

## A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ON POST INDEPENDENCE INDIAN DRAMA

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### ABSTRACT

*Giving a historically accurate account of the dominant socio-cultural paradigms in Post-Independence Indian drama in English is both challenging and rewarding and more so when the treatment of the subject is textual compounded further by its being non-literary. Drama, being a multi-dimensional literary form (visual, textual, etc.) entirely different from novel and poetry owes its origin to religion and it has a distinguished history. In an attempt to provide a most sustained example of the evolution of Indian drama in English right from the Pre-Independence era to the present day I have highlighted the outstanding contributions of dramatists like Gurucharan Das, Asif Karrimboy, Mahesh Dattani, Nissim Ezeikel etc. without getting into the clasp of literary theory. There is also a detailed discussion on Nissim Ezeikel's 'Romantic Poem' as a representative text of the New Woman in the Post-Independence period.*

*This is an argumentative essay divided into namely three parts- introduction, body and conclusion. The introductory paragraph deals with the salient features of drama. It is in the body of this research article that I have explained the dominant socio-cultural paradigm of the Post-Independence India. I conclude with a remark that Indian drama in English is deeply rooted in our cultural traditions. It has a glorious past and also an enviable future.*

**Keywords:** Paradigm, evolution, dimension, baton, presidencies, theatre

"Drama is a narrative made visible", remarks Martin Esslin (The field of drama 10). It has two dimensions- visual and textual which sets it apart from other genre like novel and poetry. The job of a dramatist can be quite a challenge. Drama by nature is said to be a 'twice born activity', written on page and watched on stage. This is the reason why its birth, growth and journey "presents a strange conjunction between at least three different categories: language, society and cultural tradition" (Contemporary Indian Drama: Astride Two Traditions 15). Being an audio-visual medium of expression, drama has been a very powerful and effective genre in world literature written and performed in different languages and also considered to be appropriate for portraying issues, social, cultural, political and philosophical. Indian drama in English has its history, heritage and culture. There can be no doubt about its substantial historicity as it was hailed as the 'Fifth Veda' in its day and continues to be so. Sanskrit was the language in which the writer rendered the experiences of his life. "Indian tradition preserved in the Natyashastra, the oldest of the texts of the theory of drama, claims for the drama a divine origin, and a close connection with the sacred Vedas themselves" (Indian Mythology 10). Here Keith, The Scottish Indologist seems to be trying to trace the origin of drama in Hindu scriptures, the Vedas being some of them. European historical documents show that in religion lie the roots of drama. One does not know when exactly the European drama came into being. But Indian drama in Sanskrit

is said to have begun earlier. Almost 2000 years ago exponents of Sanskrit language propounded a poetics by which dramas written in Sanskrit were to be judged.

Indian English Drama saw the light of the day as early as 1813. A major breakthrough in the search of a literary form in a language other than the native one was achieved. 'The Persecuted' by Krishna Mohan Banerji drew the attention of the audience. But there is no denying the fact that Indian drama in English did not seem to bear a meaningful comparison with Indian poetry and novel for a long stretch of time. The contemporary was not nearly as good and popular as the other genre were. During the British rule in India the Indian playwright who wrote dramas in English had to face many challenges. A number of Indian Dramas written in Indian languages and produced on stage in theatres were making strides. But the use of English language, lack of appreciative audience, choice of epics and Puranas for the theme of their plays besides many others were some of the factors responsible for the bleak prospect of Indian drama in English. Here it will not be out of place to put on record Shanta Gokhale's views on the first Indian plays written and published in English in pre independence era. "It was less a play and more a dramatized debate of the conflict between orthodox Hindu customs and the new ideas introduced by Western Education" (An Illustrated History of Indian literature in English 18). This is to suggest that 'The Prosecuted' read like a novel to be read in privacy or leisure and not to be watched on a stage. Some of the basic ingredients of drama like plot and stage direction were found to be missing in it.

Sri Aurobindo, who received the baton from Krishna Mohan Banerjee took the responsibility of writing drama in English. He produced plays between 1890 and 1920, his major plays being Perseus the Deliverer and Savitri. Others worthy of note include Harindra Nath Chattopadhyay, A.S. Panchapakesa Aiyer, T.P. Kailasam. A striking feature of drama written in those days was they were to be read and not to be watched. This was a serious flaw noticed by critics of drama.

The dramatist in the post-Independence period was in a marked contrast with his predecessors. Perhaps he was trying to reach his full potential as keenly aware he was of the potentialities of theatre. Published in 1987 'Indian English Drama: A critical study (19870) by S. Krishna Bhatta is full of fascinating insights into Indian drama in English written after 1950. More than two hundred plays were written in English but not published or performed. Time flies and things change with the passage of time. By 1960 Critics of drama were delighted to announce the arrival of Asif Currimboy. He seemed to enthral the audience with his plays – Goa, Sonar Bangla The Doldrummers, The Dumb Dancer, Refugee, etc. Political turmoil and disintegration of National Boundaries was an important theme of his plays. The dramatist depicts multifarious moods of violence between power and corruption. The excellence of his plays lies not in their being read on the page but in being performed on the stage. It is no exaggeration to say that Asif Currimboy is one of our first playwrights to produce plays that could be read in leisure and privacy. Also, they could mesmerize the audience in a theatre. The 1960s and the 1970s witnessed momentous changes in Indian drama. It was at the end of this decade in 1968 that the theatre group, Bombay conferred the title of the 'Sultan Padamshree Award on Gurucharan Das for 'Lorins Sahib'. Cyrus Mistry is another recipient of this award which he won in 1978 for 'Doongazi House', a

play depicting the declining fortunes of a Parsi family. There is still another award-winning dramatist, Dina Mehta regarded as worthy of admiration. She was given one of the highest accolades by BBC in 1979. Her play, *Brides are not for Burning* vividly portrays the plight and predicament of an Indian bride who does not bring enough dowry when her marriage is being solemnized. By the 1980s and 90s Indian Drama in English was moving rapidly. Mahesh Dattani and Manjula Padmanabhan were some of the leading dramatists of the movement. They focussed specially on the paradigms of a socially and culturally diverse country like that of India.

Another source of encouragement for Indian Play wrights is the Royal Court Theatre (RCT), London. This organization has been encouraging and producing contemporary drama in London since 1956. When Mahesh Dattani's *Bravely Fought the Queen* was staged in U.K., it drew RCT's attention and admiration. Elyse Dodgson, Associate director of the RCT and Head of the theatre's international department, who was working in collaboration with India said, "We found a refreshing energy in Indian English theatre and decided to embark on a long-term relationship with the Indian playwrights" (Indiatoday.com) They have lived up to their promise. The RCT has now with the help of the British Council, started lending a helping hand to play wrights in India. Acknowledging the good relationship between India and Britain in literature, K. R. Srinivas Iyengar, the doyen of Indian English literature says, "England and India had come together, or had been accidently thrown together; and out of their intimacy whether legitimate or illegitimate had come this singular offspring that is Anglo Indian literature" (Indian Writing in English 2).

The first workshop was held in Bangalore during 200/2001. It is on record Ninaz Khodajee is a product of this workshop. Seven of the plays written and staged during this workshop were published by Samuel French in a book entitled *Stagerite Seven First*. Ninaz's play is one of them. It has a foreword by Elyse, which tells us how the workshop functioned.

A playwright, contemporary with Asif Karrimboy is Professor Nissim Ezekiel. Known variously as a formidable writer of prose, the most important figure in Indian poetry in English, probably the first art critic in India, he was primarily a professor of English in a college affiliated to Bombay University. The Indian Jewish Professor for the most part taught drama. Arthur Miller's *All My Sons* edited by Nissim Ezekiel and published by Oxford University Press in 1972 seems to have become a standard against which academic scholarship is to be judged.

Ezekiel's reputation as a dramatist rest on 'Three Plays- *Nalini*, *Marriage Poem* and 'The Sleepwalkers written in the honour of Tony (Wife) and Gieve Patel (poet and medical practitioner) and published by Lal's Writers Workshop in 1960. These plays were performed on a stage in Jai Hind College Hall and in Tejpal auditorium, Bombay in January and December 1969. A common theme which runs through his plays is that the early years of the marriage seem to be sheer bliss. As soon as discords surface, things are beyond repair. The husband and the wife feel that they have made their life a terrible mess.

If 'Marriage Poem' was an instant hit, it owed its success to its 'stage worthiness', one of the parameters by which a drama was to be judged. The dramatist satirizes the institution of marriage

in Indian society. The play seems to constitute a frontal attack on a husband, who is a philanderer and also on a nagging wife. What gives the play its distinctive character is Ezekiel's art of characterization. Naresh, Mala Leela and Mrs. Lall appear in the drama. The husband lives in a world of fantasy. He is having an illicit relationship with another woman who is introduced as Leela. Another interesting character is Mala, a possessive wife, who does all she can to save her married life but in vain. Naresh bothers, annoys in fact harasses his wife in a constant way. He flirts with every attractive woman he meets, Malti, a socialite being one of them. He does not hesitate to flirt with her even in the presence of her husband. He seems to have in a way given husband a bad name. "All this happens in the name individual freedom, a prerogative exclusively meant for men". (POST- COLONIAL Indian Drama in English 48)

Enraged at her husband's behaviour, Mala says, "You never appreciate anything I do for you. You never do anything to please me" (Three Plays 60). After all Naresh is her husband, 'her foundation' and if he is led astray, life seems to have lost its meaning for her. Mala appears to be struck with the strangeness of her surroundings. One of the reasons is her 'make-up' both emotional and intellectual' is quite Indian in letter and spirit. She seems to have an abiding faith in Indian Ethos. "Marriage was as a social duty towards the family and the community and there was little idea of individual interest. The social background provided by the authoritarian joint family, and caste with its dominion in all the spheres of life, afforded no scope for the recognition of any personal factor, individual interest or aspirations, in relations between husband and wife" (Marriage and family in India 139). What really matters to an Indian Woman in her life according to the sociologist is 'the family and social institutions'. They have a say in matters relating to personal freedom. But what compensation is there in this world for the loss of personal freedom given once in one's life time? "The series of adverbials like ever, always, never ascertain that it is part of their daily routine in which Mala craves to spend some cozy moments with him (Naresh) just by sitting near him or receiving a kiss." (POST-COLONIAL Indian Drama in English 49). Her problem is her husband, who is 'preoccupied elsewhere'. It is difficult for Mrs. Lall, a middle-aged woman to pacify Mala who is angry at her husband. Here is an extract from a conversation which transpired between Mala and Mrs. Lall.

Mrs. Lall: Wives have to do things for their husbands.

Mala: I do them willingly. I love him.

Mrs. Lall: I know you do.

Mala: The first time he talked to me; I fell in love with him.

Mrs. Lall: Did he fall in love with you?

Mala: A few weeks, he agreed to marry me. Why did he agree to marry me?

Mrs. Lall: That was ten years ago.

Mala: He is my husband I love him.

Mrs. Lall: Accept him, then.

Mala: I won't accept him running after another women.

Mrs. Lall: All husbands do. (Three Plays 64)

The passage just quoted is full of wit, humour and irony. What are the options open to Mala if the husband were a flirt? He is certainly one of those who betrays his wife and the betrayal, it can be said amounts to stabbing her in the back. But Mala is a new woman, highly educated and lives in the Post-Independence India. Oscillating between two extremes- tradition and modernity, Mala seems to be passing through a deep crisis. Who would ensure her rights of a wife? Does a society have a moral duty to rescue her in distress? Let us pause and reflect. Mala further says, "I'll write to all the papers. I'll complain to the home minister. What's the use of being a home minister if he cannot guarantee the sanctity of home? I will take out a procession and shout slogans against him. We'll gherao the other, woman. She will have to agree to give him up..." There seems to be a growing exasperation within Mala at the failure of society to ensure her status as a wife who wants to demonstrate and preserve her individuality at all costs. "In the end she collapses due to exhaustion. The audience silently shares the truth of shrieks of this educated woman and enjoys the moment as a parody knowing in their hearts that nothing can improve the situation till man realizes about the injustice done to family and woman. The fiery dialogue reminds one of the quarrels in Pope's *The Rape of the Lock*," says Professor Manorma Tirkha, a critic of Indian drama in English (POST COLONIAL Indian Drama in English 49). Another eminent Ezekiel scholar argues, "Marriage poem, A one-act tragic comedy follows the dream sequence technique too. Obviously, Ezekiel felt attracted to this method. And there is that touch of irony, Ezekiel's forte in the title of this play too, for it is hardly a 'Marriage Poem'. It's more a 'Marriage Dirge' for marriage is not celebrated here, but rather lamented" (Nissim Ezekiel 95). These are largely from observational studies, 'Makers of Indian Literature' published by Sahitya Academy New Delhi in which Professor Shakuntala Bharvani has presented a portrait of Nissim Ezekiel as a poet and dramatist of Indian literature in English. It is interesting to note the fact that she 'had known him for decades and worked with him' as the noted poet Keki N. Daruwala puts it in his foreword to "Nissim Ezekiel" (Nissim Ezekiel ii). She had the privilege of editing 'The Best Order' in collaboration with Professor Ekiekel.

A glance at the history of Indian drama in English takes us back to the consolidation of the British rule in India, way back in nineteenth century. One remembers Presidencies- Calcutta, Bombay and Delhi now metros where Indian theatres were first established. But all is not well with the Post-Independence Indian drama in English. "Unlike poetry and fiction, drama has not registered very notable gains during the post-Independence period. An important reason for this is that drama- essentially a composite art involving the playwright, the actors and the audience in a shared experience on the stage- has its own problems of which the other literary forms are free. It is true that the post-independence Indian drama in English did benefit by the growing interest abroad in Indian English literature and a number of plays by dramatists like Asif Karrimboy,

Pratap Sharma and Gurucharan Das were successfully staged in Europe and the United States of America. But these stray performances abroad, in spite of all their advantages, did not lead to the establishment of a regular school of Indian drama at home. This was mainly because the encouragement that drama received from several quarters immediately after Independence was monopolized by the theatre in Indian regional languages, While Indian English drama continued to feed on crumbs fallen from rich cousin's tables. "(A History of Indian English Literature 262). Here Naik seems to be talking about the challenges that Indian drama in English was destined to face at a time when it was in a most incipient stage. Some of our dramatists have certainly done us proud. Still a lot remains to be done. Let us mark the expression 'feed on crumbs fallen from our cousin's table' and the cousin in question seems to be no other than British drama. It is true when two cultures come into contact with each other they are said to be in a complementary position. Saying that one culture depends on the other for its survival does not seem to take us far. Similar concern with Indian drama is shown by another critic, Arvind Krishna Mehrotra. "The English drama of the two decades immediately after independence produced very little work of any importance. Many playwrights wrote one or at most two plays, and used the dramatic form more to tell a story through a dialogue than to offer a theatrical experience. Like their pre independence predecessors – Sri Aurobindo, Harindra Nath Chattopadhyay, T.P. Kaliasam they wrote chiefly on mythical or religious theme" (History of Indian Literatures in English and the Contributors 339). This is to suggest that the Indian drama in English did not usher in the start of a new drama. The then dramatists could not make much of an inroad into drama. In short no major experiment in terms of theme or style was made during that period.

One of the challenges that the Indian dramatist in the first half of the twentieth century faced was to get his plays staged. "Any play written in English has an inherent disadvantage in the sense that it is very often not staged. Stage worthiness being a basic test for a play. Most of the plays written in English do not fulfil this requirement". Sometimes Naik has helpful suggestions to make. "In making his characters speak in English the playwright needs therefore no qualms at all. Let him first create living characters in live situations and the language will take care of itself" (Aspects of Indian writing in English 262). The critic seems to be drawing our attention to traditional elements of drama like character, plot and dialogue. Characters have to be convincing if the dramatist wants to be successful in his mission. The impact the dramatist wants to have on his audience can be produced only when a sense of identity is created. That will be a true pan Indian identity/sensibility.

Nirmala Ravindran is an art critic, who has in her mind the aspirations of the new generation that moves away from Malls and play stations towards theatre seeking archaic thrill of the stage which can be termed as the second coming of theatre. "It is a generation that refuses to stay in wings. As it takes its passion a centre stage, theatre aficionados can sit back and relax. It seems the show, after all, with a happy ending (India today 35). This can be taken to mean that Indian drama in English has got a great future ahead of it. It is high time the Indian dramatist offered elaborate exposition of the creative process based on his experiences. Bharatmni's Natyashastra

can lend him a helping hand in writing and producing drama. The entire West reads Aristotle's Poetics in translation. It has a fierce pride in its traditions. One thing more the Anglophone treats the creative at par with the critical. This is a step in the right direction indeed. Imaginative literature and literary criticism correspond to each other in ways more than one. Both fulfil separate but complementary needs.

Indian drama in English in its new Avtar in the Post-Independence era has come a long way. The birth of National School of Drama in 1959 is a step in the right direction indeed. It's the duty of the writer to strike a balance between the use of English language and his cultural moorings. Whatever mode of representation he chooses be it realism, naturalism, expressionism etc. he has clearly and carefully delineated the dominant socio-cultural paradigms of his times which has importance to contemporary audiences. The dramatist has absolute discretion to observe three unities or disregard them as they are enshrined in Aristotle's Poetics or Bharat Muni's Natyashastra. The audience/ reader also seems to have the ultimate authority to use any evaluative criteria based on Eastern /western Poetics. It is heartening to see that Indian dramatist is ready to meet the enormous challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century that lie ahead of him. His plays are thematically and theatrically striking. They provide us with an experience as close as possible to watching them in a theatre.

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