

HISTORICAL AND LITERARY REPRESENTATION: DRAWING PARALLELS IN GIRISH KARNAD'S TUGHLAQ

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ABSTRACT

This paper is an attempt to trace similarities between the character 'Tughlaq', and the historical Sultan, to delve into the literary creation and analyze Karnad's delineation of an idealist king who was 'ahead of his times'. Tughlaq is a chronicle play, and it is interesting to study it both in its historical and contemporary context. The play was first written in Kannada (1964), was translated into English and was published in 1972. Since then it has been produced and presented on a stage umpteen number of times, and is now prescribed in Universities and colleges as one of the important texts by an Indian author. It is pertinent to find out the ever-swaying relevance of the play, which is evident in its acceptance and laudable response from the audience despite almost five decades since it was originally written. The paper seeks to study the appositeness of the play at the present times, thematically and as a literary piece of work in terms of its dialogues, use of language and lucidity.

KEYWORDS: *Historicity, Tyranny, Visionary, and Contemporaneity*

INTRODUCTION

Girish Karnad (born May 19, 1938) is a renowned Indian playwright, author, actor, and film director whose films and plays, written largely in Kannada, explore the present by way of the past. The use of history and mythical lends to it a broader spectrum and framework to his writing and as **T.S.Eliot** says of Joyce in his review of Ulysses in The Dial:

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 pursuing 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.

Karnad, also seems to be using the historical king as a counterpoint to comment on the political situation of the country, it is a political satire, in which he uses his imaginative creativity to conceptualize a situation in the 14th century, when Tughlaq, the sultan implemented his innovative and experimental ideas, only to face failure, defeat and eventual desolation. He loses his companion and consorts the historian Barani, has his mother killed and is unable to sleep peacefully at night. The play ends in the thirteenth scene with the Sultan all broken and crushed under the weight of his own ambitious but ill-executed plans.

As **Karnad** comments in his write-up, *The March of Tughlaq*:

Muhammad Tughlaq was one of the most brilliant sultans to ascend the throne in Delhi and one of the most spectacular failures as well. Among the many innovations for which he is remembered as the 'Mad Sultan' was the moving of his capital from Delhi, which was close to the borders of his empires to Daulatabad, which was at its center, and therefore, more secure from outside invasions, and the substitution of copper currency for gold and silver coins- administrative measures which have been acknowledged by later thinkers as sound and even necessary, but which collapsed disastrously, landing his kingdom in chaos, because of the intemperate haste which they were introduced and the extreme cruelty with which they were enforced.(xi)

The character of the historical king merits a looking into, beyond the historical commentary and facts, an understanding of the 'man', the person whom Karnad has deftly delineated through the course of the play, from being a headstrong autocratic monarch, to one who is abandoned and wasted towards the end of the play. Unlike the Greek Tragedies, we do not find a divine interplay in bringing about his downfall; if at all his hamartia is his inability to foresee, but that does not essentially render him stripped off his heroic traits, his risk-taking enterprises and his urge to challenge the status quo through his innovative practices. That he suffers towards the end of the play and regrets the death of his people by hordes further intensifies his tragic stature as a 'tragic king'.

The paper would first cover the historical facts of the Sultan of Delhi, his various administrative measures, and its outcome, as it has been chronicled through the ages, then read Karnad's Tughlaq, and tries to study him as a man, an innovator who took measures for the welfare of his people and his kingdom. It would finally be attempting to study the contemporary relevance of the play, which makes it still so commercially viable for stage performances and for Universities to prescribe it in the curricula of the Under Graduate and Post Graduate students. Do we still not have political leaders or administrators who make us wonder at the viability of their projects? The kind of debate that every move of the ruling government or the opposition creates in the social media and on Television, makes one introspect on the same questions that the play must have posited before the readers of 'Tughlaq' in the 1960's and 1970's. The play then is not dated, it is rather flowing by the time, and continues to have relevance even today. Moreover, "Tughlaq", has always been used in the Indian context as an adjective for a person whose plans go amiss, whose projects go astray! The paper, then establishes these significant parallels and thereby seeks to ascertain the nature of Karnad's play as being one for all seasons.

MUHAMMAD BIN TUGHLAQ – THE SULTAN OF DELHI (1324-51)

After the death of Balban in 1286, there persisted a decade of confusion and mismanagement in the Delhi Sultanate, until Alauddin Khalji ascended the throne by treacherously killing his uncle and father in law, Jalaluddin Khalji in 1296. He continued to rule till 1316. **Satish Chandra** notes:

By the time Alauddin Khalji came to the throne, the position of the Delhi Sultanate was fairly well consolidated in the central portion of the empire, i.e., the portion comprising the upper Ganga valley and eastern Rajasthan. This emboldened the Sultans to undertake a series of internal reforms and experiments, aimed at improving the administration, strengthening the army, gearing up the machinery of the land revenue administration, taking steps to expand and improve the cultivation and providing for the welfare of the citizens in the rapidly expanding

towns. Not all the measures were successful, but they mark important new departures. Some of the experiments failed on account of lack of experience, some because they were not well conceived, or on account of the opposition of vested interests. They do however show that the Turkish state had now acquired a measure of stability and that it was no longer concerned merely with warfare and law and order.(101)

It was in this background that Ghiasuddin Tughlaq ascended the throne. He established a new dynasty by revolting against the descendant of Alauddin Khalji. The Tughlaqs ruled over Delhi from 1320 – 1412. There is a narrative that Ghiasuddin Tughlaq was killed by his son Mohammad Bin Tughlaq, but it has not been confirmed by the historians. The former on his return from Bengal after a successful campaign was being welcomed in a pageant. A wooden pavilion was erected for the Sultan from where he could witness the spoils of the war. When the captured elephants were being paraded, the wooden pavilion fell and Ghiasuddin Tughlaq was killed. Mohammad Bin Tughlaq ascended the throne and ruled for the next twenty-seven years.

Mohammad Bin Tughlaq was one of the most remarkable rulers of the age. He was deeply read in religion and philosophy. He was a scholar conversant in Persian, Arabic, Turkish and even Sanskrit. It is believed that he was liberal minded, and did not discriminate against Hindus or people of low birth. **Chandra** remarks:

Unfortunately, he was inclined to be hasty and impatient. That is why so many of his experiments failed, and he has been dubbed an 'ill-starred idealist' The most controversial step which Mohammad Tughlaq took soon after his accession was the so-called transfer from Delhi to Deogir which was renamed Daulatabad Though Tughlaq built a road from Delhi to Daulatabad and set up rest houses on the way to help the travelers, Daulatabad was more than 1500km away. Many people died due to the rigours of the journey and the heat many who reached Daulatabad felt homesick, for some of them had lived for several generations in Delhi. After a couple of years Muhammad Tughlaq decided to abandon Daulatabad, largely because he found that just as he could not control the South from Delhi, he could not control North India from Daulatabad. (107-108)

Apart from shifting of the capital the other 'Tughlaqan' move for which the Sultan is notoriously famous is the introduction of 'token currency'. Following precedents from China and Mongol, Tughlaq decided to have token currency in place of Gold and Silver, since there was a shortage of these precious metals. He introduced bronze coins, which would have the same value as a silver coin. Monetization is a modern phenomenon, but it boomeranged, it led to massive corruption and the minting of counterfeit coins further led to empty coffers. This measure too had to be taken back. History books in schools highlight these as the two major causes of his downfall, and these have been used in the play as the primary causes of his destruction. However, **Chandra** maintains:

The failure of these two experiments affected the prestige of the sovereign, and also meant wastage of money. However, the government quickly recovered. The Moroccan traveler, Ibn Battutta, who came to Delhi in 1333, could not see any harmful after – effects of these experiments.

Security of the frontiers was a far more serious issue, and the threat of the Mongol attaches kept looming large over the empire. Historical records of medieval writes like Ziauddin Barani (1285-1357), Ibn Batutta (1304- 1369?) Firishta (1560-1620), provide some factual records and information about the Sultan and his times. It is interesting to note that Karnad has used Barani as one of the important characters in the play, who records the events as they unfold, gives the king's counsel and eventually leaves him, in the play, as he was not convinced with the measures taken and its aftermath. It

is recorded that he died in utter penury later in his life.

TUGHLAQ: THE PLAY

Girish Karnad's Tughlaq is divided into thirteen scenes; the play set in the year AD 1327. It begins with a note of apprehension about the future. The decision of the Sultan is being questioned, the old man succinctly offers a critique of the folly of the king, who has agreed to be 'kicked by an infidel', causing an 'insult to Islam'. No sooner has the announcement been made about the Hindu Pandit Vishnu Prasad being compensated by the king along with a 'post in the Civil Service to ensure him a regular and adequate income', we have the Sultan, Mohammad announces his decision to shift the capital of his kingdom from Delhi to Daulatabad. He says:

Your surprise is natural. But I beg you to realize that this is no mad whim of a tyrant. My ministers and I took this decision after careful thought and discussion. My empire is large now and embraces the South and I need a capital which is at its heart. But for me the most important factor is that Daulatabad is a city of the Hindus and as the capital it will symbolize the bond between the Hindus and the Muslims which I wish to develop and strengthen in my kingdom. (Karnad 4)

Karnad begins the play with the crucial decision, right at the onset. The voice of the common people, anxious about the well being of the citizens, being smothered by the announcer and then by the tyrannical decision of the Sultan by asking the citizens to 'accompany me to Daulatabad'. The old man out rightly, unflinchingly brands this decision as 'madness' (Karnad 4). It is soon followed by a narration of events regarding the 'tyrant' Sultan, who treacherously killed his father to get the throne. Karnad is replicating a historical fact in the dialogue of the 'Third man' who says, "Now he got his father's throne. He isn't happy with that". This is soon followed by Aazam and Aziz; the latter dressed as a Brahmin, an erstwhile Muslim dhobi, who is gloating over hoodwinking the Sultan in his own game.

The exposition scene foreshadows the subsequent action of the play. The Sultan's decision of shifting the capital to Daulatabad has been sandwiched, so to say, between, the conversation of the critical old man and the common men and with that of Aazam and Aziz. The Sultan in his self-justifying self-righteousness merely make a regal appearance but leaves the reader unimpressed. We are soon after introduced to a more private scene of the Sultan with his Stepmother, who is anxious about her son not sleeping at night. The Sultan expresses his concern about his countrymen:

I pray to the Almighty to save me from sleep. All day long I have to worry about tomorrow, but it is only when the night falls that I can step beyond all that I am not worried about my enemies I am only worried about my people. (Karnad 11)

The game of chess, becomes a metaphor for the political tightrope that he has to walk, because of his trusted Governor of Avadh, Ain Ul Mulk, marching to Delhi, while his look alike, Sheikh Iman ud din rabble-raising by inciting people against Mohammad, by openly saying, "Your Majesty has forfeited the right to rule, by murdering your father and brother at prayer" (Karnad 13). The step mother's assessment of the Sultan as being, 'impulsive', and Barani's concern over Najib's, 'influence on the Sultan', provides a further chink in the Sultan's armor. But, the calculating Machiavellian Sultan is soon revealed to us when he craftily persuades Imam ud din to act as his envoy to meet Ain Ul Mulk, who was marching to attack Delhi.

The plan made with his advisor Najib was effortlessly accomplished, when Imam, the look-alike was killed in the battle against Ain Ul Mulk. The intriguing Sultan managed to hit two birds with a stone, and eliminate two of his detractors, by pitting them against one another.

Having deftly established Mohammad as a scheming, ruthless politician, Karnad, once again brings in the pivotal point of the play, the decision of the Sultan for which he was most criticized, that of shifting the capital, along with the people, you and old, from Delhi to Daulatabad, and along with it his idea of replacing silver dinars with that of copper. He says, "From next year, we shall have copper currency in our empire along with the silver dinars". It is the emperor's seal on the currency that gives it value, as he had heard was the practice in China, where paper currency had been introduced. The historical Sultan as has been mentioned in the previous section, and as has been recorded by historians, had implemented this measure as a visionary. It is often established that he was ahead of his times. Both these actions led to anarchy and suffering of the people and caused huge loss to the kingdom, and ruined his reputation as a ruler. To this day, 'Tughlaq' is used as an epithet to describe an ill-measured action taken by a person in haste. The Sultan also ruthlessly kills Shiab ud din, and manipulates the facts to win the favor and sympathy of his people, he was desperately trying to preserve that which was slipping out of his hands like sand. He announces:

I want Delhi vacated immediately. Every living soul in Delhi will leave for Daulatabad within a fortnight. I was too soft, I can see that now, they'll only understand the whip. Everyone must leave. (Karnad 45)

The characters of Aziz and Aazam, serve to offer a commentary on the decisions of the Sultan, and also as a mouthpiece of how the common men twisted the political decisions to gain profit. Aziz, who has disguised himself as a Brahmin to draw mileage out of the Sultan's policy of inculcating Hindu Muslim harmony, unabashedly announces:

Just listen to what I'm telling you—you are not going to pinch any coins, you are going to make them. Make counterfeit coins, you understand?(Karnad 50)

Karnad delineates the character of the Sultan, through Aziz, Aazam, the old man, his stepmother, Barani and other Dramatis personae. In scene eight, we find Sultan in a mellow frame of mind, who is unable to sleep, he regrets his inability to sleep peacefully, moans the loss of his youthful innocence, and indulges in self-pity, at getting things out of the hands. Karnad has invested the character of the Sultan with a poetic, tragic streak and with human tenderness as well, when he utters the following lines to one of the guards, a young boy

Nineteen. Nice age! An age when you think you can clasp the whole world in your palm like a rare diamond. I was twenty one when I came to Daulatabad first, and built this fort No, young man, I don't envy you your youth. All that you have to face and suffer is still ahead of you. Look at me. I have searched for that moment since then and here I am, still reaching for that (Karnad 55)

In the Same Strain, he Confesses to Barani, the Historian

Fortunate! You can read a book when you don't feel sleepy. I can't sleep. I can't read. Even Rumi, who once used to transport me, has become simply a web of words. Do you know, five years ago I actually used to pray to God, not to send me any sleep? (Karnad 55)

He is worried about the rebellions within his ranks in Delhi, Deccan and other parts, apart from the concern that

introduction of copper coins has boomeranged, with every Hindu house having become a domestic mint. He is aware of being called, “Mad Muhammad”, and pleads to Barani, “How can I become wise again”. It is dialogues of this tone and tenor which redeems the Sultan and invests him with qualities which redeem an otherwise tyrannical king, who manipulates people and strategically manoeuvres his subjects. He orders his step mother to be stoned to death, like an adulteress, for having got Najib, his political advisor killed. This decision is followed by a cry of anguish:

God, God in Heaven, please help me. Please don't 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 on your path, Lord, why am I wandering naked in the desert now? I started in search of you. Why am I become a pig rolling in gory mud? Raise me, clean me. Cover me with your infinite mercy. I can only clutch at the hem of your cloak with my bloody fingers and plead. I can only beg – have pity on me. I have no one but you now. Only You You You (Karnad 67)

Aziz's real identity is revealed to the Sultan towards the end of the play. The former confesses his misdeeds, but also announces that he had been only following every move of the Sultan for which from a mere thief, he disguised himself as a Brahmin, then counterfeited copper coins, when competition became tough, he bought land and sought for the farmer's subsidy, and finally killed Ghias ud din, to become a guest in the palace of Sultan. Barani warns the Sultan of Aziz's misdemeanors and wants him to be killed. Ironically the Sultan appoints Aziz as an officer in Deccan. He justifies himself in the following words:

If justice were as simple as you think or logic as beautiful as I had hoped, life would have been so much clearer. I have been chasing these words now for five years and now I don't know if I am pursuing a mirage or fleeing a shadow Barani, all I need now is myself and my madness – madness to prance in a field eaten by the scarecrow of violence. I am suddenly feeling tired. And sleepy. For five years sleep had avoided me and now suddenly it's flooding back. (Karnad 85)

The play ends with the Sultan falling asleep and then again waking up with a vacant look in his eyes as the sound of prayers resounds in the backdrop. The play, sums up the crucial junctures of the Sultan's seven-year long political career, where he ends up in piling a heap of dead bodies in his rose garden, in causing riots and massacres, and in hitting the economy of empire at its rock bottom, with his zealous plans, which were poorly executed and ill-conceived. Karnad's efficacy as a playwright rests in dramatizing the events succinctly in lucid expressions, which are most poetical when the Sultan gives his own self-assessment. Undoubtedly, the literary Tughlaq has been drawn from the historical emperor, Karnad draws from historical facts and dramatizes the crucial episodes, whereby he manages to redeem the Sultan from being an outright villain, rather he is presented as a learned man who had a vision, but it misfired. The realization of the Sultan of his failures in the last five years is rendered in long speeches which reveal his understanding of his failings, his inability to pray and to sleep makes him a truly tragic figure.

CONCLUSIONS - CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE OF KARNAD'S TUGHLAQ

As has been mentioned initially, Karnad's Tughlaq deals with the reign of the fourteenth-century ruler of Delhi, Muhammad bin Tughlaq, who is acknowledged as one of the most brilliant rulers in Indian history and one of the most spectacular failures as well. The play has had an enduring popularity since it was first staged in 1966. It finds a special place in Graduate and Post Graduate courses of Indian English Literature at the Universities of India. It is studied as an

important text of Indian Drama, and has been also produced on the stage by renowned directors, such as Alyque Padmasee, B. V. Karanth, Ebrahim Alkazi, B. Chandrashekar, Shombu Mitra, and has been translated into Urdu even Pakistan, for it lends itself to interpretations of the political climate, where a political leader falls short of his own and people's expectations despite the best motives and intentions.

Politically, the play shows, Tughlaq's failed attempts to be fair and liberal towards a majority Hindu population that he is obliged as an Islamic ruler to persecute. His decision to shift the capital to Daulatabad is a nightmare of starvation, death, and disease, leading to violence, and reveals a man with sadistic, manipulative impulses. Karnad hints at the contemporaneity of the play's history, and its resemblance to particular phases in the political experience of post-colonial India. It is often read as a critique of the policies of Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, but if we see it even in the present scenario, there would be remarkable parallels in the government set up, not of any one political party, but of almost all of them. Political power allows one party the clout to initiate a scheme, which is criticized by the opposition, who in turn do the same in their regime. Necessity makes strange bedfellows; the antagonizing parties would join hands to form a coalition, as and when required, while the same was offering a critique of the other in the past. The real stakeholders, the people of the nation, are at the mercy of the ones in power. The play can be seen also as a metaphor of the select ones in power and those who are at the receiving end, the majority of the people, while there are also characters in real life, like Aziz who invariably make hay while the sun shines.

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