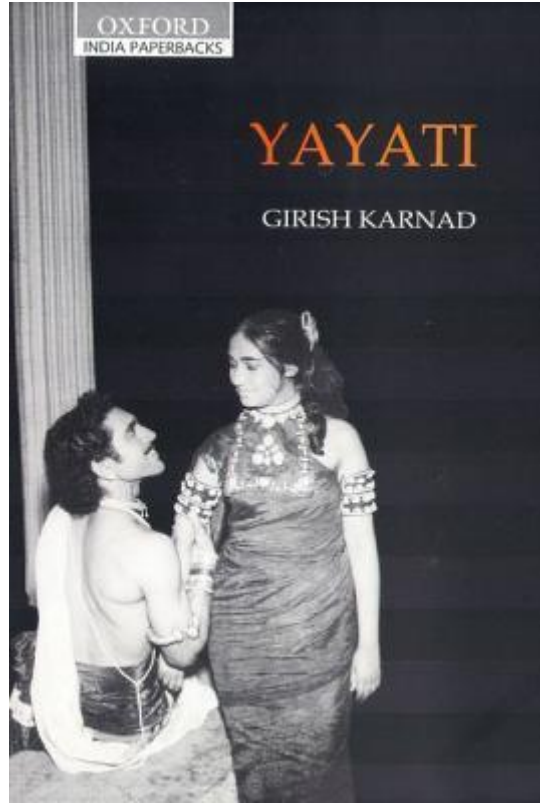


## Fantasy in Girish Karnad's Play *Yayati*

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### Abstract

This paper attempts to unravel the element of fantasy in Girish Karnad's first play, *Yayati*. An understanding of the characteristic features of fantasy literature has been highlighted through this work. This literature of subversion which is closely associated with imagination and with desire makes this play free from the restraints of the realistic texts. This play is a perfect illustration of a fantasy literature since it satisfies all the criteria that are required for a work of fantasy. Todorov calls fantasy as the literature of subversion which is all about describing desire in its excessive forms (Fantasy: The literature of subversion). This tempting subject opens the doors of an art form, which provides vicarious gratification.

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**Keywords:** Fantasy Literature, Goals of fantasy, Metamorphosis, Imaginative faculty, Repressed female energy, Subversion

### **Introduction**

The plays of Girish Karnad have achieved great acclaim internationally. Most of his plays originated from Indian mythology and history. But on closer analysis, we will learn that his plays also exhibit a strong element of fantasy. This paper attempts to elicit the elements of fantasy in the play *Yayati*. To appreciate the fantasy in Karnad's play we must have knowledge of the characteristic features of a work of fantasy.

Some of the characters of a work of fantasy are the play of imagination, breaking of sexual taboos, problems of vision and visibility, strong degree of social and class prejudice, repressed female energy, presence of enclosures, yearning for immortality, feeling of incompleteness, fascination with suicide and death, unnatural metamorphosis or transformation, disintegration, dualism and powerful mental struggle in the characters, roots in ancient mythology and so on. The play *Yayati* is a vivid illustration of fantasy in literature.

### **Ancient Mythology as Source**

Often, modern fantasy has its roots in ancient myth. So is the case with the story of the play *Yayati* which occurs in the *Mahabharatha*. Yayati, the king, belongs to the Aryan race. He is the Bharatha King but his son, Puru is born to a Rakshasa (ogre) woman. The story presents King Yayati's lustful character and we learn of him being cursed to old age for the moral crime of having a clandestine relationship with his wife's slave, Sharmishtha. The thought of losing his youth at the prime of his life makes him terribly upset and he requests his son, Puru to exchange his youth with the father's old age. The son readily agrees to his father's request and accepts this exchange, as a result of which he is transformed into an old man. This play works on our imaginative faculty which is a significant characteristic of fantasy.

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## **Transformation or Metamorphosis**

The transformation or metamorphosis of young Puru into an old man provides an illustration of a fantasy literature. Soon after he accepts the curse of his father's old age, we can see Puru bending down under his own weight. The young and vibrant newlywed prince transforms into a pathetic looking wrinkled old man. His wife, Chitrlekha's shock at her husband's premature senility overnight evokes the reader's sympathy for the young bride.

## **Immortality**

Similarly, Yayati's deep yearning for immortality also makes the play a work of fantasy. The maid Sharmishtha is visualized revealing the fact that King Yayati lusts for immortality. He seems to have married Devayani for her father's art of 'Sanjeevani'. Sharmishtha belittles Devayani by commenting on King Yayati's interest for the latter as-

“Except that he is not lusting for you, you poor darling, he lusts for immortality, your father's art of Sanjeevani”. [p.11]

Yayati, the aspiring descendant of the Bharata dynasty is never short of women, but according to Sharmistha, he married Devayani because it is she alone who can lead him to the abode of immortality. The king's lust for immortality is another element of fantasy.

## **Social and Class Prejudice**

The pictures of fantasy seem to unfold one after the other in this play. We can see a strong degree of social and class prejudice here. Yayati belongs to the Aryan race and his son Puru is born to a Rakshasa woman. In spite of his Rakshasa origin, he is expected to rule the kingdom. Puru thinks he is unfit for this great position and he feels obliged to his father for bestowing him with something greater than he deserves. Devayani is a Brahmin lady married to the Bharatha king but Sharmishtha is a Rakshasa princess. The Rakshasa princess

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enjoyed the company of Devayani because she always made her feel important. Though the two were close friends, they quarrel over a petty thing and the class prejudice arises as a hindrance in their friendship.

Sharmishtha: I opened my eyes, two years ago. Don't you remember? I do. The precise moment .When I closed my eyes, I was the princess of the rakshasas. You were the off-spring of a destitute Brahmin, dependent upon my father. I had everything, beauty, education, wealth. Everything except birth - an Arya pedigree. [p.10]

We also come across the manner in which Devayani behaves to the maid servant Swarnalata. No matter how kind-hearted and loyal the maid is, she is treated as an alien. These are clear indications of the social and class prejudice.

### **Incompleteness**

Incompleteness is yet another feature of fantasy. The inferiority complex as well as the submissive attitude that develops from casteism is evident throughout the play. Puru is sad to learn that his mother was a Rakshasa woman which meant that he was a half-caste, something similar to an untouchable to the Bharathas. He feels inferior because he is born to parents of different races. His identity is challenged and this pushes him into the dark dungeon of inferiority complex and depression. Accepting King Yayati's curse of old age is a part of his attempt to attain completeness and it is the obligation he shows towards his father for socially accepting him as his son, in spite of his maternal Rakshasa origin.

### **Repressed Female Energy**

Another characteristic of a fantasy literature is repressed female energy. In the play, we get glimpses of the above in Sharmistha who is a Rakshasa woman. We can see the same in Puru's wife, Chitrlekha. It is their repressed sexual energies that urge Sharmishtha to speak rudely to the queen, Devayani

and Chitrlekha to debate with King Yayati. On seeing her husband in a shrivelled state of senescence, Chitrlekha drives him away out of utter disappointment. When Yayati urges her to bring back her husband Puru to her chamber, she retorts full of vigour:

“I will not let my husband step back into my bedroom unless he returns a young man”[p.61]

This is an indication of the rebellion that develops in her mind because she is deprived of the rights of a wife at too early an age. She is bold enough to question her father-in-law, the unjust king and father:

“You hold forth on my wifely duties. What about your duty to your son? Did you think twice before foisting your troubles on a pliant son?” [P.62]

Her territory consciousness makes her react violently to her husband’s father. She rebukes him for screaming out her name with so much authority and remarks that the above right belongs to her husband alone. This educated lady argues relentlessly, leaving Yayati speechless.

### **Desire**

At first, we learn of Devayani’s desire for King Yayati which urges her to marry him. Her friend, Sharmishtha who has a Rakshasa origin desires the pompous and elegant life of a queen and the newlywed bride, Chitrlekha yearns for presenting the Bharatha kingdom with a son. But above all, the play is captured by King Yayati’s desire for Sharmishtha which in turn is responsible for the evil consequences witnessed in the play. His father-in-law curses him with premature old age for his infidelity. Thus, *Yayati* is a typical example of a fantasy literature because it is a literature of desire.

## **Enclosures**

Enclosures are central to modern fantasy. There is an instance where Sharmishtha pushes Devayani into a well because the latter had scolded her for wearing her blouse. When Devayani rebukes her dear friend Sharmishtha, she gets extremely angry and offended since she was blamed for fantasizing as soon as she got into an Aryan princess' attire. Yayati finds Devayani in the well covered with mud and dirt. The encounter paves way for Devayani being saved from the well by Yayati and this first meeting results in their wedding.

## **Fascination with Suicide and Death**

The play also exhibits the fascination with suicide and the flirtation with death. When Sharmistha leaves her house, her father gifts her with a vial of lethal poison that is the purest extract of wild mushrooms. She drops it on the floor and it is picked up by Chitrlekha, the young bride of Puru. She gulps it down owing to her disappointment in life and dies at once. Her dreams have been shattered when she discovered that Puru had accepted his father's curse.

## **Disintegration**

Fantasy has its commitment to disintegration and this feature is evident in this play. King Yayati's disintegration from his kingly position to that of a lustful layman in his keeping company with Sharmistha illustrates the above. He is degenerated to a victim of sexuality. The libidinal desire of Yayati eclipses his dignified kingly position. All the characters in this play have powerful mental and spiritual struggles which are also a characteristic of fantasy.

## **Dualism**

Moreover, dualism is projected by Sharmistha in the course of the play. Though she presents herself as a loud-mouthed villainous lady in the beginning, she expresses deep concern for her mistress Devayani as well as for King Yayati in the later part. Similarly, King Yayati also displays dualism in his nature. The lustful king at first shows his repugnance and revolt against the idea of living the life of an old man. He hands over the curse of senility to his son. But later,

realization dawns on him that there is neither courage nor virtue in shirking from the consequences of one's own misdeeds. Therefore, he takes back the curse of old age from his son. This paves way for another feature of fantasy.

### Conclusion

The play *Yayati* is a perfect illustration of a fantasy literature because it has achieved the goals of fantasy by helping the reader grow in his/her experience.

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