
Things Fell Apart: A Re-reading of Girish Karnad's *Tughlaq* in Postmodern Perspective

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ABSTRACT:

This write-up attempts to make a re-reading of Girish Karnad's 'Tughlaq' (1964), in postmodern perspective. The text, under discussion, makes an interesting study in the sense that it attempts to blur the boundaries of colonial historiography rooted upon the idea of grand narratives or master discourse. Karnad, in this play, through the complicated character of Muhammad-bin-Tughlaq, a fourteenth century sultan of Delhi (who is either condemned in history as a failed king or ridiculed as a mad ruler), re-writes history by embellishing it with the elements of fiction and literary imagination as a venture of postmodern counter discourse. We are presented with a complex, diverse and fragmented world full of opposites and confusion as the protagonist himself.

Key words: postmodernism, Karnad, Tughlaq, historiography, conflict.

The demise of modernism is very accurately mourned by the celebrated English poet W. B. Yeats in his much acclaimed poem *The Second Coming* in the year 1919 as: "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold; / Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world . . ." Therefore, in the light of the above statement, postmodernism may be characterized by a situation or a state of mind which undermines or deconstructs the logocentric concept of culture and master discourse. In other words, postmodernism (generally considered as an academic movement in relation to culture and literature) attempts to question the stability and authority of the *Logos*, the divine wisdom manifest in the creation, the Enlightenment ideals etc., and sees the world as diverse, unstable and indeterminate set of cultures where boundaries, be it national, racial, ethnic, cultural and even religious, are blurred. Terry Eagleton, in his seminal work *The Illusions of Postmodernism* (1996), opines that postmodernism is a style of thought which is 'suspicious' of classical notions of truth, reason, identity and objectivity, and sees the world as contingent, ungrounded, diverse, unstable, indeterminate set of cultures. It is a style of culture which reflects a landmark change in a depthless, decentred, self-reflexive, playful and pluralistic art which blurs the boundaries between art and everyday experience. (Eagleton, vii)

The text, under discussion, makes an interesting study in the sense that it attempts to blur the boundaries of colonial historiography rooted upon the idea of grand narratives or master discourse. Girish Karnad, one of the leading contemporary Indian playwrights, in this play, through the complicated character of Muhammad-bin-Tughlaq (a fourteenth century Muslim ruler of Delhi who is condemned in history as 'mad Muhammad'), re-writes history by embellishing it with the elements of fiction and literary imagination as a venture of postmodern

counter discourse. Though *Tughlaq* is a play of the nineteen sixties depicting the fourteenth century political picture of disillusionment in India (ironically parallels to the political disillusionment of the India of the sixties), yet it adopts a particular historical approach which the later historians, including the Subaltern Group, would have come to term as anti-colonialist historiography. Although much credit goes to Edward W. Said for his pioneering observation in the field of Western historical and cultural representation, the Subaltern historians led by Ranajit Guha have paved the way for dismantling the British colonial historiography and national/colonial 'elitism' of post-independence Indian historians. The playwright, therefore, not only takes his subject from history, he too gives it a fictional or imaginative twist for a greater dramatic effect.

Resultantly, in the play, we are presented with a complex, diverse, fragmented and decentred world full of opposites and confusion like the protagonist himself. Muhammad-bin-Tughlaq is considered to be an embodiment of anti-colonial hero who, unlike his colonial counterparts, tries to govern his country and people as a secular humanist and impartial ruler. He does not make any discrimination between the 'self' and the 'other' based on Orientalist perception. As a part of counter discourse, Karnad, therefore, has presented the character of Tughlaq as someone who, unlike the imperial ruler, likes to ensure justice and equality among different and diverse sects of people in his kingdom irrespective of caste, creed, religion or colour. In the very first scene of this one-act play, Tughlaq announces the rule of justice: "My beloved people, you have heard the judgement of the Kazi and seen for yourselves how justice works in my kingdom—without any consideration of might or weakness, religion or creed" (3). Tughlaq's impartiality, humanism and his concern for the welfare of the country, therefore, draw sympathy from the audience.

However, the world of *Tughlaq* is extremely complex, heterogeneous and suspicious. In such a suspicious and fragmented world where two largest communities: Hindus and Muslims, the two opposite camps, are poles apart culturally and religiously. The various measures the Sultan adopts prove to be counterproductive. First, being a Muslim ruler, he is supposed to be 'divine' like earlier sultans, but he goes against the convention by drawing people near him and considers himself a 'human being' like the common people. Second, he exempts Hindus from paying *jizya* tax which was made compulsory for them by the earlier sultans. Third, as he ensures justice without any discrimination of caste, creed or religion, a Hindu Brahmin called Vishnu Prasad (actually a cunning Muslim *dhobi* in disguise) whose land was confiscated, wins a law suit against the sultan. Fourth, his decision to shift his capital from Delhi to Daulatabad, a Hindu city in the far south, with an intention to balance and improve the bond between the Hindus and the Muslims, infuriates the Muslims who are overwhelmingly majority in Delhi. These many steps adopted by the sultan make his Muslim subjects unhappy as they consider it an insult to Islam. However, the fact is, the sultan is religious enough who ensures prayer five times a day compulsory for the Muslims. Even the Hindus are not comfortable with the sultan's lifting the *jizya* and anticipate the involvement of mischief and hypocrisy in it.

Sense of alienation is another attribute experienced in postmodern situation. As it is evident from the foregoing discussion, both Hindus and Muslims feel alienated in Tughlaq's regime. Hindus

feel alienated because they are not the ruling class, and interestingly, not even under a sultan who ensures equality and justice, frees them from the cruelty of *jizia* tax and so on. The Hindus, as said before, look at this move with suspicion, and as a result, Tughlaq's attempt to establish himself as a just and impartial king proves to be fruitless. As Aparna Dharwadkar writes in this regard, "Politically, the play shows Tughlaq's futile attempts to be just and liberal toward a majority Hindu population that he is obliged as an Islamic ruler to persecute" (in Mukherjee, 98). The Hindus are perhaps right in doing so because in the course of action in the play, we see a Muslim *dhobi* called Aziz takes advantage of the situation and gains profit and position in disguise as a Hindu Brahmin. The visionary and impractical sultan, however, fails to imagine such mischief and misuse of law. The Muslims, on the other hand, with their sense of insult and injury due to sultan's liberal attitude towards the Hindus, find themselves in a state of utter chaos and uncertainty when Tughlaq decides to shift his capital. The shifting of the capital, as said before, from a Muslim dominated city of Delhi to a Hindu dominated city of Daulatabad proves to be an utter failure and brings terrible suffering and inconvenience to the vast number of migrating population. The majority of the Muslim population, as a consequence, have lost soil under their feet. Though the sultan has his own reason behind this: "Daulatabad is a city of the Hindus and as the capital it will symbolize the bond between Muslims and Hindus which I wish to develop and strengthen in my kingdom" (3). However, such reasoning and explanation on the part of the sultan are unable to convince and tame the growing dissatisfaction and rebellion among the religious leaders, Amirs and nobles. Eventually, their sense of alienation and dissatisfaction towards the sultan reach to a certain degree that they plot against the sultan to murder him in his own palace during prayer. However, Tughlaq survives in that occasion, kills his trusted friend Shihab-ud-din (who has plotted to murder him) and comes heavily on the rebellious Amirs, Sayyids and nobles. Later, in scene VI, the angry and helpless sultan changes his invitation to people for moving to Daulatabad into a brutal order: "I want Delhi vacated immediately. Every living soul in Delhi will leave for Daulatabad within a fortnight . . . Not a light should be seen in the windows of Delhi. Not a wisp of smoke should rise from its chimneys. Nothing but an empty graveyard of Delhi will satisfy me now." (44)

Tughlaq also makes an interesting study in terms of capitalist economics or finance capitalism. In the register of historical development, postmodernity designates a society which is often called consumer capitalism (Habib, 114). Even for Marxists, postmodernism is an ideology suited to express and further the global economic system based on consumerism and capitalism. In Karnad's play, Aziz, the cunning Muslim *dhobi* disguised in the attire of a Hindu Brahmin, can be seen as an embodiment of capitalist ideology. He is extremely crazy for economic or financial gains ever since his introduction in the play. He not only cheats the sultan in the guise of a Brahmin and wins a hefty compensation of five hundred silver dinars in addition to the confiscated land (which he buys from a Hindu Brahmin namely Vishnu Prasad with a backdated contract) and a high civilian job. His sole aim is to gain money and power. At the end of scene I, he tells his assistant Aazam not to act foolishly but to follow him: "Come along. It won't be for long. I don'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." (8)

The introduction of copper currency (positioned at par with the silver coins) by the sultan with a view to improve the economy (as it will involve more circulation of money), brings to a disastrous consequence. Seizing the opportunity, Aziz, like a true capitalist, hoards the silver coins in exchange of copper coins counterfeited by him. Resultantly, the entire economy collapses. In scene VII of the play, we see him in a camp acting as an officer dressed as a Brahmin on the route from Delhi to Daulatabad. Here too, he, along with Aazam, remains engaged in illegal extortion of money from the poor, sick and suffering travellers, both Hindus and Muslims. For him, every 'paisa' counts, and like a calculating cold blooded capitalist, he makes best use of the opportunity to thrive. Moreover, in the later part of the play, in scene IX, Aziz demonstrates yet another example of his cruelty when he kills the holy man Ghiyas-ud-din-Abbasid (his assistant Aazam is the killer though), the descendent of the Abbasid Khalif of Saudi Arabia, who comes to purify the land. Aziz, who is blindly crazy for power and pelf, is well aware that if he kills Ghiyas-ud-din and can reach the court of sultan in the holy man's guise, he is definitely going to get enough money and honour. His indomitable urge for money turns him into a cruel beast and eventually he does not hesitate to kill this holy man in spite of the latter's pleading for mercy. Aziz robs the poor Khalif of his belongings including the precious ring, his letters and the robe. However, his treachery gets exposed in the final scene of the play, but the irony is that, the sultan condones him and appoints him once again as an officer in Deccan.

Another important aspect in which *Tughlaq* can be analysed in postmodern perspective is the instability or the fragmentation of the self. Muhammad-bin-Tughlaq is perhaps one of the finest examples of the postmodern fragmented self. His is a complex character full of conflicts and opposites. On the one hand, he is intelligent and visionary looking for a peaceful and prosperous society where every citizen, irrespective of caste, creed or religion will enjoy equal treatment, status and opportunity. On the other hand, he is crafty and cruel who, according to his step-mother, is impulsive and moody whose future actions cannot be predicted. That is why the instability and paradoxical nature in his character do not let him to achieve his desired goal. However, the circumstances and his people's inability to understand him and his innovative measures are also responsible to a large extent.

Perhaps, it may not be wrong to state that the ambiguities and opposites in his character have enriched the dramatic quality of this play. His initial moves betray an impartial, just and generous king who wants to build "an empire which will be the envy of the world" (4). On the other hand, when most of his plans and measures prove fruitless due to the treachery of people like Aziz, the rebellion of nobles and the intrigue of his murder comes to light, he turns himself into a crafty cruel tyrant. Therefore, the disintegration of his character symbolizes the disintegration and downfall of his empire. At end of the play we find this majestic king in a state of utter helplessness, exhaustion and dismay as if both he and his empire have fallen apart in the fading sound of the Muezzin's call for prayer in the distance.

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