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The Divided Sultan: A Psychoanalytic Reading of the Protagonist in Girish Karnad's *Tughlaq*

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Abstract

Girish Karnad's *Tughlaq* (1964) tells the story of the fourteenth-century Delhi Sultan Muhammad bin Tughlaq, a brilliant and idealistic ruler whose twenty-year reign collapses into tyranny and madness. This article reads Tughlaq's decline through two psychoanalytic traditions that have rarely been brought together in criticism of the play: Freud's account of the id, ego, and superego, and Jung's account of the persona, the shadow, and individuation. In Freudian terms, Tughlaq's arc is the slow failure of an ego that can no longer mediate between a founding act of violence and the guilt it produces. In Jungian terms, the same arc is a failed individuation — an idealistic public self that survives only by disowning, and eventually being consumed by, everything in Tughlaq it cannot admit to. The two readings are traced scene by scene through the play.

Keywords: Girish Karnad; Tughlaq; psychoanalytic criticism; Freud; Jung; shadow archetype; Indian drama.

1. INTRODUCTION

Tughlaq was first staged in Kannada in 1964 and later translated into English by Karnad himself. It tells the story of Muhammad bin Tughlaq, the fourteenth-century Sultan of Delhi, whose reforms — genuinely progressive, in places genuinely ahead of their time — end in mass executions, a ruinous relocation of the capital, and a reign so chaotic that chroniclers called him "Muhammad the Mad" (Karnad, 2005). Critics have approached this contradiction in several ways: as an Aristotelian tragedy of hubris, as a political allegory for the disappointments of Nehruvian idealism, or as a study of what one recent essay calls a "divided self" (Dharwadker, 1995).

This article takes up the last of these threads and pushes it further, using two psychoanalytic frameworks that complement each other more than the existing criticism has acknowledged: Freud's structural model of the psyche, and Jung's theory of the persona and the shadow. Where a political reading treats Tughlaq's violence as strategy, and an Aristotelian reading treats it as the unfolding of a single flaw, this reading treats the play's thirteen scenes as the record of a mind coming apart under a

weight it created for itself. The sections below move through the play scene by scene, so that each theoretical claim stays tied to a specific dramatic moment.

2. The Freudian Sultan: Guilt, Repression, and the Failing Ego

Freud divided the psyche into three parts: the id, driven by instinct and pleasure; the superego, the internalized voice of parental and social prohibition; and the ego, which has the job of keeping the two in some kind of workable balance with the demands of reality (Freud, 1923/1960). Freud compared the ego to a rider trying to control a horse far stronger than himself — a useful image for Tughlaq, whose downfall can be read as exactly that: a rider who eventually loses the reins.

2.1 The founding crime and its return

The play gives us the originary wound early. In Scene 2, Tughlaq's stepmother confronts him with the fact that he had both his father and his elder brother killed to take the throne. This isn't news to Tughlaq — he has clearly lived with it the whole time — but her saying it aloud, in front of others, forces back into the open something he has spent his energy keeping contained. Rather than deny it, he answers her in the language of necessity and providence, folding the murders into a story about destiny and God's larger design. That reflex — turning a crime into a destiny — is the superego at work in exactly the way Freud describes: not stopping the act beforehand, but demanding it be endlessly re-justified afterward.

The same reflex shows up whenever his authority is questioned on moral grounds. In Scene 4, facing the qazi and the citizens of Delhi over the costs of his rule, Tughlaq's public defense keeps returning to the same note — vision, sacrifice, a larger design that only he can see. Governance itself becomes the place where the old crime gets argued over and over, dressed up as policy.

2.2 Displacement: the killing of Sheikh Imam-ud-din

In Scene 5, Tughlaq dresses his most vocal critic, Sheikh Imam-ud-din, in royal robes and sends him toward Ain-ul-Mulk's camp, apparently as an ambassador. He knows what will happen. When Ratan Singh later tells the court that Imam-ud-din died in Tughlaq's place, killed by men who mistook him for the Sultan, the plot is confirmed as deliberate. Tughlaq cannot act on his hostility toward a rival directly without undermining the moral authority his whole rule depends on, so someone else's death absorbs it for him. It is the same violence as before, wearing a disguise.

2.3 An ego with too much to hold

From here the strain becomes visible in how Tughlaq governs, not just in what he does in private. The move of the capital to Daulatabad and the introduction of copper currency are both presented, in his own words, as visionary — steps toward a more unified and equal kingdom. Both proceed with almost no attention to what will actually happen to the people carrying them out, a failure of the kind of reality-testing the ego is supposed to provide. By Scene 9, alone in his chamber and unable to sleep, Tughlaq's thinking has turned entirely inward, circling the same questions of faith and guilt without resolving them. The killing of Najib, and what follows for Najib's mother, is where this finally tips into something closer to cruelty for its own sake. Nothing about the threat she poses explains the punishment. What explains it is guilt that has stopped finding any legitimate outlet and started discharging itself on whoever happens to be near.

3. The Jungian Sultan: Persona, Shadow, and a Failed Individuation

Jung's vocabulary gives a different angle on the same collapse. The persona, for Jung, is the face a person shows the world; the shadow is everything the persona is built to keep out of sight — instinct, aggression, whatever the conscious self can't admit to. Individuation is the slow, difficult work of bringing the shadow into the rest of the personality instead of denying it or dumping it onto other people (Jung, 1959).

3.1 *The philosopher-king*

Tughlaq's persona is laid out plainly in the opening scenes. Addressing the citizens of Delhi in Scene 1, he describes a state built on reason and religious tolerance rather than force. Karnad doesn't undercut this as empty rhetoric — Tughlaq's private conversations with the historian Barani show the same intellectual seriousness, the same appetite for genuine philosophical and theological argument. The persona is real. It's also incomplete, because it depends on keeping out of view exactly what Scene 2 has already shown Tughlaq is capable of.

3.2 *The shadow, projected outward*

The shadow doesn't return to Tughlaq as self-recognition. It returns as suspicion of everyone around him. He grows convinced that Imam-ud-din, then Barani, then the population at large, are plotting against him, placing outside himself a capacity for betrayal he has already demonstrated inside himself.

Aziz — the dhobi who poses as a Brahmin and works Tughlaq's own policies to his personal advantage — is close to an external version of that shadow. His scheme with Aazam, introduced in Scene 3, gives us a character who does, cheerfully and without guilt, exactly what Tughlaq does with agonized self-justification. That Aziz comes out ahead by the play's end, while Tughlaq comes apart, is the irony Jung's framework predicts: what a person refuses to integrate doesn't disappear. It goes on without them.

3.3 *When the mask and the shadow trade places*

The final scene doesn't reveal some "real" Tughlaq hiding under the idealist all along. It shows the line between the two finally giving out. Sleepless, alone, talking to an empty court in the middle of the night, Tughlaq can no longer tell counsel from conspiracy. The persona of the reformer is still there in his language, but it has stopped connecting to anything he actually does.

4. Structure as Symptom

The two readings meet in how the play is built. It moves from the open, public argument of Scene 1 to the closed, private disintegration of Scene 13 — from a Sultan debating policy with his citizens to a man talking to no one. That movement is the Freudian failure of reality-testing and the Jungian failure of individuation happening at once, and it's carried by the structure of the play itself, not just by what any one character says about Tughlaq.

This is also where a psychoanalytic reading earns its place next to the Aristotelian and allegorical ones already on record. Hubris, as a single flaw, explains the shape of the fall but not where it comes from. A psychoanalytic reading traces it back to a specific, nameable history — the killing of a father and a brother in Scene 2 — and a specific structural failure that follows from it. It doesn't compete with readings of the play as commentary on the collapse of Nehruvian idealism (Sharma, 2023); Karnad keeps tying Tughlaq's public failures back to his private guilt closely enough that the political and the psychological end up telling the same story.

5. What This Reading Doesn't Claim

A character isn't a patient, and it's worth being honest about that limit. Tughlaq has no unconscious apart from what Karnad wrote for him, and there's a risk in treating deliberate choices of dialogue and structure as if they were clinical symptoms rather than craft. Karnad's Tughlaq is also a twentieth-century writer's reconstruction of a fourteenth-century figure known mostly through Persian chronicles, so some of what looks like psychology here may say more about the anxieties of Karnad's own moment than about any historical Tughlaq. None of that makes the reading useless — Freud and Jung give a way of naming the coherence in how Karnad's Tughlaq falls apart. They aren't a diagnosis of a real person.

6. CONCLUSION

In Freud's terms, Tughlaq is an ego that cannot go on managing a crime it never answered for. The guilt that follows from Scene 2 doesn't disappear; it drives the displaced violence of Scene 5, the ungrounded ambition of Scenes 4 and 7, and the unearned cruelty of Scenes 11 and 12, until there's no ego left to hold the balance. In Jung's terms, Tughlaq is a persona that never manages to absorb its own shadow — a reformer's public self that survives only by denying what it did in Scene 2, exiling that denial onto Imam-ud-din and Barani and the people of Delhi, until persona and shadow finally collapse into each other in the isolation of Scene 13. Neither reading exhausts the play. Together, they go some way toward explaining why this particular Sultan has stayed so hard to put down.

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