

Women in the patriarchal society: A feministic reading in Girish Karnad's *Yayati*

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Abstract

The contemporary society is witnessing today an extraordinary spectacle of women's liberation movements all over the world. It is a universal movement and Indian society is no exception to it. We have the voices of feminism in the writings of a number of writers since the 13th century to the present. However, even in the 21st century, society is male-dominated. It is for this reason that women have been marginalized despite their fifty percent population in the world. Quite a good number of works in the post-modern period illustrate, more or less, how women are exploited in various ways. The inhuman treatment that they receive from the male dominated society indicates that they lose their freedom first and their lives later for the sake of man. Ideally speaking, it is sacrifice, but realistically speaking, it is sheer wastage physical as well as mental, on the part of women. Indian Literature viewed women as role bound possession whose sacrifices preserved the sanctity and the well being of the family. Women characters in the plays of Girish Karnad are not mere society's obsession for beauty, they are rarely to be found in the real world, but they are the true characters grounded in Indian milieu throughout ages. They are not only sensible and sensitive but also intelligent and bold. His women characters are not only empowered with shrill tongues but also capable of stings. It is true like any other subaltern characters their sting instead of causing harm to others bring their own ruin. The three major women characters in the plays of *Yayati*, the play of an ancient myth but not mythological, are Devyani, Sharmistha and Chitralkha. All these characters are living a life of hell or at least a part of it. But the combative powers of these three characters could teach Yayati a lesson what thousands of battles and hundreds of sensuous women could not. The article will focus on how Karnad's female characters in *Yayati* are struggling to break the fetters of patriarchy and yet are failing at it and succumbing to the patriarchal order of society ultimately

Keywords: Feminism, Patriarchal, Deviation, Subalternism, Feministic Theory.

Introduction

Girish Karnard is one of the key figures in modern Indian theatre. Unlike other playwrights who remained word-oriented, his constant work as an actor in parallel and mainstream Hindi and Kannada films has helped him stay in touch with natya, the element of pure performance. Karnard's creative genius lies in taking up fragments of historical and legendary experience to fuse them into a forceful statement. Gender bias in society and patriarchal oppression of women are important themes in Karnard's plays. Karnard depicts the condition of a typical Indian female in his plays, who is ruled by patriarchal order and bound by tradition, but whose spirit remains unbounded. Karnard, as a humanist, sincerely attempts to give a voice to the silenced majority through his plays. Karnard has borrowed the myth of Yayati from the Adi parva of the *Mahabharata*. In the *Mahabharata*, Yayati understands the nature of desire itself and realizes that fulfilment neither diminishes nor eliminates desire. In the drama, Karnard makes Yayati confront the horrifying consequences of not being able to relinquish desire. In *Yayati*, the issue of gender is highlighted especially in the way Yayati treats women in the play. Though the women characters in *Yayati* shows a spirit and strength unlike the docile nature and meekness expected of them, they all finally succumb to the bounds set by the patriarchal framework. However, much rebellious they were to the norms of patriarchal set up; all these female characters could only partially succeed in creating an image of an emancipated woman. Girish Karnard's *Yayati* was a step towards subverting the patriarchal imaging of women. In the drama Devayani marries Yayati to spite Sharmistha who is deeply in love with Yayati and subjects herself to a lot of physical and mental torture for love. Yayati and Sharmistha's relation led to the birth of a son. Yayati's sensual pleasures are unquenchable and so he fears old age. It is Sharmistha's son Puru who agrees to take the old age of his father and give him his own youth. Ultimately Yayati gains true knowledge and repents.

Major Thrust

Yayati shows how a mighty emperor, by the twist of fate becomes a subaltern, decrepit old man and the failure of his people to oblige him shows the erosion of moral values among the masses which in turn is compensated by the sacrifice of his son. The idea was to highlight the weaknesses of modern-day value system and the effects of generation gap on living individuals. The play is influenced by existential dramatic tradition of England and depicts the problem of responsibilities and expectations with an Indian family. It's a good play having a compact plot, a minimum number of characters, short and succinct dialogues to keep alive the dramatic sequences. The play reflects the mental condition and stressful situation of Girish Karnad himself who was undergoing intense emotional crisis while going to England for further studies. He wrote this play while going abroad. He combines in this mythological subject, the existential philosophy of life and juxtaposes the past with the present. The play is based on the existential philosophy that a man is what he chooses to be and not what he does not wish to be. The important thing to note is that the play does not glorify the obedience of Pooru to his father and this is contrary to the original myth. On the other hand, Karnad raises a practical question for what would be the reaction of Pooru's wife Chitrlekha who becomes an unconscious subaltern because of the eclipse of youthfulness of her husband. For that matter both the king and his son became sub alters at one time or other when the curse of untimely old age struck them. But the worst sufferer was Chitrlekha who suffered for no reason. She protested against male chauvinism of a selfish patriarch. *Yayati* shows how a modern man overwhelmed by carnal desires and abuse of parental authority forgets the imperishable values of life. Here Karnad reinterprets an ancient myth of Puranic past to make a statement in the form and structure borrowed from Western playwrights. The unfortunate decisions that the young Prince and his bride Chitrlekha are forced to make. Devayani, the Brahmin Queen, Sharmishtha (the Asura Princess who is Yayati's adversary and slave, sage Shukracharya's daughter Devayani), and Chitrlekha, Pooru's new bride, all succeed in subverting the male society by asserting feminine rights and advantages. Chitrlekha emerges as a New Woman who resists all kinds of conventional taboos and oppression, openly fighting against them in order to make "room" for herself. The cultural construct generated by the patriarchal system is predominantly reflected in the play. The desires of a woman are always curbed in a patriarchal order.

Chitrlekha suffers first at the hands of her husband, Puru, who does not think of his wife even once before acceding to the supreme sacrifice of giving up his youth and vitality to serve his

father's idiosyncrasies which serves no purpose but to fill up the void in his own life. Despite her caste and class superiority, she has to undergo oppression and suppression at the hands of men. She finally commits suicide for she sees no other escape from the unjust patriarchal order. Devyani and Sharmishtha, both come from royal family, but the former is an Aryan princess while the latter an Asura or an Anarya princess. Sharmishtha is made to serve Devyani, but Devyani's condition is no better; her husband seems more interested in Sharmishtha than her and finally she leaves her family out of a feeling of insult. Thus, she too, like Sharmishtha becomes deprived of the security of family and love. Sharmishtha, in her identity crisis, all her step towards completeness become meaningless. Karnard projects Sharmishtha as a practical woman with contemporary appeal who is suffered a lot and victimized by the socio-cultural pattern in the Indian Hindu society and its Varna system. Swarnalata, a simple character possessing extraordinary human values, is working in the palace as a servant maid. Karnard presents Swarnalata as a miserable and pathetic character who thirsts to survive herself in life and showers love towards others from the bottom of her heart. All the female characters are shown to have attained a state of mental liberation where they tend to question the unjust happenings in their lives. The mindset of his characters cannot be contained within the framework of patriarchal thought. Women have been oppressed for very long that the only voice ever heard from them were the voice of patriarchy but the women in *Yayati* are those that stand up for their rights and desires.

Conclusion

Thus, the woman in the Indian society, whether of high or low social standing is always looked down upon by virtue of being a woman and ill-treated by the domineering patriarchy. Girish Karnard's plays, on the other hand, all represent feminine aspects that are oppressed in male hegemonic patriarchal society. The drama *Yayati* is concerned with female issues in the family, in marriage, and on a physical and social level. Girish Karnad presents a New Woman who is an ideal human being, and her image awakens patriarchal society's males. Karnard's women characters in *Yayati* are all strong yet unable to stick to their strengths at the face of life's major trials. However strong they are, they all tend to be weak at the point of crisis. Karnard has painted only a partial image of an emancipated womanhood through his characters in *Yayati*.

Reference

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