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Girish Karnad's Tughlaq A Structuralist Approach



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Girish Karnad's much discussed play *Tughlaq* (1972) is a masterpiece of the contemporary time. Although a historical play dealing with the last five years of the troubled reign of a great King, Sultan Muhammad-bin Tughlaq from Indian history; it puts some parallels to the contemporary situation in India and the world so far. Traditional criticism would analyse the play depicting the Sultan with a tragic flaw. While structuralist criticism would seek to understand the logic of the play, the way it is structured, the binary oppositions, the sentential logic of the action, etc. and finally it tries to come to a conceptual logic.

Tughlaq has a double plot, the main plot and the sub-plot which run parallel. They are interlinked and interdependent and isomorphic too. The sub-plot is a parody or caricature of the main plot. All the thirteen scenes are divided and alternated between "deep scenes" and "shallow scenes." While the shallow scene is on, the deep scene is prepared, and in shallow scene are comical characters.

While the Sultan in the main plot moves from a position of idealism to cruelty, his gradual and fatal disillusionment, and his extinction or madness; Aziz in the sub-plot or comical plot moves from a position of poverty and powerlessness to prosperity, and placement in a position of power. Despite this significant difference, the two characters can also be understood as occupying the same function in the narrative and in the meaning

system of the play. In the main plot, Tughlaq serves as the King or the Sultan throughout the whole play; while Aziz, whose actions have exploited the Sultan's idealism, becomes a powerful officer when the sub-plot merges the main-plot. The function of the duel plot structure thus becomes evident: the play is about the betrayal of a King by his people and his officers like Aziz. The problem the play presents is of the rulers who are idealists and visionary but impulsive, who fail to understand the political pulse of their time. Tughlaq becomes a signifier for such rulers. Tughlaq, an idealist and visionary, is driven towards extinction; while Aziz, a cheat and a cunning fellow is honoured with a powerful post. The play appears as a tragedy of idealism in which the binary oppositions that make up the meaning system of the play function to signify the fact that the mischief and mongers, and troublemakers get recognition and reward; while the virtuous have to suffer exploitation and frustration.

The Tughlaq-plot begins by identifying Tughlaq as an idealist with absolute power, in particular the idealist who intends to bring about a radical change in his kingdom and to build new future for India based on "greater justice, equality, progress and peace—not just peace, but a more purposeful life." (3) Well-versed in philosophy and poetry, Tughlaq gets thrilled by his vision of "a new world which he intends to rule not with the power of the scepter in the style of a Muslim fundamentalist

tyrant but by emulating the visionary idealism of the Greeks, Zarathustra, and the Buddha,” says Nibir K. Ghosh. (113) But Tughlaq’s idea of building an ideal republic fails. What he finds is that all his idealism is caught in a farce. He is not understood by the society he lived for. His ideas and ideals that of abolition of *jiziyah* tax imposed on Hindus; due consideration to Hindus; tolerance for all religions; change of the capital from Delhi to Daulatabad, a symbol of strengthening Hindu–Muslim unity; and the introduction of the copper currency are sound and reasonable, but fail to convince his people. The very first scene opens with a conflict between the followers and opponents of Tughlaq. Tension is introduced thus:

OLD MAN: God, what’s this country coming to! YOUNG MAN: What are you worried about grandfather? The country’s in perfectly safe hands – safer than any you’ve seen before. OLD MAN: I don’t know. I’ve been alive a long time, seen many Sultans, but I never thought I would live to see a thing like this. YOUNG MAN: Your days are over, old man. What’s the use of Sultans who didn’t allow a subject which a mile’s distance? This King now, he isn’t afraid to be human—

THIRD MAN: But does he have to make such a fuss about being human? Announce his mistakes to the whole world—invite the entire capital?(1) From the beginning to the end the play consists of the signs of Kingship and non-kingship, idealism and trickery. “Both Tughlaq and his enemies initially appear to be idealist; yet, in the pursuit of the ideal, they perpetrate its opposite. The whole play is structured on these opposites: the ideal and the real; the divine aspiration and the deft intrigue.” (Murthy ix) Tughlaq’s broad-minded tolerance seems foolish to the Muslims and cunning to the Hindus. They raise rebellions against him. In order to have a firm grip over his state and the subjects, Tughlaq too stoops to trickery, firmness and wickedness. By committing one murder after the other, he emerges as a shrewd politician who has learnt the art of transforming every adverse situation to his advantage. It is very

clear, when he praises his adversary, Sheikh Imam-ud-din as a great saint and adds further, “... you have risked your life by speaking out against the Sultan.”(22) Then he gets Imam-ud-din killed and declares the state mourning on his death, saying, “When men like him die, it’s a sin to be alive.” (28)

The opening move in the Tughlaq-plot from indifference to difference, the Sultan’s transformation from idealism to cruelty, serves the function of defining power politics, the power to control the opposition by plotting against them. The move also signifies the arch-trickery and meanness adopted by the opposition to throw out the rulers. The initial plot move serves the function of indicating danger—that cruelty might overwhelm idealism; communication might not take place properly; and the ideal policy might not be executed properly. When Tughlaq does away with his opponent, Sheikh Imam-ud-din by setting him against the approaching army of Ain-ul-Mulk, the rebel governor of Avadh; he places himself on the side of the treacherous characters by betraying his idealism. He acts against “democratic theories” the very ground of his idealism. As a shrewd politician, he handles the two separate threats posed by Ain-ul-Mulk and Sheikh Iman-ud-din. He stabs Shihab to death with ferocity and then makes a public announcement that Shihab-ud-din died a martyr’s death while defending the Sultan against the attack of the nobles who attempted to kill the Sultan at prayer time. He also puts a (false) charge of adultery on his stepmother and orders her to be stoned to death publically, and thus commits matricide too, as already he was suspected and charged with patricide and fratricide. Far from being the savior monarch of his people as he wished to be, he becomes a tyrant. Scene ten contains another example of binary opposition of his past idealism from the present corruption when his stepmother says: “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—”(65) Tughlaq’s innovative measures like

the change of capital and the introduction of token copper currency have proved themselves to be hopeless failures.

The rose garden which he had envisaged as a visible symbol of visionary hopes to create a utopia becomes a rubbish dump where fake copper coins are piled up. He also knows people call him “Mad Muhammad.” But Tughlaq is not ready to eschew tyranny as a way of life, a vehicle to fulfill his mission in life. He even admits to having killed his father, brother and Sheikh Imam for an ideal. Since Shihab’s murder, killing becomes a compulsion for him. Soon after condemning his stepmother to death in an agony of despair, helplessness and bewildered incomprehension, Tughlaq tries to pray, an act forbidden by him in his kingdom. He realizes his own self-estrangement and that he has reached its extreme edge, which is madness. Tughlaq’s only hope lays in the coming visit of Ghiyas-ud-din Abbasid, the descendant of the Khalif that to resume the banned prayer in the state. Ironically, the scoundrel Aziz, who having murdered Ghiyas-ud-din, enters Tughlaq’s palace in the guise of Ghiyas-ud-din Abbasid. Tughlaq too, welcomes him as Ghiyas-ud-din publically. When the Sultan identifies his masquerade, Aziz pleads for his Mercy. Instead of punishing Aziz the Sultan gives him reward.

The ending move in the Tughlaq-plot serves the function of indicating Tughlaq’s madness (?) and gradual extinction. He is seen looking around “*dazed and frightened, as though he can’t comprehend where he is.*” (86) His words to Barani are highly indicative of his disillusionment. He says, “I am teetering on the brink of madness, Barani, but the madness of God still eludes me, (Shouting). And why should I deserve that madness? I have condemned my mother to death and I’m not even sure she was guilty of the crime...” (68) Tughlaq is seen completely shattered in mind and body, when he announces his decision to shift the capital back to Delhi and succumbs to sleep.

The purpose of the Aziz-plot is to provide a crafty, shrewd and rather more capable politician

even than Tughlaq. The duel narrative structure thus serves a major function to signify a move from Kingship to parliamentary dominion as the basis of exploitation, cruelty and manipulation. Tughlaq satisfies the first criterion, while Aziz, the second. Moreover, the parallel plots place Aziz in the same position as Tughlaq in regard to the state of arch-trickery. Aziz, who is a Muslim dhobi and a comic figure, who reminds us of Shakespeare’s Falstaff and Azdat in Brecht goes on impersonating one person after another. At first, Aziz disguises as Vishnu Prasad, the Brahmin and takes advantage of the royal decree that all are equal before law and that the people can file a suit against the Sultan himself for the misbehaviour of his officers.

The structural equivalence between Tughlaq and Aziz plots establishes a relation of contrariety or binary opposition between the two. The characters are coded positively through signifiers connoting binary opposition. Each character has the qualities the play assigns; and each is posed against characters that represent contrary qualities. Along with Tughlaq, all other characters are signifiers linked to signified concepts. Tughlaq would be described as a signifier of his psyche as well as the psyche of others. He has been portrayed as a bundle of contradictions and paradoxes.

Aziz’s indifference to his duty and irresponsibility as an officer or public servant that to serve the public in the state, contrasts with Tughlaq’s passing sleepless nights for the welfare of the people. It operates both as the quality defining idealism—Tughlaq desires to build a new republic—and as the quality defining cruelty, the impersonation that Aziz goes on doing throughout the play. Aziz, a notorious cheat who signifies all those who take unlawful advantage of Tughlaq’s idealism as well as the crafty nature of Tughlaq, is made parallel to Tughlaq as a shrewd politician and as a man of treachery. His meanness and shrewdness is posed against Shihab’s trust and pride. Najib who appears as an evil genius of Tughlaq, is parallel to Barani, who is a true and

ideal adviser and as a man of humanity. Shihab-ud-din placed in the position as Imam-ud-din. Both they are concerned with Tughlaq's use of improper methods of curbing the opposition.

The symbols used in the play too, function as signifiers. For example, the prayer has been used as leitmotif in the play that signifies the conspiracy, "an instrument of murder." (Reddy 154) The chess signifies the intriguing nature of Tughlaq. Python signifies his barbarity and the vultures are signifiers of this noble ideas, which have been frustrated but which ever continue to torture him. The external action throughout, thus enacts the inner drama of Tughlaq.

In *Tughlaq* Karnad has maintained the perfect balance between synchronic and diachronic levels, and artistically provided two dimensions of language-*parole* and *langue*. The language and decorum of the play provides a structured system of interrelated parts from the world of objects that words name. The two axes of language—the paradigmatic and syntagmatic—define the relations between the signifiers in it. Karnad chooses apt and appropriate words from a rich treasury of vocabulary. In the opening scene, Tughlaq's language is highly poetic and imaginative as it communicates his idealism, while in the later scenes his language reveals his political shrewdness, double facedness and arch-trickery. His sentence often performs two or three functions at once. It almost functions ironically in conveying to the audience a meaning different from that conveyed to the character. The speech events reveal how the whole text operates logically or

systematically, what the mechanisms are that produce meaning and how they are made up of parts in relation to one another. The voiced and non-voiced sounds are systematically arranged and they provide the deep tragic irony. One motif of betrayal unites the whole action in the thirteen scenes, and "finally culminates in the tragic failure of one of the most idealistic Kings in Indian history." (Mani 148) It indicates that treachery or betrayal seems more dangerous than crafty politics or power politics. So natural nobility, the play argues, should be more important than the dirty politics or power politics.

To sum up, Karnad's *Tughlaq* consists of a manifest level and a latent level. The deep scenes in the play appear as structuring principles; and the scenes, characters, symbols and images and the 'language family' in the play vividly project binary oppositions between the old and new, Tughlaq's idealism and treachery, the ideal and the real, the divine inspiration and the deft intrigue, etc. The meaning system of the play is quite logical and can be said to be constructed as an argument that provides both indifference and the grounds for differentiation. That is to signify, if a failure to practice idealism leads to the meanness and craftiness in power; double facedness leads to the gradual extinction and unexpected penalty as Tughlaq pays. It meant to address the need to find a solution to a problem of arch-trickery, betrayal, meanness and misgovernance. The rulers should not only talk about idealism, but also realize the ideals; the people too, be loyal to their ruler and the opposition should cooperate.

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