

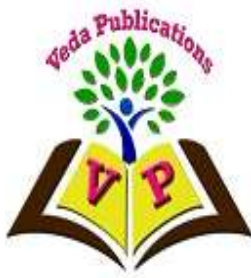


## A BRIEF SURVEY ON THE ORIGIN, GROWTH AND EVOLUTION OF INDIAN DRAMA IN ENGLISH

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### ABSTRACT



Though Drama in India is as old as its civilization, the Drama in English in India is only two centuries old. It began as experimentation with the newly educated in English in India in the early Nineteenth Century and has steadily witnessed its growth during the Pre-independent days, and came of age only after the Independence. K.M. Banerjee, Tagore, Sri Aurobindo Ghosh were the milestones during the Pre-independent era. Nissim Ezekeil, Girish Karnad, Pritish Nandi, Pratap Sharma, Murli Das Melwani, Mahesh Dattani, Asif Currimbhoy and Manjula Padmanabhan have left an indelible imprint on the Post Independent Indian English Stage.

**Keywords:** *Drama - mimetic – Indian English Drama – K.M. Banerjee – Pre-Independent Drama in English - Tagore – Sri Aurobindo Gosh - Post Independent Drama - Experimentation - Nissim Ezekeil - Girish Karnad - Pritish Nandi - Mahesh Dattani - Asif Currimbhoy - Manjula Padmanabhan.*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Drama is a composite art form. It is mimetic like all other performing arts in literature. It imitates life, particularly reflecting the three unities of time, place and action. "It is designed for representation on the stage by actors who act the parts of the characters of its story, and among whom the narrative and the dialogue are distributed."<sup>1</sup> Though India has a long and fertile history in Drama, starting from Sanskrit plays of Vedic Age, the Indian English Drama started its innings only in the nineteenth century, with the publication of Krishna Mohan Banerjee's *The Persecuted* in 1813. A social play, it brought to light the conflict between the East and the West. But Madhusudan Dutt's *Is This Called Civilization?* which was published in 1871 is reckoned as the real starter of the Indian English Drama. Later he translated his Bengali plays, *Ratnavali* and *Sermista* into English.

After a lull for a few decades, Indian English Drama came back to life in the 20th century. The Pre-independent India witnessed the works of many a significant playwright, including Rabindranath Tagore, Sri Aurobindo Ghosh, T.P. Kailasam, A.S.P. Ayyar, Harindranath Chattopadhyaya and Bharati Sarabhai. Their works signaled the coming back of Indian English Drama. Rabindranath Tagore and Sri Aurobindo Ghosh, two great names in Bengal Renaissance, held the light for the onward march of the Indian English Drama.

## 2. TAGORE, AUROBINDO & CHATTOPADHYAYA

Tagore wrote his plays in Bengali. They were translated into English. Some of them were translated by Tagore himself. His best known plays *Chitra*, *Sacrifice*, *The Post Office*, *Muktadhara*, *The Cycle of Spring*, *The King of the Dark Chambers* are tinged in symbolism and allegory and draped in rich Indian philosophy. His plays are a rich fusion of the Indian and the Western literary traditions in which the East and the West meet. According to Diana Devlin,

"Rabindranath Tagore sets out to unify Indian and western traditions creating plays which have been described as a mixture of Bengali folk drama and Western medieval mystery plays."<sup>2</sup>

Sri Aurobindo, a significant Indian playwright in English, wrote five complete and six incomplete poetic plays, transcending the limits of time and place. His plays encompass a vast continuum in the time scale, ranging from ancient Greece to medieval India. They also include a vast panorama subsuming Iraq, Syria, India, Spain, Britain and Norway. The predominant theme of his plays is universal love and brotherhood. All his plays are dipped in rich philosophy, poetry and love. His well-known plays are *Perseus the Deliverer*, *The Viziers of Bassora*, *Prince of Edur*, *Eric*, *Vasavadutta* and *Savitri*. Sri Aurobindo deftly handles the ancient legends to showcase the present search for freedom. The themes of heroism, adventure and mystery are seen in the actions of his imaginary characters. The centripetal force of all his plays is a strong romantic impulse.<sup>3</sup>

Harindranath Chattopadhyaya added a radical social dimension to Indian English drama. His social plays ignite protest and revolution. He wrote devotional, social and historical plays. His social plays, viz., *The Windows*, *The Parrots*, *The Sentry Lantern*, *The Coffin* and *The Evening Lamps* are realistic and didactic. A.S.P. Ayyar, a social reformer, exposes the ills of the Indian society, including widowhood, religious orthodoxy, superstition and hypocrisy. According to K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar, "Ayyar handles the prose medium effectively and he is seen to be a vigorous critic of contemporary life."<sup>4</sup>

## 3. PRE-INDEPENDENT DRAMAS IN ENGLISH

D. M. Borgaonkar's *Image-Breakers* (1938) is a problem play that aims to break the conventions of caste system, horoscope, dowry, etc. S. Fyze-Rahamin's *Daughter of Ind* (1940) portrays the conflict between love and social barriers, featuring a low-caste girl loving an Englishman. Balwant Gargi's *The Vulture*, *Mung-Wa*, *The Fugitive* and *The Matriarch* "dealt with themes which are engaging the attention of people everywhere."<sup>5</sup>

T.P. Kailasam's *The Burden* (1933), *Fulfillment* (1933), *The Purpose* (1944), *Karna* (1946), *Keechaka* (1949) are very much styled after the Elizabethan drama. Bharati Sarabhai's *The Well of the People* (1943) and *Two Women* (1952) express Gandhian philosophy. J.N. Lobo Prabhu is reckoned as the last name in the Pre-Independence Indian English drama, having to his credit two pre-



independent plays, *Mother of New India* (1944) and *Death Abdicates* (1945), and 6 post-independent plays, namely, *Apes in the Parlour*, *The Family Cage*, *Flags of the Heart*, *Winding Ways*, *Love Becomes Light* and *Dog's Ghost*. The Pre Independent plays centred on social issues, legendary and historical themes. They were meant for the theatres of the mind rather than for acting on the stages.

#### 4. POST INDEPENDENT DRAMAS IN ENGLISH

Despite the efforts and encouragements from the governments, Indian English Drama experienced no sign of growth in the Post-independence period. But plays written in regional languages flourished in the Indian theatre. Nissim Ezekiel, Girish Karnad, Pritish Nandi, Pratap Sharma and Murli Das Melwani contributed in the development of Indian theatre. Nissim Ezekiel (1924-2004)'s plays were woven on the themes of hollowness of urban middle class, futility of social mores and the institution of marriage. Girish Karnad (1938- ), a great name in the contemporary Indian English drama, is a playwright, actor, critic and a film star. His five plays *Tuglaq*, *Hayavadana*, *Nagamandala*, *TaleDanda* and *The Fire and the Rain* have been translated into English and the first two by Karnad himself. His plays are spun in Indian myths, legends, folk tales and history. They combine classical, folk and the Western dramatic techniques.

Though most of the plays were written in prose in the independent India, the poetic plays continued to exist. M.K. Naik observes, "the Tagore-Aurobindo-Kailasam tradition of poetic drama continues, but with a difference in the hands of Manjari Isvaran, G.V. Desani, Lakhan Deb and Pritish Nandy."<sup>6</sup> Manjari Isvaran's *Yama and Yami* (1948) is a dialogue in poetic prose. G.V. Desani's "A short poetic play *Hali* is an attempt to project Hali's confrontation of the power of creation and destruction, his grapple with life and death, his surrender to the material world, his communion with love and his transcendence of the dualities of time and place."<sup>7</sup> P. A. Krishnaswami's *The Flute of Krishna* (1950) is a verse play dealing with the legend of a girl Murli and a young man Vidyaratna. Dilip Kumar Roy's *Sri Chaitanya* (1950) is a verse play dealing with the life of a devotee of Lord Krishna. Lakhan Deb's *Tiger Claws* (1967), a verse play is based on the killing of

Afzal Khan, the Muslim general of Bijapur by the Maratha ruler Shivaji. Lakhan Deb pictures the last days of Gandhiji's life in his verse-play, *Murder at the Prayer Meeting* (1976).

Vijay Tendulkar (1928-2008), the harbinger of modern Indian English drama, deals with the conflicts between the individual and the society. His plays, *Silence: The Court is in Session*, *Kamala*, *The Vultures* and *Sakharam Binder* are spun on the themes of male domination, violence, exploitation of women and rejection of social norms. He explores human mind and its complexities in all its depth and variety.

Gurucharan Das (1943- ) is known for his popular play, *Larins Sahib* (1970). Set in Punjab, it is about the political career of a British Resident in Punjab. He starts with a good impression in the beginning but later turns out to be a power-monger. The queen trusts him so much that she offers him the famous precious Kohinoor, but his self-agrandisement leads to his downfall. However, he is dismissed at the end of the play. Larins Sahib uses Indian English for dialogues. Vera Sharma wrote a number of one act plays, including *Life is Like That* (1997) and *Reminiscence* (1997) which deal with the plight of women.

Post Independence era witnessed the birth of several one act plays. R. Raja Rao's *The Wisest Fool on Earth and Other Plays* (1996) is on the theme of homosexuality. T.S. Gill's *Asoka* (1983), V.D. Trivedi's *Gandhi: A Play* (1983) and Prema Sastri's *Gandhi, Man of the Millions* (1987), Gieve Patel (1940- )'s *Princess*, *Savaksha* and *Mr. Behram*, Dina Mehta,s *The Myth Maker* (1959) and *Brides Are Not for Burning*, Uma Parameswaram (1938- )'s *Sons Must Die and Other Plays* (1998) are some to quote.

The Post Modern era ushered in new changes in the Indian English drama, adding more dimensions to it. R. K. Dhawan observes,

"Very recently Indian English drama has shot into prominence. Younger writers like Mahesh Dattani and Manjula Padmanabhan have infused new life into this branch of writing."<sup>8</sup>

Mahesh Dattani (1958- ) a playwright of world stature, has added a new feather to the Indian English drama. He has written many plays, varied in



themes, tone and treatment. His plays deal with serious and sensitive issues like communalism, homosexuality, female infanticide, domestic abuse, child sexual abuse, condition of eunuchs in Indian society. In his preface to *Collected Plays*, Dattani, India's daring playwright on social issues, admits,

"I am certain that my plays are a true reflection of my time, place and socio economic background. I am hugely excited and curious to know what the future holds for me and my art in the new millennium in a country that has a myriad challenges to face politically, socially, artistically and culturally."<sup>9</sup>

His plays include *Where There's a Will*, *Tara*, *Bravely Fought the Queen*, *Final Solutions* and *Dance like A Man*. *Tara* is about gender discrimination. *Thirty Days in September* is centered on child sexual abuse. *Final Solutions* is about communal tension between the Hindus and the Muslims.

The Post Independent plays experiment with a lot of themes, techniques, language and characters. There are several experiments on the psychoanalysis of the character, the use of realistic language and the status of a character. Themes deal with the contemporary social problems like the conflict between old and new, intercaste marriage, untouchability, sex, power and wealth.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Post-Independent Indian Drama in English falls short of the level reached by poetry and fiction in India. There are five reasons for this: i) the main reason is that "drama-essentially a composite art involving the playwright, the actors and the audience in a shared experience on the stage-has its own problem of which the other literary forms are free."<sup>10</sup>

ii) The second reason, as Srinivas Iyenger attributes "the failure to the fact that English is not a natural medium of conversation in India."<sup>11</sup> iii) The third reason is the lack of living theatre in our country. Drama has got to be staged. M.K. Naik in his article "The Achievement of Indian Drama in English" observes:

"Drama is a composite art in which the written word of the playwright attains complete artistic realization only when it becomes the spoken word of the actor on the stage and though that medium reacts on

the mind of the audience. A play, in order to communicate fully and become a living dramatic experience, thus needs a real theatre and a live audience."<sup>12</sup>

iv) Many Indian plays do not get staged. Rama Sharma rightly points out this lapse in his preface to his *Collected Plays*, "Any play written in India in English has an inherent disadvantage in the sense that it is not very often staged. Stage worthiness being a basic test for a play....most of the plays written in English do not fulfill this requirement."<sup>13</sup>

v) The Indian English playwrights do not give much importance to the rich and varied Indian dramatic traditions involving the native myth and Indian historical heritage. Despite these setbacks, Asif Currimbhoy and Manjula Padmanabhan, have raised Indian English drama to the global level. They are socially committed, writing with a definite purpose. They present the real picture of the society and aim at bringing the necessary changes in it.<sup>14</sup>

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