

ASIF CURRIMBHOY'S THE DOLDRUMMERS: A STUDY IN HIS VISION AND TECHNIQUE

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Abstract

Asif Currimbhoy is a notable Indian English playwright of the post-independence period and has been called “India’s first authentic voice in the theatre” by Faubion Bowers. He is a playwright of social purpose and essentially wrote plays to be performed in theatre. Known for the variety and versatility of his plays, Currimbhoy deals such topical themes and issues like race, class, gender, politics, capitalism, poverty, colonization and human relationships. *The Doldrummers* (1960) is a play with a serious theme--- it discusses the plight of alienated youths who live in the doldrums. Rita, Tony and Joe live in a fashionable shack at Juhu Beach in the suburbs of Bombay. Rita is passionately in love with Tony and makes all possible effort to keep him away from Liza, the ‘technicolour doll’ and a prostitute. Joe, who calls himself Tony’s friend but does not belong to their background, is a Ph.D. and talks like a philosopher. The warm relationship that Rita and Tony share could never win Joe’s appreciation and goodwill perhaps because he was “kill-joy and kill-truth put together”. He manages to convince Rita to adopt prostitution to earn money and buy Tony expensive presents in order to prevent him from visiting Liza. However, things take a dramatic turn when Joe commits suicide leaving behind Rita and his child in her womb and also creating an unbridgeable gap between Tony and Rita. Like Shaw, Asif Currimbhoy looked upon theatre as the most feasible medium to reach out to his audience, and wrote plays of social realism to jerk the audience out of its slumber. The present paper focuses on Asif Currimbhoy’s vision as a dramatist and the theatrical techniques and devices that he employed in the play *The Doldrummers*. Currimbhoy’s use of English language as a medium of expression, his ability to handle bold themes and contemporary social issues, his extraordinary art of characterisation and plot construction, and the use of new theatrical techniques and devices that assisted him to lay the foundation of Indian drama in English also comes under the purview of this paper.

Keywords: - Asif Currimbhoy, theatre, Indian drama, English language.

Faubion Bowers, the acknowledged writer in Asian Studies and theatre, in his essay “The World of Asif Currimbhoy” states that “In sharp contrast to our own playwrights, very few Asians have been able to be prophets both at home and overseas, especially in theatre.... Another exception is Asif Currimbhoy, I think, for he has now begun to emerge more and more clearly as a playwright of international stature” (Bowers 4). Asif Currimbhoy (born 1928) emerged as a notable Indian English playwright in the post- independence period. According Bowers he was “India’s first authentic voice in the theatre” most likely because he ventured to write country’s first plays of dissent, entertained the culture of independent and outside the box thinking, chose controversial and most relevant themes challenging the contemporary society, embodied them in impressive dialogues, constructed plots in an avant-garde manner and employed new theatrical techniques and devices to his plays with the dual motive of presenting these plays on the stage and stirring his audience to think, react and act.

Asif Currimbhoy, a non-practising Khoja Muslim, who began his career as a dramatist in 1959 is associated with such a family background where he received the liberal mindedness of his father and was groomed by a social worker mother. But Currimbhoy confesses in a letter to Subash Saha of Calcutta that the greatest encouragement came from his wife Suraiya who gave him “stability and sanity through home and love”. While his early education at St.Xavier High School (Bombay) exposed him to the English language, he was influenced by Western culture and exposed to theatre during his stay at the Wisconsin University and University of California. Critics observe that as a student he admired Shakespeare, witnessed a number of dramatic productions and was quite alive to the various trends in drama in the United States. All this went a long way in shaping Currimbhoy as a “man of the theatre”. His exposure to experimental American theatre and an avid interest in history led him to compose thirty plays (both long and short) featuring a powerful engagement with the “trigger” called life. By profession a successful company executive, drama and theatre has always remained a passion with him but it is also true that he could not find a producer for about ten years in India in spite of having all the calibre of a versatile dramatist.

Among the very few playwrights of the post-independence period writing plays in English, Currimbhoy has shown immense interest in producing drama. He believes this was the art form which allowed him most to render a live representation of the complexity of socio-political issues related to India and neighbouring countries in the post-independence period which raises ethical questions about humanity in the catastrophic period of decolonization. It must be acknowledged that Western influences, and the introduction of realism, both during the imperial rule and since independence in 1947, have transformed the spirit of modern Indian theatre. A playwright of social purpose Currimbhoy uses it as the basis for the stage presentation of some imperative topical issues of gender, class, race, capitalism, poverty, mass hunger, war and colonization, problems of freedom struggle, rehabilitation of refugees, religious intolerance, human relationship and conflict, and satiation of man’s emotional and physical need. His constant engagement on such vital issues infers and impacts his vision of life. Due to the firm belief that man reveals himself through social and political systems he turns to distant lands and foreign people for comprehensiveness and a wider vision. Like Shaw he holds the view that theatre as ideal entertainment facilitates us to appreciate the relevance of art as a contributing factor in the search for insight and to a realization of man’s essential role in discovering values which sustain his identity and dignity.

Currimbhoy's plays take a deep insight into the conscious and sub-consciousness of human mind to represent mortal joys, sorrows, conflicts, hopes and vision and bear ample evidence to the fact that the 'prophet' has a message to deliver, a vision to fulfil. A keen observer of people and their life style, he is aware of human absurdities and is always in search of the ways and means for the betterment of human existence. K.R.S. Iyengar's remark in this regard is very pertinent: "...this fecundity in alliance with his feeling for variety and talent for versatility makes him the most prolific and the most successful of our dramatists" (Iyengar, 2003:246). *The Tourist Mecca* (1956) tells the story of two lovers who fall prey to the forces of circumstances and in spite of their struggle could not unite. His One Act play *The Clock* (1956) presents the frustrations of Henry and subsequent rebellion against the existing order. *The Doldrums* (1960) has been called a romantic play which is a protest against the indecency and immortality of a prudish society. It depicts an irredeemable life of illicit sex and predicament of modern youth. *The Dumb Dancer* (1961) is a powerful psychological study of a Kathakali dancer who gets totally absorbed in the character of Bhim that leads him to misapprehensions, disaster and ultimately to mental asylum. *Thorns on a Canvas* (1962), staged by Fine Arts Theatre Group in Bombay, is a protest against the art academics sponsored by the establishment. *Om Padme Hum* (1961) is a philosophical play which dramatises some historic attitudes in India and the problem of the quest of 'self'. While *The Captives* (1963) is a play with the background of Indo-Chinese conflict, *Goa* (1964) is symbolic of the colonisation of Goa by Portuguese and its subsequent liberation. Social realism has been depicted magnificently in *The Hungry Ones* (1965) which presents a realistic picture of hunger, poverty and starvation of Calcutta, where the beggars and the destitute throng in large numbers like restless shadows.

Currimbhoy's inclination towards historical and political themes can be noticed in such plays as *An Experiment with Truth* (1969) which highlights a series of historic episodes and the inner struggle of Gandhi's mind revealed through the stream of consciousness technique. *'Inquilab'* (1970), *'The Refugee'* (1971) and *'Sonar Bangla'* (1972) may be called the Bengal Trilogy as these plays deal with the plays of Bengal at different points of time. While the playwright depicts the cruel vagaries of nature--- the severe drought that took place in Maharashtra in 1972-73 in the One Act Play *The Miracle Seed* (1973), he satirizes the problem of the dissidents in politics and political corruption in *The Dissident MLA* (1974).

The Doldrums, published in 1960 by Writers Workshop, Calcutta, was banned by the censors in Bombay for featuring promiscuity and could be staged only in 1969 when the ban was lifted owing to the vigorous efforts of Mulk Raj Anand and Khushwant Singh. Ironically though, the Bombay censorship found the play "notorious" and got "detracted from the serious purpose of this play which speaks about alienated youths in the doldrums" (Currimbhoy 6). The "Doldrums", a word coined by Currimbhoy, stands for the three alienated youths who live in a shack on fashionable Juhu Beach in the suburbs of metropolitan Bombay and are on the verge of stagnation that curtails their overall growth. The play focuses on the problems of dropouts in society, captures their disillusionment and sceptical nature, and their encounter with reality that does not permit them to live wholeheartedly in the world of imagination. As a social realist the dramatist makes a sensitive yet realist approach to the life of the shack dwellers in all its poverty and squabbles, its love, passion and lust, and the innate human nature of the characters. Though the play may be situated in India, it addresses the human condition which is fairly universal in any part of the world. K.R.Srinivas Iyengar, in his essay "The Dramatic Art of Asif Currimbhoy", comments in this context, "...But these down-and-outs, these never-do-wells,

these waifs and wastrels (although one of them, Joe, is a Ph.D. or at least a would-be Ph.D., and something of a philosopher as well) are nevertheless basically human” (Iyengar 16, 17).

A play in two acts, each consisting of two scenes, *The Doldrummers* is a powerful and highly moving drama, exploring human relationships and conflicts. Tony, Rita and Joe, the three “doldrummers”, “play at love and sex and poetry and futility and pathos”. The character of Rita, who decides the action of the plot, emerges more powerful and decisive than the male characters. Her passionate love for Tony drives her to enter the marginalized world of prostitution so that she could buy him expensive presents to prevent him from getting close to the “technicolour doll” Liza. Tony, an unemployed “doldrummer”, is a “pleasant, easy going young fellow, with a slightly vacuous smile, and a magnificent torso” and his interest lies in the guitar that “forms very much part of him”. Unlike Tony, his friend Joe is “intellectual” who “reaches out to ideas,” but there is a “sinister” touch in his character which is exhibited at the moment when he convinces Rita to “change” into a professional prostitute, becomes her second customer, arranges blind dates for her and later on incites Tony to abandon her. He does not seem to believe in the sanctity of love and holds the view that “Rita or Liza, you’re all the same to me. Women with something nice between their legs. No more” (Currimbhoy 40). But Joe fails to survive under the “pressures” that the environment always brings about and later on commits suicide by drowning himself in the sea. He leaves behind him Tony, Rita and their estranged relationship along with “his child in Rita’s womb, the issue of violence and despair”. To quote K.R.Srinivas Iyengar here:

“The “intellectual”, Joe, sets into motion “a train of events”, and it ends where it ends. And yet in his self-invited death, Joe is “blissful: like he has lain down to sleep for ever. All curled up like a baby.” The Tony-Rita-Joe relationship is strangely trinitarian, and even in his absence it will probably endure” (Iyengar 17).

The play was highly appreciated due to the boldness of its theme, forceful plot construction, dramatic nature, arresting dialogue, employment of innovative theatrical techniques and devices, and stage worthiness. Currimbhoy’s craftsmanship is commendable when it comes to the creation of visual and auditory images on the stage to “stimulate the minds, the ears, and the eyes of his audience”. For instance, in the opening scene of Act One of the play he provides every possible minute physical description of the environment. To quote from the text:

“A shack at Juhu Beach, in the suburbs of metropolitan Bombay. The shack is made of thatched cocoanut-palm, and one section of it is visible on the stage... The sea-breeze is similarly erratic and either blows hard or is terribly still in consonance with the tides. At night the kerosene lamps casts shadows on the curtains and one sees the pantomime of life, mutely played” (Currimbhoy 9).

Here, the detail sketch of “the shack made of thatched cocoanut-palm”, “a hammock tied in two cocoanut trees”, the flooring of “fine sand” and image of kerosene lamps casting “shadows on the curtains” is a delight to our visual senses. Then, the description of the sound of sea waves “sometimes lulling and at other times irritating in its intensity and monotony”, “rasping sound of an old (hand) record player” churning a tune and the music of the guitar being played by Tony undoubtedly satiates the audience’s appetite for the audio effect.

Currimbhoy also makes an exceptional use of animal imagery in the play to describe the characters’ traits and to reinforce an idea or thought. For instance, when Liza, in her monologue, says that Joe was a ‘sly old weasel’ the comparison further depicts the deceitful and treacherous

trait of his character. Then again, the playwright delineates Joe’s character in flesh and blood by likening him to a lizard that does not hesitate in eating and thereby destroying its own eggs. Similarly, though Joe did not belong to the environment where Tony and Rita subsisted yet he loomed over them like a dark shadow and gradually ruined their relationship—consumed the love, joy, and peace of life. To quote from the text:

Tony: What did he want from us anyway? He never really belonged to our background.

Rita: You’ll find a Joe everywhere. He really does not belong anywhere, he exists all the same. Lift any piece of rock and you’ll find a lizard like him crawling... eating up his own eggs...

(Currimbhoy 71).

The playwright also employs animal imagery to reinforce the theme of perpetual listlessness and despondency that characterises the existence of the three “doldrummers”. Liza’s monologue in Act One, scene two leaves them mute, as if they had been jerked and jolted out of their world of imagination to acknowledge and analyse the stark reality of their purposeless existence. The three are left ruminating for a while:

Rita: We three, like blind mice, or better still, like three monkeys, see nothing, hear nothing, do nothing ...

Tony: [pretty soused by now] Huh? Huh? Hug? [apishly] [Imitating the traditional monkeys]

Joe: Live in the DOLDRUMS.

(Currimbhoy 50).

It goes without saying that characters are one of the most essential elements of drama because they play a significant role in the development of action of the play. As a skilled artist Asif Currimbhoy creates realistic characters, renders them certain recognizable human traits and qualities, dwells deep into their psyche and focuses on their inner struggle, and articulates their mind through impressive dialogues with whom the audience can identify. Considering that his plays were meant to be staged, he remains precise with the physical attributes and certain elementary features of each character. While Liza has been described as “Liza is a technicolour doll: everything about her is painted. And just in case looks misunderstand, she confirms it with a “come-hither” walk”, the physical, moral and psychological disposition of the three “doldrummers” has been sketched in rich detail in the opening scene of the play:

“There is a hammock tied to two cocoanut trees. In it lies a man in shorts and nothing else, except for a guitar that forms very much part of him. TONY is a pleasant, easy going young fellow, with a slightly vacuous smile, and a magnificent torso. The barefooted girl leaning on the tree and fondling his hair is RITA. She is a young thing, fully physical, and very much in love. Sitting at the foot of the opposite tree, ogling Rita’s legs and thighs, is another small young man, with ratty intelligent eyes. This is JOE” (Currimbhoy 10).

If the beginning of the play is suggestive of a disillusioned and mechanical life of modern youths, the latter half of it is about change, changes in the characters, changes and conflicts in relationships. Though the “train of events” set by Joe shatters their lives for they were definitely not “fashioned from immortal stone” it also helps them to step out of their world of imagination

and accept the reality of mortal existence. Rita, Tony and Joe react in their respective ways to this change--- Rita remains stoic and fights back to survive, Tony loses interest in life and recoils in a world of his own, while Joe leaves silently only to be found dead near the shores of Juhu Beach. When we meet Rita a few months later in Act two, scene one, she has adopted prostitution as a profession and “...for a moment she looks as youthfully attractive as she ever was. Then one notices the almost imperceptible changes that have come over her on the last few months. The voice is harsher, more metallic; the eyes are harder, more lustreless. The body has lost its taut ferociousness. Her movements are no longer eager and spontaneous, but are clearly slow and calculated, occasionally breaking under the strain of a tremendous nervous tension” (Currimbhoy 64). However, she still retains her human touch as in spite of Tony’s indifferent attitude towards her, her passionate love for him does not waver and she continues to take care of him in every aspect of the word. If one recalls Joe had manipulated, convinced and betrayed Rita to “change” to a prostitute but she remains determined to give birth to his child in her womb. The conversation between Liza and Rita by the end of the play shows her true mettle as a lover, mother and individual:

Rita: [her hand involuntarily goes to the cross hung around her neck] No, Liza! No!

Liza: Honey, you’ve got to be practical. You *want* the child?

Rita: Yes! Yes! It’s mine. It grows within me. I cannot deny it life, for better or for worse.

Liza: Be reasonable, Rita. It would be better for both of you.

Rita: The child will be born. It will be cared for... and loved.

(Currimbhoy 76, 77)

Further, Currimbhoy’s use of monologues, choruses, chants of communication, poetic speeches and songs imparts a natural touch to his plays. In fact like Mahesh Dattani, he has created a language for the Indian English theatre that enables the audience to relate and identify themselves with it. *The Doldrums* opens with Tony playing his guitar and singing--- though it is “raw”, “there’s a magnetic aspect to his singing”. Joe’s eagerness to sing is brought to the forefront when he snatches the guitar from him and sings a song based on the historical satyagraha movement. The song exemplifies the boredom and resignation of life that these young people experience. It spells out their passive existence and vanity of life. The song is a medium through which the playwright makes us familiar with Joe’s thoughts and his ideas of an ideal world. The last four lines of the song: “So disturb not our ho-hum/ In this satyagraha Ashram/Leave us alone, friend, just leave us alone/For we... we were fashioned from immortal stone” (Currimbhoy 11, 12) hint that they want to remain aloof from the hustle bustle of main stream life; that they do not appreciate any disturbance or interference in their monotonous and cocooned existence. The song carries yet another message, that of a quest for identity, that of a lack of vision in their life, of an unwelcoming attitude that these “doldrums” have adopted towards any sort of constructive external forces. The underlying theme of satyagraha in the poetic song of Joe reminds us of Raja Rao’s *Kanthapura* (1938) which offers a stark contrast between the passivity of the youths of the doldrums and Moorthy’s active participation in Gandhi’s non-violent struggle for freedom. Then, the introduction of Liza’s monologue in Act One, scene two of the play, jolts and forces Joe, Tony and Rita to ruminate over their futile existence. Liza says, “You know you’re all crazy, the three of you, you know it. You’re all... somewhat schizophrenic as Joe calls it... and you know it and can’t be bothered even to allow it to change. God Almighty, what a smug little world you three have created for yourselves. You

look down on others because they have all, as Joe says, hyena-like red bottoms and curly tops....Turn the mirror upside down sometimes and you'll see yourselves no different. No different, you understand" (Currimbhoy 49).

Asif Currimbhoy's plays reveal that his vision of man is that of a creature which is full of passion to love as well as despise, with potentialities for nobility as well as destruction. His dramatic concepts and ideas are integrated with the central concern of exploring certain universal human situations and predicaments, of discovering new ways to reaffirm man's faith in humanity, and of searching and finding constructive dimensions to man's existence. He takes utmost care to present the outer and inner conflict of human mind and soul as he believes that conflict is the life of theatre.

The valuable contribution of Asif Currimbhoy in laying down the foundation of Indian English drama, his steady and unwavering effort at carving out a niche for himself in the Asian as well as Western theatrical world and his unshakable faith in the power of theatre as one of the ideal modes of entertainment that directly links the writer with the audience confirms that he is indeed a playwright of "international stature". Some of the other notable Indian playwrights who use the English language as their medium of expression include Nissim Ezekiel, Pratap Sharma, Guruchand Das, Manjula Padmanathan and Mahesh Dattani, among the others. Winner of the Sahitya Akademi Award, Mahesh Dattani, has quite efficiently carried on the legacy of Asif Currimbhoy as his plays are primarily performance oriented addressing bold themes and serious contemporary issues. But the fact is that though Indian English Theatre has come a long way it still needs "real theatre" for stage performance in order to deliver a "living dramatic experience" and is yet to gain a sizeable number of audiences.

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