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## Symbolism And Political Allegory In Girish Karnad's *Tughlaq*: A Study Of Parallelism Between History And Modernity

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### Abstract

Girish Karnad's *Tughlaq* is a compelling historical play that reimagines the tumultuous reign of Muhammad bin Tughlaq, a 14th-century Sultan of Delhi, through a modern political lens. Karnad's fascination with Tughlaq arises from the ruler's paradoxical personality—an idealist plagued by political failure—which provides a fertile ground for exploring themes of leadership, disillusionment, and power. This article examines how Karnad employs *symbolism* and *parallelism* to construct a narrative that is at once historical and profoundly contemporary. The character of Tughlaq, with his utopian aspirations and tragic downfall, serves as an allegorical figure mirroring the political disillusionment of India in the 1960s. Through the strategic use of recurring symbols—such as prayer, sleep, chess, and the rose garden—Karnad probes the intersections of politics, religion, and existential anxiety. These symbols not only deepen the psychological portrait of the protagonist but also evoke broader metaphysical and socio-political concerns. The article argues that the play's symbolic architecture and historical parallelism enable a critical interrogation of governance, idealism, and the cyclical nature of political unrest, thereby affirming Karnad's relevance as a modern political dramatist.

**Keywords:** Idealism, Frustration, Disillusionment, Parallelism, Relevance, Adequacy, Materialized, Motif, Facets, Historical Allegory, Symbolism, Myth.

## Introduction

Tracing the origin and development of the narrative of Indian play is incredibly fascinating, filled with tales, secrets, and fantastic events. There are no outside sources from which Indian theatre as a form has been adapted. When the Arabian, Egyptian, Persian, and Portuguese arrived in India to reign, they did not bring any drama with them. Compared to Greek and Roman play as well, Indian drama has a much older origin. In this way, drama's beginning in India is indigenous. Initially, it was a fusion of three performing arts, namely dance and gesticulation, to which part of speech was eventually incorporated. In mythology, the Nymphs and Apsaras performed these theatrical plays while acting and dancing during the festivals of the Gods. This shows the source of Indian drama to be religion only. Likewise, it emerged from the combination of song and dance in the festival of Gods to which the narrative recitation was added later on. It was initially sung then spoken as dialogue.

Actually, drama is the oldest artistic genre which dates back to the early Vedic era, and supposed to be the source of creation that is the most original and original among all later sources that are known and available. In this regard O. P. Budholia aptly remarks:

The history of drama is as old as the existence of man on this earth. Indian drama has got its divine origin and hence it includes in its purview the cultural signification and an inclusion of the various form of emotions for its performance, the realistic overtones and the distinguishing features such as the traditional heritage, folklore, the oral signs of literature, myth and mythopoeic vision, secular and religious approaches to life. (Budholia 1)

Girish Karnad is one of the genius dramatists of Anglo-Indian drama. Initially he wanted to be a poet but he was destined to be a playwright. He came from a traditional Konkani family and was educated abroad. He spent his youth in training himself to be an English poet but could express himself better in Kannada. The theatre had a great influence on him. He was also a noted actor and a popular TV artist and won the president's award for his films. In spite of his immense versatility he has written notable plays among which Tughlaq is one of the main published in 1962. It was originally written in Kannada but later he translated it in English. Karnad was extremely interested in Indian history and studied about Tughlaq and was fascinated by the character of Tughlaq who was portrayed as a man of his will and did what he wanted which fitted well with his own character. Karnad found that Tughlaq was the character he was possessed with and felt that he was the most extraordinary ruler of Delhi and outshone in different spheres of life be it religion, philosophy, battle, war-field and even calligraphy. He displays concerns with the problems of existence and search of Identity, isolation and frustration. The main theme of Tughlaq is the search of Identity. His main inspiration for writing drama came from the 'Natak plays' hence he has strictly followed the classical rules of drama. Karnad has a rich vocabulary and is capable of using appropriate words for different situations. His language is refined and precise and he maintains decorum in his dialogues. His language suits his plays and their characters. Tughlaq is remembered for the dissonance between his intellectual brilliance and political failures. While he is acknowledged as an exceptionally

intelligent and visionary leader, he is simultaneously regarded, particularly by Karnad, as one of history's most tragic figures—often labeled “Muhammad the Mad” due to the apparent irrationality of his reforms, which, though progressive in conception, proved disastrous in execution. Karnad draws from historical sources but permits selective deviations for dramatic and thematic purposes. Within this framework, Tughlaq is initially depicted as an idealistic and benevolent ruler, whose commitment to justice and rational governance is made evident in the very first scene. However, the play gradually unfolds the contradictions of his rule, culminating in political chaos, violence, and widespread disillusionment, thus framing Tughlaq's downfall as a tragic failure of idealism in the face of pragmatic realities.

### ***Tughlaq – Myth and Political Allegory :***

The drama was composed in the Company Natak style. It was presented as a student play at the National School of Drama in Urdu in 1966. In 1972, Purana Kila in Delhi hosted the event. August 1970 saw the performance of its English translation at Mumbai's Bhulabai Desai Auditorium. The play has thirteen scenes that each contain action; there are no traditional acts. The dramatist uses a summary of the life of Muhammad Tughlaq, the ruler of Turkey and Indo-China, as both ahistorical allegory and a deft critique of Indian politics in the 1960s. U.R. Anantha Murthy quotes Karnad in his preface to *Tughlaq* (1975), stating that the history of Tughlaq struck him as being utterly modern. The most idealistic and educated king to ever rule Delhi was standing here, yet he was also one of the biggest failures. And this incredibly talented man had fallen to bits in the course of twenty years. This appeared to be caused by both his idealism and his flaws, which included his brutality, impatience, and conviction that he was the only one with the right solution. And I felt in the early sixties India had also come very far in the same direction—the twenty year period seemed to me very much a striking parallel (Karnad vii).

The play's dramatic technique, ironic and paradoxical elements, use of symbolism, transformation of the idealistic ruler, and political disillusionments with Nehru's era and idealism across the country all contributed to its immediate success and drew criticism from many quarters.

The historical account of Sultan Muhammad bin Tughlaq, who governed India from 1325 to 1351 in the fourteenth century, is where Girish Karnad gets his core idea of Tughlaq. Girish Karnad, the first Kannada writer to write a historical play, was inspired by Dr. Kirtinath Kurtkoti's assertion that no one in Kannada had ever attempted historical narrative to the contemporary sensibility in his book *Nade-dubandderi—The Way We Have Walked*, an assessment of Kannada literature from 1880 to 1960. He was enthralled with the persona and narrative of Sultan Muhammad Tughlaq after reading Ishwari Prasad's *The History of Medieval India*. While reading, Karnad became enthralled with the multifaceted character of Sultan Tughlaq, who was an odd and uncommon blend of a man of action and a dreamer, a kind and understanding human being, and an oppressive ruler. He states :

I became enthralled with Mohammed bin Tughlaq's story while reading it. I thought how wonderful this was. Despite his brilliance, Tughlaq is considered one of the greatest misfits. The moniker "Mohammad the Mad" was given to him back then for his attempts to enact laws that now appear to be brilliantly foresighted. Bloodshed and mayhem marked the conclusion of his career (Tutun 35).

He also read *Tarikh-i-Firuz Shahi* by Ziaud-Din Barani, *Tarikh-i- Mubarak Shahi* by Badoni, Ibn Batuta's *Travels*, and the *Mashik-al-Absar* by Al Marshi. The narrative of Karnad's play is derived primarily on Ziaud-Din Barani's *Tarikh-i-Firuz Shahi* (1357), which provides a historical overview and chronology of the Sultan dynasty.

India, Nepal, Pakistan, and Bangladesh were all under the authority of Muhammad ibn Tughlaq, who ruled over the region for twenty-six years, from 1325 to 1351. The Tughlaq dynasty was founded by Ghiyas-ud-Din-Tughlaq, a Turkish by origin who was the eldest son of an Indian Hindu ruler of Dipalpur. He was also referred to as Ulugh Khan, prince Fakhr Malik Jauna Khan. Upon his father's murder in 1325, he proclaimed himself to be the Sultan of India. He was an accomplished scholar who spoke Persian, Arabic, Turkish, and Sanskrit fluently. His mastery of philosophy, astronomy, mathematics, medicine, and logic was made possible by his extensive knowledge of several languages. He'd been a superb calligrapher and a superb leader. Throughout his life, he upheld morals and secularism and never touched alcohol. He consistently made Hindus happy with his various measures that promoted equality and unity between Muslims and Hindus. In Indian history, he is regarded as a "wise fool" despite his extensive knowledge in numerous fields.

### ***Tughlaq* - A Historic Character in the play:**

He ruled India in the fourteenth century after the assassination of his father Ghiyasuddin Tughlaq in 1325. He says, "I have hopes for building a new future for India..." (*Tughlaq* scene VI). The changes in his mind are quite vividly presented by the dramatist. Thus, these historical characters are made real being suffering from intense pain and mental crisis. Among his siblings, he was the most capable, possessing substantial expertise in both military strategy and administrative governance. He maintained cordial relations with the nobility and exercised effective authority over the central administration. Although certain historians have speculated about his possible involvement in his father's death, no conclusive evidence has ever substantiated this claim.

During his reign direct rule of the Delhi sultanate was established and his territories were expanded. He is graded as the man fond of making presents and also shedding blood. His generous and brave actions as well as his cruel deeds have gained a typical place for him in the eyes of the people. In spite of all his misgivings he shows great equality and comes out as the most-humble man. He is portrayed as the Sultan who was a great well-wisher of his people. He was very ambitious and had many plans which were executed though most of his plans failed yet he shows greatness and a feeling of public welfare. At times he was ignorant of the condition of people and collected

revenues which made the farmers very poor and the rich against him. When the Sultan was made aware of famine and drought, he took great measures for the good of the farmers and ordered wells and tanks to be dug for irrigation and also supplied free food for the people and their animals; though these measure and help failed to help the farmers as it was given very late. In conversation with Barani, he says:

The draught in Doab is spreading from town to town- burning up the country. Only one industry flourishes in my kingdom. Only one –and that's of making counterfeit copper coins...What should I do Barani? What would you prescribe for this honeycomb of diseases? (*Tughlaq* scene VIII)

One of the most infamous and ultimately disastrous policies implemented by Muhammad-bin-Tughlaq was the decision to shift the capital from Delhi to Daulatabad. Tughlaq believed that Daulatabad's central geographical position within the subcontinent would enhance administrative efficiency and help consolidate his rule. However, this assumption proved to be deeply flawed. Although the Sultan provided logistical support and incentives to facilitate the mass migration, the journey's vast distance placed severe physical and economic strain on the population. Despite his intentions to promote Muslim cultural expansion in the Deccan, the forced relocation resulted in immense human suffering, with many perishing en route. The once-fertile plains of Deogiri effectively became a graveyard for his subjects. Recognizing the unfeasibility of the relocation and the catastrophic loss it entailed, Tughlaq eventually reversed the decision, ordering the populace to return to Delhi—a journey that again claimed countless lives and devastated the city's vitality, both demographically and economically.

In addition to the failed capital transfer, Tughlaq's reign is also notable for its significant, though flawed, experiments in coinage and monetary reform. Upon ascending the throne, he expended substantial sums on gifts and grants to appease nobles and suppress widespread rebellions, thereby depleting the royal treasury. To replenish state finances, in 1330 he introduced token currency in the form of bronze coins, declaring them equivalent in value to silver coins. However, this decision backfired as people began hoarding precious metals— gold and silver—while flooding the markets with easily forged bronze currency. The system quickly collapsed, leading to economic instability. Ultimately, the Sultan was forced to revoke the token currency and ordered an exchange of bronze for silver from the imperial treasury, resulting in a tremendous financial loss for the empire.

According to history Tughlaq was a man who was a great visionary, idealist and scholar. He was cultured scholar a poet and had great command on subjects like astronomy philosophy mathematics and physical science. He was a lover of fine arts and an excellent calligraphist. In the matters of religion, he was very tolerant and liberal he never followed the proposals of the Ulemas blindly and also invited the non-muslim scholars for the discussions which angered the Ulemas. They became his bitter critics even some of the contemporary historians considered him as a non-believer of Islam.

When the Shaikh accuses Tughlaq for bringing disgrace to Islam. In answering his accusations Muhammad Tughlaq says:

They tried to indulge in politics- I couldn't allow that. I have never denied the word of God. Shaikh Sahib, because it's my bread and drink. I need it most when the surrounding void pushes itself into my soul and starts putting out every light burning there. But I am alone in my life. My kingdom has millions- Muslims, Hindus, Jains. Yes, there is dirt and sickness in my kingdom. But why should I call on God to clean the dirt deposited by men? (Tughlaq scene III)

On the whole the writer has altered several aspects of his reign with view of making the play more relevant in the modern Indian.

### **Parallelism between reign of Tughlaq and India of the Sixties**

Karnad's play Tughlaq is a historic play and has made the modern audience fascinated by the depiction of characters. Karnad was very conscious while writing the play regarding parallelism between the reign of Tughlaq and the Indian scene. The play can be considered as a political allegory as it reflects the corruption and disillusion prevailing in independent India of fifties and sixties. It shows the corruption and frustration of the people that was in the Indian politics of the independent India. The play shows great similarity with the politics of India as there was mistrust between the Hindus and Muslims in the reign of Tughlaq as well as after independence in India. The Muslims never trusted the Hindus even when they were exempted from the taxes. The situation in both cases worsened as despite the effort Tughlaq's efforts to bring harmony between Hindus and Muslims the situation prevailed and same with the post independent India where Gandhiji did his best effort to bring Hindus and Muslims together but failed and became a victim of the mistrust of both. Tughlaq is intellectual but is impulsive and is not able to evaluate his actions properly and invites criticism and fails in his plans. He is very intelligent where he deals with the Imam he knows that Imam is instigating people against him he invites him to Delhi to address his people. But when the Imam comes to Delhi no one comes to hear him. Tughlaq also flatters him to be an envoy of peace to the Nawab of Awadh as the Imam resembles the Sultan very much in appearance. The Imam falls to the trap of the Sultan and dresses like him and goes mounted on the elephant and is charged by an army and killed, same happens to the step mother of Tughlaq who is killed for murdering Najib. Thus, Tughlaq becomes a murderer and his idealism fails.

Practically politics and idealism do not go together, which is perfectly true in the present Indian situation. Many idealists try their best to put their ideals in practice but face challenges in implementing them. Karnad's play depict that Tughlaq was in no way different from the modern India. He had plans and programmes for the development of his Kingdom but the courtiers did not give him their support and his administration were also corrupt. The officers took bribes and undue favours from the king and also the plans of the Sultan were beyond the understanding of his subjects. His officers who executed his plans were corrupt and the plans failed. The same situation prevailed in modern India many plans and projects were taken up for the welfare of the people by the government but their enforcement was faulty hence they miserably failed due to the dishonesty. Thus, we can say that the time of the reign of Tughlaq was

not different from the time in modern India. Dishonesty, flattery and many other evils of

the kingdom of Tughlaq's reign was no different from modern Indian politics which makes Karnad's play relevant to modern India.

### Symbolism in the play *Tughlaq*

To make his play infuse deeper projecting hidden meanings he uses symbols and images in the form of words to have a greater emotional significance in his play. He has idealized Tughlaq as one of the greatest rulers to rule Delhi and also the greatest failure. It is clear that the play reflects the mood of disillusionment that also followed in the modern India. The most important symbol used by Karnad in his play is the chess symbol. He depicts that Tughlaq plays chess to pass his time as well as to solve problems. This shows Tughlaq's manipulative skills to deal with his opponents. He considers his opponents and rivals as pawns in the chess which he could use or move at his own will. It also describes the clever move of chess by Tughlaq when he invites the Imam to address his subjects and also to dress like him and go to Ain-ul- Mulk as a peace ambassador where he kills him in an attack by his army and suppresses the foolish act of rebellion. This shows that he plays the game well and has clever moves on the board.

The two rogues are also used as symbols of a nasty class of people they are Aziz and Azam who are unprincipled and opportunists and exploit people. They disguise themselves; cheat the people and the government with their deeds and policies which benefit them. Prayers can also be seen as a symbol in Karnad's plays where the farmers and some courtiers led by Ratan Singh and Shihab-Ud-din plan to kill Tughlaq when he is in prayer. When Sayyed and Amir refused to do so they clearly express their views that tyrant like Tughlaq should not be considered among the faithful to religion and should be killed during prayer as Tughlaq killed his father when he was praying. In the end of play Tughlaq falls asleep and in his sleep hears the Azan and gets up but he is dazed and frightened as he fails to offer prayers at the right time. Thus, prayer is also used as a symbol in the play. The reference of vultures also indicates that Tughlaq has lost his peace of mind. The shifting of the capital also is taken as a symbol which shows that the city of Daulatabad was the city of Hindu-Muslim unity which Tughlaq was seeking but he miserably failed in his plans due to his dishonest officers and people. We can summarise that Kannad has used relevant symbols in the play and has acquired great force and beauty.

Girish Karnad demonstrates his creative use of myth and folktales as a dramatic device. These are Karnad's greatest strengths, despite the fact that he appropriates ideas from myths and folktales. Mythology, folklore, and tales are factual manifestations of the cultural philosophy that underpins life's ethics and principles, the common experiences of races, and the social norms and regulations that Karnad deftly use to further his concept. His plays are based on folklore and mythology, including Hayavadana, Nagamandala, and The Fire and the Rain. Karnad holds that there is always a minimal but clear message from the past to the present. He employs these methods in a novel and timely way. He views the present through the lens of mythological pasts, which appropriately and pertinently blend with the contemporary situation. He also makes extensive use of folk theatrical elements such as curtains, puppets, dolls, masks, chorus, and sutradhar. With the use of all these techniques, he is a writer of singular talent

who uses historical idioms to depict contemporary life. It was also discovered that Girish Karnad, in addressing the historical roots, had demonstrated the methods employed in the historical plays Tale-Danda, Tughlaq, and The Dreams of Tipu Sultan. Karnad discovers historical figures and events related to the current era and conditions. His creative writing is influenced by topics such as gender inequity, socio-cultural disputes, political unpredictability, broken human connections, and the socio-religious crisis. He effectively teaches the people of his period the necessary morals and ethics through historical events. For Karnad, history is more than just a dramatic account of what happened; it's also about paving the way for the next generation to adopt the desired reforms and modifications. For him, history serves as a tool for more than just looking back into the past; his plays explore modern Indian subjectivity, ideas, and discourses. It also serves as a tool for analyzing the present and thinking about the future.

## Conclusion

Girish Karnad's *Tughlaq* presents a nuanced and critically layered portrait of Sultan Muhammad-bin-Tughlaq, highlighting both his strengths and his tragic flaws. Fascinated by the historical complexity of the ruler, Karnad explores Tughlaq's idealism, visionary policies, and eventual descent into disillusionment and frustration. Through the use of potent symbolism and dramatic structure, the play engages with themes that resonate deeply with both medieval and modern Indian socio-political contexts. The aspect of religion, in particular, is treated with the detached lens of an observer, allowing for a more balanced examination of its role in governance and conflict. Tughlaq's repeated failures are not merely administrative miscalculations, but manifestations of a deeper existential struggle. Karnad depicts him as a conflicted visionary—deeply learned, intellectually curious, and culturally refined—yet tragically disconnected from the will and trust of his people. His fondness for chess, Persian poetry, rose gardens, and Greek texts reflects his desire for a utopian order grounded in rationalism and cultural synthesis. He dreams of a future untouched by historical limitations, drawing parallels between his aspirations and those of prophetic figures such as Zarathustra and the Buddha. His constant invocation of "tomorrow" and a "new future" underscores his belief in transformative possibility, even as the realities of power render his dreams unattainable. Ultimately, *Tughlaq* becomes a powerful meditation on the tension between idealism and political pragmatism. Karnad presents the Sultan as a tragic figure whose noble intentions are undermined by his failure to secure the trust and participation of his subjects. The play's enduring relevance lies in its exploration of the perils of absolute power, the isolation of visionary leadership, and the fragility of utopian ambition when divorced from the lived realities of the people.

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