

**EXISTENTIALIST CONCERNS DEXTEROUSLY WOVEN IN  
GIRISH KARNAD'S *YAYATI***

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**Abstract**

*Yayati* (1961) is a play written by Girish Karnad which has been taken from the *Adiparva* of the great epic, *The Mahabharata*. The play is about the theme of responsibility in which Karnad has dexterously woven existential concerns. It was during the heyday of Modernist movement in Kannada literature, in the early sixties, when *Yayati* was written and produced. Naturally, it was bound to be influenced by the then prevailing philosophy of existentialism. The anguish of freedom is experienced by the characters of the play who constantly shirk responsibility. It is only Sharmishtha, the non-Aryan woman, who accepts the responsibility of her actions. The paper explores the existential angst of the characters in Karnad's *Yayati* and analyses the central idea of the anguish of freedom evinced by them.

**Keywords:** Existentialism, anguish of freedom, responsibility, angst, Indian English Drama, epic

**The Plot Taken from Myths and Creative Interpolations by the Author**

*Yayati* (1961) is based on the myth of the king Yayati taken from the “Adiparva” of the *Mahabharata*. Girish Karnad has made certain changes in the main storyline to suit his purpose. The story of Yayati in the original epic runs like this: King Yayati was tenth in the line of Brahma’s family (Goyanka 38). Once Devyani, the daughter of Shukracharaya, the guru of the *asuras*, and Sharmishtha, the daughter of Vrishparva, the king of the *asuras* (once bosom friends) fell out with each other. Out of vengeance, the latter threw Devyani into a well and went away. King Yayati passed by the well and saw Devyani and pulled her out by taking her hand, which in the traditional times meant assent to marriage. Ever since Devyani fell in love with Yayati and Sharmishtha was punished with serving Devyani. After a few caste-related problems—as Yayati was a *kshatriya* and Devyani, a *brahmin*— the marriage of the two was solemnized with the consent of Shukracharaya, and Sharmishtha was also sent to King Yayati’s

kingdom along with his bride Devyani to serve the latter as a punishment for her misdemeanour. With the passage of time, Devyani had two sons, Yadu and Turvasu. But out of her clandestine liaison with Yayati, Sharmishtha also had three sons born to her, Druhya, Anu and Puru. When Devyani came to know about this act of her husband and Sharmishtha, she complained to her father, who in his anger cursed Yayati to become a decrepit, and immediately the effect took place. Yayati then implored him to relax the impact of the curse, and Shukracharya said that he can only do so if he could exchange his old age with somebody's youth. None, but Puru, the youngest son of Sharmishtha, acquiesced to the proposal. Puru became old and Yayati regained his youth and vigour at the cost of his son's youth. He enjoyed sensual pleasures for a thousand more years and in the end he realized the meaninglessness of physical pleasures and returned the youth of his son Puru and took back his old age and vanished into the forests forever (Goyanka).

The playwright makes certain improvisation in the mythical tale and amends the story line and adds new characters to serve his purport and lend it a contemporary charm. In the play it is projected that Yayati is already married to Devyani. He develops an illicit relationship with Sharmishtha during the course of the play. Yayati wishes to marry her and openly expresses his desire. In the play the character of Puru is portrayed to be born from another wife of Yayati, who again like Sharmishtha is an *Anarya* belonging to the *rakshasa* clan. Two new characters which have been added to the plot by the playwright are Puru's wife Chitrlekha and the maid confidant, Swarnalata.

Thus Karnad's *Yayati* re-tells 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 (Chaitanya 1).

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### **The Anguish of Freedom**

The central experience in *Yayati* is the "anguish of freedom" which, as Olson says," arises only with the realization that one must always decide for oneself and that efforts to shift the burden of responsibility upon others are necessarily self-defeating"(Olson 52). But for Sharmishtha all the characters in *Yayati* efface responsibility and evade accountability. *Yayati*, then is a play which plays upon the theme of responsibility. As Raju puts it more clearly:

Karnad places the individual at the centre of his/ her concept of the world and shows that each individual is what he / she chooses to be through the choices he/ she makes in life. With an acute sense of psychological exploration, the playwright extends the domain of self-knowledge along with ethical and moral awareness (Raju 8).

The theme of responsibility is hinted at by the Sutradhar in his introductory speech: Neither an amorist nor a scholar has been able to escape the burden of responsibility. Our joy lies in this burden. Whether it is a stooped decrepit desperately trying to search his lost youth, or one

who tired of the atrocities of the sinful world of darkness, turns towards intense devotion or like this Nati who silently follows me like a death warning or an extraordinary memory—all these roads have one commonality. These do not lead to the Bodhi-tree but to the Cross of responsibility. It is this burden which we perennially have to carry on our shoulders and finally it is the same Cross on which we shall be crucified. (*Yayati* 8)

Every character in the play tries to seek escape from the consequences of his/ her actions. Yayati, Devyani and Puru avoid facing the consequences of their actions. Sharmishtha is the only character who accepts the consequences of her action. The play begins on a quiet note, with Swaranlata complaining to Devyani against Sharmishtha. Though Devyani defends Sharmishtha we soon come to learn the on-going conflict between the two. Sharmishtha does not accord respect to Devyani because she knows too well that Yayati married the latter as she was the daughter of Shukracharya who could bless him with immortality.

Yayati knows that the problems of Devyani are because of Sharmishtha but he does not have the heart to tell Sharmishtha to go away. Even Devyani refuses to send Sharmishtha away. The result is that Yayati, is impressed by Sharmishtha's intellect and wit and refuses to part with her when later Devyani, after the discovery of illicit relationship between the two, asks him to. Despite the discord between the two, Devyani does not allow Sharmishtha to leave the palace and go away. She cannot make a choice between making Sharmishtha stay in the palace or send her away. "Not to choose, is also to choose, for even if we deliver our power of decision to others, we are still responsible for having done so." (52) Thus she is the one responsible for the marital disharmony in her life. When the crisis in the life of Yayati comes, instead of owning up her responsibility, Devyani leaves the palace and brings upon the curse of premature old age on her husband.

She does not even fully perform her duty as a mother and a queen and does not want to welcome the newly married step-son and his wife to the palace. When Yayati learns that Shukracharya has cursed him with old age, he does not accept responsibility for what he has done. He accuses Sharmishtha for his wretched condition--"Sharmishtha, *rakshasi*, you are responsible for all this" (*Yayati* 53).

The curse demoralizes Yayati. Sharmishtha tries to pacify Yayati to accept what has come his way, but he loses control and becomes violent. He remains adamant and refuses to give in and says "If I have to retain my identity, I will have to retain my youth, Sharmi! I have to retain my youth (54)."

Yayati seated on the bed insanely tries to grapple something, something which he has lost, which has raced further ahead from him. As he says to Sharmishtha--"I am searching for my past...I don't believe this was the place where I used to have fun with my queens, where I used to compete with time" (55). He goes to the extent of saying that Puru must be celebrating this occasion because now he will get the kingship. Karnad's Yayati can speak a lot against Puru in the presence of Sharmishtha because as Suneel points out unlike in the *Mahabharata*, he is the not the son of Sharmishtha but another of Yayati's wife (109).

Puru, who runs after Shukracharya for the amelioration of Yayati's curse, comes and informs him that if a youth accepted his old age, he will be free from the curse. On hearing this, Yayati is jubilant. He is confident that someone or the other amongst his courtiers or subjects will definitely accept his old age and free him from curse. When Puru informs him that no one is willing to accept his old age, Yayati is shocked. Sharmishtha, reiterating the theme of

responsibility, bring Yayati back to his senses. But Yayati stands unconvinced. Everyone is at his/ her wit's ends to make Yayati accept the responsibility of his action. Yayati cries bitterly and is shattered. He even agrees to return youth back to anybody after five-six years. Then Puru tries to make him understand the gravity of the situation:

The question here is not of morality, not even of faith or religion...Here the question is that of a human, who wants neither sacrifice nor fame; he only wants no change in his life. If it were a deity, he would have accepted your old age with pleasure. But these are humans. On one side lies this dead world and on the other eternity. They do not want to live in the hell between these two worlds (*Yayati* 61-62).

It is then when his newly married son, Puru decides to take the curse of senility on himself. All through his life, he suffers from anguish and despair like the protagonist of Franz Kafka's *The Castle*, as is evinced in this speech of the existential hero:

...When I am alone, then I cannot remember anything but this room. I am frightened of my own existence. To prove the worth of my body, whenever I try to turn inwards and look for meaning, I can't find anything (48).

Sharmishtha tries to make Puru understand that he is committing a similar blunder as Yayati, for he too is running away from his responsibility towards his newly-wed wife, Chitrlekha. It appears that Puru, suffering from the existential angst, wants to make bold and crucial choices to define himself and to make others aware of his existence, his very being. Puru offers to accept the curse even though he tells Sharmishtha that Yayati is not worthy of self-sacrificing love. Puru feels that he is not making a sacrifice but only trying to understand his inner powers. Thus Puru's sacrifice is a waste for it is made not out of love for his father but because of his own anguish and angst. He takes the curse on himself and relieves his father. Thus, to put in the words of Seema Suneel:

Yayati succeeds in transferring his old age and his sins to Puru but in the process experiences shattering disillusionment and loss of faith. The argument that he puts forward is that his people need him as a king and therefore he is doing this. But to his own self, it is clear that this is not the truth (110).

Yayati asserts that he is not willing to own up senility because he feels that his empire needs him at that hour. But the truth is that he does not want to own up responsibility for his own actions and wants to delve more in sensual pleasures.

Even Chitrlekha acts in an irresponsible manner. Shocked by her husband's acceptance of the curse and enraged by her father-in-law's fallacious and pretentious pleas to accept her old husband, she commits suicide in a fit of anger. But she actually does not want to die and cries for help—"Save me. Stop me from dying, Swaru, save me...help Swaru...Swaru (*she dies*)" (*Yayati* 87).

Puru shocked and baffled by the happenings around, the sudden death of his wife and his own futility in acceptance of senility which brought to him no inner strength and revealed to him no inner powers only left him letting out the existential cry: "What is the meaning of all this , O God, what is the meaning?" (91) The statement is expressive of the "anguish of being" which is defined by Olson as "the anguish one experiences at the thought that nothing and nobody might ever come into existence or that everything or everybody might go out of existence in an instant"

(31).

Sharmishtha is the only one in the play who unflinchingly accepts responsibility. She is the one who from the very start convinces Yayati to own up responsibility for his own action. When she is condemned to live the life of slave for her misdemeanour, she accepts responsibility for her misdeed and follows Devyani to serve her. Now after the curse has befallen Yayati due to their illicit relationship, she assumes responsibility and clings on her decision till the very end. After watching the horror of the situation, the death of Chitrlekha and the curse of senility on Puru, Yayati finally understands that the tragedy of the situation has occurred because of his own folly in non-admittance of responsibility. He resolves to go to the forests as penitence and Sharmishtha, so firm in her decision, accompanies him.

### **Conclusion**

To conclude, we may say that Sharmishtha is the only person in the play who accepts responsibility while characters like Puru, Yayati and Chitrlekha evade it. However it is important to understand that Karnad was never such an existentialist as Kafka or Camus. As he himself declares in an interview with Meenakshi Raykar:

I do not understand the word “existentialism”. In fact there is no uniform existential philosophy. I only wanted to suggest that anguish and agony are to be accepted positively (340).

It is very difficult to find out if Karnad is committed to any philosophy. While a certain vague form of existentialism is discernible in his plays, it is wrong to pin him down as an existentialist. What he does is examine the myths he likes and find contemporary values in a context that is meaningful.

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