

Race, Caste, Power and Agency in Girish Karnad's *Yayati*

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Abstract

Girish Karnad wrote his first play *Yayati* in 1960 when he was just 22 years old. The play was initially written in Kannada and was translated into English by the author himself when he was 69 years old. Girish Karnad's play *Yayati* is a retelling of the myth of Yayati from the *Mahabharata*. Yayati's endless lust for life, power, youth, women and worldly pleasures leads to his downfall. In Girish Karnad's version of the myth, King Yayati who is cursed with old age for his infidelity, is saved by his only son Pooru who takes upon himself the curse of his father. Pooru loses his bride as a result of his sacrifice.

Keywords: Myth, Power, Curse, Sanjeevani Spell, Asura, Brahmin, Kshatriya

The paper tries to discuss the tensions that arise in the play *Yayati* due to the conflict of race, caste, power and agency. The play *Yayati* is unique in its theme and characterisation. The play presents powerful female characters who stand on equal footing with the male characters. Besides king Yayati and his son Pooru, the four prominent female characters who appear on stage are king Yayati's wife Devayani, Devayani's slave Sharmishta, the palace maid Swarnalata and Pooru's wife Chitrlekha. The other important characters mentioned in the play are Devayani's father Shukracharya who is endowed with the magical 'Sanjeevani spell' which gives immortality to people. This gives him a unique power and authority above all others in the play. Though prince Pooru's mother makes only a spectral presence in the play, her

influence over her son and the power she exerts upon his decisions cannot be overlooked. The charioteer husband of Swarnalata and the poor brahmin tuition teacher of Swarnalata, Devayani's former lover Kacha and Sharmishta's parents also get a mention in the play.

The play opens with a conversation between Devayani and her maid about Sharmishta's nasty behaviour. Yayati's wife Devayani is the daughter of the renowned brahmin sage Sukracharaya. Though poor, the privileges associated with her upper caste identity, her father's unique abilities and her position as the queen of the Bharata king Yayati apparently endow her with a form of agency that gives her power. However, the presence of Sharmishta, her childhood friend turned slave and an Asura princess in the palace does not give Devayani any peace of mind. The conflict between the former friends turns out to be a literal war of words in the palace. Sharmishta's weapons for weakening Devayani's morale are her anger, rage, reminders about her former lover Kacha and pointed remarks about her caste identity: "...a kshatriya palace, ruled over by a Brahmin queen! (Karnad, 9)."

Devayani's coveted position as the queen of the Bharata monarch Yayati is also equally desired by her slave Sharmishta. She takes revenge on Devayani by getting Yayati into bed with her and triumphantly proclaims to her: "That was my revenge on you. After all, as a slave, what weapon did I have but my body? Well, I am even with you now" (29). She seduces Yayati through her charm and manipulation. Thus, Sharmishta exposes her weakness as a slave who is left with no other means of agency other than her body. After her betrayal, Sharmishta's jealousy and resentment towards Devayani seem to subside: "For once, Devayani and I are in perfect accord" (Karnad 30). This is because Sharmishta perceives her act as a means of erasing the power differences that separate the mistress and the maid. Thus, Sharmishta reclaims a form of agency that had been denied to her inside Yayati's palace.

But the wounded Devayani loses her cool and simultaneously implores and threatens Yayati: "I implore you now. I too can bare fangs. I too can draw blood. Don't provoke me on

account of this woman” (Karnad 30). No amount of coercion from Devayani changes Yayati’s stubborn and irrational mind. It is only after this incident, Devayani started making rude remarks about Sharmishta. Until then, Devayani had maintained the decorum expected of her caste and social position and had treated Sharmishta with kindness and consideration despite her position as a slave and had even dissuaded Swarnalata from making any disparaging remarks about Sharmishta.

Devayani uses her royal powers to free Sharmishta from slavery. This was not done out of compassion for Sharmishta but because Devayani realised that she cannot share an equal position of power with her former slave in the royal bed. But Yayati’s kingly power overrides her decision and he forbids Sharmishta from going away from the palace and keeps her under his royal surveillance. Yayati also consoles Devayani saying that she would be treated as the “senior queen” and that Sharmishta will never be a threat to her position “because of her race” (Karnad 29). Race and caste thus become the most discussed and significant themes in the play. The main conflict in the play arises out of the uneven distribution of these factors.

Devayani’s rage at Sharmishta’s betrayal renders her weak and powerless in front of her slave as well as her husband. But Devayani decides to exercise her agency to destroy the life of Yayati and eventually that of Sharmishta. It is her decision to leave the palace and seek the intervention of her father’s special privileges that ruins Yayati’s life and brings the play to a tragic ending. The curse of Shukracharya will take away Yayati’s youth and he will sink into decrepitude. But according to Yayati, Sharmishta has cast a different spell on him. This spell bursts out the youth in Yayati: “Is it some spell she has cast? Some secret sorcery? I can feel the youth bursting out within me again” (Karnad 30). The two spells act contrary to each other and Yayati is now trapped between two opposing spells. If the former spell is the doom of Yayati, the latter spell rejuvenates Yayati.

Swarnalata was the only child of a “not very well-to-do” father. But her father did everything to give her proper education. The only person in the play who seems to have had some formal education is Swarnalata. Swarnalata is very pragmatic and tells Devayani that the “satanic” Sharmishta may finally become an “addiction” for Devayani. She also reminds her that Sharmishta has an “uncanny ability to cut close to the bone” (Karnad 8). Even Devayani is shocked to hear the words of wisdom coming from her maid. But Swarnalata hides her own share of sorrow: “... I am expected to be jolly, keep everyone’s spirits up, be the life and soul of the palace” (Karnad 8). She tries to restrain Devayani from leaving the palace after Yayati slept with Sharmishta. She stays calm even when Devayani insults her out of her frustration. She is well informed of everything happening inside and outside the palace. She is the first person to know that Devayani’s father had already reached the Shambu shrine. She understands the delicate situation in the palace better than anyone else and rises to the role of a mother figure, a loyal servant and a confidante to Pooru’s young bride Chitrlekha. She stays with Chitrlekha to the end of her life and it was only she who really mourned for her death and became demented after her death. With her education, practical wisdom and her amiable nature she wields a considerable influence and a certain form of agency over other characters in the play.

Sharmishta, from the beginning of the play appears as a rude and nasty person. She claims to be an “uncouth rakshasa” and is “deliberately nasty” on account of that (Karnad 9). The play begins with a reference to her devilish behaviour and Swarnalata mentions her as a “spiteful whore.” She was born as an Asura princess but is now cursed to be the slave of her own childhood friend, Devayani who is now the Brahmin queen in the Kshatriya palace. Being a slave, Sharmishta’s voice now represents the voice of the subaltern and she screams aloud to be heard within the palace. She knows how much of chaos she can create in the palace amidst the organised and structured life of the Aryas. Sharmishta snarls only because she wants to

retain a particle of her original Asura identity. The abuse and raving are shown to retrieve an iota of her true self. She is very jealous of Devayani's position in the palace and her only way of breaking Devayani's complacency was to repeatedly mock her by reminding her of her poor Brahmin origin and hint at her racial unsuitability to be an Aryan queen. What infuriated her against Devayani was a stray comment made by Devayani in the 'blouse mix up' incident mentioned in the play: "You poor people. You only have to get into a piece of Arya attire. And you start fantasizing" (Karnad 20). This casual remark made by Devayani make them sworn enemies. We understand that caste is such a fragile and divisive marker that can trigger even lifelong hostility even between close friends.

Even though Sharmishta has lost all the privileges of her birth and now lives as a slave in the palace, it is only Sharmishta who dares to critique the oppressive hegemonic system. To Yayati's question about the hell she was creating in the palace, her reply was shocking: "I could have spewed out nectar. But we leave those things to namby-pamby brahmin girls. I am a rakshasa woman. We have our code" (Karnad 17). When Yayati questioned her about her royal background, her respect and dignity, she stunned Yayati with her reply about what it means to make a person a slave: "It turns that person into an animal. A domesticated animal." In her case, her "will to act is destroyed," her "selfhood humbled" and all the Asura "vileness extracted" from her (Karnad 17). She explains to Yayati how even the concept and memory of home were erased from her mind when she was made a slave. As a slave, Sharmishta no longer feels bound by the social codes associated with caste or race. This gives her the courage to scream aloud, and she finally succeeds in making herself heard by others.

But after taking her revenge upon Devayani, Sharmishta acts very sensible and supports Yayati in his distress. She is there till the end of the play and is a witness to the death of Chitrlekha. Only she had the courage to correct and scold Yayati: "You are a good man, I am sure. But you are naïve, which is dangerous for a powerful man to be" (Karnad 25). She

tells it to his face that he killed Chitrlekha because of his endless passion and drove Swarnalata insane with Chitrlekha's death. She herself fears for her life, as she has the practical wisdom to realise that the mob will attack her if they come to know about her involvement in Pooru's sacrifice.

Pooru addresses Sharmishta as "mother." Pooru's true nature is revealed only when he admits that he came to the palace to form an alliance with Sharmishta against Yayati. He was completely confused by the stories he had heard about Sharmishta and the person he encountered in reality. Both of them had the Asura blood in them. Pooru's mother was an Asura woman. Sharmishta understands the weakness of Pooru and helps him realise it and finally accompanies Yayati to the wilds after making him return the youth to Pooru.

Though Pooru's own mother remains a spectral presence in the play, her silent but powerful presence in the play cannot be denied. The newly married prince Pooru rushes to his mother's room for solace. He even abandons his wife Chitrlekha to be lost in the memory of his mother at least for a day. That is the power and influence of the mother on her son. Pooru considers the entry of other people into his mother's room a "desecration." In truth, the room had already been defiled by Yayati and Sharmishta. According to Yayati's description, Pooru's mother was beautiful, gentle and loving. But after the birth of her son, she started behaving as if she had gone mad. She would scream and curse and made life intolerable for everyone in the palace. It is only on her deathbed she revealed the secret that she was an Asura who lost her home and hearth to the Aryas. Her sole intention in marrying Yayati was to wipe out the purity of the unpolluted Arya race. Yayati had kept this secret from Pooru and it is only after his marriage that Pooru understood that he is of mixed parentage or as he calls himself a "mongrel."

Chitrlekha perhaps is different from all other female characters in the play. She is young, talented, educated and witty. She is "versed in the art, trained in warfare" (Karnad 61). In her husband Pooru's words, she is "intelligent, loving, full of fun; but also honest and

practical” (Karnad 37) and is portrayed as a woman with agency. She is strong in her convictions and very truthful in her actions and she accepts her husband as he is. She knows that she has been groomed to be the bride of a Bharata princess and knows very well that she cannot escape the reality. But she is quite pleasant and both Pooru and Chitrlekha seem to be a very understanding couple accepting each other’s weaknesses. Pooru sometimes feels that Chitrlekha deserves a better husband than him. But Chitrlekha is very realistic and loves the honest nature of Pooru: “He is warm, considerate and loving. I have grown up amidst kshatriya arrogance. His gentleness is like a waft of cool breeze. As a wife I am happy—indeed blessed” (Karnad 64). She is intelligent enough to understand the problems smouldering within the palace. Though she genuinely loved Pooru, she could not come to terms with the reality of Pooru’s decrepitude. She questions the senseless sacrifice of Pooru and challenges Yayati to marry her in compensation for the youth he has stolen from Pooru. She criticises Yayati for his unrealistic vision of an unborn future and challenges him to father her child. She insists that she would let her husband come inside her room only when he returns a young man and asserts that only her husband can enter her bedroom without any permission or shout out her name with freedom. Thus she declares her rights as a woman. But she could not withstand the pressures of patriarchy and sacrifice of her husband and commits suicide by consuming the lethal poison Sharmishta brought from her home as “dowry.” Suicide was perhaps her way of escaping the loss of her dignity and agency. Despite all his imperial power and borrowed youth, Yayati could not prevent her from consuming the poison. Her death opens the eyes of those around her to their own faults -- Yayati realises his insatiable lust for power and youth and decides to take up the responsibility for his guilt, Pooru realises his mistake of relinquishing his duties in the name of making a great sacrifice and feels guilty over Chitrlekha’s suicide: “We brought you here only to die. But our senses are blighted and we shall never grasp the

meaning of all that you taught us” (Karnad 69). Ultimately, Pooru drops his romantic and unrealistic aspirations and becomes a wise king who rules the Bharata dynasty for several years.

Conclusion:

Karnad’s *Yayati* is not simply a retelling of the story from the *Mahabharatha* but it is also a discussion on the complexities of race, caste, power and agency. The characters in the play belong to different race and caste and possess different types of power and agency. King Yayati and his son represent two contrasting models of masculinity. The female characters in the play are endowed with different types of agency that enable them to oppose and subvert patriarchal power structures. Among the female characters, Chitrlekha stands out as a bold and assertive character who shows extreme independence and courage in challenging the conventional patriarchal norms.

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