

TWO FACES OF POWER AND ITS TRAGIC MISUSE IN GIRISH KARNAD'S TUGHLAQ

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ABSTRACT

Tughlaq, the magnum opus of Kannada dramatist Girish Karnad (1938–2019), is a historical play. It deals with the last five years of the troubled reign of Sultan Muhammad Bin Tughlaq who is acknowledged as one of the most brilliant rulers in Indian history and one of its most spectacular failures as well. It gives us a peep into the nature of power and its relationship with kingship and the people and what happens when power-wielders go awry. The play is a minor classic of Indo-Anglian drama and it will be read and enjoyed, so long as English language and literature last.

KEYWORDS: *Idealist, Secularism, Revolt, Crafty, Rebellion, Anguish, Shrewd, Intrigue, Chaos, Disillusionment*

INTRODUCTION

Originally written in Kannada by the Kannada writer and dramatist Girish Karnad, *Tughlaq* was translated into English by Karnad himself in 1970. With an introduction by U.R. Ananthamurthy, the play, which has become classic not only in Kannada drama but also in Hindi, Marathi, Bengali and English drama, faithfully reflects the political mood of disillusionment that followed the Nehru era of idealism in the country. The recipient of Padma Shri, Padma Bhushan and the prestigious Jnanpith Award, a multi-hyphenate personality, Girish Karnad recounts the genesis of the play and talks of the various interpretations it has had in the different regional theatres of India. The play which is a political allegory, dramatizes the protagonist's love of power and its subsequent collapse. From the beginning to the end, it explores the paradox of the idealistic Sultan Muhammad Bin Tughlaq whose reign is considered as one of the most spectacular failures in the history of India. In June 1971, Karnad himself commented on this beautifully structured 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 more one of the greatest failures also. And within a span of twenty years this tremendously capable man had gone to pieces. This seems to be both due to his idealism as well as the shortcomings within him, such as his impatience, his cruelty, his feeling that he had the only correct answer. And I felt in the early sixties India had also come very far in the same direction – the twenty-year period seems to me very much a striking parallel”.

The scenes in Karnad's *Tughlaq* are so juxtaposed that the reader is not allowed to be either carried away by his hatred towards Muhammad Tughlaq or by his sympathy for his utopianism. They are episodic but they intersect on to produce a complex picture of the Sultan as it gradually developed during the five years of his dominion. The central figure in the play is the Sultan who wanted to shape his kingdom according to his whims and desires. He found a new world of beauty in ancient Greek thought, which he did not find in the entire Arabic literature; even in the Holy Koran. The major

focus is on him and his plans and strategies. As a historical play its canvas is wide enough and there is a large variety of characters and places represented in it. The very first scene of the play which is expository in nature, introduces the readers to a conversation among common citizens of Delhi about the new king's idealistic, innovative and secular policies in a royal announcement.

There are at least two Tughlaqs in the play and accordingly two faces of power. One of them was a visionary who had dreams to materialize for his people; the other was a crafty and pragmatic politician whose entire politics was based on considerations other than morality or ideology. He wanted to be different from the Sultans that had ascended the throne prior to him. Intrigues, jealousies, conspiracies, deviousness and unscrupulousness seem to be the essential ingredients of the dirty game of politics in the play where friends turn foes and foes turn friendly. Here brothers are no brothers, mothers are no mothers and sons are no sons and these are the very conflicts that make the play really substantial and meaningful. The idealistic personality of Sultan is in sharp contrast to his own role as a conspirator in eliminating his father. Even his devoted and trusted friend Shihab-ud-din who is an idealist and has put his full faith in Tughlaq's rule, changes colours in course of time. The play reveals how the rulers or those at the helm of affairs conduct themselves. They pursue a democratic ideal but perpetrate just its opposite. The Sultan himself states that he had killed his father and elder brother for 'an ideal', so that he could have power, strength to shape his thoughts, strength to act and strength to recognize himself. He adopts a clear cut policy of 'Divide and Rule' and manipulates to win over the Hindu Community to his side. In scene third of the play, king calls the meeting after the prayer and requests the citizens to attend it in large numbers. But the people do not bother to come to attend it as they absolutely know the dexterous Sultan's hidden plans and designs. He does not levy *Jiziya* – a discriminatory poll tax on Hindus and claims to be impartial so that the Hindu may side with him in case of Muslim revolt. People criticize him and his plan to shift the capital from Delhi to Daulatabad on strategic grounds of its central location and grounds of being a Hindu city which also baffles the Muslim faction of the capital. Here he seems to be a ruler committed to the ideals of secularism and equal respect to all religions. His logic behind this unwise step is that "Daulatabad is a city of the Hindus and as the capital it will symbolize the bond between Muslims and Hindus which I wish to develop and strengthen in my kingdom".

Many a times, while going through the play, the reader takes the king to be a dreamer who, in his imaginative mood, likes to soar high into the sky considering himself addressing his people to share their pleasures and pains with him. In the second scene of the play, while playing the game of chess with Step-Mother, he reveals his thoughts in an emphatic manner as follows:

"I pray to the Almighty to save me from sleep. All day long I have to worry about tomorrow but it's only when the night falls that I can step beyond all that I want to climb up, up, up to the top of the tallest tree in the world, and call out to my people: Come, my people, I am waiting for you. Confide in me your worries. Let me share your joys. Let's laugh and cry together and then, let's pray. Let's pray till our bodies melt and flow and our blood turns into air. History is ours to play with – ours now! Let's be the light and cover the earth with greenery. Let's be darkness and cover up the boundaries of nations. Come! I am waiting to embrace you all!.. Tell me, how dare I waste my time sleeping? And don't tell me to go and get married and breed a family because I won't sleep".

The play throws a flood of light on how Sultan aspired to be an architect of a secular and progressive India without any distinction between Hindus and Muslims. His idealism goes with self-righteousness and his self-reflexivity

about power shows that he is quite aware of the responsibilities of a ruler. The scene sixth of the play focuses on the dubious and nefarious ways of the king when he announces his decision of introducing copper currency in the empire, along with the silver dinars which would be exchangeable with the copper coins. Here he urges the collections of Amirs to support him in his moves. He asserts that he aspires to build a new future for India and to achieve that he direly needs their help. Here the monarch virtually kneels before them in order to beg their support and says: "Because people are afraid will you mistrust me too? Laugh at me if you like, criticize me, but please don't distrust me. I can order you all to obey me but tell me, how do I gain your full trust? I can only beg for it (*pleading*). I have hopes of building a new future for India and I need your support for that. If you don't understand me, and ask me to explain myself. I'll do it. If you don't understand my explanations, bear with me in patience until I can show you the results. But please don't let me down, I beg you. I'll kneel before you if you wish but please don't let go off my hand". However, a long and tense silence is the only response he gets from the Amirs. In an appalled and nonplussed manner the Amirs say that a king should not beg support, rather he should command it. Faced with rebellion from Amirs, the monarch raises certain philosophical questions on the nature of man and the destiny of a whole kingdom in the following words:

"I have been asking myself just one question. I am king. I wear the royal robes. I have honoured myself with the title of Sultan. But what gives me the right to call myself a king? Am I a king because I am the son of a king? Or is it because I can make the people accept my laws and the army move to my commands? Or can self-confidence alone justify it? I ask you –all of you – what would you have me do to become a real king in your eyes? ... You are all silent. The others only tell me what I should not do but what I should. Until I know what else to do, Shihab-ud-din I have to go on clutching the scepter in my fist. But I am not happy".

It is evident from the play that Muhammad is furious with the Amirs and the questions that he is putting to them are not questions to which he is not really seeking an answer but apparently he is conscious about the need for legitimizing the power of even a hereditary ruler. Tughlaq is one that sees power as a game of chess in which there is someone who wins and someone who loses and the whole effort is to stay in power and if possible to enhance it. In the play, on the point of power and being a real king Aziz states Sultan's version in a befitting manner when in scene ninth of the play he says to Azam that raping a woman only out of lust is a pointless game. In his view: "First one must have power – the authority to rape. Then everything takes on meaning"! Similarly, to be a real king is to "rob a man and then ... punish him for getting robbed". Kannada poet, G.H. Nayak also, in his article entitled 'Karnad's Tughlaq' says that the play provides "insights into the universal truth concerning the relationship that exists or takes shape between Power and Man".

The dramatist, in the play, makes a careful analysis on frustration and anguish of an idealist human being, a great scholar, a shrewd and crafty manipulator, an astute, politician and a true visionary in the real sense. The play is all about the psychological problems, dilemmas and disputes encountered by the emperor. Girish Karnad has manifested him to be a man of opposites, the ideal and the real, the divine aspiration and the deft intrigue. He wanted his subjects to read the 'Koran' and made the prayer compulsory five times a day. He is what he is inspite of his vast knowledge and an intense desire for divine grace. He wants his people to follow him, but only if they have complete faith in him. The King announces that he has to mend his subjects's ignorant minds before he can think of their souls. The playwright projects the curious contradictions in the complex personality of Muhammad Tughlaq, who was at once a dreamer and a man of action, benevolent and cruel, devout and callous. He was well-versed in Greek, Persian and Arabic literature whose learning of the holy 'Koran' was far better than that of any Sheikh or Sayyid. He wanted his life to be a poem, a garden of roses where

even thorns may prick and quicken the sense. But how could he “explain tomorrow to those who haven’t even opened their eyes to the light of today”. People could never understand their monarch as his ideas were in advance of his times. He was a split personality representing the deep-rooted dualities of human nature. An exceptionally intelligent but spectacularly unsuccessful king knew it thoroughly well that people of a number of religions were his subjects, and they must all be treated impartially, equally and uprightly. On the Sultan’s ‘divided self’, K.S. Ramamurthy aptly comments: “He is at once an idealist and crafty politician, a humanist and a tyrant, a man who has murdered sleep and yet not a Macbeth haunted by supernatural solicitations, a man who thinks and broods too much and yet not a Hamlet incapable of action or guilty of delay”.

The playwright further mentions that all ethics and ideals of Sultan for making his people prosperous, cheerful and contented come to naught as there is chaos, corruption, hatred, violence, havoc and starvation throughout the country. The citizens are fed up and tired of maladministration. There is not a single grain in the royal granary. Roads are littered with skeletons. Hapless and ill-fated people are dying without food. They are eating burnt strips of skin of all kinds of animals. Some of them crowd around a butcher’s shop to catch the blood pouring from the slaughtered beasts to drink it. There is draught and famine stalking all around and they are dying unnoticed, unheard and unsung. Justice is being denied to the common people by his corrupt ministers and state officers like Aazam, Karim and Aziz who kills ‘a saint like Ghiyas-ud-din Abbasid’. The Step-mother, at this stage, reminds him:

“It’s only seven years ago that you came to the throne. How glorious you were then, how idealistic, how full of hopes. Look at your kingdom now. It’s become a kitchen of death”

In the eighth scene of the play the Sultan confesses his restlessness to Barani and asks him to prescribe a medicine for what he calls his ‘honeycomb of diseases’. At this the later submits as follows:

“I am a humble historian, your majesty: it’s not for me to prescribe ... It is difficult thing to suggest to a king and I beg you to forgive me if it hurts. But you are a learned man, Your majesty, you are known the world over for your knowledge of philosophy and poetry. History is not made only in statecraft; its lasting results are produced in the ranks of learned men. That’s where you belong, Your Majesty, in the company of learned men. Not in the market of corpses”.

Here the artful sovereign declines Barani’s prescription because that means he must give up playing the Sultan which he would never agree. “You want me to retire from my throne? ... I have often thought of that myself – to give up this futile see-saw struggle and go to Mecca. Sit there by the Kaaba and search for the peace which Daulatabad hasn’t given me. What bliss! But it isn’t that easy. It isn’t as easy as abandoning the patient in the wilderness because there’s no cure for his disease”.

The crafty historian and Islamic scholar Barani also pleads the king whom his beloved subjects call ‘Mad Muhammad’ in the prevailing horrible scenario.

“Your Majesty, there was a time when you believed in love, in peace, in God. What has happened to those ideals? You won’t let your subjects pray. You torture them for the smallest offence. Hang them on suspicion. Why this bloodshed? Please stop it, and I promise Your Majesty something better will emerge out of it”.

The play further supplements that the unscrupulous politician Sultan is charged with patricide, fratricide and matricide. One who expected love and peace, got revolt hatred and contempt and was disliked by the Hindus and the

Muslims alike. His indiscriminate cruelty, crude and immature royal edicts shatter all his dreams. His mental and spiritual agony is poignantly described when he falls to his knees and pleads God for his mercy after he has sentenced his Step-mother to death. A stunned and startled Muhammad clutches his hands to his breast and beseeches:

“God, God in Heaven, please help me. Please, don't let go off 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, Lord, why am I wandering naked in this desert now? I started in search of you. Why am I become a pig rolling in this 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. Only You ... You ... You ...”

CONCLUSIONS

The play ends at a serene and sombre note. Muhammad ponders over his past and realises that he has been chasing fleeing shadows all this time and prayerless life has given him nothing but insomnia, restlessness, despair and desolation. Thousands have been slaughtered and thousands others have died of deprivation and starvation. He orders his citizens to return from Daulatabad to Delhi. Muezzin's call for prayer is heard. However, Sultan is so exhausted and drowsy that he falls asleep while sitting on throne. He wakes up, dazed and puzzled, after the sound of the call for prayer fades away and cannot comprehend who he is and where he is. In the sleep of Sultan, it seems, that the dramatist wishes to convey the idea that brutality, atrocity and crime never pay in the long run.

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