

Girish Karnad's *Tughlaq*: An Exploration of Parsi Theatre on Stage

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Abstract

Girish Raghunath Karnad is a well-known contemporary playwright, screenwriter, translator, director and actor of Indian theatre and films. His position as an experimental playwright is as Badal Sirkar in Bengali, Vijay Tendulkar in Marathi; and Mohan Rakesh and Dharamveer Bharati in Hindi. In the early part of his life he was famous as a Kannada playwright, but with the passage of time he attained the status of a national figure in the realm of Indian theatre. He is one of those playwrights who experienced with the dramatic techniques of Parsi theatre and wrote one of his best plays *Tughlaq*. Karnad says that he had experienced the folk theatre (like *Yakshagana*) in his village by sitting with servants but with his parents he had experienced a new kind of theatre using full lights, sounds and all those modern dramatic techniques used in proscenium theatre. He says, "In my childhood, in a small town in Karnataka, I was exposed to two theatre forms that seemed to represent irreconcilably different worlds. Father took the entire family to see play staged by troupes of professional actors called *natak companies* which toured the countryside throughout the year. The plays were staged in semi-permanent structures on proscenium stages, with wings and drop curtains, and were illuminated by petromax lamps" (301).

Keywords- Proscenium, Secularism, Performance, Natak

Karnad has acknowledged the influence of Parsi theatre and natak companies in his writings. His play *Tughlaq* is an outcome of the direct influence of Parsi theatre on his writing. Karnad himself acknowledged the impact of Parsi theatre on the play and explained why he selected the techniques of Parsi theatre for this play. He says, "Yet there was no other urban tradition to look to, and in my second play [*Tughlaq*], having concluded that Anouilh and Co. were not enough, I tried to make use of the Parsi stagecraft." (307) He, in his "Introduction to Three plays: *Naga-Mandala*, *Hayavadana*, *Tughlaq*", has given full length description of Parsi theatre and also talked about certain dramatic techniques which he used in his play *Tughlaq*.

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Although Karnad has written two other plays *The Dream of Tipu Sultan* and *Tale-Danda* based on history but these plays are based on dramatic techniques of proscenium theatre. So the difference lies among all the three plays only in the matter of the selection of dramatic techniques.

The play *Tughlaq* deals with the life of King Muhammad bin Tughlaq, fourteenth-century sultan of Delhi, one of the most brilliant kings who ever ruled in Delhi but also tagged as the biggest failures. The life of Tughlaq is very interesting. Karnad selected the theme for multiple reasons. He selected the theme because it reflects the disillusionment of the current generation and explained the current situation of India. In this respect Karnad says, "In a sense, the play reflected the slow disillusionment my generation felt with the new politics of independent India: the gradual erosion of the ethical norms that had guided the movement for independence and the coming to terms with cynicism and realpolitik." (307) Thus, Karnad has used this theme in allegorical form. At one level this theme shows the life of Tughlaq and at another level it reflects the condition of Nehru era of India after independence. The use of this kind of theme in theatre shows the sharp brilliance of Karnad. Thus, by using this multi-voiced theme Karnad has shown the significance of the play at both primary and secondary levels. In this regard Nasser Dasht Peyme quotes Murthy, who says, "What struck absolutely about Tughlaq's history was that it was contemporary... And I felt in the early sixties India [Neharu era] had also come very far in the same direction- the twenty year period seemed to me very much a striking parallel." (185)

Karnad has selected this kind of theme because in Parsi theatre this kind of theme was required. Karnad in "Theatre in India" speaks about the wide range of Parsi theatre and says, "The play dealt with subjects ranging from Middle Eastern romances to Hindu myths and the adaptations of Shakespeare, but the treatment avoids all religious and ethical nuances. Secularism was a fashionable concept" (336) Secularism was the key concept of Parsi theatre. They brought secularism on stage because the writers of the plays were, most of the time, Muslim or Parsis and the audience were mostly Hindus. Karnad explains that secularism was necessary in Parsi theatre and says:

The secularism was partly necessitated by the ethnic heterogeneity of the new entrepreneurial class. In Bombay, for instance, the enterprises were financed by the Parsis, who spoke Gujarati. But the commonly understood language was Urdu, popularised by the Muslim chieftains who had ruled over most of India since the sixteenth century. Naturally many of the writers employed by the Parsi theatre were Muslim. And the audience was largely Hindu! (305)

Thus, the secularism became the common ground between the different religious mind-set interplaying in this interaction. Writers always tried their best to avoid the use of religious subject matter on stage it brings religious faith and believe on stage and starts appealing a particular class of audience. Without secularism any play of Parsi theatre could not be

successful on stage. To show secularism on stage the playwright not only experimented with the theme but also used some dramatic techniques.

Karnad has introduced secularism in the play by showing Tughlaq as an existentialist from the point of religious belief. Although he is Muslim but he does not consult *The Koran* at all for any suggestion. He gives importance to his knowledge through experience. About the use of existentialism in the play Christine Gomez says:

The fact that Tughlaq is an existentialist in religion is seen from his refusal to accept the Koran as the *Sole* receptacle of truth. He cannot reject Greek philosophy and the truth contained in other religions like that of Zarathustra or the Budhha. A fundamental principal in existentialism is that “existence proceeds essence,” that a man’s experiential knowledge drawn from existence is superior to any principal or philosophy in its theoretical essence. (117)

In the play, Tughlaq, while he talks with Shikh-Imam-ud-din, denies that the Koran is the only guide of life for him while a Muslim believes that *The Koran* is the only guide for the life.

SAIKH IMAM-UD-DIN. ...But if one fails to understand what the Koran says, one must ask the Sayyiads and the Ulema. Instead you have put the best of them behind bars in the name of justice. (26)

But Tughlaq answers “I have never denied the world of God, Sheikhsahib, because it is my bread and drink.” (26) But he denies that God will make everything right. He says, “But why should I call on God to clean the dirt deposited by men? (26) Then after a long conversation Saikh becomes angry with him and replies, “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 a patricide.”(27) Thus existentialism enters into the text as part of secularism. Through existentialism and secularism the text gives universal appeal to the audience. In the matter of using secularism in the play Karnad is similar to with T. S. Eliot’s use of secularism in his plays. Eliot’s first play *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935) was based on Christian dogma and it appealed only to the Christian audience. That is why in his following plays, Eliot had selected Greek myth (rather than dogma) in *The Family Reunion* (1939), *The Cocktail Party*, *The Confidential Clark* to show secularism in the play and denies the use of dogmas. Karnad’s uniqueness can be seen in his use of secularism by mixing historical facts. He had selected the life of Tughlaq only because in his reign he himself had supported a lot to Hindus and given equal judgment to the entire citizen of his kingdom. So he himself in his particular life was a follower of secularism. The use of secularism in the play can only be found at surface level but at deeper level Karnad has presented some religious concepts not by portraying the character of protagonist but by other characters (like Saikhn Imam-ud-din, Step-Mother, Sihab-ud-din and Ghiyas-ud-din Abbasid) of deep scenes. They represent Muslim believes on stage and always talk about *The Koran* as guide for their lives.

Secularism brings alienation on stage. Tughlaq was alienated from his true religious faith. Both the Hindu and Muslim audiences felt alienation on stage because they were not getting to see their religion openly and explicitly represented on stage. To bring alienation and secularism on stage was very easy for Parsis because they were neither Muslims nor Hindus. Thus alienation enters from wings to the stage and is an outcome of secularism. Karnad expresses his views about the relation between secularism and alienation in the following manner:

The consequences of this secularism were that every character on stage, weather a Hindu deity or a Muslim legendry hero, was alienated from his true religious and cultural mornings; and myths and legends, emptied of meaning, were reshaped into tightly constructed melodramas with thundering curtain lines and a searing climax. Unlike traditional performances, which spread out in a slow, leisurely fashion, these plays demanded total attention, but only at the level of plot. Incident was all. Even in *natak companies* run entirely by Hindus, and the basic attitude was dictated by this Parsi model. (305-06)

In the play Tughlaq is an alienated being and he is alienated from each and every thing. Most of the time he seems to be play acting, thus revealing his alienation from interpersonal level from the individuals around him. His activity in the play is not normal because he always thinks at the deeper level of the mind or in Freud's notion of the unconscious level of the mind. Karnad has used the game of chess, as an "objective co-relative" (a theory propounded by T. S. Eliot), to explore the rushing ideas running in the mind of Tughlaq. In the matter of alienation *Tughlaq* can be compared to Camus's *Caligula*. Christine Gomez has truly judged the character of Tughlaq and said, "Like Camus's *Caligula*, Tughlaq also may be seen as a play which deals with alienated outsider figure, estranged at various levels, from society and the individuals around him, from traditional religion, from existence and the human predicament in this world and from himself." (115) Thus this is a play which deals with the theme of alienation which is a strong feature of Parsi theatre but Karnad has gone much beyond of the need of Parsi theatre. The reason behind it is that he also wanted to give the contemporary note to the play. And by doing so he has explored multiple things in one frame.

The play *Tughlaq* is structured on deep and shallow scenes. The division of scenes into deep and shallow scenes is the strong feature of Parsi theatre. The Parsi theatre often contains the alternation of deep and shallow scenes. The reason for selecting the alternative of deep and shallow scenes is because the deep scenes contain the serious subject-matter and need much attention while the subject-matter of shallow scenes are often comic and is used only to amuse the audience. The shallow scenes often presented on the front stage while the deep scenes in the deeper part of the stage. When the shallow scenes run at the foreground of the stage, the deep scenes get prepared during this time. Karnad has expressed his views about the use of deep and shallow scenes and said:

The stagecraft of the parsi model demanded a mechanical succession of the alternating *shallow* and *deep* scenes. The shallow scenes were played in the foreground of the stage with a painted curtain- normally depicting a street- as a backdrop. These scenes were reserved for the 'lower class' characters with prominence given to comedy. They served as the link scenes in the development of the plot, but the main purpose was to keep the audience engaged while the deep scenes, which showed interior of palaces, royals parks, and other such visually opulent sets, were being changed or decorated. The important characters rarely appeared in the street scenes, and in the deep scenes the lower classes strictly kept their place. (307-08)

Deep scenes contain the serious episode of the play and the shallow scene uses comic episode in the play which has very little relation with the deep scene. Karnad says about the shallow scene:

The shallow scene was usually a street scene and was kept for comedy. While the shallow scene was on, the deep scene was prepared, for a garden, a palace, a dance, whatever, the sets were being changed. While the set change was going on, in the shallow scene you had comical characters, crowds. (97-98)

Thus Karnad has counted the characteristics of shallow scene and explained that this technique of Parsi theatre has come from Shakespeare. This technique has similarity with the Shakespeare's uses of 'comic relief' in his tragedies. But the differences between these two are that Shakespeare uses comic relief as the mental relief for the audience which occurs just after the blood-shed on the stage while on the other hand in Parsi theatre the shallow scenes are used for the passing of time when the scene preparation is on for the deep scene.

In *Tughlaq*, the deep scenes present the characters like Tughlaq, Step-Mother, Shaikh Imam-ud-din, Najib, Barani, etc. All these characters play very important role in the play. These characters help us to understand the development of the character of Tughlaq and they also help us to understand the psychological development and the alienation in the personality of Tughlaq. These characters always appear on the deeper part of the stage. They deliver philosophical, psychological, and emotional dialogues on the stage. On the contrary the shallow scene has two characters Aziz and Aazam. They are introduced as the comic characters in the play. Whenever they come on the stage they produce mirth and laughter. Among these two Aziz's character is used to express Tughlaq's harmony towards Hindus. He shows himself as Hindu by calling himself Vishnu Prasad and on the other hand Aazam is a picks-pocket who picks pockets of all those people who are in the crowd.

Karnad has arranged the deep scene and shallow scenes very sharply. He arranged the deep and shallow scenes according to his own personal profit. The deep scenes contain the scene number - first, second, third, fourth, fifth, sixth, eighth, tenth, eleven and thirteenth; while on the other hand the shallow scene contains the scene number seven, nine and twelve. For example scene seven is used after the announcement of the transfer of capital of the country

from Delhi to Daulatabad. On stage the transfer of capital from Delhi to Daulatabad needs change of stage setting which needs some time to change the scene. Karnad has used the shallow scene to consume time so that the deep scenes get prepared. So Karnad has sharply used his mind and introduces shallow scene when he feels the need of it.

Karnad has added something more in the arrangement of the scenes. Although he has used the techniques of Parsi theatre but he has violated the rules several times. For example, he has mixed deep and shallow scenes at two places in scene one and in the last scene of the play. His shallow scene is attached with the deep scene. In the shallow scene, the two characters always get profit of the wrong decisions made by Tughlaq. In scene first they get profit of Tughlaq's harmony towards Hindus. In another scene, they made coins of copper and get profit of the foolish decision taken by Tughlaq. The shallow scenes still depict the fate of common people. Even when errors in policies have been made by Tughlaq, the characters of Aziz and Aazam get profit of judgments. This is shown by the blending of the shallow scene and deep scene.

The structure of the play *Tughlaq* can be compared with the structure of *Hayavadana*. As in the beginning of the play *Bhagavata* interlinks both plots – main plots and the sub plot of the play and in the end of the play both plots are interlinked by *Bhagavata* and the son of Padmini. In the same way in *Tughlaq* the play begins with the characters of both scenes (deep and shallow) in one scene and in the end of the play once again the characters of both scenes unite in one scene and give a successful tragic end. Thus, this is the sharp way of uniting two plots of a play into one shape and gives a final judgment. Thus Karnad has accepted as well as violated the rules of Parsi theatre in the arrangement of deep and shallow scenes. The shallow scene is used to show the response of people towards the error of judgment made by Tughlaq.

Parsi theatre always uses multiple layers of curtain on stage. The back and middle curtains are always used to change the location or scene. They use it in both the deep and shallow scenes. In Parsi theatre, painted curtain is used for the changing of scenes rather than using props on the stage. About the use of curtain in Parsi theatre Somnath Gupta says:

Painted curtain which dropped from pulleys according to the action were used in every play. The one closest to the front was called the drop scene, and the behind it the curtain were changed in accordance with the drama. Usually the street scene was the one most used after the drop scene. The actors assembled in front of it for the invocatory prayer as soon as the drop scene was raised. It was also used in farces. Unless some special scene was required, the dialogue scene of farce was enacted before it. Other curtains commonly used were the jungle scene, the 'cut' curtain, palace, garden, and the camp scenes. (176-77)

Thus, in Parsi theatre, three curtains were used - the front curtain, middle curtain and the deep curtain. The front curtain is used as drop curtain which signals the starting of the action and the end of the action. The middle curtain is used for shallow scene. In Parsi theatre the deep

scenes take place at the deep level of the stage. The action which takes place in deep scene needs much time to prepare the stage and that is why the playwright according to the need of the situation introduces shallow scene at that place. In shallow scene often the scenery of street was painted on the curtain. The deep scene contains the paintings like the fort of a king, Masque, court, etc. In *Tughlaq* the curtains were painted in this way:

Scene One: *The yard in front of the Chief Court of Justice in Delhi.* (5)

Scene Two: *A room in a place.* (14)

Scene Three: *the Yard in front of the Great Masque.* (25)

Scene Eight: *the fort at Daulatabad.* (61)

While in *Tughlaq* the shallow scene is painted not exactly like a street scene but more or less close to it:

Scene Seven: *A camp on the Delhi-Daulatabad route.* (56)

...

Scene Nine: *A hide-out in the hills.* (68)

Thus the curtains of deep and shallow scenes are different. The painted curtain at the back side of action gives a lot of help to the directors of the play. The painted curtain minimizes the use of props in the play. The scenes in Parsi theatre often take place either outside of palace or inside of a room and by selecting this kind of scene the use of props minimizes. The playwrights of Parsi theatre always avoid the entire house as the location or scene

The performance of the play *Tughlaq* on stage brought something to Karnad. He explains the importance of shallow scene and says that when *Tughlaq* was performed on stage he felt that the shallow scene had a lot of potentiality and sometimes greater than the deep scene. He says this potentiality in shallow scene which leads him towards folk theatre. In this regard he says:

The spatial division was ideal to show the gulf between the rulers and the ruled, between the mysterious inner chambers of power politics and the open public areas of those affected by it. But as I wrote *Tughlaq*, I found it increasingly difficult to maintain the accepted balance between these two regions . . . I found the shallow scenes bulging with an energy hard to control . . . the deep scene became emptier as the play progressed, and in the last scene, 'the comic lead' did the unconventional . . . This violation of traditionally sacred spatial hierarchy, I decided—since there was little I could do about it. . . . (308)

So the shallow scene played a very significant role for Karnad. It forced him to think about the importance of the common folk and public who had not got the due importance in theatre. After this play, he moved towards folk theatre and wrote two beautiful plays- *Hayavadana* and *Naga-Mandala*. The later part of writing is done by Karnad by putting the energy of shallow scene in his mind.

In Parsi theatre the playwright uses flash-back technique to cover all those parts which he cannot present on stage or he has difficulty in presenting. In this theatre flash-back is done through narration by the character. The character comes forward and narrates his past life. In the play Tughlaq narrates in this way, “I was twenty-one when I came to Daulatabad first, and built this fort. I supervised the placing of every brick in it and I said to myself, one day I shall build my own history like this, brick by brick.” (63) In the play Karnad has also used flash back technique to show the youthful idealism of Tughlaq.

MUHAMMAD. What’s the use? I was trying to pray –but I could only find words learnt by rote, which left no echo in the heart. I am teetering on the brink of madness, Barani, but the madness of God still eludes me. (*Shouting.*) I have condemned my mother to death and I’m not even sure she was guilty of the crime (80)

In this regard Gomez says, “Karnad uses the flash-back technique to give us the glimpses of youthful idealism of Tughlaq.” (119) In the play Tughlaq recalls in his memory:

One night I was standing on the ramparts of the old fort here. There was a torch near me flapping its wild wings and scattering golden feathers on everything in sight. There was a half built gate nearby, trying to contain the sky within its cleft. Suddenly something happened- as though something had cast a spell. The torch, the gate, the fort and the sky- all melted and merged and flowed in my bloodstream with the darkness of the night . . . I was the earth, was the smoke, was the sky.(64)

Karnad has used this technique to explore the inner conflict of the mind of Tughlaq. Tughlaq’s dream not only presents his anxiety but also the fear of failure and the wrong deeds done by him.

To present the melodramatic scene of the play on stage is another characteristic of the play. Parsi theatre directly presents melodrama on the stage like death and blood-shed. By presenting melodramatic scene on the stage the playwright produces aesthetic pleasure in the mind of audience. In the play the melodramatic action gets in this way:

(...Muhammad leads the prayer. Half-way through the prayer a commotion is heard off-stage. Taking that as cue, Shihab-ud-din and the Amirs gets up and pull out their daggers.) (50)

(Muhammad slowly takes out his dagger. Shihab-ud-din is getting more and more frightened. He is almost screaming now as he speaks.) (52)

(Stabs him. Then almost frenzied, goes on stabbing him. Hits out at Shihab-ud-din’s dead body with a ferocity that makes even the solders holding the body turns away in horror.) (52)

Thus in Parsi theatre blood-shed was shown on stage. About the characteristics of Parsi theatre, Nasser Dasht Peyama quotes Gokulsing and Dissanayake and says, “The play blended realism and fantasy, music, dance, narrative and spectacle, earthly dialogue and

ingenuity of stage presentation, integrating them within a dramatic discourse of melodrama.” (177)

In the matter of the use of language in the play Karnad becomes very careful. He has used specific language for every character in the play. He has chosen the dialogue which reflects the character. His uses of language give multiple meaning. About the use of language in the play, P. Bayapa Reddy says:

Karnad’s handling of dialogue in the play is quite effective . . . A Karnad sentence often performs two or three functions at once. It sheds light on the characters speaking, on the character spoken about and it furthers the plot. It almost functions ironically in conveying to the audience a meaning different from that conveyed to the character. (151)

And in the play this can be seen at multiple places. For example at a place Tughlaq and Imam-ud-din talks in this way:

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 is sin worse than parricide. (27)

In these two dialogues of the play both of the characters are trying to convey more than what they actually say. Besides above mentioned use of language, Karnad has employed two type of language in the play. He has selected common language (most of the time in shallow scene) for the simple character while he has used a special type of language (rhetoric or courtly language) for the characters of deep scenes. Reddy explains, “Sometimes language in the play is simple, easy and precise. The language of the people of lower strata of life, like servants and soldiers, is direct, simple and powerful.” (152) While on the contrary Tughlaq speaks as a poet and his poetic talent occurs in his dialogue. His poetic talent helps him to present all those inexpressible and indefinable things expressible. In the play Karnad has employed silences and pauses many times in the play. In the play silences and pauses convey many things at a time. In a scene when Tughlaq talks to his step-mother he becomes silent. At that time the intrigue to kill Saikh-Imam-ud-din was taking place in his mind.

Symbolism is another technique employed by Karnad to make his play powerful on stage. One can find multiple symbols in the play. In the play all the symbols are employed for special purposes. The game of chess is played by Tughlaq not for entertainment but to solve his problem. Tughlaq says, “I have solved the most famous problem in chess. Even al-Adli and as-Sarakhi said it was insoluble. And it’s so simple-” (14) The game of chess symbolizes Tughlaq’s high manipulative skill of dealing with political rivals and opponents. The criminal characters like Aziz and Aazam symbolizes unprincipled and opportunistic people. They get the profit of all those error in judgment made by Tughlaq. Further the act of prayer also becomes a symbolic act. He murders Shihab-ud-din during prayer. About the use of prayer U.

R. Ananth moorthy says, “The use of murder is reminiscent of what Tughlaq himself did to kill his father. That prayer, which is most dear to Tughlaq, is symbolic of the fact that his life is corrupted at its very source.” (9) Sleep is used as metaphor to symbolise not common sleep but death. Rose is a very strong symbol in the play. Tughlaq is so deeply influenced by the poems of Shikh Sadi of Persia. He plants a beautiful rose garden. Later on, the rose garden is heaped with the counterfeit coins minted in his kingdom. It also symbolizes the dream and ideas of Tughlaq. The grief of the loss of the garden can be seen in this conversation with his step-mother.

STEP-MOTHER. What’s wrong with you: You spent years planning the rose garden and now-

MUHAMMAD. Now I don’t need a rose garden, I built it because I wanted to make for myself an image of Sadi’s poems. I wanted every rose in it to be a poem. I wanted every thorn in it to prick and quicken the senses. But don’t need these airy trappings now; a funeral needs no separate symbol. (76)

P. Bayapa Ready says about the rose symbol, “The rose is a symbol of the aesthetic and poetic susceptibilities of Tughlaq. It later on becomes a symbol of the withering away of all the dreams and ideas of Tughlaq.” (155) In this way he has used multiple symbols in his plays. The symbols in the play help the audience to understand the characters of the play.

In the end it can be said that *Tughlaq* is a play which is written around the dramatic techniques of Parsi theatre. Karnad experimented his own theatre and written this play by dividing the stage through multiple layers of curtain. He arranged the deep and shallow scenes in such a way that produced dramatic effects on stage. Like Parsi theatre, Karnad also brought secularism on stage. He selected Tughlaq as a hero for Hindu audience in his mind. At thematic level the play presents Nehru era on stage (although Karnad denied the fact). Thus, it was a great experiment done by Karnad at multiple levels.

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