Drama has been a very influential and powerful medium in the English literature because of its audiovisual medium of expression. “Drama is a mimetic representation of life combining in itself the real and the fictional, art and reality and representing the events and characters within a dimension of space and time. It combines the qualities of narrative poetry with those of visual arts. It is a narrative made visible.”

India has a long history of drama from ancient times. Its journey begins from Sanskrit plays. “Indian tradition preserved in Natyashastra the oldest of the texts of the theory of drama, claims for the drama a divine origin, and a close connection with sacred Vedas themselves” opines A.B. Keith. Thus the origin of Indian drama is found in the Vedic period. The most celebrated dramatists of the ancient era are Ashwagosh, Bhasa, Shudraka, Kalidasa, Harsha, Bhavabhuti, Vishakhadatta. Tragedies like Urubhanga, romances like Abhijnana-sakuntalam and historical plays like Mudrarakshas are the well known works of the Vedic period. The literature in Sanskrit is classified into two categories- Drishya (that can be seen) and the Sravya (that can be heard). Drama falls in the category of Drishya. “Drama in Sanskrit literature is covered under the broad umbrella of ‘rupaka’ which means depiction of life in its various aspects represented in ‘forms’ by actors, who assume various roles.”

The Indian English Drama is supposed to have begun in the 18th century when the British Empire strengthened its power in India. It is taken to have started with the publication of Krishna Mohan Banerjee’s The Persecuted in 1813. It is a

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social play which presents the conflict between the East and the West. The real journey of Indian English drama begins with Madhusudan Dutt’s *Is This Called Civilization* which was published in 1871. He also translated his play *Ratnavali* (1859) and *Sermista* (1859) originally written in *Bangla* into English. Rankinoo Dutt wrote his *Manipura Tragedy* in 1893. Indian English drama exhibited its genius after a long time in the 20th century. The Pre Independence era witnessed the emergence of many significant playwrights. They were Rabindranath Tagore, Aurobindo Ghosh, T.P. Kailasam, A.S.P. Ayyar, Harindranath Chattopadhyaya, Bharati Sarabhai who made a tremendous contribution to the evolution and development of Indian English drama. R.N. Tagore and Sir Aurobindo Ghosh, the two great sage poets, are the first Indian dramatists of repute. Including Harindranath Chattopadhyaya, they are known as the ‘big three’ who made an abiding contribution to the Indian English drama.

R.N. Tagore was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature and was considered as “the epitome of Indian spiritual heritage”4. He wrote his plays primarily in *Bangla* but almost all his plays were translated into English. Some of them were translated by Tagore himself while the others, by Indian and English translators. His best known plays *Chitra, Sacrifice, The Post Office, Muktadhara, The Cycle of Spring, The King of the Dark Chambers* are the examples of Indian philosophy. Tagore was the first among those who used symbolism and allegorical significance as a prime technique in their plays. He combined the Indian and the Western literary traditions to present a synthesis between the East and the West. Diana Devlin writes “the philosopher, teacher and writer Rabindranath Tagore sets out to unify Indian and

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western traditions creating plays which have been described as a mixture of Bengali folk drama and Western medieval mystery plays.\(^5\)

Sri Aurobindo (1872-1950) was also a major Indian English playwright. During 1891-1916, he wrote five complete and six incomplete verse plays. One of the most interesting features of his plays is the variety of periods (ranging from ancient Greece to medieval India) and places (diverse lands including Iraq, Syria, India, Spain, Britain and Norway). The two major themes of his plays are the idea of human evolution and love. All his plays are steeped in poetry and romance. The famous plays are *Perseus the Deliverer, The Viziers of Bassora, Prince of Edur, Eric, Vavadduta* and *Savitri*.

Sri Aurobindo employs ancient legends to highlight the contemporary urge for freedom and bondage and heighten the elements of heroism, adventure and mystery in the actions of his imaginary characters and as such, all his plays are imbued with a strong romantic impulse which appears to be the driving force behind all his plays.\(^6\)

In spite of his vast learning, he seems to have overlooked the rich tradition of Indian drama especially dramatic techniques. In order to express his romantic impulse, he has focused largely on the models of Elizabethan Drama. His plays are either in verse or a mixture of prose and verse. At times, he shows his ability in composing realistic dialogues in colloquial English. Regarding themes, he does not confine himself to one particular country and locales.


Last of the great Indian playwright trio, Harindranath Chattopadhyaya (b.1898) added a new dimension to Indian English drama. He was deeply influenced by the Progressive Writers’ Movement. Like Mulk Raj Anand, he sympathizes with the underdogs. He has been more eminent as a poet than a playwright. His social plays highlight social protest and ideas of revolution. His plays fall under four groups: Devotional, Social, Historical and Miscellaneous ones. *Five Plays* (1937) is a collection of his social plays - *The Windows, The Parrots, The Santry Lantern, The Coffin* and *The Evening Lamps*. These plays are marked by realism and have a didactic purpose.

In his social plays, Chattopadhyaya aims at presenting social evils and problems through symbols. In order to make presentation more effective, he presents many of his characters and situations in sharp contrast to one another. In his plays, he concentrates on a single topic which is an important feature of a short play. So far as models and techniques are concerned, Chattopadhyaya seems to have been less influenced by Western drama in regard to the depiction of the lives of the saints. Chattopadhyaya’s social themes show his commitment to the Progressive Writers’ Movement of the time, and symbolically present social problems like the problems of labour class, the evils of British rule. He sometimes indirectly suggests solutions to such problems.

A.S.P. Ayyar (1899-1963) is the next great dramatist in Indian English drama. He is primarily a social reformer who believes in exposing the ills of the contemporary Indian society. His first play is *In the Clutches of the Devil* and the last one is *The Trial of Science for the Murder of Humanity*. In Ayyar’s plays plot and characters are secondary as the message is given great importance. He writes drama with ethical and social purpose by raising questions against widowhood,
religious orthodoxy, superstition and hypocrisy. As K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar remarks, “Ayyar handles the prose medium effectively and he is seen to be a vigorous critic of contemporary life.”

A. S. P. Ayyar published a collection of three playlets, viz, Sita’s Choice, Brahma’s Way and The Slave of Ideas in 1935. His plays mostly dealt with discussions about the conflicting opinions on social customs. Sita’s Choice is a play in five acts based on the theme of widow-marriage. Brahma’s Way cannot be called a play as it is merely an interesting discussion on religious matters such as the existence of God, the caste-system in its right spirit, the unity among the three schools of Indian philosophy, vegetarianism, widow-marriage, balance between the material and spiritual aspects of life etc. The play is almost without a plot and the characters have their set attitude.

D. M. Borgaonkar’s three-act problem-play Image-Breakers (1938) is the presentation of the growing discontent of the youth in India and their revolt against the conventional marriage system which cares only for caste, horoscope, wishes of the elders, dowry and totally discarding emotions and feelings of human beings. The conflict between love and social barriers is the theme of S. Fyzee-Rahamin’s Daughter of Ind (1940) which has three acts with a prologue and an epilogue and it deals with the deep love of low-caste girl for an idealistic English-man. Balwant Gargi’s The Vulture and other play (1941) is a collection of four playlets: The Vulture, Mung-Wa, The Fugitive and The Matriarch. He too seems to be interested in the

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social problems. Harindranath Chattopadhyaya remarks, “Balwant Gargi has dealt with themes which are engaging the attention of people everywhere.”

T.P. Kailasam (1885-1946) is another worth considering dramatist on the Indian literary scene. He wrote both in English and Kannada. His dramatic genius is fully expressed in his English plays such as The Burden (1933), Fulfillment (1933), The Purpose (1944), Karna (1946), Keechaka (1949). However, he was regarded as the father of modern Kannada drama. G.S. Amur has a very high opinion about Kailasam and rightly remarks, “A talented actor who appeared in the amateur as well as the professional stage, he brought to the writing of drama an intimate knowledge of the theatre. It is for this reason that his plays whether in Kannada or in English have a uniform technical excellence.” He uses prose as a fit medium for the expression of tragic emotions.

In regard to models and techniques, Kailasam shows his inclination towards the Elizabethan drama. In spite of having reverence for the rich past of Indian dramatic tradition, he too seems to ignore it. He uses prose in dialogue, sometimes blank verse and sometimes a mixture of both.

Bharati Sarabhai (b.1912) is the maiden woman playwright who gave the Gandhian touch to Indian drama in English. Her two plays The Well of the People (1943) and Two Women (1952) are inspired by Gandhian philosophy. The play The Well of the People is a poetic pageant than a play. It is highly symbolical. S. Mokashi Punekar comments on this play, “Bharati Sarabhai’s The Well of the People is probably the only articulate work of literary art giving complete expression to the

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This play is about an old woman who builds a well for the untouchables of her village which clearly shows the influence of Gandhi. Sarabhai, though a high caste woman, became an ardent follower of Gandhi ji and worked in his Sabarmati Ashram. She had no practical experience of writing for theatre.

Moved by a story published in Harijan, Bharati Sarabhai wrote The Well of the People. The concept that God is within, is conveyed through this play. The same idea is expressed in Two Women in another way. The character Kanakaraya comes into conflict with his wife Anuradha who has decided to go to Himalayas in her quest for spiritual peace. At last, Kanakaraya gives up his rigid stand but his sudden death bring a new realization to his wife.

Sarabhai attempts to combine the ancient religion of India and the new culture. The old woman in The Well of the People acts as her mouthpiece in this regard. Sarabhai extends her theme of the practical realization of God in her play Two Women in a different way. The two women who represent the two faces of modern Indian womanhood are Anuradha, the wife of Kanakaraya and Urvashi, the widowed girl who becomes a devotional singer. The two women seem to be complementary, and true to Vedantic thought, they prove that God can be found everywhere. Sarabhai treats her themes in relation to the Indian tradition. The blend of material and the spiritual is focused. She takes her characters from the traditional world and leads them to the ultimate reality of the omnipresence of God.

J.N. Lobo Prabhu was the last great name in the Pre-Independence Indian English drama. Out of the dozen plays which he wrote only two were published before the Independence. They were Mother of New India (1944) a play in three acts

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and *Death Abdicates* (1945). His *Collected Plays* was published in 1955- which contained six of his plays- *Apes in the Parlour, The Family Cage, Flags of the Heart, Winding Ways, Love Becomes Light* and *Dogs Ghost*. Srinivas Iyengar remarks “Lobo’s energy is obvious, he can write dialogues with facility, he can device situations, but his characters are rarely alive and his denouncement are seldom wholly convincing.” His play *The Family Cage* presents the plight of a widow, Leela in a joint family. *Flags of the Heart*, another play by Prabhu, expresses the sympathetic attitude of university students for the downtrodden.

In the play, *Flags of the Heart*, Prabhu seems to give prominence to inter-caste marriage and the power of love. In his attempt to save his beloved Lucia, Raja, a low caste student suffers imprisonment. The whole play is full of action. The play *Apes in the Parlour* exposes the hypocrisy and the craze for sex and power among the elite. In the three-act play *The Family Cage*, Prabhu throws light upon the selfishness of man. Lobo Prabhu’s plays show a variety of themes but his treatment of them is superficial. Even melodrama also gives the touch of artificiality to them though they do contain some effective scenes.

Apart from these major playwrights, a few writers who exhibited their talent in other forms of writing were also seen to have tried their hands in drama also. For example, K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar, the critic and historian who has written two plays *Suniti and Her Spouse or Storm in a Tea-cup* (1942) and *The Battle of the Optionals* (1943), R.K. Narayan’s dramatization of his own short story *The Watchman* under the title *The Watchman of The Lake* (1940), Kamala Das’s *A Mini-Trilogy* which appeared in ‘Enact’ in 1971, V.K. Gokak’s *The Goddess Speaks* which was published in ‘Triveni’ in 1948, Manohar Malgonkar’s *Line of Mars* (1978), C.

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Rajagopalachari’s *Naveena Uttarkandam* (1958) and K.S. Ramaswami Sastri whose plays *Draupadi* and *Harischandra* appeared in the dramatic form:

The plays written during the pre-independence phase were mostly short plays and even the few lengthy plays were not in prose and also did not prove to be successful. Most of the playwrights of this phase did not write with an awareness that plays are meant to be staged.\(^\text{12}\)

The Pre Independence phase presents the large number of writers who preferred to write short plays in comparison to the full length plays. So far as the themes are concerned, social issues were prominent in the plays of this period. The plays dealing with legendary and historical themes occupied the place next to the social plays. Some of the writers drew their themes from ancient myth and legends and interpret them in terms of a contemporary social problem as in *Perseus the Deliverer* by Sri Aurobindo. Bharati Sarabhai and Krishnaswami also tried their hands in this direction. Playwrights like Kailasam and Ramaswami Sastri showed their interest either in highlighting the greatness of epic heroes and heroines or in giving importance to the neglected characters. Regarding social themes, many playwrights like Chattopadhyaya, Ayyar and Narayanan focus on the burning problems of contemporary society whereas V.V.S. Aiyangar and others made a farcical and melodramatic presentation of some problems. History and current politics drew the attention of only a few like A.S.P. Ayyar, Annayya and Mrinalini Sarabhai.

As regards models and techniques, most of the playwrights opted for the Elizabethan model. Sri Aurobindo adopted the Elizabethan models. Kailasam drew

inspiration from Shakespeare for plot construction. Many playwrights did not adhere to the classical Sanskrit Drama and ancient techniques. “Many follow neither the Western nor the Indian tradition and show little sense of dramatic strategy as their main interest appears to lie in composing dialogue for discussion of topics of their choice.”¹³ Further, in case of few playwrights, the ‘acts’ which their works are supposed to consist of, are nothing but scenes and this shows a lack of understanding of the structure of a play. Language also came out as a big problem to almost all the playwrights of the phase. Though they tried to overcome the problem in their own way but could not succeed. Sri Aurobindo’s long speeches created obstruction in the action of his plays. While Kailasam tried to enhance the beauty of his language with his excessive rhetoric and archaism. Chattopadhyaya, Ayyar and others showed their command on the style of writing but it gave way to the artificiality of their dialogue on the stage. On the whole, most of the playwrights did not write stage worthy plays. Their plays meant to be read only.

Indian English Drama showed little progress in the Post-independence period. Though the efforts were made but it could not gain much. The Five Year Plans after the Independence encouraged performing arts as an effective medium for public enlightenment and healthy entertainment. Institutions like National School of Drama was established in Delhi, Institutions for training in dramatic art were founded in many cities, Departments of Drama were opened in many universities. The National Drama Festival was started in Delhi by the Sangeet Natak Akademi. But all those developments promoted the growth of drama in regional languages. Though the Theatre Group in Bombay and some other agencies did successfully stage Indian English drama yet these performances could not give much popularity to Indian

English drama. By and large, plays written in regional languages dominated the Indian theatre.

As a result of these advancements, many writers started writing plays meant for the stage. In this group, there are several writers. Nissim Ezekiel, Girish Karnad, Pritish Nandi, Pratap Sharma and Murli Das Melwani are some of the writers of this group who contributed in the development of Indian theatre.

Nissim Ezekiel (1924-2004) who has made a distinctive contribution to poetry wrote six plays on the themes- hollowness of urban middle class, futility of social mores and the institution of marriage. The *Three Plays* (1969) consists of *Nalini*, a comedy in three acts, *Marriage Poems*, a one act tragic-comedy and *The Sleepwalkers* an Indo-American farce. *Song of Deprivation* is a one act comic morality play dealing with the theme of suppression and repression. After a period of twenty years, he wrote the play *Don't Call it Suicide*- a socio psychological analysis of suicide. *Nalini* is about the hollow life of two advertising executives, Bharat and Raj. In this, the playwright projects two pictures: the hollow world of the young executives and the contrast between the two Nalini- the one of the dream and the other of reality.

In all three plays, Ezekiel remains content by projecting the cross-section of contemporary society. He does not give as much importance to the development of a plot as to the composing brilliant conversations. Thus, in spite of the stage-directions and sound effects suggested by author, these plays could not meet the full demands of the stage.

Unlike Ezekiel’s picture of urban society, Arati Nagarwalla’s three-act play *The Bait* (1969) deals with the loyalty of a villager and his love for justice. Knowing his
wife is killed by a lion in a forest, Panna, the hero of the play, takes the oath to avenge her death. He kills the animal and is arrested on the charge of attempted homicide.

Girish Karnad (1938- ), a recipient of the Jnanpith Award is a living legend in the contemporary Indian English drama. He is a playwright, actor, critic and a film star. He has received recognition nationally as well as internationally. He himself accepts, “I have been fairly lucky in having a multi-pronged career. You know, I’ve been an actor, a publisher, a film maker. But none of these I felt quite as much at home as in playwriting.”

His five plays Tuglaq, Hayavadana, Nagamandala, Tale-Danda and The Fire and the Rain have been translated into English, the first two by Karnad himself. His plays are steeped in Indian culture as the themes are taken from myths, legends, folk tales and history. He combines classical, folk and the Western dramatic techniques in his plays. He has made a great contribution to Indian English drama.

Pratap Sharma (1939-2011) has written two controversial plays. A Touch of Brightness (1968) is about Bombay’s red light district and the problems of people surviving there. This play was performed abroad but banned in Bombay as it presents the harsh reality of the red light area in Bombay. The Professor has a War cry (1970) deals with the anguish and mental conflict of Virendra who comes to know that he is an illegitimate child of a mother raped by a Muslim and an English man and deserted by her lover, a Hindu professor. Sex remains the prime theme of his plays but Pratap Sharma shows ‘a keen sense of situation and his dialogue is often

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effective." In the play *A Touch of Brightness*, Sharma focuses on the dark side of the sophisticated city life that perpetuates the existence of brothels. He presents a realistic picture of a typical brothel like that of Bhabi Rani’s.

However, after the Independence, most of the plays were written in prose, but at the same time poetic plays did not disappear in the Post-Colonial era. M.K. Naik rightly opines, “the Tagore-Aurobindo-Kailasam tradition of poetic drama continues, but with a difference in the hands of Manjari Isvaran, G.V. Desani, Lakhan Deb and Pritish Nandy.” Manjari Isvaran’s *Yama and Yami* (1948) is a dialogue in poetic prose, with a prologue and an epilogue, dealing with the love of Yami for her brother. G.V. Desani’s *Hali* is a poem play in 300 pages. It was successfully staged at the Watergate Theatre London in 1950 and in India in 1951. “A short poetic play *Hali* is an attempt to project Hali’s confrontation of the power of creation and destruction, his grapple with life and death, his surrender to the material world, his communion with love and his transcendence of the dualities of time and place.”

P. A. Krishnaswami’s *The Flute of Krishna* (1950) is a verse play dealing with the legend of a girl Murli and a young man Vidyaratna who by their devotion to Lord Krishna become respectively His flute and the bamboo stick. Dilip Kumar Roy’s *Sri Chaitanya* (1950) is a verse play in three acts dealing with the life of a devotee of Lord Krishna during fifteenth century Bengal.

Lakhan Deb’s *Tiger Claws* (1967), a verse play in three acts is based on the killing of Afzal Khan, the Muslim general of Bijapur by the Maratha ruler Shivaji. His two other plays are *Vivekananda* (1972) and *Murder at the Prayer Meeting* (1976).

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16 Ibid. 256. Print.

Lakhan Deb gives a picture of the last days of Gandhiji’s life in his two-act verse-play, *Murder at the Prayer Meeting* (1976). The title is drawn from T. S. Eliot’s *Murder in the Cathedral*. The plot covers the Mahatma’s dominant role in politics just before partition, the events that followed it and the consequent communal clashes.

Vijay Tendulakar (1928-2008) can be considered as the precursor of modern Indian English drama. His plays focus on the conflicts between the individual and the society. The angry and frustrated protagonists of his plays are actually the victims of harsh circumstances in life. Since he exposes the ugly side of the society, therefore, his plays are considered as controversial ones. His plays are *Silence: The Court is in Session, Kamala, The Vultures, Sakharam Binder*. The major themes of his plays are male domination, violence, exploitation of women and rejection of social norms. He explores human mind and its complexities in all its depth and variety. He does not present human relation in relation to love and emotions but in sensuality and violence.

Gurucharan Das (1943- ) is one of the important writers of the Post Independence era who attains great success for his play *Larins Sahib* (1970). This play focuses on the Punjab in the times of 1946-47. It is about the political career of a British Resident in Punjab who gives a good impression in the beginning but later turns out to be a power-drunk official. He is good with the people in the beginning. The queen trusts him so much that she offers him the famous precious Kohinoor for
safe keeping but his hunger for power and glory leads to his downfall. However, he is dismissed from his post at the end of the play.

The play *Larins Sahib* is different from other Indian English plays for the use of Indian English for dialogues. On this ground, Gurucharan is similar to Mulk Raj Anand. What Mulk Raj Anand did in the field of fiction, Gurucharan Das did in the field of drama. Both gave a new direction to Indian English literature. In an interview, Gurucharan Das said:

The English theatre in India will have to project the kind of hybrid English we speak, interspersed with Indian expression. My approach is that the characters should speak the English that is spoken in India, using expressions like ‘Kya Yar’ ‘Chalo Bhai’. And actors can bring about a reversion in spoken English.¹⁸

Apart from these writers, there have been a few writers who contributed in the development of Indian English drama. Vera Sharma has written two plays along with a number of one act plays. *Life is Like That* (1997) and *Reminiscence* (1997), both deal with the plight of women. In *Life is Like That*, Lata, a middle class woman takes up a job after her husband dies. In spite of having two sons, she remains an alone saleswoman in her old age. *Reminiscence* is a story of a childless woman who is ill treated by her husband.

In the Post Independence era, several one act plays were also written. The most notable one act plays of this period are those of R. Raja Rao. The title of the play *The Wisest Fool on Earth and Other Plays* (1996) centers round the theme of homosexuality. It is a monologue in which the protagonist, who is a young man, is

happy to be a homo. The setting for the play is a toilet. The English Professor and While Spaces expose the self seeking and hypocritical attitude of people in the society. While the play Deadlines is about journalism. Several historical plays were also written which highlighted the long history of glory, rich tradition, invasion, colonization and the struggle for freedom but it could not flourish to the expected level except a few notable plays which are T.S. Gill’s Asoka (1983), V.D. Trivedi’s Gandhi: A Play (1983) and Prema Sastri’s Gandhi Man of the Millions (1987).

Gieve Patel (1940- ), being a poet, has written three plays Princess, Savaksha and Mr. Behram. Out of the three, Mr. Behram is the only published work. Published in 1988, it is the first Indian English play which seriously deals with Parsi life. It is a psychological play focusing on the complex relationship between Behram and an old Parsi landowner in Southern Gujrat. Dina Mehta exposed the violence against women through drama and she succeeded in her efforts. Dina Mehta’s The Myth Maker (1959) won her the Padamsree prize, Brides Are Not for Burning made her won the B.B.C. Radio Play Writing Contest in 1979 as it was about one of the social vices i.e. dowry system. Getting Away with Murder (2000) is a play highlighting another ugly aspect of exploitation of women and its psychological impact apart from the physical. The play Mangala by Poile Sengupta shows the members of a middle class Tamil Brahmin joint family commenting on a play about the victims of rape. The use of the play within play technique enhances the tragic effect.

Uma Parameswaram (1938- ) is a critic and teacher in Canada. She founded PALT- Performing Art and Literature of India in Winnipeg, Canada where she also produces a weekly television show. The plays Sons Must Die and Other Plays (1998) were written over several years. Sita’s Promise is a play presenting different form of Indian classical dances, Meera too is more a dance than a drama. Sons Must
"Die" is a play about the Kashmir conflict in 1948. But she is known for the play *Rootless But Green are the Boulevard Tree*, a social play presenting the problems of immigrants in Canada. There have been a few experimental plays but none of them came up as a successful attempt. J. P. Das has translated his Oriya play into English *Absurd Play* (1959). S. Vasuki gave a mythological play *Fresh Rains* (1995). G. Prashant put his effort in presenting the Oedipus myth from an Indian point of view in *The Myth Resurrected* (1991).

The Post Modern era brings advancement in the field of drama as it introduces new changes in the Indian English drama which adds more dimensions to it. The new writers come up with a fresh and different approach towards life as well as theatre. R. K. Dhawan states: “Very recently Indian English drama has shot into prominence. Younger writers like Mahesh Dattani and Manjula Padmanabhan have infused new life into this branch of writing.”

Mahesh Dattani (1958- ) who has been acknowledged as a ‘playwright of world stature’ has given a new direction to Indian English drama. He has written more than one and half a dozen plays which are different in themes, tone and treatment. He received the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award for his contribution to Indian drama in 1988. His plays deal with serious and sensitive issues like communalism, homosexuality, female infanticide, domestic abuse, child sexual abuse, condition of eunuchs in Indian society. In his preface to *Collected Plays*, Dattani says,

I am certain that my plays are a true reflection of my time, place and socio economic background. I am hugely excited and curious to know

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what the future holds for me and my art in the new millennium in a
country that has a myriad challenges to face politically, socially,
artistically and culturally.\textsuperscript{20}

Dattani is one of India’s most bold and innovative playwrights. He has formed
his play group named Playpen in 1984 and in 1986, he wrote his first play \textit{Where
There’s a Will}. Since then he has written many plays such as \textit{Tara, Bravely Fought
the Queen, Final Solutions} and \textit{Dance Like A Man}. All the plays of Mahesh Dattani
are based on the social issues. \textit{Tara} deals with the theme of gender discrimination in
modern society. \textit{Tara} is predominantly a play about gender discrimination and about
the tendency of Indian society where parents prefer a male child over a female one.
The play \textit{Thirty Days in September} deals with the most heinous issue, child sexual
abuse and throws light on its effect on an individual’s psyche, which gets intensified
with the passage of time. Dattani’s best known play \textit{Final Solutions} deals with the
sensitive issue of communal tension. The play focuses on the Hindu-Muslim division,
the prejudice and the deep-rooted mistrust.

However, compared to the plays of the Pre Independence phase, plays of the
Post Independence period show a greater influence of the West. There are several
experiments such as emphasis on the psychoanalysis of the character than to
present the sequence. Another noteworthy experiment in this phase is the use of
realistic language suited to the level and status of a character. Regarding themes,
the playwrights have tried to deal with the contemporary social problems like inter-
caste marriage, untouchability, sex, power and wealth along with the presentation of
the usual conflict between old and new trends.

In the Post-Independence era, Indian English drama has not reached the high level like that of poetry and fiction. A prime factor for this is that “drama-essentially a composite art involving the playwright, the actors and the audience in a shared experience on the stage-has its own problem of which the other literary forms are free.”

In the recent decades, Indian drama has progressed in regional languages along with the translations in English. A number of plays written in regional languages have been translated into English. However, Indian English drama has not achieved much as compared to other genres. There are several reasons for the dissatisfactory status of Indian English drama.

Srinivas Iyenger attributes “the failure to the fact that English is not a natural medium of conversation in India.” It is the language of the elite class in cities and big towns and, therefore, used and understood by them only. Thus it is confined to the particular section of the society, i.e. the people of the sophisticated class only. Moreover, English is not the mother tongue of Indians. It is a learnt language or the second language. Natural conversation is an important aspect of drama for its impact over the audience. English language sounds artificial and fails to create the required impact on the audience. Only for the elite class, it sounds convincing. Even in the translated works, most of the time the original form is misrepresented. It is not due to the translation only but because of the inefficiency of the English language to express temperaments, sensibilities and realities which are essentially Indian. Raja Rao pointed out nearly half a century ago, “English is a language of our intellectual makeup and not of our emotional makeup.”

He himself could overcome this problem by making his characters speak a kind of Indian English as he has done in

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his novel *kanthapura*. Thus M.K. Naik rightly suggests, “In making Indian characters speak in English, the playwright needs, therefore, no qualms at all. Let him first create living characters in live situations, and the language will take care of itself.”

The other major reason is the lack of living theatre in our country. Drama is meant to be presented on the stage. As a genre it can never flourish in the absence of its presentation in the theatre. An eminent Indian critic M.K. Naik in his article “The Achievement of Indian Drama in English” has rightly commented in *Perspectives on Indian Drama in English*:

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

The real success of the play is tested on the stage. Therefore a playwright needs a living theatre in order to evaluate his work. Besides this, many Indian plays do not get staged. As Rama Sharma in his preface to his “Collected Plays” remark, “Any play written in India in English has an inherent disadvantage in the sense that it is not very often staged. Stage worthiness being a basic test for a play….most of the plays written in English do not fulfill this requirement.” The other reason of the setback in the development of Indian English Drama is that the Indian English playwrights do not give much importance to the rich and varied Indian dramatic

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traditions. They do not make use of the rich amount of Indian myth and Indian historical heritage.

Thus Indian playwrights writing in regional languages seem to succeed in comparison to the writers writing in English. As the former is more clear regarding the purpose of playwriting, their perception of the form of drama, the intended audience/readers etc. very few dramatists in English have been successful especially in theatre. Asif Currimbhoy is one exception.

Among all the playwrights of the Post Independence era, the most prolific playwright is Asif Currimbhoy. He has been called ‘India’s first authentic voice in the theatre’. He is among those few dramatists whose plays have been successfully staged in India as well as abroad. He has published more than thirty plays within the period of eighteen years beginning in 1959. He has shown a deep concern in producing drama. His plays are appreciated outside India. Unlike other dramatists, Asif’s plays are meant for the stage. He brilliantly succeeds in producing actable plays which have given international reputation to him.

The range and variety of his themes are wide. He has worked over the issues related to history, politics, socioeconomic problems and conflicts, religion, psychological conflicts, east west encounter, philosophy and art. K.R.S. Iyengar in his academic discourse appreciates Currimbhoy “Farce, comedy, melodrama, tragedy, history, fantasy: Currimbhoy handles them all with commendable ease.”27

Born in 1928, Asif belongs to a family of industrialists who were distinguished by the British government in the field of industry. His father was a liberal minded intellectual and his mother was a social worker. Both deeply influenced Asif in his

teenage. He was brought up in an environment of education and innovative ideas which formed an integral part of his temperament later in his life. His school period also had an impact over his literary output. He studied at Xavier’s high school, Bombay and pursued his higher education at Wisconsin University. It gave exposure to the English language and to some extent to western culture.

Though he studied in a Christian missionary school, he did not keep himself away from the Indian culture. He made a thorough study of the *Bhagvad Gita* and the *Upanishads* and also the Hindu epics like The *Ramayana* and The *Mahabharata*. The impact of this study can be seen in his works.

After schooling in India, he went to the United States for college studies and spent four years there. He studied at Wisconsin University before graduating from the University of California in Economics in 1950. He recalls his experiences in the University in U.S.A., “College was in America, those beautiful mid-west landscapes of snow and loneliness. The love for language and life grew and in isolation of a groping search and hyper sensitivity.”

As a University student, he loved and admired Shakespeare. He visited different dramatic productions and was very well aware of the various trends in drama in the U.S.A. all this contributed in making him ‘a man of theatre’.

Currimbhoy was motivated for writing by his wife Suraiya whom he married soon after he returned to India. In a letter he wrote, “I doubt if I would ever have been a writer were it not for my wife who gave me stability and sanity through home and love.” The major incidents which took place in sixties influenced Currimbhoy. Independence to India led to the partition of the country which caused the anguish in

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29 Ibid. 24. Print.
all over the nation but especially in Bengal and Punjab. Currimbhoy was deeply influenced by the violence prevailing in the country and the condition of people in those days.

Asif got several opportunities to visit different places in all over the world and observe them keenly. He joined the New India Assurance Company in 1954 through which he came in contact with French culture. Soon he left the New India Assurance Company and joined Burmah-Shell in India. As a marketing executive he toured throughout India and came in contact with different locales and various problems of the people. In an interview with Rajinder Paul, he says:

The place had always had a considerable fascination for me and dialogues always appeared to me especially when they incorporated a feeling of diverse opinion. In other words a conflict in theatre, conflict at every level- physical, mental, emotional- because from the time really you meet with other people, what is called human relationships, it’s a striking sparks with each other that brings about a feel of life.\(^{30}\)

From this, it is clear that Currimbhoy is a keen observer of people and particularly their mode of expression. All these influences left an impression on his literary output. He began writing in his late twenties. The literary career of Asif Currimbhoy can be divided into two periods, the first period ranging from 1959 to 1968 and the second period from 1969 to 1975.


His plays are inspired by some incidents or situations, he observed in his surroundings or experienced himself. In 1958, he was posted to Agra where he had to spend his time in drinking sessions at hotels. He wrote Tourist Mecca which deals with the tourists to Agra. It was during his stay in Agra when he faced some problems in his job and his inner tension found expression in the play The Clock. The play The Doldrummers portrays the lives of the youth living on the Juhu Beach. He might have inspired for this play during his visits on Juhu Beach for holidays and weekends. He made a thorough study of Indian mythology and Indian philosophy. He wrote The Dumb Dancer and OM which are influenced by Indian myth and philosophy. The Dumb Dancer is a psychological play based on the theme from The Mahabharata and OM reflects the playwright’s obsession with the fear of death. Thorns on a Canvas was written due to the banning of The Doldrummers as it expresses the bitter experience of the playwright. The play The Captives takes up the issue of Indo-Chinese conflict of October 1962 but actually it probes into the human psyche after the partition.
The various places Currimbhoy visited became sources for his plays. During the second period of his literary career, Currimbhoy got more serious regarding his dramatic art. In 1969 which was the Gandhi centenary year, he wrote An Experiment With Truth which covers the whole life of Gandhi. While he was staying in Calcutta, he witnessed the revolt of the Naxals and wrote Inquilab which deals with the Naxalite movement. He was inspired to write Darjeeling Tea? After his tour in the tea gardens in the hill station of Darjeeling.

The major socio economic changes which Currimbhoy witnessed got expression in his plays. Such as the influx of the refugees and revolt within the city of Calcutta and Bengal became the theme of the play The Refugee. The emergence of Bangladesh provoked him to write Sonar Bangla. The plight of the rural society during the drought in Maharashtra in the seventies formed the background for The Miracle Seed. The Dissident MLA is about the riots in Gujrat which resulted in the abolition of the Assembly in 1974. The last play from Currimbhoy was This Alien…Native Land based on the identity crisis of Jews.

From his plays, it can be easily understood that Currimbhoy believes in depicting what he perceives in his surroundings. He has his own individual views on the art of drama. He is a dramatist with social purpose. This is made clear when he says that he is “A writer of plays which have a certain amount of meaning. The fact that what I write is socially directed in an environment to which it has pertinence of relevance does put me into the classification of being a writer with a social purpose.”31

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Though being a writer with a social purpose, he cannot be called a propagandist. As he states, “I am very much against propaganda because it does not allow people to think they come to a conclusion on their own. I do believe that you should try and place facts a correctly as possible and let people or the audience draw their own conclusion.”\(^{32}\) He has his own views on dramatic art. For him, there should be a proper blending of artistic and social concerns of dramatists. Moreover, Currimbhoy considers conflict as the basis of life as well as theatre. Regarding the dramatic language, he feels, “Indian theatre in English has not grown much in the last generation as we always seem to be borrowing English language plays from the west either in original or suitably adapted.”\(^{33}\) He gives his opinion to the Indian English playwrights regarding the use of language that the Indian dramatist in English must be conscious “English is our own language because the moment that you think of English as a foreign language you’ll end up by writing a foreign play, which would be disastrous.”\(^{34}\) The purpose of a playwright should be the perfect merging of theatre with life so that people could relate themselves with the situation they are watching on the stage.

Thus, Currimbhoy is a prolific playwright with social purpose. He has taken up unusual themes from contemporary Indian society and showed his excellence in dramatic art. He wrote more than thirty plays of varied themes regarding social, political and religious problems of contemporary India. H.M. Williams, a reputed literary critic remarks, “The English speaking theatre in India anxiously awaits a writer of Narayan’s or Raja Rao’s stature, one who might perhaps combine the

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\(^{33}\)Ibid. 29. Print.
\(^{34}\)Ibid. 29. Print.
poetic vision of Sri Aurobindo or Dom Moraes with the professional craftsmanship of Asif Currimbhoy.\textsuperscript{35}

The contribution of all the male playwrights is significant in the initial development of Indian drama in English. These playwrights belonging to different regions, ages and cultures have observed, analyzed, learnt and understood their own respective society and culture and have come out with social, serious, sensitive and most often disturbing plays while their counterparts the women playwrights have hardly been seen or heard till the mid twentieth century.

In the last decades of the twentieth century some women playwrights, though very less in number, came to the forefront. The names of Mrs. J. M. Billimoria, Dina Mehta, Kamala Subramaniam, Shree Devi Singh, Arati Nagarwalla, Poile Sengupta, Manjula Padmanabhan, Uma Parameshwaran, Tripurari Sharma etc. are worthy to be mentioned. These women dramatists attempted to utilize drama for the purpose of presenting cultural diversity, socio-political reality and above all as a mode of self expression. They have put their effort to erase the myths that try to prove that women cannot create excellent pieces of dramas. Through their plays they have also broken the silence persisted for almost hundreds of years in the history of Indian English drama. These women playwrights are serious in their tone, theme and characterization. They focus on the real Indian society, the violence against women and their struggle for survival and existence. Thus there is hardly any domain of life that has not been touched by these women playwrights. They long for an ultimate change in the society. In fact change is the motto they want through their plays.

Recently in Indian English drama, few writers have come up who raised the level of Indian English drama in quality and presentation. They have earned fame not only in Indian theatre but also in the world theatre. One of them is Manjula Padmanabhan. As Vinod Bala Sharma states, “Mahesh Dattani and Manjula Padmanabhan must be studied as two outstanding playwrights who belong to another category.”

Manjula Padmanabhan has worked as a playwright, cartoonist, journalist, novelist and a children’s book author. She was born in 1953 and went to a boarding school. She was born in Delhi and grew up in Sweden, Pakistan and Thailand. After passing out from Bombay University, she began writing in the publishing and media industry. At the moment she lives in Delhi. Apart from writing newspaper columns she also created comic strips such as Suki, an Indian female comic character. Her comic cartoon strips have appeared in The Pioneer newspaper and Sunday Observer. She was known as a cartoonist before her play Harvest was staged. She has also written the plays entitled Lights Out! (1984), Hidden Fires (2003), The Artist's Model (1995) and Sextet (1996). She has illustrated 24 children’s books. M.K. Naik comments on recent Indian English drama with special reference to the plays of Manjula Padmanabhan, Dina Mehta and Poile Sengupta in the following words, “Manjula Padmanabhan created history when her play Harvest (1998) won the first prize in the first Onassis International Cultural Competition. This is the first time that an Indian English dramatist has won an honour abroad.” Her play, Harvest, was selected from 1470 entries in 76 countries for the Onassis Prize in 1997.


Manjula Padmanabhan belongs to that generation of Indian women writers in English who have boldly stepped out of conventions that define respectability to address issues of gender, woman, her body and its behavior, its exploitation in a family and social setting... Manjula Padmanabhan has opened a fresh dialogue on a new angle of feminist concerns.  

The theme of *Escape* is the declining sex ratio in India that resulted in less number of female in comparison to male. It is the outcome of bias against the girl child. Padmanabhan’s book, *Getting There* is a semi-autobiographical novel about a young woman illustrator in Bombay. It is based on the events in the author’s life between 1977 and ’78. It is neither entirely factual nor totally realistic. It is about the journey of the author from Bombay to New York, then to Germany, and finally Holland. *Kleptomania* is the collection of stories in which the reader finds the wide range of themes from murder mystery to science fiction. Manjula Padmanabhan is among the recent playwrights who have not produced a large number of works but with the small collection of excellent works, she has occupied a respectable place in the world of Indian English literature.

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Thus, Asif Currimbhoy and Manjula Padmanabhan are the two celebrated playwrights in recent Indian English drama. Both have raised English drama not only in Indian theatre but in the world theatre also. The most common aspect of their writings is their social commitment. Both write with a serious and definite purpose. Both are truly dramatists who believe in presenting the real picture of the society and aim at bringing the necessary changes in it.