

## Asif Currimbhoy as a Post Independent Indian English Playwright

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### ABSTRACT

*Asif Currimbhoy is called as an authentic voice in the theatre as he is successful in producing plays on the stage at home and abroad. The present paper studies the contribution of Currimbhoy to Indian English literature. His plays depict the life of the people after the Independence of India. He is a social writer and writes on social problems of the common people in India. The present paper is an overview of life and some of the early plays of the playwright.*

**Keywords:** Playwright, theatre and presentation.

### I. INTRODUCTION

Asif Currimbhoy is one of the most prolific and versatile playwrights in Indian English Literature. He is rightly called by Faubion Bowers as "India's first authentic voice in the theatre".<sup>1</sup> His plays are not only the expression of thoughts but thoughts are meant for action on the stage. He is the only Indian English playwright who put great effort to enact his plays on the stage in India. Thus Asif Currimbhoy is successful in producing "actable" plays. His plays cover various facts of society and written social, political, historical, art, psychological and religious plays.

He was born on 15<sup>th</sup> August 1928 in Bombay. His father was an arm chair intellectual and a liberal minded person. His mother was veteran social worker. He hails from a family of industrialists who won the title of baronetcy by the British Government. Asif Currimbhoy was a non-practicing Muslim writer. He studied in St. Xavier's High School Bombay. The school exposed Asif Currimbhoy to an environment of the western culture and English language, which gave basic foundation of language at the early stage of his life. Though he studied in the Christian missionary school, he did not miss the roots of an indigenous culture. He studied the *Ramayana*, the *Bhagavad Geeta* and other Indian classics. For higher studies Asif Currimbhoy went to USA. He studied at University of California and graduated in Economics in 1950. Then he studied at Wisconsin University. He stayed in USA for four years and studied Shakespearean dramas and witnessed numerous dramatic trends in drama in the USA. Bayappa Reddy said "this (USA) must have gone a long way in shaping him as a man of the theatre."<sup>2</sup> Hence he had a good knowledge of the theatrical techniques.

Another great influence that Asif Currimbhoy has in his life is Suraiya whom he married soon after he returned to India. She always encouraged him to be sincere and serenity and hard work. She calls her husband a Karma Yogi.

Asif Currimbhoy's job in the New India Assurance Company in Paris gave an opportunity to acquaint French culture and way of life over there. He compared living style in Paris and Indian standard of life. Later he joined the Barma Shell in India as a marketing executive and travelled throughout India, where he come in contact with different people and problems.

The milieu of the pre-Independence, post-Independence and partition of India and Pakistan had great impact on him. During the sixties there was great current of violence in India to quote from Bayapa Reddy as "too much democratization, the lack of aptitude and objectives among students, incompetence among the teachers, crises of conscience and culture among the parents, crippled the education system. The students were thoroughly disillusioned when they knew that their degrees would not get jobs at all. So they often indulged in violence. Much of this has gone into the making of Currimbhoy's plays."<sup>3</sup>

It is one of the funny and ironical things that in India talent must be discovered in abroad before it is recognized at home. In case of Asif Currimbhoy it is true. Rockfuller Foundation in USA invited him to produce his plays. His plays were enacted in Repertory Theatres and Coffee House theatre in Greenwich village. When he returned to India his fame came with him and became an acceptable playwright in India. Then onwards his plays became part of study, research and translation.

After analyzing Currimbhoy's life sketch, one gets the feeling that ours is not to ask why, ours in only to do and die. He died of a heart attack in 1994 on a train returning to Bombay from Calcutta viewing a performance of one of his plays.

## **II. LITERARY CAREER**

Asif Currimbhoy writes 29 plays in 17 years (1959-1975). Out of 29 plays only 22 plays have been published by Writers Workshop, Calcutta. Rest of the 7 plays are short and have not been published till date. Plays of Asif Currimbhoy can be divided into two phases, the early phase covers the period from 1959 to 1968 and the later phase covers from 1969 to 1975. Important plays of the early phase are - *The Tourist Mecca* (1959), *The Clock* (1959), *The Doldrummer* (1960), *The Restaurant* (1960), *The Dumb Dancer* (1961), *Om* (1961), *The Thorns on a Canvas* (1962), *The Captives* (1963), *Goa* (1964), *And the Never Twain Shall Meet* (1964), *The Kaleidoscope* (1964), *Manson* (1965), *The Hungry Ones* (1965), *Valley Of the Assassin* (1966), *The Temple Dancer* (1967), *The Lotus Eater* (1967), *Abbe Feria* (1968), and *The Mercenary* (1968).

The important nine plays of Asif Currimbhoy in the later phase are - *An Experiment With Truth* (1969), *Inquilab* (1970), *The Refugee* (1970), *Sonar Bangla* (1972), *The Darjeeling Tea?* (1971), *Om Mane Pudme Hum!* (1972), *The Miracle Seed* (1973), *The Dissident MLA* (1974), and *This Alien ... Native Land* (1975).

Asif Currimbhoy is well known for using new technique in his plays like-documentary elements in political and historical plays; cinematographic technique; picturesque background and episodic technique. His dramas cover wide variety of subjects like history and politics, social and economic problems, psychological problems, art, religion and east-west encounter etc. The major contemporary problems are brought on the stage. It is very interesting to note that majority of his dramas end with ray of hope, that life gives chance to be optimistic.

The important plays of early phase of Asif Currimbhoy touch various subjects like social, political, psychological, religious, east-west encounter, and so on. The plays like *The Doldrummers*, and *Thorns on A Canvas* deal with social problems.

*The Doldrummers* (1960) deals with shack dwellers in Juhu beach in Bombay. The play presents modern Indian society influenced by western culture. It is a protest against immorality and indecency. The play was banned by the state censors but ban was removed by the efforts of Mulk Raj Anand and Khushavanth Singh. The play was enacted in Theatre Group, New Delhi in 1969. The depressed youth of lower class of urban society is represented by Tony, Joe, Rita and Liza. The play deals with basic human needs of food and sex, hence these characters want to satisfy these instincts which led to rivalry and conflict between Rita and Lizza, and Tony and Joe. The play successfully presents the poverty, squabbles, love, small joy, basic humanity, disillusion, agony and reality in urban life. The play presents a picture of artificial life, a careless and pleasure seeking life which is ruining young boys and girls. Through this play Asif Currimbhoy is giving a message to the Indian mass that the morals and values are not cultivated to the young generation. Hence they are involved in physical pleasure. The drama attacks on the purposeless attitude of the youth, lack of courage and vigor of the modern youth. The play is successful when it is enacted as it has innovative use of audio visual effect on the audience.

*Thorns On Canvass* (1962) is the confirmation of artist faith in Man and Man's creative work. The artist expresses his unique essence of the world. The play is a reaction against the banning of the *Doldrummers*. The play is a satire and protest against all establishment of sponsored art. The play moves around the characters like a patron, who runs an Academy of art, his daughter Malti, a painter, Nela, a dancer, Yakub and Nafesa. The intention of the dramatist is that an elevated art should express one's feelings, ecstasy, and unique essence of the world. Art cannot be taught by training; it should come as naturally as a leave comes to a tree. The dramatist satires the government policies and academy where no real art is produced. A true artist does not require any publicity and does not require any patron. Asif Currimbhoy clearly presents that artist is blessed by God, hence training is not required.

*The Hungry Once* (1965) deals with poverty and the famine-stricken city of Calcutta. The two American Poets- Allen Ginsberg and Peter Orlovsky visit Calcutta. The play presents hunger in the riot torn and the famine stricken capital of Bengal. The two Americans fail to understand the mystery of India. It ends with the two frustrated Americans leaving India. This play is a symbolic play, which has been inspired by American beatnik-poets. It presents socio-political consciousness. The play also focuses on the harsh reality of Indian society, where rich people are exploiting the poor and becoming rich. The rich are becoming richer and the poor are becoming poorer, there is a great gap between the rich and the poor. The social problem of lawlessness, where violence and riots shatters the life of Calcutta. The playwright has not only presented the hunger, but also the other forms of hunger like hunger for external values, hunger for sex, hunger for happier life for common people, hunger for wealth without any consideration for moral values and social codes.

*The Tourist Mecca* (1959) is a romantic play. A group of four tourists come to Agra from different countries like, U.K, U.S.A and U.S.S.R. *The Tourist Mecca* deals with visit of Janet Toffin, the daughter of an American Widow Lady Toffin, to the tourist place Mecca, the Taj Mahal and falls in love with Keshav Singh, a tourist agent. He wants to marry her but Jenet wants to love him but does not want to marry him. The play presents the

several contrasts like lady Toppin who is growing older and Keshav who becomes younger and younger, Toppin thinks her daughter is like herself, but inwardly she knows they are pole apart. Both Janet and Kate are possessively jealous of Keshav, Kate thinks that Keshav is a professional lover but Janet feels he has a sincere love towards her. Their love affair is cut short by the intervention of Lady Toffin. Jennet goes back to USA promising him that she would come for the next holiday. Keshav Singh slips the ring given by her. The playwright is successful in presenting the different experience of tourist. The use of flash back technique makes audience go into the mind of the characters. The language is crisp and lucid. Dialogues are suitable to characters. The new technique like flash back and the use of music reveal the intensity of action on the stage.

The playwright is known for his interest and presentation of religious subjects in his plays like *Om*. The play *Om* deals with development of the Hinduism from the Vedic times. The dramatist makes use of the Vedic and the Upanishad lore to make his play a panoramic sweep of India's spiritual tradition. The main theme of the play is search of God and different paths of salvation. The new technique like one character is used in a one act play *The Clock* which has psychological theme. Henry, a salesman, is the one character in the play; the other characters are revealed through voices and shadows. This play deals with the disappointments and failures in life. The materialism has violated all the morals of human being. One has to take care of spiritual upliftment rather than physical riches. *The Dumb Dancer* too is psychological in content. The specialty of this play is the use of KathaKali dance art form. Bhima is the protagonist who completely identifies himself with the characters of Bhima in the epic the *Mahabharata* that leads to chains of problems. He is so confused that he cannot make any difference between the world of reality and the world of myth, who is treated by a psychiatrist but the psychiatrist himself become insane at the end of the play. *The Captive* (1963) is a play on China war and successfully presents the feelings of soldiers in war. Specifically, the play deals with Indo Chinese conflict of October 1962. It actually probes the Post-partition human Psyche in the Indian subcontinent.

Asif Currimbhoy uses apt title for his dramas, the title of the play suits the morale and theme of the plot. *The Dumb Dancer* deals with the life of a dancer; *Hungry Once* focus on hunger of drought stricken poor people of Calcutta; *Om* has religious theme; *Clock* reveals the fact that time never waits for anyone and man has to get success and spiritual achievement within given period of time; *Darjeeling Tea?* deals with life of planters in the place called Darjeeling; All the plays of Currimbhoy have the titles revealing the theme of the plays.

Language is lucid, natural and suitable to the characters. He uses some Hindi words in his plays like nehi, sabjee, pundit ji, yes mamu etc. He uses picturesque technique and dream sequence to convey the meaning more effectively to the audience. Even the readers can visualize scenes in their minds. Asif Currimbhoy made a great mark in Indian English literature; he took Indian English drama to the highest zenith of literature. He has covered all facts of society in his plays. His plays have the mark of humanity and optimism. It is true that he is India's authentic voice in theatre.

To conclude, the dramatist is one of the most influential and successful representative voices of contemporary Indian life in theatre: the various themes are covered such as political, social, religious, art, psychological etc. The use of new techniques, dream like sequence and several props convey hidden feelings of characters. The language of the dialogues is suitable to the situation and characters; language is simple, lucid, crisp and understandable to Indian audience. The playwright has a cosmopolitan background. He studied in California,

worked in France, lived in India and writes on important international events and situation. The dramatist focuses on human condition everywhere with compassion and truth. Hence his plays have universal appeal. The present research paper is undertaken to present Asif Currimbhoy as an authentic voice of theatre to express injustice, exploitation and sufferings of the different classes of the society. The paper intends to study Asif Currimbhoy's art, elegant craft, the stage worthiness and social concern and his journey to write the mature dramas. The plays evaluate various aspects of dramas like the theme, technique, setting, imagery and his world vision. The study proposes to put together the aspects of his social, economic, philosophical and literary influences which shaped the author under scrutiny.

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