

Pop Art in Modern Indian English Plays

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In his introduction to Modern British Dramatists, John Russell Brown describes the art of the new drama as 'pop' art. He finds in them "popular, up-to-date, topical, vulgar and very obvious subjects." It is interesting to note these elements of 'pop' art in the modern Indian English plays as well in spite of the cultural divergences. While there is no "commonly agreed program" and "deeply-considered moral, social or political purpose" for the British playwrights, most of the Indian playwrights seek to present a moral vision and a social purpose. They are keenly aware of contemporary social problems and try to project them in their plays with a view to suggesting solutions in a subtle way. Modern Indian English playwrights deal with controversial public issues. They posit themselves against the degenerating trends of society with a non-conformist stance. This is probably the reason why they chose violence, sex and liberation as themes.

We find, for example, violence and melodrama in Vijay Tendulkar and Partap Sharma, social taboos affecting human relationships in Girish Karnad and Nissim Ezekiel, marital disharmony from man's point of view in Shiv K Kumar, and feminist perspective in Snehalata Reddy, man's failures and frustrations in Indira Parthasarathy, and "extreme human conditions" in Asif Currimbhoy. A bird's eye-view of the modern Indian Drama reveals many of the elements of British "pop" drama such as homosexuality and nymphomania, abortion, violent or casual death, disfigurement and callow humour. Although homosexuality and nymphomania are alien to Indian culture, stray references to these are found in a few plays.

In an interview published in ENACT, Vijay Tendulkar expressed his desire to write a play based on an incident in Telangana district where an entire village was kept under trial for killing six brothers. This reveals his interest in topical themes based on violence. Tendulkar examines the ethos of human relations in the present day world. The blueprint of his play, VULTURES, has come from a Mumbai house where Tendulkar lived. In VULTURES, we find gruesome violence in a scene where two brothers kick their sister in the belly to abort her illegitimate child. SAKARAM BINDER was permitted to be staged only after 32 cuts by Stage

Performance Scrutiny Board. The Board eliminated five climactic scenes and deleted many words considering them 'vulgar.' It is the element of violence that creates dramatic tension in the play, SILENCE! THE COURT IS IN SESSION. Such a violent portrayal satisfies only a 'microscopic minority.'

Partap Sharma too is concerned with the contemporary problems in his work. He observed the lives of "the prostitutes, the pimps, the urchins opening taxi-doors for the sahibs, sadhus who had given up their research and quacks." A TOUCH OF BRIGHTNESS portrays the life of a prostitute living in Mumbai. This play was banned for some time by the Maharashtra State Government for its 'highly undesirable matters.' THE PROFESSOR HAS A WAR CRY is based on a factual report of a woman who died on a railway platform after having waited for somebody for over 20 years

The man-woman relationship in the contemporary society forms an up-to-date theme for Modern Indian English playwrights. Both Girish Karnad and Nissim Ezekiel show how social taboos affect man-woman relationship. While Girish Karnad suggests the possibility of fulfilment in a forest, Nissim Ezekiel does it in an 'underground' world away from the rule-bound society. In Karnad's HAYAVADANA, Padmini is shown to have an urge for the 'steel body' of Kapila. But her marriage with Devadatta and the inferiority of Kapila's caste come in the way of her fulfilment. After miraculous 'jumbling' of heads between Devadatta and Kapila, Padmini opts for Kapila's body with Devadatta's head. But, unsatisfied with the new body of Devadatta, she goes to meet Kapila in the forest on some pretext. She tempts Kapila into consummation. What could not be attained in the city of Dharmapuri was fulfilled in the forest which is free from social inhibitions.

In Nissim Ezekiel's play, SONG OF DEPRIVATION, the nameless lover meets the anonymous beloved as her grandmother 'was in a foul mood.' Hence, they both indulge in 'dirty talk' over a telephone thus living an 'erotic' life of imagination. Sick of grandmother's hold over her, SHE craves for freedom. SHE tells HE: "Half a dozen voices saying No to me from the time I was a child." At last they join in an "international underground world" where they can be free to love.

Snehalatha Reddy and Shiv K Kumar dramatized the "clash of wills" in marital relationship. Snehalatha Reddy's SITA emphasizes woman's point of view indicting male chauvinism. Debunking Sita myth Snehalatha Reddy exposes 'masculine pomposity, absurdity and injustice.' In this play, Sita refuses to undergo the 'Purification Ceremony' as suggested by Rama. Rama's restrictions are viewed as part of male chauvinism. Rama stubbornly imposes the rule on Sita: "What pleases me should please you!" He even threatens to 'reject' her in the absence of the trial. But, Sita asserts her own dharma and 'rejects' Rama as a 'liberated' woman.

Sita says: “How dare you! It’s I who reject you!... and I go to my doom---gladly... but not for you! But for Ravana!” Ironically, Ravana emerges as a man of greater understanding because he valued her more.

Shiv K Kumar’s play, LAST WEDDING ANNIVERSARY, presents a man’s point of view of his relation with a ‘shrewish and ambitious socialite wife’, Rupa. Lalit Khanna is a ‘hired editor’ of a popular magazine having strained relationship with his wife, Rupa. She considered him a ‘crack brained.’ On the contrary, Lalit Khanna wanted her to be ‘civil’ with his friends. He threatens her: If it weren’t our wedding anniversary. I would have walked out this minute.” The ‘fiendish wife retorts: “Well one of these days I’m going to let you do it, my dear. Or may be I should clear out myself. A greeting card sent by Lalit’s friend Neela evokes the simmering hatred and breaks their marriage, ironically on their wedding anniversary. The other characters in the play are Vinod, a smooth philanderer; Inder Bhan, an unscrupulous politician; Gulmohar, a frivolous woman suggest various traits of pop art.

Indira Parthasarathy’s AURANGAZEB and Karnad’s TUGHLAQ reveal Indian English playwright’s interest in history. Karnad chooses the cruel and Machiavellian Tughlaq as subject of his drama. Tughlaq is portrayed as Everyman. Here Karnad grapples with the problem of history versus art. He tries to project the story of Tughlaq from an unbiased perspective. In the play, Tughlaq tells Barani: “Surely a historian doesn’t need an invitation to watch history take shape!” Karnad probably feels that an artist does not need an invitation to shape the history without impairing its verisimilitude. Indira Parthasarathy’s AURANGAZEB proves that all ‘dictators’ are doomed to fail ultimately. She mentions: “that is my point. Whether it is Ashoka, Whether it is Aurangzeb and now it is Indira Gandhi, they ultimately fail.” Incidentally man’s ‘sense of failure prompted both Karnad and Indira Parthasarathy to write the two historical plays.

Asif Currimbhoy’s political plays – INQUILAB, AN EXPERIMENT WITH TRUTH, GOA and OM MANE PADME HUM – dramatize the extreme ‘political events that affected the body politic of India. Currimbhoy believed in conflict at every level – physical, mental and emotional. He felt that homogeneous experience and complete agreement of relation can neither bring about a feeling of life nor blossom out into anything meaningful. All his plays dramatize the ‘extreme human condition.’

On the whole, many of the modern Indian English plays are content to portray the topical themes with sensational elements of ‘pop’ art to appeal to modern man. Very few dramatists try to universalize the topical themes. Indian English playwrights in general reveal their social consciousness through their plays. Though a few dramatists like Girish Karnad, Nissim Ezekiel, Partap Sharma try to introduce some new techniques in the drama, the thematic considerations weigh more with many of the Indian English playwrights.

Works Cited

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