UNIT 3 TUGHLAQ: STRUCTURE, THEMES AND MOTIFS

Structure

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3.0 OBJECTIVES

In this Unit we shall discuss the plot structure of Tughlaq, the sequencing of the scenes followed by a discussion of the focal theme, symbols/motifs and the dramatic devices that make Tughlaq a well-structured play. After reading the unit you will be able to appreciate the play’s everlasting appeal.

3.1 PLOT STRUCTURE

Tughlaq has been described as a well-structured play. Rajendra Paul calls it a beautifully structured play. The scenes, he says, are so juxtaposed that ‘you are not allowed to be either carried away by your hatred towards Tughlaq for his Machiavellian machinations or by your sympathy or admiration for his idealism’. (Enact: May 1973) The scene placement is entirely functional. As Rajinder Paul has pointed out, ‘Each scene is like a brick serving a particular role and helping in the total structure’. The scenes are necessarily episodic but they all converge on to producing a complex picture of the Sultan as it evolves during the five years of his rule shown in the play. The key figure in the play is of course the Sultan and the principal focus is on him and his policies. But it is also important for the audience for us to know what the common people and the nobility think about him.

3.1.1 The Sequencing of Scenes

The structuring of the play was influenced by Parsi theatre. In this respect Girish Karnad’s own comments are illuminating. According to him, the Parsi model demanded a succession of shallow and deep scenes. The shallow scenes gave prominence to lower characters and were comic and were supposed to be played in the street represented by the foreground of the stage. The deep scenes set in palaces and royal parks featured important characters. The spatial division, Karnad says, was ‘ideal to show the gulf between the rulers and the ruled, between the mysterious inner chambers of power politics and the open, public areas of those affected by it. But, as the writer points out, as he wrote the play he found it difficult to maintain what he called ‘the
accepted balance between these two regions: 'Writing in an unprecedented situation, where the mass populace was exercising political franchise, in however clumsy a fashion, for the first time in its history, I found the shallow scenes bulging with an energy hard to control.' The deep scenes, he says, became emptier as the play progressed. And 'the comic lead' Aziz appeared 'at par with the protagonist himself'. This, he says, was 'the result of the anarchy which climax Tughlaq's time'.

As a historical play its canvas is wide and there is a large variety of characters and places represented in it. Out of a total of thirteen scenes as many as seven are set in the palace. Five scenes are in the open. The conspiracy scene (Scene Five), which is the thirteenth scene, is necessarily set outside the palace; it takes place in a house in Delhi. Roughly, the scenes in the palace alternate with the scenes in the open. The scenes in the open generally have common characters but this is not true for Scene 3 which takes place outside the Big Mosque but which shows the Sultan in conversation with Sheikh Imam-un-din. On the other hand Scene Twelve is set in the palace but presents commoners Aazam and Aziz talking to each other. It is only in the last scene that the two worlds — the world of the royalty and the world of common men come together.

The alternation of scenes provides variety and sustains readers' audience interest and avoids long stretches of tension.

The first six scenes deal chiefly with the Sheikh Imam-ud-din's open revolt against the Sultan. His 'management' of both Ain-ul-Mulk and the Sheikh is the work of master strategist.

The remaining scenes show us the gradual decline of the state into chaos. Scene seven shows the privations of the people on way to Daulatabad and the way how parasites like Azis and Aazam plan to fatten themselves on the miseries of the poor.

Scene eight is set at Daulatabad and shows Barani suggesting to Muhammad to abdicate and keep the company of the learned. But Muhammad finds himself excessively embroiled in the affairs of the state to withdraw. Of the remaining five scenes only one scene deals with Muhammad and his Stepmother. This is also the most tense scene in the second half of the play. The remaining four are concerned with the tricksters Azim and Aazam — Scene Nine, Scene Eleven (Aziz in disguise) and Scene Twelve. Aziz also figures very prominently in Scene Thirteen. This is an alarming number of scenes to be given to Aziz and Aazam but as Girish Karnad himself points out, the ascendancy of Aziz is an index of the decline of the state into chaos. Barani is the last friend to leave Tughlaq never to return and his departure is significant. Equally significant is the fact that Muhammad has already acquired a new kind of lieutenant in the form of Aziz — he is soon to be an officer of the state. One can imagine what the state of affairs is going to be when the people begin their long weary march back to Delhi.

3.2 THEME OF POWER AND ITS TRAGIC MISUSE

A major theme in Girish Karnad’s play Tughlaq is inevitably power. Bertrand Russell said in his Power: A New Social Analysis that power is the capacity to achieve intended results. It will be worthwhile exploring how Tughlaq used
the power that he had acquired and why he failed to achieve the results that he had set out to do in the first instance. Tughlaq is unusually self-reflexive about kingship and the authority that it gave him. And our enquiry would hopefully give us an interesting glimpse into the psyche of a medieval king who would be different.

There are at least two Tughlaqs in the play and accordingly two faces of power. One of them was a visionary who had dreams to fulfill for his people; the other was a pragmatic politician whose entire politics was based on considerations other than morality or ideology. We shall deal with the idealistic Tughlaq first.

Tughlaq wanted to be different from the Sultans that had ascended the throne of Delhi, who wanted to use power for the people and thus rewrite history. Later he says that he killed his father and elder brother for ‘an ideal’, so that he could have ‘power, strength to shape my thoughts, strength to act, strength to recognize myself’. (Scene Ten: 204) Read the following exchange between Muhammad and his Stepmother.

**Muhammad:** ... I am not worried about my enemies. I'm only worried about my people. (italics added)

**Stepmother:** Pompous ass! As though other kings didn’t do that.

**Muhammad:** No, they didn’t. Look at the past Sultans of Delhi. They couldn’t bear the weight of their crowns. They couldn’t leave it aside. So they died senile in their youth or were murdered. (156-57)

This Tughlaq was a dreamer with the soul of a poet. In his imaginative moods he likes to soar high into the sky and contemplates a state in which he finds himself addressing his people to share their joys and sorrows with him:

...I want to climb up, up, up to the top of the tallest tree in the world, and call out to my people: “Come, my people, I am waiting for you. Confide in me your worries. Let me share your joys. Let’s laugh and cry together and then let’s pray”.

He goes further and imagines a sort of mystical union with them:

‘Let’s pray till our bodies melt and flow and our blood turns into air. History is ours to play with — ours now....Come! I am waiting to embrace you all!’ (Scene Two: 155)

At a more mundane level Muhammad wanted to be an architect of a new secular and progressive India without distinction between Hindus and Muslims:

‘My beloved people, you have heard the judgment of the kazi and seen for yourself how justice works in my kingdom — without any consideration of might or weakness, religion or creed. My this moment ...light up our path our path towards greater justice, equality, progress and peace...not just peace but a more purposeful life’. (Scene One: 149)

Tughlaq’s self-reflexivity about power shows that he is aware of the responsibilities of a ruler. In Scene Six, faced with rebellion from the Amirs, he raises the question of the legitimacy of power:
'I have been asking myself just one question. I am a king. I wear the royal robes. I have honoured myself with the title of Sultan. But what gives me the right to call myself a king? (The Amirs are baffled.) Am I a king because I am the son of a king? Or is it because I can make the people accept my laws and the army move to my commands? Or can self-confidence alone justify it? I ask you — all of you — what would you have me do to become a real king in your eyes? (Silence)...You are all silent. The others only tell me what I should not do but what I should. Until I know what else to do, Shihab-ud-din I have to go on clutching the scepter in my fist. But I am not happy'. (Scene Six: 181)

Muhammad is furious with the Amirs and the questions that he is putting to them are not questions to which he is not really seeking an answer but clearly he is conscious about the need for legitimizing the power of even a hereditary ruler and also that the ultimate legitimacy lies in a commitment to the people.

The more familiar Tughlaq is one that sees power as a game of chess in which there is someone who wins and someone who loses and the whole effort is to stay in power and if possible to enhance it. Naturally the politics followed was based on practical rather than moral or ideological considerations or what has come to be known as realpolitik. This is the more familiar face of power and Tughlaq can be seen doing what rulers have always done.

Chess as a game and later as a metaphor for political manoeuvring first occurs in Scene Two and at several places openly or implicitly till the end. The way Tughlaq aided by the wily Najib uses low cunning and deception to get rid of the troublesome Sheikh Imam-ud-din and also solves the problem posed by Ain-ul-Mulk with one master move could be called , to use the terminology of the game, checkmate. Another brilliant example of checkmating is furnished by the turning of the tables on the rebellious Amirs led by Shihab-ud-din.

For all his idealism Tughlaq cannot reconcile the two selves in him, the dream and the reality. We can see the idealist Tughlaq slipping into his more practical counterpart. Read this exchange:

**Muhammad:** So, Najib. What do you propose?

**Najib:** I can’t think of anything right now, Your Majesty — except that the Sheikh has a striking resemblance to you. (Muhammad, startled, stares at Najib.)

**Barani:** What has the Sheikh got to do with this?

**Muhammad:** (Slowly) You are a devil, Najib! (Pause. Then briskly) Good. W’ll think about that.... (Scene Two: 159-60)

Later, Muhammad, conscious of Barani’s praise of ‘his courage, honesty and justice’ is compelled to explain:

**Muhammad:** Forgive me if I let you down, Barani, but I must play this game my own way .... (160) (italics added)

And ‘my own way’ means doing what is dictated by realpolitik, resorting to low cunning and deception so that the Sheikh could be eliminated.
Tughlaq fails in his mission for several reasons. First, he is not able to reconcile the two faces of power in his mental make-up. Moreover, the visionary in him gets mired in self-righteousness. He has an outsized ego and he acts from a settled conviction that he alone is right. This together with his impatience in getting quick results makes him intolerant of criticism and dissent. A favourite scheme of his that became an idée fixe with him was the transfer of the Capital from Delhi to Daulatabad. This is also the major cause of the rebellion led by Shihab-ud-din. His self-righteousness becomes clear in his handling of the rebellion. When Shihab points out that the people of Delhi were very unhappy with the transfer, he says: ‘I have explained every reason to them, shown how my empire cannot flourish with Delhi as its capital. But how can I explain tomorrow to those who haven’t opened their eyes to the light of today? Let’s not waste more time over that. They’ll see the point soon’. (Scene Six: 180-81) He of course proceeds to crush the rebellion with an iron hand without bothering either to probe the causes of the rebellion or assessing the mood of the people. He is convinced about the rightness of the step and according to him that should be enough for everybody.

His continuing to stab Shihab long after he is dead brings his cruelty and vindictiveness to the surface. This vindictiveness assumes a more generalized form when we see the ruler who had invited the people of Delhi to go to Daulatabad voluntarily (Scene One: 149) now orders them to leave immediately (Scene Six: 185-86).

Muhammad: Najib, I want Delhi vacated immediately. Every living soul in Delhi will leave for Daulatabad within a fortnight. I was too soft. I can see that now. They’ll understand the whip. Everyone must leave. Not a light should be seen in the windows of Delhi. (italics added)

He will now use naked power as an instrument of exemplary punishment. When Barani spreads a silken cloth over Shihab’s face, Muhammad prevents him saying: ‘Don’t cover him, Barani. I want my people to see his wounds’ (186).

This is a key scene in another way. His prohibition of prayers indicates another feature of his exercise of power — its arbitrary nature. The reason he gives is that ‘our prayers too are ridden with disease, and must be exiled’. The reference apparently is to the association of prayer with murder from which he has escaped. But the whimsical nature of the interdiction cannot be questioned.

This scene then marks a watershed in the career of Muhammad. Commitment to an ideal which included commitment to the people was what had justified even the murder of his father and brother in his own eyes but the same Muhammad is well on his way to a complete estrangement from the people.

In the latter half of the play we have a glimpse of Muhammad’s use of power which is punitive and which is both arbitrary and excessive. In Scene Eight Barani who manages to tell Muhammad the truth about himself says: ‘Your Majesty, there was a time when you believed in love, in peace, in God. What has happened to those ideals? You won’t let your subjects pray. You torture them for the smallest offence. Hang them on suspicion. Why this bloodshed? Please stop it, and I promise Your Majesty something better will emerge out of it’ (196).
But he doesn’t turn back, he cannot turn back. This shows the addictive nature of power, particularly when there is no morality to restrain, to use Bertrand Russell’s words, ‘anarchic self-assertion’. There is only one occasion when he questions the punishment that he has inflicted on others — to kill his Stepmother by stoning for killing Najib: ‘Why am I become a pig rolling in this gory mud?’ This is part of the prayer that he tries to offer but cannot.

I think his growing emotional isolation has also something to do with his addiction to violence. His mother doesn’t talk to him. Barani is a trusted friend but his advice often doesn’t suit him. The only person who had an emotional hold on him and who could have exercised a restraining influence on his is his Stepmother and he feared she was trying to rival him. Bereft of all friends, Muhammad has only his ‘madness to prance in a field eaten bare by the scarecrow violence’. (Scene Thirteen: 220)

We have a third, perhaps a more contemporary face of power too in the play, illustrated through the spectacular rise of Aziz. From a dhobi he becomes a revered state guest who is welcomed as a descendent of the Abbasid Khalifs and who is supposed to purify the land and restart the banned prayers. There are two aspects of Aziz’s aspiration to power. First, he graduates from money to power. A remark by Bertrand Russell in his introduction to Power: A New Social Analysis illuminates this graduation: ‘When a moderate degree of comfort is assured, both individuals and communities will pursue power rather than wealth...’ In the beginning he wants money and becomes a robber. A stage comes in his career of the petty criminal when mere wealth doesn’t satisfy him and he wants power (‘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 stay there to punish him for getting robbed. That’s called “class” — that’s being a real king’). (198) (Italics added)

Second, Aziz wants power for self-indulgence, for what it will get him. Muhammad wanted power to fulfill his dreams for the country and the people. But he has no such pretensions. He wants to enjoy having and exercising power and all the other luxuries that it will bring. During his journey to Daulatabad he tells his friend Aazam that he has ‘discovered a whole new world [of politics] — wealth, success, position and power’. (Scene Seven: 190) He manages to acquire this position and power through all possible means with no holds barred and is very brazen about it. In that sense Aziz has a contemporary touch about him. He murders Ghiyas-ud-din, a descendent of the Abbasid Khalifs, who is on his way to the new capital at the invitation of the Sultan and is received at the palace with great deference. The imposture is discovered but the crowning irony of the play comes when Muhammad has to continue to connive at this masquerade. This seems to suggest that the Sultan cannot disown the mirror image of himself. Aziz is the bitter harvest he has produced and he must reap it. Aziz represents power at its ugliest.

### 3.3 SYMBOLS/MOTIFS USED IN THE PLAY

Girish Karnad, in this play, has used some symbols which are not literary but theatrical symbols. They form integral parts of the play’s action. Disguise and resemblance and Muhammad’s sleeplessness are such symbols. The play
begins with the disguise of Aziz, who comes at the end of the play as Ghiyas-
ud-din. Sheikh Imam-ud-din is killed while he goes in disguise. Disguise is a
very effective symbol for hypocrisy, role-playing and also imitation.
Muhammad’s sleeplessness is indicative of his vigilance a price a politician
cannot help paying. Muhammad sleeps only at the end when all his energies
are exhausted.

But the most important symbol is that of the game of chess. Muhammad is
seen in scene two playing chess and thinking of defeating his friend. But here
the game of chess is a part of dramatic action. But the whole play imitates
the structure of the game of chess. Muhammad, like the king of the chessboard,
moves towards the centre of the board for his safety by shifting his capital
from Delhi to Daulatabad. Aziz, like a pawn also moves towards the centre. If
the king moves down the pawn moves up and the king ultimately is
checkmated by the pawn. The king cannot be killed, but can only be
checkmated.

Satyadeo Dube, the well-known director, has something meaningful to say
about this play. In a paper on contemporary Indian drama, he said that the
characters of modern Indian drama do not measure up to the characters of
Ibsen and Strindberg because of the historical and sociological circumstances.
The only exception, Dube writes, “which immediately comes to my mind is
Girish Karnad’s Tughlaq. This play...has in the character of Tughlaq a depth
of exploration which can stand up to quite a few great characters created in the
western theatre”. These remarks neatly sum up the achievement of the play.
The character of Sultan Muhammad is a sure index of the development of
dramatic consciousness in Indian theatre.

3.3.1 Chess

Life, particularly political life, has often been compared to chess. Muhammad
Tughlaq is represented in the play as an accomplished chess-player. It is only
appropriate therefore that the chess metaphor should play an important part in
the play. When Scene Two opens, Muhammad is seen playing chess solo. He
has just solved the greatest problem in chess and is excited over it. Soon with
the help of Najib he is going to solve the problem posed by Ain-ul-Mulk.
That is one of the most brilliant moves made by the Muhammad — Najib duo
for not only do they get rid of the troublesome Sheikh Imam-ud-din but also
make friends with Ain-ul-Mulk. The other is the forestalling of the conspiracy
led by Shihab-ud-din. Here we have a perfect example of checkmating. The
conspirators, apparently unstoppable, are checkmated in the nick of time. At
this point Muhammad is at the peak of his success.

But his decline has already started. However, the only time Muhammad
admits to being checkmated is by Aziz the dhobi from Shiknar. The king has
been checkmated by the ‘pawn’. The irony is that with all his skill in chess
and political manouvring Muhammad’s graph of success falls steeply where
the Aziz’s graph shows a corresponding steep rise. He has murdered Ghiyas-
ud-din, the last descendent of the Abbasid Khalifa who was on way to
Daulatabad on invitation from the Sultan and has come disguised as Ghiyas-
ud-din. Earlier Muhammad and Aziz made their moves separately, their paths
touching each other only tangentially. Now they come together and we can
only imagine the kinds of moves they will make. The only certainty is that the
losers will be the people, who are mere pawns and victims, as they have
always been.
3.3.2 Prayer

A major motif in the play is the motif of prayer, which the playwright has woven into the structure of the play. As U.R. Ananthamurthy has pointed out, Karnad’s treatment of the motif is unhistorical.

Killing a man at prayer is considered sacrilegious. Witness Hamlet’s hesitation in killing Polonius while he is praying. Here was a chance for him to avenge the murder of his father but he spares Claudius’s life because killing him while praying would send him to heaven. There is no such misgiving in the minds of the conspirators in Tughlaq.

When Ratansingh lays bare his plan to murder the Sultan while he is praying, it sounds attractive because prayers being compulsory, the whole palace will be unarmed at that time. The only serious objection comes from a man of religion, Sheikh Shamsuddin, who says that it would be sacrilegious; it would pollute the time of prayer which was sacred time. But the objection is overruled. Eventually the conspiracy is uncovered and the Sultan is outraged and gives condign punishment to the conspirators. The irony is that the Sultan has himself been guilty of the same offence when he had his father and brother murdered in order to seize power while they were praying. The dramatic point being made is that Tughlaq’s power is corrupt at its very source. In a burst of fury Muhammad bans all prayers. (Scene Six) He had hoped that every act in his kingdom would be a prayer, ‘every prayer to become a further step in knowledge, every step to lead us nearer to God’. But he says that their prayers have become diseased and ‘must be exiled’. (Scene Six)

It seems that the wheel has come full circle. After five years when Muhammad finds all else failing, he resorts to religion and invites the last descendant of Abbasid Khalifa, Ghiyas-ud-din to come and purify the land. The visit will also mark the restarting of prayers. But the real descendant of the Khalifa, Ghiyas-ud-din has been murdered and it is the murderer Aziz disguised as Ghiyas-ud-din who comes and is received in the palace. It is he who is slated to lead the prayers. Muhammad is shocked at Aziz’s brazen confession but he is left with no option but to connive at this public deception. The moral degeneration of authority is complete. Prayers are essential but they have been reduced to a mere empty public gesture, nothing more. The great irony is that Muhammad is offering the people prayers when they actually want food. (Scene Twelve)

We also get a chance to look at prayers from the point of view of personal need. While prayers are bANNed, there comes a time when Muhammad feels an inner need to pray and calls for divine guidance. But he admits the hardness of his heart and his inability to pray:

‘I was trying to pray — but I could only find words learnt by rote which left no echo in the heart. I am tethering on the brink of madness, Barani, but the madness of God still eludes me’. (Scene Ten) This unenviable situation when one desparately need to pray but can’t is a measure of the distance Muhammad has traveled on the road to damnation.

The closing moments of Scene Thirteen witness a reversal of sorts. Prayers have restarted and the Muezzin is heard calling the faithful to prayer. But the
Servant realizing that the Sultan’s great need to sleep chooses to violate the prayer order and lets him sleep. This simple gesture reestablishes the essential humanity of Muhammad and his vulnerability as a human being.

3.3.3 Disguise and Resemblance as Dramatic Devices

Both disguise and resemblance have been widely used as devices in drama, particularly in comedies. In this play both have been pressed into service for serious purposes.

Resemblance first. Because of the striking resemblance between Sheikh Imam-ud-din and the Sultan, Najib lights upon a plan to kill two birds with one stone. They would be able to buy peace with Ain-ul-Mulk and also get rid of the dangerous Sheikh Imam-ud-din who is proving to be a centre for subversive activities in the state. The plan works perfectly and Sheikh Imam-ud-din gets killed as a result of mistaken identity.

While resemblance is used only for an isolated episode, disguise is employed more centrally. A character puts on disguise to hide, trick or to spy on others. Here Aziz assumes two disguises to trick others — first as Pandit Vishnu Prasad who files a suit against the state and wins it in the first scene; and second as the last descendent of the Abbasid Khalifa, Ghiyas-ud-din whom he has killed and whose robes he has stolen and who arrives in Daulatabad to purify the land in Scene Eleven. Aziz is a dhobi of Shiknar but who is ambitious and who first tries to enrich himself in various ways and later sets his sights at position and power.

On the first occasion no one is able to pierce through his disguise. The suggestion is that he is able to hoodwink the whole people. It is only when his old friend the pickpocket Aazam looks at him closely that he is able to recognize him. At this stage he is intent only on money and they join hands to go for it.

On the second occasion again when Aziz appears as Ghiya-ud-din as the Saviour from the land of the Khalifas, no one is able to see through his disguise — except one Hindu woman who he did not allow to go to look after her sick child while they were on the road to Daulatabad: ‘He killed my child! Those eyes ... I’ll never forget them...he killed my child ...’ (Scene Eleven) But he is properly exposed only by Muhammad himself when he tears the mask from off his face in the last scene of the play: ‘Who are you? Who are you? How long do you hope to go on fooling us with your masquerade?’ The irony is that in spite of the exposure of Aziz and his subsequent brazen confession of all his villainies, Muhammad has no option but to let him go on with his masquerade. The disguise is off but he sees a close resemblance between Aziz and himself. As he tells Barani: ‘All your life you wait for someone who understands you. And then — you meet him — ‘Later: ‘But I am not alone, Barani. Thank Heaven. For once I am not alone. I have a companion to share my madness now’. (Scene Thirteen)

3.3.4 Theatrical Images

Girish Karnad’s Tughlaq deserves a close scrutiny as it highlights one of the fundamental concepts of theatre i.e. that theatre is an illusion, a fleeting shadow, a vision and a dream-like experience. There is a close parallel between life and theatre and quite often life is theatre-like and vice versa. But
at no time life is theatre and theatre is life. The thin line of demarcation between good theatre and life is very often not perceived and hence the confusion and misunderstanding that both are the same or both are interchangeable. A skilful playwright, even when he is realistic, makes us conscious: Look here! You are only watching a play. There are several ways of bringing in this awareness into the audience. Girish Karnad uses theatrical images in Tughlaq to achieve an effect that is comparable to the achievement of John Osborne in Luther.

3.3.4.1 Performance

There are many references to acting, theatre, and performance in Tughlaq. Muhammad behaves and speaks like an actor. His public appearance and his private moments are like that of an actor. In the opening scene itself there is a reference to his theatricality. He appears before the crowd properly heralded, and waxes eloquent. He speaks of “justice”, “peace”, “purposeful life” — rather he uses clichés to describe his desires. He makes an “exhibition” of his sense of justice. When he leaves the scene, the Guard disperses the crowd shouting at them

“All right, all right. Go home! What are you waiting for? The show’s over! Go home…”

The Sultan’s public appearance, his sense of justice, his plans are all a part of the show. The crowd is the audience for the Sultan. It looks more or less like a scene from the street-theatre. Even after the actors have moved into another part of the city the audience sometimes lingers on and comments on the players and their performance. The Guard’s appraisal of the situation is clear and incisive. Just as the Guard judges the situation, in Scene Two, the stepmother sees Sultan as an actor. She laughs at his performance and that is a positive sign of the acting potentiality of the Sultan as an actor. She asks a simple question: “Then what do you do all night?” and the reply is a lengthy, theatrical monologue. Girish Karnad, in his Stage Directions, italicizes the word theatrical. The speech is poetic, stagy and full of grandiose statement:

“Then again I want to climb up, up to the top of the tallest tree in the world, and call out to my people: “Come, my people, I am waiting for you. Confide in me your worries. Let me share your joys. Let’s laugh and cry together and then let’s pray. Let’s pray till our bodies’ melt and flow and our blood turns into air. History is ours to play with—ours now! Let’s be the light and cover the earth with greenery. Let’s be darkness and cover up the boundaries of nations. Come! I am waiting to embrace you all!”

This is not an address in the Durbar, nor is it a king’s message to his citizens on his birthday. The scene takes place in a room in the palace. The only person listening to him is the stepmother. So, no wonder, she laughs and tells him: I can’t ask a simple question without your giving a royal performance.

The gestures and speech behaviour of Muhammad are theatrical. He plays a “role” now, then changes costumes, and plays another “role”. Before Sheikh Imam-ud-din, he plays the role of a true ruler interested in establishing a “new world”. He plays it so well Imam-ud-din tells him: “You know, Sultan, I’m just beginning to understand why they say you are the cleverest main in the
world”. Scene Six opens with silence. “Muhammad is restless and paces up and down. When the Amirs enter, the restlessness is gone. He welcomes them “with obvious warmth”. Every emotion is to be shown. It is an actor’s responsibility to make things obvious for the audience, either directly or indirectly. The pensive, restless mood is replaced by an imposed cordiality. Like a skilful actor, Muhammad keeps changing roles. Where there is an opportunity, he becomes theatrical in his action also. In Scene Four, when Shihab-ud-din perceives Muhammad with a mere bow, Muhammad brings in the actor’s touch:

That’s no way to welcome, Shihab. Come — They embrace.

In Scene Six, when he pleads with Amirs to support him in his plans, much to the surprise and embarrassment of the Amirs, he kneels before them. “The Amirs almost recoil at this sudden gesture”. They are taken aback by his theatricality. Like an actor winning applause of the audience by an unexpected gesture, Muhammad outsprints them. We must remember that Muhammad is aware of the conspiracy of the Amirs at this moment. We are told of his knowledge of the conspiracy only later in the play. So, here is a Sultan, who knows that Amirs have come to kill him and yet stage-manages a “play” before them. He could have easily arrested them in the beginning of the scene itself, but he likes to enjoy the climax of the play, and he would love to exhibit before his audience, how he plays the climax. So he allows the call to prayer. When the Amirs step forward to attack him, the Hindu soldiers overpower them. “While all this is going on, MUHAMMAD goes on praying unconcerned. Only after finishing the prayer does he step down from the throne”. In Scene Eight, Muhammad is given a long poetic monologue, which unravels the anguish of a visionary whose vision has fled. He makes the speech dramatic.

In Scene Eight, Muhammad goes to the Fort in search of an audience. He sends for Barani and talks to him. He tells Barani: “When I came here, I felt needed an audience”. He is a “demanding companion” to the young watchman. There is a constant desire for an audience.

Another important image that highlights the relationship between life and theatre is “role-playing”. Disguise in Tughlaq is a symbol of role-playing. The parallel comic plot of Aziz and Aazam and the main plot converge at one point. Muhammad asks Aziz:

Who are you? How long did you hope to go on fooling us with your masquerade?

Muhammad recognizes a fellow actor in Aziz who is also a genius in “role-playing”. When he forgives Aziz, Muhammad says: “I don’t know why I am acting like a fool”. The various roles played by Aziz — that of a Brahmin, of a victim, and more significantly that of Khalif — are pointers to the fact that Aziz converts life into a stage and goes on with his role-playing. Aziz is Muhammad’s “shadow”, his “other”. He tells Muhammad: “I insist I am your Majesty’s true disciple”. Aziz checkmates Muhammad and sends him into “a guiflaw”. He recognizes the genius of Aziz, forgives him and makes him an officer of the State. What is made very obvious in the case of Aziz, is made subtle in the case of Muhammad. Muhammad also wears and disguise himself. There is a basic dialectics in Muhammad’s personality: the visionary and the politician; the idealist and the realist. The whole play is a projection of
Muhammad’s divided self”. The whole play is a projection of Muhammad’s “divided self”. U. R. Ananthamurthy rightly observes:

“The whole play is structured on these opposites: the ideal and the real; the divine aspiration and the deit intrigue. Tughlaq is what he is in spite of his self. Knowledge and an intense desire for divine grace. He is aware of the irony of his life when Aziz, the only character in the play who has skillfully used all the schemes of Tughlaq for his own designs, kills Ghiyas-ud-din and comes in his guise as a holy messenger of peace to purify the land and revive the banned prayer”. (‘Introduction of Tughlaq’, Three Plays, 144-45).

K. S. Ramamurthy also comments on the divided self:

“He is at once an idealist and crafty politician, a humanist and a tyrant, a man who has murdered sleep and yet not a Macbeth haunted by supernatural solicitations, a man who thinks and broods too much and yet not a Hamlet incapable of action or guilty of delay” (Literature Critics, (1979), 17).

The “divided self”, pointed out by Ananth Murthy, has to be seen on the stage. To visualize the “divided self” in terms of “role-playing” is a popular English theatrical device. John Osborne does that in Luther. The man behind the revolution is a person in conflict with himself and his parents. Martin’s rebellion is a mask that provides him an opportunity to suppress the familial conflict and fight it out in another ground.

In Karnad’s Tughlaq, Muhammad is at war with himself. He is basically a visionary, a poet and not a ruler. He loves chess, a rose garden and enjoys reading poems. He reads the Greeks. He is aware of the “Greek in me”. He speaks of his visions — of finding a “new world, a world I had not found in the Arabs or even the Koran”. He builds a Utopia in his visions. His visions are like “the visions which lead Zarathustra or the Buddha”. He is constantly talking about “tomorrow”, “a new future”. Muhammad tells the young watchman in Scene Eight:

“Nineteen. Nice Age! An age when you think you can clasp the whole world in your palm like a rare diamond. I was twenty-one when I came to Daulatabad first, and built this fort. I supervised the placing of every brick in it and I said to myself, one day I shall build my own history, like this, brick by brick. ...Suddenly something happened — as though someone had cast a spell. The torch, the gate, the fort and the sky — all melted and merged and flowed in my blood stream with the darkness of the night. The moment shed its symbols, its questions and answers, and stood naked and calm where the stars throbbed in my veins. I was the earth, was the grass, was the smoke, was the sky”.

Barani sees the visionary in Muhammad. He sees him behind the mask. When Muhammad wants to know the cure for the “honey-comb of diseases”, Barani prescribes:

“You are a learned man, your Majesty; you are known the world over for your knowledge of philosophy and poetry. History is not made only in statecraft; its lasting results are produced in the ranks of learned men. That’s where you belong, your Majesty, in the company of learned men. Not in the market of corpses.
This learned man, the philosopher, Muhammad, speaks through symbols. To him every rose is “an image of Sadi’s poems”. That is one of the reasons why Muhammad’s language is poetic. He has a poet’s vision in his heart. He cannot follow Barani’s prescription because that means he must give up, playing the Sultan:

“I have often thought of that myself-to give up this futile seesaw struggle and go to Mecca. Sit there by the Kaaba and search for the peace, which Daulatabad hasn’t given me. What bliss! But it isn’t that easy. It isn’t as easy as leaving the patient in the wilderness because there’s no cure for his disease”.

Muhammad feels that he still has “something to give, something to teach, which may open the eyes of history”.

Aziz too has his moment of epiphany. He suddenly realizes that human life is just “bodies eaten-up by corruption”, like the Sultan’s moment of revelation in the rose-garden. Both Aziz and the Sultan suffer identity crisis. The Sultan, a visionary, deliberately dons the robes of a ruler. He kills his father, kills the conspirators and makes Sheik Imam-ud-din a pawn in his game of holding the scepter in his fist. He plays a tyrant but very often the role slips by and makes him a civil servant. The act of forgiveness is the real Sultan. He is a poet who has compassion and a comprehensive vision to tolerate human weakness. But when he plays the Sultan, he kills mercilessly even his close relatives — his father, his stepmother and Shihab-ud-din. The conflict is between the visionary and the ruler and the struggle of Muhammad is to achieve a synthesis between the two. Tughlaq is an excellent tragedy that depicts the struggle and failure of a poet who wants to become a ruler, a visionary who desires to establish a Utopia. The struggle becomes significant as it ends in the failure to affect a synthesis between the poet and the ruler and the failure to found a “new world”.

### 3.4 LET US SUM UP

This play in the main gives us a peep into the nature of power and its relationship with kingship and the people and what happens when power-wielders go awry.

### 3.5 QUESTIONS

1. In what sense is Tughlaq a well-structured play?
2. What use does Karnad make of the motif of chess?
3. Write a note on the use of the motif of disguise and resemblance in the play?
4. Discuss the theme of power in the play.