



Politics - Power Conflict in Girish Karnad's *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan*

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Abstract

India has had a distinguished theatrical tradition for more than a thousand years yet no clear history of the theater is found. The absence of a national language also hindered the development of an identifiable native drama. Modern Indian theater owes its origins and development to the growth of urban centers in the 18th and the succeeding centuries. Calcutta, Madras, and Bombay evolved as theatrical centers, largely because of the British presence in these cities. Other modern Indian plays more closely resemble Western plays in style. These plays focus on families and on social and political events, including India's struggle for independence in the first half of the 20th century. Sometimes they are used to satirize the contemporary Indian setup. Power politics has been a recurrent theme in most of the historical dramas. "The Dreams of Tipu Sultan" has not had been an exemption. Hence, the paper brings out the theme of power politics in the play.

Keywords: Power Conflict, Girish Karnad, *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan*.

Girish Karnad Born on May 19, 1938, in Mathern, Maharashtra, has become one of India's brightest shining stars, earning international praise as a playwright, poet, actor, director, critic, and translator. As a young man studying at Karnataka University, Dharwar, where he earned a Bachelor of Arts Degree in Mathematics and Statistics in 1958, Karnad dreamed of earning international literary fame, but he thought that he would do so by writing in English. Upon graduation, he went to England and studied at Oxford where he earned a Rhodes scholarship and went on to receive a Master of Arts Degree in Philosophy, Politics and Economics. He would eventually achieve the international fame he had dreamed of, but not for his English poetry.

Instead, Karnad would earn his reputation through decades of consistent literary output on his native soil. He is a man of many talents. He is a renowned actor, film producer and playwright. He is a contemporary writer, playwright, actor and movie director in Kannada language. He is the latest of seven recipients of Jnanpith Award for Kannada, the highest literary honour conferred in India. For four decades, Karnad has been composing plays, often using history and mythology to tackle contemporary issues. He is also active in the world of Indian cinema working as an actor, director, producer and screenwriter, earning numerous awards along the way. He was conferred Padma Shri and Padma Bhushan by the government of India. He has been a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford from 1960 to 1963 and a Bhabha Fellow from 1970 to 1972.



Karnad has great insight into human nature. His knowledge of human nature has made him a great actor and playwright. Karnad employs mythical, historical, and folk themes as the skeleton for his plays, but they are identified with the contemporary scene. Karnad's Plays are *Tughlaq*, *Hayavadana*, *Naga – Mandala*, *Bali*, *Agni Mattu Male (The Fire and the Rain)*, *Yayati*, *Angumalige*, *Maa Nishaadha*, *Tippuvina Kanasugalu (The Dreams of Tipu Sultan)*, *Tale Danda*, *Hittina Hunja*, *Photo Album etc.*

Coming to the theme, the great warrior king Tipu Sultan, known as the Tiger of Mysore, stood valiantly in the way of wily British colonialism in India. His statecraft was forward looking and was marked not only by burning patriotism but also by administrative efficiency, agricultural development, manufacturing, international and inter-kingdom diplomacy, sericulture, gold mining and refining, pearl culture, toy making, foreign trade, rocketry and development of military technology and manufacturing.

However, the well known playwright Girish Karnad brings to our notice a little known fact that Tipu was also literally a dreamer. He actually kept a journal where he noted down his nocturnal dreams. Karnad weaves his play around this fact. It would be great fun to watch a production of the play in appropriate historical surroundings like Delhi's Purana Kila, but even a reading of the play leads to admiration for the heroic-tragic personality of Tipu as well as the craftsmanship of the playwright. It is not easy writing historical fiction. There will always be critics looking for historical accuracy. However, if one wanted factual history, one should read a history tome and not fiction.

On the other hand there are those who use their characters, historical or otherwise, to mouth the author's own lemmas and dilemmas. The characters just become cardboard messengers of the author's 'message' and never come alive. If one were to engage in a serious polemic or put forward a thesis then one could write an essay and not dabble in fiction. However, we see a large number of authors succumbing to these two extremes. It is only truly good writers who raise their fiction above essays or polemical propaganda. This play proves that Karnad belongs to that select few.

True to the panoramic canvas of nearly twenty years of Tipu's confrontation with British colonialism, involving three Anglo-Mysore wars, Karnad creates a cornucopia of interesting characters: the serendipitous historian Kirmani; Col Colin Mc-Kenzie who is studying Arthashastra and pushing for a definitive history of Tipu Sultan, typifying Orientalist scholarship when he says "we want to understand our enemy"; the upstart Arthur Wellesley pushed into the limelight by his brother, though he went on later to become famous as the Duke of Wellington after the battle of Waterloo; Richard Wellesley or Lord Mornington, the Governor General, scheming against Cornwallis and pushing his brother Arthur forward with a 'plum' position; the ambitious Cornwallis waiting to avenge his humiliation in America; the politically naive Maratha, Haripant, and of course the warrior-dreamer Tipu and his children.

Karnad raises several questions: regarding the clichéd British colonial statecraft of chicanery and divide and rule; the short-sightedness of Maratha tactics; Tipu's lack of killer instinct and so on, but never imposes his own conclusions. He leaves many tantalizing loose



ends so that the reader or the viewer can draw his own. He weaves historical facts regarding Tipu's progressive statecraft effortlessly into the dialogue. Many may not know that Karnad's major as an undergraduate was mathematics. Perhaps as a result one discerns a precision and leanness and balance in his prose. Overall it is an enjoyable play that packs so much in so few pages.

The play has scenes from the present which show Hussian Ali Kirmani's attempts to write an 'objective' account of the dead Tipu for the English, and then there are also intermittent scenes from the past which portray the sultan. This gives the play a powerfully elegiac quality. Kirmani as a participant-observer in Tipu's tragedy, shows that the matter of history consists not of facts (which concern the English) but also with the memories of fabled ruler that are fading all too quickly. The play begins and ends with memory: Kirmani and Colin Mackenzie serve as the chorus for a highly selective and reflexive history that unfolds cyclically, beginning with the day of Tipu's last battle and returning to it via crucial stages in his slide towards defeat and death.

In subtle moves, Karnad also reveals that the interests of the appointed historian are at variance in some respects with 'actual' history. Kirmani disclaims that Tipu ever sent an embassy to Malarctic, the French governor –general of Mauritius, whereas the very first scene with Tipu shows him talking about Malarctic's role in arranging a royal delegation from Mysore to France. Tipu's dreams-partly narrated and partly enacted are political allegories of his reign; some contain imaginary characters while others conjure up key historical figures like Lord Cornwallis and Haider Ali. The last dream is the most poignant because it is a fantasy of victory in the midst of defeat and death. The insertion of this dream text into history introduces a level of experience even more evanescent than memory, and makes *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan* almost a poetic play.

Thus, Karnad has raised many questions through the play regarding the British Colonial policy of divide and rule; the short sightedness of Marathas, Tipu's lack of killer instinct but he leaves many loose ends never imposing his own conclusions so that the reader or viewer can draw his/her own ideas and solutions.

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