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The collection of conspiracies: A critical study of Karnad's Tughlaq

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Abstract

Tughlaq (1964) as celebrated historical play or play on history, ever written by Girish Karnad is not, if seen through the spectacle of comparison, simply about history on the grounds that it is a play of a ruler psychologically challenged and broken down as far as his megalomaniac altitude is concerned that sets all things in rest letting the country sink and drown in the ocean of blood. This play highlights on one hand the witticism of a historical ruler and on the other hand his foolishness that wipes away all his wits. In it the issues like beguiling, trust and distrust, faith and doubt, kill and crush, do or die, etc. are different profiles of the theme that one happens to encounter with. Rise and fall lies always with human dignity since nothing remains in permanence or nothing withstands the vicissitudes of time. However, the goodness of a man must accept both as a test to his specially velour and resilience and failing so is unnatural and so long one is obstinate, faces decline till death. This is what happens actually in the plot of the play with the ruler to such an extent that after close destruction his wits fail to reconstruct the lost and unfortunately the restoration of social fiber proves to be a never resolved conundrum.

People are often found saying admonishingly about politics as a dirty game in which Hell swallows up all Heaven. In the play this common sense of the commons proves a reality undenied. In it one finds cozenage, dacoity, ruthlessness, scapegoating the innocents, human treachery and disloyalty at their apex, imposture and hoodwinking through masks are interesting aspects in the play for their role in hiding and exposing the ugly selves behind the humanly faces. This paper shall be an effort to highlight and explain the series of intrigues and conspiracies made in search of power and dominance. As such, this play under the title aforementioned shall be examined through cultural studies to analyse how power after all decides the structures and sub-structures of society. More prominently, this effort shall work under the impact of Marxist ideology.

Keywords: Conspiracy, beguiling, impersonation, embroils, hubris, dominance

Introduction

The one among the most influential literary figures to whom hardly a few as parallel in the artistic excellencies is Girish Karnad, born in Matheran, Maharashtra on May 19, 1938. In literary fields he came up with universal commendation as an actor, director, playwright, translator and a critic. He attained initial schooling in Marathi and after he had grown up sought further education at Karnataka University where he took Bachelor's degree in Mathematics and Statistics in the year 1958. Later, he went to England and studied at Oxford on Rhodes scholarship. Eventually, he had Master's degree in Philosophy, Politics and Economics.

The play *Tughlaq* (1964) as a historical play is said to be Karnad's most popular play produced after a long gap of three years after *Yayati* (1961). Essentially, the play deals with the concluding five years of Muhammad bin Tughlaq as a ruler of 14th century medieval India which were full of trouble and turmoil, despair and despondency, bloodshed, human folly, human treachery and so on. The play is symbolically in its close proximity to the modern socio-political, moral, economic and cultural trauma as well. While commenting on this play in preface of her book Shailaja B. Wadikar writes:

The play, *Tughlaq* discusses in detail the mood of political disillusionment the country faced after the Nehru era of idealism. Historically, it was the story of the intelligent and visionary Sultan of Delhi, who, in his attempts to fulfil his ideals, perpetuated hatred and violence. (xi) The play encompasses a good number of conspiracies that Karnad masterly let be in the plot to create a bloody atmosphere in which the killing remains the only motive as the age ruled by Tughlaq witnessed a series of conspiracies against him as a serious reaction to remove him for his unusual approach and schemes incomprehensible to the minds of his subjects.

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As such, the sultan had inevitable threat to carry out his mission at ease and successfully. By using his extraordinary mental faculty, he fights bravely and wipes out all obstacles artfully as:

India in the Medieval Ages was full of intrigues. A network of intrigues surrounded the Sultan and his courtiers. The Sultan's position was precarious and he had to be constantly on alert against the intrigues of the nobility who plotted to overthrow him. Even his own family did not let go of a chance to conspire against the Sultan. Often the Sultan was powerful and crafty enough to turn the tables on those who intrigued against him, as Muhammad does in the play and metes out severe punishment to the plotters. (Batra 198)

No doubt intentionally Sultan Muhammad Bin Tughlaq 14th century Indian ruler was good but as long as he grew, he exemplified George Orwell's theme in his political allegory *Animal Farm* (1945) that totalitarianism kills the social norms in relation to its political decorum, religiosity, individual freedom, moral values, cultural ethos and what not. As far as intrigues are there in the play, it starts with impersonation by Aziz in the garb of Vishnu Prasad to snatch a land possessed by the kingly nobles on the pretext that it was snatched at a time when it already had been sold to him. Historically, if analysed what comes to fore is the king at his best to harmonize the religious communities like Hindus and Muslims yet in the process some favour him but many begin to oppose. Here, the religion instead of an agency of higher values proves to be a hindrance in edifying the social fiber on the basis of secularity. The antipathetic feelings from the masses essentially are the consequences of religious interference of Sultan like remission of *Jaziya* tax (a tax taken from Hindus for their complete protection in a Muslim rule) for Hindus as Karnad highlights this in the following dialogue of his play:

THIRD MAN. All this about the Hindus not paying the *Jaziya* tax. That's against the Koran, you know. A maulvi told me that—

HINDU. Now, now, don't look at me when you say that. We didn't want an exemption! Look, when a sultan kicks me in the teeth and say, 'Pay up, you Hindu dog', I'm happy. I know I'm safe. But the moment a man comes along and says, 'I know you are a Hindu, but you are also a human being'—well, that makes me nervous. (2)

The king's kingly wisdom falls apart with successful intrigue by Aziz in the guise of a Brahmin Vishnu Prasad grabs the land illegally. His claim although is justified as permissible under the kingly court of law, yet in actual it again is beguiling the power since the claim is false. Hubris and foolishness cast the net of intrigues in the play easily. Hubris works prominently at a time of king's resolution for exempting the Hindus of *Jaziya* tax without the consideration of the public opinion and his stubbornness on displaying the capital from Delhi to Daulatabad as the Old Man voices, "You can go to the Kazi-i-Mumalik for small offences. But who do you appeal to against such madness?" (Karnad 4) Power thus decides the fate of the people, the state and the religion too. Keeping in view the history, it has proved the most effective weapon to change the culture and cultural semantics. With power all things are influenced either positively or negatively as, "Foucault argues that certain authorities who possess power in society produce knowledge about those who lack power". (Nayar 52)

Aziz in disguise of Vishnu Prasad reveals a strange story of human greed and plunder while convincing his comrade

Aazam to ransack people on the way to Daulatabad as he articulates, "I didn't intend to be a Brahmin all my life! There's money here and we'll make a pile by the time we reach Daulatabad" (Karnad 8). He takes evil advantage of King's assertion of his court as equal to the commonality in terms of justice, equality and what is presently in politics as the notion of democracy. Here it is not a king's foolishness and novice nature but actually Karnad sets the episode in the play to justify how people try to befool the kingly stature. The suggestive significance of the play in this part exposes dualistic nature of the king, it no matters if the imposter played the trick successfully. A Godly king cannot and should not be subordinate to the assertion of declaring his policies as such, rather he has to act in a manner that the ruled ascertain themselves all of it. Consciously or unconsciously the king prior to be revealed further justifies his divided-self as Christine Gomez remarks:

It is state of a division of self into conflicting parts which become alien to each other. When the self-division becomes extreme, the person suffers from various psychological disorders and may even be driven beyond the border of sanity into the self-estrangement of madness. (122)

Politics is an approach of goodness towards society to keep it in balance or restore it and safeguard accordingly since then is the social fiber in less want of otherness. Aziz is not a product of fraud yet an outcome of ruler's failure, definitely a sign of lawlessness yet it all is in reality a revolt against Tughlaq. He symbolises outrage against the wrong policies of the ruler. In Marxist philosophy, a victimised being once up in the arms brings a revolution unbound and this being is not other than the one who loses his mettle to bear further oppression. From that angle Aziz in disguise symbolises that sect of society called proletarians or simply the labour class as Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels highlight the nature of bourgeoisies or oppressors in the following way:

In political practice, therefore, they join in all coercive measures against the working class; and in ordinary life, despite their high-falutin phrases, they stoop to pick up the golden apples dropped from the tree of industry, and to barter truth, love, and honour for traffic in wool, beet-root sugar and potato spirit. (75-76)

Freud's psychoanalysis in many ways talks about the instincts of propensity for power. Why a male child shows antagonistic approach against his father to be with mother is inwardly a kind of tussle for power. A father for a male child is similar to that of Tughlaq since father in almost all human societies symbolises dominance and superiority. In the way Aziz hatches a plan is similar to those activities of a child who, "begins to develop fantasies of killing his father so that he (the child) will have no rivals for his mother's love. The fantasy is what Freud famously (and controversially) called the Oedipus complex" (Nayar 66). Power, therefore, is not limited to the limited. In true sense it is a matter of a universal source for which all species long for. Scientifically, this power if properly found lies with animal kingdom also where dominant specie dominates the weak other in the hours of competition when resources fall short.

Killing of Sheikh Imam-ud-din at the hands of the king is of paramount significance in the play. He is a religious scholar besides having an authoritarian hand in the high affairs of the rule whose religious character people loved and in the consequence of spitting venom against the king to remove

him from the throne won disfavour and disregard of Sultan for him as Muhammad (*in a tired voice*) says, “Let him babble” (Karnad 14). Sheik Imam-ud-din thus symbolises in the play the religious aspect of the society as he tries to convince the Sultan not to rule against the tenets of Islam:

IMAM-UD-DIN. Because only the Voice of God, the Holy Word, can do it. Please listen to me, Your Majesty. The Arabs spread Islam round the world and they struggled and fought for it for seven hundred years. They are tired now, limp and exhausted. But their work must continue and we need someone to take the lead. You could do it. You are one of the most powerful kings on earth today and you could spread the Kingdom of Heaven on earth. God has given you everything—power, learning, intelligence, talent. Now you must repay His debt.

MUHAMMAD. No one can go far on his knees. I have a long way to go. I can’t afford to crawl—I have to gallop.

IMAM-UD-DIN. And you will do it without the Koran to guide you? Beware, Sultan, you are trying to become another God. It’s a sin worse than parricide. (Karnad 20-21)

The dramatic flow and chaotic milieu in the play take his killing under two diversions of human conspiracy. He proves a prey to the king’s anger and at the same time a motto of retribution for Najib the political advisor of Sultan Muhammad Bin Tughlaq. Drastically, all the values are violated by Tughlaq. It is unusual to find him favouring those surpassing him in tricks and plots and crushing those who are not having the least proportion of diabolic nature like Sheikh Imam-ud-din. A religion in true sense does not make a believer compromise with what goes against the norms at the cost of self-sacrifice. Exposing the king’s true nature wins Sheikh Imam-ud-din wrath and rage of the king. In a kingly rule, killing is an everyday norm when it supports the scepter to rule. A king like Tughlaq is the emblem of the world rulers whose inert nature set the whole world in trouble and turmoil. Mostly, the wars have been fought as the aftermaths of weak ruling in which religion, ethics, and regionalism fall to be impacted. The king sets a plan not to kill Sheikh Imam-ud-din directly rather in a tricky manner he embroils him, “in his fundamentalism and forces him to act as his royal envoy to Ainul Mulk” (Naikar 89). The king’s treachery there also works successfully without frivolity in the plan in making web for another conspiracy against his rival Ainul-ul-Mulk who miscues in judging the Sheikh as his resemblance to the Sultan gets cunningly used by the Sultan as he sends the Sheikh in royal dress that makes him look identical to the Sultan to a greater extent. As fact it is of the play, Sheikh Imam-ud-din dies which makes the king inroad Ain-ul-Mulk along with the convoy and thus emaciate them:

SHIHAB-UD-DIN. The Sheikh plunged down from the elephant and over his corpse we fled in confusion. The enemy was convinced the Sultan was dead and they pursued us. They walked right into the trap. It was the bloodiest massacre I’ve ever seen... We won! (*Pause.*) Sheikh Imam-ud-din was murdered, you know. In cold blood. (Karnad 30)

Partially, the king is not the mad bull. He loves those who are high spirited, high witty and highly alert even if they are the bloody fools of him. At losing such a man namely Najib the most competent worker of Sultan at the hands of his mother, his motherly nature comes off the heart and kills his mother also however not under a plot but a sooth of his anger. His mother is a victim of that sort as mentioned in the concept of rescue triangle. Anger shows expression of

superiority so aptly suits to king Muhammad Bin Tughlaq as, “Muhammad cannot forgive her, his Rescuer, though he forgives his Persecutors Ain-ul-Mulk and Aziz. He orders her to be stoned death mercilessly” (Babu 137). This play is a historical tragedy wherein tragic flaw is heightened profoundly with the application of plots and conspiracies. The play highlights the fact that what goes around comes around. The Amirs in the play are on fire to eliminate the bloodthirsty king and voraciously set a plan of killing the king at the hour of worship. However, due to the irony of fate the killers are killed and the king kills Shihab-ud-din the leader of conspirators with his dagger staggered mercilessly at him till death. The king afterwards craftily intrigues to make a public announcement that Shihab was killed while rescuing the Sultan during a revolt made by nobles of the court in the palace as the court historian of the king in the play Barani says, “Oh God! Aren’t even the dead free from your politics?” (Karnad 44). In the squeal of plot against the king, Shihab himself loses breath in the conspiracy made by his adopted brother Ratan Singh out of compensation and revenge for his father’s murder.

All conspiracies in *Tughlaq* (1964) from one aspect highlight power struggle and hegemony through characters for dominance which in the ambit of cultural studies bears utmost significance wherein, “culture is about power, where power works through insidious forms—what is called ideology—to inspire people to adopt the interests and beliefs of the dominant classes” (Nayar 203). The intrigue at the end in the play is dramatically woven by Aziz who murders Ghiyas-ud-din Abbasid a descendant of the Khalif of Baghdad and in whose garb subsequently tries to dupe the king just to win the courtly favour and reverence. Inwardly, from it, it comes to fore that both politics and religion positively have dominance over the cultural aspects of society which nevertheless take wrong turn in want of judicious expertise. Hegemony as force of dominance, therefore, has two distinctive poles of positivity and negativity well knitted in the play. The king Tughlaq symbolises political failure which he believes to be able to restore on religious grounds. This is why Ghiyas-ud-din Abbasid as a character is shown by Girish Karnad in the play as a religious scholar and is invited to join hands with Tughlaq to revive the lost ideal of good governance:

ANNOUNCER. Attention! Attention! Muhammad Tughlaq, who craves only for the mercy of Allah and for the blessings of the Khalifs, hereby announces that His Worship Ghiyas-ud-din Muhammad, son of His Worship Abdul Kahir... the Khalif of Baghdad, will bless and purify Daulatabad by arriving here tomorrow afternoon. And Muhammad is sure that the citizens of this city will collect in large numbers to welcome this Saviour. (69)

Between the religion and politics, many things are common yet so many things divert; never the two go on the same roads even if so both get at some point either parted or both compromise. Such a supposed compromise is manipulated at the hands of Aziz after the real Ghiyas-ud-din’s killing. Aziz’s plan of impersonation to face king as Ghiyas-ud-din is reminiscent of religious exploitation and sacrilege that from time to time have been in a society to satisfy the masses through false belief and adulterated theology in which the oppressed are taught to be satisfied on the maladies, treating them as according to wish of God. In such circumstances if religion by accomplishing so by theologians, controls the minds of masses and forms yet

another dominant class that finds horrible criticism in Marxist thought:

Marxist criticism suggests that all cultural forms seek to ensure that the dominant classes in a society remain dominant. In order to do so, it must convince the working classes and the oppressed not to rebel or revolt. The dominant classes usually achieve this by suggesting to the working classes that the present social condition is 'natural', benevolent and ultimately beneficial to them. (Nayar 128)

At the close of the play, Karnad as a social commentator and critic conveys the unbridled loss of kingly grace where only disorderliness becomes the norm and so long as it continuously sways ahead and around, the existential loss blurs the human values and there is no league in social structures to maintain the nation. The king's condition at his bed restless acts as an extended metaphor to depict the society in psychological breakdown where wilds gallop up the soul of humanity. If Doctor Faustus of Christopher Marlowe sells his soul to devil, Girish Karnad's *Tughlaq* sells his soul to his personal ego as he says, "Sweep your logic away into a corner, Barani, all I need now is myself and my madness—madness to prance in a field eaten bare by the scarecrow of violence". (Karnad 85)

Conclusion

Girish Karnad's *Tughlaq* (1964) keeps variety of themes pertaining to the different domains of postmodern period in which man lives with a number of issues and challenges with respect to his social, religious, economic, moral and political life. All the characters in the play which have been portrayed by Karnad symbolically represent the different facets of contemporary struggle of man to achieve his ends via deceitful and unscrupulous means out of his greed for power and dominance in all respects in a society. The use of conspiracies by the playwright in the plot of the play ironically suggest the tormented and alienated self of the political rulers associated to diverse environs of time. These conspiracies also highlight the policies and reforms of the rulers of the present time that seem outwardly for the betterment of people but inwardly carry the venom of greed, falsehood, dualism and ill will to maintain their vanity and degrade the social set-up in its wholesomeness. The play delineates the fact that the root cause of all conspiracies lie within the mind of an individual in the form of ideals and dreams beyond his reach that lead him nowhere except the path of destruction and ruthlessness like Karnad's *Tughlaq* the protagonist of the play who remains frustrated and thwarted by virtue of his approach based on crafty plots to tackle the issues of his time.

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