



# Girish Karnad's Yayati and Hayavadana: A Mythical Experiment

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**Abstract**— *Yayati and Hayavadana are the most eminent plays written by Girish Karnad. Myths are recognized as perfect ethical perspective from an alternate perspective. Myth holds significant importance in history as well as in literature, philosophy, and various aspects of human life. Myths have been a crucial element in oral, written, and visual storytelling for many millennia. That is the reason they have been present throughout all of humanity's history. Every child in India has been raised hearing mythological stories of gods and goddesses. Mythological tales are also essential in the study of culture. Yayati is a mythological tale that is part of our Indian heritage. Yayati retells a mythological story from the Mahabharata, focusing on ancient king Yayati and his desires. Karnad sourced the plot of the play Hayavadana from Kathasaritsagara, an ancient Sanskrit collection of stories.*



**Keywords**— *Myth, Culture, Desire, Identity crisis and completeness, Folk themes.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

The Indian English drama portrays the traditional beliefs and values of India in a contemporary setting. Indian English literature depicts the hesitancy of prominent literary figures. Girish Karnad was one among them. Girish Karnad was not just a talented playwright, but also took on roles as an actor and a film director. In 1998, he was honored with the Jnanpith award, the most prestigious literary recognition in India, for his literary contributions. His plays have signaled the maturation of contemporary Indian plays. Girish Karnad has significantly altered the course by exploring mythology and contemporary challenges of humanity, making a significant impact on Indian English literature. Today, human consciousness is overwhelmed by the absurdity and lack of meaning in life. Hence, writers such as Girish Karnad embody altruism, humanity, daydreaming, longing, and various other qualities. Girish Karnad has creatively used the myth to add depth and complexity to develop a modern story, resulting in the creation of a new narrative. He has employed a beginner's method to incorporate historical and mythological figures into contemporary themes like absurdity, existentialism,

and the crisis of modern people by portraying characters immersed in psychological and philosophical struggles. The playwright has portrayed past mythical, historical, and oral tales in his writings. The origin of the play Yayati is the Mahabharata. The story revolves around the tale of King Yayati, who is a forebear of Pandavas. Yayati was cursed by his father-in-law, Shukracharya, to age prematurely due to his infidelity in marriage life. The main source of inspiration for Hayavadana is Thomas Mann's adaptation of 'The Transposed Heads.' Karnad's Hayavadana tackles the issue of human identity within a complex web of relationships. The current paper focuses on transforming myth in Yayati and mythical experiments in Hayavadana by exploring conventional and modern sensibilities. It addresses issues like identity, social, religious, and philosophical conflicts, patriarchy, self-interest, and a pervasive sense of isolation.

## II. MYTHICAL TRANSFORMATION IN YAYATI

Girish Karnad has tried to connect the ancient myth of Mahabharata with a contemporary setting in his first play Yayati. Girish Karnad introduced additional characters to

revise the existing myth and address contemporary themes such as desire, alienation, social and religious conflicts, existentialism, and more. Yadavava comments: "...new characters to deepen the connotative richness of the play as he gives it a contemporary appeal." Swarnalata, Devyani's servant, and Chitrlekha, Pooru's wife, are the new additions to the play. Swarnalata's strength lies in her ability to provide insights during the play. She informs Chitrlekha about her husband's acceptance to take on his father's agedness. However, Chitrlekha, Pooru's wife, eventually commits suicide, leading to a shift in Yayati's sexual desires. She embodies selflessness perfectly because of the philosophical disagreements prevalent in society. Devyani gave birth to two sons named Yadu and Tarvasu in the Mahabharata, while Sharmistha had three sons named Druhyu, Anu, and Pura.

In contrast, in Karnad's story, the playwright highlights Pooru as the sole son of Yayati and Devyani.

*Yayati* is a legendary drama that was originally written in Kannada and later translated into English by the author himself. S. Ramaswamy says: "...by using imagination and creativity, he transformed myths and legends into a folk narrative style." *Yayati* narrates the tale of King Yayati who was hexed by his own father-in-law to become old. Yayati then requests his sons to give up their youth for him, and one of them also agrees. The play shows life's ironies through many layers revealed as the story unfolds.

Sharmishtha, Devayani, Yayati, Pooru, and Chitrlekha are the main characters in the play. *Yayati* is a drama depicting the intricate relationship among Devayani, Sharmishtha, and King Yayati. Devayani and Sharmishtha were companions. One day, they both headed to the river to bathe. Suddenly, a powerful wind began to blow, prompting them to swiftly exit the river and get dressed. Quickly, Sharmishtha put on Devayani's clothing. Devayani was not fond of it, and they began to argue. Sharmishtha shoved Devayani into the water and then departed. While King Yayati was passing, he unintentionally assisted her in getting out of the water by gripping her right hand. In the end, Devayani and King Yayati gotten married and Sharmishtha was given as a dowry in their marriage. Sharmishtha and Yayati engaged in a hidden romance, but when their relationship is exposed, Shukracharya placed a curse on Yayati, causing him to age rapidly. Yayati is unwilling to acknowledge this early onset of aging. Yayati says, "I thought there were two options –life and death. No, it is living and dying we must choose between. And you have shown me that dying can go on for all eternity. Suddenly, I see myself, my animal body frozen in youth, decaying, deliquescing, and turning rancid. You are laying on your pyre, child, burning for life, while I sink slowly in

this quagmire, my body wrinkleless and grasping, but unable to grasp anything." These lines show the modern-day struggle faced by Yayati. He cannot perceive the obscurity of material and sensual enjoyments. He cannot discover spiritual joy that can assist him in uncovering the real purpose of life. He is indulging in earthly pleasures that are steering him towards ruin.

Karnad sees *Yayati*'s case as reflecting his own in a unique setting. He comments:

"I think looking back at that point, perhaps it seemed to me very significant that this was what was happening to me, my parents demanding that I should be in a particular way, even when my future seemed to be opening up in another. So, you see, it was the play, where the myth in some ways gave exact expression to what I was trying to say but the form is entirely borrowed from the West."

When *Yayati* discovered that a curse could be passed onto someone else in exchange for regaining his youth, he was filled with immense happiness. He accepts the fact and says, "That is good news. That is good news indeed. So, I don't lose my youth, thank God." He tells Sharmishtha, "So you see Sharmishtha. You were asking me to accept to curse as though that was the end of everything." He asked his kingdom's people to swap his old age for youth, but no one agreed unfortunately. Finally, Pooru, Yayati's youngest son, decides to step up and bear the king's curse despite being newlywed. In the play, Chitrlekha, Pooru's wife, is introduced as a new character who demonstrates courage by initially disagreeing with her husband's decision. Girish Karnad has depicted the concept of survival while revisiting the narrative in *Chitrlekha*. During one of the interviews conducted with Tutun Mukherjee, Karnad says, "My attempt was to emphasize the calm acceptance of grief and anguish. Pooru's old age is a sudden transformation and not the eventuality of life. It brings no wisdom and no self-realization. It is a senseless punishment for an act he has not committed. I was also intrigued by the idea that if Pooru had a wife, how would she react? So, I introduced Chitrlekha. Every character in the play tries to evade the consequences of their actions, except Sharmistha and Chitrlekha."

Chitrlekha presents herself to Yayati. She asks Yayati about why she is in the palace. She asks her Father-in-law, "...what about your duty to your son. Do you think twice before foisting your troubles on a pliant son?" Finally, she consumes poison and ends her own life. This deed helps Yayati understand the extent of his cruelty towards his own son. He begs his son Pooru to regain his youth: "Take back your youth, Pooru. Rule well. Let me go and face my destiny in the wilds." After that he accompanies Sharmishtha to the forest and lives as a hermit.

Nevertheless, in the Mahabharata, Yayati was able to live joyfully with Devyani for many years following the incident. One day, he came to the realization that he had spent his life chasing trivial pursuits and had never considered the profound goal of spiritual enlightenment. He decided to separate himself from the alluring world of transit and embrace the path of Godliness. In his play *Yayati*, Girish Karnad has addressed contemporary social conflict. While in Mahabharata, Yayati gave his property to his sons and lived in the forest with Devyani and Sharmistha, in the play *Yayati* and Sharmistha became hermits after the death of Chitrlekha. He decided to renounce after sacrificing bold Chitrlekha, who held up a mirror to the mighty emperor.

*Yayati* is a story about a king who exchanges his old age for his son's youth to stay forever young. Yet, in this process, Pooru goes from being a compliant and honorable son to facing the futility of life. Girish Karnad's play shows that Pooru is willing to embrace old age because he doesn't have the same courage as his father. He is unwilling to accept the responsibilities of ruling a large kingdom, making it convenient for him to avoid his duties to the kingdom. Yayati tells Chitrlekha, "Pooru lacks the experience to tackle...problems...Actually more than the experience he lacks the will, the desire. Instead of welcoming the responsibilities if a king-and of a householder-he has welcomes salinity...."

Girish Karnad in his own words' states, "The story of King *Yayati* that I used occurs in the Mahabharata. The king, for a moral transgression he has committed, is cursed to old age in the prime of life. Distraught at losing his youth, he approaches his son, pleading with him to lend him his youth in exchange for old age. The son agrees to the exchange and accepts the curse, and thus becomes old, older than his father. But the old age brings no knowledge, no self-realization, only the senselessness of a punishment meted out for an act in which he had not even participated. The father is left to face the consequences of shirking responsibility for his own actions."

Pooru is not a self-centered man like Yayati. He doesn't expect anything from Yayati for his martyr. He is a good example of 'Yayati complex.' Devdutta Pattaniak says that there is a term in Hindu Mythology named 'Yayati complex,' which means parents expecting their children to sacrifice their own wishes to satisfy and fulfill the parents' wishes. Chitrlekha says, "His gentleness is like waft of cool breeze." He never senses about the emotions of his wife Chitrlekha as well as the outcomes of his activity. He has not acquired any knowledge or expertise on old age. He is experiencing an existential dilemma where his once happy life with his wife Chitrlekha appears to lack

significance for him. Sharmistha also convinces Pooru not to trade his youth for old age since the pride of sacrifice is also a type of toxin. Pooru has now transformed into a different person. Chitrlekha tells, "I thought he was an ordinary man. What a fool I have been! How utterly blind! I am the chosen one and I ...which other woman has been so blessed? Why should I shed tears?"

During the play, Pooru categorizes sons into three groups and states that there are three specific types of sons. The first type is one who meets their father's expectations without being asked, reach the highest position, and achieve life's goal. Next is the son who dutifully assists when asked. The third type of son reluctantly agrees to assist. He willingly embraces his father's curse, anticipating acquiring understanding of life's purpose. He discovers himself in a realm where traditional spiritual beliefs have vanished completely, and the new spiritual principles have not been found yet. Pooru's act of sacrifice opened Yayati's eyes to the errors in his thinking, leading him to rescind the curse on Pooru to seek redemption. Nevertheless, Pooru eventually approaches the lifeless body of Chitrlekha and tells, "We brought you here only to die. But our senses are blighted, and we shall never grasp the meaning of what you taught us." Pooru has also restored the significance of duty. The narrator of the play *Yayati* is also pleased because Pooru has asked a question for the first time, showing progress towards becoming a philosopher king.

### III. MYTHICAL EXPERIMENTS IN HAYAVADANA

'Hayavadana' is a multidimensional play portraying a love-triangle of Kapila, Padmini and Devadutta. These characters are stimulated by their own wishes. Every single fictional character represents moral archetype as well as a complicated psychological individual. It is the motif of faultlessness and entirety in life which governs the action in the play. The world portrayed in the play is as accurate as our dream world. The whole play is considered as a type of manifest dream content psychology.

The title of the play *Hayavadana* is named after a horse. The title of the play itself symbolizes fulfillment of desire. Compared to animals, humans are fated to experience this absence and face the grim fate of death. Padmini's personality is portrayed against the backdrop of this significant concern in the play. Padmini's character in 'Hayavadana,' is portrayed as a young and beautiful female woman. This character is highly cherished by literary readers and critics. This character has been created through extensive philosophical contemplation by the playwright. She is beautiful, cruel, innocent, and perceptive. All these characteristics of Padmini make her an exceptional and

different personality. The term 'Padmini' is considered as a general label for a particular group, denoting "the title given to a specific category of females in Vatsyayana's *Kamasutra*." Girish Karnad explains the social dimension in Padmini's personality as,

...a woman who had fallen in love with a man but who was not exactly out of love with husband. She was under tremendous stress and on the verge of a nervous breakdown. She broke down. She used to confuse and mix up the names of her husband and her friend. But there are social dimensions to this problem.

The portrayal of Padmini is depicted in a sexually suggestive manner, objectifying the female body.

Girish Karnad was inspired by the love triangle that ingrained in his mind to explore similar love stories in myths and mythologies. It is important to consider the mythological influences used by Girish Karnad to develop the plot. These mythical stories provide background to the play. The dramatic action of the play depends on the mythical stories. Girish Karnad adapted the plot from Thomas Mann's 'Transposed Heads.' The character of Padmini is developed in an analogous way. Each person is confined by "psychological limits set by nature." Going against these limits results in a risky and intricate situation that cannot be resolved. Padmini cannot violate the laws of nature for her own wish. Padmini's story aims to disrupt the established hierarchy in pursuit of her own definition of perfection. The play wonderfully portrays the central character of Padmini. She is the sixteenth female to enter Devadatta's life. She is an unmatched beautiful woman, possessing a charming body and face. Devadatta who has seen her on his way says,

"fore locks rival the bees, her face is..."

Kapila, who is an illiterate, envisions the attractiveness of the girl his friend talks about. He decides to accompany him. Both Devadatta and Kapila compliment, she

"... is a white lotus. Her beauty is as the magic lake. Her arms the lotus creepers. Her breasts are golden urns and her waist..."

Devadatta, the poet and man of great intellectual strength, unmatched in logic and affection, is captivated by the enchanting charm that emanates from her captivating beauty. In the language of poetry, they referred her as "...shikharidashana pakvabimbadharoshthi-Madhye Kshama Chakitaharineprekshana nimnanabhiih."

Padmini, when compared to Veda Vyasa's Shakuntala, who originates from a matriarchal society, stands out. Shakuntala, from Kalidasa's work, is a blend of characteristics from the patriarchal society that shaped her.

Padmini is an exquisite combination of the beauty and charm possessed by both women. She embodies the role of the "Shyama Nayika - born of Kalidasa's magic description - as Vatsyayana had dreamt her." She possesses not just beauty but also magical qualities. Strength in her physical being: "She lifted her hand to knock, and it touched the bird. For a minute, the bird came alive." Kapila highlights. Comments about Padmini help to form her personality, various characters, and the contrasts.

Kapila discovers the residence called "Pavana Veethi" that has a door adorned with a small, intricately designed symbol of a 'two-headed bird.' Seeing Padmini at the door, Kapila is left speechless and immediately stands up in awe, his eyes wide open, captivated by the winding beauty of the girl he is determined to find. He is in a state of almost overwhelming confusion as he speaks to himself: "I hadn't thought anyone could be more beautiful than the wench Ragini who acts Rambha .... She is Yakshini, Shakuntala, Urvashi, Indumati all rolled into one." During the initial meeting, she demonstrates a keen intellect that understands the situation, her strong logic skills, and the ability to understand the thoughts of the person in front of her. She is not a girl who falls for deception through manipulation or feigned innocence. She is a confident, daring, and assertive girl who is direct in her interactions with people, whether they are familiar or unfamiliar.

Padmini is the offspring of the prominent trader in Dharampura, a wealthy and prosperous individual. They have the goddess of wealth as a sweeper in their house. In the house of Devadatta, they have the goddess of knowledge as their housekeeper. Padmini remarks on Kapila's unresponsive attitude towards her challenging question: "I know it. I knew you wouldn't touch my feet. One can't even trust strangers anymore. All right, my dear son! I opened the door. So, consider me the doorkeeper. What do you want?" Despite her aggressive demeanor and assertive nature, she is surprisingly thoughtful and logical. Growing up in a wealthy family, she appears to have been overwhelmed with love and every wish granted by her parents. She does not give in to emotions alone and has no regard for feelings. She agrees immediately to Kapila's proposal for his friend Devadatta, without waiting for her parents' approval. She is overjoyed and honored by the marriage proposal from such a prestigious and respected family.

Devadatta is the sole offspring of the Respected Brahmin Vidyasagara. He possesses an elegant and attractive appearance along with deep intelligence; standing at a height of five feet seven inches, he sports long hair and a fair complexion. He is a poet, scholar, and adept in Vedas, excelling in both poetry and logic. Devadatta is "the apple of every eye in Dharampura." Devadatta has a delicate

physical health and tends to be sensitive and inwardly expressive. He is emotional, displaying characteristics of Apollonian. He adores her for Padmini's outward beauty and physique, but he has not attempted to understand her thoughts, character, and essence through his intellect and logic. In their initial meeting, Kapila recognizes that she is not a suitable partner for Devadatta. He comments, "Devadatta, my friend. I confess to you I'm feeling uneasy. You are a gentle soul. You can't bear a bitter word or an evil thought. But this one is fast as lightning— and as sharp. She is not for the like of you. What she needs is a man of steel. But what can one do? You'll never listen to me. And I can't withdraw now...."

#### IV. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it can be said that Girish Karnad has brought a fresh interpretation and importance to traditional tales. Themes of alienation and existentialism are conveyed through the characters Chitrlekha and Pooru in his work *Yayati*. *Yayati* learns about the nature of desire and passions in the Mahabharat, while in *Yayati* he comes to understand them after Chitrlekha's suicide. *Yayati* explores the concept of social responsibility, a realization achieved by both the father and son in the end. On the other hand, *Hayavadana* explores mythical themes by telling the story of Devadatta, Kapila, and Padmini. The swapping of Devadatta and Kapila's heads, resulting in changed bodies, implies that man cannot achieve perfection as it is a quality of the divine. Something that is unattainable is accomplished in our dreams and mythology; *Hayavadana* exemplifies this through a dream sequence, which proves to be a frightening experience for Padmini.

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