

## **Racial Reversal through Dialogical Dialectics: The Study of Female Protagonist Sharmishtha in the play Yayati by GirishKarnad**

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### ***Abstract:***

A woman manages to improve her image, her personality only when she accepts her fear as well as feelings and becomes vocal about it. Literature is the soul of life and society but there is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women, and there are families and within these Literature comprises both the outer world and the inner world and always deals with both the aspects very profoundly. The play Yayati written by GirishKarnad has been taken for this research paper which provides fleeting glimpses of the fears and desires deep within us. The central plot of the play revolves around male protagonist Yayati's fatal fascination for Sharmishtha, who is a rakshasi working as a maid in his palace. It is by her intelligence, strategic endeavours and wit, Sharmishtha reinterprets the existing myth that king is the saviour of mankind. She comes out unbroken and victorious by her powerful dialogues and crowns Pooru (half-rakshasa) as the king of Bharata dynasty. The purpose of this paper is to find out how the female protagonist of this play consciously or unconsciously employs the power of the dialogical to surmount her inner turmoil and yearning and thereby achieve completeness.

Keywords: Dialogical, strategic, yearning, myth etc.

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Yayati (1961) is one of the mythology based plays of GirishKarnad initially written in Kannada. When Karnad was preparing to go to England amidst the intense emotional turmoil, he found himself writing play. This happened when one day he was reading the Mahabharata just for fun and then he read the story of Yayati. It clicked his mind and started writing. Although the theme and language of the play was typically native; the play owed its form, not to numerous mythological plays he watched, but to western playwright which he had read. While the subject matter was purely native and traditional, the form and structure were essentially western.

In Karnad's play, the whole action takes place in one night as if the playwright is following the unity of time. Yayati has already married Devyani and wants to marry Sharmishtha during the action of the play. Karnad has invented two characters- Puru's wife Chitrlekha and Devyani's maid-servant Swarnalata. In this play, Puru is shown coming home after his marriage and the royal bed is being prepared for the newly-wedded couple. The same bed is used for the consummation of the relationship of Sharmishtha and Yayati. The curse falls on Yayati which is accepted by his son Puru and as a result he loses his youth and suddenly grows old. Chitrlekha, who wants to bear a child of the royal blood, is disillusioned. She decides to offer herself to

Yayati and then because of intense depression she commits suicide. This shakes Yayati and acts as an eye-opener. In a moment of genuine remorse, he takes back the curse from his son.

Girish Karnad has given this traditional tale a new meaning and significance by dealing with mainly two themes which are highly relevant in the context of life today. Firstly, Karnad's originality lies in working out the motivations behind Yayati's ultimate choice. In the Mahabharata, Yayati recognises the nature of desire itself and realises that fulfilment does not diminish or finish desire. In Karnad's play, however, Yayati recognises the horror of his own life and assumes his moral responsibility after a series of symbolic encounters. As far as use of dialogical dialectics of feminism in this play from the perspective of Sharmishtha is concerned, Karnad has presented this character with entirely a new touch. Through the character of Sharmishtha, as well as Swarnalata, he has criticised both the social system, which he viewed as patriarchal and as forcing women to speak in subservient way, and also individual males who were seen to violate the rights of their female interlocutors.

The play Yayati is divided into four acts. Most often act refers to "the division of the play which mirrors the sequence of action rising to a climax and ending with a catastrophe and final resolution." (4) It can be said that there are interactional acts or communicative acts in Yayati which are tightly braced together to give a cohesive effect as according to Halliday and Hasan, cohesion refers to "the means of linking sentences into larger units i.e. making them 'stick together'" (6). The character of Sharmishtha plays an integral role in bringing a strong cohesive effect in the play. She is present indirectly or directly, in almost all the acts in the form of various issues.

The conversation between Swarnalata and Devayani in the first act fantasm the belief of ancient myth that women are the main catalysts who instigate the hidden evil inside the human which results the commencement of a great battle either with others or within. And then one and only outcome is disaster and destruction. Swarnalata blames Sharmishtha for all the troubles just because she belongs to the "asura's family" i.e. "a low-caste".

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....All those dirty insinuations. The nasty jibes. They are too horrible to think. She didn't even spare His Majesty. (p.7)

Although the conversation is going on between Swarnalata and Devayani but the subject of most of their sentences is Sharmishtha which reflects that she has affected others' lives to a great extent. As according to Randolph Quirk and Sidney Greenbaum, Subject occurs before the verb phrase in declarative clauses. It can be seen here:

Devayani: She has a foul tongue. I know. (p.7)

Swarnalata: Take care madam...Someone like her, she can become an addiction. (p.8)

Swarnalata: She is satanic. She can barge into the poisonous fumes and watch me choke while she remains untouched. She creeps into the hidden corners of my mind, claw those shadows out and set them dancing. I am terrified of her. (p.8)

The use of 'Alienation Effect' has added the overall significance of Sharmishtha's character. This effect refers to "the gap felt between the reader and a character as a result of an external perspective reinforced by words suggestive of estrangement. It can also be called a theatrical device which is designed to distance the audience from the action so that the familiar should become strange and this strangeness evokes curiosity inside the reader or the audience to know about the character. (8)

Swarnalata: What have I done to her? What has she got against me?

Devayani: Nothing. It is all my fault. I didn't realise she would tear into you like that. I'll see that you don't have to deal with her from now on. (p.7)

Swarnalata: But why do you tolerate her? Why don't you send her back to her tribe? (p.7)

Karnad has dealt with the issues of 'genderlect' which "is a speech variety or lect" says Katie Wales, "that distinguishes males and females". Speech differences have always been part of sexual stereotyping. Lakoff and also Dale Spender (1980) argued that women's language style was characterised by the use of elements which signalled subordination. These features consist of: mitigation statements, hedges, tag questions and elements which signal indirectness, tentativeness, difference and hesitation. In contrast to this, male speech was characterized as direct, forceful and confident using features such as interruption. But in this play, Karnad has just reversed the meaning or definition of the existing one. Here, Sharmishtha's dialogues are masculine, combative, direct and forceful. Although she has been abused by almost everyone in the palace for being a rakshasi girl, she manages to come out from such a humiliating situation just because of her capability to upturn the unfavourable situations into the favourable one. Swarnalata, Yayati and Devayani represent that psyche of society which enjoys the heart agitating cries, though silent, of the people who pay the debt for taking birth as a low-caste. The fangs of humiliation pierce the hearts of the victims of racial discrimination but it depends entirely on them that how they can survive even in such condition. Sharmishtha is "spiteful whore", "a fiend", "addiction", "satanic" for Swarnalata; a woman with "foul tongue", "an old sting" and "blunted barbs" for Devayani. Yayati, too, abuses her by calling her "accursed creature", "deranged witch", "blood sucking ghoul", "she-devil", a woman of "demonic machinations" and "convincing barbarian". In spite of all this, Sharmishtha has maintained her position. Her speeches, from the view point of paralinguistic features, clearly reflect her attitude.

Her 'tag questions' do not show the submissive nature. On the contrary, it reflects her subtle way of taunting over the situations as well as presence of indomitable confidence.

Sharmishtha: I promise you, madam, I was not being deliberately nasty. It is just that I am an uncouth rakshasi. And the situation here... a Kshatriya palace, ruled over by a Brahmin queen! Confusing isn't the word? (p.9)

Sharmishtha: Yayati, the scion of the Bharat dynasty. He is not short of women, is he? (p.11)

Some of the most important speeches of Sharmishtha are the examples of 'Analepsis' which serve characteristically to fill in what now appear to be 'gaps', and to provide necessary

information about her character and the event. This term Analepsis is coined by Genette to refer to the break in the telling of a story for a 'flashback'.

Living in the palace, alone and discarded and working as a slave do pierces her heart but she never implicates her fate. Instead of this, she keeps on scratching the wound of irreverence by remembering her past blissful and free life and side by side she also shows herself conscious of her present deplorable condition.

Sharmishtha: I opened my eyes, two years ago. Don't you remember? I do. The precise moment, when close my eyes, I was the princess of rakshashas. 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? (p.10)

Sharmishtha: I accept the responsibility for every act, including the first, which was, actually to love Devayani. Until she stepped into my life, I was a perfect rakshasa princess. I liked being with other rakshasa girls and boys. Go singing and dancing with them under the bright moon. Weave garlands of white flowers do our festive games. Prance around in the river naked on dark nights, aware of the naked boys sensing us from the distance. But outside that world, conscious every moment that we were rakshasas, held in contempt. (p.19)

The extensive use of verb with '-ing' form depicts a continuous or constant flow of Sharmishtha's life. Apart from this, the use of first person narrative indicates that Sharmishtha is very much conscious of her "cultural barbarity" and also has the sense of self-pity.

The use of device called 'Aposiopesis' in this play, especially in the dialogues of Sharmishtha, reflect her mind and also the compactness of the events. As Aposiopesis "is a rhetorical term for the sudden breaking off of an utterance before it is completed, usually in moments of emotions" (9).

Devayani: Forgive me! May I say something? I am older than you. I have seen more of life. So if you will permit me....

Sharmishtha: What is it now? (p.8)

This sudden breaking off of the utterance shows Devayani's restlessness, annoyance and worried mind just because Sharmishtha has become a threat in her life.

Devayani: Why do you try so hard at being nasty. I feel sorry for you sometimes. I won't help to....

Sharmishtha: Help? I am afraid I don't know what 'help' madam can possibly mean. I may not be able to provide all that Swarnalata so freely provides, but....(p.9)

It reflects Sharmishtha's witty and sarcastic nature. Although she is slave of Devayani but still she never allows her to show any kind of pity and concern for her own self.

Sharmishtha: .....Like the fish. No, like the gods. No, more a corpse, its wide open. As the king crawls into your bed, night after night. I want you to remember I am here, hovering around....

Devayani: You make me sick. (p.11)

This shows that how Sharmishtha's words pierced into Devayani's heart and makes her disturbed and angry.

Yayati: Look, when Devayani demanded that you come with her to my palace as her companion...

Sharmishtha: .....as her slave. You don't have to be kind, sir. (p 61)

This shows Sharmishtha's self-consciousness and irrefragable or steadfast character to face the reality. She is, not at all ashamed of her status and unwilling to accept other's mercy.

Sharmishtha: What does it matter who she was. You destroyed her life. I pleaded with you but you were drunk with your future...

Yayati: Please, Sharmishtha! (p.67)

This is the final point when Yayati realises the horror of life, unending search for satisfaction and an incomplete quest for completeness. Moreover, the use of 'Asyndetic Co-ordination' in "...You, my respected mistress, and me, your favourite slave. Entwined, lacerating each other gouging each other's eyes out..." uttered by Sharmishta shows the continuous flow of her emotions and feelings. As Asyndeton refers to coordinated clauses or phrases without explicit conjunctions or connectives.

Sharmishtha has brought forth a question on the ancient myth related to the royal power and grace of a king. From the ancient time, it is a myth that king is the semblance of God. He can create the magic kingdom of love, ambition and power. But in this play, Yayati gets trapped into the web woven by Sharmishtha and willingly invites the distaste and misfortune for himself. But it can't be surely said that Sharmishtha traps him for the success of her vengeance as he himself asserts after making a physical relationship with Sharmishtha that she was pretending to drink the poison.

Sharmishtha: You should have let me drink the poison.

Yayati: Would you have, if I had let you?

Sharmishtha: Yes.

Yayati: So, wasn't just a threat then- a theatrical gesture?

Sharmishtha: No.

Yayati: Rakshasa are known for their histrionics. (p.23)

Inspite of all this, Yayati, the scion of Bharata dynasty gets so much influenced by Sharmishtha that he declares that he will marry her. When baffled Devayani questions his decision then calmly answers:

Yayati: Because I feel bewitched by her. Even now, at this moment, I want her. I have never felt so entranced by a woman. What is it? Is it some spell she has cast? Some secret sorcery? I can feel youth bursting out within me again. Her beauty, her intelligence, her wit, her abandon in love. Not marry her is to lose her, don't you see? I must have her. I have to keep her with me. Please try to understand. (p.30)

Here comes the difference in the genderlect. Yayati, being a male, symbol of power, authority, patriarchy and dominance, has become the subject who is continuously getting influenced by the object i.e. Sharmishtha. But side by side, it can also be seen that in spite of being impressed by Sharmishtha's intelligence, beauty and wit, he drags her to the category of witches who cast magic-spells.

If the other characters are to be compared with Sharmishtha then it will be easier to measure the depth of her dialogues.

Devayani, a Brahmin queen, mostly utters short sentences. Her simple sentences mirror her character. She is trying to be normal so that the situation can be controlled. Her balanced sentences very much show her effort to balance her deeds in the past and its annoying result in the present.

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

: It is all my fault. (p.7)

: Enough I say. Just get back to your work. There is still a lot left to do.(p.7)

: All right. All right. No need to go on. (p.8)

: We all have them, Swarna. (p.8)

:Don't be insane. (p.8)

Swarnalata's complex sentences show the complexity of her character and the situation.

Swarnalata: But madam, I can't tell you how scared I am of the shadows that curl around my jokes. I can feel them seeping in like slow fumes of poison. Alone, I am forever fighting them, struggling to block them. (p.8)

Chitrlekha, wife of Pooru, lives in the world of imagination. Infact, her name has the associative meaning. 'Chitra' means something imagination ignorant about the harsh realities of life. She asks many questions which reflect her curious, as well as confused nature.

Chitrlekha: Here beside the leg of the bed. Isn't this the pedant from the marriage

: This stillness. So many thousands standing in frozen silence. Waiting for something.

: For what? It has something to do with the curse of Shukracharya, doesn't it?

(p.52)

: I suppose everyone out there has come to know of these problems too?

And therefore this silence? (p.53)

Pooru symbolises the typical obedient sons of Indian mythology who can willingly sacrifice their lives for the sake of their fathers. But Karnad has given a modern touch to this character and makes him a man of the modern world searching for his own identity. Pooru, 'a half-caste' with rakshasa blood in his veins has the spiritual urge to experience the birth of spirituality and knowledge. That is associated with 'old age'. It can be clear by this:

Pooru: How shall I put it? My forefathers were the great eagles; keen-eyed, hovering regally in the clouds. I shall seek to be a worm. (p.37)

When he decides to accept the curse then he says to Sharmishtha.

Sharmishtha: What is it, Pooru?

Pooru: The curse, Mother. The spasm of imminent birth. (p.50)

Almost all the characters, except Sharmishtha, are in search of something. May be their own identity but as it is said that one who seeks to be equal with others lack ambition, Sharmishtha never deviates from her aim. As she says:

Sharmishtha: I opened my eyes. You had become the queen of the Arya race. Wife of King Yayati. And I was your slave. My eyes have no lids now. I live staring at you, unflinching like the fish. No, like the gods. No, more a corpse, its eyes wide open... (p.11)

If a person wants her/his dreams to come true, he must wake up. "Eyes having no lids" justifies this statement. Sharmishtha's sacrifices her position, freedom and most importantly the right to live with self-respect just for the sake of her own race, her own people. But she always try to retain her cultural ethics as she says to Yayati:

Sharmishtha: I snarl because I want to retain a part of my original self. I abuse and rave to retrieve an iota of it.... (p.18)

She very well knows that it will not help her to escape from the degradation and will turn her into a "performing freak" but she still asserts confidently:



Sharmishtha: You Aryas have sorted out thing so neatly for yourself that we must seem confused. And confusing why does she behave like that? Why can't she see what is good for her? The answer, sir, is because we rakshasas have chosen to live in chaos, proud that it is achao of our own creation. And yet of course we also despise ourselves for not being lucid and rational, like you Aryas. (p.18)

With the progress of the play, Sharmishtha's character achieves an effective importance. She is shown to be aware of the every situation and happening. She very well warns Yayati about the impending danger.

Sharmishtha: Let me just warn you that by spending this half an hour with me you have already lit the fire. Better douse it before it explodes into a conflagration. (p.24)

Again she says:

Sharmishtha: You are busy visualising 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. (p.25)

Her main motive behind tolerating all the humiliations and unfavourable circumstances is revealed when she gets agitated after hearing that Pooru is going to accept his father's old age of decrepitude.

Sharmishtha: No, no, no, you can't. That is utter stupidity! Pooru, the desire for self-sacrifice is a rank perversion. (p.50)

First time in this play, Sharmishtha is shown really baffled, annoyed and disturbed. The repetition of the word 'no' and exclamatory sentence proves her annoyed emotions as the only thing which can appease her wounded dignity was crowning of Pooru as the king of Bharata Dynasty. She knows that Pooru's mother was a rakshasi and so a bond of affection automatically creates between them. Even Pooru realises the same affinity towards her.

Pooru: Before I came here, I had heard a lot of unkind tales about you. How you had turned this palace into a noxious pit for those living in it. And I came rearing to meet you, to join in your rebellion against this stuffy palace... (p.49)

It is Sharmishtha who makes Yayati to realise the horror of his life. In a very simple way, she has conveyed everything to him. So subtle, to the point and piercing are her sentences that compel him to think gravely about it.

Sharmishtha: So, here is the foundation of your glorious future, Your Majesty. A Woman dead, another gone mad, and a third in danger of her life. Good bye sir. (p.68)

At last, the scion of the civilized race, Yayati, who was running from reality of the death and mortality accepts his curse and then retires to the forest to perform penance.



## **2. CONCLUSIONS**

To conclude, we can say that Karnad has achieved success in portraying the character of Sharmishtha who has completely reversed the unfavourable circumstances and make them the favourable ones. She has confirmed the saying of Rossane Barr that “women have yet to learn is nobody gives you power. You just take it.” She could have accepted her fate easily and spent her life living as a slave in the palace but she tried to retain her cultural barbarity all the time. She sacrificed her freedom just for the sake of her father but instead of cursing her low birth, she serves to her own race. She doesn't have any relationship with Pooru but just because he was the son of a rakshasi, it was more than enough for her: “Pooru touches the feet of Yayati and Sharmishtha. Sharmishtha embraces him as her own son. They leave” (p.69).

It is Sharmistha who reverses the myth regarding the godliness of a king by being an addiction of king Yayati. It is Sharmishtha who reverses the myth related to the relationship between husband and wife. She, indirectly, compels Devayani to turn her face away from the marital duties and to go back to her original place. It is she who reverses the myth related to the responsibility of a son towards his father. She handles the serious situation very carefully and drags Yayati to the position from where he can see the true picture of life and death. And at last after achieving victory by seeing Pooru as the king of Bharata Dynasty, she accompanies Yayati to the jungle in the quest of peace, serenity and ‘moksha’.

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