

THEMATIC EVOLUTION IN INDIAN ENGLISH DRAMA IN THE POST- INDEPENDENCE ERA

(Special reference to Asif Currimbhoy, Nissim Ezekiel, Girish Karnad & Mahesh Dattani)

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Abstract

Drama has been an integral part of the literary culture of India. Since the Vedic times, plays have been performed to instruct, inform and entertain the Indian masses. Bharatmuni's treatise on drama, *Natyashastra*, has been one of the oldest treatises on drama in the world. However, with the advent of the British in India, a new kind of drama was introduced; ever since then, Indian drama has undergone a massive transformation. As the country stepped into the twentieth century, the influence of the English language gradually began to be seen on drama as well. With playwrights like Sri Aurobindo and Rabindranath Tagore choosing to write in English, Indian English drama took its birth. Over the decades, especially in the post-independence era, many dramatists took to writing in the English language. The themes and the subject matter chosen started to assume a more contemporary outlook and with the surge of the great Indian middle classes, the dramatic scene underwent a total changeover. With the arrival of dramatists such as Nissim Ezekiel, Girish Karnad and Mahesh Dattani, there has been witnessed a thematic evolution; from showcasing tales from epics and religious texts, we now see political issues, social issues, gender discrimination, sexual abuse and even alternate sexualities.

Keywords: Thematic evolution, Transformation, Social and Political Issues, Contemporary, Current.

Theatre is life. There is no art, no craft, no learning, no yoga, no action, which cannot be seen in it.

- Bharata's *Natyashashtra*

Drama is an audio-visual medium of expression and hence has been a very powerful and effective medium of expression all over the world since humans became civilized. It has been regarded as one of the strongest and most discussed genre of literature in any language. The birth and development of drama in Greece, Rome, England and India emphasizes upon the fact that it has always been an integral part of culture, highlighting and evaluating moral commitments, religious convictions, philosophical approaches, and social and political changes in various

countries. Drama is a mimetic representation of life combining in itself the real and the fictional, art and reality and presenting the events and characters within a dimension of space and time. It combines the qualities of narrative poetry with those of visual arts. *The Natyashashtra*, one of the oldest texts on the theory of drama in the world, was hailed as the Fifth Veda in ancient India. Popularly believed to have been written by the sage Bharatmuni, it incorporates all the aspects of drama – subject matter, themes, details of histrionics, description of characters and types, plot, the ‘Rasa theory’ and even stage settings which included light, sound, music, costumes and appearances of the actors. In India, as in the rest of the world, drama became a medium to connect the varied classes and strata of society. As an instructional mode, drama became the most befitting medium to narrate and enact stories from the religious texts such as the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, the Geeta, the Vedas and various Upanishads. It is also interesting to note that in a diverse country like India, drama was seen to be present in every region – be it the ‘Nautanki’ in the northern part, the ‘Yakshgana’ in the Karnataka, the ‘Natak’ in the western parts or the ‘Jataka’ in the eastern part of the country. Its presence was formidable and it was considered as the most effective medium for education and entertainment.

With the advent of the British in India, the dramatic scene began to change slowly. To keep up the connectivity with their dramatic traditions in England, the British in India began to invite touring drama companies to cities like Kolkatta and Mumbai. These companies would enact plays of Shakespeare, Shaw, Wilde and the Restoration dramatists. The elite and the educated Indians who had either visited England or had gone there to study, were well-versed with the English dramatic tradition; hence, back home they not only watched with interest the productions of the touring companies, but also began to think on the lines of introducing English plays on their own. Indian English drama came into existence when Krishna Mohan Banerjee wrote ‘The Persecuted’ in 1813. However, the real journey of the Indian English drama began when Michael Madhusudhan Dutt wrote his play ‘Is This Called Civilisation?’ in 1871. Written in the English language, and with not too much of stage apparatus, both the plays could not cater to the mainstream audiences. After this, there was visible a gap for nearly three to four decades when no English drama was written by an Indian writer. The fervor of the Indian struggle for independence had caught on the imagination of the Indian people at large; and hence too, the Indian English dramatic scene could not really flower. It is only in the early 20th century that Indian English drama gathered momentum under the influence of British Drama. The pre-independence era saw some stalwarts like Rabindranath Tagore, Shri Aurobindo, T.P. Kailasam, A.S.P. Ayyar, Lobo-Prabhu, Harindranath Chattopadhyaya and Bharati Sarabhi. These dramatists contributed immensely to the evolution and development of Indian English drama. Bajaj et al, in their article, ‘Emerging Trends in Indian English Drama’ point out:

Indian drama got a new footing when Kendriya Natak Sangeet Akadami was started in January 1953. National School of Drama in 1959 was another development. In the 1960 by suitable mixing of various styles and techniques from Sanskrit [and] western theatre, the modern Indian theatre was given a new, versatile and broader approach at every level of creativity. (151)

Though the current article deals with the evolution of dramaturgy in Indian English drama in the post-independence era, yet note has to be taken of dramatists like Rabindranath Tagore, Shri Aurobindo and T.P. Kailasam. The former two sage poets were the first Indian dramatists in English worthy of mention. It is interesting to note that Tagore did not write his plays in the English language; he first wrote them in Bengali and then translated them into

English. However, Tagore's name has to be an integral part of the Indian English dramatists as he was one of the first playwrights to earn international acclaim through his plays translated in English. The subject-matter and themes dealt by Tagore in his plays were related to mythology, folk tales, folk lore, social practices and religious beliefs. The plays that Tagore translated were *The Cycle of Spring*, *The Sacrifice*, *Karna and Kunti*, *The Ascetic*, *Malini*, *Red Oleanders*, *Natir Puja*, *Chitra*, and a few more. One of the most frequent recurrent themes found in Tagore's plays is love – youthful and romantic love between man and woman, the love between a worshipper and Almighty, parental love and love of God. *Chitra* for example depicts the forlorn love between Chitra and Arjuna in the Mahabharata. Chitra was raised as a boy by her father who was the king of a province and who did not have a male heir. But Chitra falls in love with Arjun and the two spend a blissful year together. Chitra bears a son and remembers her love for Arjun forever. What makes Tagore's play noteworthy is the fact that it contains unsurpassed speeches of love and beauty for Chitra and Arjun. *Sacrifice*, considered to be Tagore's finest drama, is based on the religious practice of offering animal sacrifices to Goddess Kali. A little girl appeals to the King to not let her goat get sacrificed; the ensuing description of the King trying in vain to save the goat and then questioning the entire practice of 'offering sacrifices' was revolutionary to say the least. *Malini* is the story of a princess deeply influenced by Buddhism, but whose leaning towards Buddhist teachings irks the Brahmins of the Kingdom; they plot to banish her from the Palace, however, her devotion to Buddhism wins favour with the subjects of the Kingdom; finally after much drama of plotting, conspiracy, love, hatred and selfishness, *Malini* emerges as the supreme follower of Buddhist principles and forgives her detractors. Tagore's plays are translations, but he brought on stage many burning issues on the international arena which would otherwise have been relegated to oblivion. The subject matter that he chose for his plays were of course based on mythology, folk-lore and folk music, but the treatment that he provided to his themes was unprecedented in Indian drama. Moreover, Tagore's own personal exposure to English drama in England gave him ideas about dialogue writing, stage setting, character selection and even aspects such as sound and music. Though Tagore did not bring about a technical revolution through his plays on the stage, yet his plays portrayed boldly subjects that were taboo in the then Indian society. Such subject matter and themes paved the way for the future playwrights in English in India to experiment further and put on stage new ideas and make use of innovative techniques. Deeply grounded in Indian ethos, Tagore's plays opened up new frontiers for Indian English drama by catering to an educated class within India and to the British too about the root cause of problems within the Indian society. To Tagore belongs the onus of featuring India's culture on an international arena. This could of course have been possible only through the English language. The poetic renditions that Tagore could bring about in his own translations brought a great deal of awareness about the existence of Indian English drama to the literary and dramatic world at large.

Another bilingual author, T.P. Kailasam (1884-1946), who lived for six years in England, applied his two languages discreetly. He composed Shakespearean-style English drama on the Mahabharata, but used spoken idiom for his Kannada plays on contemporary themes. He could recite his works extempore, and the stage directions in his six English plays (*The Purpose* – 1924; *Karna* – 1946; *Keechaka* – 1949) reveal a strong theatrical sense unlike many closet English dramatists in India. Sri Aurobindo (1872-1950) and Harindranath Chattopadhyaya (1898-1990) adopted a technique of telling a story through dialogue, chiefly on mythical or religious subjects.

The playwrights discussed above provided the much needed beginning to Indian English drama setting the stage for the dramatists in the post-independence era. The literary and the dramatic scene in the Indian English drama in the post-independence era had a relatively shaky start. With a large proportion of the population unable to understand English as a language, English plays were found to be difficult to be staged as audience for the same was not readily available. However, the ground created by Tagore, Sri Aurobindo, T.P. Kailasam and others did inspire many dramatists to continue to write plays in English language. Urban centres like Mumbai, Kolkatta, Bangalore and Chennai saw the emergence of audiences that were very comfortable with the English language and in fact began to demand plays in English. Inspired and influenced by world renowned dramatists like Ibsen, Tennessee Williams, Samuel Becket, Thomas Brecht, John Osborne, Eugene O'Neil, Edward Albee, Arthur Miller, Harold Pinter and many more, the Indian English dramatists got the space and opportunity to experiment new and innovative ideas and bring in new techniques of stage. Crisp dialogue writing, lights, music, sound and such other details began to be incorporated in the plays. Themes and subject matters too underwent quite a change. From mythological and religion oriented plays, the dramatists now began to have themes that were close to the emerging middle class with their specific needs, demands, problems and interpersonal relationships. There was observed a paradigm shift in the way plays were now written and enacted on stage. Playwrights such as Asif Currimbhoy, Gurcharan Das, Pratap Sharma, Khushwant Singh, G.V. Desani, Nissim Ezekiel, Manjula Padmanabhan, Girish Karnad and Mahesh Dattani have taken Indian English drama to a different level altogether. From a thematic revolution, the Indian English drama witnessed a huge turnaround in terms of the applied dramaturgy too. As a matter of fact, Indian English drama became the torch-bearer of the experimental theatre in India. Even playwrights in other languages like Mohan Rakesh, Badal Sircar, Vijay Tendulkar (who also wrote a couple of plays in English) adopted the western style of enactment. Mohan Rakesh for instance was the supreme exponent of the stream of consciousness genre of theatre in Hindi. It is interesting to note that these playwrights chose themes from the Indian middle class milieu, but the treatment they provided to their plays was decidedly influenced by the Western theatrical practices. Social and individualistic issues became the primary focus of the Indian English dramatists; gone were the depictions of stories or folk-lore from the ancient epics, Vedas and Upanishads. Even when Girish Karnad used Indian mythology for his plays, the reference was definitely contemporary political and social ethos.

Contemporary Indian drama, deviating from classical and European models, is experimental and innovative in terms of thematic and technical qualities. It is not an off spring of any specific tradition and it has laid the foundation of a distinctive tradition in the history of world drama by reinvestigating history, legend, myth, religion and folk love with context to contemporary socio-political issues. A cumulative theatrical tradition evolved by Mohan Rakesh, Badal Sircar, Vijay Tendulkar and Girish Karnad, prepared the background of contemporary Indian English theatre. (Sharma 9)

This article presents an analysis of four dramatists in the post-independence era, who have helped to give a shape to the Indian English drama, and who have brought it to a global stage. A study of the four major Indian English dramatists – Asif Currimbhoy, Nissim Ezekiel, Girish Karnad and Mahesh Dattani - will give a better idea about the evolution of the dramaturgy in Indian English drama in the post independence era. The thematic evolution happened in terms

of undergoing a massive change in the focus provided by the Indian English dramatists to the social issues and individual concerns. One of the first dramatists who began to write plays substantially in English was **Asif Currimbhoy**.

Asif Currimbhoy (1928-1994) in a way revolutionized the Indian English dramatic scene. He wrote nearly 30 plays, and for the first time these were plays which could be performed on the stage with a perceptible degree of performance impact and ease. His main focus was on contemporary political and social issues. The themes of his plays were quite controversial, but he boldly gave voice to the angst of thousands of people deeply affected by the Naxalite Movement, India's fight to free Goa from the Portuguese, the famines of Bengal and Maharashtra, conflicts between Hindus and Muslims, racism, the aimlessness of the youth (in the 1960s), the vicious cycle of poverty and many more such issues.

Anita Myles makes a significant remark when she says:

Asif Currimbhoy laid the foundation of modern Indian drama in the 1950s liberating it from the static traditions of Tagore and Aurobindo. . . He had an amazing variety of subject-matter. He was preoccupied with history and current politics, socioeconomic problems, East-West encounter, psychological conflicts, religion, philosophy and art. (17)

Currimbhoy first got noticed in the arena of Indian English drama when he wrote the famous Bengal Trilogy plays – *Inquilab* or *Revolution* (1970), *The Refugee* (1971) and *Sonar Bangla* (1972). With the help of bold dialogues and psychological exploration of situations that led to the birth of the Naxalite movement, in *Revolution* the dramatist delves deep into the psyche of characters who became part of this movement and who were then directly or indirectly affected by it. Failure of education at large to provide viable solutions to all problems plaguing our society, resorting to violence finally for breaking free from the shackles of exploitation, the ever raging conflict between the rich and the poor, and innocents caught in the cross-fire of the fight between revolutionaries and the establishment is brilliantly portrayed by Currimbhoy. *The Refugee* captured the emotions of the Bangladeshi refugees who ran into India hoping for a safer existence, but who were in fact exploited, taunted and shunted out from the country at the smallest pretext. The saga of partition comes to the forefront in *Sonar Bangla* – this time though the partition woes of Bangladesh are spoken about. Millions lose their homes both in India and Bangladesh as the border crossings take place. Violence, betrayal, cheating, feeling of being uprooted, sense of terrible loss and such emotions are described by Currimbhoy in a most befitting manner. *The Doldrummers* (1960) was based on the faithlessness that had crept in the young generation born around the time when India got independence. Sense of failure grips four characters presented in the play, who are feeling lost and who are unable to grapple with the increasing commercialization of urban society. It is interesting to note that this play was banned in India because of 'objectionable language' used in it. The 'sense of freedom' that Currimbhoy tried to depict here was not taken kindly by the audience at large. *Goa* (1964) is regarded as one of Currimbhoy's most remarkable political and historical play. Recalling India's struggle to free Goa from the Portuguese, the playwright deftly and successfully weaves a racist agenda in the play. The dichotomy of a young teenage girl Rose who is half Indian and half Portuguese is presented by Currimbhoy with moving symbolism, imagery and oblique references to the colour codification from which even today the world has been unable to free itself.

The Dumb Dancer (1961) was based on the life of a Kathakali dancer who somehow has convinced his own self that he is Bheem, one of the Pandavas. Unable to shake off his illusion, the dancer is finally confined to a mental asylum. Having worked in many countries like France

and the U.S.A., Currimbhoy was extremely well aware about historical events taking place the world over. For instance, Chinese invasion of Tibet, the escape of the Dalai Lama to India and the subsequent political equations of India and China were described in another brilliant play *Om Mane Padme Hum* (1970). *The Hungry Ones*, one of Currimbhoy's best known plays was first performed in New York in 1966. It talks about a group of American researchers who tried to unlock the 'mystery' of India – how in spite of rampant poverty, class and caste tensions, violence, hunger, deprivation of basic amenities, the Indians still continue to smile through and remain hopeful for a better tomorrow. The East-West encounter is brought to life successfully with the play *Darjeeling Tea* (1971).

The myriad of themes tackled by Asif Currimbhoy speaks volumes about his ability to pen issues that were largely left untouched by most of the Indian English dramatists. Thematically, Asif Currimbhoy stands at par with other contemporary dramatists in other languages like Badal Sircar, Mohan Rakesh and Vijay Tendulkar. His major contribution to Indian English drama has been to provide it with respectability and reputation. His 30 plus plays have offered an in-depth analysis of problems and issues facing India in the post-independence era. Bhat et al, in their article 'Asif Currimbhoy: The foremost Indian dramatist in English' comment:

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, melodrama, 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. (249)

Moreover, the staging of his plays abroad, specifically in the U.S.A., gave a global recognition to India as a country struggling and emerging out from the shadows of the 200 year old British rule. Students of Indian writing in English were also finally exposed to an Indian writing that was of global standards. To have the ability to cover so many aspects concerning a huge country like India, is worthy of special mention to say the least. Indian drama which was largely speaking, confined to mythological and religious plays based on epics, lives of saints and musical drama, got a new lease of life when Asif Currimbhoy began to write plays that were contemporary, related to the Indian milieu, and ones that bespoke of the true spirit of the Indian culture. However, as far as application of dramatic techniques was concerned, Asif Currimbhoy failed to break new grounds. He was of course much advanced as compared to Rabindranath Tagore in terms of technical aspects of presenting the plays on stage, yet Currimbhoy was more of a writer of plays rather than a performer. The literary value of his plays cannot be undermined at all; however, on the technical aspect, his plays were found to be wanting. There was no pattern or a definite style of writing that emerged in his plays for the later dramatists to follow. The very core of a play is the conflict that it presents; in Currimbhoy's plays however, there was a lack of dramatic conflict. As a playwright, he was just caught up on doing justice to the subject-matter that he chose to present; the technical aspects – like elaborate stage directions – were largely speaking left out, leaving much to the director's imagination. The dialogues are neither crisp nor interesting to continuously retain the attention of the audience. The complex themes and an absence of appropriate dialogic presentation rendered his plays full of weaknesses that could not be accounted for in the stage performances. In the era of experimental theatre dramatists are not expected to follow unities of time and place; but in Currimbhoy's plays, the constant shifting of place and time zones were confusing for the audience to register. In the absence of elaborate

stage directions, appropriate attention could not be given to aspects such as light, sound and music. Hence, overall experience of watching an Asif Currimbhoy play was high on literary value, but pretty average on the performance aspect, or rather, the visual aspect. Long dialogues that presented the given situation or a character's psyche were lost out in labyrinths of dullness and lack lustre command on language. In spite of the presence of a number of characters on the stage, at times the dialogues assigned to one single character were so long, that they appeared to be more of a monologue rather than 'dialogue'. There is no doubt that Asif Currimbhoy was a prolific playwright who produced plays at very frequent intervals and who in a way provided a much needed impetus to Indian English drama. He moreover displayed ample courage in choosing to write in a language that was largely thought of as the language of the oppressors. Currimbhoy continued to write in the English language and brought about a fresh outlook to the Indian English drama.

Nissim Ezekiel (1924-2004) was recognized more as a poet rather than as a playwright, primarily because he began to write plays after writing poetry for more than 20 years. *Nalini*, *Marriage Poem* and *The Sleepwalkers* are three of his early plays published in the year 1969. Later on he also wrote *Song of Deprivation* and *Don't Call it Suicide* (1993). Ezekiel was greatly influenced by G.B. Shaw in terms of selection of themes as well as application of dramatic techniques. The middle-class urban society was what interested Ezekiel the most. His themes and subject-matter was also based on the Indian middle-classes. Problems related to marriage, hollowness and hypocrisy of the middle-classes and the struggle of the common men/women in their everyday lives are generally the issues focused upon by Ezekiel. Jolly Malyalam in the article 'India Hyphenated, the Pervading Theme in the Three Plays of Nissim Ezekiel', comments:

The three plays of Nissim Ezekiel: *Nalini*, *Marriage Poem*, and *Sleepwalkers*, are all cross-sections taken from the lives of urban, middle and upper class Indians. As Ezekiel suggests in his plays, an average Indian is a curious mixture of two influences. We are modern as well as ancient. In certain aspects we happily embrace modernity whereas in others we hold on to our old views. It can be tentatively put forth that, modernity influences only our apparels or our 'looks' whereas our outlooks ever remain strictly conservative. We find it truly hard to bring out a synergy of these two. This clash between modernity and conservatism that decides what India and 'Indianness' is today, forms the central theme of these plays. This dilemma and the resulting hypocrisy gets reflected in our lives, language and relationships with ourselves and with others, is dealt with both sympathetically and harshly by the playwright. (1)

With the help of three major characters – Raj, Bharat and Nalini – Ezekiel in his play *Nalini* brings out the pretentiousness of young corporate executives, who make a big show of being polished, suave, cultured and liberal minded, but who are actually as conventional as the older generation was. At the outset such men as Bharat and Raj pose to be equalitarian in their outlook towards women; but internally they express a dislike for women who are trying to carve a niche for themselves. The women who assert their individuality, who are ready to break traditions and conventions, and who believe in being independent irk men like Bharat and Raj. Bharat in fact tries to patronize Nalini, but she understands his limited intellectual prowess, and immediately reacts sharply and walks out on him. There is a time when both Raj and Bharat feel threatened by Nalini. Through brilliant dialogues and a deftly woven satirical strain, Nissim

Ezekiel drives home the point that in spite of modern day education, Indian middle-class society has still not been able to shed its principles of male superiority and male dominance. It may make a fuss about providing equal rights and opportunities to men and women, but the mentality of the people belonging to this society still remains bonded in age old customs and ways of thinking.

Lack of love and togetherness and a total absence of companionship forms the base of Ezekiel's play *Marriage Poem*. It depicts the mid-life crisis of two couples who cannot keep on the magic of love and camaraderie and who look for solace from relationships formed outside the married life. In contrast to Nalini, Ezekiel presents Mala, a thirty-five year old homemaker, who is agonizing over the fact that the 'newness' from her married life has vanished and hence she feels that her husband Naresh is seeking the friendship of another woman. Dependent, traditional and conservative in her outlook, Mala is scared of the fact that Naresh may simply walk out on her. They are almost strangers living under the same roof; it is interesting to see how none of them have the courage to break free from the rotting marriage and establish new relationships. Mala finds her outlet in Mrs. Lall to whom she confesses all her woes; whereas Naresh finds peace in his relationship with Leela. Another couple facing the same crisis is Malati and Ranjit. Forced to stay together, these two have no notion of what real companionship means. Frustration, dejection and isolation runs high in all the characters shown in the play, but more so in the three women depicted – Mala, Malati and Mrs. Lall. Ezekiel also points out the sense of loneliness experienced by Leela, Naresh's confidante. She is totally aware that Naresh has to live with his wife as separating from her will be a very complicated process, and that his heart lies only with her; yet, she feels jealous and possessive of Mala. Neither woman can claim to be satisfied with their own condition. Each has to carry the burden of the relationship that has been imposed on them and they do so in the name of keeping up the pretention of being socially accepted.

The Sleepwalkers is a satirical take on the Indians' fascination with everything that is American – from products to people to infrastructural systems in place there. Written in the style of the absurd theatre Nissim Ezekiel made fun of the Indian obsession with western things. It had become a way of thinking that anything that is from the west will necessarily be good. The dramatist has presented eight characters who stand in a semi-circle on the stage and constantly demand American things, refusing to modify their own selves to be able to match the western standards. The typical mentality of the Indians in the 60s and the 70s is captured brilliantly by Ezekiel, when he shows his characters as unable to even think of Indian things and Indian systems. Hollow enough to not work hard themselves, these eight characters represent different strata of society; their sycophancy is focused upon as each of them represent the Indians' desire to look west for satisfying all their needs. Each one of them is out to impress Mr. Morris, an American publisher of a magazine, who strangely opines that the media should discourage the process of thinking in order to have a balanced society. It is ironical to observe how all the eight characters instantly agree with Mr. Morris to encourage people not to think so as to have a happy society.

Song of Deprivation is basically a telephonic conversation between two very modern sensual lovers referred to as "He" and "She". The two characters continuously request for their privacy from the audience and carry on their conversation either directly or with the help of indirect/oblique language. The two characters represent the modern day youth who are largely speaking confused about their own identity, social security and societal approval. They want to have their own way but then are scared of being ostracized from the society. Modernity had

taught them how to be liberal and demand their own freedom; but they lack the courage to defy the conventions of society openly. *Don't Call it Suicide* is a play in two Acts that talks about the death of a young man who is believed to have committed suicide, but it is actually not clear whether it was suicide. There has not been an accident or report of a murder; yet the young man has been found dead, so suicide is being taken as the reason for the demise. Mr. Nanda, whose twenty five year old son commits suicide, is shattered by the event. Surprisingly his wife is pretty calm and in fact advises her husband to forget the incident and look forward to other things in life. The young man's wife Meeta who is now a widow lives with the family but is sadly ill-treated by every family member except Mr. Nanda. Ezekiel once again raises the question of women being subalterns in the Indian system and how society is still intolerant towards their needs.

Nissim Ezekiel was greatly influenced by Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter; and hence in his plays we can see the similarity of the dramatic techniques used by the great British dramatists in the early twentieth century. Like Shaw, Ezekiel also included elaborate stage directions in his plays. It is significant to note that Ezekiel's plays were first performed and then published later on. In his own words:

I can't claim to have a whole dramatic theory. I believe that the plays are written for performances and not only for reading.

All of Ezekiel's plays had sub-titles – a technique that he used most effectively to heighten the effect of the play's message. The subtitle of *Nalini* was *A Comedy*; *Marriage Poem* was aptly subtitled *A Tragi-Comedy*; *The Sleepwalkers* was given the subtitle *An Indo-American Farce* and *Song of Deprivation*, though a one act play was subtitled *A Comic Morality*. In the *Marriage Poem*, Ezekiel did not have acts or scenes; a change of scene was indicated merely by lights going dim slowly and then brightening up to reveal the arrival of another character. First introduced by W.B. Yeats, this device was successfully used by Ezekiel. The result was that the audience could watch the entire play's enactment without any distraction of changing of Acts or division of scenes. The use of masks was introduced in *The Sleepwalkers* where the dramatist does not show the faces of any of his characters. A sense of mystery just like the Absurd plays is thus created with the help of this technique. Ezekiel was not only trying to create a sense of mystery, but he was also using this mask technique to show that each human being has two sides of personality – one is that which is exposed to the world and the other is the private self. Masks hid the real identity of the characters portrayed and also showed possibility of lie, deceit, cheating and betrayal through them. This play also used most effectively the device of 'repetition'; it in fact begins with the 'Lord's Prayer' which is recited repeatedly throughout the play. The light and sound effect interwoven in between the dialogues of the characters and the recital of the prayer enhanced the performance manifold. The very fact that all the characters were made to stand in a semi-circle was ample proof of the attention that Ezekiel paid to each of his dramatic techniques. Had the characters been moving around and expressing their views on the American obsession, the play would not have sounded so convincing and effective. In the *Song of Deprivation* Ezekiel deliberately did not use names for his characters; he simply called them 'He' and 'She'. Thus the two characters became role models for an entire generation that was battling for its identity and individual freedom. On the stage too, the characters are at times hidden from audience's view as a screen is placed in front of them. Though the dramatist shows their closeness through a series of dialogues, yet he does not clarify whether the two characters' love was consumed or not. This abrupt end to the play in fact created unlimited possibilities for the audience to arrive at their own conclusion. When the play was staged, it was apprehended

that the confusion about the end, the lack of stage paraphernalia and the uncertain identity of the characters would not make it successful; but on the contrary such innovative technique was greatly appreciated and a sense of identification could be had by the audience. Nissim Ezekiel wrote limited number of plays; but he succeeded in introducing to the Indian English drama themes and techniques which so far had not been exploited or used on the Indian stage. The influence of great dramatists like Samuel Beckett and Thomas Brecht opened up new vistas on the horizon of Indian English drama. Ezekiel was never shy of experimenting both in terms of themes and techniques. He had an inherent knowledge of theatre and stagecraft and he used these extensively in his productions and in his writings. In fact Ezekiel is perhaps the only Indian English dramatist who combined the mask technique of the Japanese Noh drama, the Brechtian model, the symbolism of W.B. Yeats and the idea of absurd theatre as popularized by Beckett and Pinter.

Among all the Indian English dramatists, it was **Girish Karnad** (b. 1938) who took it to the highest level of performance and literary value. The first Indian dramatist whose plays were performed at the Broadway, Karnad wrote extensively and intensely about themes that were Indian but with the help of dramatic techniques that were greatly influenced by the western theatrical practices. Mathew Bhaskar, in his article 'Girish Karnad's *Naga-Mandala: A Myth of Chastity*', points out:

Girish Karnad has enriched the Indian drama by virtue of his dramatic genius. His originality as a dramatist lies in his extraordinary skill of using myths, history and folktales to make the drama lively, thought-provoking and gripping. (145)

For most of his plays Karnad chose the plot outline and subject matter from Indian mythology, epics and Kannada folk-tales too; but they were relevant for contemporary social and political milieu and were universal in nature. Anita Myles points out:

Karnad's contribution to drama. . . through compact plot construction, perfect interaction of characters and employment of appropriate language for conversation provides a pleasurable action to the audience. (69)

His play *Yayati* (1961) has characters and story line taken from the Mahabharata. *Tughlaq* (1962) is based on the life of Sultan Mohammad bin Tughlaq who ruled in the northern parts of India in the fourteenth century. Karnad used folk motifs in his play *Hayavadan* (1970). *Naga-Mandala* (1990) has its source in two oral tales from Karnataka which Karnad first heard from A.K. Ramanujan. *Tale-Danda* (1993) speaks about Basavanna, a social reformer of Karnataka in the twelfth century. *The Fire and the Rain* (1998) once again was inspired from an ancient legend of the Mahabharata. However, Karnad's play *A Heap of Broken Images* (2005) is different from all the earlier ones. Set in a television studio, it talks about a modern age woman writer who failed to impress readers and critics alike in her mother tongue, but who won rich accolades when she began to write in English. *Flowers* (2007), was a reinvention of Karnataka's popular folktale. *The Wedding Album* (2008) is Karnad's most recent play and unlike the other plays focuses on modern day issues such as marriage, influence of the internet, relationships that are going for a toss and the dynamics of Indian middle-class families.

Yayati is the story of the King who has been cursed with the old age syndrome in his youth itself and who then goes about begging of everyone to take his old age and substitute their young age to him. People show sympathy to him but none agrees to his pleadings. Finally his own son agrees, becomes old in the bargain and the king retains his youthfulness once again. In a modern context Karnad brings in the problem of generation gap through the story of *Yayati* the

king. Today's youth would hardly ever pause to think and consider the demands of the older generation as they are running around simply to satisfy their own goals and ambitions. The idea of 'sacrifice' is absent from the mind of the modern youth. *Tughlaq* was based on the life of the emperor Muhammad bin Tughlaq. An accomplished scholar, effective orator and a violent monarch, Tughlaq was obsessed with the idea of controlling his subjects with an iron hand and to think of himself as a representative of God. His decision to shift the capital from one city to another was not poor in itself; but the implementation of it was carried out very poorly. Instead of shifting his administrative offices, he ordered the people to leave their homes and reach the new city within a short span. So autocratic was Tughlaq that he did not even hesitate to resort to violence on those subjects who delayed the shifting to the new city. In modern perspective, *Tughlaq* is Karnad's take on current political scenario in India. He indirectly suggests through this play that religion proves detrimental to the progress of a nation. Power and people intoxicated by power are hardly interested in what way the nation is going in, with their primary aim being to fully enjoy the allotted powers. *Hayavadan* has the theme of man's perpetual quest for identity and exploration into the truth of human relationships. The idea of this play has been taken from a collection of ancient Sanskrit stories Kathasaritsagar. Kapil, a man of the world, falls in love with Padmini, the wife of his close friend Devadatta, who is an intellectual. When the affair is finally discovered, both the friends commit suicide. Padmini then interchanges the head and transplants them to different bodies. *Naga-Mandala* highlighted the issue of women's suffering. Rani is married to Appana who locks her up each day and spends time with a concubine. An old lady suggests that she make a curry with a forest root which will change Appana's heart and will bring him back to her. However, this curry instead of being eaten by Appana is tasted by a Naga, who then falls desperately in love with her. He disguises as Appana each day and spends time with her. Finally, when the truth is discovered, Rani has to go through the 'agni-pariksha', a test of virginity. The theme of women empowerment comes to the fore when Rani boldly rejects her husband and in fact puts down conditions if Appana wants to live with her. Karnad also through this play makes a case of censoring poor dramatists. Both the themes are interwoven deftly into the main plot of Rani and Appana.

In his next play *The Fire and the Rain* Karnad gave a contemporary meaning to an ancient legend, that obtaining of knowledge does not necessarily mean wisdom too has been gained. A young Brahmin does harsh penance to win the boon of knowledge from Indra; he does get it, but then being unwise he falls a prey to lust. The fire in the title of the play suggests lust, anger, thirst for knowledge and violence; while the rain suggests compassion, forgiveness, grace and life. *A Heap of Broken Images* depicts the problem of language. Karnad who has written all the above plays first in the Kannada language and then translated them into English, was trying to explore the issue of regional language vs. English language. New age technology has somehow pushed the cause of depending on English as the global language. Television, internet, video, cell phones etc. are all based on the English language and push for accepting English as the preferred language. This is the exact dilemma that is going on in the mind of Manjula Murthy who began to write in the regional language but was not successful at all. She then began to write in the English language and was an instant success. Karnad commented on this play:

The play is all about my response to the electronic age; how it affects your emotions. It is based on real-life experiences.

The Wedding Album was written by Karnad directly in the English language. Unlike his other plays it has not been first written in the Kannada and then translated into the English language. Karnad has played upon the theme of how the system of arranged marriages works in

India. A contemporary Indian middle class family is in the picture and the chief protagonist Vidula whose marriage has been fixed with an NRI boy is presented as the epitome of the typical hypocrisy for which Indian middle classes are well-known. Questions about generation gap, hidden desires, sexual liberty for which the modern youth craves, and the dynamics of a family trying to cope with past associations and feuds is brilliantly described by the dramatist. While the older generation may constantly bicker about the younger generation's indifferent attitude to traditions and upholding of Indian culture and take their desire for sexual freedom as a crime, Karnad drives home the point that the older ones have themselves been indulging in such 'unconventional' practices.

Thematically thus, one can see that Girish Karnad presented a wide range to his audience. He did use mythology and folk-lore extensively for the writing of his plays, yet the contemporary relevance of each one of them cannot be ruled out. In terms of the usage of dramatic techniques, Girish Karnad displayed an amazing range of western theatrical practices as well as the Indian 'Natak' traditions. Girish Karnad's plays can best be summed up in the words of Anita Myles:

Girish Karnad received wide acclaim for his plays because they are rooted in Indian mythology, folklore and history, yet they have a Western sensibility. He is certainly a modern playwright for he examines the crisis of an individual who invariably encounters deep psychological and philosophical conflicts. He is gifted with the knack of universalizing an individual's predicament which in turn gives his work a world wide appeal. (78)

Girish Karnad almost set the stage for the emergence of the most prolific and prominent writer of Indian English drama – **Mahesh Dattani**. Born and brought up in the city of Bangalore, Dattani, originally a Gujarati grew up watching plays in the Gujarati language and also in English. Dattani began to write plays in the late 1980s. He has written stage plays, radio plays, screenplays for films, dialogues for films based on his plays, directed most of his plays, performed as an actor, and has also directed films. With the arrival of Mahesh Dattani, it can be said that Indian English drama flowered and has come to be reckoned as significant literary force in the gamut of Indian writing in English. Angelie Multani comments:

In so many ways Dattani stands for a new generation of Indians who write in English. He doesn't debate the polemics or traps of the choice of language, there are no identity conflicts or postcolonial angst in his work . . . For him, his writing is reflective of the 'here and now', of modern contemporary urban India . . . (11)

Dattani and Karnad are the only Indian dramatists whose plays have been performed at the Broadway. The themes that Dattani has tackled in his plays speak volumes about his ability to bring on stage subjects that are generally pushed under the carpet. Indian urban society generally chooses to remain tight-lipped when it comes to issues such as gender discrimination, alternate sexuality, child sexual abuse, incest, greed, rupture within the sacrosanct 'family' system, communalism and so on. But Dattani pulls apart the façade of 'everything is fine with us' attitude displayed by the urban Indian classes, and lays bare the ugliness that is being hidden under the rug. Dattani's plays have thus generated tremendous interest both within and outside the country as they feature themes that modern Indian English drama had not included in its gamut.

One of Dattani's most loved plays around the world has been *Tara*. It is the story of two conjoined twins, a brother and sister duo, Tara and Chandan. Born conjoined, they are surgically

separated by a doctor in Mumbai, Dr. Thakkar. A difficult and a delicate operation is required to separate the twins. The operation becomes a complicated procedure not from a medical viewpoint, but more so, as the mother of the twins – Bharati – and her father, a powerful Minister in the Karnataka government, connive with Dr. Thakkar to give two legs to the ‘male’ child, despite the fact that out of the three legs that the twins have between them, two are more attached to the female child’s body. The doctor is bribed by the powerful grandfather who convinces the twins’ mother too to pay more attention to the male child rather than to the female child. Pushing all clinical considerations to the background, Dr. Thakkar, lured by the attraction of monetary benefits, literally ‘steals’ the leg from Tara, the female child, and gives it to Chandan, the male child. However, nature and science have so far not provided for such interchange of body organs in humans; hence, the forcibly ‘stolen’ leg from Tara does not attach itself to Chandan’s body and in a few days’ time, withers away, and has to be removed surgically again. Thus both the twins grow up as physically handicapped. Tara as a lame ‘girl’ is made fun of and laughed at by other girls in the neighbourhood. The mother Bharati, feels pangs of guilt at her dastardly act, and in order to atone for her ‘misdeeds’ she showers abnormal love & affection on Tara. But all the love in the world cannot make up for Tara’s loss. Dattani mocks at the urban, educated upper classes of India, who in spite of their global exposure, still resort to such ignoble ways. The desire to have a full and complete ‘male’ child is still so strong, that a differently abled girl child is accepted. Dattani pulls apart the artificial mask of equality that the urban upper classes wear all the time. Santwana Haldar in her article on gender discrimination in *Tara* correctly points out:

The preference for the male child is so common in [our] society that the surgeon could be easily managed for the wrong done to the girl child. The conspiracy was the master plan of Bharati's father, who being rich and influential... badly needed [an] heir... Hence the surgeon was bribed for doing the unethical job . . . Surprisingly, Bharati agreed to the proposal of her father... Only after the leg was wasted on Chandan's body, Bharati was tortured by a sense of sin and behaved hysterically. (Prasad 104)

Dattani’s play Dance Like a Man is one of his most telling comments on gender discrimination and the demon of patriarchy. While in Tara he showcases the terrible effects of genderisation on the female child, Dance Like a Man tells us about how even a male can be made to suffer the effects of gender discrimination. Jairaj, the son of a rich businessman and a self-claimed social reformer, Amritlal Parekh, takes up dance as his profession. Considered to be a ‘woman’s domain’, Amritlal is horrified at the very thought that Jairaj is willingly wanting to step in to becoming a woman! He tries all wily tricks to stop his son, going to the extent of throwing him out of the house as well, to help his son become a ‘man’. However, Jairaj continues to dance and cannot think of anything else as his profession/vocation. It is now that the foxy Amritlal bribes his daughter-in-law, Ratna, into pushing Jairaj to the sidelines in such a way, that he can never rise to become a ‘great dancer’. Little do Amritlal and Ratna realize that in their efforts to make Jairaj into a ‘man’, they in fact compromise with all the dreams and ambitions of his life. Jairaj is pushed to unimaginable corners of solitude and alienation. Jairaj falls a prey to patriarchy, and through him Dattani makes a strong statement that genderisation victimizes even a man.

Bravely Fought the Queen talks about the sham of a ‘sacrosanct joint family’ that prima facie exhibits togetherness and connectedness; the two brothers – Jiten and Nitin – are co-owners of an advertising agency, and their wives – Dolly and Alka – together take care of their old mother-in-law, Baa and the two houses respectively. However, hidden beneath this façade of

*a happy joint family is an entire saga of betrayal, deception, lies, violence and uncontrolled sexual behaviour. Having grown up in the shadow of a violent father, Jiten too sadly learns the same traits; he ends up becoming a regular wife-beater and inflicts violence on his wife Dolly at a time when she is carrying their child. The result is a spastic daughter Daksha. Nitin, the younger brother, and Dolly & Alka's brother Praful, are in a homosexual relationship, which is not revealed till after Alka's marriage. The play ends with the cocooned complacency of the Trivedi family ripped apart by the playwright and the ugly reality brought about with a violent jerk. The domineering patriarchs – Jiten, Nitin, Praful and Baa – throughout the play are desperately trying to 'control' the women, but in the process, their own weaknesses and dishonest means come to the surface. Lalitha, the wife of the Trivedi brothers' employer Sridhar, acts as a catalyst to the two women – Dolly and Alka – as she first portrays to them an independent woman; however, there too Dattani pulls the curtain of comfortable relationships. Dattani does not hesitate to suggest in this play that upper class urban India too indulges in violence within the family construct. In *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai* Dattani has presented the angst and the terrible feeling of fear experienced by the homosexuals in India. Limiting his locale to the urban class of India, Dattani talks about the isolation and alienation felt by six homosexuals – Kamlesh, Sharad, Ranjit, Bunny, Ed/Prakash and Deepali (a lesbian) – who are huddled in a claustrophobic flat on a sultry evening in Mumbai. The trials and tribulations of these homosexuals are brought about with a brevity rarely witnessed in Indian English drama.*

In *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*, Mahesh Dattani dares to be vocal about a group of subalterns who are normally reprehended with aversion in society that is the 'gays'. This is the first play by an Indian dramatist to handle openly gay themes of love, partnership, trust and betrayal. Kamlesh, a gay betrayed by his partner 'Prakash' alias 'Ed', gets heartbroken. Moving from Bangalore to Mumbai, he begins living in the flat of Sharad and develops a gay relationship with him. (Myles 123)

In one of his most landmark plays – *Thirty Days in September* – Mahesh Dattani has dealt with a subject that is just not spoken about in the realms of urban upper class Indian society. Child sexual abuse and incest are issues that the urban educated Indians believe and propagate does not exist among their kind of society. However, through the characters of Mala, Shanti, and Vinay, Dattani breaks this myth totally. Commissioned by an NGO – RAHI – to write a play on child sexual abuse, Dattani mercilessly described how Mala's life is destroyed by her uncle Vinay who begins to rape her since she was just seven! Her mother Shanta moreover chooses to keep quiet about this dastardly act despite the fact that she was herself a victim of her brother's incestuous behavior. The play is a psychological insight into victims of child sexual abuse and incest, which not only destroys the life of the mother, but the repercussions are seen in the daughter's life as well.

Final Solutions was Dattani's take on religious tensions and communalistic mind set of urban India. Through the characters of Javed, Babban, Smita, Ramnik Gandhi, Daksha/Hardika, and Aruna, the entire issue of communal riots is discussed. Dattani spares no one in this play; Hindus or Muslims, none of them get any preferential treatment. With the help of masks and a Greek style chorus, Dattani displays how religion converts normal people into fanatics; he also shows how the Us. vs. Them situation has become so dark and sinister, that it has almost become impossible to break free from it. Hindus and Muslims are always looking for excuses to be one up; history and the pain associated with the partition of India and Pakistan has still not been

forgotten. Hence, when Ramnik Gandhi tries to atone for the sins of his father and grandfather, Hardika appropriately reminds him of how Zarine's family had ill-treated her for no fault of hers.

The themes tackled by Dattani thus are of a myriad nature. From gender discrimination to alternate sexuality, to child sexual abuse and religious tensions, Dattani has included themes that were not touched before by any Indian English dramatist. His themes are rooted in the contemporary social milieu. They showcase issues that are concurrent with the present generation and are easily identifiable with. Moreover, the way Dattani has written his plays with the help of short, crispy dialogues, conversational style, a pinch of humour to lighten up the atmosphere, symbolism, sound, music and dance, has touched a chord with the audiences all over the world. Together with Girish Karnad, Mahesh Dattani has transformed the scene of the Indian English drama altogether.

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