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## KARNAD'S *TUGHLAQ*

*A Game of Binaries and Beyond*

Swayama Sengupta

Research Scholar

AIESRK

Amity University Kolkata

Kolkata, India

### Abstract

The play portrays the Indian emperor, Muhammad-bin-Tughlaq, with visions and ideologies neither of which could be successfully implemented during his reign, degenerating the kingdom and the emperor himself. This paper looks at the play through the symbolisms of chess, Tughlaq's multiple reflections, and the interplay of fact and fiction. It seeks to find out whether the play is one beyond the structured aspect of binaries, namely the real and the ideal, the ethical and the unethical, faith and betrayal, and reason and chaos. Through the paradoxical figure of Tughlaq, it attempts to look at the element of irony implied in every motif of mirror imaging and parallelism employed by Girish Karnad. Through his juxtaposition of history and fiction, Karnad exposes the intertwining of the ideals, and often perplexes the characters as well as the audience with the aspect of truth. The play captures much of the eccentricities of Tughlaq, who went down to be known as the 'wisest fool' in history. However, it also asks whether his decisions were a mere whim of a tyrant, those ahead of his time, or the ones which were poorly executed leading to suspect all of his sanity. What follows is rampant corruption in the kingdom, the ethical dilemma of Tughlaq, and the gradual disillusionment of his people as well as his own.

**Keywords:** binaries, ideal, real, disillusionment, chess, reflections, reason

### Introduction

Girish Karnad's *Tughlaq* was published in 1964. The play, originally written in Kannada and later translated in English by the playwright himself, traces the character of the emperor, Muhammad-bin-Tughlaq and his reign in the 14th century India. Tughlaq is known for his whimsical administrations in history, some of which are mentioned in the play including shifting his kingdom from Delhi to Daulatabad and back to Delhi, the introduction of token currency, and the increase of revenue in the Doab region, among others. While his thought behind them was farsighted yet each needed a strategic plan, preventing the disastrous consequences which were to follow eventually. It should be noted that Deccan could be administered more capably from Daulatabad. However, dragging the entire kingdom without surveying the merits and demerits cost the lives of many. Though the farmers inhabiting the Doab region could afford to pay the taxes, the famine took the lives of many which left them unable to

bear the taxes (Mishra, 2015). On the other hand, despite the use of token currency in the contemporary times, counterfeiting emerged as a profitable business and affected the economy at large. These speak of a paradox and an inability to stick to decisions. Tughlaq's actions are sentimental, thoughts poetic, and fate tragic, all of which highlight him as a tragic hero. This tragedy not only befalls on his people but himself as well, stemming from differing ideologies in the governance (Kumar, 2025).

Although the play has an imperial protagonist, it refuses to be entirely one. To better understand the state of the kingdom, Karnad does not restrict the setting inside the palace. Apart from the closing scene, he weaves a non-consecutive pattern where one scene opens outside the palace followed by another inside. The play, with conversations among various strata of the kingdom, includes the elements of economy, society, politics, and religion; the very institutions which are fundamental to create order, stability, and prosperity. Hence, Tughlaq's attempt in choking the voices is a sheer futility as the audience gets a glimpse of the resentful way they whisper about his authoritarian regime, growing paranoia, and the suffering of their own.

Although the conflict appears to be between many of the two opposing factors in the play, it is not just so. Tughlaq's ambiguities and his theatrical overtones to every circumstance add to the liminal stage the audience as well as the characters find him at. His paradoxical actions and dialogues break the conventional boundaries, those which cement the transparency of a character unlike Tughlaq's.

### **Tughlaq's Reflections in Different Characters**

A sensitive ruler bereft of practicality, it is difficult to entrap Tughlaq in the entanglement of binaries. His divided self is reflected in multiple characters which demonstrate his growing complexity throughout the play. One finds striking resemblances of Tughlaq in Ain-ul-Mulk, Shihab-ud-din, and Aziz, in different stages of his life shaping his character. In the play, Ain-ul-Mulk's rebellion is the initial blow that the Sultan has to deal with. With advisors like Barani and Najib by his side, he does not let his vulnerability turn to paranoia, and appears to manipulate strategically. He sees and is aware of the nobility in Ain-ul-Mulk's actions which the latter undertake to fight against Tughlaq's intention of weakening him.

Tughlaq's loyal courtier, Shihab-Ud-din is not only disillusioned and trapped by the other amirs but also serves as a pawn. This is similar to that of the Sultan's close confidantes, Najib and Barani, which tends to cloud both Tughlaq's and Shihab-Ud-Din's judgments. Such exterior and often violent opinions do not give either a chance to think for themselves as they are easily swept away by such manipulations and devises. In this case, the murder of Shihab-Ud-din is more dramatic than his betrayal. By stabbing him repeatedly, Tughlaq stabs his own lenience, compassion, and humanity for good. This way, he wins and loses those which he had desired for, absolute power and societal enhancement (Monga, 2018).

By preventing himself from killing Ain-ul-Mulk, Tughlaq saves a more capable, practical, and intellectual version of himself, the one that he could have been if he chose wisely. By letting Aziz walk free on the other hand, he attempts to remind himself of the same. However, what sets them apart are the ways they choose to execute their actions. While Ain-ul-Mulk, a military commander's betrayal is conventional demonstration of power, the washerman Aziz's mirrors Sultan's ruthless measures at a micro-level. It is not only the character of Tughlaq but also those of the others which transcend the neutrality of positive and negative. The characters, therefore, are different extensions of his complex self which has been dramatised for the purpose of the play (Sheela, 2016).

### **The Game of Chess**

Chess has been known as a royal game since time immemorial which when played promises the taste of a battlefield. Karnad incorporates this strategic game in *Tughlaq*. Chess emerges as a character from a mere board game as the eponymous Sultan not only plays it but uses it as a metaphor as well. The black and white chequered pattern on a chess board is a masquerade itself as it tends to transcend from its apparent simplicity veiling the risks underneath. In sharp contrast to the meanings attached to

the respective colours with black being negatively connotated and white positive, the board is one which speaks of an illusion of balance. The player, however, must be calm while deciding each move. While impulsive and sentimental driven decisions lead to inconsistent performances, a collected mind fares well in it.

The imagery of the board and the game could be compared with Tughlaq and his actions in the realm of statecraft. For someone with scholarly abilities and an outlook of liberalism, he fails to see through the illusion that statecraft possesses in the disguise of balance and order. This eventually results in chaos and wreaks havoc in his kingdom. Chess not only embodies Tughlaq's inner turmoil but his relation to others, and his obsession to win over the picture of perfection as well (Dasaradhi and Nimsarkar, 2016).

This could be understood from the fact that the game proves to be the only helpful assistance to the lonely Sultan. Not only does Muhammad-bin-Tughlaq involve himself intellectually in it for the purpose of administration but chess also happens to have an important part in his word play, the poet as he is. For instance, Tughlaq seems to be immersed in his game, unwary of the attack of Ain-ul-Mulk, which is initially shocking to his stepmother. Yet on diving deeper, the shrewd ruler is actually arranging his moves against his enemy. Renowned for its intelligence, the game challenges its players to opt for the tricky advances. Likewise, When Tughlaq speaks of the problems in solving the mysteries of the game, his stepmother is amazed to find him at ease but the audience learn that it is, in fact, a metaphor. A learned man, he wraps his plans and actions under the tactics of the *Chaturanga*.

Besides his wrong move, the play also highlights how ingenious the Sultan himself is. Though an idealist, the Sultan acts rationally upon understanding the consequences of his actions. It is only when Ain-ul-Mulk, after being captured cites him the reason why he should not be sentenced to death that the former lets him go. The real reason, however, is that killing Ain-ul-Mulk would result into a possibility of revolt against the Sultan. Besides, the character of Ain-ul-Mulk, could be identified as an opponent who is strong yet not stronger than Tughlaq. Tughlaq, the Sultan and a chess aficionado himself, does not expect to be outwitted by Ain-ul-Mulk, a military commander, and hence, a lower rank official. But when the latter does checkmate him amidst growing political arguments, Tughlaq recognises his sportsmanship, and prevents himself from punishing him. Instead, he chooses to turn his enemy as a strong ally, paying back Ain-ul-Mulk's strategic move of chess with administrative greatness.

In this context, therefore, despite their differences in background, Tughlaq's relation with Ain-ul-Mulk appears to be similar to Aziz. In a kingdom plagued with crises, Aziz, a Muslim washerman, seeks shrewd measures to have his own way. Tughlaq shows off his skills and understanding in chess in the closing scene as he forgives, Aziz, something he does rarely. The usage of the game position, checkmate, adds a final touch of his tactic. Aziz, the robber, the blackmailer, the imposter and the murderer has been looked down upon by every character yet manages to taste success with whatever *he* thinks is right, an attribute shared by his royal counterpart. Though taken aback, we understand how Tughlaq sees himself in Aziz as he not only sweetens his words to appease the Sultan but convinces him to belief that Aziz has been viewed as a failure just as Tughlaq is however right he might have thought for the good of all. Tughlaq's amused cry of 'checkmate' at Aziz's insolence proves that the Sultan has been playing the game of chess all the seven years the play covers. Although he has been afraid to look at the mirror for fear of being haunted by those he had murdered, he rests at ease now, exhausted, having seen himself reflecting in Aziz.

### **The conflict of the ideal and the real**

The play abounds in the clash between those that could have been and that which actually is, which when briefed, refers to the conflict between the ideal and the real. Tughlaq proceeds with certain projects that eventually have devastating effects. The impetuous emperor curves out his plans on the basis of superficial contexts yet fails to think about the consequences. The poetic way and the verbose speeches in which Tughlaq speaks to his stepmother sharply indicate how he fantasises life and is distant from its harsh practicalities. The Sultan continues rambling about his dreams where he visions

himself as the divine grace, promising to serve his people yet fails to undertake his responsibilities in the desired way.

The opinions of the aged commoner in the first scene further validates the point that there is no reason to pray forcefully as prayer deserves to be done out of devotion. The void between the ideal and the real is further enhanced when people like Aziz succeed to deceive the Sultan by their foul play and push the kingdom more towards the path of corruption. Tughlaq is cheated because of his own rules. The two characters Aziz and Aazam are supposed to be comic relief but they gradually contribute to the irony of Tughlaq's character. It is ironic how even the illiterate washerman reads the Sultan's pulse which helps him get a glimpse of the latter's character. Throughout the play, Aziz continues to cheat people and rob them which showcases the current political scenario of India, where the quick-witted loots like Aziz, make a fortune out of the innocent, who ultimately ends up with nothing. For instance, Tughlaq's royal proclamation upon whoever brings a law suit against him complaining that the Sultan had been unjust, would be compensated freely. A decision like this could only be backed by a scholarly mind yet the Sultan overlooks the loopholes in his declaration. As Aziz disguises under the name of the poor, helpless brahmin Vishnu Prasad whose land has been confiscated. The imposter is duly rewarded as was promised by the Sultan without an investigation of his identity and as a result, the real Vishnu Prasad is left with nothing.

### **The motif of irony mirror imaging**

Karnad curves out the scenario of the Nehruvian era in the historical context of the Tughlaq dynasty (Soundararajan, 2019). The playwright adorns his play with irony deftly, drawing parallels with the multiple anomalies of the post independent India. The irony lies in the theatrical character of the Sultan, Muhammad-bin-Tughlaq. Hoping to discipline his subjects in a religious manner, he makes it a rule to pray five times a day, the inability to follow which, promises harsh punishment. Yet, on looking back, the hour of prayer is a recurrent time of repetition of actions in the past and present in the Sultan's life as he is believed to have murdered his father that moment (Das, 2017). This further points to the dark nature of Tughlaq as the Hindu soldiers attack Shihab-Ud-din and the Amirs just when they plot to assassinate the Sultan while he nonchalantly continues to pray. The irony adds to the contradictory side of the emperor as the game of ideal and real clash against each other. The primary aim of education on religion fails as the Sultan himself goes against his rules.

The point where Tughlaq and Sheikh Imam-Ud-din face each other, looking alike, clad in similar royal robes, highlight the aspect of mirroring. During their conversation, Imam-Ud-din falls headlong in the trap of Muhammad as he pushes him towards the battlefield. The Sultan pawns him to face his enemy, Ain-ul-Mulk in the warfront. This indicates how shrewd Tughlaq is, as one sees his gradual transformation of character from the Sultan devoted to betterment to a wrathful one sparing none. He entraps the Sheikh by inviting him to a meeting which none of the subjects attend as the Sultan had stopped them from being present so as to carry out his plan successfully.

Tughlaq's efforts to bring along a harmonious relationship between the Hindus and the Muslims is evident from the conversations among the commoners standing outside the courtroom, as they blame each other as well as Ratan Singh's betrayal of Shihab – Ud – din. The post-colonial picture of India upholds the memories of the Hindu Muslim riots despite Nehru's attempts in unifying both the communities.

Tughlaq desires to introduce certain forms of democracy in his kingdom. So, the Sultan declares that whoever would file a law suit against him citing his grievances, that man would be compensated accordingly. This proclamation is not well received by the subjects, unaccustomed to such forms of liberal judgements, they receive it as the folly of the ruler. In turn, Tughlaq gets cheated in the process as a fraud pretends to be a poor Brahmin who has lost his land and gets a job instead.

Be it Tughlaq's whimsical decisions of moving the entire capital from Delhi to Daulatabad or introducing copper coins to have similar value to silver, the policies welcome death, poverty, and corruption. It is Tughlaq's dreams to bring along semblance between both the religious communities as

well as move his capital towards the interior of the country that enhances him to make such changes yet he fails miserably only to realise his procrastination in the end. The irony of the Sultan's character could also be understood by the rose garden at Daulatabad. It indicates to the aesthetic aspect in the ruler as he imagines to do something of exemplary level. Owing to his capricious behaviour, the rose garden is no more yearned for, people are hanged at the slightest suspicion, and the city is plagued by deceit all around. Despite his strength and power, the sheer villainy in Tughlaq's reign does not let him enjoy his life as his expectations have not come to fruition. Not only does his sudden transformations of tones refer to his ironical character but his ultimate recognition of his psychological double, Aziz as well, which again denotes to the mirror imaging.

With the attainment of independence, it became difficult for the Indians to accustom themselves to the concept of liberty, equality and fraternity, having being enslaved for many centuries. Karnad places the context of the Tughlaq dynasty aligned with his contemporary political situation that reminds us of how history repeats itself besides highlighting the point as to how it is always the destitute to be victimised in the hands of an unpredictable ruler.

### Conclusion

The play appears to warn its audience through the failures of a visionary, who in spite of his visions, failed to implement them. Perhaps the greatest tragedy is how Tughlaq, riddled with dilemma, is aware of his shortcomings but just like chess where one player cannot move a pawn backwards, he cannot take back his erroneous orders. Therefore, it is not only Tughlaq's close ones or subjects who are disillusioned with his chaotic reign but himself as well. The dark passage of Daulatabad fort compared to a python symbolises the twisted mind of the Sultan which sails through a path of death and disintegration. *Tughlaq* is a mix of oppositions, contradictions, and complexities, shattering binaries. It is a play about the human nature especially portraying through its eponymous character. Tughlaq's real rival is none but himself, a procrastinating and lost individual whose ideal idea of binary, the right and the wrong, dooms him to dystopian realism.

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