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# TUGHLAQ: An Alienated Existential Outsider

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**Abstract:** *Karnad's Tughlaq received acclamation and Karnad was recognized as a promising playwright. The play was translated into other Indian languages. It presents Muhammad-Bin-Tughlaq, the eponymous and enigmatic character, who keeps on changing his roles. He thinks that he alone can rule his kingdom ideally. So he gets his father and brother assassinated in a contrived accident and inherits the kingdom. He is a great scholar and visionary. He is caught in the game of power. He plays the role of Rescuer in order to feel powerful. Though his favorite role is the Rescuer, he shifts to the other roles of the Drama Triangle, Persecutor and Victim. He effects several reforms which, he thinks, will benefit his people. He announces equality of justice on the second anniversary of his coronation. Aziz takes advantage of it and, in the guise of a Brahmin named Vishnu Prasad, files a suit against the government after buying a confiscated land from a Brahmin with a back date. He is offered five hundred silver dinars and also a post in the Civil Service as compensation for the loss of his land. Tughlaq feels overwhelmed about his success in implementing his ideal.*

**Keywords:** *Alienation, Existential, Ideal ruler and Progressive protagonist.*

Girish Karnad's play Tughlaq<sup>1</sup> works out its protagonist's progressive alienation with existential overtones. This study is an attempt to interpret the play in the light of certain concepts of alienation. Like Camus's. Caligula<sup>2</sup>, Tughlaq also may be seen as a play which deals with an alienated, outsider figure estranged at various levels, from society and the individuals around him, from traditional religion, from existence and the human predicament in this world and from himself. This thesis aims at studying the various levels of alienation in Tughlaq. From the opening scene, Sultan Muhammad Tughlaq is seen as a man estranged from his society, primarily because he is a man ahead of his age. He is not understood by the society around him because his ideas and ideals are far above the comprehension of his contemporaries. In an age of religious fanaticism and hostility between Hindus and Muslims, his broadminded religious tolerance seems foolish to the Muslims and cunning to the Hindus who suspect his motives (Scene One). He wants to win the confidence of his subjects and build an ideal empire together with its traditions; any attempt to undermine them meets with a violent reaction. Hence arises the perennial dialectic between the Outsider and society. The changes proposed by Tughlaq pose a threat to the time-honored conventions and beliefs of society and so he meets with stiff opposition from all classes of people. His plans regarding the change of capital from Delhi to Daulatabad and the introduction of a token copper currency are sound and reasonable but fail to convince his subjects. His frustration at their non-comprehension is understandable. "But how can I spread my branches in the stars while the roots have yet to find their hold in the earth?"(10). He realizes here that his idealistic dreams can never reach the stars unless they are rooted in the firm support of his people. Despite all his efforts he is unable to win the confidence of his subjects -both the aristocrats and the commoners. He fully realizes the tragedy of his predicament. "But how can I explain tomorrow to those who haven't even opened their eyes to the light of today?"(39). It is the alienation of Tughlaq from his people, which is responsible for the failure of his grandiose schemes. Just as they fail to understand his reasons for proposing these schemes; he too fails to force their reactions of them. He does not take into account the emotional attachment of people to their native soil when he proposes a change of capital involving not only the shift in the administrative machinery but also of the people, lock, stock and barrel. Neither does he foresee and take precautions against the possibility of counterfeiting when he introduces token copper coins. The repeated failure of Tughlaq to win the confidence of his people paves the way for his gradual disillusionment and fall from his ideals, which ultimately ends in a state of existential alienation, as it will be seen later. Not only is Tughlaq alienated from the society in which he lives, but he is also estranged at the interpersonal level from the individuals around him. His interpersonal alienation manifests itself in two ways. First of all, he is shown to manipulate people for his own purpose, treating them as objects and not as persons. Secondly, he is unable to establish meaningful communication with others and is seen to be play-acting continually. Erich Fromm<sup>3</sup> has defined as a form of alienation the relationships among men who see each other not as human beings but as objects, which can be used to achieve their own goals. In Scene Three, Tughlaq is seen as an ace schemer who manipulates Sheikh Imamud-din to act exactly according to his own pre-arranged plans. By a diabolically clever strategy he gets rid of both his enemies - Sheikh Imam-ud-in and Ain-ul-mulk at one stroke. Tughlaq sees others through an alienated vision - not as persons but as pawns in a political game of chess, objects to be used and discarded.

In Tughlaq's relationship with others there is very little genuine communication. Most of the time he seems to be play-acting, thus revealing his alienation from others at the interpersonal level. He seems to be giving a performance all the time, striking a series of histrionic stances and poses. In the very first scene, Tughlaq tries his best to impress his people by playing the role of a just and impartial ruler (3). At the end of the episode the Guard dismisses the crowd, saying, 'what are you waiting for? The Show's over! Go home'. These words suggest that the Guard has almost seen through the theatricality of the entire performance, which had been staged by Tughlaq to win popular support. Not only in public does Tughlaq indulge in role-play, even in private conversation with his step-mother he seems to be acting, though he says that she is one of the three people in whom he can confide. When she asks him why he does not sleep at night, he launches into a long piece of inflated rhetoric (10). It is so obviously theatrical that the stepmother bursts into laughter with the amused comment, "I can't ask a simple question without your giving a royal performance" (10-11). According to Erving Goffman, "To the degree that the individual maintains a show before others.... he can come to experience a special kind of alienation from self"<sup>4</sup>

Though at first Tughlaq distances himself from others by adopting a role, the inability to communicate becomes a matter of anguish for him later. In Scene Eight when Tughlaq unburdens his soul to the young guard at Daulatabad, he meets with gross incomprehension. "I don't understand what your majesty is saying," (54) responds the Guard. This infuriates Tughlaq who rages at him, "You don't understand! You don't understand! Why do you live? Why do you corrupt the air with your diseased breath?" (54). His angry outburst resembles that of Leonido at Tizon in *The Bond Honoured*<sup>5</sup> by John Osborne. It is the alienated Outsider's rage at the insider's lassitude and drifting through life without linking. But anger is followed by a philosophical acceptance of the fact that the listener cannot help his incomprehension. "I'm sorry. It's my turn to apologize. It isn't your fault. You are also one of them". Alienated from society and the individuals around him, Tughlaq is also estranged from the religion followed by those around him. Tughlaq's alienation from tradition and religion arises primarily from the fact that he is an existentialist in his religion and therefore inevitably comes into conflict with the orthodox believers and fundamentalists in religion. This conflict is vividly presented in scene three in the debate between Sheikh Imam-ud-din and Tughlaq. The Sheikh believes that The Koran is the only guide and that "if one fails to understand what The Koran says one must ask the Sayyids and the Ulema" (20). Tughlaq asserts his allegiance to The Koran as the Word of God "I have never denied the word of God, Sheikh Sahib, because it's my bread and drink", (20) but he refuses to depend only on God and prayer and believes in his own strength and resources. "But why should I call on God to clean the dirt deposited by men?" (20). He believes that "no one can go far on his knees", that is through prayer alone. To the Sheikh this sounds like blasphemy and a desire to reject The Koran and God, setting oneself up as God. "Beware Sultan, you are trying to become another God" (21) says the Sheikh to the Sultan. The Sheikh sees Tughlaq as one who aspires to omnipotence and godhead, usurping God's power and position. The fact the Tughlaq is an existentialist in religion is seen from his refusal to accept The Koran as the sole receptacle of truth. He cannot reject Greek philosophy and the truth contained in other religions like that of Zoroastrian or the Buddha. A fundamental principle in existentialism is that "existence precedes essence";<sup>6</sup> that a man's experiential knowledge drawn from existence is superior to any principle or philosophy in its theoretical essence. From his own experience, Tughlaq finds it impossible, to deny or kill that part of him which had appreciated the Greeks. He finds The Koran and Islam too narrow to hold his comprehensive spirit. He therefore experiences fragmentation, torn between his allegiance to The Koran and his appreciation for other forms of truth. Islam requires that he should kill that part of him which had responded to the Greeks. Tughlaq speaks ecstatically of the charm that Greek philosophy and literature had held for him. He had felt the thrill of a brave new world opening before him:

I can still feel the thrill with which I found a new world, a world I had not found in the Arabs or even the Koran. They tore me into shreds. And to be whole now, I shall have to kill the part of me, which sang to them. And my kingdom too is what I am torn into pieces by visions whose validity I can't deny. You are asking me to make myself complete by killing the Greek in me and you propose to unify my people by denying the visions, which led Zarathustra or the Buddha (21)The microcosm within the king is reflected in the macrocosm of his kingdom. Tughlaq is not alienated from human existence right from the beginning of the play. The First Scene reveals him as an idealistic reformer who hopes to lead his people into a Utopia. It is only when the idealist becomes disillusioned, on seeing the unbridgeable gulf between aspiration and reality that he moves towards existential alienation. Though all the innovative measures of Tughlaq like giving equal rights to Hindus, change of capital and introduction of copper currency are excellent in principle, they fail because of two main reasons – his inability to win the people's confidence and his failure to foresee the flaws in his schemes. His social alienation from the people thus paves the way for his schemes. His social alienation from the people is also responsible for his existential alienation. Scene Two reveals Tughlaq's longing to be accepted by his people as their savior-monarch. "Come, my people, I'm waiting for you" (10). He also realizes the helplessness of the individual and the brevity of human life. "I have only one life, one body and my hopes, my people, my God are all fighting for



it”(10). In Scene Three, there are brief intimations of the beginning of existential alienation in Tughlaq. This is seen when he tells Sheikh Imam-ud-din about the “surrounding void” which sometimes pushes itself into his soul and starts “putting out every light burning there” (20). The turning point in Tughlaq’s life, ‘the boundary situation’<sup>7</sup> of existential philosophy, which sends him hurtling down the abyss of existential alienation, comes in Scene Six. The treachery of Shihab-ud-din, whom Tughlaq genuinely at not being understood by his people, at being betrayed by those whom he loved and trusted, is revealed in his tortured question to zia-ud-din Barani: “Why must this happen Barani? Are all those I trust condemned to go down in history as traitors? ... Will my reign be nothing more than a tortured scream which will stab the night and melt away in the silence?” (43). This reveals an intense awareness of the fertility and absurdity of human existence, similar to that of Macbeth who see human life as “A tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury signifying nothing”<sup>8</sup>.

In Camus’s *Myth of Susyphus*<sup>9</sup>, the absurd is seen as the relationship between the individual and the world of existence. The absurd is the encounter between the individual’s longing for order and rational explanations and the absolute chaos and irrationality seen by him in the universe. Tughlaq just cannot find a rational explanation for the treachery of Shihab and his courtier’s incomprehension of his idealistic measures. The absurdity of human existence impresses itself upon him in this totally unreasonable (according to him) act of treachery. He thus has a vision of the absurd, the meaninglessness and chaos of existence. Like Caligula in Camus’s play, Tughlaq also tries “to control and release his metaphysical anguish by an exercise of tyrannical power<sup>10</sup>”. His cruelty in the play arises from his anguish: Anguish, in existential philosophy, is the reaction of the man who has had a vision of the absurd and realizes the nothingness, the void that is at the center of all existence. The repeated frenzied stabbing of Shihab-ud-din even after he is dead, the order that the bodies of the conspirators should be stuffed with straw and be exhibited throughout the kingdom and the insistence on the immediate vacation of Delhi are acts of cruelty and tyranny arising from his existential anguish. He decides to give up the method of rational explanation and persuasion, which he had hitherto tried with his people. Instead he is now determined to rule them with an iron hand. “I was too soft, I can see that now. They’ll only understand the whip” (44). In his movement from idealist to tyrant, Tughlaq resembles Camus’s protagonist Caligula, whose existential alienation drove him to a deliberate choice of tyranny.

Tughlaq’s existential alienation is made all the more poignant by juxtaposing it with his earlier idealism. Karnad uses the flashback technique to give us glimpses of the youthful idealism of Tughlaq. In an idyllic scene on the ramparts of Daulatabad, Tughlaq shares his youthful aspirations with a young guard (53). He also recaptures a magical moment from his youth when he felt fully in harmony with the world around him. It was a moment of total communion with nature, the elements and man’s works, a ‘beautiful fusion with the things of this world’<sup>11</sup>. Tughlaq recalls nostalgically,

One night I was standing on the ramparts of the old fort here. There was a torch near me flapping its wild wings and scattering golden feathers on everything in sight. There was a half-built gate nearby, trying to contain the sky within its cleft. Suddenly something happened – as though someone had cast a spell. The torch, the gate, the fort and the sky – all melted and merged and flowed in my bloodstream with the darkness of the night... I was the earth, was the grass, was the smoke, was the sky (53).

Tughlaq had been trying to recover from that experience throughout his life, but in vain. He found himself wandering aimlessly in existential alienation as an Outsider, searching for the end of estrangement from the universe around. The hopelessness of his search for that lost moment of communication is also revealed. “I have searched for that moment since then and here I am still searching for it. But in the last four years, I have seen only the woods clinging to the earth, heard only the howl of wild wolves and the answering bay of street dogs” (54). The despair and agony felt by him are brought out in the images of discord – the howl of wild wolves and the bay of street dogs. The speech reveals an Outsider estranged from the universe, totally out of harmony with it.

Towards the end of the same scene (Scene Eight), there is yet another juxtaposition of Tughlaq’s earlier idealism and present degeneration. Such a contrast becomes an important structural device and is repeated once more in Scene Ten. At the end of Scene Eight, it is zia-ud-din Barani who eloquently evokes Tughlaq’s idealistic past and appeals to him to recapture the ideals once again, eschewing tyranny and cruelty. Zia-ud-din Barani tells Tughlaq: “Your majesty, there was a time when you believed in love, in peace, in God. What has happened to those ideals? ..... Why this bloodshed? Please stop it”. (56) zia-ud-din Barani pinpoints the disease and diagnoses it as arising from a rejection of God and fellowmen by Tughlaq. He suggests that Sulthan Muhammad Tughlaq should renew his bonds of relationship with God and neighbors. But if Tughlaq were to accept this prescription, it would mean acknowledging that he was wrong all these years, which he is not prepared to do. “But for that, I’ll have to admit I’ve been wrong all these years. And I know I haven’t. I have something to give, something to teach, which may open the eyes of history, but I have to do it within this life. I’ve got to make them listen to me before I lose even that”.(56) Here, as in Caligula, we see the fanatic zeal of a man who has a mission to accomplish, a lesson to teach<sup>12</sup>. If tyranny is the only means of forcing that lesson on

people, he will continue to adopt it. If people respond only to cruelty and violence, then he will use only those means to reach his end.

Again and again in the play, Tughlaq is made to realize the vast gulf between aspiration and fulfillment, ideals and reality. As Cruickshank puts it, 'Intellectual awareness of the absurd the experience of a person who expected a rationally ordered cosmos, but finds instead a chaos impervious to reason'<sup>13</sup>. Tughlaq is forced to admit that his innovative measures like the change of capital and the introduction of a token copper currency have proved themselves to be hopeless failures. The rose garden, which he had envisaged as a visible symbol of visionary hopes to create a Utopia, becomes a rubbish dump where useless copper coins are piled up. This degeneration symbolizes the reduction of his kingdom to 'a market of corpses' instead of becoming a Utopia. In Scene Ten, in the conversation with the stepmother on the rose garden, there is again the juxtaposition of the past idealism with the present corruption. The step-mother tells Tughlaq: "It's only seven years ago that you came to the throne. How glorious you were then, how idealistic, how full of the hopes. Look at your kingdom now. It's become a kitchen of death"(65) When his stepmother taunts him with killing his father, brother and Sheikh Imam-ud-din, Tughlaq claims to have killed them for an ideal, perhaps the ideal of building a Utopian empire, which he considered to be his life's mission. "I killed them - yes but I killed them for an ideal"(65). In this conversation, Tughlaq confesses that eschewing violence is no longer under his control. Once he has tested the exhilarating power of killing, it has become a compulsion. He traces the turning point to Shihab's murder. Further he has found that the most powerful argument lay not in words, but in the sword, in cruelty, violence and murder. He has therefore adopted tyranny as a way of life, a means to an end, a vehicle to fulfill his mission in life:

I couldn't (i.e. hold back the sword). Now, Remember Shihab-ud-din of Sampanshahr? He was the first man I killed with my own hands. And I had a glimmer then of what now I know only too well. Not words but the sword – that's all I have to keep my faith in my mission (66). Soon after this, Tughlaq insists that none of the deaths, which he had brought about, were futile. "No, they were not futile. They gave me what I wanted - power, strength to shape my thoughts, strength to act, strength to recognize myself" (66). This speech reveals a startling attitude to murder. Murder is seen as a definitive act, which leads to self-recognition and self-identity. Murder has given him power and self-realization through independent thinking and action. Cruelty and tyranny are seen almost as vehicles to help him to overcome existential alienation and a sense of the absurdity of human existence. This is close to the Nazi mentality exposed by Camus in *Caligula*<sup>14</sup>. Self-alienation has been defined in philosophy as 'alienation of a self from itself through itself'<sup>15</sup>. It is state of a division of self into conflicting parts, which becomes alien to each other. When the self-division become extreme, the person suffers from various psychological disorders and may even be driven beyond the border of sanity into the total self-estrangement of madness. In Scene Ten, soon after condemning his stepmother to death, one finds Tughlaq experiencing intense self-estrangement. Left alone, he falls to his knees, clutches his hands to his breast and desperately pleads with God to help him. "God, God in Heaven, please help me. Please don't let go of my hand ..... I started in your path, Lord, why am I wandering naked in this desert now?" (67). The tone of despair, helplessness and bewildered incomprehension are unmistakable in this prayer. Yet when zia-ud-din Barani enters, he jests at his own praying gesture in self-mockery. But a note of anguish is recognizable at the end. "I was trying to pray! Think of that no one in my kingdom is allowed to pray and I was praying. Against my own orders! But what else could I do Barani? My legs could not hold me up any longer". (68) One can almost hear the break in the voice when he says, 'But what else could I do Barani?' He now realizes that his own strength is not enough to sustain him and so he needs to kneel and pray. Though his prayer sounds genuinely desperate, he says that it was merely from the lips' memory and not from the heart. "I was trying to pray but I could only find words learnt by rote which left no echo in the heart" (68). He realizes his own self-alienation and knows that he has reached the extreme edges of self-estrangement, which is madness. "I am teetering on the brink of madness, Barani, but the madness of God still eludes me" (68). In Scene Eleven, Tughlaq again indulges in play-acting and self-dramatization. He strikes a pose of humility and dramatically falls at the feet of Aziz. This histrionic gesture has its effect on the crowd, which gasps and kneels down. In Scene Twelve, Aazam reports the nocturnal vigil of the Sultan in his proposed rose garden-turned-rubbish-dump (75). Aazam calls it madness, while Aziz puts it down to insomnia. But to Tughlaq, it is an expression of his anguish at the trick played on him by life – it had promised him a rose garden but instead had given him a rubbish dump. He wanted to rule a Utopia but ended up ruling a 'Kitchen of death' as the 'lord of skins'. This contrast between man's expectation and the reality of existence is indeed the experience of the absurd. At the end of the play as Barani passes out of his life, Tughlaq reaches a dead end in complete exhaustion:

Barani, all I need now is myself and my madness – madness to prance in a field eaten bare by the scarecrow violence. But I am not alone, Barani. Thank heaven! For once I am not alone. I have a companion to share my madness now – the omnipotent God! (Tired) (85).

Tughlaq claims that his madness is a divine frenzy, dancing in a world torn by violence, a kind of 'Rudra Tandava'. But it has left the man exhausted and he falls asleep just as prayer is restored in his kingdom after a ban of five years. As far as the theme of alienation is concerned, the play is open-ended and inconclusive. Many of the other characters in the play serve as foils to the protagonist. Vizier Muhammad Najib, zia-ud-din Barani, Aazam and Aziz highlight certain elements in the character of Tughlaq seen as an alienated existential Outsider. In a moment of self-revelation, Najib reveals himself as a former idealist, who has not become an existentialist, grasping the present moment as it is. He had given up Hinduism because it spoke only of the salvation of the individual soul and not of society. The social consciousness of Islam therefore attracted him and so he became a Muslim, hoping to bring the kingdom of Heaven on earth through Islam. But his youthful idealism met with disillusionment when he realized that schemes to bring in a golden age do not work out practically. So finally Najib concluded that all that matters is the present moment of existence, which must be grasped firmly and utilized fully: "I became a Muslim. Islam worried about this world, I said it'll bring the kingdom of Heaven on earth. But I know now - it won't work. There's only the present moment and we must grasp it firmly" (14). Thus an experiential encounter with life had transformed Najib also from being an idealist to becoming an existentialist. Barani is a close confidant of Tughlaq who frankly and fearlessly points out the Sultan's degeneration from an idealist to a tyrant. But in the last scene of the play, Barani pays a tribute to Tughlaq that though he is in the midst of violence; he is not drawn into it. Barani, the gentlest and mildest of men, imagines with relish the most tortuous deaths to be meted out to Aziz. But Tughlaq stops him with a mild rebuke, which brings Barani to a shocked self-realization of his fall from grace. He says, "I am a weak man your majesty. I don't have your strength to play with violence and yet not be sucked in by it. Your majesty warned me when I slipped and I am grateful for that. I ask your Majesty's permission to go while I'm still safe" (85). This speech of Barani throws light on Tughlaq's detached use of violence for a specific purpose to fulfill a mission in life. Though he is in the whirlpool of violence and bloodshed, he is able to maintain his objectivity and is not sucked into the vortex. Aazam and Aziz, the comic pair derived from the Akara-Makara tradition<sup>16</sup> in Kannada drama and reminiscent of Vladimir and Estragon in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*; present an interesting parallel to Tughlaq's existential alienation in a lighter vein. There is the Tughlaq's existential alienation and experience of futility and meaninglessness in the previous scene: "It's so hot - I'm fed up. I'm fed up of life. I'm fed up of the whole bloody world", (57) says Aazam. But Aziz is totally unsympathetic and does not encourage him in his self-pity. Aziz asks dispassionately, "Why don't you just go and commit suicide?" (57) Actually, this flippant suggestion has come from the problem of the absurd. Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus* speaks of "Physical suicide"<sup>17</sup> as one of the ways out of the absurd impasse. Since the absurd is a relationship between the individual and the world, suicide tries to negate the absurd by destroying the individual.

## I. CONCLUSION

Karnad's play is its exploration of man's search for power. Tughlaq motivates the action of the play. Every sequence, every act originates from his intense desire, bordering on madness, for authority and the total power it can confer on the individual. His interests and aspirations revolve within the emitting circle of power, the rest of his human impulses dry up, the needs of his being become distorted; his erudition and intellect turn out to be instruments for use in the politics of power, its stratagems and counter stratagems. Thus Tughlaq is not only good literature but good theatre, a play in which the intellectual-symbolic-allegorical levels harmonize with the level of external dramatic action by a proper balancing of theatrical and literary concomitants. The play is essentially modern, maybe more modern than most Indian plays written in English, despite being called a historical play.

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