

Symbolism, Irony and Humour in Girish Karnad's Play *Tughlaq*

Dr. Lakhwinder Singh Gill

Associate Professor

Post Graduate Dept. of English

S. R. Govt. College for Women Amritsar (Punjab)

Girish Karnad is a modern Indian playwright who draws the contours of contemporary reality upon the mythological canvas. Drawing the plots of his plays from Indian history, myths and legends, he presents them in such a way that they assume contemporary significance. As a modern playwright the urgency of exploiting the incommensurable and inscrutable impels him to negotiate a dramatic form, novel in form, characterization, organization of incidents and their dramatic representation. In order to constitute the desired form, he explores the devices of his own land and those of the west as well. However, he makes bold experiments with the folk and classical devices but the modern devices like use of symbolism, irony and humour remain an integral part of his dramatic technique. In this article we will focus only on *Tughlaq*.

This play presents the story of a monarch who came to throne by murdering his father and brother and ruled over India for about twenty years. In the play he is depicted as a wise and foolish, kind and cruel, impulsive and farsighted emperor in one breath. His two major decisions- shifting of his capital from Delhi to Daultabad and change of currency- backfire and render him and his subjects homeless. In order to prove himself a just and kind emperor sometimes he behaves in an unjust way. He kills some of his associates including his step mother thinking they are traitors to him. At the end he is totally shattered as a ruler. The characters like Aziz, Aazim, the step mother and the Prayer Scene are the dramatic inventions of the playwright designed to match his purpose.

The first scene opening in front of the Chief Court of Justice in Delhi and showing a crowd of Muslims and Hindus, becomes the microcosm of the contemporary Indian society comprising mainly these two communities. The opening sentence of the play, "God, what's this country coming to?"¹ pictures the present scenario of India when almost every Indian who believes in its rich cultural heritage carries this question in his mind. The feeling of brotherhood and unity that stood its ground in the face of the foreign ruler began to vanish under the regime of their own. The drift of the present from its cultural past is a matter of concern for everyone. Hence, the question 'What this country is coming to?' gathers immense significance. The Old Man's lament, "I don't know. I have been alive a long time, seen many sultans, but I never thought I would live to see a thing like this", (147) becomes relevant in the present context.

For his hypocritical attitude towards religion and religious practices Muhammad stands for the contemporary ruler of India. Like an Indian ruler he uses religion for his political motive. In the first scene of the play the Young Man defends Muhammad for his being a staunch believer in Islam as he has made prayer a must for every Muslim. At this the Old Man rightly comments, "What is the use of it? One must act according to it...". This hints at the duality of the Indian ruler who is not religious at heart but uses religion only as an instrument to rule the people. Muhammad tries to look like a true Muslim by making five times prayer a must for everyone.

The fact, on the contrary, is that he has killed his own father during a prayer and announced that it was an accident. Moreover, he has put all the Sayyads and the Ulema behind the bars. But to his subjects he says, "I have never denied the word of God. Because, it is my bread and my drink." (164). But when he is attempted to murder, he bans prayer (only to revoke the ban afterwards) which shows he is very opportunist. His innovative plans to introduce new currency and shifting his capital from Delhi to Daultabad have close parallelism with the schemes launched in India after independence. Muhammad's idealism and the resultant disillusionment is identical with the mood of disillusionment which followed Nehru era of idealism. It is from this symbolic angle that a critic observes: "... It is a play of the Sixties and reflects as perhaps no other play does the political mood of disillusionment which followed the Nehru era of idealism in the country"²

The atmosphere of violence, bloodshed, treachery and corruption spread throughout the action of the play is suggestive of the contemporary Indian socio-political scene. The people of independent India confronted two major problems: poverty and violence caused by the wrong political policies. If Muhammad's subjects run from Delhi to Daultabad with new hopes, the Indians too had high hopes when they shifted from the British Rule to the self rule.

Game of Chess which Girish Karnad first used in his play *Yayati* is a recurrent symbol in the play. In both the plays the game of chess stands for existential feeling of alienation and complexity of human relationships. Symbolizing the inner alienation of Muhammad the game of chess in *Tughlaq* also stands for the complexity of the character of the emperor. For him life is like a chess board where man's only aim is to win. In Scene II Muhammad tells Barani that he has invited Shihabudin- the Prince of Shampansahar. When Barani questions it, 'Forgive me. I let you down Barani, but I must play this game my own way.' (160). Caught in his deft move, Imam-u-din too pleads, "Don't play any more games with me." (166). Despite Muhammad's verbal confession that "there is no time for games", he never stops playing it to the end. In his opinion all the important persons around him are the players of chess. Barani, who is a historian, is interested only in playing chess "with the shadows of the dead", and, Najib is a politician who wants "pawns of blood and flesh" (156) Similarly when Aziz shouts at his counterpart not to call him by his name, the helpless Aazam retorts "I am fed up of these games". A critic rightly observes, "Chess symbolizes Tughlaq's game approach to life wherein he regards the other people as pawns to be manipulated for his own advantage"³

As it demands isolation and aloofness from others the game of chess can also be equated with the rose garden in *Tughlaq*. Both are Muhammad's love and can be viewed as his desperate effort to get rid of his inner alienation. Forests, jungles and gardens serve as a symbol of self searching after disenchantment with life. In Karnad's *Yayati* the king leaves for the forest after getting disappointed. The forest life of renunciation and search is suggested to him by his maid turned queen when none of the subjects of the king *Yayati* comes forward to make a sacrifice for him. Similarly, apart from serving as a symbol of dreams of Muhammad, rose garden also serves as a symbol of search and introspection. After his plans to make his state a welfare state have dashed to the ground, Muhammad is seen roaming at night in the rose garden as a dejected man.

The rose garden which ends up as a "rubbish dump" is suggestive of the burial of Muhammad's dreams. He is found strolling alone at night in his garden. There is a heap of currency coins symbolizing Tughlaq's grave (a raised place) which he sees with his own eyes.

The rose-garden which becomes a rubbish dump is a perfect objective correlative of Tughlaq's idealistic aspirations meeting with defeat . . . it becomes an image of the absurd, the unbridgeable gulf between man's expectations of orderliness and the chaos and irrationality which confronts him in the universe.⁴

There are empty court yards, locked houses and deserted temples and palaces working as symbols in Karnad's plays. Rani, the central character in the play *Nagamandala* is locked in a house where nobody lives. The temple in *Hayavadana* and the house in *Nagamandala*, both wear a deserted look symbolizing the vacuum in the life of the major characters- Padmani and Rani respectively. In *Tughlaq* there is a fort in Daulatabad which if seen at night, becomes the symbol of a puzzle the emperor is embroiled in after leaving Delhi. The young guard standing for the new generation of India describes the fort as a "magnificent thing" which no army could occupy. The fort, like the self of Muhammad and his rule, has "strange and frightening" passages within it. The guard rightly says "if it ever falls it will crumble from inside" (192) that indicates crumbling of the emperor from inside.

The description of the fort by the guard turns it into a fantastic image of the rule of the Muhammad. The guard says that the road coming to the fort appears like a "thin snake" when the fort is like a "rising anthill". The old guard agrees, "Yes, it is a long passage, a big passage coiled like an enormous hollow python inside the belly of the fort. And they shall be far happier when that python breaks out and swallows everything in sight – every man, woman, child and beast"(193). Here Muhammad is identified with a snake or a python and his fort is the anthill- both are so inimical to the life of the common people.

Animals, birds and insects also figure in almost every play of Karnad. Characters are compared with birds and animals. Muhammad's step mother calls him a "pompous ass" and says that he doesn't wish her fate even "on a dog". Even the road to Daultabad looks to him as a "snake" and the old man calls it the "eagle's nest"(192). If the passage in the fort is like "a python" and the palace is "full of flies", the people around him appear to Muhammad as "vultures". After issuing order for the death of his mother, he feels himself "as a pig" rolling in the gory mud.

As regards the use of Irony in *Tughlaq* it begins to appear from the very beginning of the play. In the opening scene Muhammad's proclamation, "My beloved people, you . . . have seen for yourself how justice works in my kingdom – without any consideration of religion and creed"⁵. The situation turns ironic when we learn that the winner against the king is not Vishnu Parasad but is Aziz disguised as Vishnu. This situation turns comic when Aziz mimicking a public announcer says, "Henceforth the people may file a suit against the Sultan for the misbehavior of his officers. . . Justice will be done. (152). His comments arouse laughter when he justifies his disguise before Aziz. Had he not disguised himself as a Brahmin "Then what would happen to king's impartial justice? A Muslim plaintiff before a Muslim king. Where is the question of justice? Where is the equality between Hindus and Muslims?, he enquires (153). Thus the disguise of Aziz ironically puts the whole administrative system of Muhammad upside down. His tall claims of justice and equality sound comic to the audience.

The play presents the best example of irony through comparison and contrast. On one hand is Muhammad who is a king and is the main character of the play and, on the other, is Aziz- a washer man- who is a minor character but assumes importance when juxtaposed with the character of the emperor. If Muhammad is an idealist who wants to shift his capital and change

his currency for the welfare of his subjects, Aziz is a realist and is a practical man to the core. If the court's judgment in favour of the disguised Aziz makes a mockery of Muhammad's slogans of secularism and justice, the underground life of Aziz and his associate Aazam mounts a parody of Muhammad's ideals about the welfare state. The appearance of Aziz and Aazam in the camp on Delhi -Daultabad road and their daily routine of cheating others pooh-poohs Muhammad's claims of an ideal king of an ideal state.

If Muhammad is very manipulative, witty, imaginative, secretive and ruthless, Aziz provides his ironic parallel. Like him, from the very beginning Aziz is clear about what he is to do in future (when he reaches his destination). In pursuit of realizing his dream to be rich by hook or crook, he manipulates the decision of the government giving compensation to those whose land has been confiscated by the state. He is a Muslim but in order to get the compensation he disguises himself as a Brahmin. Thus he punctures the balloon of the king's welfare policies. If Muhammad is confident that everything will be settled after he reaches Daultabad, Aziz is also confident of his plans. He tells Aazam, "There is money here. We will make a pile by the time we reach Daultabad." (p.155). If Muhammad has disguised his true self and poses to be a very religious and benevolent king, Aziz is disguised as a Brahmin (though he is a Muslim washer man). Ironically, he appears as a Brahmin and ends up as a special messenger to the king. He becomes an instrument in exposing the cruelty and corruption prevalent in Muhammad's regime when he refuses to help a woman with a dying son in her lap and asking for help for his medical aid. Aziz expects money from her knowing full well that her husband is bed-ridden and she is helpless. Asked by Aazam why he doesn't let her go to the doctor, very stoically he says, "It is a waste of money. I am doing her a favour." (188)

For Muhammad and Aziz politics holds a common interest. Aziz's comments about politics are ironically true:

... Politics ! It is a beautiful world- wealth, success, position, power-yet it is full of brainless people, people not with an idea in their head. When I think of all the tricks in our village to pinch a few torn clothes from people if one uses half that intelligence here, one can bet robes of power. It is a fantastic world. (190)

Like Muhammad he also makes use of religion and caste for his personal gains. He knows that even if the Hindu woman is not allowed to leave the camp, she can't complain against him as she takes him for a Brahmin. Complaining against a Brahmin to a Muslim, according to a Brahminical dogma, will send her to hell which she never desires. Furthermore, he is cruel like Muhammad in taking life of someone. He kills Ghiyas-ud-din and starts dancing after that which shows that he has no regrets of any sort after killing someone. His singing and dancing over a dead body reminds us of the neurotic self of the emperor. After killing Ghiyas-ud-din and putting on his robes he asks the horrified Aazam, "How do I look, eh? The great grandson of the Khalif. . Laugh, the fool you laugh. Celebrate! What are you crying for? . . Dance, dance. . (sings)." (201). When he is to present himself before the king, he aptly defines himself, "I am your majesty's true disciple" (216). Indeed, Aziz appears as his 'shadow' or the 'other Muhammad'. It is perhaps because of this parallelism between them that Muhammad pardons him even for his grave misdeeds.

Similarly, Aazam who is a simpleton in his behaviour represents the coward and the foolish in Muhammad. Despite taking adventurous and bold decisions Muhammad appears as a scared

man. We see him bowing before his subordinates and beseeching them to pray for his success. Aazam resembles Muhammad in his frank confessions. He admits that he is a common pickpocket and is not of sharp intellect. He, like Muhammad, looks like a helpless person. Being a coward at heart many a times he disapproves of Aziz's behaviour but doesn't leave his company. Finally when Aziz kills Ghiyasdin he literally starts crying and laments, "God, God why did I stop him? Why didn't I not let him go?(201), and "I will die of freight here." (212) Aazam's silly act of bribing the two servants of the palace to bring two horses so that he and Aziz could run away, angers Aziz.

The Prayer Scene in which the attempt is made to murder Muhammad also provides the irony of situation. It is Muhammad who has made prayer mandatory for every Muslim. But the same prayer proves a threat to his life. Moreover, it becomes a reminiscent of Mohammad's action of killing his father during prayer. Similarly, the encounter between Mohammad and Aziz, when the latter is disguised as Ghiyas-ud-din illustrates the irony of situation and comedy through contrast. With his presence of mind and witty dialogues, Aziz appears to eclipse Muhammad's intelligence. When Aziz realizes that he can deceive Muhammad no more, he reveals his identity at once. When Muhammad questions him who he is, Aziz retorts, "I am a Dhobi from Shiknar. My first name was Aziz. There have been so many since then."(215). At Muhammad's warning that he should not overreach himself, he says, "I don't. But since your majesty came to throne, I have been your most devout servant. I have studied every order, followed every instruction, considered every measure of your majesty with great attention . . . (216). Keeping in view his past Aziz's views are highly ironic and comic too. Mohammad's every ideal including his plan to introduce new currency stands ridiculed right under his nose. As Aziz comments, "Soon after your majesty introduced the new copper currency, I succumbed to its temptation. . . . There was enough money in that business, but too much competition, soon it became unprofitable . . . (217). Finally when Muhammad abuses him calling him a "dhobi" (washer man) very smartly he reacts, "What if I am a dhobi, Your Majesty? When it comes to washing our filth no saint is a match for Dhobi.(218). Ironically, the king is so much impressed by a washer man that he has to confess that "This man is a genius"(218). Irony is that nothing fascinates the emperor so much as does a criminal washer man. U.R Anantha Murthy puts it thus:

He is aware of the irony of his life when Aziz, the only character in the play who has skillfully used all the schemes of Tughlaq for his own designs, kills Ghiyas-ud -din and comes in his guise as a holy messenger of peace to purify land and revive the banned prayer. The irony is deeply tragic. In the end Tughlaq and his kingdom are one in their chaos, and he knows it.⁶

From its inception humour is inextricably associated with theatre. "Even the early theatre in the form of primitive tribal ritual and magico-religious ceremonies had elements of humour. Recreation and magic were also aspects linked with humour to the early manifestation of ritualistic drama." In this regard Karnad's plays are no exception. In *Tughlaq* the conversation between Aziz and the man who acts as the guard for the dead bodies in Muhammad's palace has a woman and six kids with him. When Aziz asks him what he is going to do till the Sultan arrives in Daultabad, the man's innocent and humorous reply is that first of all they would get married because they could not get time for marriage in Delhi. Similarly, when Aazam says that he is fed up with his life Aziz suggests to him to commit suicide Aazam's reply is, "I tried once, went and jumped into a well. But the cold water chilled me so much that I had a good swim and

went back with him (97). At the next moment, he laments why he is a thief and can't live in peace like others- the comedy takes a tragic turn reflecting the fate of a common man who is sometimes forced by circumstances to be a criminal.

The verbal irony becomes a source of comedy in *Tughlaq* when Aziz asks Aazam if he has heard the royal performance the other day. Aziz answers back, "Which one? There are so many" (152). About Shihabudin's compliment to Muhammad that he is just and impartial, Rattan Singh says, "Yes indeed, who can deny that? He is impartial . . .Of course Hindus as well as Muslims are dying with absolute impartiality" (172) .Sometimes the sarcastic comments of the characters about the policies of Muhammad become comic too. About heavy taxes levied on the people, a character says, "Look at what is happening in Delhi. Just look at it. You cannot take sleep without tax for it . . . You can't even cheat without having to pay." (174)

Though the play is based on an historical event, Karnad's adept use of symbolism, irony and humour makes it a modern play. It is because of these modern devices that the situations and the minor characters in the play dramatize the contemporary socio-political scenario in India. It is solely because of these dramatic techniques adopted by the playwright Tejwant S Gill observes, "No wonder, the life , rule and time o this charismatic and erratic emperor have past significance, the present meaning . . .is getting more and more pronounced with the passage of time"⁷

Works Cited:

¹ Girish Karnad, *Three plays: Nagamandala, Hayavadana, Tughlaq* (New Delhi : Oxford University Press ,1994), p.147. All subsequent textual quotations are from this edition. After the quotation only page number is given in parentheses.

² U.R. Ananmtha Murthy, "Introduction to Tughlaq," *Three plays*, p.150

³ Christine Gomez, "Karnad's Tughlaq as an Alienated Protagonist ,"*The Plays of Girish Karnad: Critical Perspectives*," ed. Jaideepsinh Dodia (New Delhi : Prestige books,1999), p.125

⁴ Ibid, p.121

⁵ Parmod K.Nayyar, "Voices in/of the Void: Logorrhoeic Discourse in Tughlaq," *The Plays of Girish Karnds*, p.162

⁶ .U.R. Anantha Murthy, p.145

⁷ Tejwant s.Gill, " Tughlaq: Its past significance and Present Meaning," *Bharati Journal of Comparative Literature*,Vol.II.No.1 (1987):57-58