

## SOCIAL REALISM IN THE SELECT PLAYS OF ASIF CURRIMBHOY

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### Abstract

*The post-Independence period of Indian English Drama shows a rich variety of genre. Drama blossomed because of various forms such as comedy, tragic-comedy, tragedy, history plays, farces and fantasy which make it fruitful and a creative activity. Drama is an audio-visual medium of expression and effective genre in world literature. Asif Currimbhoy, who is a modern Indo-English dramatist with genuine feeling for drama and has given outstanding contribution for theatre. Art always and everywhere has been a medium through which people have sought to express their religious beliefs. Throughout the history, religion has been an important part of the country's culture. Asif's plays on religion and art are witness to his deep involvement with the Indian tradition. Asif Currimbhoy is more a dramatist than a moralist or philosopher. His plays explore fine sense of theatrical skill as well as inter play between realism and fantasy which stand unique with the unity and universality. He is both a creative and an experimental dramatist, who uses variety of theatrical techniques like light, shadow, black-out, shadow-play and chant to show his interest in the field.*

**Keywords :** *asif currimbhoy, indian history, social realism, post-colonial india*

### Introduction

Indian creative writers have occasionally attempted drama in English for nearly a century, but seldom for actual stage production. Very few Indian dramatists, so far, have shown great interest in producing drama for the stage. One singular exception to this phenomenon was Asif Currimbhoy (1928-1994) who is rightly hailed as 'India's first authentic voice' in the theatre. His plays are essentially pieces of theatre and the literature of praxis in its true sense. He is a complex playwright and his large number of plays combined with the wide and diverse variety of themes contained in his plots, pose challenging in studying the plays under specific divisions.

The plays of Asif Currimbhoy may be classified as farce, comedy, melodrama, tragedy, history and fantasy; though the fact remains that he handled each genre with dexterity and ease. 'Inquilab' (1970) focuses on the theme of the Bengal Naxalite Movement. 'The Refugee' (1971) deals with the influx of Bangladeshi refugees into India in

1971 while 'Sonar Bangla' (1972) concentrates on the travails associated with the emergence of an Independent Bangladesh. The three plays form a historical trilogy, the Bengal Trilogy. Four plays that polarize on a wider background of human history are 'The Valley of Assassins' (1960) narrating the origins of the Persian Ishmailis; 'An Experiment with Truth' (1969) which is a reconstruction of the life and martyrdom of Mahatma Gandhi; 'Om Mane Padme Hum' (1972) depicting the conflict between Lamaism and Communism in Tibet. 'Angkor' (1973) recalling the Chinese invasion of Tibet leading to the flight of the Dalai Lama to India.

Several of his plays derive themes from recent Indian history, viz. 'The Captives' (1963) portrays the Chinese invasion of India in 1962; 'Goa' (1964) recalls the takeover of Goa on the night of December 18, 1961; 'The Hungry Ones' (1965) and 'The Miracle Seed' (1973) record the heart rending famines that gripped Bihar and Maharashtra; the students' agitation of Gujarat followed by the clamping

of President's rule form the crux of 'The Dissident MLA' (1974). Besides these, Currimbhoy constructed several other plays on diverse subjects such as 'The Tourist Mecca' (1959), 'The Dumb Dancer' (1961), 'Om' (1961) and 'Darjeeling Tea' (1971),

The present article endeavours to revisit Asif Currimbhoy as a major post-colonial Indian dramatist with social consciousness with regard to his major social plays like 'Thorns on a Canvas' (1952), 'The Doldrummers' (1960), 'The Hungry Ones' (1965), 'Inquilab' (1971), 'The Miracle Seed' (1973), and 'The Dissident MLA' (1974). Currimbhoy borrowed his subjects, themes, characters, scenes and situations for his plays of social realism from everyday life of contemporary India. His play 'Inquilab' is based on non-partisan account of the Naxalite revolt that rocked West Bengal, especially in 1970; his 'The Dissident MLA' has for its theme a dissident Congress MLA in Gujarat, who burned the city of Ahmadabad with violence and anarchy in 1974. The play 'The Hungry Ones' is occasioned by the actual visit of two American beatniks to Calcutta. 'The Miracle Seed' originated from the natural disaster of drought that harrowed the State of Maharashtra in 1972, which was a big jolt to the existence of farmers and the village folk.

His play 'Thorns on a Canvas' deplores the plight and fall of the fine arts Academy under the corrupt political State patronage which is mentally colonised in its clandestine aristocratic, anti-democratic policy of discrimination, exploitation, oppression and suppression of the subaltern. 'The Doldrummers' has as its locale the Juhu Beach, the suburb of the city of Mumbai where poverty, alienation, frustration, moral and spiritual degeneration appear to wreck the human life. Currimbhoy's plays of social realism do reveal the quintessence of 'post-colonialism' with its basic sympathies for the subaltern, the peasantry, the poor that eschews the high culture of the elite and espouses subaltern cultures and knowledge which have historically been considered to be of little value but which it regards as rich repositories of culture and counter - knowledge. His plays stand for a transformational politics, dedicated to the removal of inequalities.

In the one-act play 'The Miracle Seed' the old grandfather returns to and remembers the days in 'foreign Raj' when he faced a drought, and feels better for the 'foreign Raj' than the present one: they cared. No less than the present one in their own way' (12). On the contrary, Ram and Malti believe that the present government will protect them from the beggaries of Nature. But in course of time, Ram's faith in the present government stands shattered, and he conceives of violence and revolt against his own government.

The one - Act play 'The Hungry Ones' presents Indian college students who are Preposterously anglophiles and Anglo maniac. They are irrationally carried away by the American Dharma bums, Al and Sam who pretend to be the learned Yogis from America.

The college students do not hesitate to equate the American hippies with India's legends like Swami Vivekananda, Rabindranath Tagore and Raja Rai Ram Mohan Roy. Juxtaposed with them, we have Ramesh and Razia who are truly Indians in their respective religiosity reflecting the religious nationalism. They evince hybridity of Hindu and Islam cultures, the native elements. The American beatniks' wistful longing to learn the secret of mysterious strength to suffer possessed by the Indian couple, the American duo's struggle for superiority over the Indians, eventually resulting in resilience, understanding and sympathy for one another, show the possible existence of cultural plurality and tolerance.

In the play 'Thorns on a Canvas', the Patron Father of the Art Academy sends his only daughter, Malti to the 'Ecole-de-Beaux Arts' in France only to be returned as a 'foreign returned artist, all to gain foreign favour and recognition. In his penchant for anything Western, the Patron Father reminds one Judge Jemubhai Patel in Kiran Desai's 'The Inheritance of Loss', who is a 'mimic man' - one who learns to act English but does not look English nor is accepted as such. Like the Judge Jemubhai, the 'lie he had become' (Desai 306), the Patron Father, having internalised colonial discourse with its concomitant sense of inferiority, appears to live as a foreigner in his own country, preferring to forget his national conscience and nationality. Just as in Jemubhai's case, the rejection of

country is symbolised in the rejection of wife, in the same way the rejection of country or the nationalism is symbolised in the rejection of Yakub and Nafesa who stand for the element of Indianness and nativism.

The poor girl Nela, who is a good dancer is intrigued by Malti's English with French accent. The Patron Father's sycophancy for the French Ambassador, Malti's offering cigarettes to the French guest in the Art Exhibition certainly exhibit the colonial consciousness, or the state of colonized mentality still high in the post-colonial India. On the other hand, the great native, Desi artist like Yakub who embodies the rich native tradition of art and culture, is humiliated, suppressed and denied space as an artist in the Academy. It is the slum dwellers and beggars only who recognise the potential artist in Yakub who just remonstrates and vents out his anger against the Patron and his world of neo-colonizers. Thus, we witness the scent of 'epistemic violence' and coercion and retaliation, each eyeing the other angularly as though dead locked in a life and death struggle like cobra and mongoose' (25). The Academy of Art under the patronage of the Patron Father symbolises the hegemony of the central ones over the peripherals. It shows the ruling class of post-colonial India, indulging in the active colonial legacies of egoism, vanity, snobbery, hypocrisy, social coercion, discrimination and exploitation.

Currimbhoy, as an ardent post-colonial Indian dramatist of social realism, expatiates on the multiplicity of problems - the social, the economic, the political, the judicial and the cultural - in the contemporary post-colonial India. In his dealing with this multiplicity of burning problems of Indian society, a symbiotic relationship is discernible among them. The titles of his socio realistic plays are significant in themselves. By virtue of their thematic problems, these plays tend to evince the propensity to be viewed as a sequel to one another, as they attempt to present a 'syndrome of social maladies' of the contemporary India. 'The Miracle Seed' presents the burning issue of Indian farmer who is drought-stricken, the victim of Nature's vagaries. He lives in penury, relying on traditional farming methods, with little knowledge of modern methods of farming to beat the Nature's whim and will; his very existence is at stake. He is dejected and

hopeless of any change in his lot; his self-respect is shattered; he is schizophrenic, and thinks of ending his life. And when the peasants, who pacify hunger of the society, die of starvation, and think of committing suicide, how can a country like India - a country of villages - be happy and prosperous? Naturally, the society is sick and reeling under the octopus grip of poverty, dirt and squalor, both in rural and urban India. And nothing to surprise, we come across 'The Hungry Ones', exposing hunger and poverty in the cities like Calcutta, where 'they see along the footpaths rows upon rows of maimed and deformed beggars, some begging for alms, some moaning softly, some bearing patiently, patiently some waiting' (20).

The youth like Ramesh, the woman like Razia mingle their poverty, pain, starvation and privations with their so-called spirituality and stoics. They turn bigots, and their religions, fanatic and superstitious. The society is ripped through violence and killing. As the same appalling conditions of human existence in society continue to be perpetuated along, it is but natural to have the birth of 'The Doldrummers' on the Juhu Beach of the metro city of Mumbai. Tony, Joe, Rita and Liza represent the young 'doldrummers' in the modern urban Indian society. They are simply materialistic, homeless, uprooted, frustrated, wayward, wanton, cynical, schizophrenic, being spiritually and morally devastated. They are 'like blind mice. Or better still, like three monkeys, see nothing, hear nothing, do nothing...(50), either for themselves, or for others, just living in the 'doldrums'. They are always involved in their existence, making often wrong choices only to meet a fall in life. Still, they are certainly the product of the kind of society in which they were born and brought up. Owing to the socio-economic causes, they are the victims of life and the society as well.

Is it feasible for the society that abounds in illiterate, poor, drought-stricken peasants, the youths, hungry and schizophrenic, living in doldrums to think of any good in the interest of general welfare of the nation? The question itself is absurd. This ironical situation reminds one of the famous lines from W.H. Auden's poem, 'The Unknown Citizen': Was he free? Was he happy? The question is absurd: Had anything been wrong, we should certainly have heard'.

It seems that Indian nation suffers from scarcity from scarcity of able and competent people to contemplate and act on the existing living conditions of poverty and hunger which have devastating impact on the physical and the mental world of humanity. There is hardly any deterrent to check the element of animal instinct inherent in human being, so that the nation shall grow and prosper and nobody shall die of hunger. Political freedom sans economic freedom is useless. To the poor and hungry, the political freedom is the thing which has no sense at all. "Like eunuchs discussing the Kama Sutra, the voters discuss the elections' (Adiga, 98) in society accursed with poverty and hunger. Therefore, we have 'The Dissident MLA' in India's politics Manubhai, the devil incarnated, who is abhorrently power-maniac, corrupt and a big menace to the peace and harmony in society, with something horrible under his belt for the common, subaltern masses. He is a stigma on Indian democracy: he stands for the dark reality of contemporary Indian politics.

Victory of the politicians like Manubhai in elections exposes the political illiteracy, naivety and apathy of the common masses in the society, which being sizably poor and hungry cannot be different than this. It is the heavy and noble duty on the part of politicians to lead the country from darkness to light, from poverty to prosperity, economic, moral and cultural. They should think and take care of the drought-stricken, distressed farmers like Ram; they should see that no city shall be the empire of filth and squalor, no one shall rely on begging alms to make both ends meet, everybody shall get his or her due share in the national income; the youth shall not be made to live in 'doldrums' and seek solace in religious fanaticism. The rulers are pampered, and the masses are condemned to starve. Thus, the Manubhai factor shows that our politicians, instead of proving a boon, have emerged as bane to society, especially, more detrimental to the peripheral, the subalterns of society.

Currimbhoy's plays of social realism are a discourse on the various burning issues of post-colonial India, such as poverty in rural and urban areas, the farmers' plight, the corrupt politics, the rampant hero worship, the terrorism in the form of Naxalism, the Academies of

Art as hotbed of corruption and suppression, the bigotry, the women's woes, the live-in-relationship, the schizophrenic, frustrated city youth, the youngsters getting drug-addicted and sexually perverted, the spiritual and moral degeneration. His plays manifest the complexity of issues, which are social, economic, political and human as well in their nature and causes. After going through Currimbhoy's plays, it is likely that one may end up with the impression that his plays are replete with cynicism, pessimism and obsolescence. But it shall be a shallow, narrow approach to his socio-realistic plays. Though written or produced in the 60s or 70s, these plays still continue to be fresh and relevant.

As long as these problems continue to exist in human life and a nation, Currimbhoy's social plays will continue to claim the significance and relevance, irrespective of time and space for years to come. It is evident, though the events selected and the characters involved in generating those events symbolise a much larger canvas than they actually present, his socio-realistic plays, viewed collectively, could possibly be looked upon as an 'exciting national allegory of our time'. His social realism stands as an antithesis of Nehru's legendary narration of post-coloniality. Currimbhoy unveils that the socio political scenario in the post-colonial India testifies to the fact that the soul of Indian nation. Long suppressed, could find no utterance, no sigh of relief at all even after the end of British colonial era.

### Conclusion

Currimbhoy is one of those rare writers who tender the impression of being indispensable to their epoch. It is natural to expect that some aspect of the epoch must be reflected in one way or other in a work. And it makes Currimbhoy above all a contemporary. Like Sartre, it seems, Currimbhoy too 'wishes to be read and judged in his own time. He has never written for the benefit of posterity' (Sartre, viii). He offers human society 'guilty conscience' and inspires the humanity to grapple with the problems that endanger the nation, the nationalism and the national unity. His purpose is to provoke thought, rather

than to persuade the audience to adopt a specific plan of action. By presenting an aspect of life, he wants to impart to them some of the enthusiasm he has for life. His plays appear to be vehicle to convey always implicitly, the relevant socio-political values. Owing to his theatrical mastery, a powerful means to unfold his social consciousness and commitment, Currimbhoy as a playwright will live as long as his works arouse anger, discomfort, shame, hatred, love, even if he is no more than shade.

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