

Aziz in Girish Karnad's *Tughlaq*: A Case of the Subversive Subaltern

Mousumi Guha Banerjee

Abstract

The idea of the subaltern has come to occupy a significant position in the postcolonial discourse. The position of subalternity emerges from a socio-cultural construct, since it is ascertained in terms of class, caste, gender and office. The subaltern subject is, rather customarily, assigned a marginalized status, and the whole issue is problematized when he adopts a significant way in which he strives to serve as an agent of resistance against, rather than display compliance with, the very discourse that has created his subordinate identity. Girish Karnad's profound humanism enabled him to lend utterance to the reticent subalterns in his plays. We find a noticeable preponderance of such remarkable characters in Karnad's plays that include people of socially deprived classes, who are vulnerable and are continuously exposed to various forms of oppression by the members of the upper rung of the social ladder. Karnad has not merely demonstrated their subalternity, but has lent an unforgettable voice to them, through which they reply in a resolute tone hitherto unfamiliar. By so doing, he transforms and de-subalternizes their position and brings them to the centre of social imagination. Aziz, in the play *Tughlaq*, is one such character who not only speaks, but retorts in such a manner that even the Sultan, a stark image of imperialism and, of course, the sword-wielding patriarch, ultimately yields, subsequently granting Aziz's wish. This paper attempts to study this voice of Aziz as being particularly representative of a powerful, assertive and unwavering subaltern, who convincingly goes beyond all implications of stigma and disparagement with which his so-called social position is, more often than not, associated.

Keywords : Aziz, Power, Subalternity, Subversion, *Tughlaq*

Sketched out its wide-ranging concern both with the visible 'history, politics, economics and sociology of subalternity' and with the occulted 'attitudes, ideologies and belief system'... Subaltern Studies defined itself as an attempt to allow the people finally to speak within the jealous pages of elitist historiography and in so doing, to speak for, or to sound the muted voices of the truly oppressed. (Gandhi 1-2)

Leela Gandhi thus briskly encapsulates the idea of the subaltern subject and the stance from where he/she distinctly and recognizably voices the inner histories of a long-standing phenomenon of oppression and enslavement. It is this subject position that helps us to perceive the nature of his/her subaltern existence. The defiance and the intransigence of such a discernible subaltern against all forms of deficiency and dispossession, reclusivity and desolation, subservience and

mediocrity, renunciation and reticence, enable us to identify the condition of those whom we might call the 'neo-subaltern', who have perhaps now gradually shifted from the 'periphery' of the postcolonial sphere to the 'centre' of most debates and deliberations in the academia. Hence, the subaltern, in a sense, has ceased to be "a standard way to designate the colonial subject that has been constructed by European discourse and internalized by colonial people who employ this discourse", (237) as M.H. Abrams has primarily observed:

It can thus be said that the idea of the subaltern has come to occupy a significant position in postcolonial discourse. The position of subalternity emerges from a socio-cultural construct, since it is ascertained in terms of class, caste, gender and office. The subaltern subject is, rather customarily, assigned a marginalized status, and the whole issue is problematized when he adopts a significant way in which he strives to serve as an agent of resistance against, rather than display compliance with, the very discourse that has created his subordinate identity. Girish Karnad's profound "humanism" (Singh 2) enabled him to lend utterance to the reticent subalterns in his plays. We find a noticeable preponderance of such remarkable characters in Karnad's plays that include people of socially deprived classes, who are vulnerable and are continuously exposed to various forms of oppression by the members of the upper rungs of the social ladder. Karnad has not merely demonstrated their subalternity, but has lent an unforgettable voice to them, through which they reply in a resolute tone hitherto unfamiliar. His thorough and in-depth understanding of the characters that he has sketched and breathed life into has empowered him to create men and women, who are worth-remembering, having risen above the space and time they existed in. They are able to question the conditions of their existence, as when Aazam asks: "Why am I a thief, Aziz? Why aren't we like other people? Have a nice home, till a farm and live happily?" (Karnad 9.57). They also actively participate in constructing for themselves a new identity, a position that takes them beyond the tyranny of the "practice" of social "othering" (Nagarajan 186), thereby leading to the conventional notion of relegation to the margin and eventual suppression, as when Aziz asserts: "I am bored stiff with all this running and hiding. You rob a man, you run, and hide. It's all so pointless. One should be able to rob a man and then stay there to punish him for getting robbed. That's called 'class' - that's being a real king!" (Karnad 9.58)

Karnad's bold and fascinating play, *Tughlaq*, though essentially dealing with a pre-colonial episode of Indian history, draws our attention towards an audacious and valorous attempt by the playwright at portraying the hierarchical master-slave relationship in a subtle manner. We have the imperial and authoritative Sultan on the one hand, and an extremely shrewd, crafty and perspicacious 'dhobi' called Aziz, on the other. He is such a character who not only speaks, but retorts in such a manner that even the Sultan, a stark image of the colonizer and, of course, the sword-wielding patriarch, ultimately yields, subsequently granting Aziz's wish. The very first scene unobtrusively sets the binary wheel of actions rolling. Here, we find Aziz appearing in the guise of Vishnu Prasad, a Brahmin who sues "His Merciful Majesty" (Karnad 1.3) and amazingly wins the case. The Sultan decides that liberty would be granted to all subjects if they experienced

injustice, discrimination, bigotry and partiality in any form at the hands of the State officials, and that they could to file a case against the State. This is the beginning of an apparently parallel sub-plot that assimilates with the main plot at the end.

Tughlaq is a play that essentially gives rise to the question of credibility. The vibrancy and assertiveness of Aziz's character lies in his ability to make himself credible to the Sultan and the people around him almost always. In this case, he transplants his social identity of a Muslim dhobi to become Vishnu Prasad and with unprecedented tact and finesse, triumphs in de-subalternizing his socially endowed position of subservience and abjection to a condition where he is not only able to prove the Sultan's 'illegal appropriation of land', but is also successful in receiving a grant of five hundred silver dinars from the State Treasury. He is further assured a post in the Civil Service whereby he shall be entitled to a "regular and adequate income". (Karnad 1.3)

Eventually, we find that in whatever way the Sultan might have tried to win the confidence of the ruled-over Hindus along with the ruling Muslims by posing as an 'impartial' ruler, it has always been Aziz who has, with unfailing consistency, baffled the King's "impartial justice" (Karnad 1.8) with his artful intrigues. He seems to understand the Sultan the best when he says to Aazam: "You know, a Brahmin with a Muslim friend - the Sultan will like that." (Karnad 1.8) Thereafter, Aziz with the accompaniment of Aazam appears in between the occurrences of the main plot as if they are all set to strike the chords to play the interludes of a well-composed song.

U.R. Anantha Murthy has perhaps rightly pointed out in his 'Introduction' to the play that Aziz is "the only character in the play who has skillfully used all the schemes of *Tughlaq* for his own designs. He even kills Ghiyas-ud-din and comes in his guise as a holy messenger of peace to purify the land and revive the banned prayer. The irony is deeply tragic. In the end *Tughlaq* and his kingdom are one in their chaos, and he knows it." (Murthy ix-x) The "ironic success" (Murthy viii) of Aziz acquires a new dimension when in the concluding scene he craftily, though judiciously and at times even ingeniously, persuades the Sultan and succeeds in bringing him round to his own astonishing forms of logic and rationality. He even goes, with a candid notoriety, to the extent of appealing to His Majesty's powers of imagination and says: "But it would be grave injustice if I were punished, Your Majesty." (Karnad 13.80) He reminds the Sultan of his faculty of not associating "greatness with pedigree". (Karnad 13.80) Such a perception equates the concept of a 'saint' with that of a dhobi, with the hierarchies perhaps being rethought and redefined, since according to him, "When it comes to washing away filth no saint is a match for a dhobi." (Karnad 13.82) Yet, he claims that he is not a "common blackmailer" (Karnad 13.81) due to his unwavering loyalty and allegiance to the King. He does not fail to insist that he remains His Majesty's "true disciple". (Karnad 13.80) He goes on to narrate his deceitful actions from the very beginning and boldly justifies his stand as the Sultan's "most devout servant" (Karnad 13.80) who has "studied every order, followed every instruction, considered every measure of Your Majesty's with

great attention". (Karnad 13.80) He does not conceal the fact that he has made the best of all the situations that have come up until the time when "One day, suddenly I had a revelation." (Karnad 13.82) He goes on to narrate the truest philosophy of life as he has perceived it:

This was all human life was worth, I said. This was the real meaning of the mystery of death – straw and skin! With that enlightenment I found peace. We left the camp and headed for the hills. (Karnad 13.82)

He persistently endeavors to establish his trustworthiness and credence by questioning the Sultan thus: "I ask you, Your Majesty, which other man in India has spent five years of his life fitting every act, deed and thought to Your Majesty's words?" (Karnad 13.82) The ultimate 'Checkmate' of the metaphorical game of power befalls the Sultan when he cries out in frenzied bewilderment: "I don't think I have ever seen such insolence. This man's a genius – all right, tell me. What punishment should I give you for your crimes?" (Karnad 13.82-83) "Make me an officer of your State, Your Majesty" (Karnad 13.83) was the immediate response of the unbelievable and extraordinary dhobi. The Sultan cannot help but say, "I don't know why I am acting like a fool. Yet perhaps a State office really would be the best punishment for you." (Karnad 13.83)

The remarkable triumph of Aziz over the political, economic and the social power structures does call for the role of the 'neo-subaltern', who finds such an exceptionally convincing and compelling utterance in Karnad that the whole precept of the binary polarity that exists between the ruler and the ruled undergoes a sea change, whereby such conventional hierarchical notions require to be rethought, reconstructed and reconsidered with the sincerest efforts. The playwright, perhaps with some purposeful circumspection, framed a striking climax where the margin and the centre collide and result in the evolution of a 'new man' who reigns supreme, going beyond all plausible conditions of his mundane human existence: "All these years I have been a beggar wasting my life and I'm not proud of that. I beg Your Majesty to give me a chance to show my loyalty. I'm ready to die for my Sultan." (Karnad 13.83) This triumphant stroke by Aziz makes us feel that it is perhaps the stupendous singularity of his character that makes the play relevant for a perceptive analysis by a twenty-first century reader. It is significantly germane in the sense that even though Aziz's phenomenal moral victory over the imperial constitution of the State may seem to be a 'parallel' sub-plot, it eventually emerges to be the lifeblood flowing through the veins of the entire edifice of the drama. This is nonetheless evident in the Sultan's own voice, reflective of an inner tinge of realization: "All your life you wait for someone who understands you. And then – you meet him – punishment for wanting too much! ... As he said, 'One day suddenly I had a revelation.'" (Karnad 13.83) Hence, all the incidents within the play converge to this unique idea of revelation, a notion that not only thematizes the play, but holds it together to the centre. Aziz's actions thus truly decentre the power of the centre of all happenings and in the process subvert the periphery to prevail with an unprecedented certainty and conviction perhaps hitherto unconceived. This

process of subversion comes full circle when, by a dramatic turn of incidents, the Sultan falls to the feet of Aziz, the disguised Ghiyas-ud-din Abbasid, in the midst of a stunned group of people with the latter saying, "Amen". (Karnad 11.72) Such an action almost overthrows the idea of 'authority' and presumptuously interrogates the legitimacy that convention has blessed it with:

If you remain virtuous throughout your life no one will say a good thing about you because they won't need to. But start stealing – and they'll say: 'What a nice boy he was! But he's ruined now...' Then kill and they will beat their breasts and say: 'Heavens! He was only a petty thief all these days. Never hurt anyone. But alas! Then rape a woman and the chorus will go into hallelujahs: 'He was a saint, a real saint and look at him now...' (Karnad 9.57)

Aziz, thus, remains in full control of his diverse ploys and manoeuvres which, in their turn, evolve as the governing force behind the actions of the other characters in the play. In his aspirations, Aziz becomes the 'second Tughlaq' who in almost all circumstances has proved to be Tughlaqian in his intrigues. He seems to be the only character whose brilliance and sagacity parallel the perceptive faculties of Tughlaq and staggeringly surpass them at a later stage of the play, thereby reformulating the latter's notions of 'justice' and 'logic': "If justice was as simple as you think or logic as beautiful as I had hoped, life would have been so much clearer. I have been chasing these words now for five years and now I don't know if I am pursuing a mirage or fleeing a shadow." (Karnad 13.84-85) Hence, we find Aziz confronting all possible forms of social, political, economic, religious and cultural impediments, overcoming the intricate hazards of the subaltern subjects emerging there from and subsequently creating a firm and undaunted position for himself by convincingly going beyond all implications of stigma and disparagement with which his so-called social position is, more often than not, unavoidably associated. He redefines the concept of power by believing that even an ordinary man can possess it by practising it. Hence, power can be reconsidered as a faculty that does not necessarily come from the colonizer's 'throne', but rather develops from the character of resistance in the colonized. The way in which this act of resistance is performed becomes the source of all power. It is less a position and more a 'performance of subversion', and it is this force that 'de-others' the 'other' and brings the idea to the 'centre', where the 'self' is rather ideologically positioned. Power comes from this process of subversion towards which the neo-subaltern subject aspires.

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