

Myths, Legends and Folklores: Alternative Histories in Girish Karnad's *Tughlaq and Tale-Danda*

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Abstract:

It has become essential in post-colonial context to reanalyze the received history due to colonialist distortion and orientalist misconstruction. Post-Independence Indian theatre had two future paths to follow: either to imitate a Western modernist avante-garde theatre which can be seen as a colonial legacy or the Orientalist rediscovery of ancient Sanskrit texts. Girish Karnad rejected both the paths and engendered a new kind of theatre which had its roots in vastly rich, unexplored affluence of Indian myths and folklores. His plays are vivid examples of how historical fiction as a genre has potential to provide an alternative basis for historical knowledge- the one which is defiant to dominant ideological narratives. The paper seeks to examine *Tughlaq* and *Tale-Danda* to understand how Karnad uses myths and legends to de-idealize the past.

Keywords: historical fiction, myths, orientalism, post-colonial, theatre

The postcolonial fiction since the publication of *Orientalism* in 1978, has scrutinized the relationship between the historical discourse and colonialist strategies of cultural domination. Said in *Orientalism* demonstrates how the Western ideology has displaced history by vision in Egypt and Middle East. Such essentialism “transfixes the being, the object of study, within its inalienable and non-evolutive specificity, instead of defining it as...a product, a resultant of the vection of the forces operating in the field of historical evolution” (*Orientalism* 97). Said’s theory of Orientalism is also pertinent in Indian context and can appropriate the dismissal of British colonial historiography, which attributes a similar ahistoricity to Indian civilization.

In such a context, Girish Karnad holds a significant position in the development of Indian postcolonial theatre. Post-Independence India was left with two dramatic paths to follow: either to imitate a Western modernist avante-garde theatre which can be seen as a colonial legacy or the Orientalist rediscovery of ancient Sanskrit texts. Rather, Karnad constructed a new idea of drama that excavates from the vastly rich, unexplored affluence of Indian myths and history, analyzes their cultural contexts and invites a new mode of reception. The paper will attempt to argue that Girish Karnad’s plays as explicitly fictional form of historical writings carry out intricate epistemological and cultural functions and intercede radically in the discourse of history.

As Hayden White argues, “history is a narrative prose discourse ordered through various modes of emplotment, arguement and the ideological implication and the historians performs an essentially poetic act in prefiguring and explaining historical events” (x).

Historical fictions can provide an alternative basis for historical knowledge, the one defiant to dominant ideological narratives. In postcolonial discourse, historical fiction must focus upon the innate problem of historical representation as history predominantly appears to be an Orientalist misconception.

Girish Karnad's plays highlight the creative potential of a remarkably multifaceted postcolonial intellectual temper attempting to come to terms with its cultural legacy which is tangled up in numerous misrepresentations. Profound commitment with his cultural ethnicity has brought into existence a new artistic susceptibility that represents Indian culture assertively and portrays an indigenous concept of modernity. The versatile theatre of Karnad emphasizes the need for repossessing the lost version of histories and culture. He is a true culture-smith who aspires to stimulate the contemporary Indian intelligentsia from cultural amnesia.

In the course of founding a new theatre, Karnad has reinvented varied patterns of drama from Indian and the world literature and his drawing on the myths, folktales and histories have invigorated, expanded and re-vitalized the poetics of contemporary drama. Both tradition-seeking and intercultural in innovative intelligence, his assorted adaptation of the western mode makes it relevant to the Indian experience. In restoring a mythical and historical aspect to the contemporary Indian literature, Karnad's theatre calls into question the narrow perspective according to which the postcolonial Indian literature is perceived to be nationalist allegories. In the process of reformulating, Karnad does not take recourse to some linear concept of history; he rather discovers the essential dynamics and heterodoxy of the social and ideological formations. As he explores the past, it is realized that they were not merely transient ideologies of a historical instant, but instead pertinent alternatives that still affect the contemporary socio-political and cultural scenario.

Though Karnad's theatre does not document the reminiscence of colonialism or India's freedom struggle, his ideas nonetheless on 'What is the Indian Theatre' offers several incisive arguments regarding the damaging impact of colonial acculturation on Indian creativity. The notion of Indian art stays overwrought with controversies in contemporary situation when culture appears at the crossroads. As Karnad says, a culture- desperate for identity, for the resolution of tension between the cultural past of the country and the colonial past- drawn between the attractions of the Western codes of thought and our own tradition and between the various visions of the future that opened up once when the common political cause of political freedom was achieved. Reacting to this predicament, Karnad comments, "even to arrive at the heart of our mythology, the writer has to follow the signposts planted by the West" (304).

The postcolonial historical fiction of Girish Karnad problematizes the conception of linear, received history. The play *Tale-Danda* foregrounds the often overlooked historical phase of King Bijjala which still possess enormous influence on the history and politics of contemporary times. Emphasizing the class, caste and gender aspects in A.D. 1166, the play highlights the insidious stimulus driving various caste communities in intricate power network. The righteous benevolent anti-caste movement of the devotional cult, Sharanas, is metamorphosed into a fervently bigoted sectarian force in an environment charged with intrigue and greed for usurpation.

Tale-Danda not only retrieves the history in presenting a documentary of Virasaiva's resistance to caste-system, it also condemns all kinds of extremist ideologies in the past as well as the present. The play suggests that no social change is plausible in extremes of prejudice as well as piety. Weaving together various disparate strands of history, the play reconstructs the social intimations of Virasaiva movement and the history of King Baijjala, penetrating the public faces and exploring the private anxieties of the advocates of this radical movement.

The play *Tughlaq* explores the comparatively unfamiliar phase of the Sultanate period of India. This period is diminished in the subconscious of masses by the ensuing Mughal and British empires. The play highlights the socio-political and cultural concerns of Tughlaq's regime by traversing myths, legends and oral traditions. At the beginning of the play, Tughlaq, the Sultan envisions promising secular and economic ideals like movement of capital from Delhi to Deogir, a Hindu majority region in Deccan or issuing copper coins of same value as gold or silver. By the end, Tughlaq is left broken to ponder over the disarray, famine, and turmoil, all due to the failure of his intellectual strategies. Karnad's principal fictive character is Aziz, a crook who overturns each one of Tughlaq's benevolent strategies for his own profit. He becomes a forger when Tughlaq attempts to restore the economy. He subverts Tughlaq's last ploy of restoring peace by inviting Ghiyas-ud-din-Abbadis, a descendant of Baghdad Khalifa to sanctify the town by murdering him and superseding him at the Court. Towards the end, when Tughlaq finally confronts the real identity of Aziz, he confesses his helplessness to execute him as he realizes Aziz is his own ideological doppelganger.

The irony of the play is portrayal of Tughlaq as a sadist and calculating ruler which challenges his accepted image of an ideal ruler. Tughlaq is seen as scheming for position among the historian Barani, his incestuous step-mother, the influential religious rival Sheikh Imam-ud-din and others. Karnad shows how shrewd Tughlaq metamorphoses the betrayal and subsequent murder of Ratan Singh to his own advantage. In a Machiavellian manner, he charades a facade of being above all evils, he says to Barani, "Make a public announcement that there was a rebellion in the palace and that the nobles of the court tried to assassinate the Sultan during prayer. Say that the Sultan was saved by Shiyab-ud-din who died a martyr's death defending him. The funeral will be held in Delhi and will be a grand affair. Invite his father to it and see that he is treated with respect due to the father of a noble loyal man." Barani replies, "Oh God! Aren't even the dead free from your politics" (Karnad, 44)

Girish Karnad charts an alternative version of history through the legends and folktales. His plays problematize the received history of Tughlaq. The play offers an alternative aspect of the protagonist for whom the Medieval Islamic scholars and nineteenth century British Orientalist historiographers have deliberately created an image of profoundly brilliant ruler. Karnad retrieves the inconsistent historical Tughlaq and occasionally sources his dialogues from historical documents, creating a complex web of ideological links between history, historiography and fiction. The play prompts the reader to analyse the available history recorded by pre-modern and colonial institutions and to question institutionalized history as a source of knowledge.

Through irony, *Tughlaq* engages in the dialectic of 'heroic' and 'satiric' discourse which is consequence of European and Indian encounter. The two modes of representation

are approaches for eulogizing or disparaging the political, social and cultural institutions. During the colonial time, satire was a genre used by British modernizers and Indian reformists and heroism by European cultural relativists and Indian nationalists in the context of India. In the postcolonial context, Britain retreats from direct political control and the determining of historical and contemporary knowledge about the culture is performed by the insider through heroic self-praise or satiric self-criticism.

James Mill's *History of British India (1817)*, the dominant Orientalist texts of Indian political and economic history rationalizes the philosophical defence of British imperialism in India. The text portrays the culture of colonized civilization as "irrational malformations so as to justify the elimination of human agency from the autonomous other of the East and its placement in the hands of the scholars and readers of the West" (*Orientalist* 421). In contrast, the Indian cultural nationalists endeavour to revive in history the idyllic model with which to supersede the colonists' demeaning narrative and activate cultural resistance against British colonial ascendancy. From 1890 to 1940, the nationalists' retaliation against the Orientalist diminishing of Indian history and tradition is most intensely visible. It incorporates essays by Swami Vivekanand which emphasize the strength of Indian spiritualism to defy Western materialism and the plays by Jaishankar Prasad which depicts the regime of seventh century Hindu emperor Harshvardhna as the pinnacle of India's prosperity. In such writings, the Golden Age of Classical Hinduism works as a fictional setting to countervail the humiliation of colonial oppression.

The conclusion of colonialism augments the renewed interest in history by providing the newly emancipated citizens the opportunity to reclaim their past. However, the sustained dialectic of heroic and satiric modes of representation in postcolonial Indian writing however impedes the notion of universal historical truth. Diverse versions of historical fictions are available like the one legitimizing nation worship as well as demystifying the idealized past. The former version validates the new nation and aims at a future ideal. At the same time there coexists a multilingual body of Indian writing exemplified by Karnad's plays which sources itself on history and myth to reassess and de-idealize the past. Such sceptical perspective often subverts the heroic nationalists' construction of history and prompts the culture re-examine its self-cognition.

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