

REALISM WITH REFERENCE TO THEATRE IN GURUCHARAN DAS'S LORINS SAHIB

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ABSTRACT

Realism is a relative and evaluative term, a mode of representation in literature which aims at portraying life as it is. It emphasizes objectivity in the representation of plot and character. Realism and drama are not said to be compatible with each other. The dramatist, it is said does not explore the innermost recesses of a character the way a novelist depicts him on the page. Realism with reference to theatre is a venture to be taken with extreme caution. The present article begins with a generalization about drama. It has two dimensions – visual and textual which distinguishes it from novel and poetry. There is a discussion on a Post-Independence Indian dramatist, Guru Charan Das. Among those who migrated from Pakistan in the second half of the twentieth century and settled in India, Gurucharan Das is formidable. Alumna of Harvard, he has to his credit dramas like Tara, Dance like Men, Seven Steps around Fire and Lorins Saheb besides many others. The article aims to analyse the various strands of Postcoloniality. The dramatist sheds invaluable light on the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized. I have made this argument using a theoretical frame of Aristotle's Poetics.

Keywords: *Realism, Postcoloniality, Colonizer, Colonized, theatre.*

It is remarkably difficult to define realism in literature. One of the reasons is the manner in which it is portrayed in novel is not the same as it has been done in poetry. Drama is a genre with a difference. It cannot be appreciated properly unless it is read on the page and watched on the stage. The visual dimension of drama is often not taken into consideration. So while discussing treatment of realism in drama, the venture should be taken with a caution. The author of the play matters but equally important is the producer who directs the play on the stage. One has to read, watch and think of drama from the dramatist's and producer's viewpoint. Before one delves deep into the subject, that is treatment of realism in Gurucharan Das's Lorins Sahib, a working definition of this term is required." A mode of writing that gives the impression of recording or reflecting faithfully an actual way of life. The term refers sometimes confusingly both to a literary method on detailed accuracy of description (i.e., verisimilitude) and to a more general attitude that rejects idealization, escapism and other extravagant qualities of romance in favour of recognizing soberly the actual problems of life."¹

Realism is a mode of representation in literature. But Drama and realism are not said to be compatible with each other. 'Inherently unsuitable' they do not work well together. There is a definite cause of mutual incomprehension. "Drama requires active protagonists, whereas realism often shows in action in the face of overwhelming, impersonal forces. Realism depends upon extensive psychological

detailing which cannot be realistically rendered on stage. Realism is concerned with what is commonplace and undramatic. The idea of 'the fourth wall' drama, with the audience privy to everything, is mimetic without being realist"². It should be pointed out that the critic's interpretation of realism with reference to drama in theatre seems quite reasonable. If one focuses on the textual aspect of drama, one can have a limited insight into its relationship with realism. A greater realism to theatrical practices is possible if the author of the text and director of the play have a responsibility to foster a sense of belonging to each other.

Heuval's views on dramatic realism merit attention. He writes in his seminal essay, *Complementary Spaces: Realism, Performance and a New Dialogics of Theatre*. "The signifying strategies of realism are often said to be implicated in the processes of cultural signification that create and sustain larger structures of hegemonic discourses, without having the capacity to transvalue those practices from within"³. Reaching consensus on what constitutes realism seems to be difficult. Describing realism as connotations of a mode of representation that produces hegemonic discourses does not seem to be appropriate. In fact, Heuvel comes closer to Brechet who says, "realism simply replicates existing and therefore arguably bourgeois, patriarchal, racist, oppressive, and oedipal- discourses, and functions as a model of conciliation, assimilation, adaption, and resignation to those discourses"⁴. Brechet thus accuses realism of all conceivable sins. With the confession of the sins comes the recognition that realism seems in no way to be at loggerhead with establishment. Brechet is of the opinion that some of the dramatists of bourgeois leanings if not all cling to their faith as a buttress to support and strengthen those economic and political structures that promote inequality/ division in society. All criticism notwithstanding realism has been designed to defend itself against the challenges posed by some critics who have argued strongly against its use in literature whatever the form may be.

Problems of definition usually occur when one considers the term to describe those methods and techniques which enable a literary artist to present his work as a 'faithful copy of reality' like that of 'the mirror'. How to deal with the contemporary 'here' and now has become another major issue.

Having discussed a working definition of realism, one can profitably turn to its relationship with Post Independence Indian drama. Here mention can be made of Gurucharan Das's *Lorins Saheb*, 'The Refugee' by Asif Currimboy, 'Lights out' by Manjula Padmanabhan, 'Dance like A Man' by Mahesh Dattani, 'Insomnia' by Ninanj Khodaji and 'Worm play' by Zubin driver and Mahadevbhai by Ramu Ramnathan and so on. *Lorins Saheb* was written in 1968 and published by Oxford University Press in a book entitled *Three English Plays* in 2001. The play, it can be said won the Sultan Padamsee Award in 1968. Credit goes to Deryck Jeffereis for staging it successfully at Bhulabhai Theatre Mumbai in July 1969. Anthony Dale was cast as Henry Hardinge, Bomi Kapadia as Fredrick Currie, Keith Stevenson, Zul vellani as Henry Lawrence, Ranjit Choudhary as Dalip Singh, Farida Sonavala as rani Jindan Kaur etc. written against the backdrop of the first Sikh War, *Lorins Sahib* sheds invaluable light on Ranjit Singh's widow, Rani Jindan Kaur who did all that could be done for the kingdom of her younger son, Dalip Singh. The then British Government had appointed Henry Lawrence as the Regent of Lahore portrayed as *Lorins Sahib* in the play. Strange it might sound, the

colonizer 'heart seems to be full of the milk of human kindness'. He acts and behaves almost like Ranjit Singh and incurs the wrath of the East India Company. He is interrogated first and then the government decided to strip him of his rank. The play ends with Lawrence's return to Calcutta. He is recalled to headquarters of the East India company.

If one focuses on the ethos, environment in which Lorins Sahib is set, one remembers Anglo Sikh War. The play starts on 24th of March 1814. Act one scene two takes place a month later and Act Two begins a day after the First Act comes to an end. The action in Act Two takes place on that one day. Act Three begins two weeks later. Scene Two of this act begins a week after scene one closes. The duration of the play is about seven weeks. Here time is presented roughly in a chronological manner.

When the audience of the play first watch Henry Lawrence on the stage, he is seen in his regimental uniform, not smartly turned out. He could be taken for a, North Indian' despite his 'phenomenal reputation, Currie says," He is a regular sort, you know. Civil servant, Haileyburry, efficient, proven record, very Christian, proper, does not mix with the natives"⁵. Gurucharan Das has portrayed him as a tall, forty- year old man who looks younger, has a' long brooding face with some grey hairs and a Van Dyck beard.' Towards the end of the play the audience see Lawrence wearing Ranjit Singh's choga and the Kohinor diamond. "The mental transference is nearly complete", says the dramatist. But the price Lawrence pays for 'the mental transference' is terrible. Edwards remarks ('reading')," My dear Lawrence, I regret to inform you that the Court of Directors of the Company no longer requires your services in the Punjab. Mr. Currie will temporarily assume charge at Lahore until a suitable successor is appointed. He will prepare grounds for the formal annexation of the Punjab. You are requested to proceed to Calcutta. (Long silence)⁶. Long silences often make us uncomfortable. Sitting in the theatre and watching the play, the audience seem to be mesmerized. They are literally staring at one another in stunned silence. This brings to the fore the dramatist's theatrical skill. The thespian in Gurucharan Das communicates, articulates the theme of the play without words, gestures and succeeds in his mission. That is to paint a very vivid portrait of a colonizer who has proved to be a most benevolent ruler. He is admired for his generosity in his kingdom. One however, notices an interesting contrast between Lawrence and Hardinge. The latter treats the colonized contemptuously. He says in the play," Damn these bloody tribes! Damn this bloody country. Damn the whole world "⁷. He looks down upon India. He speaks of venom against it in his voice. "Everything in India is second rate. Even Travellers best becomes second rate in India"⁸. An incorrigible pessimist he does not spare Lawrence. "A word of advice, Mr. Lawrence. I hope you will restrain your Orientalism and keep the natives at a distance. Keep them in their place if you have to rule them"⁹. Here Hardinge seems to be talking in an informal register of a colonizer which is in a way appropriate in the situation it has been employed.

While making observations on the treatment of realism in Lorins sahib with reference to theatre, one remembers what Aristotle has to say in this regard as it is enshrined in his Poetics. Certain elements of drama such as Opsis, Lexis and Melos transform drama into a theatre. On the 'wings of poesy' or prose the audience is transported to the world of imagination. Gurucharan Das writes Lorin Sahib with a beautiful simplicity of style. Also the apparent simplicity of his plot, setting and character is

deceptive. The dramatist portrays the temporal and spatial dimension of the play very realistically. He can in a way attribute his success to his 'lexis' a term introduced to us by Aristotle meaning language used by characters in a play. The characters are delineated carefully as down to earth they are. They sound familiar. They look like someone the audience has seen before. Their familiarity with them helps them in developing an appreciation of the complexity of the situation. Here is Dalip Singh in his own words. (Enthusiastically)" Yes, I'll be the lion of Victory. I'll throw them out. (Takes out his toy sword from his belt.) I'll fight them all and defeat them. Just like my father. I'll win victory after victory. When I have defeated them all, then I'll fight the Angrej. And I'll defeat him also. (Wiping her eyes, Rani rushes to him and embraces him.)

Rani: Yes, yes. You'll defeat them all. But not tonight. Now it's time for milk and then bed. I'll call Baba "¹⁰

This is a fragment of a dialogue from Act One Scene Two of *Larins Sahib*. It shows Dalip Singh as a great patriot who is devoted to fighting for the freedom of the country. 'The Twelve year old Maharaja' and 'Victory of the Lion' is strong, brave and determined 'just like' his father, Maharaja Ranjit Singh. Given his firm and resolute determination, the audience seems to have reasons to believe that Dalip Singh would definitely succeed in throwing them out of India. Here 'them' refers to 'Angrej' meaning Britishers, our colonial masters.

Gurucharan Das's *Lorins Sahib* contains very snappy witty dialogues interspersed with 'Indianized' words such as 'Angrej', 'burra Sahib', 'Pukka Indian', 'salamming', 'Wazir', 'Zindabad' to name a few among them. The dramatist, it can be said followed the suggestions of Rahul D' Cunha who produced the play on stage in 1990. He held that inside the theatre, the performance of the actors could be better if they rendered the dialogues not in 'English' but in 'Punjabi' as well. Gurucharan Das acted accordingly. All this appear in a later edition of the play.

Characters of the play appear real to us because they use the language of common man. The play gives us a flavour of what a realistic Indian play seems to be all about. The opis required in the play has to be quite realistic. Gurucharan Das has given in *Lorins Sahib* lengthy stage directions to be followed by producers of the play. The stage has been set in a manner that everything appears real to us. The play starts. "The Governor –General's camp on the banks of Satlej, halfway between Lahore and Delhi. It is 20 March 1846, a month after the battle of Sobraon, better known as the First Sikh War. Hardinge Currie and Elliot are present inside tent. A half -hidden coolie is drowsily pulling the cord of the swaying punkha. In the far right –hand corner are a number of hammock-like chairs with arm-pieces to rest weary legs. They have an attachments screwed on to the right arm –piece which swings out to hold a glass. Hardinge has a glass of Brandy in one hand and a cigar in another. Currie and Elliot look on solicitously."¹¹ The dramatist is describing the opis of the play. What the audience see on the stage in the opening stage directions of Act One Scene help them in visualizing the Governor General's camp on the banks of the river.

The props in *Lorins Saheb* are all the objects or pieces of furniture that the dramatist has employed for a stage show. There is a long list of props. One can refer to the punkha, the hammock like chairs,

the brandy, the glasses, the cigars, the bed/ diwan/ charpoy, the toy sword, the hookah, the chogah, the Kohinoor, the cushans, the turban, the throne and the mirror besides many others. Their potential has been fully exploited for setting up a stage that is as close to reality as it is viable.

As to the use of 'melos' (music) in Lorins Sahib the audience notice besides 'the Bengal Infantry March', the sound of drums-'triumphant music' and as soon as Rani is banished the atmosphere seems to be charged with muffled shouts with "Bells, confusion, music". Also while directing the play on a stage it is necessary to record some sounds and play them whenever they are required. For example bringing a Persian wheel on the stage will be difficult. So recording the slow cracking of this wheel and the sound of the water splashing out will do the needful.

The audience seem to be facing a terrible dilemma. They do not know what to do. They are in a moral dilemma. Henry Lawrence has been portrayed as 'Lorins Sahib'. A colonizer is depicted as a kind of savour who strikes a responsive chord with the 'natives of Punjab. He says," Mr. Edwards, I am less concerned with the integrity of Mr. Lumsden than with the fact that there are at least a thousand persons outside who would be glad to have his head. Fortunately Indians are civilized people, and do not resort to violence easily. In other land, by now we would have been burnt alive."¹² Lorins Sahib's remarks on Indians as civilized people not barbarious as they are commonly described arouses our curiosity in him. It is no wonder that Rani Jindan felt an overwhelming desire to meet him privately at night in the guise of a singer called Zubheda Begaum. 'The regent' who contributes dramatically to the emotional and economic well-being of his subjects is touched by this noble gesture of Rani Jhindan. She offers a diamond to him as a gift, as a mark of friendship, as a moment to be preserved and bequeathed to posterity. In course of the secret meeting she had with him she narrated how the diamond once one of the 'proud possessions' of her late husband' was a jealously guarded privilege for Lorins Sahib to be had and preserved because of its links with late Mahraja Ranjit Singh, 'the lion of Punjab whose sad and sudden demise changed her life for ever. Things were beyond repair. Strange are the ways of life. Rani warned Lorins sahib not to wear the diamond in public as it was a symbol of friendship. She had premonition of imminent disaster. Lawrence is fired at but he escaped unharmed. Within her kingdom some of her well-wishers turned hostile to her. Conspirators like Lal Singh and Tej Singh tried to convince Sher Singh that he should ask Lawrence to return the diamond to Rani. This would amount to tarnishing her image in public. Her plight and predicament is described in graphic details.

In the final analysis it can be said that Gurucharan Das has successfully depicted the conflict between the colonizer and the colonized in 'Lorins Sahib'. It is a realistic drama well-constructed with a strong characterization and a fine prose style. The portraiture is amazingly life like. Realism lies everywhere in the play, in the characters, plot, setting, lexis, melos, ophis, dianoa, ethos, mythos and so on. Some of the details may appear superfluous and arbitrary. But they are essential. They define human life and realism. Realism by nature is 'visually and textually mimetic'. It is both real and spectacular.

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