



# LEADERSHIP AND GENDER IN GIRISH KARNAD'S *YAYATI*

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## Abstract:

The present paper is an attempt to throw light on how Girish Karnad, an Indian playwright, deals with leadership, governance, and feminine gender in his maiden attempt at *Yayati*. The play deals with the cries of women, so very painful on the Indian soil. It reminds me of the heartless treatment that has been received by women in the land of Sita and Savitri. It brings out a contrast between the fundamental simplicity and the essential complexity of women and human life respectively. In the play, Karnad critically explores the harsh realities of women in an indigenous dramatic form. The play came out as a miraculous tribute to women's sacrifices. That was, in Karnad's opinion, the only meaning of political survival in a country like India. The play has bravely stood the test of time and is as popular today as it was when it first appeared in 1961 when Karnad was giving his nights and days to the study of existentialists like Camus and Kafka on the eve of his departure to England for higher studies. It opened up fresh lines of fruitful exploration for Indian women. The world equally belongs to women. Why should they, therefore, be disrespectfully sacrificed? The play is, in this regard, the greatest dramatic composition that views and reviews things from the feminine angle. This is the most significant aspect of the play, which will claim more attention in the course of the discussion. Karnad beautifully exhibits the inner fascinations of the feminine heart who longs for a Karnad beautifully exhibits the inner fascinations of the feminine heart who longs for a perfectly divine being as her soul mate. What Karnad draws out here is really unexceptional and beyond the reach of ordinary human thought. The play also deals with the cognitive deception, governance, and leadership of the feminine kind. Karnad illuminates the play with various sorts of technical tricks in order to have a fresh feminine approach to the delicate problem of leadership, governance, and gender. He also underlines how the major female characters, especially, Devyani, the beautiful mischievous daughter of Shukracharya; Sharmishtha, the Asura girl; Chitrlekha, the princess of Anga and Swarnalata, Devyani's attendant, four, scale the heights of leadership and governance, bringing the various aspects of life under the gender telescope vis-à-vis Indian ethos. Within their respective limits, they try to bring their potentialities to the surface. Though the play concentrates upon hoary myths and magic of the dead past, what it actually pushes to the front are the foxy tricks that characterize leadership, governance, and gender in the contemporary world, especially women, the worst victims of "me too"! The play skillfully brings forth some moral degradation of homosapiens in the contemporary global world. *Yayati* draws its mold and marrow from the ancient story of King *Yayati*, the ancestor of the Pandavas, who fails to recognize his responsibilities as a ruler and takes relief in sensual pleasure, much to the humiliation of the weaker vessel, still in the chill grip of a male-dominated society. Keywords: Moral, deception, political, technical, leadership, feminine

As a dramatist, Karnad took inspiration to write the play from Achari's Mahabharata. Existentialism is the very breath of his nostrils. His tone and temper are quite modern. The prime theme of the play is to exchange the ages between father and son. But, Karnad adds new dimensions to the play by introducing his own artistic creation, Chitrlekha, the new bride of Pooru. On the literary canvas, the play is as popular today as it was in the days of Mohan Rakesh, Dharambir Bharti, Vijay Tendulkar, and Girish Karnad. The play was translated into many Indian and foreign languages and directed by many eminent directors like Om Shivpuri and Ebrahim Alkazi. In the literary field, Yayati is the unique contribution of Girish Karnad.

Karnad throws a glimpse of a feminine mindset in the very beginning of the play when Devyani, Yayati's wife, and her attendant Swarnalata are abusing Sharmistha, the daughter of Asura king, who is now serving Devyani as her Dasi (maidservant). Devyani feels that Sharmistha has made everyone's life intolerable in the palace. Swarnalata adds fuel to the fire by saying: "All those dirty insinuations. The nasty jibes. They are too horrible to think. She didn't even spare the His Majesty. I... I can't bear it."1 Then they both address her as "whore" and "rakshasi".

Yayati's son prince Pooru is coming back home with his bride, Chitrlekha, the princess of Anga, after years of absence. On this festive occasion, Devyani is looking very much upset. King Yayati enquires her: "Oh, ho! What's wrong? Tell me. What has upset my little pet?..."2 Karnad depicted the vicious mind of women by the furious remark of Devyani: "Why did you marry me?"2 On hearing this king reminded her that "And fortunately, I had pulled you up by your right hand. I was enchanted by you and you were not exactly disclined. So"2

Karnad portrays the feminine plight in such a unique way. The king is "already married to Devyani, the beautiful daughter of Shukracharya but, during the course of action, he accepts Sharmishtha, the Asura girl, who is also no less beautiful than Devyani, as his wife. Sharmishtha is staying with Devyani in Yayati's palace as her slave."3 Sharmistha develops an extra-marital relationship with the king. She is quite aware of the fact that there is no escape from this degradation. She knows well that the louder she screams, the more she declares herself a slave. Later on, she tries to commit suicide by consuming poison but fails. On the other hand, Devyani loses her temper when she comes to know about the secret relationship of Yayati and Sharmishtha. She expresses her anguish when she asks Yayati: "Don't you have enough concubines to keep you occupied?"4

Sharmistha constantly realizes Devyani that Yayati had married her because he wants to bless himself with Shukracharya's nectar of immortality. She taunts Devyani for not having true love in her marriage. She mocks her as: "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"4 She adds fuel to the fire when she further says: "Have you ever dared examine those eyes and acknowledge the lust burning there? Except that he is not lusting for you, you poor darling, he lusts for immortality. Your father's art of 'sanjeevani'."5 She adds further: "He would have gone away without a second thought- except that he learned that you were Devyani. Devyani! Daughter of Shukracharya! And Yayati's manhood raised its head. And all he had to do to keep his banner flying over the world was to plant his flag pole into you."6

But Devyani is no less revengeful than Devyani. She has lost control over her mind when she comes to know of her malicious intention. She snatches out her mangalsutra and flings other pieces of jewelry on the floor. She says to Yayati: "It's all my fault, I know. I am to blame for everything. It is just that I am unworthy of this palace... Enough, menial."7 Faithlessness of her husband forces her to break the pious relation with the king and rushes away to her father. The communication between Sharmishtha and Devyani reveals a deep insight into the ways of the feminine psyche. Her satanic remarks about Sharmishtha as: "She is satanic. She can barge into the poisonous fumes and watch me choke while she

remains untouched. She can creep into the hidden corners of my mind, claw those shadows out, and set them dancing. I am terrified of her.”<sup>8</sup>

This situation presents a shocking parallel with those realities in which a contemporary modern woman finds herself when she comes to know about her husband’s secret affairs. The unfortunate weaker vessel finds her alienated in society and becomes a meek and silent sufferer. “Devyani passes from one male (her father) to another (her husband). And Devyani here is traded, in the words of Irigaray as a ‘commodity, whereas Yayati and Shukracharya can be treated as agents to trade this commodity.”<sup>9</sup> But Karnad’s brilliance is seen when he portrays an empowered and dominant woman like Devyani. Instead of falling prey to patriarchal society, Devyani with the help of her father, Shukracharya, places a curse on king Yayati to become decrepit by nightfall. Yayati knows the fact that old age is a paltry thing and a symbol of weakness that will weaken his hold on the kingdom.

On the other hand, Karnad portrays those women who easily fall prey to patriarchal society and easily get entrapped in the dirty blame game of society. On getting old age by the curse, Yayati holds Sharmishtha solely responsible for bringing turmoil in his married life. But the actual cause of this crisis is his refusal to part with Sharmishtha. He does not agree to leave the palace by her. Karnad exposes the pitiable feminine condition when Yayati blames Sharmishtha: “You she-devil! You are the cause of all this. You are responsible. You trapped me with your wiles.”<sup>10</sup> Here Sharmishtha seems to adopt a passive role and forgets her witty skills that how intelligently and logically she wins over the king. She tries to tackle this situation by consoling Yayati like a friend that he should leave this city and we both share the wilderness together. Karnad tries to convince the readers that educated woman does not easily succumb to male-dominated society and gratify the arrogant male in a tricky way. As Simone de Beauvoir points out:

One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman. No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine.<sup>11</sup>

In Act four, Swarnalata narrates her apocalyptic married life story to Chitrlekha. She tells Chitrlekha that her husband left her after ten years of marriage. “My story has only two lines. The first line is correct. And the second...well, perhaps. But so far as I know, I got married. Then my husband left me and went away....He got tired of life.”<sup>12</sup> In the meantime she breaks the news of the arrival of prince Pooru to her and she also informs her that he has traded his youth with his father’s old age. At first, Chitrlekha refuses to accept this subjugation and does not conform to the words of Kate Millett: “Because of our social circumstances, male and female are really two cultures and their life experiences are utterly different and this is crucial”<sup>13</sup> But later on, she pacifies her situation like a traditional Indian woman and considers herself fortunate on hearing her husband’s sacrifice. She exclaims in a grand manner: “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?”<sup>14</sup> She wishes to welcome such a bold and courageous man as her husband. She sees the image of Lord Rama in him. But on seeing his decrepit face all her ideals get vanish within no minute and she cries: “Please don’t come near me, go out. Please, please, don’t touch me... I don’t know anything. Don’t ask me. Forgive me, but please ...please, get out of here.”<sup>15</sup> Later, being an Indian weaker vessel at heart she curses herself for ordering him to leave. In such a critical situation, Yayati and Sharmishtha try to pacify her. They suggest to her that being an educated woman you should act in a glorious way of Anga princess and Bharata queen so that future generations will sing your saga of bravery. They remind her of wedding vows before Fire-God and suggest that she should follow her husband to his pyre. And finally, convinced by their words, she permits Pooru in her chamber but she replies sarcastically to Yayati: “I did not push him to the edge of the pyre, sir. You did. 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?”<sup>16</sup> Then, Yayati, instead of being sympathetic to her condition says: “Pooru lacks the experience to tackle these problems...he lacks the will, the desire. Instead

of welcoming the responsibilities of a king—and of a householder—he has welcomed senility. Within a fortnight of his marriage. Why?”<sup>18</sup>

The in-depth study of this chapter describes the fact that how male-dominated society suppresses feminine desires with their patriarchal powers. Male dominates even empower women like Chitrlekha. She was devoid of her conjugal bliss by Yayati which was her moral right and in return he demands her to be obedient in the name of marriage vows. Through this play, Karnad seems to revolt against the male tyranny over females. He wants to free women from social shackles. Through the dialogues of Chitrlekha, he criticizes Yayati when she says: Do you think it would make a difference if it were only one or two? This morning I was the mistress of all that I had yearned for. But within half a day—no, within half an hour actually—half a century has driven across my bed and crushed the dreams on my pillows. And you would like me to wait...”<sup>17</sup> He disagrees with the age-old belief of Simone de Beauvoir who holds that “the masculine world seems to her a transcendent reality and absolute.” Chitrlekha reminds Yayati that she was eager to become your daughter-in-law but after getting married to Yayati you have no right to snatch away her legal right to live in Antapur, the palace of the queens, and imprison her in her own sex. Her weeping soul raises a question before the society: “What else is there for me to do? You have your youth. Prince Pooru has his old age. Where do I fit in?”<sup>19</sup> Yayati was desirous of getting a daughter-in-law to be proficient in household chores and to be a learned scholar too. But she was equally skillful in martial arts too. So it is a barbarous act to keep such a woman in ruined shackles. She taunts Yayati: “It’s the price I have paid for my education.”<sup>17</sup>

In Yayati, Karnad skilfully tries to show that there is no dearth of Yayatis in contemporary society. But in the changing globalized world, an educated modern woman is no more a puppet in the hands of a male-dominated society. She is quite capable to take her own decisions. She takes no time to part away with her husband when she comes to know about her husband’s illicit relations with some other woman. She does not wait for other’s opinions in this regard. Rather, she raises her voice in a bold manner. Education has revolutionized the thought of modern women. In our society, Hindu marriages are purely based on accepting responsibilities, mutual understanding, respect for each other, loyalty, and mutual love as long as the couples live. But if the promise breaks at any side by either gender then both are free to choose their own path. Only a woman’s life is not to be toyed with in case of disloyalty and deception in a nuptial knot. The need of a woman and her decisions should be given equal value as that of a man. In this respect, Karnad is indeed Karnad and it will take centuries in Indian drama in English to give us a like of him again. Thus, the play Yayati by master artist Girish Karnad is very significant in leadership and gender relations.

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