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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### DEPICTION OF THE DRAMATIC WORLD OF ASIF CURRIMBHOY AS BREATHING AN AURA OF SOCIAL REALISM AND SATIRIC VOICE IN ALL RESPECTS: AN APPRAISAL

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#### ABSTRACT

This Research paper a vibrant analysis attempted with an intention to throw light on the dramatic world of Asif Currimbhoy as a scenarist of authenticity and a playwright of global prominence who was the India's first resourceful and leading voice in the realm of contemporary theatre. This paper credibly anatomizes the specific aspect in that Currimbhoy is regarded as the dramatist of universalised affairs and events, he is almost a replica in mirroring the day-to-day life of ordinary people and their strains and toils in life. This research paper also predominantly focuses on the innovative theatrical devices used by Currimbhoy to express his revolutionary ideas. Thus, this research paper attests to the fact Currimbhoy is the playwright of social realism, truths in life and his themes are incorporated with satirical vein.

**Key words:** scenarist, global, prominence, resourceful, dramatist, universalised, mirroring, theatrical device, revolutionary, satirical.

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#### INTRODUCTION

Indian English drama is an umbrella-term that denotes not only the Indian plays written in English but also the bhasha – plays that are translated into English. "Modern English theatre has, on the one hand, with the application of various modern theories and innovative tools, extended its focus from rural to urban India, while, on the other, these plays, as a part of binding of the traditional forms of Indian theatre with the modern" (Chakraborty, 1). There is a paucity of drama in Indian writing in English. Compared to other literary genres, its output has been scanty. There are many reasons for this; but the most important reason is that English is not the mother tongue of the Indians. It is a 'learnt language', at best the 'second language' and it education is still, for all practical purposes confined to the 'urban elite' of India. Natural conversation is the most important aspect of drama, conversation in an idiom that has all the vigour and vitality of a spoken language and that is not possible when two Indian characters speak English on the stage. Drama is first and foremost meant to be staged and unless there is professional stage, there is no incentive to the playwright Dr. R. K. Dhawan rightly observes:

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"It is a well-known fact that the real success of a play can be tested on stage. A playwright needs a living theatre to put his work on acid test, evaluate its total effect on the audience and thereby get a chance to improve upon his performance. This handicap has not allowed him to pursue playwriting in a systematic and comprehensive way" (Dhawan, 19). Indian drama in English, with all its limitations emerged against the backdrop of a rich heritage of classical Sanskrit drama and about two centuries' culture of Shakespeare. Drama in India has had a rich glorious tradition. It started its journey with the Sanskrit plays. In the words of A. B. Keith, "Indian tradition, preserved in the 'Natyasastra', the oldest of the texts of the theory of the drama, claims for the drama divine origin, and a close connexion with the sacred Vedas themselves" (P12). The chief dramatists were Asvaghosa, Bhasa, Kalidas, Bhavabhuti and Sudrak. Tragedies like *Urbhanga*, romances like *Abhijnanas – Sakuntalam*, and historical plays like *Mudrarakshas* form an imperishable part of our Indian literary heritage. Krishna Mohan Banerjee's *The Persecuted* (1937), was the first play written by an Indian in English. It was less a play and more a dramatized debate of the conflict between orthodox Hindus customs and the new ideas introduced by western education. The real journey of Indian English drama began with Michael Madhusudan Dutt's 'Is This Called Civilization' which appeared in 1871. Rabindanath Tagore and Sri Aurobindo, the two great sage – poets of India, are the first Indian dramatists in English. Harindranath Chattopadhyay, P. A. Krishnaswamy, T. P. Kailasam, J. M. Labo Prabhu, Nissim Ezekeil, Gieve Patel, Pratap Sharma and Dina Mehta followed

suit. Contemporary Indian drama, deviating from the classical and European models, is experimental and innovative in terms of thematic and technical qualities, laying the foundation of a distinctive tradition in the history of world drama by reinvestigating history, legend, myth, religion and folklore in the context of contemporary socio-political issues. Among the major dramatists who have given a distinctive shape to this genre are Vijay Tendulkar, Girish Karnad, Indira Parthasarathy, Badal Sircar, Asif Currimbhoy, Mahaswata Devi and Mahsh Dattani, of whom Asif Currimbhoy is considered as the first authentic voice in the theatre who has emerged as 'a dramatist of reality and a playwright of international Stature exposing and questioning certain fundamentally disturbing social – political – economical – psychological assumptions, exploiting innovative stances and using theatrical devices such as loud speakers, radios, shadow cut-out, pantomime, puppets and lyrical efforts so as to have the fullest authority and impact over the audience. As Indrani Chakraborty has put it, "... Currimbhoy is India's first authentic voice in the theatre. 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 India's classical theatre" (qtd in Currimbhoy, *The Doldrummers*, viii). Generally considered as one of the leading figures in contemporary Theatre, Asif Currimbhoy is said to have attempted every genre – comedy, tragedy, farce, melodrama, history and fantasy. His plays, according to P.Bayapa Reddy, may be divided thematically, for the sake of convenience into various categories – the Bengal trilogy, the romantic plays, the political plays, the social plays and the plays of religion and art.

Asif is always drawn towards the incidents major or minor, taking place near him. His family background, education at reputed institutions both in India and abroad and his appointment as a company executive at various places – all helped him a lot to have materials for his plays. Above all, he has an ability to put what he experiences into excellent English. It is his power of portraying reality into words taking him to the world's attention. As a dramatist of public affairs and events, he wants his plays to be almost a mirror for reflecting, day-to-day life of ordinary people and their struggles in life. His themes are real and contemporary events. The drought in Maharashtra led him to write *The Miracle Seed* (1973), the youth in Gujarat and the subsequent dissolution of the Legislative Assembly provided him with material for *The Dissident MLA* (1974) and his experience in Calcutta and Sympathetic attitude towards the platform – dwellers inspired him to write his remarkable play. *The Hungry Ones* (1967) which is said to have stirred the minds of both Indian and foreign audience. *The Hungry Ones* gives in twelve scenes an account of two American beatnik-poets Allen Ginsberg and Peter Orlovsky and their struggle to understand the mystery of India. Currimbhoy gives a vivid picture of Calcutta, the capital city of West Bengal, which was gripped by violence and famine. The play ends with the two Americans leaving India. P.Bayappa Reddy observes: "The frustration of the two Americans underlines the bitter compassion Currimbhoy feels for India with deep conflicts both religious and social incapable of resolution, still suffering, smiling sadly through death and the agony of believing without hope" (P 107). Though *The Hungry Ones* is extremely theatrical and a strong statement about men and about India, it is told in compassionate terms. The play opens with two Americans lying and tumbling back into a normal posture after a few feats

on the pavement near a coffee house in a busy lane in Calcutta city. The people in the city even laugh at them as the Americans are lying there like 'Carcasses'. The curiosity of the passerby diverts when a Bengalian and woman who look smart and clothed neatly come near the coffee house. They deposit a bag on the side wall, open it and wear tattered clothes. The man begins to perform a 'monkey act'. The Americans who for the first time are themselves shaken into curiosity, are silent to the point of being morose. The Americans, full of form and confidence, begin to do all sorts of funny things from yoga to athletics and from carpet-prayer to a fray-dance. They then succeed in involving the two Indians in their 'frolicsome game'. The passersby are drawn towards 'the hungry act' performed by the two hungry Indians. The American beatniks want to break through the mystery of the hungry act. This leads them to make a powerful attempt to gain an insight into the mystery. The scene ends with the voices of the two Indians echoing:

"... so you want to become  
one of us. Stronger,  
a hungry one . . . . ?  
then learn, stranger, learn . . .  
Hunger!" (*The Hungry Ones*, 14).

Currimbhoy's satiric attitude is very much visible in the play. He ridicules the college students "with tortoise shell glasses, an intense intellectual outlook, and very receptive" (14), stupidly place the two Americans on a par with Indian saints and patriots. A girl among the students says:

"After all we need your help too.  
We haven't come across anyone quite like  
You since . . . Swami Vivekananda and  
Sri Aurobindo, Rabindranath Tagore  
and Sarojini Naidu, Subhas Chandra  
Bose and Ram Mohan Roy . . . ." (*THO*, 15).

The dramatist here just makes fun of the present day student community which has no principles of its own; as mentioned in the play by one of the students, "this movement has no manifesto" (15). Another significant point in the plays of Asif Currimbhoy is his use of humour. In fact, Currimbhoy's humour is generally bitter, cynical and seldom joyful. One such example from his play *The Hungry Ones* can be found in the scene where the two Americans are introduced. The yogic feats of the two Americans produce humour. The dramatist does not spare the Indian saints who exploit the gullibility of people by asking them to meditate all the time. The *Guru* tells his disciples to "to go then home, my son and meditate . . . meditate so deep that none may disturb you . . . meditate in yoga all the time" (*THO* 15). Asif Currimbhoy explores rather beautifully the socio-realistic world to the fullest in such notable plays as *Thorns on a Canvas* (1962), *The Miracle Seed* (1973) and *The Dissident MLA* (1974). These plays distinguish themselves by their unfailing social realism and satire. *Thorns on a Canvas* is a reaction against the banning of *The Doldrummers* and is a protest against all Establishment-sponsored art. Currimbhoy satirises the government-run Academy where one finds variable sound of table tapping, the full instrumental scale of the sarangi, interrupted sounds of singing, flashes of dancing of *Kathak* and *Bharat Natyam* canvases streaming will colours, and the quick movement artistic busily engaged. This shows how the government-run Akademy is full of noise without any qualitative work. Rooted

in the modern rural society, *The Miracle Seed* gives us a tremendous impression of reality and presents an eternal challenge of endurance and survival. There are Ram, a farmer, his village in a village in Maharashtra and Laxman, a young man of twenty, who is the nephew of Malti, the wife of Ram. Laxman brings "the miracle seed" that affected the green revolution in the Punjab, because the village is afflicted with the drought. Ram is assured of "golden harvest" and prosperity from "the miracle seed". The showing of "the miracle seeds" has gone to waste as the rains have failed once again. As an one-act play, *The Miracle Seed* deals with a single dominant dramatic situation – the cruel vagaries of nature resulting in a perpetual drought. The play is essentially realistic and satire. In the play *The Dissident MLA*, Currimbhoy becomes the voice of universal revolt and anguish at the seemingly immovable societies around the world and here in the play, Currimbhoy gets the best opportunity to satirize politicians. Even though the play is simple in treatment of theme and issues, it breathes an aura of realism. *The Dissident MLA* is a story modeled on the historical events of Gujarat in 1974. The characters in the play are easily recognizable. P. Bayapa Reddy writes: "Kantibhai is none other than Morarji Desai and his ridiculing the idea of 'conscience' reminds us the words of Mrs. Gandhi, the then Prime Minister, who gave instruction to her party workers to go in accordance with their conscience" (P 122) Kantibhai says,

"There's device conscience besides a man's conscience. And God's conscience is greater: it forms the basis of Natural Law. Man's law may be broken, but not the Natural law" (*The Dissident MLA* 39).

Ramesh, the student leader in the play, is the mouthpiece of Currimbhoy himself. Through his character, the playwright exposes the 'ugly' political situation of India, and hence he depicts Ramesh as the hero of the play standing for a complete change in Indian politics. Of course, the real world of Currimbhoy is rather bitter and uninteresting than the ideal world of others. Asif feels that his duty is just to point out the evils in society and he does not like to trigger off any social revolution. Asif Currimbhoy has taken his themes for his plays from a wide variety of fields including history and politics, social and economic problems, East-West relationship, psychological conflicts, religion, metaphysics and arts. Most of his plays deal with recent historical and political development like the Bengal Naxalite movement in *Inquilab* the student agitation in Gujarat in *The Dissident MLA*, the drought in *The Miracle Seed*, the life of platform dwellers depicted in *The Hungry Ones* and the influx of Bangladesh refugees into India in *The Refugee*. His social awareness and urge to focus his contemporary political and social life provided him with source of materials for projection of themes in his plays. Peter Nazareth rightly comments:

"Asif Currimbhoy interweaves the public event with the private to create exciting drama which asks moral questions about humanity in the cataclysmic period of decolonization" (P 37).

Currimbhoy uses certain theatrical devices to make the play more effective on the stage. "Always trying to assert and maintain control over his audience, Currimbhoy uses monologue, choruses and chants as a means of communication" (Ruth, XIV). He is an adept in his stage directions, that too, lengthy stage directions and equally stage description. His stage direction in *The Hungry Ones* depicts the pathetic conditions of Indian beggars almost condemned by the government. The element of humour is yet another strong point for there is laughter in several of his plays. It is generally bitter, cynical or ironic, 'Satire' is another device which Currimbhoy employs to express his revolutionary ideas. In *The Miracle Seed*, Currimbhoy criticizes the government's delay in providing relief to the drought affected public. Here in the play, when Laxman goes on talking about the various projects of the government, Ram loses his temper and pounces upon him saying,

"don't talk to me about the Government  
or I'll wring your neck" (*The Miracle Seed*, 28)

The relief centres set up by the government in the form of 'stone breaking' and 'road repair' hardly offer solace to the suffering people of the rural areas. Currimbhoy is a playwright of realism. Facts become his themes. He presents life as it is and not as it should be. It is evident when in *The Miracle Seed* he presents a gruesome and degrading picture of the drought that struck Maharashtra in 1972. The land is "parched and dry with web like cracks and fissures in the soil" (149). His whole approach to drama is conditioned by his vision of life that love and compassion alone matter and that they serve as panacea to the ills of society. To conclude, Asif Currimbhoy's plays are realistic and celebrated for its theatrical value and his main intention is to indicate the social evils and to make the people alert of the basic rights that the poor should be given by the government, when they are in crisis and he is equally serious in using theatrical devices which makes his themes effective on stage and widens the understanding of the reading public. He is India's first authentic voice in the theatre, and said to have emerged as a playwright of International stature and a dramatist of social realism coupled with satirical vein.

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