

### **Thematic Concerns In The Plays of Asif Currimbhoy**

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#### **ABSTRACT**

*Asif Currimbhoy is a playwright of deep and profound conflicts in the human psyche. The nucleus of a Currimbhoy play may be said to be an almost irreconcilable antagonism felt deep within. He is always concerned with life and its conflicts, inner life is explored and scrutinized in his plays, though the conflict is shown on the physical plane too in order to project the conflict between the conscious and the subconscious within the mind. Though not following any particular "ism", he amalgamates within the craft and content of his plays the methods of realism, expressionism and surrealism. Therefore his plays are rich in symbolic significance. Asif Currimbhoy, endowed with his excellent dramatic artisanship and thematic versatility, is one of the very few Indian dramatists in English who have been able to make a dent both at home and overseas, especially in theatre. Currimbhoy's plays are essentially pieces of theatre and the literature of praxis in its true sense. "Though he shares the Indian predilection for mysticism and philosophy as evidenced in one or two plays, his plays are not vehicles for expressing his thoughts as is the case with the playwrights like Tagore and Aurobindo". Currimbhoy's breeding, his education and experiences together go in shaping the nature of his dramatic corpus. Asif Currimbhoy was a child of a liberal-minded armchair intellectual father and his mother was a veteran social worker. Their distinguished intellectual concern and outstanding commercial enterprise profoundly influenced the mental faculties of young Asif Currimbhoy. He grew up in an ambience of new liberal progressive views and ideas, which in his later life came to mould his temperament. Since his childhood, he developed dramatically disturbing psychological nuances, which later on became the guiding and moving spirit behind his dramatic corpus. However, Currimbhoy did not allow his learning in a Christian missionary school to uproot the grassroots of an indigenous. Although Currimbhoy's plays deal with a variety of topics, there is a unity of approach where belies variety. As an intelligent well-read and scholarly person, history and philosophy interest him, and propel him towards for truth which is frustrated by his agonizing compassion for the condition of man. During Asif's dramatic career spanning about two decades, he handles a wide variety of themes historical, political, social, religious etc., ranging from an imaginary event at a tourist centre to contemporary politics. He widens his*

*range further by projecting scenes with a foreign setting, and by dramatizing East-West relations. He attempted almost every genre - comedy, tragedy, farce, melodrama, history and fantasy. Naturally, Currimbhoy, endowed with his social conscience and concern for humanity is a dramatist with his a social purpose and social vision. He maintains that he is a writer of plays which have a certain amount of meaning.*

**Key words:** Disillusionment, Draught, Ram, Sinewy dialogue, Monsoon, Indian peasant.

### **Introduction:**

Modern Indian dramatic writing in English is neither rich in quantity nor, on the whole of high quality. Enterprising Indians have for nearly a century occasionally attempted drama in English, but seldom for actual stage production. Asif Currimbhoy, however, is in exception. He is one modern Indian playwright who has asserted an absolute interest in producing drama and whose numerous plays reveal great concern for dramatic effectiveness. His best plays are powerfully dramatic, revealing his ability in contriving interesting situations, creating atmosphere, portraying realistic and animated characters, writing sinewy dialogue that flows naturally and lucidly, sustaining a unified plot and coherent action, and experimenting successfully with a variety of theatrical techniques. Though Currimbhoy shares the Indian predilection for mysticism and philosophy evidenced. Thus the plays of Currimbhoy are invariably dramatic and the best of them possess a subtle balance of tension that has justly earned its author the rare distinction of being the first Indian writer to have one of his plays performed on Broadway.

It is interesting to note that particular events or conditions in the affairs of men always stimulated the creative endeavour of Currimbhoy and played a vital role in shaping his dramatic career. Currimbhoy is a conscientious dramatist with his own definite views on the art of drama. His interest in what he sees around and how he reacts to it has brought him to the sphere of drama. Naturally, he is a dramatist with a 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 he writes is socially directed in an environment to which it has pertinence or relevance does put him into the classification of being a writer with a social purpose. As a writer with a social purpose, he not only seeks to present men and things as he sees them but also projects his own point of view. This is evident from what he says that you have to present all sides of the problems and to the extent that you are a writer with a sense of commitment of life, you have a say in the matter without being withdrawn from it completely. Playwriting is a very delicate mechanism, he has got to participate, you have got to withdraw, he has to be objective and at the same time he must not refrain from passing a comment which is his own.

Though “a writer with a social purpose”, Currimbhoy is not a propagandist, what he seems to aim at is to integrate his social concerns with his artistic concerns. He rightly thinks that the artist holds a certain responsibility to himself as well as to society. From this one can see that Currimbhoy stretches his material beyond the confines of the particular and does not simply produce a social document of one country’s problems. As “a man of the theatre”, Currimbhoy holds that the essence of theatre is conflict. As people in the same society hold contrary beliefs. “a clash of views, a clash of interests, a clash of positions, “inevitable”. Since theatre is concerned primarily with people and their actions, the clash of positions between men and men and between men and women generates powerful situations which form a vibrant factor of the theatre. This has led Currimbhoy to believe that conflict is the basis of life and the basis of the theatre. With all their rich variety, symbolic significance and lyrical excellence, Tagore's plays are fraught with certain limitations. His plots are weak in construction. Most of his characters are one-dimensional. The symbolism of his plays at times, becomes excessive. More often than not, the lyrical appeal gets the better of the theatricality of his plays. His plays, as Thompson rightly observes, are "vehicles of thought rather than expressions of action." So they are mostly unactable for their inadequate dramatic action.

#### **A Dramatist of the Indian Ethos:**

The plays of Asif Currimbhoy mostly deal with Indian history, society, religion, politics and philosophy. He brings the social and political aspects in his many plays such as Goa, An Experiment with Truth, Om Mane Padme Hum and The Dissident M.L.A. He, as a karma yogi, has been called as “India’s first attentive voice in the theatre”. He presents “life as it is, not as something it should be, the age-old curse of India’s classical theatre”. As a dramatist, he wants to show the relationship between human beings in the society. Many things are being revolutionized with the arrival of Asif Currimbhoy on the Indian English drama scene. He is one of the first playwrights to produce plays that could be performed. He has written more than 30 plays which will focus on social issues. He has written controversial themes in his dramas. His achievement in the field of drama in inspiring, characteristic and distinguishing. The themes from his dramas are “from the flow of contemporary life and politics”. He says that he was sympathetic to the human condition which is really fairly universal in any part of the world. But human condition exists in an environment. And environment always brings about its own pressures. His plays are deeply rooted in contemporary reality and document the major events in the post-Independence India that shook the conscience of the country. His graphic presentation of the social reality, culture and religion befittingly entitles him to be the dramatist of the Indian ethos. He was sensitive enough to perceive the prevailing state of disillusionment among Indian people and was

prompt in highlighting it in his plays. Many of his plays are virtual dramatization of this post-Independence disillusionment.

After Independence in 1947 there started a new era of changes as well as challenges in the life of Indian people. It not only meant the much-sought-after freedom from the long drawn out period of bondage to the British rule but marked the beginning of a new epoch in which people were aware of their rights, needs, requirements, demands and even their fulfillment. They had high expectations from their own government, bureaucrats and others.

The *Miracle Seed*, a one act play, deals with the cruel vagaries of nature leading to a perpetual drought. As the play open, we see laxman's arrival from the city of Ram's house, with a rich harvest in sight. The failure of the monsoon for two years at a stretch results in the drying of the miracle seed and this constitutes the middle part of the play. The ending of the play marked by the decision of Ram to go the city along with his family, which does not materialize due to city having a beginning, a middle and an end. The *Miracle Seed* is a realistic play painting a dismay picture of the severe drought that took place in Maharashtra in 1572. The drought bears a parallel to the heart-rendering Bengal famine of 1943 as pen portrayed by Bhabani Bhattacharya in his well-known novel. The *Miracle Seed* can only be characterized as an extremely naive presentation of a problem only too common in the life of the Indian peasant. There are the usual drought and famine and the playwright's laudable intention is to show how the hybrid seed could solve the peasant's problem. But there are several atrociously false touches in the play which betray the fact that the city-bred playwright knows as much about a real Indian village as an average American tourist. In scene-IV, for instance, he makes Ram, the middle-aged peasant smash his plough on the ground- a virtual sacrilege which no real Indian peasant could ever commit even in his blackest mood desperation or wildest dreams of despair. Currimbhoy has succeeded in portraying the popular consciousness at a most complex period in Indian politics, the Naxalite Movement in Calcutta, through expressive and vivid imagery and highly distinctive characters that are at the same time remarkably typical. *Inquilab* (1970) falls in this category. In the play *Prof. Datta*, Shomik, the landlord stand for the old order, whereas Amar and others stand for change and revolution. As a playwright Currimbhoy does not turn away from the realities of this world. He is not afraid of exposing terrorism, corruption, nepotism and many other perversions rampant in our society. *The Dissident MLA* (1974) is a satire based on the problem of dissidents in politics and political corruption. The play centres around Manu, a dissident MLA of Gujarat, who instigates students to get the Assembly dissolved by creating anarchic situations in the State. Ultimately the Governor is compelled to dissolve the Assembly in order to restore law and order in the state. The events depicted by the writer palpably pulsate with ideas relevant to the present. The play exposes the political leaders of modern India. Asif Currimbhoy presents a variety of experiences from different angles. His deft handling of language and his choice of simple themes are the main

props of his plays. Love and compassion are the buoys which help people to keep afloat in this sea of torment and pain of worldliness and mental anguish. A Karmayogi, the authentic voice of the theatre, a forceful playwright are some of the terms used to describe the forceful personality of Currimbhoy. Above all he was an optimist. He said: "Everyone dreams. That's hoping and everyone must hope."

### **Conclusion :**

Currimbhoy is a conscientious dramatist with his own definite views on the art of drama. His interest in what he sees around and how he reacts to it has brought him to the sphere of drama. Naturally, he is a dramatist with a social purpose. This is made clear when he says that he is a writer of plays which have a certain amount of meaning. As a "writer with a social purpose", he not only seeks to present men and things as he sees them but also projects his own point of view. This is evident from what he says that you have to present all sides of the problems and to the extent that you are a writer with a sense of commitment to life, you have a say in the matter without being withdrawn from it completely. Playwriting is a very delicate mechanism; you have got to participate you have got to withdraw you have to be objective and at the same time you must not refrain from passing a comment which is your own. Though "a writer with a social purpose," Currimbhoy is not a propagandist. He categorically states that 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 as correctly as possible and let people or the audience draw their own conclusions. What he seems to aim at is to integrate his social concerns with his artistic concerns. He rightly thinks that the! artist holds a certain responsibility to himself as well as to society. Therefore, he earnestly feels that there is no such thing as a totally unbiased work of art. Any artist will present anything necessarily from his own point of view and even in the presentation of facts, he is subconsciously capable of manipulating them so that he tries to influence the thinking of the audience in the way in which he believes himself. From this one can see that Currimbhoy stretches his material beyond the confines of the particular and does not simply produce a social document of one country's problems. Like Osborne, he is an artist who "feels" and is not afraid of his emotions. As "a man of the theatre" Currimbhoy holds that the essence of theatre is conflict. As people in the same society hold contrary beliefs, "a clash of views, a clash of interests, a clash of positions is inevitable." Since theatre is concerned primarily with people and their actions, the clash of positions between men and men and between men and women generates powerful situations which form a vibrant factor of the theatre. This has led Currimbhoy to believe that conflict is the basis of life and the basis of the theatre.

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