

**CONTEMPORARISING, DE-CONSTRUCTING, AND  
DE-CONTEXTUALISING THE MYTH IN YAYATI AND YUGANTA**

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**ABSTRACT**

Literature has always been an intensifier to history and history in turn has been to myths. Civilization, culture, and tradition make the very pulse of a nation. Apart from being mythical, myths provide a rich source of perceiving that pulse. Much of literature has been made up of different myths, sometimes downplaying and at other, dominating the plots. With the change of time, the points of view to look at these myths have not only shifted but have got altered. Contemporary writers have always called upon myths for arguments and critical examinations. The irksome bowing down is replaced with raised eyebrows and queer looks. The paper at hand endeavors to show how these characters are being put into the practical contexts and are tested at the expectations of a twentieth century sensibility. Irawati Karvey in *Yuganta* has put Bheeshma, the great and one of the most admired characters of *Mahabharata* under scrutiny. She suspects his sturdiness and accuses him for much of the misfortunes of certain characters in the myth. She dares to deconstruct the character of this legend by out rightly declaring that he was no great warrior. Another text *Yayati* broods over the glorious deeds of sacrifice that makes no sense to the author and the renowned characters like Yayati and Pooru are shown baffled.

The contemporary writer tries to de-contextualise the myth by taking them off the contexts they were written. This de-contextualisation employs different dimensions in which the characters lose their distinctive identity. This paper attempts to analyse the legendary characters of the exploited myth who have been challenged by Girish Karnad and Irawati karvey. The

present research examines if the legendary characters are pulled down from the place where they have been enthroned by myths or they are just used to weave the plot of twenty first century literary texts.

Recent episodes have shown many mis-co-ordinations between myth and literature. It includes the dissatisfaction over imagination or logic that humiliates the popular beliefs on a particular myth. A.K. Ramanujan's essay "Three Hundred Ramayana: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translations" was discarded from the syllabus of history, of Delhi University on the reason that the University should not teach a controversial essay about Ramayana. This controversy arose out of the hitherto unprecedented and unacceptable introduction of myth into literature.

Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* written in 1988 was received as blasphemy and mockery on a particular faith. Even Jaipur Literary Festival held in 2012 witnessed its contempt and anger. (Jaipur Literary Festival) Another novel, *Da Vinci Code* (2003) was received as an attack on the Roman Catholic Church. These different incidents point towards a single cause – that the application of imagination or experimentation within myth is not acceptable, irrespective of any religion, country and even time.

Myth holds a strong position within the society. In fact it is engrained within each level of our conscious mind. They would never allow literary tools to act upon their respective myths. The three incidents quoted above are the result of the attempt of de-contextualising, deconstructing and contemporarising the myths.

Myths are obviously a thing to be believed as MH Abrams points out myth is one story in mythology – "a system of hereditary stories of ancient origin which were once believed to be true by a particular cultural group, and which served to explain (in terms of intention and action of deities and other supernatural beings) why the world is as it is and things happen as they do. It provides the rationale for social customs and observances and to establish the solutions for the rules by which people conduct their lives" (178). Similar to Abrams a well known myth critic Northrop Frye reiterates the point when he says, "by myth... I mean primarily a certain type of story. It is a story in which some of the chief characters are Gods or rather beings larger in power than humanity... hence, like the folk tale it is an abstract story pattern. The characters can do what they like, which means what the story-teller likes, there is no need to be plausible or logical in motivation" (156-169). And therefore this fact gets substantiated that the moment they are put on the touchstone of experimentation or reason, their significance is played down and is unacceptable by its followers.

Though these instances question the relationship between myth and literature, if we delve deeper into the relationship, we find both of them inherently and irretrievably merged with one another. There is abundance of such texts that take almost whole world under its ambit with respect to their culture, tradition, and religion. This interdependency is so strong that if one tries to exclude the myth out of the plot of the texts, it would lose its significance as well as the aim with which it is written.

Literature is an art with implicit or tacit agenda. If myth is excluded from literature myth would not be kept alive in human psyche and would gradually come to an end. Application of

myth to literature keeps it alive and myth in turn makes literature more appealing and provides material to explore the hidden realities of life. Therefore, this complimentary relationship is worthy of respect.

Literature provides the myth a unique opportunity to travel from one time into another. It gives new meaning by displacing it from its context and putting into some other. Not only this, authors have attempted even to deconstruct the myths and legends. And this deconstruction often leads to construct a new myth out of the old. The deconstruction of myth employs the intentional as well as unintentional aim of the author.

Myth is a storehouse for literature providing material, plots, and characters. The question of importance is – would people worry if myths were challenged or attacked. Is the respect given to myths so weak that it cannot withstand the touchstone of doubts? It hints either the weakness of myth itself or the beliefs of men who propagate the propagandas over the literary experimentations.

Irawati Karvey has projected the legendary character of Bhishma and Draupadi through a different viewpoint. His terrible vow, his celibacy, his image of a great warrior and his sacrifice, has been scrutinised in the essay ‘The Final Effort’ of *Yuganta*. King Shantanu fell in love with Satyawati but unwilling to fulfil the demands of her father - to disown Bhishma from the throne, he comes back dejected. On being asked, he tells Bhishma “the only thing that concerns me is that you are my only son. If something happens to you, what will become of the kingdom?” (Yuganta 11) In this way, he indirectly suggests his desire to marry. Bhishma resolves his father’s turmoil and gets Satyawati married to him, and in turn is awarded with the boon – ‘Death at Will’. Shantanu’s actions need to be scrutinised in accordance to his intentions :

Firstly, he worries if anything happens to Bhishma.

Secondly, he provides him the boon - ‘Death at Will.’

Karvey reviews the fate of Bhishma. He was among eight Vasus who were cursed to be born as mortals. His comrades were set free by Ganga, but Bhishma had to survive on the earth for a long period being the chief convict of the sin. This may be the reason behind Bhishma’s long-lived life despite having the power to die whenever he wished. He was a warrior not only on the battle-field but in the battle of life. He gallantly fought with the challenging situations but none could waive him from his principles. However, contrary to this Karvey could not find any eminent warrior within him. She broods over Bhishma’s “consent to having Vyasa [to] beget the children” and comes to the conclusion that “choosing Vyasa helped Bhishma to retain his authority and at the same time to remain true to his vow. In ‘life of self sacrifice’, Karvey sees ‘his self still lurking somewhere” (Yuganta 16). In this way, the writer downplays the legend and could not believe any other reason – that Vyasa was Satyawati’s son and therefore Bhishma allowed him to beget children on the blood-relation grounds, as described in the myth and even suggested by Karvey in *Yuganta*.

Karvey directly accuses Bhishma for the suffering of Amba, Ambika, Ambalika, Kunti, Madri, and Gandhari. She out-rightly comments ‘In his zeal to perpetuate his house, he had humiliated and disgraced these royal women’ (Yuganta 14). But when one goes through the myth, one comes across the feeling that the challenges the Kuru dynasty faced, could only be out-manoeuvred by these ladies. They had the option to leave their in-laws’ house and go back to their father if their husbands died, or in the particular case of Gandhari when she came to know that her husband is blind. All of them withstood the challenges and are still seen as role-models

among women. Bhishma's observation and his decision, at least in this case of choosing brides are therefore justified.

Bhishma is seen always at war with destiny. His commitments are challenged from time to time but his promises were always above his worldly duties. He would not do away with his words. Though he lives an ideal life – celibate, honest, true to his vows, the experiences of his life also exemplifies that this is no easy way to follow. The probable reason behind Karvey's downplaying this character could be that such a person is beyond imagination. Legendary characters never give up but face the greatest challenges fearlessly; therefore, they have weaved a plot for epics and not any ordinary story. They have a lot within them to teach and are worthy of admiration.

Karvey also discusses Draupadi's character in her essay "Draupadi" and tries to find out her 'greatest mistake'. According to her, the greatest mistake was the question she asked before the call to present herself to the royal court. The question was – "go into the assembly and ask if *Dharmraja* had become a slave before he staked me?" (Yuganta 98) She was dragged into the court and was disrobed. Karvey described this question 'not only foolish but terrible'. She accuses Draupadi for 'standing there arguing about legal technicalities like a lady-pundit when what [disrobing] was happening to her was so hideous that she should only have cried out for decency and pity in the name of the Kshatriya code'.

According to the writer, "She [Draupadi] had made many mistakes in her life that were forgivable, but, putting on airs in front of the whole assembly she had put Dharma [Yudhishtira] into a dilemma and unwittingly insulted him" (Yuganta 101). She recommends that what Draupadi had done was the result of her earthly, violent but basically simple nature. In describing the characters of Draupadi and Bhishma, Karvey does not put the similar touchstone. Both are downplayed in their own respect.

Bhishma is accused for following the heavenly or idealistic norms, as probably a more simple and earthly behaviour is demanded. He is accused for using his celibacy to hide his impotency, inviting Vyasa to assure his own supremacy over throne, and is not accepted as a great warrior as he did not fight many battles. Thus though every action of Bhishma is put under scrutiny by the author who believes that he was never selfless, she fails to substantiate her arguments with facts. Her claim that Bhishma's terrible vow, his invitation to Vyasa to take the clan onwards – was under his plan to safeguard his own reputation and position can be rejected out rightly because it was not Bhishma who invited Vyasa on his own will; and he took the vow of celibacy even before attaining the age of puberty. As she herself writes while calculating the age of the great warrior. She writes "When Bhishma's father married Satyawati, Bhishma was the crown prince. He had already been trained in archery, so he must have been *at least* sixteen." (Yuganta 19)

But Draupadi is being accused for being earthly, and simple and not heavenly. One shudders to think of being disrobed in an assembly before courtiers as well as family members with none to help. This situation could have provided even Draupadi to talk reason. She spoke whatever she found could save her from terrible situation. Draupadi's question is not only for *Dharmaraja* but to humanity and to ethical codes. Women can never be a thing to be put at stake. This also may be the reason of her anger and contempt. Husband is said to be the companion who safeguards his spouse. Draupadi had five husbands. Each of them was best in their own way and renowned as great warriors. But none could come forward to protect her. In this situation nothing else is expected from a woman.

But still Draupadi was no ordinary woman. Even being dishonoured because of her husbands, she continued to be with them and became one of the causes of the deaths of her offenders. Though *Yuganta* boldly reviews these renowned characters but Karvey is aware of the raised eyebrows over her interpretations and therefore she says:

“I shall consider it a victory if they think that my interpretation is wrong and read the *Mahabharata* merely to prove it wrong.”(Yuganta Preface, xi)

Girish Karnad puts the myth of *Yayati* on logical and realistic ground. The original myth describes Yayati as a great king and Pooru, a great son. After Pooru donates his youth to his father for thousands of years Yayati in turn makes him his successor disinheriting all his elder sons. Karnad tries to contemporarise the myth by showing the reality of such a sacrifice. Sacrifices have always opened the door for regard and respect be it the sacrifice of Ram or any other legendary character.

Karnad in the ‘afterword’ writes: “while I was writing the play, I saw it only as an escape from my stressful situation . . . the myth reflected my anxieties at that moment, my resentment with all those who seemed to demand that I sacrifice my future . . . the myth has enabled me to articulate to myself a set of values that I had been unable to arrive at rationally . . . the myth had nailed me to my past” (*Yayati* 73-74). More interesting is to know that Karnad wrote *Yayati* for his parents at the age of twenty two.

The intensity of complexity in sacrifice always helps it to be more glorious and attractive for others. The more it is painful the more it is appreciated. Pooru has been glorified for his critical and tough decision to fulfil his father’s desire. However another alluring thing in this event is the concept of exchange of youth with old age. This term has been decontextualised by Karnad in the sense that in the myth itself the sacrifice of Pooru shows the respect of a son for father, whatever the case may be, father’s orders and demands are to be honoured. Hence, Pooru got name and fame and all his elder brothers were perished. Karnad drags this myth from its pompous platform to the practical floor by introducing the character of Chitrlekha as Pooru’s wife. She becomes the actual victim of the deal of father and son and is the seed of Yayati’s realization and probably Pooru’s philosophy.

The original myth tells that Yayati, after exchange of old age with youth of Pooru, lived eventful life for a thousand of year and after the completion of the duration took back the old age by giving back the youth of Pooru and the kingdom as a bonus over which Pooru ruled all over his life and lived happily ever after. The context of Karnad is different from this though it finds its plot from the myth. He shows everything in one day, Yayati’s acceptance of Sharmishtha, arrival of newly wedded couple Pooru and Chitrlekha, Devyani’s anger, Shukracharya’s curse, exchange of the stages of life between Yayati and Pooru, Chitrlekha’s suicide, end of the agreement between father and son, Yayati’s quit to forest, in order to follow the dramatic notions unity of place and time. While *Mahabharata* describes Yayati as glorious king, and Pooru as obedient and great son; Karnad shows these legends as common men.

Karnad has tried to show the real and threatening experience of a deed that is done only to fulfil the cynic longing of person’s desire. Sharmishtha tells Yayati about Shukracharya’s curse that he will ‘lose his youth and become decrepit by nightfall’ and sends Pooru to apologise for his father’s deed. Yayati is shown desperate as a common man would be. Karnad has tried to describe his psychological status at the time when he lacks youth and valour which is very dear to him. He feels envious for his own son Pooru and says:

“Sharmishtha, where is Pooru? Why isn't he back? He must be celebrating his youth, his chance to rule the world... . The sight of me fills him with repugnance.”(Yayati 43)

After Yayati gets to know the remedy for the curse, he is relaxed for he believes that there would be men who must be eager to give up their youths in the exchange of his old age. When he comes to know that there is none, his disgust is reflected in his speech:

“Why? Are the deeds of glory dead in this world? Has the world become so cynical, so corrupted...” (Yayati 47)

Finally Pooru offers his youth to Yayati himself. At first, Chitrlekha glamourizes Pooru and feels proud as well as privileged to have him as her husband. She commands Swarnalata to leave and asks to leave ‘a couple of lights burning’ for she wanted ‘to dazzle her eyes with his glory’ she is happy and commits that She has no life without him.

She welcomes Pooru and demands to ‘perform *aarti*’ to ‘welcome’ him in her heart. But the moment she gets the glimpse of Pooru’s decrepit face, she is horrified. She asks him to leave at once and fails to accept the reality. And then no great words could make her accept Pooru. She tries to cross the threshold of patriarchy and has a proposal for Yayati. Thus Karnad creates Chitrlekha as a desperate figure who suffers extreme aloofness and coldness from every human being around her.

This imaginary woman changes the whole scene and meaning of the myth. She finally commits suicide in contempt of anger and disgust. The death of Chitrlekha puts Yayati stunned and he realizes:

“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 for all eternity. Suddenly, I see myself, my animal body frozen in youth, decaying, deliquescing, turning rancid... . I sink slowly in this quagmire, my body wrinkleless and grasping, but unable to grasp anything.”

(Yayati 68)

Yayati could not take any more of the youth and helplessly asks Pooru: “Please help me Pooru. Take back your youth. Let me turn my decrepitude into a beginning” (Yayati 69).

Yayati was a puppet to his longing for desire and realizes the bitter truth while Pooru is still helpless and could not find anything significant. He says “... our senses are blighted and we shall never grasp the meaning of all that you taught us. (suddenly he calls out heavens.)

What does all this mean, O God? What does all this mean?” (Yayati 69)

Myths are not confined to a single text, to a spectacular time or to a particular character, but are universal, crossing the barriers of time and space. Every human could choose his own and fancy identifying himself to that particular myth or legend. They provide different dimensions to make it more vibrant by de-contextualisation and contemporarising myths, so that it could be applied to every common man. At the end of the play, Sutradhara appears and through him Karnad tries to create an aura of telling the true myth as he tells the complex and piteous state of Pooru but still comments:

“Well conventions of Sanskrit drama require that a play have a happy ending. So let us assume that this question led to many more and that finally Pooru found the question he was seeking.

For we have it on authority of the epics that Pooru ruled long and wisely and was hailed as a philosopher king.” (Yayati 70)

Contrary to *Mahabharata*, Karnad’s *Yayati* is a tale of malcontent all around without a ray of sunlight. The universal laws of suffering kill silently and the playwright’s characters are no exception. This signifies that whenever we try to judge myth, it naturally leads to de-contextualisation of the same, while judging we contemporarise it, and we deconstruct it by demolishing and in turn try to construct a new myth.

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