

De-Mythification in Girish Karnad's *Yayati* – A Study

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Girish Karnad has played several roles in the field of Indian Drama. He was an actor, writer, producer of several plays in English and Indian languages. He has also acted in the films of Kannada, Tamil, Hindi and other languages. He is a scholar in Arts and Literature. He is a recipient of many national and international awards. He wrote his plays originally in Kannada and nine of them have been translated into English Karnad himself. He wrote *Yayati* in Kannada when he was just twenty two years and translated it into English in 2008.

The Mahabharata is a garland of many stories among which the story of Yayati is also one. All the stories impart one or the value or dharma. The story of Yayati imparts the righteousness or dharma of filial duty. The righteousness or dharma of filial duty imparted through Yayati story is that the children should perform any sacrifice for the sake of the well being of their parents. In the story of Yayati, Yayati wants his son Puru to exchange his youth with his old age. Puru performs this self-sacrifice which is advocated as righteousness or dharma in the Hindu way of life. But many modern and twentieth century writers have found it to be not agreeable and thus have changed it so as to suit the present context. Karnad has also changed this notion of righteousness/dharma in his play *Yayati*. This paper attempt to highlight how and why the ancient value system of filial duty has been changed in the plot of how and why the ancient value system of filial duty has been changed in the plot of *Yayati*.

Sukracharya is a wise sage who was the guiding spirit of the asuras whose king called Vrishaparva. Devayani is the only daughter of Sukracharya. One day Devayani accompanies the asura princess Sarmishtha and her sisters to the woods where they sport in joy. After their sport, they get into a water pool leaving their garlands and dresses on the bank. Lord Indra creates a strong breeze mischievously which mixes their dresses in a huddle. After

their bath, they come and happen to wear the wrong dresses due to the mixture of their dresses. Sarmishtha happens to clad herself with the dress of Devayani and vice versa. Devayani. In the ensuing interaction, Devayani exclaims in a jester that Sarmishtha has clad herself in the dress of the daughter of their master. It arouses anger in Sarmishtha besides insulting her on the status of her father that he survives on the bounty of her father who is the king, pushes her into a dry well and leaves.

Yayat, who is an emperor and the ancestor of Pandavas, visits the forest for hunting. As he feels thirsty, he goes in search of a well and thus arrives at the well into which Devayani has been pushed. She requests him to rescue her from the well which does by seizing her hand. After she is saved from the well, Devayani makes a proposal to him to marry her but Yayati refuses by saying that their marriage would become *Partiloma* which is not acceptable in the Vedic tradition and returns to his capital.

Although Sukracharya sends messengers to Deviyani to persuade her to return home, she declines to do so. Then Sukracharya himself arrives where his daughter is staying and pleads with her to go home with him. Devayani narrates the verbal and physical assault of Sarmishtha on her to her father:

She replied in sorrow and anger : Father, leave alone my merits and faults, which are after all my own concern. But tell me this, was Sarmishtha, the daughter of Vrishaparava, right when she told me you were but a minstrel singing the praises of kings? She called me the daughter of a mendicant living on the doles won by flattery. Not content with this arrogant contumely, she slapped me and threw me into a pit which was nearby. I cannot stay in any place within her father's territory. And Devayani began to weep.[Rajagopalachari, 16]

After hearing Devayani's grievances, Sukracharya rushes to the asura king, Vishaparva and briefs her daughter's misbehaviour. Vishaparva realises the enormity of his daughter's offence and is prepared to die in the fire if Sukracharya leaves him. On the instruction of Sukracharya, Vishaparva and his daughter visit Devayani and make all attempts to appease her. At this juncture she puts condition for returning home as :

Devayani was stubborn and said: "Sarmishtha who told me that I was the daughter of a beggar, should become my handmaiden and attend on me in the house into which my father gives me in marriage". Vishaparva consented and asked his attendants to fetch his daughter Sarmishtha. Sarmishtha admitted her fault and bowed in submission. She said: "Let it be as my companion Devayani desires. My father shall not lose his preceptor for a fault committed by me. I will be her attendant," Devayani was pacified and returned to her house with her father. [Rajagopalachari, 16-17]

Devayani could not forget Yayati and longed to get married to him. Then she gets an opportunity to meet him again in the forest and makes the same proposal more earnestly. Yayati refuses to accept her proposal of marriage with him not because he is unwilling to marry her but because their marriage is against the convention of Chaturvarna scripture. A man may marry a woman of lower caste but not that of higher caste which is adharma. Yet Sukracharya relaxes this norm and get them married which Devayani is illustrated as shown under:

On another occasion also Devayani came across Yayati. She repeated her request that he should marry her as his wife since he had clasped her right hand. Yayati repeated his objection that he, a Kshatriya, could not lawfully marry a brahmana. Finally they both went to Sukracharya and got his assent to their marriage. This is an instance of the pratiloma marriage which was restored to on exceptional occasions. The sastras, no doubt, prescribe what is right and forbid what is wrong but a marriage once effected cannot be made invalid. [Rajagopalachari, 17]

Yayati and Devayani live together happily. As per the Sarmishtha's promise, she also goes to her house and

stay there as her attendant. The most unexpected crisis takes place at this juncture. Sharshmitha meets Yayati privately and makes a prayer to marry her. Yayati also agrees and marries her without Devayani's knowledge. Devayani considers Yayati's secret Marriage with Sharshmitha to be a serious betrayal and outrage and complains the same to her father. Her father becomes angry and curses Yayati instantly:

Devayani came to know of it and was naturally very angry, she complained to her father and Sukracharya in his rage cursed Yayati with premature old age. Yayati, thus suddenly stricken with age in the very prime of his manhood, begged so humbly for forgiveness that Sukracharya, who had not forgotten Devayani's rescue from the well, at last relented. He said: "O king, you have lost the glory which is youth. The curse cannot be recalled, but if you can persuade anyone to exchange his youth for your age the exchange will take effect." Rajagopalachari, [17]

After giving the solution to his curse, Sukracharya leaves for his place. Yayati becomes old suddenly. He becomes an emperor and has not experienced defeat in his career of wars with other kings. He keeps following all sastras, worshiped the gods and venerated his ancestors with great devotion. Thus he becomes a loved ruler for devotion to the wellbeing of his citizens. In addition to his premature oldness due to the curse of Sukracharya, all these years increased his old age. Yet he feels that his genuine joy of sensual pleasure is not fulfilled and thus is unable to come out of his sensual desire. In order to satisfy his sensual quest, he requires becoming young again. Since Sukracharya has said that he can recover his youth if any young man exchanges his youth for his old age, he approaches his sons. Yayati has five sons, two from Devayani namely Yadu and Turvasu and two from Sharshmitha namely Durhyu, Anuduryu and Puru.

While the first four sons disagree for the exchange, Puru agrees which is illustrated thus: "He first asked his eldest son. That son replied: "O great king, women and servants will mock at me if I were to take upon myself your old age. I can not do go. Aske of my younger brothers who are dearer to you than my self". [Rajagopalachari, 17]

Yayati is still confident that his four children will obey him but the second one also refuses to exchange his youth for his father's old age as "When the second son was approached, he gently refused with the words: "Father, you ask me to take up old age that destroys not only strength and beauty but also as I see wisdom. I am strong enough to do so." Then he invites his third and fourth sons whose reply is as follows: "The third replied: "An old man cannot ride a horse or an elephant. His speech will falter. What can I do in such a helpless plight? I cannot agree." The king was angry and disappointed that his three sons had declined to do as he wished, but he hoped for better from his fourth son, to whom he said: You should take up my old age. If you exchange your youth with me, I shall give it back to you after some time and take back the old age with which I have been cursed." The fourth son begged to be forgiven as this was a thing he could by no means consent to. An old man had to seek the help of others even to keep his body clean, a most pitiful plight. No, much as he loved his father he could not do it. Yayati was struck with sorrow at the refusal of the four sons.[Rajagopalachari, 17-18]

Now his last son, Puru is alone left. He has felt disappointed and betrayed by the response of his first four sons. He expected his sons to follow the principle of filial love and duty but in vain. He calls his fifth son, Puru and he readily accepts to help his father which is illustrated as shown under:

Still, hoping against hope, he supplicated his last son who had never yet opposed his wishes: "You must be save me. I am afflicted with this old age with its wrinkles, debility and grey hairs as a result of the curse of Sukracharya. It is too hard a trial! If you will take upon yourself these infirmities, I shall enjoy life for just a while more and then give you back your youth and resume my old age and all its sorrows. Pray, do not refuse as your elder brothers have done." Puru, the youngest son, moved by filial love, said: "Father, I gladly give you my youth and relieve you of the sorrows of the old age and cares of the state. Be happy." Hearing these words Yayati embraced him. As soon as he touched his son, Yayati became youth. Puru, who accepted the old age of his

father, ruled the kingdom and acquired great renown. [Rajagopalachari,18]

Yayati begins to live his life with a new energy and spirit. He enjoys every moment of his life seeking gratification in the sensual joy. The more he seeks enjoyment, the more the desire for such pleasures grows. He realises that there is end for the sensual enjoyment through indulgence. His realization is narrated in Rajaji's the Mahabharata like this:

Yayati enjoyed life for long, and not satisfied, went later to the garden of Kubera and spent many years with an apsara maiden. After long years spent in vain efforts to quench desire by indulgence, the truth dawned upon him. Returning to Puru, he said: "Dear son sensual desire is never quenched by indulgence any more than fire is by pouring ghee in it. I had heard and read this, but till now I had not realised it. No object of desire, corn, gold, cattle or women, nothing can even satisfy the desire of man. We can reach peace only by a mental poise beyond likes and dislikes. Such is the state of Brahman. Take back your youth and rule the kingdom wisely and well." With these words Yayati took his old age, Puru, who regained his youth, was made king by Yayati who retired to the forest. He spent his time there in austerities and, in due course, attained heaven.[Rajagopalachari, 18-19]

The episodes of Yayati in the Mahabharata convey the moral that the desire to the senses is the source of all misery and it cannot be mitigated through or by indulgence. However, several norms or conventions of the Hindu way of life are also incorporated in the narrative. They are pratiloma, anuloma, holding the right hand, araya, asura, curse, filial love and renunciation. These norms or conventions were believed to be eternal although they are hierarchically discriminatory. This paved the way for many writers and critics to debate about its validity among whom Girish Karnad is also one as he has modified original myth in his play Yayati.

Karnad wrote this play while he was leaving for Britain. He has objections to many of the issues in the original myth of Yayati. He could not view it just as a moral story conveyed at the climax in the original. He could not

ignore the issues which are part of the myth. When he ponders over the issues such as inter-caste and interracial marriage systems; the treatment to the handmaiden, the authority of father over the sons, he found them to be invalid in the present context. Thus he has re-written the story of Yayati with a categorical which amounts to demythification. Let me examine the play with reference to how and why it is demythified.

One method of demythification in Karnad's *Yayati* is the creation of new characters and their stories. There are two new characters in *Yayati* that are not there original episodes of *Yayati* in the Mahaharata. They are Swarnalata and Chitralka.

Swarnalata is a maid in Yayati's palace and attends to Devayani most of the times. It is she who attempts to create a feud between Devayani and Sharshmita. She makes numerous allegations and complaints to Devayani against her at the outset of play. One illustration may suffice to drive this point home as follows:

DEVAYANI : Enough, Swarna. How often do I have to tell you not to pay her any attention? Get up noe. There is so much to attend to --

SWARNALATA: That spiteful whore _ I would have torn her hair out if you hadn't stopped me. Taught that fiend a proper lesson.The rakshasi. You heard us, madam. Did I say a word against her? All those dirty insinuations.The nasty jibes. They are too horrible to think. She didn't even spare His Majesty. I ...I can't bear it. [Karnad, Act One, 7]

In the original myth, Devayani goes to her father and informs him about Yayati betrayal in marrying Sharshmita without her knowledge. But Karnad has made some changes with regard to this instance in his play. He uses Swarnalata to provoke Devayani to go to her father to complain about Yayati. Indeed Yayati has not yet married Sharshmita. Yayati detects that Yayati and Sharshmita have copulated and forces Yayati to send Sharshmita back to her place. But Yayati tells her that he has decided to marry her. Devayani becomes frustrated. At this juncture, Swarnalata intervenes and provokes her thus:

SWARNALATA: Forgivr me. But won't you at least talk to your father before you decide ...

DEVAYANI: I don't you to tell that. I am going home. Go, tell them to summon my carriage.

SWARNALATA : But, madam, your father is here. He has come to the city to greet the Prince.

Devayani(surprised) : Has he? When did he come?

.....

DEVAYANI: Tell me. Where is my father?

SWARNALATA : I was told he was resting in the Shambu Shrine.

DEVAYANI: Good. That saves me a lot of trouble.[Karnad, ACT TWO, 32]

Swarnalata is responsible for the suicide of Chitralka. Devayani rushes to meet her father. In the time, Puru and his bride, Chitralka, arrive in the palace. The chamber meant for Puru's stay is not kept ready. So Chitralka is asked to be in another chamber which Yayati, Puru and Sharshmita converse among themselves in the first chamber. They come to know that Sukracharya has already spelt his curse on Yayati that he would become old and invalid. Puru brings the message that Yayati may get back his youth if anybody exchanges his youth for his old age. Yayati is confident that his people will be ready for such a sacrifice for the sake of their king. But the fact is that no body is ready for such a sacrifice. At this time, Puru comes forward for the exchange which Yayati is not ready to accept. Puru sends Swarnalata to inform his bride to come his chamber.

Instead of conveying Puru's message to Chitralka, Swarnalata informs her about Puru's decision to exchange his youth for his father's old age. Though she becomes proud of her husband's sacrifice, she gets shocked miserably to see her husband's disfigure. Swarnalata comes with the vial of poison which was left Sharshmita earlier. Chitralka takes it from her and consumes it as follows:

(She picks the vial of poison from the bed, walks up to him, and holds it up to the demand)

YAYATI (terrified) :Chitralka, don't be foolish!

CHITRALEKHA: Foolish? What else is there for me to do? You have your youth. PrincrPooru has his old age. Where do I fit in?

(She lifts the vial to her lips)

YAYATI :Chitralka, wait. Listen to me

(He rushes forward and grabs her hand. Then recoils in horror)

CHITRALEKHA : There you are. You say I shouldn't be foolish but you can't even bring to stop me.

YAYATI : No, no! It is not that. Wait ... Listen ...

(Calls out)

Sharshmita, maid ...

(Chित्रalekha smiles defiantly and swallows the poison. Suddenly she crumbles up with pain. Sharshmita and Swarnalatha rush in. Chित्रalekha collapses, writhing, in their arms.) [Karnad, ACT FOUR, 66-67]

Karnad has also added the story of Swarnalata. When she visits Chित्रalekha to convey Pooru's message to her, her interaction with her leads to the story of Swarnalata. She narrates her story to Swarnalata. She says that she belongs to a poor family. As her father is unable to pay the fee for her education, a Brahmin teacher is hired on a nominal fee and food to teach her. Then she gets married to a charioteer of Yayati. They have led a happy abdicant life until the gossip about her relationship with the teacher. She tells him that she has not committed any wrong doing with the teacher. Yet her husband becomes depressed and resigned. In order to make him normal, she tells a lie that she had courtship with the teacher. After hearing this, her husband has left her and the place. She knows whether he is alive or dead. Thus she leads her life like *asumangali*.

Chित्रalekha character is also a new creation in Karnad's *Yayati*. Karnad opens the play with a backdrop of the preparation for welcoming Pooru and his bride. Her character is relevant in demythifying in two ways. Firstly, her own story. Her marriage with the heir of Bharatha dynasty is decided in advance. So the normal formalities like participation of potential grooms, breaking the bow and others are dismissed. She is married to Pooru. This is a deviation from the original myth.

Secondly, the rejection of self sacrifice as irrational is conveyed through her objection to her husband's exchange of his youth with his father's old age. The impact and consequence of exchange between father and son is not limited and confined to the life these two. It affects their spouses also. Chित्रalekha who is expecting a son from Pooru can not get owing to his old age now. Yayati has

become young now but can not give Chित्रalekha a son as he is not her husband. The irrationality of the self sacrifice preached through the original myth is thus exposed by Chित्रalekha.

In the original myth, Devayani demands that Sharshmita should work as her handmaiden after her marriage. Although Sharshmita is a daughter of asuraking, there is no racial discrimination. But the racial discrimination is evident in Karnad's *Yayati Swarnalata* is a maid in the palace like Sharshmita but she never feels that she is a slave because she belongs the same race of Devayani namely Arya race. But Sharshmita feels that she is a slave because slavery is always found between two different races between which one race is regarded as being superior to the other.

Sharshmita knows that Devayani demanded Yayati to marry her on account of his holding her right hand while she is rescued from the well. She wants the same norm in her case also. Thus she brings a vial of poison when she meets him. She attempts to consume it with the expectation that Yayati would stop her by holding her right hand.

The myth of *Yayati* is distorted in several ways in Karnad's *Yayati*. Firstly, two new characters are included. Secondly, the racial discrimination between the araya and asurais viewed with scepticism. Thirdly, *Yayati* in the play is presented with more humanity than *Yayati* in the myth. In the myth, *Yayati* is ambitious in the pursuit of sensual pleasure at the cost of his son's youth. But *Yayati* in the play never approves Pooru's consent to exchange his youth for his father's old age. In the original myth, there is no reference to the implication of the Puru's exchange of youth for his father's old age on his spouse. But Karnad's play exposes the serious impact of such a norm on the dependents of Pooru. His wife commits suicide because of the filial love and duty as it deprives of the conjugal love and duty. Thus Karnad's *Yayati* is regarded as demythification of the myth of *Yayati*.

References

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