

The Refugee: A Psycho Analytical Study

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Abstract –

The modern plays of Asif Currimbhoy are well known in India and abroad. He emerged as a notable Indian English playwright in the post-independence period. He is a versatile playwright with keen eye for the dramatic art. Written in quick succession, *Inquilab*(1970), *The Refugee*(1971), and *Sonar Bangla*(1972) form a group which could be called the Bengal trilogy. They are concerned with Bengal and its problems at different points of time. The problem of refugees which is introduced as a minor theme in *Inquilab*, becomes central theme in *The Refugee*. It is about Yassin, a young refugee from East Pakistan and his search for conscience in the confusing world of political standard. This one act play is a psychological study of their character and personality.

Key Words- Nostalgia, confusion, conscience, psychology, pangs, miseries, humanity.

Introduction

Asif Currimbhoy emerged as a notable Indian English playwright in the post-independence period. Faubion Bowers commented about him that he was “*India’s first authentic voice in the theatre*”. (Bowers–7) Born as the son of an industrialist in 1928, Asif Currimbhoy was brought up in an environment of ebullient ideas, which in later life formed an integral part of his temperament. British Government had honoured his family with baronetcy for their remarkable achievement in the field of industry. His father was an intellectual and mother, a social worker and naturally this intellectual background might have creatively influenced his dramatic career. His acquaintance with English language helped him attain mastery in the language and his later education at Wisconsin University enhanced his adoration for Shakespeare. Therefore, his experience with various trends in drama in America would have helped him to shape himself as a man of theatre. In an interview to *Commentary*, he talks about his basic education and its influence on his life. He reveals that his exposure to the pre-independence days and the colonial experience shaped his attitude to the colonial syndrome, which was centered on English.

His modern plays were well known in India and abroad. The dramatic groups of American Universities, repertory companies and the off Broadway theatre had staged his plays. Politics and public affairs found abundant expression in his plays. According to Peter Nazareth, “*Asif Currimbhoy interweaves*

the public event with the private to create exciting drama which asks moral questions about humanity in the cataclysmic period of de-colonization". (Nazareth–23) Currimbhoy's job in New India Assurance Company in Paris gave him the opportunity to get in touch with French culture also. Later, he joined the Burma Shell in India as an executive and his extensive travel throughout India enabled him to familiarize himself with different locales and people. It is also certain that his keen observation of people and their life during this time enhanced his theatrical vitality.

Asif Currimbhoy is a versatile playwright with keen eye for the dramatic art. He had been writing plays for many years, but none of his works had been produced at home. He received a grant from the Rockefeller foundation inviting him as a playwright to come to America in 1965-66. At America, he was accepted as a great playwright. When he returned his hometown Bombay, his fame also came with him and set him off as a somewhat acceptable playwright in India also. It also gave him an entry into academic world of theatre, so that the plays he wrote hereafter became the subject of study, research and translation. Asif Currimbhoy has produced 29 plays. Out of them, only 22 plays have been published by Writers Workshop, Calcutta. Rest plays are very short and have not been published yet.

Concept Note

Written in quick succession, *Inquilab*(1970), *The Refugee*(1971), and *Sonar Bangla*(1972) form a group which could be called the Bengal trilogy. They are concerned with Bengal and its problems at different points of time. Set in Calcutta and the beautiful green countryside, *Inquilab* deals with the Naxalite revolt that battered the Bengal in the 1960s. With west Dinajpur district in West Bengal as the background, *The Refugee* is about the influx of Bangladeshi refugees into India during 1971. With the border villages in Bengal as its setting, *Sonar Bangla* presents the trails preceding the emergence of independent Bangladesh. Although Currimbhoy is not an overtly political writer, he has taken considerable pains to present his thought by implication, indirection and innuendo rather than direct statement. His play *Inquilab* is a direct response to the Naxalite revolt in West Bengal, where the agrarian community opted for violence. The play explores, in depth, the Naxalite revolt and is a non-partisan and honest account of the violent events that overtook Calcutta in 1970. The problem of refugees which is introduced as a minor theme in *Inquilab*, becomes central theme in *The Refugee*. Currimbhoy is deeply interested in the exodus of ten million Bangladeshi refugees into India in 1971. The play also seeks to explore the change in status between the refugees of 1947 and those of 1971.

The Refugee is about Yassin, a young refugee from East Pakistan and his search for conscience in the confusing world of political standard. Sen Gupta, who himself came to India as a refugee some 24 years ago and became prosperous through his hard work and diligent application, is now, ironically, sore about the very influx of the refugees. Sen Gupta is a Professor at the university and he belongs to the intelligentsia group of people. He is not only intelligent but a great hard worker and with his hard work he becomes prosperous. He occupies a good place in the society. The play brings out the morose and cold

attitude of Sen Gupta towards the refugees. The plot centres round Yassin, a young intellectual, who flees to India from East Pakistan after having miraculously escaped the machine guns at the notorious 'intellectual massacre' of university scholars by the Pakistani military ruler Yahya Khan. He is welcomed to the household of Sen Gupta, who himself was a refugee 24 years earlier and had been the childhood friend of Yassin's mother Rukaiya. Sen Gupta looks back with nostalgia upon his home town of Comilla in East Bengal and cherishes sweet memories of Rukaiya, his young love, though he is now the father of two children Mita and Ashok. He is genuinely touched by the sad plight of the East Bengalis and his family shares his sympathy. But as days go by, the number of refugees swell they occupy the open fields, idle sewerage pipes, and even Sen Gupta's garage. Sen Gupta's idealism wanes and now he looks upon the refugees as a threat to his own home and community.

The play opens with Sen Gupta's invitation to Yassin into his household. He tells Yassin how the intelligentsia and the Awami League's future leadership were all wiped out barbarously. He wants to keep up the assurance given to his childhood friend, Rukaiya, whose son is Yassin. Sen Gupta is totally unhappy about the refugees who have encroached on the open field, his palm trees and the pond. He strongly feels that the problem of refugees and Bangladesh must have political solution. On the other hand, Mita, the daughter of Sen Gupta, inspires Yassin to concern himself more and more with his refugee brethren. She actively associates herself with refugee rehabilitation programmes, accuses Yassin of deliberately avoiding the refugees as if they did not even exist. Life to her means involvement and action. Her confrontation makes Yassin restless and disturbed. He overhears Sen Gupta saying that the refugees exodus is an undeclared war by Pakistan and that to protect the Hindus who are being persecuted and driven out, India must declare war upon Pakistan. Yassin protests against this. He is a Muslim and still a Pakistani and so his loyalties are with Pakistan. Mita's announcement that cholera has broken out in the refugee camps disturbs Yassin. At night, in the company of Professor Mosin, he goes to the refugee camp for the first time "to look for his conscience". He, at last, decides to work for the liberation of his country. He feels that freedom of thought and action should be preserved in his country.

Conclusion

The play concludes when Yassin goes to the cupboard and takes out the "Mukti fauj" uniform and the rifle to join the 'Mukti Bahini' to liberate his country from the clutches of West Pakistan. He bids farewell to Mita who has helped him to find himself and who, he assures her, will remain his ideal across the border just as his mother had been for her father. *The Refugee* is a neatly structured play with a beginning, middle and an end. The arrival of Yassin forms the beginning of the play. His staying in the house of Sen Gupta is the middle of the play. His decision to liberate East Bengal forms the ending of the play. The tempo is slow and almost even till Yassin decides to help the unhappy brethren of his country. With his decision to support the mighty cause of a struggling humanity, the tempo of the play quickens. This slow and quick tempo adds to the dramatic interest of the play.

Like character novel, *The Refugee* is a character play. The main focus of this one-act play is as much on Sen Gupta as on Yassin – the play is a psychological study of their character and personality. Yassin is a closed character, an introvert who sits smugly in his comfortable cocoon in the house of Sen Gupta. He was neither involved in the freedom struggle in East Pakistan nor is he concerned with the refugees in India. In fact, he has reason enough to abstain from the misery around. It was that “*shattering reality that erased all that followed; blocking pain, suffering and death*”. (*The Refugee* – 17) He survived miraculously “*to continue living without passing judgment, interesting or helping*”. (*The Refugee* – 17) So he keep aloof from current disturbances.

The *Refugee* explores the predicament of humanity caught in the political restlessness, moral mooring and psychological alienation. The solution to the problem of the refugees is offered through Mita, who understands the refugees sympathetically and is deeply concerned with the rehabilitation. For her, life means involvement and action. She wants Yasin to realize that the refugees are as human and real as other people.

“The refugees exist the same way. They’re alive, and oh, only too real, They bring tears to my eyes, their suffering touches my heart, I can’t bear to leave them alone”. (*The Refugee* – 25)

The cry of Mita seems to be the cry of Currimbhoy himself. Thus ‘The Refugee’ presents a psychic transformation of Yasin who is first a shock-shaped self, then condemned insensitive refugee and finally a awakened patriot. It is just as a study in parallelism with the character of Sengupta, who, from a secular idealist turns a rationalist and finally ends up as a Hindu Indian nationalist. The skill with which Asif Currimbhoy traces the subtle change that comes over the characters reveals him as a playwright of great psychological skill. For instance, let us examine Sen Gupta. He is full of sympathy for the refugees at the beginning of the play when he welcomes Yassin into the house. You are welcome. As friends and neighbours you are all welcome. As long as there is enough room to live in and food to share, he promises that there will always be shelter in this town for those who need our help. Many of us came here uprooted after partition settled down, worked hard, built proudly our own positions in life, but not without a sense of responsibility and social purpose. But when the refugees increase in number and occupy even his garage, Sen Gupta's idealism starts waning. He even talks of sealing the borders. He even expresses his irritation at having to harbour Bengali Muslims but checks himself as Yassin is in his study. As Sen Gupta slowly dissociates himself from his ideals, his children become more and more idealistic and committed. Sen Gupta is angry to see the Hindus being driven out of East Pakistan. If this pressure keeps up and the hordes of Hindu refugees grow, how much longer will we in India remain secular? He calls Yassin "traitor" when the latter declares himself to be a Pakistani. But Yassin tells him that he must be allowed freedom of thought and action even though he is a refugee in Sen Gupta's house. Sen Gupta's daughter Mita is the Indian counterpart of Yasin's mother Rukaiya and in that Yasin is to Mita, what Sen Gupta is to Rukaiya. Before parting from Mita, Yassin pours out his heart's tenderness as “*Hush....Hush....the night is deep, the longings*

are far, and one evening in the loneliness of my study room in Comilla, I shall dream of you". (*The Refugee* – 41)

As a realist, Currimbhoy does not hesitate to give a vivid account of the Bengal setting for the play. His description of the house of Sengupta and the refugee camp, where the feeling of uncertainty and insecurity set in, is really picturesque.

"The refugee scene grows with early dawn or evening shadows like an ominous prehistoric beast's death pangs. Groans and wails, skeletoned men and sunken-eyed babies sucking on to shriveled breasts. Maimed human beings reduced to inhuman existence robbed of dignity and essential life".
(*The Refugee* – 17)

His sense of commitment has overpowered his language, which creates a sense of immediate action – the implied physical movements of restless violence, the questions and exclamations, the arresting changes of tone – the one that takes our interest. It sheds light on the character speaking, on the character spoken about, it furthers the plot, it almost functions ironically in conveying to the audience a meaning different from that conveyed to the characters. Currimbhoy's language in the play is very effective and it adds much to the theatrical values of the play. The descriptions of the Sen Gupta household and the refugee camp are picturesque. The way Yassin recalls the 'intellectual massacre' is also vivid and descriptive. It is to the credit of Currimbhoy that he is able to adopt subtle variations in tone and style in the dialogue as the mood of the character varies. Mita says how the conscience of the world is roused :

"The Conscience. The CONSCIENCE. What a word, oh my God, what a meaning. Don't tell me it escaped us all along. The morality of it all. Here we are talking about politics and rescue and refugees and war even taking sides. It's not the lack of commitment that matters, it's the lack of morality that does. And we must..... both aggressor and giver of shelter.... Search for our own conscience". (*The Refugee* – 29)

Here, the dramatist is very sharp, politically, and uses his language creatively and meticulously.

The structure of the play is different from the usual one-act play. Here, Currimbhoy has compressed a full-fledged drama into a single act. Here in *The Refugee* almost all characteristics of a full-fledged well-made play, consisting of exposition, rising action, climax, denouement and conclusion, and also other ingredients like melodramatic situations, high-flown dialogue, etc. The first scene is expository in nature, establishing the background and introducing almost all the characters. The action slowly mounts to a climax and Mita's hysterical outburst, rousing and inspiring Yassin to shake off his indolence and search for his conscience (*Scene III*). In *Scene IV* the devotement begins, and the play comes to a conclusion when Yassin leaves the Sen Gupta household. Mita's melodramatic announcement of the outbreak of cholera and her hysterical speech link Currimbhoy with his well made play models from the West. B.Chandrika also remarks that it is *a fledged play consisting of exposition, rising action, climax, denouement and conclusion.* (*Chandrika* – i)

The play beams back contemporary social and political spectrum and focuses apparently on its psychology of the main characters. As to its stage worthiness, the play enunciates the stagecraft of the dramatist. Ultimately, Asif Currimbhoy is successful in giving us the message that we should love humanity without distinguishing the nationality, caste or creed of a man or a woman, by bringing alive the pangs and miseries of the refugees who were not put under the trouble by their own faults or crime, but it is simply the mounting ambition of the politically-sick people.

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