UNIT 4 CHARACTERS AND CRITICAL
COMMENTS ON THE PLAY

Structure

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4.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit will focus on the different characters in the play and bring out their chief characteristic or what has been called the spine. It will also give some idea of how the play has been received in production over time.

4.1 CHARACTERS

Muhammad

So much has been said about Muhammad before. So we are giving only points that could be developed.

1. Muhammad is an idealist and visionary as also a crafty manipulator who will shrink from nothing to acquire power.
2. His idealism goes with a self-righteousness — that only he has the right answers to the problems of the state.
3. His impatience with the people and intolerance with dissent.
4. His view of the people as mere cattle — his increasing alienation from the people.
5. His resorts to violence in order to enforce his will.
   (Add other points that you think have been left out.)

Vazier Muhammad Najib

Najib comes through as an astute politician and master manipulator who is ever-vigilant and whose integrity and loyalty are beyond question. His master moves are: the elimination of the dangerous Sheikh Imam-ud-din and peace with Ain-ul-Mulk. And though nothing is mentioned about his role in quelling the conspiracy against the Sultan, he must have played a major part in it. The Stepmother has him poisoned because she doesn't like his influence on Muhammad. She believes that his kingdom had become 'a kitchen of death — all because of him'. (Scene Ten) But if Muhammad is to be believed, 'Najib had been advising him against violence. He wanted him 'to hold back [his] sword for the stability of the throne'.
It could be said that in spite of what the Stepmother says, in his death the Sultan lost a loyal, clear-eyed politician who could manage the affairs of the state in a sensible way.

Stepmother

Muhammad’s Stepmother brings a touch of femininity to an otherwise all-male world of the play. Muhammad’s relationship with his Stepmother is quite strong and intimate. She is solicitous about his welfare and is worried about his late nights — that he doesn’t sleep as much as he should. And he shares his vision of a mystical union with his people with her. (Scene Two)

She doesn’t like Muhammad’s predilection for violence and attributes it to the growing influence of Vizier Najib on Muhammad. She consults with Barani to exercise his restraining influence on her son and gets a promise from him never to desert his Sultan. She waits for a while after which she has him poisoned.

Muhammad’s reaction to the murder of his trusted lieutenant shows how fragile his ties are even with those he loves (‘...I love you more than I have loved anyone in my life.’) (Scene Ten) He suspects that her Stepmother also wanted power for herself — a sort of a rival centre of power, and he couldn’t tolerate any rival. The only language that he knows to deal with dissent is violence. So the punishment that he gives her is the worst that he can give her — punishment for adultery, which is death by stoning. How intimate his feelings are is clear from his great need to pray and his inability to do it (’I was trying to pray — but I could only find words learnt by rote which left no echo in the heart.’) (Scene Ten) For the first time perhaps we have a feeling for the genuineness of Muhammad as a human being.

Since Muhammad is still single and since his father and brother are already dead, the Stepmother’s death signifies the drying up of the springs of human affection in him.

Zia-ud-din Barani (Pronounced Barni)

The presence in the play of Zia-ud-din Barani who was a historian at the court of Muhammad Tughlaq, presents the point of view of a critical insider who has watched the events taking place from a ringside seat and who’s both sympathetic and detached. In Muhammad’s Stepmother’s words, he is ‘a sober man, ... level-headed and honest’. (Scene II: 160) She adds significantly that he (The Sultan) needs friend like him. Though Barani promises her never ‘to leave him-ever-whatever he does’, a time comes when his mother dies in the food riots raging in the country and he uses the opportunity to quit. His departure is the departure of the last of the faithfults and is—a signal for the ascension of opportunists like Aziz.

The fact of the matter is that while Barani is a friend of the Sultan — The latter counts him among the three friends he can trust, the other to being Najib and the Stepmother (Scene Ten: 204), he is neither consulted, nor is his advice heeded. Scene two highlights the disjunction between the policies followed by Najib and Muhammad, and the moral values upheld by Barni. The Sultan is faced with the serious problem — one in dealing with the growing rebellion of Sheikh Imam-ud-din and the other to placate Aim-ul-Mulk, who is marching
to Delhi with thirty thousand. Barani suggests the old world values of patience and magnanimity and even offers to go as an envoy to Ain-ul-Mulk to sort out any misunderstanding that there may be. But Najib and Muhammad have other ideas.

Read this exchange

**Muhammad:** So, Najib, what do you propose?

**Najib:** I can’t think of anything right now. Your Majesty — except that the Sheikh has a striking resemblance to you. (Muhammad, startled, stares at Najib)

**Barani:** What has the Sheikh got to do with this?

**Muhammad:** (slowly) you are a devil, Najib! (Pause. The briskly)

Good. We’ll think about that. In the meantime, the army should be ready to march. Will start for Kanauj the day of tomorrow in the evening?

**Muhammad:** forgive me if I let you down, Barani, but I must play this game my own way .... (Scene Two: 159-60)

Going ‘my own way’ — here means resorting to deception and murder. A mere glance from Najib’s is enough to tell Muhammad of the plot Najib is hatching to get rid of Sheikh Imam-ud-din — to exploit the resemblance between the Sultan and the Sheikh and to have the latter killed. Najib and Muhammad’s plans are not immediately clear to Barani but he knows that something sinister is afoot and he is horrified: What’s all this, your Majesty? I can’t follow a thing. But my heart tremble for you.

Muhammad whose courage, honesty and justice; he had praised sometime before is compelled to own up: “Forgive me if I let you down Barani, but I must play this game my own way”.

The gap between profession and actual practice is appalling. Here and elsewhere in the play Barani is best seen as a benchmark for political morality.

Barani is naturally very discrete in his comments and criticism and never offers advice unsought. But when his advice his sought, he can be very forthright. When Muhammad asks him for a remedy for the diseased polity, he suggests abdication — a remedy that Sheikh Imam-ud-din had also suggested more indiscreetly.

“History is not made only in state craft; its last time result are produced in the ranks of learned men. That’s where you belong. Your Majesty, in the company of learn at men. Not in the market of corpses.” (Scene Eight: 195)

Later we reminds him of his earlier idealistic days:

Your Majesty, there was time when you believed in love, in peace, in God. What was happen to those ideals? ....... Why this bloodshed? Please stop it, and I promise your Majesty something better will emerge out of it (Scene Eight: 196)
Barani remains free for bitterness till the very end of his stay in Tughlaq's scot even when his own mother is killed in the food riots. He just wants to go away — for good and he does.

There is one occasion when Barani becomes really furious — as he listens to Aziz "tale of his criminal rise and prescribes the harshest punishments for him. But ironically Tughlaq himself belongs to the devils league and he knows it. So who will punish whom?"

Barani describes himself as 'a humble historian'. He is a historian but his also a moral presence in the play.

Sheikh Imam-ud-din

Sheikh Imam-ud-din is the Sultan "most vehement critic. He considers him to be incompetent, says that he is a disgrace to Islam and most of all that he has forfeited the right to rule by murdering his father and brother at prayer.

The Sheikh is apparently a brilliant orator and his inflammatory speeches have caused a riot in Kanpur. He has now become the backbone of rebels and his presence in Delhi is obvious a cause for great alarm to Najib and Muhammad. He is tough nut to crack as can be seen in Scene Three.

However for all his toughness, Sheikh Imam-ud-din is not able to see through the designs of the Sultan. In a clever move the Sultan tries to clip his wings by openly asking all Delhi to come and listen to him but privately sending his soldiers to homes to prevent the people from going to the meeting. The result is that there is no one to listen to the Sheikh — non except the Sultan.

But this is only a traitor to the real drama that unfolds later. The Sultan is able to successfully to persuade the Sheikh to go to Ain-ul-Mulk as his envoy of peace by appealing to him in the name of avoiding shedding of Muslim blood. The essentially simple minded Sheikh falls into his trap and goes on the peace mission. There is a melle, he is mistaken for the Sultan and he gets killed. This resemblance was what Najib and Muhammad had banked on.)

Sheikh Imam-ud-din comes through as a fearless critic who minces no words to tell the Sultan the truth about himself.

Shihab-ud-din

Shihab-ud-din is the Prince of Sampanshahr and could be called the reluctant leader of the conspiracy against the Sultan.

He has come to Delhi at the invitation of the Sultan to look after the administration along with Najib during the Sultan absence. This invitation is meant to be a move to mollify the Prince's father.

Shihab-ud-din himself has no grievance against the Sultan nor any personnel ambition. Though he is requested by the rebellious Amirs and is egged on by his adopted brother Sardar Ratansingh to lead the conspiracy he remains reluctant to do so till almost the very end. In fact he has words of praise for the Sultan:
But he has done a lot of good work. Built schools, roads, hospitals. He has made good use of the money. (Scene five: 174)

For the Amir’s he has nothing but content:

Come, Ratansingh, let’s go. This is worse than I thought: They don’t deserve to kiss the hem of the Sultan’s dress (175).

He agrees only when Sheikh Shihab-ud-din appeals to him in the name of Islam:

Sheikh: ‘will you only think about yourself, Shihab-ud-din’? You are the strong, the powerful in this country. The citizen of Delhi don’t wish to go to Daulatabad, but they are weak. Will you do nothing for them? How many people like Sheikh Imam-ud-din have to die before you’ll be ready to act? (176)

(No reply) ......

Ratansingh: You accuse the people of Delhi of cowardice and yet you won’t raise a finger to correct an obvious wrong..........

Amir: You must help us, Shihab-ud-din

Sheikh: Islam needs your help. (Scene Five: 176-77)

Though Shihab agrees, he continues to have misgivings till the end: ......All right, let’s get down to the details. We have to work everything out carefully. (Suddenly). Must we do this, Ratan, must we? (179)

All this comes to nothing, however the irony is that Shihab-ud-din himself becomes a victim of a private conspiracy engineered by his own adopted brother Ratansingh. He informs the Sultan about the plan of the rebels. This is his vengeance for the death if his father by Shihab.

Though Shihab is a traitor, his death will be mourned as the death of a martyr who died fighting the rebels. This shows how even the dead are not free from politics.

Aziz

Aziz is one of the most absorbing figures in the play. Starting as a dhobi from Shiknar, his spectacular rise to power and position betokens an revocable moral decline and chaos in Tughlaq regime at the end of the play.

Aziz is a rank of opportunists who exploits all the schemes of Tughlaq to his own advantage. In this process he resorts to masquerade, minting coins, robbery, murder and blackmail. In all these activities his constant though reluctant partner is Aazam who has been a small time pickpocket.
In the beginning Aziz is just interested in making money of more money. When in scene one the Sultan announces the brotherhood of all religions and showcases a decision in favour of a brahmin against the state as an example of it, we find that the winner is Aziz masquerading as a brahmin. Later he shifts to the more lucrative business of minting newly introduced copper coins and still later to farming and collecting farm subsidy.

At one stage he and his friend had the job of shifting corpses of the rebels executed by the state and hanging them up for exhibition filled with straw.

Money doesn’t satisfy the ambitious for long, however. As Bertrand Russell suggests in his Power: A New Social Analysis; “when a moderate degree of comfort is a sort, both individual and communities will pursue power rather than wealth”

This proves to be true for Aziz who now wants power. Instead of money. In scenes seven we see Aziz already cherishing dreams of joining politics:

“Only a few months in Delhi and I have discovered a whole new world — politics. My dear fellow, that’s where our future is — politics! It is a beautiful world — wealth, success, position, power — (190).

In scene nine when they one robbers he is still restless:

Aziz: I am bored stiff with all this running and hiding. You rob a man, you run, and hide. It’s also pointless. One should be able to rob a man and then stay there to punish him for getting robbed. That’s called ‘class’ — that is being a real king! (198)

When the royal guest on way to Daulatabad Ohiyas-ud-din is brought to him bound and a foot, he sees his chance. The royal guest is killed and he puts on the royal robes and asks Aazam:

‘How do I look eh?’ The great grandson of the Khalif?
Laugh, you fool, laugh. Celebrate! What are you crying for?
Look, look at the palace doors. They are opening for us Dance, Dance, you son of an ass ... (201).

When they go to Daulatabad, they are royally received. Even the Sultan is deceived for sometime. What distinguishes Aziz from other criminals is the complete brazenness with which he confesses to every misdeed if his. He claims that he alone understands the Sultan and could be said to be a mirror image of him.

What’s more he has the Sultan in a cleft stick. Having welcomed him as a saviour and having bowed before him, the Sultan cannot undo his earlier actions and must now become a part of the high level masquerade. This is the biggest irony in the play. The Sultan who had earlier checkmated Sheikh Imam-ud-din and Ain-ul-Mulk is himself checkmated. He’s in a trap for which there is no easy escape.

By the time we reach the end the morality of the play has turned up side down. Tughlaq’s high moral ground that he held in the beginning is long gone. All his noble dreams lie in a shambles. He is in fact conniving at an importure that is ceremonial in value without any substance whatsoever.
Ghiyas-ud-din Abbasi
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Ghiyas-ud-din is a descendant of the Abbasid Khalifs who are supposed to be the last of the Khalifs.

He has been invited by the Sultan to come and bless the land by his holy presence. As he says in scene Six, he is ‘turning to tradition and history now and寻求 an answer there — in the blessings of the Abbasid Khalifa’. (181)

This can be seen as an attempt, even a desperate attempt, by the Sultan to use a symbolic religious figure to consolidate his hold on the people.

But Ghiyas-ud-din turns out to be a poor symbol and even this travesty of a symbol falls into the hands of the murderess duo — Aziz and Aazam and gets killed. So what we have by way of the visit of Ghiyas-ud-din in Daulatabad is the mockery of a holy visit by Aziz and his lieutenant. Significantly the importure is discovered by Hindu women who had lost her child because of Aziz long before it is done by the Sultan.

4.2 CRITICAL OPINIONS ON TUGHLAQ AND ITS PERFORMANCES

4.2.1 Tughlaq as a Text

Girish Karnad himself has drawn attention to several features of the play: its contemporary relevance, the structuring of scenes and the influences on him. This was in 1971 in an interview with Rajinder Paul for Enact. Later that year in his brief introduction to the play for the OUP edition of three plays of Karnad’s U.R. Ananthamurthy was all praise for the play: it had ‘an interesting story, intricate plot, scope for spectacle, and uses dramatic conventions like the comic pair Aziz and Aazam (the Akara and Makara of Natak performances), to which theatre audiences respond easily’. (143)

Following Girish Karnad himself, Ananthamurthy also refers to the play as a political allegory but the primary interest for him lay in what he called ‘the ambiguities of Tughlaq’s character’. He also drew attention to the motif of ‘prayer’ in the play and shows how the play is built round opposites — ‘the ideal and the real, the divine inspiration and the deft intrigue’. He points out that the irony in the emergence of Aziz who after murdering Ghiyas-ud-din comes as a holy messenger of peace is deeply tragic.

G.H. Nayak in his article entitled Karnad’s Tughlaq (Enact 193-94, Jan-Feb 1983) says that the play provides ‘insights into the universal truth concerning the relationship that exists or takes shape between Power and Man’.

Tughlaq has been compared to western plays. M.N. Naik’s essay on ‘The Limits of Human Power’ compares and contrasts it to Camus’s Caligula. (Studies in Indian English Literature: 1983) Ashis Sengupta has compared Arthur Miller’s play The Ride down Mount Morgan and Tughlaq as political allegories. (Notes and Queries, Vo.9, May 2005)

Aparna Dharwadker used Tughlaq (1964) ‘to chart the complex textual and cultural ramifications of postcolonial historical fictions’. (PMLA Jan 1995).
Ashis Sengupta has also written an insightful essay on ‘Being and Role-Playing: Reading Girish Karnad’s Tughlaq in Indian Literature, Jan-Feb 2003.

Psychiatrist Dr. K.A. Ashok Pai with whom Girish Karnad made the television serial ‘Antaral’ has drawn attention to the depth of psychological understanding of the behaviour of his characters displayed in Karnad’s plays. Karnad’s plays, he says, possess the potential for interpreting them as examples of psychoanalytical studies in human behaviour. He cites the examples of Yayati, Hayavadana, Tughlaq and his 2005 play A Heap of Broken Images. When during the course of an interview with the writer, Dr Pai asked him if he agreed with the view that the fragmented image seems to be his metaphor for the human personality, this is what he said: ‘It was only when I wrote my third play that I became conscious that certain themes recurred in my play or (since I didn’t invent the plots) certain themes seemed to stimulate me — themes with the “Double” as the central motif”. According to Dr Pai, Tughlaq is ‘a case study of split personality representing the deep-rooted dualities of human nature’. (Newsletter: The Indian Psychiatric Society, Karnataka State Branch, No.9, May 2005)

There has been a dissenting voice also. The noted Kannada novelist S.L. Bhivrappa has accused Karnad of being untrue to history in order to curry favour with the establishment. It seems there was a controversy about his depiction of Tippu Sultan in his play The Dreams of Tippu Sultan in the Kannada newspaper Vijayakarnataka. But nothing much has come of it.

Tughlaq has been acclaimed both critically and in performance.

4.2.2 Play in Performance

Written in Kannada in 1964, it was first produced at the Indian National Theatre at Bombay in Kannada in 1965. There was another Kannada production at Delhi at Kannada Bharati under B.V. Karanth (1966). The same year the play was produced in Urdu by Om Shiv Puri for the National School of Drama. Om Shivpuri played Tughlaq.

Girish Karnad was persuaded to translate it into English by Alyque Padamsee and the English translation was first staged by the latter for his Theatre Group at the Bhulabhai Auditorium Bombay in 1970. The production was a major success. Later the play was produced by Ebrahim Alkazi for the NSD in 1972 and later in 1974 and 1982 also. The last production was in London. Arun Kuckreja produced it for Ruchika in Delhi in 1975.

Tughlaq in Marathi translation by Vijay Tendulkar was performed in 1971 and later and in Shyamanand Jalan’s Bengali translation in Calcutta also.

The play is available in Kannada, Hindi-Urdu, Marathi, Bengali, Gujarati and English editions.

A few words about some of the performances would be in order here. The impact, says Rajinder Paul of the 1966 production of Om Shivpuri, was ‘quite tremendous’. Alkazi’s production of the Urdu version at the NSD’s open-air theatre in 1972 came with a new cast. Shivpuri’s set had a historical and architectural resemblance to the period. It also had massive platforms, steps and arches, and the tall Shivpuri in the tailor-made role of Tughlaq. Alkazi had Manohar Singh as Tughlaq. ‘Alkazi depends a lot, in this play on
spectacle. Amal Allana’s costumes are just breathtakingly beautiful. Alkazi
also physicalized the entire direction. ‘There is a lot of pulling, muscling and
manhandling of and between actors. I liked it quite a lot — the whole action
sinking into the growing sadism of Tughlaq — death and killing come to
Tughlaq as naturally as metaphors to a poet’. (Enact, May 1973) Naseeruddin
played Aazam and Uttara Baokar the Stepmother.

Alyque Padamsee who produced Tughlaq for the Theatre Group in English in
Bombay in 1970 recalled his production some 24 years later, describing it as
‘a play of enormous stature’. Kabir Bedi, then 24, who had impressed him
with ‘his stage presence and his magnificent voice’ was cast as Tughlaq. The
play became what Padamsee called ‘the biggest sensation on the English
stage, with queues of teenagers waiting for Kabir’s autograph at the door
backstage’. (The Independent, 23 Feb 1994) Alyque’s innovation consisted of
a prologue that showed ‘a bare forked creature’ standing nude with his
back to the audience in a solo spotlight. He is dressed in the royal robes of
the monarch and finally turns to face the audience, fully clad as the Emperor
Tughlaq. This chanced in the audience to my interpretation of Tughlaq turning
from a young callow youth into a mythic figure.’

Arun Kuckreja’s production of the play in December 1975 was not just a
dusty page of history but ‘a play about the basic questions of our own times’.
That was why it was produced so close to the audience at the Triveni Garden.
‘At Triveni he created the atmosphere of an arena by placing the audience on
three sides of the area usually intended for seating....The action took place in
front of this but spread out on occasion to include the parapet on the left and
the verandah on the first floor of the Triveni building’.

Another production worth recalling is Arvind Gaur’s direction of the play for
Asmita in the Sri Ram Centre Basement in April 1994. Ebrahim Alkazi had
given Tughlaq a very grand historical scale full of the glitter of old traditions
and costumes, by staging it in for the first time in Delhi’s Old Fort’. Gaur
dispensed with fancy sets and props and concentrated on bringing out the
contemporaneity of the play: ‘to draw comparisons between the social,
economic and political situation of a period as old as 88 years ago and of our
modern times’. ‘The plot highlights the clash between power, politics and
religion in which neither side gains, and a third party is left with an
opportunity to exploit the situation. This party has neither any morals nor any
vision of life. It is also thoroughly materialistic and coupled with degenerate
values, represents a true picture of our modern times’. What impressed one
about the production was the honesty of the actors and the director in focusing
on the characters, rather than the externals of technical support.

Try Play Reading

What you as a student can do is of course to see the play if possible. But if
for some reason a performance is out of reach, create your own
performance. You can do it by getting two or more of your friends
together, choosing a scene that you particularly like and reading it out as
you think the lines should be read. This exercise will help you to come
near to the heart of the play. Play-reading can be a very exciting activity.
4.3 LET US SUM UP

Tughlaq is a deeply absorbing study of one of the most enigmatic figures in medieval history. As a play it is both brutally objective and deeply sympathetic. The commentaries and the questions raised in the course of the scene-wise analysis of the play have, I hope, helped you to discover the fascinating character of the Sultan — his love for power, his idealism and his self-imposed mission for the people, which co-existed ‘with his impatience, his cruelty and his feeling that he had the only correct answer’.

A final word about Girish Karnad’s achievement

Karnad’s great achievement lies in re-interpreting the country’s past, both its myth and folktales and history, to comment on matters of contemporary interest and also offer insights on human condition in general.

When asked what his legacy would be, he said: ‘I am happy to belong to a generation that had a Dharma Vir Bharati, a Mohan Rakesh, a Vijay Tendulkar, and I. Together we can claim that we did create a national theatre for modern India’. (India Today: 12 April, 1999)

4.4 QUESTIONS

1. ‘There was synthesis of opposing extremes in the character of Sultan Muhammad Tughlaq’. Comment
2. What are the causes for the failure of Sultan Muhammad?
3. “People did not understand Sultan Muhammad as his ideas were in advance of his times”. Do you agree with the statement?
4. Write a note on the contemporary relevance of Tughlaq.
5. Discuss the relevance of Aziz-Aazam episodes in the play.
6. Do you find the episode of Muhammad stabbing Shihab-ud-din repeatedly even after he was dead revolting? Was it dramatically necessary? Discuss.

4.5 SUGGESTED READINGS

Text


Interviews


Pai, Dr Ashok. ‘An Interview with Mr Girish Karnad’ [Write-up of the play “ODAKALU BIMBA” and an Interview with noted playwright Mr Girish Karnad], Newsletter: Indian Psychiatric Society, Karnataka State Branch, No. 9, May 2005, 3-5.


Criticism

General


On Tughlak


Ramamurthy, K.S. “Some Aspects of Indian Drama in English with Special Reference to Tughlaq”, *Litcrit*, No.1 (1979), 17.


