

Analyses Of The Characters In Girish Karnad's Play 'Yayati'

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Abstract

Girish Karnad is one of the renowned playwrights of India. 'Yayati' is his acclaimed play translated by him to English. This play is an adaptation of an episode in the mythological epic Mahabharata, where the story revolves around the character Yayati. He was cursed by his father-in-law for having married the latter's daughter's servant Sharmishte, who was once a princess. In order to recover from the curse, Yayati had to transfer his cursed old age to a young man. This curse was accepted by his son, Puru. The play involves such conflicts among the main characters. Yayati is seen as an ambitious King. Devayani, his first wife is portrayed as an insecure queen. Sharmishte, Devayani's servant, is a very impactful and manipulating woman. Puru is the one who sacrifices his youth for his father Yayati. And Chitrlekhe a young lady with natural desires who opposes the unnatural aging of her husband Puru. This paper aims to analyze the characters in the play which are unique and dynamic in nature.

Keywords: *Myth, curse, conflicts, ambitious and sacrifice.*

Girish Karnad is one of the significant playwrights and is regarded as one of the pillars of the Renaissance Indian theatre. His works are based on Mythology and History. But, he has given them a contemporary resonance in plays such as Tughlaq, Yayati and Hayavadana. His plays question stereotypes and the common notions and beliefs about different topics. Karnad initially wrote in Kannada and translated most of his plays himself.

Yayati is Karnad's first play, published in 1961 and translated to English in 2007. It is a revisionist play as Karnad revisits the epic Mahabharata and adapts it into the play. The story of Yayati is taken from the chapters 75-93 of the Adiparva. There were other playwrights who wrote about the story of Yayati, such as R. Venkataramanayya and Shiranga before Karnad.

Their intention was to imbibe the Sanathana values and narrate the story as it is in the epic respectively. However, Karnad has made changes from the main epic and has created new characters and scenes. The changes in the play served the intention of giving it a new contemporary perspective and build a stronger conflict in the play. Yayati is a story of a King who is in constant longing for eternal youth and who usurps the youth of his son to fulfill his desires. The symbolic theme is attachment to life and its materialistic pleasures with a contrast of philosophical quest. This paper attempts to analyze the characters of the play: Yayati, Devayani, Sharmishte, Puru, Chitrlekhe and Swarnalathe.

Yayati-The character of Yayati is different from that of the one in the epic Mahabharata, wherein he is portrayed as an ideal king, but here he is a grey character. In the beginning, he is shown as a pawn in the hands of Devayani and Sharmishte. As the play progresses, Yayati establishes his character by developing a relationship with Sharmishte and shows that he is not merely a pawn, but also a player in their game. As a result, he suffers from the curse of Shukracharya. He derives a sadistic sexual pleasure by making his queens and mistresses cry. He is a mighty king and a good administrator. But, he fails to understand the minds of the common people and his family. As a father, he fails to understand his son Puru's turmoil. He is ambitious and hedonic; he rejects Sharmishte's suggestion of accepting the curse and going to the forest. He cannot accept the sudden old age and is not ready to renounce his palace, kingdom, his queens, mistresses and comforts. This character shows the difficulty in renouncing the materialistic comforts for a man who is immersed in them. This contrasts Puru's character; Puru who is supposed to be ambitious and energetic is very disinterested and on the other hand, Yayati who is relatively older is still in the desire for youth. He believes that his people would be proud to take up his old age by accepting the curse. But Puru makes him realize that common people would always want to lead a normal life and they do not want to sacrifice their lives for the sins committed by Yayati. We come across a slightly patriarchal aspect of Yayati; when Sharmishte wins him with her wit and wisdom, he falls for her. But, he is not able to accept it and hence he feels the need to win over her again by wooing her. This is also noticeable when he himself has

taken his son Puru's youth, he asks Chitrlekhe to be an ideal wife by succumbing to what has happened to her husband. Yayati fails to understand the value of Puru's youth and is also unable to think about the repercussions of taking his youth, which later costs the life of Chitrlekhe. Yayati is enlightened by the younger generation characters Puru and Chitrlekhe at different points of the play. The psychoanalytical concept of 'Yayati Complex' derives its name from the character Yayati wherein, parents expect sacrifices from their children in order to fulfill their selfish motives. -**Sharmishte**-Sharmishte is one of the significant characters of the play who gives life to it. Sharmishte is proud to be born as a princess in an Asura (demon) clan and she believes that there is more humanity in the Asuras than humans, which she proves later in the play. Although she is now a Dasi (slave) of Devayani, the qualities of a princess still remain in her. She is not in want of the position of a queen, as she already behaves like one. Her words are her strength and she plays through it. She can manipulate the minds of people according to her wish which is the reason for the movement of the play. She is able to trigger Devayani, trick Yayati and gain respect from Puru by merely being a Dasi. The master-slave relationship between her and Devayani is subverted by her through her play of words and does not miss an opportunity to taunt Devayani. Devayani and Sharmishte share a love- hate relationship. They are not able to let go of each other as they were once friends and are now enemies. They are the only characters who have understood each other very well but the irony is that they cannot tolerate each other. Sharmishte wins Yayati not by seducing him, but only by her reasoning power and wit. Although in the first half, Sharmishte is a witty and a taunting woman, in the later half, we see a transition in her behavior and she exhibits a different aspect of her. We see her as a woman who is completely aware of her actions. She is able to handle the situation and behave accordingly. She is able to foresee and she knows the repercussions of getting the curse annulled. Hence, she advises Yayati to renounce the palace life and go to exile. She is also ready to go with him as his wife. She performs the duties of a wife with Yayati and behaves like a mother to Puru in the absence of Devayani. The relationship between her and Yayati might begin with a lustful intention, but eventually, Sharmishte becomes a philosophical guide and a symbol of true

love to Yayati. Through this character, Karnad shows that the position or authority is of least importance when compared to the qualities of an individual in managing an institution. Finally, towards the end of the play, Sharmishte proves her saying that the Asuras have more humanity than the humans themselves.

Devayani-Devayani is a crystal clear character in the play. She has no dilemma; her only problem is with Sharmishte. Her decision of keeping Sharmishte as her maid despite so many clashes with her shows her stubbornness. She cannot accept Sharmishte taking her position. Her father is her strength. Initially, her temperament is soft and sober, but as the play progresses, she becomes furious and strong. She is a character who acts according to what she feels; she is not a hypocrite. This is noticeable in the scene wherein she is asked to perform the duties of a queen by welcoming Puru and Chitrlekhe irrespective of what was happening in the palace, she chooses not to do it because she does not feel like doing so. Although she is the queen, she does not behave like one. All her thoughts and actions are determined and triggered by her maid Sharmishte. It is her anger towards Yayati and not Sharmishte that results in the turnover of the events in the play. She has accepted Sharmishte as she is but is not able to accept the justification given by Yayati about his relationship with Sharmishte. She is one of the self-centered characters, as she leaves the palace without thinking about the new couple, the future of the empire and her family when she is frustrated upon knowing about the relationship between Yayati and Sharmishte. Her act of tearing and throwing away her marriage thread is a bold move, an act ahead of her time. It is a blatant expression of rejecting Yayati as her husband and walking out of the marriage.

Puru-Puru is a young prince who is in constant quest for completeness. He goes through Identity crisis as he is not aware of who his mother is. This becomes the root cause for all his conflicts throughout his life and is reflected in his decisions. His childhood is full of sorrow because of this turmoil. He is different from his forefathers; he is not a mighty warrior, due to which he has an inferiority complex and a sense of alienation from his family. This reflects in his disinterest towards the Kingdom, its administration and the surrounding activities. He always feels

incomplete. He feels responsible for the first time when Sharmishte asks Puru to get the curse annulled. Seizing this opportunity, he takes up his father's old age by accepting the curse. Superficially this act might appear as a sacrifice, but Puru takes this decision to get completeness in life and also to attempt an experiment on himself thinking he would root himself back to the family by getting some qualities of his father and his ancestors. Later he realizes that this is not merely an ordinary old age but also an accumulation of his father's sins and hence although he is physically transformed as an old man, he doesn't attain the completeness that he was looking for.

Chitrlekhe-The character Chitrlekhe is Karnad's own creation in the play. The princess of Anga is well-educated and shrewd. When the play has witnessed the clashes between Devayani, Sharmishte and Yayati, she gives a fresh wave with her aspirations and dreams about her life in Hastinapura, as the daughter-in-law of the Chandra dynasty. Her imagination about the dynasty, the royal family and her life in this new place breaks into the contrasting reality at different stages of the play. Firstly with the understanding of Puru, who is not a warrior prince, although he is from the renowned Chandra Dynasty. Later, as she enters the palace she is welcomed by the pendant of the marriage thread of Devayani which is fallen on the floor and not Devayani herself. This symbolism breaks her imagination and shows the reality about the family that she is married to. When Chitrlekhe is slowly learning about the events that has happened, she also learns that her husband Puru has accepted his father's old age. Although initially she is proud and very happy about the sacrifice that her husband has done, once again when reality faces her, she is not able to face it and hence rejects Puru saying that she does not deserve him. Her opportunity and dream of giving birth to a child of Chandra dynasty is also taken away from her. Finally, when she realizes that all her dreams are shattered, she exhibits the bold, confident and the straight forward aspect of her. She is the only one who directly rebels against Yayati in the whole play, for taking away her husband's youth. Karnad creates this character to show the generation gap between Yayati and Chitrlekhe, the difference in their thinking and attitudes. She questions the moral values and ethics of Yayati. During their

conversation, when Yayati asks her to wait for about five years before he returns Puru's youth, Chitrlekhe speaks about the value of time. She is a woman who lives in the present. Chitrlekhe tries to get back her youthful husband from Yayati but when she fails to do so, thinking about her own futility, she commits suicide. Her suicide is the point of realization for Yayati after which he returns Puru his youth.

Swarnalathe-Swarnalathe is also Karnad's own creation. The maid is older than Devayani and Sharmishte. Hence, she also acts as an adviser to Devayani. Swarnalathe develops hatred towards Sharmishte as she is constantly taunted by her. Since Sharmishte is also a maid to Devayani, she expects her to remain in the standards of a maid and cannot accept Sharmishte violating the norms of a maid and attempting to pursue the position of Devayani. She respects Devayani and tries to protect her from Sharmishte's conspiracies, out of concern. Karnad shows the curiosity and the opinion of a common man on different issues that take place in the palace, through her character. All the other characters of the play represent the royal class. And hence, their thinking, behavior and actions seem to be very eccentric to the common woman Swarnalathe. She has a sense of responsibility and maturity. This can be noticed in the scene in which Devayani is distressed by the relationship between Yayati and Sharmishte, Swarnalathe advises her to perform the duties of a queen mother by welcoming the newlywed couple. Her motherhood is seen when she comforts and befriends Chitrlekhe who is new to the palace. When her husband suffers from the dilemma between her love and suspicion for several years, Swarnalathe decides to liberate him from this dilemma by lying and taking the blame on her, hence letting go of him. While the other characters failed to accept the reality of their lives and find a solution to their problems, a common woman of the same period found the solution for her problem and led a realistic life.

Conclusion

All the characters in the play are grey with their own strengths and weaknesses. The epic gives an idealistic image of the characters especially Yayati and Puru, whereas Karnad portrays them in a realistic fashion. While some of the characters undergo a change, the others reveal the hidden aspects of themselves in the course of the play. A lot of irony is involved in the characters themselves. They behave differently from what is commonly expected from them because of their position, class or caste: Yayati, although is a King, fails to think about the repercussions of his actions. Puru being a young prince is more philosophical and desires for the old age, Sharmishte, a Dasi, who does not behave like one but later behaves like an ideal wife and a queen despite being an Asura-princess. Lastly, Chitrlekhe is seen as someone who is more matured and realistic than a lady of her age. Hence, although there is an implied theme of social differences, the conflict in the play is majorly brought about by the psychic conflicts of the characters. The location of the play is the rooms of the place; the queens' abode. Hence, the abode becomes a symbol of an individual's mind with the characters as his or her thoughts constantly in conflict with each other. The characters of the play perform a vital role in giving more weight and serving the intention of bringing a contemporary resonance to the revisionist play.

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