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## **V. S. Khandekar's *Yayati*: A Study in Myth**

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Myth is a much disputed term. Various thinkers, philosophers and critics have tried to define and categorize the term. The New Gresham Encyclopedia gives its meaning as:

*The word myth originally simply meant speech, then in a narrower sense, a tale or tradition, particularly one handed down from prehistoric times giving, in the form of a story about a god or hero, some ancient belief regarding the processes of nature, customs or problems of cosmogony. (53)*

Myth is never related to a single individual, it is always collective, always communal, binding a society, a tribe, a community together by its force. Mark Schorer says in *William Blake: The politics of vision*, "Myth is fundamental, the dramatic representation of our deepest instinctual life, of a primary awareness of man in the universe, capable of many configurations, upon which all particular opinions and attitude depend."

Barthes writes in *Mythologies*, "Mythologies is an accord with the world, not as it is, but as it wants to be." Thus through myth, literature tries to shape the world. It is a chosen context having manifold dimensions. Literature is considered to be the expression of total human experience, making it a collection of ideas and beliefs of the society. Beliefs lead to rituals and myths, which are represented in literature. Thus two types of narratives inter-mingle, inter-act and coexist within the framework of literature.

J. W. Rogerson remarks, "Myths expressed profound truths about human existence, and therefore were not to be regarded merely as a relic of man's childhood" (62-71). These profound truths necessarily discuss human condition and predicament. Myth becomes a vehicle for propagating the wisdom of the by-gones to the present generation. Myth is a meaningful narrative which can be modified and re-invented by the writer to satisfy the yearning of modern culture.

Writers not only use existing myths but also re-shape and re-invent to suit their specific purpose. In the book, *Mythology in the Modern Novel: A Study of Prefigurative Techniques*, White writes that novels which deal with myths can be divided into four categories. The first category includes novels in which there is a complete re-narration of a classical myth. The author inevitably names his chosen mythological characters and settings so that there is no ambiguity about the choice of myths. The second category includes novels where author juxtaposes sections narrating a myth and contemporary world. Third category includes those works where a novel is set in the modern world but contains a pattern of references to mythology continuously through the work. Fourth category includes novels in which a mythological motif prefigures a part of the narrative but without running consistently through the whole narrative, as in the category three. On the basis of this classification *Yayati* can be included in the first category of novels. It is not only a re-narration of the myth, but also a renewal of the energy of the myth which sends a message to the contemporary society. The real struggle of mortals has remained the same through the centuries.

Vishnu Sakharam Khandekar is a well known name as he is considered to be one of the prominent writers of Marathi literature. He has written eleven novels, thirty one collections of short stories and many volumes of critical literary essays. It was 1959 when V.S. Khandekar wrote the novel *Yayati* in Marathi. *Yayati* is his best known and most critically acclaimed work. He has won the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award in 1960 and Jnanpith Award in 1974.

V.S. Khandekar in the “Introduction” of the novel writes, “I do not know if I would have written this novel, if in the decade 1942-51 I had not been witness to the happenings in the world and in our country- the strange spectacle of physical advancement and moral degeneration going hand in hand” (*Yayati* 7). These words indicate that *Yayati* is not merely a tale of a king and his obsession of youth, but it is a saga of human condition. His novel deals with the exploration of the motives of mortals. It brings to the fore their tragic fall into corruption and moral degradation.

*Yayati* is a multilayered incident which is full of deep connotations relevant to the life of man. The myth conveys the recognition of the path of virtue and vice and the need of self – control in human society. *Yayati*’s character represents a mortal’s desire to be immortal. The ambition becomes obsession and results in chaos. Khandekar tries to give meaning to the myth in modern context. A fertile imagination blended with intuitive vision gives rise to a beautifully crafted work. The present paper makes an attempt to examine the use of myth and its interpretation in the present context in the novel *Yayati*.

Writer has used ‘*Yayati*’ myth which first appears in ‘Mahabharata’. Gods and Demons are warring factions. Vrishparva is the reigning king of Demons. Maharishi Shukra, the Lord Preceptor of the Demons, has the power of Sanjeevani, which can bestow the gift of life to the dead. Gods want to acquire that power. They send Kacha, the younger son of Devguru, Brahaspati, as a disciple to Maharishi Shukra to obtain that power. Kacha and Maharishi Shukra’s daughter Devayani fall in love. Kacha is killed by Demons. His body is cremated and ashes are mixed in the wine of Maharishi Shukra. He drinks the wine and Kacha remains inside his body. Devayani insists that Kacha should be given a new life by her father. Maharishi Shukra uses his power of Sanjeevani and Kacha is given a new life. Now Kacha refuses to marry Devayani. He explains that he was inside the body of her father and had access to his heart. It is because of that he is Devayani’s brother. He says that they are now same flesh and blood. Devayani becomes furious and Kacha leaves. Sharmishtha, Asur king’s daughter and Devayani go to the river for bathing. Their clothes get interchanged and a fight ensues. Devayani falls into the well. *Yayati*, the son of king Nahusha, happens to come there and saves Devayani. He gets married to Devayani and Sharmishtha is punished by egoist and spiteful Devayani. She is ordered to accompany Devayani as a maid. *Yayati* falls in love with Sharmishtha and marries her secretly. A son, Puroo, is born of the wedlock. *Yayati* tries to conceal the truth but fails in his attempts. Maharishi Shukra curses *yayati* with decrepitude, when the secret of *yayati*’s marriage with Sharmishtha is revealed to him. *Yayati* pleads that he is not yet fulfilled in his marital life with Devayani, Maharishi Shukra grants that he could exchange his old age with any young man who is ready to accept his curse of old age. Puroo accepts the condition and gives his youth, vigour and energy and takes the weight of the curse on his shoulders. *Yayati* enjoys his regained youth, but soon realizes the futility of his desires. He returns Puroo’s youth and along Devayani and Sharmishtha retires to lead a life of purity and peace as a hermit.

*Yayati* is a mythological story but Khandekar has handled the story to make it significant for all the time periods. The message of *Yayati* proves to be universal. T.S. Eliot discusses the use of myth by James Joyce and states, “In using the myth, in manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity, Mr. Joyce is pursuing a method which others must pursue after him. They will not be imitators, any more than the scientist who uses the discoveries of an Einstein in proving his own, independent, further investigations. It is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history” (201).

Khandekar challenges those age old unresolved ethical issues which have remained unanswered in the past as well as present. Myth is a powerful tool in the hands of a genius like Khandekar, through which he presents the dilemmas of the modern man. His narrative carries the complex ideas of the present age. He tries to present those human emotions which have flown in a continuous flow since ages. *Yayati* presents a protagonist who is engrossed in the physical and worldly pleasures. It is the plight of modern man, for whom materialistic success has become an obsession. Writer has used ‘myth’ to bring into focus the issues and problems like complicated man- woman relationship, patriarchy and problem of identity faced by modern man. The novel is a manifestation of human emotions which link modern man with the past. The great king, Yayati, becomes a symbolic figure. He represents the modern man, who continuously yearns for worldly pleasures and suffers due to his follies.

Khandekar portrays Yayati as a discontented man. He remains restless in spite of enjoying all the material pleasures. He fails to understand his duties as a king and a father. Devayani wants to beg, “Crush Devayani for the sake of your pleasure as you might a flower. But stop this sacrilege of your duty. Wake up to your duty as a husband. Remember your duty as a father. Do not forget your duty as a king” (*Yayati* 211).

*Yayati* always tries to find new ways to satisfy his lust. He forgets all his responsibilities and busies himself with carnal pleasures. He muses:

*How many years? Eighteen? No, I have been in heaven for something like eighteen hundred years. I am forever drinking nectar from the lips of beautiful maidens. Under the tree which grants every wish is my bed. I loll in bed night and day, on a mattress of delicate flowers. Now, I am going to take Indrani in my arms. (Yayati 215)*

Novelist is portraying modern man with his lust for sensual and material pleasures Moral values have no place in the world. His desires are leading him towards his doom. He is not ready to accept the evening of his life. *Yayati* becomes selfish and demands his son’s youth, “I was begging Puroo, now on the threshold of youth, for his youth. I was set on giving him my old age” (*Yayati* 240).

Novelist’s exploration of the myth makes the modern man review his own life. Myth enlivens the narrative and brings the underlying theme into sharp focus. Khandekar’s achievement lies in the fact that his novel reflects man’s inner self. He tries to delve deep in the psyche of the man. *Yayati* finally realizes peace can be achieved through giving up desires. The man should strive to rise above the carnal desires. When *Yayati* finally decides to return Puroo’s youth, Sharmishtha’s selfless love becomes his support. Through Sharmishtha, *yayati* understands the real meaning of love and sacrifice. A new realization dawns upon him and he thinks:

*Sharmishtha was mine. She had given me unflinching love. It was my duty to lay my life down for a tear of hers. It was not just a duty; in such death lay seas of happiness. I began thinking. To make Sharmishtha happy, I must return to Puroo his youth. And that, without a moment's delay. But except with my death there was no returning to him his youth. (Yayati 243)*

Yayati has learnt the essential truth that true happiness does not lie in indulgence of senses. Suffering and sacrifice are considered to be necessary for purification and regeneration. The characters in *Yayati* show this purification of the soul. Kacha, Sharmishtha and Puroo sacrifice for the sake of others and thus attain sainthood. Puroo sacrifices his youth for his father's sake and does not hesitate for a moment. He has inherited this spirit of sacrifice from his mother as he states, "Father, I am the son of a Princess who agreed to be a maid for the sake of her people. I am willing to take on your old age" (*Yayati* 241).

Thus novelist emphatically establishes the moral of the myth. Yayati's spiritual awakening is complete and the novel ends with a triumphant note with these words:

*In happiness and misery, remember one thing. Sex and wealth are the great symbols of manhood. They are inspiring symbols. They sustain life. But they are unbridled. There is no knowing when they will run amuck. Their reins must at all times be in the hands of duty.*

*Oh man, desire is never satisfied by indulgence.*

*Like the sacrificial fire, it ever grows with every offering. (Yayati 251)*

Yayati repents for his sins and teaches the modern man to live in a way that reflects genuine change. Khandekar has used myth and turned it into an intense drama of mental agony intertwining the concepts of indulgence and sacrifice.

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