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DRAMATIC TECHNIQUES IN THE PLAYS OF ASIF CURRIMBHROY

SHODAVARAM SWARNALATHA<sup>1</sup>, Dr.PODALAPALLI BABU<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Ph.D (PT)SCHOLAR & LECTURER IN ENGLISH, S.V.V.JUNIOR COLLEGE, MUDDANUR, KADAPA Dt.,  
A.P., Email: podalapalli1@gmail.com

<sup>2</sup>LECTURER IN ENGLISH, GOVT., DEGREE COLLEGE FOR MEN (A, KADAPA, ANDHRA PRADESH  
Email:podalapalli@gmail.com



ABSTRACT

Currimbhoy's breeding, his education and experiences together go in shaping the nature of his dramatic corpus. Asif Currimbhoy was a child of a liberal-minded armchair intellectual father and his mother was a veteran social worker. Their distinguished intellectual concern and outstanding commercial enterprise profoundly influenced the mental faculties of young Asif Currimbhoy. He grew up in an ambience of new liberal progressive views and ideas, which in his later life came to mould his temperament. Since his childhood, he developed dramatically disturbing psychological nuances, which later on became the guiding and moving spirit behind his dramatic corpus. However, Currimbhoy did not allow his learning in a Christian missionary school to uproot the grassroots of an indigenous. He studied thoroughly the Bhagavad-Gita and the Upanishads along with the Hindu epics like the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, and made some of these classics his dramatic concerns. Currimbhoy's university life too has prominently influenced his dramatic career. He studied at Wisconsin University before graduating from the University of California in Economics in 1950. His college days in America exerted a deep psychological impact on him. As a university student, he loved and admired Shakespeare, witnessed numerous dramatic productions, and was quite alive to the various trends in drama in America. This must have led him a long way to stand out as "a man of the theatre".

Asif Currimbhoy's plays reveal the notions and aspects of colonialism. He highlights the de-humanizing aspects of colonialism by focusing on the influence of capitalism in all walks of the Post-independent Indian life in some plays. His plays were undertaken as subject of study and research and were even translated into regional language. His plays cover a wide range of themes from History and Politics. The issues of race, class & gender which are prominent in most of Currimbhoy's plays have not been examined in detail. Currimbhoy's constant engagement on vital issues informs and impacts his vision of life. He interweaves the public events with the private to create exciting drama which asks moral questions about humanity in cataclysmic period of de- colonization. He is a distinctive playwright in whose works one can find the contemporary burning social and political issues and problems of Post-Independence period.

**Key words :** Dramatic corpus, Veteran social worker, Nuances, A man of the theatre, Colonialism

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## INTRODUCTION

Asif Currimbhoy believes in the fact that literature is meant to represent the society. As a social critic, he exhibits his excellence in portraying the social condition as prevailing in the contemporary time. Jr. Martin C. Carroll has also commented that the chief function of literature is "to reflect with meaning the totality of the contemporary human condition." We see that an artist brings out social truths and that literature is a reflection of social process. He has been called "India's first authentic voice in the theatre" by Faubion Bowers. He is a playwright of social purpose and essentially wrote plays to be performed in theatre. Known for the variety and versatility of his plays, Currimbhoy deals such topical themes and issues like race, class, gender, politics, capitalism, poverty, colonization and human relationships. Asif Currimbhoy is a well known name in Indian English drama of modern times. He began his career as a dramatist in 1959 and has written more than 30 plays. He applied variety & versatility in his plays. Thus the literature influenced by its milieu reflects the contemporary social structure. Asif Currimbhoy is a close follower of the above mentioned view. Each play has a touch of reality due to its connection with some major event or incident of the past or the contemporary time. He targets the impact of the social issues over the lives of people. Walter Meserve remarks: Currimbhoy's plays are concerned with the problems of man everywhere. He lends breath to his thought...even when he deals with India, he becomes the voice of universal revolt and anguish screaming itself hoarse at the seemingly immovable societies around the world. The plays of Currimbhoy are based on the issues related to the society, politics, religion, human life and relations etc. He takes up particular incident happened in the country and presents it in a realistic way. As the plays *Inquilab*, *The Refugee*, *The Hungry Ones* are based on any particular issue in the nation and its impact on the society. The *Bengal Trilogy* by Asif Currimbhoy includes *Inquilab* (1970), *The Refugee* (1971), *Sonar Bangla* (1972). It has been named as *The Bengal Trilogy* because the plays in it deal with Bengal and its problems at different points of time.

For his literary interest and aptitude, Currimbhoy does owe to his wife, Suraiya. In a letter to Mr. Saha, he once admitted "I doubt if I would ever have been writer, were it not for my wife who gave me stability and sanity through home and love". Currimbhoy as a dramatist is certainly the product of the time in which he grew. Partition of India resulted in bitter animosity between Hindu and Muslim that led to the fall of spirit of brotherhood and human values, violence and outrage rocked the country, especially in Punjab and Bengal where millions of people suffered a lot. These socio-political upheavals provided Currimbhoy with the dramatic material to draw upon in many of his plays. The country witnessed an upsurge of violence during sixties. All this has gone a long way in making of Currimbhoy's dramatic oeuvre.

"Modern Indian dramatic writing in English" is neither rich in quantity nor, on the whole, of high quantity. Enterprising Indians have for nearly a century occasionally attempted drama in English but seldom for actual stage production. Asif Currimbhoy, however, is in exception. He is one modern Indian playwright who has asserted an absolute interest in producing drama and whose numerous plays reveal great concern for dramatic effectiveness. His best plays are powerfully dramatic, revealing his ability in contriving interesting situations, creating atmosphere, portraying realistic and animated characters, writing sinewy dialogue that flows naturally and lucidly, sustaining a unified plot and coherent action, and experimenting successfully with a variety of theatrical techniques. Though Currimbhoy shares the Indian predilection for mysticism and philosophy evidenced, for example, in such plays as *Om Mane Padme Hum* (1961) and *The Hungry Ones* (1965) his plays are not merely vehicles for expressing his thoughts. There are first and foremost meant for the stage and Currimbhoy succeeds in creating "actable" plays. Concepts and ideas are integrated with and subservient to the more central concern of exploring certain human situations and predicaments. Characters are placed in carefully selected circumstances and they are made to convey certain points of view, and in a Currimbhoy play several and often conflicting points of view are pitted against each other to produce a wholeness of perspective. In Currimbhoy's own words that "the essence of the theatre in my opinion is conflict. To have conflict you have different points of view which come head on. This clash forms the most vibrant factor of the theatre itself, my approach to all my plays is that there is an essential conflict of attitudes."

Thus Currinibhoy plays are invariably dramatic and the best of them possess a subtle balance of tension that has justly earned its author the rare distinction of being the first Indian writer to have one of his plays performed on Broadway. That play was *Goa* which, significantly, was acclaimed as an "exciting theatrical event" doing "honor to the western theatre." It clearly demonstrates Currimbhoy's fine sense of the theatre and his skill as a dramatist. As it remains the best of the many plays of Currimbhoy's prolific writing career, focusing on it would be an obvious choice.

Although Currimbhoy's plays deal with a variety of topics, there is a unity of approach where belies variety. As an intelligent well-read and scholarly person, history and philosophy interest him, and propel him towards for truth which is frustrated by his agonizing compassion for the condition of man. During Asif's dramatic career spanning about two decades, he handles a wide variety of themes historical, political, social, religious etc., ranging from an imaginary event at a tourist centre to contemporary politics. He widens his range further by projecting scenes with a foreign setting, and by dramatizing East-West relations. He attempted almost every genre - comedy, tragedy, farce, melodrama, history and fantasy. Naturally, Currimbhoy, endowed with his social conscience and concern for humanity is a dramatist with his a social purpose and social vision. He maintains that he is a writer of plays which have a certain amount of meaning.

As a "writer with a social purpose", he endeavors to present men and things as he seen them, and reflects his own point of view inherent therein. Though Currimbhoy is "a playwright with a social purpose", he is not a propagandist. It is his conviction that he is very much against propaganda, because it does not allow people to think, they come to a conclusion on their own, he does believe that he should try, and place facts as correctly as possible, let people or the audience draw their own conclusions". He is an artist who weaves his artistic concern with a social concern, and thereby executes his avowed duty to himself and to the society as well. So, he strongly holds that there is no such thing as totally unbiased thing of art. Any artist will present anything necessarily from his point of view, and even in the presentation of facts, he is subconsciously capable of manipulating them so that he tries to influence the thinking of the audience in the way in which he believes himself. Currimbhoy's plays certainly transcend the limits of what is called "a social document of a country's problems," and do emerge as a good work of art with an inherent 'social vision'<sup>1</sup>. As regards his urge for the well-being of humanity, Currimbhoy reminds one of the modern dramatists like John Galsworthy and Osborne. He wants theatre to be married with the real life in the true sense, so that the essential sense of identification with the given dramatic situation is felt on the part of the audience. Viewed against the backdrop of the historical survey of Indian drama in English, Asif Currimbhoy marks a significant landmark in the development and growth of Indian theatre in English. Currimbhoy, a recipient of John D. Rockefeller III Foundation grant, enjoys the status of a playwright with an international stature and recognition. Struck by his boldness and imagination of Asif Currimbhoy's work, Arthur Miller calls him "a forceful playwright." Jeremy Brooks, "Literary Manager", Royal Shakespeare Company, records, "There is a considerable admiration in England and in this Company in particular, for the work of the Indian playwright, Asif Currimbhoy."

Currimbhoy's "*Revolution*" has special significance, and not merely as a peopled portrait of a city and a province. "The play is the nightmare and the redemption of today's Calcutta," he wrote to me, and added, "Amidst all the uncertainties, I am still trying for what is most precious to me, a Bengali-language production in this heart of disturbed Calcutta. This is the only thing that will give my own disturbed heart some peace." And in another letter written at the height of the Bangladesh War, he mentioned as a post-script, "The war is a tragedy. can't understand why others don't see it the same way. The blood flows, the hysteria grips all opponents." And regarding *The Refugee*, he wrote again, "Yet there seems to be very little choice. A mistake committed at a particular point of time seems to have a cumulative effect, and one inevitably gets drawn into it all." A voice of sanity lost in the din of unreason.

He has written that country's first plays of dissent. He presents life as it is, not as something it should be, the age-old curse of Indian's classical theatre. Once again, art, that discredited wonder box of illusions, finds itself telling the truth while politicians lie and people look the other way. I am not necessarily saying that Currimbhoy is a great dramatist. Nor am I saying that he should he read mainly for his visual politics. (One of the most electrifying scenes ever written occurs in his *An Experiment with Truth*, a sexual biography of Gandhi

that outdistances Erik Erikson, where you have as a means of torture an unwashed untouchable making sexual advances to an orthodox Hindu). But I am saying it is inconceivable to me to estimate what it has meant for Currimbhoy to believe in himself so fiercely, to work for so long totally alone (in theatre, otherwise he has a devoted wife and three children, one of whom is a six-foot, 20-year old son who takes his father to college plays imported from the West on Che Guevara), to be a Bombay-born non-practising Muslim (he's from baronetcy stock of the Khoja sect, followers of the Aga Khan), to conform and yet create, to obey society (he's an executive in Burmah-Shell oil company in Calcutta) and yet destroy it with death-ray words, to write plays like bullets needing only the trigger of a national event, and even to live in this unappreciative world where fame is awarded others so cheaply and on such a flimsy basis. I am also saying it will be a generation before we can really take the measure of Currimbhoy's true worth.

Man, when in conflict, uses violence as a weapon to fight against odds. *Goa* is a play which deals with love between Kishore and Rita, Al-phonso and Rose. This simple story develops into a strange play of deep emotions and uncontrollable forces. The love plot seems to run parallel to the political sub-plot. The play suggests that whatever is remote and unreal is mysterious. Man resorts to brutality only when he is helpless. Love sometimes has a withdrawn effect. It is like the waves which come in fast and disappear in that manner. It can be devastating in its effects. As a writer summed up the tragic quality of love in general, "Love thrives in proximity but dies on contact."

Thus, each of Sri Aurobindo's plays, while presenting the dramatist's vision of evolution of man, lays stress on the harmonising power of love. They show the vision of not only the whole man but the whole society. Though they opened up new vistas in the Indian drama in English by displaying an element of robust optimism about the future of mankind they are, at best, closet dramas lacking as they do that dynamic impulse which makes a play worthy to be staged. They are more dramatic translations of Sri Aurobindo's "Laws and Facts of Evolution" than pieces of theatre. Nevertheless, they reveal his hold on rich poetry and his exquisite skill in the portrayal of characters.

As Kulkarni points out, Sri Aurobindo has created "extremely interesting men and women by developing the psychological element which endows his plays with inexhaustible human interest and significance." T.P. Kailasam who stands apart from Sri Aurobindo in that he has made an earnest attempt to blend both the Indian and the Western traditions of drama. Though almost all his Kannada plays are social comedies, his English plays are mythological and tragic.

As Malagi points out, "the habitual Kailasam humour gives place to an unmixed obsession by the tragic significances of many of the major protagonists of the Mahabharata and, to a lesser extent, with those of the Ramayana." His *The Burden* is the story of Bharatha who on his way back from his grandfather's place to Ayodhya, learns that his father is dead. He is so enraged that he does not want to spare even the royal priest Vasistha. Fulfilment delineates the story of Ekalavya who is about to join the Kauravas on the war front. Krishna tries to dissuade Ekalavya from doing so. But Ekalavya remains firm. At last, while Ekalavya goes on narrating the story of the Bird's Tree, Krishna stealthily kills him and his mother.

While *The Purpose* delineates Ekalavya's concept of idealism, *The Curse of Kama* describes the destiny of Kama and the tragedy caused by Bhargava. *Keechaka*, another play of Kailasam, idealizes the character of Keechaka. The plays of Kailasam stand apart from other plays in the field of Indian drama in English by virtue of their rich poetry, sparkling wit, subtle humour and ideal characters. This poetic tradition of Indian drama in English belongs Harindranath Chattopadhyaya, "a poet of infinite possibilities" who has written a few devotional plays like *Raid as*, *Chokha Mela*, *Eknath*, *Pundalik*, *Saku Bai*, *Jayadeva*, *Raidas* gives an account of the cobbler saint of that name who startles even the Brahmins. The play is poetic and the dramatist is at his best in the delineation of the faith of the Cobbler. *Chokha Mela* presents the confrontation between the Brahmins and a low-born saint.

*Eknath* is about the realisation of an ordinary devotee, the realisation being that God is there even in a low-born fellow like a scavenger as much as a high Brahmin. The curses of the twice-born creatures go futile. Though the play organically has a flaw, it gives a vivid picture of the confrontation between Eknath and the Brahmins. *Pundalik* is a story of an agnostic who turns a devotee. Pleasure and revelry are the

ideals of Pundalik in the beginning but after the transformation he craves for devotion. Saku Bai delineates the devotional life of a popular Maharashtra saint and Jayadeva tells us the story of a poet and singer of the namesake. In Tukaram the dramatist succeeds in bringing out the importance of devotion. Though Harin's devotional plays "enthralled everyone who heard them from the poet's" with the exception of Tukaram, they are loose in construction and suffer from predominance of poetry over action.

#### **Conclusion**

Thus, the plays of Tagore, Sri Aurobindo, Kailasam and Harindranath Chattopadhyaya, which mark the early stages of Indian drama in English, are essentially lyrical, allegorical and symbolic. These playwrights wrote their plays in an idiom which has "an archaic quality and this archaicness lends the dialogues a charm, a grace and a kind of distance which produce heightened aesthetic pleasure." They wrote English plays not so much for the stage as for being read. In short, they wrote about what life should be rather than about what life is.

However, a change came over the scene with the economic depression in 1930s coupled with the rapidity of the National Movement. Gandhi led the nation to an increasing degree of self-government. By 1930, with more important political issues consuming the officials' time, there was "a political-social Indian drama, primarily in the one-act form, and produced almost wholly on the college campuses." Subsequently there emerged the Indo-English drama of social realism and social revolution both as an Indian phenomenon related to the National Movement and as part of the English social realism of the period. As a result of the new wave of social realism, sprang up plays dealing with the underdog of society, the peasant and the factory worker. To this tradition of social realism belong A. S. P. Ayyar, Harindranath Chattopadhyaya's plays of social protest, S. Fyze-Rahamin and J. M. Lobo-Prabhu.

The drama of Asif Currimbhoy appears to offer not God's plenty but only "half-God's." Emerson believed that 'when half-god, the gods arrive' (*R.W.Emerson, 'Give All to Love,' The Oxford Book of American Verse ed. F.O. Matthiessen (N.Y., 1952) p. 107.*) (the gods arrived a little too punctually in Emerson but that is another story), in Currimbhoy, in a different sense, the gods do not seem to have arrived (at least as yet), for his amazing fecundity has not so far been attended by actual artistic achievement which should be commensurate with it. A close study of his plays makes the reasons for this abundantly clear.

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