

2

Synchronising Hi(s)tory in Girish Karnad's *Tughlaq*: A New Historicist Re-reading

BIPLAB DAS

ABSTRACT

A new interest in deconstructing traditional historiography attained remarkable height towards the end of the 20th century. This new critical approach in historiography focuses on the importance of the nature and construction of history in literary texts. Popularly known by the term, New Historicism breaks the notion of objectivity in history. It emphasises the element of subjectivity in historical narratives. This paper is an attempt to study Girish Karnad's play *Tughlaq* from the perspectives of new historicism. Girish Raghunath Karnad belongs to a celebrity clan of the Post-Independence Indian dramatic literature. Karnad has moved from his folk theatre to write plays having historical subjects in *Tughlaq*, *Tele-Danda* and *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan*. Karnad felt that "Our independence has made history suddenly important to us; we were actually conscious of living in a historically important era" ('Introduction' Karnad, 7). His treatment of history in *Tughlaq* is subjective; in fact, his representation of hi(s)tory deviates from the mainstream Europeanised view of Indian history. The 'mode of emplotment' (Hayden White, p.444) allows Karnad to synchronise the last five years of Sultan's life to show the transformation from the most brilliant individual ever to descend the throne of Delhi into a degenerate being. This artistic orientation of history becomes a site for political and cultural mediation. A new historicist view adds new insights to the projection of the curious contradiction in the complex personality of the Sultan who was at once a man of contemplation and a man of action.

Keywords: New Historicism, Synchronise, Representation, Historiography.

Girish Raghunath Karnad belongs to a celebrity clan of the Post-Independence Indian dramatic literature. Both Karnad, Habib Tanvir and K.N. Panikkar have looked back to their own cultural repository in order to write their folk theatre. They are the harbingers of the Root Theatre movement in Post-Independence India. Karnad has worked on the folk elements in *Yayati*, *Naga-Mandala*, *Hayavadana*, *The Fire and the Rain*. But in *Tughlaq*, *Tele Danda* and *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan*, Karnad has moved from his folk theatre to write plays having historical subjects. As Dharwadker rightly says, “Karnad’s plays employ the narratives of myth, history and folklore to evoke an ancient or pre-modern world that resonate in contemporary contexts because of his uncanny ability to remake the past in the image of the present” (2006: ix).

In the *Historical Novel* (1937), George Lukacs has observed, “It was French revolution, the revolutionary wars and the rise and fall of Napoleon, which for the first time made history a mass experience and moreover on a European scale...For men began to comprehend their own existence as something historically conditioned, for them to see in history something which deeply affects their daily lives and immediately concerns them” (23-24). Karnad’s way of thinking is similar to Lukacs’ viewpoint: “The appeal to national independence and national character is necessarily concerned with a re-awakening of national history with memories of the past and of past greatness. Thus in this mass experience of history, the national element is linked on the one hand with problem of social transformation and on the other, more and more people become aware of the connection between national and world history” (H.N.25).

Let us at first focus on the traditional historical sources Karnad has worked on. Karnad first read of him in Ishwari Prasad and was fascinated by him. After Ishwari Prasad, Karnad

went to other historical authorities. Maulana Ziyauddin Barani (1268-1359) and Ibn Battuta (1304-1377), in their invaluable works, *Tarikh-i-Firozsachhi* and *Rehla* respectively, had provided their respective firsthand impression about Tughlaq. Barani stayed with the Sultan as his attendant at the court for seventeen years and three months. He was the first Indian Muslim to write a history of India. Ibn Battuta reached India on land route on 12th September 1333. He came to Delhi on 20th March, 1334 when Sultan Muhammad was the ruler of Delhi. In recognition of Ibn Battuta's eminence as a historian, the Sultan appointed him a Qazi of Delhi. Both the historians had drawn an identical picture on the overall summation of Sultan as a failure. The traditional historiography laid emphasis on the whimsical nature of the Sultan and attempted to judge him on the yardstick of his administrative faculties. Karnad has chosen the much known facts of Tughlaq's life and dramatized the history of the fourteenth century India, in his thirteen-scene play *Tughlaq*. In order to facilitate his artistic and technical purposes, Karnad deviates from historical texts and gives parallel importance to non-literary texts. Karnad has done his best to create the atmosphere of distrust, orthodox, and stereotype faith, communal intolerance, religious tension, treachery and sedition, corruption, soaring prices, natural calamities-plague and famine, the sultan's conflicting idealism, his disillusionment and his ultimate alienation.

A new historicist approach of the play gives new insights into the treatment of history. New Historicism first caught the attention through the work of the critic and Berkeley English Professor Stephen Greenblatt and gained widespread prominence a decade later. Montrose's famous definition of new historicism is that it centres upon "the historicity of text and the textuality of history" (Barry, p.179). Renowned new historicist literary critic John Brannigan says: "New historicism and cultural materialism share a common preoccupation with the relationship between literature and history and share an

understanding of texts of all kinds as both products and functional components of social and political formations" (3). New Historicism throws light on the construction and evaluation by its contextual narratives. It is, in fact, a way of doing history by its interpretive measures and the notion of anti-establishment, always implicitly on the side of liberal ideals of personal freedom and accepting and celebrating all forms of difference and 'deviance'. By 'synchronising', Hayden White means the process of selection and arrangements of data from the unprocessed historical record. According to him, new historicism deconstructs the notion of objectivity in history. It emphasises the element of subjectivity in historical narratives. Traditional historiography deals with 'facts' whereas new historicism treats history as 'narratives'. In fact, it is a re-telling of history. In relation to new historicism, Tyson considers history as "text that can be interpreted the same way literary critics interpret literary texts" (Tyson, 282). This paper attempts to analyse *Tughlaq* from the perspectives of new historicism. The play is obviously a historical play with a fine blending of fact and fiction in its narrative.

In a conversation with Tutun Mukherjee, Karnad says: "When I read about Mohammed bin Tughlaq, I was fascinated. How marvellous this was, I thought. Tughlaq was a brilliant individual yet is regarded as one of the biggest failures. He tried to introduce policies that seemed today to be farsighted to the point of genius, but which earned him the nickname 'Mohammed the mad'. He ended his career in bloodshed and chaos" (Mukherjee, 35). It seems that Karnad has rejected the European version of Indian history and has presented an alternative history. We come to interpret different events in the reign of Tughlaq. He has tried to provide justice to this stigmatic historical figure by focussing him more on humanistic aspect trapped in a conflict between promise and fulfilment. Also the contemporary socio-political atmosphere of India has shaped the narrative in re-telling this historical myth.

As regards Tughlaq's idealism, scholarship, religious tolerance and his feelings of Hindu-Muslim unity, Karnad closely follows historical sources. Karnad portrays Tughlaq as generous and charitable in the first scene. Tughlaq is introduced in the very opening scene where a crowd of citizens-mostly Muslims with a few Hindus have assembled to listen to Tughlaq whom they are expecting in the chief Court of Justice. Meanwhile they go on discussing their Sultan. A mixed feeling about him comes to the fore during their conversation. While an old man condemns him 'as an insult to Islam' (Tq, p.1), a young man on the other hand admires him as a human being. What is quite amazing is the reaction of the Hindus for whom the Sultan has abolished the Jiziya tax: "Look, when a Sultan kicks me in the teeth and says, '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" (Tq, p.2). Their conversation comes to a halt following the announcement of the public announcer: "In the name of Allah it is hereby announced that Vishnu Prasad, a Brahmin of Sikandar, had filed a suit against His Merciful that his land had been seized illegally by the officers of the state and that he should be given just compensation...The kazi-i-Mumalik...had declared...that the Brahmin's claim is just and His Merciful Majesty is guilty of illegal appropriation of land...his Merciful majesty has accepted the decision of the Kazi" (Tq, p.2). As a result: "Vishnu Prasad should receive a grant of five hundred silver dinars from the State treasury. But the Sultan, in addition to the grant of five hundred silver dinars, has offered the said Vishnu Prasad a post in the Civil Service to ensure him a regular and adequate income" (Tq, p.2).

Tughlaq was a great scholar, idealist and visionary. Of all the Sultans who had hitherto occupied the throne of Delhi he was the most learned and accomplished. A man of versatile genius and achievements, in the words of Ishwari Prasad, "He was a lover of fine arts, a cultured scholar and an accomplished

poet, he was equally at home in logic, astronomy, philosophy, mathematics and physical sciences...he was well-versed in Aristotelian logic and philosophy, so that divines and logicians feared to argue with him" (Chaturvedi, 212). He was a keen student of religion and philosophy. He had profound knowledge of various forms of religious attitudes, including atheism and agnosticism. He was pre-eminently a rationalist and he subjected every religious postulate to deep and searching discussion. He also invited non-Muslim scholars for discussion. He used to have discussions with Muslims, Hindus, Jain scholars, Buddhist monks and Hindu thinkers. He was liberal in matters of religion. Due to his liberal and rational religious views the orthodox theologians like Zia-ud-din Barani thought him a non-believer in Islam.

The Young Man in the play defends the liberal attitude of the Sultan and appreciates his devotion to Islam. He says, "Now you pray five times a day because that's the law and if you break it, you'll have the officers on your neck. Can you mention one earlier Sultan in whose time people read the Koran in the streets like now?" (Tq, p1.). Tughlaq's idealism and humanism are vividly presented in his speech which he utters in his mother's presence in Scene Two: "Let us launch and cry together and then, let's pray. Let's pray till our bodies melt and flow and our blood turns into air...I wish I could believe in recurring births like the Hindus but I have only one life, one body and my hopes, my people, my God are all fighting for it" (Tq, p.10). Karnad's Tughlaq is a celebrated scholar, as historians describe him. He tells Imam-ud-din who condemns him for his liberal outlook, that it is difficult for him to give up Greek influence; "I still remember the days when I read the Greeks-Sukrat who took poison so he could give the world the drink of gods. Aflatoon who condemned poets and wrote incomparably beautiful poetry himself-and I can still feel the thrill with which I found a new world, a world, I had not found in the Arabs or even the Koran-you are asking me to make myself complete by killing the Greek

in me and you propose to unify my people by denying the visions which led Zarathustra or the Buddha" (Tq, p.21). He was also well versed with the poetry of Rumi. His rational philosophy was not liked by the orthodox.

Karnad adroitly employs historical evidence about Tughlaq's rash decision to change the capital from Delhi to Daulatabad. It is a turning point in his career and it causes inexpressible suffering to the common people. In the First Scene explaining the reasons for it he says, "My empire is large and now embraces the South and I need a capital which is at its heart. Delhi is too near the border and as you well 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 symbolise the bond between Muslims and Hindus which I wish to develop and strengthen in my kingdom" (Tq, pp.3-4.). Muhammad concludes his highly emotional address with the words: "I invite you all to accompany me to Daulatabad. This is only an invitation and not an order. Only those who have faith in me may come with me. With their help I shall build an empire which will be the envy of the world" (Tq, p.4). However, his speech fails to rouse any positive response in them. Rather they feel that the idea to shift the capital is nothing but an act of 'tyranny', 'a sheer tyranny' of their Sultan. Their disillusionment about Muhammad is further augmented by the news that Sheikh Imam-ud-din, a saintly figure has publicly announced that Muhammad is accused of committing patricide and fratricide. The more Tughlaq confronts the contrary situation, the more terrible he becomes. The subsequent scenes of the play show Tughlaq's gradual disintegration. This process starts from Scene Two onwards and reaches its climax in Scene Ten. Now we would analyse the scenes to trace the gradual erosion of the true self of Muhammad. In scene Two, Muhammed is informed that Ain-ul-Mulk his dear friend, his fellow companion in chess at this very moment is marching on Delhi with an army of thirty thousand. Muhammed is naturally

perturbed by the news. In the wake of it another equally important problem has come up. Sheikh imam-ud-din has been instigating people against him. He calls Muhammed “a disgrace to Islam” for his patricide and fratricide during prayers. He even goes to the stage of demanding his abdication from the throne. This rash decision really frightens them.

But Muhammad remains steadfast in his decision. Now all his subjects including the ministers hear his emotion-laden speech: “I have hopes of building a new future for India and I you’re your support for that. If you don’t understand my explanation, 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” (Tq. P.40). Karnad describes this decision as mass exodus. He follows contemporary historians who, as has already been explained, condemned the Sultan indiscreetly. Karnad’s Tughlaq says: “Najib, I want Delhi vacated immediately. Every living being in Delhi will leave for Daulatabad within a fortnight. I was too soft. I can see that now. They’ll only understand the whip, everyone must leave. Not a light should be seen in the windows of Delhi. Not a whisp of smoke rise from its chimneys but an empty graveyard of Delhi will satisfy me now” (Tq, p.44). The Old Man gives a heart rending account of the sufferings of the people underwent during exodus: “The Merciful Sultan had made perfect arrangements...It is a historical fact that no other measure or reform brought so much of unpopularity and infamy to the Sultan as the forced migration of the Delhi people to Daulatabad. The Sultan lost the confidence of the people” (Tq, p.52). Karnad does not project sultan’s generosity or appreciate his aspirations, rather interprets his administrative decisions as an act of a whim. In Scene Five, there is the rise of the subalterns, which is an important part of new historicism to focus on the alternative history of the underdogs.

Another stigma that Tughlaq carries with him is his failure of implementing the introduction of copper coins. Tughlaq decided to counterfeit the silver dinar with copper coin. Barani thinks that the Sultan's munificence had depleted the treasury and it was a device to face the crisis of bankruptcy. The shortage of silver not only in India but all over the world led the Sultan to issue the token currency which had been successfully issued in the thirteenth century in China and Iran. In Tughlaq's reign the silver shortage was intensified on account of the establishment of new mints in the expensive empire and the enormous expenditure incurred on military expeditions and the Deccan experiment. The Sultan's idealistic experiment proved wrong as the minting of counterfeit coins became rampant and the national economy suddenly broke down. It is obvious that Karnad does not appreciate his taxation policy and he seems to have followed Barani and others who were opposed to the Sultan's enlightened measure. Amir II in Scene Five was angry with the Sultan's taxation policy: "Look at what's happening in Delhi. Just look at it. You can't take a step without paying some tax or another. There's even a tax on gambling. How are we to live? You can't even cheat without having to pay tax for it" (Tq, p.31).

Karnad also refers to natural calamities like famine and plague which proved instrumental in Sultan's administrative failures in implementing his policies and ideas. Karnad has depicted Najib as a very moving character who exercises great impression on Tughlaq and is later on murdered by the trickery of his step-mother. In historical texts he is not a very important character but Karnad presents him as the evil genius of the Sultan in order to justify his aim which is to find a parallel in Tughlaq's administration for the India of 1960s. The artistic creation of Aziz and Aazam is very important in the play so far as creating the comic irony in the play is concerned. Also their inclusion in the play is Karnad's subjective choice to exhibit the eccentric steps of Tughlaq's administration.

A new historicist re-reading of the play provides an in-depth interpretation of Tughlaq as a human character. Karnad has neither glorified Tughlaq nor project him as a failure; but has shown us various dimensions of this great personality in order to fill some gaps, omissions and silences of the national historiography. Karnad makes this 14th century historical figure parallel to contemporary character. N.K. Ghosh's observation in "Girish Karnad's Tughlaq: History in the Future Tense": "The untenability of idealistic and visionary politics makes the play perennially contemporary. In a society poised between secular and fundamentalist ideologies, the parameters of Tughlaq's world bear close resemblance with the discourse of the modern Indian political and cultural experience" (Pandey, 116). To conclude, we can say that the play *Tughlaq* brings forth two contemporary relevant discussions – the ideology of secularism in a pluralistic society and the underlying forces that destroy that ideology. Karnad uses history and places facts of history into a narrative mode in the midst of imaginary incidents and situations to dramatise history. Despite the best efforts of Muhammad to bring Hindus and Muslims together, he failed. This fact of fourteenth century still holds relevance. On the other hand, Karnad makes Tughlaq an idealist and establishes that in politics idealism does not pay. It is bound to fail, especially when the idealist is impulsive. This double facedness of Muhammad very much resembles the two faces of the politicians of today. What Karnad shows in *Tughlaq* is that the idealist and his idealism do not go hand in hand with a politician and his politics.

WORKS CITED

- Barry, Peter. *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*. Manchester UP, 2007. p. 179.
- Brannigan, John. *New Historicism and Cultural Materialism*. St. Martin's, 1998. p. 3.

- Dharwadker, A. P. "Introduction". *Collected Plays 1. Girish Karnad*. Oxford UP, 2006. p. ix.
- Ghosh, N.K. "Girish Karnad's Tughlaq: History in the Future Tense". *Writing in a Post-Colonial Space*, edited by Surya Nath Pandey, Atlantic Publishers & Distributors, 1999. p.116.
- Karnad, Girish. *Tughlaq*. Oxford UP, 1975.
- "Introduction". *Three Plays*. Oxford UP, 1997. p.7.
- Lukacs, George. *The Historical Novel*. Marlin Press, 1962. pp.23-25.
- Mukherjee, Tutun. "In His Own Voice: A Conversation with Girish Karnad". *Girish Karnad's Plays*. Pencraft international, 2006. p.35.
- Tyson, Lois. *Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide*. Routledge, 2008. p. 286.
- White, Hayden. "Introduction to Metahistory". *Literature in the Modern World: Critical essays and Documents*, edited by Dennis Walder, Oxford UP, 2004. p. 444.