



Representation of myths in girish karnad's *Yayati*

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Abstract

Legends, myths and folktales from ancient India have always influenced various forms of literature. Girish Karnad, the remarkable playwright of the 20th century, takes the source material for most of his plays from authentic Indian sources. He played a crucial role in the efforts to devise a distinctly Indian theatre that would stand apart from the traditions of western realism, naturalism, and expressionism. Thereby he creates a uniquely modern Indian drama. The myths he uses in his plays are taken out of their traditional connotations, and are explored in the larger perspective of the universal importance conveying specific human experience. He uses only fragments of the myths and supplements them with his imagination in order to suit the needs of modern context. The present paper seeks to study the representation and rewriting of myths in Karnad's play *Yayati*.

Keywords: myth, Indian drama, existential, reinterpret, postcolonial

Introduction

There is a scarcity of Indian Drama in English which is attributed to several reasons, one of them being the fact that the form of drama in English is still awaiting Indianization. The form of novel and poetry in Indian English is successfully presenting Indian sensibility in a typically Indian style. But, the drama is still not able to appeal to Indian sensibilities. The stunted growth of Indian-English Drama is also due to the inability of Indian playwrights in English to draw upon the rich and varied Indian dramatic traditions and make use of the rich plethora of Indian myths and Indian historical heritage.

However, in recent decades, contemporary writers like Girish Karnad have made convincing attempts to Indianize the form of drama by using conventions of Indian classical drama and folk theatre. Karnad states: "The basic concern of the Indian theatre in the post-independence period has been to try to define its 'Indianness.'" Girish Karnad has time and again returned to eternal roots of his cultural tradition, taking inspiration from mythology and folklore. He has laid the foundation of a unique tradition in the history of Indian English drama by rewriting and reinvestigating myth, legend, history, and folklore with reference to contemporary socio-political issues. He uses myth and folktale in order to reveal and establish modern man's relationship with the past and tackle contemporary problems by placing a continuous parallel between antiquity and contemporaneity. He is credited with taking stories from epics and oral tradition into contemporary tales and analyzing them in the context of modern existential conflicts. The fact that although the tales seem to uphold traditional values, they also have the means of questioning those values. Like Brecht, Karnad compelled the audience to respond intellectually to the action of the play and to question it rather than accept it passively. By rewriting Indian myths, Karnad talks about the contemporary issues related to women, postcolonialism, sexuality, identity crisis, and so on. His handling of issues of personal identity in a complex world of tangled relationships through rewriting of myth and folktales is exemplary in nature. Karnad also championed the cause of women in his plays, be it *Hayavadana*, *Agni Mattu Male* (Fire and Rain), *Yayati*, or *Hayavadana*. He merges myth and reality, past and present in an effort to carry his message of restructuring the present society.

What is Myth?

The term 'myth' is derived from the Greek word 'mythos' which means 'fable' or 'tale'. Myths are symbolic tales of the ancient past and are generally concerned with the belief systems that guide the social actions and values of the individuals of the society. Myth is a mode of cultural transmission. It relates to stories and legends of the kings, priests, gods, demons, and cultural heroes. Myth carries with itself a pragmatic character of primitive faith and moral wisdom.

Devdutt Pattanaik: "Myth is essentially a common cultural understanding of the world that binds individuals and communities together. This understanding may be religious or secular..."

Karnad's representation of myths in his plays

Karnad avidly used myths, legends, and folktales to present contemporary problems. He opines that the roots of modern day issues are deeply embedded in them. Through his plays, he tried to interpret myths and legends in the modern context. "I wanted Indian myths to achieve the status Greek myths have on the world stage," Karnad said in one of his interviews. In doing so, he conveys the message of restructuring the present society on the

solid basis of the new values of life. He never presents the old myths and legends as they are in their conventional modes. He adds a new dimension to the original myth.

Karnad draws all the sources for his dramatic art from Indian mythology and history. His writing is invariably rooted in the Indian consciousness, though he adopts various Western techniques to reinterpret modern life and times. He uses tradition to question its appropriateness. He attempts to preserve tradition while breaking away from it. Karnad tries to challenge those ethical and moral questions for which no ready-made answers are available, neither in the past nor in the present. He rewrites and reinterprets Indian myths to suit his dramatic purpose and design. By exploiting myths and legends, Karnad tries to show how they are relevant to modern times in presenting a modern man's dilemma.

Rewriting of myth in Yayati

The theme of Yayati is taken from the first chapter of the Adiparva episode of the Mahabharata. It is an existentialist play on the theme of responsibility. It re-interprets an ancient myth from the modern point of view. In the play, Karnad has successfully rewritten the Indian myth in order to deal with issues such as existentialism, man-woman relationship in the male-dominated society, caste, class, gender consciousness, sense of alienation, complexities of responsibilities, and expectations. Moreover, the socio-religious tensions of the epic story were translated into an essentially contemporary tale of conflict between the generations.

In the Mahabharata version of the story, King Yayati makes a pact with the great sage Shukrachariya that he will only be in a physical relationship with Devayani, his lawful wife and Shukra's daughter, but not with Devayani's slave, Sharmistha. When his infidelity is discovered, Shukra curses him with instantaneous old age and decrepitude. When Yayati pleads that Sharmistha had made it impossible for him to refuse, Shukra modifies the curse: "The son who will give you his youth shall become the king". Yayati asks each of his sons, in turn, to exchange for a thousand years of his youthful body for his father's senile one. His four oldest boys refuse in disgust. But the youngest boy, Puru, agrees and Yayati regains his youth and with it the kingdom. The epic story ends peacefully, with Puru's quiet, uncomplicated passive submission.

By contrast, Karnad's play is a complex modern tragedy, reflecting the tensions of the educated urban Indian caught up in the contradictions of his time. Karnad states: "At the time of writing, I had seen the play only as an escape from my tensions. But, looking back, I am surprised how accurately the myth reflected my anxieties, my resentment at the elders who seemed to be demanding that I sacrifice my future for their peace of mind. By the time I had finished writing the play, it was not my parents but this myth that had appeared out of nowhere to come to my aid that seemed to pose the real challenge. It had nailed me to my past."

Karnad rewrites the original myth into a play discussing the dichotomy of self vs. family. He explores the complexities of responsibility and expectations within the Indian family. The elder generation expects too much of the younger generation and thereby spoil their future prospects. King Yayati, just to fulfill his lust, demands his son's sacrifice for his youth. He does not care what will happen to Puru and his wife in the future. Karnad expressed in it a personal dilemma between his family's demands and his own wish for freedom.

Another theme Karnad raises is a man's responsibility towards his parents and his wife and whom to prioritize if one has to choose between the two. The reason why Karnad rewrites this myth is its relevance in modern times: "A question began to haunt me," Karnad writes in his autobiography *Aadadata Ayushya*. "What if Puru had a wife? Would she have approved of this unnatural arrangement and allowed her husband to sacrifice his youth for his father?"

Girish Karnad was only twenty-two when he attempted his interpretation in the play, Yayati. What makes his version of the tale so startlingly original, is that he rejects the traditional glorification of the Puru's 'self-sacrifice' and, against a backdrop of lust, jealousy, and, racial tensions, foregrounds the tragic choices with which the young prince and his bride are confronted. Karnad's portrait of Puru as an "unheroic hero" is described by U.R. Ananthamurthy as "trying to use the past to explore real problems in the present". The story of Yayati also reminds of Oscar Wilde's novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) in which Dorian, in order to live an eternal life of materialistic and sensual pleasures tries to escape from old age by exchanging his age with that of his painting.

Instead of inventing a new plot, Karnad uses a pre-existing narrative and gives it a complex shape and meaning. He adds new characters and handles the theme in such a way that it makes appeals to contemporary times. In fact, it enraged some critics as Karnad articulated women's sensibilities in an effective manner by re-writing the myth. Although the society projected here is male-dominated, female characters like Devayani, Sharmistha, and Chitrlekha are at the center of the play's action. Through these characters, Karnad portrays strong women in society.

One woman character that traditionally becomes tragic in the gender-based society is Chitrlekha, the newly-wedded bride of Prince Pooru. Like her husband, she too obliquely becomes a victim of Yayati's keen desire for youth and vigour. However, the character of Chitrlekha in the drama differs from that in history. Karnad's Chitrlekha is the epitome of a "New Woman." Karnad depicts Chitrlekha as a bold character. She refuses to be treated like a puppet. Yayati tries to dominate her as her father-in-law and the king. But she remains adamant and refuses to be his pawn. Chitrlekha takes a firm stand for herself by outrightly refusing to be with an old and ugly husband. She raises a voice of protest against the injustice done to her.

Chitrlekha is the representative of a modern woman who asserts her individuality and fights for her rights.

Karnad's Sharmistha is quite distinct from that of the Mahabharata. It is not she who is interested in Yayati, but it is Yayati who gets bewitched by her physical charms. She is practical-minded and is guided by reason. That is why she tries to dissuade Pooru from accepting his father's old age since she says: "No, no, you can't. It is utter stupidity! Pooru, the desire for self-sac is a rank perversion". According to Aparna Dharwadker "This chorus of unusual female voices, mixed in with the flaws of male utterances, humanizes the myth and gives it ethical and dialectical weight."

Conclusion

Using the incident in ancient Indian history, Karnad here projects a modern man's dilemma who cannot make a proper choice and therefore turns out to be tragic. Although the play is based on a mythological tale, Karnad has given it a new meaning and significance highly relevant in the context of contemporary life. Although in our Indian context myths are related to religion, Karnad is only interested in the mythical side of it. He finds a Jungian quality in these myths.

Indian myths offer a solid basis of a common background which permeates the collective consciousness of the entire nation.

Moreover, the myth acquires new dimensions in the creative hands of Karnad and the play unfolds rich strands of meaning. By using these myths Karnad tried to reveal the absurdity of life with all its elemental obsession and conflicts and man's eternal resistance to achieve precision.

So, Karnad dives deep into the traditional myths to spell modern man's distress and predicament that are fashioned in his mind. Karnad does not take the myths in their entirety; he takes only parts that are useful to him and the rest he supplements with his imagination to make his plots interesting. They form an internal part of cultural consciousness of the land, with different meanings and it reflects contemporary issues. Karnad believes in the Jungian collective racial consciousness and so turns to the past habitually for the source materials. As Dhanavel says, the borrowed myths are "reinterpreted to fit pre-existing cultural emphasis".

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