



The Tragic Hero In Modern Indian Drama: A Character Analysis Of Tughlaq

Dr. Sanjay Kumar
Assistant Professor
P.G. Dept of English
Magadh University, Bodh Gaya

Abstract

Girish Karnad's *Tughlaq* (1964) stands as a landmark in Indian modern drama, offering a richly layered portrayal of Sultan Muhammad bin Tughlaq as a tragic hero deeply rooted in both classical and contemporary frameworks of tragedy. This research paper aims to analyze Tughlaq's character through the Aristotelian lens—where the protagonist's downfall is triggered by a combination of a tragic flaw (hamartia), excessive pride (hubris), and the inevitable consequences of fate—while also incorporating modern interpretations of tragedy that focus on psychological depth, moral ambiguity, and existential struggle.

Tughlaq is presented as an idealist and visionary ruler whose intellectual brilliance and dream of a just, secular state soon unravels into chaos and tyranny. His failure is not only political but deeply personal, as his aspirations turn into disillusionment and paranoia. His hamartia lies in his detachment from the realities of governance and his overreliance on rationality, which blinds him to human emotions and practical limitations. This descent evokes pity and fear, fulfilling Aristotle's tragic criteria.

Moreover, the play functions as a political allegory, mirroring the disillusionment with Nehruvian ideals in post-independence India. Tughlaq's trajectory reflects the collapse of utopian hopes and the rise of authoritarianism masked by noble intentions. The paper further draws parallels between Tughlaq and tragic figures like Oedipus and Macbeth, situating him within a global tragic tradition while emphasizing his distinctiveness as an Indian ruler entangled in caste, religion, and power. Thus, Tughlaq emerges as a uniquely Indian tragic figure whose story resonates with timeless questions of leadership, ethics, and destiny.

Keywords- Oedipus and Macbeth, Aristotle's tragic criteria, disillusionment, paranoia, hamartia, Indian modern drama

1 Introduction

Modern Indian drama, especially in the post-independence era, has served as a powerful medium for exploring the social, political, and historical complexities of a newly sovereign nation. It grapples with issues such as cultural identity, the legacy of colonialism, and the aspirations and failures of nation-building. Girish Karnad's *Tughlaq* (1964) is a seminal work in this tradition, skilfully blending historical narrative with contemporary allegory. Originally written in Kannada and later translated into English by Karnad himself, the play presents the figure of Muhammad bin Tughlaq, the 14th-century Sultan of Delhi, whose reign was marked by ambitious reforms, philosophical idealism, and tragic miscalculations.

Karnad reimagines Tughlaq not merely as a historical figure but as a tragic hero whose inner conflicts and political decisions mirror the dilemmas of modern leadership. Tughlaq's vision of a secular, rational, and just rule resonates with post-independence India's early idealism, especially under the leadership of Jawaharlal Nehru. However, just as Tughlaq's high ideals collapse under the weight of political reality, so too did many postcolonial aspirations falter amid rising corruption, communal tensions, and authoritarian tendencies. This duality makes *Tughlaq* a deeply political play that uses the past to comment on the present.

This research paper examines Tughlaq's character through the lens of classical Aristotelian tragedy—where a hero's downfall is caused by a combination of hamartia (tragic flaw), hubris (excessive pride), and the workings of fate—as well as through modern tragic theory, which emphasizes existential conflict, psychological depth, and moral ambiguity. Tughlaq's idealism, while noble, blinds him to the emotional and spiritual needs of his people. His relentless pursuit of a perfect state leads to chaos, alienation, and violence, marking his descent from a visionary ruler to an isolated, paranoid tyrant.

The study also situates Tughlaq within a broader tragic tradition, drawing comparisons with figures such as Sophocles' Oedipus, Shakespeare's Macbeth, and Vijay Tendulkar's Ghanshyam Kotwal. Each of these characters represents a unique cultural context, yet they share a tragic trajectory shaped by ambition, moral conflict, and irreversible choices. In this light, Tughlaq emerges as a uniquely Indian tragic hero—one who is deeply entangled in the socio-religious fabric of his time, yet whose struggles transcend cultural boundaries. *Tughlaq* reveals how the pursuit of power and perfection, when disconnected from human realities, leads to inevitable downfall. It remains a timeless reflection on leadership, governance, and the enduring complexities of human nature.

2 Theoretical Framework

2.1 Aristotelian Tragedy

Aristotle's *Poetics* outlines the tragic hero as a person of noble stature whose downfall is not the result of vice or depravity, but of a fatal flaw—*hamartia*—often linked to hubris, or excessive pride and ambition. This downfall evokes *pity* and *fear* in the audience, leading to *catharsis*, a purging of these emotions. Girish Karnad's *Tughlaq* resonates strongly with this classical model. The protagonist, Muhammad bin Tughlaq, is portrayed as a brilliant, idealistic ruler whose vision for a rational, secular, and just state sets him apart as a figure of noble intent. His intellectual prowess and ambition to transform society reflect the traits of a traditional tragic hero.

However, Tughlaq's very idealism becomes his tragic flaw. His impractical policies—such as the shifting of the capital to Daulatabad and the introduction of token currency—reveal a disconnect between vision and reality. His hubris blinds him to the consequences of his decisions and isolates him from both his advisors and his subjects. As the play progresses, Tughlaq's moral certainties erode, and his rule descends into paranoia, violence, and tyranny. This decline arouses pity for his isolation and fear of unchecked authority, fulfilling the Aristotelian conditions for tragedy.

At the same time, applying a purely Aristotelian lens to *Tughlaq* has its limitations. The play is rooted in an Indian socio-political context where caste, religion, and historical trauma play crucial roles—elements that extend beyond the classical Greek framework. Thus, while the Aristotelian model is useful in structuring Tughlaq's tragic arc, it must be supplemented with culturally specific insights to fully grasp the play's complexity. Karnad's *Tughlaq* not only conforms to universal tragic structures but also challenges them, offering a uniquely Indian reinterpretation of the tragic hero.

2.2 Modern Tragic Theory

Modern tragedy, as redefined by thinkers like Arthur Miller, marks a shift from the classical Aristotelian model by locating tragedy not in the fall of kings and nobles, but in the struggles of ordinary individuals against oppressive social structures. Miller, in his seminal essay *Tragedy and the Common Man*, argues that the tragic hero can be a common person who is willing to fight to maintain their dignity, even in the face of defeat. This modern framework expands the scope of tragedy to include systemic injustice, political oppression, and personal alienation as central to the tragic experience.

In the Indian context, scholars such as M.M. Bhalla have pointed out that modern Indian tragedy synthesizes classical structures with postcolonial anxieties. According to Bhalla, Indian dramatists often highlight the tensions between individual ambition and the socio-political systems shaped by colonial legacies, caste hierarchies, and communal divisions. These plays reflect the fractured consciousness of a newly independent nation grappling with its identity, ideals, and institutional realities.

Girish Karnad's *Tughlaq* is emblematic of this fusion. Though the protagonist is a historical Sultan, Karnad reimagines him in modern psychological and political terms. Tughlaq's downfall does not

simply arise from personal flaws; it reflects deeper systemic contradictions in governance, ideology, and public trust. His attempts to build a just, secular, and progressive state echo post-independence aspirations, particularly the Nehruvian vision of India. However, his alienation from the people, his descent into authoritarianism, and the chaos that ensues mirror the real disillusionment with idealistic politics in the 1960s.

Through this lens, *Tughlaq* becomes more than a historical drama; it is a modern tragedy that uses the past to comment on the present. Tughlaq's personal struggle is deeply entangled with broader historical and societal forces, making him a modern tragic figure. His failure symbolizes the collapse of utopian dreams under the weight of political realities and human limitations. By employing modern tragic theory, this paper highlights how *Tughlaq* resonates with post-independence anxieties and continues to serve as an enduring allegory for the challenges of leadership, reform, and national identity in modern India.

2.3 Allegory and Post-Colonial Context

Girish Karnad's *Tughlaq* is widely regarded as a powerful allegory for the disillusionment with Nehruvian idealism in post-independence India. The play reflects a time when the initial optimism of the 1940s and 1950s was giving way to frustration and political anxiety. Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first Prime Minister, had envisioned a secular, democratic, and modern nation-state built on principles of scientific rationality and social justice. However, by the 1960s, the country was grappling with food shortages, corruption, communal tensions, and growing public disenchantment with the political class. Against this backdrop, *Tughlaq* offers a haunting exploration of the dangers of idealism divorced from ground realities.

In the play, Sultan Muhammad bin Tughlaq is depicted as a brilliant and visionary ruler who aspires to build a just and secular kingdom. His policies—such as introducing token currency and shifting the capital from Delhi to Daulatabad—are driven by intellectual and philosophical ideals, much like Nehru's ambitious economic planning and secular nation-building projects. However, Tughlaq's reforms are poorly implemented, disconnected from the needs of the people, and ultimately disastrous. The relocation of the capital, in particular, serves as a metaphor for the impracticality and human cost of ideal-driven but unrealistic policymaking.

Karnad's portrayal of Tughlaq captures the tragic irony of a leader whose progressive vision leads to chaos, alienation, and tyranny. This mirrors the experience of post-independence India, where noble intentions often faltered in the face of socio-political complexities. Through Tughlaq's disillusionment and increasing paranoia, Karnad critiques the limitations of top-down governance and intellectual elitism. The Sultan's isolation reflects the widening gap between the rulers and the ruled—a theme that resonated deeply with audiences living through the failures of early Indian democracy.

By using historical allegory, Karnad draws attention to the fragile line between visionary leadership and authoritarianism. Tughlaq thus becomes a cautionary tale about the perils of unchecked ambition and the tragic consequences of ignoring practical realities. In examining the collapse of Tughlaq's idealism, this study underscores Karnad's critique of Nehruvian politics and highlights the enduring tension between dreams of progress and the messy realities of governance in a postcolonial nation.

3 Tughlaq as a Tragic Hero

3.1 Idealism and Nobility

Tughlaq begins Girish Karnad's play as a ruler of exceptional vision and ambition, determined to build a kingdom grounded in justice, equality, and rational governance. His statement, "I dream of a nation where justice will be done to all, Hindu or Muslim," signals his commitment to secularism and unity in a deeply divided society. This vision aligns with Aristotle's conception of the tragic hero as a noble figure—one who is morally elevated, intellectually superior, and motivated by lofty ideals. Tughlaq's early reforms, such as the abolition of the jizya tax and efforts to promote Hindu-Muslim unity, reflect a sincere desire to transcend the religious and caste divisions that fractured medieval Indian society.

Yet, it is this very idealism that becomes his tragic flaw, or *hamartia*. Tughlaq's belief that rational, well-intentioned policies alone can reform a society riddled with entrenched prejudices reveals a profound naivety. He underestimates the emotional, historical, and cultural complexities that shape human behavior. As Aparna Dharwadker observes, "Tughlaq's vision is noble but impractical, divorced from the realities of power." This gap between his utopian aspirations and the harsh political realities he faces contributes significantly to his downfall.

Tughlaq's idealism blinds him to the necessity of pragmatic leadership and makes him increasingly intolerant of dissent. As the play progresses, his policies unravel, his subjects turn against him, and his reign descends into chaos. Thus, his intellectual and moral superiority—initially sources of admiration—become the seeds of his failure. The tragic arc of his character lies in the transformation of a visionary into a tyrant, not because he lacks virtue, but because his virtue is ill-suited to the world he seeks to transform. In this way, Tughlaq exemplifies the tragic hero whose fall evokes both pity and fear, fulfilling classical and modern dimensions of tragedy.

3.2 Hamartia and Hubris

Tughlaq's fatal flaw—his intellectual arrogance—emerges as a central force driving his tragic downfall in Girish Karnad's *Tughlaq*. Though he begins with a vision of a just, inclusive, and rationally governed kingdom, his unshakable faith in his own intellect blinds him to the consequences of his decisions. The most symbolic example of this is his decision to shift the capital from Delhi to Daulatabad, a move aimed at centralizing administration and promoting Hindu-Muslim unity. However, the execution of this plan proves catastrophic. The journey causes immense hardship and loss of life, and the people's suffering is captured in the chilling line: "The road to Daulatabad was paved with corpses." This vivid

imagery not only reflects the human cost of his policies but also marks the failure of his rationalist idealism when divorced from empathy and realism.

Tughlaq's hubris, or excessive pride, aligns closely with Aristotle's definition of *hamartia*. He sees himself as above ordinary rulers, governed solely by reason and destined to reshape history through his intellect. However, this overconfidence turns fatal when it leads to moral and ethical compromises. To maintain control, he manipulates events and individuals, including the calculated murder of the charismatic Sheikh Imam-ud-din. This act is not just a political manoeuvre—it is a betrayal of the very ideals of justice and openness that Tughlaq once championed.

Ania Loomba rightly notes that Tughlaq's tragedy lies in his "oscillation between idealism and ruthlessness." This internal conflict reflects a deeper tension between personal ambition and the ethical responsibilities of leadership. As a tragic hero, Tughlaq embodies both visionary potential and destructive excess. His failure is not merely individual but systemic—he becomes a symbol of the larger collapse of idealism in the face of political reality. His story is thus a compelling study of power, pride, and the moral cost of failed governance.

3.3 Pity and Fear

Aristotle's *Poetics* asserts that the essence of tragedy lies in its ability to evoke *pity* and *fear*—pity for the suffering of the protagonist and fear that such a downfall could befall anyone of noble intentions. In Girish Karnad's *Tughlaq*, the journey of Sultan Muhammad bin Tughlaq from an enlightened reformer to a tyrannical, isolated figure powerfully fulfils this Aristotelian ideal of tragedy. Tughlaq begins with noble ambitions—seeking justice, religious harmony, and administrative efficiency. His reforms, while intellectually ambitious, are aimed at uplifting his people and creating a rational and inclusive kingdom. His idealism, though flawed, is sincere, and it is this sincerity that evokes pity as his vision collapses.

As Tughlaq's plans unravel due to miscalculations, betrayal, and mounting opposition, his descent is marked by increasing paranoia, cruelty, and emotional isolation. His decision to manipulate, deceive, and ultimately kill those who challenge him reflects a man who is consumed by the very ideals he once cherished. The culmination of this tragic arc is captured in the heart-wrenching line, "I have no one left to talk to." This moment reflects Tughlaq's complete alienation—not just from his subjects and court but from the very purpose that once drove him. It encapsulates the loneliness of a ruler who has lost both his political legitimacy and personal peace.

This final image powerfully evokes fear as well. Tughlaq's downfall is not the result of external enemies alone but of internal flaws—his hubris, moral compromises, and inability to balance vision with realism. The audience is left contemplating the thin line between greatness and failure. By crafting a character whose noble goals lead to tragic ruin, Karnad successfully channels Aristotle's cathartic function, making *Tughlaq* not just a political drama but a profound exploration of human frailty and the costs of idealism unmoored from reality.

4 Allegorical Dimensions

4.1 Nehruvian Idealism and Post-Colonial Disillusionment

Tughlaq, emerges as a powerful political allegory reflecting the growing disillusionment in post-independence India. During this period, the initial optimism following the country's freedom in 1947 had begun to wane. Although Jawaharlal Nehru's leadership was marked by visionary ideals—such as secularism, democratic socialism, and rapid industrialization—many of these ambitions were undermined by practical challenges, administrative inefficiencies, and a widening gap between the government and the common people. Karnad's portrayal of Muhammad bin Tughlaq captures these contradictions with striking relevance.

Tughlaq's grand but poorly executed reforms—most notably, his decision to shift the capital from Delhi to Daulatabad and the introduction of token copper currency—mirror Nehru's own struggles with implementing policies that were often idealistic but lacked adequate groundwork. In the play, the copper currency reform, intended to bring economic uniformity and stability, instead leads to rampant counterfeiting and economic collapse. This resonates with the early economic crises faced by newly independent India, where lofty developmental schemes faltered due to systemic inefficiencies and a disconnect between policy and ground realities.

Karnad also critiques the failure of political communication in *Tughlaq*. The Sultan's inability to make his subjects understand his vision reflects a wider concern of the time: the alienation of the Indian political elite from the masses. Tughlaq, though intellectually brilliant and progressive, fails to translate his goals into tangible change—a theme that echoed strongly in the political atmosphere of the 1960s. As K.D. Verma aptly notes, "Tughlaq's tragedy is the tragedy of a nation struggling to reconcile its ideals with its realities." In this sense, the play transcends historical retelling and becomes a mirror to the post-independence Indian condition. Karnad uses historical allegory not only to explore a tragic character but also to critically interrogate the nation's contemporary political disillusionment.

4.2 Power and Alienation

Tughlaq's increasing isolation reflects the alienation of the modern leader, a theme resonant in post-colonial contexts. His inability to trust his advisors, coupled with his paranoia, transforms him into a tyrant: "I am alone, and my enemies are legion (4). This alienation aligns with modern tragic theory, where the hero's struggle is as much against societal forces as against personal flaws (6). Tughlaq's tragedy is thus both individual and collective, reflecting the broader alienation of a nation grappling with its identity.

5 Comparative Analysis

5.1 Tughlaq and Classical Tragic Heroes

Tughlaq shares similarities with classical tragic heroes like Sophocles Oedipus and Shakespeare's Macbeth. Like Oedipus, Tughlaq is driven by a quest for truth and justice, but his intellectual arrogance leads to unintended consequences. Both characters evoke pity through their recognition of their flaws Oedipus's anagnorisis in his blinding, and Tughlaq's in his final solitude (1). However, Tughlaq's tragedy is more modern, as his failures are tied to systemic issues rather than divine fate.

Macbeth's ambition parallels Tughlaq's hubris, as both characters compromise their morality to retain power. However, Tughlaq's idealism distinguishes him from Macbeth's self-serving ambition, making his tragedy more poignant in its altruistic origins (5). These comparisons highlight Tughlaq's universal appeal as a tragic figure, while his Indian context grounds him in a specific cultural narrative.

5.2 Tughlaq and Indian Tragic Heroes

Within Indian drama, Tughlaq can be compared to Vijay Tendulkar's Ghashiram Kotwal in Ghashiram Kotwal (1972). Both characters are flawed leaders whose attempts to wield power led to their downfall. However, Ghashiram's tragedy is rooted in personal vengeance, while Tughlaq is driven by ideological failure.

6 Tughlaq's Moral Ambiguities

Tughlaq's character is defined by moral ambiguities that enhance his tragic complexity. His secular policies, such as promoting Hindu-Muslim unity, are progressive, yet his ruthless methods executing opponents and manipulating religious figures reveal a darker side. As Loomba notes, "Tughlaq's tragedy lies in his inability to reconcile his ideals with his actions (5). This tension is evident in his relationship with Aziz, a conman who exploits Tughlaq's policies for personal gain. Aziz's opportunism mirrors Tughlaq's own moral compromises, creating a doppelgänger effect that underscores the Sultan's internal conflict (4).

Tughlaq's self-awareness adds to his tragic depth. Unlike many tragic heroes who remain oblivious until their anagnorisis, Tughlaq recognizes his failures but is powerless to reverse them: "I wanted to build a new future, but I have destroyed the present.

7 Tughlaq in the Context of Modern Indian Drama

Modern Indian drama, as developed by playwrights like Karnad, Tendulkar, and Sir- car, seeks to address post-colonial anxieties through a blend of traditional and modern forms. Karnad's use of history in *Tughlaq* draws on Indian theatrical traditions like Yakshagana, while its thematic concerns power, identity, and failure resonate with Western dramatic forms

The play's non-linear structure and use of meta-theatrical elements, such as the chorus- like commentary of characters like Barani and Najib, enhance its tragic effect. These elements distance the audience, encouraging critical reflection on Tughlaqs actions, a technique akin to Brechtian alienation but adapted to an Indian context

8 Challenges and Limitations

While *Tughlaq* is a compelling tragic hero, the plays historical setting raises questions about its accessibility to audiences unfamiliar with Indian history. Karnads reliance on allegory may also limit its universal appeal, as the Nehruvian critique is specific to 1960s India

9 Conclusion

Girish Karnad's *Tughlaq* is a landmark in modern Indian drama, offering a nuanced portrait of Sultan Muhammad bin Tughlaq as a tragic hero whose rise and fall encapsulate both individual complexity and socio-political critique. Tughlaq is portrayed as a visionary ruler with noble ideals—justice, secularism, and administrative reform. However, his inability to translate these lofty ambitions into effective governance reveals the tragic disjunction between vision and reality. His idealism, while admirable, becomes his fatal flaw (*hamartia*) when coupled with an intellectual arrogance that blinds him to practical challenges and human limitations. This blend of nobility and error aligns with Aristotle's concept of tragedy, where the downfall of a great man evokes both pity and fear in the audience.

Beyond the classical frame, *Tughlaq* also resonates with modern tragic theory, particularly as articulated by Arthur Miller, where the tragic hero is often an ordinary individual caught in conflict with overwhelming social forces. Tughlaq, though a ruler, is deeply human—tormented by doubt, torn by guilt, and isolated by his own choices. His tragic arc reflects broader themes relevant to post-independence India: the disillusionment with Nehruvian idealism, the failures of governance, and the alienation between political leaders and the masses.

Tughlaq's character also invites comparison with classical figures like Oedipus and Macbeth, as well as Indian tragic characters such as Ghashiram from Vijay Tendulkar's *Ghashiram Kotwal*. Like them, Tughlaq is driven by a potent mixture of ambition and fatalism, navigating the treacherous terrain of power, morality, and destiny. Yet, his context—medieval yet modern, historical yet allegorical—gives his tragedy a uniquely Indian dimension. He becomes a symbol of the contradictions of a nation grappling with its identity in the wake of colonial rule.

As a cornerstone of modern Indian drama, *Tughlaq* affirms the enduring relevance of the tragic hero in dramatizing the tensions between personal aspiration and collective reality. Tughlaq's failure to reconcile idealism with pragmatism serves not only as a cautionary tale about political leadership but also as a profound meditation on human fallibility. In exploring power, identity, and disillusionment, Karnad's *Tughlaq* remains a timeless reflection on the tragic consequences of noble intentions undone by flawed execution.

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