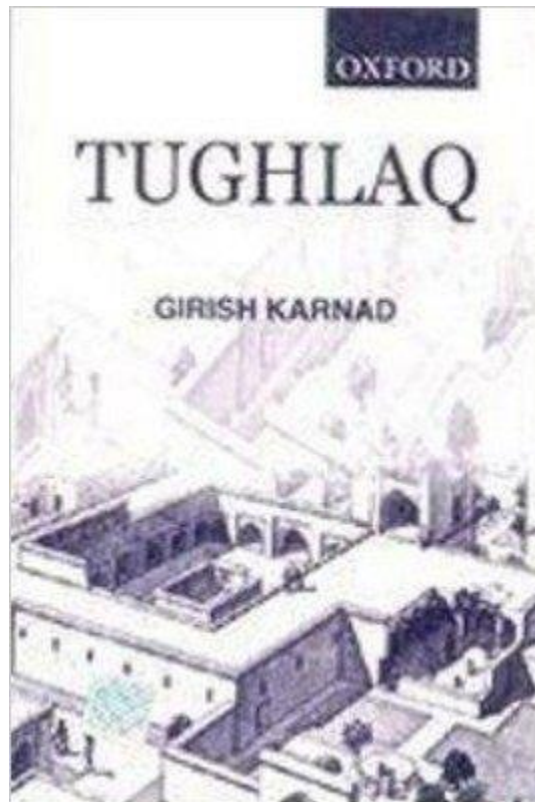


**Indian English Drama and Girish Karnad's Portrayal of
Muhammad and Padmini as Existential Figures Respectively in His
Tughlaq and *Hayavadana*: A Brief Analysis**

Dr. S. Chelliah, M.A., Ph.D.



Abstract

Girish Karnad is one among the intellectuals who felt the spirit of humanism in his heart and dramas and his dramas are nothing but the living documents of existentialism. This article throws light on Girish Karnad's existential philosophy and his views on the problems of isolation and frustration in this world. His works project the philosophical and

social vision of Girish Karnad which is challenging but really appealing. He has carved a niche for himself as an observer of the problems of human beings and occupied a coveted place among the most celebrated dramatists in interrogating existential philosophies and has proved himself to be a superb interpreter of the existential characters through his works *Tughlaq* and *Hayavadana*. In those works, he tries to define precisely the various subjective states of the actual and concrete individuals. Muhammad and Padmini respectively.

Key words: Girish Karnad, *Tughlaq*, *Havyavadana*, existential, persecution, liberation.

The Growth of the Indian Drama in English

The growth of the Indian drama in English both during and after the World Wars was found to be very slow. Unlike the Indian novel or Indian English poetry, the Indian English drama was not prolific due to the lack of a good theatre-going public. Only in cities like Delhi, Bombay and Madras, there was good patronage for the English play. Writers like Tagore and Aurobindo wrote dramatic poems rather than proper drama. “Tagore and Aurobindo showed a predilection for casting their full length plays in the Shakespearean mould without trying to evolve a new dramatic form that is artistically viable in the modern context” (Naik 185)

Indian English drama saw the first light of the day when Krishna Mohan Banerji wrote **The Persecuted** in 1831. However, it is pertinent to note that the real journey of Indian English drama begins with Michael Mudhu Sudan Dutt's **Is this Called Civilization?** which appeared on the literary horizon in 1871. As Prema Nandakumar puts it, “In the field of Indo-Anglian literature, drama is but sparsely cultivated. We have had very few dramatists, and one can easily count the number of good dramas” (p 191). Rabindranath Tagore and Sri Aurobindo, the two great sage-poets of India, are the first

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Indian dramatists in English worth considering. Tagore wrote primarily in Bengali but almost all his Bengali plays were available to readers in English renderings. *Chitra*, *The Post Office*, *Sacrifice*, *Chandalika*, *Natir Puja*, *Mukta Dhara* are some of his notable plays which are firmly rooted in the Indian ethos and ethics in their themes, characters and treatment. Sri Aurobindo who is considered as a major voice in Indian English drama is said to have written such five complete blank verse plays as **Perseus the Deliverer**, **Vasavadutta**, **Rodogune**, **The Viziers of Bassora** and **Eric** and also six incomplete plays. The most striking feature of his plays is that they all deal with the different cultures and countries in different epochs, ringed with variety of characters, moods and sentiments.

Another playwright who has made significant contribution to the growth of Indian English drama is Harindranath Chattopadhyay. He started his dramatic career as a playwright with **Abu Hassan** (1918) and had to his credit publication of seven verse plays under the title **Poems and Plays**, all of which are based on the lives of Indian saints.

Another dramatic voice on the literary scene that demands attention is that of T.P. Kailasam. Even though Kailasam is considered to be the father of modern Kannada drama, his genius finds its full expression in his English plays such as. 1. **The Burden** (1937) 2. **Fulfillment** (1933) 3. **The Purpose** (1944), 4. **Karna** (1946) and 5. **Keechaka** (1949).

Bharati Sarabhai is the modern women playwright during the colonial era of Indian English drama, who has to her credit publication of only two plays : 1. **The Well of the People** and 2. **Two Women**.

J.M. Lobo Prabhu is the last name in Pre-Independence Indian English drama.

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In the Post-Independence era, Indian English drama did not make a noteworthy presence of unlike poetry and fiction. A prime factor for this is that “drama-essentially a composite art involving the playwright, the actors and the audience in a shared experience on the stage-has its own problems of which the other literary forms are free” (Naik 225).

The most prolific playwright of the Post-Independence period is Asif Currimbhoy. **The Tourist Mecca** (1959), **The Restaurant** (1960), **The Doldrummers** (1960), **The Captives**, **Inquilab** (1970) **The Refugee** (1971) and **The Dissident MLA** (1974) are some of his plays worth considering. Nissim Ezekiel’s **Three Plays** (1969), including **Nalini: A Comedy**, **Marriage Poems: A Tragic Comedy** and **The Sleepwalkers: An Indo-American Farce** are considered a welcome addition to the dramaturgy of Indian English drama.

Girish Karnad and His Plays

Girish Karnad, a recipient of the Jnanpith Award, is a living legend in the arena of contemporary Indian English drama and his journey from **Yayati** to **The Fire and the Rain** holds a mirror to the very evolution of Indian theatre for nearly four decades. Such a celebrated playwright, a well-known actor and a director was born in Matheran near Bombay in 1938. He was a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford during 1960-63. He also received the Bhabha Fellowship. To him, theatre essentially means communicating through action and provoking people to ask questions on things which they have accepted rather blindly. As for his plays, he is very much stimulated by a lot of given material either in history or myth. He combines the folk element and the contemporary idiom to give his plays a truly Indian flavor. Karnad’s first play **Yayati** is a recreation of the Hindu myth on the theme of responsibility. It is a self-consciously existentialist play on the exchange of years between father and son. **Tughlaq**, Karnad’s second play was an immediate success on the stage. It discusses not merely the reign of Mohammed Bin Tughlaq but raises a few philosophical

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questions on the nature of man and his visions. **Hayavadana** is another existentialist play on the fundamental ambiguity of the human condition. The promise that he showed in **Tughlaq** written in 1964 found eloquent expression in **Hayavadana**.

Represent a Synthesis of Culture

Girish Karand is a dramatist who does represent a synthesis of culture and his formal experiments have been far more rigorously conceived and have certainly been far more successful than those of some of his contemporaries. “The likes of Girish Karnad enable us to pretend that there is a such a thing as a truly “Indian” theatre which can be true to its traditions and at the same time responsive to contemporary concerns” (Chandra Sekhar XI).

Impact of Kannada Drama

Karnad has written four notable plays: 1. **Tughlaq**, 2. **Hayavadana** 3. **Tale-Danda** and 4. **Nagamandala** which are his wonderful dramatic creations. It is true that Karnad was initiated into the writing of drama by chance but there were several influences that went a long way into shaping his dramatic taste and genius. Even though he was considerably influenced by Shakespeare, the influence of the Kannada drama was quite profound and deep on him. He represents the best traditions of the Kannada drama which was quite rich with romantic plays, tragedies, comedies, poetic and blank verse plays. He took keen interest in all these kinds of Kannada plays.

An Existentialist Dramatist

No doubt, Girish Karnad is an existentialist dramatist. He concerns himself with the problem of existence of self, search of identity and the problems of isolation and frustration. Existentialism implies the quest of the individual for the assertion of self despite his limitations and failures. This branch of thought upholds the fact that man can

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transcend reality in his own consciousness. In fact, existentialism asserts humanism or the dignity of man. This philosophy is well exemplified in all the three plays of Karnad. The major theme of these plays is that of responsibility and the search of identity. For example, in **Yayati**, it is the theme of responsibility; in *Tughlaq* it is the search of identity. Even theme of **Hayavadana** is that of the search of identity and human relationship.



Courtesy: <http://www.thefamouspeople.com/profiles/muhammad-bin-tughluq-6755.php>

Tughlaq

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Tughlaq, the first play in New Drama in India, reveals the tenor of Muhammad Tughlaq's despotic rule and the plight of his people and explores the paradox of the idealistic Sultan, whose reign is considered one of the most spectacular failures in India's history. It is a historical play because the hero of the play is a historical figure and the events which constitute the play's framework are historical events. But it is much more than an ordinary historical play because it is an imaginative reconstruction of some of the most significant events in the life of a great king, seen not only in relation to a particular period in India's seen not only in relation to a particular period in India's national history but also in relation to contemporary history. What makes the play more significant is that it is contemporary. Karnad commented once: "What struck me absolutely about Tughlaq's history was that it was contemporary (Paul 32). Karnad finds a striking parallelism between the twenty years of Tughlaq's rule and the twenty years of the Nehru's era, between the political moods of disillusionment which followed an area of idealism in both the cases. The play has an irreducible puzzling quality which corner from the ambiguities of Muhammad's character. "But it would be unjust to say that the play is about an interesting character for the play relates the character of Muhammad to philosophical questions on the nature of man and the destiny of a whole kingdom which a dreamer like him controls" (Ananthamurthy 8). A distinctive feature of the play is that it provides insights into the universal truth concerning the relationship that exists between power and man. Muhammad is the protagonist who motivates the sequence of action in the play. Every act of his originates from his intense desire for authority and the power which it confers on the individual.

Muhammed Bin Tughlaq was an extraordinarily intelligent man. He was supremely eloquent in an age of rhetoric, a philosopher trained in logic and Greek metaphysics, a mathematician and a lover of science. He was a great scholar but his rule was a woeful failure. His own character was partly responsible for this. He was a bundle of both good

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and bad qualities. His wide learning and bundles generosity were saintly qualities but his revolting cruelty and insensate obstinacy made a devil of him. Muhammad was an idealist and he wanted to build an empire completely different from others for which he planned many schemes. But his schemes were sound only in theory and when put into operation, they became impracticable and looked fantastic and foolish. He egotism brooked no opposition and he scorned advice. Disappointed by failures, he charged his people with perversity and disloyalty. He punished little faults with great cruelty and pursued his enemies with relentless fury. He is a king who “isn’t afraid to be human” (Tughlaq 1). His sense of justice and fair play is so strong that in his kingdom, even an infidel can go to the court against the Sultan and win his case, with the Sultan accepting the verdict with good grace. He is a devout Muslim and yet he is not a fanatic for in his kingdom, the Hindus are treated on perfectly equal terms with the Muslims.

Scene III shows Muhammad’s mind which has room enough for both dreams and political responsibilities. This is beautifully seen in the way he handles the two separate threats posed by Ain-ul-Mulk, the rebel governor of Avodh and Sheikh Imam-Ud-din, the holy man. Taking advantage of the fact that the Sheikh bears a remarkably close resemblance to him, he persuades the holy man to go and meet Ain-UI-Mulk and propose peace. Mistaken identity leads to the Sheikh’s death and in the following confusion, it is easy for the Sultan to capture Ain-UI-Mulk also. Even in moments of terrible rage, his calculating mind is coolly busy plotting Machiavellian schemes to turn difficulties into opportunities. He kills Shihab-ud-din with his own hands and announces that he died trying to protect his master from assassins. The Amir’s revolt in Scene six, which Muhammed crushes is shattering blow to him not because it had posed a political threat but because it is an attempt to defy his absolute power, a denial of his supremacy to which he brooks no challenge. “This makes him nurse his abnormally inflated ego still more assiduously till it

develops into a monster spreading death all over” (Naik 143). He rationalizes this by declaring,

“I was too soft,

I can see that now.

They will only understand the whip” (P 44)

Muhammad becomes so angry that he even bans prayer in his kingdom because the attempt on his life is made at prayer time. It makes him guilty of blasphemy, of a kind of revolt against God himself. Scene Eight shows Muhammad five years later after the disastrous migration to Daultabad has been accomplished. He condemns his step-mother to death by stoning, for having killed Najib, the vizier. In the last scene, Muhammad sees a parody of himself in Aziz and realizes the futility of his entire reign. The Sultan, to achieve his ideal of the most prosperous state, stoops down to hiding his plans and committing murders. Aziz, to realize his ambition of becoming bigger than Sultan murders Ghiyas-ud-Din Abbasid and reaches the court of the Sultan as an heir to the Kalif. Hearing the career of Aziz, Muhammad comes to know that predicament of human condition. Completely shattered both in mind and body, he sleeps for the first time after he has murdered sleep for the past five years. When the play ends, Muhammad is seen waking up with a start and looking around “dazed and frightened as though he can’t comprehend where he is” (P 86)

Symbolic Use of the Game of Chess

Karnad uses the game of chess in the play symbolically to illustrate the fascinating character of Muhammad. ‘Chess’ is a favourite game of Muslim aristocrats. This game is a symbol of Muhammad’s political career in which Aziz, a doer checkmates the Sultan. Muhammad spends sleepless nights to solve a problem in chess and suddenly discovers the solution. Karnad sees the life of Muhammad as the struggle of an individual to see the

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meaning of existence. The dramatist pictures Muhammad as existential character. Muhammad thinks that he shall find peace in the new world he hopes to create. He shuns sleep to create the new society. He wants “not just peace but a more purposeful life” (P 3). All his actions are those of a free individual with the commitment of establishing a new world. To achieve this end, he kills his father, brother, Sheik-Imam-Ud-din, Shihab-ud-din, his step-mother and many other innocent people.

Man of Action, Existentialist

Muhammad is a man of action who experiences freedom and practices it. The first significant choice that he has made is shifting of his capital from Delhi to Daulatabad. He orders the people to come with him to Daulatabad to build an empire “which will be the envy of the world” (P 4). He provides all sorts of facilities such as camps, food and clothing, but they prove of no avail. So he earns the hatred of all the people who have to abandon their homes and property. Muhammad’s second daring original attempt is introduction of Copsy currency under the influence of the paper currency prevalent in China. It is the originality of the idea and the love of experimentation that drives him to issue copper coins in the face of opposition from almost everybody. But his experiment ends in a disastrous failure due to lack of adequate supervision.

Muhammad, like an existentialist, insists on action, for only in action, existence attains concreteness and fullness. He feels that he is free to act but he cannot exchange his existence for the existence of the other. He refuses to listen to the advice of others fearing that he may lose his identity. When he plans how to defeat his friend Ain-UI-Mulk, Barani the historian says to him, “What’s all this your Majesty? I can’t follow a thing. But my heart trembles for you” (P 16). As a reply to this, Muhammad says,

“Forgive me if I let you down, Barani,
but I must play the game my own way” (P 16)

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His Own Way

Muhammad wants to do everything in his own way and that too quickly. He accepts the policies of Najib only because they are in tune with his own line of thinking. Later he disagrees even with Najib when he advises him to give up his violent methods. When confronted with a choice, Muhammad makes in favour of power, rejecting religion and peace. He does not want to waste his time by sleeping at night because he has only one life to live and so much to do in it. Though he is an ardent devotee of Islam, he wishes he were a Hindu, so that he would believe in recurring births to achieve all that he wants. He declares,

“No one can go far on his knees.

I have a long way to go. I can't afford to crawl

I have to gallop” (P 20)

In achieving his goal, he is an existentialist. He openly admits that he is lonely and he has concern for the millions of his subjects. With his intense self-knowledge and self-awareness, he creates a world for himself in which he has the freedom to choose, the freedom to act on his own responsibility. What is more important about the character of Muhammad is its complexity arising from the dualism of the man and the hero. He sees life in terms of theatre and all his public appearances and utterances are theatrical. He is both an idealist and an existentialist. As K.S. Ramamurti has put it, “He is at once an idealist and crafty politician, a humanist and a tyrant, a man who has murdered sleep and yet not a Macbeth haunted by supernatural solicitations, a man who thinks and broods too much and yet not a Hamlet incapable of action or guilty of delay” (P 17). No doubt, he is an existential figure who desires to become even god-like. He believes that he is always right and he cannot ever be wrong. As a god, he wants to climb up the tallest tree and say to his people,

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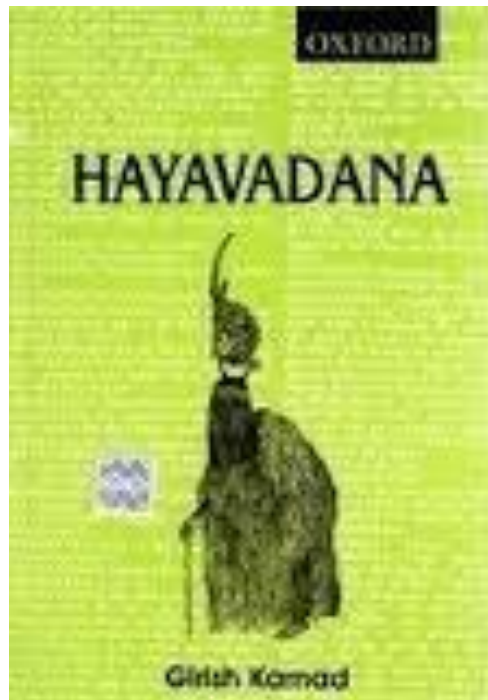
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“Come my people, I am waiting for you,
Confide in me your worries....
History is ours to play with ours now!...
I am waiting to embrace you all” (P 10)

Use of Violence

In order to fulfill his glorious mission, Muhammad determines to use as much violence as he thinks necessary. This self-revelation marks the metamorphosis in his personality. In the single-minded and ruthless aspiration for absolute power, Muhammed totally disregards others around him or just uses and exploits them as mere tools to further his own purpose. He becomes an introspective individual who is alienated at various levels and is aware of his alienation. He is alienated from other individuals and society, from the human predicament and from himself as an existential figure. Muhammad experiences existential alienation when he comes to know the plan of Amirs to kill him. The threat that has come from outside in the form of Amirs makes Muhammad a complete existential outsider. The existential alienation leads Muhammad to tyranny as tyranny leads Macbeth in Shakespeare’s play **Macbeth** to total alienation. Muhammad carries out one of the basic tenets of existentialism i.e., existence precedes essence and it alienates him from God, religion, moral and social values. Like the existentialists, he feels that he is only what he does and what makes of himself. As an existentialist, Muhammad becomes aware of man’s mortality, powerlessness and meaninglessness of existence in a normless universe.



Tragic Elements in Human Existence – *Hayavadana* - Padmini

Karnad seems to be fully aware of the tragic elements in human existence by projecting a world of intensities, uncertainties and unpredictable denouncements in life through the character – portrayal of Padmini in the play **Hayavadana**. The dramatist proves the very nature of existence through the character of Padmini. The successful characterization of Padmini as a unique inexplicable, alienated, desperate and death-obsessed heroine has made Karnad as one of the outstanding dramatists of the human existence. Padmini is the only female character seen as a lonely lady throughout the play. She is alone in her house, when Kapila goes to her house as a messenger of his friend Devadatta. She talks with Kapila for a long time but nobody comes to the scene. Though she is playful, mischievous and sharp-witted, she feels isolated in her house. Brought up in an independent way, Padmini wants to exercise her freedom. The struggle between her husband Devadatta and Padmini starts when Devadatta limits her freedom saying, “Bad upbringing” (P 22). Padmini does not have authentic relationship with Devadatta, who by wanting to exercise his power and by his very existence poses a danger to her. She goes to

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Kapila in quest of her authentic identity. When Devadatta and Kapila fight for Padmini, she does not know to whom she belongs. So she remains silent. She cannot say that she can live with both as she knows that they can live together only ripping each other to pieces. When they die, she is left alone. She realizes that “they burned, lived, fought, embraced and died” (P 62) only because of her. As she cannot get success in her search for identity, she ends her life.

Sense of Alienation

The sense of alienation leads men to experience despair and anguish. Further if he is a man who acts freely, he cannot escape from despair. In the temple of Kali, Padmini gets a moment of despair. By mistake, she exchanges the heads of Devadatta and Kapila. She becomes desperate and says,

“I’m afraid I’ll get the blame
for it ultimately...” (P 36)

As an existentialist, Padmini has the mixed feelings of conflict and anguish. When she sees the dead bodies of Devadatta and Kapila in the temple of Kali, she experiences mental agony. The intensification of her death wish can be seen in her willingness to offer her head to Kali. In the temple, she stumbles over the dead bodies and realises that she is left alone in the world. Saying “Kapila’s gone – Devadatta’s gone. Let me go with them” (P 31). She lifts the sword and points to her breast. She does not want to live as the people would say that the two men have fought and died only because of her.

This alienated and death-obsessed woman clearly demonstrates that a man or a woman is a unique and isolated individual in an indifferent and hostile universe, responsible for his or her actions and free to choose his or her destiny. In the long run, a man is doomed to fail, to achieve that which he is inevitably to aim for “(Warnock 126).

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Padmini is no exception. She fails to achieve her goal and embraces death. Padmini's tragedy is the tragedy of human love which cannot find its total fulfilment either in the body or in the mind. Her plight suggests woman's vain attempt to unite Man as intellect and as flesh. But these two aspects of the masculine personality are basically at war with each other and hence the attempt ends disastrously in the destruction of both woman and man. This theme of incompleteness which is one of the essential characteristics of existential philosophy embodies Padmini as an existential female figure. As an existential woman, Padmini serves to stir the readers to the very depth of their being and awaken in them clearly and fully the transience of the human mind and the brute reality around.

To Conclude

To conclude, it may be said that Muhammad and Padmini resemble each other in one way or other as existential characters, regardless of the sex, living in a world of their own and seeing their life as a game, being as authentic individuals aware of the importance of the present human existence. No doubt, in **Tughlaq** and **Hayavadana** Karnad tries to define precisely the various subjective of the actual and concrete individuals, Muhammad and Padmini respectively.

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