

Existence V/S Essence: An Existential Study of Girish Karnad's *Yayati*



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Abstract

The crux of existentialism is the freedom of choice / decision which an individual exercises in his life in order to find out the essence / true meaning of his existence. He is the architect of his life and is, therefore, solely responsible for the consequences of his deeds. His mental poise or otherwise depends on his willingness or reluctance in owning this responsibility. Girish Karnad's first play *Yayati* brilliantly illustrates this philosophy of existentialism. *Yayati*, the king of Hastinapur is cursed with premature senility by Shukracharya not for others' sins but for his own excessive indulgence in sensual pleasure and physical gratification. Instead of accepting the consequences of his deeds, he goes to the extent of getting it exchanged with his son Puru's young age. The drama that unfolds after this is symptomatic of the uncalled for travails in the life of Puru and his wife Chitrlekha. After a series of symbolic encounters and catastrophic realization, *Yayati* returns his youth to Puru. To the shocking dismay of all, it results in the untimely death of Chitrlekha and the consequent loneliness of Puru who still gropes in the darkness of confusion and ignorance.

Keywords: Existentialism, Essentialism, Determinism, Existential Dilemma, Mythological, Choice and Responsibility.

Introduction

In traditional philosophical definitions, 'Essence' (meaning attached to life) is more significant than 'Existence' (life itself). Essentialism which comes from the word 'Essence' and which believes in the intrinsic value of life, can be equated to 'Determinism' also, which means the role of luck, fate, chance and also of God, but existentialism as a philosophy categorically rejects the role of any external entity in shaping the life of an individual. According to existentialists, once a man is born, he is thrown into the hostile universe that is bent upon exercising callous forces on the individuals. It is the individual who has to grapple with these forces and make a decision, a choice and take a step to direct his life. He, therefore, has 'freedom of choice', to make a decision and whatever happens after his choice-making, will be his own responsibility. If he shirks this responsibility and passes it on to others, he will have to face the consequences. Hence there is the resulting angst or frustration and alienation.

Objective of the Study

This research paper seeks to bring to light the main tenets of existentialism (namely the precedence of existence over essence, role of an individual's decisions in shaping the course of his life and his readiness/reluctance to accept his responsibility) and to explain them with reference to Girish Karnad's first play *Yayati*. An all prevailing alienation, despair and resulting angst can be avoided if the person knows how to make right decisions/choices and how to accept the consequences calmly and ungrudgingly.

Main Text of the Study

Existentialism as a mode of thinking became popular at a time when there was deep sense of despair following the Great Depression and the World War II. This despair had been articulated by the existentialist philosophers and their philosophy is still popular and continues till this day as a particular way of thinking and reasoning, with freedom to choose one's preferred moral belief system and life style. The concept here is that humans 'exist' first and each individual spends a lifetime changing their 'essence' or nature. Jean Paul Sartre (one of the main exponents of this philosophy) writes in his book *Existentialism is Humanism*: "...man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world –and defines himself afterwards. If man as the existentialist sees him is not definable, it is because to begin with he is nothing. He will not be anything until later, and

then he will be what he makes of himself" (28). Existentialism also enunciates that people are searching to find out who and what they are throughout life as they make choices based on experiences, belief and outlook. Further, a person should be forced to choose and be responsible for it without the help of laws, ethical rules or traditions. Although a person sets out from the point of emptiness or absence of meaning in life (due to the imperfection or deficiencies of his own nature), he in the process happens to find one or the other meaning which he comes to associate with his life. Existentialism, in this way, is the journey and search for true self and true personal meaning in life.

Existential dilemma or crisis is another concept which has emerged as a popular construct these days because in the present circumstances, a man is also confronted with the difficult task of making a choice out of the possible alternatives. A man standing at the crossroad which branches out into two paths is the brilliant example of positing a man into existential dilemma, which path to take and which one to renounce, so that "the road not taken" as described by the great American poet Robert Frost always allures and beckons the traveller to choose it and tread on it, while at the same time the other one is equally tempting.

Existentialism was as much a literary phenomenon as a philosophical one because like most of the existentialists, Jean Paul Sartre articulated his views not only through his philosophical works like *Being and Nothingness* and *Critique of Dialectical Reason* but in a more powerful manner through his fictional works like *Nausea* and *No Exit*. Contemporary writers all over the world were influenced by his philosophy and either took clues from his books or based the structure of their works on these existential ideas.

Girish Karnad belongs to that generation of writers who witnessed the disturbances caused by the turmoil of the world wars and other contemporary events. It was also the time when Karnad was under the influence of the western playwrights like Anouilh, Sartre, O'Neill and the Greeks. He was particularly influenced by the French playwrights like Cocteau and Anouilh, because they chose myths to depict the complex conditions of modern life in place of the realistic sets. Taking clues from these playwrights, Karnad has tried to evolve an idiom which would suit typical Indian conditions. He was quickly and naturally drawn towards the enunciation of the powerful philosophy of existentialism in almost all his works, *Yayati*, his first play is no exception in this case. He has accepted in an interview with Tutun Mukherjee, "it is true that existentialism was the persuasive philosophy of the time. My attempt was to emphasize the calm acceptance of grief and anguish" (*Girish Karnad's plays* 31). In another interview with Rajinder Paul, Karnad recapitulates the determining influence of existentialists in shaping the thematic structure of *Yayati*. He avers, "...I was reading a lot of Sartre and the existentialists. This consistent harping on responsibility which the existentialists indulge in

suddenly seemed to link up with the story of *Yayati*" (*"Girish Karnad Interviewed"* n.p.).

Yayati, although a short play, is a miniature in the drama of life. It enacts the philosophy of existentialism broadly and beautifully. The play seeks to exemplify that if there is suffering and anguish, it is all because the characters do not want to own their responsibility / duty. Tutun Mukherjee is of the view that "Karnad's first play *Yayati* (1961) was written with impulsive enthusiasm in the context of the persuasive philosophy of existentialism, when he had neither much knowledge nor experience of the world of theatre..." (*Girish Karnad's Plays* 18). It is interesting to note here that in many respects, *Yayati* describes quite appropriately the existential crisis in the dramatist's life also, Firstly, he had never fancied himself as a dramatist. He had tried to write poetry, but "found himself writing a play that was *Yayati*" (*Girish Karnad's Plays* 30). Secondly, he had trained himself to write in English, but again "found" himself writing the play in Kannada, the language of his childhood. Another striking thing about this play is that Karnad was trying to reveal his anguish or repression against his own paternal authority which got reflected in the father - son relationship in *Yayati*.

The story of *Yayati* is taken from Adiparva of the *Mahabharata*. It is the tale of the mythological king Yayati who in his longing for sensual pleasure sought to borrow the youth and vitality of his own son Puru. The plot moves round the relations of Devyani and Sharmishtha on the one hand and their relations with Yayati on the other hand. Chitrlekha is the later creation and imagination of the dramatist who did it as he was thrilled with the very idea of what would have happened in such a unique situation, if Puru's wife had been there. Swarnalata is the maid attending both Devyani and Chitrlekha. She had been witness to all that had conspired within the close precincts of the palace. These characters show how women (irrespective of their caste or class) had to suffer due to male dominance.

Moreover, Karnad gives this traditional tale a new and significant close also. In the *Mahabharata*, Yayati renounced the throne because he came to realize the nature of desire itself that fulfillment of desires did not diminish or finish them; rather they were prompted quickly. In Karnad's play, however, Yayati recognizes the horror of his own life and assumed his moral responsibility after a series of symbolic encounters and shocking realization. Herein lies the original approach of the playwright and it gives the play a new meaning and significance highly relevant in the context of life today. That's why, Aparna Dharwadkar in her article "Playwriting and Criticism : Another Look at Girish Karnad" describes Karnad as being "uncannily close, therefore, to the kind of modern writer, T.S. Eliot imagined in "Tradition and Individual Talent", a founding critical text of 20th century modernism" (*Theatre India* 86). She further writes that the historical sense, which is a sense of the timeless as well as the temporal together is what makes a writer not only traditional but highly relevant also in his own time. (87)

If we analyze Girish Karnad's *Yayati*, we find that it is traditional in the true sense because although it tells a very old mythological story, the discourse unleashed by it is very relevant, modern and universal also. The Sutradhar becomes the mouthpiece of the playwright and in the very beginning of the play; he enunciates its theme and purpose. According to Sutradhar, "The man who looks back to past is one who has lost his path and has descended into the tomb filled with the remains of an unknown culture. He has to hear the echoes of past through his ears in present" (*Yayati* 7). The Sutradhar also informs the audience that although the play is like a page from the history of an unknown past, the reality depicted is applicable to modern times as well and "it is our duty to accept as final that part of reality which concerns us and which we see reflected in the mythological story" (*Yayati* 8). He further says that neither a scholar nor an ordinary person can escape the burden of responsibility wherein lies the joy of life. Whether it is an old man in search of lost youth or a saint lost in the darkness or the mute actress following him - everyone carries a tree of responsibility all along one's journey and finally hangs from it (*Yayati* 8). He also explains the theme of existential dilemma in the following words:

Sometimes when we are walking along a path, we see two paths in front of us. We can take only one road and feel that we are fulfilling our life's purpose. However, we are always conscious of the inaudible voice which says what would have happened if we had walked on the other road.... Yet let the untrodden road be untrodden and let its secrets remain buried. Let us stick to the morals of the grandmother's stories that we heard in our childhood. This is the sad story of our life. (*Yayati* 9-10)

From among the characters who come on the stage along with their "bags of good deeds as well as sins" (*Yayati* 10), the most important and one in the leading role is Yayati, the king of Hastinapur. This whole drama offers a brilliant study in how he grapples with his 'existence' in order to gain 'essence' or a true meaning of life. He tries to neglect his responsibilities, as he is completely engrossed in sensual pleasure and physical gratification. He always tries to find new ways and means to quench his insatiable thirst for sensual pleasures. He fails to understand his duties as a father and tears the idea of kingship to shreds. In the name of his kingdom, Yayati wants to hold on to young age at the cost of his own son Puru's personal life.

Yayati married Devyani, the daughter of Shukracharya, the guru of demons. Devyani and Sharmishtha (the daughter of demon king) were very close friends but one day they entered into a quarrel over the unintentional change of their dresses, and Sharmishtha out of rage, threw Devyani into the well. Hearing the cries of Devyani for help, Yayati who was passing by that way, took her out of the well. Later he married Devyani because of holding her by her hands.

Up to this point, there was no crisis or problem. There was no need to 'make a choice' or 'take a decision' because it was the custom among the warrior kings to marry the girl whose hand was grasped even for the purpose of saving her. The problem arose when Devyani 'decided' to carry her childhood friend Sharmishtha to the palace of Yayati not as friend but as a slave so that the latter could be kept in the perennial state of humiliation. This decision of Devyani was at the spur of the moment decision prompted by jealousy and rage, but from this point onwards all the problems ensue in the lives of those characters who are concerned here including Puru and his wife Chitrlekha also.

The whole of the palace knows about the bitterness of the relationship between Devyani and Sharmishtha. Swarnalata, the maid, raises very pertinent questions before Devyani: "But why do you also tolerate all this? Why is she not sent back to those demons again?" (*Yayati* 11) It is like "the game of chess" (*Yayati* 14) which was started by Devyani as Sharmishtha alleges her. The otherwise sweet and close relations of the two friends have now been reduced to the unequal one of a master and slave. Sharmishtha also spares no opportunity to hurt Devyani with her stinging words like when the latter is constantly reminded of the motive behind Yayati's decision to marry Devyani. She tells Devyani: "Yayati hopes for only one thing; nectar to be immortal. Who does not want to be immortal? He accepted you in the hope of immortality. As soon as he came to know that you were Devyani, he had an urge to conquer death" (*Yayati* 15).

Yayati also calls Sharmishtha the root cause of all squabbles in the palace. This is what Yayati intends when he says, "You pushed Devyani into the well, and hence the crisis. I saved her but am caught in the crisis" (*Yayati* 21). Yayati knows that his problems are due to Sharmishtha's presence in the palace but he doesn't have the heart to tell Sharmishtha to go away, Devyani also does not do so and Yayati is conscious of this. He tells Sharmishtha, "Sharmishtha, no one is as mad as Devyani. She is playing with fire" (*Yayati* 26). It is Devyani's 'decision' to take revenge on her demon friend that the latter is still staying there and making hell of everyone's life. The tension arising out of these complicated and entangled relations reaches the point of explosion when Yayati holds Sharmishtha's hands in order to prevent her from consuming poison. Being a Kshatriya, he has to follow the custom of accepting her as a wife. He therefore enters into a clandestine relation with Sharmishtha.

When this bitter truth comes to the knowledge of Devyani, she is beset with infurious rage. The only thing that dawns upon her at this moment of deprivation is that Sharmishtha has betrayed her and, therefore, she should be expelled from the kingdom, but now the king is adamant on retaining the latter in the palace. He says in a decisive voice:

If it concerned somebody else, I would have agreed. I have been winning over the hearts of various

girls by my talks and my handsomeness. But today Sharmishtha has taken me by surprise....Should Bharata family be defeated like this? If I want to have peace, I will have to win her over.... I was feeling old because of your comments and jealous conduct. Sharmishtha has enthused me and returned my youth to me. I cannot leave her. (*Yayati* 38)

Yayati describes the pleasures of youth as the essence of life. It is elevating as well as fatal. Like the child who plays with the bottle of poison without knowing about its deadly nature, a man wants to enjoy the allurements of youth. (*Yayati* 30) It is Yayati's nature and decision to gain more and more sensual pleasures that prepares the ground for his undoing. Now he has to pay a heavy price for his infidelity towards Devyani whose father Shukracharya curses him with premature senility so that he cannot have any more of sensual enjoyment.

After making of decisions or choice, now comes the turn of consequences and also the willingness or otherwise of the characters to own their responsibility calmly and ungrudgingly. So far as Devyani is concerned, she does not perform her share of duty properly. Stung with the poison of jealousy, she goes in the shelter of her father. Thus, when the crisis in the life of Yayati comes, instead of owning up her responsibility, Devyani leaves the palace. She refuses to yield and the result is the premature old age on Yayati.

Now when Yayati learns that Shukracharya has cursed him with old age, he also does not accept the responsibility of what he has done. Instead he yells at Sharmishtha, "You, the demon, the main cause behind all this... things have come to this point because of being entrapped in your talks" (*Yayati* 53). He loses control over himself and does not know how to handle the situation. When Sharmishtha asks him to keep calm, he protests, "Calm... this calmness is like the one a person experiences before falling into a bottomless well, Sharmishtha!" (*Yayati* 53).

Yayati is so mad and restless at the very idea of premature old age that he abuses everyone including Shukracharya and his own son Puru also. All efforts of Sharmishtha to teach him the right path go in vain. Among all the characters, only Sharmishtha behaves like a wise person who accepts her responsibility without any grudge. Unlike Devyani, she remains devoted to Yayati till the end. She inspires him to accept the consequences calmly by embracing old age and going to the forest as it is sure to happen in his life. She tries to pacify Yayati with the following words of worldly wisdom:

Do not be angry. Nobody can escape old age. You have unnecessarily invited it prematurely. There is no hindrance. Now please accept the life of a hermit. I will also accompany you. I do not know the depth of your sorrow, but I can imagine. (*Yayati* 54)

In this way, we find that Sharmishtha is the only character in the play who knows her true self. She maintains her equanimity and readily accepts her responsibility. When she came to the palace as Devyani's maid, she knew her job and performed it well. Now when she becomes Yayati's wife (as he calls her), she does not leave her husband in the lurch and fulfils the duties of a wife by being with him in the thick and thin till the end.

But Yayati remains adamant and says that his youth is his identity and remembers nostalgically how he has played with the happiness and sorrow of numberless queens on his bed, "I found greater pleasure in their crying than in their laughing" (*Yayati* 50). He even goes to the extent of blaming and accusing Puru of harbouring the dreams of imminent kingship, "Now he (Puru) must be dancing with joy He wanted this ... He hates me. He must be dreaming about becoming a king" (*Yayati* 55).

But Puru is cherishing none of these sinful dreams as Yayati alleges him. Puru is just the opposite of his father not only in chivalry and bravery but in moral strength also. He has no ambition of conquering and ruling the world like his forefathers. He is afflicted with the inferiority complex of his being less strong than his forefathers. In fact, his inclination is towards doing the great act of kindness for the posterity. He shows the right path to his father by trying to dissuade him from begging desperately before others for the exchange of youth with his old age. He tells his father that nobody in the kingdom is ready to accept Yayati's senility because "Dying in the battle field is a different thing and suffering because of someone else's sins is a different thing" (*Yayati* 60). There can be no better advice than this which has a startling tone of existential crisis. Even Sharmishtha also utters the same wise words, highlighting the otherwise simple and intelligible reality, "Why should they (the people) accept the consequences of your deeds? Is sin or virtue some money which can be exchanged?" (*Yayati* 58-59)

When all avenues of hope are closed for Yayati, Puru comes to the rescue of his father. He 'decides' to exchange his young age with his father's old age, without thinking even for a moment as to what will be the consequences of such an act of blind rashness. Sharmishtha tries to dissuade him, saying, "Remember, the pride of sacrifice is also a kind of poison" (*Yayati* 65). She also reminds him of his responsibility towards his wife, but Puru remains fixed in his decision, "Don't remind me of her (Chitrlekha). I am like an infant standing at the threshold of a new life. Don't push me back with this one word (the name of Chitrlekha)" (*Yayati* 65). In this way, Puru makes a 'choice' keeping in mind only his fame as a devoted and kind son. Before the fall of night, he becomes decrepit, much older than his father, presenting a horrible image to his wife who becomes restless and confused and does not know what she should do. Although she was initially impressed by this great act of her husband, now she calls him "a poor and stupid son of his father whose sins he is hanging around his neck" (*Yayati* 87). Although a scholar and an intelligent young woman, she cannot bear the

outcome of these sudden and uncalled for changes in the palace. In her utter despair, she requests Yayati either to marry her and give her children or he should give back youth to Puru. Seeing that neither is possible, she commits suicide by taking poison from the same bottle with which Sharmishtha has tried to do so.

Chitralkha has no right to 'decide' the course of events in her life. She has to accept the consequences of others' deeds. On the one hand, her self-sacrificing husband leaves her alone in the prime of her youth. On the other hand, her father-in-law preaches her to have patience for five or six years so that the people of Bharata land will be highly indebted to her. (*Yayati* 80) However, she emerges as a brave woman who holds mirror to Yayati when she asks him sneeringly, "What is the connection between your youth and your people that you try to point out?" (*Yayati* 81) She also accuses Yayati of putting the everlasting chains of subjugation round the feet of the females in the palace. She finds herself as just a piece in the game of chess between Yayati's lust for youth and Puru's craze for self-sacrifice. In this game of chess, she turns out to be a useless tool and a misfit too.

The play comes to a close with the exchange of youth again between Yayati and Puru. Things come back to their former state again except the tragic death of Chitralkha. But what is the result of all this? Yayati cannot gain any benefit from it nor does Puru's old age bring him wisdom. Having failed as both king and father, Yayati is left to face the consequences of shirking responsibility for his own actions. As is the custom with the old people, Yayati leaves for forest alongwith Sharmishtha to do penance for the wrongs he has done in his life. Puru who has overlooked his duty towards his wife, has become old but only in looks. He gains no wisdom. So after he regains his youth, he is left in the bewildered state at the turn of events during this period. He is left alone to brood over the complexities of life. Utterly shocked at the sacrifice of Chitralkha's life, he can only utter, "... But you were not one from among us. Like the debt of some previous birth, you came here to teach the right lesson" (*Yayati* 91). But the existential crisis persists and mystery of life remains unsolved for Puru. There is still a big question mark over what is the

significance of all this drama that is called life. The play ends with the pathetic appeal of Puru to God, "What does it all mean? O God, what does it mean?" (*Yayati* 91) Yayati has found the true meaning of life and realized the true nature of desires, so he renounces everything to adopt the status of *vanaprastha* or forest dweller. Puru, however, is still lost in the whirlpool of perplexing ideas and is seeking to find a way out.

Conclusion

Thus the play aptly instantiates the philosophy of existentialism in the context of the myth of Yayati and Puru, but the fact is that it is highly relevant in the life of modern men as well. The message is that we can neither defer the things to be solved by luck or destiny nor can we evade the consequences of our deeds as someone else's problems. The foregoing analysis can be summed up with the following remarks of P. Obula Reddy that, "*Yayati* is a self-conscious retelling of the Hindu myth on the theme of responsibility, but presented as an existential drama reminiscent of Sartre" ("*Cultural Heterogeneity in Indian Drama*" 36).

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