

Conceptualisation of Life and Death in Girish Karnad's *Yayati*: A Semiotic Perspective

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INTRODUCTION

“The science that deals with the dynamics of signs is called Semiotics” (Singh 11) The terms Semiotics and Semiology are alternately used. Semiology is popular on the continent because of Ferdinand de Saussure’s contribution. However, across the Atlantic, the term Semiotics was made popular by C.S Peirce (1839-1914), a great American Semiotician and Philosopher. In Saussurean sense Semiology is a general discipline which studies signs including the linguistic sign, while Roland Barthes views semiology as translinguistics that studies the various non-linguistic languages as sign systems. Next A.J Greimas has made a neat, methodological demarcation between semiotics and semiology by applying the term “Semiotics” to the level of expression and “Semiology” to that of content.

In his monograph, *Structuralism and Literary Critique*, Harjeet Singh Gill identifies three fundamental levels of structuration of the narrative. The three levels are: 1) the level of Semiotics, 2) the level of Semiology and 3) the level of Mediation which correspond to syntactic, semantic and paradigmatic points of view. The semiotic organization is the organization of form. At this level one can generalize that, whatever be the type of the text i.e., religious, economic or literary, there is always a different and unique dialectics of form. “These forms serve as codes of social stratification, and at the same time, trigger all creative activity in a social milieu” (Gill 207). At this level the syntactic organisation and linear progression of events is analysed through the level of signs. “This denotative order of signification is primarily representative and self-contained” (Chandler 82). The division of ensembles and sub-ensembles in a narrative helps to compose the three phases of equilibrium-disruption-equilibrium. The semiological significance emerges at the level of content. Though the basic process of structuration and comprehension remains the same, the semiological patterns can be understood only through the interplay of the psychic components of each human situation. This “connotative order of signification reflects the expressive values which are attached to a sign.” (Chandler 82). The basic issue of confrontation and conflict encompasses at this level of analysis. The level of mediation signifies that, “every literary discourse is a link in the historical chain and must be understood in its proper ideological background that is there due to a number of dialectical interactions between the diachronic reflections which are directly related to the basic theme of the discourse” (Corti 9). Roland Barthes argues that the orders of signification called denotation and connotation combine to produce this order of signification called Mediation. In mediation, a sign reflects culturally variable concepts underpinning a particular world view: historical, anthropological, mythological and psychological. This level of analysis always involves ideological analysis. Voloshinov declared that “whenever a sign is present, ideology is present too” (Chandler 216).

In my analysis, while unchanging the elementary formulations of the model prescribed by Harjeet Singh Gill, there are certain modifications which I have undertaken. I attempt to study both semiological and mediatory level collectively while analysing the conceptual contour of unity of life and death in the play *Yayati* by Girish Karnad. In uniting these two levels, the ideological background of the discourse has been used to make links between the historical events and contemporary situations of the characters. The dominant existential parlance acts as the base for reinterpreting the various incisions-mythological, historical, anthropological and heads under the paradigmatic study of the discourse.

YAYATI BY GIRISH KARNAD

In *Yayati* (Kannad 1960, English 2007) we confront a king whose only purpose is to secure his immortal future. His whole life is obsessed with a fear of death which makes him miserable. When his own misdeeds make him confront his biggest fear of being cursed with decrepitude, he undergoes terrible anxiety. Seeing the misery of his father, Pooru, the son of Yayati takes upon himself the burden of his father’s curse. So, King *Yayati* exchanges his old age with the youth of his eldest son for the satisfaction of his youthful urges. The origin of this lust for life can be traced to the very background of the story of *Yayati* in *Adi Parva* segment of *Mahabharata*. The basis of the story lies in contest between gods and the asuras for prosperity in the three worlds. The gods selected the sage Angiras, and the asuras appointed Kavya Usanas (Shukracharya) as their preceptor. These two Brahmins were of high intellect but it was Kavya mighty Shukracharya who knew the *Sanjeevani Vidya* and hence the gods were driven to deep despair. The gods thus sent Kacha, the eldest son of *Brahmaspati* to procure the *Sanjeevani* lore secretly but in the process got cursed from the *Shukracharyas*’ daughter Devyani whose love he rejected (Dange 165). She cursed him that his deeds to attain the immortality lore will seek no fulfilment. So eventually following the great gods and asuras and the curse of Kacha, Yayati a Kshatriya King becomes the next one to fall for this never- ending lust for life. While trying to secure his immortality he falls in love with Devyani and marries her. Girish Karnad has dramatized the story of Yayati in his interpretation keeping the basic theme of life and death intact. Basically, man always tries to deny this terrible reality of death through the concept of immortality. In the times of *Mahabharata*, the concept of immortality was initiated by the notions of *Sanjeevani buti* or some spells. Even the religious scriptures and Christian belief of this era provides impetus to this idea of immortality by finding solace in the concept of blissful life after death which further makes lust for life win over reality.

The *Upanishads* version of Yayati's story explains more about Yayati's inherent clinging to life. The *Upanishads* reveal that when Yayati was hundred years old, death came and he started crying and weeping. Yayati said, "You have come and I have not yet been able to live. ..I fought many wars . I accumulated much wealth... but I have not lived." To resolve his misery his youngest son who was just sixteen Pooru sacrificed his life and Yayati lived for hundred years more. With passage of time death came again and again and she would take one of his sons and Yayati lived for one thousand years (Napat n.p). Patanjali writes, "Postponing life is the only sin that I call sin...this is the only existential moment, live it" (qtd in Osho 123). Fear of death becomes a barrier in one's enjoying true happy life in present. Christianity says that when one is thrown into hell, the hell is going to be eternal. The theory of eternal hell is very psychological and simply shows that time (good or bad) is a mind- oriented phenomenon. Yayati's situation of deep restlessness and desperateness when he is in crisis of old age explains his eternal hell. Yayati desperately requests Chitrlekha that "Give me a little time... I shall settle the affairs of the state. I shall present you and Pooru with a future that shall be secure and yours to keep" (64). This clinging to the life makes a king nothing less than a beggar. A beggar always live in the future and one is a beggar if one lives in future. This is why beggars never renounce the world and only a Buddha: A Mahavira-born in palaces as prince renounces the world as they have nothing to hope for as everything is there in their lives but misery persists. In Sanskrit this clinging to life is called *Klesha Abhinivesha* and in clinical terms *Gerascophobia*.

In addition to Yayati, all the major characters try to escape death, Devyani is rescued in her encounter with death by Yayati, further Sharmishtha is saved by him from drinking poison. However, when the reality dawns, this provider of life himself turns out to be under a constant fear of death. Both the ladies indirectly join to make him witness his worst fear of death which turns him into a helpless victim. Yayati while failing to realize the reality of death lives in an unauthentic life and cherishes only "Queens, ministers, armies, the populace" (43). Yayati in his deception thinks "The only death real to me is that of someone else. Not mine. I don't think of my own death. That is not for me a possibility at all" (24). This difficulty of acknowledging the general problem of death into personal problem of 'I must die' is also highlighted in *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* by Leo Tolstoy. The hero Ivan who is about to die remembers in his logic course the syllogism "All men are mortal. Caius is a man, Caius is mortal" (Stern 163). But the logical substitution of 'I' for "Caius" is to him psychological impossibility because of the powerful instinct of survival just as in *Yayati*.

A blissful man would embrace death and thus one will transcend death. However, a coward like Yayati dies a thousand and one times. If one transcends death, one attains a life which is not misery but a life which Jesus talks: life in abundance, the life of which Buddha talks: the life of ecstasy, of nirvana, the life about which Patanjali talks: eternal, beyond time and space, beyond death. The cause of ones clinging to life is that one is not able to live and one has been insensitive to the blessings of life. This insensitivity makes one away from real life.

Pooru and Chitrlekha both transcends the fear of time and death and immortalize their true essence. Pooru sacrifices his youth and becomes a true persona of a faithful son, however, Chitrlekha, Pooru's new bride dies to safeguard her honor because feels offended at Pooru's uncalled decision and Yayati's illogical reasoning's. As a faithful wife she does try to win back her husband's youth from Yayati but when she fails, she decides to die rather than to live a life according to the expectations of others. As she asserts "I am here, this minute sir. And I cannot interest myself in your unborn future" (65). Her choosing death over life raises her to the rapture of a wife like *Sati Savitri* who fought for her husband's life. Her essence can be crystallized as an embodiment of courage, strong will and devotion. The significance of her death lies in making Yayati realize the difference between life and living and death and dying. He realised that he never actually lived his life. For Yayati, Chitrlekha becomes a symbol of Christ who leads him to his self- discovery and enlightenment. Just like Jesus who dies to give life to humanity, Chitrlekha dies to give new life to Yayati and Pooru. As critic writes "Jesus, who though he was in the form of God...emptied himself, and became obedient unto death , even death on cross" (Simmel 142).

CONCLUSION

Yayati's journey toward his final self-discovery can be identified with Kubler Ross five stage theory. Elisabeth Kubler Ross identifies five stages a man undergoes in time of crises. These stages include *Denial*, a stage when man refuses to face the reality and in the story of Yayati when he gets information about his curse from Sharmishtha he considers it one of her another tricks. He thinks the whole situation as outrageous. Thus, he completely denies the reality. The second stage is feeling of *Anger* which involves emotions such as rage and envy and similarly Yayati is furious about his curse. He abuses Sharmishtha on being the cause of it. The third stage is *Bargaining* which involves an attempt to postpone the onset of crisis. Correspondingly Yayati demands that his subjects should take his curse in exchange of royal fame. The fourth stage is of *Depression* when one feels sad and dejected. As such *Yayati* feels when he sees no other alternative from his stressful situation. The last stage is of *Acceptance* when a person accepts one's fate or course of life and thus in the end *Yayati* accepts his curse back from Pooru and reclines in wilderness (Jacobson 87-88).

Life and death actually interlock each other and is process of growth. This recurring pattern of life and death becomes one of the great themes of Bible. God creates life in garden of heaven where the tree of life stands but it was human who opts for death and thus separation from life. Rest of the Bible tells of humanity finding its way to new life on earth which brings with itself death. It is almost equivalent for *Yayati*, *Sisyphus*, *Prometheus* and *Frankenstein*. In Mary Shelly's work *Frankenstein*, the major character Frankenstein tries to break this rule. He creates a monster which is living dead and exhibits his futile understanding about life and death. It explains that a dead living is nothing but to lead a monster's life. Life and death are one and it is useless to divide one from another. *Advaita Vedanta* justifies that a reality has always two sides. In the supreme *Brahman* there is a natural dissolution of all relativities. Yayati's final acceptance of his curse back from Pooru makes him recognize the truth of life and death. This allows him peace of mind and finally making sense of death through living rightly.

So, while processing through Harjeet Gill praxis of semiotics a collective semiological and mediatory analysis of the text of *Yayati* has been conducted to legitimate that Girish Karnad through this text succeeds in dramatizing the inevitable and conjoined process of life and death. He rightly depicts the psychological interpretation of human history -the basic conflict of man, his littleness and limitless, follies and faults of his life and the continuous struggle with death he is involved in. He presents the concept of life and

death as an ultimate existential dilemma, one which arouses terrible anxiety but finally offers an avenue towards authentic self-discovery. A poem by Kahlil Gibran, *On Death* rightly explains the union of life and death.

You would know the secret of death.

But how shall you find it unless you seek it in the heart of life?

The owl whose night bound eyes are blind into the day cannot unveil the mystery of light.

If you would indeed behold the spirit of death,

Open your heart wide unto the body of life

For life and death are one, even as the river and sea are one. (qtd in Shefran 108)

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