

# Millennium Modern Women in Girish Karnad's Play Yayati

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The paper attempts to present the innovative depiction of the ancient myth in a modern light by Girish Karnad. Girish Karnad's feminine sensibility is also well understood through the delineation of women characters in the play Yayati. This paper also concentrates on the conventional and modern sensibility used by Karnad to analyse the part played by women in the contemporary society. Through the paper, the scholar also conveys the dramatists perspective that the women should also abide by the traditional and conventional values and should try to find the solutions to the problems they face without breaking or ignoring those values.

**Keywords:** *Feminine sensibility, traditional values, ancient myth, modern sensibility*

Indian dramatists in English have slowly but steadily earned national and international recognition. The innovative playwrights like Mohan Rakesh, Vijay Tendulkar, Badal Sircar and Girish Karnad in Hindi, Marathi, Bengali and Kannada theatres respectively in the sixties and seventies rendered regional drama into national drama. *Yayati* is the first play by Girish Karnad published in 1961. Karnad has attempted to relate the old myth in the *Mahabharata* with the modern Indian context and society. The play centres around the character of Yayati, the king being cursed to suffer in old age. He has got redeemed from the curse only because of his son Pooru's whole hearted sacrifice. The play was written in Kannada and it has got both positive and pessimistic criticism. The portrayal of myth in relevance to the contemporary twentieth century society has got a negative acclaim in the perspective of the conventional critics. At the same time, some modern critics are impressed with the way the play is written in an innovative manner by projecting modern light on the ancient myth.

M.K. Naik has justly commented that Karnad was aware:

If Indian English drama wishes to go ahead, it must go back first, that is, only a purposeful return to its own roots in the rich tradition of ancient Indian drama, both in Sanskrit and folk drama in Prakrits, can help it shed its lean and pale look, and increase its artistic haemoglobin count, and make it cease to be the 'sick man' of Indian English Literature (43-44).

In the play there are four remarkable women characters. Girish Karnad has delineated various temperaments and nature of women through these four characters. Devayani, Sharmistha, Chitrleka and Swarnalatha are the four women characters. Devayani is a Brahmin by birth and daughter of Shukracharya, the guru of Rakshashas and wife of Yayati the king. Sharmistha is the princess of Rakshashas clan, childhood friend of Devayani who has later turned out to be her slave and becomes villain to Devayani's life. Swarnalatha is the waggles slave and maiden servant in Yayati's palace who works solely for food, clothing and shelter.

Chitrleka is the daughter in law of Yayati and Devayani, wife of Pooru the son of Yayati.

Devayani is a simple woman who wants to lead her life as she wishes. Sharmistha has got an intimate relationship with Devayani because of her easy going nature. Sharmistha feels happy and respectful towards Devayani because of her indifference towards the class discrimination. Devayani is quiet friendly and affectionate towards Sharmistha in a mutual manner. In their adulthood, there comes a duel in which Devayani has expressed her class consciousness and pride as a superior class woman. It is evident:

DEVAYANI: we have exchanged our blouses

SHARMISTHA: I was on the brink of a beautiful dream. You have ruined it.

DEVAYANI: You poor people. You only have to get into a piece of Arya attire. And you start fantasizing.

Devayani is a woman of self-consciousness. She gives prime importance to her desires. If she cannot attain what she aspires for she does not want him/her to be happy rather to be in unending worry. Devayani has loved Kuch, the disciple of her father. When she comes to know that he does not love her, she has cursed him as he has to forget Sanjeevani mantra. Similarly when she comes to realise that Yayati has completely fallen into the hands and mesmerizing tricks of Sharmistha, Devayani has completely denied him by throwing the wedding chain. She has also made her father to curse him to suffer in old age. Thus Devayani is a woman who never wants or allows her possessions to be enjoyed by anyone else at any cost. She does not want that particular being to be happy anymore in the life after denying or betraying her. Devayani always wants to lead a sophisticated, unaffected life and does not want to face any problem.

Sharmistha is a woman of Rakshasha clan who is a true friend of Devayani. She is very much hurt and insulted while Devayani has expressed her pride of class. She has gone even to the extent of attempting to murder Devayani

by pushing her into the well. Yayati has saved her and married her with an intention of learning Sanjeevani mantra from her father. Sharmistha boasts and ridicules Devayani by telling that Yayati has married the latter only with a selfish motive and not because of her so called beauty in order to insult and humiliate her whenever she gets a chance because she wants to revenge on Devayani for the unforgettable insult and punishment to be a slave to Devayani from the position of Princess. Though Sharmi uses foul language to scold and humiliate people around her, Devayani as a queen is able to understand the stress and depression of Sharmi and she does not grow angry on her. Sharmi challenges and wins Devayani by enchanting her husband Yayati towards her and here the former has grabbed the latter's prestigious life itself. Sharmi is a kind of revengeful woman who can't be at peace until her enemy is attacked in one way or the other with a heavy blow. Sharmi wants her enemy to experience the pain and sufferings she has undergone and wins in it by hurting insulting and humiliating Devayani. No woman could bear if any one grabs her life from her. Sharmi has committed it to Devayani and made her suffer.

Though Sharmi is a Rakshasha woman, she proves to be a worthy wife of Yayati unlike Devayani. She is firm to stay with the cursed Yayati to serve him and be with him always. Though Sharmi takes revenge on Devayani in a very cruel manner, she is steady and clear in whatever she does. She is kind towards the old Yayati. But Devayani who is a sophisticated woman is quite sympathized with her childhood friend Sharmi after the dual between them. She understands the state and feelings. She proves herself as a good friend but fails to understand and analyse the long years of marriage life and about her son Pooru. She has thought only about her emotions and she has given prior importance to her feelings and in her anger towards Yayati, she fails to think of her son who is about to come to the palace after marriage.

Swarnalatha is a lovely character in the play. She is a wage less slave in Yayati's palace. She is pushed to such a state of marry by her suspicious husband who has deserted her after

ten years of marriage. Swarnalatha can be rightly called a typical Indian woman who does not even want her husband to suffer in mental stress due to suspicion on her. Swarna has accepted that she is adulterous in a fake manner to make her husband not suffer in stress. But he has failed to understand her nobility and deserted her. Thus her husband has become the sole reason for the enslaved and poor life of Swarnalatha. In spite of being a slave, Swarna has the freedom to talk intimately with Devayani. Swarnalatha is very much disturbed due to the harsh behaviours of Sharmistha and her filthy language. Swarnalatha tries her level best in not letting Devayani leaving the palace to save her prestigious life as a queen. Devayani warns Swarna not to cross her limits. Swarnalatha as a deserted woman has the assertiveness and perseverance to lead her life at any situation. So she wants and expects her queen also to be like that. From the character of Swarnalatha, Girish Karnad has revealed the sacrificing attitude and courage of women to face and live at any critical situation that comes in the life during the millennium era.

Chitraleka is the newly wedded wife of Pooru who has come to the palace with so many youthful dreams and aspirations. She is a practical, brave, courageous, rational and humorous woman. When she finds her husband Pooru the prince being defeated in archery competition, she does not feel for his inability. Rather she accepts him. She wants to behave according to the rules and norms of Kshatriyas as a wife of prince in the palace. In the palace, Chitraleka seems to have got closely associated with Swarnalatha on the very first day itself. Chitraleka is a great lover of stories and she asks Swarna to narrate her some stories about Swarna herself and then Chitraleka asks Swarna to tell a story about her own self to understand much about her from a third person's perspective. Because she it will be helpful for her to fit herself in the Kshatriya family without any fault or mistake on her side.

Chitraleka is a young and beautiful woman of dreams. Pooru says that he likes his

wife. He says: "That is what I liked about her. She is intelligent, loving, full of fun, but also honest and practical." Chitraleka is shocked to see the marriage chain of the queen Devayani on the ground. She does not want to react or show that she has already known about the curse of Shukracharya or Devayani's anger. Chitraleka does not want to react because she should behave bravely like a woman of Bharata family. But she afraid inwardly and she wants to escape from that thought so she asks Swarna to tell a story. Swarna narrates the story of Pooru who has bravely and whole heartedly sacrificed his youth to his cursed old and decrepit father and he himself has become old. Chitraleka seems to be astonished by the news and she stands frozen without any reaction. Swarnalatha advises her not to control her tears because it is harmful to her health. Chitra the young woman tries to pretend as if she is bold and ready to accept her husband at any state.

She tries her level best to be calm and composed. When she found Pooru's withered face in the light of arati, she screamed in shock and told Pooru not to come in front of her and into the bedroom. She screams: "Please don't come near me. Go out. Please, please, don't touch me."

Chitraleka proves herself as a rational, lustful and rebellious woman through her courageous conversation with Yayati. Chitraleka has got extremely annoyed to analyse the disrespect towards her. Because Pooru as well as Yayati has least bothered to discuss or consult Chitraleka the better of Pooru before sacrificing the youth to cursed and old Yayati. Thus the lack of importance and indifference and insensitive attitude towards woman is made explicit through the disrespect towards Chitraleka. As Jaganamohana Chari says: Stifled by the energy of patriarchal estimations of the decision class belief system. Be that as it may, she gives off an impression of being generally more liberated and more equipped for separating herself from the hegemonic settings. She may rest content in her agree to the hegemonic

settings, yet she embraces the more backhanded method of confronting up to reality (Chari 234).

When Yayati remains Chitra to follow the foot prints of Pooru as per the marital promises she replies thus:

YAYATI: ... to walk in the path marked by his foot prints whether home or into wildness....

CHITRALEKA: Or into the funeral pyre?... I didn't push him to the edge of the pyre, sir. You did.

B. Charanya observes:

Womanhood has two different images in the society. She is equated with "Shakthi", the goddess Durga and Kali. On the other hand, she is forced to be a dependent, under the male governed & defined social tradition and culture and she is looked upon as a sexual object or a property to be possessed and passed on from one to the other. These are the traditional images of women in the society. (90)

Yayati advises Chitralka to come out of all these issues to lead her life with Pooru. He says: "Rise above the trivialities, Chitralka. Be superhuman." Chitralka in her utmost painful situation expresses:

CHITRALEKA: This morning I was the mistress of all that I had yearned for. But within half a day-no, within half an hour- half a century has driven across my bed and crushed the dreams on my pillow.

K. K. Sharma bolsters radical women's activist's view who advocates that "the underlying driver of ladies' mistreatment lies in patriarchal sex relation, instead of lawful system or class conflict" (Sharma 07). Yayati insists Chitralka to stand by the ethics as a responsible wife. She says that she is an independent woman and she can't be restricted by the ethics of life she has got married to a young and potential man and not an old man who is devoid of all his abilities. She also makes him feel ashamed of his deeds by telling that:

CHITRALEKA: You have taken over your son's youth. It follows that you should accept everything that comes attached to it.... Rise above such trivialities. We have to be superhuman. Nothing like this has ever happened before. Nothing like this is likely to happen in future.

Chitralka's strong, sharp, powerful words have made Yayati to realize his mistake gradually.

Chitralka, after having poured out all her anger, wrath and painful emotions as questions towards Yayati and Pooru, she reveals that she has asked all such strong and humiliating questions because she is an independent and educated woman who is very much aware of the contemporary status of the society. Anyhow, Chitralka has learnt well that she has no option to choose other than accepting Pooru at that critical situation. But as a young woman, she is not ready to lead a shattered and dull life with that withered husband rather she chooses to die by swallowing poison. Chitralka's death has been a heavy and unforgettable blow to the self centred Yayati and he has realised his mistake and gives back his son's youth to himself and has left the palace with Sharmistha.

### Conclusion

Girish Karnad has conveyed that each and every women has own grace and greatness to make strong impression. Towards the end of the play, Devayani has gone out of Yayati's life with an intention of not coming back. Chitralka ends up her life by committing suicide in the very front of her husband and Yayati to give them a heavy and eternal blow to make them realize their unforgivable sin. Prem Sagar and R. Varshney observe:

The play remains an existentialist predicament, showing in definite terms how a persons rendered rootless and alienated becomes revengeful. This makes it a psychological study of those who are awarded severest sentence for no fault of theirs. (96)

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