

## **Retelling History: A Study of Girish Karnad's *Tughlaq***

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### **ABSTRACT**

Girish Karnad is a pioneer in new drama and all his plays can be enacted. The neo-literary movement throws a bright light on the disparities in our social life. He is unsurpassable as a humanist and satirist in modern Indian English Drama. His plays are an invaluable contribution to dramatic literature. Karnad evolves a dramatic technique that is so flexible that it changes according to the requirements of his plots. The plot of *Tughlaq* is based on history and it has all the essentials of a good historical play. *Tughlaq* has an enduring place in dramatic literature.

### **KEYWORDS**

Retelling history; Girish Karnad; *Tughlaq*.

### **Introduction**

Girish Karnad is a living legend in contemporary Indian English drama. His journey from *Yayati* to *The Fire and the Rain* holds a mirror up to the very evolution of the Indian theatre for nearly four decades. He presents a synthesis of cultures and his formal experiments have been far more rigorously conceived and have certainly been far more successful than those of some of his contemporaries. The likes of Girish Karnad enable us to pretend that there is such a thing as a truly Indian theatre that can be faithful to its traditions and at the same time respond to contemporary concerns. *Tughlaq*, *Hayavadana*, *Tale-Danta*, and *Naga-Mandala* are some of his wonderful creations.

### **Indian English Drama**

Drama is a composite art and it requires for its success various accessories, such as a stage, actors, and audience. Indian theatre is replete with plays written in regional languages which

were intelligible to the audience. Early Indian English writers could not enjoy this advantage and hence the growth of Indian English drama suffered.

Indian English drama has no tradition. M.K.Naik, says in *A History of Indian English Literature*,

Owing to the lack of a firm dramatic tradition nourished on actual performance in a live theatre, early Indian drama in Bengal, as elsewhere in India, grew sporadically as mostly closet drama; and even later only Sri Aurobindo, Rabindranath Tagore, and H.N.Chattopadhyaya produced a substantial corpus of dramatic writing. (Kumar 2)

Drama as a form of entertainment and as a form of literature is of ancient origin in India as well as the world. It is not easy to trace the origin of Indian drama. The ancient Indian plays are based on religious themes and episodes selected from the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. Drama

must be good, decent, decorous, pleasing, elevating, and instructive so that the audience gets education and guidance.

Indian English drama saw the first light of day when Krishna Mohan Banerji wrote *The Persecuted* in 1831. The real journey of Indian English Drama begins with Michael Madhusudan Dutt's *Is this called Civilization?* which appeared on the literary horizon in 1871. Romance, heroic play, tragedy, comedy, and farce all find representation and thus the scale is large and the themes are diverse.

Though Girish Karnad has attempted to Indianize the dramatic form by using some of the folk theatres and by blending them in a singular style of his own. There seems to be a lot of difference between a reading and a performance of his Kannada plays and that of the translated English ones. This partly explains why Karnad chose to write his plays in Kannada first despite being a competent writer in English.

#### **Retelling History in *Tughlaq*:**

Karnad's treatment of history is to understand the present and prepare for the future. As Lukas describes it:

The realm of history is where past and future, no longer and not yet, come together in a single moment. What we usually call the present in drama is self-appraisal; from the past is born the future, which struggles free of the old and of all that stands in opposition (426-7)

Karnad's plays derive from the Indian sense of time, which being more psychological than historical, invests them with a certain dream-like quality of mythic timelessness as it exists in the human consciousness.

Karnad's *Tughlaq* came from Camus's *Caligula*, which provided both the absurd conception of the human situation and the technique of handling a historical myth for the modern theatre. However, Camus's influence seems restricted to the theme alone; the form is Karnad's

creation. *Tughlaq* is defined as a historical play because the principal character is taken from history and the events that constitute the framework for the plot of the play are documented as historical events.

#### **Betweenness Character in *Tughlaq*:**

Karnad's *Tughlaq* is an Indian as well as a western play. In his play, Aziz and Azamam become the links between the world of Tughlaq and the common humanity. Aziz especially represents a kind of Tughlaq's alter ego. Interestingly, Mohammed-Bin-Tughlaq is also a 'Between' character. He is a visionary and a tyrant. He loves Sadi's poems and at the same time wields his sword against anyone suspected, including his stepmother. His political scanning, planning his moves as in the game of chess, and his calculated designs in suppressing the voices of protest are as real as his desire for one world, a world built in love. This 'betweenness' in Tughlaq is communicated through the actor's image in this play. Mohammed is most of the time play-acting, using the gestures of an actor and the rhetoric of a great actor before an audience. No wonder, then that the guard at the end of scene I, says "what are you waiting for? The show is over". The play and its likes with modern India have been established in the production of Ebrahim Alkazi against the backdrop of the Purana Kila and Delhi.

#### **Minor Characters:**

In the maniacal pursuit of his Utopia, Tughlaq clears the ground ruthlessly until he is shamed on his face by poor dhobi Aziz. *Tughlaq* is a tragedy; Karnad has etched an existential-humanistic outlook on every page from the beginning to the end through several characters: the old man, the Hindu, Aziz, Azamam, the step-mother, Najib, Barani, Sheikh Imam-ud-din, the starved crowd, the young soldier and so forth. The scholarly historian Barani's perspective

on Aziz is proved wrong when he is prolonged by the sultan. Even Tughlaq, who is madly merciless, receives the most sympathetic treatment from Karnad.

#### **Historical Evidence:**

Girish Karnad adroitly employs historical evidence. In a play of thirteen scenes, the playwright presents the following sequences to throw light upon the complex personality of the sultan: the affair of the two thieves, Aziz and Azamam; Tughlaq's attitude in levying heavy taxes on the poor farmers; his orders to change the capital from Delhi with its entire people to Daulatabad (historical evidence proves that Tughlaq took the radical decision for changing the capital for effective administrative control of the south); the futile conspiracy of the disgruntled Amirs to kill the Sultan while at prayer; his cruel punishment to his step-mother for her crime of getting the vizier Najib killed; Aziz's impersonation of the invitee-Caliph and its consequences; and finally the Sultan's death.

As these scenes follow each other on the stage, they focus attention on Tughlaq the dominating figure and a complex character who is idealistic, dreamy, intelligent, religious, and at the same time cruel, an honest scoundrel (who) murders a man calmly and then actually enjoys the feeling of guilt. To help in unfolding complex and peculiar nature, the playwright has created some minor characters, like Tughlaq's cool-headed step-mother, the shrewd vizier, Nazib, the straightforward Shihab-ud-din, the "level-headed and honest" historian, Barani, and others.

#### **Oppositional Behaviour:**

Murdering during prayer was what Tughlaq did in the case of his father: when the same weapon is tried on Tughlaq, it shows the corruption of his life at its very source. There is a conflict between the Sultan's inner feelings and the external action.

Both, Tughlaq and his enemies, who initially appear to be idealists, perpetrate the opposite in the pursuit of the ideal; and thus, the whole play is structured on these opposites; the ideal and the real; the divine aspiration and the left intrigue. The game of chess is symbolic and the playwright skilfully handles the main and sub-plots like the story of Aziz and Azamam running parallel to that of the Sultan. He brings the comic pair Akara and Makara to the folk stage in the form of Aziz and Azamam. With its suspense and crisp dialogue, the play is a success on the stage. It has been successfully staged many times in India as well as in other countries.

In *Tughlaq*, Karnad follows history in mentioning the numerous rebellions—rebellion of Bahuddin Gurshap, the rebellion of Shewan, etc. But he could not deal with all these rebellions from the viewpoint of maintaining artistic coherence and unity of impression. To stress the humanity of Tughlaq, Karnad greatly alters the historical facts of Ain-ul-Mulk's rebellion. He sends Sheik Imam-ud-Din as his official envoy. The Sheik who resembles the Sultan wears the royal robes and marches toward Ain-ul-Mulk's army. The sheikh is treacherously killed by the machination of Tughlaq and so he gets rid of his enemy who incited rebellion against him in Kanpur. This episode is an elevation from history. According to history, Ain-ul-Mulk was defeated and after a few days of indignities, he was released and was appointed as the superintendent of the royal garden. But in *Tughlaq* Ain-ul-Mulk's governorship is restored to him. The ghastly murder of Shihab-ud-din is also a deviation from history.

#### **Passion for History:**

Karnad was fascinated by the history of Tughlaq's reign because it reflected the political mood of disillusionment that prevailed in the

sixties in India. He writes about this in *Enact*, June 1971:

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 a span of twenty years tremendously capable man had gone to pieces. This seemed to be both lures to his idealism and the shortcomings within him, such as impatience, his cruelty, and 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 seemed to me a very much striking parallel. (Kumar 17)

*Tughlaq* is categorically a landmark as a historical play in Indian English Literature. Karnad mentions some facts of history and places them amid imaginary incidents and situations to dramatise history so that the play has a contemporaneous interest.

#### **Mohammad-Bin-Tughlaq:**

Girish Karnad depicts the life of the hero namely Tughlaq concerning the subjects in his kingdom. He appears to be an intelligent person whose way of thinking is not understood by the average people and he is taken to be a foolish and impulsive king by the people of his kingdom.

Karnad's refiguration of history and his use of motifs create complex verbal, structural, and psychological patterns. But the play's paradigmatic qualities as historical fiction and its cultural vitality derive principally from the multifold engagement with history that lies behind the words. Karnad's play describes the narrative of *Tughlaq* in the audience's memory, refining legend and oral tradition through detailed historical re-enactment.

#### **Characterisation of Tughlaq:**

The history of Mohammed-bin-Tughlaq is the product primarily of medieval Muslim and colonial British traditions of historiography, whose modes of ideological implication have only recently begun to be scrutinized. Karnad in his occasional comments on *Tughlaq* stresses the 'contemporaneity' of the play's history that is, the resemblance to particular phases in the political experience of post-colonial India while maintaining that the play is not an allegory of any one political figure or event.

*Tughlaq* is not about a historical character alone. The so-called 'mad' Tughlaq comes fully alive on the stage with his entire plus and minus points, his ideals shortcomings, and his dreams and daydreams. It is a victory of a torn self-oppressed by the burden of his misdeeds.

Through this history-based play, Karnad attempts a mind shift by establishing the mindset of the twentieth-century Indians. In *Tughlaq* Karnad recovers the figure of Tughlaq from the onslaughts of both imperialist historiographies as well as Hindu Chauvinist bigotry. (Kumar 21)

Karnad's writing reviews history through the lens of contemporaneity.

#### **Style of the Play:**

Karnad is a modern Indian Playwright. His style is simple and the dialogue is in prose. It is pregnant with meaning and suits the Indian sensibilities. Generally, Historical plays are mostly glorifications of the Kings or Historical figures for whom the dramatist has a great admiration. But Karnad's play *Tughlaq* is slightly different.

The name Tughlaq has historical significance. So, when people watch Karnad's play, they end up thinking that Mohammed-Bin-Tughlaq was a very kind and considerate ruler, whereas history mentions exactly the opposite. Karnad has

been writing plays using history and mythology to tackle contemporary issues. He has successfully used history as material in *Tughlaq*.

**Conclusion:**

Karnad's treatment of history in *Tughlaq* is artistic. He has skillfully brought out the dramatic potentialities in history and has cleverly imposed upon them the dramatic act.

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