



Exploring Indian Mythology and Folklore in Girish Karnad's Dramas; *Yayati* & *Hayavadana*

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Citation: Sarita Kumari, (2024), Exploring Indian Mythology and Folklore in Girish Karnad's Dramas; *Yayati* & *Hayavadana*, *Educational Administration: Theory and Practice*, 30(8), 733-736
Doi: 10.53555/kuey.v30i8.9878

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Girish Karnad is one of the best dramatists of the contemporary era, who borrows the plots or storylines from the Indian mythology and folklores to present them with a new taste to the audience. Drama is one of the forms of art and a significant tool to represent the picture of contemporary society on the stage where it communicates to the majority of people. This paper explores the stories from Indian mythology and folklore in Karnad's two famous dramas, entitled *Yayati* & *Hayavadana*. The plot of *Yayati* is taken from the great epic, *The Mahabharata*. It is the story of The Hindu King *Yayati* and his son *Puru*. The play deals with the theme of responsibility and existential crisis. The source of the plot of *Hayavadana* comes from *The Kathāsaritsāgara* which is a collection of ancient Indian folklores. The play has two acts presenting two different stories. One story deals with two friends *Devdutta* and *Kapila*. *Devdutta* gets married to *Padmini*, a beautiful lady, desiring a perfect husband who later becomes the victim of her desire for perfection. This play has another plot with a story of *Hayavadana* which means 'a man with horse head'. Through both the plots, Karnad presents the theme of incompleteness and existential crisis of human beings on this earth. This paper will study how Indian mythology and folklores have been a source of inspiration for the dramatist, Girish Karnad. It will also focus how Karnad preserves the ancient culture and traditional art forms in his plays and reinvents the ancient tales with contemporary touch to presents the plight of modern man.

Keywords: Contemporary Era, Culture, Drama, Folklore, Mythology, Society, Tradition.

The roots of Indian drama go back to the *Rigveda* which has a vivid impact on modern contemporary Indian drama. Indian drama has a long history dating back to ancient times, starting from Sanskrit plays. According to *Natyashastra*, the oldest texts of the Indian theory of drama states that the drama has a divine origin and is connected to the sacred Vedas. The *Natyashastra*, composed between the 2nd century BCE and the 2nd century CE, is a fundamental text that gives the principles of dramatic theory, aspects of acting, music, dance and stagecraft.

It provides a systematic guide for the creation and performance of drama.

The *Natyashastra* classified drama into ten major types, providing a framework for the diverse narratives that could be presented on stage, ranging from mythological epics to the tales of everyday life. Notable playwrights who contributed to the development of Sanskrit drama include *Bhasa*, *Shudraka* and *Kalidasa*. *Kalidasa's Shakuntala* and *Malavikagnimitram* are celebrated for their poetic beauty plots and exploration of human emotions. The golden period of Sanskrit drama began in the 2nd century and unfortunately ended in the 10th century. The reasons for the decline of Sanskrit were mainly the foreign invasions and the rulers banned the art forms.

The medieval Indian Drama starting from the 10th century to the 18th century witnessed the diversification of theatrical traditions across different regions of India. Other local forms of drama began to emerge and were often influenced by regional folklore, traditions and cultural practices. The medieval drama was not confined only to the Sanskrit language, as it emerged in other regional languages too. Despite the regional variations, the drama retained a connection to religious texts, folk tales and social values. Drama became a mode of entertainment and cultural expression for the local communities. After the Medieval era, Colonial Era, beginning from the 18th century to the 19th century marked a significant shift in Indian drama due to the

influence of British colonialism. English language and Western theatrical traditions influenced Colonial Indian drama. The era of renaissance in Indian drama began in the 20th century with the emergence of influential playwrights. Modern Indian dramatists have made significant innovations and experiments in their plays that enriched the Indian history of drama.

The Nobel Laureate in Literature, Rabindranath Tagore, contributed significantly to the fusion of traditional Indian drama with Western influences. Vijay Tendulkar, another dramatist addressed social and political issues and advocated significant changes in society through his plays. Badal Sarkar was also a prominent writer of the modern era. The Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA), formed in the 1940s, played a pivotal role in using theatre as a medium for political and social commentary.

Girish Karnad, a renowned playwright, and filmmaker dealt with historical and mythological themes. This research is based upon the adaptation of stories from the great Indian epic entitled *The Mahabharata* and notable Indian folklore. The *Mahabharata* is an ancient legendary epic that has had a great impact on Indian culture. This epic has influenced many artists, authors, filmmakers, and actors. Since its creation, this epic has been a great inspiration for many dramatists as well. Girish Karnad was an Indian actor, film director, Kannada writer, and playwright whose plays' plots have been taken from Indian mythology. Karnad had a love for drama because he had been watching plays staged by troupes of professional actors in his childhood days. In India, those troupes are known as Natak companies which used to take myths, folk tales, etc. because the native audience has special admiration for them. This paper deals with his two great plays, *Yayati* and *Hayavadana* whose plots have been inspired by the *Mahabharata* and Indian folklore respectively.

Yayati was first written and produced in Kannada. Karnad's *Yayati* represents the theme of responsibility of a person. *Yayati* was Karnad's first play published in 1961. The story of the play revolves around the character of Yayati, "a king who in the prime of his life is cursed to old age and he goes asking around people, 'Will you take my old age? Will you take my old age?' No one accepts, except his son Puru. Ultimately the son becomes old and the father becomes young?" For the plot of *Yayati*, Karnad goes back to *The Mahabharata* an Indian Mythological work. The story of Yayati and Devyani is a well-known episode from *The Mahabharata*. He was the second son of powerful king Nahus.

According to mythology, Devyani was the daughter of the Guru of Asuras, Shukracharya. He knew the Sanjeevani Vidya whereby he could revive anyone dead. He would revive all the Asuras who died in the battle and therefore, it was the biggest threat to the Devas. Thus, Devas needed to learn the Sanjeevani Vidya that was known to only Shukracharya. One of the Dev, Kach, the son of Brihaspati, the Guru of Suras was sent as a student to the ashram of Shukracharya to learn the Sanjeevani Vidya. The Asuras grew suspicious lest Kach should become perfect in the science of reviving the dead. They tried to kill him twice but Shukracharya had to revive him under the pressure of his daughter Devyani, who had fallen in love with Kach. Once again they tried to kill him and they cremated him and mixed his ashes in the drink of Shukracharya. But again on Devyani's request, Shukracharya revived Kach. Devyani was so much in love with her that she proposed to him but he refused her proposal saying she was his sister. This made Devyani so enraged that she cursed him that Mahamantra of Sanjeevani Vidya which he had learnt, would become ineffective. Kach also cursed her in return that she would never be married to a Brahmin, and would have to live as a wife of a Kshatriya. Over time, Devyani was married to a Kshatriya, Yayati. Yayati was the son of the famous king Nahus. Along with Devyani, Sharmistha, the daughter of Vrashparva, the king of Asuras, had to go as her attendant because she had insulted her once. Yayati fell in love with the maid and married her secretly. Devyani felt humiliated that she went to her father

Shukracharya and complained to him about Yayati and Sharmistha's secret marriage. Shukracharya cursed him to become old and decrepit. Yayati asked for redemption and requested him to withdraw the curse. Shukracharya agreed to give him power and to transfer his old age to anyone willing to accept it. Yayati had five sons but none of them was willing to accept the curse except Pooru. He gave his youth to his father willingly whereas Yayati enjoyed all the comforts and his youth. Yayati ruled for a thousand years. Despite being young for a thousand years, he was not satisfied. It was after great efforts and persuasion Yayati returned Pooru's youth to him and went to the forest to lead an ascetic life.

Karnad sticks to the original text only concerning the two characters – Devyani and

Sharmistha. Both of them are close friends, but Devyani has a hatred for Sharmistha and

Sharmistha out of anger pushes her into a well. Yayati who happens to pass by the wall, hears

Devyani's cries for help pulls her out of the well and marries her. Sharmistha accompanies Devyani as her assistant. To resolve the issue between Devyani and Sharmistha, Yayati tries to talk to Sharmistha, and he gets smitten by her wit, and he decides not to leave her at any cost. This act by Yayati enrages Devyani so much that she goes to her father, Shukracharya who curses Yayati for the transgression to become old and decrepit. On the consideration that Yayati once saved Devyani's life, Shukracharya allows him to exchange his old age with any young man overnight. None other than Puru agrees to take Yayati's old age in exchange for his youth.

Karnad makes changes in the story and adds the characters of Swarnalata and Chitralekha for the anagnorisis of Yayati's desire to acquire youth. Karnad exposes many themes through each character's life in the play. Through Sharmistha, he exposes the evils of apartheid which still affects the city. The changes he has made in the play provide Swarnalata's empathy for Chitralekha and Chitralekha's denunciation of Yayati and Puru for his impulsive act of accepting old age and forgetting her rights. The play also reveals the male chauvinism in

removing the name of Puru's mother from the family rolls and banning her from speaking her name in family prayers as she belonged to the Rakshasa clan.

Karnad, somewhere associates with the story of Yayati as he said, "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 my future seemed to be opening 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." (Sagar p.3) Karnad admits that he borrows the plots from Indian mythology and under the influence of Western traditions presents it to the modern Indian audience.

Another play of Karnad which is based on Indian folklore is, *Hayavadana*. This play explores themes of identity, search for completeness, self-discovery, and perfection. The plot is based on *Bharatkatha* and Thomas Mann's *The Transposed Heads*, which in turn is borrowed from one of the Sanskrit *Kathasaritsagara* stories. This play was originally written in Kannada in 1970 and later translated into English. The story of Hayavadana is his creative invention. The title of the play is based on the character of Underplot. Originally, the story of Transposed Heads in *VetalaPunchvamisthi* is under the title 'story of the lady who caused her brother and husband to change heads'. At the end of the story, the ghost named Vetala poses the question to the king Vikrama, "So tell me the king. Which of the people, thus mixed was her husband, and if you know and do not tell, the curse previously denounced shall fall on you." The king answers him as follows "that one of the two, on whom her husband's head was fixed, was her husband, for the head is the chief of limbs and personal identity depends upon it." (Das p.153)

The play opens with the invocation of Lord Ganesh who is the "destroyer of incompleteness". The use of Bhagavata, something of a chorus, comments on the theme of the play which is the theme of incompleteness. As Bhagavata says:

Bhagavata: May Vighneshwra, the destroyer of obstacles removes all hurdles and crowns all endeavours with success, bless our performance now. How indeed can one hope to describe his glory in our poor, disabled words? An elephant's head on a human body, a broken tusk and a cracked belly whichever way you look at him he seems the embodiment of imperfection, of incompleteness. How indeed can one fathom the mystery that this very Vakratunda-Mahakaya, with his crooked face and distorted body, is the Lord and Master of Success and Perfection? Could it be that this Image of Purity and Holiness, this Mangala-moorty, intends to signify by his very appearance that the completeness of God is something no poor mortal can comprehend? Be that as it may. It is not for us to understand this Mystery or try to unravel it. Nor is it within our powers to do so. Our duty is merely to pay homage to the Elephantheaded god and get on with our play. (*Hayavadana* p.235)

Bhagavata sets the tone of the play, besides making a beginning with an invocation formally in Hindu tradition. After the invocation, Bhagavata tells the story of two young men, Devdutta and Kapila, living in the city of Dharampura. Both of them are the closest friends who are, 'two bodies one heart'. Devdutta is a Brahmin, who conquered the mightiest pundits in debates on logic and love and the greatest of the poets of the world with his poetry and wit. On the other hand, there is Kapila, the son of a blacksmith, Lohita. Kapila is dark and plain to look at, yet in deeds daring, in dancing, in strength, and physical skill, he is the mightiest.

The story gets interrupted by an actor who is terrified of seeing a man with a horse head.

Bhagavata first does not believe him but soon Hayavadana, the man with a horse's head appears on the stage. He tells Bhagavata that his mother was a princess and in her Swayamvar she decided to marry a horse of an Arabian prince. After fifteen years of married life, the horse turned into a man. The man told her that he was a Gandharava, who was cursed to become a horse. when he was going back to heaven he asked his wife to accompany him but she refused. The Gandharava cursed her to become a stallion and left for heaven and the mare went into the forest merrily. Hayavadana, being the son of a human and a cursed horse got the head of a horse on a human body.

Bhagavata advises him to go on a pilgrimage to make himself free of the horse's head. Hayavadana has already been to many pilgrimage places but everything was futile. Bhagavata tells him to visit the goddess Kali temple and Hayavadana leaves for the temple and begins the main plot again where Kapila is talking about wrestling but Devdutta is lost in his thoughts. Kapila asks him about the same and later Devdutta tells him about Padmini, a girl whom he has fallen in love with. Kapila goes in search of Padmini's house and when he sees her, he gets struck by her beauty. Nevertheless, he acts as a good friend and succeeds in getting Devdutta and Padmini married. After some months it is seen that Padmini is pregnant and she also starts admiring Kapila and Devdutta somewhere feels jealous of them. The trio goes on a trip to Ujjain against Devdutta's wish. On their way, they come to the temple of goddess Kali and lord Rudra. Padmini urges to visit Kali's temple but Devdutta refuses her. Both Kapila and Padmini go to the temple of lord Rudra whereas Devdutta goes to the temple of Goddess Kali to fulfil his promise to offer his head to lord Rudra and arms to Goddess Kali if he gets married to Padmini.

Going towards the temple, Devdutta finds an abandoned sword and cuts his head in front of goddess Kali. Kapila goes in search of Devdutta and when he finds Devdutta lying dead, he also cuts his head off. Later, Padmini goes in search of both of them and gets stunned seeing Devdutta and Kapila lying dead. Padmini also proposes to go their way but goddess Kali forbids her to do so and asks her – "Put these heads back properly. Attach them to their bodies and then press that sword on their necks. They will come up alive. Is that enough?" (Hayavadana)

When they both wake up, they find that their heads get exchanged as in her nervousness she places the heads wrong. At first, they feel happy but then arises the question of identity and the question of Padmini's lawful husband. They reach to the conclusion that Devdutta is Padmini's lawful husband as he has the head of Devdutta and in society head is the sign of a man. Both Devdutta and Padmini return to the city merrily leaving Kapila disheartened and betrayed by the weak body. After years, through dolls, Padmini's state becomes clearer that she misses Kapila. Earlier Padmini was very happy to get a perfect husband with a perfect body and mind. But after years, there is a change in Devdutta's body and she misses Kapila. She asks Devdutta to go to Ujjain to buy dolls for their son and she goes to meet Kapila. Padmini's sight makes Kapila upset but Padmini consoles him to show him their son. Later Devdutta comes to their place and their stories end in a dual and both of them die. Padmini performs Sati and gives her son to Bhagavata to keep him in the forest as Kapila's son for five years and then asks to give him to Devdutta's city parents as Devdutta's son.

The main plot and the under plot get united when Hayavadana arrives as a complete horse with a human voice. He tells him about the episode at Kali's temple where he became a complete man but his human voice remained intact. In the end, Padmini's son who never laughed starts laughing at Hayavadana's human voice and to everyone's surprise, Hayavadana's voice transforms into neigh. Karnad combines the plot of the transposed heads with the story of Hayavadana.

Karnad, therefore borrows the plots from mythology and folklore and presents them with his inventions to the audience with a new vision. *Yayati* is about the theme of responsibility, which teaches a man to be morally obliged for each action. *Hayavadana* tells about the concept of 'perfection' which is quite impossible for a human being to achieve as there is an eternal fountain of human desires. Various techniques such as Yakshagana, Bhagavata, masks, curtains, symbols Sutradhara and dolls are used by him in *Hayavadana* and *Yayati*. Karnad gives reference to Hindu gods and goddesses, Indian rituals and traditions. Karnad's revisit to Indian mythology and folklore fused with Western style grasps his modern audience and at the same time preserves ancient art forms.

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