

Narratives of conflict and identity: A thematic analysis of Girish Karnad's Yayati

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Abstract

Girish Raghunath Karnad is one of the most influential playwrights of our time, engaging deeply with historical narratives and folktales in his work to express the richness of Indian traditions through various themes and techniques. His contributions to Indian theatre have earned him notable recognition, including the Padma Bhushan, one of the country's highest civilian honors, as well as the prestigious Jnanapith Award, which celebrates outstanding contributions to literature. Originally, Karnad wrote his plays in Kannada, showcasing the cultural nuances of his native language, but he later translated them into several other languages to reach a wider audience. One of his key works, *Yayati*, first penned in Kannada in 1961, marks Karnad's debut in the realm of drama and was subsequently translated into English by the playwright himself. In this play, Karnad draws from historical and traditional elements of the Mahabharata, using them as a framework to explore and critique the irrationalities of human existence, alongside the poignant attachments that define life. Furthermore, his work highlights significant contemporary social issues within the context of post-Independence literature. The research paper aims to delve into the thematic concerns presented in Girish Karnad's *Yayati*, while also reflecting on the evolving contemporary social issues faced within post-colonial Indian society in today's context.

Keywords: English literature, Girish Karnad's Yayati drama, Indian tradition, Culture, narratives of conflict, Jnanapith

Introduction

Girish Karnad is one of the most influential playwrights in contemporary India, skillfully exploring Indian tradition through the themes and techniques in his plays. His works, originally penned in the Kannada language, have since been translated into various other languages, ensuring a wider audience can appreciate their depth and insight. Karnad presents a rich tapestry of Indian civilization and tradition by drawing on a wealth of native concepts, myths, folktales, and ideologies. His storytelling skillfully intertwines modern dilemmas with age-old narratives, creating a dialogue between the past and present that resonates deeply with audiences. Aprana Bhargava Dharwadkar discusses the profound influence of Indian myth, tradition, and history on Karnad's writing. She highlights how his plays are not merely expressions of his thoughts but also serve as a reflection of the cultural heritage that shapes the characters and narratives within them. Through his unique blend of realism and fantasy, Karnad invites the audience to engage critically with societal issues, prompting reflection on their values and beliefs. Each work is layered with meaning, encouraging viewers to delve deeper into the complexities of Indian identity and the rich history that informs it, ultimately revealing the timeless struggles and triumphs of humanity.

Theme

The play opens with *Yayati*, who is married to *Devayani*, the daughter of the demon guru, *Sukracharaya*. *Devayani* is not just an ordinary princess; she is a figure of complexity and depth, representing the duality of privilege and struggle. Alongside her is *Sharmistha*, the daughter of the demon

king *Vrishparva*, who is presented as a maidservant or slave to *Devayani*. This dynamic sets the stage for the unfolding drama and the intricate relationships between these characters. *Yayati*, filled with a mixture of excitement and curiosity, soon becomes aware of *Sharmistha's* cheerless plight, which evokes a strong sense of empathy within him. Despite the warnings from *Sukracharaya*, who cautions *Yayati* against allowing *Sharmistha* to share his life, *Yayati* cannot suppress his desires. Compelled by an overwhelming attraction to *Sharmistha*, *Yayati* secretly marries her, plunging himself into a web of conflict and emotional turmoil. This act of rebellion against his father-in-law's authority is a crucial turning point in the narrative. When *Sukracharaya* learns of *Yayati's* actions, he is furious and casts a profound curse upon him, condemning *Yayati* to become an old man prematurely. This transformation from a youthful to an aged state is not simply a loss; it represents a deep existential struggle and a questioning of the values surrounding desire, duty, and the repercussions of one's choices.

Sukracharaya, in his wrath, also reveals a potential salvation for *Yayati*: he grants him a unique opportunity to reverse his aging if he can find someone willing to exchange their youth with him. This aspect of the curse introduces a layer of complexity, inviting themes of sacrifice and the intricacies of human relationships. *Yayati* is faced with the daunting task of finding someone to willingly give up their youth for him, which raises ethical questions and explores the lengths to which one might go to regain what has been lost.

As the drama unfolds, the motivations and inner conflicts of each character are pushed to the forefront, leading to an

exploration of love, sacrifice, and the consequences that arise from pursuing forbidden desires. Through this rich tapestry of interactions, the play delves deep into human emotions, examining the intersections of power, submission, and the desire for fulfillment. Ultimately, the choices made by Yayati not only alter his own fate but also ripple through the lives of those around him.

Karnad has been extensively praised by both cinema and play critics for various aspects of his works, such as characterization, plot construction, and the incorporation of traditions from myth, history, legend, and folktales. Additionally, he adeptly addresses contemporary social issues within Post-Independence literature. His plays are not simply performances featuring costumes and masks; rather, they are infused with contemporary relevance that resonates with the post-colonial context of Modern India. Through his innovative narratives, Karnad explores themes that are deeply rooted in the cultural heritage of the country while simultaneously reflecting the complexities of modern life. His ability to weave together the past and the present makes his work particularly poignant, as it encourages audiences to engage with the historical and social fabric of society. In an interview, Karnad expressed a belief in the power of storytelling as a means to confront and engage with the realities of life. This perspective is evident in his writing, where each character is more than just a role but a reflection of broader societal issues, thus inviting an ongoing dialogue about identity and culture in a rapidly changing world. His contributions to theater continue to inspire discussions about art's role in society.

"I had never fancied myself a dramatist. In fact, I had tried my hand at writing poetry. When I was at Dharwar which was the cultural capital of Karnataka having produced writers like Bedre, Crokak and so on, I would very often pass by the famous Kannada publishing house Manohara Granthamala and wonder if my work would ever be published by them! During the weeks of preparation for my departure to England-which were as I said quite stressful for various reasons- I found myself writing a play. This was Yayati. Though I had trained myself to write in English, I found myself writing the play in Kannada. (Mukherjee)"

Yayati is the first dramatic work by Karnad, which deals with traditions of myth, history, legend, and folktales from the Mahabharata, all within a modern context. It examines the Indian tradition and culture rooted in the past while focusing on contemporary social issues that arise in the post-colonial scenario of Indian society. Karnad embarked on what would become a splendid contribution to Indian English Drama through his play, Yayati. He had a keen eye for observing and portraying the evolving dynamics within the relationships of the characters. These relationships might appear complex at first glance but are ultimately relatable and easy to understand, allowing audiences to connect deeply with the narrative. The power of expression in terms of ideas, thoughts, and emotions felt by his characters stems from his remarkable yet straightforward style, which has a profound impact on both the audience and the reader alike. Yayati intricately presents the multifaceted relationships between the trio of Devayani, Sharmistha, and Yayati himself, along with characters like Pooru and Chitrlekha. Each character embodies distinct traits and motivations that contribute to the unfolding drama, reflecting turbulent societal norms and individual struggles.

In his play Yayati, we can easily observe that Karnad tries to illustrate the traditional myth from the Mahabharata in a modern context. The character of Yayati embodies a struggle that resonates with contemporary audiences, as it delves into deep philosophical questions about existence, identity, and the choices we make. Yayati is a self-conscious existentialist play, grounded in the theme of responsibility, which forces characters to confront the consequences of their actions in a meaningful way.

The conflict within Yayati highlights the tension between personal desires and social obligations, reflecting a struggle that is very much relevant today. This exploration of existential themes allows the audience to engage with profound questions about life and morality. Karnad acknowledges the influence of existentialist writers on his work, stating, "I wanted to tell people I had read Sartre, Camus, and others." This admission reveals his intention to weave complex philosophical ideas into a narrative that not only retells a myth but also challenges viewers to reflect on their own lives. Through this lens, Yayati becomes not just a retelling of an ancient story, but a timeless examination of human nature and the existential dilemmas we face.

It is true that Existentialism was the persuasive philosophy of the time. My attempt was to emphasize the calm acceptance of grief and anguish; Pooru's old age is a sudden transformation and not the eventually of life. It brings no wisdom and no self-realization. It is senseless punishment for an act he has not committed. It was also intrigued by the idea that if Pooru had a wife, how could she react? So, I introduced Chitrlekha. Every character in the play tries to evade the consequence of their actions except Sharmistha and Chitrlekha. (Mukherjee).

Karnad has significantly enhanced the Indian fictional landscape through his deep involvement with culture, art, play, and theatre. However, the most important contribution he has made to Indian English drama is his dedicated effort to reclaim the rich cultural and mythological traditions of the Indian past. In Karnad's plays, we observe his return to the roots of Indian heritage as he seeks to renew and celebrate local culture and tradition. India possesses a distinctive cultural identity, shaped by colonial histories within the post-colonial context. It is a vibrant tapestry of multicultural influences, showcasing a strong presence of indigenous traditions, culture, and moral values that often struggle against the dominance of imported European culture. It is Girish Karnad who courageously endeavors to recover and bring forth the invaluable treasure of Indian culture and tradition in post-Independence literature.

To sum up, Girish Karnad is one of the most influential playwrights and gifted craftsmen of dramatic arts, showcasing remarkable skill as a member of the performing arts community in post-independence literature. His play Yayati exemplifies this mastery, weaving together layers of intensity of thought, potential sensibility, and a reinterpretation of ancient myths within a modern context, particularly reflecting the nuances of postcolonial Indian society. The narrative delves into various pressing issues, including the complexities of tradition, the intricacies of culture, the quest for women's identity, and the moral dilemmas faced by individuals. These themes resonate profoundly within the framework of contemporary Indian society, underscoring the ongoing relevance of the discussions sparked by the play. Aparna Bhargava Dharwadkar, a notable scholar, offers insightful

commentary on the work, emphasizing its capacity to challenge conventional perceptions and provoke thoughtful dialogue. The characters in *Yayati* navigate a labyrinth of social expectations and personal desires, presenting a tapestry of human experience that remains impactful. Through Karnad's vivid storytelling and characterization, the play invites audiences to reflect on their values and confront the realities of their changing world. These elements contribute to making *Yayati* a significant piece of literature that continues to inspire and engage.

Conclusion

It can be stated that Girish Karnad has infused a fresh meaning and importance into an ancient tale. He has conveyed themes of alienation and existentialism through characters such as Chitrlekha and Pooru. According to Prem Sagar and R. Varshney, the play presents an existentialist dilemma, clearly illustrating how a person, rendered rootless and alienated, can become vengeful. This transforms it into a psychological exploration of individuals who receive the harshest penalties for actions beyond their control. (96) *Yayati*, too, has come to recognize the futility of life and the triviality of worldly desires. His singular wish to remain youthful and indulge in sensual pleasures has led to the destruction of many lives, including Chitrlekha, who meets an untimely end, and Pooru, who loses his beloved wife. In the *Mahabharata*, *Yayati* discerns the nature of desire and passion, while in *Yayati*, he comes to this understanding only after Chitrlekha's suicide. He rejects sensuality and embraces responsibility. *Yayati* addresses the theme of social responsibility, which is ultimately acknowledged by both father and son. They both come to the realization that one is accountable for their actions and that insatiable desires cannot be fulfilled.

On the basis of the above description, it is clear that "*Yayati*" holds significant value in understanding man-woman relationships, traditional values, and various existential concerns. Karnad delves deeply into the complexities of human interactions, particularly those between men and women, allowing readers to find common ground with each character as they navigate the dilemmas of contemporary life. Throughout the play, he explores the intricate dynamics that shape these relationships, highlighting both the struggles and the bonds that exist between individuals.

The characters of Devayani, Sharmistha, Swarnlata, and Chitrlekha, along with *Yayati* and Pooru, each bring their unique experiences and viewpoints to the stage. They reflect the multifaceted nature of relationships, illustrating how love, duty, and sacrifice often intertwine. Throughout the narrative, these characters live through various forms of companionship and conflict, allowing the audience to witness the depth of each interaction. The richness of their relationships serves to engage the audience on multiple levels, compelling them to consider their own experiences in relation to the themes presented.

Karnad's exploration of these characters and their relationships is rich in thematic concerns that resonate on both personal and societal levels. The play raises questions about gender roles, power dynamics, and the sacrifices individuals make for love and familial duty. In doing so, it uncovers the societal expectations that often dictate behavior and shape personal choices. Each character's

journey offers a lens through which we can examine our own beliefs and values about relationships

By portraying the tensions and reconciliations between the characters, Karnad creates a narrative that is not only relatable but also thought-provoking. The emotional conflicts faced by *Yayati* and the women around him showcase the struggles inherent in navigating personal desires alongside societal pressures. The interplay of tradition and personal freedom is a recurring theme that adds layers to the story, making it a profound reflection on human nature. Ultimately, "*Yayati*" stands as a significant work that presents varied perspectives on relationships and the human condition. Through its rich character portrayals and thematic depth, the play offers insights into the complexities that define our lives and relationships, inviting a deeper understanding of the bonds we form and the challenges we face.

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