



Indian Playwriters and Indo-Canadian Playwriters: A Kaleidoscopic View

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Abstract

Indian Playwriters and the playwrights who have migrated to Canada have many things in common. These two countries have their own give and take in the sphere of theatre. Girish Karnad and Uma Parameswaran are notable writers from Indian side; the contributions of Uma Parameswaran and Rahul Varma are analysed from Indo- Canadian side.

Key Words : Theatre, *Nāṭyaśāstra*, migration, culture specific location etc.

Asian Drama has a long history of nearly 3500 years commencing with Indian and Chinese drama. Indian Drama emerged with classical Sanskrit drama, which traces its origin to the folk theatre of the country. Bharata Muni is often known as the father of Indian dramatic arts for his *magnum opus*, *Nāṭyaśāstra*. “Charanas,” who were professionals in dramatic recitation of epic stories, might be deemed to have founded the modern Indian theatre. In this process of metamorphosis, folk theatre adopted *Sutradhāra*, *Vidusakā* and other classical conventions.

In later developments of Indian theatre, one can distinctively identify a carry over of the structures and conventions of the Sanskrit Theatre in their purposive denial of unities of Time and Space, the division of the play into plots and subplots, their use of *Sāndhis*, the utilisation of the hero-heroine types as the *nayakā* and the anti-heroes, and the all important roles of *Sutradhāra* and *Vidusakā*. The *Sutradhāra* is used as an important device for interlinking phases and as chorus; the *Vidusakā* is used to connect two dimensions of time, the past and the present. Although the highly organised division of the space of the Sanskrit stage is lost to many of these forms in their contemporary manifestations, they still adhere to some rough and ready conventions of the *Kaksavibhāgā* (zonal divisions) of the Sanskrit stage. Also the stylised gesticulation pattern, particularly of the hands (*hastābhinaya*), is absent or minimal in most forms. Classical Sanskrit

playwrights like Kalidāsā and Bhāsa acclaim international recognition even today for their wonderful stagecraft. Kalidāsā's three major plays: *Malavikāgni Mitra*, *Vikramorvasiyam* and *Abhinjānā Sākuntalam* and Bhasa's contributions like *Swapnavasavadāttām* and *Chārudattam* exhibit a refined and matured facet of classical Sanskrit stage.

Indian theatre keeps this cultural continuity as it is evolved from the performing arts of this subcontinent. Drama, being a performing art, has an immediacy of appeal. The picture of Indian theatre totally changed when it got enough encouragement from the freedom fighters. The war of Independence in 1857 was a major reason for a new awakening. Plays of that time expressed the contemporary urge for freedom. As a natural consequence of these theatre activities, professional theatre flourished in various parts of the country. Simultaneously, with the growing demand for plays in modern Indian languages, the educated class was fascinated by plays in English. The emergence of Indian drama in English was seen as early as 1776 when the Bombay Amateur Theatre was set up. Greek theatre, mainly Aristotelian theatre had its tremendous influence on Indian drama in English in characterization, setting and dialogue.

In the pre-independence phase, there were many major playwrights like Sri. Aurobindo, Kailasam, Harindranath Chathopadhyay, Rabindranath Tagore and Bharathi Sarabhai. The plays of pre- independence phase were mostly symbolic, didactic and propagandist. The plays of post-independence phase, when compared to the phase of the pre-independence, showed a greater influence of the west. This phase exhibited different kinds of experiments. The major playwrights of this period were Asif Currimbhoy, D.M. Bargonkar and Lobo Prabhu. There were also a number of playwrights who had written just one or two pieces each. Going against the convention of lengthy plays, the modern playwrights appeared to be content with presenting a situation in brief. In this phase, the playwrights had tried to tackle contemporary social problems like inter-caste marriage, untouchability, sex, power and wealth. They continued to present the usual conflict between old and new trends. There were also plays translated into English from regional languages by the authors themselves.

It was very difficult for the Indian playwrights to express the Indian spirit in a language, which was not the language of their emotional make up. Since they acquired its knowledge at an advanced stage of western education, their dialogue was bound to be stilted and artificial. Moreover, the Indian playwrights in English found it difficult to utilise the materials from ancient folklore, myths and legends. They could not

produce thrilling action on the stage in want of the exteriorisation of inner experiences. Only very few playwrights had experimented with strategies like allegorical representation of ideas, dance drama and use of suitable Indian and western techniques. Compared to the vastness of the field, the extent of this experimentation was rather meagre.

Indian drama in English could not advance much in the early post- independence era. It failed to achieve a regular theatre till 1988. Institutions like National School of Drama and Sangeet Natak Akademi were founded. But all these developments promoted the growth of regional language theatres. As a result of it, the growth and development of Indian theatre in English tremendously suffered. The theatre groups in Bombay and some other agencies have successfully produced some plays like Asif Currimbhoy's *The Doldrums*, Gieve Patel's *Princes* and Shiv K. Kumar's *Last Wedding Anniversary*. But these occasional performances have not added to the popularity and the development of Indian theatre in English.

The common man was not much attracted towards Indian theatre in English. Indian theatre in English remained as an academic exercise of the elite class. Iyengar suggests: "English theatre in India will have to project the kind of hybrid English we speak, interspersed with Indian expressions. This may mean local verisimilitude; but only at the expense of national intelligibility" (730-31). During this period, there was a change of direction in the history of Indian drama in English. This change was due to the emergence of talented playwrights like G.V. Desani, Lakhan Deb, Pratap Sharma, Gurcharan Das, Asif Currimbhoy and Girish Karnad. These playwrights employed new methods and techniques. G.V. Desani's *Hali* (1950) is a complex and singular piece of theatrical art. Lakhan Deb's *Tiger Claw* (1967), *Murder at the Prayer Meeting* (1976) and Gurucharan Das's *Larins Sahib* (1970) are remarkable contributions to the historical plays. Nissim Ezekiel, who has made distinctive and memorable contribution to poetry, has written five plays on his favourite themes — hollowness of urban middle class and the institution of marriage. His plays include *Nalini*, a comedy in three acts; *Marriage Poem*, a one-act tragic-comedy; and *The Sleepwalkers*, an Indo-American farce.

Post-independence era witnessed the rise of playwrights like Dharamvir Bharti, Mohan Rakesh, Vijay Tendulkar, Badal Sircar, Mahesh Dattani, Mahasweta Devi, Bibhas Chakravarty, Girish Karnad, Chandrasekhar Kambar. The two playwrights I would like to focus on in this thesis are Girish Karnad and Vijay Tendulkar as representative playwrights of the national landscape. Girish Karnad has earned

international acclaim as a playwright, actor, director, critic and translator. He served as Chairman of the *Sangeet Natak Akademi* (National Academy for the Performing Arts), New Delhi. He was awarded the *Padma Shri* in 1974, the *Padma Bhushan* in 1992 and the *Jnanpith* in 1998. Karnad's fame rests in his plays, which were written in Kannada. They have been widely translated into English and all major Indian languages. His career as a playwright was launched with the play *Yayati* in the year 1961. His major plays in English translations are *Tuglaq*(1964), *Hayavadana*(1971), *Nagamandala*(1988), *Taledanda*(1992), *The Fire and the Rain*(1998), *Bali: The Sacrifice*, *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan* (2004) and *A Heap of Broken Images*(2005). The earliest influence in Karnad was that of the *Company Natak* that was in vogue in Sirsi and the other influence was the Yakshagana plays of Maharashtra. The greater influence came from the naturalistic drama of Henrik Ibsen and through him that of G.B. Shaw. He was also influenced by Shakespeare considerably. But the influence of Kannada drama was quite profound and deep in him. He is considered as an existentialist and historical dramatist. His concerns are related to the problems of existence of self, search for identity and the problems of isolation and frustration. While *Yayati* thematises responsibility, *Tuglaq* and *Hayavadana* explore identity crisis. Though *Tuglaq* and *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan* can be treated as historical plays, he adopts always a convincing blend of fact and fiction. As a representative of the influences of national and transnational landscapes, Karnad's *The Fire and the Rain* and *Yayati* are chosen for detailed analysis.

Vijay Tendulkar, who was born in Kolhapur, began his career in the mid 1950s and died on May 19th 2008. He excelled in many fields like play writing, writing for screen and television, literary essays, political journalism, and social commentary. He wrote thirty full-length plays and twenty-three one-act plays, most of which have been translated and produced in major Indian languages. For the past four decades, he had been the most influential dramatist and theatre personality in Marathi. The fierce controversy surrounding his plays was perhaps an obvious indicator of their currency and their strong rootedness to the socio-political context in which they were written. Many of his plays were censored following their immediate publication. At the same time, his plays have a magnetic quality and they mainly concentrate on social realism. It is reflected in the frequency with which they continue to be performed in different parts of India and abroad. This suggests the universal appeal of his plays. His major works are *Silence! The Court is in Session* (1967), *Sakharam Binder, Kamala*(1981), *Kanyadaan*(2002), *Encounter in Umbugland*(2003), *The Vultures*, *His Fifth Woman* and *The Cyclist*. Tendulkar's output in Marathi also includes eleven plays for children, four

collections of short stories, one novel, and five volumes of literary essays and social criticism. He is an important translator in Marathi, having rendered nine novels, two biographies and five plays into the language. He is also the author of original stories and screenplays for eight films in Marathi. As a representative playwright of Indian social sensibilities, Tendulkar's plays, *Kamala* and *Kanyadaan* are selected for detailed study to analyse the influences of national and transnational landscapes in their text forms and stage directions.

In the quest for a greater financial situation, Indian immigrants are greatly attracted to countries like Britain, U.S.A. and Canada. There are half a million people in Canada, whose ancestral heritage can be traced to the South-Asian origin. "South Asian Canadians" is a term used to denote Canadians who are descended from people born in India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, and who have come to Canada directly from one of these countries or indirectly from other countries such as East Africa, Fiji, etc. The question of "Indianness" of Indians overseas remains a major cultural interrogation. It can be argued that one is more easily an Indian abroad than in India. There are elements, which are major characteristics of Indian diaspora and these elements have emerged to cement the widely different elements from the Indian subcontinent into an Indian community. Indo-Canadian playwrights work through their plays to create a space for them as a diasporic community in the Canadian context. They deal with everyday problems in the lives of their particular community: intergenerational conflicts; gender-based oppression of women; the problems of ageing; the breakup of the traditional structure of adult children caring for their old parents; exploitation of workers and the experiences of racism. This thesis focuses on the portrayal of gender in diasporic writings. In this thesis, on the basis of affiliation towards use of myths and raising gender issues, literary critic and playwright Uma Parameswaran and *Teesri Duniya*'s artistic director and well known playwright Rahul Varma are considered for a detailed analysis of their select plays.

Uma Parameswaran was born and raised in India and currently lives in Winnipeg, Manitoba. She received a Master of Arts Degree and Diploma in Journalism from Nagpur University, a Master of Arts degree in Creative Writing from Indiana University and a Ph.D. from Michigan State University. She started as a newspaper reporter in India and joined the faculty of the University of Winnipeg. She is a widely renowned playwright and has written plays that are produced in Winnipeg and published in Toronto and India. She has written or edited ten scholarly books in post-colonial literature and women-focused research. Her poems have appeared in various journals and she has published many articles and essays over the years.

She has also been active in The Writers Union of Canada, serving on the National Council in various capacities throughout the 1990s, a past president of The Manitoba Writers' Guild and a board member for various women's organisations. As founder of the Performing Arts and Literature of India (PALI), she has been involved in organising instruction in the classical dances of India in Winnipeg and produces a weekly show on India and Indians in Canada on community television. She also won Jubilee Award and New Muse Award (respectively in 2000 and 1999 for poetry collection *What was Always Hers*) and won Lady Eaton Award in 1967 for her poetry collection *The Door I Shut Behind Me*. Her major plays include *Rootless but Green are the Boulevard Trees*, *Meera: A Dance Drama*, *Sons Must Die* and *Sita's Promise*. To analyse the extent of influence of national and transnational landscapes in their use of myths, Uma Parameswaran's *Meera: A Dance Drama* and *Sita's Promise* are chosen in this thesis for detailed analysis of texts and textual references for performance.

Rahul Varma was born in Narion, India in 1952 and educated at the University of Lucknow. He works as a research technician at McGill University in Montreal. His early full-length plays, such as *Bhanumati Ka Pitara* and *Ghar Ghar Ki Kahani* were written in Hindustani and performed by and for community members. He was the founding member and artistic director of "Teesri Duniya," a multicultural theatre group based in Montreal. His published plays include *Bhopal*, *Counter Offence: A Play*, *Isolated Incident*, *Job Stealer*, *Land Where the Trees Talk*, *No Man's Land* and *Trading Injuries*. The growth of Indo-Canadian playwrights is closely associated with "Theatre of Protest" developed by the South Asian Canadians. As a representative playwright of Indo-Canadian immigrant experiences, Rahul Varma's plays, *Job Stealer* and *Isolated Incident* are selected for in depth analysis for identifying the influences of national and transnational landscapes in play texts and references for performance in texts.