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## ANCIENT TRADITIONS AND VALUES REGARDING INDIAN WOMEN - A STUDY OF KARNAD'S *YAYATI*

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### **Abstract:**

*The research paper examines the influence of ancient traditions and values regarding Indian women in shaping Girish Karnad's Feminine sensibility. For this purpose, the paper examines Karnad's play Yayati. The paper researches how Karnad interprets the impediments that society puts before women in their progress from the traditional to the modern life. The paper tries to examine whether traditional or modern sensibility is employed by Karnad to interpret the role and status of his women, and also examines, how he judges his women characters. The paper presents the view that Indian women have to look within their own traditions and find solutions for their contemporary problems.*

**Key Words:** *Ancient traditions, feminine sensibility, impediments, modern sensibility.*

The objective of this research paper is to analyse the influence of ancient traditions and values regarding Indian women in shaping Karnad's feminine sensibility in *Yayati*, in the light of the ancient Indian values which the dramatist advocates and upholds, and which determines his feminine tone and temper. *Yayati*, based on the theme of responsibility, depicts the dilemma of the modern man caught between responsibilities and individual desires. The paper seeks to understand how Karnad interprets the impediments that contemporary society lays before women in their progress from the ancient to the modern world. It examines how he portrays and judges the women, and whether he sees them in the light of the ancient Indian traditional sensibility or the modern sensibility.

*Yayati* examines how Karnad employs ancient Indian philosophy to solve the dilemma of the modern man, and how an ancient myth is used to bring out the contemporary significance of traditions and conventions. Karnad's reshaping of the old myth of *Yayati* to include two new women characters, and his giving voice to the other females, reaffirms his faith in the ancient Indian philosophy and traditions as torch bearers to the modern chaotic society. The women in *Yayati* are ambassadors of Indian spirituality and philosophy. The aim of the chapter is to determine Karnad's feminine sensibility in the light of his affirmation of faith in traditions as the guardian of feminine identity and freedom.

M.K. Naik has justly commented that Karnad was aware that, "If Indian English drama wishes to go ahead, it must go back first, that is, only a purposeful return to its own roots in the rich tradition of ancient Indian drama, both in Sanskrit and folk drama in Prakrits, can help it shed its lean and pale look, and increase its artistic haemoglobin count, and make it cease to be the 'sick man' of Indian English Literature" (43-44).

Karnad wrote his first play, *Yayati* (1961) in Kannada language when he was just twenty-two years of age. The play reinterprets the myth of King Yayati from the *Adiparva* of the *Mahabharat*. *Yayati*, considered one of the most significant plays by Karnad, established his position as a dramatist of great repute in Kannada literature. The play continues to be performed all over country and has been translated into several Indian languages. *Yayati* was first translated into English by Priya Adarkar, but later Karnad translated it himself.

Karnad gave some interesting twists to the original myth of *Yayati*, by the juxtaposition of the dual forces of tradition and modernity. *Yayati* retells the myth of *Yayati*, an ancestor of the *Pandavas*. It follows

the traditional style of *Yakshagana* in which either the *Sutradhara* or the Chorus enters on the stage. The play opens with the *Sutradhara's* address to the audience, in the Prologue, "Our play this evening deals with an ancient myth. But, let me rush to explain, it is not a 'mythological'. Heaven Forbid!" He further adds that, "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" (Karnad 5).

Unlike the myth, Karnad's King Yayati undergoes a major transformation when he sees the dead Chitrlekha. He accepts old age by embracing Pooru. Pooru regains his youth, but only after losing his bride on the nuptial night. *Yayati* is a tale of a king's longing for eternal youth and carnal pleasures at the cost of his own family and subjects. It depicts the crisis of values, leading to the misery of an irresponsible modern man, and the suffering of his loved ones.

*Yayati* represents the modern, self-centred materialistic man. In the original story Pooru is unmarried, but in Karnad's play he is married. Swarnalata, is another addition. Why Karnad felt the need to add two female characters, to an already existing story, makes interesting study. Karnad's sensibility is deep-rooted in Indian traditions. The use of *Yakshagana* tradition, principles of *Natyashastra* and the influence of Sanskrit drama is evident in his plays. Bharata in his *Natyashastra* has elaborated that drama as an art was meant to promote the fulfilment of the four *Purusharthas* namely *dharma*, which relates to the spiritual sphere, *artha* to economic and political power, *kama* to sexual and aesthetic gratification, and *Moksha* to liberation from human bondage and the cycle of birth and death. Karnad's *Yayati* shows his traditional sensibility, because he depicts how deviation from the path of *Purushartha* leads to destruction and chaos. In *Yayati*, Karnad follows these traditions of the *Natyashastra*.

Female oppression and materialism are social evils of the recent Indian past, having no base in traditional Indian sensibility but Karnad depicts them in his plays because he is aware that the evil forces in society have marred its pluralistic character today. In order to make his plays socially relevant, Karnad mingles the ills and crisis of modern society in the mythical plot and attempts at a traditional solution.

Karnad's creativity required that he invent the characters of Chitrlekha and Swarnalata. The research examines *Yayati*, with an opinion that Karnad's reshaping of the myth does not prove his faithlessness in one of the richest tradition, philosophy, and culture of the world. His treatment of female as well as male characters shows the influence of ancient tradition and values on his sensibility. Wherever Karnad deviates towards western influences he just wants to provide a socially relevant modern context.

Even though Karnad restructured the myth, he trusted and retained the basic principles and propagated the ancient Indian value system. As a responsible dramatist he has given his female characters a rebellious strain and the courage to rise. His women speak against the loss of traditional values, the old glory of women which is an inherent characteristic of Indian culture as reflected in its oldest texts and scriptures. His women are willing to die rather than compromise with their values. The females in *Yayati* are ambassadors of Indian spirituality. Karnad propagates the principles of *Dharma* through them. It is this angle in the play that the research attempts to explore.

*Dharma* is the path of righteousness and living one's life according to the codes of conduct as described by the Hindu scriptures. It is a combination of spiritual discipline and moral codes guiding one's life. Its observance helps humans to be contented and happy and saves them from degradation and suffering. Hinduism suggests that there are ways to enjoy worldly bliss as well as attain supreme happiness on earth itself. It endorses the idea that it is one's *dharma* to marry, raise a family and look after it, and the one who strays from the path is left discontented.

The word *Dharma* also refers to *nyaya* (justice), that which is right in a given circumstance, moral values, obligations, and right conduct in all activities. It is the law that maintains the cosmic order as well as the individual and social order and brings harmony in human life. Human society is sustained by the *dharma* performed by its members. These basic principles of *Dharma* as mentioned in the ancient scriptures are echoed again and again throughout the play. The tragedy in *Yayati* is due to loss of traditional

values and Yayati's failure to uphold his *Dharma*. In fact the entire play seeks to bring Yayati on the path of *Dharma*.

When the men forget their *Dharma*, the women take lead. None of the female characters in the play are decorative dolls. They reflect the pride, intellect, and honour bestowed on them by traditions. Karnad endows even the servant Swarnalata with intellect, compassion and sensibility.

The play opens with the *Sutradhar's* address to the audience. The concept of the four *ashramas* or stages of life according to Indian Vedic philosophy that is *Brahmacharya*, *Grihastaashrama*, *Vanaprastha* and *Sanyasa* find an echo in the *Sutradhar's* words in Karnad's *Yayati*, "The two must enter this space and on this bed they must create for themselves the magic kingdom of love, ambition and power" (Karnad 6).

*Grishthaashrama*, the second stage of life requires an individual who completes his education to marry, and enter the domestic life and work for the welfare of his wife, children, relatives, and society. This *ashram* is the only one permitting sexual gratification on ethical principles. It demands that one should earn money, perform religious rituals, protect his family members, and give charity. It must be noted that throughout the play Karnad positions the male and female characters on an equal pedestal. While Yayati asks Chitrlekha to follow her *dharma* as a wife, Chitrlekha too reminds Yayati of his duties. Pooru is blamed for his mindless self-sacrifice, while Devyani is reminded of her *rajadharma* or duty towards the subjects. Pooru violates the principles of *Grihasta ashrama* and takes irresponsible decisions, ignoring the will and well-being of his wife. The play shows Karnad's reinforcement of tradition through Devyani and Chitrlekha's rebellion. The play does not advocate the modern sensibility where family, marriage and relationships are shallow and meaningless.

Karnad shows Chitrlekha in the light of the traditional sensibility, demanding her familial rights and believing that life would be meaningless without the ideals of married life. So Karnad creates Chitrlekha and then depicts her death in the play to punish Pooru and Yayati for forgetting their *Dharma*.

Chitrlekha hails the traditional Indian value system and sensibility. She resolves to be an ideal wife and support Pooru in the noble act of sacrifice. The ideal of *Pitro Devo Bhava* (*father is like God*) rises before her and she bids Swarnalata to go leaving, "a couple of lights burning." for she wants "to dazzle her eyes with his glory" (Karnad 56; act 4). She welcomes Pooru and wishes to perform *aarti*. Her ideals are then shattered. Chitrlekha realises that Pooru has violated the *dharma* of a *grihasta*. Without once thinking of his responsibility towards her, he has traded not only his youth but also her dreams and so she reacts and refuses to submit. Ancient Indian traditions call for whole-hearted commitment from both the partners and the misdemeanour of one binds the other to destruction, so Chitrlekha revolts. Through Chitrlekha's refusal to accept Pooru's follies, Karnad gives a message that values and traditions are intrinsic to Indian life and cannot be bartered away. Pooru is a great son but a failed husband. An oppressed wife would have accepted a life with an old dying man, but not so for Chitrlekha. She demands the sanctity and traditional dignity of a wife.

According to Indian traditions, it is the obligation of the father to protect the girl till her marriage, the husband to protect his wife after marriage, and the son to protect his mother during old age. This implies that a woman must be protected because of her vulnerability, and be treasured and guarded like a jewel as she is the pride and power (*shakti*) of society. Karnad asserts these traditional values in his plays. Women in ancient India had the freedom to choose their spouse, so when Devyani expresses her desire to marry Yayati, Shukracharya despite being a rigid follower of social customs, relents for the sake of his beloved daughter and approves of the match. Social rules are relaxed for the love of a daughter. There is no suppression of female desire here.

Traditions have not suffocated women's freedom to love. In this context, Karnad's *Yayati* is similar to the original story in *Mahabharat* because it shows that thousands of years ago daughters were loved and pampered by their parents and not considered a burden as most modern interpretations of the Indian

traditions would like the world to believe. Devyani's tender love is not suppressed, in stark contrast to the honour killings and racial wars raged furiously in the contemporary world to destroy those who wander out of their caste for love. In contemporary India where female souls are hounded and sacrificed in the womb, the myth of Yayati and his marriage to Devyani, a daughter loved and treasured, is of enormous significance.

Most modern literature portrays India as a caste-ridden, exploitative society. *Yayati*, in contrast shows a high caste Brahmin relenting for the sake of his daughter. Sharmishtha is a *rakshasi* woman, but she is educated like the men. Chitrlekha is trained in martial arts. Women in the original myth as well as Karnad's *Yayati* are representatives of the enlightened traditions of the past. Karnad wants his women to throw away the yoke of evils in contemporary society, and regain their past glory. Feminism in India thus has a different connotation and significance as compared to the west which has no culture or tradition rooted in equality of all sexes to boast of.

Devyani agrees that it is her *Karma* to please Yayati. The *Grihastha ashrama* calls for the satisfaction of *Kama* or desires and conjugal desire is one of them. She tells Sharmishtha, "And why not? That's what I am here for. To be lusted for by His Majesty" (Karnad 11; act 1). Devyani's faithfulness to her husband is evident. In the past, kings had several wives due to political and diplomatic reasons and to some extent to satiate their lust, but the practice was not popularised or promoted by the masses in general. The concept of the ideal Rama's faithfulness to Sita influenced mass ideology. And even when kings practised polygamy, they were responsible for the welfare of all their queens.

King Yayati's treatment of Devyani is also to be noted. He talks to her affectionately and says that he married for love. Their blissful life is disturbed only by the presence of Sharmishtha. Yayati is amazed as to how Devyani got exposed to the uncouth forces inside the safe confines of the palace. Karnad illustrates that in an intimate relationship of marriage, an outsider creates havoc. Yayati realises this and wishes to expel Sharmishtha from the palace. It is only later that he succumbs to her charms, laying bare his human weakness. It needs strength of character and determination to adhere to values. Devyani abandons the palace, Yayati is cursed, Pooru loses his youth, and Chitrlekha her life. Karnad does not lay the blame on his women. Sharmishtha, a slave and a woman becomes Yayati's moral guide at this hour. It is Yayati who is made to shoulder the responsibility of his doings.

Karnad shows that marriage in India is associated with piety, unlike many western cultures where the marital relationships have collapsed and are on the verge of disintegration. Indian philosophy believes in the peaceful resolution of conflicts in relationships and cementing the bonds, rather than modern sensibility which implores one to break the 'fetters' of relationships and seek individual freedom. Modern individual thinks of instant gratification at any cost. In Indian philosophy the individual is not above society and he must keep welfare of others before the 'self'. This is the basic difference between the western and oriental philosophy.

A society's cultural progress is measured by the growth and development of its own sensibility, not by comparing it with other cultures. No two countries have the same culture, so what is correct for one might not be apt for the other. Modernity means a growth 'within' a culture and westernization means a major transformation in Indian culture to infuse elements of an altogether foreign culture. Karnad's Chitrlekha looks for refuge in her own tradition. The moment she asks Yayati to satisfy her sexual desires, she experiences guilt and remorse. She does not want to lose track of her values and step beyond the sacred vows of marriage.

Ancient Indian texts like the *Manusmriti* mention that a house in which women are insulted and shed tears, is destroyed. The proverbial saying from the *Manusmriti*, "*yatr naryasto pojyantay, ramantay tatr devta* [3/56] (where women are provided place of honour, gods are pleased and reside there in that household)" (qtd. in Patwari), abounds in Indian wisdom. Yayati is a cause of immense grief to the women in his house and so he has to lead a deplorable life. Karnad thus makes Yayati's happiness very transient.



Karnad advocates the ancient Indian philosophy of non- violence and compassion. Devyani asks Sharmishtha not to hurt Swarnalata or Yayati. She becomes protective towards Pooru and says, "Don't you dare touch them" (Karnad 10; act 1). She reasons with Sharmishtha that in hurting others she is jeopardizing her own happiness. Karnad reinstates the power of the Indian philosophy resting on the pillars of love and compassion and endorses humanitarianism as the greatest virtue.

Sharmishtha an important character in the play is educated, wealthy and beautiful. Vedic society advocated women's education and allowed them to perform the *Upanayan* ceremony. Indian females studied the Vedas, religious scriptures, and practised martial arts. They were considered the transmitters of culture to children, hence their education was important. It is only in later ages with the advent of the Muslim rule, that women began to be confined to their homes for protection. Karnad's women possess a sharp intellect, sensibility, and prowess to bring about a transformation in the highly accomplished King Yayati. Sharmishtha is shown to be extremely bold and vicious. She is energetic and powerful, like *Shakti*, the supreme power. She is beautiful and loving like a goddess but also venomous and revengeful like a demon. She is shrewd enough to decipher, that Yayati married Devyani for a reason. She loves Devyani, showers gifts on her and flaunts their friendship. By fulfilling her father's vows at the cost of her freedom, Sharmishtha endorses the ancient Indian tradition which considered the breaking an oath as a cowardly and shameful act.

Indians idolise Lord Rama as an ideal man, who honoured the word of mouth and became the '*maryada purushottam*'. Rama's life and journey is one of perfect adherence to *dharma* despite the harsh tests of time. The traditional Indian philosophy stands in stark contrast to the modern sensibility in which satisfaction of the self at all cost is a priority. The women portrayed by Karnad show his traditional sensibility. They are responsible and dignified bearers of ethics and morality.

Pooru's mother is a *rakshasa*, but Pooru holds her in great esteem. The ideal of parent worship exists nowhere other than Indian culture. Karnad's glorious women are not the replicas of the "new woman" influenced by western feminism but are reminiscent of the dynamism of traditional Indian womanhood. Karnad's *Yayati* reminds of the high position and reverence of women in ancient Indian tradition. *Yayati* provides an opportunity to the world, to get glimpses of the rich reservoir of Indian culture. Karnad emphasises on the need of contemporary Indian society to look within and not without for emancipation. *Yayati* shows the disintegration caused when there is a crisis of values in society. Devyani, Swarnalata, Sharmishtha, and Chitrlekha suffer because of lack of values in the institution of marriage. Karnad comments on the modern society through Yayati. In contemporary society, there is a rise in the consciousness of rights, and decline in the consciousness of duties. Lack of values on the intellectual level, has made man imitative of the west, rather than creative. The intellectual hollowness of king Yayati, is mirrored in the modern age where values are determined by television, internet, politicians, and film stars. The new generation is taught to strive for monetary success. Virtues of character, honesty, and humility are no longer desired.

Karnad's women are not subjugated and oppressed. They remind the world that Indian sensibility and culture is rooted in the principles of equality and equanimity, and do not support oppression. Hinduism considers the soul to be neither male nor female. There is no place for violence against women in the country advocating non- violence. Karnad promotes India's cultural heritage, philosophical beliefs, religious thinking, political understanding, social values, ethics and customs among the people of the West. By his creative dramatization he shows to the western world, the plurality in Indian culture and the solidarity in the man- woman relationship, which is conspicuous by its absence in the western world.

Karnad uses myths to show the spiritual evolution of man. For him, history is a positive concept to analyse life and society. He believes that the significance of myth never dies. In an age of globalization and modernisation, he observes people's craze for materialism and their crude imitation of western civilization. As a responsible and conscious dramatist he upholds myths, legends and folktales in his plays. He reflects

upon the pride of women, his women bask in glory despite hardships and constraints. He shows how the modernist thinking based on selfish, materialistic motives, mislead man and make him a culprit in society. He establishes self- constraint and self-discipline as timeless values.

The deplorable condition of women today, the sexual atrocities and acts of violence against them, go against the tenets of ancient Indian philosophy. They represent the modern man's lust, greed, and hunger for pleasure. Karnad shows the crisis in domestic and marital sphere through his characters and advocates the perusal of *dharma*, and the four *Purusharthas*.

By the use of the myth of Yayati, Karnad imaginatively revives the ancient dramatic tradition and celebrates all that is human and humane. His views can be estimated from the *Sutradhar's* narrative, "But we must trust the narrative we have chosen for ourselves. Invent bits if necessary, but go on. We must relive, not a saga embedded in books, but a tale orally handed down by our grandmothers in lamplit corners" (Karnad 6).

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