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Reinterpretation of History in Girish Karnad's Play "The Dreams of Tipu Sultan"

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Abstract

Interpretation of history by historians and historical playwrights is nothing but two sides of the same coin. Both endeavour in exposing the past to the contemporary generation. But in terms of the degree of freedom in writing the history, the historians are restricted. On the other side, the historical playwrights have got a higher degree of freedom in reinterpreting the history to the audience. For example they may modify the elements of history; they may blend the chronology or may discuss an incidence in a stretched manner . Karnad in his play 'The Dreams of Tipu Sultan' (1997) has opted an amalgamation of history and its interpretation in the play in conveying a legitimate identity to the play. This play is based on the story of a monarch, Tipu Sultan , of Mysore (India), who reigned from 1782-1799.It brings the focus to the dreams which were seen by Tipu Sultan and had been great inspiration for him as they inspired him to endeavour against wrongs, evils, hypocrites and especially the British and also persuaded him to raise wars against them. Karnad in the present play emphasize the fact that Tipu Sultan was a ruler who was misrepresented in History and showcases another side of history that was not chronicled by the British Historians. In this work Tipu Sultan is projected as a visionary and a person ahead of his times. So, the aim of this research paper is to critically analyze the reinterpretation of the history related to the historical character Tipu Sultan by Girish Karnad in the play 'The Dreams of Tipu Sultan'.

Key words- History, war, dreams, interpretation, modernity, reality.

Girish Karnad a renowned Indian playwright, author and a versatile actor was born in the city of Bombay. This Jnanpeeth Awardee, who belongs to the Post Independence era,

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mainly pens in Kannada. His works include 'Yayati', 'The Fire and the Rain', 'The Dreams of Tipu Sultan', 'Taledanda', 'Hayavadana' etc. Folklore, mythology, history and complexities of contemporary life becomes the representative themes of his works. In 'The Dreams of Tipu Sultan' Karnad tries to highlight the last days of Tipu Sultan and tries to convey a counter history hidden by the western hegemonic agenda.

The play 'The Dreams of Tipu Sultan' or 'Tipuvina Kanasugalu' deals with the life of Tipu Sultan, the ruler of Mysore during the 18 century. The play is beautifully presented through the perspective of Indian Court historian Kirmani and British Oriental scholar Colin Mackenzie. The play is more than a history experience. Author portrays Tipu Sultan as a dreamer, a visionary and a man ahead of his times. He unfolds the real Tipu Sultan which is hidden from the history. 'The Dreams of Tipu Sultan' was originally written for BBC to celebrate the fiftieth year of Indian Independence.

The play starts with a conversation between Kirmani and Mackenzie and moves the action to the year 1799, the year British seized Srirangapattanam and killed Tipu Sultan. In this play Karnad takes into consideration the fact that Tipu was literally a dreamer. Tipu used to record his dreams which in turn motivated him.

In one of his dreams he visions of his visit to a dilapidated temple with his finance minister Poornaiya. When he enters the temple he sees that the idols in the temple becomes alive and starts talking with the ruler. On his conversation with the idols Tipu comprehends that they are seeking for salvation and wants the temple to be rebuilt. Tipu replies with empathy;

"Come, Poornaiya. Let's go. We'll have the temple repaired, the walls rebuilt so that these seekers after God are not disturbed". (Two Plays: The Dreams of Tipu Sultan, Bali, The Sacrifice. p 19).

Here we sees a tolerant leader who is all prepared to seek the prosperity and happiness of his subjects.

In an another dream, that happens before the day he is prepared for an attack with Marathas. There he sees women in a man's attire and Tipu later in the play realizes the hidden fact that Marathas has actually cheated him. Tipu says;

"I interpret this dream in the following fashion.
May it please God, though these Marathas are dressed in male attire, they will in fact prove to be women?" (30).

Tipu's father Haider Ali also appears to him in his dream and expresses his dislike for sending his two sons to the British. Here Tipu Sultan makes a conversation with his father and states he is not petrified of the British but disturbed by the fact that his own people has started supporting them. Tipu Sultan says;

"I knew several of my officers had already started secret negotiations with him. I even knew who they were. My trusted officers. Yet I couldn't expose them without bringing the whole edifice down."(51)

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Tipu's last dream is an optimistic one where he gets a news that British has retreated from India but in reality he was killed in the Anglo Mysore war that happened on the very next afternoon. The gravity of the situation becomes evident that Nadeem Khan, Mir Sadiq, Quamaruddin and Poornaiya were rewarded by the British.

This play is not merely a record of historical account of Tipu's inner life and his dreams but also a representation of his innovative, radical and progressive ideas which greatly influenced social, political, economic and religious aspects of his age, including his own personal life. . His vigilance about his children's education is one of them. In fact Tipu knows the value of education; therefore, he is very alert about it, particularly about his own children's education. When Tipu is preparing to send a delegation to France for commercial and political purpose, his son Fath Haider wishes to join it. At that time, Tipu advices him that he should concentrate on his studies in order to get new and latest knowledge of the world. He illustrates the importance of education with his father – Haider Ali's example, who was an illiterate, foul-mouthed person and that was enough for him to rule. But his son Fath Haider belongs to different and challengeable age which was full of problems and difficulties. So Tipu thinks that his son must prepare himself for the different life and world and it could be possible only through education. Indeed, education can bring radical change in one's life. Definitely it provides knowledge for facing the worldly problems. Therefore, Tipu asks his son to concentrate on his studies instead of going on France tour.

Even Tipu is a far-sighted ruler and father, who took his children with him while administrating. He desires to give them the practical lessons of administration, therefore, involved children in the important decision-making process. This effort of Tipu clearly shows that he wants to develop his children's mind with progressive and enlightened thoughts with the experience of practical things. No doubt, he wants to train them for making a strong, knowledgeable, experienced and able ruler for future.

This play is an honest attempt of Karnad for removing all the untruths and misunderstanding about the 'cursed hero' of Indian history – Tipu Sultan. In fact this play resurrects him as a modernizing monarch whose mind was fraught with high ideals, hopes, projects, missions and visions which he wants to use for the regeneration of his subjects. Verily, Karnad presents this great man with a new perspective who was, indeed, far ahead of his age.

Dr. APJ Abdul Kalam pays homage to Tipu Sultan during the Hazrath Tipu Sultan Shaheed Memorial lecture organized by the Al-Ameen Educational Society in Bangalore on 30th November 1991. He is amazed by his rocket technology system;

" Rocket technology engulfed me for two decades since my visit to Srirangapatna in 1960. The question continued to haunt me.How Tipu Sultan would have led to the world's first war rocket'? what environment was responsible for the birth, of such a technological innovation in our country. In August 1974 I received a paper presented by Frank H. Winter of National Air and Space Museum Washington USA, titled "The Rocket in India from ancient times to the 1 9 century." This highly 'Agni Astra' from Vedik hymns to Tipu's war rocket with eighteen class references."

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Tipu Sultan also had keen interest in trade mainly of sandalwood and ivory trade. He even brought the silk industry from China. Kamad is influenced by Tipu Sultan's passion of developing India as a developed land and this influence is clearly seen in the play.

Girish Karnad says that Tipu is misrepresented in History. The image was so distorted because his identity was largely created by the British. The Hindu reported on 13 September 2005 about Karnad's view on Tipu Sultan. Karnad says;

"He was a thinker and visionary, who represented the best of Karnataka. Unfortunately he has been misunderstood by the people of his own country and a lot of untruths were spread about him,"(The Hindu)

Karnad also shows in the play that how Tipu settles old scores after he lost in the third Mysore war by agreeing on four conditions. In scene nine, Poornaiya utters all the conditions to Tipu. When the fourth conditions of bartering the sons come, Poornaiya does not speak. Tipu then takes the paper from him;

"All right then. I'll read it out myself. Hand me the paper (Reads) The last condition; two hostages to be handed over to the English to be kept with them until the terms of the treaty are agreed upon, signed and sealed. (Pause) Two of my sons." (41)

And the noble men make noises. Some say that it is outrageous; some say that this is barbaric. There is angry protest in his chamber. Tipu after a long silence comments;

"This is the new language that has come into our land: English. This is the culture of that language. English Boys of seven and eight as hostages of war." (42)

The fourth Mysore war has a strong impact on the Mysorean ruler - Tipu Sultan's life. After the third Mysore war, Tipu Sultan got his sons back, he regained his power. He increased his contacts with the French, the Turks and the Afghans. Napoleon also intended to assist Tipu Sultan. But, unfortunately Napoleon was defeated in Syria and was forced back to France. On the other side, in 1793, Sir John Shore became General in place of Cornwallis and in 1798, Lord Wellesley became Governor-General. Wellesley fought against Tipu Sultan and won the war. He presented some conditions in front of him. Firstly Tipu Sultan will surrender half of the kingdom. Secondly he will pay twenty lakhs pounds to English within six months. And thirdly that they will keep his two elder sons and four honest employees in the custody of English. Tipu Sultan did not accept these conditions and fought bravely in the war. He was shot dead by a soldier. His two sons were taken as prisoners in Calcutta.

Tipu Sultan's unfortunate death is also shown in the play. In scene-fifteen, Tipu worriedly responds to the conditions which were sent to him. He says;

And now they have asked for four of my sons as hostages and half my kingdom again- half of the half they left me last time. (Pause) By the time the next governor general takes over. I'll be left with half street and none of my sons. (Pause) Shall I accept? (Pause) And don't say, Poornaiya, that you had warned me. I knew the English wouldn't like my extending my hand to the French. So what? Shall I Spend the rest of my life looking with anxiety at the

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English for smiles of approval or frowns of displeasure? Today I am the only one in India who won't bow and scrape before them. So they want to humiliate me. I'm told England is buzzing with stories of what a monster I am and how I need to be subdued. (Pause) Shall I allow myself to be subdued? (Pause) The English make impossible conditions. They expect me to reject them. I could throw their whole strategy into confusion by accepting these terms? Shall I be subtle and accept?" (60)

And, finally he denies the conditions and gets ready for the war against the British and says that the future is ours without knowing the fact that English has already surrounded the fort of Seringapatam. Kirmani in the last scene narrates Tipu's end as;

"That was Tipu's last dream. That afternoon he was killed in battle. . . .The battle of Seringapatam was lost before it had begun." (Sc. - 16, 64)

Karnad makes best use of the wars in the play. He does not give dramatic effects to the wars in the play. No doubt, there are the scenes which are devoted on the real history, but none of the scenes displays proper elaboration of the war except scene two that shows the post war effects. In this scene, as the fourth Mysore war ends, the soldiers eagerly search out the demise of Tipu Sultan. A soldier shouts after finding the corpse of Tipu;

"Colonel, I think we've found him careful. That one with the gold buckle on his belt. Lift him out." (14)

Despite giving full account on these wars which took place in Tipu Sultan's life, Girish Karnad elucidates more about Tipu Sultan's interest in the innovations in various fields and his alliance with various nations. Tipu Sultan wanted to introduce the technological substances in India. He wanted to develop a strong army, navy equipped with advanced technology to invade Europeans.

Fisher speaks of the history of Tipu Sultan in his history book 'Indirect Rule in India: Residents and the Residency System' in India;

"Finally ignoring Tipu Sultan's belated and qualified acceptance of such an envoy, Wellesley ordered the poised armies of the company loosed into Mysore. These armies smashed their way into the Mysore capital. By May 1799, Tipu Sultan lay among the piles of dead defenders of that capital." (Indirect Rule in India: Residents and the Residency System, 404)

The play in giving attention to the rational side of its main character Tipu ,does not ignore the emotional one which is best portrayed in the dialogues between him and his wife and children. These familial interactions completely humanize his character as the playful conversations he has with his wife and children in the first half of the play may well be out of the life of any ordinary Indian. The Tipu that emerges in these scenes is the one who has shed the baggage of lore and fable and shows Karnad's skill at imagining the everyday reality lived by a historical figure. In the latter half of the play these scenes help build up more sympathy from the audience especially when in a meeting with the noblemen Tipu Sultan declares that the British want to keep his sons as hostages of war while announcing the death

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of his beloved wife Begum Ruqayya Banu. The play then not only captures Tipu as a sultan but also as a human and a dreamer by overlapping them through a structure that fluidly shifts between the different sides of his character. In other words Karnad, a literary historian is more interested in the emotive content of an event. His history then does not shy away from its own constructability rather it turns its imaginative power into its strongest point as it allows plural truths to co-exist and that too at multiple levels; social, psychological and artistic.

The authenticity of the work is gained by employing historical figures, Kirmani and Mackenzi as narrators. Karnad also focused on the famous 'Note Book of Dreams' by Tipu Sultan as a scaffolding in writing this play. Karnad has opted an amalgamation of history and characteristics of a dream play in conveying a legitimate identity to the play. He unveils a ruler who was misunderstood by the people almost for 200 years. Tipu was a soul who wanted to take his nation to a superior heights but people couldn't match his ideas and thus got a controversial image. His true image was not known or deliberately ignored by everyone. Through this play Girish Karnad was actually constructing a counter history against the one created by the British.

Thus, Karnad presents history and its important figure with a substance and leaves certain events which could have been stretched at their best. He intends to present his dreams that have paradoxical effect in his life. This is why he has not titled the name of the play as 'The Wars Fought Between Tipu Sultan and His Rivals' or 'The Rivals of Tipu Sultan', but 'The Dreams of Tipu Sultan' has been ascended by Girish Karnad.

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