

# Asif Currimbhoy: An Authentic Voice in Indian English Drama

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## Abstract:

Indian English drama has been searching for his identity which comes to an end when Asif Currimbhoy entered in to the field of Indian English theatre. He is Khoja Muslim Indian writer credited more than twenty two dramas in the field of Indian English theatre and considered as the first authentic voice in Indian horizon of English drama. His dramas are base to study the Indian identity, society, culture, politics, religion and many more other values.

**Key words:** Asif Currimbhoy, Indian English drama, authentic voice.

Theatrical tradition in India had distinguished more than a thousand years. It is believed that in India the theatre have originated in 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC. India is the nation of multiple culture and mosaic identity of tradition and religion. Therefore, the theatre in India was influenced with Hindu religion, the cast systems, Sanskrit literature and many ancient language of India. *Mahabharat* and *Ramayan* are the two great epics provided the horizon to expand the territory of theatre in the subject of history, legend characters, myth and many more aspects which provide the base to Indian dramatist. Multiple languages are speaking in India, therefore it has many dramas which were written in different languages. The enriched roots of drama lie in Sanskrit language in India and credit for this treasure goes to Kalidas' *The Natya Shastra* (The Science of Dramaturgy), a Sanskrit handbook written around AD 200 gives the practices in drama, dance, acting, costume, and makeup. In later stage not only the Sanskrit language but Hindi, Marathi, Bengali, Gujarati and all other Indian speaking languages have their own art of drama to perform on the stage.

English drama entered in the fertile territory of India through East India Company. Bengal is the centre to spread the English drama all over nation. East India Company has to bring English theatre in India because of their English officers. Nand Kumar says that:

“English Education in India not only fostered the critical study of western drama and the classical Indian drama, but also gave rise to the English theatre in India. A glance at the development of theatre in India during and after the British Raj serves to illustrate the point.”<sup>1</sup>

There is no doubt that after the colonisation English language boosts its root in Indian land. At initial stage it is difficult for the English officers as well as for the natives to communicate but as time passes it becomes easy to do business and communicate in English language. Indian English drama did not

develop in India smooth way. At initial stage theatres were founded to please British officers and army officers but Indian English drama suffered a great setback due to the growth of vernacular languages and other reasons. Language is the main cause in India that Indian English dramas were not developed smoothly as knife flourished in Butter. For regional plays local languages are the main attractions and for Indian English drama it is difficult to understand for the audience and also for the performance to come with original feelings on the stage.

It is said that, Princess Drama has been waiting for her Prince unlike Cinderella. The early Indian English drama lacks in both prosperity and excellence of artisanship. In general drama requires various accessories like stage, actors and audience. Early Indian English dramatist could not enjoy the advantage of English language to flourish their idea and found difficulty to express their views, culture, society and many more. The way poetry, novel and non-fiction triumph over in the field of English language, the genre of drama failed to sustain its identity in the initial stage. K.R.S. Iyengar writes:

“Indo-Anglian Drama: isn't it like talking about ‘Snakes in Iceland?’ Not quite, but the problem is there, for while poetry, novels, and non-fiction prose can be read in the silence of one's study. Drama can come to life only in the theatre.”<sup>2</sup>

There are many limitation and hindrances for Indian English dramatist to write dramas. Krishna Mohan Banerji wrote the first play, *The Persecuted or Dramatic Scenes Illustrative of the Present State of Hindoo Society in Calcutta* (1831). Later on Michael Madhusudan Dutt translated his own plays into English language. Rabindranath Tagore, Sri Aurobindo and H. N. Chattopadhyaya are three known for their invaluable contribution to Indian English drama. Then most significant playwrights are Girish Karnard, Mahesh Dattani and Pratap Shrama who wrote in Indian English drama. Girish Karnard originally has written dramas in Kannad and later translated into English.

Asif Currimbhoy considered the authentic voice for Indian English drama. Faubion Bowers rightly mention him as, “the first authentic voice in Indian English drama.”<sup>3</sup> There is no doubt that in Indian English drama very few dramatists has reached at the peak and established their legacy as the Indian English dramatist. There is no other dramatists had ever produced the number of dramas in compare of Asif Currimbhoy did in the field of theatre. He is the writer who emphasized on the Indian ethos, cultural value, heritage, political ideology, historical views and many more aspects to present India in Indian English drama and earned world wide as Indian English dramatist. As Peter Nazarath mentions:

“Asif Currimbhoy intervenes the public event with the private to create exciting drama which asks moral questions about humanity in the cataclysmic period of decolonisation”<sup>4</sup>

He had been writing for many years but none of his plays were produced at native land and it is the irony of our Indian art that talent must be discovered abroad before it is recognised at home. This playwright received a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation (JRD 3<sup>rd</sup> Fund) inviting him as a playwright to come to America in 1965-1966. It is really like a milestone for him that his plays done at Universities, Repertory

Theatres and an experimental Coffee House theatre in Greenwich Village. In America he was accepted as a great playwright and when he came to India his fame also followed him and established him in India as acceptable playwright and gave him entry into the academic world of theatre.

Krishna Avtar Agraval divided Asif Currimbhoy's twenty two dramas into social, political, historical, religious categories. He is considered as an authentic voice of Indian English drama because there are many dramas written by him denote the identity of Indian society and its culture. India assembled in her lap so many foreign cultures that came to meet or attack her during the course of history and all of them amalgamated into one another as sugar mingle into milk. Due to this amalgamation, certain critical issues come to the surface such as merging of diverse customs, systems, faiths, rituals and above all their history and many more. This created a complicated Indian society having unity in diversity but sometimes the balance is not maintained and problems arise out of such situations. Indian English Literature was influenced by such aspects of Indian culture. The plays written by Asif Currimbhoy deals with various socio-cultural, political and historical and many other issues related India in his works.

Cindrella has been waiting for her prince and that wait ends with prosperity and joy unlike Indian English theatre produced the dramatist like Asif Currimbhoy. Faubion Bowers says that,

“to work for so long alone in theatre to conform and yet to create, to obey society and yet destroy it with death-ray words, to write plays like bullets needing only the trigger of a national event and even to live in this unappreciative world where fame is awarded others so cheaply and on such a flimsy basis... It will be generation before we can really take the measure of Currimbhoy's true worth.”<sup>5</sup>

He has given more than twenty two dramas to the Indian English theatre which provide the glimpse of India. *The Tourist Mecca* (1959) is a drama about the tourists who came at Agra on a pilgrimage from different nationalities and they get their different experiences at Agra. They are not of one common opinion about the duty, character and culture of the case. In this drama dramatist is successfully handle the views of the people of different nations in a nice way. *The Doldrums* (1960) explores human relationship in a wonderful way. It depicts the postcolonial way of living society affected with colonisation in culture and value of Indianness.

*OM* (1961) is a religious play which represents the man's search for God and outlines, in some of the most theatrically impressionable scenes, the different paths to salvation. *The Dumb Dancer* (1961) is a powerful study of a Kathakali dancer. It is a dance play form the episode of 'The Slaughter of Duryodhana' in the ancient epic of *The Mahbharata*. *Thorns on a Canvas* (1962) is a play which written as a reaction against the prohibition of *The Doldrums* and it is the protest against all Establishment sponsored art. *The Captives* (1963) is the finest example of a political play which reflects subtle tensions and alienations that continues to exist between Pakistan and India.

*Goa* (1964) deals with such crucial political events that affected the politics of India. It is the story of Indian government which took over the Goan land in December 1961. This drama also possesses the allegorical nature with full of political issues and social themes. *The Hungry Ones* (1965) depicts the terrible situation of famines in Bihar and Maharashtra in the early seventies of the twentieth century. This drama has the elements of realism of natural circumstances. *Monsoon* (1965) considers as his religious play. This drama reflects the Christian religion which is pious one and is accepted by the largest number of the people of the world. *Abbe Faria* (1968) is a fascinate biography about a hypnotic Goan-priest in France. *An Experiment with Truth* (1969) is a drama which deals the Gandhian philosophy. It is the political play which discussed the theme of the assassination of Gandhi in 1948.

*Inquilab* (1970) falls under the category of political drama which also dealt with the historical Naxalite revolt that battered Bengal in the 1960s with West Dinajpur District in West Bengal. *Om Mane Padme Hum* (1971) is a historical play with a political movement which based on the fight of the Dalai Lama from Tibet when China occupied it in the fifties. *The Refugee* (1971) is the second drama which falls under the category of Bengal Trilogy, which discuss about a human concern of the exodus of Bangladesh refugee in India in 1971. *Darjeeling Tea* (1971) has a satirical and light comic aspects set in the beautiful tea plantations in the Himalaya range with British-Indian and tribal characters. *Sonar Bangla* (1971) is the historical drama considered the third drama which falls under the category of Bengal Trilogy gives the account of the Indo-Pakistan war in 1971. *The Miracle Seed* (1973) is a satirical drama which satire on especially upon the false social standards of city life and the awfully bad performance of the government about providing relief to the drought affected public. *The Dissident MLA* (1974) is a political play with the social elements. This play denotes the cunningness of the political leaders. *The Alien...Nature Land* (1975) is a drama which discusses about the predicament situation of Indian middle class Jewish family.

There is no doubt that mainly his dramas focus on the India and deals with the Indian identity. We have now many dramatists who originally write in Indian English but drought of Indian English drama came to an end with the entry of Asif Currimbhoy. His drama leads Indian identity at overseas with English language and dramatic sense. Therefore, he is considered as the first authentic voice in Indian English drama.

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