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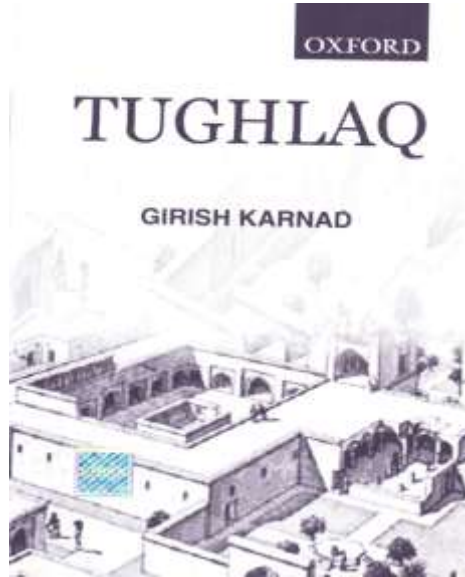
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A Perspective on Symbols in Girish Karnad's *Tughlaq*

M. Jagadeswari, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D. Scholar



Abstract

Imagination creates culture out of nature and it also produces literary language. Symbols are often used to support a literary theme in a subtle manner. Symbol is something that represents something else either by association or by resemblance. The purpose of symbol is to

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communicate meaning. Girish Karnad is the foremost playwright of modern India. Tughlaq, his second play, is a historical play replete with symbolism.

Tughlaq – A Symbolic Play

Girish Karnad in Tughlaq deals with the life of the medieval Indian ruler, Muhammad Bin Tughlaq. The author skillfully picturises the life and reign of Tughlaq through his intensive use of symbols. Girish Karnad in “Introduction to Three plays” remarks:

“Muhammad the mad” the Sultan ended his career in blood sheds and political chaos. In a sense, the play reflected the slow disillusionment my generation felt with the new politics of independent India, the gradual erosion of the ethical norms that had guided the movement for independence, and the coming to terms with cynicism and real politik.(27)

In the play, the symbols have a myriad of origin as well as forms. He used symbols to represent universal thoughts and emotions. His 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.

Chess

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; sce.2). The game of chess symbolizes Tughlaq’s high manipulative skill of dealing with political rivals and opponents. 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-ud-din. He uses Sheikh Imam-ud-din 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-ud-din resembles Tughlaq in appearance. Tughlaq crafts a plan. He invites Sheikh to Delhi and cunningly sends him to Ain-ul-Mulk as his envoy of peace in the royal robes. The dress makes them look alike. In the battlefield, Sheikh is killed. Thus Tughlaq craftly overthrows the fighter of Islam. Ain-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:

At the macro level, 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 washerman. Through this symbolist technique, the playwright has

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succeeded in creating the right political atmosphere.(155)

Aziz and Aazam

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 utilizes 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; sce.7). He murders Ghiyas-ud-din 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 favours from the king.

Prayer

Prayer symbolizes the fact that the life of Tughlaq is full of corruption. The Amirs, some courtiers, Sheikhs, led by Ratan Singh and Shihab-ud-din conspire to kill the Sultan at the time of prayer. The plan is exposed by Ratansingh to Sultan and Shihab-ud-din 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-ud-din 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:

At the micro level, prayer symbolizes the religious idealism of Tughlaq. At the macro level, 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)

Python

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; sce.8). The python symbolizes Tughlaq’s cunning and crooked tricks with which he traps those who rebel against him. The python

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symbolizes increasing fierceness, brutality, blood thirstiness and inhuman nature of Tughlaq. The python is symbolic of complete degeneration of the personality of Tughlaq.

Vulture

The frustration mood of Tughlaq is symbolized by vultures. 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 dejection 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; sce.8). The vultures also symbolize Tughlaq’s ideas, ambitions, and desire of revenge. They do not allow him any peace day and night. He is known as a mad emperor.

Daulatabad

Daulatabad city 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; sce.8). It shows the collapsed life of the people. It symbolizes the rash and uncalculated decisions of Tughlaq.

Rose

Sultan is a learned man. He is so 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; sce.10)

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).

Tughlaq

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The play Tughlaq is itself symbolic. It is not only historical but can be seen as a symbol of the contemporary political situation in India. Tughlaq reflects the chaos, disillusionment and prevailing corruption in independent India. The Indian government's policies are echoed by those of Tughlaq. U.R. Anantha Moorthy 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).

Conclusion

Girish Karnad has used relevant symbols in an effective way to enrich its beauty. It helps to understand the theme in a realistic way.

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M. Jagadeswari, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D. Scholar
Assistant Professor of English
Vellalar College for Women (Autonomous) SF
Erode 638012
Tamilnadu
India
mahijagi@gmail.com