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GIRISH KARNAD'S TUGHLAQ: RE-CONTEXTUALIZING HISTORY

Sushree Sudipta

Research Scholar

Department of English

*Commonwealth Vocational University,
Tonga, Kingdom of Tonga*

Abstract:

Literature is always represented by writers. Writers are heavily influenced by the facts of history and most of the time they borrow the characters from the pages of history. They broadly set the story against the backdrop of historical characters. Always, s\he tries to find a lofty message from the known chapters of the history and represents them in a fictional presentation. S\he more or less finds similarities between the cultural heritage and traditional practices of ancient monarchs within the contemporary society where he lives. History serves as a good source of information about the glorious past and writers always adapt histological learning to their subject matters. They seek to, deliver a message through their adaptation of history. The literature of India is shaped by various luminous artists like Kalidas, Panini, Vatsyayana, Patanjali, Kabir, Rabindranath Tagore, Aurobindo and many more writers. The literature in the pre-independence period of our country was glorified by writers like R.K Narayan, Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand and many more gems of Indian literature with the theme of rich heritage and rustic culture and the dark side of the country which was covered by the clouds of superstition, racism, untouchability and many more social issues. Post-independent literature of modern India was glorified with a lofty vision transmitted by playwrights like Badal Sircar, Mahesh Dattani, Vijay Tendulkar, Manjula Padmanabhan, Girish Karnad and many more. Hence, Girish Karnad with his brilliant craftsmanship adapted and modified the character of Muhammad bin Tughlaq, one of the most intriguing contemporary figures of the Tughlaq dynasty, and reshaped the history with his powerful pen.

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History is often revisited by artists with the traditional techniques of fictionalizing the plots or characters with a vision for reshaping them. Writers often introduce and induce new characters by marking some similarities between the two eras. Girish Karnad has created Tughlaq as a political allegory which has reflected a marked resemblance to the contemporary period in which he struggled. With some striking similarities between the two ages, he has constructed the Tughlaq play by reflecting on his perspective of the current Nehruvian era by balancing the main plot of the grand narrative. He has aimed at creating a spectacular play without perturbing the primary data of the historical account of the 'Tughlaq Era.' Karand has served the idealistic vision of the monarch Tughlaq and his catastrophic failure and created a comparison between the then situations which resulted in the complete doom of post-independent India. Hence he has reconstructed some parts of the history in his play and somehow rendered a new shape in his play Tughlaq. He has traced some appealing facts in the character of Tughlaq and every modern man. The existentialist character Tughlaq and his quest for identity appealed him to the most. He has realized that the whims of Tughlaq are in every man. As a postcolonial writer, Karnad has depicted the struggles, trauma and the



political upheaval of our country in a subtle way. He gave birth to a modern play that resembled the contemporary moment against the backdrop of the Muhammadian period... He has elaborated in the introduction of the play,

“What struck me absolutely about Tughlaq’s history was that it was contemporary. The fact that here was the most idealistic, the most intelligent king ever to come on the throne of Delhi...and one of the greatest failures also. And within twenty years, this tremendously capable man had gone to pieces. This seemed to be both due to shortcomings within him, such as his impatience, cruelty, and this feeling that he had the only correct answer. And I felt in the early sixties India had come very far in the same direction – the twenty-year period seemed to me very much a striking parallel” (Karnad, *TUGH.*, 8).

Hence, it is revealed from the statement of Sri Karnad that the contemporary situation induced him to create a magnum opus that became an immediate success in the early sixties. By borrowing some of the major components from the layers of history, he has somehow composed a great narrative of the Tughlaq era with some of his imaginative characters. Although he has not chronicled the biography of Tughlaq, he has retained the pivotal essence of the character Tughlaq, his whim, his madness, his attitude and his temperament and his insane commands to his netizens. Though in some cases, Karnad had highlighted only the dark side of Tughlaq by veiling the positive aspects of his personality from the entire discussion of this paper, gradually it will be revealed how Karnad has mixed facts with fiction to represent the chaos of the contemporary period with which he was struggling.

From the layers of the history, it is revealed that there is so much conflicting information about the death of Tughlaq’s father and brother. It’s believed that while returning from Bengal, Ghiyasuddin Tughlaq and his elder son met with death because of unexpected lightning or the collapse of the building due to the parading of trapped elephants. But according to the records of historians like Ibn Batuta, Ferishta, and Badauni, the fall of the wooden structure built for the welcome ceremony was a preplanned conspiracy. But Ziauddin Barani, the court historian of Tughlaq tried to discharge him from the charges of murder.

Here, in this play, Karnad in scene one portrays Tughlaq as a bloody murderer of his father and brother. It is visible from the lines of the Play itself:

The crowd was discussing the suspense behind the death of Tughlaq’s father.

Young Man: “It was. The elephant suddenly went wild. The crowds must have frightened it. It just ran and dashed against the wooden pandal. And the pandal collapsed” (Karnad, *TUGH.*, 4).

Hindu: “Yes, yes, we know that. But tell me. How did the elephant know it was the time for prayer?” (Karnad, *TUGH.*, 5)

Third Man: “All right, don’t trust my word. But do you think a man like Sheikh Imam-Ud-din would lie? Well, he said in clear loud words that it was murder. And he said it publicly- I was there!” (Karnad, *TUGH.*, 5)

In scene -ten, Karnad has crafted the scenario in a way that extracts the exact truth from the dialogue between the stepmother and Muhammad himself. Muhammad answered the acquisition of patricide charged by his stepmother like this:



“I killed them- yes – but I killed them for an ideal. Don’t I know its results? Don’t you think I’ve suffered from the curse? My mother won’t speak to me- I can’t even look into a mirror for fear of seeing their faces in it. I had only three friends in the world -you, Najiband Barani. And now you want me to believe you killed Najib. Why are you doing this to me?” (Karnad, *TUGH.*, 65)

Hence, Karnad has employed many comical elements to provoke humour in this tragic play. He has introduced two comic characters, Aziz and Azam. They are the products of his imagination. Through these imaginative figures, Karnad has tried to develop a tone of satire with a serious message for society and showed the extent of corruption with a grave expression. Aziz and Azam are both sides of Tughlaq’s controversial character that always oscillates between virtues and vice.

In the entire play, Tughlaq is an existential character who quests for a self-identity. His decisions are paradoxically juxtaposed with each other. With the character of Aziz, Karnad portrayed the darker, villainous side of Tughlaq who ruthlessly murdered innocent souls and sometimes enjoyed the bloodbath of his noble citizens. From the discussion of Tughlaq and Aziz, it is revealed how manipulative both characters are.

Tughlaq says:

“Don’t overdo it. It is time for prayer. Remember, you are still his holiness Ghiyas-Ud-Din Abbasid...” (Karnad, *TUGH.*, 83)

It is extremely comical and humorously articulated by Karnad. The historical context of Muhammad bin Tughlaq is missing such characters. But Karnad has employed such figures with comical effects to heighten the funny mood for the audience. Hence, he has suppressed some major facts about Tughlaq.

After delving deep into the pages of the history of the Sultanate’s empire, we can realize the liberal temperament of Tughlaq towards his netizens and we could know several reforms headed by Muhammad. Being too generous to the poor people of his empire, he has relaxed many taxes on them. But Karnad has omitted this fact from the play by portraying the cruelty and the madness of Tughlaq.

While reconstructing the scenes of the play Tughlaq, Karnad has nowhere shown the impartial character of Tughlaq. Unlike other Muslim rulers, Tughlaq tried much to bring equality between Hindus and Muslims.

But just like history, Karnad labelled Tughlaq as Mad Muhammad, highlighting only his tyranny by neglecting his generosity towards the people. Actually, behind his every step there existed enough reasons and that’s why he had introduced drastic projects. But Karnad has restructured the story with some fictional characters and by representing the negative image of Tughlaq.

There are so many symbols like a game of chess, a scene of prayer, the garden of rose, the serpentine passage of the fort of Daultabad and the funeral and the deadly python used by Karnad to portray the imaginary, photographic representation of a period where the tyrant ruler crushed the essence of his subjects due to his mismanaged projects and ambitious plans for an unseen future. Karnad had emphasized only five years of the ruling period of Muhammad Tughlaq with a microscopic glance. Though it is a story play, Karnad has employed so many rich symbols to reflect the contemporary situation.

The game of chess used by Karnad is to signify the helpless citizens whom Tughlaq had used as pawns. The theme of disguise of Aziz whose character is almost identical to Tughlaq and echoes with the bloodshed of innocent people. It's not at all completely historical as the surface of the play indicates to the readers. Karnad has made a profound effect on the audience of the sixties by creating a



play similar to their political disillusionment, the theme of prayer in scene two replicates the recurrence of the scene of what Tughlaq had done to his father himself. The theme of the prayer as a dramatic irony continues to haunt Tughlaq throughout the play. Shihabud din as a loyal courtesan of Muhammad suddenly rebelled against him and ultimately, betrayed by Ratan Singh. Karnad as tactfully maintained the intrigues in the play by borrowing facts from the pages of history, particularly those written by Barani and Iban Batuta and other historians and from the account of foreign visitors. Karnad has deftly weaved the imaginary character of Aziz who with villainous planning and plotting succeeded in cheating on the people and was eventually awarded and elevated to a higher post. He has skillfully managed to ruin the lives of citizens only to fulfill his divine aspiration. The appearance of saint Ghiyas-ud-din and the murder of the saint by the dhobi imply the death of innocence. Karnad has delicately maintained the chaos and disorder through the imaginary characters. Tughlaq's quest for self-identity and his sublime journey to mingle with absolute being is running throughout the play as a main theme of the play.

Karnad has balanced the spiritual hunger of Tughlaq by incorporating his divine longing to be with the almighty. In the tenth scene of the play, Tughlaq says (soliloquies) to himself:

Tughlaq: "God, God in Heaven, please help me. Please do not let go of my hand. My skin drips with blood and I don't know how much of it is mine and how much of others I started in your path, why am I wandering naked in this desert now? I started in search of you. Why am I becoming a pig rolling in mud now? Raise me. Clean me. Cover me with your Infinite Mercy. I can only clutch at the hem of your cloak now with my bloody figures and plead. I can only beg-have pity on me. I have no one but you now. Only You. Only You...You...You...You..." (Karnad, *TUGH.*, 67)

Again and again, he has used the theme of prayer to intensify the situation. Religion has been contaminated by politics. Karnad has taken the facts from history by introducing the chapter on the copper currency by the Sultan in 1329 A.D. From the records of the Sultanate ruling period, it is deciphered from the excavation that copper currency was introduced by Muhammad with an equal value to gold and silver. As a result, fraudulent people thought it was a golden opportunity to cheat and every house of a Hindu or Muslim became a minted machine. With heaps of counterfeit coins in the rose garden, Sultan walked throughout the night.

Sleep has been employed by Karnad as a symbolic manifestation of the Sultan's high aspirations and at last in the thirteen scenes, it is revealed that Sultan is devoid of sleep. As an insomniac person, he has seen longing for sleep. It's like a metaphor for the intensely ambitious Tughlaq who has eluded sleep to dream high and at last, his, swollen, tired and sleepy eyes instantly embraced a trance-like situation in which he took refuge in the divine light from the humdrum of his bloody life. Hence in the thirteenth scene, he converses with Barani:

Barani: Is your Majesty not feeling well? (Karnad, *TUGH.*, 85)

Muhammad: I am suddenly feeling tired. And sleepy. For five years sleep has avoided me and now suddenly it is coming back. Go, Barani. But before you go – pray for us. (Closes his eye again) (Karnad, *TUGH.*, 85)

Karnad has used sleep as irony. The same sleep has vanished from Muhammad's eyes for five years. But in the last scene, disillusionment and hopelessness clouded his eyes. Loaded with the pressure of massacres, assassinations of near ones, patricide, fratricide and even matricide, his eyes



loathed with the bloodbath of the citizens of Delhi, and retired from this physical world may be for a temporary period.

From the accounts of history, Karnad has taken the conspiracy, violence, malignancy, jealousy, treachery, adultery, double standards, deceit, and spirituality and then incorporated them into this play of course with a contemporary touch.

While constructing a similar portrayal, with the anecdote of the thirteenth century, Karand has similarly portrayed the event of shifting of capital from Delhi to Daultabad (1327 A.D). With uncountable sufferings and untold agony of thousands of citizens, Karand highlighted the whimsical and mad decision of Tughlaq. But there was a certain reason behind his major decision. From the records of history, it's revealed that the threats of attacks Mongols always created a much pressure on the emperors of Delhi. Muhammad was no exception from that. Due to some genuine geographical reasons, he felt Daultabad was free from the attacks Mongols. Due to its settlement in the Northern region of our country, Daultabad was somehow free from foreign invasion.

According to some historians, Daultabad was positioned at the South end of his empire. So as an idealist, he wished for the integration of Muslims and Hindus and tried hard to bring peace to the two religions. Hence, he embraced the south region of the country to solidify the unity of the Hindus and the Muslims.

But while creating the historical play Tughlaq, Karnad had nowhere mentioned the generosity of the Sultan and his highly motivated outlook behind such shifting as recorded by different historians. It's evident from the accounts that no mass exodus of the population of Delhi was ordered. However, a large number of the population migrated from Delhi to Deogiri. Only due to hot weather and long-distance travel, many people die on the way. Soon the rebellion in Mabar and the outbreak of bubonic plague forced Sultan to change his decision. Again, the people from Deogiri had to shift to Delhi with much anguish because of the long-distance and many more untold sufferings.

However, Karnad had sketched the uprising of peasants in Doab in his play because of the increase in the revenues in that highly fertile land. In scene eight Muhammad, confesses to Barani about the uprising in the Deccan.

Muhammad: "Yes, And there's been another uprising in the Decan..." (Karnad, *TUGH.*, 55)

However, famine in Doab spread and created rebellion. This type of rebellion gradually became a stepping stone to his downfall.

Hence, Karnad has depicted a confused monarch who always shifted from one project to another failed project resulting in crises in his capital and ultimately people revolted against this. Though we know Tughlaq had reigned for 26 years. Karnad has only illustrated his five years of ruling period in his play. In this short five years of span, Karnad has mentioned many real historical figures like Barani, and Ainul Mulk who existed in that period. Also, he has imagined two fictional characters and employed those comic characters as Aziz and Azam. In a highly crafty way, Karnad has sketched the character of Tughlaq in a most heterogeneous way. According to Karnad, due to reckless temperament and rash decision-making attitude, Tughlaq's empire had fallen into pieces.

Be it a copper currency or shifting of capital, Tughlaq had experimented a lot with his whims. However, he had taken large steps for the expansion of agriculture in India and tried a lot to unify a strong bond between Hindus and Muslims. But Karnad has missed these facts while weaving the historical play, Tughlaq.

But with his limitation, he has been remembered for his mad projects and his brutal punishments for his traitors because of his highly suspicious nature. In this play, thirteen scenes were



woven into the tale where Karnad has closely interlinked some facts with fiction. Despite a lofty and broad personality, Karnad's Tughlaq with his large empire miserably crumbled because of his lust to control the entire land and by cruelly crushing and thrusting his unethical experiments on the public.

To conclude, from the accounts of history, Karnad has taken the conspiracy, violence, treachery, malignancy, adultery, jealousy, spirituality, double standardness and many more and then incorporated such traits into his contemporary play. He has intertwined some elements of Shakespearean Macbeth, and Camus' Caligula in the play Tughlaq to heighten the mood of the play. Also, he has fused history, myths, legends, folklore and some traditional techniques in the play with a contemporary touch so that we can connect with the play easily.

Karnad has rightly portrayed the highly ambitious personality of the Sultan, his purpose, his plans and his Machiavellianism. For giving a realistic touch, Karnad has intensified Tughlaq's highly ambitious project, his mad whims, and his ruthless attitude to successfully identify with the contemporary scenario of the 1960s. One can reinterpret and rediscover layers of meaning hidden beneath the surface of the play. The struggle for power and hegemony with violent oppression of the downtrodden can be easily traced through the scenes of the play.

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