

## THE REFUGEE AS A HUMAN PREDICAMENT

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### Abstract

*This paper aims to discuss Asif Currimbhoy's play 'The Refugee' as a human predicament. Asif Currimbhoy is a prolific writer and since 1959 he has written twenty-nine plays. His plays have been acclaimed abroad and largely ignored at home. As most of his plays are staged abroad, many Indians are not fully aware of his abilities as a dramatist. Currimbhoy's plays dramatize the eternal struggle of humanity against suppression and the ultimate triumph of humanism over brutality. For instance The Refugee deals with the influx of the Bangladesh refugees into India in 1971, but it speaks about different societies of all times. The problem of refugees is the same irrespective of the time and place whether it is the Bangladesh refugees in 1971 or the refugees from Afghans in 2003 or the refugees from Syria. As the number of refugees grows, the warmth and welcome will cease and the locals want the refugees to move on and on, out of sight, out of mind. However Currimbhoy's emphasis in the play is more on the human values and passions than on politics or region. The playwright draws our attention to the refugee problem which will repeat itself a thousand times as long as man indulges in inhumanity to his fellow beings*

**Key Words:** contemporary society, intrusion, burden, across the border, rehabilitation, humanity

### Introduction

The Refugee is about Yassin, a refugee from East Pakistan, and his search for conscience in the confusing world. The play opens with Sen Gupta's invitation to Yassin, (the son of his childhood friend Rukiya) to join his household as a part of keeping his promise he has given to Rukaiya. Yassin tells Sen Gupta how the intelligentsia and the Awami league's future leadership were wiped out barbarously.

Yassin: First there were elections and the Awami League won. Then those who held elections were not prepared to transfer power and the trouble began. Some say the Bengalis angered at being deprived of their right and smarting under the exploitation of West Pakistan, revolved against non-Bengalis and killed some. Others say the Army helped – or was it interfered – and retaliated barbarously in mass extermination. What you call help someone else may call interference! (14)

Yassin: The rattle of the guns is all I remember. A shattering reality that erased all that followed, blocking pain, suffering and death. I survived miraculously, if living means surviving. (15)

The title The Refugee clearly reveals that it is a social problem and not just confined to Bangladesh. Refugee is a neatly structured play with a beginning, middle and an end. The arrival of Yassin forms the beginning of the play. His staying in the house of Sen Gupta is the middle of the play. His decision to liberate East Bengal forms the ending of the play. Though it is a one-act play, all the five scenes are set in different places and at different times. So, it gives the effect of a full-fledged play of five acts, with a lot of action.

In scene ii three actions take place almost simultaneously. The first is the refugees outside the house, some under tarpaulin covers/tents, some under tin shacks, and some in large water pipes. The second action takes place in the living room of the house-hold with Sen Gupta and members of the family. And the third action takes place in Yassin's room, which overlooks, overhears the refugees on one side, and the family living room on the other.

As a realist, Currimbhoy's description of the house of Sen Gupta and the refugee camp where the feeling of uncertainty and insecurity set in is really picturesque. "The way Yassin recalls the 'intellectual massacre' is also vivid and descriptive." (Chandrica 67) Here is a splendid passage describing a refugee camp:

Pathetic helpless creatures, concerned only with food and safety, and shelter, stories of repression and terror, wanting only time to get back their breath from the horrible tragedy. (39)

Sen Gupta, who had been driven from East Pakistan under conditions of indescribable horror and misery becomes prosperous through his hard work and diligent application, is now ironically enough, sore about the influx of the refugees. "The play brings out the morose and cold attitude of Sen Gupta towards the refugees." (Bayapa Reddy 42)

Sen Gupta: I am worried about the whole thing. It all started as a small thing- a few refugees across the border – it happens every year. (25)

Sen Gupta is totally unhappy about the refugees who have encroached on the open field, his palm trees and pond nearby. He is sore about the refugees occupying the house and the garage, which he has built after toil of so many years. He makes such fuss about the Incursion of the refugees and feels that it has affected development projects. He is alarmed at the growing number of the refugees. He says:

Now it's holocaust and we're completely unprepared for it. Why, there are more refugees today in this town than local inhabitants. Our development projects have come to a standstill. The refugee, with his minimum rations, is better than the local unemployed. (25)

Sen Gupta is of the opinion that the Mukti Fauj is not the problem that India is caring. It is the problem of the intrusion of the refugees into his fields that has made him worried. He says: "Of course, I feel sorry for the refugees outside, but look at what a filthy mess they're made of things." (18) He strongly feels that the problem of refugees and Bangladesh must have a political solution. "Sen Gupta conducts himself like a politician. He is of the firm conviction that the affairs of men are dictated by politics." (Bayapa Reddy 42)

Yassin is a young man of about twenty. As a student of Coilla University he saw the twin paths of contemplation and action. He is torn between his involvement in the cause of suffering humanity and his academic detachment and moral withdrawal from a world of

simmering realities. He says: "All pain comes from attachment, all wrongs come from self-interest. That is why we should each lead our...own lives...." (25)

In the beginning Yassin is detached, indifferent and unconcerned. Though himself a refugee, he avoids the refugees. He is not moved by the mute and mutilated masses of East Bengal. Sen Gupta calls him an odd character. Mosin refers to his closed nature and warns him against his escapist attitude. Mita too wonders why Yassin does not talk about the refugees at all as though they didn't exist. She says:

Mita: You...you avoid the refugees. You don't talk about them, or help them. As though they did not exist...There is so much you can do. You'd understand their problems better than the others, you could help...in their rehabilitation.... Do you think by closing your eyes, they'll disappear? (24)

Yassin's psychic disintegration in the last scene is similar to 'Lama's in the play Om Mane Padme Hum! Dalai Lama says towards the end with a heavy heart, "In any human conflict the ultimate interests of the combatants are the same." (67) Yassin who was indifferent in the beginning says, "What I do...or don't do...is a matter of personal choice. It's the interference of people that brings about tragedies." (14)

Though Yassin is detached in the beginning, he is not apathetic to his fellow refugees. Slowly he sheds his inhibitions and pays a visit to the refugee camp along with Professor Mosin. He is pained to see the refugees who narrate the stories of repression and terror and who want to get back from the horrible tragedy. He musters up courage and decides to liberate his country. The plot centers round Yassin. Chandrika observes, "The skill with which Asif Currimbhoy traces the subtle change that comes over the characters reveals him as a playwright of great psychological skill." (63) Yassin, an introvert, is indifferent in the beginning about the refugee problems. Later change comes over in his attitude when Mita, the daughter of Sen Gupta stirs his mind. Mita inspires Yassin. Yassin at last decides to work for the liberation of his country. He also feels that freedom of thought and action should be preserved in his country. He realizes his duty towards the entire humanity.

According to Chandrika, Yassin's decision of leaving Sen Gupta's house is a logical step in the evolution of his character, but the means employed by the playwright to achieve this does not seem to be justified. "Yassin could retreat to his comfortable den without taking sides, without getting involved. But how long can an individual live in society non-committally? Yassin is dragged back and plunged headlong into action." (67)

Yassin goes to the refugee camp at night and watches Ramul, their leader, in action, condemning another refugee to death. Ramul is a half-eccentric character but more responsible and realistic than Yassin. He foresees the impending danger.

Ramul: As our number grows, the warmth and welcome will cease ... And they will want the refugees to move on and on, out of sight, out of mind. (17)

Some people visit Ramul, asking for his help to create trouble in the country, for they do not want the law and order problems in India to be solved. Ramul bursts into hysterical laughter and the men, convinced that he is mad and irresponsible, leave. Ramul comes out with a comment: "You see... we're not altogether unwanted." (21)

The play can be analyzed at the level of conflict. The main conflict is in the mind of Yassin - it is between action and inaction. There is a conflict between Sen Gupta and his son, Ashok. The former is selfish, cold, and hypocritical and suffers from a crisis of conscience. The latter concerns himself very much with the refugee problem. All is not well with Mosin too. No doubt he is one of the most distinguished teachers. He is at a loss to understand what he should do for the refugees. Thirdly he has his own doubts about the Pakistani Muslims. Chandrika observes, The conflict in the individual, between the forces of narrow nationalism and humanism, between different factions within the same religion (Yassin – Mossin), and between the beliefs of different generations (Sen Gupta- children). (66)

Asif Currimbhoy has also touched the delicate issue of Hindu- Muslim conflict in the play. Mossin, so eager to help his Muslim brother from across the border, changes his stance when he finds the position of the Indian Muslim in jeopardy. Yassin is able to understand that his presence has affected the relationship of Prof. Mosin with Sen Gupta's family. He says he is a bird of passage where as Prof. Mossin has to live his life there.

Prof. Mosin: The Indian Muslim as a minority has learnt to co-exist, sometimes precariously. Along come the refugees, mostly persecuted Hindus, and throw off the balance.... There is a difference between the Indian Muslim and the Pakistani Muslim. (35)

Yassin: You also mean the presence of the Pakistani Muslim, the refugee, jeopardizes the position of the Indian Muslim in India. Very subtle, very delicately put. Like a placard saying:

MUSLIM REFUGEE, GO HOME. (35)

Ramul says, "Now listen: floods, famine, pestilence: we have it all in Mother Bengal. Add to that refugee: Eight out of ten refugees coming in today are Hindus; we must protect them...against Pakistani infiltrators..." (31) In the trial scene, Ramul talks about protecting the Hindu refugees and sentences a Muslim refugee to death. The absurdity of the scene is complete when Ramul declares that they were just playing a game.

Sen Gupta even expresses his irritation at having to harbour Bengali Muslims. He calls Yassin "traitor" when the latter declares himself to be a Pakistani. But Yassin tells him that he must be allowed freedom of thought and action even though he is a refugee in Sen Gupta's house.

Sen Gupta is a Hindu and so he is unhappy when thousands and thousands of Hindus are driven out of East Pakistan. He expresses his sense of concern. They're Hindus now – Minority Hindus being exterminated and driven out to purge Pakistan! If this pressure keeps and the hordes of Hindu refugees grow. How much longer will we in India remain secular. (27) Thus, Sen Gupta represents the social consciousness of the typical Hindu in India.

In the play, every character is a parallel and a contrast to the other. Yassin and Sen Gupta are both refugees but they differ in their attitudes to life. Both cherish the ideal across the border symbolized by Yassin's mother and Sen Gupta's daughter. Yassin and Ramul are refugees, but their ways are different – one closes his eyes to the problem and leads his own comfortable life while the other immerses himself in the problem and reigns supreme in the world of the refugees. Yassin and Prof. Mossin are both Muslims – but the contrast is made

evident in the last scene when one identifies himself with the Pakistani and the other with the Indian Muslim. The active rebellious children of Sen Gupta are contrasted with Yassin who is happy in his shell. Through these parallels and contrasts each character grows and evolves.

Currimbhoy has been criticized as a wordy playwright mainly because of his excessive use of dialogue. But infact, the dramatist uses his language very sharply and creatively. The play has gripping dialogue. To illustrate,

Yassin: I've always been accused of avoiding responsibility.

Prof Mosin: Each man's path is different, Yassin.

Yassin: Still...society expects it to be recognizable. If it does not follow their norms, then man is an outcast, a refugee. (35)

The dialogue gives an insight into the theme of the play and the playwright's power to handle it. Bayapa Reddy says, A Currimbhoy sentence often performs two or three functions at once. It sheds light on the character speaking, on the character spoken about; it furthers the plot; it almost functions ironically in conveying to the audience a meaning different from that conveyed to the characters. (47)

Sen Gupta: (seriously) well, may be I'll run for office. The town's Advisory council has put up my name. As soon as Ashok graduates, takes over the business. I can gradually move...to other responsibilities. Man can't live by bread alone. (14)

Currimbhoy's language in The Refugee is very effective and it adds much to the theatrical value of the play. The following passage is a case in point. When cholera breaks out in the refugee camp, Mita says how the conscience of the world is roused:

The conscience. The CONSCIENCE. What a word, oh my God. What a meaning. Don't tell me it escaped us all along. Here we are talking about politics and rescue and refugees and war and even taking sides. It's not the lack of commitment that matters; it's the lack of morality that does. And we must.... both aggressor and givers of shelter ... search for our own conscience. (29)

The father's running for town Mayor Ship or Minister Ship is unwarranted because the rehabilitation of the refugees is to be attended to at first. "Dirty politics" has other connotations. He wishes to run for some office or the other, after the graduation of his son. He cherishes the word "politics". His utterances – "too busy making a living," "Man cannot live by bread alone" – (14) reflect the hypocrisy and double standards of any modern politician. His concern for "the happenings across the border" provokes laughter in us. He claims to be 'a responsible citizen'. There is an element of irony in it.

The solution to the problem of the refugees is offered through Mita who understands the refugees sympathetically and is deeply concerned with their rehabilitation. For her, life means involvement and action. She wants Yassin to realize that the refugees are as human and real as other people. She says:

"...Refugees dying...like flies. Disease...spreading...(breathless)...much sympathy... from outsiders." (29)

As it is rightly observed by Pushpa, Currimbhoy has made a very valid point that, “Refugees soon become burdens; their salvation lies not in seeking protection in some other land, but fighting for their rights at home. Refugees are exploited by power seekers and transform into anti-social elements.”(74) This is clearly expressed in the following dialogues of Ramul.

Ramul: As our numbers grow, the warmth and welcome will       cease ...And they will want the refugees to move on and on, out of sight, out of mind. (17)

Bayapa Reddy observes,

The playwright’s point of view is that the government should not be officious in handling the refugee problem, which has to be looked at from the human and not the administrative point of view. The play is not a documentary on the refugee-rehabilitation programme; it is really a projection of the ideological conflicts in various individuals. (44)

The refugee of Currimbhoy’s play is Yassin; he is also Sen Gupta and he is Hussein in Sonar Bangla and Dalai Lama in Om Mane Padme Hum!. Infact he is any refugee and he is all refugees. Yassin who is the refugee of the play is all refugees. Srinivasa Iyengar says, “Refugees’ are masses of people, but they are also composed of individuals, and each of them is unique. It is because this primary human dimension is ignored, history is so replete with stupidities and brutalities.”(245)

Bayapa Reddy has rightly observed,

The playwright draws our attention to the refugee problem which will repeat itself a thousand times as long as man indulges in inhumanity to his fellow beings.(40)

Human suffering at times cannot be avoided, but it can certainly be reduced by the ‘togetherness’ of men. All most all of Currimbhoy’s central characters do become acutely aware of their predicament at some point or the other in their lives and they begin to search for the meaning of their life and destiny. The protagonist here is dejected and is constantly nagged by the thought of his status as a refugee. “The Refugee explores the predicament of humanity caught in the political restlessness, moral moorings and psychological alienation.” (Bayapa Reddy 44)

Yassin, in the play is a symbol. His suffering symbolizes the suffering of many not only refugees but who possessed alienated souls. Since his predicament is suggestive of every modern man in general and appeals beyond time and place, his tragedy becomes the tragedy of every man. Man really has little choice in life. He is often forced into a situation, where there is no way out. “A decision, an action...gets destined, almost involuntarily.”(34)

Yassin in this play is resolved to fight against the foreign forces and redeem his community from injustice and exploitation. He is an individual on a quest- it’s not an individual’s personal quest but a reflection of everyman’s search for belongingness – who is out of harmony both from his inner self as well as outer self.



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