

## Adaption of the Myth of *Yayati*: A Study of Girish Karnad's *Yayati* (2008)<sup>1</sup>

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As a reader of Karnad's plays, one has to pay attention to their sources. Almost every text has a source in that the plot is derived from somewhere. The common sources of his plays include myths, folk tales, *Puranas*, historical chronicles, epics etc. He seems to have inspired from Shakespeare who follows the same tendency of adapting recognized plots. The modern dramatists tend to use original plots, or any well known historical or political event, or adapt a popular Greek myth. There is nothing wrong with the practice of adapting any known or unknown text since it may provide you with the new insights into the source text. Some critics even say that every literature is based on another literature as it carries the echoes of its procreator. For Peter Allen, literary texts 'are built from systems, codes, and traditions established by previous works of literature' (Allen 1). The exercise of finding how the original texts are adapted and the new meaning generated in the process is worth attempting; it offers us with a new perspective on the subject, event, plot etc.

The adaptation is normally a process of putting a source text into another genre, a kind of switch over. Many fictions have been transformed into successful plays or films and vice versa: Jhumpa Lahiri's *Namesake* is made into a film. In the West, it is a popular practice to dramatize a prose narrative or fiction. Sometimes, the adapted text provides a kind of 'commentary on a source text' (Sanders 18). It offers a new perspective, a viewpoint which is not realized or focused in the source text. It tries to simplify a difficult or unintelligible text to the new readership. Modern Shakespeare is a very good example of such practice. It is a kind of reinterpretation of the canonical texts either by moulding them into a different genre or relocating their cultural context. Besides, the more the adaptation deviates from the source text, the more creative and original it becomes. The question of fidelity towards the source text is irrelevant as it undermines the creativity and innovativeness of the adapted text. The recent success of adaptations is a clear rejection of all those who term these acts as imitations, copying or plagiarism, or repetition. This is because they sustain or prolong our pleasure of the source text. As John Ellis puts it, "adaptation into another medium becomes a means of prolonging the pleasure of the original presentation, and repeating the production of a memory" (Ellis 4-5). Adaptation is a never ending process; as long as the source text sustains its relevance, a need to adapt it would be felt.

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<sup>1</sup> The present paper is based on Karnad's translation of *Yayati* in 2008. The earlier translation was attempted by Priya Adarkar.

Karnad engages himself in what Genette calls ‘transgeneric practice’ i.e. adapting mythic narratives, folk narratives and historical chronicles into drama. He takes plots from these sources and delivers them in new dramatic forms. In that sense all his plays are transpositions in which the original narratives are adapted with the ‘aesthetic conventions of an entirely different generic process’ (Sanders 20). Moulded into a new form, these texts offer a new perspective of life which is relevant in the present context. Karnad derives plots from these sources because he feels that they are relevant and enable him to reflect on the contemporary social and political life in a more subtle and systematic way. There are many taboos and forbidden things in the world which can not be discussed overtly. Otherwise you would invite the wrath of society unnecessarily. Sources such as myths, folk tales or historical events/legends of historically important figures offer him with a safety valve which enables the expression of the unacceptable or forbidden ideas in an acceptable manner. Under the disguise of this one can comment on the present social and political scenario.

The play that started Girish Karnad’s successful career as a playwright was *Yayati*. It was penned over a few weeks in 1960 when Karnad was planning to leave India for Oxford as a Rhodes Scholar for three years against the wishes of his parents. Hence, the play had its relevance that older generation demand sacrifices on the part of younger generation.

Unlike his other play, it was Priya Adarkar who translated the play. It served the purpose until Girish Karnad himself felt the need to translate it in 2008. Actually he was reluctant to touch the play, a work of his ‘juvenilia’ (written when he was only twenty two.) The present translation of the play by Karnad is, therefore, modified and enriched with the suggestions from Satyadev Dubey, Dr. Shreeram Lagoo, and C. R. Simha.

On the suggestion of Kurtkoti, Karnad tried to reinterpret the myth psychoanalytically like Eugene O’Neill. Karnad was very much influenced by O’Neill’s *Mourning Becomes Electra* and wanted to achieve the same kind of intensity. Karnad found the myth of Yayati-Devayani-Sharmishtha rich in possibilities for the expression of psychological and physiological needs of human beings and social obligations. It follows the model of John Anouilh’s plays (especially *Antigone*) as he was influenced by Alkazi (who had tremendous influence of Anouilh).

The myth of Yayati-Devayani-Sharmishtha has been continuously adapted in Indian literature. It has been turned into many plays and novels. There are films based on the myth. In Marathi literature, the two Jnanapith Awardees Khandekar and Shiravadkar (Kusumagraj) adapted the myth into a novel and a stage play respectively. Indian writer’s fascination with the myth of Yayati still exists and works based on the myth pour in every year. However, Karnad’s adaptation holds an important place in these outnumbering adaptations. He challenges the very authority of parents by inventing the character of Chitrlekha. She questions the moral authority of Yayati in taking over her husband’s youth on the first night of their marriage.

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According to Devdutta Pattaniak (2006 *Myth Theory*), in Hindu mythology, there is a famous 'Yayati Complex', that is, parents expecting sacrifices on the part of their children to fulfill their selfish motives. He termed it as 'reverse Oedipus Complex'. In Greek mythology, there are numerous tales depicting a son responsible for the death of his father. For example, the famous tale of *Oedipus Rex*. However, in Hindu mythology we have the reverse situation i.e. a father destroys his son to fulfill his ambitions. Whether it is Bhishma, Rama or Pooru, they have to sacrifice for the sake of their fathers. The Yayati Complex indicates the moral obligations in Indian family which even Karnad had to abide by when he decided to go to Oxford as a Rhodes Scholar for three years. Hence, Karnad employed the myth to show the intricacies of Indian family structure and challenge its moral authority which makes sons like Pooru to sacrifice their prime and precious things to keep it intact. He writes,

*While I was writing the play, I saw it only as an escape from my stressful situation. But looking back, I am amazed at how precisely the myth reflected my anxieties at that moment, my resentment with all those who seemed to demand that I sacrifice my future. By the time I had finished working on Yayati-during the three weeks it took the ship to reach England and in the lonely cloisters of the university - the myth had enabled me to articulate to myself a set of values that I had been unable to arrive at rationally. Whether to return home finally seemed the most minor of issues; the myth had nailed me to the past (74).*

Karnad sticks to the original story as far as the past of the characters is concerned. The prenuptial conflicting relation of Devayani and Sharmishtha, Yayati's encounter with Devayani whom he found in a well after her quarrel with Sharmishtha and his marriage with Devayani form the part of exposition which is spread through the play. In the play, Yayati's liaison with Sharmishtha and willingness to marry her angers Devayani. She makes her father Shukracharya curse Yayati for his transgression to become decrepitude. In the original story, Devayani learns about the marriage between Sharmishtha and Yayati from their sons.

Interpolation is a common feature in adaptations. Karnad too invents the character of Chitrlekha as a wife of Pooru. Her function is to question the moral authority of Yayati in taking her husband's youth for his sensuous pleasure. Her suggestion to Yayati to take over the role of husband surprises everybody.

**Chitrlekha:** I did not 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 doesn't possess any of the qualities for which I married him. But you do.

**Yayati** (flabbergast): Chitrlekha!

**Chitrlekha:** You have taken over your son's youth. It follows that you should accept everything that comes attached to it.

**Yayati:** Whore! Are you inviting me to fornication? (65-66)

The suggestion of Chitrlekha makes Yayati realize his mistake and her suicide forces him to return Pooru's youth. Swarnalata's character like that of Chitrlekha is invented and runs parallel to the disenchantment experienced by the latter. She has also lost her husband and thinks that death brings peace, 'the deliverance from uncertainty' (60). However, she repents her proposition when she finds Chitrlekha, taking cue from her speech, commits suicide. Just as Swarnalata's husband deserted her when he learned about her relationship with her teacher, Devayani too deserts Yayati after he makes love to Sharmishtha. Swarnalata's married life is Karnad's addition to the original tale.

Tranpositional practices form the core of adaptation activity as genre-switch is mostly what is expected of it. Karnad takes the story from one genre i.e. myth as it appeared in *Mahabharata* and delivers it into a stage play by means of the aesthetic conventions of an entirely different generic process to new audiences. Yayati's story which happened over many years is shown to be happening in a very limited span of time in Karnad's *Yayati*. He has to cut or shorten many action units to focus on the core part of the myth i.e. transplantation of age. Most of the events are merely narrated and conveyed or suggested by characters - the past of Devayani and Sharmishtha, Shukracharya cursing Yayati, Pooru's marriage and many other events.

The identity of Pooru's mother is not revealed until the third and fourth Act. In the first Act, there is an impression that Devayani is Pooru's mother unlike in the original tale. However, it becomes clear from the third Act that it is Sharmishtha not Devayani who is the mother of Pooru. The revelation of Sharmishtha as Pooru's mother makes us understand that Yayati has been in love with her for a long time keeping Devayani in ignorance. It is only in the second Act that she becomes witness to their transgression and decides to leave the palace. That means Sharmishtha is not shown married to Yayati as in the original tale. And it is more than mere vengeance on the part of Sharmishtha in the play. She remains firm behind Yayati and tries to prevent him from exchanging his decrepitude with anyone including Pooru. She wants him to accept his fate and lead a life of an ascetic.

Overall Karnad has been faithful to the source text of *Yayati*. However, he has made few changes to intensify the theme of social obligations and 'ripeness is all'. As Karnad says:

*...old age brings no knowledge, no self realization, only the senselessness of a punishment meted out for an act in which he (Pooru) had not even participated (73).*

The play written by a twenty two years old playwright shows that mere old age (i.e. Yayati) should not be revered but the maturity of a youth (i.e. Pooru). The adaptation of *Yayati* by Karnad has its relevance not only at the time it was written but also to the present time when children has to sacrifice their wishes to the whims of their parents who are competing with other parents. However, some children are also forcing their loved ones to bend to their wishes. So it is very clear that adaptations provide us with new perspectives and points of view.

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