



INDIAN DRAMA IN ENGLISH: A RETROSPECTIVE LOOK

**Dr.PR Chandra Reddy
P. Lokeswari**

Associate Professors of English

Department of English

Mother Theresa Institute of Engineering and Technology

Melumoi, Palamaner, Chittoor Dt, Andhra Pradesh, PIN 517408, India

Abstract: ‘*kaavyeshu naatakam ramyam*’ says a Sanskrit adage. It means the best of the branches of literature is drama. It gives both audio and video effect. In this article, I would like to shed light on the advent and the continuance of Indian drama in English with its twists and turns. With the introduction of English education in India by the Governor General, Lord William Bentinck, Indian writers in English came up, among whom, Raja Ramamohan Ray is said to be the first. Later, the contribution of Tagore and Sri Aurobindo Ghosh to Indian drama in English or Indo-Anglian literature is noteworthy. But the dearth of Indian drama in English is a fact which can be understood even by an ordinary student of Indo-Anglian literature. In this genre, Indian plays in English lag behind in quality as well as in quantity, when compared to the Western.

Terminology: Indo-Anglian, Indian Drama, twists and turns, universal, lyrical beauty

Tagore studied both Indian and Western plays including those written by Kalidasa, Shakespeare and Ibsen. He was himself a gifted actor. His career as a playwright started with ‘Sanyasi’ which reminds the story of ‘Jada Bharata’ in ‘Vishnupuranam.’ The Sanyasi tries to get salvation through the complete negation of life. So he runs away from Vasanthi who loves him. But her love haunts him and he finally resolves to accept life and attain atonement through inner purification. ‘The King and the Queen’ is an antithesis of ‘Sanyasi.’ While the King, immersed in erotic pleasures, neglects administration, the Queen leaves him, fights and saves the kingdom from the rebels. ‘Sacrifice’ exposes the inhuman cruelty of sacrificing innocent animals and even human beings at the altar of Kali and pleads for universal love and mercy. ‘Malini’ despises religious fanaticism and recommends religious tolerance and she is a Buddhist. The Brahmins demand her banishment. But when they see the grace of her love, they become her followers. She forgives Kemankar who hatches a plot to kill her. In ‘Natir Puja,’ the sacrifice of Srimati transforms Lokeswari and Ratnavali.

In ‘Chandalika,’ Prakriti an untouchable girl, falls in love with Ananda, a Buddhist monk whom she drags to her with the help of her mother’s spell. But she cannot bear the spiritual urge in him and she requests her mother to release him from the spell. Her mother dies, freeing him. ‘The Cycle of Spring’ mingles fantasy and culture and brings to our mind Shelley’s rhetorical question, ‘if winter comes, can spring be far behind?’ In ‘Red Oleanders,’ Nandini stands

against governors, professors, policemen and other people who lead a mundane and banal life. 'Mukta-Dhara' is a play against the technology that spoils the environment and exploits people. In the play Tagore shows the relation between man and nature.

'Chitra' is the 'Shakuntala' of Tagore which elevates love from physical lust to spiritual union. The play, 'Karna and Kunti' glorifies the spiritual bond between mother and son while in 'Gandhari's Prayer', the mother denounces the wickedness of her sons. Both 'The King of the Dark Chamber' and 'The Post Office' deal with human adventure with God. Thus the plays of Tagore are about love, non-violence, sacrifice, narrow-mindedness, religious fanaticism and social evils. They are noted for their lyricism and symbolism. Most of the themes are borrowed from legends and myths.

The plays of Sri Aurobindo show Elizabethan tradition in them. They are written in blank verse. His first play is 'The Viziers of Bassora' and the title resembles Shakespeare's plays. It is about the love between Anice, a Persian slave girl, and Nureddene, a handsome prince and son of Alfazzal. Their love survives the machinations of Almune, the wicked vizier and elevates Nureddene from a philanderer to a good king of Bassora. In 'Perseus, the Deliverer', Andromeda fights bravely against Poseidon and her courage wins Perseus' heart and they together defeat the dreaded sea-monster. 'Rodogune' is a tragedy, a changed version of the Carnelian play with the same title. Rodogune, former Parthian princess and a captive attendant of Cleopatra, loves Antiochus who, like King Lear's youngest daughter, does not boast of his love for Cleopatra, his mother. Cleopatra therefore unjustly declares Timocles as her first son who kills Antiochus. Rodogune dies heartbroken.

In 'Eric', the eponymous character is the king of Norway. He falls in love with Aslaug, the sister of his enemy who has come in disguise to murder him. Eventually her animosity turns into amity for Eric. In 'Vasavadatta,' Mahasegu, King of Avunthie, kidnaps and imprisons Udaya, his rival and king of Cowsambie, with whom Vasavadatta the jailor and daughter of Mahasegu, falls in love. Thus all the plays of Sri Aurobindo deal with love that purifies and glorifies human souls. The themes are borrowed from both Indian and Western myths and legends. His plays are poetic and very difficult to be enacted.

T.P.Kailasam combines both Indian and Western theatrical traditions in his plays. He evokes sympathy in the viewers for such mythical characters as Ekalavya, Karna and Keechaka. In 'The Burden,' Bharata along with Satrugna returns to Ayodhya from their grandfather's place and learns about their father's death and the banishment of Rama. He is so upset and sorrowful that he blames Vashishta for the calamity. Then Vasishta consoles Bharata and enlightens him of his duty. In 'The Purpose', Ekalavya, a young hunter, observes Drona's teaching archery to Kaurvas and Pandavas and learns it. Arjuna feels envious of Ekalavya. On Drona's asking Ekalavya cuts off his right thumb and offers it to Drona as his teacher's fee. In 'Fulfillment', Krishna fails to dissuade Ekalavya from joining Kauravas and so stabs him stealthily while he narrates Krishna the story of the Bird's Tree. 'The Curse of Karna' is a play in five acts based on the Adi, Sabha and Karna parvas of 'The Mahabharata'. In 'Keechaka,' Kailasam takes liberty with the original in order to glorify the eponymous character. A 'Monologue', is a dramatization of Manu's description of the helplessness and the consequent dependence of a woman on a man in various stages of her life.

Harindranath Chattopadhyaya a versatile personality like Tagore, wrote several plays and playlets social, historical and religious. Of his five social plays 'The Window' is the first. It is dedicated to the brave textile workers of Parle, Bombay. The worker's wife beats her children for wasting a match stick, and such is their poverty. She thinks that it is due to their *karma*, fate. The worker blames God who, he thinks, is bought by capitalists. He lashes out at the new taxation. The play ends when he smashes the window panes and shouts 'light, light'. It depicts the destitution of workers and the oppressive exploitation by the capitalists and the title symbolizes hope.

'The Parrot' shows how the traditions created by men become their own 'Parrot cage'. The woman in the play leads a miserable life on account of her drunkard husband, and so her talkative son is her only solace. But one day her husband kills her son by drowning him in the sea and says that he does not want him to grow up to be a drunkard like him. It is dedicated to all those, whose morality is not a parrot cage. 'The Sentry's Lantern' exposes the evils of imperialism and is dedicated to all the victims of imperialist gallows. 'The Coffin,' dedicated to the progressive writers of India, and brings home the responsibilities of the writers while criticizing the bourgeois (middle class) poet and his false world. 'The Evening Lamp' unfolds the corrupt life of people and says that shadows are good as they are free from evils. 'The Saint' shows that the saints who are lazy and addicted to narcotics are dangerous to society. 'The Sleeper Awakened' is an allegorical play criticizing the modern civilization and its evils. 'Siddhartha', 'Man of Peace' and 'Jayadeva' are his other plays.

Indian prose drama in English also suffers from certain drawbacks. Fyzee Rahaman's 'Daughter of India', A.S.P Ayyar's 'The Slave of India' and other plays, Asif Currimbhoy's The Tourist, The Doldrummers and Dumb Dancer and many others do not rise above the level of ordinary conversation in their dialogue and are dull. There is too much of speechifying, too frequent intrusion of colloquialism and wrong use of Indian phrases and idioms. Such plays are the products of craft rather than art. The dramatists have no individual vision of life, or at least they fail to communicate it effectively through their plays it is said. However Currimbhoy is a playwright with a social purpose. In his plays he deals with social, political and religious problems of the day.

Pratap Sharma is one of those raw Indo-Anglian dramatists whose plays 'A Touch of Brightness', The Professor Has a War-Cry etc., are more successful theatrically. They are good action plays. But there is too much of verbosity and irrelevancy in dialogue. The dramatist fails to exploit the resources of English as a spoken language and adopts it to his creative purpose. But both the plays have been commended for their thematic boldness, character delineation and technical values.

Gieve Patel's 'Princess', the first ever Parsi play is singularly free from the above shortcomings. As he succeeds in giving his language a touch of the present idiom, it is more refreshing and natural. It is a landmark in the history of Indo-Anglian drama for in it the dramatist has successfully tackled the problem of the dialogue. The play is about two families in a Parsi village in Gujarat. The conflict and tension in the play arise from the struggle of two families for the possession of a child who in the play becomes an invalid and later dies but is nevertheless the cause of quarrel in the play. The struggle for the possession of the child is so effectively handled in the play that it brings out the baser selfishness of the two families. A very important feature of the play is the modified English speech which Gieve Patel uses for the dialogue to add a Parsi flavour. Thus it is not merely as a Parsi play realistically portraying Parsi life, but as one which tackles the problem of dialogue that 'Princess' is important in the history of Indian drama in English.

Nissim Ezekiel, known more as a poet, in his plays 'Nalini' and 'A Marriage Poem' is successful in his dialogues, and his example shows that success in dialogue can be easily achieved, if English knowing characters who naturally speak English are introduced instead of the characters who are not likely to speak English. This limits the scope of the dramatist but it makes for greater realism and authenticity. Another successful play, by an Indian writer Santha Rama Rao is 'A Passage to India' a close adoption of the well-known novel of E.M Forster. She shows great skillfulness in the handling of dialogue. Her task was made easier by the fact that the dialogue in the play closely follows dialogue in the novel. But there is a skilful adoption and selection.

Then the Indian drama in English has taken another turn with the vibrant playwrights like Mohan Rakesh, Badal Sircar, Vijay Tendulkar and Girish Karnad who have remained the most representative of the contemporary Indian drama not only in Hindi, Bengali, Marathi, Kannada respectively but also on the pan-Indian level. Last, but not least, now younger playwrights like Mahesh Dattani and Manjula Padmanabhan have instilled more life into the modern plays. 'A touch of brightness' is a play in seven scenes and one intermission, written by Pratap Sharma, is about Rukhmani, a girl sold to a brothel house in Mumbai. Her relationship with Pidku, a street urchin, who tries very much to rescue her from her life as a prostitute is portrayed well in it. Rukhmani is an optimist and ties a coloured thread round the boy's wrist. Through this raksha-bandhan, she adopted him as her brother.

Conclusion: Now the Indian Drama in English has almost lost its ground. It can be said that Indian Drama lacks the great dramatists of the West like Christopher Marlowe, Shakespeare, George Bernard Shaw, Oscar Wilde etc. Particularly Shakespeare, the mighty dramatist of all times in the words of Samuel Johnson, is beyond time and space. His ability to recapitulate the range of human emotions in simple yet profoundly eloquent presentation is universally commendable. It is perhaps the greatest reason for his enduring popularity. If he couldn't find words to express how he felt about a situation, he coined words which the world is using even now. India could not produce a dramatist like him. All these immortalized his dramas and sonnets. Kalidasa produced dramas with mythological settings and lyrical beauty. As they lack universality and universal human feelings they are limited to a certain space and time. Indian Dramas in English in most of the cases are not with the focal points like the deep insight into human nature, the universal and timeless characters and themes like, love, death, ambition, power, fate, free will, sacrifice, tyranny, family bonds, human conflicts etc. After all, literature should reflect the contemporary society.