

Dreams and Historical Memory: Exploring Girish Karnad's *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan*

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Abstract

Girish Karnad's The Dreams of Tipu Sultan (2004) is a postcolonial intervention in the historical narrative surrounding Tipu Sultan, the eighteenth-century ruler of Mysore. The play uses dreams as an important narrative device to present a different perspective on Tipu's life and legacy, challenging colonial historiography that has often demonized him as a fanatic and despotic ruler. By presenting the viewpoints of both the Indian court historian Mir Hassan Ali Khan Kirmani, and a British orientalist, Colonel Colin Mackenzie, Karnad highlights the subjectivity and bias present in historical records. This paper argues that Karnad's play functions as a counter-historical text, offering an alternative understanding of Tipu Sultan as a visionary leader and an early anti-colonial resistance figure. Drawing upon Ronald Inden's critique of Orientalist historiography and Hayden White's theory of historical narrative as poetic discourse, the study examines how Karnad's fictionalized dreams serve as a means of reclaiming agency for Tipu Sultan. The analysis focuses on four key dreams from Tipu's Khwabnama (dream diary) to illustrate his secular outlook, diplomatic ambitions, and tragic downfall due to betrayal. The paper concludes that Karnad's play not only revises colonial narratives but also invites contemporary audiences to reconsider Tipu Sultan's contributions to Indian history.

Keywords: Girish Karnad, Indian theatre, Tipu Sultan, postcolonial historiography, dreams in literature

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Introduction

Girish Karnad (1938 - 2019) holds an important place in modern Indian theatre and literature. As a playwright, actor, director, and public intellectual, his body of work consistently interrogates the foundational myths, historical fractures, and cultural identities that constitute the Indian subcontinent. Writing initially in Kannada, his native language, Karnad's plays from *Yayati* (1961) to *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan* (2004) are characterized by a profound engagement with history, not as a static repository of facts, but as a contested arena of interpretation and power. His works often draw upon indigenous performance traditions, mythology, and historical episodes to create a dynamic and critical theatrical language. As Aparna Dharwadker notes, Karnad's historical plays, such as *Tughlaq*, are central to a postcolonial project that seeks to "rewrite history from a position of ironic scepticism towards all official versions" (44). This scepticism is the driving force behind *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan*, a play that uses the intimate and symbolic space of dreams to dismantle colonial caricatures and restore agency to a pivotal figure in Indian resistance history.

The Dreams of Tipu Sultan (originally written in Kannada as *Tipu Sultan Kanda Kanasu*) dramatizes the final days of Tipu Sultan, the formidable ruler of the Kingdom of Mysore who died defending his capital, Seringapatam, against British forces in 1799. Rather than presenting a conventional historical chronicle, Karnad frames the narrative through the competing memories and historiographical perspectives of two figures: Mir Hassan Ali Khan Kirmani, an Indian court historian, and Colonel Colin Mackenzie, a British orientalist and surveyor. This narrative structure immediately signals the play's central concern: the politics of history-writing. It asks who gets to record the past, for what purpose, and how subjective biases become embedded as "objective" truth. The play's innovative use of Tipu's own *Khwabnama*, or dream diary, serves as a powerful counter-archive, offering a window into the ruler's psyche that official records, treaties, and battle accounts fail to capture.

This article argues that Girish Karnad's *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan* functions as a counter-historical text that reclaims Tipu Sultan from the distortions of colonial historiography. "The intrusion of colonial rule introduces a psychological fracture within the community" (Jenobhar 120). By using dreams as a central narrative device and dramatizing the conflict between indigenous and imperial modes of knowledge, Karnad not only rehabilitates Tipu's image as a visionary and secular leader but also performs a broader critique of how history is constructed. The paper will demonstrate that Karnad's artistic intervention, grounded in postcolonial theory, offers an alternative model of historical understanding one that privileges memory, affect, and the oneiric over the empiricist claims of colonial documentation.

Methodology and Theoretical Framework

This study uses a qualitative, text-based analytical approach grounded in postcolonial literary theory and historiography. The primary source for analysis is

Girish Karnad's *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan*, as published in his *Collected Plays* (Oxford University Press, 2005). The analysis will focus on the play's structure, character dynamics, and, most centrally, the four dream sequences that constitute the core of the narrative. To interpret these elements, the paper draws upon a theoretical framework that combines the insights of postcolonial historiography with theories of narrative and representation.

The first part of this framework is based on Ronald Inden's critique of Orientalist knowledge. In works such as *Imagining India* and "Orientalist Constructions of India," Inden argues that colonial historians and scholars often represented India as passive and incapable of shaping its own history. He contends that the Western scholar, having claimed authority over objective knowledge about India, created distorted images that helped justify colonial rule. This study uses Inden's framework to examine how Karnad's introduction of Kirmani as a native historian alongside the British orientalist Mackenzie challenges the monopoly of colonial knowledge and restores the "agency that those historians have stripped of its people and institutions" (Inden 1).

The second part is Hayden White's theory of historical narrative as a form of "poetic discourse." In *Metahistory*, White argues that historical works are not neutral reflections of past events but are "narrative prose discourse[s]" imbued with a "deep structural content which is generally poetic" (ix). For White, the historian, in explaining "what really happened," "performs an essentially poetic act" (ix). This perspective is crucial for understanding Karnad's project, as the play does not pretend to be a piece of objective historiography. Instead, it embraces its status as a fictional construct to explore deeper truths about Tipu's character and the politics of his legacy. By dramatizing dreams, the most subjective and poetic form of human experience, Karnad self-consciously performs this "poetic act" of historical reinterpretation, offering an "alternative form of figural representation" that challenges "legitimized histories" (Dharwadkar 44).

Gayathri Spivak's concept of epistemic violence is particularly relevant to the understanding of the central conflict in Karnad's play. Spivak argues that colonial power does not operate solely through military force or legal control. It also functions by systematically dismissing indigenous ways of thinking, treating them as primitive or irrelevant, "epistemic violence occurs when colonial power denies or erases local ways of knowing, making them seem backward or irrelevant" (Jenobhar121). This is precisely what Mackenzie enacts when he encounters Tipu's dream diary. In this view, dreams do not qualify as historical evidence, official documents, treaties and battle records can be considered as legitimate sources of knowledge, anything that comes outside this narrow definition which also includes Tipu's personal reflections and spiritual experiences, is regarded as insignificant. Howbeit, this attitude is far from neutral. By the act of refusing to acknowledge the value of the dream diary, Mackenzie effectively erases Tipu's inner world and reduces him to the state of a conquered enemy. Karnad draws the audience attention to this act of erasure, encouraging them to recognise that what appears to

be a simple disagreement over historical sources is, in reality, an exercise of colonial power one that deliberately silences an entire way of understanding human experience and history. “Recent postcolonial insistence on the hybridization of identities has revealed the irrelevance of the search for national identity that was prominent in the postcolonial thinking of the 1960s” (Dirlik 428).

The article incorporates the concept of “counter-history” as a postcolonial strategy. This concept, implicit in the work of subaltern historians like Ranajit Guha, involves actively challenging and rewriting dominant colonial narratives. Karnad’s play embodies this by moving beyond the binaries of the colonial archive to imagine a more nuanced, humanized Tipu, thereby aligning with the postcolonial imperative to deconstruct colonial narratives and recover marginalized voices (Chakrabarty 2000; Spivak 1988).

Literature Review

The academic reception of Girish Karnad’s work, and particularly *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan*, is situated at the intersection of Indian theatre studies, postcolonial historiography, and literary criticism.

The dramatic texts offer a critical perspective to post-independent Indian playwrights who sought to explore in dramatic terms and literary abstractions, political, philosophical and psychological issues requiring prioritisation in the aftermath of colonialism. (Dutt 2)

Several key works inform this paper’s approach to the play. A foundational text for understanding Karnad’s historical dramaturgy is Aparna Dharwadker’s “Historical Fictions and Postcolonial Representation: Reading Girish Karnad’s *Tughlaq*.” Dharwadker’s analysis of Karnad’s earlier play provides a critical vocabulary for discussing how his work navigates the “collision” between historiography and fiction to achieve a “much needed change in perspective in the discourse of history” (44).

A considerable amount of works existed on dramatic literature and was a preoccupation before the advent of theatre and performance studies in Indian academia, which, since 2000 has focused on plays and practices in performance, and significantly on repertoires which were never canonised, for example, political theatre which was censored or ignored in the official discourses but was popular amongst the audiences and publics. (Dutt 1)

This article extends her argument to *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan*, showing how Karnad uses the even more radical device of dreams to achieve this perspectival shift.

Imad Khawaldeh and Shadi Neimneh’s article, “Reclaiming the Lost Hero in Girish Karnad’s *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan*,” directly addresses the play’s counter-historical project. They argue that Karnad’s mission is to remind the audience that Tipu’s modernizing attempts to undermine the colonial project were the very factors that led to his demonized image (Khawaldeh and Neimneh 7). This paper builds on

their work by providing a more detailed analysis of the specific dream sequences as vehicles for this reclamation.

Kate Brittlebank's scholarship on Tipu Sultan, particularly her article "Accessing the Unseen Realm: The Historical and Textual Contexts of Tipu Sultan's Dream Register," is crucial for establishing the historical basis of the play's central device. Brittlebank confirms that Tipu maintained a genuine *Khwabnama* containing thirty-seven dreams, which she argues is a document of great historical value as it "provides an insight into how Tipu responded to the difficulties that he faced during the final years of his reign" (174). Her work validates Karnad's choice of the dream diary as a source and underscores its potential to reveal the Sultan's inner world.

Furthermore, the study of dreams in the Islamic tradition, as explored by Nile Green in "The Religious and Cultural Roles of Dreams and Visions in Islam," provides a cultural context for understanding Tipu's practice. Green's work highlights the significance of dreams as meaningful communications that could influence political and personal decisions, a tradition exemplified by figures like Babur in his *Baburnama*. This context reinforces the idea that Tipu's engagement with his dreams was not merely an eccentricity but a culturally embedded practice of self-reflection and meaning-making. Narasingha P. Sil's analysis of Tipu's resistance and B.P. Mahesh Chandra Guru's work on his diplomacy further contribute to a more nuanced historical picture that Karnad's play seeks to recover.

Multiple possibilities for the meanings of dreams and multiple ways of approaching dreams in analytic therapy are suggested. Although many therapists for complex reasons shy away from working on dreams, an interpersonal approach recognizes that several wishes of both patient and analyst may be significantly fulfilled in the pleasures of working together on dreams. If it is mindful of what is unfortunately a growing tendency to project into all dreams a single-minded preoccupation with transference and countertransference, and if it respects the world of dream imagery in its own right, interpersonal psychoanalysis can make a genuine contribution to our understanding of dreams and dreams can lend an important dimension to interpersonal concepts. (Lippmann 835)

Narrative Structure and the Contested Terrain of History

The play's framing device immediately establishes history as a contested terrain. As the play opens, Seringapatam has fallen, Tipu is dead, and the British are consolidating their victory. Colonel Colin Mackenzie, the British orientalist, is tasked with surveying the kingdom and gathering historical materials. His presence represents the colonial desire to know, classify, and thus control the conquered land. In contrast, Mir Hassan Ali Khan Kirmani, Tipu's court historian, represents an indigenous, intimate, and deeply affected memory. The play's central tension lies in the friction between Mackenzie's empiricist, documentary approach to history and Kirmani's personal, memory-based account.

Mackenzie dismisses the value of Tipu's dream diary, focusing instead on political treaties and administrative documents, which he considers "facts" (Karnad 192). Kirmani, however, treats the discovery of the diary as a profound violation, insisting on the significance of dreams that "spoke to him" (Karnad 192). This conflict is a dramatic enactment of Ronald Inden's critique of Orientalist knowledge. Mackenzie, the colonial knower, claims a position of power by privileging a specific type of knowledge the official, the documentable thereby relegating Tipu, his culture, and his subjective experiences to a position of irrelevance and powerlessness. Karnad's introduction of Kirmani as a counter-voice challenges this artificial construct, suggesting that there are other ways of knowing the past that are equally, if not more, valid. The violent storm that destroys key documents further underscores the fragility of the colonial archive and the inherent instability of historical truth, paving the way for the alternative archive of dreams.

In the imaginative plot of Karnad's play "The Dreams of Tipu Sultan" historical facts are interspersed with imagined episodes to recreate Tipu's life in the light of his dreams. In doing so, Karnad constructs an alternative historical analysis for the modern audience, drawing upon the account of the court historian and narrator Kiirmani, scenes from the past in which Tipu himself appears and four specific dreams from the diary that the Sultan maintains. Kate Brittlebank, a leading authority and scholar of Tipu, in her study on the actual dream register of Tipu Sultan containing records of thirty-seven dreams of the Mysore ruler maintains that it is a document of great historical usefulness as it "provides an insight into how Tipu responded to the difficulties that he faced during the final years of his reign." (Brittlebank 174). Tipu's dreams which form the main plot of this play, to some extent fictionalized by Karnad, leave the readers with newer perspectives with which they could recreate Tipu Sultan for themselves. Islam's concern with dreams and visions has been a subject of study for many scholars who have tried to link the beginnings of Islam to visions (Green 287). In examining historical sources, one observes that the reverence for dreams was a common phenomenon among both men of action such as soldiers and military leaders and those involved in religious reform or contemplation. These parallel underscores a societal belief that dreams possessed a profound significance, transcending the boundaries of religious or philosophical domains. For instance, autobiographical materials from the sixteenth century reveal that individuals from different backgrounds often recorded their dream experiences, emphasizing the universality of this phenomenon. These personal accounts serve as valuable windows into the inner worlds of historical figures, revealing their fears, hopes, aspirations, and spiritual encounters.

The Sultan's dreams, thus, as the article suggests may also be used to explain developments in political history. It is through this prism of dreams that Karnad most profoundly performs White's "poetic act" of historical explanation and achieves Dharwadker's "alternative figural representation." The very inclusion of dreams as a central framing device signals a departure from conventional historical methods. Dreams, by their nature, are intensely personal, symbolic, and often

resistant to straightforward interpretation. They offer a gateway into the subconscious, revealing anxieties, aspirations, spiritual inclinations, and intuitive understandings that are rarely captured in official documents or battle records. In Karnad's hands, Tipu's recorded dreams become a powerful tool to humanize the Sultan and to offer insights into the psychological and emotional landscape of a ruler facing immense pressure from the encroaching British East India Company.

The autobiography of Babur, the first Emperor of Mughal Empire known as the *Baburnama* offers a richly detailed and closely observed account of his life, including numerous references to dreams and visions. Babur's dream narratives are among the most extensively documented in Muslim historiographical and autobiographical literature, illustrating the importance placed on such experiences in shaping personal and political destiny. Babur often interpreted his dreams as divine signs, guiding his decisions and actions as he navigated the tumultuous political landscape of central Asia and India. His dreams ranged from prophetic visions to symbolic images that reflected his inner struggles, ambitions, and fears. The inclusion of dreams in Babur's autobiography reiterates the importance attached to dreams as meaningful communications that could influence worldly affairs. Tipu's own practice of reading his dreams emerges not as an isolated peculiarity but as the continuation of an established Indo - Islamic mode of self-fashioning, in which the ruler interprets the oneiric realm as a legitimate source of political and spiritual guidance. Karnad's decision to foreground the *Khwabnama*, *ergo*, identifies Tipu within a recognisable lineage of Muslim sovereigns for whom dreaming was a form of statecraft, dismantling the colonial caricature of an irrational despot.

Analysis of the Four Dreams: From Secularism to Betrayal

As Girish Karnad's *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan* opens, the world is marked by loss and treachery: Tipu is dead, Seringapatam lies devastated, and betrayal shadows his fall. The discovery of the Sultan's "secret" dream diary by Munshi Habibullah unsettles Kirmani, who treats its exposure as a violation (Karnad 192). The diary's blank pages and Kirmani's claim that Tipu "recorded the dreams that spoke to him" suggest silences within history itself (Karnad 192). Colonel Mackenzie dismisses such dreams, privileging political exchanges over visionary experience (Karnad 192). Kirmani struggles to produce an objective account for the British Orientalist archive, especially after a violent storm described as a night of "extraordinary violence" destroys key documents. This moment of erasure underscores the fragility of historical truth and the distortions shaping Tipu's legacy. Yet Karnad reclaims him as a dreamer, proposing that dreams offer an alternative archive through which his life and anxieties may be reimagined. The play mentions four of Tipu Sultan's thirty-seven dreams which are registered in his *Khwabnama*. A lot of study and research has gone into his dream book which was found under his pillow and immediately transferred to London on recovery. In the play however, as the article argues Karnad uses these four dreams to resurrect the much-tarnished image of the Tiger of Mysore.

In one of the first dreams in Act, I that the plot of the play mentions Tipu along with his trusted Poornaiya find themselves in a dilapidated temple like mysterious structure, where idol - like human female figures spoke to him claiming that they were living women who were seeking salvation by praying to God for many centuries. They sought uninterrupted isolation for themselves so that they could continue to seek salvation. Tipu leaves the place assuring them that the temple would be repaired “so that these seekers after God are not disturbed” (Karnad 193); a dream which highlights the Sultan’s secular outlook and challenges the popular image of Tipu being a cruel, despotic ruler intolerant of infidels and non-believers. After having left the temple premises he meets the envoys of the Emperor of China who arrive with a white elephant and horses as a token of friendship for the Sultan. Though this dream is a continuation of the previous one according to the plot of the play but Brittlebank regards this as an independent dream (Brittlebank 168). One of the envoys, an old man mentions that the emperor had previously sent a white elephant only to Alexander the Great and no one else. Tipu interprets this dream as a gesture that he too would be as great as Alexander. It was a known fact that under Tipu’s able leadership Mysore was one of the most flourishing states in India in the eighteenth century. Tipu’s ambition of connecting Mysore to the outside world is also suggested in this dream. Karnad reveals Tipu’s wish to send a delegation from Mysore to France to bring ten thousand French soldiers to join the Sultan’s army and also French crafted guns, cannons and pistols. Historical documents clearly reveal that Mysore under Tipu had diplomatic connections with France, Afghanistan, the Ottoman Turks, Persia among others not just to defend his territory but with a larger vision of empowering Mysore with the best from these foreign powers (Guru 3; Sil 71). Tipu was patriotic and ambitious at the same time for which he confronted the military forces of a foreign trading company who not only consolidated its hold on India but was insistent on expanding its dominion over a larger territory which he felt would harm his own country’s interests (Sil 47).

In Act I the second dream features a mysterious figure who initially appears in male disguise. As the exchange unfolds, the figure reveals herself to be a woman, unsettling the Sultan and prompting him to drive her away. He connects this woman in his dreams to Maratha warriors who may be dressed in male attire but would prove to be disguised as betrayers in context of the impending battle with the British. Right after the dream, Karnad introduces a conversation between Nana Phadnavis, the Maratha statesman with Charles Malet, representative of Lord Cornwallis which highlights the British moves of gathering alliances against Tipu Sultan who occupies vast Maratha territories from the days of his father. Tipu saw it as his primary duty to remind all his neighbors that they need to stand united. Unfortunately, no one, not even the brave Marathas could connect to Tipu’s vision.

In Act II Tipu’s third dream follows the 1792 treaty with Charles Cornwallis, after he sends his sons as hostages. In this vision, his father Haidar Ali accuses him of “maiming” him and surrendering his limbs to the enemy, condemning him for thinking “like a trader” (Karnad 228). The dream reflects Tipu’s guilt over political

compromise and internal betrayal. As Nile Green observes, visionary encounters could generate meaning beyond conventional historiography, circumventing epistemological limits (298). Here, the apparition dramatizes Tipu's anguish over disunity among Indian rulers and the self-interest of his officials. He contrasts British loyalty with the treachery of his own countrymen and turns toward the French after the refusal of the Nizam and the Marathas to support him, failing to recognize his "political sagacity and foresightedness" (Guru 5). Tipu's emphasis on control of the coastline as the "key to power and prosperity" underscores his strategic foresight (Karnad 228).

Guilt formed the term around which the law enacted the necessary stages of its social adaptation and produced constructs to underwrite the requirement for general, abstracted and positively inclusive law that constitutes modern society. The ultimate result of guilt's evolution as a legal figure became visible in the fact that the law progressively intensified its positivity and inclusivity, and it amplified the legal and normative resources that it permitted modern societies to store, utilize and reproduce. (Thornhill 103)

The Sultan's "last dream" in *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan* by Girish Karnad* embodies his deepest desire to see the British expelled from his land. In the Diwan-i-Aam, he finds Mir Sadiq, Poornaiya, Qamaruddin, and Nadeem Khan united with him, supported by French cannons and his son Fath Haidar. News arrives that the Nizam and the Marathas have joined Mysore, and that the English are retreating. "With the Marathas and the Nizam on our side, we can chase the English into the sea any day," Tipu declares (Karnad 238). The dream fulfils his vision of unity as the "white plague departs." Yet, that very afternoon, he is betrayed and killed by the same trusted men. As Kirmani observes, "the battle of Seringapatam was lost before it had begun" (Karnad 238). Even his mechanical tiger was taken to London's Victoria and Albert Museum. The final dream thus remains a poignant testament to Tipu's visionary nationalism.

Conclusion

Girish Karnad's *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan* is a masterful example of postcolonial counter-history. Through its innovative narrative structure, which pits the intimate memory of a native historian against the empirical pretensions of a British orientalist, and through its dramatic use of Tipu's own dream diary, the play dismantles the colonial caricature of a fanatical despot. In its place, Karnad constructs a complex and compelling portrait of a visionary leader: a secular ruler who protected places of worship other than his own, a modern diplomat with global ambitions, and an early nationalist who dreamed of a united Indian resistance against imperial encroachment.

That disregard reflects in their literary and political writings that arguably rely on the British Orientalist historiography to construct the myth of caste-neutral and egalitarian culture of Sufi Sindh. It traces the historicisation of the claim of Hindu-Muslim interfaith harmony, and its persistence in the post-Partition

Sindh. Based on the content analysis of progressive literature and the historiography of progressive politics in Sindh, it is concluded that owing to the casteist social structural barriers the privileged caste elite at the vanguard of progressive nationalist politics was blinded by their own privileged position to justly address the caste question. That inherent blindness to see through the problem of caste is the reason that progressives' emancipatory projects to redefine the past and myths end in failure. (Hussain 317)

The analysis of the four dreams reveals them to be more than mere literary devices. They function as a powerful counter-archive, offering access to Tipu's subjectivity his hopes, anxieties, and his unwavering commitment to his kingdom's sovereignty. They perform what Hayden White would call the "poetic act" of historical explanation, offering a deeper, human truth that traditional historiography, with its claims to objectivity, often fails to capture. By foregrounding these dreams, Karnad restores the agency that Ronald Inden argued was stripped from Indian subjects by colonial knowledge systems. He allows Tipu's own voice, filtered through the symbolic language of dreams, to speak across centuries and challenge the narrative of the victors. Ultimately, the play serves a vital contemporary purpose. It invites modern audiences to reconsider a figure who has remained politically and culturally contested in India. By mourning the loss of a "well-ordered polity" (Sil 45) and a vision of unity, Karnad compels us to engage with history not as a settled book of facts, but as an ongoing dialogue. *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan* demonstrates that in this dialogue, fiction, poetry, and dreams are not mere embellishments but essential tools for reclaiming the past and imagining more just futures.

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