CHAPTER - I
INTRODUCTION

Since ages drama has been an effective and authoritative genre of expression in world literature. The derivation and development of drama in Greece, Rome, England and India accentuates the fact that it has always been an essential element of culture. It has always been the best medium for highlighting and assessing ethical commitments, religious passions, philosophical approaches, and social, economic and political changes in various societies. Drama, a mimetic depiction of life, coalesces in itself the factual and the fictional reality and art, and presents the events and characters within the dimensions of time and space. In the field of literature, drama is, of course, the most peculiar, the most appealing and the most entertaining of all types of literary pursuits. It is so genuinely allied with the inner consciousness of human life that it has precisely been viewed as the best means for exploration of human nature in all its forms and manifestations. Drama is a composite art that involves the playwright, the actor and the audience in a commonly shared and created artistic experience. Drama requires appropriate sense, subject, plot, character, dialogue and technique to achieve the intended effect.

Indian English Drama is, however, not so impressive and prosperous both in quality and quantity as Indian English poetry or fiction is. Since the publication of the first Indian English play *The Persecuted* (1831) by Krishna Mohan Banerjee, about four hundred plays have been penned in English and a few of them staged not only in India but abroad also. The paucity of Indian Drama in English is attributed to several reasons—lack of a living theatre, specialized skill and talent in selecting the themes which could be presented on the stage and in picking up appealing techniques. Drama is meant to be staged and its success principally relies on the audience. As for the study of drama, it is partly literary and partly sociological because it comes in direct contact with the masses, both literate and illiterate, through stage production. Thus, a professional stage and an encouraging box office prospect act as incentives to the playwright. It will be quite pertinent to quote R.K. Dhawan here: “It is a well-known
fact that the real success of a play can be tested on stage. A playwright needs a living theatre to put his work on acid test, evaluate its total effect on the audience and thereby get a chance to improve upon his performance” (19). What is more, the form of drama in English still awaits Indianization. The form of the novel, though initially borrowed from the West, has got well-assimilated into Indian writings not only in English but also in regional languages. The forms of novel and poetry in Indian English are successfully presenting Indian sensibility in a characteristically Indian style, whereas the form of drama has not been convincingly Indianized even after the initiation of Girish Karnad to Indianize it by using conventions of Indian classical drama and folk theatre.

Interesting enough, many Indian plays are not staged. To quote Rama Sharma: “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 basic test for a play...? Most of the plays written in English do not fulfil this requirement” (qtd. in Shukla 8). So the plays written in English are meant to be read, and, in turn, the writer, who could have been a good playwright, turns to other genres. As Rama Sharma further observes, “However, these can be read and enjoyed for their thought content and for the relevance they have to the perennial problems of life” (qtd. in Shukla 8). Another significant factor that has been responsible for the stunted growth of Indian English Drama is the failure of Indian playwrights in English to draw upon the rich and varied Indian dramatic traditions and make use of the rich plethora of Indian myth and Indian historical heritage.

However, the major setback in the development of Indian English Drama is language. English has always been one of the biggest hurdles in its rapid growth. The Indian audience, especially from the northern part of the country prefers to visit the theatre which presents the drama in his native language. Resultantly, Indian drama has flourished largely in regional languages. English is not the mother tongue of Indians. It is a ‘learnt’ language, at best the second language. Natural dialogue is the significant characteristic of drama but when two Indian characters speak English on the stage, conversation is bound to sound artificial. Thus, it fails to produce a palpable effect or the necessary impact on the audience. Only when the characters are
presented to belong to the urban classy section, a dialogue in English sounds convincing. Language is one of the primary determinants of the form of a text. In the process of translation, the original form is misrepresented. However, this perceptible artificiality in form cannot be dismissed as a mere problem of translation. The artificiality is due to the inherent inadequacy of English to express realities, sensibilities and temperaments which are essentially Indian. A play, known for its ideas, not for its form, can be realistically translated into English as translating idea is not problematic as translating Indian mindsets, sensibilities and temperaments. English is basically a language of our intellectual makeup and not of our emotional makeup. Raja Rao could ingenuously overcome this problem by making his characters speak a kind of Indian English as he has done in his novel *Kanthapura*. This can be incorporated in Indian English Drama. M.K. Naik precisely suggests: “In making his Indian characters speak in English, the playwright, therefore, needs no qualms at all. Let him first create living characters in live situations, and the language will take care of itself” (qtd. in Shukla 9).

Moreover, the Indian English dramatists have to write with a sense of rootedness representing a true Indian sensibility. They have to triumph the temptation of catering to the foreign gallery and blindly imitating the Western dramatic models. In this way, the Indian English playwrights can effectively overcome challenges and pave the way for a better and brighter future for Indian English Drama which has survived the test of time and which has all the possibilities and potentialities to carve a niche for itself in the corpus of literary writings in the days to come.

India has a dramatic tradition of its own. Though it is difficult to determine the accurate date of its origin in our country, there were mimes, pageants, rituals and other folk forms. As the Greek drama had its origin in fertility rites and frenzied worship of Dionysus, the classical Indian drama also originated from the folk theatre of the country. In the course of centuries, both borrowed from each other and developed. The process of evolution of the dramatic art can be traced right from the ancient period of *Rigveda* which contains some dramatic dialogues. Besides, there are also some references to drama in the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* and the works of Panini, and traces of its development in Krishna legends. The theory of Greek
impact on the ancient Indian theatre is refuted, and it is generally accepted that the Indian theatre was totally independent in its origin, in the ideas which governed it and in its development. Drama is the product of an essentially cultured condition of a nation. The precise point of the progression of the theatre is concealed in diverse forms and confused accounts. Whether it is divine or human, religious or social, spiritual or secular, it is organically related to the human impulses which provide an impetus to all our gestures and movements.

Drama, in India, sets out its journey with the Sanskrit plays. A.L. Basham, a prominent historian, expresses his views: “The origin of Indian theatre is still obscure. It is certain, however, that even in the Vedic period dramatic performances of some kind were presented, and passing references in the early resources point . . . at festivals of religious legends, perhaps only in dance and mime” (434-435). The origin of Indian English drama can be traced to the ancient rules and seasonal festivities of the Vedic Aryans. “Indian tradition preserved in the Natyashastra, the oldest of the texts of the theory of the drama, claims for the drama a divine origin, and a close connection with the sacred Vedas themselves” (Keith 12). The dramatic performances of those times mainly included such events as portrayal of events of daily life accompanied by music. Some members of the tribe acted as wild animals like goats, buffaloes, reindeers and monkeys, and the others played the role of hunters. Thus the drama was performed in such a crude and simplistic manner during the period of the Vedic Aryans. Later, different episodes from The Ramayana, The Mahabharata and The Bhagvadgita were dramatized at public places. This kind of performance is still very popular in India, especially during the time of Dussehra when the episode of killing Ravana is enacted out in different parts of country.

Bharatamuni is said to have borrowed the art of effective speech or elocution from the Yajurveda and the rasas from the Atharvaveda. Tiwari says that “no object can be comprehended without the aid of rasa. Sentiment is produced from a combination of determinants, consequents the transitory states. In other words, when the dominant or permanent states come in contact with transitory feelings, they result in the awakening of rasa, a complete state of enjoying the flavour” (7-8). Whenever and wherever the humans have progressed beyond the mere struggle for existence,
gods, recreation and self-expression, there has been a theatre in some sense. Since ages Sanskrit drama has remained the most beautiful and vital part of Indian literature. It is well-known that the expression of sentiments and feelings of man through gestures and speech laid the seeds of drama, which is a reflection of life, of the emotions of the three worlds.

Indian classical dramatists held the view that the dramatist presents events that generate emotions around him and the readers, in turn, receive aesthetic pleasure. Tradition of drama, in India, is glorious and pristine. *The Natyasastra*, the most voluminous and comprehensive study on dramaturgy, has remained since long the only text on dramaturgy. *The Natyasastra* encompasses within itself elements not only of drama but also of music and dance. The title *Natyasastra* literally means “the science of drama” and Bharata has taken into account theatre organization, along with various aspects of drama. The treatise is generally believed to have been composed between 200 B.C. and 200 A.D. The process of dramatic art is like that of a tree—“the germ, the sprout, the development of the tree into branches, flowers and fruits. The seed attains fulfillment on giving fruits” (qtd. in Tiwari 4-5). In a similar manner, drama attains fulfilment on the arousal of *rasa* or dramatic experience. Bharata observes that “the theme or plot is the bulk of *natya*” (qtd. in Tiwari 5). The germ or the plot forms the basis, the framework on which drama is constructed. Whether it is read or seen, the dramatist cannot execute his art without undergoing the process of plot construction.

The entire literature in Sanskrit is classified into *Drishya* (that can be seen on exhibited) and the *Sravya* (that can be heard or recited). While poetry in all its forms can be said to fall under the latter, whereas drama falls under the former. Drama in Sanskrit literature is converted under the broad umbrella of ‘*rupaka*’ which means depiction of various aspects of life represented by the actors who assume various roles. A ‘*rupaka*’ has ten classifications of which ‘*Nataka*’ (drama), the most important one, has come to mean all dramatic presentations. The Sanskrit drama grows around three primary constituents, namely *Vastu* (plot), *Neta* (hero) and *Rasa* (sentiment). The plot could be either principal (*adhitikara*) or accessory (*prasangika*). The former concerns the primary characters and the theme and pervades the entire
play whereas the latter serves to further and supplement the main topic and relates to subordinate characters. This is further divided into banner (pataka) and incident (parkari). The former is a small episode that presents, describes, improves or even hinders the primary plot from creating an added excitement; whereas the latter involves minor characters. The neta or the hero, according to the definition prescribed by the Natyashastra, is always depicted as modest (Vineeta), sweet tempered (Madhura), sacrificing (Tyagi), capable (daksha), civil in talks (priyamvada), belonging to a noble family (taptaloka), pure (suchi) articulate (vagmi), consistent (Sthera), young (yuva) endowed with intellect (buddhi), enthusiasm (utsaha), good memory (Smrthi), aesthetics (kola), pride (maan) and is brave (shura), strong (dridha), energetic (tejaswi), learned (pandita) and pious (dharmika). The main category in which the hero of Sanskrit drama normally falls is the ‘Dheerodatta’ that is who is brave and sublime at the same time.

Imagination, according to Bharata, is essential to drama. He says, “In it there is no exclusive representation of you or of the gods; for the drama is a representation of an action of Avastha” (qtd. in Tiwari 9). He further says, “the drama devised by me is a mimicry of action and conduct of people, which is rich in various emotions and which depicts different situations. This will relate to actions of men—good, bad and indifferent, and will give courage, amusement and happiness as well as counsel to them all” (qtd. in Tiwari 9-10). All this is an imitation of action and the conduct of people, rich in various emotions in different situations. Aristotle says that poetry can imitate people as they are or people who could be better and worse than the average. Bharatamuni and Aristotle mean more or less the same thing by imitation.

The Indian concept of drama has rather been serious as compared to the Western concept. The subject matter of drama is usually the life of a person whether historical, contemporary or imaginary. The Western dramatists aim at the presentation of a character manifesting itself in action. On the other hand, the Indian dramatists aim at the presentation of a basic mental state. Thus in the presentation of drama, action occupies a central place in the Western concept. In the Indian concept, the mental state is of prime concern.
The most celebrated dramatists of the ancient era are Ashwaghosh, Bhasa, Shudraka, Kalidas, Harsha, Bhavabhuti, Visha-khadatta, Bhattanarayana, Murari and Rajshekhara, who enriched Indian theatre with their works such as Madhya-Mavyaayoda, Urubhangam, Karnabharan, Mrichkatikam Abhigyana Shakuntalam, Malankagnimitram, Uttar Ramacharitam, Mudrarakshasa, Bhagavadajjukam, Mattavilasa, etc. The supreme achievement of Indian Drama, undoubtedly, lies in Kalidasa who is often called the Shakespeare of India. The Sanskrit drama flourished in its glory till the twelfth century in India i.e. before the arrival of the Muslim rule. But till the fifteenth century, plays of Sanskrit tradition were performed on stage in Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Karnataka, Andhra, Uttar Pradesh and Gujarat but, thereafter, Indian dramatic activity almost ceased due to foreign invasions on India.


The rise of the modern Indian drama dates back to the eighteenth century when the British Empire strengthened its power in India. As Krishna Kriplani points out: “The modern Indian drama owed its first flowering to the foreign grafting” (40). With the impact of Western civilization on Indian life, a new renaissance dawned on Indian arts including drama. Furthermore, English education provided an impetus and momentum to critical study not only of Western drama, but also of classical Indian drama. English and Italian dramatic troupes toured India and performed many English plays, mainly Shakespeare’s, in the cities like Bombay and Madras. The Portuguese brought a form of dance drama to the West coast. A Russian music director, Rebedoff is said to have produced the first modern drama in Calcutta towards the end of the eighteenth century. Thus, the Western impact awakened. “The dormant, critical impulse in the country to bring Indians face to face with new forms of life and
literature, and to open the way for a fruitful cross-fertilization of ideas and forms of expression” (Drama in Modern India 1).

In 1765, a Russian drama lover, Horasin Lebdef and Bengali drama lover, Qulokhnath staged two English comedies, namely Disgaig and Love is the Best Doctor. But the real beginning was in 1831 when Prasanna Kumar Thakur established Hindu Rangmanch at Calcutta and staged Wilson’s English translation of Bhavabhuti’s Sanskrit drama Uttar Ramacharitam. In 1852-1853, the famous Parsi Theatre was launched in Bombay which influenced the whole country in no time. Postagi Pharmji was the pioneer in establishing the Parsi Theatre Company in India. Many new dramatic experiences were presented on the stage during the Parsi Theatre evolution in India. On the other hand, the amateur theatre also developed with the works of Bharatendu Harishchandra who is acclaimed as the father of Hindi drama. The real journey of Indian English Drama begins with Michael Madhusudan Dutt’s Is This Called Civilization? which appeared on the literary horizon in 1871.

Rabindranath Tagore wrote primarily in Bengali but almost all his Bengali plays are available to us in English translation. His prominent plays are Chitra, The post Office, Sacrifice, Red Oleanders, Chandalika, Muktadhara, Natir Puja, The King of the Dark Chamber, The Cycle of Spring, Sanyasi and The Mother’s Prayer. His plays firmly rooted in the Indian ethos and ethics in their themes, characters and treatment, display a unique blend of simplicity and complexity, conventionality and modernity. Tagore was the first playwright who invested Indian English Drama with symbolic overtones and allegorical significance. He served his fellowmen fruitfully by being an interpreter and mediator between the civilization of the East and the West. He combined the Indian and Western literary traditions to bring a synthesis between the East and the West. Diana Devlin focuses that “the philosopher, writer and teacher Rabindranath Tagore set out to unify Indian and European traditions creating plays which have been described as a mixture of Bengali folk drama and Western medieval mystery plays” (110).

Sri Aurobindo was a versatile genius who was not only well-versed in the great classics of Greece, Rome, Germany, France, Spain and Italy, but fully acquainted with our rich Sanskrit texts also. He was really a distinguished creative
artist with encyclopaedic knowledge of Indian culture, society and metaphysics. D.L. Murray rightly remarks that Sri Aurobindo is “a new type of thinker, one who combined in his vision, the alacrity of the West with the illumination of the East” (qtd. in Rai 15). It is, however, an accepted fact that the kind of genius Aurobindo displayed in the field of poetry, epic and philosophy could not be perceived in the field of drama. He modelled his plays exclusively on late Victorian pastiches of Shakespearean drama and his characters look like Elizabethan personages in Indian garb. He wrote his five complete plays on a variety of themes which are representative of important culture of the world symbolizing certain significant moments of human history. At the philosophical level Aurobindo deals with the idea of human evolution as is evident from *Perseus the Deliverer* and the idea of love as a benevolent force essential for the restoration of peace and harmony, as can be seen in *The Biziers of Bassora, Eric and Vasavadutta*. In his plays Aurobindo has depicted the perennial clash between good and evil in various forms and presented the heroes as veritable deliverers. The notable feature of his plays is that they depict different cultures and countries in different epochs, ringing with variety of characters, moods and sentiments. *Perseus the Deliverer* is based on the ancient Greek myth of *Persues*. *Vasavadutta* is a romantic tale of ancient India. *Rodoguna* is a Syrian romance whereas *The Viziers of Bassora* is a romantic comedy which takes us back to the days of the great Haroun al Rashid. *Eric* is a romance of Scandinavia, a story of love and war between the children of *Odin and Thor*. In Aurobindo we find romance, heroic play, tragedy, comedy, farce. Aurobindo is much influenced by the Elizabethan drama in respect of plot construction and characterization. The use of English blank verse is flawless in Aurobindo and in the right tune with the characters and situations. We also find the impact of Sanskrit playwrights like Bhasa, Kalidas and Bhavabhuti on Aurobindo as K.R.S. iyenger observes: “But all five plays are stepped in poetry and romance, recalling the spirit and flavour of the distinctive dramatic type exemplified in different ways by Bhasa, Kalidas and Bhavabhuti. Though, of course all have Aurobindoian undertones” (226).

Another playwright who has made significant contribution to the growth of Indian English drama is Harindranath Chattopadhayay. His plays are serious in tone
and spirit. There are seven verse plays to his credit published under the title of *Poems and Plays* (1927) and all the seven plays are based on the lives of Indian saints. They deal with the brighter and nobler aspects of human life. His *Five Plays* (1929) reveals his socialistic approach towards life. His first play *The Window* deals with the exploitation of textile workers of Bombay by the big industrialists who are curbing their rights ruthlessly. They want to seal their children’s mouths and tax even their songs, sobs and laughters. *The Parrot* depicts the woman’s urge for freedom from her undesirable husband’s bond of marriage. *The Window* and *The Parrot* deal with the lives of the poor; whereas the *Sentry’s Lantern* is a symbolic display of the expectation of the advent of a new age for the downtrodden people. *Sidhartha: Man of Peace* is an adventurous effort to dramatize Buddha’s life. If *The Sentry’s Lantern* expresses the agonizing sentiments of three victims, *The Coffin* depicts the crumbling of the bourgeois family. *Siddhartha, Man of Peace* (1956) provides a viable alternative to the war-torn humanity. The play expresses his deep concern over the discovery of nuclear power and the ensuing crisis in human civilization. His plays, however, failed on the stage on account of his inability to create living characters and moving plots.

Another dramatic voice on the Indian literary scene that invites our attention is T.P. Kailasam, a powerful Kannada and English playwright, who wrote in both English and Kannada. Though Kailasam is regarded as the father of modern Kannada drama, his genius finds its full expression in his English plays such as *The Burden* (1933), *Fulfilment* (1933), *A Monologue: Don’t Cry* (1933), *The Purpose* (1944), *Karna* (1964) and *Keechaka* (1949). G.S. Amur has a very high opinion of T.P. Kailasam and rightly remarks: “A talented actor who appeared in the amateur as well as the professional stage, he brought to the writing of drama an intimate knowledge of the theatre. It is for this reason that his plays whether in Kannada or English have a uniform technical excellence” (qtd. in Shukla 7). In his plays, Kailasam has blended both Indian and Western traditions. His *Karna* is the only full-length play which has some significant similarities to Sophocles’ powerful tragedy *Oedipus the King*. Both *Karna* and *Oedipus* suffer from a fatal curse which shapes their life and destiny. We find a rare blending of genius and intuitive vision in the plays of Kailasam who has
the credit of revolutionizing Kannada drama. Though the theme is based on *Mahabharata*, he is strikingly original in looking at the theme from a new perspective. In his social vision he can be easily compared to Ibsen or Shaw. J.M. Lobo Prabhu is the last great name in Indian English drama in the pre-independence period. He wrote over a dozen plays but only *Mother of New India: A Play of India Village* (1944) and *Death Abdicates* (1945) appeared before independence. Prabhu is capable of writing dialogues with felicity, and situation-creation is also admirable but his characters do not appear lifelike, soothing and convincing to the audience.

In the post-independence era, drama, in English, could not flourish as a major current of creative expression. Although the pre-independence drama is notable for its poetic excellence, thematic variety, technical virtuosity, symbolic significance and its commitment to human and moral values, it was, by and large, not geared up for actual stage production. The post-independence drama was benefited by the increasing interest of the foreign countries in Indian English literature in general and Indian English drama in particular. A good number of plays by Indian playwrights like Asif Currimbhoy, Pratap Sharma, Gurucharan Das were successfully staged in England and U.S.A. But the plight of Indian English drama is that no regular school of Indian English drama was established in our country. This was mainly because the encouragement that drama received from several quarters immediately after India had got freedom but it was monopolized by the theatre in the Indian regional languages while Indian English drama continued to feed on crumbs fallen from its rich cousins table.

The tradition of poetic plays also survives in the post-colonial era. M.K. Naik rightly opines: “That Tagore Aurobindo-Kailasam tradition of poetic drama continues, but with a difference in the hands of Manjeri Isvaran, G.V. Desani, Lakhan Deb and Pretish Nandy” (256). Manjeri Isvaran’s *Yama and Yami* (1948) is a dialogue in poetic prose, with a prologue and an epilogue, dealing with the incestuous love of Yami for her brother. G.V. Desani’s *Hali* (1950) received high praise for its originality, symbolism and rich imagery. Regarding the message of the play *Hali*, Naik remarks: “Hali finds peace in the thought that man must transcend human love; go beyond life and death and even leaving behind his limited idea of godhead,
develops in himself a god-like love and detachment" (257). Lakhan Deb’s *Tiger Claw* (1976) is a historical play in three acts on the controversial murder of Afzal Khan by Shivaji. His other plays are *Vivekananda* (1972) and *Murder at the Prayer Meeting* (1976). The use of blank verse is flawless and the last play compels us to remind of T.S. Eliot’s *Murder in the Catherdral*. Other verse plays of the period include P.A. Krishnaswami’s *The Flute of Krishna* (1950), M. Krishnamurti’s *The Cloth of Gold* (1951), S.D. Rawoot’s *Immortal Song, Karm and the Killers* (1959), Satya Dev Jagg’s *The Point Of Light* (1967), Pritish Nandy’s *Rites for a Plebian Salute* (1969), Hushmat Sozerekashme’s *Vikramjeet* (1970), Sree Devi Singh’s *The Purple Braided People* (1970), P.S. Vasudev’s *The Sunflower* (1972) and S. Raman’s *Karme* (1979). However, the prose plays outnumber the poetic plays. Major contemporary playwrights include such illustrious names as Pratap Sharma, Nissim Ezekiel, Girish Karnad, Vijaya Tendulkar, Mahesh Dattani and Asif Currimbhoy. Contemporary Indian drama, deviating from classical and European models, is experimental and innovative in terms of thematic and technical qualities. It is not an offspring of any specific tradition and it has laid the foundation of a distinctive tradition in the history of world drama by reinvestigating history, legend, myth, religion and folklore with context to contemporary socio-political issues.

Pratap Sharma is also a significant playwright in Indian English Drama. Pratap Sharma wrote two prose plays *A Touch of Brightness* (1968) and *The Professor Has A War Cry* (1970). Sex remains the prime theme of his plays but he presents a keen sense of situation and his dialogue is often effective. The play *A Touch of Brightness* presents a picture of the red-light district in the city of Bombay is to be commended for its thematic boldness but is marred by the sensational superficialities. It was performed on two continents abroad, but banned in Bombay for some time. Similarly, sex is the main theme in Sharma’s another play *The Professor Has a War Cry*. It is a mixture of melodrama and tragedy. In the play, a young man Virender comes to know that he is an illegitimate child of a mother raped successively by a Muslim and an Englishman after having been deserted by her lover, a Hindu Professor, Gopal. Finally, Virendra and Professor kill each other. M.K. Naik appreciates his dramatic art
in the words: “There is keen sense of situation and effective dialogues” (261) and noticeable local colour and pointed criticism of social hypocrisy.

In the realm of Indian Drama, Nissim Ezekiel is acknowledged for his exceptional poetic creed and rare dramatic sensibility. Nissim Ezekiel’s three plays (1969) including Nalini: A Comedy, Marriage Poem: A Tragi Comedy and The Sleep Walkers: An Indo-American Farce are considered to be a welcome addition to the dramaturgy of Indian English drama. The play, Marriage Poem presents the conflict of a middle-class husband caught in the conflict of commitments of married life and the desire of love. The Sleep Walkers is a diverting take off on national preconceptions and prejudices. In spite of strong sense of dramatic concept, Ezekiel could not transform his poetic talent into appropriate dramatic talent. His plays can be appreciated for symmetrical construction with abundance of irony. They unveil his sharp observation of the oddities of human life and behaviour. Ezekiel’s poetic self swayed his dramatic creed but his plays make a ‘pleasant reading.’ It is attributed: “In his satire of current fashion, in his exposure of prose and presence, the spirit of some English social satirist in theatre” (Beston 49).

Modern European playwrights like Shaw, Sartre, Camus, Giradoux and Brecht went back to their myth or history in order to give a message to the contemporary society. Most of the Indian-English playwrights, however, have failed to do so. The only exception in the contemporary era is Girish Karnad who is an impressive actor, intelligent director and powerful playwright. When he started his career as dramatist he had no established theatrical tradition to begin with. The Parsi theatre, in spite of its enormous success as a spectacle over nearly seventy years, had produced no significant work. On the other hand, the Sanskrit theatre had been an ‘elitist phenomenon’ even in its glorious days and had restricted itself to a group of wealthy and educated courtiers without having any appeal for the general public. In his “Author’s Introduction” to Three Plays (1994), Girish Karnad clearly stated:

To my generation a hundred crowded years of urban theatre seemed to have left almost nothing to hang on to, take off from. And where was one to begin again? Perhaps by looking at our audience again, by trying to understand what experience the audience expected to receive from the theatre (30).
Kamad, recipient of Jnanpith award, is a living legend in the contemporary Indian-English Drama who substantially contributed to enrich the tradition of Indian English theatre through his versatile roles as writer, director and actor. His dramatic sensibility was moulded under the influence of touring Natak Companies, especially Yakshagana which was in those days not accepted as the purified art form. His well-known plays are Yayati (1961), Tughlaq (1962), Hayvadana (1970), Nagmandala (1972). His journey from Yayati to The Fire and the Rain holds a mirror to the very evolution of Indian theatre during nearly four decades. He is an emissary of Indian art and culture. He is among the foremost media persons of our time. Karnad’s achievements as a playwright have received widespread recognition both nationally and internationally. As an actor-director, art-critic and film star Karnad is a man of many achievements though he is at his best in playwriting. He accepts, “I have been fairly lucky in having a multi-pronged career. You know, I’ve been an actor, a publisher, a filmmaker. But in none of these I felt quite as much at home as in playwriting” (Karnad 362). He borrowed his plots from history, mythology and legends but with intricate symbolism he tried to establish their relevance in contemporary socio-political context. Yayati reinterprets an ancient myth from Mahabharata in modern concept. The plot of Hayavadana is adopted from Katha Saritsagar, an ancient collection of stories in Sanskrit. Tughlaq is Karnad’s best historical play where he mingles fact with fiction. Karnad projects the curious contradictions in the complex personality of Sultan Muhammad-bin-Tughlaq. In Tale Dande, he discovers the vital relationship between contemporary society and literature. His plays are steeped in Indian culture and his themes are taken from myths, legends, folk tales and history, but his approach is modern. He combines classical, folk and western theatrical traditions in his plays. His use of myth as a structure and metaphor in his plays gives new meaning to the past from the vantage point of view of present.

Tendulkar’s plays have provided Indian theatre a rich and challenging repertoire. Leading the vanguard of the avant-garde Marathi Theatre, Tendulkar symbolizes the new awareness and attempts of Indian dramatists of the country to depict the agonies, suffocations and cries of middle-class Indian society in the present
times. In all his plays, he harps upon the theme of isolation of the individual and his confrontation with the hostile surroundings. Tendulkar relates the problem of anguish to the theme of violence in most of his plays. He does not consider the occurrence of human violence as something loathsome or disgusting. He says:

Unlike the communists I don’t think violence can be eliminated in a classless society, or for that matter, in any society. The spirit of aggression is something that human being is born with. Not that it is bad. Without violence man might have turned into a vegetable (Choudhari 512-513).

While depicting violence on the stage Tendulkar does not dress it up with any fancy trapping so as to make it palatable, but rather keeps it raw and natural. In *Silence! The Court is in Session* (1968) and *Ghasiram Kotwal* (1972), the theme of oppression dominates. *Sakharam Binder* (1972) is a study in human violence amounted to powerful dramatic statement. *Kamala* (1982) and *Kanyadaan* (1982) are written on the lines of naturalistic tradition. *Kamala* is a study of marital status as well as study in the theme of exploitation. *Kanyadaan* is a complex play about the cultural and emotional upheavals of a family. Tendulkar was actively associated with New Theatrical Movement in Maharashtra. He presents a fictional reality in which the reality of life acquires a sharp focused character having rare dramatic power. His plays have changed the face of Indian theatre. He has written plays, stories, features and television serials. His plays like *Sakharam Binder, Silence! The Court is in Session* have created a storm in society. Tendulkar raises several questions about love, sex, marriage and moral values prevalent in Indian society, making ample use of irony, satire, pathos and mock element to highlight the hollowness of middle-class morality. He exposes hypocrisy in the traditional Indian society.

Badal Sircar too is a prestigious name in the realm of contemporary theatre. He represents New Theatrical Movement in India. He has created an appropriate ‘people’s theatre’—a theatre supported and created by people. His dramatic career began with a humorous play like *Solution X*. His earlier plays are *Evam Inderjit* (1962), *That Other History* (1964) and *There Is No End* (1971). All these plays are based on political, social, psychological and existential problems. *Evam Inderjit* is a
tale of a playwright who struggles in vain to write a play. In the play *There's No Need*, he develops the thesis that 'we are all accused' and share the burden of guilt. Afterwards, he wrote *Pary Konodin, Jadi Aur Ek Baar, Palap and Pagla Ghoda*. His later plays *Procession, Bhoma and Stale News* are based on the concept of a world free from exploitation and hunger. The play *Procession* is about the search for a 'real home' in new society based on equality. It suggests a 'real way' to new way in which man does not have to live exploiting man but should work according to his own needs. *Bhoma* is a dramatization of the life of oppressed peasants in rural India. The analysis of these plays suggests remarkable changes in Sircar's concept of a 'real home'—a new society based on equality and free from the horrors of exploitation.

In Indian English drama, the influence of Mohan Rakesh can not be overlooked. He wrote in Hindi but for exceptional dramatic relevance, his plays have been translated into English and other regional languages. He published his first major play *Ashadh Ka Ek Din* in 1958, *Leharon Ke Rajhansa* appeared in 1963 and *Adhe Adhure* was first staged in 1969. The play *Pair Tale Ki Zamin* was completed by Kamleshwar after his death and published in 1974. As a playwright, Rakesh's main concern was to portray the crisis of contemporary man caught in the web of uncongenial surroundings and the persistent threat to human relationship. He perceived drama as a complex art involving the uniform contribution of actors, scenic effects, light and music and effective stage direction. He made extensive experiments in theatre, using words and language not as dialogues or direct statements but as the tools of suggestion to convey the meaning beyond the verbal connotation. In *Ashadh Ka Ek Din*, Badal Sircar presents the dilemma of a person who never finds fulfillments only because of his failure to truly appreciate his ownself. In *Leharon Ka Rajhans*, he reflects on the problem of relationships between man and woman, ego clashes, divided self and ongoing illusion and nothingness. *Adhe Adhure* deals with the clash of ego between husband and wife, disintegration of family relationship, the prominence of individual interest against the commitments towards the family and society.

Mahesh Dattani, another major English playwright, is rightly regarded one of India's best and most serious contemporary playwrights writing in English. Dattani is
an authentic contemporary playwright whose plays are rooted in contemporary urban experience. He is not only a director and a playwright but actor, producer and the founder of a theatre group known as *Playpen*. He has the unique capacity to read the rumblings of contemporary urban Indian society and smell the perennial clash between tradition and modernity. He is not interested in polemics but writes frankly about the oppressed or the marginalized class such as minorities, women, gays, *hijaras* etc. Recognising the importance of Dattani’s images taken from the urban middle-class milieu, an internationally renowned director, Prof. John McRae, special Professor in the Department of English Studies at University of Nottingham, wrote: “Mahesh Dattani has given us images which could only be created in the theatre, images which deserve to be seen by audiences worldwide, images which give Indian drama a vital new place in modern world theatre” (qtd. in Rai 21).

Dattani is well acquainted with the works of Tenessee Williams, Arthur Miller and Strindberg. In his dramatic technique, he has been compared to Ibsen in the sense that the ghosts of the past and the dark secrets of the human consciousness are explored in his plays in a very subtle and convincing manner. His plays expose the violence of our private thoughts and hypocrisy of our public morals. They draw our attention to the complex prejudices of our class, gender, race and religion in a very subtle and effective manner. They reveal the physical and spatial awareness of Indian theatre on the one hand and the textual rigour of Ibsen and Tennessee Williams on the other.

Theatre is Dattani’s life long passion. He is married to the theatre and hence he has decided to cling to bachelorhood for the rest of his life. His first play *Where There’s a Will* was published in 1986 and since 1995 he has been devoting himself fully to the theatrical activities. For the first time in our country in 1998 Dattani set up his own theatre studio meant for the training of new talents in acting, directing and stage writing. In 2000 Penguin Books India brought out an anthology of Dattani’s eight plays—*Seven Steps Around the Fire, On a Muggy Night at Mumbai, Do the Needful, Final Solutions, Bravely Fought the Queen, Tara, Dance Like a Man and Where There’s a Will* under the title of *Collected Plays*. His latest play *30 Days in September* came out in 2001. It deals with the sexual abuse of a child and its
disastrous impact on man-woman relationship.

In the summer, Dattani engages theatre courses at Portland State University U.S.A. He writes plays for B.B.C. and conducts workshops regularly at his studio and elsewhere. Dattani’s studio at Bangalore has now become a renowned center for creative collaboration among playwrights, directors, actors and audience. This is the only place in India where new playwrights can view the different stages in the enactment of their plays and make suitable modifications wherever necessary. Dattani is regarded as an intellectually stimulating playwright as his plays are powerfully and brilliantly written. He wants to give more opportunity to the new voices of contemporary era.

Dattani showcases the mean, ugly and unhappy aspects of human life. The Bangalore-based Dattani is a promising playwright and has won the Sahitya Akademi Award for English literature for his play *Final Solutions*. Dattani puts drama on a very high pedestal and argues: “Well, I think this is a wrong perception prevailing among the academics, especially the view that writing for the stage is inferior to writing a novel or writing poetry. I think it is important to keep in mind that the playwright is actually a craftsman” (qtd. in Shukla 7). Dattani has been acclaimed as a leading playwright in English. He is arguably one of the best playwrights the country has ever produced. He preferred English as a medium of expression. He was almost obsessed to represent Indian soil and sensibility in the wake of globalization.

The recent decades have witnessed a spurt of the Indian drama in regional languages and the drama in English translation. Extensive translations of regional plays into English have established a bond between East and West, North and South. However, Indian English Drama has not achieved much in terms of quantity or quality. Compared to all other literary genres its output has been scanty. Indian English drama has registered a remarkable growth and maturity through English translations of Hindi, Marathi, Bengali and Kannada plays. Dattani speaks of his choice of English as a medium because his characters though essentially indeed, speak in English in a normal and unobtrusive way. English is for him a sort of given. It’s his language as it is to a lot of Indians here and abroad. Dattani’s art is appreciated for the diversity of themes, the awareness of the issues responsible for tension in
contemporary society and exceptionally brilliant contribution to technical innovations. Dattani’s work probes tangled attitudes in contemporary India towards communal differences, consumerism and gender etc.

Besides male dramatists, women dramatists also enriched the soil of Indian drama by projecting the inner world of feminine psyche in the theatre. Women’s theatre coalesces with Street Theatre movement, using the same technique in performance and production. It can be attributed as a ‘Theatre of Protest’ because women writers expressed their resentment against the politics of exploitation on the basis of gender discrimination. They also revived the traditional myths of Sita and Savitri and tried to reinterpret the epics from women’s point of view. The dramatic work of Usha Ganguli and Mahasweta Devi can be placed in their category; the latter emerged as a dramatist having a quest to explore something challenging and new. Her five plays are *Mother of 1084, Aajir, Urvashi O’ Johny, Byen and Water*. The play *Mother of 1084* is a moving account of the anguish of an apolitical mother who had witnessed the horrors of the Naxalite Movement. In *Aajir*, Mahasweta deals with the issue of the speedy deterioration of values and their effects on society, particularly on illiterate people. *Urvashi O’ Johny* is a play written for emergency through the love affair of Johny with Urvashi, a talking doll. The play *Byen* presents a moving account of harsh reality of a woman’s life in rural India. The play *Water* is the story of a professional water-diver, Maghai Done, who is an untouchable boy. Her plays represent a profound concern for human predicament and sincere hope for the better future of mankind. Manjula Padmanabhan, another eminent voice in the recent Indian-English Drama, has bagged the Onassis Award for her pioneering play *Harvest* which has been internationally acclaimed. She is a powerful playwright and a cartoonist. In *Harvest*, she delineates a dehumanized, terrifying world in which mothers sell their sons for the price of rice. In her another play *Lights Out*, she draws our attention to the heart rendering screams of a woman, Leela, which destroy the fabric of domesticity of a middle-class couple. Women face violence in many aspects of their daily life. This violence is multi-faceted. It is not merely physical but more often mental and emotional. It is deeply complex, subtle and indirect, hard to recognize and much more difficult to overcome. Dina Mehta’s first full-length play
The Myth Makers won an award in Sultan Padamsee Playwriting Competition in 1968. Brides Are Not Burning (a play on dowry deaths) won the first prize in a worldwide competition sponsored by B.B.C. in 1979. Getting Away with Murder was on the shortlist of seven specially commended radio plays out of 902 entries submitted for the B.B.C. World Playwriting Competition, 1989. The play deals with childhood, sexual abuse, infidelity and insecure relationship. It gives an account of three women friends who pass through their own private hells and finally emerge as strangers to one another. Her other famous plays are One Plus One Makes Nine and Sister Like You. P. Sen Gupta is a columnist, poet, children’s fiction writer and above all a playwright. Her first full length play, Mangalam won the award for its society relevant theme in The Hindu. Her latest play Keats was short-listed for the 1996 British Council International Playwriting Award and won a special commendation. Her play Mangalam shows how women have been facing various kinds of violence and abuses for generations.

We, thus, see that there is a proper blending of western intellectual consciousness and Indian theatrical techniques in the experimental plays of contemporary Indian-English playwrights. They deal with the aspirations of the deprived and marginalized sections of society and depict the acute conflicts of contemporary life. Their interaction with the world theatre has broken our alienation from the rest of the world. Indian English drama can flourish and prosper only when Indian English playwrights try to imbibe the spirit of rich Indian theatrical tradition and look at different issues with a sense of contemporaneity. Regarding the future scope of Indian-English drama and relevance of Indian theatre the remarks of Mahesh Dattani seem to be apt:

I think there is going to be a good positive development, because as we get into the internet age which isolates human beings, the act of communication will be a premium. Theatre is our cultural activity directly related to human beings’ communication with each other . . . (qtd. in Rai 23).

The perspectives of Indian drama in English are bound by our history, lineage, folklore, mythology, social customs, rituals and by our servility to the invaders, first
Muslim and then imperialist. These links to the past are important, as they are the roots and soil, which provide nourishment and sustenance to the Indian mind. Reminiscences, nostalgia and retrospection have led sometimes to an imitation of the themes adopted by earlier writers, at other times, the same themes have been recast with a new outlook.

The most prolific playwright of the Post-Independence period is Asif Currimbhoy who has written and published more than thirty plays. Asif Currimbhoy is a distinctive playwright in whose works we find contemporary burning social and political issues and problems of post-Independence India. Asif Currimbhoy is one of the most prominent dramatists of India who began to author his plays on different topics in the mid-fifties when he was only thirty one years old but failed to find a publisher in India for ten years. As M.K. Naik writes: “As a playwright he has no equal: ever since he began writing in the late fifties, he has averaged almost two plays a year” (140). Till his death on 1st June, 1995, he had produced twenty nine plays of all shades of thought.

Asif Currimbhoy had a background of a reputed family of Khoja Muslims. His father was an industrialist and was an open-minded intellectual whereas his mother was a dedicated social worker. He was married to Suraiya, a talented woman who loved Indian culture. He had three grown-up, well-settled children. He was only inspired by his wife and William Shakespeare. His wife, Suraiya termed him as a “Karma Yogi” (30) during her conversation with Ruth L. Meserve and W.J. Meserve. His creative writing reveals the impact of his family background and education. Asif Currimbhoy passed his schooling from Jesuit Mission, Bombay and graduated from Berkeley University in California in Economics. After graduation, he lived in France for a few years. Being Senior Executive Officer in Burmaha Shel Oil Company, he visited all over India and foreign countries which took him to acquire global knowledge and practical experiences which went into the writing of his plays. He grew in English environment and was even taught by English teachers. Telling about the English influence on himself and his family in an interview, he says:

These were of course pre-Independence days the colonial influence was felt full blast. It meant going through schools under the institutions that existed at
that time for which I have my own sense of preparation and, perhaps, criticism; the family environment was centered around English; we were literally brown Sahibs—as they call it, with a sense of humour and a sense of frustration (Baratham 38).

By taking pre-mature retirement from senior position of the company, Asif Currimbhoy started devoting much of his time to the writing of his plays. A grant from the Rockefeller Foundation (JRD 3rd Fund) transformed him into renowned playwrights in America between 1965-1966 where he took this opportunity to present his plays at Universities, Repertory Theatres including Coffee House Theatre in Greenwich village. On his return to his home town Bombay, his global fame provided him the same publicity in India. His plays were undertaken as subject of study and research and were even translated into regional languages.

Some of his important plays are The Doldrummers (1960), Goa (1964), Inquilab (1970), The Refugee (1971), Sonar Bangla (1972), and The Dissident M.L.A. (1974). He covers a wide range of themes from history and politics, society and religion, art and metaphysics. But surprisingly enough his plays have not received a detailed critical analysis for reasons beyond the comprehension of a serious reader. There are hardly two full-length studies on the playwright, besides a small number of articles. Faubion Bowers considers him to be “India’s first authentic voice in the theatre” (“The World of Asif Currimbhoy” 7). Bowers holds the view that Currimbhoy in the beginning wrote “plays of dissent” (“The World of Asif Currimbhoy” 7). K.R.S. Iyengar credits Currimbhoy with “sheer fecundity as a dramatist” (“The Dramatic Art of Asif Currimbhoy” 9) which is evidenced in his variety and versatility. Iyengar rightly observes: “There are one-act plays like The Doldrummers, three-act plays like Inquilab and four-act plays like Sonar Bangla. Farce, comedy, melodrama, tragedy, history, fantasy—Currimbhoy handles them with an easy assurance” (“The Dramatic Art of Asif Currimbhoy” 9). About the variety of topics and unity of approach in Currimbhoy’s dramatic output, R. L. Meserve and W. J. Meserv’s observation is apt:
Although plays that Currimbhoy has written thus far in his career treat varied topics, there is a unity of approach that belies that variety. As an intelligent, well-read and scholarly person, history and philosophy interest him and propel him toward a search for truth which is frustrated by his agonizing compassion for the condition of man. Constantly at war with his strong social conscience, fully aware of the irredeemable absurdities of man, there is that part of him which remains idealistic and concerned with human and personal salvation. In this conflict there may be found a core of unity ("Asif Currimbhoy" 30-31).

Sangeeta Agrawal comments:

Asif Currimbhoy has been prominent writer of the plays and that some of his plays are based on certain social issues and political events of our country. Currimbhoy's social and political consciousness is of paramount significance to us as he is able to show through it his deep-rootedness in the Indian ethos, his sense of 'belonging' to the soil (196).

Despite Aggarwal's stated concerns about the playwright, her study of his plays leaves much to be desired in the field of critical analysis since she talks about only the story outline of a few plays selected randomly. Thus her study is myopic and lopsided. K. A. Agrawal's article "Socio-Political Consciousness in the Plays of Asif Currimbhoy" also falls in the same category. Though the title is full of rich evocations but it fails to live up to the expectations since the article is only a superficial study of various thematic concerns of the playwright.

L.M. Joshi focuses on the social problems in Currimbhoy's The Doldrummers. She relates the thematic concerns of the play to Currimbhoy's larger world:

Time was out of joint when Currimbhoy chose the dramatic medium to set right. The political upheavals, the ill-fated partition of the country causing deepest struggle and anguish in Bengal and the Punjab, the loss of fraternal background, people indifference to communal harmony, the topsy-turvydom of human values, the poor execution of land reformation acts and bills, the resurgence of undemocratic measures to seize power, irrelevant education
policies the mediocrity in the rank of the teachers and students unrest were, therefore, treated as the source material for his play writing. Besides, the various offices Currimbhoy held gave him an opportunity to develop an in-depth acquaintance with men and matters in the proper study of mankind (256).

S. Joseph Arul Jayraj sums up the limitations of the new critical method which discards the biographical elements which give rise to a work of art. He rightly points out that "the greatness of a literary work for the New Critics consists in the way it transcends its historical limits and achieves a universal appeal" (Ravichandran 157). Yet in his attempt to prove the approach of New Critics Rome tries to find universal appeal in *The Refugee*:

*The Refugee*, though a period piece, has a global context. Thousands of people all over world are rendered homeless by wars and internecine conflicts. Men, women and children from Cuba, war-torn Bosnia, Rwanda are on the run. The human tragedy is heart-rending. War dehumanizes man and the play *The Refugee* is centered on this dehumanization (Ravichandran 157).

T. Ravichandran also finds fault with the new critical approach in studying the play, *The Refugee* when he observes "correspondingly, the New Critical approach is certainly not justifiably in the study of a play like Asif Currimbhoy’s *The Refugee*” (156). Ravichandran’s study of Currimbhoy’s *The Refugee* offers illuminating insights into the thematic and artistic purpose of the dramatist. The critic raises and answers very pertinent questions related to the motive behind the writing of a play like *The Refugee*:

But what is the purpose of the playwright? Does his intentions [sic] make any import to the content of the play? And why did he choose to mention ‘the massacre of intellectuals at Universities’ at the time foil of the play? Perhaps, the playwright being an intellect was disturbed deeply by the massacre of the intelligentsia. But being disturbed what should a writer do? Can he continue to rest in his ivory tower, remain complacent and noncommittal or should he join
the mainstream and *do something*? This is the writer’s conflict that is at the fulcrum of the play’s action (163).

Bayapa Reddy’s *The Plays of Asif Currimbhoy* is a comprehensive and illuminating study of various facets of Currimbhoy’s themes and technique. Reddy, besides tracing various kinds of influences that went into the making of Currimbhoy’s vision, places him in the company of the other great dramatists like Tagore and Aurobindo. P. Bayapa Reddy succinctly brings out Currimbhoy’s achievement as a dramatist which, according to him, lies in “an interplay between realism and fantasy” (146) which imparts his plays unity and universality of great dramatic art. Reddy rightly opines:

Currimbhoy never forgets that he is more a dramatist than a moralist or a philosopher. His plays are meant for the stage and they demonstrate his fine sense of the theatre and his skill as a dramatist. The dramatist’s concepts and ideas are integrated with the central concern of exploring certain human situations and predicaments. More than any contemporary Indian dramatists in English, he brilliantly succeeds in projecting an image of the time. While his vigorous imaginative grasp of the pageant of life is reinforced by a dramatic use of colloquial idiom and imagery, his control of dramatic form makes his plays artistic and universal. He works his satire into the character, and the character into the plot ingeniously. His relentlessness is born out of his intellectual uprightness as well as of his artistic integrity (151).

A. Ramesh Babu and K. Ranjith Rao study love and sexual corruption in *Goa* and relate it to its Portuguese colonization. The critics observe that “Asif Currimbhoy has in a roundabout way mentions how the colonialism still dominates in India by the names of love, lust and romance” (57). Yoosaph, A.K. reads *Goa* as a “significant example of Currimbhoy’s treatment of colour and race as an inevitable tool of analyzing postcolonialism” (3). He further observes:

It is exemplified how the skin of the black colour is perceived by an aristocratic white in the colonial context. Miranda’s derisive attitude to the
dark-skinned and her consciousness about the skin colour seem to have
given her more self-confidence creating a sense of inferiority in the colonised.
Her scathing remarks would have accelerated the colonised’s internalization of
the colonizer’s notion about the colonized that they are inferior and
underprivileged (4).

Yoosaph’s The Plays of Asif Currimbhoy: A Reading in Postcolonialism is a
significant contribution to Currimbhoy criticism. It studies “the different notions of
colonialism and postcolonialism” (10) in Asif Currimbhoy’s plays. The critic studies
Asif Currimbhoy’s plays “in terms of a number of binaries such as black/white,
colonizer/colonized, powerful/weak, upper class/lower class, employer/employee,
master/slave, master/disciple” (12). Though Yoosaph presents very illuminating,
fruitful and scholarly perspective on various colonial and postcolonial aspects of Asif
Currimbhoy’s plays, it has failed to provide any perspective on socio-political
consciousness.

The foregoing critical survey clearly reveals the fact that the available criticism
on the plays of Currimbhoy is limited in range and scope besides being simplistic.
Besides its meagre quantity and limited range, it does not make any detailed thorough
and critical study of Currimbhoy’s socio-political consciousness which inform most
of his plays. His plays are both topical and universal because they are “the voice of
universal revolt and anguish screaming it hoarse at the seemingly immovable society
around the world” (Foreword, The Hungry Ones 12). Though the plays like Inquilab,
The Refugee and Sonar Bangla are based on topical themes but they attain a kind of
Shakespearean universality in the hands of Currimbhoy. Though The Hungry Ones
and The Miracle Seed present the painful picture of famines in Bihar and Maharashtra
as their background, Currimbhoy’s social realism makes these issues “the problem of
man everywhere” (Foreword, The Hungry Ones 12). Currimbhoy is a playwright with
a strong social and political consciousness. But it does not mean that he uses his plays
as vehicle to propagate a particular social or political ideology. His plays are works
of art and not work of propaganda. Asif Currimbhoy’s social consciousness is visible
even to a casual reader.
Currimbhoy deals with the burning social and political issues as faced by the Indian society in the post-Independence period. At the age of thirty one, he began to author his plays on different topics in the mid-fifties but failed to find a publisher in India for ten years. M. K. Naik writes: “As a playwright he has no equal: ever since he began writing in the late fifties, he has averaged almost two plays a year” (262). Till his death on 1st June 1995, he had produced twenty nine plays of all shades of thought. Naik is of the opinion that ‘sheer quantity’ in the absence of the ‘quality of vision’ cannot make him a great dramatist. When, we make an objective assessment of his plays, we realize that he has dramatised human conflict at different levels varying from the directionless lives of young people, Liberation of Goa, agonies of the people of Bengal to the hunger and poverty of rural India, English tea planters and Indian Muslims. Through his plays he gives us the message that we are all ‘captives’ of our own religion, nation, politics, sex, and family. He expresses his deep sense of resentment at the seemingly immovable societies around the world.

Currimbhoy deals with the themes of public importance and its variety is amazing. His plays bear ample evidence to this fact that he has a message to deliver, a vision to fulfil. He has the international reputation as a dramatist, as his plays have been performed in several parts of the United States. Though he is aware of the irredeemable absurdities of man, he is always in search of the ways and means for the betterment of human life. He has the unique ability to create visual and auditory images on the stage. With the help of various theatrical techniques he wants to shock the audience and make them feel for the human suffering. He has been constantly experimenting with new forms, new subject-matters, new structures and new modes of presentation.

Like Arnold Wesker he is a social realist and reminds us of Strindberg and Tennessee Williams in the use of his theatrical techniques and stage directions. He is capable of creating proper atmosphere, interesting situations, powerful and animating characters. His plays are poetic, symbolic, passionate, even melodramatic. Sometimes he seems to be interested in creating exciting situations and thrilling incidents rather than delving deep into the ideological and dialectical conflict. Though his plays sometimes suffer from loose plots, sketchy characters, lack of wit and humour and
The present study seeks to examine the socio-political themes in Asif Currimbhoy's major plays such as *The Doldrummers, Thorns on a Canvas, The Hungry Ones, Darjeeling Tea, The Miracle Seed, Goa, Inquilab, The Refugee, Sonar Bangla* and *The Dissident M.L.A.* The study analyzes the political events like partition, liberation of Goa, the Naxalite Movement and Indo-China conflict. His plays address such issues as poverty, starvation, racial and class conflict, the depraved state of being a refugee, violence, superstition, loss of human and moral values. Primarily, his plays present life in all its shades. His social consciousness is manifest in such plays as *The Doldrummers, Thorns on a Canvas, The Hungry Ones, Darjeeling Tea, The Miracle Seed* and his political consciousness gets reflected in the plays like *Goa, Inquilab, The Refugee, Sonar Bangla, The Dissident M.L.A.* The playwright considers politics as an essential part of the social fabric. He also believes that each political incident has a far-reaching impact on society. He presents some of the moving political events and situations, affecting the social life in his plays.

*The Doldrummers* shows how the young boys and girls in the pursuit of easy pleasure disregard and discard the moral values in the present-day Indian society. Under the (negative) impact of the Western culture in the name of individuality and freedom they are taking recourse to wrong paths to enjoy unprincipled life. Their over-indulgence in irresponsible and dishonest sexual pleasures is discarding the worth and validity of the moral and human values which constitute the corner stone of a healthy society. The play dramatizes the loss of human and moral values through four Anglo Indian characters—Tony, Rita, Joe, Liza. Tony, on the one hand, flirts with Liza for the costly gifts that he receives from her, and on the other, he indulges in sex with Rita, thereby discarding her sentiments and sacrifices. When Rita comes to know about his relations with Liza, she gets disillusioned. Through the character of Tony the playwright portrays the unprincipled and irresponsible life of the youth; whereas through the character of Liza, he highlights the virtues of love, trust and sacrifice. Rita turns into a professional prostitute to earn a lot of money so that she
could buy Tony's love and keep him to herself but Tony is least concerned about Rita's honour and self-respect. Through the character of Joe, the playwright presents the inhumanity of the modern youth who consider woman only sex object. He exploits Rita both sexually and emotionally and makes her pregnant but misguides Tony about the illicit relationship of Rita with her old uncle Lollipop but the fact is that she approaches him for money to buy expensive gifts for Tony. On hearing this Tony becomes angry and beats her up and goes away. Ditched by both Tony and Joe, Rita gets frustrated and runs out to commit suicide, but she is saved. On the other hand, when the secret of Rita's pregnancy is disclosed, Joe commits suicide. Through this play, Currimbhoy digs at the unprincipled ways of the modern youth who fail to understand the basic meaning and purpose of life. The way all the characters act and react indicates that irresponsible and unprincipled life leads nowhere.

**Thorns on a Canvas** demonstrates the social and humanistic significance of art. A true piece of art is nurtured in pains and privations of life. In the play, the artistic instincts of Yakub and Nafesa are curbed by the rich who do not have any experience of hard and thorny life. This fact is illustrated through an incident where Malti, the daughter of rich patron, rushes to Yakub to take possession of the rose flower that he is holding in his hand, but cries as the thorn pierces her fingers. Through this incident the playwright suggests that no one can be true artist unless and until he or she undergoes the pains and privations of life. Malti, hailing from the privileged class, fails to understand the sense and significance of true art whereas Yakub is a true artist who turns the real thorns of life into his paintings. The play suggests that the beauty and sweetness of the rose can not be assessed without facing sharp thorns. In the same way, true art cannot be produced and appreciated unless one is pierced by the thorns of life. The play exposes hollowness and hypocrisy of various Art academies which instead of promoting art and artists have become the domains of the rich and nincompoops.

**The Hungry Ones** presents various forms of hunger, *viz.* hunger for happier life, food, sex and wealth. The rich exploit the poor to satiate their hunger for money and material life. Hunger for sex is exemplified through the character of the American poet who longs to enjoy the beauty and body of Razia, whereas hunger for food and
self-respect is presented through the characters of the Juggler and his wife who refuse to accept a coin and banana thrown by the apathetic Americans. Hunger for love is shown through the characters of a Hindu boy Ramesh and a Muslim girl Razia who continue to love each other even in the adverse circumstances. Hunger for freedom from *burqua* and household drudgery is presented through the characters of traditional Muslim women. The play underscores the view that unless and until due liberty is given to women, society cannot pace up with the fast-changing world. Besides, the play also presents how the youth, under the impact of the Western culture, are adopting indifferent and irresponsible attitude towards long-established social and moral values. They pride in putting on western clothes, make fun of the American visitors, calling them *Moulviji* and *Panditji* and adopt indifferent attitude to the burning problems of starvation and servitude. Through their unseemly behaviour and casual attitude the playwright presents the sharp decline of a healthy and moralistic society.

In *Darjeeling Tea* Asif Currimbhoy presents contrasts and conflicts of past and present values. The play reflects the problem of exploitation, despair gloominess and the growing restlessness among the various sections of society. The tea club which used to be the hub of social interaction has become now deserted and dirty. In the old times, the club throbbed with life, laughter and music and that is why it is symbolized like a big Christmas tree. Asif bemoans the decline in the values of Indian society which is being corroded by growing materialism and commercialization of human values. The subtitle of the play “A Comedy on Contemporary Manners in Two Acts” succinctly sums up the thematic concerns of the play. Big Mac and Big Hugh represent the past adventurous and romantic life of the tea planters which were always characterized by camaraderie and close kinship with nature. They always take recourse to past as a reference point in their lives which was full of parties and togetherness but these values have given way to the cheapened value systems and beliefs of the new emerging class of carpet—bagging proprietors who are symbolic of new times. The moral values of the past have now been eaten away by brass commercialization and materialism of the new masters.
The Miracle Seed presents a realistic picture of the painful ravage caused by the drought in Maharashtra in 1972. The play dramatizes an eternal struggle of endurance and survival of the peasants in the face of frequent droughts in their state. The playwright makes us acquainted with the miserable condition and fatalism of the farmers through a peasant family in the face of natural or man-made calamities. On the other hand, Laxman, an intelligent boy from Bombay, offers some hybrid seeds to the hopeless family to sow in the field to have a golden harvest. But Ram does not have faith in the words of Laxman whereas his wife believes in Laxman from the very beginning. Laxman introduces them with the new schemes like storage of water through dams and canals, employment generating programmes, free shelter camps and medical facilities for the drought affected people. The play achieves universal appeal since it brings to fore the calamitous lives of the poor peasants, their ignorance and backwardness.

Goa deals with the aftermath of Goa's political liberation from Portuguese in 1971. The play dramatizes social-political conflict between the Goa Hindu Nationalists and the Portuguese where the latter exploit the former. The beauty of a Goa village is place of pride for the Portuguese local administrator. But this beauty spot is used as place for carrying out romance by some regulars with women of loose morals. Through the characters of such people, the playwright exposes the casual view of the inhabitants towards newly-gained political freedom, which is evident in the way they try to make most of the newly found freedom without any social commitment and responsibility. Senhora, a fashionable and fair looking woman of forty, spoils her fourteen year innocent daughter Rose to maintain her luxurious and relaxed lifestyle. She is fond of new brand of whisky and new friends with wealthy backgrounds. Even she likes to enjoy sex with the boy friend of her daughter, Krishna. The playwright draws our attention towards the fast-accumulating sexual garbage in the wake of political liberation of Goa under the loose local administration. In the name of political freedom, irresponsible sex and unchecked smuggling gain speedy momentum. The playwright suggests that a nation needs responsible, honest, hardworking and committed citizens to maintain its hard-earned political freedom.
The next play, *Inquilab* dramatizes how violence is used by the youth to bring about social changes. The playwright presents the misdirected and mis-channelized youth through the characters of Ahmed, Amar and Shomik who take recourse to violent means to cleanse the system of hunger, injustice, corruption and social discrimination, thereby grossly disregarding the Gandhian philosophy of non-violence, and the democratic process of our Constitution as supported by Prof Dutta and the landlord Jain respectively to bring about social changes.

*The Refugee* dramatizes the deplorable conditions of refugees in the wake of liberation struggle of Bangladesh from the tyranny of Pakistan. The play conveys the message that to be a refugee is to be the most pitiable person—without family, without home, without nationality and without food. One becomes a refugee only because of circumstances beyond one's control. The play shows how Sen Gupta, himself a refugee in 1971, forgets completely what to be a refugee had meant to him in 1947. This transformation in Sen Gupta is symbolic of transformation of values and beliefs of the other characters in the play which are brought into light through parallels and contrasts to others. The skill with which Asif Currimbhoy traces the subtle changes in his characters reveals him to be a playwright of great psychological skill. The play is a brilliant study of socio-political problems generated by mass intrusion of the refugees. The play also reveals how the feelings of compassion and charity change into feelings of indifference and apathy towards the torture and plight of other human beings. Through his characters such as Yassin and Prof. Gupta, Asif Currimbhoy reveals how an individual affects and gets affected by the larger issues and concerns of the society around.

*Sonar Bangla* depicts the gruesome face of the nefarious designs undertaken by the politicians to perpetuate their narrow and selfish ends. Yahya Khan uses armed forces to restore peace in Bangladesh, whereas Prof Hussain and Aziz ask the students to foil the militarism by adopting the Gandhian means. The playwright presents a humanistic approach to such problem through the characters of Hussain and Elizabeth who devote themselves to the cause of humanity by offering food, shelter and medicines to the victims of the battle. Through the love relationship between
Elizabeth and Hussain, and Sumita and Mullah, the playwright suggests that love as panacea can embalm all the wounds of humanity.

The Dissident M.L.A. exposes the real face of the elected public representatives in the contemporary India. They use students to create social disharmony to perpetuate their petty and selfish ends. The playwright unmasks the ugly face of the dirty politics through the character of a dissident M.L.A Manu who uses his own son, Ramesh, a student leader, to instigate students to create situation of disorder and lawlessness to compel the governor to dissolve the Legislative Assembly. But, on the other hand, the real and genuine problems of the students like unreasonable costly food bills, unhygienic living conditions, irrelevant examination system and unemployment are relegated to the background. The playwright also digs at the corrupt and unprincipled politicians who enjoy luxurious lives at the cost of public exchequer.

Currimbhoy makes use of strong creative imagination to present his social-political consciousness but there is also a strong element of melodrama in the plays like Doldrummers, The Hungry Ones and The Darjeeling Tea. He also makes use of symbols to impart richness to his expression and to have an effective communication with the audience. His dramatic technique fuses the elements of dance, song and pantomime. He succeeds in creating powerful images at once visual and auditory which make his plays significantly theatrical. He deftly employs such dramatic techniques as parallels, contrasts, irony, flashback, cut-outs, satire, song, language, chorus, juxtaposition, symbolism, imagery, soliloquy and monologue which illustrate not only his themes but also present his distinctive skill as dramatist.
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