

SEMESTER-I

ENGLISH MINOR-101

Notes from Girish Karnad's *Tughlaq*

1. Portrayal of the character of Tughlaq:

Girish Karnad's *Tughlaq* presents a multifaceted portrait of Muhammad bin Tughlaq, the 14th-century Sultan of Delhi. He is depicted not as a mere historical caricature, but as a figure of "paradoxical and complex nature". Karnad explores the Sultan as a man caught between his "divine aspiration and the deft intrigue" required to maintain power.

Initially, Tughlaq is portrayed as a visionary idealist seeking to create an egalitarian society. He promises his subjects "justice, equality, progress and peace" and strives for a kingdom governed "without any consideration of might and weakness, religion or creed". A rationalist and scholar, he attempts to nurture communal harmony by abolishing the jiziya tax, asserting that all are "equal in the eyes of the law". He views his reign as a project to build his "own history... brick by brick".

However, the portrayal shifts as his policies, such as the introduction of token currency and the disastrous move to Daulatabad, result in "untold and inexpressible suffering". Labeled "Muhammad the Mad" by his contemporaries, Tughlaq is a "dreamer and a man of action" whose inability to reconcile lofty ideals with practical governance leads to chaos. As resistance grows, his benevolence curdles into tyranny; he becomes a "callous and heartless murderer" who uses religion as a political tool.

Tughlaq's manipulative nature is symbolized by his obsession with chess, where he treats rivals as "pawns... he could use or move at his own will". By the play's end, he is a "divided subject" haunted by the "futility and absurdity of human existence". Ultimately, Karnad portrays Tughlaq as a tragic figure whose "idealistic dreams could never reach their destination" because they lacked the support of a people who could not comprehend his radical vision.

2. *Tughlaq* as a Historical Tragedy:

Girish Karnad's *Tughlaq* is a profound historical tragedy that explores the "paradoxical and complex nature" of a ruler whose visionary ideals result in a "spectacular failure". The play functions as a tragedy of idealism, focusing on the "unbridgeable gulf" between Tughlaq's utopian aspirations and the "practical realities of governance".

The Sultan is initially portrayed as a "dreamer and a man of action" who seeks to establish a kingdom governed by "justice, equality, progress and peace". However, he is an intellectual "misfit" whose rationalist policies are "beyond the comprehension of his subjects". This disconnect between the ruler's vision and the people's "bigotry and orthodoxy" creates a "colonial strain" that marks the "genesis of his tragedy".

Tughlaq's downfall is driven by his own character flaws: his "impatience, his cruelty, [and] his feeling that he had the only correct answer". As his ambitious reforms-such as the disastrous move to Daulatabad-lead to "untold and inexpressible suffering," his benevolence curdles into

tyranny. He eventually transforms into a "callous and heartless murderer" who manipulates religion and prayer for "deft intrigue".

The tragedy is poignantly symbolized by his "rose garden," which he envisaged as a "symbol of visionary hopes" but which ultimately becomes a "rubbish dump" for counterfeit coins. By the conclusion, Tughlaq is a "divided subject" who is "teetering on the brink of madness". Ultimately, Karnad depicts a ruler who attempted to "overcome the limitations of the human" only to be shattered by the "futility and absurdity of human existence".

3. Tughlaq as a Political Allegory:

Girish Karnad's *Tughlaq* is widely regarded as a profound political allegory, using the 14th-century reign of Muhammad bin Tughlaq to mirror the socio-political disillusionment of post-independence India. Written in 1964, the play reflects a period where the initial euphoria of independence had given way to a "mood of disillusionment". Karnad himself noted a "striking parallel" between Tughlaq's twenty-year decline and the first two decades of Indian independence under Jawaharlal Nehru.

Leadership and the Paradoxical Hero

At the centre of the allegory is the theme of leadership, portrayed through Tughlaq's "paradoxical and complex nature". He is depicted as a ruler of "intellectual brilliance" who is simultaneously a "spectacular failure". Tughlaq is at once a "dreamer and a man of action", balancing "divine aspiration" with "deft intrigue". However, his leadership is marked by a tragic isolation; he is an "intellectual misfit" whose rationalist and secular policies are "beyond the comprehension of his subjects". This disconnect mirrors the challenges of post-colonial leaders who sought to transform traditional societies through modern, visionary ideals.

Governance and the Failure of Vision

The theme of governance is explored through Tughlaq's ambitious yet "impractical policies". His decisions to shift the capital to Daulatabad and introduce token currency were meant to modernize and unify the empire. Yet, these reforms were "poorly executed" and lacked consideration for the "practical needs of his people," resulting in "untold and inexpressible suffering". The play suggests that effective governance requires "empathy and pragmatism", qualities Tughlaq lacks as he prioritizes his own "unchecked ambition" over public welfare. The corruption of his officers, who swindled money and took bribes, further sabotaged his reforms, a situation Karnad explicitly links to "modern Indian politics".

Power-Idealism and Moral Decay

The play is ultimately a "tragedy of idealism". It explores the "unbridgeable gulf" between a leader's utopian expectations and the chaotic reality of power. Tughlaq initially seeks a kingdom of "justice, equality, progress and peace", yet his pursuit of these ideals leads to their opposite. As he faces resistance, his benevolence curdles into "paranoia and tyranny," and he becomes a "callous and heartless murderer". He begins to use religion and prayer-initially his "bread and drink"-as mere tools for "deft intrigue" and political manipulation.

The symbol of the rose garden, which he envisioned as a "symbol of visionary hopes," eventually becomes a "rubbish dump" for counterfeit coins, perfectly capturing the decay of his idealism. Through this allegory, Karnad provides a "timeless critique" of how absolute

power and unchecked idealism can lead a well-intentioned leader to become a “despotic figure”.