

TUGHLAQ : THE MONARCH MISUNDERSTOOD

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Abstract : Girish Karnad is considered as one of the three great writers of the contemporary Indian drama. A versatile genius, Karnad has contributed much to enrich the tradition of Indian English Drama by experimenting with the fusion of the traditional and modern dramatic forms and content. His second play *Tughlaq*, translated to English by the author himself, was a great success on stage. The play, more than a political allegory, is an authentic and honest portrayal of sad and tragic events in the life of Muhammad-bin-Tughluq, one of the most controversial Muslim rulers in the world. The artistic genius of the dramatist is in the portrayal of Sultan's personality which is structured on the opposites and contrasts : the ideal and the real, the sanity and the madness, and, the dreams and the frustrations. The play shows a great emperor 'divided against himself' and beautifully demonstrates the immensely capable Sultan's terrible conflict with his citizens, and more importantly, confrontation with his own 'soul'.

Keywords : Indian English Drama, Translation Method, Conflict, Confrontation

Introduction : Drama is integral to Indian literature and culture. It is a composite art which involves the playwright, the actors and the audience in a shared experience on the stage and has its own problems of which the other literary forms are free. It is because of this, that Indian English Drama has not achieved remarkable success when compared to the tremendous success of other forms of literature like poetry and fiction. In his book *Indian Writing in English* K R S Iyengar rightly says :

“ ‘Indo-Anglian Drama’ : *isn’t like talking about ‘snakes in Iceland’ ? Not quite,---- but the problem is there, for while poetry, novels and non-fiction prose can be read in the silence of one’s own study, Drama can come to life only in the theatre.*” (Iyengar,1985)

Early Background : Though a number of plays of the dramatists like Asif Currimbhoy, Pratap Sharma and Gurucharan Das, successfully staged in Europe and the United States of America, did a great benefit by growing interest abroad in Indian English Literature in general and Indian English Drama in particular, yet they did not lead to the establishment of a regular school of Indian English Drama at home. In his book, *A History of Indian English Literature*, M.K. Naik remarks :

“ *This was mainly because the encouragement which drama received from several quarters immediately after Independence was monopolized by the theatre in the Indian regional languages, while Indian English Drama continued to feed on crumbs fallen from its rich cousin’s tables.*” (Naik,2002)

Modern Indian drama in English developed steadily during the last few decades. It took considerable time in crossing the initial phase of experimentory and then developed its own expression. With the establishment of the National School of Drama by the Indian government to encourage the performing arts as an effective means of public enlightenment and starting of the National Drama Festival in 1954 by the Sangeet Natak Academy established in 1953, Indian English Drama got a new footing. By mixing of various styles and techniques from Sanskrit western theatre, the Modern Indian Drama was given a new, versatile and broader approach at every level of creativity. In 1970s, a new trend of “Translation Method” came in English dramas in India which changed its face. Translating the

plays of contemporary notable regional playwrights in English and staging them in theatres got huge success for its bold innovations and fruitful experiments in terms of both thematic concerns and technical virtuosity. Playwrights like Mohan Rakesh, Badasl Sircar, Vijay Tendulkar, Girish Karnad, Mahashweta Devi, Nissim Ezekiel, Manjula Padmanabhan and Mahesh Dattani emerged on the scene. By using legends, myths, folklores and history, they not only produced good works at regional level but also brought Indian English Drama on the pan Indian level.

Karnad—the Author : The new phase of Indian theatrical development happily coincides with the personal development of Girish Karnad as a dramatist--- the author of the Kannada plays *Yayati* (1961), *Tughlaq* (1962), *Hayavadana* (1970), *Nagmandala* (1972) etc. Born on May 19, 1938 to a Konkani family, Girish Raghunath Karnad, in capacity of writer, director, actor and T V personality substantially contributed to enrich the tradition of Indian English Drama. Growing up in Sirsi his dramatic sensibility was moulded under the influence of touring Natak companies and especially Yakshagana which was not accepted as the purified art form in those days. Karnad has represented India in foreign lands as an emissary of art and culture. He has experimented with the fusion of the traditional and modern dramatic forms and content. K R S Iyengar remarkably comments :

“ In all his three plays--- be the theme historical, mythical or legendary--- Karnad’s approach is ‘modern’, and he deploys the conventions and motifs of folk art like masks and curtains to project a world of intensities, uncertainties and unpredictable denouements.” (Iyengar, 1985)

Karnad, who read all kinds of books, went through a book of Indian history. Reading about Tughluq in that book he found the subject in tune with the times and the outcome of it was his second play *Tughlaq*, a contemporary Indian play written in Kannada. In the words of Karnad:

“ What struck me absolutely about Tughlaq’s history was that it was contemporary. The fact that here was the most idealistic, the most intelligent king ever come to the throne of Delhi..... and one of the greatest failures also. And within a span of twenty years this tremendously capable man had gone to pieces. This seemed to be both due to his idealism as well as the shortcomings within him, such as impatience, his cruelty, his feeling that he had only correct answer. And I felt in the early sixties India had also come very far in the same direction---the twenty-year period seemed to me very much a striking parallel.” (Enact,1971)

Persuaded by Alyque Padamsee, Karnad himself translated the play into English. The play was first staged in the Bhalabai auditorium at Bombay during 1917 and was a great success. The audiences were able to enjoy this drama without paying much attention to its rich and complex symbolism and the subtle weaving of its different motifs. This drama appealed to the Indian audience due to the fact that this reflected the political mood of disillusionment which followed the Nehru era of Idealism in India.

Tughlaq—the Play : The play *Tughlaq*, more than a political allegory, is an authentic and honest portrayal of sad and tragic events in the life of Sultan, Muhammad-bin-Tughluq, one of the most controversial Muslim emperors in the world. It shows a great emperor ‘divided against himself’. As a dramatized version of Sultan’s tortured and tormented soul which finds solace nowhere but in madness, the play beautifully demonstrates the immensely capable Sultan’s terrible conflict with his citizens, and more importantly, confrontation with his own soul. The artistic genius of the dramatist is in the portrayal of Sultan’s personality which is structured on the opposites and contrasts : the ideal and the real, the sanity and the madness, and, the dreams and the frustrations.

Tughluq—the Sultan : Muhammad-bin-Tughluq is a profound scholar, intelligent, broad-minded, dreamy-eyed idealist and visionary. He is an emperor who can sacrifice everything for the comfort and the betterment of his people. He stands for administrative reforms, for the policy of Hindu-Muslim amity and friendship and due recognition of merit irrespective of caste and creed. As a keen administrator, he reorganises administrative machinery and taxation structure for the establishment of an egalitarian society in which all of his subject would enjoy fundamental human rights and justice, equal opportunities and freedom of faith or religion. In the opening scene, addressing his subjects he says :

“My beloved people, you have heard the judgement of the Kazi and seen for yourselves how justice work in my kingdom---without any consideration of might or weakness, religion or creed. May this moment burn bright and light up our paths towards greater justice, equality, progress and peace---not just peace but a more purposeful life.” (149)

From his childhood Tughluq has cherished a dream of creating a confident, vibrant and powerful nation. He passionately urges his people for their active support and participation in the realization of his dreams and says :

“I have hopes of building a new future for India and I need your support for that. If you don’t understand me, ask me to explain myself and I’ll do it. If you don’t understand my explanations, bear with me in patience until I can show you the results. But please don’t let me down, I beg you. I’ll kneel before you if you wish but please don’t let go of my hand.” (182)

It is unfortunate that all his noble and visionary activities are opposed by the orthodox people. He is condemned by his own Muslim brothers and gets insulted, accusation and curses in return. He is severely attacked by political critics at home and threatened by his enemies at the boarder to crush him down. Sheikh Imam-ud-Din criticizes him an incompetent Sultan and says publicly that “the Sultan is a disgrace to Islam”. Several plots by Amirs, Sayyids and Ulemmas are engineered against his life.

Muhammad-bin-Tughluq wants the capital of his empire to be shifted to Daulatabad, in the centre of his far-flung kingdom for effective administration and control of the south and keep it away from his increasingly dangerous foes. He says :

“ My empire is large now and embraces the South and I need a capital which is at its heart. Delhi is too near the boarder and as you know its peace is never free from the fear of invaders. But for me the most important factor is that 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. I invite you all to accompany me to Daulatabad.” (149)

He is so considerate that he has made all the arrangements carefully for facilities of travel and conveyance. But the Amirs and Sayyids are of the view that by transferring the capital to Daulatabad, the Hindu dominated town, the Sultan wants to weaken their strength. All the measures provided by the Sultan are misused and misappropriated by the corrupt officers like Aziz and Azam. Angered by the miserably poor response to his well-intentioned and noble idea, the Sultan turns out to be a hard realist, a shrewd and cunning politician. Shifting of the capital has now become a ‘fatwa’ for the realization of his dream. The Sultan once “not afraid to be human” now turns out a ruthless tyrant without slightest regard for humanity and started killing people with absolute impartiality.

The Sultan tries to promote the understanding of human situation amidst the dearth and disparities. He wants his countrymen to rise above the sufferings and insecurities. He is restless because he thinks that his primary responsibility is to awaken his countrymen to

feel the truth. He identifies himself with their sufferings and spends sleepless nights. The restlessness of his mind and soul is evident in scene two when he tells his step-mother :

“ I pray to the Almighty to save me from sleep. All day long I have to worry about tomorrow but it’s only when the night falls that I can step beyond all that.....then again I want to climb up, up to the top of the tallest tree in the world, and call out to my people : ‘Come, my people, I am waiting for you. Confide in me your worries.....Let’s be 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!’ ” (155)

Born ahead of time the Sultan finds himself in the tight existential condition and makes a difficult choice. He is convinced about the authenticity of his choice and refuses to relent to the tough opposition from the narrow-minded and orthodox citizens who question his integrity. He frankly admits to Imam-ud-Din in scene three how other philosophical thoughts of the Greeks specially of Sukrat and Aflatoon have shaped his personality :

“I can still feel the thrill with which I found a new world, a world I had not found in the Arabs or even the Koran. They tore me into shreds. And to be a whole now, I shall have to kill the part of me which sang to them. And my kingdom too is what I am----torn to pieces by visions whose validity I can’t deny. You are asking me to make myself complete by killing the Greek in me and you propose to unify my people by denying the visions which led Zarathustra or the Buddha. ”(165)

Being a fonder of experimentation and inspired by the tremendous success of paper currency in China, Muhammad, in the sixth scene announces to introduce copper currency in his kingdom. But the scheme turns out to be a complete failure due to improper arrangements for preventing the circulation of counterfeit coins. Private persons begin to manufacture copper currency. The house of every Hindu becomes a mint and the whole economy starts bleeding. The Sultan is also sore about the proliferation of counterfeit coins and says in eighth scene :

“ 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 eyes. ”(195)

Muhammad's mental agony and confrontation can be felt well in scene eleven, when he, almost every night, visits the huge piles of counterfeit coins in the garden and in an act of sheer madness steals them.

Sultan's willful acts create crisis and situations which are totally absurd and drag him down in the 'mud' and cause self-deception, sense of guilt, anguish despair and dread. In utter despair he says :

“ God, God in Heaven, please help me. Please don't let go my hand. My skin drips with blood and I don't know how much of it is mine and how much of others. I started in Your path, Lord, why am I wandering naked in this desert now? I started in search of You. Why am I Become a pig rolling in the gory mud?”(205)

Muhammad-bin-Tughluq appears to be a spectacular failure as a king. He is seen as a man estranged from his society primarily because his ideas and ideals are far above the comprehension of his contemporaries. He is a failure only because of his subjects who refuse to respond to his aspirations. Whole life he craves for being 'understood' and earnestly says to Barani :

“ All your life you wait for someone who understands you. And then-----you meet him----punishment for waiting too much. ”(218)

Taking care of inscription of his father's name on coins immediately after his coronation and succession to the throne is a sufficient proof of his attempt to atone for his crime of murdering his father and brother. Such kinds of realizations can never be of a mad man but of a tragic character who is misunderstood completely. Muhammad's every effort to do good yield the opposite results. He is betrayed by fate, chance and his own people, and whom even “sleep avoided” for “five years”. His words to Barani at the end of the play are pathetic but dignified :

“ If justice was as simple as you think or logic as beautiful as I had hoped, life would have been so much clearer. I have been chasing these words now for five years and now I don't know if I am pursuing a mirage or a fleeting shadow. Anyway what do all these subtle distinctions matter in the building madness of the day? Sweep your logic away into a corner, Barani, all I need now is myself and my madness---- madness to prance in the field eaten bare

by the scarecrow violence. But I am not alone. I have a companion to share my madness now-----the Omnipotent God!”(219)

Conclusion : It is not the Sultan but the subjects in his kingdom who cruelly and intentionally discourage all possibilities of building a vibrant nation which would have become the pride and glory of human civilization. The society in which he lives, dreams and hopes have made him insane and even inhumane. Dr Ishwari Prasad, a historian, rightly says in his book “ *A History of Quranah Turks in India*” :

“ We have sufficient data to prove that Muhammad was no monster who took delight in shedding blood for its own sake and those who stigmatize him as a callous tyrant forget the age in which he lived and the circumstances in which he was placed.”

It is then public apathy that forces him into social and psychological alienation putting an end to his intellectual world, but at the same time, this process of isolation opens up larger possibilities of spiritual wisdom. His confrontation with the practical and unpleasant realities of human life makes him dangerously bitter, leaves him totally devastated and bewildered and finally forces him to take refuge in madness. Bitter experiences of life teach him an important lesson : man has to rely upon himself for the realization of his well-cherished dreams and any hope for support and encouragement from others leads only to frustrations and disappointments. In a few words, it can be said that Sultan is a “victim-turned sinner” not “an incompetent fool”.

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