



## From Rebel to Monarch: A Review of Girish Karnad's Tughlaq

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From Rebel to Monarch: A Review of Girish Karnad's Tughlaq Abstract. Sultan Muhammad-bin-Tughlaq is the central figure of Girish Karnad's famous play 'Tughlaq' and dominates the play from beginning to the end. He is one of the most controversial figures of medieval Indian history. Karnad immortalized this legendary and disputed figure of Indian history.

### ABSTRACT

*Sultan Muhammad-bin-Tughlaq is the central figure of Girish Karnad's famous play 'Tughlaq' and dominates the play from beginning to the end. He is one of the most controversial figures of medieval Indian history. Karnad immortalized this legendary and disputed figure of Indian history. The character of Tughlaq deserves a review since he has been portrayed loosely both by historians and critics. So it is needless to say that the readers of Girish Karnad are likely to follow the character of Sultan Muhammad-bin-Tughlaq with a mere biased approach. The main object of this research paper is to find out the emergence of Tughlaq as a ruler and also to discover the hidden corners of the character of Sultan Muhammad-bin-Tughlaq. This research paper is also intended to interpret the play as well as the character of Tughlaq in the light of his journey from rebel to monarch.*

### KEYWORDS

**Girish Karnad, Muhammad-bin-Tughlaq, Indo-English Drama, Historical play.**

### INTRODUCTION

Karnad's Tughlaq is regarded as one of the most important and widely read drama in Indian writing in English. Publication of Tughlaq and its notable popularity among the readers established Girish Karnad as a major Indian dramatist writing in English. Though he has contributed number of plays for the readers of English literature but Tughlaq stands as a gem among all his plays and one of the nicely crafted and elaborated play. It is a classic of its kind. Karnad is an Indian, writing

in English and he has succeeded in creating a proper Indian atmosphere in almost all his plays. Tughlaq is an immortal play which shall be read and acted as long as English is read and enjoyed in India. It is a great classic of Indo-English drama.

Sultan Muhammad-bin-Tughlaq is the central figure and dominates the play from beginning to the end. He is one of the most controversial figures of medieval Indian history known for all his cunning, wicked behavior as well as popular war campaign and insane policies. After the publication of English version of Tughlaq in 1970, Karnad immortalized this legendary and disputed figure of medieval Indian history. The character of Tughlaq deserves a review since he has been portrayed loosely both by historians and critics. So it is needless to say that the readers of Girish Karnad are likely to follow the character of Sultan Muhammad-bin-Tughlaq with a mere biased approach. It is important to assess and interpret the play in its proper perspective.

Undoubtedly Karnad's Tughlaq is an excellent work of art with an intricate plot, finest irony, sharp satire and interesting symbolism. Over the decades, scholars have been over-emphasizing the value of the play more as a political satire than anything else. Though it is true that a work of art is open to more than one interpretation yet the glorification and interpretation of the play as only a political satire seems to be a rather under-estimation of this piece of art. Though historical inputs serve Tughlaq as an eccentric or whimsical kind of character, but the play offers an excellent psychological study of the character of Sultan, which are the central figure as well as the main matter of concern for the readers of Karnad. His vision, his motifs and his endeavor to establish himself as the ruler of the people is the witness of his command over the empire. This research paper is intended to assess the diverse view point and provides a short review of the character of Sultan Muhammad-bin-Tughlaq. Historical interpretation of the medieval Indian history charged Tughlaq for parricide. Though the murder of his father may or may not be true. Tughlaq's struggle begins with the assumption of the power as the Sultan of Delhi Sultanat. His opponents or enemies, all are men of vested interest. Ain-ul-Mulk's aim to capture the throne of Delhi, Imam-ud-Deen and chieftains of Delhi are seeking to increase their level of power but Sultan has a different kind of personality. He places humanism above religion thus provides a new outlook of the social structure of contemporary India. In his view, the religion is like a guiding power and should play a positive role in human life, to uplift the spiritual depth and happiness of the people. In the initial stage of the play, Tughlaq strives hard to keep his ideals intact. The first part of the play establishes the Sultan as highly intelligent ruler. Undoubtedly he deals ruthlessly with his enemies and several deeds of the Sultan cannot be applauded. He did many mistakes and unpardonable crimes. But this is altogether a different issue. Circumstances have probably forced him to take harsh decision. If we study the character of Tughlaq from standpoint, we will experience the Sultan is victim-turned-sinner. All in all, Karnad's Tughlaq is greatest play and a fine piece of art. Karnad presented very honestly the different hues of a very controversial but also the most loving character of the gallery of historical figures of medieval India.

Karnad's Tughlaq is a man ahead of his age. He is regarded as one of the most intelligent as well as cruel ruler of the time. He is widely misunderstood by the society because his ideas and ideals are far above the interpretation and comprehension of his contemporaries. In an age of religious slavery and hostility, his religious ideals are unacceptable to both community, Hindus and Muslims. Though he is a broad-minded ruler, who wanted to change the age-old religious rituals and aimed to free the society from religious hypocrisy but as Indian society is governed by its tradition and religious beliefs, we can simply understand that any stroke upon these age-old beliefs will create a harsh reaction from the side of people. And this actually happened with Sultan Tughlaq. The change and reforms imposed by Tughlaq pose a threat to ancient conventions and beliefs and Sultan faces a harsh reaction from the people.

Sultan Tughlaq is an idealist, who wanted to establish a far better governance and empire than their predecessors. An empire that can serve for its people and can set a new example of public welfare. In order to follow new administrative and economical reforms Tughlaq introduced change of capital from Delhi to Daulatabad and introduction of token copper currency. Though these changes were sound and reasonable but failed to convince the people. His frustration and mental pressure is evident in these lines: “ But how can I spread my branches in the stars while the roots have yet to find their hold in the earth.” After the continuous failure he realizes that his idealistic dreams cannot fulfill without the consent of the general masses and his courtiers. But despite all his efforts he is unable to win the support and confidence of the people. He fully realizes the tragedy of predicament: “But how can I explain tomorrow to those who haven’t even opened their eyes to the light of today.” Actually, not the ambitious schemes but the alienation of Tughlaq from his people is responsible for his continuous failure. Both the sultan and the people is misunderstood each other and as a result, Tughlaq find himself under the clutches of unfulfilled dreams. If people fail to understand the true emotions of sultan, he too, failed to foresee the reaction of the people after imposing these schemes. Especially in the matter of capital change, Tughlaq does not take account of the people that they love very much to their native soil. In the matter of currency change also, he couldn’t foresee the peoples reaction, corruption and possibility of counterfeiting. The repeated failure of Tughlaq, in the way of peoples support pave the way of his gradual disillusionment and separation from the common people of his sultanate and ultimately ends in a state of existential alienation.

Not only this Tughlaq alienated from the society in which he lives, he is also disconnected at the interpersonal level from the individuals around him. This alienation can be seen in two different ways. Firstly he is shown involved in manipulation of the people in his own interests treating them as object and not persons. Secondly, he is unable to establish meaningful communication and dialogues with the people. The same situation is evident also in religious ideas and ideals of sultan. Tughlaq is an idealist, a reformer in religion. His alienation from traditional religion arises primarily from the fact that he is an existentialist in his religion and therefore naturally comes into struggle with orthodoxy and fundamentalism in religion. This conflict and verbal tussle can be easily seen in scene three of the play where Tughlaq and Sheikh Imam-ud-din. As Sheikh believes that “If one fails to understand what the Koran says one must ask the Sayyids and the Ulema”.

Hence Tughlaq never challenge the religious autonomy of the courtiers and Ulemmas, but he refuses to depend only on God and prayers and believes in his inner strength and resources. He has his own practical ideas about religion and this is the very point where courtiers and other aristocrats differ with the sultan. He believes that no one can go far in his knees. This kind of view is totally different with the teachings of Islam and for the Shaikh this view is like the blasphemy. Shaikh says:- “Beware sultan, you are trying to become another God.” Infact Tughlaq is an existentialist in religion and this fact can be seen in his refusal to accept the Koran as the sole receptacle of truth. The turning point in Tughlaq’s life is the boundary situation<sup>2</sup> of existential philosophy. He says;- “Will my reign be nothing more than a tortured scream which will stab the night and melt away in silence.” These lines of Tughlaq strongly represent his awareness about the futility of human existence and absurdity of life, similar to that of Macbeth, who sees human life as “ a tale, told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifies nothing”.

In the several occasion of the play, Tughlaq is made to realize the difference between expectations and fulfillment, ideals and the reality. As John Cruickshank observes “Intellectual awareness of the absurd is the experience of a person who has expected a rationally ordered cosmos, but finds instead a chaos impervious to reason”.

capital and new copper currency is totally a unsuccessful and flop endeavor. The rose garden which he had envisaged as a symbol of hope and expectation to create a utopia becomes a rubbish dump where useless copper coins are piles up.

Self- alienation has been defined in philosophy as “alienation of a self from itself through itself.” In a state of division of self into conflicting parts which becomes 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 total self-estrangement of madness. The same thing is evident in scene ten of the play where, due to the intense mental pressure, Tughlaq feels a kind of self-estrangement. Left alone and totally shattered psychologically and physically, he falls to his knees and pleads to the God for the help and mental relief- “God, God in Heaven, please help me. Please don’t let go of my hand... I started in your path, Lord, why am I wandering necked in the desert now.” So readers can simply experience the note of despair, mental agony and frustration in this prayer.

The game of chess and the rose garden are two important recurring images which are part of the inner structure of the play. Both are metaphors of alienation and may be associated with the Tughlaq’s alienation. The chess represents the Tughlaq’s approach towards life wherein he regards other people as pawns for the purpose of manipulations for his own self. Though in this political game he is checkmated by Aziz yet he strived hard to overcome his follies and defeat his enemies. The rose garden which becomes the rubbish dump is a perfect objective correlative of Tughlaq’s idealistic approach meeting with defeat, frustration, agony and disillusionment. It becomes an image of absurd, the unbridgeable gulf between mans aspirations of orderliness and the chaos and irrationality which confront him in the universe.

## CONCLUSION

Thus, in Karnad’s play, Tughlaq is presented as alienated character that faces interpersonal and social alienation, existential alienation and self-estrangement. He is the central character of the play and dominates it from beginning to the end. Karnad showed him as a man of opposites, the ideal and the real, the divine idealist and royal treachery. M K Naik concludes his opinion about the character of Sultan Tughlaq by saying “Karnad projects the curious contradiction in the complex personality of Sultan, who was at once a dreamer and a man of action, benevolent and cruel, devout and callous”. The play ends as he sleeps on the throne, tired and exhausted mentally and physically. Then he wakes and looks around dazed, frightened and confused as if he cannot comprehend to identify his own existence. This scene is very clear evidence of his alienated existence in his own empire. Though he was a genius but all his schemes fall due to the lack of proper planning and consultation with his close companions. As a result, despite of all his purity in thoughts and actions, he failed in almost all his future planning which made him notorious in the eyes of the common people of his empire. Actually the character of Tughlaq is a great artistic victory of Girish Karnad, who made this character immortal, despite his all failures in life. Though many of other character of the play are also seen to experience alienation but Tughlaq represents this state of mind in more rigorous and realistic way. All in all Tughlaq is a lovely character with multi dimension qualities of a competent ruler and an able diplomatic personality of medieval Indian history.

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