

## Literary and Historical Discourse in Girish Karnad's *Tughlaq*

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Self-reflexivity has been identified by many critics as a distinctive feature of Girish Karnad's dramatic texts. Accordingly, some of his plays, such as *Tughlaq*, *Naga-Mandala* and *The Fire and the Rain*, reflect on the nature of art and literature. They say something, overtly and at times covertly, about literature —poetry, playwriting and storytelling, drama and ritual. Hence, these plays can be read not only as literature but also as inquiries into the nature of literature itself. The present study reads a sub-text of Girish Karnad's *Tughlaq* as a site which constructs a discourse on historical thinking and literature. Deploying the post-structuralist theory of textuality, especially that of Roland Barthes, it is argued here that a sub-text of the play, while creating the categories of *poetic* and *historical*, validates the literary by juxtaposing history and poetry dialectics. Reading the Tughlaq-Barani connection as more than that of a king and a historian —i.e. finding a poet in Tughlaq and a historical discourse in the interaction between Tughlaq, the king, and Barani, his confidant— the present study views *Tughlaq* as a critique of historical writing. A close reading, especially of Tughlaq's and Barani's speech, forms the substance of this analysis.

Keywords: Tughlaq; Karnad; post-structuralism; self-reflexivity; literary discourse; Indian theatre

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## El discurso literario e histórico en *Tughlaq*, de Girish Karnad

La auto-reflexividad ha sido considerada por muchos críticos como un rasgo distintivo de los textos dramáticos de Girish Karnad. Algunas de sus obras, como *Tughlaq*, *Naga-Mandala* y *The Fire and the Rain*, llevan a cabo una reflexión sobre la naturaleza del arte y la literatura. Comentan, de manera abierta o encubierta, cuestiones literarias: cuestiones poéticas, teatrales o narrativas, o aluden a la dramaturgia y el ritual. Así pues, estas obras no sólo pueden leerse como literatura, sino también como indagaciones en la naturaleza de la literatura misma. El presente estudio propone una lectura de un sub-texto de *Tughlaq*, de Girish Karnad, como un espacio que construye un discurso sobre el pensamiento histórico y la literatura. A través de la teoría post-estructuralista de la textualidad, en especial la de Roland Barthes, se argumenta

aquí que un sub-texto de la obra, al tiempo que crea las categorías de lo poético y lo histórico, valida lo literario mediante la yuxtaposición de la dialéctica de la historia y la poesía. Tomando la conexión Tughlaq-Barani como algo más que la de un rey y un historiador —es decir, al considerar a Tughlaq un poeta y un discurso histórico a la interacción entre Tughlaq, el rey, y Barani, su confidente— este estudio ve en Tughlaq una crítica de la escritura histórica. La base del análisis es la lectura atenta de los discursos de Tughlaq y Barani.

Palabras clave: Tughlaq; Karnad; post-estructuralismo; discurso literario; teatro indio

“All reading is misreading”

PAUL DE MAN

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Girish Karnad has been in the forefront of modern Indian theatre since the spectacular success of his much celebrated play *Tughlaq*, written in the Kannada language and translated into English by the author himself in 1972.<sup>1</sup> One of the twenty-three official languages of India, Kannada belongs to the family of Dravidian languages. It is estimated as being spoken by sixty million speakers in India alone, and by a further nine million as a second language. It is the state language of Karnataka and is one of the modern languages of India.

Girish Karnad was born in 1938 at Matheran in Maharashtra state, India. He completed his schooling in Sirsi (Karnataka) and took a BA (Mathematics and Statistics) at Karnatak College, Dharwad, India. Later he went as a Rhodes Scholar (1960-63) to Oxford University to pursue his post-graduation (Philosophy, Political Science and Economics). In addition to being a bilingual writer, Karnad is also a renowned filmmaker, director and actor, whose autobiography has recently been released (2011). If his directing and acting have earned him some twelve awards, his career as a playwright has bestowed upon him *Jnyanapeeth*, India's highest literary award, and he has received further recognition from various institutions.

## 2. THE PLOT OF *TUGHLAQ*

The play centres on the historical figure of Mohammed-bin-Tughlaq, a Muslim king of the Tughlaq dynasty who ruled from Delhi over large parts of Northern and Central India during the period 1325 to 1351. The play aptly fuses history and fiction. History, in the form of the political career of Tughlaq, forms the main plot; fiction forms the subplot of the play in the creation of the pair Aziz and Azam, a *dhobi* (washerman), and a pickpocket, respectively. If the main plot enacts the fall of an ambitious autocrat in Tughlaq, the subplot presents an ordinary *dhobi* manipulating for his own benefit the schemes introduced by the king.

The play fashions the character of Tughlaq as an ambitious king who wants to build a grand empire and manoeuvre his citizens to think as he does. To that end he devises the grand schemes of transferring his capital from Delhi to Daulatabad, and introduces a new currency system. A lover of the game of chess, Tughlaq symbolically moves his political pawns without ethics or morality. Manipulation and cruelty combine together in him to serve his delusions. Tughlaq attempts to make a show of the prevalence of justice in his

<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Dr G.S. Amur, Dr C.N. Ramachandran and Prof. (Mrs) Shyamala Narayan, for making valuable suggestions. I am grateful to certain anonymous reviewers for their advice and help. I also would like to thank my colleagues and students at Ahmednagar College (University of Pune, India), where the idea of this paper came to life.

kingdom by restoring to Vishnudatta, a Hindu Brahmin, his confiscated property and by giving him an appointment in his state service. This political pretension of showing how justice prevails in Tughlaq's kingdom is manipulated by the *dhobi* Aziz, who presents himself in the guise of Vishnudatta.

Tughlaq is portrayed as a master of intrigue and treachery. His politics do not spare even religion; he invites Sheik Imam-ud-din, a great religious leader, who criticizes him openly, to address his people, but sees to it that no one attends his address. He later persuades Sheik, in the name of Islam, to act as envoy to his political rebel Ain-ul-Mulk, only to make Sheik the scapegoat. However, Tughlaq's tyranny makes the overlords of Delhi rebel against him; they hatch a plot to kill him during prayer, but he sabotages the conspiracy and murders Sihab-ud-din, one of the conspirators. Tughlaq gives it a political colouring by projecting that Sihab-ud-din died while saving the king. As Tughlaq's ambition fades, his cruelty and disillusionment dominate the state; not even his stepmother is spared from death. When Ghiyas-ud-din Abbasid, a descendant of the famous Abbasid dynasty of the Caliphs of Baghdad, is on his way to visit the new capital Daulatabad, Tughlaq revives the prayer which he had ordered to stop after the conspirators' plan to finish him off. Aziz kills Abbasid on the way and supplants him in the palace by disguising himself as a descendent of *Khalif*. By that time there is chaos in the kingdom as a result of famine and counterfeit currency. In the end, Tughlaq finds himself alone; even Barani, his confidant and constant companion, leaves him to his fate.

This text is not only successful as written literature but also as a dramatic piece — its staging has established a tradition of excellent theatrical performances. As might be expected, it has invited a variety of critical readings in both Kannada and English. Among the Kannada writings on Tughlaq,<sup>2</sup> G.H. Nayak (1984), in one of the best essays on *Tughlaq*, undertakes a thematic analysis of the play, while C.N. Ramachandran (2008) offers perceptive insights into Karnad's engagement with history. Ramachandran scrutinizes three of Karnad's historical plays — *Tughlaq*, *Taledanda* and *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan* — on the premise that what is important for a work of art which is based on history is not only historical objectivity but also the rationality of defining history. In Ramachandran's opinion, Karnad's *Tughlaq* defines history as a narrative of the past which reflects the contemporaneity of the present. By contrast, *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan*, while questioning the very discipline of history, asserts that India should reject colonial thinking and develop its own theory of history (Ramachandran 2008: 106). This analysis is a good entry point for Karnad's historical plays. However, my present aim goes beyond the discussion of *Tughlaq* as a historical play.

<sup>2</sup> There are many studies in Kannada on Karnad in general; among the most important are: K. Marulasiddappa and Krishnamurthy Hanuru (eds.) *Girish Karnadara Natakagalu: Kannadada Pratikriye* (2010), a collection of many important articles on Karnad's plays; Kirthinath Kurtkoti's many articles, which are also available in their English translation in Basavaraj Donur (ed.) *New Perspectives on Girish Karnad's Plays* (2009); G.S. Amur's *Girish Karnad haagu Bharatiya Rangabhumi* (2008); Krishnamurthy Chandar's *Girish Karnad: A Life History and Works* (2004); Krishnamurthy Chandar (ed.) *Girish Karnadara Natakagalu* (2000).

Aside from the full-length works on Karnad's dramatic oeuvre, such as those by Jaydeep Singh Dodiya (1999), Tutun Mukherjee (2006), Basavaraj Donur (2009) and Pradeep Trikha (2009), there are important studies on *Tughlaq* in English: Naik (1987), Ramamoorthi's (1988) reading of *Tughlaq* as an actor, Gomez (1994), Dharwadkar (2006) and Bhat (forthcoming), among others. "Yet no critical examination of the play", as U.R. Anantha Murthy aptly remarks, "can easily exhaust its total meaning for the reader, because the play has, finally, an elusive and haunting quality" (1975: viii). The present paper, while endorsing Murthy's observation, offers a different reading of *Tughlaq*, contending that the play constructs a discourse on the categories of *literary* and *historical*. It tries to show how the *poetic* and the *historical* are constructed in meaningful ways such that, when speaking about the *historical*, the text is also speaking about the identity and characteristics of the *poetic*. The comparison may be unspoken but it is always present.

### 3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

My understanding of the play in this framework is based on three assumptions. First, Karnad's dramatic texts are essentially what Roland Barthes (1974) calls *writerly texts* (*scriptible*),<sup>3</sup> which allow "bi- or multilateral and pluri-dimensional" readings (Mukherjee 2006: 22). As they lend themselves to different interpretations, it is possible to read some sub-texts of Karnad's plays as constituting literary discourse; they have something to say about poetry, playwriting and storytelling. Karnad, although a student of Statistics and Mathematics, has first and foremost shown an inclination towards art and literature. As he has often, and perhaps too emphatically, declared, his ambition as a student was to write poetry.<sup>4</sup> His artistic career is not only the result of his dramatic genius but is also shaped by his reflections on literary aesthetics. As an actor and dramatist, or in general as an artist, he deliberates on the role of art, aesthetics and drama in contemporary society. Some of his plays, especially *Tughlaq* (1972), *Naga-Mandala* (1990) and *The Fire and the Rain* (1998), engage in constructing an aesthetic discourse on different genres of literature, while also dealing with universal themes of betrayal, ambition, power, adultery or revenge.

Theatre is an "artistic statement" for Karnad (1989: 331) and his plays can be read as meta-theatre. If *The Fire and the Rain* constructs literary discourse in relation to drama and the Yajna ritual (it enacts how drama and Yajna have similar structures and functions), *Naga-Mandala* situates that discourse within the literary space itself —drama-story

<sup>3</sup> Roland Barthes' notion of *readerly* and *writerly* texts (in French, *lisible* and *scriptible*) is quite similar to Umberto Eco's *open* and *closed* texts. As I understand it, in the former the interpretation is restrictive and in the latter there is a range of possibilities of interpretation; the reader writes the text. However, Eco's concept of *open* and *closed* text is often used in a sense that is quite the reverse. In his formulation, a *closed* text is one that is moderately 'open' to every possible interpretation. See Barthes (1974) and Umberto Eco (1979).

<sup>4</sup> After the "Girish Karnad Theatre Festival" at Dharwad (Karnataka) in 2000, Karnad mentioned this in his interaction with the audience.

interaction (narrating and displaying). In *Tughlaq*, as the present study intends to show, literary discourse is implicated in the history-poetry dialectics of the play.

Second, my understanding of *Tughlaq*, in terms of the history-poetry dynamics, is partly based on Roland Barthes' theory of textuality and partly on post-structuralist ways of reading. If meanings in a text, as Derrida and others have tried to show, are unstable, there is room for multiple interpretations, one of them being that the text reflects upon its own processes and provides an allegory of reading itself (see de Man 1979). As Barthes puts it, the text "accomplishes the very plural of the meaning" (1977: 159). A text encapsulates many (sub-) texts and it is the polysemy of a text that makes the reading of sub-texts possible. A sub-text is always latent and it is our interpretation that creates its meaning. Therefore, each reading, which creates its own sub-text, depends on the experiences, knowledge, beliefs, opinions, attitudes and values of what Stanley Fish (1980) calls the *interpretive community*. The construction of a sub-text is possible because of the signification of the text, which is "held in the language" (Barthes 1977: 157). The reading of a sub-text implies unearthing "a hidden level of meaning that surfaces slowly through character interaction and subtleties of language" (Vena 1988: 174). The present reading of *Tughlaq* makes use of the multiplicity of meanings generated in Karnad's portrayal of the interaction between the characters and the subtleties of their dialogues. If we take the political career of Tughlaq in the play as the main text, the history-poetry dialectics embedded in the interaction between Tughlaq and Barani can be read as a sub-text. On the surface, it appears that the Tughlaq-Barani relation is that of a king and a historian, but it is also possible to read that relation —on the basis of the dialogues, especially by Tughlaq, and those between Tughlaq and Barani— in terms of a poet and a historian.

Third, while analyzing the utterances of Karnad's characters, I use the term *discourse*, with its linguistic implications —how the speech acts of certain characters disseminate an assortment of meanings and subtly construct literary discourse within the texture of the play. At the same time, while positing how Karnad's characters construct literary discourse, I use the concept of *discourse* in the Foucauldian sense, that is, a "large group of statements" and in the Bakhtinian sense of "a method of using words that presume a type of authority" (Hawthorn 1998). What I mean by literary and historical discourse in the present paper is that certain aspects of the text make authoritative statements on historical thinking, its nature and function; while constructing certain suppositions about historical thinking, the text indirectly talks about literature, especially poetry. The phrase *literary discourse* is used here in its broadest sense: poetic, performance, figurative and special uses of language, literary tropes.

Karnad borrows materials for his plots from history, myth and folklore, but the relevant question is what does he do with his sources? One could answer that he simply creates theatre out of them. The literary merit of his theatre, by and large, rests on his ability to invent speech for his characters. As he himself acknowledges in an interview, his theatre is all about "speech" (Rajendran: 78). His theatre gives priority to dialogue, a characteristic feature of theatre as literature, and his characters breathe their lives through

their idiolects, marked by speech acts, implicatures and polyphonic utterances. They are quotable and arresting to the ear of the spectators. This makes Karnad's texts intensely *oral* in their dramatic representation. The textual property I chiefly make use of for the analysis of the history-poetry interface in the present paper resides in the speech and speech acts of Tughlaq and Barani.

Many critics, for example Ramamoorthi (1988) and Ramachandran (2008), have remarked on the self-reflexive nature of Karnad's plays. *Tughlaq* not only exhibits a historical consciousness but also constructs a historical discourse. The play has its own historicity. What led Karnad to write a play on Mohammad-bin-Tughlaq was "a comment by Kirtinath Kurtkoti that there were only costume plays and no historical plays in Kannada which could appeal to modern sensibilities", and Karnad felt "why not give history a try as a tool to interpret our life and times?" (Mukherjee 2006: 35). The very act of writing a historical play, howsoever the play is motivated by the contemporary political consciousness, implies the history-playwriting dynamics, the history-literature interface. In this context, the play is not only a response to "the existing tradition of historical play writing", but also a way of facing up to historical writings. The following sections deal with this aspect in terms of the history-poetry dialectics.

#### 4. TUGHLAQ AS POET

Before discussing the Tughlaq-Barani role in the framework of the history-poetry interface, let me establish the poet in Tughlaq, since the play's views on poetry are demonstrated through the very creation of the poetic protagonist. He is the locus of the play and holds our attention through his speech. He dominates others not because he is the king but because of his rhetoric. His speeches are longer and more persuasive than those of other characters in the play. In fact, he is a poet capable of using poetry for his political ends, too; through his deft handling of language, he convinces Sheik Imam-ud-din to negotiate with Ain-ul-Mulk.

One of the features of Tughlaq's idiolect is that it is marked by literary tropes — figurative language, metaphors, alliterations, rhyme and rhythm. He utters everything obliquely and often means more than he utters. He also infers pragmatic meaning in the utterances of others even though they do not intend it. His first speech on the announcement of the transfer of his capital is not only a fine example of political rhetoric but also a poetic piece.<sup>5</sup> To quote:

May this moment burn bright and light up our path  
towards greater justice, progress and peace  
— not just peace but more purposeful life. (1: 3)

<sup>5</sup> Terry Eagleton (2007) considers the connection between rhetoric and poetry while discussing the literariness and language of poetry.

In a similar way, what Tughlaq narrates in scene II, when his step-mother asks him what he does all night, can be read as a soliloquy:

I pray to the Almighty to save me  
 from sleep. All day long I have to worry about  
 tomorrow but it's only when the night falls that I can  
 step beyond all that. I look at the Pleiades and  
 I think of Ibn-ul-Mottazz who thought it was an  
 ostrich egg and Dur-rumma who thought it was a  
 swallow. And then *I want to go back to their  
 poetry and sink myself in their words*. Then again  
 I want to climb up, up to the top of the tallest tree in  
 the world, and call out to my people: 'Come, my  
 people, I am waiting for you. Confide in me your  
 worries. Let me share your joys. Let's laugh and  
 cry together and then, let's pray. Let's pray till our  
 bodies melt and flow and our blood turns into air.  
*History is ours to play with* — ours now! Let's be  
 the light and cover the earth with greenery. Let's be  
 darkness and cover up the boundaries of nations.  
 Come! I am waiting to embrace you all!  
*But then how can I spread my branches in the stars  
 while the roots have yet to find their hold in the earth?*  
 I wish I could believe in recurring births like the  
 Hindu but I have only one life, one body and my  
 hopes, my people, my God are all fighting for it.  
 Tell me, how dare I waste my time by sleeping?  
 And don't tell me to go and get married and breed  
 a family because I won't sleep. (II: 10; emphasis added)

The poetic expression of Tughlaq's ambitious dream is marked by the poetic register, animal imagery, symbolism, rhetorical questions and suggestiveness. After this lengthy speech, the step-mother responds, "I can't ask you a simple question without your giving a royal performance" (II: 10-11). Zia-ud-din Barani's *Tarikh-i-Firoz Shahi* attests that the arts of calligraphy, metaphor, poetry and science were among (historical) Tughlaq's accomplishments (Dharwadkar 2006: 104).

As a poet, Tughlaq's ideals are the classical Persian poets Rumi and Sadi. Like their works, his poetry is dream poetry. He wants every rose in the garden to be a poem. The long dramatic monologue Tughlaq sings, when he meets a young sentry on the fort of Daulatabad, is an example of romantic poetry:

Nineteen. Nice age! An age when you think you can clasp the whole world in your palm *like a rare diamond*. I was twenty-one when I came to Daulatabad first, and built this fort. I supervised the placing of every brick in it and I said to myself, one day *I shall build my own history like this, brick by brick*.

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 blood stream with the darkness of the night. The moment shed its symbols, its questions and answers, and stood naked and calm where the stars throbbed in my veins. *I was the earth, was the grass, was the smoke, was the sky*. Suddenly a sentry called from afar: 'Attention!' 'Attention!' and to that challenge the half-burnt torch and the half-built gate fell apart.

No, young man, I don't envy you, your youth. All that you have to face and suffer is still ahead of you, look at me. 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. Another twenty years and you will be as old as me. I might be lying under those woods there. Do you think you'll remember me then? (VIII: 53; emphasis added)

This dramatic monologue, characterized by poetic diction and a wealth of symbols, animal imagery, rhetorical questions and figures of speech, is delivered rhythmically.

Of all Karnad's characters, Tughlaq is drawn as intensely poetic, so much so that he has been realized more poetically than Devadatta, who is a declared poet in Karnad's *Hayavadana* (1971, English 1975). The portrayal of Tughlaq as a poet is conspicuous in the play. However, what is particularly relevant is that the poetic in the play is constructed not only through Tughlaq's poetic vein but also through historical discourse.

### 5. HISTORICAL DISCOURSE

Although a historical play, *Tughlaq* very subtly circulates the modernist conception of historical thinking by means of a sub-text which makes discursive statements on history and historical writings, and also through the identity of Barani, the historian-character. We often come across such discursive statements: “[s]urely a historian doesn’t need an invitation to watch history take place” (II: 13), or “History is not made in statecraft” (VIII: 55). Apart from the oblique references to historical discourse, the play makes more than five explicit statements on history as a craft. For example, Muhammad’s comment that “Barani is a historian—he is only interested in playing chess with *the shadows of the dead*” (II: 12; emphasis added) can be read as a statement that what history is capable of is dealing with shadows, not even of the living, but of the dead; because history-writing,<sup>6</sup> essentially in the construction of the past with a claim to objective truth, largely depends on sources where objectivity and truth, in the Nietzschean and the Foucauldian sense, are a myth, whereas literature (*drama* here), though it owes a great deal to history, deals with living characters. True to its belief, the character of Tughlaq in the play is intensely alive and “realized in great psychological depth” (Murthy 1975: viii) compared to Tughlaq in historical writings. In addition, we can make a close reading of the phrase *playing chess*, which connotes the *interpretative* and *imaginative* (White 1976, 1982) work of the historian in constructing the past.

Now the question is, in what way is Karnad’s text different from historical narratives? Though Karnad’s text is a tissue, as Barthes would have called it,<sup>7</sup> a cross-section of a variety of discourses, mainly in literary and historical registers, it constructs the human image of Tughlaq: archetypal, at the same time highly individualized, contemporary and a poet-politician. The history of Tughlaq’s regime that the play constructs is markedly different from what historical writings narrate.<sup>8</sup> For instance, the play very subtly stages *the absence of trust* in the affairs of Tughlaq’s transaction as a cause for his doom, whereas the historical narratives cite political reasons. There are innumerable examples in the text where Tughlaq’s citizens exhibit distrust of their king, to the extent that suspicion permeates the whole atmosphere of the play. Hence, Karnad’s play, as generally observed in the history-creative writing interface, implicates the human problem in the affairs of the Sultan, whereas the historical narratives interpret the political problem. Above all, Karnad’s success is an artistic discovery of Tughlaq, who is rendered poetically.

<sup>6</sup> See Alun Munslow’s *Deconstructing History* (2008), which assesses the claims of history as a form of “truthful explanation” and examines history-writing from the post-structuralist perspective.

<sup>7</sup> Barthes’s notion of literary text is composed of “multiple writings”; according to him, “The intertextual in which every text is held, it itself being the text-between of another text, is not to be confused with some origin of the text: to try to find the ‘sources’, the ‘influences’ of a work, is to fall in with the myth of filiation; the citations which go to make up a text are anonymous, untraceable, and yet *already read*: they are quotations without inverted commas” (1977: 160; emphasis in original). Barthes’ theory is quite similar to Set Theory in Mathematics.

<sup>8</sup> For the historical accounts on Muhammad-bin-Tughlaq, see Elliot and Dowson (1971). Published in London, the eight volumes are the translations of medieval Muslim chronicles. See also other historical narratives, such as Barani (1953); Haq (1959); Hardy (1960); Hussain (1963); Habibullah (1967); Nigam (1968); Defremery and Sanguinetti (1986); and Rizvi (1993).

The sub-text creates historical thinking through the identity of Barani. Its polemics on history as a craft are all convincing, because they are used in relation to Barani. For example, after realizing the futility of the transfer of his capital city and the subsequent chaos in the kingdom, Tughlaq asks, "You are a historian, Barani, you are the man to prescribe remedies for this . . . What should I do, Barani? What would you prescribe for this honeycomb of disease?" (VIII: 54-55). Accordingly, the play upholds the assumption that the main function of history is to suggest remedies for contemporary problems. This is the task we have traditionally assigned to historical writings: that history repeats itself, hence it is worth studying. In this respect, it is quite clear that Karnad's text looks at history through the lens of the present. That "the past is for the present" (Karnad 1972) was a typically modernist conception of history very much prevalent in the Indian academe during the time of the composition of the play.

In the final scene, when Barani wants to abandon Tughlaq during the chaos in the kingdom, Tughlaq challenges him: "You wanted to see history formed in front of your eyes", to which Barani replies, "I have spent seven years here and *the greatest historians of the world would have given half their lives to see a year in it*" (XIII: 78; emphasis added). This is a rare comment from Barani on historical discourse in the play. History, in this context, is not simply a chronicle of past events. It is a complex and bewildering phenomenon which historians take pains to construe: so much has happened in the reign of the Sultan within a short span of time that it is difficult for historians to interpret it.

If scrutinized closely, Barani's presence in the play offers a contrast to the poetic side of Tughlaq. Karnad's primary historical source for the writing of the play was Zia-ud-din Barani's *Tarikh-i-Firoz Shahi* (1357), a historical narrative which chronicled the reigns of certain Delhi Sultanates ruling the Indian subcontinent during the medieval period (Dharwadkar 2006: 98). In this respect, Barani's presence in the play is very significant. However, it is remarkable that all other characters are involved in the development of the plot, either contributing to the tension or resolving it, all of them act, but no single act is performed by Barani. From the viewpoint of plot development, *Tughlaq* could still be *Tughlaq* without the character of Barani. So what function does Barani perform? As a confidant of the king he simply observes "history taking place", and as a historian-character he lends historical consciousness to the play. Readers are reminded of the relevant figure of the confidant as a theatrical convention, in general, and in Indian drama, in particular. But this observation may prove to be too simplistic. More than an agent of historical consciousness, Barani is necessary for the text, as the (sub-) text attempts to validate the literary by juxtaposing the historical. Hence, it can be argued that the poetic in *Tughlaq* is constructed not only through the *distinct* language he uses but also by contrast to Barani. Tughlaq embodies the literary and Barani the historical. If Tughlaq stands for the poetic, imaginative sensibility or feeling, Barani stands for the historical, referential, matter-of-fact observance and sobriety. This relational aspect is suggested in the observation of the stepmother, who says that Tughlaq is impulsive and gets into his moods, whereas Barani is sober, level-headed and honest (II: 17), a

description which befits their archetypes as poet and historian, and helps us understand the history-poetry dialectics the sub-text builds.

## 6. HISTORY-POETRY DIALECTICS

The most striking comparison between history and poetry comes to the fore when Tughlaq, after becoming aware of the chaos in his kingdom, asks Barani, "What should I do, Barani?" Barani replies directly but humbly: "Your Majesty, you are known the world over for your knowledge of philosophy and poetry. History is not made only in statecraft; its lasting results are produced in the ranks of learned men. That's where you belong, Your Majesty, in the company of learned men. Not in the market of corpses". At this point Tughlaq's comment on the rhetorical device of Barani's speech helps us interpret the history-poetry dialectics the play poses; Tughlaq says, "You want me to retire from my throne? (*Laughs*) Barani, *if you were capable of irony, I would have thought you were laughing at me. But as usual you mean it*" (VIII: 55; emphasis added). One way of reading this dialogue is as if poetry were challenging history in that the historical register cannot be ironical, whereas poetry can. History communicates directly, while poetry is indirect and suggestive in constructing a reality through the use of tropes such as irony.

Tughlaq, the poet, is aware of the fact that his is the language of poetry. If Barani plays chess with the shadow and Najib as a politician "wants pawns of flesh and blood", Tughlaq, as a poet, the text asserts, can "breathe life into these bones" (II: 12). While making statements on history and politics, the illocutionary speech act of Tughlaq's dialogue implicates the literary discourse. It is as much a statement on his own language as on the language of the historian. In this respect, Tughlaq's language is what Terry Eagleton calls "verbally inventive" (2007: 41).

## 7. CONCLUSION

Literature dealing with its own genre, glorifying or ridiculing or critiquing itself, is not a recent development. Works such as Aristophanes' *The Frogs*, Sheridan's *The Critic*, Molière's *L'impromptu de Versailles*, Luigi Pirandello's *Sei Personaggi in Cerca d'Autore* (see Ramachandran 2008: 41), among many others, are plays about plays and writers; they critique the category called *literature*. As Wallace Stevens says, poetry itself is the subject matter of poetry (Jaaware: 2001: 38). In this respect, Karnad's dealing with literary discourse is not remarkable. However, analysis of this play contributes to the understanding of how literature has viewed itself in different historical eras and in what ways we may read it differently. In this study, I have tried to show how Karnad's *Tughlaq* implicates literary discourse by utilizing historical discourse to validate its own position. While seemingly writing a historical play, the playwright has not merely tried to fill the lacuna in the tradition of historical plays in Kannada but has also responded to historical writings on Tughlaq. As a critique of such writings, the play artistically reveals the Sultan in terms of human implications. An ambitious play, it subtly constructs a sub-text that deals with its

literary and historical discourses and is the result of the portrayal of Tughlaq as a poet who knows history well, who comments on and tries to theorize history. In addition, Barani is created in the play to present a contrast to the poetic side of the king. The interplay between Tughlaq and Barani is thus a classic example of the construction of a sub-text.

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