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Girish Karnad's *Tughlaq*: Trace of Historical Elements

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Abstract

Girish Karnad's second play *Tughlaq* (1964) has been remarkably fabricated as a historical play. It was first produced in Kannada in 1965 after that it was translated into other languages. It is a play set in the medieval past of India based on History but politically relevant to the contemporary period. Karnad took a historical theme- the turbulent reign and paradoxical character of Tughlaq- for developing the plot of this famous play.

Keywords- Transcreation, Paradoxical, Scripture, Moharram, History, War

Karnad's famous play *Tughlaq* is a historical play which deals with the complex and paradoxical character of Muhamad-Bin-Tughlaq who ruled over India for twenty six years. Characters, plot, scenes, actions, events, and attires of the play fully conforms it historicity. But there are some confusions among historians about the date of his accession but on the basis of extant records it may be said that Tughlaq's accession took place in Zil Hij 724/November-Devember 1324 and his coronation forty days later, i.e. in A. H. 725/January 1325. He died on 21 Muharram 752/20 March, 1351.

Indian drama can be traced back to the Vedic times at least, and it is clear that the Hindus of over two thousand years ago, had their own theory of drama, and that in their dramatic practice they avoided - perhaps unconsciously - both the severe austerity and simplicity of Greek Tragedy and the opulent extravagance of the ancient Chinese drama. The dramatic tradition of the ancient Hindus was fully developed. Bharata says in his celebrated *Natyashastra*, which has been given the status of the fifth Veda, that Lord Brahma created the synthetic art forms of Dance and Drama by taking the "word" from the *Rig Veda*, "gesture" from the *Yajur Veda*, "song" from the *Sama Veda*, and "rasa" from the *Atharva Veda*; and the art of Drama was meant to promote the fulfillment of all the four purusharthas, viz.,

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"Dharma", "Artha", "Kama" and "Moksha", or to put it in other words, the goods, the useful, the beautiful, and the true. Thus drama was expected to comprehend the whole are of life, ranging from the material to the spiritual, the phenomenal to the transcendent, and provide at once relaxation and entertainment, instruction and illumination.

The new theatre which emerged in our country under the impact of the Western culture was totally different in all these aspects, because it had taken shape in the imitation of an alien theatre, fundamentally different in its world view and aesthetic approach. In our Indian view of life, the purpose of drama and theatre was to create a feeling of pleasure or bliss "Rasa" by delineating different situations, mental status and feelings of human beings. On the other hand, the purpose of the Western drama, was to reveal struggles of life in their various forms. In the Western outlook, some kind of conflict between gods and man, man and man, man and nature, and between different emotions, desires and tendencies within man itself, that is at almost every level, is inevitable. It was, therefore, difficult to conceive of drama without some form of conflict.

Karnad mostly follows traditional sources which present before us a prejudiced and biased view of the life and time of Muhammad-bin-Tughlaq, who was a visionary and idealist but at the same time the most misunderstood monarch of his time. Karnad deviates from historical sources whenever he thought it necessary for artistic and dramatic purposes.

Basically Tughlaq is the tale of a dreamer. He desires to acquire perfection through political idealism and strives hard to achieve. There were several stagings of the play in various Indian languages and all were successful. In 1970 it was performed in English.

The action of the play takes place first of all in Delhi in the year 1327, then on the road from Delhi to Daulatabad, and lastly in and around the fort in Daulatabad five years later.

Tughlaq is a learned man; he studies deeply the various branches of knowledge. He has made Ain-ul-Mulk the governor of Avadh, to go to Deccan on the same post but he does not want to go to Deccan, so, he marches towards Delhi against the Sultan. In the meantime Tughlaq learns from Najib that Sheikh Imam-ud-din who is in Delhi has accused him of patricide and fratricide and also that he resembles Sultan in his appearance. Now Tughlaq plans a dirty plot to kill two birds with one stone. Firstly he invites the Sheikh to address a congregation in the big Mosque in Daulatabad to analyse the administration of the Sultan. He placates the Sheikh and makes him ready for the address. The statement of Sultan: "No one can go far on his knees. I have a long way to go. I can't afford to crawl-I have ago gallop." (Tq, p.164)

The play shows Tughlaq's increasing taxes in Doab. He thinks that Doab being a fertile land lying between the Ganga and the Yamuna produced more grains but the farmers

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there are taxed in the same manner as the farmers of the other regions, so he levies more taxes. But there occurs a famine and people begin to starve. Ratan Singh in the play terms it as impartiality of death:

He is impartial! Haven't you heard about the Doab? He levied such taxes on the poor farmers that they preferred to starve. Now there's a famine there. And of course Hindus as well as Muslims are dying with absolute impartiality (Tq, p.172).

The Amirs are greatly dissatisfied with the Sultan. These Nobles are against the shifting of the capital from Delhi to Daulatabad. They suspect that he is trying to weaken them. They are also dissatisfied due to excessive taxation. They are against the withdrawal of Jaziya.

We see Tughlaq interested in the public welfare in the true spirit of a ruler but he is misunderstood. His next step is the introduction of token currency made of copper along with the silver Dinar. He calls it a question of confidence to accept copper currency as good as silver Dinar. He gives a reference to China where paper currency is used. Amirs think it to be a madness.

Soon we find that Amirs attempt a coup which is unsuccessful as the Sultan already knows of the plot through Ratan Singh. He wants the explanation from Shihab-ud-din is stabbed to death mercilessly by the Sultan himself and makes a public announcement that the nobles of the court tired to assassinate the Sultan, who was saved by Shihab-ud-din and in the attempt Shihab-ud-din died a martyr's death. He orders his funeral to be a ground affair attended by his father.

Sultan's estimate of life and his dreams of noble plans are shown to shattered in following lines:

Politics! My dear fellow, that's where our future is - politics! It's a beautiful world - wealth, success, position power and yet it is full of brainless people, people with not an idea in their head. When I think of all the tricks I used in our village to pinch a few torn cloths from people - if one uses half that intelligence here, one can get robes of power. And not have to pinch them either - get them! It's fantastic world (Tq, p.190).

Karnad's *Tughlaq* in an attempt to correct the mistake committed plans to shift the capital again to Delhi. Tughlaq has faith in his convictions. He is not ready to accept that he has been a fool all his life.

Girish Karnad's *Tughlaq* depicts the life of the eponymous hero in relation to his subjects in his Kingdom. The problems in Tughlaq's kingdom are caused as much by the peculiarities of his personality as by the unusualness of circumstances involving two contradictory cultures or religions.



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Tughlaq's reign though full of idealism and forward looking quality, great administrative reforms. Violence, ruthless massacres, bloodshed and barbarity, fascinated Girish Karnad because it reflects as no other play perhaps does the political mood of disillusionment which followed the Nehru era of idealism in the country. Girish Karnad himself comments:

Tughlaq is historical play on the life of Sultan Muhammad Bin Tughlaq of the fourteenth century India. Karnad projects the curious, contradictions in the complex personality of the Sultan, who was at once a dreamer and a man of action, benevolent and cruel, devout and godless. His two close associates - Barani, the scholarly historian and Najib, the politician seem to represent the two opposite selves of Tughlaq, while Aziz, the willy time server appears to represent all those who took advantage of Sultan's visionary schemes and fooled him. (Tq, p. 165).

The play is 1327 A.D. in the yard in front of the Chief Court of Justice in Delhi. A crowd of citizens consisting mostly of Muslims and a few Hindus is seen. The people are impatiently waiting for the trial to conclude and the people to come out. They are discussing the administration of Sultan Muhammad and its faults. Few are happy with the nature and ways of the Sultan. They find fault with him for the deterioration in the administration of the state.

Muhammad tells his mother that he very easily solved a very difficult problem in chess, which even the expert chess players like Adil and Al Surakhi could not solve. He informed his mother that his old and intimate friend Ain-ul-Mulk was marching towards Delhi with an army of thirty thousand soldiers. Tughlaq wanted a strong man to be the Governor of Deccan and so he asked Ain-ul-Mulk to go there. He was not in a position to defend himself. But it seems that Ain-ul-Mulk is in revolt against him. He has a smaller army than that of Ain-ul-Mulk who is marching with thirty thousand soldiers at his command.

His mother expressed great concern over his insomnia. He told her that he was not worried due to Ain-ul-Mulk. His inability to put his ideals and visions into action very much perturbed him and was mainly responsible for his sleeplessness. He expressed his concern for his people. Tughlaq tells her that the past Sultans of Delhi could not properly discharge their responsibilities so they were either murdered or died senile in youth. He wants to do what no king has done so far. He will work for Hindu-Muslim unity, brotherhood, justice and peace in the country. He wants to die fighting for the cause of his ideals and his country. He is not worried about his enemies but about his subjects. The step-mother laughs at him and calls him 'a pompous ass' for his ideas. According to her, the other kings of Delhi also had been concerned with the welfare of the people. But Muhammad challenges her statement and says that they couldn't bear the weight of their crown and so they died in old age or were murdered

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in the prime of life. His step-mother tells him not to joke in this way and is tense. Muhammad also grows tense and wants to know from her if she also believes in the common rumours that he is responsible for the murder of his father and brother. All the courtiers including their own mother believe it. But she denies and says that she takes no notice of such rumours.

Barani told Najib that the Sultan himself had given the right to criticize him to his subjects. Najib wanted a political solution to the problem, whereas Barani wanted everything to be done according to the tenets of Koran. He thought that Najib was born Hindu who was converted to Islam quite late so he could not understand the fundamentals of Islam. Najib reported that he disliked the salvation of individual soul in Hinduism. Islam attracted him because in it he found the salvation of society but now it also greatly disappointed him. He wanted to tackle the present problem tactfully.

Najib hints that the Sheikh should be killed, as he has ignited revolt in Kanpur and is openly talking against the Sultan, Barani admires the courage, honesty and justice of the Sultan and wants him to deep off from such a heinous crime. Najib as a politician, is firm in his opinion that a traitor should be done away with. he calls Ain-ul-Mulk also a traitor who on being appointed the governor of Deccan is displeased with the Sultan. He says, " Your Majesty when you came to the throne, there was anarchy in Avadh and you made Ain-ul-Mulk the Governor then. He crushed the rebels, restored law and order and the people in Avadh regard him a God. He's happy there. Suddenly he gets a letter making him the Governor of the Deccan asking him to leave immediately. Is it surprising he should suspect a knife in his back? Najib further adds that he always suspected him. It is his job to suspect everybody. He hints at the striking resemblance between Sheikh Imarm-ud-din and the Sultan. Muhammad is startled and calls Najib a devil.

The Sultan asks Najib to get the army ready to march to Kanauj. He tells his mother that Najib will be there in Delhi to look after the administration. Then he tells them that he had invited Shihab-ud-din, to look after the administration of Delhi in his absence. Barani does not like this but Sultan tells him that he wants to play this game in his own way.

Muhammad and Najib go away. The step-mother is left with Barani. She talks of the great intelligence and diligence of the Sultan and his passing sleepless nights for the welfare of the people. She tells him that Muhammad is impulsive and needs honest and level headed friends, like Barani. She requests him not to leave the Sultan but to be always with him. She does not like Najib and says that if he goes on like this he is likely to meet a worst fate than that of a dog. Barani is moved to tears by her maternal care for the Sultan.

The Sultan had declared that in the evening after the prayer a meeting would be organized in the yard in front of the Big Mosque. Sheikh Imam-ud-Din, who was respected all over India, is a saint and would address the meeting. He would analyze the Sultan's

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administration and would show where he had thoughtlessly taken wrong measures which were harmful to the country and Islam. The Sultan himself would be present at the meeting to seek directions from the Sheikh. The citizens of Delhi were requested to attend the meeting in large numbers.

Muhammad Tughlaq and Sheikh Imam ud-din and a few old servants of the palace were present in the yard in front of the Big Mosque. But no one else has turned up to listen to the Sheikh.

Tughlaq and Imam-ud-din exchanged hot words. No one turned up to listen to the Sheikh. The Sheikh held the Sultan responsible for it. The Sultan immediately retorts that he would not have arranged the meeting had he not wanted it himself. In fact he wanted to learn much from the Sheikh about himself. The Sultan ordered his servant to summon all the Khans, Amirts, Sardars and others at once. Imam-ud-din expressed his strong disapproval to speak to a collection of courtiers. He found no sense in addressing a gang of bootlickers (flatterers to the king). He wanted to speak to the people who were willing to act, who were willing to do something for Islam and the country. He told that if no one turned up he would go to the market place the next day and speak there. It is said that he very much looks like the Sultan but the Sultan's actions are quite different from those of his. The Sultan converses with the Sheikh all alone and informs him that he has never violated the tenets of Islam consciously.

Imam-ud-din damned the Sultan for scores of transgressions of the holy tenets of Koran and vehemently said, "But if one fails to understand what the Koran ways one must ask the Sayyids and the Ulema. Instead you have put the best of them he hind bars in the name of Justice. "The Sultan responded that they tried to indulge in politics which was not their sphere. In order to maintain the unity of his realm he had to safeguard the interests in millions of Muslims, Hindus, and Jains alike. He never denied the word of God. Tughlaq believed in human responsibility. He said, "yes there is dirt and sickness in my kingdom. But why should I call in God to clean the dirt deposited by men?"

Imam-ud-din, an orthodox believer in Islam, wanted the Sultan only to spread Islam and to follow its tenets. Tughlaq wanted to introduce radical reforms which were not envisaged in Koran. He did not mix religion with politics. He was deeply influenced by the Hellenic and humanistic philosophy of Socrates, Aristotle etc, the idealism of Zarathustra and Buddha. The Sheikh and other die hard followers of Islam, wanted him to give up other influences and to live up only up to the teachings of Koran. Scolding him to Sheikh said: "Where are these brilliant successors of yours. Where are these guarantors of your balanced future?" Tughlaq retorted: "There's none yet. But I haven't lost hope. I shall find them and



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teach them to think like me." He accused the Sheikh for inciting rebellion in Kanpur. The citizens of Delhi did not come to listen to him because they did not trust him.

The Sultan next tells the Sheikh that there is not even a fly to listen to him because they suspect that since he has come here on the Sultan's invitation he is a spy. They will greet him as a spy in the market place. It is useless to think that they are Muslims and have faith in him anymore, The Sultan then is congratulated by the Sheikh for his cleverness. Muhammad then makes an appeal to the Sheikh to help him by going to Ain-ul-Mulk and pleading with him for peace. He says that if he does not accede to his request a lot of Muslim blood will be shed. He says: "I am willing to make peace but how can I do It? Don't even know why Ain-ul-Mulk has turned against me. He won't even see my official envoys (pause). But he will see you. He respects you as every Muslim in India does. He will trust your word. That's why I'm asking you- will you please go as my envoy and dissuade him from this folly. Please Sheikh sahib I am not asking you only for my sake but for all the Muslims who will die at the hands of Muslims if there is a war. You can't deny that this will mean a slaughter of Muslims at the hands of fellow-Muslims. Isn't that enough for the great Sheikh Imam-ud-din? You have attacked at me for inaction. You can't turn away, now when you are offered a chance. You can't so to save the Muslims the Sheikh must take upon himself the duty of an envoy and ask Ain-ul-Mulk to stop war. The Sheikh knows that there is no alternative and so he agrees to do what he is asked to do.

Barani was confused but Tughlaq ironically told him: "You wanted to see history formed in front of your eyes, didn't you? Just wait a few moments, and you'll see not just the form but the coiled intestines of it." He was hurt. He said that he had spent seven years here and the greatest historians of the world would have given half their lives to see a year in it. He advised the Sultan not to start the public prayer within half an hour because the palace was in mourning due to Najib's death. Tughlaq turned down this piece of advice and said,

"We are praying because the Holy Man like Ghiyas-ud-din Abbasid had come to our land and blessed us! We can't let anything stop that! (laughs) Oh, Barani, Najib should have been here now. He would have loved this farce." (Tq, p. 40).

Aziz disguised as Abbasid entered with the soldiers. Both Tughlaq and Barani bowed before him. Tughlaq informed him about Aazam Jahan's sudden murder. He suspected the bonafides of Aziz and bluntly asked him how long he would go on fooling them with his masquerade. He knew all about Aziz's disguise as Abbasid.

Aziz calmly replied that he was a dhobi from Shiknar. His first name was Aziz but he had impersonated himself in several disguises. He requested the Sultan not to punish him but to recognize his merit because "Your Majesty has never associated greatness with pedigree.(Tq, p. 50). "He called himself the true disciple of the Sultan. Barani warned him

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and said: "Your Majesty, this scoundrel is trying to spread a net of words around you. It's dangerous to talk to him. He must be punished at once." (Tq, p. 54).

Aziz persuaded the Sultan to treat him as a saint because he started public prayers after a lapse of five years in his honor, and had publicly called him Savior and had fallen on his feet. Aziz frankly confessed that when the Sultan came to the throne he was a poor starving dhobi. The Sultan had declared the brotherhood of all religions and Aziz used it to build his fortune. He disguised himself as Brahmin Vishnu Prasad. When copper currency came into vogue, he made enough business in that by counterfeiting coins. When the business became unprofitable due to competition, he took the silver dinars and went to Doab and bought some land there for farming. He also collected the state subsidy for farmers. When Aziz and Aazam were discovered they ran into the hills and became robbers. They later on joined the Sultan's servants. They had to shift the corpses of all the rebels executed by the state and hang them up for exhibition. They stuffed dead bodies with straw and hung them up on poles for exhibition. One day he had a revelation: "This was the real meaning of mystery of death-straw and skin." He found peace in this enlightenment.

One day Aziz heard about a beggar who claimed to be Ghiyas-ud-din Abbasid and was on his way to the capital. He admitted that he killed Ghiyas-ud-din and cheated the Sultan. He said, "I ask you, Your Majesty, which other man in India has spent five years of his life fitting every act, deed and thought to Your Majesty's words?" Tughlaq rebuked him and Barani wanted him to be sentenced to death. Aziz remained unperturbed and quietly replied: "what if I am a dhobi. You're Majesty! When it comes to washing away filth no saint is a match for a dhobi." The Sultan laughed and called him a man of genius. Aziz requested the Sultan to give him a chance to prove his loyalty. Sultan decided to send him to Deccan as an office in the army of Khusro Malik and next will go to Arabia and disappear completely.

Tughlaq moved towards the throne. He looked tired and dispirited. Barani, who was very sad, requested the Sultan to punish Aziz because he would betray him any moment. He said that he had also forgiven Ain-ul-Mulk who had stabbed him in back. Similarly Aziz can rebel and harm the Sultan any time. Barani again requested that Aziz should be punished but the Sultan turned down his request. In a mood of utter frustration, Sultan sits on the throne with eyes closed.

A servant came. He saw Tughlaq sleeping and went out. Tughlaq head fell forward on his chest in deep sleep. The Muezzin's call to prayer was heard. The servant turned to awake him, then after a pause went out without doing so. As the Muezzin's call faded away the Sultan suddenly opened his eyes. He looked around dazed and frightened, as though he could not comprehend where he was. He seems lost. The history ends at such place with its story but



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the narrative of conflict still haunts with its multiple criticism. It is narrative of errors and judgments.

To conclude the chapter it may be added that Karnad brings to light very skillfully the 14th Century Sultan Muhammad- bin-Tuglaq in his historical play Tughlaq. Karnad writes in the introduction of this play, certainly the most brilliant individual ever to ascend the throne of Delhi and also one of the biggest failures (Introduction-27). Muhammad-bin-Tughlaq suffered from attributes, which were his eccentricities in the 14th century India's but for sightedness in the modern world. He has his own peculiarities considering the age in which he resigned. Karnad depicts him as an estranged man who is unfamiliar with contemporary society as well as human predicament. His ideas and ideals are incomprehensible to the people of his age. As the complete wipe out of discrimination between Hindu and Muslims makes the two communities suspicious of the Sultan's policy.

As K. K. John points out, "Karnad's play Tughlaq is an excellent work of art with an intricate plot subtle irony, copious satire, delicate symbolism (127). In this respect Karnad's succeeded in this application of prayer. It also reminds us Hamlet's avenging motif at the prayer of his uncle Claudius in Hamlet. Karnad's dramatic art also lies in the portrayal of Tughlaq as a developing character. Here Dr. Punam Pandey remarks:

The play shows the transformation of the character of the medieval ruler Mohammad-bin-Tughlaq who turned to the humanist ruler of people. Tughlaq, misunderstand and maligned, suffers and increasing sense of alienation and is forced to abandon his earlier idealism and end up as a tyrant (50). Sometimes it seems that Tughlaq does not follow the tradition of historical plays, for political theme dominates it. Karnad's imagination some time effects that character of Tughlaq more than needs. As M. K. Naik points out the feature of Tughlaq: "Tughlaq is not an ordinary chronically play but a very imaginative reconstruction of some of the most significant events in the life of a great king.... Neither the play can be called a historical drama because liberties have been taken with regards to historical fact in it" (132). The same view has been given by P.B. Reddy that "The theme of the play is from Indian History, yet the treatment is not historical but high political (149). In this sense, Karnad strayed some extent from presenting Tughlaq as a history play. His interest in politics diverts him to be a legendary figure, for his political power he kills his relative courtiers and even his father. He secures political power by usurping father's throne and wins restless and discomfort for himself. Tughlaq has made difficult choice with the best of intentions, but he is convinced of the authenticity of his choice which he has felt, realized and lived. He frankly and vehemently tells Sheikh Imam-uddin about the excellence of his existential:

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