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THE SELF AND THE OTHER: REPRESENTATION OF SOCIAL REALITY IN ASIF
CURRIMBHOY'S *THE REFUGEE*

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ABSTRACT

Asif currimbhoy manifests his excellence in realistic portrayal of the contemporary social condition. His plays are mainly based on issues related to society, religion, politics, human life and relationships. His plays are a true reflection of the happenings around. Currimbhoy is a very sensitive writer who gets influenced by the happening around him that enforces him to write and reflect. His plays are a powerful exposition of the plight of people who are suffering physically and mentally in their lives due to various socio-political reasons.

Introduction

Asif Currimbhoy's plays are, no doubt, replete with messages. His plays are primarily meant for the stage and they express his resourceful sense of the theatre and his dexterity as a dramatist. The plays are framed by integrating his concepts and ideas with the sole concern of exploring actual human experiences at certain points of time. Problem plays usually reflect social, moral, political, economic and the other human-related problems. The main aim of problem play is to question and analyze the existing ideas, conventions, customs, firmly held religious, social and moral values in order to bring some change or awareness amongst the audience or readers. In other words, with problem play, "drama became a direct criticism of life" (Sodhi 66). Asif Currimbhoy's plays are no exception to this. His plays are replete with messages. With the dexterity as a dramatist his plays express resourceful sense of theatre. The plays are primarily meant to be staged but they are always integrated by his concepts and ideas that explore actual human experience.

Unlike the earlier Indian English dramatists like those of Rabindranath Tagore, Sri. Aurobindo and T.P. Kailasam, who were engrossed with lyrical, allegorical and symbolic presentations in their plays he has freed himself from the Indian classical plays and western drama. As a socially conscious Indian English playwright he has brought freshness and excitement into the budding Indian English dramatic scene, with plays centering on the subjects like slum life, untouchability, widow remarriage, evil of dowry, exploitation of the poor by the capitalistic factory owners and conventional morality.

As a prolific playwright, no situation or incident seem meaningless to him. He takes significant themes from contemporary Indian society and weaves them into plays of artistic excellence. Peter Nazareth has rightly observed: "Asif Currimbhoy interweaves the event of the public with the private to create exciting drama which asks moral questions about humanity in the cataclysmic period of decolonization" (Nazareth 18). His

plays are a true reflection of society. Each play has a glimpse of reality due to its connection with some major event or incident of the past or the contemporary time. His plays are a true reflection of society. He is truly a dramatist of the public event. Giving artistic touch of excellence to the public events like the assassination of the Mahatma Gandhi, invasion and accession of Goa from Portuguese by India, the flight of Dalai Lama, the visit of beatniks to India, drought in Maharashtra, famine in Bengal and consequences of poverty and hunger, Bangladesh uprising, streaming of refugees to India, the political situation in Gujarat and Kathakali dance of Kerala, his plays are richly embellished with theatrical effects. The plays are, therefore, stage worthy because he has creatively employed monologues, choruses, chants of communication, loud speakers, radios, projections, slide shows, shadow cut-outs, pantomime, puppets and special musical effects.

Asif Currimbhoy's one act play *The Refugee* is written in 1971. It talks about the plight and issues of refugees. During 1971, about 9 million refugees from East Pakistan entered into India to save themselves from the cruel atrocities of the West Pakistan armed forces. Apart from the extra burden to the economy, these refugees created other social and political problems. The play is usually included as part of The Bengal Trilogy along with *Inquilab* (1970) and *Sonar Bangla* (1972) as all these plays deal with Bengal and its problems.

Currimbhoy subtly talks about past and present. In its dealing of the refugees, the playwright has ingeniously brought home the difference between the refugees of 1947 in the character of Sen Gupta, who has established himself as a middle class citizen, and the refugees of 1971 who are unwanted and constantly scoffed at. Yassin, the Bangladeshi refugee of 1971, who is depicted as the prime refugee of the play, is representative of all the refugees in the world. The playwright has explored the eternal struggle of humanity against suppression and the ultimate triumph of humanism over brutality in these plays. This struggle of humanity against inhumanity continues even today in its painful trend and is bleakly showing any sign of getting it abated.

The plot centers round Yassin, a young intellectual, who flees to India from East Pakistan after having miraculously escaped the machine guns at the notorious 'intellectual massacre' of university scholars by the Pakistani military ruler Yahya Khan. He is welcomed to the household of Sen Gupta, who himself was a refugee 24 years earlier and had been the childhood friend of Yassin's mother Rukaiya. Sen Gupta looks back with nostalgia upon his home town of Comilla in East Bengal and cherishes sweet memories of Rukaiya, his young love, though he is now the father of two children Mita and Ashok. He is genuinely touched by the sad plight of the East Bengalis and his family shares his sympathy. But as days go by, the number of refugees swell they occupy the open fields, idle sewerage pipes, and even Sen Gupta's garage.

Sen Gupta's idealism wanes and now he looks upon the refugees as a threat to his own home and community. But, strangely enough, Yassin remains unperturbed lie occupies Sen Gupta's study, goes for his new job at the university regularly, and does not even talk about his home or the refugees outside. Sen Gupta's son Ashok joins the Mukti Foj, for "someone has to do the fighting" when able-bodied men from East Bengal choose to remain indifferent and noncommittal. Ramul, the leader of the bunch of refugees outside, appears to be intended as a foil to Yassin, who seems to be happy in his cosy room and job, and seems to have forgotten the fact that he was once a refugee. Mita, Sen Gupta's daughter, who actively associates herself with refugee rehabilitation programmes, accuses Yassin of deliberately avoiding the refugees as if they did not even exist. Life to her means involvement and action. Her confrontation makes Yassin restless and disturbed. He overhears Sen Gupta saying that the refugees exodus is an undeclared war by Pakistan and that to protect the Hindus who are being persecuted and driven out, India must declare war upon Pakistan. Yassin protests against this. He is a Muslim and still a Pakistani and so his loyalties are with Pakistan. Mita's announcement that cholera has broken out in the refugee camps disturbs Yassin. At night, in the company of Professor Mosin, he goes to the refugee camp for the first time "to look for his conscience" as Mita suggested. They watch Ramul conducting a trial and passing a sentence of death. Yassin interferes and the prisoner is set free. Ramul hints that they are all doomed to death: "Release the prisoner. Let him roam. Give him enough rope, He will hang himself. 32). Everything seems a nightmare to Yassin, who loses the distinction between reality and nonreality. Later in the night he goes to the refugee camp again, all alone. He helps a young woman bury her dead mother and tells her to pray for his salvation. He comes back home and packs up to leave for his home

town. He has a bitter confrontation with Professor Mosin who is worried about the Indian Muslims whose position in India is endangered by the Pakistani Muslims. He bids farewell to Mita who has helped him to find himself and who, he assures her, will remain his ideal across the border just as his mother had been for her father. He takes away Ashok's MuktiFouj uniform and leaves the house, still unsure whether he is doing the right thing. To lay bare the horrors of social reality Currimbhoy has chosen the dramatic, form of the one-act play and has provided infinite riches in a little room. But he does not confine his play to one little room, for this one-act play has five scenes, all set in different places and different times.

Man defeats himself by being an escapist. The playwright has unearthed man's detachment and moral withdrawal from a world of simmering realities. Man's tendency to evade painful realities of life fuels the inner self with a greater intensity. Faking the true self and escaping from the painful side of life endangers the inner world of man. The dramatist has portrayed that continual denial of the reality of suffering, sorrow and pain of life makes a person to be in constant war with himself or herself. Ultimately, the faking self-plummets and exposes the true self or in most cases it defeats the true self. This latter outcome makes a person mentally unstable

The dramatic system of Asif Currimbhoy is the system of parallels and contrasts. In *The Refugee* every character is a parallel and a contrast to the others. Yassin and Sen Gupta are both erstwhile refugees, but they differ in their attitudes to life and demeanour, both cherish the ideal across the border

The playwright swoops deep into the conscience of man and exposes the tightly gripped opposition of human mind to change. Inner conflict is not just being in two minds but being in a new situation where the old attitudes and habits are at war with and hinder the need for change. Expunging the old habit or attitude or even social position and replenishing it with the new entrant perhaps endorses sacrifice. This sacrifice is painful because one is already attuned to the old system. The dramatist has presented this psychological state of man to depict the weakness in adapting to new things. He penetrates into the deepest crevices of human mind and unearths the effects of change that invites the mind to be "locked in the death struggle" (15). This induces pain because it involves sacrifice symbolized by Yassin's mother and Sen Gupta's daughter. Yassin and Ramul are refugees, but their ways are entirely different, one closes his eyes to the problem and leads his own comfortable life while the other immerses himself in the problem and reigns supreme in the world of the refugees. Yassin and Professor Mosin are both Muslims but the contrast is made evident in the last scene when one identifies himself with the Pakistani Muslim and the other with the Indian Muslim. The active rebellious children of Sen Gupta are contrasted against Yassin who is happy in his shell. One can even detect the unconscious contrast implied between Rukaiya, Sen Gupta's ideal of love, and Sarla, his own wife. Through these parallels and contrasts each character grows and evolves.

The skill with which Asif Currimbhoy traces the subtle change that comes over the characters reveals him as a playwright of great psychological skill. For instance, let us examine Sen Gupta. He is full of sympathy for the refugees at the beginning of the play when he welcomes Yassin into the house. He says as long as there is room to live and food to share he is ready to accommodate the refugees as friends and neighbours. He also talks about his poast how they have been uprooted once from their homeland after partition and were settled here, worked and built their dreams on this land and proudly accepted this place as his homeland with a sense of responsibility and social purpose. But when the refugees increase in number and occupy even his garage, Sen Gupta's idealism starts waning. The very idea of helping the refugees became a burden. Sen Gupta started looking at them as encroacher. The play is written with the humanistic approach where the political infiltration by Bangladeshi refugee's is seen from the humanitarian approach. Currimbhoy is in search of the conscience in the confusing world of political boundaries.

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