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***Asif Currimbhoy: Voicing People and Their Problems***

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India has rich heritage of theatrical art. Right from the beginning of Natyashastra of Bharata, perhaps the oldest and the most authentic treatise on theatrical or visual art, to the most recent developments of theatre and the art itself, the contribution of Indian dramatists have remained significant to the globe. The vast range of the imagination of the Indian playwrights shows that India has a long and glorious dramatic tradition that traces back to the classical Sanskrit Drama, originated from the folk theatre of the country. The plays Written by Kalidasa, Bhasa, Bhama, Asvghosa, Rajsekhara and many others not only entertained the readers across globe but also formed a path for the future Indian dramatists. With invasion of British in India, the art of drama experienced renaissance in the hands of invaders, Iyengar observes the new spirit as “A Russian musical director by name Labeledoff is said to have produced the first modern drama in Calcutta towards the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century” (Iyengar 4).many of Shakespeare’s plays were performed in Bombay by Italian and English drama troops. By late 19<sup>th</sup> century drama found its root in many of Indian languages by some pioneering spirits writing plays in their mother tongue. Though it lacked in quantity, especially in English, the efforts were noteworthy by playwrights like Tagore, Aurobindo and TP Kailasham. For Dramatic expression in India R.K.Singh rightly observes, “While Indian fiction and poetry in English have drawn world-wide attention, Indian English drama has not been so fortunate” (P 161)

Tagore’s plays like *The Post Office*, *Chitra*, *Sanyasi*, *Sacrifice* became popular for their rich lyrical excellence and symbolic significance. Aurobindo is known for well-knit adaption of classical mythology of the East and the West. He wrote *Persons the Deliverer* and *Vasavadutta* as original dramatic creations in English constructed on Elizabethan Models. Aurobindo’s style appealed more to scholars whereas Tyagaraja Paramasiva Kailasam (1855-1946) popularly known as T.P.Kailasam, breathe out and out a deep reverence for our ancient culture and value of life. Some of the notable plays of Kailasam include *The Burden* (1933), *A Monologue* (1933), *Fulfillment* (1933) and *The Purpose* (1944). Kailasham displayed a better stage sense and great success on the stage for he did his best in highlighting the greatness of the tragic heroes of the epics. The Plays written during Post—independence was found to be more successful than that of pre-independence Indian Drama. English translation of many of Girish Karnard’s, Badal Sirkar and Vijay Tendulkar’s plays were well acclaimed by viewers and critics around the world. The success of these translations inspired many Indian playwrights to use English as their creative Expression. Grish Karnard, Asif Currimbhoy and Mahesh Dattani are some of the chief creative artist writing English Drama by second half of the Twentieth century. The present paper, thus tries to attempt to verbally picture Asif Currimbhoy’s creative genius as the First authentic voice of Indian theater as observed by Faubion Bowers.

Asif Currimbhoy (1928-1994) born a khoja muslim in the family of an industrialist was educated at St.xaviers College Mumbai which enabled him to acquire mastery over English language at a young age. He pursued his Higher Education from University of Wisconsin, US where he developed love for Shakespearean drama. After returning to India he worked for Burma Shell Oil Company giving it up later to be a full time creative artist. His working at Burma Shell provided him an opportunity to travel across india that acquaint him to different locals and the problems of people living there. To his credit, Asif Currimbhoy has twenty-nine a published play in which he does display a variety of themes. His plays are broadly categorized in to Romantic Plays, Political plays, Social Plays and Plays of Religion and Art. Comedy, tragedy, farce, melodrama, history and fantasy are all genres to his credit. In an interview with Rajeinder



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Paul and Paul Jacob he says:

“The place had always been 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, its striking sparks with each other that brings about a feel of life” (Paul, 25)

From this, it becomes clear that Currimbhoy is a keen observer of people and their expressions. It is also given to understand that he views conflict as the basis of life as well as the base of the theatre. All these influences have left, no doubt, have made a significant impression in the creative writing of Currimbhoy and inspired him to work with unusual themes from contemporary Indian society to write plays of artistic excellence. As Peter Nazareth rightly puts it, “Asif Currimbhoy interweaves the public event with the private to create exciting drama which asks moral questions about humanity in the cataclysmic period of decolonization” P18). He himself says that his plays spring from his “emotional reaction” to what he sees around him. The most recognizable sincerity, interest in the happenings around, man-woman relationship, especially husband and wife relationship and personal rebellion against the bitter experiences in life remains some of the significant themes in his plays. Beside social and political happenings of the time he also successfully uses mythological and philosophical inclinations which all get reflected in his plays which are 1. *The Tourist Mecca* (1959), 2. *The Clock* (1959), 3. *The Doldrummers* (1960), 4. *The Restaurant* (1960), 5. *The Dum Dancer* (1961), 6. *OM* (1961), 7. *Thorns on a Canvas* (1962), 8. *The Captives* (1963), 9. *Goa* (1964), 10. *And Never the Twain Shall Meet* (1964), 11. *The Kalaidoscope* (1964), 12. *Monsoon* (1965), 13. *The Hungry Ones* (1965), 14. *Valley of the Assassins* (1966), 15. *The Temple Dancers* (1967), 16. *The Lotus Eaters* (1967), 17. *Abbe Farie* (1968), 18. *An Experiment with Truth* (1969), 19. *The Refuge* (1971), 20. *The Miracle Seed* (1973) and 21. *The Dissident MLA* (1974).

A common goal Asif writes with is to give voice to the problems of man everywhere. May it be the people starving with hunger in the streets of Calcutta, the pain of farmers for not getting rain in Maharashtra, The problems of tea planters on the hills of Dargeling, emerging rebel of youth against government on unemployment and poverty, peasant movements against suppressing landlords, the plight of Jews feeling alien in India and Portuguese in Goa, the refugees struggling to get their identity at India-Bangladesh borders and many other are artistically presented by Currimbhoy. The vast range of themes he produces in his plays remains one of the striking features of his writing. The problems he presents on stage are not only the problems of any one civilization, but they are of universal nature faced by civilizations across world. Currimbhoy understands well the psychology of people he portrays, through them he speaks of the conflicts that are eternal. For instance, *The Miracle Seed* presents the social differences between the way village and city people thinks, the contrast is presented through the characters of Ram and Laxman centered around the theme of green revolution in India. His *Thorns on a Canvas* presents a picture of freedom of expression for creative artist, *The Dissident MLA* show in a great measure their social realism and satire on how dirty politics play its role in manipulating youth and spoil their lives. *The Hungry Ones* seeks to dramatize the great reality of hunger and love. The *Doldrummers*, his most controversial play pictures senseless youth for whom there is no life other than worldly pleasure. Asif’s Social plays emerge from his belief that despite endless arson and hopelessness, there is scope for value like love, peace and understanding.



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Asif Currimbhoy has a command over writing political and historical events such as the Indian takeover of Goa, the Naxalite movement in Calcutta and the Pakistani War that gave birth to Bangladesh. *Goa* beautifully presents traumatic situation in which people of Goa live during India's taking over of Goa. The play symbolically presents imperialism through characters of Krishna and Rose. In writing *Inquilab, Refugee and Sonar Bangla*, A trilogy, Asif canvases a living picture of Liberation of Bangladesh and the aftermath. Currimbhoy is credited to have popularizing Indian English Drama worldwide as many of his plays are successfully presented at theatres abroad. *Goa* was staged at The University of Michigan in 1965. The Theatre Company in Boston exhibited *The Hungry Ones* and *The Doldrummers* was successfully staged at Actor's Studios. While he was working in Agra in 1958, he wrote *The Tourist Mecca* which deals with the tourists bound for Agra. It was during his stay in Agra that he faced some problems in his job and his inner tension found an expression in *The Clock*. He wrote *The Dumb Dancer* and *OM*, the former being a psychological play with its theme from the Mahabharatha and the latter reflecting the playwright's obsession with the fear of death. *Thorns on a Canvas* was written as a personal rebellion against the bitter experience he had in the banning of *The Doldrummers*. He made theatrical adaption of life of Mahatma Gandhi giving it a title *An Experiment with Truth* covering the whole life of Gandhi.

Thus, Asif Currimbhoy has the international repute among the modern Indian playwrights writing in English. His plays have been approved with laud applause in India and abroad. Walter J. Meserve observes; "For western audience and students of modern Indian drama, Currimbhoy is a playwright of social purpose and, as Faubion Bowers rightly calls him, the first authentic voice of India" (Walter 423). To conclude, it may be said that Asif Currimbhoy is a dramatist of public events presenting life as it is and his plays are nothing but a mirror reflecting the day-to-day life of ordinary people and their struggle. His themes are out and out real and contemporary events stirring the minds of both Indian and foreign audience.

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