

CHARECTER ANAYLISIS OF MEN IN THE STORY OF KING YAYATI

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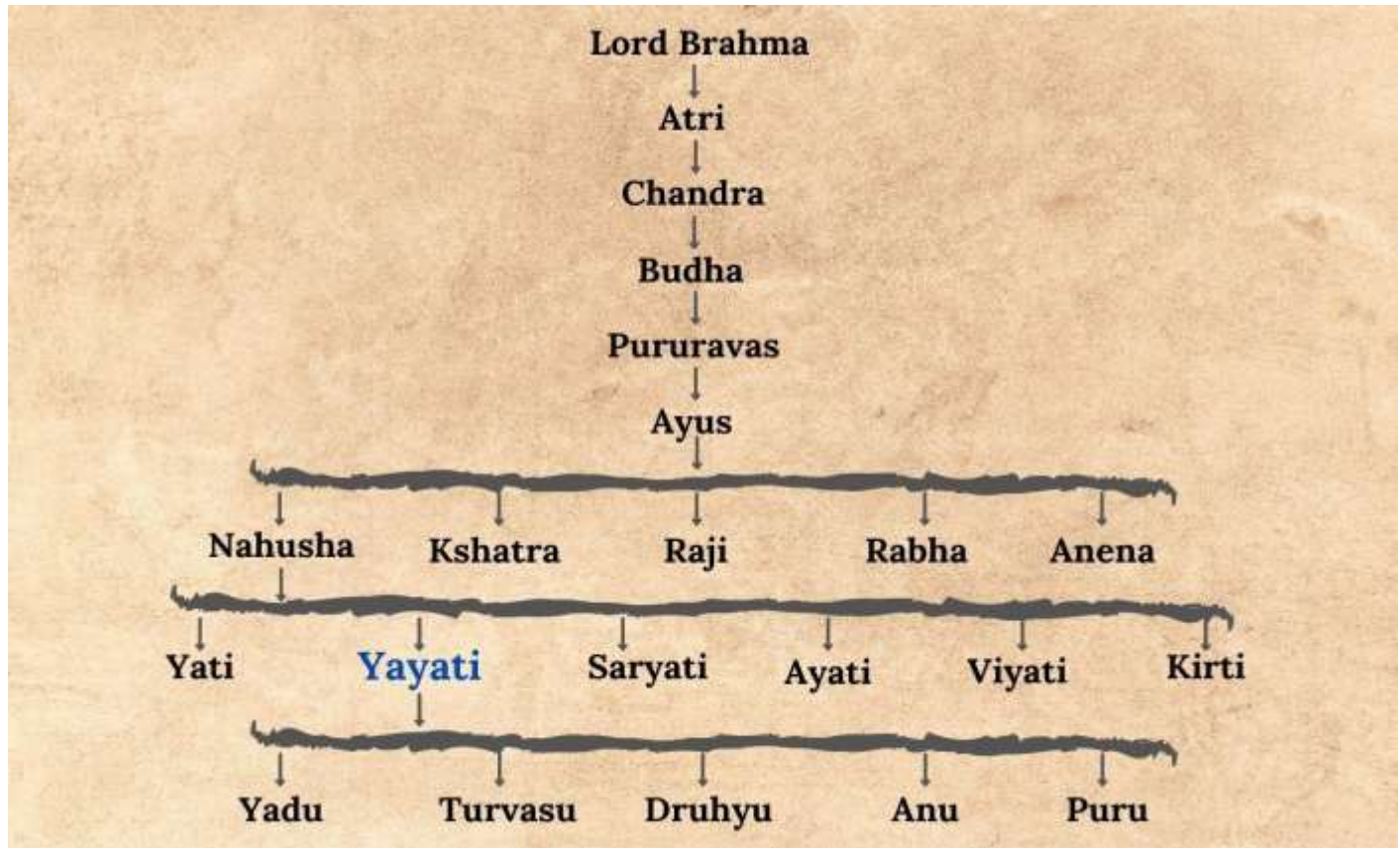
Abstract:

Indian mythology is a sea of complex characters and their deeds. One of such pearl is the story of King Yayati who on one hand is a great and brave monarch but on the other a man falling again and again for his own lust.

King Yayati is the ancestor of Pandavas and Kaurvas of Mahabharata. He was a great king with all the strength and power, but as the ruler of the nation, he also had a weakness. It was this weakness of his which leads him to commit a betrayal with his wife and asked for a sacrifice from one of his sons.

This paper throws light on the character analysis of the three main protagonists of the story. **Yayati**, who fell for his unfulfilled lust despite of his achievements and moreover he asked his sons to make sacrifice for him. **Puru**, Yayati's son who sacrificed for his father's desires to gain recognition in his eyes, overlooking the silent pleas of his wife which ultimately led her to commit suicide, and lastly, **Shukracharya**, who was the father of Devyani who is Yayati's wife. Shukracharya is already a well known name in mythology for his anger and rage. In this story yet again we find two victims of his rage as the first one is Sharmistha who is cursed to be a maid despite of being a princess and the other one is Yayati the husband of his daughter.

Keywords: Yayati, Puru, Shukracharya, sacrifice, father, son, forgiveness.

King Yayati Family TreeThe story of King Yayati

Yayati is the second son of the famous king Nahush. He is crowned as the king after his elder brother Yati took sanyas. Yayati marries Devyani, the daughter of demon-guru Shukracharya. Devyani had kept Sharmishtha, daughter of demon king Vrishparva, as her maidservant.

Though Yayati is a great king, he is not free of sensory desires. He is a very lustful man with a court full of consorts. While marrying off his daughter to Yayati, Shukracharya had taken a vow from the king that he would not summon Sharmishtha to his

bed. However, Yayati couldn't keep his vow. When Sharmishtha sees that her friend Devyani has borne a son to the king, she also desires to be a mother. So, she approaches Yayati one evening and requests him to help her conceive a son. King Yayati reminds her of his vow.

On this, Sharmistha said, "O king, it is not sinful to lie on the occasion of a joke, in respect of women sought to be enjoyed, on occasions of marriage, in peril of immediate death and of the loss of one's whole fortune. Lying is excusable on these five occasions." After a long back and forth between both, the king, weak in his senses, ultimately gives up on the demon princess's desire. As a result, Sharmishtha gave birth to three sons from Yayati-Dhruyu, Anu, and Puru. From Devyani, he begot two sons- Yadu and Turvasu.

Yayati and Sharmistha succeed in keeping their liaison secret for some time, but eventually, when it is revealed to Devyani, she becomes furious and immediately leaves for her father's house. Upon learning of Yayati's transgression, Shukracharya curses him to suffer old age and invalidity. What could be more painful for a lustful man to lose his youth and vitality before its natural time? Yayati is in great distress and thus begs his father-in-law for forgiveness. He says, "O son of Bhrigu, I have not yet been satiated with youth or with Devyani. Therefore, O merciful, be graceful unto me so that decrepitude might not touch me."

At last, Shukracharya shows mercy and gives him the benediction to exchange his old age and invalidity with one of his sons. Shukracharya also says that the son who trades Yayati's old age with his youth will be the throne's successor. He shall have a long life, wide fame, and numerous progeny. Yayati, overcome with decrepitude, returns to his kingdom and summons all his sons, but none of them agrees to give their youth to their father. Ultimately, his youngest son, Puru, consents, and Yayati gets his youth back.

Having received Puru's youth, Yayati becomes exceedingly gratified, and with it, he again begins to indulge in his favourite pursuits to the full extent of his desires. He rules the entire world like Indra-the king of celestial gods. His senses are unimpaired, and he enjoys unparalleled and unlimited material happiness to his heart's content without transgressing the precepts of religion. He is delighted to be able to enjoy all the rarest of objects in the world. His only qualm is that all these will end one day.

In the back of his mind, Yayati always has this truth lurking that after the passing of a thousand years, he will have to renounce everything. Even after indulging in all kinds of pleasure for a thousand years, he still is unsatisfied. On the one hand, he found his desire burning high; on the other hand, he is also aware of the transient nature of material pleasure. At last, when he sees that his thousand years of youth are ending, he summons Puru and gives back his youth. Soon after installing Puru on the throne, the king retires into the woods, followed by brahmanas and ascetics. Having lived in the forest in the company of ascetics, observing many rigid vows, eating fruits and roots, he finally ascends to heaven.

Character analysis

Yayati

The King of the Bharata dynasty, he is depicted as a symbol of unchecked desire, forever chasing sensual pleasures and eternal youth.

After Shukracharya curses him for a transgression involving Sharmishtha, Yayati gets an opportunity to exchange his old age for youth with one of his sons. He enjoys thousands of years of youth with his son's sacrifice but ultimately realizes its hollowness, leading him to return the youth and seek redemption in the forest.

Yayati is characterized as an ambitious, self-centered, and hedonistic king obsessed with material and sexual pleasures, which shirks his responsibilities and is ultimately unable to escape the consequences of his actions. We find the other perspective of this character in Girish Karnad's play. Unlike the mythological ideal king, Karnad's Yayati is a complex, "grey" character, a symbol of the modern man driven by insatiable desire and a futile pursuit of pleasure. His character explores the futility of unchecked desires and the importance of moral responsibility, highlighting the cyclical nature of consequences and the ultimate failure of seeking happiness through material gratification. Yayati embodies an obsessive pursuit of physical pleasure and material comforts, even at the expense of his own family. He is depicted as a self-absorbed individual who fails to understand the desires and turmoil of others, particularly his son Puru, and avoids facing the consequences of his misdeeds. A significant aspect of his character is his intense fear of aging and his desperate attempt to cling to his youth and vitality.

Girish Karnad uses Yayati to represent the modern man's complex conflicts, his entanglement with irrational desires, and the existential quandary of seeking fulfillment through material means. Unlike the traditional heroic archetype, Yayati is a flawed, complex figure, demonstrating that humanity is often caught between moral impulses and materialistic temptations.

Yayati's quest for pleasure ultimately reveals the futility of desire itself, as the pursuit of one pleasure often gives way to another, never leading to lasting satisfaction.

Shukracharya

The father of Devayani (Yayati's wife) and a powerful sage. He curses Yayati after Yayati's insult to Devayani's friend Sharmishtha. He later shows mercy and amends the curse, allowing Yayati to exchange his old age. He represents the power of the divine and the ability to both punish and redeem. His emotional nature and his decision to amend the curse reflect a compromise and a demonstration of divine wisdom.

In Yayati, Shukracharya is characterized by his fierce loyalty to his family and his powerful, punitive nature, which stems from his love for his daughter Devayani. As the guru of the asuras and a renowned sage with the secret of Sanjeevani, his anger is a formidable force that leads him to curse Yayati with old age and decrepitude after Yayati's relationship with Sharmishtha, Devayani's companion. His character is crucial in demonstrating the consequences of disrespect and the complexities of family honor and duty in the epic.

Shukracharya's actions are driven by his deep love for his daughter, Devayani. When Devayani is insulted and treated as a maidservant by Sharmishtha, he becomes enraged. As the guru of the asuras and the possessor of the Sanjeevani Vidya (the secret of longevity), his position and powers are immense. This status gives him the leverage to demand that King Vrishparva make Sharmishtha a maidservant. His fury over Devayani's humiliation extends to Yayati, the man who married his daughter, resulting in the curse of senility. Shukracharya's character highlights the authority of a guru and a father. He doesn't back down when his daughter's honor is challenged, emphasizing his fierce protective nature. His role as a vengeful father is central to the story's conflict. He sets in motion the curse on Yayati, which ultimately leads to Yayati's pursuit of sensuous pleasures and the eventual exchange of youth with his son, Puru.

In essence, Shukracharya is a complex figure, representing both the power of a wise sage and the fierce love of a father, whose emotions trigger the central events of the Yayati story.

Puru

Yayati's youngest son, he is shown as courageous and selfless. He accepts his father's curse and offers his own youth in exchange, enduring old age for Yayati's sake. This act saves Yayati, but it ultimately brings the sorrow of his wife's suicide, forcing Yayati to confront the reality of his selfish quest for pleasure.

Puru is characterized by an identity crisis, feelings of incompleteness, and a deep desire for self-discovery and completeness, which leads him to accept his father Yayati's old age in hopes of finding purpose and a connection to his family and lineage. His character arc explores existential themes of responsibility, sacrifice, and the search for identity within a patriarchal structure, contrasting his quiet nature with his valiant father's legacy of heroism.

Puru's initial sorrow stems from not knowing his mother, causing a profound sense of identity crisis and incompleteness. He carries an inferiority complex due to his father's valorous image, feeling like a disappointment to his heroic father. His sense of alienation and disinterest in the kingdom and its affairs is a reflection of his internal turmoil and search for personal meaning.

Puru's decision to exchange his youth for his father's old age is not just a sacrifice but an attempt to achieve completeness, to root himself in his family by gaining ancestral qualities.

He sees this exchange as a personal experiment to discover and realize himself, to become a whole person.

Puru's struggles reflect existential themes, with the play examining the anguish and dilemmas of human existence and the individual's responsibility for self-definition. While paternal loyalty is a noble gesture, Puru's willingness to accept his father's curse also brings ruin to his own life, highlighting the complex relationship between personal desires and familial duty.

Puru serves as a counterpoint to his father, who embodies Kshatriya masculinity, while Puru is a disappointment in terms of heroism and sexual prowess, representing a different kind of strength.

Conclusion

The main conclusions from the story of King Yayati are that desire is a self-perpetuating fire that cannot be quenched by indulgence, worldly pleasures are temporary, true wisdom comes from experience and reflection, and spiritual understanding and renunciation are essential for lasting peace and salvation. Yayati's story emphasizes that a meaningful life requires wisdom beyond youthful vigor, and that one must ultimately embrace detachment from worldly pursuits to achieve true happiness and freedom from the cycle of birth and death. Yayati's attempt to satisfy his desires by borrowing his son's youth proves that indulgence only intensifies desire, leading to an endless, suffering cycle. He realizes that youth itself is meaningless without wisdom and that a life dedicated solely to sensual pleasure is a futile, enslaving pursuit.

The story highlights that all worldly pleasures, including youth and sensual gratification, are temporary and ultimately lead to emptiness.

Yayati's journey shows that even the most desirable experiences eventually lose their luster, revealing the ephemeral nature of worldly happiness. True greatness and wisdom are not found in physical strength or youthful energy, but in the lessons learned through reflection and experience. Yayati's eventual renunciation of his power and embrace of old age lead him to a deeper understanding and peace. The ultimate conclusion points towards spiritual knowledge and detachment as the path to salvation and true liberation.

Yayati's understanding of the cycle of birth and death and his eventual ascension to heaven demonstrate that freedom from worldly desires is key to attaining a higher spiritual state. The legend serves as a reminder to navigate life with awareness, understanding the duality of joy and challenge that comes with every experience. It encourages appreciation for the present moment and the wisdom gained through life's journey, rather than an endless pursuit of fleeting pleasures.

Yayati represents insatiable desire for worldly pleasure, Puru embodies self-sacrifice and responsibility, and Shukracharya is the powerful sage who curses and later amends Yayati's fate. While Yayati indulges in sensuous pleasure to the point of ruin, Puru bravely sacrifices his youth to save his father from the curse, though this leads to his wife's death and Yayati's final regret. Shukracharya, as a powerful figure bound by duty and emotion, grants Yayati the chance to exchange his decrepitude but is also swayed by Yayati's eventual remorse.

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