Being and Role-playing: Reading Girish Karnad's *Tughlaq*

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> Step-mother (to Muhammad): I can't ask a simple question without your giving a royal performance. *(Scene Two.)*
>
> Muhammad (to Barani): When I came here I felt I needed an audience... *(Scene Eight.)*

Girish Karnad's *Tughlaq* (1971) abounds in references to "acting," "performance," "show," "masquerade," and other such theatrical terms. The whole play may appear as a show Muhammad puts on before his people to realise his visions of kingship. Traditionally, the stage presents things that are make-believe, life presents things that are real and sometimes not well-rehearsed. But the relationship between theatre and life, as Elizabeth Burns has argued, can be two-way (8-11). If the stage is a world in its own right, all the world is equally a stage. And much of the modern analysis of social life uses the "stage" as its root metaphor: social actor, social performance, and the like. If we live and move only in our roles, theatre foregrounds these real-life performances and defamiliarises them by bringing its own set of necessities. This in turn confronts us with the following questions in relation to the conditions of living. Do the roles assumed by a person express an authentic self? Or are they merely masks leaving the central self untouched? Or do they put in question the very possibility of a transcendental subject? *Tughlaq* broaches the issues in a self-reflexive manner and problematises the traditional notion of a unified subject. In other words, it situates the subject as a multiplicity of cultural and historical forces, as a conglomeration of roles without essence. Character is not a given, a defining trap,

but simply a field of possibilities.

Muhammad appears to be an idealist; yet in the pursuit of his ideals, he perpetrates their opposites. The whole play is structured on his multiphrenia. Karnad himself has commented on this:

> Here was the most idealistic, the most intelligent king ever to come on the throne of Delhi...and one of the greatest failures also.... This seemed to be...due to his idealism as well as the shortcomings within him, such as his impatience, his cruelty, his feeling that he had the only correct answer (qtd. in Murthy viii).

The point at issue is that once any degree of fission is allowed to develop in the nuclear self, the concept of unitary, autonomous selfhood is under threat. And the notion of plural selves, in the words of Raman Selden, readily invites a post-modern debate on subjectivity (60). The old division between the mask and what lies behind it, or the Kantian split between the empirical ego and the transcendental subject that remained convincingly in place till the late nineteenth century, was destabilised in modernist art and was finally subverted in post-modern writings. Humanists have ever been anxious to protect the integrity/stability of the central self. Even writers like Robert Langbaum and Alan Kennedy took pains to provide a reliably humanistic source for the plurality of selves. Personae, according to them, are surface appearances of the deep structure. Muhammad goes on assuming role after role to realise himself as an exemplary king. But does he discover an essential self after his extravagant role-playing? The search for self/true being seems to show an endless deferral of presence, projecting in the process its multiple narratives. To borrow phrases from Derrida, there is nothing that is just there, present, durably identical to itself. The subject is not destroyed by this, but "only reinscribed...within relations of force that are always differential" and therefore "mobile" (146). It depends on the effectiveness of historically contingent practices of "contextualization." Muhammad cannot conduct personae from afar but continually merges with them, thus underlying the indeterminability of self-identity. What he is stands or falls with the contingent roles by which identity and existence acquire practical and performative determinability. There is no backstage or offstage where roles are momentarily abandoned or suspended to reveal an authentic inner self. The sense of continually *being* his roles (and not playing them) remains the only tangible source of his subjectivity. In other words, the role he is striving to live up to in any particular context explains the conception he has provisionally formed of himself. In Lyotard's terms,

the self is not a given; it derives from the situated contingencies and rituals of interaction. It is a self that is located at institutional "nodal points" and exists in experience to the degree that it is variously constructed within a mobile "fabric of relations" and practices (15). Religion, politics, law and morality can be viewed as the varied contexts or discursive locations from which Muhammad derives a sense of the multiple truths/authenticities he is. To use Foucault's terminology, as "discourses-in-practice," these sites incite the sultan to take different subject positions as a participant would play out several roles within them. To read this further with Althusser's formulation that ideology "interpellates" the individual as a subject, Muhammad as a subject becomes the site of conflicting ideologies and therefore lives diverse roles in the social/political arena (58). Post-modernists differ in their views on subject-formation, but what is common to the systems of thought we have briefly surveyed is the dispersion of the notion of the paramount self followed by the rendition of the subject as a construct. And my contention here is that Muhammad's roles may be viewed as his plural selves which are but constructs.

The play opens with Muhammad in the role of a secular humanist. He dreams of a kingdom that would be a land of justice and peace, equality, and progress. He is even ready to "announce his mistakes to the whole world" and be judged in public (1). The announcement in Scene One corroborates this: His Merciful Majesty has accepted the charge of a Brahmin that he is "guilty of illegal appropriation" of the poor man's land and granted "just compensation for the loss" (2). The performance is sincere, to adopt Erving Goffman's role-play theory, because the performer is "taken in by his own act" (28). No wonder a section of the sultan's audience applauds: "This King...isn't afraid to be human" (1). The expressive bias of the performance is accepted as reality that has characteristics of a ceremony, of the ritual of ideological recognition, so to say. On the other hand, the audience reaction makes the performer conscious of how much he is observed and how much the crowd is disposed to favour all his inclinations. So Muhammad finds it the opportune moment to declare that the capital of his empire is going to be shifted from Delhi to Daulatabad. A city of the Hindus, the new capital will symbolise the long-cherished bond between Muslims and Hindus. The sultan's lofty view of himself and his empire, then, not only derives from the juridical and cultural ideals of Indian monarchy but becomes complicit with the idea of sovereignty. He believes that by his humility and deportment he can also subject his credulous people to his authority. His assertions of value and his knowledge

of truth, in Foucauldian terms, are therefore based on a solid alliance with power. As a faction of the crowd suspects the sincerity/reality of the performance, the performer tries to repair his image by way of amending the expressions given off: "Your surprise is natural, but I beg you to realise that this is no mad whim of a tyrant. My ministers and I took this decision after careful thought and discussion" (3). Once Muhammad starts playing an ideal sultan, he gets trapped by his visions and resorts to contrivance, ironically enough, to project what he considers the real reality. The individual thus becomes a manifold self-articulated in the varied scripts of life.

The sultan's sense of unique subjectivity cannot be seen as transideological; it is rather articulated in institutionally produced languages. Acutely aware of the shortness of life and the stupendous task before him, he, almost like Emperor Ashoka (d. 232 B.C.), would dedicate his life to the well-being of his subjects. Only with the unfinished work done, could he call out to them and say: "Come my people, I am waiting for you. Confide in me your worries. Let me share your joys.... Let's pray till our bodies melt and flow and our blood turns into air" (10). It is a rehearsal for the idealistic sultan for the "royal performance" he has sincerely aimed at. A king is no king, Muhammad claims, unless he is one with his people. He takes it upon himself to correct all the errors committed by the past sultans in order to spread the Kingdom of Heaven on earth. At the same time, he, like all of them, must exercise power to realise his vision, to produce what may be called rituals of truth. Power, according to Foucault, is "less a confrontation between two adversaries...than a question of *government*" (qtd. in Allen 156). But it can be violent, of course, or coercive, or repressive when the idea of government (a structure of actions upon other actions for possible outcomes) is frustrated. So Muhammad kills his own father and brother "for an ideal." He confesses to his step-mother, in Scene Ten, that he cannot even look into a mirror "for fear of seeing their faces in it" (65). But he considered "duty" above personal relationships. Interestingly, in Scene Two, he dismisses the allegation of patricide as "a piece of gossip" and manufactures lies for public consumption. The kind of government he promised to protect public interest did not only cover the legitimately constituted forms of political subjection but also modes of action which were designed as repressive strategies. It may be a cynical performance, but the performer is sincerely convinced of his own sincerity. Had he made a premature disclosure of the killings, his people might have deserted him, thus ruining his pursuit of "truth". Or, in that case, he would be an actor in "an empty auditorium" and lose the occasion to perform "reality".

The announcement at the outset of Scene Three strikes us as a parallel to the announcement in Scene One. Sheikh Imam-ud-din, a revered saint and the severest critic of the sultan, will address a meeting to analyse His Majesty's administration. He will show where the king has taken measures "harmful to the country and the Faith." Muhammad will be present at the meeting to seek direction from the sheikh. He might have never "consciously tried to go against the tenets of Islam," but he does not claim himself to be omniscient either. So he believes that the sheikh's criticism of his inadvertent "transgressions" will indeed help him complete his mission. But the conviction with which he initially sought the judgement, or the sincerity with which he wanted to act as a pious, dutiful king, gives way to deceit and manipulation the moment he apprehends the risk involved in such a performance. The orthodox theologian, Imam-ud-din threatens Muhammad's secular ideals. Following the example of Ala-ud-din Khilji, sultan of Delhi from 1296 to 1316, Karnad's protagonist refuses to impose Islamic *Shari'at*, or canon law, on his people because as a modern leader he must define his role in terms broader than those of religion (Dharwadker 54). The sheikh does not get his audience because people are secretly barred from coming to the venue. The impression of reality the sultan now fosters and stages before others is that he should not "call on God [or His saints] to clean the dirt deposited by men." Instead, he should rely on his own resources to found "a new world." He even justifies what the sheikh condemns as his "transgressions": to live by the *Koran* alone would be to kill "the Greek in me" and deny "the visions which led Zarathustra or Buddha" (21). He also wishes to believe in "recurring births like the Hindu" because "my hopes, my people, my God are all fighting for" the "only one life" he has (10). Muhammad knows that his kingdom is being "torn into pieces by [his] vision's," but he cannot deny their validity at all (21). No wonder, he gets the sheikh eliminated after the latter's speeches have triggered off violent protests in other parts of the country. He convinces the sheikh that the war Ain-ul-Mulk is determined to impose on Delhi "will mean a slaughter of Muslims at the hands of fellow-Muslims." And that is enough for Imam-ud-din to agree to Muhammad's proposal that he meet the enemy as the sultan's "peace emissary." As he marches towards Ain-ul-Mulk's army, looking exactly like the sultan with the royal robes on, Muhammad's army starts the battle and kills the puzzled sheikh. Thus Muhammad's multiple selves are all equally "real," depending upon the sites of construction. The very concept of personal essences is thrown into doubt. There is no essential, fundamental understanding, only a plethora of possibilities for what

one can be. Self-construction is never completed, never fully coherent. There is only a relative stability of contextualizing practice to make the occasional truths true. Each reality of self gives way to "reflexive questioning, irony and ultimately the probing of yet another reality" (Gergen 7).

In contrast to the humanist assumption that subjectivity is based in eternal values, the play shows how it is constituted by one's engagement in the practices and discourses that lend varied significance to the events of the world. Such a view does not reject the subject wholesale but problematises it by situating it in the mobile network of social and political relationships. Particular historical situations/moments inscribe and reinscribe the subject in different ways, underlining its incoherence and discontinuity. *Tughlaq* installs and then challenges the transcendental subject in a typically postmodern and paradoxical way. The more Muhammad struggles to define himself as a unique king, the more he becomes diverse and fragmented. He steps into one role after another in a vain effort to realise his true being and gets deluged by the competing versions of "reality" available to him. The roles, he earlier played sincerely to realise his visions are later replayed rather cynically only with an aim to power. As if to retrieve his role as the architect of "a new...India," he now takes another step – the introduction of copper currency that will have the same value as silver dinars (38-40). Muhammad is almost sure that his people will accept it since it is only a question of confidence and "trust" in their emperor (39). But he is, at the same time, aware of the growing dissidence among the amirs (nobles) due to his decision to move the capital. Initially, he tries to contain them by his emotional theatrics. But as they rise in revolt during a prayer, he gets them arrested in a fashion that suggests his foreknowledge of the rebellion. He then kills Shaihab-ud-din for leading the rebel amirs and bans praying in the kingdom on the grounds that the prayer so dear to him has been profaned by bloodshed. The killings, he reiterates to his step-mother in Scene Ten, were after all necessary because "they gave me what I wanted – power, strength to shape my thoughts..., to recognise myself" (66). However, the issue of self-realisation is problematised not by stressing the discrepancy between intention and outcome but by breaking up the grand bases of knowledge. The self, situated in discursive locations, is variously addressed and its meaning assembled and assigned. And from this perspective, self-reality seems to be contingent and therefore provisional.

Muhammad proceeds from the assumption that an idea can be an object of cognition, that a law can be adequately represented.

If the law is thus within what Lyotard calls "the theatre of representation," then determinate judgements can be made in reference to it. The effect of this is to preclude the possibility of dispute, which is the essence of totalitarianism. The terror of totalitarianism consists in making such a claim as "I am just because I *know* what justice is." Idealism may be totalitarian in that it claims to formulate prescriptive statement in reference to a determinate idea of the "good," a *knowable* good. But politics is not a matter of devising strategies for arriving at goals so much as experimenting with an indeterminate law, the idea of justice. Moreover, that idea itself is "a product of the social relations that it serves to judge" (Cahoone 15). As with Muhammad's politics, the grand narrative of historical destiny institutes terror in that it attempts to produce an account of justice "as mimetic correspondence to a model of society" by eliminating all resistance (Readings 111). This is not to say that the absence of criteria in indeterminate judgement is a relativist refusal to judge. The point is that judgements are not made from a position of a transcendent subjectivity which stands outside the judgements it makes. The justice of a judgement can only be judged, again, without determinate criteria. Muhammad goes on changing his stand on justice, but always preoccupied with a sense of self-righteousness.

Muhammad, the tyrant cannot be separated from Muhammad, the idealist in the way role can be from being. Initially, the sultan resorted to killings as a means, however cruel, to his idealistic end. There was a seeming unity of purpose in it, and contrivances could be distinguished from reality, however contingent or questionable. But later subjectivity can only be multiple. Muhammad is anything but a whole: an idealist, a tyrant, a poet, a civil servant, and a self-pitying king. In Scene Seven, he bluntly orders his people to leave for Daulatabad: "Anybody who attempts to stay behind will be severely punished" (46). Scene Eight is set in the Daulatabad fort – five years later. Once again, the sultan needs an audience, but this time to admit his failures. This serves to frustrate the search for unity, subjective or historical. Muhammad wanted to reduce history to a kind of autobiography, to reduce India to his own consciousness. He tells the young sentry that while supervising the construction of the fort, he thought "one day I shall build my own history like this, brick by brick" (53). But one night, when he was standing on its ramparts, the gate, the fort and the sky seemed to fall apart. Like a poet agonised over the destruction of his own creation, he goes on: "In the last four years, I have seen only woods clinging to the earth, heard only the howls of wild wolves and the answering bay of street dogs" (54). By trying to make personal experience the source

of public history, the play actually subverts the traditional notion of history as non-contradictory continuity. In other words, the scene questions both subjectivity and history as successive forms of a primordial intention. Significantly, Muhammad confesses his frustrations to Barani as well, the historian who sees history being formed in a disjunctive manner. The introduction of copper currency has helped "only one industry" flourish in his kingdom-production of counterfeit coins in every Hindu household. The experiment itself might have been a serious innovation, as Chaudhuri suggests, anticipating by half a century the introduction of paper currency in China (83). But Muhammad is hardly aware that "communities marked by political inequality and religious difference survive through a negative equilibrium" (Dharwadker 54). If the Muslim minority feels increasingly alienated for his exemplary humility towards the Hindu majority, the latter indulges in fraud as though in collective communal revenge against an alien king. A sick economy, threats of armed rebellion, natural calamities – all connive with each other, as it were, to turn the land into "a honeycomb of diseases" (55). The drought in the Doab causing cracks in the soil, is symbolic of a fragmented king and his fractured kingdom. Muhammad still postulates himself as the origin of meaning, both private and public: "I have something to give, something to teach, which may open the eyes of history...." He considers himself more a shaper of history than a historical subject. However, his crisis of confidence surfaces in his final frenzied attempt to make his people "listen to me before I lose even that!" (56). This questions our old sure sense of the subject in history. One has to dispense with the constituent subject, to quote Foucault, "to arrive at an analysis which can account for the constitution of the subject within a historical framework" (59). This is a form of history which can account for the constitution of knowledges/discourses without having to make reference to a subject which is either transcendental in relation to the field of events or runs in its empty sameness through the course of history.

The assumption of an autonomous self is challenged and the paradigms of wholeness and parity undercut by the presence of the Aziz-Azam plot as a parodic intertext. Aziz, a low-caste Muslim washerman, goes on donning mask after mask without any illusion of moral integrity, taking life as theatre which, for him, is ruled by improvisation and irony. He perfectly understands the political situation in which Muhammad is trying to realize a fantasy of equitable government; and as his second person (the master politician who marginalises the ethical to attain absolute power), he subverts each of the sultan's well-intentioned" moves. Aziz is the Brahmin who

wins the case against Muhammad, the civil servant who loots the people on their way to Daulatabad, and finally the Khaliff whose holy arrival would bring peace and prosperity to the wilderness that the kingdom has been reduced to. While Muhammad cannot help rationalising murder and large-scale brutality, Aziz considers power as "a kind of licensed evil that need not be naturalised through discourse." The play's "absolutist discourse of power" comes more from Aziz's mock-heroic micropolitics than from Muhammad's epoch-making gestures (Dharwadker 52). Aziz is a cynic. But his masquerades are covert interruptions in Muhammad's metanarrative which lies no less ruptured by the sultan's self-conflicting actions. Even after his discovery that Aziz is impersonating Ghiyas-ud-din, Muhammad has to welcome him because he has already announced the arrival of the "Saviour" who would revive the public prayer in Daulatabad which has been mute for years. The sultan himself calls it a "farce" and wants to get out of it by going back to Delhi with his people. "What is the logic in it?" asks Barani. Muhammad replies: "If justice was as simple as you think or logic as beautiful as I had hoped, life would have been so much clearer....all I need now is myself and my madness...." As the prayer fades and the curtain comes down, the sultan "looks around dazed and frightened, as though he can't comprehend where he is" (84-86).

The world of *Tughlaq* is a diverse world of multiple selves, knocking our sense of self off centre. Exploding, as it were, with representations of who the sultan is, it brings out the fictions of selfhood underlying his overarching aim to create history. Such questioning of the nuclear self radically problematises the entire notion of subjectivity, pointing directly to its dramatised contradictions. The play inscribes the humanist subject in a system that exposes its instability and ultimate self-subversion of the effects to which it owes its seeming unity and autonomy. The roles, Muhammad plays are neither facades nor hyper real images but subjectivities as open-ended constructs. Their "authenticities" are recognisable only within the multiple sites the protagonist occupies and therefore provisional. They are, in theatrical terms, performances which he exists in and through.

Perhaps no critique of *Tughlaq* can be complete without reference to the "contemporaneity" of the play's history, which Karnad has stressed in his occasional comments on his work. The fictional Muhammad, who both emerges from and repudiates the figuration of institutional history, evokes not one but several political figures of the colonial and post-colonial India by embodying their radically different impulses. He is at once the Gandhi experimenting with

truth, the Nehru aiming at cultural modernity and the Indira choosing self-destructive authoritarianism for her concept of national well-being. Muhammad's humility and self-questioning necessary for public confessions of error are "fundamental to Gandhi's political practice" (Dharwadker 51). For example, the Mahatma confessed at a public meeting in 1919, after the Civil Disobedience Movement had turned violent in the Ahmedabad region, that he had launched it prematurely. Muhammad's affinity with Nehru is even greater. His "hopes of building a new future of India" (40) reminds one of Nehru's "dislike for the present as well as for many relics of the past" and his anxiety to "give [Independent India] the garb of modernity" (50). The sultan's desire for a transformative union with his people is a striking parallel to Nehru's dream to revitalise his citizens by releasing their "vast stores of suppressed energy and ability" (56). The analogy with Indira Gandhi reverses the Gandhian and Nehruvian models of political action, as Dharwadker maintains, by underscoring politics as "the self-serving fantasies of power" (50). After a State High Court set aside her election to Parliament in 1975, Mrs. Gandhi declared a National Emergency on the grounds that she was "the only person to lead [the country]." She considered it "my duty to the country to stay, though I didn't want to" (qtd. in Moraes 220). The extent to which the Emergency proved coercive is suggested by a programme note to a Delhi production in 1975: "Our interpretation of the play is one in which the politics of the entire situation are all-important and the violence of the second half of the play evident" (*Tughlaq*). By making Muhammad's regime a mix of the above political paradigms, Karnad suggests a complicity between them in terms of Indian politics between the late sixties and the early seventies. Here Mrs. Gandhi comes closest to Karnad's protagonist as a mixture of paradoxes, choosing coercive strategies "out of a compulsion to act for the nation" (Dharwadker 53). Her "mercurial, manipulative...brilliant" style of leadership, as Thapar portrays her, replicates the tensions within Muhammad (qtd. in Gupte 123). She sought to modernize and discipline India with such zeal that she came to impose herself on her people. Her serious reformative urges ended up as private cravings for power, making her the most controversial political figure of her time. Karnad's historical fiction does not reduce "history" to a topical allegory but certainly invests it with new meanings by theatricalising a most complex historical subject in the light of modern Indian political and cultural experience. By evoking Gandhi, Nehru, and their political heirs, Karnad's protagonist lends contemporary relevance to the multiple roles he is.

Notes

1. *Tughlaq*, revived regularly by the National School of Drama (Delhi) since the first production by B.V. Karanth in 1966, has been universally acknowledged as a modern classic. The protagonist of the play is Muhammad-bin-Tughlaq, an exceptionally intelligent but spectacularly unsuccessful sultan of Delhi (1325-51) popularly known as Mad Muhammad. Karnad's primary historical source is the *Tarikh-i Firoz Shahi* (1357), a chronicle whose author, Zia-ud-din Barani, spent seventeen years at Tughlaq's court. Barani "defines history as a source of instructive examples that promote virtue and discourage vice but, more significantly, as a form of knowledge essential for understanding" the Islamic tradition (Dharwadker 47). Of the eight sultans, whom he judges according to the principles of Islam, Tughlaq is the most unsatisfactory. Barani, who belonged to the class of ulemas (Islamic scholars), ascribes the sultan's political failure to a series of projects "not in harmony with the religious traditions of Islam" (Chaudhuri 83). The "history" of Tughlaq is the product as much of medieval Muslim historiography as of nineteenth and twentieth century British orientalist constructions of medieval India. Mountstuart Elphinstone acknowledges Tughlaq as "one of the wonders of the age" but accuses him of a "perversion of judgement which...leaves us in doubt whether he was not affected by some degree of insanity" (1:59). Henry Elliot also casts Tughlaq as a brilliant oriental despot who, in the absence of civilizing influences, turned insane and tyrannical. Karnad draws on Barani's basic narrative and the orientalist texts, but mainly to problematise the received notion of Tughlaq as the subject of and in history.
2. Some historians think that the basic motive of the sultan behind transferring the capital to Daulatabad was effective administrative control of the South, while others believe that the region was economically more prosperous to sustain the structure of an all-India government. It was also a geopolitical reality that Daulatabad was almost free from the fear of invaders (Habib and Nizami 506-10). However, the play focuses primarily on Tughlaq's penchant for cultural integration so as to problematise his humanistic ideals.
3. Ashoka, the third Mauryan emperor, is well known as India's philosopher king. The apotheosis of humility, he interpreted royal duties and powers as "a paternal despotism whose rallying call was 'All men are my children' " (Thapar 82). Despite his conversion to Buddhism after the bloody campaign in Kalinga, he was careful to make a distinction between his personal belief and his duty as emperor to remain unattached and unbiased without slanting in favour of any particular religion. However, his policy of *Dhamma*, a humanistic code of behaviour formulated for the king and subjects alike, did not succeed because of his over-anxiety that it be accepted. Ashoka suppressed differences of opinion in the interests of general harmony, but this ironically led to severe social tensions and sectarian conflicts.
4. The copper coins had Arabic inscriptions on one side and Persian on the other. The former reads: "He who obeys the Sultan, obeys God"; and the latter: "Minted tanka, current during the days of Muhammad Tughlaq, who hopes for Divine favour". The word "current" means

that the coins owed their value to the credit of the sultan, and not to their metallic value. For a detailed discussion of the issue, see Habib and Nizami 516.

5. The following is a short excerpt from a conversation between Tughlaq and Barani as recorded in the *Tarikh-i Firoz Shahi*: "I will keep inflicting capital punishments...till either I perish or the people are set right and give up rebellion and disobedience..." (qtd. in Habib and Nizami 551-52).
6. An earlier version of this paper was presented at a UGC-sponsored National Seminar at the Department of English, University of North Bengal, in October 2001.

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