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Tughlaq: A Wise Fool in Indian History

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Abstract:

This paper aims to explore the complex nature of the character of Tughlaq depicted by Girish Karnad. The protagonist of the play *Tughlaq*, wrestles with inner turmoil and is one of the most controversial and eccentric rulers of India. He is a brilliant but stupendously failed Islamic Sultan and is called the 'Wisest fool' by his own people. Tughlaq attempted to enact laws that, in review, appear brilliantly foresighted, earning him the nickname "Mohammed the mad" at that time. Standards to evaluate truth and facts are different from time to time. His ideas were well beyond the understanding and grasp of the ordinary person. Utopia and philosophy beckoned Tughlaq and directed and impacted his decision-making. There are still many unanswered questions about this peculiar ruler in the annals of Indian History: whether he was a genius or a lunatic, an idealist or a visionary. What the play accomplishes is to encourage introspection and address leadership-related issues.

Keywords: Tughlaq, Utopia, paradoxical, Visionary, History.

Mythological drama derived inspiration mainly from pan-Indian Hindu sources, whereas historical drama conferred greater importance on provincial sources. Girish Karnad's *Tughlaq* is one of the masterpieces in the historical genre of Indian theatre. This is Girish Karnad's second play published in Kannada in 1964. It's a 13-scene play composed by Karnad, with a fourteenth-century Indian ruler as the protagonist is both a chronicled play and a discourse on contemporary Indian politics. This play is considered a classic in Indian English drama.

Karnad has done a lot to advance the tradition of Indian English drama by experimenting with the fusion of traditional along modern dramatic forms. The play is considered one of the honest portrayals of sad and tragic events in the life of Muhammad-bin-

Tughluq, who was one of the most controversial Muslim rulers in the world. He tried to implement radical policies without considering the practicalities or the consequences they might have on his people. His actions often result in chaos, confusion, and suffering for his subjects.

In this play, Karnad presents Muhammad-bin-Tughlaq, as an unpredictable character, who was well known in history as a failed king or a wise fool. Karnad uses fiction to reconstruct history, and his love of literature inspires him to write from a postmodern viewpoint. The creative genius of the playwright is in the depiction of the Sultan's character, which is shaped in paradoxical ways: the ideal and the real, the rational and the mad, and, the visionary and fanciful. The play described a great emperor 'divided against himself' and also clearly described an extremely capable Sultan's dreadful conflict with his citizens and more significantly, clash with his 'soul'.

Girish Karnad began perusing a lot of history before beginning to write Tughlaq. Karnad says: When I read about Mohammed-Bin-Tughlaq, I was fascinated. How marvelous this was, I thought. Tughlaq was a brilliant person yet is viewed as one of the greatest disasters. He attempted to decree laws that, in review, appeared brilliantly foresighted, earning him the nickname "Mohammed the Mad" at the time. He ended his tenure with violence and anarchy. Karnad portrays Tughlaq and his monarchy with a great deal of historical accuracy, with a few dramatic and artistic liberties taken.

The historical play is a nineteenth-century phenomenon in Indian theatre. The initial motivation to write historical fiction was mainly the romanticization of the past as a means of escape from the harsher present, but the Indian dramatist soon realized the genre's potential, making it an effective instrument for the propagation of socio-political ideals. Interestingly, political theatre had its beginnings in historical drama. History is nothing more than the examination of every facet of previous social life in the context of contemporary events and aspirations for the future. It is based on accounts from real people that include historical information.

The palace intrigues, heroism, romance, yearning for political power, treachery, and self-sacrifice formed the paraphernalia of which most historical plays were made whether Indian or Western. William Shakespeare was one of those playwrights who hired history in his playwriting. Plays like Richard II, Henry IV, and Julius Caesar come to mind as historical

plays. Also, they provide insight into the political structure throughout the Renaissance and how it affected society in addition to having a profound impact on historical figures.

Honouring local leaders provides a crucial foundation for the development of historical plays. Several Marathi authors were chosen at the same time to write biographies of historical figures like Shivaji, a notable monarch of the Maratha state. Several playwrights build a wealth of real-world sources for their works. The genre was very influential in India's political theatre revolution. The partition movement in India in 1935 had an impact on Girish Chandra Ghosh, the father of Bengali theatre, who composed *Sirajuddaula* in 1905, *Chhatrapati* in 1908, and *Mirkasim* in 1906. There were more playwrights besides these, including D.L. Roy, who created historical dramas like *Mewar Patan* (The Fall of the Mewar), *Chandragupta*, *Rana Pratap Sinha*, and *Nurjahan*, among others. These are a few illustrations of historical plays produced before independence. These plays were most likely written in the local languages.

Tughlaq's originality also contributed to its enormous success on stage, inspiring many renowned theatres to translate the play and stage it in other important Indian languages. The play has also been performed in Marathi, Bengali, and Assamese in addition to Kannada. The English version of Tughlaq first appeared in Bombay in 1970. This English adaptation of the play aids in spreading the fame and quality that it rightfully deserves. Karnard's engagement with a variety of images, including chess, prayer, python, Daulatabad, roses, and birds like vultures, performs deeper emotional and associative importance.

Prof. Asha Kothari Chaudhuri of Gauhati University has said of the play: "Tughlaq is defined as a historical play because the chief protagonist is a character taken from history and the play documents a series of past events that took place during the reign of Mohammad-bin-Tughlaq. Tughlaq can also be considered as a political play as it represents the reign of a king and his various moves to unify the Hindus and Muslims, and establish a just kingdom in Delhi."

Muhammad-bin-Tughluq is a prominent scholar, and an intelligent, broad-minded, multitalented personality. He was a king who was well known for his sacrifices for the welfare of the people as well as the kingdom. He was the main platform for the administrative reforms, the policy of Hindu-Muslim harmony, and due recognition of merit irrespective of caste and creed. As a keen administrator, he recognizes administrative machinery and a taxation model for the formation of an egalitarian society in which all of his subjects would satisfy fundamental human rights and equal opportunities, justice, and freedom of religion.

In the opening scene, addressing his subjects, he says:

“I have hopes of building a new future for India and I need your support for that. If you don’t understand me, ask me to explain myself and 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 of my hand.” (Text, 182)

Muhammad-bin-Tughluq wanted the capital of his kingdom to be shifted to Daulatabad, (present-day Aurangabad in Maharashtra, India) which is located in the center of his kingdom, for effective administration and to have control of the south and keep the kingdom safe from his dangerously increasing foes. For him, Daulatabad was perceived as a more defensible location, situated on a hill and surrounded by natural barriers, which could provide better security against external threats. In his words:

“My empire is large now and embraces the South and I need a capital which is at its heart. Delhi is too near the border and as you know its peace is never free from the fear of invaders. But for me, the most important factor 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. I invite you all to accompany me to Daulatabad.” (149)”

But the Amirs and Sayyids are of the view that by transferring the capital to the Hindu-dominated town of Daulatabad, the Sultan wants to decline their strength and they see it as a strategic move to consolidate Tughlaq's power in the Deccan region.

Amir1: Just consider this. Why is he taking us to Daulatabad? Have you wondered about that? I'll tell you. He wants to weaken the Amirs. You see, we are strong in Delhi. This is where we belong. But Daulatabad is a Hindu city and we'll be helpless there. We'll have to lick his feet. (Text, p. 31)

Muhammad announced that he would establish copper currency in his kingdom since he is a devoted researcher and is inspired by the enormous success of paper money in China. However, as a result of inappropriate actions to halt the circulation of counterfeit coins, the strategy ends up being a total disaster. Regarding copper currency, Tughlaq intended to stabilize the economy by introducing a new denomination to supplement the existing currency. Copper coins were minted and circulated alongside gold and silver coins. However, the introduction of copper currency faced several challenges. The following dialogue between the Sultan and his Step-Mother makes it clear:

Step-Mother: Muhammad, do you know what's happening outside?...

Muhammad: What else can I do? I said the new copper coins would have the same value as the silver dinars. Now I can't go against my orders.

Step-Mother: But this is sheer folly! The Vizier says there are five hundred carts out there and they are all full of counterfeit coins. Are you going to exchange them all for silver?

Muhammad: There's nothing else for it. I should have expected this, but didn't--that was my fault. If I don't withdraw the coins now, the whole economy will be in shambles. It's in a bad enough state already. (Text, 63)

As a leader, Muhammad-bin-Tughluq appears to have failed spectacularly. He is perceived as a man who has lost faith in society mostly because his ideas and beliefs are well beyond those of his contemporaries. Only his subjects, who won't support his goals, are to blame for his failure. In this matter, Tughlaq's efforts to reform the currency system ultimately failed, resulting in financial instability and social unrest during his reign. His policies are often cited as examples of well-intended but poorly executed by corrupt officers in Indian history. All the measures provided by the Sultan were misused by corrupt officers like Aziz and Azam. Infuriated by the miserably poor response to his aim and noble idea, the Sultan becomes a hard realist, a perceptive and cunning politician.

And the shifting of the capital has become a 'fatwa' to the mindfulness of his dream. The relocation involved a massive administrative effort, with the forced migration of a significant portion of Delhi's population to Daulatabad. This upheaval caused widespread discontent and hardship among the people. The Sultan, once "not afraid to be human," turns out to be a ruthless tyrant. He wants the misery and uncertainty of his idle troops to grow. He believes that his greatest responsibility is to make his fellow humans feel the truth, which is why he is restless. He finds himself experiencing their sorrows and has restless nights.

In the play, the character of Tughlaq is depicted as a compassionate human being as well as an unpredictable ruler. For instance, his reaction to the murder of Nazib is a pivotal moment in the play, showcasing his capacity for both wrath and mercilessness. When Tughlaq discovers that his stepmother has been involved in the murder of Nazib, his wrath is fuelled not only by the loss of his friend but also by the betrayal and treachery within his own family. However, Tughlaq's wrath is also tinged with a sense of tragedy. His actions are driven not only by a desire for justice but also by a deep sense of personal betrayal and loss.

Step-Mother: *I'm glad Nazib is dead. He was leading you astray. It's because you wouldn't trust anyone as much as him that the Kingdom's in this state! The Ulema are against you; the noblemen are against you; The people hate you. It's all his work. I'm glad he is dead. He should have died a long time ago.*

Mohammad: *Nazib wasn't loyal to me; he was loyal to the throne. (Text, p: 64)*

Step-Mother: *... I had poisoned him. ... It was easier than killing one's father and brother. It was better than killing Sheik Imam -ud-din.*

The complexities of ruling a vast empire, coupled with personal losses and the demands of power, would likely have taken a toll on his psyche. Mohammad accepts that he killed his father and brother for his ideal. His inner struggle is brought out in the following dialogue:

Mohammad: *I killed them-- I killed them- for an ideal. Don't I know it's results? Don't you think that I've suffered from the curse? My mother won't speak to me—I can't even look into a mirror for fear of seeing their faces in it. I had only three friends in this world-you, Nazib and Barani.*

Tughlaq's willingness to betray his flesh and blood for the sake of his political aspirations reflects the moral ambiguity of his character and the harsh realities of political intrigue. Throughout the play, Tughlaq's reign is marked by political intrigue, betrayal, and bloodshed. The act of patricide also serves to underscore the themes of betrayal, ambition, and the corrupting influence of power that runs throughout the play. He orders executions, deploys his allies and enemies alike, and commits acts of violence to assert his authority and maintain control over his kingdom.

Eventually, Tughlaq's dual nature both as a bard and a slayer serves to deepen the audience's understanding of his character and the complexities of power and leadership explored in the play. Karnard's intelligent use of juxtaposition of Tughlaq's poetic sensibilities with his capacity for assassination creates a compelling and contradictory portrait of the character. It highlights the complexity of human nature and the tensions between humanity and brutality, idealism and pragmatism, that define Tughlaq's character. Tughlaq's reign is more often outshined by his ambitious but often ill-fated policies, such as the attempted shifts in the capital, the introduction of copper and forfeit currency, and his military campaigns. These actions have overshadowed any potential reputation he might have had as a scholar or poet.

Every effort Muhammad makes to do good has the opposite effect. At the conclusion of the play, he says to Barani, the historian, in a pitiful but dignified way: "If justice were as simple as you think or logic as lovely as I had hoped, life would have been so much clearer. I have been chasing these words now for five years and now I don't know if I am pursuing a mirage or a fleeting shadow. Anyway, what do all these subtle distinctions matter in the building madness of the day? Sweep your logic away into a corner, Barani, all I need now is myself and my madness to prance in the field eaten bare by the scarecrow violence. But I am not alone. I have a companion to share my madness now the Omnipotent God!" (219)

Dr Ishwari Prasad, a historian, rightly says in his book "A History of Quanaah Turks in India": "We have sufficient data to prove that Muhammad was no monster who took delight in shedding blood for its own sake and those who stigmatize him as a callous tyrant forget the age in which he lived and the circumstances in which he was placed. His conflict with the practical and unkind truths of human life makes him treacherously unpleasant, leaves him entirely shocked and confused and completely forces him to take shelter in mental illness.

Muhammad Bin-Tughlaq, the protagonist of the play, is one of the most debatable and eccentric rulers of India. He is a brilliant but stupendously failed Islamic Sultan and is called the 'Wisest fool' by his own people. Karnad's main historical foundation is the Tarikh-i-Firoz Shahi 1357, a recorded history whose author, Zia-ud-din-Barani, stayed seventeen years in Tughlaq's kingdom. Using Barani's tale, his outlooks, and part of his text, Karnad created a unique play in thirteen scenes, in a systematic manner that portrays both political and psychological ironies. Karnad, in his own words, says "What struck me absolutely about Tughlaq's history was due to the modern era where he fuses both past and present. Tughlaq is portrayed by Karnad as someone who sought to end religious animosity and establish equality between Muslims and Hindus. The drama's treatment of this issue was, nonetheless, compelling. Hindus and Muslims should be united, Tughlaq proclaimed, "Hindu Daulatabad, the nation's capital, would serve as a symbol of the ties that Hindus and Muslims share.

According to R.P. Rama, Tughlaq may therefore be interpreted as a drama illustrating the effects of Tughlaq's choices on the proletariat. The common man was more preoccupied with the extremely basic task of existing, whereas, at one level, Utopia and philosophy beckoned Tughlaq and directed and impacted his decision-making. Karnad's portrayal of Tughlaq as a "wise fool" highlights the complexities of leadership and the inherent contradictions within human nature. Tughlaq's character serves as a cautionary tale about the

dangers of unchecked idealism and the importance of understanding the practical realities of governance. However, there are still many unanswered questions about him, such as whether he was a genius or a crazy lunatic, an idealist or a visionary. What the play accomplishes is to encourage introspection and address leadership-related issues.

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