Shabd Braham
E-ISSN 2320 – 0871
International Research Journal of Indian languages
17 August 2025
Peer Reviewed Refereed Research Journal

Self as Fragment: Modern Indian Identity and Postcolonial Incongruity in Karnad's *Tughlaq*

Nikhilesh Kumar
Ph.D. scholar
English Department
Barkatullah University
Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh, Bharat

Abstract

This paper examines the fragmented nature of modern Indian identity through Girish Karnad's seminal play Tughlaq (1964). Although set in 14th-century India, the play operates as an allegory for the political and psychological dissonance of post-independence India. Karnad's Muhammad bin Tughlaq emerges as a conflicted and paradoxical figure - a visionary trapped in his own idealism, and a rationalist who resorts to tyranny. Using the postcolonial theoretical frameworks of Homi Bhabha, Frantz Fanon and Ashis Nandy, this paper shows how Tughlaq represents the fractured self of postcolonial India grappling with mimicry, feeling of alienation, and lack of moral self-integrity. Through his failure as a ruler, Karnad reflects the problems that postcolonial societies are facing in making balance between indigenous cultures and western models of governance. The paper also explores how Karnad's dramatic structure reflects psychological fragmentation, making Tughlaq an enduring critique of fractured modernity and unfulfilled utopias.

Introduction

'Tughlaq' written by Girish Karnad is one of the remarkable dramatic works in the history of contemporary Indian drama. It is not only a history of one of the Sultan of Delhi, Muhammad bin Tughlaq of the 14th century but much more than that. The play was composed in the year 1964 when India was also at a juncture of confusion and disappointment when the early expectations of independence started fading.

Karnad takes the story of Tughlaq not only to speak about a king, but rather he tries to touch a more fundamental issue in the sense of identity, power, and the struggles in front of the modern nation.

In the play, Tughlaq is shown as a smart and ambitious ruler who wants to create a fair and secular state. But as his plans fail, he becomes more harsh and disconnected. His good intentions slowly turn into acts of cruelty. This makes him a tragic figure—someone who cannot match his high ideals with the reality around him. His struggle reflects a larger truth about postcolonial India. After independence, the country was torn between its rich spiritual traditions and the modern, Western ideas it had adopted. This created confusion in how people saw themselves and their nation.

This paper looks at Tughlaq as a symbol of that struggle. It tries to understand how the character of Tughlaq shows the broken or "fragmented" self of postcolonial India. Through literary and cultural theories, we will explore how Karnad presents this deep conflict between past and present, tradition and modernity.

Theoretical Framework: Mimicry, Alienation and the Fragmented Self

Homi Bhabha's idea of mimicry helps us understand why Tughlaq seems so confused and torn. According to Bhabha, mimicry is when someone copies the powerful "Other" in an effort to gain control, but this imitation always has cracks. Tughlaq tries to copy the ideas of secularism, Greek logic, and even bureaucratic governance—much like the British colonial rulers later did. But this copying doesn't fit well in his world and causes more confusion than clarity.

Shabd Braham
E-ISSN 2320 – 0871
International Research Journal of Indian languages 17 August 2025
Peer Reviewed Refereed Research Journal

We see this in Tughlaq's bold statement: "My kingdom is made up of Hindus and Muslims. And I am their Sultan. And I dream of a new future for them—a future of justice, equality, progress."

This dream sounds great, but it is based on abstract ideas, not the ground realities of his people. This gap between ideal and real is at the heart of what Bhabha calls postcolonial mimicry.

Frantz Fanon's theory of alienation, especially from Black Skin, White Masks, also sheds light on Tughlaq's mental struggle. Fanon says colonized people often try to become like their colonizers and end up losing a sense of self. Tughlaq's deep love for Persian poetry, Greek thought, and Islamic law shows this inner conflict.

Ashis Nandy, in The Intimate Enemy, argues that colonialism first captures the mind before the land. Tughlaq, though from medieval times, behaves like someone mentally colonized. He values rules and logic more than emotion and tradition. This disconnect leads to his downfall—a man unable to balance modernity with his own roots.

Historical Allegory and Postcolonial Parallel

Though Tughlaq is set in 14th-century India, its historical setting serves as an allegorical lens through which Karnad critiques the failures of post-independence India. Sultan Muhammad bin Tughlaq, who ruled from 1325 to 1351, was a visionary known for his intellectual brilliance and bold reforms—such as the transfer of the capital from Delhi to Daulatabad and the introduction of token currency. However, these ambitious policies failed due to poor planning, lack of public understanding, and oppressive implementation.

Karnad recreates these same historical developments in a way that exemplifies the disappointment in the ideals of Nehru in the 1960s. Post-independence, Nehru advocated a vision of secularism, democratic order, planned development which was ideal in theory and failed in practice as was the case with Tughlaq. The deepening of communal strains after independence, failure to consolidate its bureaucracy, and Indo-China war were some of the factors that showed the weakness of this modernist project. This national nervousness is ventilated into Tughlaq, which contrasts the Sultan and his flawed utopia with the emerging accounts of Indian cynicism towards the new Indian state of post colonialism.

Tughlaq's personal contradictions—his idealism marred by cruelty, his dream of justice undermined by violence—capture the fragmented nature of modern Indian identity. His words, "I was so confident of love—of being loved. It's so easy, I thought, to win the love of my people", are not only a reflection of his hubris but also echo the misplaced faith of India's early leadership in top-down reform and mass consensus.

The vision of the Sultan is a failure since it is disconnected to reality of his cultural and social setting. Likewise, efforts by the Indian state to impose western forms of governance and development frequently came into conflict with the caste, religion, and local power arrangements. By turning to a distant past, Karnad creates a parable for the postcolonial present—one where lofty ambitions collide with historical continuities and unresolved contradictions. Thus, Tughlaq is not merely a historical drama; it is a postcolonial allegory about the peril of fractured modernity, elite-driven utopias, and the cost of leadership that fails to listen.

Tughlaq as the Embodiment of Fragmentation

Muhammad bin Tughlaq, as imagined by Girish Karnad, represented the fractured psyche of post-colonial times. He is not simply a misguided historical ruler but a deeply symbolic character whose contradictions mirror the tensions within modern Indian identity. Through his characterization, Karnad explores the tragic consequences of alienation—from faith, from people, and most profoundly, from the self.

Shabd Braham
E-ISSN 2320 – 0871
International Research Journal of Indian languages 17 August 2025
Peer Reviewed Refereed Research Journal

Personality of Tughlaq is full of contradictions indicating the inner differences he has. He is a very holy man though he wishes to construct a state resting on enlightenment and secular ethos. Even though he is a devoted Muslim, he would like to see the unity between the Hindus and the Muslims with only one law which is just and fair. He assumed the role of a philosopher-king and is influenced by thinkers from Islamic tradition, Persian poets and Greek philosophers. However, his reign was very dominating and dictatorial. These inconsistencies cannot be called the mere symptoms of the hypocrisy but the disclosures of the divided personality of a man who tries to fight against his own nature drawing between various beliefs and ideas. The dreams of Tughlaq are neither based on the reality he sees around but on the abstract concepts imported from other contexts and eras. After all, he represents a man that tries to make balance the between tradition and change, faith, and reason, strength and fairness.

The ideal of having a fair and inclusive society is sincere in approach, but too brutal in practice. He has ambitions of the kingdom where government will overcome the differences between religious denominations, where reason rules the public affairs, and where the authority will behave morally. However, the means that he takes over as suppression, surveillance, and issuing orders without consulting authorities, come to betray his ideals. He lays excess confidence in rationality and reforms and shows a lack of sufficient interest in empathy or having public consultation. His policies appear to be tyrannical even regardless of how noble his aims may be when there is no trust and no actual participation. This paradox underlines those difficulties which countries have to face after colonialism as the maxim of progress tends to be achieved at the expense of democracy and the engagement of people.

We learn in the play that the major changes made by Tughlaq, such as the shifting of the capital to Daulatabad, introducing token currency are not only mere mistakes, but are manifestations of his disturbed mind. The decisions indicate clearly that he is unable to reconcile the difference between what he believes in and what is actually functional in the real world. Tughlaq believes that a reformation of the society will solve all the problems, and he never reflects on difficulties people were facing emotionally and mentally. At the time when he transports thousands of people to Daulatabad he does not consider what effect it is going to have on them in terms of their belongingness, their spiritual life, or absolute chaos it brought. At the end, the emergency resettlement is not only painful to the population, but it also serves as a sign that Tughlaq has lost the true sense of reality.

Karnad is very meticulous in constructing this psychological unraveling through soliloquies and dialogues which indicate more and more introspection, paranoia and despair on the part of Tughlaq. His dialogues with Barani, who was a historian, and monologues of self-doubt indicates a troubled mind full of contradictions and doubts that he cannot eliminate. Tughlaq is idealist and cynic, believer and skeptic. The conflicts between his visionary ideals and brutal tactics were not just political but also existential in nature He turns into a person who in the words of Frantz Fanon has the problem of having “the divided self”- a subjectivity between faith and that of aspiration to modernity.

The ultimate collapse of his authority is not the result of military defeat or economic collapse, but a slow moral erosion. Ministers betray him, allies turn away, and the masses withdraw their trust. The intellectual ruler becomes an isolated dictator. The disillusionment is complete not because his ideas were unworthy, but because his methods alienated the very people he wished to uplift. The single most revealing line in the play captures this tragic irony:

“I set out to build an empire of reason—and all I have is blood on my hands.”

This confession underscores his tragic self-awareness. Tughlaq is not unaware of his descent; rather, he is tormented by it, trapped in a cycle of guilt, compulsion, and grandiosity.

In this way Tughlaq is not only a failed king but also a metaphor pertaining to the "fractured postcolonial subject". His dilemmas are similar to those of India, as to how it is possible to reconcile spiritual pluralism with secular politics; how it is possible to modernize and not to be alienated; how to form ethical form of politics in the milieu of structural violence. The genius of Karnad is that he uses a historical character to develop the causes of psychological and philosophical derangement of new India.

Postcolonial Incongruity and the Indian Modern

Tughlaq's failure, while deeply personal, serves as an allegory for the postcolonial Indian state's existential crisis—caught between the ideals of modern governance and the enduring pull of traditional structures. His attempts to enact sweeping reforms, implement rational administration, and separate religion from politics are noble in aspiration but disastrous in execution. The contradiction arises not simply from flawed leadership but from the structural incongruity embedded in the postcolonial condition.

The hybridity theory proposed by Homi Bhabha provides a very important angle through which this paradox can be deconstructed. Tughlaq happens to be living a liminal identity not a conventional monarch of the Islamic type nor a contemporary democratic secular ruler. This is a sort of in betweenness which makes him illegitimate on either front. These reforms of his which were based on reason and idealism are counteracted by mistrust and complacent opposition. As opposed to forming a movement behind his vision, his doubts are exploited by the court. As one courtier cynically observes: "The Sultan's words sound sweet, but there is poison underneath." This statement captures the growing disillusionment with leadership that cloaks authoritarianism under the guise of progress.

Moreover, the common people's rejection of Tughlaq's policies is not grounded in ideology but in the instinct for survival. The top-down imposition of reforms without consultation reflects the broader failure of elite-driven modernity to engage democratic participation. Tughlaq's isolation intensifies as he loses the trust of both the masses and the elite, symbolizing the alienation experienced by citizens in postcolonial societies that promised liberation but delivered estrangement.

In this way, the fragmented self becomes a metaphor not only for Tughlaq but for the fractured consciousness of a nation navigating modernity without a cohesive cultural anchor.

Language, Power, and the Crisis of Communication

In Tughlaq, language becomes both a tool of power and a site of its unraveling. The Sultan is a master orator and rhetorician, employing refined Persianised Urdu and philosophical allusions to craft an image of enlightened leadership. His speeches are filled with references to rationalism, justice, and divine purpose, aiming to inspire loyalty and project moral authority. However, this very use of elevated, abstract language often alienates him from his subjects, who speak a more grounded and vernacular idiom. The resulting communication gap deepens the disconnection between the ruler and the ruled, turning his vision into a monologue rather than a dialogue.

The crisis of communication indicates that the postcolonial Indian state tried to govern through idioms of modernity, which include bureaucratic rationality, legalistic discourse, and secular nationalism without acknowledging lived experiences of its diverse people. The speeches by Tughlaq resemble the declarations of a newly born independent state that is trying to make legitimacy through performative statement instead of participatory politics.

The irony here is that the eloquence of Tughlaq turns out to be the reason of his downfall. The greater the amount he speaks about ideals the greater the distance between words and the reality becomes visible. This disjuncture is mocked by one of the minor, but seminal characters, the court poet Sheikh Imamuddin, who emphasizes on the absurd nature of a rule that is controlled with beautiful lies and philosophical detachment.

In this sense, language, as featured in the play written by Karnad, is not only expressive but rather performative; that is, it produces authority, creates perceptions, and, finally, shows the fragmentation of the self. This demonstrates the emptiness of elite rhetoric in a fractured postcolonial society as Karnad finds it with Tughlaq in his eloquence.

Conclusion

Girish Karnad's Tughlaq stands as a profound meditation on the fractured self of postcolonial India. Tughlaq, as a character, embodies the tragedy of the modern subject—alienated from both history and community, reason and emotion. His rule becomes a metaphor for India's own postcolonial journey: inspired by noble visions, yet undercut by disconnection from the socio-cultural fabric.

The paper has shown how the play dramatizes postcolonial incongruity through Tughlaq's inner conflict, his failed reforms, and his estrangement from both divine and human worlds. Using postcolonial theory as its lens, the analysis demonstrates that the "self as fragment" is not a failure of character, but a symptom of larger structural contradictions in India's modernity.

Karnad does not offer easy resolutions. His Tughlaq dies not in battle but in solitude—betrayed by those he trusted, misunderstood by those he governed, and crushed under the weight of his own ideals. It is this unresolved tension that gives Tughlaq its enduring relevance in postcolonial discourse.

References

- *Bhabha, H. K. (1994). The Location of Culture. Routledge.*
- *Fanon, F. (1952). Black Skin, White Masks. Grove Press.*
- *Karnad, G. (1972). Tughlaq. Oxford University Press.*
- *Nandy, A. (1983). The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism. Oxford University Press.*
- *Dharwadker, A. (2005). "Theatre and the Postcolonial City: Tughlaq and Others." Modern Drama, 48(2), 206–232.*