CHAPTER - III

THE DOLDRUMMERS AND OTHER PLAYS

All the plays included for discussion in this chapter have “something to say, something he must say, a message to deliver,” (Foreword, The Hungry Ones xiii) concerning the social and political events affecting men and nations deeply. The Doldrummers deals with the degeneration of the modern Indian young generation in the name of mindless aping of the western culture whereas The Dissident M.L.A. and Thorns on a Canvas deal with the decline of values in the political and artistic worlds. Darjeeling Tea? bemoans the loss of traditional values in the name of modernization and Goa is concerned with the impact of liberation of Goa on the Goan society. The Hungry Ones and The Miracle Seed bring out the painful reality of hunger and starvation in Indian society even after so many years of Independence.

The title of the play The Doldrummers is a “clever-clever word coined by Currimbhoy to indicate the doldrums which settle over a group of hip young people who ‘haven’t’ worked for a year of Sundays,’ who live in a shack on fashionable Juhu Beach in the suburbs of metropolitan Bombay, who are ‘too close to reality to live the life of imagination,’ and whose ‘idealism has turned to cynicism’” (“The World of Asif Currimbhoy” 5). The Doldrummers is basically “Currimbhoy’s coinage, and fits the play like a glove” (“The Dramatic Art of Asif Currimbhoy” 16). The New Oxford Dictionary of English defines ‘Doldrums’ as “a state or period of stagnation or depression.” It also refers to “an equatorial region of the Atlantic Ocean with calms, sudden storms, and high unpredictable winds.”

The word ‘doldrums’ occurs twice in the play, firstly when Joe tells Rita that they “live in the DOLDRUMS” (Currimbhoy, The Doldrummers 50) and secondly, towards the end when Tony remembers this word after Joe’s death:

Let’s go my friend,
We’ll go together, my friend,
To where the doldrums end (The Doldrummers 92).
All the characters in the play—Tony, Rita, Joe and Liza are the representatives of modern youth of India who have become purposeless and drifters in their lives. These “never-do-wells, these waifs and wastrels” (“The Dramatic Art of Asif Currimbhoy” 16) indulge in illicit sex and drinks to fill their vacuous lives. For them, love and sex have become synonyms. Tony is a “pleasant easy going” (The Doldrummers 10) person who is not eager to earn through work. He lives off Rita who has meagre earnings through stitching clothes. When Rita tells him that there is “nothing wrong with working” (The Doldrummers 45), Tony is shocked and indignantly replies: “That’s the first time you’ve told me that, Rita. You want me to work” (The Doldrummers 45). Tony tries to impress Rita by telling her that he has become unemployed now but he “had a first-class job before” as “a personal assistant to an executive” (The Doldrummers 27) but his lies are exposed when the fat and bald man reveals that he had been his servant. There are hardly any scruples, values or morals in the world of Rita, Liza, Tony and Joe. Though Rita has pure passionate and natural love for Tony but he values his other girl friends more because they can afford to give gifts like jewelled wrist watches, expensive silk shirts, perfumes, lavenders, dancing shoes, bracelets and necklaces. When Liza presents an expensive watch in exchange of, Rita cries out:

RITA: Why did you do it, Tony? Why did you do it! Isn’t my love enough for you? I have given you all of it. Why shouldn’t I expect all from you? Woman’s no different from a man. Why did you go to her? Was it for her, or the watch? Did the watch mean so much to you? (The Doldrummers 29)

Liza gets these gifts for sleeping with rich people and gives them to Tony in return of his love. For Rita, “it’s not the present that matters” but what he has “done to get it” (The Doldrummers 30). Tony defends his position that he does not find anything objectionable in this fair exchange:

TONY: I like the feel of a fancy silk shirt, or a sporty tie, or... or... one of those nice pointed shoes for dancing that I can polish and see my face in. Same way as a woman likes a bunch of flowers or a diamond
bracelet. So if someone likes you, and gives you something, why, it’s a fair exchange (The Doldrummers 30).

Tony is not only immoral and liar, he is also a shrewd and cunning man who knows how to manipulate a woman’s love. He, by indulging in self-pity, manipulates Rita’s emotions and tries to evoke her sympathy:

TONY: [trying to arouse her sympathy through self-pity] Well, I do live off you. I do no work. I’m lazy, and good-for-nothing (The Doldrummers 30-31).

Joe sums-up Tony’s character very beautifully when he says:

JOE: But Tony cannot change. You can, and I can, but not Tony. There’s no sense in advising a person that cannot change. He’s got a fixation for nice presents. But he won’t go out and work for them, so he’s got to receive it from other people. He’s right when he said that he felt like a king when he got that bagful of marbles, but he can’t remember [sic] whether the little girl who gave it to him felt like a queen. He couldn’t be bothered thinking about her. He’s happy he got that two-bit watch strap from Liza, but that doesn’t mean he’s concerned about her (The Doldrummers 35-36).

Joe also wants Rita’s body and he manipulates the differences that have cropped up between Tony and Rita over Tony receiving the gifts. Joe tells Rita very clearly that she must have money to retain Tony’s love:

By giving him an expensive present now and again you are merely making sure that you retain it, by keeping him happy (The Doldrummers 37).

Rita can ill-afford to present costly gifts because the money she earns by stitching dresses is “barely enough to pull on with” (The Doldrummers 37). So, he suggests to Rita that she should also become like Liza who “has many rich friends . . . admirers” (The Doldrummers 37) from whom she accepts gifts. Tony had earlier
stated that he would not object to getting gifts so “long as two people are friends and there is no exchange of money” (*The Doldrummers* 38). Joe exploits Rita’s basic weakness which lies in the fact that she can hardly bear Tony’s separation from her and thus, will be ready to do anything to keep him with her. Rita even agrees to Joe’s suggestion of taking to prostitution just to keep Tony happy by offering him gifts. Very soon we find a new Tony who is now “beautifully dressed and carries a brand new guitar which he keeps pawing every now and again” (*The Doldrummers* 42).

Tony is excited like a baby over his new possession. He tells Liza about his new guitar:

> TONY: [excitedly exhibiting it, like a toy] Brand new. Not even shop-soiled. No price reduction either, like they give for defective disposal things. I am proud of it. It is the best thing I ever got (*The Doldrummers* 44).

But soon the euphoria disappears as the reality of situation starts sinking in him. In his heart of hearts he knows fully well that Rita gives him these gifts by earning money through prostitution. However hard a man may try to live in illusion, sooner or later the sense of guilt starts gnawing his inner conscience. Though Tony is highly immoral, he is “nevertheless basically human” (“The Dramatic Art of Asif Currimbhoy” 16). Tony loses interest in everything whether it is singing or gifts or Rita and Liza. This change is perceptibly visible in the beginning of Act-II, Scene –I:

> A few months later. Tony is lying in the hammock. Immobile. The guitar has been placed near the tree and Tony is looking up at the sky with his hands folded behind his head. He has a far-away look, as though he sees and hears nothing, but is living in a world of his own. The smart clothes of a few months ago seem crumpled and unkempt and dirty. He has a stubble on his chin and a bottle at his side from which he takes a drink and now again (*The Doldrummers* 64).

Even Rita undergoes “imperceptible changes that have come over her in the last few months” (*The Doldrummers* 64). There is no moral courage left in Tony which is revealed when he encounters the fat and bald uncle Lollypop, Rita’s
customer who has been procured for her by none other than Joe himself and he himself tells Tony to assault the fat and bald man. He musters enough courage to go to the shack where he finds his former-employer who is none other than Lollypop. He behaves like a whimpering dog with tail between his legs. Though, Rita instigates him to kill the F & B Man. She says:


But Tony “does not move, as though and invisible chain were holding him down” (The Doldrummers 58). The fat and bald man taunts him by saying:

Say, incidentally, it’s alright you and me being friendly here, because, you know, you got me so to speak with my pants down, but you won’t talk about it outside, will you? Of course you won’t. You’re used to receiving orders from me, aren’t you? (The Doldrummers 59)

Tony sheepishly behaves in this high-voltage situation and even accepts money which Lollypop gives him to buy drinks. This instance clearly brings out that immorally corrupt person cannot challenge or dispute any kind of atrocity or injustice or even inhumiliation. Yoosaph Aayalakkandy rightly observes that “Tony’s helplessness in challenging the fat and bald man to save Rita from his control is indicative of the ambivalence of the weak-willed. He is embroiled in a dilemma that made it impossible to move forward with his plan of attacking the man” (89).

The situation is ripe for Joe to make his “next move” (The Doldrummers 59). Rita unwittingly tells Joe that the situation she is in is engineered by Joe himself who now offers himself as a customer but Rita is totally distraught because the person for whom she was playing this “game” (The Doldrummers 62) was not worth its price. Rita had wanted Tony to live “not only for himself ” (The Doldrummers 61) but also for her. Rita finally realises the futility of such words as love, hope, faith and sacrifice. She has finally come to realise that “we each live only for ourselves . . . and self-sacrifice has no meaning except to satisfy one’s own vanity” (The Doldrummers
Joe offers her diamond ring but Rita demands money from him because now the game of playing according to the rule that "as long as it was a present, and it came from a friend of Tony, it was mutually acceptable" (The Doldrummers 62) was over. Now she offers herself to anybody and everybody who can pay the price in cash. Rita despairingly declares:

RITA: Meaning that we don't need to play the game, Joe. Not any more. It's open house now. Lay your money on the table, Joe. It does not have to be a present any more, and it need not come from a friend either. Tony won't mind. As you just said, he didn't. He just stood... doing nothing. [Voice rising] Come on, Joe, what are you waiting for? You're being clocked. For God's sake let's stop talking and get down to it! (The Doldrummers 63)

Rita's "open house" (The Doldrummers 63) is now being frequented by people of all ages and of all backgrounds. The episode of school children and a drunk man visiting her house shows the pathetic and mechanical behaviour of Rita as a prostitute reminding the reader of Eliot's description of this kind of pure animalism in The Waste Land:

She turns and looks a moment in the glass,  
Hardly aware of her departed lover;  
Her brain allows one half-formed thought to pass:  
Well now that's done: and I'm glad it's over (249-252).

Rita tries to recreate the magic of old times by asking Tony to kiss her and by also telling that their love "is something quite apart" (The Doldrummers 72) but she forgets the inevitability of the situation she has landed herself in. When Rita kisses him "with passion and he without" (The Doldrummers 73), Rita asks Tony the reason of his impassive response:

TONY : You started it. The whole place smells of vomit including you.

TONY: She doesn’t at least change brands like you. You smell of two dozen kinds of sweat.

RITA: [screaming] You never seemed to mind it before. Not as long as you could cover it up with some of that fancy perfume I bought for you... with my sweat mixed in it (The Doldrums 73).

Rita’s pure and natural love for Tony ends in violence when Tony “slaps her with a heavy hand” and she spits “full on his face” (The Doldrums 74). Asif Currimbhoy expresses his strong condemnation of the loveless and mechanical carnal gratification to the total exclusion of any serious involvement with the opposite sex. Mere animalism and sexuality of the modern generation excludes any reverence for human ideals and constitute a cynic’s love ethic best represented by none other than Joe himself who ironically enough a Professor doing a course for the award of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. Shyam S. Agarwalla rightly observes that “Joe’s words and behaviour reveal his disgust and disappointment with his world. His character speaks volume about disillusionment among youth in post-Independence era” (76). Joe is a nihilist and a misanthrope who holds the view that everybody is selfish by nature and there is hardly any meaning of love, hope and faith:

RITA: Then there’s no meaning to it all, is there? We each live only for ourselves... and self-sacrifice has no meaning except to satisfy one’s own vanity.

JOE: [smiling hard] You’re catching on now, Rita.

RITA: And Love...

JOE: As I said before, it’s like any other four-letter word.

RITA: And Hope...

JOE: Hold on to it while it lasts, but no longer...

RITA: And Faith...

Joe: There is no God in Man (The Doldrums 61-62).
Rita rightly observes that "there's no difference between love and making love" (*The Doldrummers* 13) for him. All the human ideals by which mankind has survived have lost their meaning for the young generation of post-Independence India best represented by Joe. He, time and again, demolishes the human belief that there is anything like love, respect, faith or honour. Ironically enough he talks about Plato with Tony who is "as brainless as a banana" (*The Doldrummers* 20) and believes that "somewhere there exists a perfect world of ideas" (*The Doldrummers* 31). He firmly believes that nobody lives for others and that everybody is selfish. According to him, all noble ideas of our lives "boil down to one thing alone; Me. Me" (*The Doldrummers* 63). He makes fun of Caesar's phrase "Et tu Brute?" (*The Doldrummers* 63) because every person is a Brutus for him. He holds people in low esteem as is revealed by his response to Rita's suggestion that "You can be better than you are" (*The Doldrummers* 24). He scornfully retorts:

JOE: Christ, you give me a pain in the neck, Rita. What are you trying to do? Reform us? Put us in jail? No, better still, put us in the Zoo? So you can laugh with the rest of the hyenas. Those ones with the red bottoms and the curly tops. I see them every day around me. They wear hats and ties and carry umbrellas and work from ten to five. I see them in tram-cars with their long snouts buried in the papers. They blow their noses in clean handkerchiefs and pay four annas to the boot-polish boy. All neat and tidy. But have you ever seen them when they go home and let their hair down? They look for lice in each other's hair. They can't be bothered to pull the flush after dirtying the pot. Their bloodshot eyes are full of murder and rape as they read the cheap papers (*The Doldrummers* 24).

Like Iago, he distrusts all human relations and emotions. His whole philosophy of life is determined by the fact that there are no more causes, ideals and common goals left for the young generation after the independence. The noble ideals which have inspired our struggle for Independence have given way to criticism and despair:
I remember ... many years ago when we were all different, moulded closer to nature’s heart, fighting rightly for survival. *Satyagraha* was then also a different word. There was... there was a young boy... whom I once knew... who was a flag *Satyagrahi*. He passively resisted all oppression and never let the flag down. They came with batons... they bludgeoned him... beat him down bloody and broken... but even as he fell down dead, he buried the flag upright... let it fly in the freedom of the rising wind.

The flag, like some tender plant, found root in the fertility of the soil, and blossomed into a giant tree. It was memorial created form the blood of martyrs. We were proud, satisfied. The cause fulfilled. Mirrors straight. Identity... found.

But something was still missing. A distortion in the seed. They chose to ignore it, resting on past laurels. Gradually, unknowingly, the tree decayed, the landscape changed into desert, and the fight for survival... was inversed. We became monsters.

Reptilian. With scales insensitive. With breaths of fire and venomous spittle *(The Doldrummers 50-51)*.

It is as a result of this decay and death of values that even such ideals as *Satyagraha* have lost their meanings and are scoffed at by Joe in the very opening of the play:

One day we met a Dharma Bum
He came from America and called us Chum
Swore every night he slept with Nirvana
Smoked a weed he called... Mirajuana.

One day we just... non-cooperated
Sat around and merely waited
Others came and waited too
Not knowing what, where or who *(The Doldrummers 11)*.
No wonder then that in this world of cynics, sex-maniacs and wastrels women are treated merely as objects of lust and sexual desire. Women are treated with contempt and derision by people like Tony and Joe. Rita is described merely as “a young thing” (*The Doldrummers* 10) full of physical charm and Liza is described as a “technicolour doll” and “everything about her is painted” (*The Doldrummers* 17). The use of such words as “thing” and “doll” clearly reveals Currimbhoy’s strong denunciation of the modern society which disrespects and disregards women as human beings. Though Tony is totally dependent on Rita’s earning for survival yet he holds her in very low esteem. When Rita objects to Tony’s habit of receiving gifts from other girls, Tony behaves with her as if she were his servant: “Why do you look at me like that? Like I’d done something wrong. You got no claim over me, like we were married or something” (*The Doldrummers* 29-30). The way, he talks to Rita, shows his total disregard for her. When Rita angrily asks him to go, Tony compares her to a bitch. He says: “Alright. Alright. But don’t call back for me. You want me to go; alright I’ll go. But don’t call me back when you’re in heat” (*The Doldrummers* 35). Joe’s attitude towards women is even more revolting and shocking because he says: “Man always pins a woman ’neath him. Like a butterfly, with beautiful wings, spread out and pinned. For a woman, it’s crucifixion” (*The Doldrummers* 35). Women are merely objects of carnal gratification for him as is revealed by following dialogues between Joe and Rita:

**JOE:** [almost fiercely] Don’t bring me in, Rita. I’m out, and I want to say out. Rita or Liza, you’re all the same to me. Women with something nice between their legs. No more.

**RITA:** There’s something hateful about you, Joe.

**JOE:** Yeah. That’s the closest I can get to any woman’s love. And it satisfies (*The Doldrummers* 40).

For him, there is hardly any difference between one woman and the others as he views every woman as lustful and sexy: “Rita or Liza, you are all the same to me. Women with something nice between their legs” (*The Doldrummers* 40). The only thing common between the brainless Tony and Joe, the would-be holder of Degree of
Philosophy with "ratty intelligent eyes" (*The Doldrummers* 10) is their attitude towards women:

JOE: Never fear, Rita. Tony’s a natural born boy here. His mother had pangs of childbirth before he was born. He’s clean. Not me. I just slithered out with a lot of muck. My Ma never went to the hospital. They didn’t take her in because Pa wasn’t around to register her. I just came off in the street. That’s why the smell remains. I can smell a ditch half-a-mile away (*The Doldrummers* 24).

There is hardly any love and respect for both the women in this world of Tony and Joe. Rita and Liza have not to face physical or sexual abuse; they are also subjected to verbal abuse. Tony slaps Rita, knocks her down for no fault of hers: “Tony slaps her with a heavy hand that knocks her to the floor. He turns around and leaves” (*The Doldrummers* 74). The kind of abusive language, Tony and Joe use in the presence of Rita and Liza, shows their utmost disregard for their dignity. Words like ‘bloody swine’, ‘bastard’, ‘pimp’ and ‘bitch’ punctuate their dialogues. They have no shame in using such sentences and phrases like “I have a good grip” (*The Doldrummers* 22), “you are in heat” (*The Doldrummers* 35) and “he lays the guitar” (*The Doldrummers* 19). The only redeeming feature of the play is Rita’s display of courage and fortitude towards the end of the play. After Joe’s departure, Rita tells Liza that she is carrying Joe’s baby. Liza suggests to her the practical solution of abortion but Rita’s determination in giving birth to the baby instead of aborting it comes as a pleasant surprise to the audience and the readers:

LIZA: Honey, you’ve got to be practical. You want the child?
RITA: Yes! Yes! It’s mine. It grows within me. I cannot deny it life, for better or for worse.
LIZA: Be reasonable, Rita. It would be better for both of you.
RITA: The child will be born. It will be cared for...and loved.
LIZA:...without a father...?
RITA: It shall have a father (*The Doldrummers* 76-77).
Forgetting all her “jealousy and bitterness” (Venugopal 267) for Rita, the woman in Liza wakes up and does everything she can to console and help Rita. This female bonding between Rita and Liza offers a ray of hope in the world of the doldrummers.

The play with its bold presentation of the nether world of post-Independence India naturally invited ire and protest from the defenders of Indian culture and sensibility. The play was banned by the State Censor Board soon after its publication and it required “top names in India’s writing firmament” (“The World of Asif Currimbhoy” 5) such as Khushwant Singh, Mulk Raj Anand and Sham Lal, the editor of *Times of India* to get the ban lifted. Instead of taking remedial steps to check malice afflicting the Indian youth, the moral police use the weapon of censorship to shoot the messengers who showed the true reality of the young people who have been reduced merely to the level of “debtors to the whore of love” (Ezekiel, *Times to Change* 3). The death and decay of the moral fibre of the Indian youth reminds one of Eliot’s lines in *The Waste Land*:

Unreal City,
Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,
A crowd flowed over London Bridge so many,
I had not thought death had undone so many (60-63).

*Thorns on a Canvas* written by Asif Currimbhoy was a reaction against the ban imposed on *The Doldrummers* which was lifted only after “top names in India’s writing firmaments such as Khushwant Singh and Mulk Raj Anand, wrote letters to the Times of India editor, Sham Lal, himself a titan in the intellectual world anywhere” (“The World of Asif Currimbhoy” 5). More than a mere reaction the play is a stinging satire on the art academies, the primary purpose of which is to spot, nurture and promote art and artists. Instead of serving the purpose of art, these art academies have become the seats of favouritism, nepotism, corruption and promotion of fakers in the name of promotion of art. As usual in the Indian politics, old and retired politicians are offered plum positions such as a gubernatorial post or are made the chairman of such academies as Lalit Kala Academy and Sangeet Natak Academy.
The "mushrooming growth" of such academies "throughout India under state patronage" (Currimbhoy, *Thorns on a Canvas* 10) has provided enough scope for the government to reward their favourite oldies. The patron of the academy of the Art which forms the centre of action *Thorns on a Canvas* is an "elderly man wearing a Gandhi-Cap" (*Thorns on a Canvas* 9). The old man is "terribly short sighted" (*Thorns on a Canvas* 10) and has absolutely no knowledge of Art. His daughter has just returned after studying Art after having obtained a certificate from Ecole des Beaux Art (School of Fine Arts) and a diploma from the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts. She is on a conducted tour of the academy and is "wonderstruck and excited at her first visit to the Academy" (*Thorns on a Canvas* 9). She has been promised "a studio all to herself" (*Thorns on a Canvas* 9) by her generous father who has made elaborate plans to promote his daughter as an artist. For this purpose he has planned an elaborate exhibition of her paintings, though at the time of planning she has no paintings to her credit. On being asked about the arrangements of the exhibition the patrons' secretary says:

BUKAY: (metallically) the exhibition, set for January the 10th, a propitious day for travel, marriage and money (but not love), will the inaugurated by the Minister of Culture and Cultural Affairs. After seven minutes of fruit juice drinks and several toasts, he will introduce His Excellency, the Ambassador from France, who will speak of your daughter's many—splendoured career at the Ecole de Beaux Arts. The occasion will be graced by dignitaries from all walks of life. There will be Congressmen, Patrons, Critics, Editors, Art Dealers, and the... The twenty families (*Thorns on a Canvas* 27).

The details of the exhibition amply illustrate the way the art exhibitions are organised. Instead of promoting the works of real artists, the art academies under the patronage of leaders turned patrons are being misused to promote artists like the patron's daughters. The patron orders his daughter to paint twenty-five paintings out of which five should be "on pastoral scenes" and "ten on national monuments" (*Thorns on a Canvas* 28). The details of the exhibition as outline by Yakub clearly
goes to prove that the exhibition of paintings will be more of a show of commercial
and powerful links than serving its true purpose. Iyengar rightly observes that in these
exhibitions “cocktails stimulate pretentious critical jargon, and ignorance and
insincerity run riot”. He rightly observes that this scene is “summit hypocrisy and
crude fabrication where Art is a Public Sector enterprise with its bureaucratised
remarks” (“The Dramatic Art of Asif Currimbhoy” 18).

The description of the exhibition of Malti’s paintings is the most powerful
satire on the devaluation of Art and the artists, the unholy nexus between the leaders
and business tycoons. The visitors at the exhibition are from “High Society bunched
around like a cocktail party” (Thorns on a Canvas 34). The art galleries have become
the ideal place “where the rich meet the idle poor in a brave display of mutual
camaraderie” (Thorns on a Canvas 34). Asif Currimbhoy stingingly remarks that such
meetings of the rich and the poor “break all social barriers” (Thorns on a Canvas 34).
The gathering of the ‘art lovers’ “emit the sounds of buzzards getting together”
(Thorns on a Canvas 35). Yakub, the real artist has soft feelings for Malti and he
wants to save her from these ‘buzzards’ as he tells Nafesa:

YAKUB: (to Nafesa, though it is Malti on the other side of the gallery who
appears to hear him in a telepathic sense) Buzz... buzz... buzz... like
buzzards. The buzzards get her. They envelop the prey, tear open the
flesh. Sharp claws and fangs, streaked with blood. Eat the gory vitals and
become a buzzard yourself. So you’ve no different from the others. Tell
me, Nafesa, have you ever seen a beautiful dove... transformed into a
buzzard... so as to become one of them... (nudging Nafesa crudely by
the elbow) Nafesa, lets pretend to be buzzards and walk like them
(Thorns on a Canvas 35-36).

The ‘art lovers’ have time and again been described as buzzards because they
pretend to know the niceties and complexities of art but all their discussions and
descriptions are no more than the sound of buzzards. Their souls are “deadened
and an utter slave to things” (“The Dramatic Art of Asif Currimbhoy” 17). Asif
Currimbhoy’s attempt is to expose the fakers and phonies – be it artists, art critics or
the patrons of academies or are galleries. The way they show their 'knowledge of Art' is the high point of drama.

CRITIC: The two-dimensional patterns... the stylized treatment... is exactly the same as Aria's

AMBASSADOR:... the dramatic intensity... the conception of the heroic and the tragic... reminds me of Gujjar's...

PATRON:... the medley of lines... the quiet and robust colours... are quite like Kishe's... (Thorns on a Canvas 38).

The way they exhibit their shallow knowledge of art is a testimony of Asif Currimbhoy's strong antipathy to this world of Art and artists. Actually these paintings are not entirely the creations of Malti; rather they are the products of the apprentice-artists.

1ST APPRENTICE-ARTIST:... the left breast's mine...

2ND ARTIST: I did the hips and neck. Lines... I love the best.

3RD ARTIST: You should have seen me work over her back.

4TH ARTIST: The mole's mine (Thorns on a Canvas 37-38).

The way critic starts quivering and trembling when Malti's father throws indirect hints of his close connection with proprietors of the art magazine for which the critic works is highly satirical. The exhibition scene is also a devastating satiric attack on the Establishment - sponsored Art and artists. Yakub's abilities as a natural, spontaneous and original singer have not been recognized because he did not bow to the dictates of the Czars of the world of Art. He, in uncontrollable fury, shouts:

YAKUB: Where did the rot start? How much of it were you responsible for... and how much... I? And how much... they? It was like... gangrene. It started small, but spread and stank, rotting every inch of the way, killing. Now we're dead under... and wisps of ficate from the Ecole de Beaux Arts. A diploma from the Royal Academy of Dramatic
Arts. It speaks of distinction unknown here . . . (then finding Malti not listening, speaks irritably) . . . Malti! Aren’t you listening to me? Why do you look across every now and again? Whom are you looking at? Or are you planning to leave? You can’t leave, you know; not after we’ve initiated you. You’re now one of us (Thorns on a Canvas 41-42).

Yakub fully realises what the malevolent influence of the Establishment can do to Malti’s art because he thinks that despite the best efforts of her father she has still retained in the purity of her feelings and heart. He also at the same time knows fully well the defects of Malti’s paintings which are nothing more than “simulations of colour and form . . . photographed from masterly lenses (Thorns on a Canvas 44). P. Bayapa Reddy correctly observes that Malti’s paintings symbolise “perfection without a soul, slickness of execution but lacking perfection” (183). The soul is missing because “hot-houses” like the Academy “can not breed natural art” (Thorns on a Canvas 44). Yakub parodies the true purpose of such academies where Art is practised and promoted for interests other than artistic:

Ars Gratia Artis
Ars Gratia Artis
Art of the sake of yourselves
Art for the sake of ourselves
Art for the sake of compulsion
Art for the sake of reward (Thorns on a Canvas 46).

Yakub wants to take away Malti from the baneful atmosphere of the Academy to the real world where life teaches and forms the subject matter of Art:

YAKUB : (grabs hold of Malti and pulls her away from them) Come! Come with me. Come to where Art speaks for itself. Where it is not wound like a mechanical clock nor dances like a puppet on strings. It’s no glass cage where I’ll take you. I’ll show you the real ones. . . I’ll show you colour and line . . . forms that betray truth . . . for masterpieces can only be fashioned . . . within themselves! (Thorns on a Canvas 47)
In this real world, the real artist learns to be natural, spontaneous and original. Yakub takes Malti to a start where there is pain, hunger and imperfection which are the essentials of the Art. Yakub, in this real world, feels like a free bird and regains his artistic spontaneity. He desires to show Malti the meaning of art from unknown to her because “art was taught [to Malti] without being learned” (*Thorns on a Canvas* 44). With a piece of charcoal in his one hand and sheets of paper in the other, he “reproduces sketches of life around” with “swift, dexterous lines and curves” (*Thorns on a Canvas* 48). He has brought Malti to make her realise that the imperfection of life is the fountain head of real and original art:

Feel Malti Feel. Feel the texture and form on the paper. It’s three-dimensional, and the thorn gleams sharp from the thrust. Don’t be afraid. Don’t be afraid. The pain comes from life’s realization. Without it there can be no awareness: Without it there can be no birth. . . no greatness to painting (*Thorns on a Canvas* 49).

He also tells her that there can be no awareness without the realization of pain of life. They find a man producing sweet music on empty kerosene tin and a ‘queer’ starts dancing in a perfect dance which is in total contrast to the artificiality of Neela’s artificiality of her Kathak dance. She herself is aware of limitations as she says: “I can’t get it, try as I may! It’s not a perfect NARITYA” (*Thorns on a Canvas* 17). This is entirely because of the artificial atmosphere of the Academy that the artists do not nurture their natural artistic talents. Yakub is fully conscious of the nether world of Art academies when contrasted with the ecstasies of the real world of imperfection. Yakub praises the dance of the eunuch and says:

... look, no strings attached. She does not dance like a puppet, nor is the music keyed to a uniform note. What you have chosen to see with me is almost 300 hears old. It isn’t so difficult to see that far back, is it? Why, it might well have been ... yesterday, or tomorrow if you want it to be that way . . . (*Thorns on a Canvas* 51).
In this world of reality, motivation to paint, to dance and to sing comes naturally and Yakub who is a natural singer finds his heart singing because this world is of his own choice in which he is not forced but “impelled to perform” (*Thorns on a Canvas* 55). This world is a “street singer begging for alms” (*Thorns on a Canvas* 55). He starts singing Ghalib’s ghazals in rapture and enthralling melody which goes on becoming sweeter and sweeter with every passing hour of night. He sings in the streets as melodiously as does a nightingale in the dark woods. He goes on singing throughout the night and “a little before dawn” (*Thorns on a Canvas* 57). His last song sums up the artistic feelings, yearnings and desires:

‘Dil hee toh hai no sang vah khart dardh sai bhar ne ayai quein
Roaingay hum hazar bar koey hamain setaay quein.’

(LEAVE ME, OH! LEAVE ME ALONE, AND LET ME WEEP.
WHY SHOULD I NOT WEEP?
WHY SHOULD I SUPPRESS MY TEARS?
I AM NOT MARBLE OR STONE; I AM NOT WOOD:
I HAVE A TENDER HEART.
MOVED BY COMPASSION AND PAIN) (*Thorns on a Canvas* 57).

Yakub has achieved this artistic excellence, though unrecognized by the Establishment because he has suffered in life and knows what suffering and pain means. This is what he wants to teach Malti because without realizing the intensity of pain and suffering, one can not become an excellent artist. Therefore, he invites Malti to come to his room at dawn where she finds him in a compromising position with Nafesa. Malti starts “trembling, sobbing with humiliation and anguish, and indignation” (*Thorns on a Canvas* 60). When Malti asks Yakub why he deliberately hurts her, he replies: “It hurt, didn’t it? Or don’t you remember . . . the hurt given to others? Those who have no words ... remain unseen . . . mutter only in Pain, supported by laughter. . . ” (*Thorns on a Canvas* 61). Yakub succeeds in teaching Malti “that there are no roses without thorns” (*Thorns on a Canvas* 62). Malti learns the lesson and her paintings start pulsating with “life and reality” (*Thorns on a Canvas* 68). She realizes the change and says:
MALTI: (with a change in mood, one of renewed hope and longing) Oh come with me, Bukay. I have so much to show you. A new line, a new colour. I'm no longer tired or sad or hurt. I feel...a change. It must express itself...urgently. It's like an unknown experience, so full of fear and expectation that it is. I must share it...realize it...with you. Won't you come...won't you, please? (Thorns on a Canvas 69)

There comes "a look of sadness in her face, of recognition, of awareness, of longing and of pain" (Thorns on a Canvas 70). Asif Currimbhoy is of strong conviction that artistic honesty and authenticity are of great importance in a writer's life. An artist must not sacrifice these sterling qualities at any cost and if an artist does so, he becomes robotised and as mechanical as bukay, who is the opposite of Yakub. bukay has become a slave of the Establishment by bartering away his soul and in the process he has been decorated "from neck to knees in medals like a medieval knight in armour" (Thorns on a Canvas 30). Asif Currimbhoy is not so much against bukay as he is against the Establishment of the Art academies represented by Malti's father. He is truly, in Yakub's words, a Devil who mars and distorts the soul of a man. The sly manner in which an artist soul is deformed by this Devil is described by himself in the following words:

FATHER: I thought not...bukay has a way of attending to...everything. Sometimes I don't even need to be present, because I KNOW everything he's doing. It wasn't easy, was it, bukay? Little by little, little by little, and I was many, but he was alone... (bukay looks impassively in front)
drop by drop, drop by drop, like melting ice that burrows its way through a man's flesh deeper than any branded iron...
(bukay's face quivers under the control)
And no marks. No outside marks at all. A perfect imitation of flesh, a perfect duplication of freedom...but with a soul so marred and tortured that it needs love the thorn to the beautiful rose... (Thorns on a Canvas 28).
The plays of Asif Currimbhoy reflect his views on art and artists. An artist, as the play suggests, should be independent and autonomous to achieve greatness in the realm of art. The play is an acidic satire on the Establishment of the art academies which spawn imitators rather than true artists. Asif clearly emphasizes that there is no substitute to direct confrontation with life and a true artist has to learn to live an authentic life by realising the significance of pain, suffering and want. He considers closeness of experience of life as a mark of true art which lends it authenticity. At the same time, Asif fully reveals his strong aversion to fakery and egocentricity in an artist’s life. His antipathy to such fakers in the realm of art is revealed by his caricature, the character of bukaY.

Though the play is set against the liberation of Goa in 1969 by India yet it presents a fascinating account of the social, political and religious ethos of that time. Goa was first conquered by the Portuguese in March 1510 without any resistance from the Indian side. Though India became free in 1947 but Goa still remained a Portuguese colony. The Indian satyagrahis tried to enter Goa in 1955 but they could not succeed in the mission. In December, 1961, Indian troops supported by the Indian Navy and the Air Force occupied Goa and subsequently it was incorporated in the Indian union in 1962. The play beautifully captures the scenic beauty of Goa, its leisurely life and its social, religious and political harmony.

The Portuguese Administrator is so much enthralled by the beauty of Goa and its people that he says:

Goa ... Goa ... this is Goa, my own, nestling amidst green hills and valleys, the rice fields and rivers that make this a paradisial land ... Look at the patio in front of you. This is a heart of each village in Goa (Currimbhoy, Goa 17).

The patio where people from all walks of life come to discuss various issues of life over a glass of beer or wine symbolises the cross-section of the Goan society.

The meetings here are always loud and lively, with nothing to hide ... on market days there is all noise and bustle, scents and smells, a strange mixture of fish and flowers. Buxom, garrulous fisherwomen, with sweet – smelling...

saios in their hair, are busy enticing the wily customer to buy their delicious river fish ... the church feast is a great day for the entire village. There is the village band, with fair and fireworks. . . the smell of incense and finim in the evening air, and at home hot sarepatel and wines await the revellers (Goa 18).

The patio is the “peculiar meeting. . . of cultures and religions ... of different political attitudes ...” (Goa 18). The placing of the church in the stage direction of Asif Currimbhoy alongside the taverna symbolizes the close connection between religion and the drinking way of life of Goans. Religion is an integral part of the Goans which can not be separated from the easy way of life of which drinking is a regular habit. There is complete harmony, leaving aside certain imbalances of opinions and attitudes in the social, religious and political fields. Though Goan Nationalist is a Hindu working for the liberation of Goa from the Portuguese and the Portuguese Administration is Christian responsibility for keeping the colonial intact, we find that both enjoy a very mutually satisfying and enjoyable relationship. Both of them enjoy a glass of beer sitting on the same bench but expressing different opinions and views regarding various issues of life. The Goan Nationalist is hopeful that the Indian Government will soon liberate Goa but the Portuguese Administrator thinks otherwise:

This is Goa .. my home, no less than Lisbon where I was born. And when we, the Portuguese, came to India almost four centuries ago, we made of Goa an enclave ... (Dim light falls on the GOAN NATIONALIST who is sitting across from him drinking beer.) Ah but my friend here who calls himself a ... a ... (Suggestion of a deprecating snigger) ... Nationalist insists we made this into a ... colony ... instead of a small part of Portugal (Goa 17).

The Goan Nationalist holds totally different views and charges, the Portuguese exploiting the simple and peaceful Goans:

PORTUGUESE ADMINISTRATOR : Nice day. I always enjoy a glass of bear in the sun.
GOAN NATIONALIST: Don’t you ever work?
PORTUGUESE ADMINISTRATOR: Certainly. I’m here to keep you out of mischief.
GOAN NATIONALIST: Your days are numbered, friend.
PORTUGUESE ADMINISTRATOR: There’s nobody here who knows how to count.
GOAN NATIONALIST: Yes, you made sure of that, didn’t you?
PORTUGUESE ADMINISTRATOR: No, I give the people what they want ... a glass of beer in the sun ...
GOAN NATIONALIST: Like me. I like this too. But I want something more. You understand?
PORTUGUESE ADMINISTRATOR: Yes.
GOAN NATIONALIST: And you won’t let me have it.
PORTUGUESE ADMINISTRATOR: I’m here to keep you out of mischief.
GOAN NATIONALIST: You’re exploiting us.
PORTUGUESE ADMINISTRATOR: (Screwing up his nose) That’s a dirty word.
GOAN NATIONALIST: You’re exploiting us (Goa 18-19).

The Goan Nationalist becomes disillusioned because the liberation of Goa was occasioned by the use of force by the Indian forces: “But in the process the innocent and peaceful and moral image of India was blemished with her first act of violence ... tarnished was the rose worn in the lapel ... (Goa 79).

The Goan Nationalist is quite hopeful that Goa will progress both economically and socially with the advent of the liberation. There will be economic upliftment of the people with the opening of the tourism sector and establishment of other industries and factories.

Tourists will come and industries will develop and this pleasant sleepy town with the languid Portuguese atmosphere will develop into an Indian metropolis, giving opportunities to all (Goa 80).
The religious harmony of both the Christians and the Hindus is beautifully presented by Asif Currimbhoy. Though with the stage details it is revealed to us that the white church, "was built on the foundation stone of a temple with Hindu carvings" (Goa, Stage Details 12).

When the Goan Administrator goes inside the Church to pray, the following conversation between the Vicar and the Goan Nationalist sharply brings into focus the religious harmony and tolerance.

VICAR: Don’t forget to come to church now, both of you.

(The PORTUGUESE ADMINISTRATOR and GOAN NATIONALIST wave back their consent to the VICAR. The VICAR turns benignly to his companion on the bench, the GOAN HINDU). And when will you come to my church, brother...

GOAN HINDU: I’ll worship from outside, father.

VICAR: Why from outside?

GOAN HINDU: My temple, father. You built your church on it.

VICAR: What do you mean?

GOAN HINDU: (Pointing to the foundations of the church) See the foundation stone of the church, father? Look closely. That ancient carved motif is the lotus flower, and my God’s sublime. That was my House of God...

VICAR: ... and still is, my son. Come inside (Goa 20-21).

The play Goa is an intermix of socio-political issues. Politics and public affairs found abundant expression in his plays and according to Peter Nazareth, "Asif Currimbhoy interweaves the public event with the private to create exciting drama which asks moral questions about humanity in the cataclysmic period of de-colonisation" (Web). The play provides a galaxy of social evils like prostitution, greed for money, gold, diamond, smuggling, sexual pleasures, the evil of lechery, communalism and parochialism.

Miranda is a prostitute who has no scruples and is even ready to bargain her own daughter for a gold necklace. The regular meetings at the patio benches are well
aware of her misdoings. They whisper about her coquettish nature as she passes by them.

SENHORA MIRANDA, a fair-looking WOMAN of about forty, splendidly dressed in the latest Portuguese fashion with colourful parasol in hand, comes down the steps of the bar-tavern (West side of stage) slightly tipsy, and walks slowly across the patio to her residence (East side of the stage) in the course of which SHE finds herself obliged to pass by the benches in the middle of the square (Goa 13).

The regulars who are busy in their conversation stop dead upon seeing Senhora Miranda and stare at her continuously. She is fully conscious of the effect she is creating. She walks slowly and carefully to attract the people and to avoid showing any effect of her tipsyness. She is influenced by the important personalities of the society like the Vicar and the Administrator. She bows to them slightly but ignores the local people and the smuggler.

Miranda is greedy by nature and offers herself in proportion to the price of the gift. The following conversation reveals Miranda’s greed for gold and money.

SENHORA MIRANDA : Oh, let me guess.
ALPHONSO: I’ll give you a hint.
SENHORA MIRANDA : More expensive than the last one?
ALPHONSO : Yes.
SENHORA MIRANDA : (Delighted, Kissing him) of silver?
ALPHONSO : No, gold.
SENHORA MIRANDA : (Squeezing him joyfully) Oh, you need more than a kiss for that.
ALPHONSO: Give.
SENHORA MIRANDA: First tell me what it is.
ALPHONSO : (Removing from his pocket) A necklace. A gold necklace. With a chunk of gold at the end. A cross weighing goodness knows how many ounces.
SENHORA MIRANDA: (Taking it in her hand and feeling its weight) Why, it’s heavy ... (Looking at the figure of Christ on the cross) ... and beautiful. I’ll wear it to Church. Won’t the Vicar be happy!

ALPHONSO: Like me?

SENHORA MIRANDA: (looking mischievously) In a different sort of way, I guess.

ALPHONSO: Heavenly gates. We all want to enter the heavenly gates. And the keys are made of gold.

SENHORA MIRANDA: Why, Alphonso, that’s a very philosophic remark. And practical too.

ALPHONSO: Like you, huh? (Goa 28-29)

She offers Rose, her own daughter to Alphonso just to keep him near her. She is apprehensive that she will lose a very precious customer if Alphonso deserts her. The lack of scruples on the part of Miranda does not surprise or shock the reader.

SENHORA MIRANDA: Rose ... (Turning ROSE around to face her) ... see me, dear ... Rose, we’ve got a guest. He wants to go but I want him to stay. You understand? (Rose nods) He talks at [sic] lot about you. Calls you an innocent white flower ... (Rose’s hand goes to her heart) says Rose is Goa and Goa is Rose. Is terrified of me, yet comes and often stays. (ALPHONSO cannot bring himself to look up at her) Hoping. Hoping. That’s why he comes back over again. See what he gave me? A necklace ... of gold. With a cross that weighs a ton. Here, I’ll put it around your neck. No, no, don’t be frightened. He’s harmless animal. I know. (She gently puts the necklace around the neck of her daughter) Now, Alphonso. Look up. Look at her. Nothing to be ashamed of. She’s innocent and beautiful. And she’s dark. Not fair like you. Look up, you dog. Look up at her! (ALPHONSO is perspiring, he can’t look up) You’ll never see her again if you go for good. So see her now! Look at her! (ALPHONSO raises his eyes slowly, guiltily. Then he bursts out at Miranda) (Goa 41).
Miranda does not even wink once before she tells Krishna that he will have to satisfy her sexual appetite before he can even think of going to Rose. "It's not going to be easy, Krishna. (Softly) You see, Krishna, I come first, like two spoons of sugar before three. No one's going to stop you, Krishna ... but you'll have to pass by me first" (Goa 48).

The other pimple blemishing beautiful face of Goa is in form of smuggling. Though the smuggler has no big role to play in Goa, he has simply been introduced to make the reader aware of the evil of smuggling in Goa. He defends his profession by claiming that smuggling is not an illegal work; rather, according to him, it is a work of commission. The smuggler defends his illegal activity by proclaiming that he provides necessary imported things to the people without charging much profit.

Who said I was a smuggler! I'm a ... a ... commission agent. Why, some of the best families ... are my friends. After all, it is I who risk imprisonment for them. Ah, but look at my clothes: the latest striped shirt from Portugal, and pointed black shoes that set me up as the first in fashions in old-fashioned Goa. Certainly I was filthy once. I never came from the landed Goan-Christian aristocracy. I came from the fields and wore a loincloth. But I was smart. I can now speak Portuguese like the Portuguese, not the locals. Yet I am more nationalist than the nationalist. I worship the Church from inside and the Temple from outside. I can tell more old wives' tales than all you tails put together. So now I am filthy ... rich! (Goa 22)

The foregoing analysis clearly brings the fact that Asif Currimbhoy "writes plays like bullets needing only the trigger of a national event" (Introduction xiii). Here, the national event is the liberation of Goa against the backdrop of which he raises several important socio-political issues like religious harmony, nationalism, communal harmony, prostitution and smuggling.

The Hungry Ones was basically inspired by the visit—Allen Ginsberg, a beatnik poet, alongwith Peter Orlovsky to Calcutta and their futile efforts to "gain an understanding of and admission to the mystery of India" (Foreword, The Hungry Ones). They want to learn what constitutes mystique and mysticism of the Indian
culture but the play reveals that “what they learn is that they can never learn” (Foreword, The Hungry Ones). Both Ginsberg and Orlovsky represented basically the beat generation of the post-World War II America which believed in “experimentation with drugs, alternating forms of sexuality, an interest in Eastern religion, a rejection of materialism and the idealizing of exuberant, unexpurgated means of expression and being” (“Beat Generation,” Web). No wonder then that we find Al and Sam, their fictional representation in The Hungry Ones, trying to unravel the complexity of Indian society and Indian culture. It is really amusing for an Indian to find these two Americans taking recourse to drinking and drugs to help them do so. We find these two Americans “Dharam Bums”, “one standing on his head in Yoga-pose” and the other one “kneeling on carpet facing Mecca, praying” (Currimbhoy, The Hungry Ones 25). For them, these outward and physical manifestations of yoga and prayer will initiate him but they learn the hard way that to understand India is to understand “its deep conflicts both religious and social, incapable of resolution through the existing and contradictory voices, still hungry, still suffering smiling sadly through death and the agony of believing without hope” (Foreword, The Hungry Ones 18). The first contradiction that they fail to grasp and comprehend lies in the “bizarre movements” of a “Bengali man and woman, able-bodied and decently dressed” who remove their fine dress and start wearing “tattered beggar-like clothes” (The Hungry Ones 25). The playing of drum by the woman and the hungry act performed by the Bengali man further confuses them:

The man now lies prostrate, as though without arms and legs, writhing has body forward, inching forward painfully, his flesh picking up the filth of the pavement, cutting itself on sharp stones till blood shows on dirty cloth, all the time slapping his bare brown stomach, his eyes hollow, till the sound of his empty stomach sounds very much like the empty drum, that drives him on and on (The Hungry Ones 26).

Moved by the grief of the woman and the festering body of the man, one American offers him a banana and other American a coin. But the man does not accept either banana or the coin. Then they offer the same to the woman who also
"declines, folding her hands in thanks" (The Hungry Ones 27). What bewilders them more is the man’s acceptance of gram from an “urchin child” (The Hungry Ones 28) who gives him some of his own food:

He stretches his hand out, slapping his belly, eyes now beseeching...the child is moved to pity, takes out some of his own food (possibly from mouth), and puts it in the mouth of the man, who at last closes his eyes, stops hitting his belly, lies inanimately, only his mouth chewing slowly on the food, the life coming and going out of him (The Hungry Ones 28).

The Americans cajole both of them to play different games but the “Indians still seem to maintain their reserve in terms of the ‘hungry act’” (The Hungry Ones 29). The Americans are now desperate to decipher the mystery of the ‘hungry act’ of the Indians with whom they have found the “uncommon in common, the beatniks and the hungry ones” (The Hungry ones 30). The playwright is at pains to point out that it is not possible to understand the meaning and significance of the ‘hungry act’ without knowing or realizing what hunger means:

... so you want to become
one of us, stranger,
a hungry one ...?
then learn: stranger, learn ...
HUNGER! (The Hungry Ones 30)

The Americans are hell-bent on deciphering the mystery of the “uncommon in common” (The Hungry Ones 30) as Al points out: “This contrast and friendship. This need and rebuke. I ... will ... still ... break ... their ... reserve ... their secrecy... if only to prove my superiority” (The Hungry Ones 35). The Americans’ quest naturally begins with search of the Indian man and woman in the maze of the streets of Calcutta and the ‘beatniks’ who wanted to be one with the ‘hungry ones’ are appalled and shocked to see “rows upon rows of maimed and deformed beggars, some begging for alms, some moaning softly, some bearing patiently, some waiting (The Hungry Ones
38). They decide to abandon their search in “bewilderment and horror” (The Hungry Ones 39).

Al, the American Muslim, does not know the essence of his religion which lies in “deprivation and prayer”, “discipline and rigours”, “abstinence and devotions” and “grief and love” (The Hungry Ones 41). He is a Muslim only in name and does not know the meaning and significance of Ramzan and Mohurrum. It is the beggar who tells him what privations and sufferings the Prophet suffered in the blazing deserts of the Arabian Desert:

Privations? Your privations? And as day follows night, in deserts sandy and bare, blazing hot and starry cool, this firmament did witness such acts of privation, unfelt and untold ... when warring tribes clashed in thousands, the sands turned red, the casis dried, figs no longer grew on trees, and life stirred only though the murmur of the evening breeze, the last breath there was to life...

(His voice rises, soft and beautiful, the powerful and majestic, making the beggars weep around, bare their breasts and beat themselves with chains and cut open their flesh with knives and other self-inflicted torture, as is the practice in the Muslim month of Mohurrum)

... oh, the torture, oh the torture; endured and battered came the lasting faith, cleansed as it was through the sacrifice and pain, of one man, of one man alone, not God, but his Prophet... (The Hungry Ones 41).

Al realizes that he is not “able to participate nor identify himself with them in the manifestation of the faith which he professes to be the same as theirs” (The Hungry Ones 42). He fails to participate or respond to the beggars’ lamentations and mourning as is the practice during Mohurrum which is the month of remembrance of the martyrdom of Hussain ibn Ali, the grandson of Mohammad, the Prophet in the Battle of Karbala. The Muslims during the month of Mohurrum inflict pain and sufferings on their bodies through beating of chest, and hitting with chains, swords or knives to participate in the sufferings of Hussain the same way Christians observe
Mass to participate in Christ's crucifixion. Faith is the cornerstone of any religion and both Sam and A1 lack it badly. They also can't comprehend how a beggar could distribute food to the hungry and the needy during Ramzan which is a month of fasting and refraining from all kinds of desires. Fasting teaches Muslims patience, spirituality, humility and submissiveness to God. Ramzan is the month of self-discipline and self-control, spiritual reflection and worship and purity of thought and action. It is these fundamentals of Muslim religion which A1 so badly lacks. The woman offering food to the beggars is none other then the Bengali woman whom they were searching for her sensuality and beauty. The Bengali woman knows Sam's predicament and therefore to learn the "hunger that goes with fasting" (The Hungry Ones 43). Asif Currimbhoy also emphasizes the basic principles of Hinduism as enshrined in the Mahabharata and the Ramayana, the two essential philosophical "treatises that form part of the Hindu religion" (The Hungry Ones 47). Values of family ties, piety, love, pity and the conquest of good over evil are exemplified through recitations from the Ramayana whereas the Mahabharata teaches us to follow the path of action and meditation, though contrary, it may appear to be. Asif Currimbhoy also brings out the significance of Guru-Shishya (teacher-pupil) Parampra (tradition) of ancient times. The essence of life as contained in the Hindu philosophy is succinctly brought out by the Guru:

GURU: Learn you this, my son, for none is beyond learning in this life existence, that the stories you heard ... (his hand floating to the left) ... from the Ramayana ... (to the right) ... and the Mahabharata ... from part of your life and religion, raised as you were on these thoughts and deeds, which inculcated themselves deeply within you, inspiring forms and motives that came from your own clay, from your own reincarnate spirit, that you might take from these scriptures the essence-extract of your own life, and give it the meaning you choose, destined though you are, as man of action and meditation, seeking vengeance and purity, remorse and repentance, tolerance and worship ... (The Hungry Ones 48).
Al fails to resolve and understand the complexity of the Indian way of life and the same is the case with Sam.

Besides highlighting the essential way of living of both the Hindus and the Muslims which lies in its inherent contradictions, juxtapositions and contraries, Asif also satirises the Indian young generation which does not value its own culture and civilization. The way the college students are attracted to the Americans and “stupidly place the beatniks on a par with the Indian saints and patriots” (Reddy 111) is high point of the playwright’s use of satiric irony:

GIRL: After all, we need your help too. We haven’t come across anyone quite like you since... Swami Vivekananda and Sri Aurobindo, Rabindranath Tagore and Sarojini Naidu, Subhas Chandra Bose and Ram Mohan Roy ...

(The Hungry Ones 32).

Currimbhoy’s depiction of riot-torn Calcutta goes to point out that despite the seemingly apparent brotherhood of the Hindus and Muslims, there lie the embers of disquiet and doubt which can easily be fanned by the disgruntled and fanatic elements of both the religions. The redeeming feature of Indian culture still remains in the deep bonding of love and faith between various communities best exemplified by the passionate love of Razia and Ramesh for each other. The beatniks’ quest fails to provide them a clear perspective on the Indian culture and civilization and it is for this reason they are referred as ‘strangers’ again and again in the play. The play ends in a cyclical way revealing that what the beatniks “learn is that they can never learn” (Foreword, The Hungry Ones 18).

Asif Currimbhoy is a prominent Indian playwright whose plays are imbued with an acute social and political consciousness. His plays reflect various dimensions of Indian society and he bemoans the fall in values in Indian society which is being corroded by growing materialism and commercialization of human relationships. In Darjeeling Tea ?, he dramatises the fall of values by juxtaposing the past and the present. The locale of the play is tea-estates of Darjeeling where the plantation-estates are passing from old planters into the hands of new planters. The subtitle of the play A Comedy on Contemporary Manners in Two Acts succinctly sums up the thematic
concerns of the play. The old system is represented by Big Hugh and Big Mac and the present system is symbolised by carpet-bagging proprietors. Asif Currimbhoy shows us that the values of the past are collapsing now. In the old times, there was much social interaction between the people and that's why the club which is the centre of social interaction was very much prosperous at that time. But now the club is not as prosperous as it once used to be. Its maintenance and upkeep is now not quite upto the mark because people don't take interest in social interaction. Now a way of life is singularly outdated. In the old times, the club throbbed with life, laughter and music and that's why it is symbolized like a big Christmas Tree. But, now the club is dead. Now it looks shabby and there is only awful loneliness here:

JENNIE: . . . Remember the parties at this club, Sally? It was like a big Christmas tree . . . and now I think of home . . . and the awful loneliness here ... in the midst of these incredibly beautiful hills (Currimbhoy, *Darjeeling Tea* ? 11).

In the old times, the women were also very happy because there was happiness and joy everywhere. They were like queens and they held the full authority.

JENNIE: *[Musing]* Yes, we were queens in these plantations. The white memsahibs of the fearful planters who held absolute authority (*Darjeeling Tea* ? 13).

During the old times everything was wonderful. But in the present time there is only sadness and tears everywhere because everyone is just thinking about money. The old time was so good that by remembering the old times one can weep. As the greying woman says to Jennie: "The things that were so wonderful that they made you cry" (*Darjeeling Tea* ? 31).

Big Mac and Big Hugh have a haunting sense of their past adventurous and romantic lives which were always characterised by camaraderie. Their conversations always have a past as a reference point:

BIG HUGH: Yes, not like the old days (*Darjeeling Tea* ? 10).
On one side, there are Big Mac, Big Hugh, Jennie, Sally and Bunty who are symbolic of the old times, always talking about the parties, beauty of tea gardens and adventurous nature of their life. But on the other side, there are new carpet-bagging proprietors, who are symbolic of the new times. They always talk about costs, profit, expenditure, devising strategies to cut prices and rig more profit. The old planters were educated and Big Hugh and Big Mac also have a sense of artistic taste; that's why they want to present the play on the stage to bring back the happiness of the "fuddy-buddy club" (Darjeeling Tea? 18). They are also interested in games and hunting along with their business. Their old lives were enlivened by hunting and golf. Mac who is a planter of the old time wants to bring back the glory of the old time with the arrival of Bunty. The old planters, Hugh and Mac think about art, games and beauty. Bunty, who is a copy of the old planters, always talks about the beauty of nature. He says that the blue hills, the coolie women picking the shrubs, the sudden sunshine breaking through the clouds give him a thrill. But the new carpet-bagging proprietors don't pay any attention towards art, games or beauty. They, all the time, think life in terms of monetary values.

The old planters' business was based on moral values. Their business was based on honesty, good quality and integrity. They not only think about their own profit but also about their social commitments. To quote Chairman of Tea Board Association, "We must maintain our standards of research and plan for the future. This is the obligation we owe to the industry and to the country" (Darjeeling Tea? 30). But the carpet-bagging – proprietors' business is not based on moral values but it is based on money. They neither think about the country nor about the industry, they only think of money and profit. The old planters even treated their rivals like friends. The old planters Big Mac and Big Hugh belong to two different groups - Maclouds and Jenkins; but they have no hostility towards each other. They are rivals and in spite of this, they are good friends and even their fighting is just for keeping their friendship. As Jennie herself admits that they cannot be friendly unless they fight" (Darjeeling Tea? 27). But the new carpet-bagging proprietors have jealousy for their rivals. They treat them like enemies. They all the time think how to cut their rivals. Marwari's attitude is very clear when he says, "We'll buy over the gardens, one by
one, proprietors like me who know how to cut wasteful overheads" (Darjeeling Tea ? 12).

In the olden times, the planters were attached with the gardens and soil. They always worked and protected the gardens heartily. They were also emotionally attached with the hill people. They were loyal to the gardens as well as to the hill people. Mac sums up the attitude of old planters in the following words, "It's fire and pride, an unknown brand of loyalty, that ties soil and people alike, the hill people, the finest and loveliest creatures in this world ... " (Darjeeling Tea ? 24).

But the new planters are just working and protecting the gardens only because of the profit motives. The old planters were the saviours of the tea gardens while the new carpet - bagging proprietors are the destroyers of the tea gardens. The tea gardens which suggested a way of life marked by joy, cheerfulness, parties and adventure are now smothered by a new breed of proprietors for whom the tea gardens are like a goose which lays golden eggs. They are just using the gardens for their profit:

HUGH: Milk the god-damn gardens till there are no leaves or wood left.

And when they sell out there's nothing but waste land left...

(Darjeeling Tea ? 12).

In the old times, the planters treated their workers like the family members. Mac's hospitality towards Bunty is an evidence of it, "Mac's got his reading glasses on, is smoking a pipe and is taking a look at one of the air-flown British papers. The fire is on in the hearth. Jennie is making a dress and talking to Bunty. Bunty is sitting on the carpet. It is evident that with the usual planter's hospitality Bunty has been accepted in the family fold" (Darjeeling Tea ? 17).

But in the present time, the carpet - bagging proprietors treat their workers like the servants. For them, workers are merely lifeless machines who are useful only so far as they reap profits for the planters. So they are recruiting the local prototype Indians and they are paying them twice only to earn more and more money.

MARWARI: (coldly) It's not what they're paid that matters. It's what they're worth (Darjeeling Tea ? 14).
The carpet-bagging proprietors want that the workers should work all the time in the gardens and they don't want them to spend their time in the club: "If you spend less time at the club, you'll have more time for the gardens" (Darjeeling Tea ? 14). In the olden times, the labourers were satisfied and peaceful because the old planters looked after them with great care and attention. They provided them many facilities. So at that time the labourers led peaceful, contented and useful lives. But now the carpet-bagging proprietors treat them like animals. So now they resort to violence and revolution rather than negotiations. The labourers cannot tolerate the atrocities of the carpet-bagging proprietors so, "now they are creating hell all over the place" (Darjeeling Tea ? 52).

The situation has become so horrible that the old planters find it difficult to stay on. They are selling their estates and moving out of India because the times are now out of joint for the kind of lives they had lived:

MAC: Bound to
HUGH: No place for a foreigner! (Darjeeling Tea ? 35)

The Jenkins group is winding up now because they cannot face the rising costs, less profit and the unethical problems of Marwaries. Three generations of Hugh family had spent their lives on the tea-estates and that is an evidence of their love for the tea-estates. Even though Jenkins are winding up their business in India, they are offering all the dues and retirement benefits to their employees. Hugh is being given "the pension and separation benefits and all that" (Darjeeling Tea? 34) and apart from it he is being offered a new posting in South Africa. This kind of employer-employee relationship has totally been torn apart by the new breed of planters. Mac's love for the coolie woman is an example of steadfast nature of the relationships the old planters developed, "It wasn't a planter's role in the hay with a coolie woman.... It was a life time love affair... with a dead woman" (Darjeeling Tea? 46).

But at the end of the play, we find a suffocating atmosphere of sadness and loneliness. Jennie leaves Mac who dies of separation. Hugh has already left and what
is left is only traces of past life in the form of Bunty. The coming and going Marwaries suggest that the days of gloom have been replaced by crass materialism and commercialisation of all relationships.

Indian economy is heavily dependent on monsoons and it has been rightly termed as monsoon economy. The economy flourishes if the monsoon is good and it becomes sluggish if the monsoon is weak or delayed. The consequences of weak economy are manifold—droughts, famines, fall in agriculture production and scarcity of food resulting in sparkling prices making the life of common people difficult and intolerable. This is all the more important because Indian agriculture contributes twenty five percent to GDP and employs seventy percent of population. Asif Currimbhoy is a sensitive dramatist who can not remain untouched with the plight of common man. When Maharashtra was devastated by the acute drought of 1972-1973, he mirrored the plight and sufferings of the common man in *The Miracle Seed*. The play is poignant dramatic tale of the stunted life of the village folk. It is set in an isolated farmhouse of “a village in Maharashtra a few hundred miles from Bombay” (Currimbhoy, *The Miracle Seed* 9). The play centres around Ram, a farmer, who is totally disquieted by the fact that there have been no rains and is seen “restless, his hands clutching and unclutching, pacing around, looking at the land, and at the clear blue cloudless sunny sky” (*The Miracle Seed* 9). His wife Malti is pregnant and tries to assure him by her religious faith. Malti has firm faith in the gods and thinks that her prayers for rain will be answered. But Ram, battered by his hard fate, has no faith in gods and when Malti “lights the diva, garlands Ganpati” (*The Miracle Seed* 9), he blurts out angrily by saying that “and all you can do is pray and pray” (*The Miracle Seed* 9). Nothing helps. Monsoons fail for years together and the land becomes “parched and dry, with web-like cracks and fissures in the soil” (*The Miracle Seed* 26). Food in the family becomes scarce with every passing day. Ram desperately cries out when Malti asks him to go out and see the cow:

RAM: He is getting thinner and thinner. Never enough of anything, did you say? Yes, he’s not getting enough food. God knows, we’re not getting enough either. And the water in the well is getting less and less ... till there’ll be nothing (*The Miracle Seed* 10).
The impact of the drought is so severe that there is hardly any water for the fields or the family, animals are dying and land has been turned into a hard cake with the cruel sun blazing over it.

With the arrival of Laxman from Bombay, we find the different approaches to life of a city dweller and a villager. Laxman's arrival changes the glooming atmosphere of Ram's house. He brings a sackful of gifts for everybody — bracelet for Malti, stone for curing Savitri's stammer, cigars for Bapu and above all, miracle seed for Ram. Laxman tries to instil hope in the desperate heart of Ram by telling him that the miracle seed will bring prosperity in Maharashtra as it has done in Punjab:

LAXMAN: Mamu, listen to me and listen well. This is no smoke ... it won't curl and vanish ... This is the seed that has created the green revolution in Punjab. Have you ever heard of the green revolution? It's fields of gold, for as far as the eye can reach. Quick growing, full and healthy, well fertilized ... There's nothing like this on earth. No more poverty, no more those whims of nature, the arid dying soil, the demented green ... Here at least is man's dream coming true. I've seen it myself, revolutionize life, bring prosperity and fullness to living.... We'll plough it tomorrow, together, you and I, for here at last ... is the miracle seed ... (The Miracle Seed 19).

But even the miracle seeds wither in the absence of monsoon and the atmosphere becomes more desperate and gloomy. The food has become quite scanty, the vegetables grown near the well have dried up and there is no fodder for the cow. The hopes of Ram of becoming rich and to "buy all the things we ever wanted" (The Miracle Seed 21) fall flat on the ground and the cow is dying. This episode brings out clear contrast between the attitudes of a village farmer and a city dweller. Laxman is unattached, unemotional and practical. He suggests that instead of seeing the cow everyday they should take it to the slaughter house. A furious Ram cries out: "He, not it! He! He, with whom I have tilled the soil season after season. He, with whom I h've planted seed year after year, toiled with the some yoke, wiped our sweats with the same cloth. He, with whom I shall never reap the harvest again. Take him to the
slaughter house if you wish. I will not be part of it. (He gets up and goes. Malti looks at Laxman and nods her head)” (The Miracle Seed 28).

Ram has been suspicious of Laxman because he thinks that the city boys are so clever that they know “how to get along” (The Miracle Seed 10) in this competitive world by hook or crook.

The following heated discussion between Ram and Laxman clearly brings into focus the different thinking, approach and behavioural pattern of a city dweller and a villager:

RAM: I don’t need to ask Bapu anything. It’s like asking ... a city slicker. The solutions they think of are ... quick and easy. All ... miraculous. Like the seed. Practical also. Like slaughtering the cow. And then ... there’s always a profit angle there.

LAXMAN: (angry for the first time) Sure, there is profit. How do you think we survive in the city? There are gutters all over the place that suck out our pride. No, we don’t let that come in our way, or let others suffer for it...

RAM: (the anger building up to a climax) And how does a city man survive on a drought-stricken farm? How does he manage to look as well – fed as you?

LAXMAN: (quivering with indignation, in cold fury now) He learns ... to eat the slaughtered cow (Ram lets out a yell of anger and pain, and slaps his nephew who stands stock-still) (The Miracle Seed 30).

Apart from showing the contrast between Ram and Laxman typifying the ways of city and village, the playwright emphasizes the feeling of self-respect which is the moving spirit of farmer’s life. When Laxman tells him about the relief centres for the drought – stricken farmers and indirectly suggests to him to join the relief centres to earn a living, Ram becomes furious:

RAM: (inadvertently feeling the plough in his hands) I’m a farmer. Look at these hands. (spreads them out) They hold a plough, break open the
soil, cut the harvest. Are these meant for breaking stones? Do I have to stand in long lines with a begging bowl for food? No, I will not have it. I will not allow it ... A green revolution, did you say? The only revolutions I see are red. No, I don’t read the papers and I don’t listen to politicians, but this I know, that my land in the good years fed a lot of people, and in the bad years the debt must be repaid ... (The Miracle Seed 30).

Asif Currimbhoy shows the irony of the life when the self-respecting village farmer has to go to the relief centres to support his family.

Another important aspect of the play is exposure of Government apathy and indifference to the plight of the farmers. The villagers are still ignorant, illiterate that they don’t know anything about what is happening in the country, leave aside the world. The very fact that Ram is ignorant of hybrid seeds and green revolution in Punjab goes to prove the point. The very fact that canals and dams have not been built to benefit the farmers and to effectively check ravages of drought and famine even after twenty five years of independence. It is this failure of system that forces people to adopt violent means either in the name of naxalism or in the name of terrorism. Ram, the simple farmer dreams of violent means shows his helplessness at the cruelty of the system:


The play is, therefore, a strong evidence of the fighting spirit of the Indian people to lead a good and decent life even in the failure of any supernatural or Government help. The very fact that Ram drops the idea of going to the city to live in a relief camp amply proves this point.
The play *The Dissident M.L.A.* was written by Asif Currimbhoy in 1974 to point out political scenario in Indian democracy. He touches all the political evils through this play and has successfully "presented a sordid world of politicians" (Agrawal 227). By presenting the character of MLA Manu, the playwright has given the message to the society at large that the people are being misguided and exploited by their elected representatives on the pretext of highlighting the problem of the people. The playwright explores socio-political picture by "exposing the political men who are wolves in the garb of social workers and politicians" (Agrawal 230). Two types of characters of politicians presented by the playwright through this play are Manu, a dissident MLA, who represents the immoral politicians and Sri Kantibhai, who represents ideal and moral politicians.

The play starts with loophole of Indian parliamentary democracy upto eighties. Indian Parliamentary democracy was facing a major problem of defection in State Assembly and Parliament and, therefore, the government was unstable even after attaining two-third majority by a political party in Assembly or Parliament and this grave problem of defection by MLAs and MPs was faced in every state of India upto 1985 when Anti-Defection Law was passed by the Parliament.

The Anti-Defection Law was passed in 1985 through the 52nd Amendment to the Constitution, which added the Tenth Schedule to the Indian Constitution. The main intent of the law was to combat 'the evil of political defections' There are several issues in relation to the working of this law which need to be discussed. Does the law, while deterring defections, also lead to suppression of healthy intra-party debate and dissent? Does it restrict representatives from voicing the concerns of their voters in opposition to the official party position? Should the decision on defections be judged by the speaker who is usually a member of the ruling party or coalition, or should it be decided by an external neutral body such as the Election Commission? (“Anti Defection Law,” Web)

In view of enactment of Anti-Defection Law in India, it would be true to say that the playwright highlighted the main problem of Indian democracy in 1974 which was further identified by our Parliament after twelve years. It is evident that the
playwright was the best political thinker and raised his voice against defection to awaken the Parliament of India with a view of resolving this problem on priority basis. This was the reason that the playwright has opted the title of *The Dissident M.L.A.* inasmuch as the term ‘Dissident MLA’ attracts the attention of Indian people towards this problem. It can be said that Anti-Defection Law in India is only originated from the idea of Asif Currimbhoy who was the first Indian who identified this major problem of the defection because MLAs and MPs were changing their respective political parties frequently against the desired mandate of their voters who had elected them by casting their valuable votes in favour of a political party for good governance.

Asif Currimbhoy bemoans the fact that the educational institutes are being misused by the scheming politicians for their selfish ends. The MLA Manu is an example of the same who also used his son in his political battle. The play opens with a discussion between Manu, a dissident MLA of Gujarat and his wife Shanti, regarding their son Ramesh, who has advanced the basic problems of the students before his father, being a student leader. Ramesh reveals to his father that the students are unhappy with the administration of the university which was not paying any attention to their problems. The students were facing the following problems:

1. Students were being denied healthy and congenial atmosphere of the hostel despite the fact that the students have been enrolled in the university from the different parts of the country.
2. They were not getting their meals on the reasonable price because of a steep rise in the mess bill.
3. The examination system was tough and irrelevant.
4. A number of other problems including problem of unemployment.

Ramesh discusses the aforesaid problems with his father Manu hoping that he would help in the proper solution of these problems but Manu, with a political design, wants to take advantage of the situation for furthering his political design. Therefore, he advises the students through his son that they should launch an agitation against the Vice-Chancellor. He tells Ramesh to stage *gherao* of the Vice-Chancellor with his college friends and the ulterior motive behind his suggestion is to create law and order.
problems for the state Government, ultimately, resulting in the dissolution of the State Assembly. After instigating the students to attack the Vice-Chancellor, Manu further motivates the students even to go to the Home Minister against the Vice-Chancellor:

Well, they don't like him too much. It's true the more revolutionary ... the active students ... well, sort of hate him ... *(forcing laughter)* and would like to put him behind bars themselves. I've got a better idea to show him his impotency by having enmeshes dance around him; shave his head, paint his face black, and force him to ride on this mule .... THAT'LL SMASH HIM *(Currimbhoy, *The Dissident M.L.A.* 23-24)*.

Agitation started by the students for the solution of their problems is hijacked by the politicians under a wide political conspiracy for getting the Assembly dissolved. The students resort to destructive violence. The students are supported by the politicians on the pretext of consolidating their vote-bank. Resultantly they set buses and trains on fire which creates anarchy in the city on account of bloody violence. Manu is a tactful schemer who knows how to make his political design successful for which he has no hesitation even to use his son. On one hand, he is launching agitation of students through his own son and on the other hand, he seeks the support of some of his friends among MLAs for forcing the Governor to dissolve the Assembly. The politicians by and large are presented in the play as lechers, schemers and conspirators. Such *goondas* turned politicians want to usurp all power through all means. Manu says: "Hah! yes, an M.L.A. could have been more, my son, but you know it's always better to work ... behind the lines ... so to speak. *(The Dissident M.L.A. 11)*.

Currimbhoy presents selfishness of the politicians and their greed for power. It is shown how the politicians plot the most inhuman actions. They patronise the students' organizations for their own political agenda. Instead of resolving the problem of the students, it is properly shown in the play how the politicians pollute the atmosphere in the educational temples like universities. Manu tells his son Ramesh as how he has used the students for his selfish end as under: "May be it was
Asif Currimbhoy's technique of using the strategy of juxtaposition and conflict of various ideologies and characters is also evident in *The Dissident M.L.A.* when he juxtaposes the immoral politics practised by politicians like the wily Manu, and Kantibhai, a staunch Gandhian who believes in the ideology of non-violence and *satyagraha* and for whom politics is a means for the welfare of the common people and not for furthering one's ends. Kantibhai is presented as a leader who wants to bring peace in the state by adopting Gandhian philosophy of fast-unto-death. The wily Manu meets his mentor Kantibhai to assure him that he would do his best to solve the present situation and therefore, he pressurises Kantibhai not to go on fast. Kantibhai is no other than Morarji Desai who is known as a man of character and principles. Morarji Desai was very strict to his principles and he never stooped before any power, however, might it be, against his principles. Smt. Indira Gandhi, the then Prime Minister of India, was known as an iron lady but the most powerful Prime Minister in the world could not compel Morarji Desai to accept her views and compromise. Kantibhai believes in the voice of his conscience which is, according to him, true voice of God. Kantibhai speaks in following words: "There's divine conscience besides a man's conscience. And God's conscience is greater: it forms the basis of Natural Law. Man's law may be broken, but not the Natural Law" (*The Dissident M.L.A.* 39).

Asif Currimbhoy presents the contemporary political evils through this play. He bemoans the fact that Indian political leaders have become immoral and self-servers. The main character of Manu has no principle in life. He is a depraved knave in the guise of a politician who just lives only for himself. His illicit relations with a large number of women exposes the immorality of his character. His inhuman words can be quoted to explain his character as a corrupt politician. He has no warm feelings even for his wife: "So you've come to haunt me now, have you, woman? You're not really protesting against the Government and high prices. You're protesting against me, ME. I don't care. I'll survive. I was born in the image of my son, woman. I NEVER MADE LOVE TO YOU, WOMAN, I ONLY HAD YOU, REMEMBER..."
THAT. And my son was born” (*The Dissident M.L.A.* 25). He develops physical relations with his maid Sonal which further goes to prove that women for him are mere objects of carnal gratification:

Sonal throws the rag near him and starts to swab, her buttocks coming closer in front of him and his beady, sparkling, lusty eyes. He opens his hands in a football-keeper position, as though ready to make a grab for her hips, wavers and hesitates.... She of course doesn’t know anything about this, and is occupied with the wiping and washing, letting her natural charm flow without being aware of it. Manu wipes the sweat from his brow and puts his hands down (*The Dissident M.L.A.* 19).

Even a destitute woman like Sonal is not spared by these lecherous politicians. Her molestation and that too by the Minister of Social Welfare is highly condemnable:

It was dreary and hypocritical in the Rescue Home. When it wasn’t the attendant molesting us, it was the Minister of Social Welfare... (*Manu giggling and slapping his thighs in sheer fun and exuberance of her frankness)*... all in the name of the Mahatma (*The Dissident M.L.A.* 20).

In *The Dissident M.L.A.*, another pattern of feminism linked with the power politics of the post-Independence period of India is portrayed. The play displays how the power hungry politician treats women as commodities. The play examines how badly the politician treats his wife is likened even to a cow: “You? (angrily) Who the hell was cursing you, you cow?” (*The Dissident M.L.A.* 46) This statement is significant in the sense that a woman is always treated as a milking cow for the selfish aims of men. Though she is his wife, he treats her callously in his wayward, licentious life and when she interferes in his thoughts to request him to lead a normal life with her, he responds thus: “Keep quiet, woman. You’re disturbing my thoughts” (*The Dissident M.L.A.* 46). This response reveals the fact that woman has no value and relevance in the politician’s life which is appallingly self-centred.
Manu's dealings with the maid servant are no different and he utilises her as an instrument to satisfy his sexual needs and when she leaves for Kantibhai's house, he talks to her with the same attitude. It was Kantibhai, a strong Gandhian, being quite opposed to Manubhai, who sent her to the house of Manubhai who exhibits his lecherous desire for her even when she is leaving for Kantibhai's house:

MANU: Before you go, I'd like you to know something . . . (she looks) Sonal, my dear, you were the loveliest, highest-assed woman I ever had and I shall miss you.
SONAL: Thank you.
MANU: How about a quickie before you go? I'll give it to you from the front this time.
SONAL: No.
MANU (sighing): Oh, well, I guess all good things come to an end. Goodbye, love. Look after the old goat . . . the old man. If there's any trouble, call me.
SONAL: I will (The Dissident M.L.A. 52).

Yoosaph Aayalakkandy rightly observes: "For Manu, his wife and the maid servant are the victims whose voices are heard not far from the limited walls of a politician's immoral life. Thus it reiterates the notion that men are victimisers of women in the present political setup" (127).

Taking into consideration his responsibility as a dramatist towards Indian society, Asif Currimbhoy has been quite sincere in reflecting his socio-political consciousness through the character of Manu, the protagonist of the play. There is no doubt that the evil designs of Manu result in development of the play. Manu seems to be a representative of some corrupt politicians who are responsible for creating bad image even of those politicians who are true to the political system. The dramatist feels that the political system in India can be reformed when the young generation starts thinking in a new way. This idea has very well been explained by Manu when he says to Sonal, his maid servant:
'Be free... and I shall deliver you ....' But an old corrupt crab like me can't do it. It needs someone clean and young and new ... and innocent, yes, innocent, like my son. (*Braying of a mule outside*) What's that? (*The Dissident M.L.A.* 21).

Manu, the shrewd politician, is not worried about reforming the political system. He is more worried about the life of Kantibhai, his political mentor for his selfish design; he has no concern with his agenda of political reforms:

If Kantibhai dies, we'll all lose. (Click of phone disconnected. Darkness. Manu opens out a bottle of Scotch and gets into a long drinking session with himself. All in darkness. The clink of glasses and the glowing ends of the chain-cigarettes. Windows all locked and barred and drawn. Suddenly noise of the shuttered windows being thrown open, the light of morning coming in, the clouds of stale smoke clearing up) (*The Dissident M.L.A.* 53).

It matters little to Manu if Kantibhai dies. What matters to him is the possibility of the failure of their sinister game of forcing the Governor to dissolve the Assembly. Man is indeed, in Iyengar's words "the lecher, the schemer, the man of ambition and superstition, the hypocrite, the incendiary button-pressure, the undisguised goonda" ("The Dramatic Art of Asif Currimbhoy" 15) who does not spare even his mentor, Kantibhai, a true Gandhian:

THAT FOX ! THAT SLY WEASEL ! Learnt from the Grand Old Master himself ! Thought-read my mind, did he ? Screw him. SCREW HIM . . . (trying to control himself, calming himself down, another shot of whisky). There are more things than are dreamt of in your philosophy, many more things, you old decrepit man . . . (Sobering up more and more as he drinks more, relaxing the excesses of his mind) Don't know why I take it from him. It somersaults me, this wonky mad-world . . . (Drinking) Ah . . . it tastes good; almost makes me sober. (Suddenly shouting again — eyes and nostrils flaring up) EXCEPT THAT HE DRIVES ME MAD ! COMPLETELY MAD ! (Raises his fingers before his eyes) See. See. Five fingers. Five bloody
fingers. (*Shakes them into a blur, drinks another gulp*) Presto, five once again. TO SHOVE INTO YOUR ASSHOLE, YOU HELL-HOLE MORALIST! (*Room getting dark*) Where’s the light? (*The Dissident M.L.A. 29*)

The playwright further presents the real picture of the politicians who are most hypocritical people. The politicians present themselves as the believers in religion and astrology but inwardly they are different. They take shelter of religion and astrology only to escape from their inner conscience. Manu also consults an astrologer who tells him that Tuesday and Thursday are lucky days for him but advises him to abstain from drinking and womanising:

Who knows? Who know? For you it will be a tussle. Destiny surrounds you like a mortal coil, and you’re locked in the death struggle (*The Dissident M.L.A. 37*).

Asif Currimbhoy attracts the proper attention of the audience towards hidden political conspiracy by using the students. The politicians take advantage of the emotions of the young generation for their political purpose. They distort the facts and misguide the youth to divert their minds from the main issues. For this purpose, the action of Manubhai and reaction of students when they organise the *gherao* of the Vice-Chancellor has been presented in the following words:

**ACTION OF MANUBHAI:**

Close, close, get close to him
Jostle him a bit, Scream into his ear.
DON’T PLAY FOOTSIE WITH HIM: GET HIM! GIVE HIM FEAR!
That’s right.
Get him into the sun. Make him stand there .... Let him feel the suffocation of life: to be denied and deprived,
as you are .... Make him feel the
whiplash of your anger and fury

ACTION OF STUDENTS GHERAOING THE V.C.

They close in on him, chanting, shouting slogans.
They push him around without actually manhandling him.
They play it slightly rougher.
Action in burning sun.
They follow out his orders, whipping themselves into a frenzy,
hypnotized by his passion (The Dissident M.L.A. 13-14).

The dramatist has an aim to guide his viewers about his ideas through his
dramatic skills. He wants to show the audience clearly as how the students play in the
hands of cunning politicians who exploit the students. He concludes that politicians
try to create unrest in the society for achieving their unholy aim. The politicians
receive political donations which is illegally utilized for their private interest and
these funds are misused for violence.

In the beginning, the students motivated and guided by idealism, start the
agitation against corruption for bringing social reforms. They want the Government to
take strict action against black-marketeers and corrupt politicians. But the tragedy of
every agitation, struggle or movement, however noble its motives may be is that it
strays from its defined path and ideals. The same happens in the case of present
agitation also. The students resort to violence, thus, sending the whole state in gulfs of
fire under the disguised instigation of the politicians. So much so that those student
leaders who were motivated by the noble purpose of solving the problems of students
and forcing the state to take action against corrupt elements themselves became power
hungry. Ramesh realizes this by observing as follows:

Comrades, we’ve revolted against corruption, haven’t we. And it seemed to us
corruption come only with politicians and business men, hoarders and black
marketeers ... Well, there’s another kind of corruption coming in too. The
corrupt, unethical, power hungry student. And what are you doing to stop
that? ... (The Dissident M.L.A. 45).
The same view is also echoed by Kantibhai when Ramesh talks about the dignity of students, Kantibhai retorts:

Don’t try and bluff me about dignity of students, Manu. Both you and I know they can be a bunch of hooligans. What they need is a firm... (looking at him closely)... corrective, guiding hand (The Dissident M.L.A. 27).

The students also fall prey to the evil mechanisms of wily politicians in forcing the dissolution of State Assembly. Actually, they are glibly oblivious of manoeuvres of selfish politicians who fully know that the dissolution of State Assembly is not going to solve the students’ problems. Ramesh himself realises the true design of the dissidents’ demand for the dissolution of the Assembly:

RAMESH: Did we? You know what that wise old fox told me ? He said there’d be a new election, and new corrupt M.L.A. would come in instead of the old corrupt ones. (Laughing a little hysterically, like his father) Did you hear me? It means we have gone through all this for nothing. We all have the same old corrupt Government as long as people live. (Laughing louder and louder, the father looking at him bewildered for the first time.) Don’t look at me like that. As though you didn’t know... right from the beginning. As though you didn’t know... .
(Sound of receding Laughter as he leaves. Manu gets up wearily and goes over to the phone. Dials) (The Dissident M.L.A. 55).

As a conscious dramatist towards socio-political issues of India, Asif Currimbhoy has clearly pointed out that solution to different social and political problems lies in adopting Gandhian ideology. In a way, the action of Manu, the corrupt politicians and Ramesh, the son of the politician, have been criticised by the dramatist. In the character of Kantibhai, the dramatist seems to have visualized the power of Satyagrah in India which has just rocked the Indian society with the fast of Anna Hazare for Jan Lokpal Bill. The efforts of the dramatist in exposing the corrupt practices of the politicians have not gone waste because in the present time, many right-minded persons are resorting the non-violent means advocated by Mahatma
Gandhi to reform the Indian political system through peaceful solutions. This fact has been very well explained by the dramatist in the dialogue of Kantibhai:

KANTIBHAI (*interrupting*): Ah, but principles don’t change. I feel ... I deeply feel. That the people want the Assembly dissolved. This is their protest against the failure of the Government. And the Government are [sic] resisting the dissolution. I must therefore fight the Government by the only means I know and believe in: *satyagraha* (*The Dissident M.L.A.* 48).

Asif Currimbhoy does not spare any person or institution in assailing them if he finds that they resort to ignoble means to achieve their ends. He clearly reveals his strong denunciation of appointment of undeserving and inefficient people as Vice-Chancellors of the universities. It is not their academic merit or administrative acumen that matters; it is their close proximity to the politicians of the ruling party. Vice-Chancellors are also often appointed on the basis of caste or religious considerations. Manu tells the students:

MANU (*smiling*): Why not? I know them all. (*Then suddenly serious and shouting, flying off on a tangent*) I KNOW THE WHOLE BLOODY LOT OF THEM ... (*then suddenly in excited confidence.*) You’ve heard of the fiddle in the appointment of the V.C. Do you think he got it on merit? It was manoevred [sic]. The bloody C.M. manoevred [sic] it. Pull it down boy, pull it down (*The Dissident M.L.A.* 13).

*The Dissident M.L.A.*, like his other plays, reveals Currimbhoy’s strong emotional reaction to what is happening around. He just can not remain a mute spectator to the social, political and moral degradation of the Indian society and therefore, he takes us along on “the catwalks over furnaces of truth and fact” (“The World of Asif Currimbhoy” 8) to make us realise the blast heat of decline and corruption affecting every section of the Indian polity and society.
WORKS CITED


