Looking at the Past: Refiguration of History in Girish Karnad's *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan*

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ABSTRACT: *To review and revise history and to present it in an imaginative form is one of the challenges taken up by South-Asian historical theatre. However writing back to the empire poses many problems, the foremost of the danger of hegemonic re-construction which ultimately leads to an inversion of the power structure (through replacement or substitution) without making a genuine effort to engage with the colonial/western perspective along with its tools of erasure and overwriting. Such a text, ultimately written as a rebuttal, without trying to delve into the very process by which the colonial version of history is created, indirectly legitimizes its perspective. Taking Girish Karnad's The Dreams of Tipu Sultan I explore how South-Asian theatre not only deals with the politics of representation questioning euro-centric conceptions of objectivity and authenticity by decentering colonial version of history but also deconstructs historiography by challenging the dichotomy between fact and fiction and most importantly questioning the nature of historical truth itself. .*

Keywords: post-colonial, alternate history, South Asian theatre, Girish Karnad, Tipu Sultan, refiguration

To review and revise history and to present it in an imaginative form is one of the challenges taken up by post-colonial historical theatre. However writing back to the empire poses many problems, the foremost of the danger of hegemonic re-construction which ultimately leads to an inversion of the power structure (through replacement or substitution) without making a genuine effort to engage with the colonial/western perspective. Such a text, ultimately written as a rebuttal, without trying to delve into the very process by which the colonial version of history is created, indirectly legitimizes its perspective. An alternative history, then in order to make a claim or to reclaim has to not only configure a historical event but also refigure the process by which it is created. It does not simply deconstruct a grand narrative but also resist the urge to create a new one in its place, giving its point of view while at the same time being conscious of its ephemeral nature, paradoxically a fact that comes the closest to ensuring its longevity as it engages with a postmodernist skepticism between fact and fiction and thereby engages with the larger epistemological debates about the production and circulation of truth. It has to go beyond mere representation to the politics of representation in a self-reflexive , non-essentialist manner, resisting conventional spatio-temporal structures through hybridity and flux which is in keeping with its aim of presenting history that is neither passive nor static but in the very act of making, constantly shifting in its form and pluralistic in its content .

Keith Jenkins in his book *Refiguring History* points out two misconceptions about looking at the past, the first being that the past should be studied for its own sake and second that history has the ethics of neutrality, objectivity and truth seeking . He challenges the validity of historical objectivity and disinterested histories arguing that historical truth is unachievable; thereby contending for open-ended, self-reflexive histories that celebrate the "impossibility of enacting a total historical/historicizing closure of the past"(5). He argues for a refiguration of history- a process which is both inevitable and never-ending for him as he writes, " living in the middle range between the ideal (the transcendental gesture) and the empirical means that any decision made to try to fix a definitive meaning for history is always arbitrary, always inadequate. Located between two unstable poles (for the idea of history is really just a heuristic device as unfixed and contingent as the empirical) any decision as to what history is is ultimately an arbitrary choice along the spectrum which, stretching to infinity as spectrums do, is not a fixed decision at all but is rather

eternally refixable; eternally refigurable" (28). In the context of post-colonial studies the need to take away from history the ontological status bestowed on it by the colonizer and to treat it as an episteme has never been more urgent. Hence history's claim to objectivity and authenticity are constantly under fire by post-modern and post-colonial historians who, in their refusal to accept the mimetic function of history, have turned their attention to the construction and operation of historical narratives. To present an alternative narrative is to simply invert a structure but to lay bare the system in which a historical narrative operates is to actually challenge those philosophical assumptions on which rests the whole system of knowledge production and its regulation. That is why Girish Karnad's *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan* engages with the process of producing/ constructing history instead of simply presenting it. As a post-colonial text the play opens up a new form of presenting history in a fragmentary, self-disruptive, non-factual polyphonic narrative, invested with an alternative ending that showcases a possibilistic inversion of events as they happened in the past, all made possible through a syncretic form which draws on narrative, dialogic exchange, performance and representation to at once present and undermine its historical narrative.

Western conception of historical objectivity is more of a myth that aims to legitimize the colonial point of view by imposing its own logic over events which it sequences and structures to come up with a narrative that proclaims its own authenticity rather than establish it. Bernard S. Cohn writes in *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India*, that British modality of historiography,

> involved the ideological construction of the nature of the Indian civilization, as typified in the major historical writings of Alexander Dow, Robert Orme, Charles Grant, Mark Wilks, James Mill, and James Tod. The historiographic practices and narrative genres of these writers can obviously be subjected to critical analysis, but beyond this they can be seen to have begum the formation of a legitimizing discourse British's civilizing mission in India (6).

Karnad, in writing back to the empire, deconstructs the above mentioned Manichean allegory that sought to legitimize the colonizing project by pitting it against a subaltern narrative. However in doing that Karnad raises many important issues like ethical problems of informing about

indigenous history, cultural diversity of historical representation along with the guilt and melancholia experienced while establishing connection with the past.

Since the narrative of history is embedded in a form, to write back to the empire is not just to contest the imperialist version of it but also the very structure of that narrative with its politics of inclusion and exclusion. Hence arises the need to refigure history, a task not without its own set of problems, a task made much more difficult because of scholarly suspicion, at times of even disregard for historical fiction as a genre which is more interested in the persons involved in the event rather than the event itself as is deemed right by the "legitimate" scholars of history who in their effort to institutionalize history have taken away much of its reconstructive potential. This challenge is made all the more difficult as a dramatist tries to impose a kind of pluralist order (a term I use to signify difference, dispersion and fragmentation) onto a chaotic mass of the past itself resisting any form of rigid closure whether literary, political or representational. Since it is fiction first and fact later it's legitimacy as a historical narrative is debatable. However in that very debate and the text's ability to initiate or rather invite it lays the refiguration of history and not just a recycling of it.

Fanon wrote in *Wretched of the Earth*, " When the colonized intellectual writing for his people uses the past he must do so with the intention of opening up the future, of spurring them into action and fostering hope" (167). To Gyorgy Lukacs again nation building is not just a social phenomenon but a task of tremendous intellectual labour and to ensure the rebirth of a nation its intellectuals need to go back to the past, to greatness in order to evolve a historical consciousness among the masses. The same goes for Grish Karnad's play, *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan* which opens up new forms of presenting history in a self-disruptive narrative made possible through a syncretic form which draws on narrative, dialogic exchange, dream sequences, performance and representation to at once present and undermine a historical event. In that way, the form of the play itself works against the construction of any permanently stabilized historical and cultural formations.

The Dreams of Tipu Sultan as an alternative history is a text that goes beyond the subject matter of its historical content to directly delve into the problematic of historical representation. Speaking to presspersons at the announcement of the staging of *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan*, Karnad said about Tipu Sultan: "For me, he is the greatest Kannadiga….Tipu

Sultan has been misrepresented in history books and early works written on him as a fanatic and someone who converted his subjects. But this was largely because what was written was largely influenced by what the British spread and wrote about him as `they were out to destroy him,". (The Hindu)

In writing this play Karnad fully exercises his imaginative power as well as his historical agency. The play is written as a single act with no division between scenes, the scenes following each other in rapid succession, shifting between different temporal and spatial frames without much distinction. The play begins in 1803 with two historians discussing Tipu Sultan and then moves in retrospect to present his life on stage; starting off with his death in 1799, before going back to the events that led to the siege of Seringapatam and ending with the post script telling the audience that when India gained independence in 1947 the families of rajas who bowed before their British masters were granted great lands and privy purses while the descendants of Tipu Sultan were left to rot in the slums of Calcutta. The action of the play is punctuated with Tipu's dream which he interpret as signs of good fortune but which actually foretell his downfall.

The drama takes these dreams from Tipu's diary, a private record of the dreams he had from April 1786 to January 1799. After Tipu's defeat by the hands of British at Seringapatam in 1799, the manuscript was presented to the Court of Directors of the East India Company in 1800 by Alexander Beatson on behalf of the Governor-General, Marquess Wellesley. The story of its discovery is recorded in Beatson's signed and dated note at the end of the volume:

> This register of the Sultaun's dreams was discovered by Colonel William Kirkpatrick, amongst other papers of a secret nature in an escritoire found in the Palace of Seringapatam. Hubbeeb Oollah, one of the most confidential of the Sultaun's servants, was present at the time it was discovered. He knew that there was such a book of the Sultaun's composition; but had never seen it, as the Sultaun always manifested peculiar anxiety to conceal it from the view of any who happened to approach while he was either reading or writing in it. (Williams. "Tipu Sultan's dream book").

Hence in writing the play Karnad reclaims Tipu's diary of recorded dreams and provides them with a new significance as they connect with the legend's bigger dreams of making India great and freeing it from the British colonial rule. Karnad mixes these dreams with snatches of conversation between two historians who are writing about the sultan in addition to portraying moments from Tipu's personal and private life. He specifically directs that the scenes depicting Tipu's dreams and the scenes from his real life should not be separated from one another through any means of differentiation. Hence he aims for a fluid form to be presented on stage. He thereby decenters the colonial version through hybridity and flux which is manifested in the form of the play in which there is no formal separation between scenes and one episode merges into another without any indication of the shift in time and space.

Tipu in this play comes across as more of a political visionary and dreamer than a soldier and this is because Karnad draws on Tipu's dreams (literal and metaphoric) to retrieve and reclaim India's pre-colonial past that has been rewritten by the British which becomes even more obvious when one studies the circumstances in which the play was produced.. Grish Karnad was commissioned by BBC to write a play to commemorate fifty years of Indian independence and Karnad's choice of subject matter and its treatment was a direct outcome of his desire to reconstruct Tipu Sultan as an enlightened figure of his times. Hence Karnad's Tipu is first an economist and policy maker with a great sense of trade and industry and not the fanatic soldier he is made out to be in popular history. In doing so Karnad not only writes back to the empire giving voice to the post-colonial subject but also to the subaltern Muslim subject whose narrative is continuously trampled on by the meta narratives that seek to align themselves with the ideological propaganda of the state as quite evident in recent controversies regarding the naming of a university after Tipu's name in his home town of Srirangapatna.

Karnad aims to problematize received history of Tipu sultan by portraying the more human side of his character, one that focuses on his familial and psychological life. He , being an innovative playwright, one who is known to merge disparate theatrical traditions in a fluid form, mixes real historical facts with an imaginative plot to portray Tipu Sultan as a figure who demands respect and pity at the same time. The play does not open up with the central character of Tipu Sultan but with two historians namely Kirmani and Mackenzie. By foregrounding these historians instead of the historical figure of Tipu Sultan Karnad at once

draws our attention to the way the past is actively processed through superstructures of history and culture. Kirmani and Mackenzie, through their dialogue, represent the eastern and the western conceptions of history respectively as they inhabit disparate positions not just individually but also culturally and socially; where the former wants to know history, the latter feels it . The play starts with a dialogic engagement between them where they present their respective point of views, a meeting point for a western and a native consciousness, highlighting their ideological differences instead of assimilating them. That is why when Mackenzie says to Kirmani, "You need to develop certain objectivity" Kirmani answers, "Yes, that's what you keep telling me, Mackenzie Sahib. Objectivity. Dispassionate distance. Is that even possible?" (7) This is one of the questions that lie at the heart of the play.

Mackenzie favours authenticity as the foremost pre-requisite for writing valid history, his idea of authenticity being limited to a precise reportage of the time and place where events actually happened. To him an accurate history is an objective history in which facts and figures are of utmost importance. However as their dialogue develops one observes that in his quest for objectivity he unwittingly severs history from experience as is obvious in his demand to know the political facts from Kirmani, facts he is more interested in being re-affirmed as pointed out by Kirmani, "For you he is made up of bits of evidence, bits of argument that prove that your side was right. And that's what I don't understand about you. You have your version of history, all worked out. Why do you want my side? "(8). His authenticity as an investigating subject is challengeable as he uses objectivity as a tool to veil the permanence of his own euro-centric essentialist ideological familiarity with eastern history. Mackenzie is interested in the voice of the other but he is interested in a voice that can be dictated and controlled, a voice that simply re-asserts his own epistemic postulations, a voice which is valuable as it belongs to a "court historian" who are not easily "bought" (8), a logic which pronounces the exotic and in fact implicitly re-affirms the otherness of the other in its explicit claim to allocate it.

The role of memory is closely linked with the act of producing history in the play. Kirmani is engaged by Mackenzie because of his stature as a court historian and he pesters him to remember things from the past. However the things Kirmani receives from his memory are not necessarily objective and factual as he can not distance himself from the

object of his study. Hence the events presented on stage is a mix of Mckenzie's public and Kirmani's private history. Anne Whitehead writes in *Trauma Fiction,*

> Postcolonialism has drawn attention to the ways in which contemporary cultural works are influenced and shaped by the complex legacies of colonialism. It recognizes that history represents an investment by groups or ideologies in specific power formations. Post-colonial fiction has sought to replace the public and collective narrative of history with an interior and private act of memory. Memory counters or resists the ways in which history elides difference and forgets the heterogeneous. (82)

Kirmani's idea of history is a subjective one as it is his personal stakes that are involved in it. Hence he relies more on memory; an account of first hand experience, still intact and immediate, one coloured by strong emotions. As he says to Mackenzie, "There's no healing. True, the blood and tears dried up a long time ago. But the wound remains fresh" (7) .Since he speaks through a trauma he is not healed and hence cannot forget. There is a sense of betrayal attached to his recounting of history, a betrayal of acting as an informant for the west as is represented by his social position. The play, in portraying his character, pays particular attention to the role of voice, memory and the sense of guilt and melancholia. Kirmani himself says, "I spent my life serving him and his father. And now I work for you, his enemies. What does that make me? A traitor? Am I trustworthy anymore? Doesn't that worry you? It worries me"(8). However what pinches him most is not the political but the personal betrayal. It is only when he is unable to recount the memories of Tipu Sultan that he really panics. To him informing about the past to a colonizer is not as big a problem as holding onto that past with all its immediacy intact. That is why when Mackenzie says to him, "Our loyalty is to history. Keep emotions out. Stick to the facts", Kirmani answer,"You mean memories. But that's where the real betrayal lies. Do you know I was just trying to remember what he looked like on that last day and I just couldn't" (8). It is interesting that Kirmani is both selective in his remembering as well as his forgetting and this is where the scars of trauma can be traced.

It is more so problematic for Kirmani since it is not the dispensing of information that bothers him but the fact that his memory has begun to fail him. History for him is subjective as the facts he had recorded during

his career as a court historian had been burnt by the British in their plundering of the city. His recorded version is turned into memory and to hold onto this memory and to draw on it is his only chance of reconstructing a subjectivity, ironically for the very master (as is observed in the relations of production between Mackenzie and Kirmani) who had destroyed it in the first place. For him living in an illusion of a subjectivity that is ready made and offered to him by Mackenzie is to betray his role as a presenter. Kirmani's reliance on memory and his desire (which almost borders on desperation) to hold onto that memory problematizes his role as a native informant. The question that arises is then; Is kirmani simply a native informant, one who fulfills the role of supplementing western histories, capitalizing on his role as a court historian or does he go beyond that role to exercise self-reflexivity in the very process of reconstructing history so that his history is not a self-proclaimed "objective" process detached, from his being a creator of that very process?

The text in a way then questions the investigating subject namely the historian. If Mackanzie can not access the historical reality so can not Kirmain. However what differentiates the latter from the former is the realization of the impossibility of recreating facts in the process, not to sever memory as an account dimmed by the displacement of both time and space from the actual event as it happened, not as a scenic representation or a historical fact but to try to preserve it as an event with its emotive content still intact and assimilated. However to simply engage the alternative point of view is to do half the work and hence Karnad takes upon himself the task of inventing a form that can convey history with all its ironies and discrepancies intact, resisting any attempt at providing a ready- made order for them .

Karnad is aware of the pitfall of seeking absolute truths from the study of past and hence utilizes varied narratives to capture the past with its dynamism intact. To that end he resists fixating the binary of self and the other in closed roles, ones that potentially confine the post-colonial writer to either a position of ironic acceptance(ironic as he is not aware of his own conformity) or outright negation. To fall into the above mentioned positions is to continue, one way or the other, the epistemic violence which is generated by colonial discourses of history. Hence the play unravels history through many means; through the recorded dates and figures given by Mackenzie, the memory and narrative provided by

Kirmani and the private account of Tipu's personal dreams. The play hence foregrounds what Karen Hellekson call the "constructedness of history and the role narrative plays in this construction" (5).

Karnad in one of his interviews draws attention towards the erasure and overture that clouded the greatness of figures like Tipu Sultan and their actual role in history. He said that Tipu Sultan is the only figure in Indian history who realized the real threat posed by the East India Company to the sub-continent. He was portrayed as a fanatic who converted his subjects forcefully when in reality he 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," In the play special attention is being paid to Tipu Sultan's skill at trade and policy making than his soldiering that has been the focus of both eastern and western versions of popular history. He himself charts out his priorities in this line, "Soldiers, yes but trade, industry, money" (24).

One of the objectives of the play then is to rediscover the past that has been erased or overtured as is done by employing the symbol of tiger. The are two types of tigers in the play; the mechanical tiger with which Tipu's children play and the real tigers which he keeps in his private zoo. The mechanical tiger is one of the toys imported from France who held a white soldier in its clutches. The sound of both the mechanical and the real tigers make up an important part of the play's sound imagery. Where the former shows his shared interests with a common enemy of the British, the latter is a symbol of Tipu's potency as a soldier who could strike thunder in the hearts of his enemies. The Bengals's tiger was Tipu's namesake as Tipu identified himself with tigers; his soldiers dressed in tiger jackets and his personal symbol was calligraphed in such a way so as to make it look like a tiger, even his epitaph read "The Tiger of Mysore". At the end of the play it is told by Mackenzie, "The tigers of the palace were shot dead while the mechanical tiger was shipped off to London" (64). In the aftermath of the war of independence the mechanical tiger was misused as a symbol of barbaric bloodshed by the British. Hence when it was displayed in London for the public during the nineteenth century it turned into a symbol justifying British colonial rule in the subcontinent. Instead of invoking the glory of Indian past it became a memorabilia of the Mutiny inverting the iconography of the piece. More than that the manipulation of the tiger's symbol is an evidence of the colonial master's misconception that he can comprehend

and more importantly dominate the indigenous culture which he would either erase or overwrite in order to manipulate the image of the colonized subject.

The play then is also an attempt to rewrite what has been erased from received histories of Tipu Sultan. It exposes another side to Tipu's character; his political acumen and foresight. What makes Karnad's Tipu stand out as a ruler is not as much his hatred of the colonizer as his understanding, even appreciation of him. While talking to his courtiers he openly exclaims, "That's what makes Europe so wonderful-it's full of new ideas-inventions-all kinds of machines-bursting with energy" (25). His excitement and curiosity while he informs them about the invention of thermometer is not only opposed to the barbaric opposition and ignorance usually associated with the colonized, often used as an excuse to control and dominate him, but also wide reading and thirst for knowledge . The same is obvious in the way he takes keen interest in his sons' education. Tipu Sultan is a threat to the colonizer not because of his fanaticism but his intellect and rationality, his readiness and skill in learning from the British and analyzing the link between empire and trade. He can see where their strength lies, "how they came to this country, poor, cringing, and what they have become in a mere fifty years. They threaten us today. It's all because of their passion for trade" (26). And still later in one of his dreams he tells his father, "But, father, often, suddenly, I see myself in them-I see these white skins swarming all over the land and I wonder what makes them so relentless? Desperate?...What drives these young lads to such distant lands through fever, dysentery, alcohol so-often to death-wave after wave? They don't give up. Nor would I. Sometimes I feel more confident of them than my own people" (51). The relationship Tipu has with the colonizing British is one of ambivalence in the play as he respects them at the same time he hates them. He does look upon them as figures of authority and himself a child as implied in the way he considers them his teachers, and ranks them with his father," I've had two teachers in my life. My father, who taught me war, and the English who taught me trade. They taught me that the era of camel is over, that it is now the age of the sailing ship. And they dislike me for being such an adept pupil"(35). Though the simile of a father and child has been used by colonial theorists to examine the relationship dynamics between the colonizer and colonized, Tipu problematizes their hierarchy without changing the subject position. The child here is no more an uncivilized subject who needs to be both

protected and enlightened by the father figure but a subject who is ready to learn and then replace the authority figure by beating him at his own game.

The play in giving attention to the rational side of his character does not ignore the emotional one which is best portrayed in the dialogues between him and his wife and children. These familial interactions completely humanize his character as the playful conversations he has with his wife and children in the first half of the play may well be out of the life of any ordinary Indian. The Tipu that emerges in these scenes is the one who has shed the baggage of lore and fable and shows Karnad's skill at imagining the everday reality lived by a historical figure. In the latter half of the play these scenes help build up more sympathy from the audience especially when in a meeting with the noblemen Tipu Sultan declares that the British want to keep his sons as hostages of war while announcing the death of his beloved wife Begum Ruqayya Banu. The paly then not only captures Tipu as a sultan but also as a human and a dreamer overlapping them through a structure that fluidly shifts between the different sides of his character. In other words Karnad, a literary historian is more interested in the emotive content of an event, to use Dalton's words , "What it felt like?" rather than what and why it happened. His history then does not shy away from its own constructedness. Rather it turns its imaginative power into its strongest point as it allows plural truths to co-exist and that too at multiple levels; social, psychological and artistic.

The play on the whole then not only challenges institutionalized sources of history by problematizing received histories of Tipu Sultan but also reshapes cultural memory by attempting to draw attention to the erasure and overture of it in the past by both indigenous and colonial bodies. More than that it does not simply write back to the colonizer showing its lacking but writes with a view to finding its own using theatre as a tool of historical knowledge. Hence the counterfactual conditional employed at the very end is starkly contrasted with the post-script showing how the British, at the time of independence, gave large estates to the rajas who had aided them in the past while Tipu Sultan's offspring was left to rot in the slums, all because of the betrayal he received at the hands of his own people. The play in short emphasizes the need for historiography in particular and culture in general to revise its self-perceived notions inviting it to re-examine as well as refigure the way narratives and subjectivities are constructed by not only disrupting privileged identity

but also resisting the construction of another one in its place. Through the above done discussion I have argued that an alternate history such as *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan* , in order to make a claim or to reclaim does not only configure a historical event but also refigure the process by which it is created. It goes beyond mere representation to the politics of representation in a self-reflexive, non-essentialist manner challenging the dichotomy between fact and fiction, decentering the colonial version and most importantly questioning the nature of historical truth itself by engaging with historiography as a cultural and political construct.

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