



A Study of Narrative Techniques of Symbolism and Humour in Girish Karnad's *Tughlaq*

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Abstract

Girish Karnad's *Tughlaq* is a historical play, similar to Shakespeare's *Richard II* and Marlowe's *Edward II*, yet it remains relevant to modern audiences. Karnad skilfully draws parallels between Sultan Muhammad Tughlaq's reign and contemporary Indian politics, particularly the disillusionment following the Nehru era. He uses symbols and imagery to infuse deeper meanings into the play, making it more than a mere historical recount. In this paper I will analyse the symbols of *Tughlaq* which reflect the contemporary political situation in India. Karnad himself noted the striking parallel between Tughlaq's idealistic yet disastrous rule and India's political landscape in the early 1960s.

Keywords: historical play, disillusionment, symbols, imagery, disastrous rule, political landscape.

I. Introduction

Girish Karnad's *Tughlaq* is undoubtedly a historical play, akin to Shakespeare's *Richard II* or Marlowe's *Edward II*. However, while those plays were primarily relevant to their own times, *Tughlaq* has been crafted to captivate modern audiences as well. Karnad was keenly aware of the similarities between Tughlaq's reign and the political climate of contemporary India, particularly the disillusionment of the Nehru era. Great writers often strive to go beyond the surface meaning of their work, embedding deeper or hidden messages. To achieve this, they frequently employ symbols and imagery, using words with rich emotional and associative significance. Karnad has skilfully infused his play with symbolic meaning, ensuring that it is perceived as more than just a historical narrative.

As a Political Allegory:

The play *Tughlaq* serves as a political allegory, symbolizing the contemporary political situation in India. Karnad himself noted this connection.

"What struck me absolutely about Tughlaq's history was that it was contemporary. The fact that there was the most idealistic, the most intelligent king ever to come on the throne of Delhi... and one of the greatest failures also. And within a span of twenty years this tremendously capable man had gone to pieces. This seemed to be both due to his idealism as well as the shortcoming within him, such as his impatience, his cruelty, his feeling that he had the only correct answer. And I felt in the early sixties India had also come very far in the same direction the twenty years period seemed to be very much a sticking parallel."

However, Karnad did not intentionally create his play to be symbolic. He stated that any contemporary relevance was merely coincidental. He addressed this aspect of the play in his writings.

"I did not consciously write about over here era. I am always flattered when people tell me that it was about the Nehru era and equally applies to developments of politics since then. But 11926-361% that is a compliment that any playwright would be thrilled to get but it was not intended to be contemporary play about contemporary situation..."

There is no doubt that Karnad's play captures the sense of disillusionment that emerged after the Nehru era in India. Critic U.R. Anantha Murthy also notes that *Tughlaq* "reflects as no other play perhaps does, the political mood of disillusionment which followed the Nehru era of idealism in the country."



The very opening sentence of the old man in the play reflects this contemporary situation "God, what's this country coming to!"

The Chess Symbol:

The chess symbol is the most significant symbol employed by Karnad. Muhammad Tughlaq does not play chess for leisure but uses it as a method to tackle complex problems. In scene two, he is seen focused on a chessboard when his stepmother arrives and looks at him inquisitively. Tughlaq smiles at her and says, "I have just solved the most famous problem in chess. Even Al-Adli and Sarakhi said it was insoluble. And it's so simple Through the chess symbol, Karnad emphasizes Tughlaq's adept manipulative skills in dealing with political adversaries. Muhammad Tughlaq views his critics and opponents as mere chess pawns, which he can manipulate at will.

This is evident in Tughlaq's handling of Ain-ul-Mulk and Sheikh Imam-ud-din. Tughlaq faces the problem of Ain-ul-Mulk's rebellion and seems to resolve it while playing chess. He uses Sheikh Imam-ud-din as a pawn to tackle Ain-ul-Mulk. Knowing that the Sheikh has been inciting rebellion against him in Kanpur, Tughlaq invites Sheikh Imam-ud-din to address the citizens of Delhi and highlight the shortcomings of his rule. However, when the Sheikh arrives, no one comes to listen. Tughlaq then orders his soldiers to gather the amirs and courtiers, but the Sheikh refuses to speak to them, calling them 'bootlickers.' As a skilled chess player, Tughlaq takes advantage of another situation: the Sheikh's resemblance to him. He requests Sheikh Imam-ud-din to go to Ain-ul-Mulk as his peace envoy to dissuade him from rebelling. The flattered Sheikh falls into Tughlaq's trap. Diplomatically, Tughlaq tells the Sheikh, "Please, Sheikh Sahab, I'm not asking you only for my sake but for all the Muslims who will die at the hands of Muslims if there is war." The Sheikh dons the royal robes of an envoy and, looking much like the Sultan, stands on a royal elephant. When he faces the enemy, a trumpeter on the Sultan's side signals the charge, the battle begins, and the Sheikh is killed. The crafty and manipulative Sultan overcomes the fearless and tireless fighter of Islam.

Ain-ul-Mulk surrenders and is eventually forgiven, demonstrating the significant use of the chess symbol.

Prayers as Symbol:

Prayer, in Karnad's play *Tughlaq*, can be seen in symbolic significance. U.R. Amatha Murthy writes:

"The use of prayer for murder is reminiscent of what Tughlaq himself did some fier. Theat prayer, which is most dear to Tughris Evtinted by him as well as his enemies, is symbolic of the fact that his life is corrupted as its very source."

The Amirs and some courtiers, led by Ratan Singh and Shihab-ud-din, conspire to kill Muhammad Tughlaq during prayer. When Sayyid and Amir-I express their hesitation about killing Tughlaq at prayer time, Ratan Singh responds, "Where is your Holy Koran? The tyrant does not deserve to be considered among the faithful. After all, he killed his own father during prayer." The ensuing conversation is equally significant.

Sheikh: You can't pollute the time of prayer. It is sacred time. We can't stain it with the blood of Musalman.

Amir II: O,come, we can always make up later. Do penance for it. Sheikh But prayer isn't penance. Remember we are here to save Islam, not to insult it.

Amir I: Don't get excited. Islam will benefit in the long run.

Even Shihab-ud-din eventually supports Ratan Singh's proposal. He says, "Is your Islam only about prayer? You have convinced me to do what I had sworn never to do. Your Holiness, I'm sure the Lord will not mind an interrupted prayer."

Muhammad Tughlaq becomes so disillusioned that he bans prayer in his kingdom. He declares,

"I wanted every act in my kingdom to become a prayer, every prayer to be a step towards knowledge, and every step to bring us closer to God. But our prayers are also plagued with disease and must be abolished. There will be no praying in the kingdom."

Anyone caught praying will be severely punished. From now on, let the moment of prayer pass through my streets in silence and disappear without a trace.



The ban on prayer is lifted only after five years when the arrival of Ghiyas-ud-din-Abbasid is announced. In the end, Muhammad Tughlaq falls into a deep sleep and wakes up only when the Muezzin's call fades away. Dazed and frightened, he fails to pray at the right time. Thus, the prayer symbol serves as a foundation for the play.

Other Symbols:

Among other symbols, there is a reference to a python. In scene eight, the young man and the old man discuss a mysterious secret passage in the fort of Daulatabad:

Young Man: Tell me more about this fort, grandfather. Is it true there is a strange and frightening passage within this fort? Dark, they say, like the new moon night.

Old Man: Yes, it's a long passage, a winding tunnel coiled like an enormous hollow python inside the belly of the fort. And we shall be far, far happier when that python breaks out and swallows everything in sight—every man, woman, child, and beast.

This python can be seen as a symbol of the Sultan's increasing fierceness and brutality. The Sultan has been growing more and more inhuman and bloodthirsty. Thus, the python symbolizes the complete degeneration of Muhammad Tughlaq's personality, suggesting he has transformed into a beast-like creature, akin to a python.

Aziz and Aazam-Their Symbolic Significance:

The two rogues, Aziz and Aazam, symbolize a particular class of unprincipled and opportunistic people who exploit liberal ideals, government policies, and welfare activities for personal gain. Aziz, the dhobi, disguises himself twice to take advantage of situations for his own benefit, exemplifying his opportunistic nature. Politics attracts him more than any other profession. He tells Azam, "My dear fellow, that's where our future is—politics. It's a beautiful world—wealth, success, position, power—and yet it is full of brainless people, people with not an ideal in their head."

In a moment of deep despair, Muhammad Tughlaq says to Barani:

"It isn't as easy as curing a patient in the wilderness because there's no cure for his disease. Don't you see—this patient, wracked with fever and crazed by the fear of the surrounding vultures, can't be separated from me? Don't you see that the only way I can abdicate is by killing myself? I could have done something if the vultures weren't so close. I could have crawled forward on my knees and elbows. But what can you do when every moment you expect a beak to dig into you and tear a muscle out?"

The reference to vultures is significant as it indicates that Muhammad Tughlaq has lost all peace of mind. His noble ideals and aspirations have been thwarted, and his critics and opponents are trying to overthrow him. The vultures and other birds of prey symbolize Tughlaq's frustration as an idealist.

Even Daulatabad holds symbolic significance. The city represents Hindu-Muslim unity, a vision Tughlaq sought to achieve. His intentions behind shifting the capital were honest, but the plan failed miserably due to the dishonest people in his kingdom.

Thus, the play *Tughlaq* employs several relevant symbols. Girish Karnad has skillfully used these symbols to enhance the play's force and beauty.

II. Conclusion:

Girish Karnad's *Tughlaq* uses historical events and rich symbolism to explore themes of idealism. By drawing parallels between Tughlaq's reign and contemporary Indian politics, Karnad creates a play that resonates with modern audiences, offering a profound commentary on the cyclical nature of history and human behaviour. Through its symbolism and allegorical elements, the play explores themes of idealism, disillusionment, and manipulation, making it a powerful commentary on both historical and contemporary political situations. *Tughlaq* stands out as a work that not only recounts history but also resonates with modern audiences, providing a timeless reflection on the complexities of governance and human ambition.



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