

The growth of Indian drama from pre to post independence era A bird view analysis

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Indian writing in English has now come of age shedding behind all doubts and questions and it remains as one of the major literatures amidst the literatures of the English-speaking world. Besides, world recognition has been accorded to it by regular scholarly studies, covetous literary awards and translations into major languages of the world, putting some of them on the list of best sellers of the different genres literature. Drama has been one such genre and it has been developing in India in the regional languages through English drama in India has been developing slowly.

Drama has been hailed as the fifth Veda in India and the tradition has been very rich. Indian English drama saw the light of the day when Krishna Mohan Banerjee wrote 'The Persecuted' in 1813. But the real journey of drama in English began with Michael Madhusudan Dutt's 'Is this Called Civilization?' in 1871. After a long gap of nearly four decades, in the early 20th century drama gathered momentum under the influence of British dramatists.

Indian drama in English may not have achieved the position that Indian fiction or poetry English enjoys in the realm of Indian English literature. However, there are a few dramatists in India who have written in English and are worth remembering. These dramatists include Sri Aurobindo, Rabindranath Tagore, T.P. Kailasam, A.S.P. Ayyar, Girish Karnad, Mahesh Dattani, Harindranath Chattopodhyaya, Bharathi Sarabhai, Vijay Tendulkar and a few others who wrote in their regional languages and in English too.

Sri Aurobindo and Rabindranath Tagore who wrote in the pre-independence era represented the present age of drama in Indian writing in English besides Nissim Ezekiel and they could evolve themselves as widely acclaimed and successful playwrights. Tagore combined the Indian and Western traditions to bring a synthesis of the east and west and thus could unify the two by producing plays which have been described as a mixture of Bengali folk

drama and western medieval mystery plays. Both Sri Aurobindo and Tagore are today known more for their poetical compositions and social criticism.

The drama that developed in India during and after independence is highly instructive. One reason for the underdevelopment of drama in Indian writing in English is the handicap with the language, besides, a limited audience. Drama in other Indian languages however has developed over a period of time unlike drama in English. This implies that in India, the theatre movement did produce plays but it could find itself only in the regional languages and the movement as such did not embrace English as the medium, with the exception of a few dramatists like Girish Karnad, Vijay Tendulkar and Mahesh Dattani who wrote in Kannada and Marathi respectively besides English.

In order to appreciate the drama of our own, it is necessary to have a look at what has been attempted and achieved during the last century that has been one of the most unrewarding periods in English theatre though it was a great in poetry and fiction. But men of letters when they came into theatre seldom found themselves in a congenial atmosphere. The audience was content with farce and melodrama and extravagant displays and no management had the courage to attempt any elevation in the taste of the audience of the day.

After a hundred years of insignificance, drama appeared as an important literary form, where men of genius who were also practical and experienced men of theatre created a live and significant drama out of the problems of their age. Like the novelists, most of the dramatists were chiefly concerned with the contemporary social scene.

By the end of the nineteenth century, a great surge in dramatic power and strong movement for naturalism was aroused through the work of the Norwegian, Henrik Ibsen. The influence of Ibsen was contagious all over Europe and he soon became the master of dramatic construction. He gave up soliloquies, asides and other old conventions and there was directness and simplicity in his presentation of scene or dialogue without any theatrical artificiality.

English drama since the nineteenth century has been narrowly episodic in form initially. Modern drama employing different techniques aims realism and in their attempts to reproduce the hard knocks of life or its attractions which befall on man from time to time, the modern playwrights have taken absolute liberty with the

dramatic and the conventional device of the five acts in a play has been changed into four, three acts or even one act play. The modern drama is plastic and is often advocated by the playwrights that since life breaks without any definite end, why should the drama which is a reproduction of reality, not have an incompleteness as an inconclusive catastrophe to the play.

The modern dramatist employs the device of symbolism in order to give a wide tone to his / her drama and to provide universality. To them suggestiveness is the key-note of the dramatic art and instead of telling so many things plainly, they merely suggest.

Theatre in India went through many different phases that were caused due to the various groups that ruled India through ages. According to the rich tradition of Indian Natya, it has its roots deeps deeply allied with Vedic ritualism and with the age-old social-cultural anthropology, which delineated the development of various dramatic forms of Indian theatre. In fact, theatre, which was primarily just a means of entertainment during medieval India, gained a concrete shape during the British rule.

The history of Indian theatre goes back to the mythological era holds the fact that ancient drama which was once the illustrations of the epics and myths gradually became a structured art form with the passage of time. The history of Indian theatre, thus, portrays the rich saga of journey from epic genres like classical Indian drama, traditional Indian theatre, Indian folk theatre, Indian puppet theatre and Modern Indian theatre.

In the beginning of the second century, a new kind of theatre called Sanskrit existed in India. The basic ideas of this art form were derived from the Greek comedies. Sanskrit theatre combined dance and drama together which consisted of five acts divided by intermission. Sanskrit drama which was once the aristocratic way of reflecting the unedited realities of life slowly became lot more structured and contemporary. It lost its popularity during seventeenth century and by the eighteenth century it had evolved into a new form known as 'Indian Classical Dance' which later became the India's Traditional Theatre officially.

Puppetry is the most prominent division of theatre in India. It started in the cradles of civilization as an entire village event which is popular even today. The most popular form of puppetry which is an age-old art has

been practiced for thousand years are a part of Indian culture. Most of the shadow puppet plays are based on the two Indian epic poems The Ramayana and The Mahabharata.

Development of theatre in India was slow as it was invaded a number of times and in every case, a part of the invaders stayed in their conquered lands who played a major role in shaping of Indian culture and heritage. Folk theatre was forgotten by many for years while the issue was on the center stage of the Indian culture. Folk theatre in India became a rude and improper act, a path different from that of classical Indian theatre. In recent years, many agencies have begun to work on the rebuilding of the Indian theatre.

Indian theatre which was only the weapon of revolting against the British imperialism became rather a rationalized form of expression in independent India. The harmonized blend of eastern and western, the impact of London theaters later added the contemporary tinge to the age-old aspects of Indian drama. Indian theatre became a lot more realistic and naturalistic after independence. Historical plays, mythological characters, virtues and vices were not paid much importance instead a whole fresh enunciation was bestowed in new form of Indian theatre - The modern Indian theatre.

Indian theatre was only a form of entertainment during the medieval India gradually became an artistic form of expression. Indians were always comfortable in illustrating their feelings amidst this art form and therefore Indian theatre gradually became the center stage of Indian culture. Renowned theatre personalities from the ancient age to the modern times contributed a lot in shaping the Indian theatre as a typical art form where mime, poetry, music, philosophy, literature and ideology – all find an ambiguous enunciation. Hence, it can be said that it is during the two hundred years of British reign, Indian drama became a much naturalistic and realistic way of manifesting the realities of life.

Indian drama is one of the most erstwhile genres of art form. According to Indian ‘Natya Shastra’, Indian drama is nothing but an overall depiction of the unedited reality amidst music, dance, when it is staged, drama comes fully into life. Drama which is union of art, direction designing and acting is regarded as the coherent process of reflecting the true aura of life.

Theater in India gradually became a logical expression of democratic ideas and traditions. It was then a form of illustrating the views of life amidst pictorial artistry and creativity. The well accepted personalities in Indian theatre during British rule, with their brilliance and majesty thus added the maturity in Indian theatre.

After independence, the Indian theatre was further reshaped by other personalities. The haphazard form Indian Natya was made rather contemporary. The seed of modern drama was sown during the time of British rule and therefore quite ideally the typical theatre form right after the independence became more modish to befit the existing political and economic scenario of independent India.

Different personalities in Indian theatre added colour to the theatre and dramas while enhancing its overall qualities. After India gained political independence in 1947, a number of playwrights felt the need to develop a theatre that did not follow British models but was in some way Indian. Personalities like A.S.P. Ayyar, Bharathi Sarabhai, Utpal Dutta, Safdar Hasmi, K.V. Subbanna, B.V.Karant and Shambhu Mitra, further added that post-colonial maturity in Indian theatre while making whole modern and jazzy.

Kavalam Narayana Pannikar along with Habid Tanvir, Vijay Tendulkar and Girish Karnad, members of what is referred to as The Theatre of Roots movement began to study Kathkali, Yakshagana, Chhau, and other traditional Indian performance forms to see what could be used in the creation of a modern Indian drama.

Girish Karnad the influential Indian modern playwright, clearly states that “However, the attempt was not to find and reuse form that had worked successfully in some other cultural context. The hope rather was to discover whether there was structure of expectations.” (Karnad, 121)

When asked about his role in the growth of Indian theatre and drama, he said that, he was certain of continuity of Indian theatre tradition and dismissed any thought of it getting stagnated.

Indian writing in English in general has been focusing on contemporary issues in it as Prof. K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar observes; “Poetry or drama, novel or short story, history or biography philosophical or political treatise, Indian writing in English shows no signs either of exhaustion or insanity. There is no doubt that with its own individual vision and voice, Indian literature will grow like other literatures of contemporary Indian form strength to strength and help us make us nation and a new people wedded to the tasks of national reconstruction

and international harmony.” Sri Aurobindo wrote his plays originally in English. They are full length five act plays in blank verse with an Elizabethan flavor. They are steeped in poetry and romance recalling the speed and flavor of the distinctive dramatic type exemplified in different ways by Bhasa, Kalidasa and Bhava Bhuti though Aurobindo’s plays had their own undertones. Harindranath Chattopadhyaya was the first to import realism to drama and made it a vehicle for social protest and emergence of a significant working class. He was the first to identify him with the poorest of the land. His plays were highly progressive in outlook. The post-independence era witnessed the successful production of plays by Prathap Sharma, Gieve Patel, Asif Currimbhoy, Guru Charan Das, Shiv K. Kumar, Girish Karnad, Mahesh Dattani, G.V. Desani and others. (Iyengar, 202)

Modern Indian play writing in English is neither rich in quantity nor on the whole, of high quality. Enterprising Indians have for nearly a century occasionally attempted drama in English but seldom for actual stage production. Madhusudan Dutt’s ‘Is this called Civilization?’ came out in 1871. Rabindranath’s play – *Chitra, The Post Office, Sacrifice, Red Oleanders, Chandalika, Mukta Dhara, Natir Puja*, and the rest are available in English renderings. By the early 20th century, the theatre movement gathered momentum under the influence of British drama. Many theatre groups found their way into the Indian scenario. Harindranath Chattopadhyaya and T.P. Kailasam who belonged to this period wrote verse plays. T.P. Kailasam and Sri Aurobindo wrote their full length plays in the age old Shakespearean mode without pondering whether the form was still artistically visible in the modern context.

T.P. Kailasam, being a talented actor brought out an intimate knowledge of the theatre in his plays. It is for this reason that his plays have a uniform technical excellence. Bharathi Sarabhai was the modern woman playwright during the colonial era of Indian drama in English. Lobo Prabhu was another well-known dramatist in the pre-independence era.

In the post-independence era the most prolific playwright, Asif Currimbhoy wrote and published more than thirty plays. History, contemporary politics, religion, philosophy and art were the issues that he discussed in his plays. He handled with commendable ease farce, comedy, melodrama, tragedy, history and fantasy.

Pratap Sharma’s two plays were staged in the foreign soil. Nissim Ezekiel’s plays expressed his perceptions of the oddities in human life and behavior providing by glimpses of a cross section of the contemporary society.

Girish Karnad is a living legend in the arena of contemporary Indian English drama. He is one of the most outstanding practitioners of performing arts. Being a playwright, actor, and critic of Indian art and culture, he is also among the foremost media persons of our time. His plays portrayed Indian cultures through the themes are taken from myths, legends, folk tales and history. He combines the classical folk and the western theatrical traditions in his plays. His contribution to Indian English drama is immense. Mohan Rakesh, Badal Sircar and Vijay Tendulkar have been the representatives of contemporary Indian drama in the respective regional languages.

The post- modern era seems to be productive for Indian English drama, as it has received impetus from young writers like Mahesh Dattani and, Manjula Padmanabhan. R.K. Dhawan observing the same opines; “Very recently Indian English drama has shot into prominence. Young writers like Mahesh Dattani and Manjula Padmanabhan have infused new life into this branch of writing. Both Dattani and Padmanabhan project stark realism through their plays. Dattani showcases the mean ugly and unhappy aspects of human life. Manjula Padmanabhan on the other hand delineates a dehumanized terrifying world in which mothers sell their sons for the price of rice.” (Dhawan, 201)

Madhu Jain (India Today 15th Oct, 1994) finds Dattani as the authentic contemporary voice and his plays being rooted in contemporary urban experience. Dattani is not only a director and a playwright but also an actor, a producer and the founder of a theatre group known as ‘Play Pen’. “He has the unique capacity to read the rumblings of contemporary urban Indian society and smell the perennial clash between tradition and modernity. He is not interested in polemics but writes frankly about the oppressed or the marginalized class such as minorities, women groups Hijras etc.” (Dhawan, 102)

Recognizing the importance of Dattani’s images taken from the urban middle class milieu, Prof. John Mc Rae opines: “Mahesh Dattani has given us images which could only be created in the theatre, images which deserve to be seen by audiences worldwide and he also says that these images have given Indian drama a vital place in modern theatre. The role of playwrights, according to Dattani, is to probe the tangled attitudes in contemporary India towards communal differences, consumerism and gender.” (Mc Rae, 92) His plays are a true reflection of his time and they portray the socio economic background of a country that myriad challenges to face politically, socially, artistically and culturally. His plays hold mirror to the contemporary Indian society. They also bring out

the struggle of the individual human being for space in the society and therefore make an attempt to create a space for them. He talks about the areas where the individuals feel excluded and thus he makes his plays talk about such people who are trying to expand this space. His plays expose the dark secrets of human consciousness that torment the present.

Contemporary Issues: Thus, in contemporary Indian drama, one will be able to note a proper blending of western intellectual consciousness and Indian theatrical techniques while dealing with aspirations of the deprived and marginalized sections of the society and depicting the acute problems of contemporary life. Contemporary Indian drama in general deals with historical themes and contemporary issues socio-economic issues, family, marital relations. For instance, in the plays of Vijay Tendulkar yet another well-known contemporary playwright, one can find the expressions of agony, the outcome of greed, selfishness, and the vulnerable positions of women and so on.

Simultaneously, theatre movement in regional languages also flourished in India and in the states of Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra to mention a few.

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