

LITERARY MOTIFS IN ANCIENT AND CONTEMPORARY INDIAN DRAMA: AN OVERVIEW

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(ABSTRACT)

The paper focuses on the origin of drama and Indian aesthetics in Indian English drama since the ages. Through this study, the researcher endeavors to explore the history, development and aesthetics in Indian English Drama in original and translation works of the Indian classic playwrights. The present paper explores the different phases in history drama in Indian literature. The paper unveils the journey of Indian drama as an art and literature from Bharat's *Nataya shastra* to contemporary Indian drama. The paper graphically covers the origin of drama in India, declining, adaptation and its revival to contemporary scene. The researcher tries to highlight many up and down in the journey of Indian drama. The study peeps into the major developments of Ancient Indian Drama to contemporary Indian English Drama.

Keywords: Drama, Indian Aesthetics, Sanskrit plays, Contemporary literature and

Drama is the most dynamic performing art which is deeply rooted in the religious beliefs and principles of morality and humanism throughout the world. It was the religious element that resulted in the development of drama at initial level but with the passage of time it is established as the most dynamic form of literature that is designed for performance in theatre, where stories are enacted with plot, dialogue, music, signs, props, dance, conventions, perception, stagecraft and text. Traditional Indian drama, which is highly influenced by the Hindu religion and mythology, had achieved it excellence by indigenous artist and playwright. It sustains itself with regional flavor with the local artists and performers. Indian drama originally is not a replication of western influx. History of Indian drama has originated and developed from storehouse of Sanskrit. In India, Bharata *Muni* is traditionally considered to be the father of drama in the history of Indian art and literature.

Indian Drama has a long golden history of over the thousand years. The origin of Indian drama can be traced back to the Vedic period. Hindus over two thousand years ago had their own theory of drama comprised and compiled in Bharata's *Natyashastra* in Sanskrit classic which elaborately discusses the ancient stagecraft and different elements of art of drama. All aspects of the drama such as stage setting, music, plot construction, characterization, dialogue, performance, convention perception, audience and text have been dealt with in detail in the classic book. *Abinaya Darpana* is another Sanskrit treatise on the same subject which not only discusses histrionics but also dwells on different postures in dance. Sanskrit drama, and its ancient glorious history has conformed to these

classical norms prescribed by Bharata, the sage. Sanskrit drama, while following the highest principles of Indian aestheticians mirrored the life of well- cultured and elite class of people. The dramatic works of Bhasa, Shudraka, Kalidasa, Harsha, Bhavabhuti, and Vishvakhadatta are works of sustained technical excellence.

Bhasa is one of the most celebrated and well-known names in classical Sanskrit literature. However, much is not known about the life and literary history of the great dramatist but might have preceded, a period certainly earlier than that of the celebrated dramatist Kalidasa who has praised him in one of his plays by name. wrote thirty-five plays including one act plays and one scene plays. Many of these are full of soliloquies, thereby setting an example for later playwrights especially Kalidas. His masterpieces are considered *Urubhanga* and *Dutavakya* and *Karna* are known for their tragic intensity and dramatic style.

Later playwrights like Kalidasa and Bhavabhuti distinctly bear the imprint of Bhasa's dramatic style. Kalidas undoubtedly is consider the supreme achiever in the genre of drama and is often called the Shakespeare of India though he lacks the range and variety of Shakespeare, he has given the world a profounder spiritual vision of life. His Magnum opus, *Abhijnana Shankutala*, is said to be the most famous and well quoted and completely satisfying romantic drama. Bhuvabhuti wrote dramatic poems rather than stage plays. His *Mahaviracharita*, *Malatimadhava* and *Uramacharita*, reveal the poet's maturity of mind, his sense of craftsmanship and an acute understanding of human mind. The Sanskrit drama flourished in its glory under the patronage of the court and aristocracy till the twelfth century up to the intruders into India. This upheaval era led to a period of decline when it faded away gradually from the stage.

After the Sanskrit drama ceased to be acted and was read only as literature, the theatre of the people flourished for many centuries. The old splendor and glory of drama was gone, but people still needed relaxation and entertainment. Rama Sharrma rightly points out in his words in the preface of his collected plays, "Any play written in India in English has an inherent disadvantage in the sense that it is not very often staged. Stage worthiness being a test for a play.... Most of the plays written in English do not fulfil this requirement" (Sharma IV).

As a result of such challenges music dance and drama survived in varying forms in different parts of India. The *jatias* of Bengal, the folks play of Tamil Nadu, the *Yaskshaganas* of Andhra and Karnataka, the *Kathakali* of Kerala, the *Bhaval* of Gujarat, and the Ramlila plays of north India took place instilling their meaning into the sub-conscious of the race and coming generation. This form of entertainment had but little merit as literature, but they conveyed to the people the essential of Indian culture as K.S.Ramaswami Sastri puts it in his words that they formed a transition from the classical Sanskrit drama to the modern Indian drama and had some influence on the evolution of the former.

It was only under the British rule that the debauched Indian drama received new boost and witnessed a substantial revival. In the words of Krishna Kriplani, the modern Indian drama owed its first flowering to foreign grafting. Under the impact of western civilization, a new renaissance dawned on Indian arts including drama. Moreover, English education system gave an impetus and a momentum to the critical study of not only Western

drama but also classical Indian drama. The newly awakened creative efforts first resulted in translation and adaptations from Sanskrit and English drama, for instance Kalidasa's *Abhijnana Shankutala* was translated into quite a few regional languages. *Mrichchakatika* was translated into *Malthill* and *Ratnavali* into Sindhi. William Shakespeare was the most sought after and among his plays the frequently translated or adopted were *Comedy of Errors*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Hemlet*, *Othello* and *Cymbeline*. Apart from Shakespeare's plays Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer* was favorite play among Indian translators. The Western impact put new aura into the Indian conventional tradition, thereby opening the exciting chapter of modern Indian drama written originally in the vernaculars, and at times, translated into English. By the end of the nineteenth century there were pioneering efforts boldly employing the mother tongue for creative dramatic expression. The earliest dramatists from different regions of the country tried their hand at different forms romance, opera, comedy, farce, tragedy, melodrama, and historical play. Thus, the modern Indian drama was a product and blend of many models. K.R.S. Iyengar has a point when he asserts, "Modern Indian dramatic Writing in English is nether rich in quantity nor on the whole, or high quality" (Iyengar 226). When old puranic themes were handled, various approaches-the reformist, the revivalist the idealistic the iconoclastic, the frivolous and the allegorical-were tried. A few representative plays written in regional languages are Khadilkar's mythological play *keechaka Vadha* in Marathi, Lakshminath Bezbarua and Gohain Barua's historical play *Jaymati* in Assamese, Amanat's opera *Inder sabha* in hindi, Ram Shankra roy's *Kanchi Kaveri* in Oriya, Gurajada Apparao's social play *Kanyasulkam* in Telugu, T.P.Kailasam, *Tollu Gatti* in Kannada, Sundaram Pillai's poetic drama *Manonmaniyam* in Tamil and Tegore's symbolic poetic plays in Bengali an later translated into English. Therefore by 1920 a new drama was thriving in almost all the India languages. It reflected the powerful influence of new movements such as Marxism, psychoanalysis as well as symbolist and surrealist movements.

The theatre movement in the Indian languages had gained momentum under the influence of British drama and the theatre in English could not flourish on expected lines. The first English play in English was written by Michael Madhusudan Dutt in 1871, but for decades together it was not followed up by any sustainable creative effort there are several reasons for the lack of growth of Indian English drama. Drama is a composite art, unlike poetry and novel and involved the playwright, the actor and the audience in a commonly shared artistic experience. It calls for total commitment of the persons concerned in order to create a lasting impact. Moreover the normal medium of conversation in India is the mother tongue therefore, it is difficult to make a dialogue between Indians in English sound natural and convincing. Some Talented Indian English writers have, however, tried to overcome this handicap by choosing situations and language that transcends time and place and by inventing characters who are plausible and convincing.

In the pre-Independence era we have writers like-Rabindranath Tagore, Sir Aurobindo, T.O.Kailasam, A.S.P.Ayyar, Lobo-Prabhu, Harindranath Chattopadhyaya and Bharathi Sarabhai who made a significant contribution towards the growth and development of Indian English drama. Rabindernath, Tegore, in

particular, invested Indian drama in English with lyrical excellence, symbolic overtones and allegorical significance. According to Diana Delavin, “Rabindranath Tagore sets out to unify Indian and western traditions creating plays which have carried out as a mixture of Bengali folk drama and western medieval mystery play” (Delvin 53). His best-known plays are *Sacrifice*, *Chitra*, *Mukta-dhara*, *The Post Office*. *The King of Dark Chamber* and *Red Oleanders* are a beautiful blend of simplicity and complexity as well as conventionality and modernity. His plays no doubt have great variety and richness, but they tend to be too suggestive and symbolic and thus, they lack in dramatic action. According to a critic Thompson, Tagore’s plays are ‘Vehicles of thought rather than expressions of action’. Moreover, Tagore’s plays, though rendered into English, often by the author himself, belong primarily to Bengali drama.

Sri Aurobindo carried forward the tradition of the Elizabethan poetic drama of Marlowe and Shakespeare which was revived by Robert Bridges and Stephen Phillips in the Victorian era. His five complete plays—Perseus, Vasavadutta, Rodogune, The Viziers of Bassara and Eric reveal his dramatic genius abundantly. These were written originally in English. Perseus is modeled on a Greek legend and it depicts the vision of world moving through evil and anarchy towards the attainment of a blissful state. Vasavadutta is a romantic comedy dealing with the love story of Vuthsa Udayam, the young king of Kosambie, and Vasavadatta, the princess of Avanti where Udayam is kept in prison. Rodogune takes sustenance from Shakespeare’s and Jacobean tragedies and shows how the suffering that a man undergoes is not meant to crush him but to raise him to a new consciousness and a higher plane. *Eric* is a comedy of love and adventure showing various stages of love and establishing man’s kinship not only with his fellow human beings but with the universe at large. In form, it observes the dramatic unities of time, place and action and is Aurobindo’s closest approach to the classical form of drama.

Sri Aurobindo is a highly celebrated dramatist and an accomplished craftsman in verse steeped as they are, in rich poetry and romance they reflect the spirit and flavour of the distinctive dramatic type exemplified, though in a somewhat different way by Bhasa, Kalidasa and Bhavabhuti. But they are often labeled “closet drama” meant to be read rather than for performance on the public stage. The plays however reveal Aurobindo’s skill in the portrayal of characters as he has created characters by developing psychological elements which endow his plays with inexhaustible human interest and significance. His plays are imbued with this optimism about the future of mankind. T.P. Kailasam’s plays are based on puranic themes taken from the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. But he renders skillfully in the intellectual idioms of his own day that they make an immediate impact on the audience. His first play, *The Burden* (1933) is based on Bharata’s predicament at the death of his father Dasaratha, and the exile of his elder brother, Rama. Fulfillment is about Ekalavya’s decision to join the Kauravas against the Pandavas, when he reverses his decision he is slain stealthily by Lord Krishna who kills his mother too, in order to spare her the misery of losing her son. The play bears full testimony of the fertile imagination of the playwright. *The Purpose* (1944) demonstrates Ekalavya’s devotion to the art of archery in the forest, his aim being to protect the lives of fawns and the weak from the tyranny of the strong. *The Curse of Karna* (1946) deals with Karna’s belief in intrinsic worth and not accidental birth. The play demonstrates that it is the purpose of

killing, not the means and the manner of the killing that decides the fairness. *Keechaka* (1949) is about the heroin character of Keechaka as after returning from the war he falls in love with Sairandhri and is eventually killed by Valala. Kailasam's exalted and idealized Keechaka of the Mahabharata is entirely different from the mean-spirited *Keechaka*. Kailasam's plays are marked by his quest for greatness and his bold and original approach to characters in the epics. Most of his plays are successful on stage. Harindranath Chattopadhyaya with his leftist leanings and revolutionary fervour added a new dimension to Indian English drama. His devotional plays: *Riadas*, *Chokha*, *Mela*, *Pundalik*, *Saku Bai*, *Jayadeva*, and *Tuka Ram* deal with the lives of saints in his own characteristic style. His social plays: *The window*, *The Parrot*, *The coffin*, *The Evening Lamp*, and the Sentry's Lantern deal with social problems and his deep sympathy for the suffering classes. *The Window* is a discrimination against women. The sentry's lantern condemns imperialism and the Coffin is satire on those writers who live in their ivory towers cut off from the outside world and its problems. Thus, Chattopadhyaya's plays show his commitment to certain values and ideas as well as a realistic depiction of people and their problems. The post-Independence era ushered in developments in the Indian English Drama as R.K. Dhawan observes, "Very recently Indian English Drama has shot into prominence. Younger writers like Mahesh Dattani and Manjula Padmanabhan have infused new life into this branch of writing" (Dhawan 24)

rati Sarabhi is the first noted woman dramatist whose plays reveal the influence of Gandhian thinking her first play. *The Well of the People* (1949) upholds Gandhi's doctrine Daridra Narayan (Worship of the poor as god). In this play, the protagonist, an old woman fails to go on a pilgrimage to Haridwar. She decides to build a well with her savings for the untouchables of her village. Her second play, *Two women* (1952) dramatizes the conflict between tradition and modernity, the material and the spiritual, thus emphasizing that god is within. The pre-Independence English drama is notable for its poetic excellence, thematic variety, technical skill, symbolic significance and its espousal of human and moral values, yet it was not yet fully geared for actual stage production. The sole exception was self Currimbhoy who is rightly hailed as "India's first authentic voice in the theatre" thereby fusing the elements of farce, dance and song, he succeeds brilliantly in creating powerful auditory and visual images that make his plays vitally theatrical. Currimbhoy's plays have a social purpose. He wrote thirty plays dealing with the social, political and religious problems of contemporary society. His more famous plays are *The Hungry Ones*, *The Captives*, *The Doldrummers*, *An experiment with Truth*, *Goa*, *this Alien...native Land*. His plays are marked by social realism, the opulence of his scenes, situations and characters, his experimentation in technique, improvisation of his stagecraft and the mastery of his dialogue.

In the post-Independence period, quite a few playwrights have made a significant contribution to the development of Indian English drama. The most well-known among them is Nissim Ezekiel, a noted Indian English poet who has also enriched Indian English drama. His *Three Plays* (1969) consisting of *Nalini*, *A Marriage Poem* and *The Sleep Walkers* and another play, *Song of Deprivation* expose the hollowness of the urban middle class life, fickleness of modern lovers, fascination for American way of life. He has also exposed the hypocrisy and inhibitive nature of contemporary Indian society. He is a superb craftsman. His plays are known for their symmetric

construction, abounding in irony, wit and humour. They have sharp observation of the oddities in human life and behaviors providing glimpses of cross-section of contemporary society. Though they lack some requirements of the stage, they make pleasant reading and are known for their stage worthiness. In Chetan Karnani has an opinion in his satire of current fashion, in his exposure of pose and pretense, Ezekiel comes very close to the spirit of some English social satirists in the theatre.

Two playwrights Lakhan Deb and Gurucharan Das contributed to the development of historical play. Lakhan Deb's *Tiger's Claw* (1947) is powerful dramatization of Shivaji's killing of Afzal Khan bringing out the heroic nature and nobility of Shivaji. His *Murder at the Prayer Meeting* (1976) is based on the events in Punjab during 1846-47 and is reconstructed from the documents and letters exchanged by the principal characters. It is a remarkable achievement in historical drama in that the playwright has not only recreated history, accurately, but has also captured the essential traits of the historical characters and he also evokes successfully the nineteenth century colonial Indian background. Gieve Patel and Partap Sharma are two other distinguished dramatists. Gieve Patel's *Princes* (1970) and *A Touch of Brightness* (1970). The first play brings out the mental anguish of Virendra who becomes aware of his illegitimacy and the second is a realistic portrayal of the red-light area in Bombay. Both the plays have been praised for their thematic boldness, Character delineation and technical triumph.

Though, the journey of the drama has observed many phases and ups and downs. There are many endeavors have been made in in the direction but there are some challenging issues as marked by M.K. Naik, "Drama essentially a composite art involving the playwright, actor and the audience in a shared experience on the stage-has its own problem" (Naik 256). In his preface to collected plays, Mahesh Dattani himself asserts about challenges, "...the new millennium in a country that has a myriad of challenges to face politically, socially artistically and culturally" (Dattani 3). The contemporary Indian drama in English translation is marked by bold innovations and significant experiments in terms of both thematic concerns and technical virtuosity. It is imbued with history, legend, myth and folklore. Mohan Rakesh, Badal Sircar, Vijay Tendulkar and Girish Karnad are the most representative of the contemporary Indian drama not only in their respective regional languages but also on the pan-India level.

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