



## EXISTENTIALISM IN YAYATI

**Abhimanyu K. Rao, Dr. Shalini Sharma**

Research scholar, Supervisor

School of Research and Development

Sabarmati University, Ahmedabad, Gujarat, India

**Abstract:** In absurd literature, the absurd arises from the fundamental disharmony between the individual's search for meaning and the universe's meaninglessness. The 'absurd' pervades all Albert Camus's writing, and he was the pioneer of the genre, one Indian writer who mastered the art of absurd literature at a young age was Mr. Girish Karnad. In "Yayati," written in 1961, we see how the protagonist Yayati indulges in an extravagant lifestyle and wishes to live forever to fulfill his carnal desires. Camus's absurdity is a conflict between two choices. Like in this work, Yayati wants eternal life to fulfill his desires but at the expense of his son's youth. Specifically, the dilemma in which we humans live. The king's desire for physical pleasure affects his moral judgment.

On the other hand, the silent death, Yama waiting to take him to hell, signifies cold universe on the other. We see how the king experiences evoking notions of absurdity. Such a realization leaves the individual with a choice: suicide, a leap of faith, or indulgence in desires. He concludes that recognition is the only secure option. Thus, in this paper, we attempt to find the theme of alienation in Yayati and how he comes to terms with the absurd in the end.

Keywords:

- Existentialism, Absurdism in Yayati, Yayati an absurd drama, Existentialism in Girish Karnad's works

**Introduction:**

In Yayati, the main protagonist is a Chandravanshi king. He is the son of King Nahusha and Ashokasundari (daughter of Shiva and Parvati). The famous characters of Mahabharat: Pandavas, and Yaduvanshis, were his successors. He was the second brother among his five brothers: Yati, Samyati, Ayati, Viyati, and Kriti. Yayati obtained the title of Chakravartin Samrat (World Emperor) after conquering the whole world. He is married to Devyani and ties the knot with Sharmishtha (Maid of Devayani) in a hidden ceremony. After learning of this relationship with Sharmishtha, Devayani complains to her father Shukracharya, who curses Yayati to old age in the peak of his era, but later gives him an exception to exchange youth with his son, Puru.

Puru is Yayati's son who agrees to give his youth in exchange for old age as a rightful son after learning his father's curse. After the marriage of Puru and Chitrlekha. The bed prepared for Puru and Chitrlekha is used to solemnize Yayati and Sharmishtha's marriage. As the curse befalls, Puru loses his youth to his father, Yayati. Chitrlekha wanted to bear a child and thus offered herself to Yayati, who declined her proposal. As a result of frustration and psychological pain, Chitrlekha ends her life by committing suicide. Her death opens Yayati "s eyes, so much so that he takes back the curse from his son and abandons the kingdom. Puru exchanges his youth with his father's old age, and this is regarded as good deed as a son but a very immoral husband leaving his wife Chitrlekha deserted. (Khursheed)

On the other hand, Yayati cannot enjoy his old-age transformation out of irritation. Hence, all the three characters Yayati, Puru, and Chitrlekha, experience a fractured and divided personalities. There is always a quest for longing and incompleteness, and their cravings are full of frustrations and existential situations. Chitrlekha "s suicide makes Yayati alienated and isolated himself only to realize s responsibility for his actions. Yayati feels that the fear of sacrifice leads him to an imaginable road. His physical desires have made him blind and such a narcissistic human. Thus he asks Puru to take back his youth and rule the kingdom as a just ruler. Chitrlekha's death is what makes Yayati aware of the reality," hence making Yayati realize his flaw. Yayati questions his existence and the ways of the world. Choosing an exchange of ages with his father leads Puru and Chitrlekha to endless suffering and agony. They become a split-personality and a divided self. They are cut out from their society and the world due to self and social alienation.

### Girish Karnad's Yayati:

Girish Karnad belongs to the era of writers who witnessed world wars and other contemporary events. It was also when Karnad was under the influence of western playwrights like Anouilh, Sartre, and the Greeks. Taking clues from these playwrights, Karnad has tried to evolve an idiom that would suit typical Indian conditions. He was naturally drawn towards the enunciation of the influential philosophy of existentialism in almost all his works, Yayati, and his first play is no exception in this case. Karnad's first play Yayati (1961), was written with impulsive enthusiasm in the context of the persuasive philosophy of existentialism when he did not have much knowledge or experience of the world of theatre neither. It is interesting to note here that Yayati describes quite appropriately the existential crisis in the dramatist's life in many respects. The story of Yayati is taken from Adiparva of the Mahabharata. The plot moves around 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.

Moreover, Karnad gives this traditional tale a new and significant-close also. In the Mahabharata, Yayati renounced the throne because he realized the nature of desire itself that fulfillment did not diminish or finish them. However, in Karnad's play, Yayati recognizes the horror of his own life and assumes 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 is relevant in the context of life today. If we analyze Karnad's Yayati, it tells an ancient mythological story. The discourse unleashed by it is very appropriate. We learn from the work that neither a scholar nor an ordinary person can escape the burden of responsibility where the true joy lies in life, whether an older man searching for lost youth or a saint lost in the darkness.

Yayati describes the pleasures of youth as the essence of life. It is elevating as well as fatal. Like the child who plays with a sharp knife without knowing about its deadly nature, a man wants to enjoy the allurements of youth. Yayati's nature to gain more and more sensual pleasures prepares the ground for his undoing. Now he has to pay a very hefty fine for his infidelity towards Devyani, whose father Shukracharya curses him so that he cannot have any more sensual enjoyment. After making such decisions, when the time comes for consequences. Yayati is not much happy then. (Gupta)

The mythological tale and the story presented by Sir Girish Karnad are both very different. In Karnad's version, the overwhelming desire for sensual indulgence is visible along with the psychological aspects. The mythological version tells us how Yayati is just another obsessed king, but in Karnad's performance, we see how King Yayati experiences the changes around him. The psychological trauma that Yayati experiences when learning that Chitrlekha has committed suicide breaks Yayati.

Puru is shown as a person who is in constant conflict with himself. Karnad's version shows him as a man of weak character. The emphasis in work is more on Puru rather than Yayati. Puru could be termed a true existentialist rather than Yayati in Karnad's version. Puru cannot see the pain in his father's eyes and thus agrees to let him fulfill his desires at the expense of himself. The character thought portrayed as weak but has great depth as he feels that someday he will be as helpless as his father.

We see that Karnad's Puru needs crutches. Therefore, a fine lady, Chitrlekha, enters as Puru's wife: a character absent in the original. If we remove Chitrlekha from Karnad's Yayati, the whole play loses its value. When she learns about Puru's decision of trading youth for old age, she could not bear this and thus ends her life. Therefore this is the moment we realize how absurd this play is. All three characters are experiencing significant trauma, which Yayati later discovers. Yayati thought that life is all about indulgence and fulfilling carnal desires but later realized that the journey was not outward but was always inward. Girish Karnad also hides Yayati's confession that sensual indulgence does not lead to inner peace. Finally, Yayati opts for a genuine spiritual quest. Yayati is seen as a pleasure monger while, in reality, he is a great king. Yayati has conquered everything and is the only high remaining in his life to enjoy the physical aspects of the world. In the mythology, we learn that he has exchanged life ten times from his different sons, but we only remember Puru as he is the first to give away his youth. (Balakrishna)

### **Existential Crisis:**

Yayati's long span of sensual indulgence tells us about the chase we all do in our lives for happiness in things that are mere meaningless. In life, everything comes to an end. Yayati tried to keep increasing his lifespan to indulge more, only to find later that it was not very meaningful. When one drinks water from the sea, he feels that he is consuming more and more water, but the quench of thirst does not stop. Each climax of sexual conquest ends with sorrow that it is over, followed by a craving for more, to repeat the transitory



pleasure once more. Eventually, Yayati is bored out of all this. He tries to fill the void inside himself, only to see it increasing more and more. Thus now he finds himself in this never-ending cycle. Which he craved for, but once he has obtained it, he no longer wants that life. This spectacular is quite absurd. Yayati gets what he wants, only to discover later that it was all useless. Karnad's version shows that Yayati is filled with guilt and pain in the end.

In the original, neither Yayati nor Puru suffers from existentialist elements initially. They're fully aware of their motivations, choices, and high conviction. They feel no guilt or remorse. Puru thinks it is his duty towards his father, adhering firmly to the dictum of *pitru devo bhava* (father is akin to God). Yayati is completely honest as he expresses his desire to enjoy sensual pleasure for a longer time (after the curse). His strength of character again shines when he speaks with the conviction that he has realized his folly and willingly accepts old age.

In the mythological version, we also witness that after attaining youth for the tenth time, Yayati now is no longer moved by the desires. Therefore when death in the form of Yama visits him this time. He asks that the remaining of his life be given to Puru and leave with Yama this time.

If we keep ourselves in place of King Yayati, we can understand his perspective. He has conquered every land of the world and now does not understand what he must do in life. Thus he does what gives him utmost pleasure. The strength of his character is seen when he openly admits that he would love to indulge in pleasures of the senses and feels that his limited time does not allow him to get the satisfaction he wants. Thus he requests his son Puru to give his lifespan for his father. Yayati has all the qualities of a great leader and king. He is a phenomenal king already. In one sense, his demands don't seem that ridiculous. He just wants to have fun. Nothing wrong with having fun and doing what one likes in life. Also, when you are the king of the world, this seems even more typical.

Later in the story, Yayati realizes that he was wrong in the way he thought about life in general. In the mythology, when he has obtained youth for the tenth time and in Girish Karnad's version when Chitrlekha commits suicide. In the first scenario, he is simply bored and tired. He indulged in these desires for centuries and thus didn't long for them anymore. In the second scenario, he realizes his horrendous act against his son and daughter-in-law. He felt shame. All his life, he lived as a glorious king. Thus, he requests the curses to be removed and end this madness.

**Yayati's Dilemma:**

We can see Yayati's dilemma. Throughout the story, we see the vibrant spirit of a king, from the highs of being a conqueror, the joy of being the chosen one, the devastation of losing his youth, and finding a purpose in one's life throughout the devastation. His realization at the end of the story echoes how we all manage to cope with the sometimes meaningless strife we face all the time. Despite not living forever, he can create impact and change in his kingdom through his actions. He found meaning in defiance of the meaningless moments of despair throughout his life. He did this with the true existentialist fashion; he indulged himself in the pleasures of the flesh. And then he moved on and carried on living, despite the despair. He sought to make his life meaningful and impactful, despite knowing there was no reward in the hereafter.

Yayati's quest for eternal life destroys the life he should be living in the here and now. His time is up, and he should leave the kingdom to Puru; the kingdom will live on after him and continue to grow if Puru rules it well. The king's final quest is his journey back to Yama. The ending to Yayati is profoundly pessimistic. There is no heaven, no promise of eternal life or divine redemption. It demonstrates that the journey is more important than the destination. Finally, he understood his limitations as a mortal. At this moment, we see that he eventually become human. He was maturing through a series of emotions that he had never experienced before. In contrast, it is hard to accept the meaninglessness without reaching into the loving arms of religion, science, or finding a meaning for oneself.

**Conclusion:**

Yayati did not gain much after being young again because he was the reason behind the death of Chitrlekha, nor did Puru's old age bring him wisdom. Yayati has failed as a father and king, only to be left to face the consequences of shirking responsibility for his actions. Yayati found the true meaning of life and realized the true nature of desires. They never end. The end of one desire gives birth to another. This whirlpool goes on till the end of time. Humans are a unique species. They always long for something more, even when they have everything they need. When Yayati realized all this, he renounced everything to adopt the status of vanaprastha or forest dweller. Puru is still lost in the whirlpool of ideas and seeks to find a way out.

Thus, the play portrays the philosophy of existentialism in the myth of Yayati and Puru, but then it is highly relevant in modern men's lives. The message is that one cannot outrun his duty, and things cannot be solved by luck, or exchanges cannot alter destiny. Also, we cannot get away from the consequences of our

actions or put them on some other person. Yayati is in many ways a reminder to the modern youth to bear the responsibility that the world has put on them. Because the young men and women do not accomplish their duty and indulge in the wrong notions of like King Yayati, the end would be the same as the king. Freedom is a way very costly thing; it is said that cheap people cannot afford it.

We see that all the three characters have suffered a big deal in Karnad's work. It is an existential tragedy; it is among the few existential works in Indian literature and is still relevant today. The story portrays many aspects of the human world. The relationships and the situations created by Yayati are prime examples of what a man should do and do not do in life. It is a tale of great inspiration.

### Works Cited:

1. Balakrishna, Sandeep. "Karnad Caricatures Yayati in the Black Hole of Existentialism." *The Dharma Dispatch* (n.d.).
2. Khursheed, Bisma. "Existentialism in the plays of Girish Karnad." *academicresearchjournals* (2016): 4.
3. Gupta, Nisha. "Existence V/S Essence: An Existential." *Remarking An Analisation* (2019): 5.
4. *The Distilled Essence of the Mahabharata*: Dr. S.R. Ramaswamy: *Kāntaśakti*, the Commemorative Volume on Umakanth Bhat (pp. 91–104). Translated by Sandeep Balakrishna
5. Bibek Debroy, Dipavali Debroy (2002). *The holy Puranas*. p. 152. "Nahusha and Ashokasundari had a son named Yayati."

### ONLINE SOURCES:

1. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yayati><https://www.academicresearchjournals.org/IJELC/PDF/2016/November/Khursheed.pdf>
2. <https://www.dharmadispatch.in/culture/karnad-caricatures-yayati-in-the-black-hole-of-existentialism>
3. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4p3NbO-lSbc>
4. [http://www.socialresearchfoundation.com/upoadreserchpapers/5/290/1910190613251st%20nisha%20gupta%20\(1\).pdf](http://www.socialresearchfoundation.com/upoadreserchpapers/5/290/1910190613251st%20nisha%20gupta%20(1).pdf)