

# Girish Karnad's Retold History in *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan*

**K. Sharmila**

Assistant professor in English

Madurai Institute of Engineering and Technology

Sivagangai

sharmimiet@yahoo.in

Indian English Drama has registered a remarkable growth and maturity through the English translation of Hindi, Marathi and the Bengali plays in the 1980s and the 1990s. A study of Karnad's amply reveals that he has added a new dimension to Indian drama through his substantial contribution. Talking an all-round view of things it may be said that Indian English drama has achieved a considerable measure of success during these years. Yet it has to go a long way to complete with the other literary genres in Indian English literature.

In Karnad's plays, words of reality and fantasy or illusion meet in such a way that poetry is created. Karnad's plays represent the junction at which 'dream is simultaneously reality, where the visible coincides with the invisible, where the object is both itself and the revelation of something not itself'. Yet, it is everyday language he uses, re-shaped and re-vitalized with connotative richness, but operating as part of the language of the theatre. Below the surface of the actors' roles, there is a potential limitless body of facts and knowledge about what the characters are like, how they would react to certain situations, even though the drama-text might not always address itself to the specific problems of performance. The wealth of such knowledge is obviously derived from Karnad's own experience as an actor, director and translator because all the three functions demand knowledge and awareness of the strategies of both 'adaptation' and 'application' of a given text.

*Tughlaq*, *Tale-Danta* and *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan* are historical plays which are derived from Indian history. *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan* deals with Muslim kings and focuses on the eighteenth century Mysore history. The play attempts to highlight the gap between the dreams and deeds of the greatest king who began with the noble aim of building a glorious kingdom but ended up in gory violence. Here, Tipu had to fight with the British forces.

In *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan*, Karnad studies the nature of the Sultan, the Tiger of Mysore, in a perspective, free from colonial and religious perceptions. The play asserts Tipu's greatness as a man seeking growth in different spheres of life.

There are two views present in the state of Karnataka about Tipu Sultan: one view holds him as a dictator and Muslim fanatic; the other view sees him as a tolerant of other religions, as a

learned person with fore-sight and great military prowess. Concentrating on the later view, Karnad intends to show Tipu not merely as a warrior Chieftain of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, but also as a visionary, who, with his modern mind and dynamic ideas, opposed the British colonial rule and wanted to revolutionize society, catapulting it to the modern times.

The play presents Tipu Sultan as a visionary who wishes for the dawn of a new era. His vision for the future is of India, free from clutches of colonization. He wants to thoroughly wipe out the English from the face of India. In his last dream, he fancies the British retreating from the battle field. He jumps in joy even as he dreams: “Muizudin, Fath Haidor, Abdul Khaliq call the entire Zenna out. Invite them to the ramparts to see the white plague depart. Let’s all watch a new era dawn” (Karnad, *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan* 2). His visions include not only the removal of the English from the Indian soil, but also the establishment of a great empire like them. He aims to acquire military power by gaining economic power, which, he believes, is to be gained through trade is the way to prosperity.

Tipu’s Economic planning, Political strategy and military powers are quite modern. He is far sighted and firm when it comes to the economy. Tipu says to his kingdom, on the whole, is applicable for the whole universe - “You have to prepare for a different world” (Karnad, *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan* 1). He is not satisfied with his subjects enchained in tradition and steeped in mediocrity. He vows to overhaul the existing conditions in his kingdom. In the process of changing traditions, Tipu has to surmount opposition from all quarters. He is portrayed as a master trader in the play, who carries out trade with foreign countries. China, France, Turkey, Muscat, Arabia and other countries have trade relations with him. He exports ivory, sandalwood and spices from his land. He feels that the sea is the key to trade because they are sea facing nation. He says: “Mine is a land-locked kingdom. So I thirst for the sea, for today the sea is the key to power prosperity” (Karnad, *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan* 2). The Caliph of the Istanbul, the Imam of Muscat and the people in the countries of Turkey, Arabia and Iran, are all clamoring for his products. He champions not only export but also imports. Kebabs are brought from Kashmir, silkworms and eggs from Muscat, toys from France and so on. With his expert accounting system, he surpasses his neighbors—the Marathas and the Nizam—in trade.

Given these instances of diversification of trade for the economic growth of his subjects, Tipu comes across as a man ahead of his times and promotes what we in modern may call globalization. He sowed the seeds of globalization four hundred years ago. One can see the diplomat in Tipu and his foresighted foreign policy as he sends delegations to various countries like France, Muscat, Turkey, Arabia and other countries. His association with the French has

hidden motives: he wants to subdue the English. For which Ghulam Ali Khan and Osman Khan, two of his trusted nobles, are sent to France. This royal delegation from Mysore to France is arranged by the French Governor General of Mauritians. The nobles hope to meet the French King and persuade him to sign a treaty of perpetual alliance with Mysore. Tipu goes a step further and tries to sweep away the English with the help of the French. He sends a provisional list of professionals whom he needs from France. The list includes a doctor, a surgeon, a carpenter and a watch maker. He insists that they should have a gardener from the garden of Versailles. His list of items includes not just professionals and artifacts but also scientific inventions. His wide reading helps him in comprehending the mechanisms that the western world has to offer. He lectures on a thermometer to which his courtiers listen in wonderment:

“Thermometer! It is quick silver in a glass  
 tube. When placed in the hands of a  
 sick man, the quick silver rises to a certain  
 number of degrees and indicates the  
 height of his disorder. That helps the

hakim decides on the treatment” (Karnad, *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan1*)

Tipu’s insatiable urge and impatience for new ideas, inventions and energy are powerfully expressed when he insists that Ghulam Abi khan should bring home a thermometer from France. He says: “You must indeed. That’s what makes Europe so wonderful- - It’s full of new ideas- - inventions- -all kinds of machines- -bursting with energy. Why don’t we in our country think like them?” (Karnad, *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan1*). It is this urge that derives him to create Chennapatna, a center for glassware, musical instruments and toys. His children play with mechanical toys. Tipu despises the English but has a strange fascination for their art of trade and wants to turn it into a weapon to confront them. His admiration for the Englishman’s trade is revealed in the lines: “think of the john company - -how they came to this country, poor and what they have become in fifty years” (Karnad, *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan1*).

The British, he feels, are successful only because of their trade. That is the reason for his desire to conquer the world through his trade. Morning-ton, the English Governor General, himself makes this remark: “Tipu is building a trading empire on the European model and succeeding eminently” (Karnad, *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan2*). Then he reasons why Tipu should

be attacked: “We’ have driven the French and Dutch out of India, contained the Portuguese. Is there any reason why we should tolerate an upstart native?” (Karnad, *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan*2).

All of Tipu’s economic moves have military and political motives. For him economic growth is indivisibly connected to political stability and military power. He craves for economic prosperity. What he feels to be the need of the hour is social transformation. Moreover his love for trade has a political motive of expanding his empire. His indomitable spirit cannot cower before the British. It is beyond him to succumb to the whims and fancies of the British. The English detest his alliance with the French. Yet he joins hands with the French because he does not want to bow and scrape before them. All his alliances with France are initiated only through trade. Thus he emerges as a multi-national businessman challenging even the English in trade.

Tipu’s tie-up with the other nations, in a way, results in his downfall. He changes the tradition of the king as a conqueror and makes his mark as a trader. The British join hands with the Marathas and the Nizam to bring down the Sultan. This results in conflict. He finds his own people unable to match his vision and is dismayed to see them join hands with the British in the end. Finally, he is left isolated, having lost half his kingdom, his sons and his queen Ruqayya Banu. His trustworthy nobles- -Mir Sadiq, Wadeen Khan and Poornaiya become allies of the British. This aggravates his mental agony and suffering.

His last dream of winning against the English is a wish. It is what he longed for. In the dream, the Marathas and the Nizam collaborate with Tipu and they drive the English, the white plague, out of the land. This beautiful dream turns out to be a sad one, as Tipu is betrayed by his generals and officers and is killed in the very next afternoon. All of Tipu’s predictions - -his predictions about the conduct of the Indian Princes and their alliances with the British; the English attack on the Marathas- -all come true. Hence Kirmani, the historian’s final words are very apt. he says: “It was not Tipu’s dreams but his predictions that come true” (Karnad, *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan*2).

Tipu’s vision for his kingdom was deeply rooted in his ambition and desire of developing into a progressive, powerful force in India. Karnad’s Tipu Sultan is shown as ruler, who learned, farsighted, keenly interested in the political and economic growth of his kingdom, shrewd in understanding the motives of the people and visionary far ahead of his time. There is some area of his personality where he diverges. But in the end coverage at one point: death. Tipu is physical-spiritual. The most interesting fact is that even now India suffers from lack of unity and common purpose, and, unwillingness to take on modern ideas of infrastructure and governance.

It is this unwillingness in Tipu's contemporaries to accept his ideas of trade and vision to bring about a social change that paves the way for his fall. Tipu's initiative to globalize gives rise to many problems and conflicts which finally prove disastrous for him. Karnad has succeeded in portraying Tipu as an ardent reformer and a zealous visionary whose ardor and zeal fail to reconcile his dreams with his people's lives.

Karnad mentions some facts of history and places them in the midst of imaginative incidents and situations to dramatize history so that the play has contemporaneous interest. The choice of historical figure of Tipu Sultan, the "Tiger of Mysore" as his subject for a play for BBC to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of Indian Independence, is not without a touch of irony. Tipu fought till his death to prevent the British takeover of the southern states and would not have lost had he not been betrayed by his own people.

Karnad writes in the Preface to the text, "I immediately thought of Tipu Sultan, one of the most politically perceptive and tragic figures in Modern Indian History". Tipu was politically perceptive because he was a visionary who dreamt of a strong and united Mysore state and "his dream of a Republic came through about one hundred and fifty years later when India ushered itself into a new era on 26<sup>th</sup> January 1950" (qtd in Mukherjee Sudhir 309). The treachery and deceit of his own nobles when led to the fall of the Fort and Tipu's subsequent death certainly add to the element of tragedy that surrounds the legends of Tipu Sultan.

Karnad has shifted a substantial archive of historical accounts, letters, ballads, rural plays and especially the remarkable "Notebook of Dreams", before constructing the essence of Tipu's character which would lend itself to a portraiture displaying at once grandeur and nobility, vulnerability and desperation of a very human figure poised at a critical moment of history, trying single-handedly to stem the onslaught of foreign invasion into his beloved land. There is no division of scenes or any marked distinction between the sequences of dream and reality.

Exits and entrances of characters are not always under the layer of the dreams of Tipu. Karnad has proved this through a significant critique on historiography. The piece of conversation is not between two individuals, Colonel Mackenzie and Mir Hussain Kirmani, but between two different approaches to historiography. Colin and Mackenzie are the representatives of the Western approach to Indian history and Kirmani is the native historian. These two historians not only differ in their backgrounds but also in their respective approaches to historiography. Western historiography, though Mackenzie claims it to be, is not very objective. Mackenzie advises the historians to develop a dispassionate distancing, which, according to him, is essential for a historian but which it is impossible for Kirmani who had been a courtier of the

late Tipu. Though Mackenzie professes objectivity and dispassionate distancing, he is prejudiced against Tipu's career. Karnad shows how history is subjective and suits the powerful.

Karnad has handled the theme in a way that makes Tipu Sultan so graphic and real that his psyche escapes the limitation of time and space and becomes a state of mind addressing itself to patriotism in the World wars. In Karnad's style of writing, the entire drama of the gradual unfolding plot and the progress of action are never neglected at the cost of reflective introspection. This is in spite of the constant flux between dream and reality. Actually, the dreams perform two functions here. Besides taking us deep within the realms of the subliminal, they also introduce us to strange other realities indicated.

Karnad's instruction in the "Note" to the play says that the dream scenes are to be staged as realistically as possible without the use of masks, special lighting or costumes and the scenes must follow each other in rapid succession. By blurring the margins of the two states of consciousness, the playwright succeeds in placing the essence of the Sultan's principles along his dreams and aspirations as a neat cross-section of his life. The Dreams of Tipu Sultan constitute the voice of his being and emerge from the subliminal levels of consciousness to speak to Tipu in working and in sleep. Their presentation cuts the inner core of the man through which the emotional sap of his life flows.

Though titled *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan*, the progress of the action in the play remains deeply rooted in actual historical events and recorded facts. Karnad mentions some facts of history and places them in the midst of imaginative incidents and situations to dramatize history in order to be of contemporaneous interest. Karnad has succeeded in mixing history and fiction to give the feet of life of the fourteenth century which is quite relevant to the contemporary reality in India.

The two predominant interests that Karnad explores in his plays are history and myth. The earlier plays that dealt with history are *Tughlaq* and *Tale-Danda*. The echoes of the earlier plays are heard in this play as well. Tipu is visionary par-excellence. Karnad's each historical figure is treated within different parameters. His portraiture of Tipu has sincerity. This play uses the technique of memory to evoke the past and to bring Tipu Sultan back into our thoughts. So many aspects on Indo-British relations rise up like ghosts from the past.

In showing that the fearless warrior was in fact a dreamer of peace and progress who yoked ethics with economics, Karnad adds human diminutions to the figure painted into the fading morals of history. Girish Karnad has re-claimed The Dreams of Tipu Sultan to present the man in the new light of Indian history.

Girish Karnad's historical plays depict the life of the eponymous hero, namely Tipu Sultan, in relation to the subject of his kingdom. He appears to be intelligent person whose way of thinking is not understood by the average people and they are taken to be foolish and impulsive king by the people of his kingdom.

In *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan*, Karnad appears to be preoccupied to a large extent with the visualisation of historical incidents through the Theatrical Medium. An important point to remember is that Tipu himself yearns to be regarded as a 'Modern' king who is capable of resisting the onslaught of a new religion and culture.

Karnad projects the other side of history, unexplored and deliberately denied history. Karnad brings Tipu alive and rescues him from colonial perceptions and refracts history through the perspective of independent India. He strives to resurrect Tipu as a modernistic monarch, a statesman and courageous warrior, who, in a country, would have been a great ruler. A century or so later, he would have led the Indian anti-colonial struggle.

In this play, Karnad recovers the figure of Tipu from the onslaughts of both imperialist historiography, as well as Hindu Chauvinist bigotry" (Satish Kumar. Themes and techniques in the plays of Girish Karnad 21). Karnad's writings review history through the lens of contemporaneity. He should be complimented for giving such a play to Kannada Theatre and literature especially at this point of time when two hundred years have elapsed after Tipu's death.

Karnad's choice of Tipu as his subject not only had to do with a 200 year-old history, but also with the present history - At the point of time there was a great moment against Tipu by the right wing fundamentalist groups, trying to picture him as a fanatic. He has tried to paint the eighteenth century prejudices.



### Works Cited

Bedre, R.T. “New Historicism: A Critique of Girish Karnad’s *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan*.  
*Quest*. 20.2 (2006):49-52. Print

<http://rand-rambler.blogspot.com/2006/10/girish-karnad-S/-bhyrappa-tipu-sultan.html>

<http://en.Wikipedia.Org/wiki/Girish-Karnad>.

Karnad, Girish. *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan* New Delhi: Oxford UP. 2004. Print.

Kumar, Satish. *Themes and Techniques in the Plays of Girish Karnad*. Bareilly: Student Store,  
2004. Print.

Mahle, H.S. “Girish Karnad: History and Contemporary Reality”. *Indo-Anglican Fiction: Some  
Perceptions*. Ed.Mahle. New Delhi: Jainsons 1985 138-46

\*\*\*\*\*