
Indian Drama in English: Asif Currimbhoy's Pioneering Contribution

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Abstract:

It is an undeniable fact that Indian authors in English demonstrated remarkable excellence in fiction, producing iconic novelists such as R.K. Narayan, Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand, Anita Desai, and many others. However, the realm of drama did not witness a similar success. While Rabindranath Tagore had already gained recognition in the Western world as an English dramatist, his major share of fame was due to his other literary contribution. It was Asif Currimbhoy who emerged as a pioneer, dedicating his entire life to the art form of drama. Among the few Asian playwrights, Currimbhoy stands out for promoting theatre both within India and on the global stage.

The culture of theatre-going for English plays was not popular even in metropolitan cities like Bombay, Calcutta, Madras, and Delhi, where theatrical companies were few and far between. Despite these challenges, Currimbhoy relentlessly pursued his passion for drama. This research article focuses on Asif's plays and the broad spectrum of addressing every aspect of his beloved country and its socio-economic and political issues directly or indirectly. Asif Currimbhoy possessed an extraordinary ability to perceive and articulate truths that often eluded others.

Key words: Indian Literature, English Drama, Asif Currimbhoy, His writings & Greatness.

Introduction:

Asif Currimbhoy, one of India's most prominent theatre personalities, was born in 1928 in Bombay into a distinguished industrialist family that adhered to the Ismayeelia sect of Islam, followers of Agha Khan. The family's significant contributions to industrial development were recognized by the British Government, which conferred upon them the honor of a baronetcy. Beyond their industrial prominence, Currimbhoy's intellectual father and socially active mother fostered a stimulating environment that shaped his formative years and later inspired his dramatic career. His education at the University of Wisconsin in the United States played a pivotal role in honing his command of English and deepening his admiration for William Shakespeare.

Immersing himself in the works of Shakespeare and other English dramatists, Currimbhoy explored diverse trends in American drama, earning high praise from the renowned art critic Faubion Bowers, who hailed him as "India's first authentic voice in the theatre". A true polymath, Currimbhoy composed approximately 30 plays, each reflecting his expansive creative vision.

Currimbhoy belief in his abilities was unwavering, as Bowers noted: "It is inconceivable to me to estimate what it has meant for Asif Currimbhoy to believe in himself so fiercely, to work for so long totally alone." His perseverance bore fruit after 15 years when his play *Goa* was staged by the University of Michigan. Another of his works, *Monsoon*, was also performed in the United States. In India, *The Dole drummers*—previously banned—was eventually staged in Delhi, marking the beginning of his extensive theatrical journey. Currimbhoy went on to produce numerous plays, including *The Dumb Dancer* and *OM* in 1961, *Thorns on a Canvas* in 1962, and *Captives* in 1963. Later works such as *An Experiment with Truth* (1969), *Inquilab* (1970), *Darjeeling Tea* (1971), and *The Refugee* (1979) solidified his reputation. Other notable plays include *Sonar Bangla* and *OM Mane Padme Hum* (1972). His work garnered recognition from critics both in India and abroad, establishing him as a pioneering voice in Indian drama.

Currimbhoy's plays are often seen as India's first works of dissent, offering an unvarnished portrayal of life as it is, rather than as it ought to be. His wife aptly described him as a *Karma Yogi*, whose artistry lies in his conception of action, not confined to the physical realm but extending to the metaphysical, which fascinated him deeply. His plays span diverse themes, categorized into romantic, political, social, and religious dramas. Interestingly, his romantic plays deviate from conventional notions of romance, blending reality with imaginative fervor. As Prof. Iyengar aptly noted, Currimbhoy's romantic plays are a "deliberate coalescing of reality and reverie, reality and fevered imagination."

Sexuality, treated as a psychological element rather than mere sensationalism, is often used as a dramatic technique. His portrayal of dominant and complex female characters further underscores his craft. Currimbhoy's works also include satirical explorations of upper-class decadence, as evident in *Darjeeling Tea*. His *The Doldrummers* may appear to be a light-hearted play, yet its subtle nuances invite deeper psychological analysis. Similarly, *Tourist Mecca*, with its enigmatic protagonist Keshav, demands an equally introspective interpretation. Through his plays, Currimbhoy not only entertained but also challenged societal norms, leaving an indelible mark on Indian theatre.

The second category of Asif Currimbhoy's works comprises his political plays, where his creative prowess reaches its zenith. Prominent examples include *Goa*, *An Experiment with Truth*, *Om Mane Padme Hum*, *The Refugee*, *Sonar Bangla*, and *The Dissident MLA*, among others. Currimbhoy, however, is not overtly political in his approach. Instead, he conveys his ideas through

subtle implication and indirect narrative techniques, offering profound insights into the political landscape while critiquing the futility and moral bankruptcy of many political events. His political philosophy is rooted in the belief that understanding, generosity, and compromise are essential for resolving conflicts and that violence can never truly eradicate violence.

Currimbhoy is deeply attuned to the socio-economic dimensions of political upheavals, which is evident in his plays. As a “dramatist of public events,” he masterfully addresses the human cost of political crises. In *The Refugee*, for instance, he poignantly explores the plight of Bangladeshi refugees who fled to India during the 1971 exodus, expressing profound empathy and concern. Similarly, in *Sonar Bangla* and other works, he intertwines the personal with the political, producing dramas that are not only gripping but also thought-provoking. These plays raise pressing moral questions and transcend the boundaries of religion, region, and language, advocating for a universal humanity. Currimbhoy’s political plays are not mere spectacles; they are vehicles for delivering meaningful messages, urging audiences to reflect on issues of justice, empathy, and the shared responsibility of humankind.

In his social plays, Asif Currimbhoy demonstrates a profound attraction to social realism as a dramatic mode, which accounts for the topicality and relevance of many of his works. He delves deeply into the socio-realistic world in plays like *Thorns on a Canvas*, *The Hungry Ones*, and *The Miracle Seed*. *The Miracle Seed* conveys a powerful affirmation of faith in the resurrection of life, while *Thorns on a Canvas* is a symbolic protest against establishment-sponsored art, inspired by the banning of his earlier play, *The Doldrummers*. This play advocates for the artist's freedom to express their personal pain, unique vision of the world, and creative ecstasy. The protagonist, Yaqub, symbolizes the inevitable artist who transforms fear and pain into a creative force. In *The Hungry Ones*, Currimbhoy portrays the harrowing cry of poverty and hunger while drawing a poignant comparison between the racial problems in the USA and the Hindu-Muslim tensions in India.

Currimbhoy’s religious plays reveal the influence of ancient Indian epics like the *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, *Vedas*, and *Upanishads*, which he turned to for inspiration in themes and techniques. He himself acknowledged this influence, stating: “There is a mystical element in the human being that always drew me to the spiritual factor in life.” This spiritual inclination led him to write deeply academic and philosophical plays on religion and art, such as *OM* and *The Dumb Dancer*. *OM* is an audacious and imaginatively conceived play modeled after Greek tragedy. It explores humanity's eternal quest for God, dramatizing different paths toward salvation. The play vividly illustrates the struggle for self-realization and delves into the complex and abstract philosophies of Hinduism, attempting to simplify and bring clarity to these deeply intertwined concepts. Currimbhoy’s religious plays blend philosophical inquiry with dramatic artistry, making them profound and thought-provoking contributions to Indian English drama.

The Dumb Dancer is an intricate study of a Kathakali dancer who seeks to identify himself with Bhima, a central figure in the episode of *The Slaughter of Duryodhana* from the ancient epic *Mahabharata*. The play explores the dancer's confused psyche as he oscillates between the realms of reality and mythology. Paul Verghese credits Asif Currimbhoy for seamlessly integrating the Kathakali dance form into the structure of the play, making it an integral element of the narrative. Currimbhoy's craftsmanship shines through in his nuanced characterization and his use of psychoanalysis to delve into the complexities, tensions, and frustrations of his characters.

Dr. Prema, a central figure in *The Dumb Dancer*, transcends the role of a mere psychiatrist and emerges as a fully realized human being, evolving dynamically as the play progresses. The work maintains an atmosphere of suspense, enriched by myth and grounded in psychoanalysis, from the opening scene to the dramatic conclusion. Deeply rooted in the ancient traditions of Hinduism, *The Dumb Dancer* also addresses contemporary issues, including starvation and famine, while giving voice to the plight of the poor.

Currimbhoy does not shy away from portraying graphic scenes of bloodshed in plays such as *Inquilab*, *The Refugee*, and *Sonar Bangla*. However, this depiction is not for mere shock value but to awaken audiences to the harsh realities of violence and suffering. He portrays war as a tragedy and laments the global indifference to its devastating consequences. Throughout his works, Currimbhoy conveys the sense that the voice of reason and sanity has been drowned in the cacophony of irrationality.

Although Asif Currimbhoy has passed on, his monumental body of work continues to inspire and resonate across the English-speaking world. His plays are performed throughout Europe, and numerous critics and scholars have explored his dramatic art in depth. Literary luminaries such as Edward Said, Faubian Bowers, and Frantz Fanon have analyzed his works. Peter Nazareth described him as a "dramatist of public events," while J. Meserve and I. Meserve offered high praise in their foreword to his play *The Hungry Ones*.

In India, prominent critics such as Srinivasa Iyengar, Prof. Sunil Dutta, and Paul Verghese have examined the various aspects of Currimbhoy's artistry. His works offer profound insights into the socio-economic conditions of India during the late 20th century. His dramas, with their exploration of humanity and society, have the potential to foster empathy and humanize the populations of the Indian subcontinent.

Currimbhoy's political plays, particularly those centered on the Bangladesh War and its aftermath, aim to impart a moral lesson: the futility and destructiveness of violent conflict. His works encourage a rethinking of political perceptions and advocate for peace and understanding in the region.

Meanwhile, his social and semi-romantic plays delve into human relationships and societal norms, often breaking barriers of convention. His keen observation of people and their lives adds depth and vitality to his plays. Currimbhoy's professional journey, from working at New India Assurance Company in Paris to his executive role at Burma Shell in India, exposed him to diverse cultures and experiences. His extensive travels across India familiarized him with the traditions and customs of various regions, enriching his creative perspective.

His exposure to experimental American theater and his enduring fascination with history also contributed to the monumental quality of his plays, which reflect his profound engagement with life. As Yoosaph A.K. observes, "It is also certain that his keen observation of people and their life during this time enhanced his theatrical vitality." Dr. Ramesh Babu and K. Ranjith Rao acknowledge that Currimbhoy revolutionized Indian English drama, albeit with themes often regarded as controversial. They admit, however, that "his plays focus on social issues and his achievement in the field of drama is inspiring, characteristic, and distinguishing."

Prema Vandakumar takes a profound step in analyzing Asif Currimbhoy's dramatic themes by asserting that "the themes from his dramas are from the flow of contemporary life and politics." Currimbhoy, as a playwright, never took overt risks or strongly advocated for specific ideologies. Instead, he remained an objective observer and interpreter of human experiences. In an interview, he explained his creative stance by saying, "I am 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." This nuanced perspective reflects his ability to portray characters and situations with empathy and authenticity.

Although Asif Currimbhoy spent a significant portion of his life outside India, the term "immigrant" cannot be applied to him. He never lost his deep connection to his Indian roots, retaining an unwavering sense of "Indianness" throughout his work. His attachment to his homeland is vividly evident not only in his religious plays but also in his secular and historical works. For instance, his controversial play *The Doldrummers* (1961), banned in Bombay for its alleged promiscuity, exemplify his commitment to exploring themes that resonate with Indian audiences. Rather than retreating after the ban, Currimbhoy approached the subject matter with greater depth and sophistication, successfully carrying forward his vision.

Much of Currimbhoy's material is drawn from distinctly Indian experiences, and he has fearlessly experimented with various dramatic genres, including comedy, tragedy, farce, melodrama, history, and fantasy. His remarkable contribution to Indian drama in English lies in his ability to blend intense realism with imaginative storytelling. His plays are not mere transcriptions of factual events but serve as a microcosm of Indian life, capturing its complexities and contradictions.

Through his dramatic art, Currimbhoy seeks to expose his "vision of man," emphasizing the universal human experience while rooting his narratives in Indian culture and society. His works reveal his abiding faith in the transformative power of love and compassion. As a playwright, Currimbhoy's ultimate goal is not just to entertain but to offer a panacea for the ills of society. His plays reflect a deep concern for humanity as a whole, transcending cultural and geographical boundaries.

By weaving themes of contemporary life, politics, and human emotion with a uniquely Indian perspective, Asif Currimbhoy has established himself as one of the foremost voices in Indian drama in English. His works continue to inspire, provoke thought, and evoke empathy, leaving a lasting legacy for generations to come.

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