

Girish Karnad's Play Tughlaq: A Product of Symbolic Language

Abstract

Symbolic language is often used to support a literary theme in a subtle manner as symbol is something that represents something else either by association or by resemblance. The purpose of symbol is to communicate meaning. Girish Karnad's play Tughlaq written in 1964 is replete with symbolism. It is a historical play on the life of Sultan Muhammad-bin-Tughlaq of the fourteenth century India which shows Tughlaq as a complex personality. He has an imaginary and impracticable dreams of Utopia. He does his best to put his ideals into practice and realizing his responsibility to himself and to his countrymen he makes an independent choice which is to usher India into an egalitarian society based on secularism and Hindu-Muslim amity. Karnad uses the Sultan only as a background to make the people understand, judge and interpret contemporary reality. His purpose is to show that in true history, faces change but forces don't. Karnad's Tughlaq should be studied to find parallelism between the realities of 14th century India ruled by the Sultan and the 20th century democratic country governed by a prime minister and his cabinet. Karnad finds a striking parallelism between the twenty years of Muhammad Tughlaq's rule and the twenty years of Nehru era. In the play symbolic language has been used to represent universal thoughts and emotions. The use of various symbols in the play such as Chess, Aziz and Aazam, Prayer, Python, Daulatabad, Rose and birds like Vulture add greater emotional and associative significance.

Keyword: Language, Symbols.

Introduction

Symbolism is the practice or art of using an object or a word to represent an abstract idea. An action, person, place, word, or object can all have a symbolic meaning. When an author wants to suggest a certain mood or emotion, he can also use symbolism to hint at it, rather than just blatantly saying it. In a literary work symbolic language is often used by a writer to enhance his/her writing. As symbolic language can give a literary product more richness and color and can make the meaning of the work deeper. In literature, symbolism can take many forms including a figure of speech where an object, person, or situation has another meaning other than its literal meaning in the context of the whole story.

A great example of a literary product presented through a highly symbolic language is seen in the form of Girish Karnad's play Tughlaq. Written in 1964, it is a historical play on the life of Sultan Muhammad-bin-Tughlaq of the fourteenth century India which shows Tughlaq as a complex personality. Karnad explores the paradox of Muhammad Tughlaq, the idealistic Sultan of Delhi, whose reign is considered to be one of the most spectacular failures of Indian history. Tughlaq is not an ordinary chronicle play but a very imaginative reconstruction of some of the most significant events in the life of the great king. The greatest part of the fascination and appeal of the play surely arises out of the complex personality of Tughlaq who has been realized in great psychological depth. In the play Karnad has depicted psychological state of Tughlaq. Very nicely Tughlaq's determination and anguish are revealed using a lot of symbols in the language of the play. Tughlaq has an imaginary and impracticable dreams of Utopia. He does his best to put his ideals into practice and realizing his responsibility to himself and to his countrymen he makes an independent choice which is to usher India into an egalitarian society based on secularism and Hindu-Muslim amity.

In the play symbolic language has been used to represent universal thoughts and emotions. The use of various symbols in the play such as Chess, Aziz and Aazam, Prayer, Python, Daulatabad, Rose and birds like Vulture add greater emotional and associative significance.

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Tughlaq is a skillful chess player. He plays the game of chess not as a pastime but as a means of solving complicated problems. Muhammad says, "I have just solved the most famous problem in chess. Even al-Adli and as-Sarakhi said it was insoluble. And it's so simple" (Karnad, Tughlaq 9). The game of chess symbolizes Tughlaq's high manipulative skill of dealing with political rivals and opponents. As "Tughlaq gets enraged when anybody tries to impede his ideals" (Babu 69). Tughlaq considers his critics and enemies merely as pawns of chess which he can use at his will. Tughlaq well plays the chess of politics and solves the problem created by Ain-ul-Mulk and Sheikh Imam-uddin. He uses Sheikh Imam-uddin as his pawn to solve the problems of Ain-ul-Mulk. Ain-ul-Mulk, the friend of Tughlaq revolts against him and is marching towards Delhi. Sheikh by his constant speech enlightens the people and is inciting rebellion against Tughlaq in Kanpur. Sheikh Imam-uddin resembles Tughlaq in appearance. Tughlaq crafts a plan. He invites Sheikh to Delhi and cunningly sends him to Ainul Mulk as his envoy of peace in the royal robes. The dress makes them look alike. In the battlefield, Sheikh is killed. In this way, Tughlaq craftily overthrows the fighter of Islam. Ani-ul-Mulk is pardoned and is made the governor of Avadh. The chess symbol symbolizes that the whole kingdom is as complicated and full of problems as the game of chess. P. Bayapa Reddy remarks:

...the game of chess is an ordinary game, which is popular in India. It also symbolizes a political game in which the most intelligent and clever politician is check mated by an ordinary washer man. Through this symbolist technique, the playwright has succeeded in creating the right political atmosphere. (155)

The criminals like Aziz and Aazam symbolize unprincipled and opportunistic exploits of people. They exploit the liberal ideas and policies and the welfare activities of the government. They lack humanity and utilize every chance to earn money. Aziz, the dhobi, disguises as Brahmin Vishnu Prasad and wins the case against the Sultan himself. To Aziz politics is a profitable profession. Aziz remarks to Aazam: "My dear fellow, that's where our future is politics! It's a beautiful world-wealth, success, position, power- and yet it's full of brainless people, people with not an idea in their head..." (Karnad, Tughlaq 50). He murders Ghiyas-uddin Abbasid and in the guise of the saint, appears before the sultan to bless him and purify Daulatabad. Aziz the wily time-server appears to represent all those who took advantage of Sultan's visionary schemes and fooled him. The corrupt people like Aziz and Aazam symbolize who took bribes and undue favors from the king.

Through the language of the play prayer symbolizes the fact that the life of Tughlaq is full of corruption. The Amirs, some courtiers, Sheikhs, led by Ratan Singh and Shihab-uddin conspire to kill the Sultan at the time of prayer. The plan is exposed by Ratansingh to Sultan and Shihab-uddin is cunningly killed by Sultan. U.R. Anantha moorthy mentions, "The use of prayer for 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" (ix). Sultan is fanatic about prayer. He realizes the futility of prayer and prohibits prayer in his kingdom. The ban is revoked only after five years when Ghiyas-uddin Abbasid comes to Daulatabad to bless the Sultan. Prayer is exploited as an instrument of murder. The word prayer has lost its relevance in the play. In the words of P. Bayapa Reddy:

...prayer symbolizes the religious idealism of Tughlaq...it connects man's unconscious need for divine protection and guidance in an hour of anguish. In the beginning, prayer is made compulsory but later it is revived. It is reduced to a mockery when the Sultan's life is threatened at the time of prayer. (155)

Now coming to the description of Tughlaq's fort one comes to know that the fort has a long and dark passage coiled like an enormous hungry python inside its belly. The python kills its prey by twisting itself round and crushing it. Similarly, any living creature enters the fort is crushed and swallowed. When the young man pries about the fort the old man says, "yes, it's a long passage, a big passage, coiled like an enormous hollow python inside the belly of the fort..." (Karnad, Tughlaq 52). The python symbolizes Tughlaq's cunning and crooked tricks with which he traps those who rebel against him. The python symbolizes increasing fierceness, brutality, blood thirstiness and inhuman nature of Tughlaq. The python is symbolic of complete degeneration of the personality of Tughlaq.

The language of the play also uses vultures to symbolize tughlaq's frustrated mood. It is symbolic that vultures in the form of rebels thrust their beaks into the flesh of Muhammad and has made him to lose all his peace. Mohammad in a dejected mood says: "Don't you see- This patient, racked with fever and crazed by the fear of the enveloping vultures, can't be separated from me?... (Karnad, Tughlaq 56). The vultures also symbolize Tughlaq's ideas, ambitions, and desire of revenge. They do not allow him any peace day and night. He is just known as a mad emperor. As Daulatabad is a Hindu city, Tughlaq wants to flourish Muslim culture there. It is a symbol of Hindu-Muslim Unity. It throws light on the mistrust that is emerging amongst the Hindus and Muslims in Tughlaq's rule. The old man feels as he is trapped in an "eagle's nest" (Karnad, Tughlaq 51). It shows the collapsed life of the people. It symbolizes the rash and uncalculated decisions of Tughlaq. Sultan is a learned man. He is deeply influenced by the beautiful poems of Sheikh Sadi of Persia. He plans a beautiful rose garden. Later on, the garden is heaped only with the counterfeit coins minted in his kingdom. When Muhammad tells his step-mother about the decision of heaping the counterfeit coins in the rose garden, it can be noted:

STEP-MOTHER: What's wrong with you: You spent years planning that 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 has no need for a separate symbol (Karnad, Tughlaq 63-64).

The rose garden, the king envisages is the garden of ideals which has dried by towards the end. P.Bayapa Reddy remarks: "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).

The play Tughlaq itself is symbolic. It is not only historical but can be seen as a symbol of the contemporary political situation in India. Karnad uses the Sultan only as a background to make the people understand, judge and interpret contemporary reality. His purpose is to show that in true history, faces change but forces don't. Karnad's Tughlaq should be studied to find parallelism between the realities of 14th century India ruled by the Sultan and the 20th century democratic country governed by a prime minister and his cabinet. Karnad finds a striking parallelism between the twenty years of Muhammad Tughlaq's rule and the twenty years of Nehru era. Karnad himself asserted on the fact:

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 to come on 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 short comings within him, such as his impatience, his cruelty, his feeling that he had the 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. (Karnad, Tughlaq VII).

Karnad finds similarity between the moods of disillusionment which followed an era of idealism in both the cases. A close and careful study of the play should reveal relevance to the contemporary socio-political situation. If the theme of the play is the sad story of a tremendously capable man going to pieces within a span of twenty years, it also reflects the chaos, disillusionment and prevailing corruption in independent India. The Indian government's policies are echoed by those of Tughlaq. U.R. Anantha Murthy comments, "It is a play of the sixties, and reflects as no other play perhaps does the political mood of disillusionment which followed the Nehru era of idealism in the country" (vii-viii).

Thus, Girish Karnad has used relevant symbols in the language of the play in an effective way to enrich its beauty which helps to understand the theme in a realistic way.

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