

## INDIAN ENGLISH DRAMA: A PERSPECTIVE

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### Abstract

The multifaceted variety of contemporary Indian English drama is an outcome of a long traditional vintage of drama that India possesses as well as the influences of multiple theories and philosophies which have dominated not only drama but have touched the other genres too. The present scenario of drama portrays a picture which reflects the daring capacity of the playwrights to delineate the current issues by showing the audacious innovations both in terms of theme and technique. The focal points of the playwrights have always been centered on the involvement of myth, history and philosophies which structures the theme of the plays. And the innovative technique serves as an additional purpose by employing shifting temporal setting, masks, dream sequences and others.

The Indian English post colonial drama shows the multi-dimensional, cross-cultural and multi-coloured elements while dealing with any of the issues which reflects the fact that it is an outcome of not only one theatre tradition (Indian) but an amalgamation of both Indian traditional theatre and modern western theatre particularly from the playwrights such as Bertold Bretch, Jean Paul Satre, Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter etc. Hence Indian English drama breaks a new ground by liberating itself from the certain dimension of conventional themes and their treatment, it has now shaped into a new structure and are available for the analysis under the light of contemporary literary theories from what it has been deprived earlier.

### Drama in India:

“The theatrical expression of some kind has been, since primitive and mythic ages, an integral part of Indian life. At the same time, it has undergone wide- ranging, fundamental changes during the last two or three thousand years...Subsequently, its different forms crystallized, were adopted by the upper strata of society and continued as such for more than a thousand years, some of which have come down to us as Sanskrit drama and theatre.” (Jain 1)

The above statement reflects the fact that drama serves as an integral part in our lives as it constitutes a very important proportion of literature. In India, no other literary genres can have a conspicuous tradition as drama possesses. The cultural heritage of India can take drama as one of its most carefully shaped crafts. Drama is not only considered as a literary form but has proved itself worthier than this as critics have more often than not equated it to the Vedas and takes it as

Fifth Veda. This comparison shows the vitality of drama in the rich historical voyage of Indian theatre tradition.

Bharata's *Natyashastra*, the prime manifesto of Indian dramatic tradition, is considered to be the foundation of the Indian dramatic tradition as it prescribes the various norms which are regarded as the most vital elements of drama. *Natyashastra*, elaborately describes poetics of the stagecraft. The detailed and in-depth analysis of drama is defined in the most organized manner. Bharata Muni was an incarnation for the development of Indian theatre tradition as he breathed the theory of drama and stagecraft in his famous treatise *Natyashastra* which deals with all aspects of drama including– stage setting, music, plot-construction, characterization, dialogue and acting. The soul of his poetics of drama can be summarized by quoting one of the celebrated quotation from *Natyashastra*,

“The combination called natya is a mixture of rasa, bhavas, vrittis, pravittis, siddhi, svaras, abhinayas, dharmic instruments song and theatre house.”

In the words of Bharata, poetry (kavya), dance (nritta), and mime(nritya) in life is a play (lila) produce emotion (bhava) but only drama (natya) produces flavor (rasa). He elaborately discusses this fact that the drama deals with eight basic emotions of love, joy, aversion ,sadness, pride, fear, anger and wonder attempting to resolve them in ninth hostile feeling of peace. *Natyashastra* empowered the Sanskrit drama and enhanced the aesthetic beauty by providing it a well structured norms for playwriting. *Natyashastra* ripped the sprouted seeds of Sanskrit drama and produced a bunch of everlasting fruits such as Bhasa, Shudraka, Kalidasa, Harsha and Bhavabhuti, whose works are infused with technical excellence. The golden age of Sanskrit drama produced world-famous playwrights, among whom Kalidasa (370-450 CE) ,who is more often than not compared with Shakespeare. His masterpiece *Abhijnanashakuntalam* is considered to be the finest specimen of a tragi-comedy. *Malvikagnimitram* is a romantic comedy, while *Raghuvansham* traces the history of the clan of King Raghu. Kalidasa is widely appreciated for his beautiful poetry, vast range of characters, spiritual vision and dexterous psychological treatment of characters.

Sanskrit drama witnessed its decline in India after 12th century onwards; the effect of this rejection caused much to Sanskrit drama as it remained in the mind of people only as a part of literature which lacks the vital essence to be called stage worthy. After this the decentralization of the tradition of Sanskrit drama started due to the adaptation of the heritage that Sanskrit drama secured for the upcoming generations and the diversity of culture that India has possessed.

The plays of Sanskrit tradition were followed up in the various states and performed on stage in, Kerala, Karnataka, Andhra, Uttar Pradesh and Gujarat but thereafter, Indian dramatic activity almost ceased due to foreign invasions on India. The new era witnessed the fresh form of the oldest genre, Drama. The adaptation of drama into various local colours had brought a new cult in Indian literature from the 17<sup>th</sup> century onwards. Initiated with Loknatya in almost every sphere of the nation and flourished in manifold regional colours such as “Yatrankirtaniya”, ”Gaan” in Bengal , in Madhya Pradesh, “Mach” and “Ramleela” in Northern India. All these varied colours of drama kept the audience enthusiasm alive even in an age where not much scope for entertainment was witnessed.

A new awakening takes up the traditionalized way of handling dramatic form in India with the arrival of English people in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Almost all the aspect of literary arts, including drama came under the immense influence of western ideology. It touched not only the literary forms but had deeply enlightened the common life of the people too and since drama relates itself directly with the audience it got affected much more than any other forms. This

swift transition had strengthened drama to get into a new dimension of multi-cultural domain. Hence, drama moves radically from its traditionalized form to modernized version. By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, modern Indian drama came up originally in vernacular languages and sometimes translated into English had come into being. This latent urge of Indian drama experimented with the blending of western tradition and Indian tradition. The impact of western tradition can be termed as a renaissance in India as this hybridism of two totally different cultures merged to innovate a new breed of drama.

The pre-independence phase showed the first glimpses of liberty of thoughts of the playwrights to portray the originality under ample of other restrains. Although the crave for independence was felt everywhere in the country, drama emerged even in such chaotic situation and created a soothing as well as revolutionary atmosphere that helped the people to some extent.

During the period of colonialism in India, the playwrights such as Rabindranath Tagore, Sri Aurobindo and Harindranath Chattopadhyaya strengthen the Indian English writing through their creative vitality. They brought a new cult in literature in English writing as producing a work in English was not common to a non-Englishmen. Thus, English language was no longer considered to be an alien language for Indians. Since then the Indian English drama flourished a freedom of sense which deconstructed the mental domination caused by the language that no more remained –alien to us. Tagore (1861-1941) showed his craftsmanship in shaping up drama with soothing power of musical touch, symbolism and allegorical significance. His plays were characterized by the touch of humanism in them. They present the reflections of Tagore's own personality. His best-known plays are *Sacrifice*(1891), *Chitra*(1913), *The Post Office* (1914) and *Red Oleanders*(1924). Sri Aurobindo (1872-1950) was a distinguished genius wrote originally in English but was well versed in the classics of Germany, Spain, Rome, Italy and at the same time he was well learned scholar of our traditional Sanskrit classics too. His well-known plays are *Perseus*(1955), *Vasavadutta* (1957) and *Rodogune*(1958). His plays are steeped in beautiful poetry. Harindranath Chattopadhyaya (1907-1988) was a prominent playwright and an accomplished craftsman in poetry. As far as his excellency in playwriting is concerned it is revealed through his well crafted plays. He took the Indian playwriting in English to a new height through his revolutionary zeal and leftist leanings. He wrote a few devotional plays also, like *Raidas*, *Chokha Mela* and *Tuka Ram*. His other plays like *The Coffin*, *The Parrot* reveal his concern for various social issues.

Indian English writing was greatly served by these three men of letters. Their creations displays their poetical excellence, thematic variety, technical virtuosity, symbolism and moral commitment. This initial phase of play writing could not be considered as the age of perfection as all the plays written in that period were lacking the vitality of being staged. These plays were not suitable for stage production. But this lack was swiftly covered up by the upcoming generation of the playwrights with more developed sense of stage. The emergence of new playwrights helped drama to keep on experimenting not perfectly in English language but in various Indian languages. These playwrights such as Dharmavir Bharati, Badal Sircar, Mohan Rakesh, Asif Currimbhoy, Mahesh Dattani and Girish Karnad are considered to be among the finest playwrights of Indian languages. They gave priority to the techniques of the stage and themes rather than producing their plays in English language. M.K. Naik has very rightly stated that, "In making his Indian characters speak in English, the playwright needs therefore no qualms at all. Let him first create living characters in live situations, and the language will take care of itself." ( Naik 191)

Dharmavir Bharati (1926-1997) based his play *Andha Yug (1954)*, on Indian epic *Mahabharat*. *Andha Yug (1954)* is a political allegory that attacks the contemporary political condition. Dharmavir Bharati shows his capacity of handling the epic theme in allegorical manner to bring out the evils of the corrupt political system.

Mohan Rakesh (1925-1972) another prolific writer shows the vitality of his dramatic sense in his *Aashadh Ka Ek Din (1958)*, the play is considered to be the first modern Hindi play the play portrays the ambiguity of modern times. His other famous plays are *Adhe Adhoore (1959)* and *Lehron Ke Rajhans (1963)*. Badal Sircar (b. 1925), along with the richness of his plays he is also known for his innovative endeavor to create a genuine people's theatre- The Third Theatre. Third Theatre is a fully people's theatre where they not only act as an actor but they also help to support the theatre for further dramatic creations. Third Theatre breaks the traditional way of handling out the theatrical norms as it goes beyond the limits of a traditional theatre. *Procession (1974)*, *Bhoma (1976)* and *Stale News (1979)* are the plays based on this conception of theatre. Thus Sircar's contribution in empowering the Indian theatre cannot only be confined to the certain dimension of his Third Theatre but he has also established his name as a sound playwright too.

Asif currimbhoy is a versatile Indian-English playwright whose plays are concerned with variety of issues and themes. His plays cannot be confined within the certain dimension of themes as it covers a wide range of themes from religion and society to history and politics and art and metaphysics. His famous plays are *The Doldrums (1960)*, *The Dumb Dancer (1961)*, *Thorns on a Canvas (1962)*, *The Captives (1963)*, *The Refugee (1971)*.

Girish Karnad (b. 1938) one of the most influential playwright of post colonial Indian drama, portrays contemporary scenario correlating it to the traditional myth, folklore and history. Although the myth and history are frequently utilized by Karnad in his plays, but at the same time he never moves away from the basic issues of his plays- that is to question the ambiguous condition of contemporary Indian subjectivity. His profound and deep rooted knowledge of Indian myth, folklore and history enlarges the dimension of his themes as he employs the devices not only for the sake of portraying the historical condition but to delineate an allegorical portrayal of contemporary scenario His dramatic sensibility shows a very sustainable path on which Indian drama can look for a well shaped journey towards future. . He uses these devices not just to visit the past but to look at the present and also to foreshadow the future. He uses myth and history to create a new consciousness of the absurdity of human life with all its passions and conflicts. His plays such as *Tughlaq (1964)*, *Hayavadana (1972)*, *Naga-Mandala (1988)*, *Tale-Danda (1990)*, *Bali (1980)* and *Tipu Sultan (1997)* show his perfection in handling the history, myth, and folk tale. He took the contemporary issues under the light of history and myth and endeavors to present a new perspective of such issues.

Mahesh Dattani, is one of the most renowned playwrights of the present scenario. His plays are deeply concerned with the contemporary urban experience. He is a man of versatile genius. His multi-coloured personality can be seen in his art of playwriting, art of direction, production and his art of acting not only that he is also credited for being the founder of a theatre group known as *Playpen*. The portrayal of the present urban scenario with a conflict between tradition and modernity can be best witnessed in his plays. His plays are also got the recognition for his unconventional use of themes particularly in Indian sub-continent. Dattani is not hesitant to write about some uncommon issues such as gay, lesbian and hizaras etc. His famous plays are *Where There's a Will (1988)*, *Final Solutions (1993)*, *Seven Steps Around the Fire (1998)*, *On a Muggy Night at Mumbai (1998)* *Tara (1990)* and *Dance Like a Man (1989)*.

Thus we can easily come to the point which proves the fact that the present scenario of Indian English playwriting is an outcome of a proper blending of the western theatrical mode of consciousness and Indian theatrical techniques. The playwrights of the contemporary times are basically concerned about the deprived section of the society. They are emphasizing the condition of these marginalized parts of the society and try to make these mute entities the voiced individuals.

**Works Cited**

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