

**“TUGHLAQ: A SEMIOTIC INTERPRETATION OF LANGUAGE,  
LITERATURE, AND MEDIA AS TOOLS OF RESISTANCE”**

**Mr. G. Karuppasamy,**

PhD Research Scholar,

Madurai Kamaraj University,

PG & Research Department of English,

The Madura College, Madurai-11

Email: karuppasamyvendar@gmail.com

**Dr. A. Chandra Bose,**

Associate Professor of English,

PG & Research Department of English,

The Madura College, Madurai-11

Email: chandrabose@maduracollege.edu.in

**Abstract**

This paper analyzes semiotics to study Girish Karnad's Tughlaq to comprehend how language, literature, and the media can be used as tools of resistance against ideological manipulation and political repression. Through an analysis of political and social commentary, the study uses a semiotic framework to examine the symbolic structures in the play's dialogue, stage directions, and character portrayals. A complex symbol of failed utopias and disenchantment with power, Muhammad bin Tughlaq is characterized by his contradictory beliefs and oppressive methods. It also looks into how Tughlaq is being reactivated as a locus of cultural resistance through performances, adaptations, and online discourse. The study makes the case that the interaction of mediated representations, linguistic decisions, and literary storytelling not only challenges past authoritarianism but also speaks to contemporary political reality.

**Keywords:** Political Resistance, Language and Power, Literary Critique, Media Adaptations, Cultural Discourse, Political Allegory, Postcolonial Theatre

---

Girish Karnad's Tughlaq presents themes of political deceit and disillusionment through language and symbolism. Karnad portrays a severely flawed ruler whose utopian vision slowly crumbles under the weight of his contradictions through complex dialogue, sardonic remarks, and potent symbols. Language as a Deceptive and Ironic Instrument, the Eloquence of Tughlaq: Muhammad bin Tughlaq is described as an intelligent and gifted speaker. To gain the support of the populace, he speaks in an idealistic and persuasive manner. He preaches, for instance, about religious tolerance, justice, and sensible governance—values that both Muslims and Hindus find appealing. Irony in Speech Nevertheless,

his actions frequently stand in stark contrast to his high ideals. While he orders executions without trial, he talks about justice. Despite their elegance, his words often conceal cruelty. A strong sense of irony is produced by this discrepancy between speech and action, which emphasizes the idea of political deceit. Tughlaq uses manipulative rhetoric to defend his divisive choices, such as moving the capital from Delhi to Daulatabad or instituting token currency. He exposes how political rhetoric can be used to cover up failure by portraying these radical actions as progressive even though they cause chaos.

Symbols the capital's move from Delhi to Daulatabad, that reveals disillusionment, represents the gap between the people and the ruler. What Tughlaq views as a calculated move ends up representing his subjects' suffering and migration deaths as a result of blind obedience. The introduction of copper coins, or token currency, is a symbol of Tughlaq's idealism; however, its failure because of forgery exposes both his political naivete and the public's decline in trust. It turns into a metaphor for broken promises and ineffective leadership. Empty Throne: The throne, which is frequently depicted on stage as desolate or empty, comes to represent isolation, loneliness, and the breakdown of leadership. The throne symbolizes the weight of power that Tughlaq is unable to bear as his support declines. Violence and Blood: Tughlaq's idealism frequently serves as an excuse for the recurrent theme of violence and execution, which represents the tainting of lofty aspirations. Death is shown on stage a lot, emphasizing the price of his vision.

Voices of the Ordinary People and the Language of Other Characters: In contrast to Tughlaq's rhetoric, commoners, guards, and courtiers speak plainly and simply. Their fear, whining, and sarcasm act as a reality check, mirroring the general public's growing disenchantment. Through their humorous and cynical dialogue, Azam and Aazam (Thieves) reveal the moral decay of Tughlaq's rule and demonstrate how even criminals lose faith in the failing system.

In Girish Karnad's Tughlaq, semiotic elements—signs, symbols, gestures, and images—are essential because they are tools of resistance to authoritarian control and failing idealism as well as efficient ways to express ideas. These elements give characters—and even the audience—the ability to subvert and challenge Tughlaq's autocratic regime in nuanced yet potent ways. Language as Symbolic Resistance: The Mockery and Sarcasm of the Crowd Through sarcasm, sour jokes, and whispers, the common people, guards, and minor characters frequently make fun of Tughlaq. The public's discontent and resistance are reflected in this casual, informal language, which turns into a symbolic act of rebellion. Although they might not overtly rebel, their mockery damages Tughlaq's reputation as a kind philosopher-king and calls into question his authority.

In the Empty Throne Image, through absence, the throne—which is frequently perceived as remote or encircled by stress and quiet—becomes a representation of lost authority and resistance. The empty throne symbolizes Tughlaq's growing isolation and the way its own people are renouncing authority—a tacit but effective form of resistance. The grandeur that a throne typically represents is resisted by the visual emptiness. Trickster Figures Aziz and Aazam as Semiotic Opposition These two robbers serve as subversive symbols by disguising themselves and taking on different roles. They stand for the survival and wit of the average person, exposing the regime's shortcomings through humor and disguise. They act as an indirect form of resistance to state power by making fun of the system and exposing its absurdities through their conversations and actions.

The fake currency (token coins), through subversion, the forged copper coins—which were the product of Tughlaq's utopian vision—become emblems of resistance. By creating counterfeit coins, the general public takes advantage of the system and engages in a nonviolent kind of mass rebellion. These coins expose the breakdown of law and order and cast doubt on the government's authority over the economy.

The Role of Stillness and Silence Silence has deep significance, particularly during Tughlaq's monologues or following executions. Passive resistance takes the form of silence, especially from citizens and characters like Barani. The ruler's demands for participation and obedience are challenged by this reluctance to express one or respond candidly. Symbolic images of resistance include corpses and graves on stage, the regular presence of dead bodies, or references to them. Tughlaq's philosophical ideals are hauntingly opposed by these images, which silently accuse the regime and symbolize the results of despotism. Tughlaq's prophetic appearance turns him into a semiotic contradiction; he looks like a devout, spiritual man, but he is actually covered in blood and oppression. The irony in this picture turns into a visual critique of power itself, and his appearance turns into a symbolic battlefield where idealism and reality clash.

Media, such as theater, film, and online versions, have reinterpreted Tughlaq in ways that relate to current sociopolitical conditions, particularly those involving authoritarianism, idealism, public protest, and systematic failure. These versions often amplify or reintroduce semiotic elements from the play to critique contemporary circumstances, transforming Tughlaq into a live political allegory.

Tughlaq as a Symbol of Modern Autocratic Leaders: In contemporary productions, Tughlaq is frequently depicted as a modern politician, sometimes with vocal and visual similarities to actual leaders. He emphasizes criticizing populist speeches versus authoritarian actions, technocratic or hyper-nationalist policies that alienate the general populace, and his rhetoric, lofty promises, and contradictory actions. The disparity between public welfare and political vision, Tughlaq is

reframed in this contemporary way as an example of failed leadership in the modern era rather than merely as a medieval tyrant.

**Reinterpreting Contemporary Costumes and Sets as Semiotic Subversion:** In order to represent how power structures change but maintain comparable dynamics, costumes may combine traditional clothing with business suits, military jackets, or bureaucratic uniforms. In order to reflect state surveillance, bureaucracy, or migration issues—all of which are relevant to the capital shift in the original play—the set design may substitute digital screens, government offices, or border walls for the medieval backdrops. **Economic Policy and Currency as Allegory** Media adaptations have compared the token currency disaster to demonetization, digital currency reforms, and economic mismanagement in times of crisis. These productions frequently draw a clear comparison between the past and present by highlighting the chaos, forgery, and suffering that the public endures as a result of rash economic decisions.

Sometimes using multimedia projections of public shows, Voiceovers or recorded testimonials mimicking news reports or social media posts, amplified through Media, modern renditions often give more space to choruses, guards, and commoners, so portraying the people not as mere sufferers but as active agents of critique. It captures the democratizing of perspective in the era of media and the internet. In recent staging, some directors combine digital symbolism and surveillance aesthetics with hacked news tickers, drone visuals or surveillance cameras on stage. These symbols reinterpret Tughlaq's obsessive control and paranoia in line with modern surveillance states and digital authoritarianism.

**Reevaluating Silence and Stillness,** Media adaptations make silence more charged by using sound design and lighting: Darkness descending following every death, Silence is an even more powerful critique of power since sudden microphone feedback or static replacing spoken words and use of mute protest signs or visual metaphors like empty chairs, barricades, or footprints accentuates nonverbal resistance. **Tughlaq as the Tragic Antihero in Movies and Documentaries** In filmic depictions or documentaries inspired by Tughlaq, the king is sometimes portrayed as a visionary doomed by his context, a lonely intellectual misinterpreted by the masses, or a sad emblem of too ambitious behavior.

A semiotic reading of Girish Karnad's Tughlaq uncovers new dimensions of resistance by highlighting how signs—both linguistic and visual—carry deeper political meanings that transcend the surface narrative. Through this point of view, resistance is not only overt revolt but also a coded, symbolic contestation of power conveyed via sarcasm, silence, costume, setting, and images. These signals challenge the authoritative discourse of the state and let underprivileged voices—often silent in conventional narratives—to express agency and dissent.

The Cultural Trifecta as a Flexible Instrument for Assessing Authority, The cultural trifecta of language, performance, and symbolism—which serve as a dynamic and interconnected instrument for challenging authority—is at the core of this semiotic reading. Especially in the voices of common people and cunning characters who undermine royal rhetoric, language turns into a tool of irony and mockery. Performance reveals the brittleness of political illusions by communicating repressed truths through body language, silence, and spatial dynamics. Through the encoding of policy failures and the weight of disillusionment, symbolism—from thrones to coins to corpses—challenges the grand narratives of progress, unity, and divine kingship. When combined, these components create a multi-layered critique of governance that is relevant to all political eras and cultures, particularly when modified to take into account contemporary sociopolitical realities.

A semiotic reading raises Tughlaq as a site of coded defiance and quiet revolt, and the cultural trinity of language, performance, and symbolism helps scholars to easily critique authority. As the distinctions between theater, media, and digital expression become more blurred, Tughlaq remains a rich source of investigation, debate, and dissent in the evolving field of political narrative.

## References:

- Abrams, M. H. 2003. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 7th ed. Bangalore: Prism Books.
- Ananthamurthy, U.R. “Introduction.” *Tughlaq*, by Girish Karnad, Oxford University Press, 1972, pp. vii–xiii.
- Barthes, Roland. *Mythologies*. Translated by Annette Lavers, Hill and Wang, 1972.
- Baldick, C. 2015. *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*. 4th ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. Routledge, 1994.
- Karnad, Girish. *Tughlaq*. Oxford University Press, 1972.
- Kurtakoti, Kirtinath. “The Tragedy of Tughlaq.” *Literary Criterion*, vol. 12, no. 2, 1975, pp. 49–60.
- McLuhan, Marshall. *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. MIT Press, 1994.
- Peck, J., & Coyle, M. 1985. *Literary Terms and Criticism*. Basingstoke: Macmillan.