



# History of the Colonized Justified in Girish Karnad's 'Dreams of Tipu Sultan'

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## Abstract

The play interrogates the very established mode/process of writing history. Karnad wants to free Tipu's history from its colonial distortions and perversions. The new historicist perspective is very subtly and aptly presented in the play through the following sarcastic and rhetorical words of Indian Court historian Kirmani to Mackenzi, "Your version of history is already prepared. It's of what use to listen to my babblings now? : Irony is that I have lost the right to speak about my own culture." Karnad's play is a kind of counter history that resists subjugation/oblivion – It is a counter-memory. So, Karnad depicts Tipu as an intelligent, empathetic, tolerant leader seeking prosperity and happiness of his subjects; as a sagacious person with a modernist approach in trade, literature, music, science, agriculture, medicine ,warfare etc almost in every facets of life. Karnad has resurrected magnanimous personality of Tipu in the play . The hidden cunning games of the colonizer are exposed in the play. The play questions the way history has been and is being written. It attempts to throw light on alternative ,rather true interpretation of Tipu's life and history. The play is a postcolonial attempt to bring back real Tipu who had been subjugated in the domain of western knowledge. The paper identifies the doubly alienated condition of Tipu in today's communally charged environment . In this sense, the play is a right response to the present scenario of Karnataka ( old Mysore state) where misrepresentation of Tipu and hatred for Muslims has become a political propaganda for some section of people.

## I.Introduction

The Dreams of Tipu Sultan ( Kannada : Tipu Sultan Kanda Kanasu) is a 1997 play, in two acts, written by Girish Karnad for BBC to commemorate 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Indian Independence. The play deals with certain historic moments during the last days of life of the ruler of Mysore, Tipu Sultan, through the eyes of an Indian court historian and a British Oriental scholar. Mir Hussain Ali Khan Kirmani (active 1781-1802), the author of the book "History of Tipu Sultan: Being a Continuation of The Neshani Hyduri" and Tipu's court historian , is seen as one of these two narrators of the play. Karnad has based his play on a Farsi manuscript ( Khwab Nama) Notebook of Dreams written by Tipu in his own handwriting preserved in the India Office Library . In the book, Tipu recorded almost thirty seven dreams from 1785 to 1798. The playwright has chosen only four dreams which can be seen as political and cultural allegories in the play.

## II. Justifying the history for Tipu Sultan

The play Dreams of Tipu is a historiographic analysis of life and events of Tipu Sultan, the ruler of Mysore during the 18th century. It interrogates the very established mode/process of writing history. Karnad has very deftly deconstructed the attempt of the British colonial history to show Tippu as a stereotyped oriental ruler. The play unfolds the real portrayal of Tippu as a visionary, dreamer, intellectual, deft tradesman ,poet ,rather a good human being. Karnad wants to free Tipu's history from its colonial distortions and perversions. The time of its publication 1990s when communal riots were at peak in India has, perhaps, prompted Karnad to retell religiously prejudiced history of Tippu in right angle.

The hidden cunning games of the colonizer are exposed in the play . The cunning way the British officers negotiate with the Marathas and Nizama in order to isolate Tipu speaks of the divide and rule policy of the colonizer. The play shows how the colonizers always sense the strength of the enemy and make all the possible strategies to weaken him. The play exposes that it was not just Tipu's bravery or his martial skills that the colonizer was afraid of , rather it was his far-sightedness , vision ,his skills in trade and commerce , his ability to understand what should be done to the progress of the country -these were all the things which made the colonizer to be afraid of Tipu. They knew well that it was only Tipu who could beat them in the field of trade and commerce by using their own techniques. They knew well what was the martial capacity of Tipu and that it was difficult to beat him directly. That's why they wanted to weaken Tipu mentally, psychologically by taking away his beloved sons in form of ransom for his defeat in the third Anglo Mysore war. Even in the last war it is not in the face to face situation that Tipu is killed but he is betrayed by his own officer who takes away the soldiers from the battlefield saying that there would be distribution of salary in different place. The gravity of the betrayal becomes evident with the fact that Nadeem Khan, Mir Sadiq, Quamaruddin and Poornaiya were rewarded by the British after the victory. Thus the play makes an attempt to foreground the reality of the colonizer's deceit and cunning scheme.

Edward Said says, "the west shows a general patronizing attitude towards Middle Eastern, Asian, and North African societies and essentializes these societies as static and undeveloped. Thereby the west fabricates a view of Oriental culture that can be studied, depicted, and reproduced in service of imperial service." According to Said what is implicit in this fabrication is the idea that western society is developed, rational, flexible, and superior while the eastern ones are not. This is what is found in the arguments of Meckenzie and other officers like Mornington about Tipu throughout the play. However, the play resists this hegemonic image given by the colonizers to Tippu and puts him in true postcolonial perspective through the arguments of Kirmani. Through Kiramani's words the play unfolds another side of history that was not documented by the British Historians. Girish Karnad in an interview (in The Hindu 13<sup>th</sup> sept 2005) says Tipu is misrepresented in History. His image was so distorted because his identity was largely created by the British. Karnad says, "Tipu was a thinker and visionary, who represented the best of Karnataka. Unfortunately he has been misunderstood by the people of his

own country and a lot of untruths were spread about him,"(The Hindu). The authenticity of the work in the play is gained by employing historical figures, Kirmani and Mackenzi as narrators . Karnad unveils a ruler who was misunderstood by the people almost for 200 years. True image of Tipu was not known or purposefully ignored by the people. In this work Tipu Sultan is projected as a visionary and a person ahead of his times. The play exposes the petty mindedness of the colonial regime which couldn't tolerate an efficient ruler like Tipu Sultan. It also suggests that 'Tipu was a soul who wanted to take his nation to superior heights but his people couldn't match his ideas and thus got a controversial image'(Diana). The playwright has experimented the fusion of history and characteristics of a dream play in rendering a legitimate identity. Karnad tries to highlight the last days of Tipu Sultan and tries to convey a counter history hidden by the western hegemonic agenda. Karnad uses the famous 'Note Book of Dreams' by Tipu Sultan and other documents to foreground this alternative history of Tipu . The new historicist perspective is very subtly and aptly presented in the play through the sarcastic words of Indian Court historian Kirmani to Mackenzi " your version of history is already prepared. It's of what use to listen to my babblings now? : Irony is that I have lost the right to speak about my own culture." Khawaldeh and Neimneh have pointed out the narrative technique and its significance in the play in the following words, "Karnad skillfully subverts official colonial history by creating the characters of Mir Hassan Ali Khan Kirmani, the court historian and Colonel Colin Mackenzie, the British Orientalist. Mackenzie's historical remarks about the Sultan are incorporated within the larger narrative frame created by Kirmani, and thus become subordinate to the prevailing re-written history of the colonized in the play" (Reclaiming Lost Hero. 2-21).

In colonial hegemonic history the facts about the colonized become subjugated knowledges . "Subjugated knowledges are , Foucault says , forms of experiences and remembering that are pushed to the margins and rendered unqualified and unworthy of epistemic respect by prevailing and hegemonic discourses of the colonizer or the dominant. (p 82-85)." British colonialist historians, specially after 1857 riots of Independence, began to spread in a greater degree the fabricated narrative that medieval muslim kings oppressed the hindus (Tarakere 86). Tippu was a victim of such fabricated narratives. As a part of this colonialist agenda many theatrical performances demonizing Tipu Sultan were performed by British colonialist writers and artists in England even during the his lifetime and immediately after his death (Khawaldeh and Neimneh). Karnad's work is a sort of Counter history that opposes this subjugation/oblivion – It is a counter-memory. So, Karnad depicts Tipu as an intelligent, empathetic, tolerant leader seeking prosperity and happiness of his subjects; as a sagacious person with a modernist approach in trade, literature, music, science, agriculture, medicine ,warfare etc almost in every facets of life. Karnad has resurrected magnanimous personality of Tipu . The Jordanian scholars Khawaldeh and Neimneh conclude in an article that "what Karnad wishes to achieve, through this counter-historical theatrical project, is to dismantle the image of the ruthless and unprincipled 'Other' propagated by British historians, dramatists, and performers by creating or even recreating an alternative humane and noble character of Tipu Sultan" (Reclaiming. 2-21). Even though Tipu Sultan regained his power , he was murdered unfairly in the

fourth battle as he was betrayed by his own people, friends Marathas and Nizams. Unfair means of battle used by the enemies emphasizes the bravery of Tipu and cowardice of the British.

And now the history of the post colonial India is facing another crisis which cannot be solved so easily. In India today the vested interests of upper class, upper caste and new elites of the backward communities who are associated with socio-political power centers, some misguided deliberately by a certain political ideology, or some for their own socio-political gains, have begun to misuse the tools of colonial distortions on Tipu Sultan's history. Today's Karnataka ((the Mysore state) has witnessed unprecedented debate( pro and con) over Tipu, his Jayanti (birth anniversary) being celebrated and protested by the same people in power over a period of time. The communalist scenario has grown up very fast after the beginning of neo-liberal free-market policy in 1990s supporting corporate giants, feudalism, landlords, businessmen and upper class elites (Tarikere 92). In this neo-colonial condition Tippu has got doubly alienated in his own land. The present and the past interacting with and influencing each other is another major motif in 'Dreams of Tipu' as the play ends in its beginning while it begins in the end. In this sense the play is a right response to the present scenario of Karnataka (old Mysore state) where misrepresentation of Tipu and hatred for Muslims has become a political propaganda for some section of people

### III. Conclusion

Thus, the paper argues that, through the dreams and the description of the Anglo Mysore wars, Karnad is actually creating a counter history hidden by the British. He pictures the real Tipu. The play foregrounds a model of Tipu Sultan as a human being with all complexities in his personality, not as a stereotyped other propagated by the colonial regime for its own imperial agenda. Karnad was not focused on the chronological historical details but was keen to present the real Tipu Sultan with the help of alternative historical evidences. In this sense the play follows new historicist approach in order to unravel the hidden truths of Tipu's history. It questions the way history has been and is being written. It attempts to throw light on alternative ,rather true interpretation of Tipu's life and history. Today more than ever before, the play becomes much relevant because of the communally charged atmosphere around us.

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