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Thematic Aspects in Girish Karnad's *Yayati*: A Critical Study

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ABSTRACT

Girish Karnad is a renowned actor, film producer and a playwright. He has written in Kannad and English. He is also the recipient of Jnanpith Award for Kannada, the highest literary honour conferred in India. Karnad has great insight into human nature. Karnad has employed mythical, historical, and folk themes in his plays and ta the same time they are identified with contemporary scene. IN this paper, the researcher has explored the thematic aspects with special reference to his play, *Yayati*. Karnad took the theme of *Yayati* from Adiparva of Mahabharata yet he has maintained the originality by his own style and techniques.

Key Words: Theme, play, drama, Critical Study



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Introduction:

Yayati is the first play written by Girish Karnad. He was just twenty-two years old when he presented his own interpretation of the play *Yayati*. This play established Karnad's reputation as a dramatist in Kannada literature and launched him on his celebrated career in the Indian theatre. *Yayati* has been translated into many Indian languages and has continued to be performed all over country. Priya Adarkar translated Girish Karnad's Kannad play *Yayati* into English. But Karnad was not happy with this translation and he translated his own play *Yayati* into English.

Overview of the Play:

Yayati marries Devayani and also takes Sharmishtha an 'asura girl' as his wife. Devayani is a daughter of sage Shukracharya. *Yayati*'s relationship with Sharmishtha infuriates Devayani and in her anger and jealousy Devayani goes to her father Shukracharya. Shukracharya curses *Yayati* of senility and decrepitude. But however, there is a saving clause, if *Yayati* is able to persuade someone else to bear the curse on his behalf then he would enjoy everlasting youth. *Yayati*, who is indulged in the sensual pleasures, asks the people of his kingdom and at last in desperation to his sons exchange their youth with him. Only Pooru, the youngest son willingly offers his youth in filial devotion. *Yayati* promptly accepts Pooru's offer. He remains young while his son turns into a weak and senile man. *Yayati* forsakes his life of sensual delights only after indulging in it for a thousand years. Karnad adopts the mythical story of *Yayati* as the plot of his play. He adds new characters to deepen the commodative richness of his drama and gives it a contemporary appeal.

Thematic Aspects in Karnad's Play *Yayati*:

Karnad projects various themes in this play such as human relationship, Sexual relationship, power politics and violence.

Human Relationship:

In *Yayati*, as the play is based on a myth, the family concept is used in a broad way. In the myth the kings were allowed to have many wives and in *Yayati*, *Yayati* marries many women. He has many sons but it is Pooru who willingly accepts the old age of his father and willingly offers his youth as filial duty and devotion. In myth, the sentiments of the kings and queens are not shown like common human beings. Yet,



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the mythical characters are also full of sentiments. Devayani would have accepted any other woman as co-wife but she dislikes Sharmistha as she belongs to Rakshasa community. Father-son relationship in the play is remarkably stressed. A father without observing any duties expects his son, his daughter-in-law and his wives to do the consigned duties. As a father, *Yayati* is failed and as a son Pooru is passed.

Sexual Relationship:

In *Yayati*, sexual relations are also significant because Shukracharya curses *Yayati* due to his illicit relationship with Sharmishtha. *Yayati* has many queens and the complexity in the relationships is due to these sexual relations. Devayani was in love with Kacha. But as *Yayati* saves her life, she has to marry him.

The subplot of the play moves around the character of Swarnalata. Her husband thinks that before marriage Swarnalata was in love with her teacher. In order to take revenge on her he indulges himself in many women and drinks. With a single affair of his wife Swarnalata's husband is disturbed. But he does not think of Swarnalata and her mind, what would have happened to her by his many affairs? In mythology women's freedom is curtailed and the same happens in Karnad's *Yayati* also. The male characters suppress the women. Only Chitrlekha thinks in a rational way.

Pooru is married with Chitrlekha and the young married couple has arrived into the palace. On the nuptial evening itself Pooru accepts the old age of his father and when he regains his youth Chitrlekha is no more. Though marriage is the stamp of the society on the sexual relationship in between man and woman and though Pooru is married with Chitrlekha, the sexual relations cannot take place.

Power Politics:

Yayati craves for power, for youth. When Sharmistha suggests that *Yayati* should accept the old age and go into solitude, he is not ready to sacrifice his throne. He loves his youth and throne and is ready to sacrifice anything for his youth. He sacrifices his son's youth for his own. The struggle in between Devayani and Sharmishtha is also for power. Devayani does not want that Sharmishtha should enter and encroach on her relationship with *Yayati*. Devayani tells Sharmistha, "I will not be able to sleep a wink while his hands caress your body." (*Yayati*, 33)

Devayani is angry with Sharmishtha because she is worried about her influence on *Yayati*. And *Yayati* is a symbol of power. At the end of the play the father in *Yayati* is awakened and he hands over all



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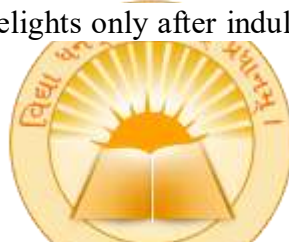
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the power to his son Pooru and goes in solitude with Sharmishtha.

Theme of Violence:

Karnad's *Yayati* is based on the responsibility of a person. It is based on the sentiments of the man. Class-distinction and the caste distinction take the society to violence. Sharmishtha, being disturbed by the comments of Devayani, pulls her with her long hair, takes her to a well and throws her inside. Sharmishtha's behaviour is violent whereas Devayani's words are violent. In order to take revenge on Devayani, Sharmishtha seduces *Yayati*. Being psychologically disturbed by Sharmishtha's behaviour Devayani goes to her father and makes him to curse *Yayati*. Pooru's acceptance of old age is responsible for the death of Chitrlekha.

The most violent thing in the play is Chitrlekha's death. Karnad has created Chitrlekha's character on his own. It is due to Chitrlekha's death *Yayati*'s mind changes. Otherwise in the myth it is mentioned that, "*Yayati* forsakes his life of sensual delights only after indulging in it for a thousand years." (B. Yadav Raju, 80)



Conclusion:

Karnad has taken the plot of the play *Yayati* from the first chapter of the Mahabharata in which *Yayati* is cursed by Shukracharya and Sharmishtha's son Pooru rescues *Yayati* from the curse. *Yayati* is a play on the theme of responsibility where *Yayati* himself is not ready to shoulder his responsibility. At last he accepts it, after enjoying youth for one thousand years. Karnad's originality lies in working of the motivations behind *Yayati*'s choice. In Karnad's *Yayati*, *Yayati* recognizes the horror of his own life and assumes his moral responsibility only after symbolic encounter of Chitrlekha. Chitrlekha is Karnad's own creation. In the Mahabharata, *Yayati* recognizes the desire itself and realizes that fulfillment does not demilish even after a thousand years.



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