowed myths are "reinterpreted to fit pre-existing cultural emphasis" (58).

As Sinha says, "Girish Karnad's art can be described as a vision of reality" (123). He employs the traditional myths to tell the modern man's agonies and dilemmas. Karnad himself admitted that "the borrowed tales are given a turn of the screw, as it were, which works wonders with his plays" (Chakravartee 36). All his plays have a storyline with which the readers/audience are more or less familiar. His substantial variations from the source texts are attempts to infuse the old legends with new significations.

Karnad, through his characters, delineate the predicament of being human - Yayati is torn between sensuality and responsibility, Puru is dilemmatic about duty and desire, Chitrlekha appears to be inherently selfish in her proposal to Yayati and Sharmishta is evidently self-centered and vicious. When Devayani discovers Yayati's illicit affair with Sharmishta, she says:

... 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. (Karnad 29)

Through the portrayal of the deteriorating individual self, Karnad posits a critique of the established and unchallenged values of Indian culture. Chitrlekha's unwillingness to accept her husband's sacrifice in the name of filial duty is an example for this. She also quizzes the moral authority of Yayati in accepting her husband Puru's youth for the sake of his bodily pleasures. She says:

Chitrlekha: I did not know Prince Pooru when I married him. I married him for his youth. For his potential to plant the seed of

the Bharatas in my womb. He has lost that potency now. He doesn't possess any of the qualities for which I married him. But you do.

Yayati (flabbergast): Chitrlekha!

Chitrlekha: You have taken over your son's youth. It follows that you should accept everything that comes attached to it.

Yayati: Whore! Are you inviting me to fornication? (Karnad 65-66) As Gupta and Sharmawrites:

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. (36)

Conclusion

Girish Karnad's Plays deal with man's confrontation with the elemental passions of existence. With his strategy of revisionist telling of myths and folktales, he penetrates into the conflictual, chaotic, elusive and contradictory nature of human existence. By doing this he tries to deconstruct many socio-cultural myths regarding human nature. The fundamental struggle of being human is one of the recurrent concerns of Karnad. This concern is visible even in his very first attempt in the form of the play Yayati. Yadav Raju writes:

Karnad's Yayati retells the age-old story of the king who in his longing for eternal youth does not hesitate to usurp the youth and vitality of his son.

Karnad invests new meaning and significance for contemporary life and reality by exploring the king's motivations. In the Mahabharata, Yayati understands the nature of desire itself and realizes that fulfillment neither diminishes nor eliminates desire. In the drama, Karnad makes Yayati confront the horrifying consequences of not being able to relinquish desire; and through the other characters he highlights the issue of class, caste and gender coiled within a web of desire. (18)

A 'myth plus psychology' technique constitutes one of the significant dimensions of Girish Karnad's dramaturgy. His first play Yayati stands out as a triumph in this regard.

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