

A CRITICAL STUDY OF SELECTED POSTMODERN INDIAN ENGLISH DRAMATISTS

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HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF INDIAN ENGLISH DRAMA

Drama is an important cultural performance of a society. It not only registers but also manifests the changes the society undergoes. It enables to reconstruct the history, understand the society and comprehend its identity. It conceives the cultural identity of the society to which it belongs. It is the specific mode of fiction represented in performance. The term comes from a Greek word meaning action, which is derived from the verb meaning to *do or to act*. The enactment of drama in theatre, performed by actors on a stage before an audience, presupposes collaborative modes of production and a collective form of reception. The structure of dramatic texts is directly influenced by this collaborative production and collective reception.

The earliest form of Indian drama was the Sanskrit drama that is said to have its framework directly given by Lord Shiva who used these techniques to pray to Lord Vishnu. Between the 1st century AD and the 10th was a period of relative peace in the history of India during which hundreds of modern plays were written. With the Islamic conquests that began in the 10th and 11th centuries, theatre was discouraged or forbidden entirely. Later, in an attempt to re-assert indigenous values and ideas, village theatre was encouraged across the subcontinent, developing in a large number of regional languages from the 15th to the 19th centuries. Modern Indian theatre developed during the period of colonial rule under the British Empire, from the mid-19th century until the mid-20th. Drama in India is revived during the British rule. Though vernacular drama became popular,

English drama also saw the beginning during this time. Thus English theatre in India is essentially an 18th century phenomenon that began with a purpose of entertaining the British who came to serve British administration in India. European touring companies performed comedies, farces and operas in major urban Indian spaces where the British used to live. Indian English drama thus began its primary development following the European drama. Rabindranath Tagore was a pioneering modern playwright who wrote plays noted for their exploration and questioning of nationalism, identity, spiritualism and material greed.

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His plays are written in Bengali and include *Chitra (Chitrangada, 1892)*, *The King of the Dark Chamber (Raja, 1910)*, *The Post Office (Dakghar, 1913)*, and *Red Oleander (Raktakarabi, 1924)*.

Though a substantial number of plays are contributed by the playwrights from Sri Aurobindo to the contemporary Mahesh Dattani or ManjulaPadmanabhan, English drama took off only recently. Increasing number of Indians with English acquaintance and increasing interest of foreign countries in Indian English Literature inspired few more writers to contribute their best to this genre. Meanwhile, a substantial contribution by translations from Kannada, Hindi, Marathi and Bengali helped this genre's emergence with a new vigour. But these translations could not substitute or replace the original texts. This gap is addressed quickly by contemporary playwrights like ManjulaPadmanabhan, Mahesh Dattani and some others. The Indian English drama during colonial rule and in post-colonial India depicts the cultural changes sealed into Indian culture. As observed earlier, the revived Indian drama did not follow ancient drama but followed modern, Western drama. The cultural changes that initiated with the advent of Britishers are quite evident in the stage, setting, costume (trousers and shirt), music and other architectonics of theatre. But the subjects, themes, issues, characters, actors were Indian, indicating the hybrid identity of this genre.

POSTMODERN INDIAN DRAMA

It began with the writings by K.N.Banerjee's play titled *The Persecuted or Dramatic Scenes Illustrative of the Present State of Hindu Society in Calcutta*, published in 1831. Later on, the second play in English is published by Michael Madhusudan Dutt titled *Is This Called Civilization?* in 1871. In Indian English Drama, four playwrights have given a new direction in postmodern period are Girish Karnad, Nissim Ezekiel and Mahesh Dattani.

Girish Karnad, (born 19 May 1938) is a contemporary writer, playwright, screenwriter, actor and movie director in language has written a number of plays first in Kannada and then renders them into English. Karnad's English versions of Kannada plays are better than the originals. His rise as a playwright in 1960s marked the coming of age of Modern Indian playwriting in Kannada. He is a recipient of the 1998 Jnanpith Award, the highest literary honour conferred in India. His plays use history and mythology, to critique and problematize ideas and ideals that are of contemporary relevance. Karnad's numerous plays such as *Tughlaq (1972)*, *Hayavadana (1975)*, *Naga-Mandala (1990)*, *Taledanda (1993)* and *The Fire and The Rain (1998)* are significant contributions to Indian drama. All these plays are transcreated into English by the playwright from Kannada originals. In his preface to *Naga-Mandala*, Karnad says that the play is based on two oral tales from Karnataka.

The first is obviously the traditional tale of a cobra turning into man at night and visiting a married woman; and the second is based on the popular belief that a night long vigil in a temple can ward off death. Newly wed Rani is neglected by her husband Appanna, who locks her up in the house, a king cobra from an ant hill nearby falls in love with her and starts visiting her at night in the form of her husband. When the husband comes to know this, Rani is ordered to prove her innocence by undergoing the cobra ordeal. She emerges unsheathed and is hailed as a goddess by village people. Finally the cobra finds shelter in the long tresses of Rani. This play reflects the relationship between the art and imagination.

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In *Tale-Danda*, there is a conflict between religion and society. The play deals with the final crisis in the life of Bosavanna, the great social reformer in 12th century Karnataka and the founder of Lingayat faith. He tried to propagate his revolutionary philosophy about the abolition of caste, equality of sexes, rejection of idol worship etc. The play shows how the higher castes resent Bosavanna's iconoclasm and how his disciple gives his daughter in marriage to an untouchable. His wife voices her anxiety over her daughter marrying a harijan. Finally Bosavanna dies in mysterious circumstances.

The Fire and The Rain is based on a myth taken from Mahabharata. This is clearly mentioned by the playwright The Myth of Yavakrita occurs in Chapters 145-138 of the VanaParva of the Mahabharata. It is narrated by the ascetic Lomasha to the Pandavas as they wander across the land during their exile. The play has a complex framework with a central myth assuming the form of a dramatic performance within the larger framework of the story of Arvasu's betrayal by his brother Parvasu, the chief priest performing a yagnya to bring rains to the drought stricken land. The title of the play is symbolic. The fire represents the fire of passion that leads to lust, revenge, violence and death, the rain symbolizes regeneration, revival, life giving, forgiveness and divine grace.

Nissim Ezekiel (16 December 1924 – 9 January 2004) was an Indian Jewish poet, actor, playwright, editor and art-critic. He was a foundational figure in postcolonial India's literary history, specifically for Indian writing in English. He was awarded the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1983 for his Poetry collection, "Latter-Day Psalms", by the Sahitya Akademi, India's National Academy of Letters.

Nissim Ezekiel's *Don't Call It Suicide* (1993) is a tragedy in two acts. It is based on a real life incident. It's a short play with an unusual title. The plot of the play is based on a dilemma— whether to call an unnatural death of a young man. Mr. Nanda, the deceased father refuses to call the death of the son, a suicide. The protagonist of the play is the dead son. The play opens with the discussion between Nanda and Sathe on some business matters. But soon it takes an inward turn when Mr. Nanda chooses to tell Sathe about the tragedy that has befallen on his family. Mr. Nanda is the sentimental character and rests of the characters are pragmatists. Mr. Nanda broods over the death of his son and breaks down when he recalls the sad incident with nostalgia. His eldest son was unhappy about the ways of the world. His married life was not satisfactory. His wife was not happy with him, he remained calm and silent. Once when he was alone in the house, he hanged himself to death. His wife is given shelter by her in-laws. But she is made to hard work in the house. Mr. Nanda is sympathetic to her and wants her to be treated more kindly by his wife. He has a soft corner for his daughter-in-law, Meeta. Ezekiel brings out intricate relationship between the mother-in-law and the daughter-in-law through the characters of Mrs. Nanda and Meeta. When Mr. Nanda wants Meeta to meet other members of the family over dinner, Mrs. Nanda puts her foot down and asks her not to come out of kitchen.

When Mr. Nanda proposed to have a family gathering and wants Meeta to meet Sheila and Hari, Mrs. Nanda frowns upon him saying that there would be no time for her to do so. She asks Meeta to cook the food, clean the utensils and to eat in the kitchen. Thus she was very unkind to Meeta. She has cunning motto to look after Meeta in her house as Meeta was helpful to her in the house. Mr. Nanda's second son, Hari is pragmatic and dominating like his mother. He ill-treats his wife, beats her and always tries to boss over others. He takes his brother to be a sentimental fool and has no sympathy with her sister-in-law. It is really shocking that everyone

except Mr. Nanda is rude to Meeta. Mr. Nanda has humanistic approach to life towards Meeta. Rests of the family members a self-centered and pragmatic in their approach to life. Ezekiel shows the patriarchal view of men like Hari who beats his wife Malati brutally. He explains inhumanity of people in the society. The play move to its end by explaining the doubts raised by Mr. Nanda in the beginning of the play regarding the cause of his son's suicide. The failure on the part of a person makes him feel diffident. The attitude of the society towards people who have failed in life is deplorable. Hence people like Mr. Nanda's eldest son commits suicide due to frustration.

Finally Mr. Nanda cannot absolve the blame for his son's death. He takes pills and puts an end to his life. Thus the play which begins against the backdrop of the elder son's suicide ends with the father's suicide. Tragedy is being recreated in the character of Mr. Nanda. Mrs. Nanda completely breaks down after the death of her husband. She bursts out: *I have lost a son. Now I've lost my husband. What have I done to deserve this?* (Act II, page 3)

At that time, Meeta comes to her and comforts her. She could not help saying: '*Oh! My daughter*'. Like a drowning person catching at a straw, Mrs. Nanda turns to Meeta for her support. The end reminds us of Shakespeare's play *Pericles* and T.S.Eliot's words of *Mariana*. The play exposes the ills of the society like unfair treatment given to women in general and widows in particular in our time. Thus the ending of the play is ironic.

Mahesh Dattani (born 7 August 1958) is an Indian director, actor, playwright and writer. He is the first playwright in English to be awarded the Sahitya Akademi award for his *Final Solutions and Other Plays* in 1998. His plays have been directed by eminent directors like Arvind Gaur, Alyque Padamsee and Lillete Dubey. His works deal with communal differences, consumerism and gender. His collected plays contain eight plays: *Seven Steps around the Fire, On a Muggy Night in Mumbai, Do the Needful, Final Solutions, Bravely Fought the Queen, Tara, Dance like a Man and Where There's a Will*.

In *Seven Steps around the Fire*, he presents the life story of a hijra named Kamala, a beautiful eunuch, whose murder remained mysterious. The play narrates the plight of the hijra community who are equidistant from men and women. They sing and dance at weddings and child births. But the irony is that they can neither marry nor give birth to children. Dattani boldly depicted the life of hijras who are looked down upon in the society. He writes about hijras, homosexuality and politics in present day society with confidence and fortitude.

Homosexuality is the major theme of Dattani's plays namely *Bravely Fought the Queen* and *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*. The play presents a group of well to do homosexuals in Mumbai, their changing mutual relationship, their relations, their self delusions and self discoveries. Kamallesh is weak and sensitive person whereas Sharad is strong and bold. Ed assumes a double identity, with Prakash as his second avatar. Bunny is a good husband at home and a very competent one in his bedroom, while he enjoys himself as a gay soul in the company of the initiated. Ranjeet solves his problem by going abroad where he feels he will be more readily accepted; and Deepali is a militant lesbian, who declares, *Every time I menstruate, I thank God I am a woman, totally free of guilt*.

She is strong and bold enough to strike Ed when he becomes violent. For homosexuals, marriage can only be a double dirty twice four letter word. Dattani chooses a theme of homosexuality to his plays to give a chance to the people to look into the problem intently.

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Final Solutions, a play in three acts, deals with a political theme. It is replete with communal tensions that bedevil our society. Two Muslim boys, Javed and Babban, take shelter in the house of Ramnik Gandhi, a Hindu businessman, while communal riot rages outside. During the course of their interaction, Ramnik reveals the past and confesses how his father and grandfather had burnt down the shop of a rival Muslim businessman, in communal riots forty years ago. Ramnik's mother also remembers the travails of partition and how both Hindus and Muslims suffered then. Babban comments at the end of the play; *If we understand and believe in one another, nothing can be destroyed; one reality cannot accept another reality.*

Thus Indian English drama plays a crucial role in postmodern era. It arouses the keen interest among the readers and caters their needs.

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