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HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE TO GIRISH KARNAD'S YAYATI

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Abstract

This paper attempts to analyze the play "Yayati" written by Girish Karnad from a historical perspective. It studies how Karnad has borrowed the plot of Yayati from the mythical folktale of Yayati-Puru myth and reinterpreted it in today's modern world. This paper also studies the original story as well as the deviations that Karnad applied to his drama to reinterpret the themes from modern perspectives. This paper examines the reason why Karnad did not take the whole mythical story but only took a few segments from it and then completed the play with his imagination and how the past can be used to study the present. This paper also attempts to analyze certain segments of this play by applying feminist theory.

Keywords: Historical perspective, myth, deviations, themes, modern perspectives, feminist theory

Girish Karnad was a pioneering contemporary playwright, actor, and film director. He wrote many plays in Kannada and afterward he translated them into English. He was awarded the Jnanpith award, the best literary honor. The plot of this play is taken from the Adiparva of the Mahabharat. This play is an interpretation of the traditional myth from Mahabharat in today's modern times. The play Yayati is based on the story of one of the episodes from the Mahabharat where the king Yayati, who is one of the ancestors of the Pandava brothers, is cursed by his father-in-law with premature old age. The story of Yayati- the Puru myth is taken by Karnad in his play and modified together with his imagination and also added some characters which are not mentioned in Mahabharat.

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This play includes certain segments where feminist theory can be applied. Feminist theory can be defined as the application of feminism to various literary texts. Karnad made some modifications, changes, and additions within the actual story of Yayati to relate this story to this present world. These deviations are associated with the females of today's world. Therefore, the theoretical framework used for the few segments during this play is the feminist critical theory. These few segments of the play can be analyzed through the feminist theory of Valerie Bryson, where, in one of her renowned works, 'Feminist Political Theory', she says "the father of any man is the head of the family and is also the ruler". (Bryson) Just like Yayati is the ruler of his kingdom and also the head of the family, where he takes all the decisions without taking the consent of anyone else. Other segments of this play are analyzed from the historical perspective.

The actual believed story of Yayati is slightly different from Karnad's play, 'Yayati'. According to the Mahabharat, Yayati was a Chandravanshi king and he was the ancestor of the Pandava brothers and the Yadavas. Yayati was the 'Chakravartin Samrat' that is the one who has conquered the whole world. He got married to Devayani, the daughter of Shukracharya, and later copulates with Sharmishtha, the daughter of the Asura king, who is the maiden of queen Devayani. Devayani and Sharmishtha were friends earlier but due to a fight, Sharmishtha pushes Devayani into a well and goes away. Later Yayati saves her life but Devayani punishes Sharmishtha by making her Devayani's maiden. Hence, this secret relationship of Yayati with Sharmishtha makes Devayani jealous and she complains about this to her father Shukracharya who is the priest of Asuras. Hence, Shukracharya curses yayati with premature old age. (Adi Parva: Sambhava Parva: Section LXXXI-Sacred Texts). These instances are mentioned in the Adi Parva and Sambhava Parva of Mahabharat and form the base of king Yayati's story. Karnad takes this base of the story of Yayati as it is in his play. But here he focuses more on Yayati's need for sensual pleasures and selfishness just like a common man in today's modern world.

In the Adi Parva, princess Sharmishtha persuades Yayati to choose her as his wife by saying that one may look upon her friend's husband as her own. (Adi Parva: Sambhava Parva: Section LXXXII- Sacred Texts). But in karnad's play, he wrote that Yayati was the one who got attracted to Sharmishtha. Yayati says that "I feel bewitched by Sharmishtha, I want her, I have never felt so entranced by a woman like this before, I can feel youth bursting out of me again. Not to marry her is to lose her." (Karnad). This deviation is made by Karnad to depict Yayati's character as a man indulging in physical pleasures. This character also represents today's human nature which prioritizes physical desires over emotions. In the play, Yayati's son Puru sacrifices his youth for Yayati. It is indeed a sign of a great son but he takes this decision without asking his wife. This scene from the play conveys that Puru, in a need of pleasing his father and portraying himself as a great son, did not even consider his

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wife. The need for Chitrlekha's character can be analysed through the feminist theory. In this play, Puru took his wife for granted, which most men still do in modern times. In the play, Puru is shown as the son of the king's other queen who died when Puru was a child. In Mahabharat, Puru is believed to be the son of Sharmishtha. Karnad made this deviation to show Puru's character as an outsider who is distraught by the questionable legitimacy of his birth and hence would want to prove himself great in front of his father and his people of the kingdom. In Mahabharat, Yayati himself realizes that such desire is of no use and there is mortality in solitude. But in the play, Yayati realizes this nature of desire after the suicide of Chitrlekha. Chitrlekha is a character that is not found in the original story of Mahabharat. This character is added by Karnad in his play to make viewers understand the side effects of the sacrifices that Puru made in his life. Chitrlekha represents the modern woman in this play. She is the only character in this play who is outspoken and rational in the patriarchal world shown in the play where all the other women are suppressed by the male characters. Everyone praises the sacrifice made by prince Puru which serves no actual purpose and only fills up the invalid in his own life, but

Karnad adds Chitrlekha's character to show the ultimate sacrifice that she made and also portrayed how still men are praised more than women in this modern world. Her character, in the beginning, is portrayed as having very strong traits of powerful womanhood but later fails to retain this strength throughout this play. It represents that though a woman has got traits of powerful womanhood, it is very difficult for her to maintain it throughout her life, even in this modern patriarchal world. Another Karnad's own created character in this play is the character of Swarnalata. She is shown as the maiden of the Queen. It is thus obvious that she belongs to a lower class and caste and hence had to undergo the oppression and suppression from the men. Her husband doubts her having an affair with her teacher before marriage and hence to take revenge, he indulges himself in many women. He never thought of the emotions of Swarnalata. By adding these two characters of Chitrlekha and Swarnalata, Karnad portrayed that whether the woman belonged to the higher caste or lower caste, they still suffer from the suppression by the men. These two characters represent the theme of the need for feminism in today's modern world. This deviation from the original myth, made by Karnad in his play, was necessary to understand the position and treatment given to the women in those eras. In Mahabharat, Yayati enjoyed his youth for a thousand years and then accepts the curse of old age. But Karnad has deviated from this reality while writing the play. In the play, Yayati accepts his curse just after Chitrlekha's suicide. It represents how in today modern world people realizes their mistakes only after experiencing a loss in their life or after losing someone near to them. Comparing the age-old story from Mahabharat to the modern story of Karnad's play 'Yayati', it can be said that this play is mainly based upon the theme of choice, where Puru chooses to exchange his youth and vitality in return for his father's curse of premature old age.

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To conclude, Girish Karnad has taken this story of Yayati to show the absurdity of human life and how humans prioritize sensual pleasures and elemental pleasures over emotions and morality. This play inspires us to interpret this mythological story in a modern context. Like Yayati, the common man of today is surrounded by material and sensual pleasures and has forgotten the values.

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