



RESEARCH ARTICLE

MODERN WESTERN AND INDIAN DRAMA; THE NEED FOR A COMPARATIVE FOCUS

***DR. Surajmukhi Yadav**

Asstt. Prof. in English, MGCW, Mokhra (Rohtak), India

Received 28th March, 2018; Accepted 22nd April, 2018; Published 18th May, 2018

ABSTRACT

Both the western and the Indian drama have their respective classical traditions - the Greek and the Sanskrit, however, modern western drama has kept closer to its classical tradition than modern Indian drama which is virtually an offshoot of the western drama, both medieval and modern. Thanks to the study of English literature that the Indian playwrights were exposed to Shakespeare and then gradually to the moderns. Indian playwrights and theatre directors would do well to probe their own cultural heritage in order to give better representation to Indian drama abroad. Even the westerners would like it and love to borrow from our sources.

Key words:

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Citation: DR. Surajmukhi Yadav, 2018. "Modern western and Indian drama; the need for a comparative focus" *International Journal of Current Research in Life Sciences*, 7, (04), 2089-2090.

INTRODUCTION

Both the western and the Indian drama have their respective classical traditions - the Greek and the Sanskrit. However, modern western drama has kept closer to its classical tradition than modern Indian drama which is virtually an offshoot of the western drama, both medieval and modern. Thanks to the study of English literature that the Indian playwrights were exposed to Shakespeare and then gradually to the moderns. According to O'Malley, "India was roused -from its intellectual coma by contact with the West and turned to Western literature, science and philosophy for cultural inspiration" (O'Malley, 1941). In the context of drama, "Naik has pointed out that theatre movement in the Indian languages gathered momentum under the influence mainly of British drama in the early twentieth century" (Naik, 1977). No doubt, modern drama in most Indian languages developed under the influence of English education and English literature. Even the commercial Parsi theatre borrowed a great deal from Shakespeare and adaptations of his plays were quite popular on Parsi stage but modern Indian drama did not follow Parsi models and emulated English drama directly. Shakespearean influence was more marked in the beginning but it soon gave way to realistic drama which was more suitable for the treatment of contemporary social problems. The plays of Jones, Robertson, Galsworthy, Shaw, Ibsen, etc. provided models to the Indian playwrights according to the ideational and structural requirements of their themes. Sanskrit drama

being feudal in character and Parsi theatre being commercial in nature, western realistic drama provided better models for the problems of the middle-class. Thus a parallelism of themes and structures is visible in the modern western and the modern Indian drama. While modern Indian drama has developed in all the languages of the country and various trends in modern western theatre like realism, naturalism, theatre of cruelty, theatre of the absurd, epic theatre, etc., have continued to influence Indian playwrights and theatre directors, there has been a considerable output of Indian drama in English, both original and translated. However, the latter has rather been neglected. About 400 plays in English written by Indian playwrights have hardly been examined or properly noticed. The modern Indian plays in different languages have frequently been staged but Indian plays in English have rarely been produced "Paradoxically enough, some of these plays like Gurcharan Das's *Mire*, Pratap Sharma's *A Touch of Brightness*, and Asif Currimbhoy's *The Dumb Dancer* have successfully been staged in the west, a fact which has provoked the jealous ire of some of the supporters of "Indian language playwrights who have been complaining of the unfair advantage the medium of expression confers on the Indian playwrights in English, conveniently forgetting the latter's plight in his own country." On the other hand, Indian language playwrights like Paritosh Gargi (Chhaleeds) and BaLwant Gargi (*The Dark Ritual* and *The Mango Tree*) have been able to stage their plays in the U.S.A. and the U.K. but most of the modern Indian drama has remained unknown to the western audiences. There is a great need to bring about a closer interaction between modern Indian and modern western drama with the

*Corresponding author: DR. Surajmukhi Yadav
Asstt. Prof. in English, MGCW, Mokhra (Rohtak), India.

help of critical studies and through the medium of the theatre. Indian drama in English has come a long way since the poetic plays of Sri Aurobindo, symbolical plays of Rabindra Nath Tagore, mythological plays of T.P. Kailasam, and lyrical plays of Harindranath Chattopadhyaya which bore the influence of Elizabethan drama and Victorian drama. The plays by G. V. Desani (Hali), Lakham Deb (Murder at the Prayer Meeting), P.A. Krishnaswami (The Flute of Krishna), M. Krishnamurti (The Cloth of Cold), Sadashiv D. Rawoot (The Killers), Satya Dev Jaggi (The Point of Light), Pritish Nandy (Rites for a plebian Statue), Hushmat Sozero Kashme (Vikramjeet), Shri Devi Singh (The Purple-Braided People), P.S. Vasdev (The Sunflower) and S.Raman (Karma) call for critical attention. Asif Currimbhoy is a prolific playwright who has written about 30 plays in English which deal with social, political, and psychological problems. Likewise, Partap Sharma, Nissim Ezekial, Gurcharan Das, and others have written a number of plays in English. All these plays must be given due consideration and the representative plays of these playwrights should be studied with a comparative focus keeping in view the modern western drama.

Naik likens the Indian playwrights in English to Sanskrit playwrights of the past because of the limited appeal to a circle of the cultivated. He advises the playwrights in English "to make fruitful use of these conditions in the manner of his ancient forbears, turning his professional limitations into artistic assets" (*ibid.*, p. 193). Modern Indian drama in different languages has certainly made great in twentieth century. Theatre in Bengali, Marathi, Malyalam, Kannad and Hindi has made enriched Indian theatre to a great extent. Badal Saroar (Bengali), Vijay Tendulkar (Marathi), Shankara Pillai (Malyalam), Girish Karnad (Kannad), and Habib Tanvir (Hindi), to name only a few, have brought international recognition to Indian theatre. Even Balwant Gargi (Punjabi) has done a great deal to create a better understanding and appreciation of Indian theatre in the west. He was Professor of Indian theatre at the University of Seattle in the U.S.A. and produced a couple of his own Punjabi plays in English translation in the U.S.A. and the U.K. while most of the Indian playwrights in different languages continue to absorb influence of western dramatic techniques and latest theatre movements, some of them have also drawn upon their own folk and classical traditions. V.B. Karanth has for example produced Macbeth in Yakshgana style. Plays of Brecht have often been adapted into Indian languages to look like original works. Balwant Gargi's adaptation of O'Neill's *Desire under the Elms* as *Balde Tibbe* in Punjabi hardly betrays its source.

Needless to say that all such plays have reached Indian theatre through the medium of English. Although argument is often given that Brecht has taken a great deal from the orient, the fact remains that modern Indian drama has been on the receiving and so far. No doubt, playwrights/theatre directors like Habib Tanvir, Balwant Gargi, and Vijay Tendulkar have given some outstanding plays to the west but modern Indian drama has yet to develop a real interaction with the western drama as is the case with the theatre in English, German, Spanish, and Scandanavian languages. A few modern Indian playwrights like Girish Karnad, Bedal Sircar, and Vijay Tendulkar have also been successful in getting their plays in English translations produced by professional theatre groups. In this context, Karnad's *Tughlak*, Sircar's *Evam Indrajeet*, and Tendulkar's *Silence ! The Court is in Session* are very significant plays which have been noticed internationally. *Tughlak* is more than a political allegory; *Evam Indrajeet* deals with the frustrations of an educated middle class person who fails to do anything worthwhile; *Silence ! The Court is in Session* leads to the self-realization of characters assembled to rehearse a play. All these plays deal with the complex reality of modern life. *Tughlak* being no exception because it alludes to contemporary concerns. Such plays can be favourably compared to the works of modern western drama which is increasingly becoming existential in character. These plays can certainly modern Indian drama in the west. World drama is a collaborative activity and the interaction between modern western and Indian drama is welcome. However, it should not remain a one-way affair. In order to follow modern western drama, Indian playwrights have rather neglected their own folk theatres. Habib Tanvir's *Bahadur Kilarin* is perhaps a deeper myth than *Oedipus the King*. Indian playwrights and theatre directors would do well to probe their own cultural heritage in order to give better representation to Indian drama abroad. Even the westerners would like it and love to borrow from our sources.

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