

(De) colonization Of Indian Drama!

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Since English literature is now relishing its easily perceptible apogee and thus the presentation of this discourse may be justified as it intends to debate the phases of decolonization of stage or drama in world literature. As for Indian drama, in English or in regional languages, the case is bit different and the possibilities of its colonization are extremely fragile. Drama, incontestably, is the most archaic artistic form of literature in Indian civilization. While there may be a debate regarding its first appearance in different parts of the world, for example in Greek or in India, but India has a completely evolved tradition of drama is rarely disputable. And before 19th century any linkage or influence of European drama on Indian is diametrically refutable. There may be/are parallels and contradictions in thematic and structural properties of Indian and European stage, and it must be as all drama intends to dramatize human life with its constituents. Some of them are invariably same viz. character, plot, dialogue, action, music and spectacle. These constituents are dense need of drama irrespective of land, language and locale rather than an influence of a distant land.

Indian drama from the apex of Kalidasa or Bhasa to now striving hard for survival in several regional languages (now available in English translation) and some written originally in English has made a journey downwards. The worst is that the contemporary status of the Indian drama in English is that of the Parsi community, living on the verge of extinction, surviving with charitable discussions, and deliberate production of reminiscences of the glorious past. Here enumerating the prominent reasons of such downfall will divert the clear objective. The objective to prove that Indian English drama has never been in the way of decolonization. Decolonization is a subsequent action to colonization and colonization of drama in India is unsubstantial and an illusory creation. Except Sri Aurobindo's plays, that too contains only structural resemblances with Elizabethan plays, to find European impact on Indian drama is too much difficult and if it is traced somewhere it is purely coincidental.

From the very first Indian English play 'The Persecuted or Dramatic Scenes of the Present State of Hindu Society In Calcutta' in 1831 by Krishna Mohun Banerjee to the latest and last, but first English, play Of Vijay Tendulkar, His Fifth Woman (2004). Indian English Drama has remained purely Indian, thematically or structurally, with the aforementioned coincidental exceptions. The great signatures in Indian English Drama namely Rabindranath Tagore, Sri Aurobindo, T P kailasham, Harindranath Chattopadhyay, Bharti Sarabhai, Manjeri Isvaran, Pratap Sharma, G.Das, Asif Currimbhoy, Mahesh Dattani, Girish Karnad, Vera Sharma, Manjula Padmanabham et al. almost all of them written plays for and of Indian people.

A literary history should not be a hurried categorization of a prolix and variegated archive with scant attempt to comprehend it and just a casual consideration of History. Rather it should be a reflection of the culture as a whole, with due emphasis on the integral and the

fundamental, along with a chronological and spatial account of the development and dominance of major generic forms and also an insight into the reasons of the subordination of other generic forms in the course of the historical development. Aijaz Ahmad has termed such hurried attempts of generalizing a whole history of literature as “disorientation of elite scholarship” (In Theory, 47).

A discourse on Drama and Art endeavors to draw invisible contours around its infinity whereas it is always open ended and the first discourse in itself contains seminal ideas, the future development of which branches into several new semantic trajectories. With such open endedness I wish to proceed in the critical exploration of some of the selective playwrights who undeniably are the markers of Indian drama in its evolution. To begin with Sri Aurobindo’s own conviction regarding drama would be apt as he stands among the first bell ringers of drama in this country in English. M K Naik refers to his ideas of drama as:

Drama must have an interpretive vision; the vision must contain an implicit or explicit idea of life; the vision and the idea have to seem to arise out of inner life of characters, and through an evolution of a speech leading to an evolution of action; the true movement and result in all great drama is really psychological; action and events in drama have to be cast into a close dramatic form; and the essential purpose of the drama is to presentation of the poet’s vision of some part of the world-act in the life of the human soul (14).

All his plays are written albeit before the appearance of *The Future Of Poetry*, yet it bears his convictions immaculately. Now all existing criticism on his plays unanimously agrees on the echoes of Elizabethan verse plays on the account of his extensive use of blank verse. That is all true but the vital genius of Sri Aurobindo in transferring that medium to Indian context, myths, histories and ambience is often evaded and he remains only an imitator. The interpretive vision that Sri Aurobindo stresses again and again is evident in all his dramatic arts. It seems to arise out of the inner life of the principal character and is conveyed through the more important instrument of speech which is well supported by outward action and event. It can be illustrated through *Vasavadutta*, as other plays deals with the context of European History and Mythology, excluding English that might have been a stamp of colonialism, a borrowing from Somdutt’s *Kathasaritsagar*. According to Sri Aurobindo’s version of the story of Vasavaddata, both Chunda Mahasgen, the king of Avunthie, and Yogandhnarayan, the aged minister of Vatsa Udayan, have imperial ambitions. In attempt to realize his dreams, Mahasgen resorts to fraud and gets Vatsa kidnapped to his capital Ujjaiyene. His intention is to make Vatsa his vassal after marrying him to his daughter Vasavaddata. Vatsa gives an outwardly impression that he has fallen a prey to Mahasegen’s lure. Secretly however he wins the love of Vasvaddata and carries her off to Cowsambie. Manjulika, the princess of Saurashtra, in captivity of Ujjayine, and Vicurna, the younger son of Mahasegen, help him. The point is that despite being under the influence of Elizabethan model Sri Aurobindo Indianises the context in hand with his unfettered imagination. And he justifies his doing,

“Drama is the poet’s vision of some part of the world act in the life of the human soul; it is in a way his vision of karma, in an extended and very flexible sense of the world: and at its highest point rendering an illustration of the Aeschylean *drasanti pathein*. (Naik, 8)”

Ravindranath Tagore’s dramatic talent was flared with an immense variety often overshadowed with his poetic vision. *Savitri* is his first important play and the theme is, which recurs in most of his later plays too, the joy of attaining the infinite in the finite. He wrote in *My Reminiscences*:

The play should be looked upon as an introduction to whole of my future literary work: this has been the subject on which all my writings have dwelt----the joy of attaining the infinite in the finite. (Naik, 53)”

The central figure of the play is a lonely hermit who is free from fear and desire and celebrates his loneliness, ‘I sit chanting the incantation of nothingness.’ In the opening long monologue he takes an oath that he would take revenge upon ‘interminable appearances, mistress of endless disguise’. The dark eternity is contrasted with the confined earth. Sen Gupta has interpreted this play as representing a stage in the poet’s own development, because like the Sanyasi he was absorbed in his self and like the Sanyasi he emerges into the open life of nature, beauty, human love, joy and sorrow. In his short play *The Post office* Tagore reaches the peak of his dramatic talent and W B Yeats commended his genuine endeavor in the preface to the play:

On the stage the little play shows that it is very perfectly constructed and conveys to the right audience an emotion of gentleness and peace. (Preface, V)

The play is one of the richest and most suggestive plays and can be read on two different levels, Naturalistic and Symbolic. One of the earliest critics of Tagore Ajit Chakrovarty finds that one of the main themes of the play is the yearning of the mind for things afar. On the Philosophical level the play seems to be a search of the soul for the over soul of the King symbolized in the form of God. Death brings the fulfillment of such a yearning as it is a liberator which frees man from all earthly pain. Yeats in the same preface finds deliverance as one of the arch theme of the play, deliverance which the child discovers in death. Although the plot deals with death and sickness but it is nowhere morbid. It pulsates with the warmth and joy of life, however short-lived that may be. Tagore himself has refuted the charges of allegorical levels and shows how concrete the play is. He wrote to C F Andrews in one of his letters:

Amal represents the man whose soul has received the call of the open road; he seeks freedom from the comfortable enclosures of the habits sanctioned by the prudent and from walls of rigid opinion built for him by the respectable. But Madhav the worldly wise considers his restlessness to be the sign of a fatal malady; and his adviser, the physician, the custodian of conventional platitudes---with his quotations from prescribed textbooks full of maxims--- gravely nods his head and says that freedom is unsafe and every care

should be taken to keep the sick man within the four walls. And so the precaution is taken. But there is the post office in the front of Amal's house and the boy waits for the King's letter to come to him, bringing the message of emancipation. At the last the closed gate is opened by the King's own physician, and that which is death to the world of hoarded wealth and certified creeds brings him awakening in the world of spiritual freedom. (177)

In spite of relying on the dramatists own attitude of his plays the Indian critics love to make a beeline to fallacious studies set up erstwhile. Tagore's plays are uprooted deeply in Indian soil without having even an iota of future critical jargons. It is also not any deliberate attempt of creating nationalism against the preponderant waves of foreign regime and culture. On the simplest it is his vision and perception of the age old country and the ideal with which he wished his countrymen to live and to enjoy the eternal bliss:

"Let the light of joy of man eternal Amid all men
Be enkindled in my mind
Beyond the silent world of worldly grievances
Let me behold the blessed, from of the eternal." (Gitanjali)

T P Kailasham holds a secure place in the narrow plot of ground of Indian Drama in English. His plays breathe out a deep reverberance of our ancient culture with a modern critical approach. One can easily perceive a fine blending of genius and intuitive vision, a fertile imagination, ready wit and subtle humor and a serious presentation of the theme. All his plays as *The Burden*, *Fulfillment* or *The Curse Of Karna* derives its germination from our all-time classical epics *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata*. Kailasham returned to the Mahabharata more frequently and tells the reason for it, "You see the character in The Mahabharata are all like us, living rooted to this world. They may have their *adhyatmic* ambitions, but in the way the great sage Vyasa has depicted them, they are all human. But in The Ramayana, sage Valmiki has transgressed humanity. All the characters are at the threshold of divinity. The material dross has never trained their feet." Whatever the themes be, the delineation of characters is Kailasam's own and it has been the result of either his intuitive vision or his fertile imagination. In fact we find in them a subtle creation of the Indians we know and identify better. For instance the character of Karna in his play *The Curse Of Karna*. In the court scene, instead of gloating over the insult attempted by Dussasana to Draupadi, he springs to his feet and addresses the tyrant in a threatening voice to kill the culprit. This Karna is an amendment of his prototype in the classical text.

This is rather unfortunate particularly because while critics are tired of repeating the charges of hopeless aridity in the field of Indian drama in English, there seems to have been scarcely any attempt to discover the oases hidden in the desert. Such is the fate of Harindranath Chattopadhyay whose contribution if not the most it is either not the least. Harindranath's dramatic output is by no means negligible, though it is true that it is extremely difficult to have access to all his plays, and all his plays deal with certain situations of our religious leaders mostly from Maharashtra. His works are playlets rather than full

length plays. The first play *Raidas* consists of just one scene and deals with the cobbler-saint of that name. The essential drama lies in the conflict between this honest and simple soul and the set of insolent and vainglorious Brahmins who insist that Raidas has no right to worship God since he does not possess the sacred thread. When all his argument falls flat, Raidas rips open his chest and shows that he too has a sacred thread. Harindranath's other playlets are *Chokha Mela*, *Tukaram*, *Pundalik* and the most successful *Siddhartha-Man Of Peace*. His attempts to dramatize the lives of some of our saints is in itself praiseworthy attempt since they are like so many shining models of good living which we neglect at our own peril. Mencius, an ancient Chinese philosopher, that a saint is a teacher of all ages and his life must be taught to all posterity and D H Lawrence suggests that it is mandatory to concentrate on their teachings to save the world from 'a colossal idiocy.'

The restriction of time and space hinders, here, the must inclusion of Gurucharan Das, Asif Currimbhoy, Gieve Patel, Manju Padmanabham, Pratap Sharma and ilks. Thereby I make a direct beeline to the four-some of Karnad, Tendulkar, Sircar and Mohan Rakesh who has together shaped the destiny of Indian drama in four different regions of the country. Their individual imagination with the aide of modern theatrical devices of Brecht and Beckett anchored upon the distant historical and mythical properties of the country. It is not a respite or escape in the past but an exposition of the present lapses of the contemporary society while putting the past in stark contrast with the present. Islamic invasions pushed the practice of classical form of drama in oblivion, it was not finished as generally supposed, where it was absorbed into folk forms in several languages actually getting fresh vitality in the process, by drawing closer to the common man. Thus arose folk forms like *Jatra and Nautanki* in Bengal; *Bhand Jashn* in Kashmir; *Rasadhari* plays in Mathura; *Ramlila* in Northern India; *Bhavai* in Gujrat; *Lalita, Khele, Dashavatar and Tamasha* in Maharashtra; *Yakshagana, Bayalata, Attadata, Dodatta and Sonatta* in Karnataka; *Veedhi-Natakam* in Andhra Pradesh and the *Kuttiyatam, Mohiniattam and Kathakali* dance dramas in Kerala. Before the post-independence era these forms and its devices were not looked upon but with aforementioned four- some group Indian drama has been increasingly turning to folk forms and tapping their springs of vitality with splendid results. Karnad's use of *Yakshagana* in the Kannada play *Hayavadana*, Tendulkar's of *Dashvatar* and *Khele* techniques in the Marathi play, *Ghasiram Kotwal*; the adaptation of *Jatra* model in Sircar's play *Evam Indrajit*. An American critic of drama Martin Cobin opines "At the moment, the vitality and independence of India's folk theatre exceeds that of any other in Asia." (97-98)

Modern Indian Theatre therefore is developed on two tendencies, one is our own archaic tradition and culture and another is the modern theatrical tendencies of the west. Again these tendencies have worked with an imperative to decipher the modern psyche of common Indian man and by doing so they have attempted to offer a better image of the country's present. There is clearly an absence of any agenda of liberating Indian drama from the shackles of colonialism. Their return to native tradition is also not reactionary but a rediscovery of appropriate forms to appease the aesthetic aspirations of their countrymen.

R S Pathak observes "The Indianness of Indian drama may take several forms and shape and may appear in a work in diverse ways, both overt and subtle. Indian writers in English draw their sustenance from their heritage. The recurrent imagery and myths, themes and characters will help them capture the characteristic Indian ethos. Conscious Of the double burden on their shoulders, the Alps of the Western tradition and the Himalayan of their past, they have to undertake a quest for the eternal varieties so dear to Indian psyche." (5) Let's cast a glance to various specific contributions of these four-some playwrights who are credited for framing Modern Indian Drama with novelty. Mohan Rakesh, the prominent Hindi Playwright, feels compelled to express and communicate something that is by his own nature dramatic that reveals itself in his mind of the visions which have inherent drama in them. His function as a playwright is not to mould, but to recapture, not to fabricate something around it but, but to discover its own perspective. Rakesh himself makes it clear:

I find myself under the sway of this something happening to me as well as around me something that is a force, a conflict and terrible irony. At every step it strikes me down, but again lifts to my feet by that contradicting and negating itself. What is this great something? I do not know. It is in the air, in the age, in me, I know it is there but can't give it a name. (Why, 17)

His semi-historical character and situations in *Half-way House* and *One day In Asahdah* should not be deluding because History as such has never fascinated his creative imagination; he was more of his time.

Badal Sircar has had the tack and talent of an imaginative dramatist, command over dramatic craft and apprehending vision of an artist who was in search of an Indian literary identity. From dealing with serious philosophical themes in his earlier plays, Badal Sircar began to involve himself in changing the language of theatre to meet contemporary needs. He realized that the city theatre in India is not an extension of the traditional theatre in the urban setting, but a completely different theatre imported from the west, and the ideal dealt within this theatre have their roots mainly in the western culture. On the other hand the traditional rural theatre has retained its indigenous characteristics, both in form and contents. He worked therefore to develop a model of theatre that would not be limited to an urban audience belonging to the middle classes, nor did it tie down to backward values unrelated to the life and problems of the working masses of the country. He realized gradually that a flexible, portable and an inexpensive theatre is needed for the country and that is his **Third Theatre** , concretized in *Bhoma*, *Evam Indrajit* and in *Procession*. Badal Sircar, thus has become an innovator and an influence on many theatre people to change the language of their theatre according to the problems and needs of the day while contributing towards an Indian Drama. He has written:

We adopted the concept of poor theatre in the literal sense that is inexpensive theatre. Our group was poor so were our countrymen. But we wanted to utilize poverty and turn into an advantage instead of a reaction. (75)

This significant change in the use of the language in the contemporary drama is indicative of some deeper shift in the aesthetic feeling. In a way one may characterize the change in language as greater skill in compact, expression or greater freedom in the employment of words. But it does not appear just to be just a question of skill or freedom on the contrary the changes seems to be outward manifestations of the changed quality of experience that the new writer wants to put in words. The contemporary Marathi writer uses a language whose expression is fluid, but at the same time has the sharp edge of a probing instrument. After a fairly impressive flowering it seems that the contemporary Marathi avant garde theatre had reached a somewhat critical point. Tendulkar has brought much freshness to the stale atmosphere that surrounded the Marathi theatre in the 50s. His achievement is seen in his early one act plays as well as his full length plays. Indeed this dramatic achievement of his is what puts him in the vanguard of the avant-garde.

Influenced to a certain extent by western models, Tendulkar wrote one act plays which were not only refreshing in its content but also whole heartedly experimental in form. In his full length plays Tendulkar portrays the travails of the "little man" in varying circumstantial contexts and for his one act plays he throws a somewhat wider net which fits the experimental scope of his dramatic form. The avant-garde was a growing stream at that time and the whole movement howsoever limited its strength, was yet to be best with internal ironies and contradictions which have grown with the movement. At this particular time Tendulkar began to experiment with new themes, and different techniques, were used by him to explore new themes. He feels angry and agitated with the things and circumstances which engulf the modern man. He says "I feel a concern about human existence as such. Poverty, squalor, crime, disorder, social and psychological injustice, and the general feeling of apathy are bound to make an impact on every sensitive human being." (65) He makes his protagonist violent, to fight with the society which has made him weak, dependable and isolated. All these experiments of these were the necessary stepping stones towards a new goal, towards an Indian drama.

Girish Karnad is different from these playwrights in that he delves deep into the traditional Indian myths to spell out modern man's anguish and the dilemmas that are created in his mind. Though Karnad has used traditional plays his plays are as contemporary as any other playwright of modern drama. All his four plays are different in theme and content. Karnad believes that there is enough plots in our folklores that are in themselves very dramatic and are fit for interpretation on the stage. He tells

The energy of folk theatre comes from the fact that although it seems to uphold traditional values, it also has the means of questioning these values, of making them literally stand on their head. The various conventions—the chorus, the mask, the seemingly unrelated comic episodes, the mixing of human and non-human worlds, permit the simultaneous presentation of alternative points of view, of alternative attitudes to the central problem. (14)

These myths have a personal value for him. What he does is, examine the myths he likes find contemporary values in a context that is meaningful. Such an analysis also seems to solve many of the problems that we are faced with today. Even is the philosophical part of

the theme does not quite get across it, it is a good piece of theatre. Thus Karnad has contributed towards in Indian drama by using myths in his search for tradition in Kannada drama.

In shaping modern Indian drama, most of the contemporary playwrights have used elements from the classical tradition, folk tradition and modern theatrical concepts specially concepts developed in the West but which have universal existence, like the existential absurd and concepts like realism, symbolism expressionism to delve into the psychological aspects of their character.

Today when the modern Indian playwrights want to express his mind he finds that sometimes all existing drama fails him in achieving the aim. This necessitated him to find a new one and this urge induced him to begin the search of all new traditional forms of theatre in his own state or elsewhere. This forced him to examine all the aspects of the folk and classical tradition which was not difficult to find answers to his questions but the real difficulty was to synthesize them in order to create a new form. What the modern playwright has achieved is a thorough synthesis of all the three traditions--- classical, folk and contemporary western theatres. When used discriminatingly and intelligently, leads to a discovery of a new form and as a result a new style of production leading to the evolution of, let's say "Indian Drama." And to conclude with R S Pathak "Indian writer's presentation of Indian reality and their rewriting of the contemporary Indian History in creative terms will go a long way in removing some deep-rooted misconceptions. This literature demands attention, analysis and definition for its intrinsic worth and also for enhancing the creative potentials of English literature. The process of Indianisation is an ongoing activity with wide ramifications and it is high time that it were considered from various angles." (16)

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