

A Study of Race, Class and Gender in Asif Currimbhoy's Plays

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Abstract: *Asif Currimbhoy's plays reveal the notions and aspects of colonialism. He highlights the de-humanizing aspects of colonialism by focusing on the influence of capitalism in all walks of the Post-independent Indian life in some plays. His plays were undertaken as subject of study and research and were even translated into regional language. His plays cover a wide range of themes from History and Politics. The issues of race, class & gender which are prominent in most of Currimbhoy's plays have not been examined in detail. Currimbhoy's constant engagement on vital issues informs and impacts his vision of life.*

Introduction: Asif Currimbhoy is the most prolific playwright of the Post-Independence period who has written and published more than thirty plays. He emerged as a notable playwright and he has been called the first authentic voice of the Post-Independence era. He took Indian English drama to the new heights in the Post-Independence period. Some of his important plays are *The Doldrums* (1960), *Goa* (1964), *Inquilab* (1970), *The Refugee* (1971), *Sonar Bangla* (1972) and *The Dissident M.L.A* (1974). He interweaves the public events with the private to create exciting drama which asks moral questions about humanity in cataclysmic period of de-colonisation. He is a distinctive playwright in whose works one can find the contemporary burning social and political issues and problems of Post-Independence period.

Sangeeta Agrawal comments:

Asif Currimbhoy has been prominent writer of the plays and that some of his plays are based on certain social issues and political events of our country. Currimbhoy's social and political consciousness is of paramount significance to us as he is able to show through it his deep-rootedness in the Indian in the ethos, his sense of 'belonging' to the soil (196)

In currimbhoy's Plays colonial differentiation among human beings on the basis of skin color comes in for sharp criticism. The white colonialists not only considered the colonized black skinned people inferior but also induced in them the notion of inferiority of their races – a notion which shall govern the behavioral and thinking patterns of the black skinned people. In *Hungry Ones*, the visit of two American beatniks, Al and Sam to India to comprehend its mystery is a case in point. The two Americans belong to the beat generation of post - World War II America, which believed in experimentation with drugs and sexuality to unravel the mysteries of life. These dregs and castaways of the American society are elevated to the status of the great gurus and saints by the most enlightened section of the Indian society – the students of Calcutta

University. The way the college “stupidly” place the beatniks at par with the Indian saints and patriots (Reddy 111) exposes the interiorization of racial inferiority of the Indian people :

Girl: After all, we need your help too. We haven't come across anyone like you...Swami Vivekananda and Sri Aurobindo, Rabindranath Tagore and Sarojini Naidu, Subhash Chandra Bose, Raja Ram Mohan Roy (*The Hungry Ones* 32).

To the Europeans and Americans, Asian and African countries are the lands of mysteries. The Americans have come to India to unravel these mysteries. But they fail miserably because they do not understand the elements of purity, love, pity and faith which constitute the very fabric of the Indian way of life and society. Thus, the beatniks` quest fails to provide them a clear perspective on the Indian culture and civilization and it is for this reason that they're referred as 'strangers' throughout the play. The question of racial superiority is also very dominant in *Goa* which deals with the fag end of Portuguese occupation of Goa. Miranda is a prostitute but she strangely dislikes the dark skinned people because she belongs to the ruling class of the white Portuguese. She treats the dark skinned people derisively and says, “They make me feel dirty” (*Goa* 37). The play reverberates with constant reminders of white being pure and black being dirty. But Krishna compares the whites to Albinos and tries to subvert the white's notion of racial supremacy: “You may have white skin, but so have albinos. It doesn't prove a thing” (*Goa* 60). Similarly, in *Tourist Mecca* Lady Topin and Janet, her daughter despises Kesav because he is black. To be black is to be inferior and to white is to be superior. In Lady Janet's opinion, the natives (read blacks) have crude and unpolished culture and she criticizes them for their linguistic inferiority as well:

Oh, I can see that he wrote the word “slept”.

These natives can never use English euphemistically.

He should have used the word “made love” instead of “slept” (*Tourist Mecca* 45).

The racial discrimination takes the form of caste discrimination in such plays as *An Experiment with Truth*. Untouchability is the scourge of the Indian society by which upper caste people exercise racial discrimination. Gandhi had made it the mission of his life to remove this scourge and he starts this practice from his home. He asks Gopal, the untouchable, to go to the kitchen and fetch a glass of milk and give it to Kasturba. She flinches even at the thought of an untouchable entering her kitchen but she had no choice but takes it from Gopal's hand and gives it to Gandhi. Similarly, when all forms of physical torture fail to break the icy silence of MadanLal, who had attempted Gandhi's assassination, Patel uses the most ingenious form of mental torture by asking an untouchable woman to lie by the assassin's side. The untouchables are considered to be the lowest caste the agonized conscience of which is expressed in Ambedkar's words:

An untouchable vote today is a Hindu vote. Tell me, Why should I...the untouchables ...remain as the lowest caste in Hinduism? We could change over ... (looking at him slyly) ... Islamic brotherhood... (*An Experiment with Truth* 48) .

The class issues manifest themselves in Currimbhoy's plays in the binary opposition of the ruler and the ruled, the colonizer and the colonized, the rich and the poor, the master and the employee. Currimbhoy explores various strategies the upper class people use to keep their hegemony intact and to subvert resistance of the lower class. The use of violence is the most commonly and widely used form of subjugating the ruled people. In *An Experiment with the Truth*, Gandhi and his followers resort to peaceful resistance in the Dandi March but the Britishers resort to the worst type of brutality and dispense the peaceful agitators. Similarly in *Goa*, the distinction between the colonizer and the colonized is brought out in the form of administrative capacity. The Portuguese colonizers think that the natives not have the knowledge and the skills to administer a colony like Goa. In *Darjeeling Tea?*, the argument between Mac and Bunty centers on the concept of the old planters' common sense which is a colonizer's strategy to deny power and knowledge to the colonized. The white rulers were replaced by the dark skinned politicians in post-independence India who use all kinds of deceptions and maneuverings to retain their hold on the levers of power. In *Inquilab* and *The Dissident M.L.A.*, Asif Currimbhoy exposes the political degeneration in India. Devdas, a minister in the state govt. is not simply concerned about the killing of the innocent people, bombings in the street and the violent grabbing of the land belonging to the rich landlords. His simple motive is to retain his power and position. He adopts a double standard policy by not taking strict action against the Naxalites because that would amount to losing the peasant's votes nor does he want to alienate the landlords because they provide him with money and muscle power – two essential ingredients of political power. *Inquilab* exposes the degenerate rulers of India masquerading as the representatives of the people against the backdrop of Naxalite movement which has its roots in the unbridgeable gap between the rich and the poor, the haves and the have-nots, the landlords and the landless and the capitalists and the workers. Class differentiation takes new forms in the boss/employee and master/slave relationships in *Thorns on a Canvas* and *The Clock*. *Thorns on a Canvas* depicts the relationship between an elite patron of the Art Academy and the poor artists like Yakooob and Nafeesa. This relationship is a variation of colonizers/colonized syndrome. Similarly, in *The Clock*, Henry's life is dictated by the never ending deadlines of his boss. All these relationships are characterized by the domination and subjugation of the lower class by the upper class. Though in some plays, the characters belonging to the lower class adopt various strategies of active and passive resistance, in others they simply accept it as God's "Given" and suffer their lot.

In their gendered roles, women characters are portrayed to be more powerful and stronger than men characters. Meserve and Meserve comment that "In Asif's best plays, the power of his women characters dominates the action ... in retrospect one finds Asif Currimbhoy's women

characters, whether minor or major, stronger and more memorable than men” (X-XI). Asif’s perspective on women is different than that of Tendulkar and Karnad in whose plays women are more or less victims and objects of patriarchal order. Though a prostitute by profession, Miranda, Asif’s most fully portrayed woman controls the whole action of *Goa*. It is she who controls the actions and motives of Alphonso and Krishna. In *Darjeeling Tea*, the women characters protest against male chauvinism of their husbands by rewriting the existing status of women as wives confined within the four walls of the house. In *OM MANE PADME HUM*, the muted voice of the women sweeper after her death is a strong protest against patriarchal order of society. In *Dissident M.L.A.*, Asif Currimbhoy exposes the modification of women by none other than those who control the destiny of India. For Manu, the dissident M.L.A., his wife is no more than a cow, an animal identified with submission, docility and humility. Manu’s dealings with the maid servants are no different and he uses her to satisfy his lust.

Mita, in *The Refugee*, voices Asif’s perspective on life. Yassin and Mita present two different ways of life – Yassin of non-committal and detachment and Mita of commitment and involvement. She is the embodiment of Asif’s strong humanitarian approach to life. Dalai Lama’s mother in *OM* and Kasturba Gandhi’s wife in *An Experiment with Truth* are minor characters of great significance. Rita in *The Doldrums* takes bold decision to give birth to unwanted baby. Suprea and Prof. Datta’s wife in *Inquilab*, Savitri in *The Miracle Seed* and Sumitra in *Sonar Bangla* not only offer optimistic atmosphere in the plays but also testify to the value and significance of the personal struggle and spiritual force which are the cornerstones of Currimbhoy’s vision and philosophy of life.

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