Advanced International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research
E-ISSN: 2584-0487
editor@aijmr.com
Volume 4, Issue 3, May-June 2026
CrossRef DOI: 10.62127/aijmr.2026.v04i03.1397

The Nature of the Struggle: Internal Decay in Tughlaq vs. Imperial Threat in Khuangchera

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Abstract:
This article reads Girish Karnad's *Tughlaq* (1964) and Dr. Laltluangliana Khiangte's *Pasalṭha Khuangchera* (1997; English translation 2024) as two historical tragedies whose dramatic energies issue from opposite directions. In *Tughlaq*, the antagonist is interior: the ruler's own intellect, ambition, and unsteady idealism corrode the kingdom from within. In *Khuangchera*, the antagonist is exterior: the British colonial machine presses upon a small hill polity from outside, and the protagonist's tragedy unfolds as a defence of land, kin, and culture. Using Aristotle's account of tragic action as a starting point, and drawing on Edward Said's analysis of colonial representation and Frantz Fanon's account of anti-colonial resistance, this study argues that the two plays demand different theoretical instruments for adequate reading. The article reads closely the scenes of disintegration in *Tughlaq* — the murdered Sheikh, the failed copper coinage, the abandonment of Delhi — alongside the moments of confrontation in *Khuangchera* — Captain Browne's reckoning at Sailianpuia's court, Khuangchera's farewell, and the final battle. It concludes that the two plays, taken together, offer a fuller account of what tragic struggle can mean in modern Indian drama than either provides alone, and that the field of comparative tragic studies stands to gain from reading them in conjunction.

Keywords: Indian drama, tragedy, postcolonial theatre, Girish Karnad, Laltluangliana Khiangte, *Tughlaq*, *Pasalṭha Khuangchera*, historical play, colonialism, Aristotle, Said, Fanon.

1. Introduction

Two plays separated by three decades, two languages, and two regional theatres of India share an unusual structural symmetry. Girish Karnad's *Tughlaq*, first published in Kannada in 1964 and translated by the author into English by 1972, dramatises the reign of the fourteenth-century Sultan Muhammad bin Tughlaq through thirteen scenes that move from Delhi to Daulatabad and back into the ruined fort. Dr. Laltluangliana Khiangte's *Pasalṭha Khuangchera*, first published in Mizo in 1997 and translated into English by the author with Lalremtluangi in 2024, dramatises the life and death of a nineteenth-century Mizo warrior who resisted the British colonial advance into the Lushai Hills. Both are tragedies. Both rest their dramatic weight on a single charismatic male figure whose end the audience watches arrive. Both deploy what G. N. Devy, introducing the English Khiangte, calls a structure "after Shakespeare's history plays" (Devy 8). Yet what these plays show, when read alongside one another, is a near-perfect opposition in the nature of the struggle each dramatises.

In *Tughlaq*, the antagonistic force is not external. The Sultan's enemies appear in the play, but they are largely creatures of his own court: the Sheikh, the Amirs, his stepmother, Ratansingh, Najib, the impostor Aziz. Each opposition arises from within the polity that Tughlaq inherited and continues to govern. The cause of the kingdom's ruin is the Sultan himself — his impatience, his over-extension, his idealism

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unmatched by political discipline. U. R. Anantha Murthy's introduction to the play observes that Karnad himself, asked in 1971 what struck him about Tughlaq's history, replied: "within a span of twenty years this tremendously capable man had gone to pieces. This seemed to be both due to his idealism as well as the shortcomings within him" (Murthy viii). The struggle, in other words, is internal: a self destroying its kingdom by way of destroying itself.

In *Khuangchera*, the antagonistic force is precisely the opposite. The protagonist's community is intact, his ethical commitments are firm, his domestic affections are unconflicted. What threatens him is the encroachment of an imperial power whose representatives — Captain Browne, the interpreter, the unnamed Commander — enter the village from outside and demand tribute, obedience, and surrender. Khuangchera does not unravel from within. He is overwhelmed from without. The tragedy is the tragedy of a small society pressed by a vastly larger one, and the hero's death is not the consequence of an inner flaw but of standing exposed in the path of a force he could not defeat.

This article argues that this opposition is not incidental. It defines the analytical demands the two plays make on a reader. The same theoretical apparatus will not serve both. Reading the two plays together makes the differences visible, and the differences are productive. They reveal something about the variety of tragic dramaturgy available within modern Indian theatre, and about the limits of any single account of what tragedy is or how it works.

The discussion proceeds in five sections. The first establishes the historical and dramatic frame within which each play operates. The second reads the internal decay in Tughlaq's court through Aristotle's account of tragic causation, identifying where the Aristotelian model holds and where it strains. The third reads the imperial confrontation in Khuangchera through Edward Said's analysis of colonial discourse and Frantz Fanon's account of anti-colonial violence, identifying what these frameworks bring to the play that Aristotelian categories cannot. The fourth places the two protagonists in comparative perspective, examining how each plays' final scene crystallises the nature of its struggle. The conclusion takes stock of what the comparison teaches about tragic form in Indian drama and what it suggests for the comparative study of tragedy more broadly.

2. Two Historical Theatres

Tughlaq opens in Delhi in 1327, in the yard outside the Chief Court of Justice. The first voices the audience hears belong to a crowd of citizens debating the Sultan's recent decisions. An old man laments: "God, what's this country coming to!" (Karnad 1). A younger man defends the new king. A third complains about Hindu tax exemption. A Hindu speaks up, then a second Muslim shouts him down. The opening establishes, before the Sultan appears, the texture of the polity he governs. It is fractious, multi-religious, anxious, and contradictory. When Muhammad Tughlaq himself enters, he announces an Islamic court ruling against a Brahmin and a Brahmin's compensation paid from the State Treasury, then declares that his capital will move from Delhi to Daulatabad to symbolise "the bond between Muslims and Hindus which I wish to develop and strengthen in my kingdom" (Karnad 3). The opening scene is dense with foreshadowing. Every theme that will become catastrophic later is sketched here: religious tension, idealistic public projects, suspicion of motive, the Sultan's desire to be misunderstood.

Pasalṭha Khuangchera opens, by contrast, on a scene of intra-communal life. Elders and middle-aged men weave bamboo baskets at the *Zawlbuk*, the bachelors' dormitory at the centre of village social organisation, and discuss craft, the chief, and the village's young hero. The opening dialogue is built around a remembered hunting episode in which Khuangchera entered a bear cave with only a machete. The conversation establishes *tlawmngaihna*, the Mizo ethical code of selfless courage, as the operative moral vocabulary of the community. "A courageous individual begets another courageous soul," Thanga-pa

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observes, "is a suitable description considering his father's legacy" (Khiangte 25). The opening scene is also dense with foreshadowing, but the structure of the foreshadowing is opposite to *Tughlaq*'s. Where Karnad's opening introduces every fracture that will later split open, Khiangte's opening introduces the cohesion that the colonial intrusion will later strain. The two plays establish their dramatic worlds in exactly contrary modes.

Both plays use historical drama to engage their contemporary moments, but they use it differently. Karnad's thirteen scenes figure the disenchantment of post-Nehruvian India — the unravelling of the high idealism with which the new republic had begun. Khiangte's five acts and twenty-two scenes recover and consolidate the memory of indigenous resistance against an imperial power whose legacy continues to shape the post-colonial situation of Mizoram. In Devy's phrase, Khiangte's play "presents the plot in five acts, divided in twenty-two scenes, with a spectacular theatrical clarity in the nature of the conflict between the natives of Mizoram and the colonial invaders" (Devy 8).

3. The Sultan Undone by Himself: Internal Decay as Tragic Engine

Aristotle's account of tragic action in the *Poetics* remains the indispensable starting point for any discussion of tragic causation. He requires that the protagonist be neither saint nor villain but a figure of stature whose fall arises through *hamartia* — an error, a frailty, a misjudgment that destabilises his fortunes (Aristotle 26–27). The flaw is not crude moral failure; it is a structural feature of the protagonist's very excellence. The reader feels pity because the misfortune is unmerited and fear because it could befall someone like oneself.

Muhammad Tughlaq fits this template with unusual precision. He is no caricatured tyrant. The play insists on his intelligence, his learning, his sincerity. "May this moment burn bright and light up our path towards greater justice, equality, progress and peace," he proclaims at the close of the opening scene, "—not just peace but a more purposeful life" (Karnad 3). His ambitions are the ambitions of a reformer: religious equality between Muslim and Hindu, a more rational currency, a capital relocated to integrate the empire's newly acquired southern provinces. The Sheikh, sceptical of the Sultan's religious commitments, accuses him of indifference to the Koran. Tughlaq replies: "My kingdom has millions — Muslims, Hindus, Jains. Yes, there is dirt and sickness in my kingdom. But why should God clean the dirt deposited by men?" (Karnad 20). The vision is grand. It is also, the play insists, idealistic in a way that proves fatal.

The fatality issues from Tughlaq's own choices, repeated across the play. He invites the Amirs to a meeting under the cover of prayer, then has them slaughtered when they attempt assassination. He banishes prayer from his kingdom in response, an act whose pious offering of penitence is undone by the rage with which it is announced. He moves the capital to Daulatabad on a project of administrative consolidation, but the move is so coercive that it produces, in Karnad's most haunting image, a road lined with corpses. He introduces copper currency, but the result is not economic modernisation but mass counterfeiting. He invites the Khalif's descendant Ghiyas-ud-din Abbasid to bless his capital and so restore prayer, but the man who arrives is the impostor Aziz, who has murdered the real Ghiyas-ud-din on the road. Every initiative is recognisably an attempt to govern more justly; every initiative produces a result more catastrophic than the previous one.

The structure here is genuinely Aristotelian. There is *hamartia* in the sense the *Poetics* requires: error not of vice but of frailty. There is reversal of fortune from prosperity to adversity. There is recognition in the play's final scenes, when Tughlaq, in his Daulatabad fort, comes to know what he has become. "I have only three friends in the world — you, Najib and Barani. And now you want me to believe you killed Najib," he tells his stepmother, before having her stoned to death (Karnad 65, paraphrased; see Karnad

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65–66). The recognition arrives as the protagonist's own act of execution — a peripeteia in the form of self-destruction.

Yet the Aristotelian frame, while necessary, is not sufficient. Aristotle's tragic protagonist falls within an ordered cosmos whose moral architecture the fall confirms. Tughlaq's cosmos is not ordered in this sense. Karnad's play, situated in the disenchantment of the 1960s, locates the catastrophe not within a moral universe whose principles the hero violates but within a historical-political moment whose contradictions the hero embodies. Anantha Murthy's introduction identifies the source of the play's power as "the ambiguities of Tughlaq's character, the dominating figure in the play" (Murthy viii) — the irreducible elusive quality the protagonist carries. Tughlaq is a more modern tragic figure than the *Poetics* anticipates. His undoing is internal, but the internality is not just psychological. It is also historical. The contradiction Karnad places at the centre of the play — idealism that destroys what it loves — is recognisably the contradiction of the post-1947 Indian intellectual: the heir to the Nehruvian project watching that project flounder. As Karnad himself remarked in 1971, in the early sixties India had "also come very far in the same direction" as Tughlaq's twenty-year unravelling, and "the twenty-year period seemed to me very much a striking parallel" (qtd. in Murthy viii). The play's historical setting and its contemporary referent rhyme.

The dramatic energy of the internal decay is concentrated in three structurally pivotal scenes. The first is the killing of Sheikh Imam-ud-din during the staged peace embassy to Ain-ul-Mulk — a betrayal Tughlaq orchestrates while remaining at one remove from the act itself. The second is the assassination of the Amirs at prayer in Scene Six, in which the Sultan, having unmasked their conspiracy, has Hindu soldiers carry out the slaughter while he continues praying. He stabs Shihab-ud-din's corpse afterwards with the words: "Don't cover him, Barani. I want my people to see his wounds" (Karnad 45). The third is the long monologue in Scene Ten, in which the Sultan confesses to his stepmother and then has her stoned for poisoning Najib:

Why am I wandering naked in this desert now? I started in Your path, Lord, why am I become a pig rolling in this gory mud? Raise me. Clean me. Cover me with Your infinite Mercy. I can only clutch at the hem of Your cloak with my bloody fingers and plead. I can only beg — have pity on me. I have no one but You now. Only You. You … You … You … You … (Karnad 67)

The speech is the play's lyrical low point. It is also the precise place where the Aristotelian frame begins to come apart. Aristotelian recognition produces clarity. Tughlaq's recognition produces only the deepening of confusion. He sees what he has become. He cannot retreat from it. He has no resources within his moral vocabulary to act otherwise. The tragic effect issues not from a single error but from the protagonist's constitutional inability to do anything but compound it. This is a tragedy of the modern subject, where the inner self is itself the field of catastrophe.

Raymond Williams's account of modern tragic experience captures the relevant shift. Williams argues that tragedy in modernity registers "the overwhelming of the individual self by what feels like the impersonal weight of the historical world" (Williams 87). Tughlaq, however, is overwhelmed by no impersonal weight. He is overwhelmed by what he himself produces. The kingdom rots because the Sultan rots. The kingdom and its king are, as Murthy observes, "one in their chaos, and he knows it" (Murthy ix).

4. The Warrior Pressed from Without: Imperial Threat as Tragic Engine

Pasalṭha Khuangchera presents a tragedy whose causal architecture is structurally inverse. The protagonist's community is not riven by faction. His ethical commitments do not contradict themselves. His domestic life, while compressed by his vocation as warrior, is not at war with it. The disequilibrium

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that the play tracks is not internal to him or to his society. It is the encroachment of a foreign power on a polity that, until that encroachment, had been internally coherent.

Edward Said's analysis of colonial discourse helps name what is being represented when this encroachment is staged. Said, in *Orientalism*, argues that the colonial encounter is always also a discursive encounter: the imperial power arrives with a vocabulary in which the colonised is already pre-categorised, pre-defined, and pre-judged (Said 3). The vocabulary is one of the instruments by which power is exercised. The Mizo characters in *Khuangchera* encounter precisely this. Captain Browne arrives at Chief Sailianpuia's court with an entire diplomatic vocabulary already in place: the agreement of 13 June 1890, the levy of guns, the stripping of chieftaincy from Lianphunga, the prohibition on killing Englishmen. The vocabulary is not merely a record of past arrangements; it is the present form of imperial demand. "Your forebears even proclaimed," Browne says, "Killing white men is prohibited. If you kill a sahib, it is as though you are killing yourselves" (Khiangte 102). The proclamation is staged as ancestral, but the prohibition is colonial. The vocabulary of the natives is being captured and repurposed by the colonial speaker.

The play's representation of this scene is acute. Browne does not need to threaten violence in the same moment that he extracts compliance. The threat is structural. The interpreter's gloss — "Village crier, you must remain silent. He is a high-ranking official, and you won't comprehend his significance. Just be silent" (Khiangte 101) — enforces the silence on which the colonial encounter depends. The Herald who tries to speak up is told down by the Mizo elder Upa-min as much as by the colonial figures: "It is best to remain silent for now. Just stay quiet" (Khiangte 101). The colonial system has already insinuated itself into the village's deliberative practice. The imperial threat is not just the threat of external force; it is the threat of an interior discipline that the imperial encounter introduces.

It is here that Frantz Fanon's account of anti-colonial resistance becomes analytically useful. Fanon, in *The Wretched of the Earth*, argues that the colonial situation is one in which the only possible response to a violence structurally inscribed into every colonial transaction is, ultimately, violence on the part of the colonised (Fanon 35–37). This claim has been controversial, but its diagnostic value for reading *Khuangchera* is direct. Khuangchera's decision to fight is not the expression of a hot-blooded individual temperament. It is the necessary response to a structural situation in which compliance is impossible without the loss of the very things — land, kin, *hnam*, *tlawmngaihna* — on which his identity rests. Fanon's formulation — that anti-colonial violence is the form in which the colonised reclaim themselves as agents — fits the dramatic shape of Khuangchera's decision precisely.

The protagonist's farewell soliloquy in Act V, Scene v, gives this decision its fullest articulation. Returning home from the colonial confrontation, Khuangchera prepares to leave his family and stand alone against the imperial soldiers. The speech is the affective and ethical centre of the play:

I must go without hesitation. I shall leave behind my wife and children despite their utter need for my presence and assistance. … These three days have felt like an eternity! Meanwhile, I was immersed in work at home taking care of my wife and our newborn child. It is clear as day that Khuangchera is a sought-after presence indeed in times of danger. … I press on. For the village and the people, I must always prepare for combat. My responsibility extends beyond my family whom I love and want to protect; my responsibility encompasses our tribal land, this land that needs our protection! If we do not protect our land first from the hands of these colonisers, our families will never be safe from them. (Khiangte 114–15)

Three features of this passage deserve emphasis. First, the speech is given in the form of inner monologue — the stage direction reads "Muttering only for himself to hear as he walks" — which insists that the decision is not a public posture but a privately wrought commitment. Second, the speech explicitly extends

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the protagonist's responsibility from family to community to ancestral land. The widening of the moral horizon is consecutive: the safety of the family is grounded in the safety of the village, which is grounded in the integrity of the land. Third, the speech ends with an acknowledgment of cost. The line, "How difficult it is to balance the roles of a good husband and a reliable warrior!" (Khiangte 115), registers the price the choice exacts. It is not a triumphant martial declaration. It is a sober reckoning with the impossibility of the situation in which the colonial encroachment has placed him.

This is not Aristotelian tragedy in any obvious sense. There is no hamartia. The protagonist's end is not the consequence of an error of judgment or a frailty of character. His judgment is sound; his character is exemplary in the precise terms his community values. What undoes him is the asymmetry of force between the small hill polity and the imperial military apparatus. The Aristotelian model, premised on a protagonist whose own qualities precipitate his fall, cannot capture this. The tragedy in Khiangte is not the tragedy of an individual who errs. It is the tragedy of a community whose ethical architecture cannot withstand the structural weight of empire. The protagonist registers this dramatically, but the tragic effect is registered communally.

This is also where Said and Fanon become indispensable. Said's account of how colonial discourse pre-arranges the encounter, ensuring that the colonised speaks already within categories that the coloniser controls, accounts for the dialogic asymmetry of the play's confrontation scenes. Fanon's account of why the colonised, in such a structurally rigged situation, must finally choose the response of violence accounts for why Khuangchera's decision to fight is morally inevitable rather than morally optional. Neither account would be necessary to read Tughlaq. Both are necessary to read Khuangchera adequately. The theoretical instruments are not interchangeable.

5. Two Deaths, Two Struggles

The final scenes of each play crystallise, with unusual symmetry, the nature of the struggle each has been dramatising. Both protagonists die at the close of their respective dramas. The manner of their deaths and the affective register in which the audience receives them, however, differ in ways that make visible the analytical distinction the article has been pursuing.

Tughlaq's final scene takes place in the palace at Daulatabad. The Sultan has just been informed that the impostor Aziz has been unmasked. The would-be Khalif has been arrested. The genuine prayer that was to inaugurate the post-banishment religious life of the kingdom turns out to have been authored by a thief. The Sultan, exhausted and sleepless, asks: "You know, when the muezzin's call comes for the morning prayer, why don't we throw the prayer-rugs into the river…?" (Karnad 84). The bitterness is unmistakable but it carries no element of external threat. The Sultan is alone with what he has produced. The play's closing tableau — the muezzin's call sounding off-stage, Muhammad waking from troubled sleep and looking around "dazed and frightened…as though he can't comprehend where he is" (Karnad 86) — figures a man enclosed within his own ruin. There is no external enemy to overcome. There is only the protagonist surveying the wreckage of his own conduct. Murthy's reading captures the resonance: "In the end Tughlaq and his kingdom are one in their chaos, and he knows it" (Murthy ix).

Khuangchera's death scene, by contrast, takes place outside the village, in a forest clearing surrounded by enemy soldiers. The protagonist has been shot through the thigh, then through the arm. His friend Ngurbawnga has died beside him. He cannot raise his machete. The Commander of the British detachment, watching him, registers his bravery: "Tenacious and fearsome!" (Khiangte 120). The dying protagonist refuses, even at this point, to allow his death to be construed within the colonial vocabulary. His last extended speech is the play's ethical climax:

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My very blood has made a vow to safeguard this land in need of rescue. Let the flow of my blood serve as a resolute force that will unquestionably drive the Vailian (British expedition) invaders from our land. I am a man who always serve my people…come, let's have a fair fight one by one…. I do not perish within your grasp; you are the interlopers who invade and plunder the territories of those whom you have forcibly displaced… How dare you lay claim to our ancestral lands, the land passed onto us by our forefathers? (Khiangte 119–20)

Two features of this passage repay attention. First, the death is not a private matter. The blood is offered as an agentive substance — "a resolute force that will unquestionably drive the Vailian invaders from our land." The protagonist does not see his death as a personal loss but as a contribution to a longer struggle whose outcome he will not see. Second, the speech is structured as accusation rather than lament. The protagonist's final utterance is a demand for accountability from the colonial soldiers — "How dare you lay claim to our ancestral lands" — not a meditation on his own situation. The death-speech is rhetorically directed outward. It is addressed to the imperial force whose violence has produced the situation in which it is being delivered. Where Tughlaq's last extended speech is a confession addressed to God, Khuangchera's is an accusation addressed to empire.

The contrast clarifies the analytical claim. Each protagonist dies at the close of his play. Each death is registered as tragedy. But the mechanism by which the tragedy is produced, and the affective register in which the audience receives it, differ in kind. Tughlaq's death — figured here as the death of his political agency rather than his physical extinction — is the consummation of an internal decay that has been the play's subject from the opening scene. Khuangchera's death is the consummation of an external imposition that has been the play's subject from the colonial intrusion onward. The first death turns inward, towards the protagonist's relation to himself. The second turns outward, towards the protagonist's relation to the imperial power that has killed him. The audience grieves both, but for opposite reasons.

6. Conclusion: Two Tragedies, Two Theoretical Demands

What is the value, then, of reading these two plays in conjunction? The first answer is descriptive. The comparison makes visible the variety of tragic dramaturgy available within modern Indian theatre. Indian drama in the post-Independence period has not been a uniform aesthetic phenomenon. The plays produced by playwrights working from major metropolitan centres in dominant Indian languages have differed substantively from those produced by playwrights working from regional and what G. N. Devy calls "tribal" contexts. The differences are not merely thematic. They are structural. They involve the kind of tragic causation each playwright deems serious, the kind of protagonist each places at the centre of his work, the kind of theoretical apparatus each demands for adequate reading.

The second answer is methodological. The comparison demonstrates that no single theoretical framework adequately handles both plays. Aristotelian categories — *hamartia*, peripeteia, anagnorisis — work well for Karnad's *Tughlaq*, though they require modification in the direction Williams and Steiner have indicated to register the play's specifically modern features. They work less well for Khiangte's *Khuangchera*, whose tragic causation is not located in the protagonist's character but in the external imperial pressure on his community. Postcolonial frameworks — Said's account of colonial discourse, Fanon's account of anti-colonial resistance — work well for Khiangte's play. They are largely beside the point for Karnad's, where the tragic catastrophe is generated within the polity rather than imposed on it from outside. A comparative reading therefore requires a theoretical pluralism. The reader must be prepared to deploy different instruments for different tragedies, and to recognise that the appropriateness of a framework is a function of the tragedy being read.

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Both plays end, in their different ways, with the death of their protagonist. Tughlaq dies into his own bewilderment, with no enemy to blame but the wreckage of his own designs. Khuangchera dies into the cordon of imperial soldiers, with the enemy named and accused even in his last breath. The two deaths are equally tragic. The tragedies are not, in any obvious sense, of the same kind. To read the plays well is to register both kinds with the attention each requires. To read them comparatively is to learn that tragedy itself has more than one structure, and that the structures available are best perceived by those willing to attend to dramatic art that has emerged from outside the canonical traditions to which tragic theory has so far given most of its attention.

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