



International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research and Development



IJMIRD 2015; 2(1): 247-249
www.allsubjectjournal.com
Received: 09-12-2014
Accepted: 18-01-2015
e-ISSN: 2349-4182
p-ISSN: 2349-5979
Impact factor: 3.762

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Asif Currimbhoy: The foremost Indian dramatist in English

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Abstract

None can deny the fact that in pre and post-independence eras Indian Authors in English showed great excellency in fiction and there appeared such great novelists as, R.K Narayan, Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand, Anita Desai and lots of others but the field of the drama did not show any great fertility. We can safely say that earlier Tagore from India had made a name in the western world as an English dramatist but then his fame rested on the other fields of literature also. It was Asif Currimbhoy alone who dedicated his whole life to the field of drama; rather he is the dramatist among very few Asians who have been able to promote the art of drama both at home and abroad. In those days, there were not too many theatre goers for English plays and even in such cities as Bombay, Calcutta, Madras and Delhi, there were a few theatrical companies only. Even under such circumstances, Asif Currimbhoy pursued this art so vigorously that such a great art critic as Faubian Bowers calls him as the “India’s first authentic voice in the theatre”. Asif Currimbhoy is a versatile genius and he has composed around 30 dramas. The range of his dramas is very wide and he touches upon everything that concerns his own dear country, directly or indirectly. Nothing goes un-noticed with him, be it social, economical or political. Asif Currimbhoy sees things which others fail to see.

Keywords: Asif Currimbhoy, art, Indian English drama, artist, sensibility

1. Introduction

Asif Currimbhoy, the foremost Indian Theatre personality was born in 1928 at Bombay in a great industrialist family which followed the Ismayeelia sect of Islam and thus, followers of Agha Khan. The then English Government had honoured the family with baronetcy for its industrial development. But this is not all, his father was an intellectual and his mother a social worker. This intellectual background influenced his basic education and later creatively influenced his dramatic career his later education at Wisconsin University galvanized his learning of English and he got greatly attached to William Shakespeare. Not only Shakespeare, but the whole range of English dramatists lay before him and he acquainted himself with various trends in drama in the U.S.A which resulted in shaping him as the “India’s first authentic voice in the theatre”. (1) All this helped him to try his hand in writing theatrical plays. The man had full faith in himself and his potentialities. Faubian Bowers is forced to say, “But it is inconceivable to me to estimate what it has meant for Asif Currimbhoy to believe in himself so fiercely, to work for so long totally alone”. Asif Currimbhoy trugged on patiently and it was after a long period of 15 years that he saw one of his plays ‘Goa’ staged by the university of Michigan. His ‘Monsoon’ too was staged in America. Back at home they staged his ‘Doledrummers’ in Delhi where it had been banned previously. He went on pilling plays upon plays. Produced ‘Dumb Dancer’ and ‘OM’ in 1961 ‘Thorns on a Convas’ in 1962 and ‘Captives’ in 1963. Then he produced ‘An experiment with truth’ 1969, ‘Inquilab’ 1970, ‘Darjeeling Tea’ 1971 and ‘The Refugee’ 1979. Sonar Bangla and ‘OM Mane Padme Hum’ 1972 and so on. All this got him recognition with the critics in India as well as abroad. He has written India’s first plays of dissent. He presents life as it is, not as something it should be. “This gives us the sum total of his creative plays. He is a ‘Karma Yogi’ as his wife calls him and so action is a measure key to his artistry. His conception of action does not belong to the physical world alone but stretches to the vast limits of his imagination and includes the larger metaphysical world in which he is most interested. His plays are divided into romantic plays, political plays, social plays and religious plays. His romantic plays are not romantic in the conventional sense of the term, but they are “deliberate coalescing of reality and reveric, actuality and fevered imagination” as Prof. Iyenger puts it. Sex is used as a dramatic technique in these plays and

most of their characters are Aliens or Anglo-Indians. This does not mean to say that Asif Currimbhoy in these plays to increase their sex appeal or here is any over- dose of sex in them. Here Asif Currimbhoy treats of sex psychologically and he uses it as per the due measure of plot. It is only a sick mind which gets provoked on seeing these plays. No doubt, as in other kinds of his plays, Asif Currimbhoy has drawn strong and dominant women characters. All the characters in these plays do not come from common masses as we find the characters in 'The Doledrummers' often he uses humour and satire in them to expose the sex-adventures of seemingly high-profile characters as we find in the play 'Darjeeling Tea'. His 'The Doledrummers' is ostensibly a 'light-play' but Asif Currimbhoy's craftsmanship has given so subtle touches to it that it invites some psychological explanation. Keshav is the hero of his another romantic play, 'Tourist Mecca'. He has been drawn as a mysterious character and so, it also needs psychological explanation.

The second type of his plays comprises of political plays and here Asif Currimbhoy is at his best. His plays 'Goa', 'An Experiment with Truth', 'Om Mane Padme Hum', 'The Refugee', 'Sonar Bangla', 'Dissident M.L.A' and some others fall under this category. Asif Currimbhoy is not an overtly political writer and presents his thoughts by implication and indirection. He gives us an insight into the political world and assesses the worthlessness of these political events. Sum total of his political views can be expressed in the words that generosity of understanding and compromise is essential in life and he feels that violence cannot be used to finish violence. He is fully aware of the socio-economic dimensions of all these political turmoils. As a 'dramatist of public event' Asif currimbhoy shows in his famous play 'The Refugee' a human concern about the exodus of Bangladesh refugees in India in 1971. He feels the same about 'Sonar Bangla' and some other plays. In these political plays, he is not only producing an exciting drama but he is asking moral questions also. He has a message to deliver. He is always thinking in terms of greater humanity, crossing the boundaries of religion, region and language.

In his social plays, we see Asif Currimbhoy greatly attracted towards social realism as a dramatic mode. This gives the reason of the topicality of his many plays. He explores this socio-realistic world fully in such plays as Thorns on a Convas, The Hungry Ones and The Miracle Seed. The Miracle Seed gives us an affirmation of faith in the resurrection of life while Thorns on a Convas shows his reaction against the banning of his earlier play 'The Doldrummers' and is protest against all establishment-sponsored art. The play teaches us the lesson that an artist should express 'his' own pain, 'his' unique essence of the world, 'his' rapture and ecstasy. It is a symbolic play and Yaqub, the main character of the play, symbolizes the inevitable artist who is able to create because of his fear and pain. The play 'The Hungry Ones' presents a bitter cry of poverty and conscience. Besides poverty and hunger, Asif Currimbhoy gives a comparison between the racial problem in the USA and Hindu-Muslim problem in India.

Religious plays of Asif Currimbhoy show that like other creative writers, Asif Currimbhoy too has been greatly inspired by the ancient epics like the Ramayana, the

Mahabharata, the Vedas and the Upanishads. He turned to these ancient books for new themes and techniques. He himself confesses the need of these traditional books thus: *"There is a mystical element in the human being that always drew me to the spiritual factor in life; ----- As a result, I wrote separate plays on religion which are highly academic"*.

This has result in his writing of such plays on religious themes and art as: 'OM' and 'The Dumb Dancer'. 'OM' is a bold, imaginatively conceived philosophical play modeled after Greek tragedy. It presents man's search for God and shows different parts of man's salvation. The problem of the quest of 'self' with respect to different attitudes of life in India has been dramatized in this play. The playwright has tried his best to make us understand the abstract and greatly entangled concepts of Hinduism.

'The Dumb Dancer' is the study of a Kathakali dancer who tries to identify himself with Bhima. It is a dance play from the episode of 'The Slaughter of Duryodhana' in the ancient epic of Mahabharata. The play moves through the dancer's confused mind as he hovers between reality and the world of myth. In the words of Paul Verghese it goes to the credit of Asif Currimbhoy that he had made the Kathakali dance an integral part of the play. Here Asif Currimbhoy shows great craftsmanship in characterization and uses psycho-analysis to probe into the complexities, tensions and frustrations of his characters. Here, Dr Prema is not presented just as psychiatrist only but as a full-blooded human being who grows and develops with the advancement of the play. 'The Dumb Dancer' is a play of suspense shrouded in myth and involving a lot of psycho-analysis from the beginning to end. The play has its roots in the dim past of Hinduism. He describes starvations and famines and never ignores the lot of the poor. There is enough of bloodshed in his plays like Inquilab, The refugee and Sonar Bangla but can he help it? Not at all! He portrays these goary scenes faithfully, not to give us enjoyment but rather to bring to our senses. He accepts that war is a tragedy and feels pinched why others don't think in the same way. He constantly gives us a feeling that the voice of sanity is lost in the din of unreason. He is seemingly so dispassionate and neutral about the situations and events that no one dare doubt his integrity. Asif Currimbhoy is no more in this world but his monumental works remain which continuously spread his fame and name throughout the entire English-speaking world. His plays are displayed throughout the European countries. Hundreds of critics have taken interest in his dramatic art and literary journals are often publishing articles about his art. Such luminaries as Edward Said, Faubian Bowers and Fanon worked on his dreams, Peter Nazareth wrote about him as a 'dramatist of public event'. J.Meserve and I. Meserve praised him highly in their foreword to his drama 'The Hungry Ones'. In India his own people did not lack behind in evaluating his dramatic acumen. Srinivasa, Professor Iyanger, Prof. Sunil Dutta and Paul Verghese exploited the different aspects of his art. Looking through his eyes, the prevailing conditions concerning economical and social life of India towards the end of 21st century are to be guessed well. His dramas can humanize the population of the sub-continent. Asif Currimbhoy's political novels are result

oriented. The Bangladesh War is over and refugees are settled for good or bad but the work must enforce the lesson to people not committing bloody wars again. The work must help to change the political perception of the people of the sub-continent. His Social and Semi-romantic dramas will be dealt with separately, describing old love adventures which cut across all social bindings. Detailed analysis will enable us to lay thread-bare the backdrop of Asif Currimbhoy's dramas and give a true picture of causes and events which formed the base of his plays. Asif Currimbhoy got a job in New India Assurance Company in Paris which brought him in touch with French culture also. Later, he joined the Burma Shell in India wherein he worked as an executive. This caused him to travel throughout India extensively and enabled him to familiarise himself with people and customs of different regions and localities. This great exposure, more especially to experimental American theatre, as well as his vivid interest in history led him to compose such monumentan plays showing his great engagement with life. According to Yoosaph A. K, "It is also certain that his keen observation of people and their life during this time enhanced his theatrical vitality"⁽²⁾. Dr Ramesh Babu and K.Ranjith Rao think that many things are being revolutionized with the arrival of Asif currimbhoy on the English drama scene but call his themes controversial.⁽³⁾ They in the same breath confess that "his plays focus on social issues and his achievement in the field of drama is inspiring, characteristic and distinguishing".⁽⁴⁾

Prema Vandakumar goes a step further and asserts 'the themes from his dramas are from the flow of contemporary life and politics'⁽⁵⁾. He never takes risks and never advocates for this or that. In an interview he explains his position thus, "I am sympathetic to human condition which is really fairly universal in any part of the world. But human condition exists in an environment. And environment always brings

about its own pressures"⁽⁶⁾. Asif Currimbhoy spent much of his time outside India but we cannot apply the term 'immigrant' to him. He never lost the sense of 'Indianness' and always felt for his home-land. This attachment of Asif currimbhoy is not seen in the religious plays only but also in his so-called secular or historical plays. 'The Doldummers' in 1961 got banned in Bombay for promiscuity but what then? He wanted to carry his point and did it in a better way. It is evident that Asif Currimbhoy gathers his material mostly from a distinctly Indian experience and has tried his hand upon every genre-comedy, tragedy, farce,melodramy,history and fantasy. His contribution to Indian drama in English is great. His plays show intense realism, but are not literal-minded transcription of near facts. We can call his plays as microcosm of Indian life. He seeks to expose his 'vision of man' through his dramatic art. His plays show his abiding faith in the efficacy of love and compassion. His plays serve as panacea to the ills of society. He shows great concern for overall humanity.

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