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Existential Self in Girish Karnad's *Tughlaq*

Madhurantika Sunil

M.A. English
Patna Women's College, Patna.

&

Nikhila Narayanan

Assistant Professor,
Department of English,
Patna Women's College,
Bailey Road, Patna-800001

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Abstract:

The study of the tradition of knowledge explicates that the essence of knowledge has been an enquiry to reveal the realities of self. The epistemic structure explains the fact that the phenomenon of apocalyptic wars, economic depression, linguistic crisis, and ecological imbalance has resulted into existential crisis. Literature has been a platform to reflect on the concepts of self, subject and subjectivity. Girish Karnad in his writings have explored the tradition of Indian Folklore, myth, history, and tradition. In the given context have also portrayed the idea of existential self. The paper has taken into account the play *Tughlaq* (1964) by the writer. The paper is an attempt to explain the existentialist self of the central character in the play *Tughlaq*. The study intends to apply the basic philosophical arguments of Existentialism for forming the epistemic texture of the present paper.

Keywords: Existential crisis, Identity, Self, Subjectivity, Existentialism.

Introduction

The synchronic and diachronic study of the tradition of knowledge elucidates that philosophy and literature share an integrated relationship. However, the dichotomy between these two disciplines have played a pioneering role in the development of epistemology. Plato condemns literature for copying, for being twice away from reality, and upholds philosophy. However, Aristotle reasserts the place of literature in the epistemological construction. Philosophy questions the most fundamental aspects of metaphysics, ontology, and epistemology of the human self, subject, and the process

by which it acquires subjectivity. Literature, which is the reflection of society, has provided fertile grounds for philosophy to carry out its scientific inquiry on the subjects created by various writers throughout history. Through the dialogue between philosophy and literature, the plethora of thinkers and theorists have tried to trace the journey of human *self* to *subjectivity*. The process of surveying the voyage from “be”, with what a *self* is born, to the addition of “ing”, that a person acquires from the *noumena* throughout his life, has always been the matter of academic inquiry.

The question of self and identity has been a matter of debate, discourse, contemplations and reflection since time immemorial. It has played a vital role in the development of the tradition of knowledge that has developed in dialectic, dialogic and in a discursive manner. Beginning from Empiricism, Cognitivism, and Pragmatism to the modern schools of philosophy like Structuralism and Post Structuralism, the concept of self as a human subject and its features has always been the Centre of discussion. Empiricism believes in the concept of self and the empirical realities associated with it. This reality combines impressions, sensations, feelings, and ideas experienced by the mind. Its roots lie in Plato's idea of mimesis elaborated by John Locke in his essay *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690). The essay elaborates on how the human mind is a ‘tabula rasa’/ ‘a clean slate’ or as a receptor of impressions from the outside world.

Veerendra Kumar Mishra in his *Modern Novels and Poetics of Self* (2014)

The physical realities of stimulus, response, and the process of reinforcement, construe the realm of human's epistemic existence. The existence of epistemic realities impinges deeply upon the formation of one's self, subject, and identity.
(26)

Rene Descartes's famous proclamation ‘I think therefore I am’ from his book *Discourse of Method* (1687) lays the foundations for the inception of Cognitivism which highlights the importance of the human mind, psychological and cognitive realities. Descartes marks a paradigm shift in the role of the mind and the process of creation of subjective self. The concept of mind is further extended by the psychoanalysts like Freud and Lacan who put forward the philosophy of human conscious, subconscious and unconscious mind and their role in the construction of the self. Immanuel Kant synthesizes both the thesis and antithesis of empiricist and

cognitive ideology and expounds his philosophy of pragmatism that abides by the idea of the harmony of body and mind and sense and intellect in the construction of a human self. In *An Introduction to Metaphysics* (1903), Henry Bergson establishes that it is the link between the inner and the outer world that integrates to represent the true essence of the self.

Martin Heidegger in *Poetry, Language, and Thought* (1971) delineates those human beings are thrown into the world of language, and certainly it is the linguistic realities that defines and locate the complex and dynamic processes of subjectivization which further develops the epistemology. According to Lacan the self of a person is constructed by 'system of language' espoused by F. D Saussure in his theory of Structuralism.

Over the years witnessing different theories and philosophical reflections on self, including 'Cartesian', 'Kantian', as well as linguistic paradigm the phenomenon of self has been unsettled, uncanny. The modern era characterized by technological interventions, two world wars, ecological imbalance, further complicated the 'self' and made humanity questioned the foundations of its existence. The idea of self, agency, meaning, purpose of life, all of it came into question. This phenomenon gave birth to the philosophy of existentialism.

Existentialism deals with exploring the changing feature of the human self and being. Existential thinkers like Soren Kierkegaard and Jean-Paul Sartre have stated the fact that even the core of the ontological self is not absolute, and it can change. It is a philosophy that explores the possibilities of leading life and finding meaning in the ever-changing realities of self. In the absence of a center, everything is fractured including the self. The 'fractured self' finds itself in the reality of alienation, desolation, meaninglessness, brokenness, rootlessness, and purposelessness. Therefore, the philosophy of existentialism advocates that self must try to negotiate with the void of life and the changing realities of ontological narratives. The philosophy of existentialism, since its inception has also been an important theoretical tool to analyze the texts of literature. As it has been understood that literature is a reflection of life and society, it encompasses the image of self to its corresponding circumstances.

Girish Karnad and His Works

Girish Karnad was one of the most vibrant playwrights of the post independence period. He was a versatile genius, well versed as a T.V. artist, film producer, and an actor. Most of his plays were written in Kannada and some of them he himself translated in English. Some of his famous plays are *Yayati*, *Tughlaq*, *Hayavadana*, *Nagamandala*, *The Fire and the Rain*, *Tale Danda*, *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan*. His achievements include the Sahitya Academy award (1994), Karnataka Sahitya academy award (1993), Padma Shri (1974) and many more. His plays are appreciated for an absorbing story, an intricate play, a logical dialogue, an impressive spectacle, a beginning, middle, and a neatly tied up conclusion. He goes back to myths and legends with a view to make them a vehicle for a new vision. By employing myth he shows the absurdity of modern life with all its elements as passions and conflicts and man's eternal struggle to attain perfection.

Among these the plays *Yayati*, *Tughlaq*, *Hayavadana* deals with the reality of existential crisis. In these plays Karnad has exhibits the characters feelings of alienation, their spiritual crisis, their inner chaos, tension and complexes, their sensibility and creative impulses. In the given plays, Karnad in continuation of the ideas of existentialist philosophers finds man at the center of the universe. The characters's inwardness and individuality leads them to a state of absurdity, purposelessness, rootlessness, alienation, agony, loneliness and estrangement. They appear like lonely figures having a split personality and divided self because of being victims of existential sufferings and predicaments.

As a persona [the protagonists of the abovementioned plays] tangled in the socio-economic, political, cultural, and historical realities, they get tied up in the cobweb of existence. This leads them to an existential crisis. The manner and the method of them coping up may remind, the reader, of the philosophy of existentialism. Some of the ideas of the philosophy are:

- Life is meaningful; everybody has the potential to change his/her life.
- It establishes the idea of individualism.
- The mechanization of Human emotion
- The person struggles to survive in the world of crisis

- It destabilizes all abstract categories like Freedom, Finitude, Certainty, etc.
- It records the phenomenon of alienation, frustration, despair, disappointment, separation, angst, anger, etc.

The present paper attempts to study Girish Karnad's work *Tughlaq*, through the lens of existentialism vis-à-vis the protagonist of the play. The aim is to understand the protagonist through the existential worldview.

The Existential self in Tughlaq

Girish Karnad's play *Tughlaq* is based on the 14th C. ruler Muhammad –bin-Tughlaq, of the Tughlaq dynasty. He ruled India from 1325-1351. He has been recorded in history as Muhammad the Mad because of his eccentric policies such as the introduction of copper currency, and the infamous shifting of capital city. The present work by Karnad is a historic re-telling of Tughlaq's reign. The play has also been read in as political allegory, in special reference to the period of Nehru in India.

Nonetheless, the play has many more perspectives and dimensions to itself. The due credit for it goes to the character of Tughlaq whose ambiguous self makes him question the nature of man and the destiny of his kingdom. Karnad depicts that how the persona of the protagonist is caught between ideal and real. The subjectivity of Tughlaq is entangled in constructs such as religion, politics, history, law, and morality.

The play highlights Tughlaq's dualistic behaviour, his self being in a dilemma between 'real' and 'ideal'. The idea of his to shift the capital from Delhi to Daulatabad, along with the population proves to be a disaster. His ideal thought was that the change of capital will promote communal harmony, moreover it will protect its people from foreign invasions. The real picture had the discontent of his subjects, as on the way, many people died, families destroyed. Khursheed in his paper, "Existentialism in the plays of Girish Karnad", mentions, "In the name of equality, justice and Hindu-Muslim unity, he brutally massacres his relatives... Ultimately he becomes a divided self/split personality as a result of his earnest endeavour to build a heavenly kingdom of communal harmony and equality for his people. Instead of being a rescuer, he becomes a victim and people (his victims) become his prosecutors." (Khursheed, 181)

He is frustrated because his idealistic dreams could never reach their destination. After all, they lack the firm support of the people. He is fully aware of his

mental predicament when he says: "But how can I explain tomorrow to those who haven't opened their eyes to the light of today?" (Karnad, 39)

In him there is an ardent search for identity wherein Tughlaq at first finds his identity in his imaginative plans and ideals, but once there is a diversion in his plans by chance or by choice or if there is non-execution of his plans, he feels outraged and utterly frustrated and takes recourse to bloodshed, tyranny, and slaughter. The character of Tughlaq appears to be an idealist, yet in the pursuit of that idealism, he promotes their opposites. Girish Karnad comments on the same:

"Here was the most idealistic, the most intelligent king ever to come on the throne of Delhi...and one of the greatest failures also....This seemed 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." (Karnad, viii)

Further, the idea of him beginning on the note of idealistic human being to find its end as a tyrant, is also espoused by the dialogue of Stepmother where she states "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"(Karnad, 65). Moreover, this highlights the idea stated by Sartre in his essay, *Existentialism is Humanism*, wherein he says, "...when we say that man is responsible for himself, ...not...only for his own responsibility, but that he is responsible for all men". (Sartre, 3) Thus, the fate of Tughlaq, also becomes the fate of his kingdom.

Girish Karnad makes use of the images of chess and the rose garden as metaphors of alienation. Chess symbolizes his approach to life, which refers to his [Tughlaq's] life as a game of chess where the aim of the person playing the game is to win by all means. Further, in the game he regards other people as pawns to be manipulated for his own advantage. Moreover, the game of chess delineates the complexes of Tughlaq's character. The rose garden that becomes a rubbish dump is a perfect objective correlative of his idealistic aspiration meeting with the defeat, frustration and disillusionment.

Moreover, Tughlaq is a person who is contemplative in nature, and has a sense of reflection on the human life, that is why he cares for his people and tries to do the best for them. Tughlaq says that justice works in his kingdom "without any

consideration of might or weakness, religion or creed" (Karnad, 3). Through this idea of his, he attempts to guarantee the freedom of choice and meaningful existence to his countrymen. He thus tries to promote the understanding of human existence amidst sufferings and insecurities. He also feels, that whatever he understands about life and the way it progresses, it must be communicated to the people. Thereby, he is unable to sleep in the night because of his fervent ardour to make his subject understand the truth about his existence. He tells his mother: "I wish I could believe in the recurring births like Hindus but I have only one life, my people, my God are all fighting for it. Tell me, how dare I waste my time sleeping." (Karnad, 10)

Tughlaq contemplates the idea of choice wherein he realizes the difficulties and problems that one faces while making it. Thus, the idea of the pain of loss will always be there. Tughlaq has made a 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 cannot give up his choice despite tough opposition from the narrow-minded citizens. He frankly tells Sheikh- Immam-ud-Din about his existential choice:

"I still remember the days when I read the Greeks- Sukrat who took poison so he could give the world the drink of gods, Aflatoon who condemned poets wrote incomparably beautiful poetry himself and I can still feel the thrill with which I found a new world, a world I had not found in the Arabs or even the Koran. They tore me into shreds. And to be whole now, I shall have to kill the part of me, which sang to them. You are asking me to make myself complete by killing the Greek in me and you propose to unify my people by denying the visions which led Zarathustra or the Buddha." (Karnad, 21)

Existentialism argues for the nature of man as a bundle of contradictions, which can be seen in the character of Tughlaq and he is always in the midst of complicated situations. Amidst troublesome situations and circumstances of his life, he makes decisions, which happens to be opposite from what he speaks. Herein, the above passage depicts the wisdom and learning that he has, and he seems to be a knowledgeable fellow. In his actions, he is contrary. He recurses to strategy and cunningness to kill Sheikh Imam-Ud-Din, Shihab-ud-Din, and even decide for the death sentence for his mother. The death sentence that he approves for his mother proves to

be a metaphorical death for Tughlaq too. He is guilt ridden and he is in despair. In his sense of despair and anxiety, he turns to God, he says:

“God, God in Heaven, please hold me. Please don't let go of my hand. My skin drips with blood and I don't know how much of mine and how much of others. I started in your path; Lord why am I wandering naked in this dessert 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.” (Karnad, 67)

As the last resolve, and to find a little peace of mind, he turned towards God. It portrays, that how an individual is in search of something finite, certain, fixed, to escape multiplicity and fragmentation.

Conclusion

The protagonist of the play *Tughlaq* stands as a symbol for the predicament of man, who feels the sense of anxiety, despair, alienation, rootlessness, loneliness, hopelessness, anger, and protest. In the play, the protagonist is always in a divided state of realism and idealism and hence indecisive behavior. Ultimately, he becomes a divided self as a result of his earnest endeavor to build a heavenly kingdom of communal harmony and equality for his people. As a helpless creature, he is full of despair and has no authority to change. He is a fragmented personality, encompassing a diverse world of multiple selves. There is no way that Muhammad the tyrant can be separated from Muhammad the idealist. He is also a poet, a civil servant, a historian, and in the end a self-pitying King. The ideal and the real, the fanatic and secular, the political and historical are the different selves or facets of Tughlaq.

Through this play, Karnad brings into light the problem of contemplation, abstract thoughts, and the dynamics of ideal and real. To have a balanced approach in life is important, thus one may lead a good life. The fractured self of Tughlaq in the play also displays the plight of modern man who lives in the world of insecurity and contingency, the true face of modern man and his struggle to survive in the existential crisis.

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