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The Psychosomatic Maze: Analysing Conflicting Socio-Religio-Political Duality in Girish Karnad's *Tughlaq*

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Abstract

Conflict serves as a foundational element within narrative structures, driving plot progression and character development. This paper explores the multifaceted nature of conflict in literature, encompassing external and internal struggles, dilemmas, and tensions arising from ignorance, fear, and preconceived biases. Through an analysis of Girish Karnad's play *Tughlaq*, the paper investigates the interplay between conflicting forces within the protagonist and the socio-political milieu of the narrative. Specifically, the paper delves into the divided self of the protagonist, Sultan Muhammad Tughlaq, revealing the constructed nature of his identity through internal turmoil and external contradictions. Muhammad Tughlaq's aspirations, coupled with the reality of his rule falling short, contribute to a profound sense of disillusionment. The paper examines Muhammad Tughlaq's attempts to reconcile his idealistic vision with the harsh realities of governance, leading to a scrutiny of his methods and the criticism he faces from his court and subjects. Through this analysis, the paper aims to illuminate the complex tensions and conflicts inherent in Karnad's portrayal of Sultan Muhammad Tughlaq's character and rule.

Keywords: Conflict, narrative tension, internal conflict, external conflict, dilemmas, cultural influences, colonial transition, identity construction, disillusionment, governance, socio-political milieu.

Introduction and Aim:

Conflict constitutes an indispensable element within the narrative framework. It serves as the primary impetus propelling the narrative forward, fostering narrative tension. Furthermore, conflict serves a multifaceted function, illuminating intricate thematic threads woven into the tapestry of the narrative offering a profound exploration of the characters'



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motivations, emotional states, vulnerabilities, and value systems. At its core, conflict manifests as a literary device that embodies the struggle arising from the opposition of two forces, often due to discordant values, desires, or motivations. This struggle need not be confined to the realm of ‘man versus man,’ but can encompass a broader spectrum, including ‘man versus nature,’ ‘man versus society,’ or even ‘man versus abstract concepts.’ The protagonist’s pursuit of a designated goal, contingent upon overcoming a series of narrative conflicts, forms the bedrock of the plot. Resolution, the culmination of this pursuit, serves as the platform for disseminating the narrative’s central message or moral to the reader. External conflict arises from the protagonist’s interactions with external forces such as technological advancements, the natural world, societal structures, and the like. These external forces act as impediments on the protagonist’s path towards achieving their goals. Internal conflict delves into the protagonist’s intrapersonal struggles, which may stem from anxieties, deficiencies in self-confidence, competing desires, or other psychological burdens. This type of conflict is frequently characterized by the protagonist’s effort to reconcile two opposing internal forces. The exposition of the narrative serves as the platform for introducing the conflict, laying the groundwork for subsequent events. A narrative can encompass numerous conflicts; however, a singular primary conflict typically occupies the central narrative space, demanding the protagonist’s sustained attention throughout the story. One potent source of conflict lies in ignorance, exemplified by a character’s persistent refusal to acknowledge the truth. This wilful ignorance often compels other characters to undertake actions aimed at forcing the protagonist to confront the truth or alter their perspective. This scenario can manifest as both internal and external conflict due to the character’s necessary growth to relinquish the ignorance and the consequences this ignorance has on others. Fear of external events, potential rejection, and failure in any form can also ignite conflict. This fear can lead to clashes with other characters who may not comprehend the nature of the protagonist’s anxieties. Dilemma presents another compelling source of conflict. It arises when the protagonist is forced to choose between two undesirable options. The tension and suspense leading up to the character’s decision are also central to the conflict’s construction. Preconceived negative biases towards individuals or groups can be a significant cause of conflict. The character’s unfounded assumptions regarding others create tension whenever the two parties are forced to interact or collaborate.

As mentioned above tension engendered by conflict catalyses significant transformations in the characters. Tension serves as a foundational element in dramatic discourse. This principle holds true for the works of Girish Karnad, whose plays are characterized by a core thematic concern with dialectical thinking. Karnad’s dramatic vision often presents a binary opposition, with his protagonists oscillating between these opposing



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poles. The reason for the same is that Karnad went through diverse influences during his formative years:

It was India of the Fifties and the Sixties that surfaced two streams of thoughts in all walks of life-adoption of new modernistic techniques, a legacy of the colonial rule and adherence to the rich cultural past of the country (Dhawan 16).

The genesis of this thematic preoccupation can be traced to the historical context of Karnad's emergence as a playwright. The period was marked by a significant societal shift, transitioning from colonial subjugation to independence. This socio-political transformation was further complicated by the convergence of Western and Indian cultural influences, creating a potent source of tension. However, the tension in Karnad's plays deviates from the realm of the overtly physical or external. It delves deeper, manifesting as a predominantly psychological conflict. Karnad's protagonists harbour aspirations that propel them forward. Yet, the reality they encounter consistently falls short of their expectations, leading to a profound sense of disillusionment.

The present paper aims to deconstruct the reasons behind the tensions and conflicts that permeate Karnad's play, *Tughlaq*. It examines how Sultan Muhammad Tughlaq's divided self, characterized by internal turmoil and the pressure of external contradictions, ultimately reveals the constructed nature of his identity. The exploration delves into the seemingly paradoxical nature of Muhammad Tughlaq: a ruler who exhibits vulnerability, readily acknowledges his mistakes, and even subjects himself to public censure, yet simultaneously emerges as a shrewd manipulator, driven by unwavering ambition and a ruthless exercise of power. The paper scrutinizes the inherent tension between Sultan Muhammad Tughlaq's poorly conceived measures, undertaken in a desperate attempt to project himself as a tolerant and efficient ruler, and the scathing criticism he faces from his court and subjects due to his demonstrably irrational and erratic methods.

Background:

The historiography surrounding Mohammed bin Tughlaq predominantly originates from both medieval Muslim and colonial British traditions, the ideological implications of which have only recently come under scrutiny. Prior to British colonialism in India, the subcontinent was governed by Muslim rulers for many centuries. A study of Indian history reveals numerous conflicts among these rulers and their families vying for kingship. Between 1206 and 1526, India witnessed the reign of five dynasties—the Slaves, the Khaljis, the Tughlaqs, the Sayyids, and the Lodis. It appears that the British colonialists utilized these internal conflicts as a means to disparage Indian culture. Karnad endeavours to offer an alternative historical narrative distinct from the perspectives advocated by Orientalists and official historiographers. His portrayal seeks to resurrect aspects of the cultural past that bear relevance to contemporary themes such as communalism and power politics. Through his



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plays, Karnad provides explicit commentary on critical and contentious issues confronting modern India. Girish Karnad's *Tughlaq* deftly interweaves historical fact with fictional elements. The primary narrative strand, grounded in historical reality, traces the political trajectory of Sultan Muhammad Tughlaq. A secondary, fictional narrative involving Aziz, a washerman, and Azam, a pickpocket, serves as a counterpoint. While the central narrative depicts the downfall of an ambitious autocrat, the subplot illustrates the opportunistic manipulation of the king's schemes by an ordinary citizen, Aziz.

Sultan Muhammad Tughlaq emerges as a ruler consumed by ambition, yearning to forge a sprawling empire and bend his subjects to his will. A fervent chess enthusiast, Muhammad Tughlaq employs his political manoeuvres with the ruthlessness and dispassion of a player controlling pawns. His manipulative tactics and cruelty fuel his increasingly delusional pursuits of power. Sultan Muhammad Tughlaq attempts to cultivate an image of a just ruler by restoring confiscated property to Vishnudatta, a Hindu Brahmin, and offering him a prestigious government position. However, this facade crumbles when Aziz, the washerman, skilfully impersonates Vishnudatta and exploits the king's misplaced trust. Muhammad Tughlaq's political machinations extend even into the realm of religion, revealing a cynical disregard for religious figures. He invites Sheik Imam-ud-din, a prominent cleric who openly criticizes him, to address the public, yet deliberately ensures a deserted audience. Subsequently, he manipulates the Sheik into serving as an envoy to a political rival, only to betray him later. As a watchful and shrewd politician, Muhammad Tughlaq then bewails his death. In Scene Four of the play Ratan Singh says, "I have never seen an honest scoundrel like your Sultan. He murders a man calmly and then flagellates himself in remorse" (Karnad 171-172). When dissent against Sultan Muhammad Tughlaq's tyrannical rule intensifies, the Delhi elite conspire to assassinate him during prayer. However, Muhammad Tughlaq anticipates and foils the plot, slaying one of the conspirators. He skilfully manipulates this event to project himself as a divinely protected saviour. Shihab-Ud-din falls victim to Muhammad Tughlaq's scheme and is murdered for attempting to incite the populace against the Sultan. Subsequently, Muhammad Tughlaq orchestrates a narrative portraying Shihab-Ud-din as a martyr who sacrificed himself defending the Sultan during a supposed rebellion. The funeral will be held in Delhi and will be a grand affair" (Karnad 185). I need it most when the surrounding void pushes itself into my soul and starts putting out every light burning there" (Karnad 164). This cynical manipulation of events for political gain prompts Barani to lament, "Oh God! Aren't even the dead free from your politics?" (Karnad 185). This critique seems directed at those who exploit religion as a tool to further their own selfish objectives.

Yet, as Sultan Muhammad Tughlaq's ambitions wane, his disillusionment and cruelty engulf the entire state. Even his stepmother does not escape his wrath. Amidst the chaos



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wrought by famine and the failure of the new currency, Muhammad Tughlaq's descent into isolation becomes tragically apparent. Even Barani, his confidant and constant companion, abandons him to his fate. Barani's critique of Muhammad Tughlaq revolves around the king's alleged deviation from Islamic principles, portraying him as both ruthless and ambitious. Barani reproves Muhammad Tughlaq for instituting draconian laws and making arbitrary decisions solely to maintain his grip on power. This sentiment finds resonance in the analysis of renowned Indian historians Habib and Nizami, who assert "Barani makes a broad observation to the effect that [Mohammed bin Tughlaq] had lost implicit faith in 'the revealed word' and the traditions of the prophet" (493). In similar vein, Munshi et al also say, "According to Barani, the sultan wantonly shed the blood of innocent Muslims, threshold of the palace" (82). Ultimately, Muhammad Tughlaq finds himself a solitary figure, his grand ambitions shattered by the turmoil he himself unleashed.

Girish Karnad's *Tughlaq* transcends the limitations of a purely historical portrayal. By employing a technique of establishing thematic parallels between the depicted historical events and contemporary circumstances, Karnad elevates the play's relevance to the present era. The play functions not merely as a window into the past, but rather underscores its enduring significance for understanding contemporary political realities. A key strategy employed by Karnad lies in drawing a compelling parallel between Muhammad Tughlaq's rule, as depicted in the play, and the political landscape of the Nehruvian era. This technique allows the audience to engage not only with the historical context, but also to critically evaluate contemporary political processes. One of the pivotal themes Karnad delves into in *Tughlaq* is the profound disparity and persistent discord between political aspirations, or the envisioned state of affairs, and the stark reality of their implementation. This theme resonates not only with the historical context of Muhammad Tughlaq's reign, but also with the on-going challenges of translating political ideals into effective governance in the present day.

Analysis:

As delineated earlier, *Tughlaq* elucidates the inherent tension between idealism and reality, a theme manifest through the profound disparity between the protagonist's aspirations and their actualization. A stark juxtaposition emerges between the utopian vision of the kingdom and the pragmatic milieu that Muhammad Tughlaq confronts over time. This disjuncture is articulated succinctly as "his suffering emanates from an unbridgeable gulf between aspiration and fulfilment, from the impossibility of communication, from an acute realisation of the futility of human relationships..." (Das 143). Throughout the play's narrative the external occurrences or conflicts mirror the inner turmoil of Muhammad Tughlaq. Initially, both Sultan Muhammad Tughlaq and his adversaries are depicted as idealists; however, their pursuit of the ideal leads them to employ antithetical means. The overarching



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structure of the play hinges upon this dichotomy: the ideal and the real; the divine aspiration juxtaposed with deft intrigue (Murthy 144).

The play commences in the year 1327 AD, during the reign of Sultan Muhammad Tughlaq, a Muslim ruler who held dominion over India. It evokes a vivid portrayal of monarchical governance in India, with the initial scene unfolding in “the yard in front of the Chief Court of Justice in Delhi” (Karnad 148). The rich religious diversity of India is depicted through the presence of “a crowd of citizens—mostly Muslims, with a few Hindus here and there” (Karnad 148). In this opening sequence, Muhammad extends an invitation to his subjects to partake in the celebration of a new system, wherein justice prevails “without any consideration of might or weakness, religion or creed” (Karnad 149). Two individuals—one young and the other aged—engage in a discourse regarding the merits and demerits of Muhammad Tughlaq’s governance. The elder, herein referred to as the Old Man, harbours grave reservations concerning Mohammad’s ruling and foresees ominous days ahead. Conversely, the younger counterpart holds a different viewpoint, asserting confidence in the present leadership, proclaiming it to be “perfectly safe hands—safer than any you have seen before” (Karnad 147). This juxtaposition delineates a dichotomy between the contemporary era and historical precedent. While the Young Man finds contentment in the present circumstances, the Old Man indulges in severe criticism. Their discordant perspectives serve as allegorical reflections of India’s contemporary state juxtaposed with its historical legacy. The Old Man’s discontent with the current state is articulated through his lamentation wherein he says, “I never thought I would live to see a thing like this,” whereas the Young Man dismissively opines, “Yours days are over, old man” (Karnad 147). However, the Young Man’s illusion becomes evident when his naivety is revealed regarding the truth known to the Old Man that Muhammad has ascended to the throne through usurpation, a fact erroneously labelled as an “accident” by the Young Man. In the second last scene, the Young Man’s initial fervour wanes, giving way to introspection and receptiveness. Displaying a sense of embarrassment, he seeks enlightenment from the Old Man, expressing a desire to acquaint himself with the harsh realities previously unknown to him. In Scene Eight he asks the Old 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 moonlight” (Karnad 193). No longer exuding zeal and aggression, he adopts a stance of receptivity, affording the Old Man’s insights patient consideration, thus attributing significance to the elder’s perspective.

Muhammad Tughlaq harbours an idealistic vision, epitomized by his aspiration for “greater justice, equality, progress, and peace — not merely peace, but a more purposeful life” (Karnad 149). When the Muslim Ulemas want him to “tax the Hindus” because they believe that “the jiziya is sanctioned by the Koran,” he says:



My kingdom has millions—Muslims, Hindus, Jains. Yes, there is dirt and sickness in my kingdom. .. You are asking me to make myself complete by killing the Greek in me and propose to unify my people by denying the visions which led Zarathustra or the Buddha. I am sorry. But it can't be done (Karnad 174, 164, 165).

Sultan Muhammad Tughlaq's decision to relocate to Daultabad signifies an endeavour to materialize this ideal into reality. He anticipates that by transferring his capital to Daultabad, his realm will not only become the 'envy of the world' but also becomes, "large now and embraces the South and I need a capital which is at its heart. But for me the most important factor is that Daulatabad is a city in my kingdom" (Karnad 149). Such idealism prevents him from experiencing restful sleep. Before the shift of the capital, an announcement is made:

... The Merciful Sultan Muhammad has declared—that within the next month every citizen of Delhi must leave for Daulatabad. . . . All arrangements have been made to ensure the comfort of citizens on the way to Daulatabad. It is hoped that every citizen will use these amenities to the full and be in Daulatabad as soon as possible (Karnad 187).

But Husain shares different views about this shifting of capital from Delhi to Daulatabad. He writes:

[It] brought destruction to the capital perished on the long way (109-110).

Sultan Muhammad Tughlaq becomes estranged from his society due to his idealistic convictions, which diverge from the prevailing mind-set of his people. Shrivastava elucidates, "He is estranged from society because he is a man ahead of his age and is not understood by the society around him because his ideas and ideals are far above and very different from an ordinary human being" (76). Muhammad Tughlaq's lofty idealism creates a rift between him and his population, and his endeavour to subject every action to rigorous rationality results in calamity for his reign. When queried by his mother regarding his inability to find tranquillity, he attributes it to his perpetual contemplation of a promising future:

. . . I want to climb up, up to the top of the tallest tree in the world, and call out to my people: History is ours to play with—our now! Let's be the light and cover the earth with greenery. Let's be darkness and cover up the boundaries of nations. Come! I am waiting to embrace you all! (Karnad 155).

Beneath Muhammad Tughlaq's idealistic façade lies a profound internal conflict, epitomized by his acknowledgment that he cannot extend his aspirations to celestial heights, as his roots have "yet to find their hold in the earth?" (Karnad 155). This lack of grounding gives rise to a stark dissonance between his envisioned utopia and the harsh realities he encounters. His vision of peace and prosperity becomes mired in bloodshed and famine, while



his advocacy of integrity and equity paradoxically fosters betrayal and deceit. Muhammad candidly acknowledges the chasm between his aspirations and their realization: “And my kingdom too is what I am—torn into pieces by visions whose validity I can’t deny” (Karnad 165). The unfolding reality presents a jarring contrast to Sultan Muhammad Tughlaq’s ideals. Witnessing figures like Shihab-ud-Din succumbing to the very violence they perpetuate, leaves him disillusioned and perplexed about the trajectory of his kingdom. The revelation of conspiracies plotted against him further compounds his distress.

The play exposes the paradox of the idealistic king, Sultan Muhammad Tughlaq, who never experiences a moment of peace or rest. He perpetually harbours suspicions regarding the motives of those around him. The presence of imposters, betrayers, and treacherous individuals offers him no genuine support. Regarded as mad by the people and labelled as tyrannical by the Amirs, Muhammad Tughlaq grapples with the inherent contradictions of his idealistic vision amidst a reality fraught with deceit and duplicity. He reflects, “what hopes I had built up when I came to the throne! I had wanted every act in my kingdom to become a prayer, every prayer to become a further step in knowledge.., every step to lead us nearer to God” and then laments, “But our prayers are too ridden with disease, and must be exiled” (Karnad 186). Karnad addresses the killing of Muslims in the play, attributing it to their alleged conspiracy to assassinate the Sultan during prayer. Ratansing devises the plan, stating, “The muezzin’s call to prayer will be the signal for attack” (Karnad 178). When Sheikh Sahib questions the morality of killing someone during prayer, the Amirs justify it by suggesting that they can atone for the sin and that Islam will benefit in the long run (Karnad 178). Karnad employs satire to critique the religious fervour of the Muslims, who advocate for Muhammad Tughlaq to utilize his throne to propagate Islam. Betrayed by his own people, Sultan Muhammad Tughlaq adopts ruthless measures to quell their rebellions. The plot to assassinate him during prayer deeply unsettles Muhammad Tughlaq, leading him to ban prayer in his kingdom.

Each endeavour that Muhammad Tughlaq undertakes seems to backfire, fostering an atmosphere of pervasive chaos. Even his trusted historian friend Barani begins to question his rationality upon observing his relentless pursuit of those who dare to challenge his authority. Thus, an aura of utter turmoil envelops Muhammad Tughlaq and his realm. Muhammad admits:

In Ma’bar Ehsanshah has declared himself independent. Bahal-ud-din Gashtasp is collecting an army against me. The drought in Doab is spreading from town to town—burning up the country. Only one industry flourishes in my kingdom, only one—and that’s of making counterfeit copper coins. Every Hindu home has become a domestic mint; the traders are just waiting for me to close my . . .
(Karnad 195).



Sultan Muhammad Tughlaq believes that there are only two individuals worthy of his trust in his kingdom: Ain-ul-Mulk and Shihab-ud-din's father. He finds himself in a state of impotence amidst the pervasive turmoil, lamenting, "What should I do Barani? What would you prescribe for this honeycomb of diseases? I have tried everything. But what cures one disease just worsens another" (Karnad 196). His stepmother also laments, "It's only seven years ago that you came to the throne. How glorious you were then, how idealistic, how full of hopes. Look at your kingdom now" (Karnad 204). Perceiving failures on all fronts, Barani subtly suggests his withdrawal from the political stage. However, Muhammad adamantly refuses, asserting his persistent engagement in the affairs. He finds relinquishing his role arduous, as the malady afflicting him cannot be remedied nor ignored, for "there is no cure for his disease" (Karnad 196). Muhammad Tughlaq, once brimming with ideals akin to a patient, now embodies sheer helplessness. Barani rightfully queries the fate of his Sultan's ideals. Muhammad asks Barani:

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. Barani, what vengeance is driving these shapes after me? (Karnad 196).

In the initial scene, Muhammad Tughlaq exhibits a secular and equitable demeanour by upholding the judgment of Kazi-i-Mumalik. However, in the denouement, the same Muhammad Tughlaq bestows honour upon Aziz, the washerman, who blatantly violates the established laws of the realm. This disparity signifies the complete dissolution of Sultan Muhammad Tughlaq's idealistic principles. When queried by Barani regarding the rationale behind honouring a murderer, Muhammad's response encapsulates his disillusionment. The lofty ideals of justice have perpetually remained elusive, leaving him uncertain whether he is "pursuing a mirage or fleeing the shadow" (Karnad 219). Ultimately, the once-idealistic monarch finds himself bewildered and apprehensive, seemingly unable to comprehend his current predicament. He stands far removed from the visionary dreams he once harboured. Parmod K. Nayyar is right in commenting, "Girish Karnad's *Tughlaq* presents a tortured man. Muhammad Tughlaq is a king who wants to reform and improve his people. He is an idealist whose ideal praxis renders him a dreamer and a fool. Tughlaq stands as a man deluded by his idealism and dreams (162).

The tension in the play escalates with the introduction of Aziz, a washerman, who stands in stark contrast to Muhammad Tughlaq. While Muhammad epitomizes idealism and visionary aspirations, remaining indifferent to public opinion, Aziz emerges as a realist, pragmatic in every aspect. The court's verdict favouring the disguised Aziz not only undermines Muhammad Tughlaq's proclamation of secularism and justice but also serves as a satire on Muhammad's ideals of a welfare state, as evidenced by the secret activities of Aziz and Aazam. Their clandestine activities, including their reappearance along the Delhi-



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Daultabad route and their daily routines, sharply contrast with Muhammad Tughlaq's depiction of his kingdom. The stark reality of the kingdom becomes glaringly evident in light of these occurrences. In contrast to Muhammad Tughlaq's manipulative, strategic, secretive, and assertive nature, Aziz presents an ironic counterpoint. From the outset, Aziz exhibits clarity regarding his objectives. He wins a suit against the Sultan himself. In his conversation with Azam, Aziz says:

Look at me. Only a few months in Delhi and I have discovered a whole new world—politics! . . . And not have to pinch them either—demand them! It is a fantastic world (Karnad 190).

Initially, Aziz manipulates the king's decision regarding compensation for those whose lands have been seized by the state. While Muhammad Tughlaq envisions resolution upon reaching Daultabad, Aziz shares the same destination but diverges in purpose, expressing his intent to amass wealth along the journey. He says, "There is money here and we'll make a pile by the time we reach Daulatabad" (Karnad 153). While Muhammad Tughlaq assumes the guise of a benevolent, religious emperor, Aziz, a humble washerman, adopts the guise of a Brahmin, eventually serving as the emperor's special messenger. When Tughlaq introduces copper currency, both Aziz and Azam became counterfeit coin makers. Make counterfeit coins, you understand? If your fingers are getting restless, use them there" (Karnad 191).

Like Muhammad Tughlaq, Aziz manipulates religion and caste for his own selfish purposes. An illustrative incident occurs when a Hindu woman, cradling her dying son, beseeches Aziz for medical aid, yet he remains unmoved. He understands that she is unlikely to voice any complaints against him. According to Brahminical doctrine, lodging a complaint against a Brahmin to a Muslim would condemn her to hell. This incident serves as a poignant reminder of the cruelty and corruption pervading the kingdom. Aziz's interaction with Ghiyas-ud-din further illustrates his cruel nature. Like Muhammad Tughlaq, Aziz callously murders him without a trace of compassion. His demeanour after the act, characterized by singing and dancing, evokes parallels with Muhammad Tughlaq's neurosis. Donning his robes, Aziz taunts the horrified Azam, "How do I look, eh? The great-grandson of the khalif! Laugh, you fool, laugh. Celebrate! What are you crying for? Look, look at the palace doors. They are opening for us. Dance, dance..." (Karnad 201). In defining himself before Sultan Muhammad Tughlaq, he asserts, "I insist. I am your majesty's true disciple" (Karnad 216). Indeed, Aziz emerges as Muhammad's 'shadow' or the 'other Muhammad.' Perhaps owing to this resemblance, Muhammad Tughlaq pardons him even for his most heinous crimes.

The tension depicted in the play also serves as a metaphor for India's experience under British rule and its subsequent post-independence journey. The dichotomy between the ideal and the real portrayed in *Tughlaq* resonates with the aspirations of pre-independence India juxtaposed with the realities of post-independence India. The opening scene, set in front of



the Chief Court of Justice, featuring a diverse assembly of Hindus and Muslims, symbolizes the contemporary Indian society, with these two communities representing significant constituents. The poignant query, “God, what’s this country coming to!” encapsulates the sentiment prevalent among many Indians, who, imbued with religious faith and pride in India’s cultural heritage, find themselves pondering the current state of affairs (Karnad 147). The divergence of present-day India from its historical trajectory warrants serious concern. This observation underscores the widening chasm between India’s past glory and its current state under its rulers. Indians harboured animosity towards the British colonialists, expelling them due to their deprivation of rights, exploitation, deception, and ultimate alienation of the populace in their own homeland. While independence initially ushered in significant changes, the subsequent decades witnessed a decline in societal conditions, with the current juncture marked by a deteriorating trajectory. The polity holds society hostage, resulting in a complete erosion of moral values. The sense of camaraderie and unity that emerged during foreign rule swiftly dissipated during and post-independence. Hence, the elderly man’s reply, “I’ve been alive a long time, seen many sultans, but I never thought I would live to see a thing like this” to his apprehension regarding ‘what the country is coming to,’ resonates deeply with the lament of every Indian witnessing the regression of human values (Karnad 147).

Karnad portrays Sultan Muhammad Tughlaq as a monarch with unwavering confidence in his abilities and a leader committed to the welfare of his people. He is depicted as someone who explores novel and inventive ideas. Muhammad expresses his determination, “I have something to give, something to teach, which may open the eyes of history but I have to do it within this life” (Karnad 196). In his pursuit of realizing his aspirations, he implores for support and participation from his people. He requests his people:

Laugh at me if you like, criticize me, but please don’t let go of my hand
(Karnad 182).

However, his appeals are met with rejection by both his allies and subjects. Karnad appears to suggest that in the absence of a positive response from his people, Sultan Muhammad Tughlaq abandons his compassionate demeanour and adopts stringent measures. He announces:

. . . I want Delhi vacated immediately. Every living soul in Delhi will leave for
Daulatabad within a fortnight. ... Nothing but an empty grave yard of Delhi will
satisfy me now (Karnad 186).

The portrayal of Muhammad Tughlaq in the play reveals traits of intolerance, impulsiveness, arrogance, and impracticality. He harbours a fervent desire to realize his ambitions at any expense. However, he struggles to maintain a balance between his idealistic aspirations and pragmatic considerations. He admits, “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” (Karnad 164).



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Upon closer examination of Sultan Muhammad Tughlaq's character, it also becomes evident that his approach to religion and religious practices is fundamentally hypocritical. He merely wears the facade of religiosity, a trait shared with leaders of independent India. This decay is exacerbated by the contemporary political leaders who exploit religion for their personal gains. In the opening scene, the Young Man defends Muhammad Tughlaq's purported piety, citing increased adherence to Islamic practices under his rule. He asks the old man, "Tell me, how often did you pray before he came to the throne? Sultan in whose time people read the Koran in the streets like now?" (Karnad 147). However, the Old Man counters the argument by highlighting the futility of such outward displays devoid of genuine adherence to religious principles. He retorts, "What's the use? One must act according to it . . ." and thus strikes at the futility of such an exercise. The Third Man critiques Hindus for their non-payment of the Jiziya tax, which he perceives as a violation of the Kuranic injunctions. Furthermore, the pervasive influence of Hinduism, which has assimilated numerous smaller religions, is highlighted by the Old Man's cautionary statement: "Beware of the Hindu who embraces you. Before you know what, he'll turn Islam into another caste call the Prophet an incarnation of his god . . ." (Karnad 148). There is a pervasive concern that the religious identity of the Muslims may be destroyed by Hinduism. The mention of communal riots in Kanpur serves as a poignant reminder of the on-going communal violence in various parts of India, hinting at the contemporary relevance of these themes. On the one hand this reflects the underlying apprehension felt by Muslims and other minority groups in India, who fear assimilation into Hinduism and on the other the Hindus also feel insecure and dissatisfied. As one of his Hindu subjects says, "We didn't want an exemption! Look,!—well, that makes me nervous. (Karnad 147-148). This hints at the lurking suspension between the Hindus and Muslims during that period.

The dichotomy in Sultan Muhammad Tughlaq, wherein he presents himself as outwardly benevolent but harbours inner deceit, mirrors the traits of contemporary Indian rulers, who embody this duality devoid of any other redeeming qualities. Muhammad's proclamation, "My beloved people, you have heard the judgement of the Kazi and seen for yourself how justice works in my kingdom—without any consideration of might or weakness, religion or creed" serves as a veneer to portray himself as a devout Muslim ruler, exemplified by his imposition of obligatory prayers five times a day—an overtly political manoeuvre (Karnad 149). However, his true nature is revealed through his callous act of murdering his own father during prayer, dismissing it as an accident and thereby undermining the sanctity of prayer. Vincent Smith observes that it is "astonishing that such a monster should have retained power for twenty six years, and then have died in his bed" (254). Fundamentally, Muhammad Tughlaq's inner self is atheistic, as evidenced by his incarceration of Sayyids and Ulema. Given the multi-faith composition of his kingdom, comprising Muslims, Hindus, and



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Jains, he adopts a language that does not offend any religious group, reflecting a purely political approach to religion. Muhammad candidly admits, “I have never denied the world of God . . . because it is my bread and butter. . . . Only atheist can try to be God. I am God’s most humble slave” (Karnad 169). In response to an assassination attempt, he abruptly bans prayers, only to rescind the order later, underscoring the capricious nature of his religious policies.

Imam-ud-din’s caution to Muhammad, “Religion! Politics! Take heed, Sultan, one day these verbal distinctions will rip you into two,” holds significance in contemporary times, as highlighted by a critic who observes, “In this potent play, politics intricately intertwines with religion” (Karnad 165, Reddy 150). By utilizing Sheikh Imam-ud-din for his political manoeuvring, Sultan Muhammad Tughlaq epitomizes the fusion of religion and politics. Muhammad Tughlaq appoints the Sheikh as his envoy due to his status as a Muslim saint, thus leveraging his unassailable integrity. However, upon discerning Muhammad’s duplicitous intentions, the Sheikh astutely remarks, “You know, Sultan, I’m just beginning to understand why they say you are the cleverest man in the world” (Karnad 167). Subsequently, the Sheikh meets his demise at the hands of Sultan Muhammad Tughlaq’s soldiers, illustrating parallels between Muhammad’s reign and post-independence India. It may be noted that Sultan Muhammad Tughlaq’s irrational and erratic methods draw severe criticism from both his courtiers and citizens. He emerges as a shrewd contriver and a ruthlessly ambitious ruler. He bears responsibility for the assassination of his staunchest critic, who accuses him of parricide and of straying from Islamic principles. As noted by V.R. Annantha Murthy, “...It is a play of the Sixties and reflects as perhaps no other play does the political mood of disillusionment which followed the Nehru era of idealism in the country?” (143). Sultan Muhammad Tughlaq, akin to his aspiration to build an ideal empire, embarks on transformative policies such as relocating the capital from Delhi to Daultabad and introducing changes to the currency, reminiscent of the experimental initiatives undertaken in independent India. Through socio-economic measures like the Five Year Plans, the introduction of democracy via the newly formulated constitution, and various national and international policies, the playwright implicitly critiques the inherent contradictions and challenges in their implementation. Karnad, by portraying the consequences of Muhammad Tughlaq’s innovative endeavours, expresses apprehension regarding the policies and their execution in independent India.

The pervasive atmosphere of violence, bloodshed, treachery, and corruption depicted in *Tughlaq* resonates with the contemporary landscape of India. The natives grapple with two major issues: poverty and violence, stemming from misguided political policies. Just as Muhammad Tughlaq’s subjects embark on a journey from Delhi to Daultabad filled with lofty expectations, the people of India harboured similar hopes during the transition from British



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rule to self-governance. However, like their counterparts, Indians encountered disillusionment and frustration instead of the anticipated peace and prosperity. Under the guise of democracy, they found themselves subjected to opportunistic politics, exacerbating communal tensions and lawlessness. The chasm between the Ideal and the Real remains pronounced. Interpreting the situation, Tejwant S. Gill observes, “No wonder, the life, rule and time of this charismatic and erratic emperor have past significance, of which the present meaning... is getting more and more pronounced with the passage of time” (58). Similarly, Girish Karnad acknowledges, “In a sense, the play reflected this slow disillusionment of my generation felt with the new politics of independent India: the gradual erosion of the ethical norms that had guided the movement of independence, and coming to terms with cynicism and real politic” (16). However, Karnad denies any conscious effort in drawing parallels, asserting that the resemblance between Sultan Muhammad Tughlaq and his kingdom with the post-independence era is “accidental.” He states, “I did not deliberately write about the Nehru era. While I am flattered when people interpret it as such, it was not intended to be a contemporary play addressing current issues” (16).

Conclusion:

In *Tughlaq*, the underlying tension between idealism and reality serves as the cornerstone of the narrative, delineating the profound discord between the protagonist’s lofty aspirations and their eventual realization. Sultan Muhammad Tughlaq’s pursuit of an idealized vision for his kingdom, juxtaposed with the harsh realities he encounters, embodies this thematic tension. The play masterfully captures the struggle between divine aspiration and pragmatic intrigue, epitomizing the dichotomy between the ideal and the real that permeates throughout the storyline. For Muhammad Tughlaq, the transition from Delhi to Daultabad represented a panacea for all societal maladies, yet it ultimately proves to be an illusion. Through the interactions between characters like the Old Man and the Young Man, *Tughlaq* presents a poignant allegory of contemporary India vis-à-vis its historical legacy. The discordant perspectives of these characters, representing divergent viewpoints on Muhammad Tughlaq’s governance, mirror the broader societal discourse surrounding India’s trajectory after independence. Sultan Muhammad Tughlaq’s internal conflict, encapsulated in his idealistic ambitions for justice, equality, and progress, is juxtaposed against the grim reality of a kingdom mired in violence, corruption, and deceit. This stark dissonance underscores the profound disillusionment experienced by Muhammad Tughlaq and reflects the broader disillusionment felt by the Indian populace in the face of unfulfilled promises of peace and prosperity. Moreover, *Tughlaq*’s narrative extends beyond the individual struggles of its characters to offer a searing critique of contemporary Indian society. The pervasive atmosphere of violence, poverty, and political opportunism depicted in the play serves as a poignant commentary on the post-independence era. Karnad’s portrayal of Sultan Muhammad



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Tughlaq's transformative policies and their unintended consequences parallels the challenges faced by independent India in navigating socio-economic reforms and political upheavals. Through nuanced characterizations and intricate plotlines, *Tughlaq* elucidates the complex interplay between idealism and reality, offering profound insights into the human condition and the socio-political landscape of India.

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