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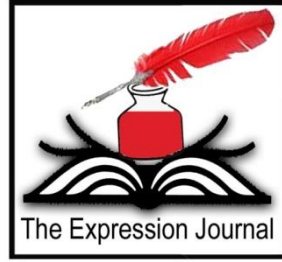
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Female Archetypes and Hegemonic Constraints: A Study of Women Characters in Girish Karnad's Play *Yayati*

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Abstract

Girish Karnad's name needs no introduction in Indian drama. He is renowned for his Kannada plays. His play, *Yayati* (1961), depicts the Mahabharata myth from a modern perspective. The play recontextualizes the story of King Yayati's insatiable lust and the subsequent curse. Due to his selfishness, the lives of other persons are also adversely affected. This paper is an attempt to critically analyze the four women characters of this play—Devayani, Sharmishtha, Chitrlekha, and Swarnalata—who become victims of patriarchal hegemony. The play, *Yayati*, narrates how women's jealousy and revenge not only harm them personally but also affect other women's lives. Devayani was a simple Brahmin girl and Sharmishtha was an Asura princess, but after Devayani's marriage, Sharmishtha is forced to become Devayani's slave. Sharmishtha sleeps with King Yayati, not primarily out of love, but to take revenge on Devayani. Chitrlekha is driven to commit suicide simply because her husband, Pooru, does not even think to seek her permission before taking his father's curse. Unable to accept her young husband in a decrepit state, she commits suicide. The last character, Swarnalata, loses her husband who doubted her character, and at the end of the play, she loses her mental balance. In this way, this chapter attempts to examine all the women characters from a feminist perspective, exploring how they try to break their patriarchal chains but remain unsuccessful in their efforts.

Keywords

Girish Karnad, *Yayati*, Myth, Devayani, Sharmishtha, Chitrlekha, Female Archetypes, Hegemonic Constraints, Lust, Patriarchy, Selfishness, Sacrifice.

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Girish Raghunath Karnad was one of the greatest Indian dramatists. He was a playwright, actor, and theatre director who brought the Kannada language theatre to the international level. He was born on 19 May 1938 at Matheran (now in Maharashtra). He received his Bachelor of Arts degree in Mathematics and Statistics from Karnataka University, Dharwad, in 1958. He received the prestigious Rhodes Scholarship, due to which he got an opportunity to study at the University of Oxford (1960–63). He studied Philosophy, Politics, and Economics in the United Kingdom and was elected President of the Oxford Union. Karnad wrote his plays primarily in Kannada, and later his works were translated into English. Karnad is famous for taking social issues, history, and mythology in his plays. He has shed light on contemporary socio-political issues.

Girish Karnad wrote his first play, *Yayati* (1961), during his stay in England. His second play, *Tughlaq* (1964), is based on the 14th-century Delhi sultan, Muhammad bin Tughluq. Apart from these, his other influential plays include *Hayavadana* (1971), *Nagamandala* (1988), and *Taledanda* (1990). Apart from playwriting, Girish Karnad also worked as an actor and director in films. His film *Vamsha Vriksha* (1971, co-directed with B.V. Karanth), won a National Award. He also played roles in *Samskara* (1970) and *Manthan* (1976), and played the memorable role of Swami's father in the TV series *Malgudi Days*. Girish Karnad tells in his interview with Tutun Mukherjee:

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. (Mukherjee 2006, 31)

Besides this, Girish Karnad worked as the Director of the Film and Television Institute of India (FTII), Pune, from 1974 to 1975. He was the Chairman of the Sangeet Natak Akademi

from 1988 to 1993. He was a Visiting Professor at the University of Chicago from 1987 to 1988 and the Director of the Nehru Centre, London (2000–03). He received the Padma Shri (1974), the Padma Bhushan (1992), and the Jnanpith Award (India's highest literary honour) (1999) and many more film awards. He breathed his last on 10 June 2019 in Bengaluru and left a great void in Indian drama.

Girish Karnad's play, *Yayati* (1961), is based on a story from the Mahabharata. Kunwar Sahab Singh writes in his paper, "Myth and Patriarchy in Girish Karnad's Play *Yayati*," "The original story of Yayati is found in the *Adiparva* of the *Mahabharata*" (2023, 1). Vanitha S. and S.A.R. Abidi write in their paper, "Myth and Reality in Girish Karnad's Play *Yayati*," (Added comma) "In *Yayati*, Girish Karnad inspires us to rethink about the myths, mythologies and folklores he has profoundly used in his plays, with the contemporary life and elements infused in them" (2016, 711). The play narrates that there is no end to man's carnal desires. This play is a conflict between duty and desire. King Yayati is the central figure in this play who is cursed with premature old age for having an illicit relationship with Sharmishtha. He becomes so blinded by his sensory pleasures that he demands the youth of his own son, Pooru, and adds poison to his son's married life. He marries Devayani in order to get the knowledge of *Sanjeevani* through her father. The play narrates Pooru's sacrifice for his father. Girish Karnad writes in the "Preface" of this play:

A key element in its plot is the '*Sanjeevani*' vidya—the art of reviving the dead, which promises release from the limitations of the fleeting life this self is trapped in. The gods and the *rakshasas* have been killing each other from the beginning of time for the possession of this art. Humans have been struggling to master it. Sadly, we aspire to become immortal but cannot achieve the lucidity necessary to understand eternity. Death eludes definition. (6)

This paper is an attempt to explore the female characters in this play. Devayani, Yayati's wife, is a Brahmin girl and Shukracharya's daughter. Sharmishtha is a bitter, intelligent Rakshasa princess who becomes Devayani's slave. Chitralkha is Pooru's wife and an idealistic, self-sacrificing young wife, and Swarnalata is a loyal maid. Through their characters, Girish Karnad has tried to show their characters from a modern perspective, exploring how they try to subvert patriarchal powers but remain unsuccessful in their efforts. In Act 1, when the play opens, Queen Devayani is talking to her maid, Swarnalata. They are talking about Sharmishtha, and Swarnalata seems to be cursing Sharmishtha. Their conversation shows that Sharmishtha has some inherent weaknesses in her character:

DEVAYANI: Enough, Swarna. How often do I have to tell you not to pay her any attention? Get up now. There is so much to attend to yet—

SWARNALATA: That spiteful whore—I would have torn her hair out if you hadn't stopped me. Taught that fiend a proper lesson. The *rakshasi*. You heard us, madam. Did I say a word against her? All those dirty insinuations. The nasty jibes. They are too horrible to think. She didn't even spare His Majesty. I... I can't bear it.

DEVAYANI: She has a foul tongue. I know. Just ignore her. (7)

Devayani is a Brahmin's daughter who is married into a Kshatriya family. She does not get this opportunity due to her virtues but by her lineage, because she is a Brahmin girl and Shukracharya's daughter. Yayati married her to get the knowledge of *Sanjeevani* from her father. Even after marriage, she remains perpetually insecure and depressed because she thinks that her magic does not work on King Yayati. She comes to know about this through

Sharmishtha, who tells her that her worth is negligible. That is why Sharmishtha says, "What was your worth? That your father knew the '*sanjeevani*' spell. That is all" (11). Devayani knows it well that King Yayati does not love her to the extent she expected from him.

When Sharmishtha questions what she sees in the King's eyes, Devayani triumphantly replies, "And you would see only one thing in my eyes. The reflection of His Majesty's face..." (12). She is full of doubt after this conversation; that is why she asks King Yayati, "Why did you marry me?" (15), which shows her insecurity and doubt. Her ultimate fear, planted by Sharmishtha, is the concubine's claim, "even a prostitute is asked her name first when she is picked off the street. And you didn't ask mine." (16). Devayani thinks that she is a victim of circumstances. She wants to send Sharmishtha to her tribe, but she does not send her due to their previous bond. She accepts Sharmishtha's torment.

SHARMISHTHA: Just think of when Yayati saw you first. You were in a well—covered in mud and filth. Scratched. Bleeding. Your clothes in tatters. You think he fell in love with that spectacle? Fool! He would have gone away without a second thought—except that he learnt that you were Devayani. Devayani! Daughter of Shukracharya! (13)

Yayati is preparing to receive his son, Pooru and his wife, Chitrlekha. Sharmishtha approaches him and coaxes him to share a bed with her, and Devayani complains about this incident to her father, Shukracharya. When Shukracharya comes to know about Yayati's infidelity, he curses Yayati with premature old age so that he may not be able to do such kind of acts in the future. Shukracharya also said that if someone exchanges his youth with him, then he can become young again. Yayati meets many people and requests them to exchange their youth with him, but none agrees. When Yayati gets dismayed, his youngest son volunteers to exchange his youth with his father's premature old age. Abhimanyu K. Rao and Shalini Sharma write about this play:

Yayati is in many ways a reminder to the modern youth to bear the responsibility that the world has put on them. Because the young men and women do not accomplish their duty and indulge in the wrong notions like those of King Yayati, the end would be the same as the king. Freedom is a very costly thing; it is said that cheap people cannot afford it. (380)

For Devayani, Yayati's tryst with Sharmishtha is less about love and more about insult in Act 2. She says in sarcasm, "Very nice. An auspicious reopening of your son's bed chamber. Where is she gone?" (27). She calls Sharmishtha a treacherous woman, "Shut up! You, you treacherous hyena..." (28). Devayani gets angry with King Yayati and Yayati also does not want to see her angry. That is why he says:

YAYATI: What is this, darling? What is going on? I mean, it is an auspicious day today. Such an important occasion for us. The Prince is meeting you for the first time! He is bringing home his bride! Their entourage is at the city gates. They should be here any moment. And nothing is ready. The room hasn't been decorated. Look at you. You aren't... (14)

Devayani thinks that King Yayati has become selfish and he always thinks about himself. He does not think about her even a little. She says, "That's all you are worried about, aren't you? Celebrations. Revelries. Festivities. That's all you care about. What I am going through means nothing to you. You are so wrapped up..." (14). On being asked, Devayani shares her major problems with the King. (Corrected 'cproblems with thee king') Here is the conversation between them:

YAYATI: If you can tell me what you are so upset about, perhaps...

DEVAYANI: Why did you marry me?

YAYATI (surprised): Listen, is that a question for now? We have been married two years.

DEVAYANI: If you had deserted me after we first made love, left me on the bed of leaves, no one would have blamed you. Kings are used to women throwing themselves at them. I too would have kept silent from fear and shame. Why then did you marry me?

YAYATI: Because you are the most beautiful woman I know. And at that moment you were an apparition of the kind I had never seen before: dirty, dishevelled, ravishing. All at once.

DEVAYANI: Don't play the fool, please. I must know. (14–15)

Devayani feels totally at a loss when her husband says that he wants to marry Sharmishtha. She gets shocked to know this and says, "Oh god! This slave of mine is to be... No. That is not possible" (30). Devayani tears the marriage thread and her jewellery in rage. Karnad writes, "(Devayani goes and pulls open some curtains on the left... she tears the marriage thread from around her neck and flings it on the floor)" (33). Devayani's protest shows her bold character. She thinks that she cannot live with this insult, "I have nothing more to do with this lot. I am finished with them" (33). She decides to go to her father, Shukracharya.

Sharmishtha, the former Rakshasa princess, has to become Devayani's slave after her marriage to King Yayati. She is the embodiment of resentment, intellectual acuity, and self-preservation. She wants to torment Devayani, and she narrates that Devayani's marriage with Yayati is the result of the king's desire for immortality. She defends her behaviour, saying that it is the result of her lineage, "It is just that I am an uncouth *rakshasi*." (10). She knows well that being a slave means destroying a person's selfhood and identity. She says, "To be a good slave is to have all your vileness extracted from you." (18–19). Her viciousness is an act of resistance, "I snarl because I want to retain a particle of my original self. I abuse and rave to retrieve an iota of it." (19). She thinks that her public degradation comes due to her lineage.

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 offspring of a destitute Brahmin, dependent upon my father. I had everything. Beauty, education, wealth. Everything except birth—an Arya pedigree. What was your worth? That your father knew the '*sanjeevani*' spell. That is all. Yet I worshipped you. No, I loved you. (11)

Sharmishtha's long monologue recounting the well incident provides the audience with her tragic backstory. She loved Devayani and was ready to sacrifice for her. That is why she says, "I loved you... To me, the most wondrous power I possessed seemed to be my ability to shower gifts upon you..." (11). At the well incident, Devayani uses degrading language for her, "'You poor people,' she said. And I realized with rising panic that she had never ever used that phrase before." (21). She tries to commit suicide by drinking poison, but King Yayati prevents her from doing so.

In Act 2, Sharmishtha confronts Yayati not just as a lover but as an intellectual equal, who removes his illusion. She says, "You are so busy visualizing the grand design of life, you have no sense of the traps and snares waiting in the grass. You have no sense of how illogical suffering can be and therefore how terrible. (Pause.) You don't know what a disaster you could be" (25). She talks to Yayati without any fear. She says openly to him:

SHARMISHTHA: Please, wait. It is true I am your wife's slave. You may dismiss me as you wish. But you asked to see me. And as you said yourself, I am a princess by birth. I have a right to be heard. (19)

Later on, she also says, "I am not your slave, Your Majesty. I am hers. I have absolutely no need to be scared of you..." (26), which shows her bold nature. She also admits that she slept with him not out of love but as an act of revenge against Devayani. She wanted to take revenge for her slavery; she uses her body as a weapon. That is why she says, "Yes, I got him into bed with me. That was my revenge on you. After all, as a slave, what weapon did I have but my body? Well, I am even with you now. And I am free. I shall go where I please" (29). She also turns down Yayati's proposal of marriage. She says, "No, thanks. I must turn down your kind offer." (27). However, she is also seen to save Yayati from the curse, which shows her attachment or at least a sense of shared doom. That is why she requests Pooru, "Please, please, Prince. Only you can save His Majesty now. Please, hurry up and go. You mustn't waste time." (41)

In Act 3, Sharmishtha's love for King Yayati is interrogated by Pooru. Pooru also says, "You love him. You actually love Father. I had never imagined a person could be capable of that. You are offering to share his wretched fate. I can't understand it" (50), but she says that he can get rid of his bad luck only when King Yayati will forget her. She says, "All he has to do, to get out of this situation, is to let go of me. Send me away. But he won't think of it" (50). But she knows that it seems impossible for him to forget Sharmishtha.

Chitralkha, Pooru's witty bride, becomes the tragic martyr due to her husband's sacrifice for his father. She understands the sign of danger from the silence of the massive crowd. She says, "Yes. And they are all so silent! In my city, only ten have to come together and there is a riot. You can't imagine what it would be like with this many." (52). She comes to know about how Devayani breaks her marriage and she says, "But I never thought it would come my way in this fashion. (Smiles.)" (52). She receives the vial of poison from Swarnalata, which she considers as an unholy wedding gift of her new family. All these tragic things make her understand the legacy of emotional wreckage in this family. Simone de Beauvoir aptly writes in this context, "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman.... It is civilisation as a whole that produces this creature which is described as feminine" (1989, 267). When she comes to know that her husband has taken Yayati's curse, she undergoes a total transformation. Her cynicism is replaced by admiration and shame for having underestimated her husband's greatness. She feels remorseful for it, "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?" (57).

Chitralkha's idealistic vision is violently shattered when she lights the lamp and sees Pooru's decrepit face. She changes her decision immediately; she screams loudly and drops the lamp on the floor. She says, "Please don't come near me. Go out. Please, please. Don't touch me..." (59). When Yayati enters, Chitralkha recovers her composure and delivers the play's final, devastating intellectual challenge. She puts the blame on Yayati and says that she will not allow Pooru into her room until he achieves his youth. She calls Yayati a selfish father. She says that he will have to pay the price for what he has done, "You have taken over your son's youth. It follows that you should accept everything that comes attached to it." (67). Yayati also gets angry and calls her a whore (67) for her double standards. She finally commits suicide not due to despair but as an act of defiance.

Swarnalata is Devayani's loyal maid. She tries to save Devayani from the problems. Swarnalata is fiercely loyal to Devayani, referring to Sharmishtha with virulent epithets like "That spiteful whore," and "That fiend" (8). She tells Devayani that she must know what status Sharmishtha has now, "I know she was your friend once. But today she is your slave. You mustn't let her forget that." (9). She keeps all her sufferings to herself and wants to save others from pain. Her husband, the charioteer, committed suicide and he doubted her character. Despite her personal grief, she remains loyal to Devayani and continues to serve her properly. Yayati also tells about her husband's death, "She probably hasn't been told." (39).

She is a bearer of ominous news of the palace. She tells Devayani about Sharmishtha's crooked acts, and she informs Chitrlekha about Pooru's sacrifice. She feels very sad while sharing this news, "I shouldn't have agreed to this. I should have sent someone else... I couldn't tell you what I came here to tell." (56). She can be called a repository of despair. She tells that Sharmishtha was taking a bold step, but she is not bold enough to take such steps, "The vial of poison which Sharmishtha carried... It promises instant death—release from living hell. But I don't have the courage it takes." (61). When she sees Chitrlekha's breakdown, she shows her deepest concerns for her. She says, "I know, I know the terror of silence." (59). In the final scene of the play, Chitrlekha dies, Swarnalata is driven to madness, laughing in small spasms of grief. She says about Chitrlekha, "But she found no peace. 'Save me, Swaru. There is no release in death.' Poor darling..." (69).

The play shows that the effect of Yayati's acts is not limited to him only; his conversation shows how the consequences of Yayati's actions aren't limited to him alone, but affect everyone around him—especially his son Pooru and the other women characters of the play. The new bride, Chitrlekha, feels so disappointed and lonely. Even Sharmishtha, who is depicted initially as an aggressor, feels heartbroken and repentant over her acts. Devayani leaves the palace in anger. In this way, the play demonstrates how Yayati's pursuit of lust and power leads to his tragic fall and affects the life of other women in his orbit. Raju B. Yadav writes about this play:

Karnad's *Yayati* retells the age-old story of the king who in his longing for eternal youth does not hesitate to usurp the youth and vitality of his son. Karnad invests new meaning and significance for contemporary life and reality by exploring the king's motivations. (18)

Yayati's daughter-in-law, Chitrlekha, could not withstand her husband's old age, and she commits suicide. King Yayati notices some fierce consequences of his action. He notices that Devayani has deserted him and Chitrlekha has died, and Swarnalata has become insane after knowing his illicit relationship with Sharmishtha. Ultimately, he feels remorseful of his act, and he returns his youth to his son. K.R.S. Iyengar called his plays, "manifestos of the new dawn of realism" (2).

Girish Karnad brings a revolution in the position of women through this play. He has challenged the traditional image of women in the patriarchal society. Though Girish Karnad tries to show the courage and resistance of women through this play, they also have to succumb to the powerful patriarchal structures. However many efforts these women try to come out of the vicious cycle of patriarchy, their efforts remain futile. This play shows how women characters try to break the chains of patriarchy, but they remain unsuccessful in their efforts and they have to succumb to the power structures.

This play also narrates the class divide—how Devayani belongs to a Brahmin woman and Sharmishtha is a demon princess, but now she is Devayani's slave. Devayani is Sage

Shukracharya's daughter. In this way, this play narrates the class divides. The play further narrates how women's identity is decided on the basis of the identity of their husbands. Devayani leaves her husband due to his infidelity, and it is a bold step taken by her, but she goes to her father, which is also a transfer of domination from one man to another man. She will have to take actions according to her father's orders.

Chitrlekha is Pooru's wife and Yayati's daughter-in-law. Yayati does not think for a bit about her before taking Pooru's youth. As a father and father-in-law, he does not think for a bit how his decision would affect Pooru and Chitrlekha's life. Chitrlekha is a modern woman who represents a logical woman who raises questions on her husband's sacrifice and Yayati's ego. She is not able to liberate herself from the patriarchal bondages and commits suicide. Jyoti Gupta and Sushma Sharma write about this play:

Karnad's *Yayati* reveals the afflicted consciousness of a broken man like Yayati who tries to find a meaning in existence. Out of sorrow and humiliation, Yayati is unable to understand the meaning of life till he is rid of old age. But contrary to his expectation Chitrlekha's suicide leads him to expiate his desire. (36)

This play depicts that while the Queens are busy with their high-stakes drama, the servants endure their own quiet suffering, often in ignorance or forced denial. All the women character in Girish Karnad's *Yayati*—Devayani, Sharmishtha, Chitrlekha, and Swarnalata—are tragic figures. They struggle against patriarchal hegemony and but all of them have to succumb against the oppressive forces. Hima Parayil Kalesan writes in her paper "Analysis of Women Characters in Karnad's *Yayati*":

Girish Karnad's *Yayati* is a celebration of the other, a portrayal of parallels. It brings together the differences of gender, class and caste in one stage. Karnad's *Yayati* is not a glorification of the sacrifice of Pooru but a play which intrigues one to think more about the issue of class, caste and gender in society. (13)

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