



REVIEW OF RESEARCH

ISSN: 2249-894X

IMPACT FACTOR : 5.7631 (UIF)

VOLUME - 10 | ISSUE - 9 | JUNE - 2021



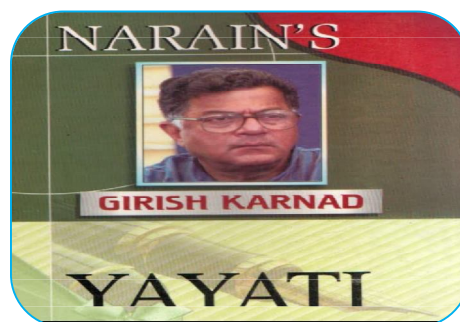
UNHEARD FEMALE VOICES IN GIRISH KARNAD'S YAYATI

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ABSTRACT

As a playwright, poet, actor, critic and translator Girish Karnad holds a unique position not only in India but also in the world. His outstanding dramatic genius reveals out magnificently first in his native language Kannad to retain the ethnicity of his texts, and later on he himself translates them in English that earns him a subtle global recognition. In his writings, Girish Karnad makes artistic use of myths, symbols, metaphors, and folkloristic devices for depicting the complexities of human behaviour and relationships within the family. In his first play Yayati (1961), Karnad has used myth not only to fiddle with contemporary social and moral issues, and to reveal the cultural dialectics of India's past but also to converse with the problems of human beings as whole. Present paper intends to focus on the unheard female voices in Karnad's play Yayati.



KEYWORDS: Female Psyche, Hushed, Suppressed, Myth, Folklore.

INTRODUCTION

Many playwrights have dealt with the contemporary religious, political, and social issues through mythological themes and characters in Indian English Drama. About which Nand Kumar remarks: "Their sources and approaches may be different but all of them aim at solving material and moral problems through myths, acquainting the West with our rich cultural heritage and traditions, and popularizing Indian drama in India as well as abroad." (*Indian English Drama*, 208) So far as the myth of Yayati is concerned, Girish Karnad was greatly fascinated by this character of Mahabharata. In an interview, he says:

I was excited by the story of Yayati, this exchange of ages between the father and the son, which seemed to me terribly powerful and terribly modern. At the same time, I was reading a lot of Sartre and the Existentialists. This consistent harping on responsibility which the Existentialists indulge in suddenly seemed to link up with the story of Yayati. (Paul, Rajender: 1971)

Beside the main myth, around which the whole plot rotates out, there is another myth woven within, that is the myth of Devyani and Kacha, a Brahmin boy who came to Shukracharya for learning the art of 'Sanjeevani Vidya.' Devyani's proposal of marriage was refused by him saying that he is like her brother who was brought up in her family. The refusal made Devyani furious so she cursed him that he would not be able to use the knowledge of 'Sanjeevani Vidya' in future. In return, Kacha cursed her never to get married with a Brahmin. It is this myth which extends the structural meanings to the plot of the play.

'*Sanjeevani Vidya* is "the art of reviving the dead, which promises release from the limitations of the fleeting life, this self is trapped in." (Karnad, Girish. *Yayati*, 6) The aspiration to become immortal is like creating an imbalance in the process of nature. Prof. Budholia analyses it psychologically, "The metaphor of "*Sanjivini Vidya*" serves two intents of the dramatist: the sentiment of fear and the quenchless lust for the fulfillment of desire. The desire as the seed of all human thoughts motivates a man for transgressing the social and moral codes of life." (*Yayati*, 22)

Yayati, the protagonist, is a Puranic king and the son of king Nahusha; he is one of the ancestors of Pandavas. The play opens with Yayati, the husband of Devyani, the daughter of Asuras's Guru, Shukracharya. Yayati is carried away, with a wave of emotion, to see the miserable plight of slave Sharmishtha, the princess of Rakshasas. Yayati and Sharmishtha share the bed despite of the warning by his father-in-law. Yayati was cursed to old age for his moral transgression, and he wishes to exchange his old age with his son Pooru, who has just returned home with his newly wed wife Chitralkha. Yayati takes the youth of Pooru but soon realizes the impropriety of his shallow decision. He is shocked to see the disastrous results of his action as Chitralkha, not able to bear her husband's old age commits suicide. Finally, Yayati takes back the curse from Pooru in a moment of remorse, renounces the world, and retires into a forest.

The play has four female characters, magnificently woven by the dramatist with different colour of threads. On the one hand, we have Devyani, ambitious, jealous, arrogant of her birth but with no voice at all. On the other hand, there is Sharmishtha, intelligent, revengeful, with a ready voice but not to be heard. Chitralkha with royal blood in her veins, is confident, assertive, speaks as a true feminist, but proves to be a coward in the end and commits suicide. Lastly, there is a maid, Swarnlata, the most sensible lady who suffers the most in the play but does not yield to destiny.

The most audible and acceptable voice in the play is of Sharmishtha. Though a slave yet the whole plot rotates round her bewitching personality. The solidity of her character is introduced by herself very beautifully when Yayati warns her to send back to her home due to her teasing and humiliating way of talking with Devyani and about her stay "amongst strangers against your will." (*Yayati*, 17) In reply, she makes quite a witty use of the word 'word' thus:

Against my will? Who said so? No, sir. I agreed to this arrangement. This is my life now. My home. Devyani has her father's word that I shall be her slave. My father has given her father his word that I shall be her slave. And I have given my father my word that it shall be so. We can't go back on all those words. Too many words to break. (*Yayati*, 17)

Thus, she gives the lesson of keeping the words in one's life whatsoever the circumstances are. She does not prefer freedom from slavery due to the promise made to her father. On being asked the reason of staying in this hell, she refers proudly to 'the code' of rakshasas. She does not even hesitate to justify their choice of living in chaos before an Arya king: "...we rakshasas have chosen to live in chaos, proud that it is a chaos of our own creation. And yet of course we also despise ourselves for not being lucid and rational like you Aryas. To be thus convoluted is our prerogative." (*Yayati*, 18) With logical arguments, she protests against slavery which "turns that person into an animal. A domesticated animal. One's will to act is destroyed. One's selfhood humbled into grateful submission. 'Accept that crumb, wait for a pat on the back.' To be a good slave is to have all your vileness extracted from you." (*Yayati*, 17) To assert her 'original self', Sharmishtha screams and snarls against the injustice done to her, as a slave, though she knows well its futility also. Like a psychologist, she describes the agony and the frustration of a slave too: "I snarl because I want to retain a particle of my original self. I abuse and rave to retrieve an iota of it. It's all useless of course. Scream as I may, I know there is no escape from the degradation. The louder I scream, the more I declare myself a slave. That is the point. I have decided to turn myself into a performing freak." (*Yayati*, 18)

Sharmishtha is destined to be the slave of Devyani for the whole life due to a furious quarrel between them. A slight mistake of exchange of blouses made Devyani so annoyed that she criticized the whole of rakshasas race sarcastically saying: "You poor people. You only have to get into a piece of Arya attire. And you start fantasizing." (*Yayati*, 20) Sensitive Sharmishtha could not brush off these bitter words as they were uttered by "Devyani- my Devyani - Devyani to whom I had dedicated myself!"

(*Yayati*, 20) Hopelessly, she pushed Devyani into a well nearby. No one, including her father, could measure the depth of her heart and she was asked to be a slave of Devyani forever, as the punishment. Though a slave she raises her voice still, sometimes to be heard and at other times it remains unheard. Following of her dialogue with Yayati will show her awareness about her rights: "It is true I am your wife's slave. You may dismiss me as you wish. But you asked to see me. And as you said yourself, I am a princess by birth. I have a right to be heard." (*Yayati*,18) By her skill of authentic arguments, she forces Yayati to make relationship with her. She, in fact, traps him in her words when Yayati grabs her right hand while she tries to drink the "lethal poison, purest extract of wild mushrooms," (*Yayati*, 21) Sharmishtha reminds him: "Sir, you are holding my right hand. And I am a Princess." (*Yayati*, 21) The on-going conflict between the two- Devyani and Sharmishtha - results into Yayati's involvement in extra-marital affair with Sharmishtha which was her long-awaited aim. And then, she objects on being called a concubine and sets herself right thus: "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?" (*Yayati*, 29) When she is asked to leave the palace by Devyani, surprisingly Yayati not only defends her but also tries to justify his act of clandestine liaison: "Because I feel bewitched by her...I have never felt so entranced by a woman...Is it some spell she has cast? Some secret sorcery? I can feel youth bursting out within me again. Her beauty, her intelligence, her wit, her abandon in love. Not to marry her is to lose her, don't you see? I must have her." (*Yayati*, 30)

Sharmishtha is the guiding force to Yayati but unfortunately, he is heedless to her voice. She talks philosophically about so many issues like life, death, renunciation etc. She warns him about death saying: "You cannot flirt with one death and then pass on to taste the next one. There is no next one." (*Yayati*, 23) The strength of her character- the outcome of her sensibility - is discernible when she tries to make Yayati realize the reality of old age and its decrepitude like a true thinker after he has been cursed by Shukracharya for his immoral liaison act thus: "No one can escape old age. You have just hastened its arrival. Let us accept it." (*Yayati*, 42)

Another important female in the play is Chitrlekha who is introduced to us by Sutradhar in 'Prologue' thus: "Prince Pooru, is returning home...is bringing home with him his bride, Chitrlekha, the princess of Anga." (*Yayati*, 6) Soon Sutradhar tells the intention of her getting married in this Bharata Dynasty and also hints about the doubt in fulfillment of it: "She must proudly bear on her breasts the tooth-mark incised by their offspring. Must. Nothing, however, ever happens as it must. What we have in front of us is not a well-charted map but a network of paths, many of which plunge into the shrubbery and disappear before we have even registered them." (*Yayati*, 6)

Pooru's great sacrifice of exchanging his youth with the old age of his father brings disastrous results. His newly wedded wife Chitrlekha is unable to bear her husband's premature old age. Though earlier she regards herself a "blessed" woman because he is not an ordinary man so orders Swarnlata, the maid, to "leave a couple of them (lamps) burning" because "I want to dazzle my eyes with his glory." (*Yayati*, 56) She wishes "to perform the arati" (*Yayati*, 57) to welcome him into her heart. Though pooru warns her about all this saying: "This is no ordinary old age, devi...The sum total of Father's transgression. The burden of the whole dynasty, perhaps." (*Yayati*, 57) When Chitrlekha looks his old and withered face due to decrepitude, she asks him to leave the room screamingly. She curses herself for not being as great as her husband. Yayati asks her to accept the destiny like a true queen of Bharata Dynasty but Chitrlekha refuses to yield meekly to his pleas and asserts like a feminist: "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." (*Yayati*, 65)

When Yayati suggests her to "rise above trivialities" and "be superhuman", then breaking all the moral codes, she asks him to take the place of her husband because Pooru can hardly fulfill the promises of marriage now. Prof. Budholia remarks on it: "The disgust and the physical nausea yet again become the symbolic device for revealing the interior motifs of relationships. A woman like Chitrlekha in her demand of having her womanly rights asks for the fulfillment of her womanhood." (*Girish Karnad*, 5) While in her rebellious nature, Manoj K. Pandey sees a 'New Woman' "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." (*The Plays of Girish Karnad and Tradition*, 51)

Yayati tries to show his kingly power so asks her to accept the destiny and scolds her for using the words- 'the funeral pyre' for Pooru. He expected that the pressure of patriarchy will work out but Chitrlekha reminds him of her power of womanhood saying: "Sir! This is my chamber. Only my husband has the right to come in here without my permission. Or to shout out my name when he pleases. I am not aware I have allowed anyone else that freedom." (*Yayati*, 62) She, under the spell of self-awareness puts some puzzling questions before Yayati for the existential search of the self like: "What else is there for me to do? You have your youth, Prince Pooru has his old age. Where do I fit in?" (*Yayati*, 60)

In the end, this bold lady fails to cope up with the sudden-aroused turmoil in her life so chooses to empty the vial of poison and thus her voice remains unheard for forever. About the death of Chitrlekha, Punam Pandey opines thus:

Thus, Karnad has developed a kind of existentialism in the 'absurd' as propounded by *Albert Camus*. There is no escape from the 'absurd' which generates meaninglessness in life. Men seek their freedom through actions but freedom is always eluding. They make efforts on the path of existence and 'choose' the three ways...First by committing suicide or homicide: secondly hoping for the betterment and thirdly by living with it or to compromise. (*The Plays of Girish Karnad*, 76-77)

Sharmishtha sarcastically calls Chitrlekha as "the first martyr to His Majesty's glorious vision." (*Yayati*, 69) It is Chitrlekha's suicide that brings Yayati to his senses and makes him realize the nucleus of life, "I thought there were two options- life and death. No, it is living and dying we have to choose between." (*Yayati*, 68) Finally, he declares, "Take back your youth, Pooru. Rule well. Let me go and face my destiny in the wilds." (*Yayati*, 69) Thus, "The father is left to face the consequences of shirking responsibility for his own actions." (*Afterword*, 73)

There is one more character in the play who sacrifices her right to speak truth and even confesses a sin which she never committed, in anticipation to balance the imbalance of her marital life. Manoj K. Pandey remarks in this connection, "To accept a lie, which nourishes upon life-blood seems to be more suicidal." (*The Plays*, 47) The story of Swarnlata runs about the development of a baseless doubt in the mind of her husband regarding her affair with a brahmin boy who had been her teacher, before their marriage. On her protest, he started tormenting himself by keeping indulged in women and drinks etc. but of no use. Lastly, just for the sake of his mental peace and her married life, Swarnlata admitted the false charge of the violation of her virginity by that boy. The confession relieved him of the agony but "With that, Swarnlata's story too ended. But not Swaru's private hell" (*Yayati*, 60) as her husband disappeared after that never to come back so her voice remains unheard for the whole of her life.

In an interview, B. V. Karanth comments on the Hindi translation of Karnad's *Yayati* (not present in English version) remarkably about the female characters of the play:

In *Yayati* every character seems to carry his/ her own complexity. Women in the Mahabharata are always a subversive voice, they are dumb. Women were not permitted to decide for themselves. This thing has been beautifully expressed through the character of Sutradhara. He comes on the stage followed by female Sutradhara with her hands tied with a rope. She does not speak. It is only the male Sutradhara who narrates. (An interview by Manoj K.Pandey)

Here the presence of dumb female Sutradhara, with her tied hands, itself gives an idea of the position of females in the palace, in general, and of Devyani, in particular. For Devyani's introduction, the words of Sharmishtha will work: "...You were the offspring of a destitute Brahmin, dependent upon my father...What was your worth? That your father knew the 'sanjeevani' spell. That is all." (*Yayati*, 10)

Devyani is a queen with a less-heard voice. In her very first meeting with Yayati, though Devyani uttered a few words only yet they were poignant enough to change her life completely. When Yayati pulled her out of the well, "it was love at first sight. Once again" so she said to him: "Sir, I am a maiden. And you have held me by my right hand.' That's it. Only two sentences. Fourteen words. I should know. How often have I counted them, coercing myself to believe that mere fourteen words could actually so

completely change a life." (*Yayati*, 13) As a queen, her voice remains inaudible in the palace. After the immoral liaison of Yayati, when Devyani furiously orders Sharmishtha to get out, Yayati is heedless about her due to his male-dominance so ignoring her protests rather asks Sharmishtha to be his queen. Hopelessly, Devyani goes to seek the help of her father Shukracharya for making her voice audible through a curse "that he will lose his youth and become decrepit by nightfall." (*Yayati*, 41)

Thus, the females in the play continuously struggle to raise voices, out of their unfortunate predicament, though most of the times their voices remain ignored, unnoticed, and unheard. About Karnad, Dhanavel says: "Girish Karnad is a humanist in the sense that he has a profound concern for both men and women, especially the oppressed and downtrodden." (*The Indian Imagination of Girish Karnad*, 33) Through his multi-dimensional humanistic approach, Karnad makes such voices heard through his plays. His play *Yayati* presents a king who "exploits female community for the cheap sense of 'self.'" (Manoj, *The Plays of Girish Karnad*, 52) And to justify, the speech of Sharmishtha is worth to quote: "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." (*Yayati*, 68)

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