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**Girish Karnad's *Yayati* – A Tale of Malcontent All Around**

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# Girish Karnad's *Yayati* – A Tale of Malcontent All Around

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## ***Yayati*: Image of an Alienated Modern Man**

Keniston writes that “heroes” of all kinds and all ages have been alienated and their stories are the tales of alienation and of struggles to end it.”

Girish Karnad's *Yayati* is an Indian mythological king who represents the modern alienated man. Karnad has borrowed the myth from great Indian epic *Mahabharata* and other *Purans*.

The play opens when Yayati is married to Devayani, the daughter of demons' guru Shukracharya. Sharmistha, the daughter of the Demon King Vrishparva, is shown as her slave. Yayati was carried away with a wave of emotion to find the miserable plight of Sharmistha, a princess, in fact, and secretly married her in spite of the warning by his Father-in-Law that he should never let Sharmistha share his bed. When Shukracharya came to know this, he uttered his curse on Yayati to become an old man. Shukracharya also said the only concession he could give was that if Yayati wanted he could give his old age to someone and take their youth from him.

Karnad takes a deep insight into Yayati's character and shows Yayati's passion for the enjoyment of life, which ultimately turns into detachment and aloofness. Yayati is a true ambassador of modern common man, who in spite of having much pleasures of life, still feels impatient and dissatisfied. Yayati takes the youth of Pooru, his youngest son, but soon realizes the impropriety of his shallow action and feels like an alienated common man. Yayati feels cataclysmic disillusionment and loss of faith in life. His torment and burden for Pooru's youth is revealed in the following words.

“Please help me, Pooru. Take back your youth. Let me turn my decrepitude into a beginning.”

Thus, Yayati's disillusionment is complete only with saturation. He has had his fill but remains unfulfilled.

## **Devayani: A Grouch Female**

Throughout the play Devayani wanted to prove her superiority to the daughter of the *Asura* race. But, ironically, like a common woman in a male dominated Indian society, she is not allowed inclusive freedom and a life of her own which finally leads to her self-alienation.

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The drama opens with the Sutradhara's hint to spectators that though the characters and incidents of the play relate to earlier times, they could as well be applicable to contemporary times.<sup>5</sup> Devayani is easily trapped by the acerbic words of Sharmistha as she fills her ears that Yayati married her only to learn the art of *sanjivani* (immortality) from her father as a marriage gift. She refuses to accept Yayati's argument that she had been very beautiful to him and, therefore, he proposed to marry her.

Devayani asks Yayati:

“They say even a prostitute is asked her name first when she is picked off the street. And you didn't ask mine.”

The war of words between Devayani and Sharmistha, who were good friends once, is loaded with anxiety and bitterness. Devayani utters abuses to Sharmistha and finds the uselessness of her life, “Bitch! I'll kill you. I'll feed you to the...”

### **Pooru: Symbol of Sacrifice**

Pooru proves himself as a great symbol of sacrifice. He accepts the imposed old age of his father and becomes a ripe old man in his formative years while Yayati regains his youth. However, in another sense, Pooru becomes the victim of his father's hysterical desires for sensuality. Pooru seeks Chitrlekha's help, his wife, to the lead rest of his life in solace and calm with him. He asserts:

“This is no ordinary old age, devi. This is decrepitude. The sum total of the Father's transgressions. The burden of the whole dynasty, perhaps. I couldn't take it on without your help.”

Earlier, Chitrlekha admired her husband's decision and felt herself honoured and lucky for being his wife. She also performs an *arati* as a sign of admiration. Yet when she looks at the old and ragged face of her husband she realizes that a treachery has fallen over her. She screams to look at her face and utters, “Please don't come near to me. Go out. Please, please. Don't touch me...”

### **Chitrlekha: Image of Futility**

As a matter of fact, we must understand that Chitrlekha, a creation of Karnad, in the highest sense, stands for the futility of life even though she was born as a princess. Chitrlekha marries Yayati because of his youth and dynamism, but Yayati accepts decrepitude of his father without consulting her. Meanwhile, Yayati asks her to be patient and to rise above such inconsequential consideration. He also asks her to be a great woman. Karnad takes a memorable turn here, and his Chitrlekha tries to cross the threshold of patriarchy. Chitrlekha boldly has a proposal for Yayati:

“I didn’t know Prince Pooru when I married him. I married him for his youth. For his potential to plant the seed of the Bharatas in my womb. He has lost that potency now. He does not possess any of the qualities for which I married him. But you do.”

Thus, Karnad creates Chitrlekha as a desperate figure who suffers extreme aloofness and coldness from every human being around her. Ultimately she finds only one way open to her and she commits suicide by taking a vial of poison to end her unbearable misery.

### **Swarnalata: Innocent Bearer**

Swarnalata is also a creation of Karnad who suffers from the hands of her husband and human sympathy as well, and, thus a symbol of modern lost man. Her character is also a symbol of conservative society that anticipates a woman to prove her innocence. She feels a close association with Chitrlekha and churns out her own tale of laceration. Swarnalata’s father engages a *Brahmin* tutor to educate her who teaches her to read and write. With the passage of time Swarnalata finds a nicer husband of her own caste. Both lived happily and enjoyed the bliss of married life.

One day her husband came to know that a *Brahmin* boy used to visit her house before their marriage. Her husband could not control his doubt about the chastity of his wife, which grew as suspicion and poisoned his mind completely. Life became a disease for Swarnalata and in spite of being innocent she suffered the hatred of people and faced the ordeal of her broken dreams. One day she told a lie to her husband to help him get out of his nagging doubt about her chastity that she had been seduced by her teacher. As a result, she found that, for the first time in many years, her husband turning his side and fell into deep sleep. But the very next day, her ray of hope is shattered and she finds herself alone in a world full of human beings but no one for her;

“He disappeared next morning. I haven’t seen him since. I still deck myself up as a married woman. Our house awaits his return: every one of his possessions in its place, exactly as he left it. But if he doesn’t return, I hope he at least found peace in death.”

### **A Tale of Malcontent All Around**

Thus, Karnad’s *Yayati* is a tale of malcontent all around without a ray of sunlight. The universal law of suffering seems to be that it kills silently, and playwright’s characters are no exception of this law.

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