

INDIAN ENGLISH DRAMA: A BRIEF SURVEY

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Abstract:

A piece of quality literature always reflects the true picture of the society with its hopes and aspirations, demands and responsibilities. Literature is like a mirror through which we can see the world. Without literature we cannot imagine a society. Like poetry and novel, drama plays an important role of representing different cultural aspects of a society. It not only registers but also manifests the changes the society undergoes. It enables to reconstruct the history, understand the society and comprehend its identity. It portrays the cultural identity of the society to which it belongs. It is the oldest and the most charming form than the other genres of literature. The present paper is modest attempt to study Indian English drama in brief.

Key Words: *Drama, tradition, cultural aspects, reconstruct.*

Ancient Indian Drama has a rich and glorious tradition of its own, is known for its variety of cultures, customs and languages. It came to light before pre-independence era. Drama is a growing art and it requires constant experimentation. The audience of Indian English drama is limited. So plays in English are not widely written like poetry and novel. Regarding this, there is a general opinion that Indian English drama is not so well-developed a genre as Indian English fiction and poetry are. Various factors are responsible for the meager achievement of Indian English Drama. K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar suggests:

Modern Indian dramatic writing in English is neither rich in quantity nor, on the whole, of high quality. Enterprising Indians have for nearly a century occasionally attempted drama in English-but seldom for actual stage production. (Iyenger-226).

The first and the chief reason is the lack of a living theatre. In this regard, Bipinkumar Parmar confirms the great sage Bharat Muni's statements in treaties of Natyashatra:

Theatre is life. There is no art, no life, no craft, no learning and no action which cannot be seen in it. (Parmar Bpinkumar-2)

It is a well-known fact that the real success of a play can be tested only on the stage. A playwright needs a living theatre to put his work on acid test and evaluate its total effects on the audience and thereby get a chance to improve upon his performance. The scarcity of theaters has not allowed him to pursue playwriting, in a systematic and comprehensive way. M. K. Naik says in his article that:

Drama is a composite art in which the written words of the playwright attains complete artistic realization only when it becomes the spoken word of the actor on the stage and through that medium reacts on the mind of the audience. A play in order to communicate fully and become a living dramatic experience thus needs a real theatre and a live audience (Naik-180-181).

The dramatist attempts to reach audience through the means of stage via performers, idea, and paraphernalia. One of the major problems that Indian English drama faced was the language problem. English being a foreign language it was not easy for the playwright to write a script and natural dialogue in colloquial English. For many, it was not the language of one's emotional make-up and every day transactions. It poses many barriers not only to playwright but also the actors and the audience. In this

connection Supriya Shukla says that:

The inherent inadequacy of the English language to express temperaments, sensibilities, and realities, are essentially to Indians. (Shkla-9).

Writing plays poses greater difficulty than writing fiction, as the spoken idiom needs to be more natural than the idiom employed by writers of fiction. Another vital factor for the meager achievement of Indian English drama is the playwright's inability to explore the Indian classical dramatic tradition, myth, ancient literature and folk forms. Due to the lack of a proper medium of external communication to express the inner experience honestly, the playwrights have failed to create exciting action on the stage. This is how Indian English drama remains purely as a literary form due to the lack of theatre, professional actors and a wide audience.

In spite of these drawbacks, Indian drama in English has achieved the position of an independent literature like the literature of other nations due to the efforts of some of the best creative minds in the country.

The major playwrights of classical Sanskrit drama are Bhasa, Bhavabhuti, Kalidasa, Asvaghosha, Harsha, Sudarka and Vishakhadatta. The period of these dramatists is considered to be the golden age of Sanskrit drama. They gave some immortal works of literature. They have been sources of inspiration not only for their successors but also continue to inspire the Indian playwrights even today. The works of these playwrights' i.e., serious plays like *Urubhanga*, romances like *Abhijnana Shakuntalam* and historical plays like *Mudrarakshasa* form an eternal part of our literary heritage. After the decline of classical Sanskrit drama, Indian dramas registered considerable development in the regional languages of India. There were many dramatists who had tried to write plays in their own languages. As a matter of fact, most Indian English plays are translated works. Some of them translated by writers themselves, while some by others. A very few plays are originally written in English among them Mahesh Dattani is one.

The origin of Indian drama in English can be traced back to the Pre-Independence era. Krishna Mohan Banerjee wrote the first Indian English Play entitled *The Persecuted or Dramatic Scenes illustrative of the Present State of Hindu Society in Calcutta* in 1831. This social play presents the clash between orthodoxy and new ideas that came from western education. The play deals with the East-West encounter theme. It is very essential to mention here that the real journey of Indian Drama in English started with the publication of Michael Madhusudan Dutt's translated play *Is this called Civilization?* This appeared on the literary horizon in 1871. The play originally was written in Bengali and translated by the playwright himself into English. The play depicts the social life and the issues pertaining to that period of it. Ramkinoo Dutta wrote *Manipura Tragedy* in 1893. It completes the tale of Indian English drama published in Bengal in the nineteenth century.

Pre-Independence Era

Most of the Indian English dramatists of Pre-Independence period followed the tradition of Elizabethan drama in general and Shakespeare in particular. By the end of the 19th century, there were pioneering efforts boldly employed by contemporary playwrights such as Rabindranath Tagore, Sri Aurobindo, Harindranath Chattopadhyaya, T.P.Kailasam, Lobo Prabhu, Bharati Sarabhai and so on, who contributed substantially to the growth and development of Indian English Drama. These dramatists tried their hand in different forms of drama romance, opera, comedy, farce, tragedy, melodrama and historical and mythological plays. All these playwrights had been greatly influenced by the poetic drama tradition of contemporary British Literature and more correctly saying, Indian playwrights imitated all the contemporary British Playwrights in their poetic drama tradition. Anyhow, Indian drama in English started its roots in this infant stage by handling various issue such as social, religious, historical, mythological which were heart touching to native audience.

Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) has been called the father of modern Indian stagecraft. He

occupies a prominent place in Bengali as well as in Indian English drama as a dramatist. His extraordinary dramatic career includes over forty plays like *Henrick Ibsen* in Norwegian literature. He won extraordinary recognition all over the world on the basis of translation. Tagore's collection of writings has been translated in English as well as other languages of the world. His dramatic achievements include *Malini* (1996), *The King and the Queen* (1889), *Chitra*, *Autumn Festival* (1909), *Muktadhara* (1922), *The Cycle of Spring* (1916), *Kacha and Devayani*, *The Mother's Prayer*, *Karna and Kunti* (1899), *The Post office* (1912), *Natirpuja* (1931), *The King of the Dark Chamber* (1910) and *Chandalika* (1938). In these plays Tagore has dealt with philosophical, religious, political, social issues. Rabindranath Tagore's first play *Valmiki Pratibha* (*The Genius of-Valmiki*) was published in 1881.

Sri Aurobindo is recognized one among the playwrights of Pre-Independence era. He has written five complete blank verse plays which exhibit his profound knowledge of Eastern and Western thought. His plays are based on the Elizabethan model; however, sometimes they have the classical flavour of Sanskrit drama. His complete plays are *Perseus the Deliverer* (1955), *Vasavadutta* (1957), *Rodogune* (1958), *The Viziers of Basaora* (1959) and *Eric* (1960). In his plays, we see that love emerges as a benevolent force destroying evil and creating harmony and peacefulness.

Another playwright who has made a considerable contribution to the growth of Pre-Independence Indian English drama is Harindranath Chattopadhyay. His dramatic career started with the publication of *Abu Hassan* in 1918. He wrote seven verse plays, which were published in *Poems and Plays* (1927) based on the lives of Indian saints. *His Five Plays* (1937) is a collection of social plays, *The Windows*, *The Parrot*, *The Sentry's Lantern*, *The Coffin* and *The Evening Lamp*. These plays are realistic and symbolic. These plays are more effective than his other plays.

A. S. Panchapakesa Ayyar (1899-1963) is another dramatist of the pre-independent era, whose notable plays are *In the Clutch of the Devil* (1926), *Sita's Choice and Other Plays* (1935), *The Slave of Ideas and Other Plays* (1941), *The Trial of Science for the Murder of Humanity* (1924) and *A Mother's Sacrifice*. He is a vigorous critic of contemporary life. His fame rested mainly on his exceptional verse play, *The Flute of Krishna*.

Tyagraja Parmashiva Kailasam (1885-1946) is popularly known as T.P. Kailsam was both a great playwright and a talented actor. He is also bilingual dramatist, who wrote plays both in English and Kannada. T.P. Kailasam has very intelligently taken up his themes and characters from *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharatha*, two great epics of ancient India. His published plays are *The Burden* (1933), *Fulfillment* (1933), *A Monologue* (1933), *The Purpose* (1944), *The Curse of Karna* (1946) and *Keechaka* (1947). He was influenced by Greek and Elizabethan models in technique and pattern and neglected the glorious dramatic tradition of classical Indian theatre.

Bharati Sarabhai is the only woman playwright during the colonial period of Indian English drama, who gave a Gandhian touch to Indian English drama. She has successfully written two plays, *The Well of the People* (1943) which upholds Gandhi's well-known doctrine 'Daridra Naravana' (worship of the poor as God). It highlights the conflict and tension caused by East-West encounter, by the conflict between tradition and modernity.

Another great name in pre-independence Indian English drama is J. M. Lobo Prabhu. He has written a number of plays, but only *Mother of New India* (1944) and *Death Abdicates* (1945) appeared before independence. Apart from these early dramatists, a few more playwrights may be taken into consideration, though their contribution to Indian drama in English is not really significant. Some of these were Sudhindra Nath Ghose (*Colours of a Great City*), R. K. Narayan (*The Watchman of the Lake*), K. R. S. Iyengar (*The Storm in a Tea Cup and The Battle of the Optional*), Balvant Gargi (*The Vulture and Other Plays*) and Mrinalini Sarabhai (*The Captive Soil*). During the pre-independence period, various dramatic organizations such as the Indian National Theatre and Ebrahim Alkazi's theatre unit, the Bharatiya Natya Sangh, came into existence.

Post-Independence Era

The tradition of Indian English drama has been enriched in the post-independence era. During the time of pre-independence, drama did not flourish well because of the lack of regular theatre. Although some institutions like National School of Drama was established in Delhi; National Drama Festival was started in Delhi by the Sangeet Natak Academy, but all this caused to the development of drama in regional languages. India is a multi-lingual country. In India, plays were written by great dramatists in their own regional languages. Mohan Rakesh in Hindi, Grish Karnad in Kannada, Badal Sircar in Bengali, and Vijay Tendulkar in Marathi wrote a number of plays which gave a new way of life to Indian English drama. But Mahesh Dattani, born in Bangalore, wrote dramas in English. They broke the barrier of regional works at national level languages and produced many good works at national level by dramatized universal aspects of Indian human life. However, some theatre groups in Mumbai, Calcutta, and New Delhi successfully staged plays of these dramatists. There are few organizations like *Akshara Little Theatre* in New Delhi and *Little Theatre in Bangalore*, which are only meant for drama in English. But being small in number they have not been able to cater to the needs of Indian English playwrights all over the country.

Manjeri Isvaran's *Yama and Yami* (1948) is a dialogue in poetic prose with a prologue and epilogue. An entirely different kind of play *Hali* (1950) by G. V. Desani has been highly praised by Indian as well as European critics for its originality. Lakhan Deh's *Tiger's Claw* (1967) and *Murder at the Prayer Meeting* (1976) are notable contributions to the historical drama. There is a remarkable similarity in almost all the aspects between *Murder at the Prayer Meeting* and *Murder in the Cathedral* by T. S. Eliot. *Vivekananda* (1972) is one more play by Lakhan Deh. Apart from these, there are a number of other verse plays. But the number of prose playwrights is larger than the number of verse playwrights.

Among the modern dramatists of the post-independence period, Asif Currimbhoy deserves a special place in the history of Indian writing in English. He is one of the most prolific and successful dramatists, who has written and published more than thirty plays. Almost all the dramatic forms like farce, comedy, melodrama, tragedy, history and fantasy are handled by Currimbhoy with great ease. He has rightly been considered as "India's first authentic voice in the theatre" (Bipinkumar Pamar-15).

His plays are woven around political, social and historical themes. Some of his important plays are *The Tourist Mecca* (1959), *The Restaurant* (1960), *The Doldrums* (1960), *The Captives* (1963), *Goa* (1964), *Monsoon* (1965), *An Experiment with Truth* (1969), *Inquilab* (1970), *The Refugee* (1971), *Sonar Bangala* (1972), *Om Mane Padme Hum* (1972), *Angkor* (1973) and *The Dissident MLA* (1974).

Pratap Sharma has written two prose plays they are; *A Touch of Brightness* (1973) and *The Professor has a Warcry* (1970). He has written effective dialogues with a keen sense of situation.

Nissim Ezekiel is regarded as one of the greatest poets of Post-independence era. He wrote number of poems. Besides, he wrote *Three Plays* (1969) consisting of *Nalini: A Comedy*, *Marriage Poem: A Tragic Comedy* and *The Sleepwalker: An Indo-American Farce*, have their share in enriching Indian drama in English. Gurucharan Das's *Larins Sahib* (1970) a historical play dealing with Henry Lawrence of the Punjab, is distinguished from other Indian English plays, due to its successful use of Indian English for dialogue. His other plays are *Mira* (1971) and *Jakhoo Villa*. Mohan Rakesh is a Hindi playwright who is greatly influenced by Marxism. His plays dramatize the suffering of men and women. His plays are *One Day In Ashadha*, *The Great Swans Of The Waves*, *Lahron ke Rajhans* and *Halfway House* are translated in English which had a immense success on stage. Rakesh's language separates him from other Hindi playwrights and puts him on a higher level of competence.

Badal Sircar is a great Bengali playwright, he is popularly known as 'barefoot playwright', who created a tradition of 'people theatre' a theatre can bring about new awareness on socio-economic issue (Prasad -22). His plays deal with social, political and psychological problems. His important plays are *Evam Indrajit*, *Baki Itihas*, *Bagh*, *Pralap*, *Jadi Aur Ekbar*, *Third Theatre* and *Bhoma and Basi Kabar*. These plays have secured a higher place in Indian English drama. *Evam Indrajit* (1965) is a milestone in the

history of modern Indian drama. Bipinkumar Parmar says about Badal Sircar that;

He has not only broken the dictionary between the actors and audience but reduced the drama to its barest by dispensing with conventional story, plot, characters, and dialogues (Parmar-17).

Girish Raghunath Karnad is one of the greatest playwrights. His plays written in Kannad have been widely translated into English. Karnad's plays include *Yayati* (1961), *Tughlaq* (1964), *Hayavadana* (1971), *Anjumallige*, Kannada version published by Manohara Grantha Mala, Dharwad, 1977. *Driven Snow. Hittina Hunja*. 1980, published as *Bali: The Sacrifice* [along with *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan*]. *Nagamandala: A Play with a Cobra*. (1990), *Tale-Danda* (1993), *The Fire and the Rain* (1998), *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan*, *Two Monologues: Flowers and Broken Images*, *Wedding Album* and *Boiled Beans on Toast*.

Vijay Tendulkar is one of the contemporary Marathi playwrights, who provided new force and direction to the Marathi theatre as well as Indian English drama. His plays are *Shantanta Court Chalho Aahe (Silence! The Court is in Session)*, *Giddh (Vultures)*, *Sakharam Binder* and *Ghasiram Kotwal*, which have made him popular playwright in Indian writing in English. *Ghasiram Kotwal* is based on a historical incident taken from the life of Balaji Janardan Banu Peshwas Phadnavis of Pune. Firstly, it deals with politics as a game of power. Secondly, it deals with the evils related to power politics; the play has attracted a large number of spectators.

Though Indian English drama was a mere imitation of British dramatists, but it had a genuine feelings and cultural notions with which it identified. So that at present few dramatists like Mahesh Dattani, Manjula Padmanabhan and Girish Karnad are achieving milestones of success in Indian theatre with great prospect in Indian theatre as well as world theatre.

Manjula Padmanabhan is the first Indian to earn international fame with her *Harvest*, a futuristic play that deals with the exploitation of human body in 21st century. Padmanabhan projects a dehumanized, terrifying world in which mothers sell their sons for the price of rice. Her play *Harvest* won the Onassis Award and helped her gain popularity throughout the world. But her plays are intellectual and not suited for stage.

Mahashweta Devi, basically Bengali dramatist and is known as the innovator of contemporary Indian street theatre or Third theatre. Her well known plays are *Mother of 1084*, *The Occupation of the Forest*, *Womb of Fire*, etc.

Mahesh Dattani is one of the leading contemporary dramatists in Indian English drama and is the first Indian playwright in English to be awarded the *Sahitya Academy Award* for his play *Final Solutions and Other Plays* in 1998. He uses Indian mythology, Indian tradition, Indian dance, Indian English and Indian social problems in his plays, through which He focuses on the burning social issues of the contemporary Indian society like religion tension, communal disharmony, child sexual abuse, lesbianism, sexuality and gender discrimination, which were recently considered to be a taboo in Indian society. He is the most powerful and potent dramatic voice in the contemporary Indian English Drama. His realistic portrayal of human nature evokes both sympathy and empathy in the mind of reader. He strongly believed that theatre is a strong source of reforming society as well as express oneself totally. That's why he founded 'Playpen' a theatre company in 1984 and wants a national identity of this new theatre. He also believes that to form cultural identities we need all three: tradition, continuity and change.

Mahesh Dattani is a keen observer of the modern society and its problems. His stories are reflection of realistic society. The society has framed a code of conduct for smooth and harmonious of individual. This code has collectively sanctioned to form the society for its impartial fulfillment /enforcement. But when the individual tries to disobey the laws of the society, the society tries to control him, thus arises a conflict between the society and individual. Due to this sexual minorities are excluded from the mainstream society. They are treated inhumanly even though the constitution assures that 'All are equality

before law' irrespective of their caste, religion, place of residence, gender and sexuality inspired me to deep concern about the issue of homosexuality in this particular study.

Indian English Drama has also been enriched through English translation of Hindi, Bengali, Marathi and Kannada plays into English. The plays of Vijay Tendulkar, Mohan Rakesh, Badal Sircar, Girish Karnad, Mahesh Dattani and others have added a new dimension to Indian drama through their contribution. Some of the Indian English plays have been and are being staged in western countries. In India also, English plays are occasionally staged in capital cities like Delhi, Calcutta, Mumbai and Chennai. This is how Indian English drama has achieved considerable success in recent times.

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