

## Analysis of Women Characters in Karnad's 'Yayati'

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### Abstract

Karnad has revolutionized the image of women in drama through 'Yayati', one of his initial plays. He has contested the typical women image created by the dominant patriarchal ideology. Though the women characters in 'Yayati' shows a spirit and strength unlike the docile nature and meekness expected of them, they all finally succumb to the bounds set by the patriarchal framework. However much rebellious they were to the norms of patriarchal set up; all these female characters could only partially succeed in creating an image of an emancipated woman. The play do not show the characters in an open wage against the societal structure and male domination but the female characters are shown to be thinking beyond the bounds set by the dominant ideology. The courage to break away from thinking along the lines of dominant misogynic ideology is a great step towards women's emancipation. The essay is an attempt to

show how Karnad's female characters are struggling to break the fetters of patriarchy and yet are failing at it and succumbing to the patriarchal order of society ultimately.

Keywords: Girish Karnad, Indian theatre, feminism, myth, patriarchy

Girish Karnad's 'Yayati' is a reinterpretation of the mythical story of king Yayati which appears in the Purva Parva of Mahabharata. Though titled 'Yayati', after the male protagonist, Karnad's play revolves around the four prominent female characters, namely, Devayani, Sharmishta, Chitrlekha and Swarnalatha. Karnad has placed the ancient story in a new light, which ensures that the heroic deeds of men do not underscore the equally valiant acts of women. The endeavour to incorporate four female characters who actively take part in the play's progress was in itself path breaking. The multiplication of female protagonists and characters on stage can be seen as an attempt to articulate a range of women's experiences and viewpoints that were not represented adequately.

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Theatre has not, for long, been an accommodating space for women. Earlier, dramas did not portray women as what they were but projected the patriarchal codes of desire through the female characters. Girish Karnad's 'Yayati' was a step towards subverting the patriarchal imaging of women. It stood as an anomaly to the tradition of women characters that were created in accordance with the misogynistic images of women dominant in the culture. This new emphasis on female characters and consequent sexual freedom on stage has helped in liberating women from the patriarchal notions of womanhood.

'Yayati' is Karnad's attempt at giving voice to and celebrating the other. The cultural construct generated by the patriarchal system is predominantly reflected in the play. All the female characters are shown to have attained a state of mental liberation where they tend to question the unjust happenings in their lives. The mindset of his characters cannot be contained within the framework of patriarchal thought. Women have been oppressed for very long that the only voice ever heard from them were the voice of patriarchy but the women in 'Yayati' are those that stand up for their rights and desires.

The play includes the problems arising from the intersection of gender with race and class as well. Karnad has raised the issue of class, caste and gender to politicize the play. The conflict between Devayani and Sharmishta puts forth the class distinction within women themselves. Devayani is a Brahmin woman who is married to the Kshatriya king Yayati whereas Sharmishta is an asura princess who is cursed to be a slave of Devayani. The conflict between the two is a product of social hierarchy. It is a replica of the issue of class divide existing in the contemporary world. The cultural superiority of Devayani increases as she marries king Yayati. Sharmishta, on

the other hand, is deprived of her royal status and has been condemned to serve as a slave of Devayani. Feminism and the quest for women empowerment cannot ignore the issue of class, race and economic divide existing among women. As we see today, the bourgeoisie women and proletariat women do not fight for the same needs. The oppression that women of the different classes suffer also differs but none escapes the patriarchal oppression. The conflict within themselves hinders women from uniting against male oppression.

Devayani is Yayati's wife and Shukracharya's daughter. Her identity is so dependent on her husband and father that she is known for the roles she play in their lives and not for what she essentially is. The problem of existing in the shadow of men is not an isolated issue of Devayani. Women had no identity of their own apart from the male figures of the family. A woman's talent and strength had to remain within the walls of her home and to the world outside she is nothing if not for her husband and father. She is conditioned to believe that her life has no value of its own and it is her duty to sacrifice her desires and dreams for the happiness of her family. The ancient Hindu concepts of 'pativrata' and 'Sati' are all in support of the idea that a woman's identity and life revolves entirely around her husband's. Devayani shows the traits of an independent, rational woman when she shows the courage to walk away from her husband after he is caught guilty of infidelity. This is neither an accepted nor an expected act from a married woman in accordance with the patriarchal ideology as well as the Hindu tradition. Fidelity is imposed on women so that they remain chained to the domination of men. Men, on the other hand could afford to be with as many women as they choose and their infidelity is not considered as crime. The whole concept of fidelity is built to deny sexual freedom to women and tether them to the dominion of men. There is always the double standard which makes the same act unforgivable for a female and negligible for a male. Though Devayani puts up a fight against the unjust act of her husband

one could see her succumbing to the patriarchal dominion when she agrees to forgive her husband if he would sent away Sharmishta, the woman he was found cheating with. Her decision to leave her husband who was unfair was definitely an act of strength but the flaw one could not be blind towards is that she is merely making a choice between her husband's and her father's dominance. She leaves her husband to run towards her father which becomes only a reassurance of the patriarchal argument that a woman has to provided for and taken care of always. One could always resort to the excuse of blaming the condition of society to justify her act but it cannot be considered as a gesture of emancipation.

Sharmishta's character falls in line with the femme fatale stereotype of women constructed by the patriarchal society .This stereotype represents the alluring and yet disturbing embodiments of female sexual power over men. This image can be traced back to the Helen of Troy. The typical femme fatale image represents cold, arrogant and inaccessible, yet irresistible, defiant of social convention; mysterious, enigmatic and exotic women. She is charming yet cruel. She is a woman who excites man's desires without satisfying it. The image of Sharmishta can be well fitted into this stereotype that veils her charm to seduce Yayati. Karnad gives us a deeper insight into the character of Sharmishta. Sharmishta is shown to be a woman of valour. Sharmishta is shown to be a rebel who chooses not to be subjugated by anybody. She is a woman who does not lament over her conditions but takes charge of it and lives with her head held high. Her conversation with Yayati in the play depicts this clearly.

Sharmishta: "You see yourself as awesome and powerful, a figure towering over your vast possessions, a demi-god if not god himself. You are busy visualizing the grand design of life. You have no sense of the traps and snares waiting in the grass. You have

no sense of how illogical suffering can be and therefore how terrible. (Pause) you don't know what a disaster you could be.

Yayati: "No one has dared to say that to me" (KAR, 25)

The conversation perspicuously explains the rebellious nature of Sharmishta who is bold enough to raise her voice against the king. Audience gets to see a flash of an emancipated womanhood in Sharmishta but later a vulnerable side of her character reveals itself. She falls an easy prey to the sexual gratification of Yayati. Later in the play when Yayati accuses her as the cause of the curse that has befallen on him she stands silently accepting his insulting accusation.

Chitrlekha is the other major female characters who also shows traits of powerful womanhood but fails to retain the strength throughout. Chitrlekha is the daughter-in-law of Yayati and wife of Puru. She is a representative of a modern woman in the play who exercises her rational mind. She dares to express her desires and question the unjust happenings in her life despite her helplessness in making any changes. She is not a meek person who accepts male hegemony without questioning. Chitrlekha accuses Yayati thus,

"I did not push him into the edge of the pyre sir. You did. You hold on forth on my wifely duties. What about your duties to your son? Did you think twice before foisting your troubles on a pliant son?" (KAR, 62)

Yayati had robbed Puru of his youth and consequently robbed Chitrlekha of her natural right of conjugal bliss. She does not accept the chauvinist attitude of Yayati and does not withstand the suppression and supremacy of the king. She reminds Yayati that by getting married to Puru she has gained equal rights over Anathpur, the palace of queens. Chitrlekha thinks that she had committed a crime by asking her husband to leave while Puru had exchanged his youth

with the decrepitude of his father without consulting his newly married wife. This idea of sin is nothing but a social construct. However enlightened she has held herself to be she is not free from the social conditioning of patriarchy which makes her think that rejecting her husband is an unforgivable sin. Though she portrays a lot of courage she ultimately accepts her defeat in her wage and commits suicide.

Swarnalatha is the maid who was deserted by her husband who suspected her of infidelity. The mere thought of her infidelity was eating him up. He could not even imagine her to have sexual freedom when he sleeps around with many women. She ultimately was forced to lie about having a past relationship with her tutor. She lied that she had a relationship with her tutor before her marriage so that her husband gets some peace of mind. The instance portrays how deeply ingrained are the idea of fidelity and other impositions of patriarchy are in our psyche. In the end of the play, Swarnalatha goes out of her mind for she could no longer keep sane holding on to her sorrowful longing for a husband who had deserted her long back.

Girish Karnad's 'Yayati' is a celebration of the other, a portrayal of parallels. It brings together the differences of gender, class and caste in one stage. Karnad's Yayati is not a glorification of the sacrifice of Puru but a play which intrigues one to think more about the issue of class, caste and gender in society. Karnad's women characters in Yayati are all strong yet unable to stick to their strengths at the face of life's major trials. However strong they are, they all tend to be weak at the point of crisis. Karnad has painted only a partial image of an emancipated womanhood through his characters in Yayati.

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