

GIRISH KARNAD'S
***THE DREAMS OF TIPU SULTAN* : A TEMPLATE OF**
SOCIO-POLITICAL MILIEU OF INDIA

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Abstract

The Dreams of Tipu Sultan (1997), the last in the row of Karnad's historical plays, recounts British colonialism, depicting Tipu Sultan as a major figure in the history of Karnataka. He was a visionary and patriot active during the Governor-General of Lord Cornwallis and Wellesley. Karnad has selected the historical sources to present a convincing patriot of his principal characters with an imaginative dramatic plot in a self-reflective manner. The process of history writing has been dramatised through the character of Hussain Ali Kirmani, a court historian in the play, who is incapable of writing history with 'objectivity' and 'dispassionate distance'. Like several other playwrights, Karnad was fascinated by the valour of Tipu Sultan who kept on inspiring folk ballads in Karnataka. Its plot clearly deals with some aspects of Indo-British relation. The play primarily attempts to explore the secret inner world of a man whose public life was a continual war against British colonialism.

Keywords: historical, colonialism, patriot, imaginative, incapable, visionary.

Karnad handles mythological and historical stories in modern perspective. It promotes the elements of psychoanalysis, political praxis and revolutionary concepts. In his historical plays, he attempts to suspend the disbelief of the readers and produce a new fondness for his protagonists. He unfolds and discovers the contemporary consciousness in the history. Being a lover of historical personalities in Indian history, he has projected their whims, temperaments, eccentricities, objectives, peculiarities and their popularity too. He proposes and presents the world of human beings in the past and the present at the same time highlighting the image of man and his modernity. His historical plays reflect Eliotian concept of 'historical sense' which is 'a sense of the timeless as well as the temporal' and also of 'the timeless and the temporal together.' They enable the writer to locate man's place in time, with a sense of tradition. They also re-locate and re-examine the significance of history in the contemporary context.

Karnad wrote *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan* “to celebrate the 50th Anniversary of Indian Independence.” (1) The late A. K. Ramanujan drew his attention to the record of his dreams maintained by Tipu Sultan himself. Like several other playwrights, Karnad was fascinated by the valour of Tipu Sultan who kept on inspiring folk ballads in Karnataka. Tipu Sultan is considered one of the most brave warriors, political visionaries and dreamers; one of “the most politically perceptive and tragic figures in modern Indian history.” (2) Nodoubt, the characters, major as well as minor, are put together, and the language in dialogue is apt to create the atmosphere of the Sultanate period of India. The play is a ‘historical reconstruction’ in a dramatic mode done through the polyphonic voices of the historical figures like Tipu, Haidar Ali, Nana Phadnavis, Lord Cornwallis and Arthur and Richard Wellesley. There are also less important historical figures like Kirmani, Tipu’s queen and sons, courtiers, ordinary citizens and soldiers. Aparna Bhargava Dharwadker rightly remarks: “Karnad interlineates ‘textualized’ and history with legend, lore, and memory because all these modes of transmission are germane to the story of Tipu” (3).

Karnad also projects Tipu Sultan in multiple and contradictory roles as a beloved ruler, legendary warrior, loving father and visionary dreamer, and also a Machiavellian schemer. He plots with the French against the British, the defeated soldiers enter into humiliating treaties with the enemy, and the gullible commander is eventually betrayed by his own side. Tipu’s fall destroys a visionary who has progressive ideas to modernize his empire on the European line. Karnad’s *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan* follows the model of his history plays established in *Tughlaq* and *Tale-Danda*. “It draws upon a range of historical sources to present convincing portraits of the principal characters,” says Aparna Bhargava Dharwadker, “but creates an imaginative plot and resonant dialogue to contain their experience. It deals with a controversial protagonist who can be characterised in radically opposite ways, depending on the observer’s view point – as a heroic figure of anti-colonial resistance (comparable to the Rani of Jhansi) in one perspective, and a treacherous but fallible (and even foolish), adversary in another. The image in the play of a polity in crisis, both because of internal dissensions and the presence of a powerful alien adversary, carries the same potential for application to contemporary problems that had made the history of *Tughlaq* and *Tale-Danda* politically relevant in present-day India.” (4)

The play is also about the beginning of the British colonialism in India, its crucial stages of military expansion and an Indian emperor’s inescapable psychodrama. It dramatises Tipu’s fabled persona as the Tiger of Mysore in a historical reconstruction demonstrating his dreams-partly narrated and partly enacted – along with his interpretations. The playwright narrates Tipu’s four dreams in elegiac tone. Tipu shines as a proto-nationalist who resists English man’s schemes to rob his land and believes in English man’s belief ‘in the destiny of their race,’ and the will to die in faraway places for the dream of England. In colonial historical parenthesis, Karnad reconstructs Tipu’s ambition for nation building; rational, calculating, pragmatic and ruthless British generals and their racist contempt; hostile Hindu and Muslim allies such as Nana Phadnavis and Nizam of Hyderabad in their ‘traitorous’ collaboration; and others like prominent historians, Kirmani, his family members and military officials.

However, he received the thought in his understanding of the late eighteenth century socio-political milieu of India in a cartographic imagination in which everything was exhibited as it were, in the paintings at memorial complexes or museums. Karnad’s sole aim, in this play, is to highlight Tipu’s visionary zeal, political strategies, battlefield manoeuvres, modernising impulses and the populist trade and commerce policies. In the dramatisation of his protagonist he

has achieved the artistic merit of the play. Tipu was a great visionary, dreamer and utopian-builder. As a premature utopian of Indian nationalism, he loses his political haemoglobin by interrogating the British imperialism in counter-hegemonic activity. In portraying him, Karnad strictly adheres to the historicity without distorting the facts. In the context of the play, a comprehensive layout is made on geographical regions, and the periodisation of the Anglo-French conflict in the backdrop.

The towering dimension of Tipu's stature is assessed in his political ideology, philosophy, and in the diplomatic relationships with the neighbouring kingdom and foreign countries. Tipu was restless but not foolishly callous like his Indian counterparts when the West was establishing its strongholds, to dominate the East. Dramatising this dream's vision, humanism, and dynamism, Karnad projects Tipu as a casualty of history for his zeal for nationalism and his strategy to tackle his enemies. He appears to be grieved for Tipu's decimation by his peripheral adversaries and British advantages to override him. Tipu's failure as a nation-builder and dreamer lies in his tightrope walking between bargaining for peace and botanising the enemies.

Set in 1803 the play begins with a very significant interaction between two historians – one belonging to the class of colonizers and the other to the colonized. Colonel Mackenzie, the British Oriental-scholar, evinces a keen interest in the life and history of Tipu Sultan and urges Tipu's court historian, Hussain Ali Khan Kirmani, to translate his dreams. Though Kirmani was employed in the job of a historiographer to narrate the topsy-turvy career of this great Sultan, it was very painful to him for the betrayal of his conscience and his loyalty to his one-time patron. Narrating Tipu's obsession with idealism, secularism and militarism, Kirmani presented the glorious achievements of his Sultan in the history of Deccan India. He presented Tipu's passion for the socio-economic potentiality and civilizational plenitude. Tipu's struggle to achieve all these glorified him in history, but it led him to suffer in the stature of an Aristotelian tragic hero. His bargaining for peace ultimately became a diplomatic snag in his policy which served as a tragic hamartia. Though Kirmani snubs this as a diplomatic failure, he appreciates this as a strategic necessary from different ontologies, political praxis and historical exigencies. Karnad analyses them in a post-colonial hypothesis.

Tipu was called by his volatile English enemy, Arthur Wellesley, "the Tiger of Mysore." (5) The British even after his death had not dared to chop off his whiskers as this tropical tiger had made them restless with his bravery, diplomacy and idealism. A serious researcher of history may neglect the relevance of his tie with the French to strengthen his ideological state apparatuses in his contemporary ambience but it is adjudged as a great strength of this dreamer. In England's territorial ambition the two British Governor Generals-Lord Cornwallis and Arthur Wellesley had accused him dubiously as ambitious, disloyal and betrayer of friendship. In a dispassionate perspective it can be said that if the British signed the Treaty of Versailles with the French to sort out their differences in Europe and Afro-Asian countries for the safety of their extended empire, it was merely a colonial bias to label Tipu's alliance with France a betrayal of faith. His passion for galvanizing his Sultanate with all amenities and successful foreign relationship shook his intolerant neighbours like the Marathas and the Nizam of Hyderabad with apprehension. It is obvious that Tipu had borne the envy of his neighbours as his late father Haider Ali had made them restless by occupying parts of their territories. But Tipu had tried his best to satisfy them without adding salt to their injury and without insulting the spirit of his father.

Tipu hated the English, as the English hated the French, in his motive of hunting malignity in defence of their repressive schemes. From the point of view of sovereignty, if the imperialist Governors dreamt their empire, Tipu asserted his rights to translate his dreams into action. He admitted of accepting two teachers in his life – his father, Haider Ali who taught him war, and the English who taught him trade. While he used the former's teaching to safeguard his territory, the latter inspired him radically to start transcontinental business by sailing across the seas and not by riding camels through the deserts. In negotiating for peace with the British, he tried to sort out all differences, but they rather accused him as the enemy of all mankind for joining his "hands with the villainous French." (6)

With the self of a historian and the soul of a friend, philosopher and guide, Kirmani had a close association with Tipu in his evil days. Being torn between loyalty and "dispassionate distance", he narrates the last days of Tipu before Mackenzie. He presents Tipu as a great dreamer like Alexander and Napoleon who had met with their ends in the course of translating their dreams into action. Tipu is one of the worst victims of destiny, in the proverbial saying, 'Man proposes God disposes.' In his artistic endeavour, Karnad agrees with Kirmani's assessment of Tipu before Mackenzie.

Tipu was secular in spirit, modern in thought, much above than the thinking of his Indian counterparts and very defiant in his dreams for his reasonable vectors. While negotiating for peace, he was never neglecting the interest of his state. He had appointed a Hindu Brahmin, Poornaiya, as Finance Minister, and had high respect for Hindu pundits, seers and astrologers. There were even many Hindu soldiers in his army. He believed superstitiously in Hindu astrology and the propitiousness of stars and planets. On his way back from Farrukhi near Salamabad, he was mystified by the stone eyes of the female idols in a dilapidated temple and turned to Poornaiya with proposal, "We'll have the temple repaired, the walls rebuilt so that these seekers after God are not disturbed." (7) Tipu's respect for other faiths and foreign envoys was expressed in his act of offering them positions in his Diwan-i-Aam and Diwan-n-Kkas, and had made him popular at home as well as abroad. The Hindus seers, like the seer of the monastery of Sringeri, had offered him the blessings of Goddess Sharada.

The emperor of China had sent his envoy to Tipu's court to negotiate on silk business. He had also sent his delegation of envoys to France, Istanbul, China, Turkey, Arabia, Mascot and Iran. Through his successful foreign policy, he had established a healthy diplomatic relationship with all the Islamic nations. Tipu had a dream to make his state capital a centre of trade and commerce by establishing industries of sandal wood, spices, ivory and silk. Tipu Sultan, one of the most politically perceptive Indian Kings during the British rule, keeps on wavering between nationalistic sentiments for India and everything Indian and his respect for the British way of life, British people's undying love for their nation and their great passion for trade. Tipu knows that the British are thriving in India owing to their clever political machinations and their stronghold on trade:

Think of the John Company-how they came to this country, poor, cringing, and what they have become in a mere fifty years. They threaten us today. It's all because of their passion for trade. (8)

While the British industries were established in a bandit-mode to exploit the natives, Tipu's attempt to industrialise his capital was populist, desirably benevolent and ethically equalitarian. He had a great ambition to make his state a model one by designing Lal Bagh in the shape of Versailles and "stun the world." (9) He had negotiated with the French through his envoys to procure professionals like doctors, surgeons, smelters, carpenters, weavers,

blacksmiths, cutters, watchmakers, dyers and gardeners to model his Lal Bagh and to train his men.

It becomes clear from Tipu's discussion with Ghulam Ali Khan and Osman Khan that in modernity and sophistication the French are much better than the English. He had the desire for inter-civilizational alliance between the French and his people. For civilizational plenitude and perfection, he preferred 'hybridity' and 'mimicry' in his inter-continental diplomatic relationship. In order to negotiate with Monsieur Pierre Monneron of Pondichery he had sent Osman Khan to convey his request to the French Governor General of Mauritius for his consent to send his delegation to France. His "Main objective is to explain to the King of France the situation in India. Particularly the state of the French here." (10) He had the plan to convince the French King Louis XVI, "if the French don't wakeup, the English will gobble up the whole of India." (11) Expressing his willingness to sign a "Treaty of Perpetual Alliance" (12) with the French he made a request to send ten thousand French soldiers to be placed under him to kick the British off from India. He made a request to the French king to send mechanics to make guns, cannons, pistols, and also gardeners to plant a variety of trees and flowers to beautify his capital. His request for the newly invented machines like thermometer to help his hakim in treating the patients and for translation of different French professional books into Persian reveal Tipu's outlook as a great visionary.

Thus, Karnad explores history in this play as he did in his earlier plays –*Tughlaq* and *Tale-Danda*. The echoes of the earlier plays are heard in this play as well. Tipu is a visionary like Tughlaq and his emancipator visions, like those of Basavanna, are trampled by the selfish greed of the lesser brings surroundings him. It is a significant feature of Karnad's dramaturgy, however, that each historical figure is treated on different parameters. His portraiture of Tipu has sincerity whereas Tughlaq's had irony. This play uses the technique of memory to evoke the past and to bring Tipu Sultan back into our thoughts. So many aspects of Indo-British rise up like ghosts from the past.

References:

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