

Exploration of history in The Dreams of *Tipu Sultan*

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ABSTRACT

Girish Karnad employs the narrative from Indian history in The Dreams of Tipu Sultan (2004) to confront British colonialism in its crucial early stages. National history, both pre-modern and modern is a principal mode of retrospective representation. The nation's history signifies the oral and written records the authenticity of which is documented and can be verified. This retrospective method adopted by Karnad facilitates in evaluating the relevance of the nation's remote past in the present situation. In the present paper, an attempt is being made to comprehend the cultural vitality of The Dreams of Tipu Sultan which is the result of its multifold engagement with history and politics. Here, Karnad rewrites the narrative of Tipu Sultan in the collective memory of its audience by creating a complex ideological and intertextual web. In this play he pitches a consolidated nation with technological superiority and ideological clarity against a country divided against itself in the face of disintegration of the Mughal Empire.

Girish Karnad's exploration of violence and non-violence and speculations on modern Indian history find creative expression in his play *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan* (2004). Girish Karnad was commissioned in 1997 by the B.B.C. to write a radio play in celebration of the Fiftieth Anniversary of Indian Independence. Karnad records that he, "immediately thought of Tipu Sultan, one of the most politically receptive and tragic figures in modern Indian history. It was the late A.K.Ramanujan who drew my attention to the record of his dreams maintained by the warrior" (*Collected Plays* xxiii). The radio play was broadcast by the B.B.C. on 15th August 1997.

Karnad's theatre is unique by virtue of its capacity to include numerous cultural systems like myths, folklore and history into its aesthetic sphere. The cultural tradition of India as a nation is reflected in its essential means of retrospective representations, which evoke an ancient, pre-modern and pre-colonial past. In the words of Vanashree Tripathi, "As a playwright, his artistic response to the past energizes the dynamic interaction of all three and invests our culture with continuity. Continuity however in his vision does not mean repetition; it means change-mutations and innovation." (*Three Plays of Girish Karnad: A Study in Poetics and Culture* 8).

Karnad employs the narratives from Indian history in four plays; *Tughlaq* (1964), *Tale-Danda* (1993), *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan* (2004) and his last play *Crossing to Talikota* (2018). The history plays written by Karnad draw extensively on printed sources, combine real-life individuals with fictional characters and recreate particular places at particular moments in time. National history, both pre-modern and modern is a principal mode of retrospective representation. The nation's

history signifies the oral and written records the authenticity of which is documented and can be verified. This retrospective method adopted by dramatists facilitates in evaluating the relevance of the nation's remote past in the present situation. Karnad's genius lies in his ability to find a voice and a distinct identity to claim the past of the country. His plays present a reinterpretation of history and are larger than life in their dimensions.

As an organized and documented account of a nation's past, history enjoys an unparalleled position in literature. Literature and history are related to each other in various ways. History often provides content, structure and form to literature. Besides, both history and literature are primarily narratives. An understanding of a literary work in its historical context reveals the cultural identity of the people. The power and cultural vitality of *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan* is the result of its multifold engagement with history and politics, which lies behind and beyond its words. Here, Karnad rewrites the narrative of Tipu Sultan in the collective memory of its audience by creating a complex ideological and intertextual web.

The initial motivation behind the playwright's interest in this genre emerged predominantly from romanticization of the past as a means of escape from the realities of the present. Soon this genre's potential of being an effective instrument for the advance of socio-political ideals was realized. The basic foundation of historical drama rests on these cornerstones, which establish its relationship with the past and the present. First, all historical narratives are fundamentally intertextual because they emerge from and return to history as suggested by Hayden White the renowned American historian, "at one

level they can be regarded as alternative forms of figural representation.”(*Theatres of Independence*, 220). The second dominant feature of these plays is the interpretation of historical facts by the playwright as Aparna Dharwadkar aptly states, “The intertextual connection has important interpretive implications because fictionalised history always stands in a determinable ideological relation to textualised history-confirming, repudiating, or radically reshaping its message”(*Theatres of Independence* 220). The third feature is that the reenactment of the past must resonate in the present. Stressing on this aspect, Walter Benjamin explains, “every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably” (*Illuminations* 250).

To grasp the reach and abundance of Historical genre in the field of drama, it will be useful to begin with its genesis, touching upon some seminal historical plays in the Western and Indian context. Fictionalized histories epitomize the ideological force of the past-present relations, and in this representational context drama has a priority over other fictional genres. The development of history play in 1590’s England offers the most powerful instance of the nexus between history, form of drama, and particular socio-political conditions of reception. Richard Helgerson in *Forms of Nations* (1992) concludes that 1590’s was a historical moment when nation, theatre and playwright combined together to create one of the strongest expressions of a nation’s past through historical plays. Elucidating further he holds that, Shakespeare’s history plays (1592-98) “served at a crucial moment in the history of English stage as sites of individual and collective struggle and self-legitimation, and have remained a paradigmatic expression of Anglo-British national self-understanding”(204). The other prominent historical plays commenting on the history of a nation were Dryden’s *The Duke of Guise* (1682), Joseph Addison’s *Cato* (1714), Ibsen’s *Brand* (1865), *Peer Gynt* (1867) and *Emperor and Galilean* (1873) and Strindberg’s *Master Olof* (1872).

Indian theatre also has a rich repertoire of historical plays. Their growth in the Indian context coincided with interest in history in general and Indian past in particular. It was further magnified by the Indian writers’ warm response to the European historical romances and drama. The first Indian historical drama in English was D.N. Wadia’s *The Indian Heroine; Being Some Incidents of the Sepoy Revolt Of 1857* (1877). The play was dramatisation of his own novel, *The Indian Heroine*. As title of the play suggests it deals with some incidents of the *Sepoy* Revolt of 1857. There were only a handful of historical plays written in the pre-independence period like V.V. Srinivasa Annaya’s *The Bride of God* (1931), Mrinalini Sarabhai’s *Captive Soil* (1945). In contrast the post-independence period witnessed a great spurt of plays retelling the past with the arrival of prominent playwrights like Asif Currimbhoy, Harindranath Chattopadhyaya, Lakhani Deb, Asif Gurucharan Das, Utpal Dutt, Vijay Tendulkar and Girish

Karnad. Some of the seminal plays written during this era were *An Experiment with Truth* (1925), *Inquilab* (1971), *Ordeal 1857*, *The Siege of Chitor* (1960), *Larins Sahib* (1970), *Line of Mars* (1978), *Ashoka: A Historical Play* (1983), *Tughlaq* (1964), *Kallol* (1965) and *Ghashiram Kotwal* (1972).

Karnad’s historical perspective in *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan* negotiates between the historical fact and the dream of the protagonist, resulting in a dialectical opposition between the two. The historical fact is again polarized between the Indian and the British perceptions. This polarity is maintained throughout the play. Actually it is not only the dreams of the Sultan but also of the playwright and the British heroes of the Mysore campaign. The thematic pattern incorporates the ifs and buts of history and Karnad attempts to redeem the events from the colonial perspectives. Besides, Karnad is interested in exploring the strength and weakness of the contending parties, so that the historical lessons of the catastrophic outcome are well understood by his compatriots.

The death and destruction of Tipu Sultan is seen by the British as a glorious story of the British valour in the conquest of India. But his fall is a story of tragic but heroic struggle of Indian resistance to British dominance from our viewpoint. The fate of the Sultan becomes all the more tragic for us when we realize that he had not only lofty dreams for our country but also understood the dynamics of the then modern warfare and the political complexities of the Indian and foreign situations of his times.

The action of the plays covers the two Mysore wars. The Act 1, opens in 1803 at the house of the historian Mir Hussain Ali Khan Kirmani in Mysore. Col. Colin Mackenzie, the oriental scholar is seen urging the historian to complete the commissioned work of writing the history from the Indian point of view. For Kirmani, it is a painful experience, for the defeat and death of Tipu Sultan still hurts him. But Mackenzie urges him to achieve a historian’s objectivity, the “dispassionate distance” from the event. Mackenzie has commissioned him to know the other side of the story and knowing the other side is part of the democratic culture of England, which is her great strength. Kirmani’s mind is still engrossed in the memory of the Sultan’s last day and his last dream, which he had recorded and sealed and handed over to him before he went to battle, which ended his rule and the freedom of his people, but which marked an important milestone in British conquest of India. The complexity of historical truth lies in the subjective affiliations of contending parties as Kirmani shares his dilemma,

KIRMANI: I find a lifetime insufficient to understand my own. Besides I spent a lifetime serving him and his father. And now I work for you, his enemies. What does that make me? A traitor? Am I trustworthy any more? Doesn’t that

worry you? It worries me.” (*Collected Plays* 182)

The scene then shifts to the last battle on the night of 4th May, 1799, and Tipu's defeat and death. The British soldiers are seen searching for his body on the ramparts of the Srirangapatna fort. Wellesley wants to be certain that Tipu is dead. Once they find it, they resort to its rude desecration. The unprecedented and rapacious looting of the city follows. Mackenzie asserts that it was Tipu's embassy to Mauritius, the Malarctic Adventure, that was his undoing. Kirmani on the other hand says it had never happened. According to the English, the Governor General had absolute proof of Tipu's mischief. Kirmani calls it Lord Mornington's dream. For Indians' it was only a cock and bull story, an excuse, concocted to finish off Tipu after the British entered into a conspiracy with the Marathas and Nizam, who reneged the clear understanding that Tipu had with them that they would not act against him. The missionary commitment and resoluteness made the national dream of the English a reality.

The scene shifts to Tipu's dreams of repairing an ancient temple and an Embassy from the Emperor of China. He dreams that he will become another Alexander and a great secular monarch of his people. Tipu also dreams about experimenting with industrial and commercial self-reliance through state intervention, also of pragmatic foreign policy. But Karnad also states that Tipu could not manage the Marathas and the Nizam nor could he stem the moral degeneration of his opportunistic and corrupt officers who were conspiring against him under his nose. But all dreams are valid in the dreamland.

Tipu sends an embassy to the King of France to persuade him to put ten thousand French soldiers under him to drive the Britishers out of India. He also wants French craftsmen who could make guns, cannons and pistols in India. He also tries to expand business with other countries to boost Indian exports to them. He feels Europe is wonderful for it is full of new ideas, inventions, all kinds of machines and it is bursting with ideas.

TIPU: You must, you must indeed. That's what makes Europe so wonderful-it's full of new ideas-inventions-all kinds of machines-bursting with energy. Why don't we in our country think like them? I've just read about something called thermometer. You must bring me one. (*Collected Plays* 199)

Tipu obviously is much ahead of his times and countrymen, who are steeped in superstition and ignorance and have no idea of notion-state. He is a consummate dreamer. It is actually the dramatist who is indulging in historical dreaming or rather late day-dreaming.

The British are crafty, unscrupulous, rapacious colonizers hungry for gain by hook or by crook, individually and nationally. Tipu is betrayed by his own people, the Marathas and the Nizam who consider him a greater danger than the Britishers. Britishers bribe Tipu's generals who betray him. It was a great victory for the Britishers for each English soldier could loot as much gold as he could carry, the English generals fulfilled their ambitions of being great in furthering the interests of their nation by destroying a formidable foe and bringing rich territory under their control. They were then ready to deal with the Marathas.

Karnad pitches a consolidated nation with technological superiority and ideological clarity against a country divided against itself in the face of disintegration of the Mughal Empire. India was still unaware of the new forces unleashed by the Industrial revolution. It was only a rare ruler like Tipu Sultan or Ranjit Singh who noticed the modern trends though they could not come together to face his challenge, because they did not know how to do it. We had to become more British ourselves and also discover ourselves through enlightenment brought by the Britishers before we could face them and gain mastery over ourselves and our nation.

The dialectic of dream and reality is maintained through the play. The tension between what could have happened and what actually happened imparts a historical perspective which makes the play contemporary. The lessons of history are clear and concise. The dramatist is looking at history from the perspective of Independent India and it imparts a new thrust and meaning to the play. The playwright succeeds in achieving historian's objectivity, the capacity of appreciating the others point of view. The detachment from one's own subjective affiliation is a measure of a nation's maturity, and Karnad has attempted to achieve that successfully. Tipu Sultan becomes a symbol of our nation in the making. His dream had to wait for two centuries and confront many a challenge. The play explores all this quite successfully.

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