

**Challenging the Past Narrative through Historical Distancing: A
Comparative Study of Shahid Nadeem's Dara and Girish Karnad's The
Dreams of Tipu Sultan**

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Abstract

The study aims to deal with the playwrights' purpose behind adopting and adapting historical subject matter to revisit, define, redefine, deconstruct, challenge, and reconstruct the history, culture, and past narratives. Moreover, the study's objective is to examine playwrights' purpose to address contemporary cultural issues by dealing with historical stories. For instance, Shahid Nadeem's Dara and Karnad's The Dreams of Tipu Sultan challenge the prevalent narratives of the past. Nadeem deconstructs the past portrayal of Dara Shikoh as a villain in Pakistani history. He maintains his argument by unearthing Dara's poetic, philosophical, and humanistic nature, where he tries to attain inter-religious harmony. On the other hand, Karnad exposes the misrepresentation and mishandling of Tipu Sultan's historical image by English historians and novelists in history. The reason behind the distortion was the victorious and rebellious nature of Tipu, who defeated the East India Company in wars and kept on challenging their authority until his death. The playwright reconstructs the past by highlighting Tipu's political, social, and economic skills to make his country great under his sovereign state.

Keywords: Historical Narrative, Cultural Comparison, Dara, Tipu Sultan, Historical Distancing

Introduction

The plays that deal with historical events are commonly called historical plays. It's not a new trend for playwrights to deal with historical subject matter. The contemplative point behind this adoption and adaptation is the reason for taking the material from the past. History fascinates writers because of its dynamic and glorious subject matter, which they use to challenge the past narrative and address contemporary issues. The playwrights challenge the leading worldview by "redefining, reconstructing, revisiting, and reshaping historical facts and events. The stances of the same pieces of literature have been presented dialectically, where they endeavor to transform the audience/reader by distancing their identification to meditating and pondering upon the issue" (Hameed & Kayani, 2022, p. 1027). Simultaneously, they revisit the past with a purpose. They strive to reconstruct the past narratives about the misrepresentations of historical personalities and events, the distortion of history, and biased portrayals. In this respect, the theater provides them a place to present their perspectives to challenge the past and contemporary mishandlings.

In this context, the current research explores the historical perspective of the selected Indo-Pak drama. For this purpose, I have taken two plays written by Indian and Pakistani playwrights. Shahid Nadeem, a Pakistani playwright, emerged in the 1980s. He became the resident playwright of Ajoka Theatre, which is "known for its resistance theatre, and stands out in addressing various societal issues" (Farooqi & Asif, 2023, p. 71). During this writing journey, he faced hard times during General Zia ul Haq's authoritarian rule because he challenged the dictatorial regime. He "deals with the themes of oppression, dominance, protest against misuse of power, resilience" (Hameed et al., 2025, p. 294), and produces resistance literature that investigates and raises a voice "against state atrocities, religious oppression and violence, political oppression, or social and economic injustice" (Khan & Khan, 2023, p. 83).

His play *The Third Knock* (Teesri Dastak) also exposes the mindset behind martial law, other than that of *Dara*.

This study includes Nadeem's play *Dara*, discussing the story of Shah Jahan's Crown Prince, Dara Shikoh (1615-1659). He was a Sufi poet and philosopher who believed in inter-religious harmony in the Indian subcontinent. Aurangzeb Alamgir, Dara's brother, got the throne after a war of succession. He finally succeeded and murdered Dara through the Sharia (Religious) Court by accusing him of being blasphemous (Saeed Ullah et al., 2021).

Moreover, Girish Karnad, an Indian playwright born in 1938, gained maturity in the two decades post-independence era of the 1950s and 1960s. He contributed to the development of Indian theater and drama "along with such contemporaries Dharamvir Bharati, Mohan Rakesh, Vijay Tendulkar, Badal Sircar, Utpal Dutt, Habib Tanvir, G. P. Deshpande, and Mahesh Elkunchwar" (Karnad, 2005, p. viii). He started writing in his regional Kannada language, but his works are available in international languages, including English.

This study includes Karnad's *The Dream of Tipu Sultan*. In this play, Karnad portrays the bravery and downfall of Tipu Sultan (1751-1799), a tragic figure in Indian history who fought against the East India Company. The play exposes the distortion of history by English historians. Karnad not only deconstructs the past but also reconstructs the narrative through Tipu Sultan's dreams. He has taken four dreams out of 37 mentioned in Tipu's handwritten book *Khwab Nama* (Singh, 2018).

Historical Drama

From ancient times to the present, playwrights have attempted to interpret the present through the lens of the past (Shubhalaxmi, 2020). Historians and historical playwrights investigate the differences between their respective roles. Contrary to historical playwrights, historians are limited to representing history based on circumstantial evidence and witnesses,

whereas historical playwrights have broader latitude in their depictions of history. Historical playwrights have much creative leeway while “writing historical plays, but they should avoid distracting the audience from the subject” (Tyagi, 2014, p. 5959).

Producing or adapting plays based on historical material is not a new concept. A wide range of writers have used it throughout history. For instance, Wole Soyinka wrote *Death and the King's Horseman* from events in 1944 in Nigeria, and Shakespeare took Julius Caesar's story from the history of England to produce his play (Adeoye & Jays, 2010, p. 190). The same is true with *The Life of Galileo* by German dramatist Brecht, which tells the story of the 17th-century astronomer. Likewise, Shahid Nadeem's plays *Bulha* and *Dara* are also based on actual historical figures. He staged *Bulha*, a poet from the 18th century, related to the Sufi school of thought, and *Dara*, who belonged to the Mughal era of the 17th century. The same pattern was followed by the Indian playwright Girish Karnad, whose *Tughlaq* is based on the 14th-century Delhi dynasty, whereas, from the 18th century, he took the story in *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan*.

The Purpose Statement

The current study aims to explore how the playwrights purposefully adopted and adapted the historical stories and events to revisit history, challenge the past narratives, and address the issues of contemporary society. Nadeem, in *Dara*, and Karnad, in *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan*, have deconstructed and reconstructed the historical narratives, respectively.

Research Questions

- a. Why do the playwrights challenge the historical narratives by defining, redefining, revisiting, deconstructing, and reconstructing the past in the selected Indo-Pakistani historical plays?
- b. What are the causes behind the adaptation of historical themes in the selected Indo-Pakistani historical plays?

Methodology

The current study is interdisciplinary. Interdisciplinary research deals with two or more disciplines. Researchers opt for this when one discipline fails to fulfill the requirements to answer the research issue or problem. They integrate different research tools from various fields (Rudall, 1998; Szostak, 2007). By discussing interdisciplinarity, Rudall argues, “Integration is a process by which ideas, data and information, methods, tools, concepts, and theories from two or more disciplines are synthesized, connected, or blended” (1998, pp. 3–4). For example, historical research discusses facts, figures, dates, and events, but it needs to include performance critique when dealing with the enactment of plays.

Although the current study mainly deals with literature, it also gets insights from history, philosophy, and cultural studies. It examines Shahid Nadeem’s historical play *Dara* from Pakistan; Girish Karnad’s *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan* from India. These plays represent the most significant literature from the Indo-Pak region dealing with the cultural history. Additionally, the plays are rooted in actual historical figures and events.

The drama also incorporates a significant philosophical standpoint. Playwrights express their ideology and perspectives in their works. For example, Shahid Nadeem confronts the prevailing regimes and societal taboos. In his work, *Dara* deals with the historical accounts surrounding the Aurangzeb-Dara conflict. Girish Karnad challenges Western historians’ biased depiction of Tipu Sultan in *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan*, redefining Tipu’s heroic image.

The primary sources are the texts of the selected Indo-Pak plays, while the secondary sources are library books, journal articles, YouTube videos, newspaper articles, written and online interviews, review papers, theses, dissertations, online sources, e-papers, web pages, and print materials. These sources contributed significantly to the formation of this study in exploring the research issues.

Study's Theoretical Stance and Historical Distancing

This study examines the appearance of distance in the context of history, i.e., how it can be analyzed by referencing the past. To determine 'distancing,' it is essential that historical elements be considered. It also shows how capable it is of redefining the past and addressing the concerns of the present. Hameed and Kayani (2022) bring up some intriguing points: "Does the past have the potential to redefine the present, or can the present revisit the past? Moreover, how to realize the phenomena of taking and understanding the material from the past by ignoring the elements of construction and biasedness" (p. 1029). It is also endorsed by Philips (2013), who talks about the historical construction and the dynamics of historiographical elements. According to him, the "distance is both historically given and historiographically constructed in ways that move far beyond the standard association of distance with objectivity and the passage of time" (On Historical Distancing, p. xi). The doubts are observed by Hameed and Kayani (2022) on the very concept of "historical distancing because of the existing elements of the construction of history in history itself" (p. 1029). The strategy of this study is to direct the current argument to analyze past occurrences and narratives to challenge the given narratives.

The point of discussion moves forward with the assumption of whether the past and present are different or similar. They can be different if we look into history's overall developmental process. In this way, understanding the objects and events can be studied "in the constantly flowing stream of history" (Hollander et al., 2011, p. 4). However, a careful 'hindsight understanding' is required to become familiar with the past to know the unknown. This process of becoming familiar otherwise may lead historians astray if they rely on their wisdom about history's strange events and objects. Hollander et al. (2011) have discussed the division of 'distancing' into the 'minimizers' and the 'maximizers.' The 'minimizers' claim that the past and present are not similar but "separated by an (ontological) gap that ought to be

bridged (cognitively).” The problems arise for the ‘minimizers’ in this way to distinguish the object of study given in the present; however, they need to separate themselves from the very object of study, and they are still required to represent the object in respect of ‘historical understanding’ (p. 5).

On the contrary, the ‘maximizers’ have looked at the idea differently. They argue that the ‘past and the present cannot be distinguished accurately because the “clear distinctions between past and present do not exist, if only because the present is so much a result of the past that it is hard to say where ‘the past’ stops and ‘the present’ begins” (p. 5). In this context, one must create distance from the subject of study for a better understanding of history. The distancing will “allow an idea, a text, or an image to appear as a historical object of study” (Hollander et al., 2011, p. 5).

Robin George Collingwood is another critic and historian from the ‘maximizers’ school of thought. He says, “All history is the history of thought” (1939, p. 110) and claims that one tries to think historically but cannot think due to one’s thoughts. He calls it a re-enactment of someone else’s thoughts. The idea of someone he reads from history is, he associates the present study, and what he thinks after reading that thought is a past thought. He says, “It is a past thought living in the present but encapsulated, not free. What is encapsulated thought? It is a thought which, though perfectly alive, removes the thought-form its original question-answer complex” (p. 113).

Similarly, Hollander et al. (2011) call Hans-Georg Gadamer affiliating with the maximizers. Gadamer (2004) presents the idea of the fusion of horizons. He assigns the present and past two separate horizons that need not be bridged. The past supports understanding the present by putting oneself on the horizon of history. He argues that the half-truth will be left if we try to understand or interpret the events through historical distancing. He adds, “If we fail

to transpose ourselves into the historical horizon from which the traditional text speaks, we will misunderstand the significance of what it has to say to us” (p. 302). In his view, temporal distance is no longer essential for understanding; instead, we must place ourselves in another’s place. Hence, historians must not drag the past into the present but evolve themselves into the very historical situation. This fusion will transform history and present to gain ‘historical objectivity’ (Hollander et al., 2011; Phillips, 2013). In this regard, Gadamer says that “understanding is always the fusion of these horizons supposedly existing by themselves” (2004, p. 305).

This study has also taken Gadamer’s idea of the Fusion of horizons because it meets the requirements to explore the issue under discussion. The history and historical narrative can only be revisited, revised, and challenged when they are fused to draw comparisons and contrasts. This contrastive situation allows the playwrights to dig out the historical truth. In this way, they can revisit and challenge the historical events and past narratives.

Discussion and Analysis

Challenging the Narrative through Historical Distancing in Shahid Nadeem’s *Dara*

Nadeem revisits history to erase some predetermined conceptions about Dara and his execution. Dara is considered a villainous character in the historical narrative of Pakistan (Altaf et al., 2020). One of the goals of adapting the story from the past is that Nadeem “has taken the story to change the people’s reaction regarding the established narrative against Dara” (Hameed & Kayani, 2022, p. 1032). Furthermore, the incident of Dara’s assassination at the hands of his younger brother, Aurangzeb Alamgir, has significant ramifications for Indo-Pakistani politics. It changed the political scenario from Dara’s secular intention to Aurangzeb’s religious implementation in the kingdom. Besides, people continue to discuss how Dara was executed by attributing heresy rather than on the battlefield.

One of Nadeem's purposes in revisiting history is to highlight the misuse of religious teachings and practices. The technicalities behind Dara's execution hint at the misuse of religion. Aurangzeb and his advisors use religion for their purposes. Mullah Qavi's suggestion is a clear example of this wrong practice. He says, "The reason for Dara's execution ought to be religious. He should be presented as an enemy of God, not the king" (Nadeem, 2010, p. 20).

By highlighting the wrong religious practices and the judicial murder of Dara, Nadeem also deconstructs the historical narrative. The argument can be built that it was the war of succession between the princes, which was converted and constructed into a religious conflict. Through and after Dara's trial, he was portrayed as a villain of Islam (Altaf et al., 2020). Nadeem presented a counter-narrative through the scholarly and philosophical traits of Dara. He presents Dara as a passionate researcher, philosopher, a harbinger of inter-religious harmony, and full of humanistic qualities. He brings Dara's educational and poetic portrayal to the forefront. Dara was a Sufi poet who wrote books including "*The Sirr-e-Akbari* (The Greatest Mystery), *Majma-ul-Bahrain* (The Mingling of the Two Oceans), *Safina-ul-Auliya* (Biographies of Sufi Saints), *Sakinat-ul-Auliya* (Biographies of Miyan Mir and Mullah Shah Badakhshi), and *Hasanat-ul-Arifin* contains the biographies of saints and his ideas about mysticism. He was also "a patron of fine arts, music, and dancing, a trait frowned upon by his sibling Aurangzeb" (Selfstudyhistory, 2015, p. 1; Sengupta, 2015, p. 572).

Additionally, Nadeem achieves his goal of presenting secularistic traits through the story of Dara. He over-glorifies Dara because he himself possesses a secularistic ideology. He uses Sufism and Dara's inter-religious mindset to portray his socio-political philosophy. The playwright claims, "I am a secular person, and my interest in Sufism is mainly cultural" (Nadeem, 2020, p. 3). In this context, it can be claimed that Nadeem travels from spirituality to Secularism in *Dara*. For this purpose, he uses theater as a useful medium to exercise this representation.

Nadeem craftily unearths the real issue of history. He projects a situation where one must think about past wrongdoings. It is a critical time for the people, especially those with the power and the right to exercise it. It is also a message for all who read or watch the play. The point of reference is that one may follow the mistakes made by the ancestors or deviate from reforming the present and future. Nadeem presents the dialogue of Aurangzeb as relevant to the claim where he hints toward his father's killing of his brothers: "Have you forgotten that my father did not hesitate to kill his brothers and nephews to capture the Delhi throne?" (Nadeem, 2010, p. 17). Nadeem reminds the reader about the two options Aurangzeb possesses: to give himself a false excuse to follow his father's action of killing his brothers, or to act to save humanistic values. Aurangzeb wants to kill Dara only to avoid the possible danger to his crown. Moreover, he makes excuses, "Sister, I can forgive; rather, I have forgiven my enemy Dara Shikoh. But Dara has been declared an apostate and a rebel to Islam and sentenced to death by the Sharia Court. I surely am Emperor of India, but I am a commoner and wield no powers as far as the judiciary is concerned. I dare not speak against their verdict. Sharia's decision is final and binding. Dara is destined to die" (Nadeem, 2010, p. 70). Nadeem challenges both the narratives of Dara's historical portrayal and Bhutto's execution in this play. Nadeem was the ardent lover of Bhutto, and he was in the same jail. Once, he jumped the jail walls to meet Bhutto (Peerzada, 2021). The detail indicates that Nadeem narrates Dara's story to revisit Bhutto's execution and to challenge the narrative of Pakistani history.

In conclusion, *Dara* by Nadeem further compels the reader to comprehend the past through a dialectical view of history. To synthesize the issue, he confronts the reader with both narratives, in favor of Dara and against him. Historical distance also provides the perspective to either lose oneself in the past or analyze history objectively through critical analysis. Nadeem not only constructs his onstage world but also revisits the historical conflict of the Mughal Empire and challenges the historical narratives of the Dara-Aurangzeb controversy. At

the play's end, he comments, "It seems he lost the battle though he had apparently won it" (Nadeem, 2010, p. 81).

Challenging the Narrative through Historical Distancing in Girish Karnad's *The Dream of Tipu Sultan*

The play *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan* contains the historical portrait of the Sultan of Mysore, Tipu Sultan. Although the play was commissioned, the playwright deconstructs and reconstructs the biased portrayal of the Sultan based on the Orientalist historians. It further connects the past with the present by unmasking the distortion of history on the part of those historians. The playwright builds the story based on four dreams of Tipu's self-written book *Khawab-Nama*, found just after he died in 1799. He shifts the scenes back and forth through several dramatic techniques, including flashbacks, storytelling, historical narration, suspense, and exploration of the past.

The dreams are about the expected friendship and trade with China, never reaching army support from France, and Tipu's wish to defeat the British army with the reunion of Tipu, Nizam, and Marathas. The story also delves into the chivalric perspective of the Sultan and his love for his people when he surrenders his two children to the British for peace. Moreover, it describes the prophetic vision of the Sultan, who foresaw the downfall of the Marathas at the hands of the British army. Karnad has also portrayed the treacherous and disloyal attitude of the Sultan's officials who joined the British before the war started.

The play talks about the past, encompassing historical narratives. Karnad's *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan* contains the elements of reconstruction, re-creation, and an investigation of the historical narration that enhances the audience's attention when it deals with the historical conflicts between the historians of East and West. The existence of shifts between the narratives allows the playwright to present the viewpoints to attain a dialectical understanding. Using these components to depict the past enhances its appeal and popularity. Hassan et al. argue that

the “dramatists may adhere strictly to historical facts, they are often at liberty to add or deduct or even refract the facts to suit the purpose of their writing” (2019, p. 166).

The playwrights can create their own world, like Karnad’s *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan*, where they can add their input for historical understanding. For example, Karnad has exposed the biased portrayal of Tipu in the hands of Western historians like Colonel William Kirkpatrick, who wrote letters to sketch out Tipu in England. Kate Teltscher argued that Kirkpatrick painted Tipu negatively. In his letters, he highlighted Tipu, “The cruel and relentless enemy; the intolerant bigot or furious fanatic; the oppressive and unjust ruler; the harsh and rigid master; the sanguinary tyrant; the perfidious negotiator; the frivolous and capricious innovator; the mean and minute economist; the padding trader; and the retail shop-keeper” (as cited in Chakraborty, 2013, p. 56). Following Kirkpatrick, Colonel Mark Wilks also criticized the Sultan of Mysore in his work *Historical Sketches of South India* (1817). Tipu was portrayed as a fierce tyrant by the colonial historians. They accused him as the oppressor “who tortured Indians and the British alike.” The British used him as an excuse to rule over the sub-continent. They presented themselves as the savior of the Indian people. Tipu was also misrepresented in their novels, including “*The Surgeon’s Daughter* by Sir Walter Scott, *Tippoo Sultaan: A Tale of the Mysore Wars* by Captain Meadow Taylor, and *The Tiger of Mysore* by G. A. Henty” (Chakraborty, 2013, p. 55).

Karnad’s *The Dream of Tipu Sultan* does not distort the truthfulness of history but unearths the historical underpinnings to make the picture clear for the audience. He reconstructs the narrative painted by Western historians and novelists. Westerners misrepresented Tipu because Tipu and his father, Haider Ali, twice defeated the East India Company. The playwright also exposes the divide-and-rule policy through which the British won the war against Tipu. In the fourth dream, Tipu visualized the Marathas and the Nizams on his side against the East India Company. Fath, his son, asks Tipu, “Let’s attack them, Father. Let’s not

allow the English to get away this time” (Karnad, 2005, p. 63), but Tipu avoids the situation by saying, “Not today. Today we celebrate. We pray and thank God. With the Marathas and the Nizam on our side, we can chase the English into the sea any day” (Karnad, 2005, pp. 63–64). Contrasting to the dream, the English engaged the Marathas and the Nizams on their side rather than fighting with Tipu individually. In this way, Karnad exposed the British historians by revisiting the historical events and challenged the past narrative through historical distancing.

Karnad provides a counternarrative to Tipu’s distorted portrayal. In this narrative, he figures out the reason behind Tipu’s historical misrepresentation. In addition, he outlines the wicked nature of Tipu’s courtiers who served and supported the British. The purpose behind this is to raise awareness among the masses. Karnad, through the character of Kirmani, further exposes the situation at the end of the play. Kirmani narrates, “Mir Sadiq’s conduct of the war was so openly treacherous that his own troops lynched him. The Qilledar, Nadeem Khan, ordered a pay parade for his troops at the moment of the British assault, thus taking them away from the battlefield. Poormaiya slipped with alacrity into the post of Prime Minister under the new regime” (Karnad, 2005, p. 63).

The play provides both narratives of Eastern and Western historians. The character of Collin McKenzie represents a Western historian, and Hussain Ali Kirmani talks about the Eastern viewpoint. The inclusion of both narratives engages the readers with historical distancing that allows them to be objective. The historical objectivity clarifies the historical situation. After encountering the narratives, the readers can comprehend the past situations and depiction of biased historical presentation of Tipu.

Conclusion

The study explored the challenging nature of the selected plays through historical distancing that offers an objective approach. It examined playwrights' purpose in revisiting history and challenging past narratives. They purposefully took the stories based on historical personalities and events. The purpose was to provide a counter-narrative and to challenge that narrative through a dialectical approach. For example, Shahid Nadeem challenged the historical postures of Dara and Aurangzeb in his play *Dara*. Aurangzeb is considered a hero, and Dara is a villain in the historical narration in Pakistan. In particular, Punjab textbooks portrayed Dara as a negative character who rebelled against Islamic teachings. Nadeem brought Dara's poetic, philosophic, and humanistic image to the forefront. The playwright has done it purposefully because Dara possesses a secularistic mindset similar to the playwright's ideology. He took it as a cultural entity. On the other hand, Karnad is more experimental in his play *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan*. In this play, he refigured Tipu Sultan as a true hero of the Sub-continent. He exposed the English historians and Novelists who distorted the image of Tipu. They painted the Sultan as a ruthless ruler and traitor. Karnad defined, redefined, rediscovered, deconstructed, and reconstructed, and challenged the historical narrative by revisiting the past. The English historians damaged Tipu's name because he defeated them in the wars. He was the last significant ruler of the Sub-continent who engaged with them for more than three decades.

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