

Where the Oneiric Trail Leads in Girish Karnad's *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan*

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Abstract

The depiction of an oneiric world of Tipu Sultan's life, as projected in Girish Karnad's *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan* works as a counter device to contest any unidimensionality posed by the construct of history. The four dreams represented in a stream of consciousness method allows the dramatist to evoke the emperor of Mysore as an existential figure and the employment of the oneiric signifies the crucial aspect of humanizing the often concretized category of history. The oneiric references by Karnad imply the manifestation of human condition by underlining the signifying oppositional elements crystallized as in the form of a simultaneity of absence / presence that are paradigmatically problematized in the dreams of the Sultan. In this paper, I would like to argue that it is the recognition of the coexistence of the thematic constructs, namely the historical and the oneiric, that helps to signify a more literarily nuanced understanding of the ruler, Tipu Sultan, as a human subject. The term, 'Oneiric' is put into context, definitionally and thematically. It would be argued how the understanding of Oneiric literature requires a philosophical approach manifesting, among the thematic thrust of the play, the essential aesthetic of a dream. Taking into a signifying account of the dream images presented in the two acts, the conceptual universe of Tipu Sultan's oneiric realm would be explored from an existential point of view.

Keywords: Consciousness; Existential; Historical; Oneiric; Reality.

The oneiric element allows for the existential aspect of Tipu Sultan's human nature to get revealed for it to break away from the historical, political and testimonial expectations of a specific period. The oneiric dimension provides the thematic paradigm to an otherwise contested history or

reality of the famous ruler of Mysore. The oneiric references by Karnad imply the manifestation of human condition by underlining the signifying oppositional elements crystallized as in the form of a simultaneity of absence / presence that are paradigmatically problematized in the dreams of the Sultan.

The paper argues that it is the recognition of the coexistence of the two worlds, namely the historical and the oneiric, that provides a more signifying and subtle understanding of the ruler, Tipu Sultan, as a human subject. The term, 'Oneiric' is put into context, definitionally and thematically. It would be argued how an understanding of Oneiric literature, such as the text at hand, requires a philosophical approach manifesting, among the thematic thrust of the play, the essential aesthetic of dream. Taking into a signifying account of the dream images presented in the two acts, the conceptual universe of Tipu Sultan's oneiric realm would be explored from an existential point of view. The fact that the plot is based on a secret record of dreams as well as rooting these confidential dreams in the interpretative realm of the inner life of this otherwise political ruler is paradigmatically pertinent to the aesthetic context of oneiric themes. That Tipu was a dreamer, a scholar, poet, only heightens the possibility of knowing him as having an existential human condition which is something that is overlooked often for the political considerations revealing the figure during colonial times.

Karnad attempts to extract that hidden oneiric aesthetic of Tipu's life from what the enigmatic figure had 'kept under his pillow', (Karnad 57) especially in the light of the fact that these are records of an inner life – the dreams of Tipu which were never told to anyone but maintained until the last day of his life. The dreams of Tipu Sultan as recorded in his dream book – register concealed from the political arena acts as a metaphor for the oneiric-aesthetic self of a much humanized ruler. Karnad employs the oneiric self of Tipu in such a way that enables the stream of the consciousness of the ruler to correlate directly with the reader or the audience is forced to zoom into the oneiric state rather than the historico-political self. The employment of the dreams in the play is also to depict the other side of a politically understood ruler. At the outset of the play, in a dialogue between Kirmani and MacKenzie, the other side of what is about to follow in the play is invoked by Karnad as an undesirable or a preconceived colonial version. When the historian, Kirmani asks if his side of the story is required, the dramatist seems to highlight that the historical political version has already been meted out.

The Oneiric in Context

Etymologically speaking, the 'oneiric' is taken from the Greek 'oneiros' for dream ("Oneiric"). As a thematic category, however, the oneiric could be referred to as a conceptual realm that manifests aspects of human condition by structuring a conceptual correspondence between the co-existent parts of human consciousness. The interaction of the oppositional elements is based upon the juxtaposition of 'absence' and 'presence' as rendered possible by specific oneiric moments in Karnad's play. These are moments of self realisation quite different from those where the binaries offer one part of existence presiding over the other or controlling the other. But instances where the oppositions are considered together or imagined self-inclusively, take place within these reveries and dreams. The images produced in such a state may not be real but this presentification of the absence can only happen as it happens in an oneiric realm.

The oneiric mode then is precisely making present what is actually absent so that the absence-presence dichotomy dissolves into a new meaningful construct through the thematic category of the oneiric realm of significance. Thus, from the level of the manifestation of binary oppositions like that of a grand ruler or a despot where the character figure of Tipu Sultan is either aggrandized or vilified, we find Karnad's treatment of these dreams as a movement towards a level of immanence within the domain of signification represented by constructs such as the oneiric. Once we consider the possibility of the coexistence of apparently irreconcilable categories, the complex figure of Tipu Sultan is realised in the form of the oneiric self.

Dream images constitute a crucial conceptual construct in Girish Karnad's drama. However, before we embark on dealing with these highly charged images of dreams, it is important to conceptualize the theoretical underpinnings of what may be termed as an oneiric realm of significance. In the context of the thematic universe of Girish Karnad's drama, I would like to consider the concept of 'oneiric' as a phenomenologically productive conceptual category as presented by the Romanian group of writers such as Dumitru Țsepeneag and Leonid Dimov.

Citing these theoretical voices, Laura Pavel, in the chapter, 'The Principal theses of Aesthetic Oneiricism', argues for the uniqueness of the concept: "In the provisory system of categories into which Țsepeneag separates the "aesthetics of the dream," the Oneiricism of the 1970s is distinct from

the procedure of invoking a dream, which, from the ancients onwards, was lacking in aesthetic autonomy, as well as, from the “fantasy of ignorance,” to be found in the Middle Ages, and the medieval moralizing and didactic oneiric” (20).

Historical differentiation of an aesthetic oneiric, from that of the ‘psycho-analytical’ or ‘scientific’ oneiric also deems defining the concept which its chief proponent, Dumitru Țsepeneag, thus puts forward: “Finally, the oneiric which I shall baptize simply aesthetic, a category in which the dream is no longer an artistic means of moralization, or a source of metaphysical revelations, or a ‘scientific’ method of venting frustrations through art; rather it is quite simply a criterion, a limit term for comparison or, as Leonid Dimov would say, a suggestion for the legislation of an independent art, but one that is analogous to reality” (in Pavel 21). Dimov, the post-modernist poet and translator explicates further this category of ‘dream’: “It [oneiric literature] creates a new legislation ... one that is always more meaningful (literarily speaking), more alive, more powerful than the real world, one that provides not the illusion of a certainty, but the certainty of an illusion” (in Pavel 30). The whole point of tracing the concept of Oneiricism to its literary roots is to envision the dream-like image as an open-ended, positive and productive entity essential to one’s human condition. It is rather not to be seen in terms of any reductive, negative aberration representing lack in finality. This strand of thought, where the dream is presented as an essential part of reality, is also found in what Michel Foucault talks about in his preface to Ludwig Binswanger’s essay, “Dream and Existence”, entitled as, ‘Dream, Imagination and Existence’.

The dream image is constituted through imagination, a category which is traditionally viewed in opposition to reality. Gail Weiss stresses the importance of Foucault’s crucial observations regarding the limitations of psychoanalysis in addressing the significance of imagination and thus dreams; “Foucault’s discussion of the relationship between image and imagination is valuable insofar as it seeks to dismantle the referential relationship that is ordinarily posited between the image and reality... Foucault argues against a traditional understanding of the imaginary as designating an “absent presence” or unreal in order to demonstrate that, on the contrary, it is “through the imaginary that the original meaning of reality is disclosed” (68). What the protagonist experiences in the disquiet of his thoughts and imagination thus too emanates from the oneiric realm of dreams. Foucault maintains that, “every act of imagination points implicitly to the dream. The dream is not a modality of the imagination, the dream is the first condition of its possibility” (in Weiss 69).

Before we begin to start looking closely at the oneiric images in the paradigmatic structures of the narrative discourse of Karnad's text, I would like to reiterate once again, in the words of Leonid Dimov, the essential realm of the dream: "The oneiric, as I understand it, is not a mode of escaping from reality, but on the contrary, one of invading it, of piercing as far as its skeleton, where the sensible world is replaced by its anterior hypostasis, by a force" (in Pavel 29). Tipu Sultan's calibre as a humane emperor is heightened through his dreams. The preference given to recording his dreams, the sensitivity of appreciating the aesthetics of the oneiric in the sense of having the ability and capacity to perceive alterity in human life; an essential quality that keeps you down to earth, it is in the context of these features that Tipu draws from his dreams the sustenance of human condition or the essence of being human. The first words attributed to the voice of Tipu in the play appear in the form of an insistence: "In this register are recorded the dreams I've had and am having" (Karnad 191).

The oneiric realm of Tipu's life is that which allows him to see the alternative side in others too. In the third dream, despite despising the English, Tipu reveals his admiration for their quality of resilience to fight; something he recognizes in them as their 'dream'. In witnessing Tipu's dreams, the reader could correlate how dreams are free from political ambitions or partisan thoughts, as these fragments of one's consciousness could be bluntly honest, paradoxical and ambiguous, revealing the unmotivated and unprejudiced being. Thus, Karnad's choice of the dream is analogous to an attempt to humanize history in the context of Tipu Sultan. Tipu himself has the potential to signify the oneiric by contrasting his dreams with those of the inebriated dreams of other princes, dreams that rather inhibit one's consciousness instead of augmenting it: "Today the Indian princes are all comatose, wrapped in their opium dreams" (Karnad 210).

The realist details of the play are interposed with, or rather mediated by dream sequences that appear in a stream of consciousness, as the two historians' (the 'choric characters') dialogue depicts. Within the structure of the play, thus, it is deliberately made problematic to demarcate any lines of separation of reality from imagination, for the two zones enable the partitive human existence to meet with or manifest the complex category of the whole. The dreams, one by one, become a fluid space essentially required for the historical figure of Tipu to situate himself in a way that is essential to counter the absolute historical figure. In this context, if we resort back to an explanation regarding the fundamental meanings of the oneiric, which relates that, "To dream means: I don't know what is happening to me. From the I and the me there again emerges, to be sure, the

individual.... In no way, however, does the individual emerge as he who makes the dream, but rather as the one for whom – he knows not how – the dream occurs.” (in Rizo-Patron 154). In Tipu’s case, the inclusion of the unknown in the purported ‘historical’ known, is the first sign of recognizing one’s lack of absolute knowing, and hence one’s fallible humanness. Karnad’s depiction is to insist lest the ‘human’ Tipu gets forgotten, without aggrandizing or vilifying the figures from history.

The inclusion of the oneiric element in the play makes it possible for the historical narrative to utter a deeper significance of a symbolic dimension that, for instance, the Sultan intermittently dreams. Subsequently, this underlying significance is not in what it represents but what it reveals as not present or being the part of the historical narrative of a ruler as a father, a son, and eventually a creative as well as even a literary figure. It is when the normal experience is pondered upon, when it is juxtaposed with ‘oneiric voices’ and ‘poetic latencies’ that are uttered through questions and reflection, a ‘supersensible meaning’ emanates from the ‘sensible’ (Rizo-Patron 157). By infusing a historical narrative with potential oneiric elements that reveal signifying penumbral absences, Karnad enables the possibility of the ordinary-historical life itself partaking in the imaginary or rather the poetic-aesthetic tendencies of a human mind. Letting these tendencies to manifest a nuanced significance of human nature is the implication of the oneiric expression of human utterance. It would be interesting to look at these oneiric break-ins in the text, for the dramatist tends to tap into that realm often in his plays; for instance, in the final scene from ‘Tughlaq’, the historically located emperor lays in the lap of an oneiric experience as he dozes off and forgets the empirical reality. This forgetfulness deems the waking up of remembering the essential aspect of life which could be termed as oneiric immanence.

The Conceptual Universe of Tipu’s Oneiric Realm

If there is a common thematic cluster underlying these dreams, it could be seen as a longing to explore and effort rendering the willingness to come to terms with the strange or the unknown in life. Despite the references to outcomes of battles, relationships or political strategies, the oneiric realm of Tipu Sultan’s dreams depict, paradigmatically, a space that allows the emperor its essential existential articulation in the form of oneiric utterances.

The first dream, in this vein, appears to be about the insistence of having not seen the strange or the unknown and what is seen seems not to belong

to any apparent ontological categories. At best, Tipu is witness to images and although the Sultan wants to 'inspect them more closely' (Karnad 193), the figures in the images defy hierarchies like time and space, as the dream registers the voice from the unknown manifesting existence 'for many centuries now'. It could be considered as an encounter with a timeless dimension of life. When in the morning Tipu interprets the dream in terms of the political scenario, it emanates from the immediate atmosphere of the court. What remains at the core of the oneiric realm nonetheless is the overarching elements of the strange; much like the Jungian 'collective unconscious'.

The second dream manifests in a stream of consciousness narrative mode immediately after Tipu concludes the strategic plans to counter the British while anticipating their eagerness of striking back with vengeance. However, the oneiric realm opens to the strange world of presences which are best understood as disguises; the thematic oppositions of disguise and revelation are manifested in the form of a strange 'visitor' whose private meeting with the Sultan signifies essence of an androgynous nature. Again, although the dream is reasonably interpreted in militaristic terms, it is the other conversation that stands out in this brief oneiric encounter. The disguised self, a stranger who appears as a young man-woman, happens to know the Sultan personally out of its 'intense admiration'. The element of the 'strange' when reveals itself to the emperor renders an intimate moment representing an interaction between the strange and the intimate, known-unknown, and disguise-revelation. Tipu's accusation against the stranger unknown is that it has 'inveigled' the Sultan's pragmatic self. However, the fact that the king allows his private self to 'register' this oneiric moment of cajolery by the queer or unfamiliar dream presence and rather preserve it in literary expression deems the playwright's assertion regarding the great emperor's otherwise conscious human sensitivity to regard human nature and its course of action as more nuanced and existentially subtle proposition.

The 'spectral landscape' of the third dream largely involves the father-son interaction about the struggle against British. While the context here is apparently political, once again Tipu reveals his uninhibited longing to face the more amorphous questions of life: "But, Father, after, suddenly, I see myself in them They don't give up. Nor would I. Sometimes I feel more confident of them than my own people. What makes them so unsparing towards themselves? Is it only money?" (Karnad 225). Only in the oneiric realm Tipu's monarchical-public self is able to identify with its 'other(s)'. The oneiric realm countenances an impartial contact between an existen-

tial self and its elusive other, thus lending the life of a ruler a literary as well as a philosophic worth.

The final dream is about the unending desire to live, and about making the possibility of a productive existence. More than anything it is about the human reassurance to exist. The vision of Tipu's last dream crystallizes into the image of a garden blooming with a rose bush. Even in the dire circumstances of war, the oneiric space enables a significant association of the pastoral, and with it, nature and the human self. Although Tipu Sultan gets killed the next day, it is crucial to record the emperor's own determined chronicling of his oneiric being and asserting thus its significance in the imperative.

Conclusion

The 'dreams' in *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan* are key to understand an important aspect about our belief in history, that is its palpability is imbued as well with a dimension of the unknown or the strange, that would invariably resist any straitjacketing dictated by political agendas. The 'reality' of a king, its people, his family and its nation, at large, is a phenomenon that could not be based solely upon any person's belief, knowledge, vision or policy. It must enfold within its precincts the very roots of 'imagination'. The understanding of a human subject could not be initiated from any reductive reading of history but a history subtle enough to incorporate within its core the 'dreams' or the oneiric realm of its people.

The oneiric experience, thus, could be considered as a productive experience instead of a repressive reaction against a psychological one as a result of a political situation. The unfolding of the oneiric realm is therefore neither in the ultimate control of Tipu's imagination, since the dream here could not be termed as emanating from experience testified as real life, nor in the domain of a pure sense of a dream world where the human subject entirely unconsciously steps in or out indulgently. Rather, the oneiric images prevail within and upon a horizon-like penumbral space conjoined within the dream and the real, or imagination and reality. The oneiric, then, is about the dream within the realm of Tipu's real life. It is what Foucault contends to be a dream which "unveils, in its very principle, the ambiguity of the world, which at one and the same time designates the existence projected into it and outlines itself objectively in experience" (in Weiss 68).

The play's discourse is based upon wedging the two parallel planes of

reality and imagination in an open impartial recollection of what the construct of history represents once it yields within its margins a space for the poetic and aesthetic mediation for it receives the historical as more operative, relevant and human.

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