

Predicament of Humanity and Political Turmoil in Asif Currimbhoy's *The Refugee*

***Dr. Ranjit Kaur**

Abstract

Jr. Martin C. Carroll has commented that the chief function of literature is "to reflect with meaning the totality of the contemporary human condition." We see that an artist brings out social truths and that literature is a reflection of the social process. Thus, the literature influenced by its milieu reflects the contemporary social structure. Asif Currimbhoy is a close follower of the above-mentioned view. As a social critic, he exhibits his excellence in portraying the social condition as prevailing in the contemporary time. Asif Currimbhoy has a great interest in producing dramas and believes in the fact that literature is meant to represent society. His plays reveal his deep concern for dramatic effectiveness. His plays are first and foremost meant for the stage. He brilliantly succeeded in producing "actable plays". Faubion Bowers calls him, "India's first authentic voice in theatre". The plays of Currimbhoy are based on the issues related to society, politics, religion, human life, and relations, etc. Each play has a touch of reality due to its connection with some major event or incident of the past or contemporary time. He targets the impact of social issues on the lives of people. He takes up a particular incident happened in the country and presents it in a realistic way. The Bengal Trilogy by Asif Currimbhoy includes *Inquilab* (1970), *The Refugee* (1971), *Sonar Bangla* (1972). The play *The Refugee*, a one-act play written against the political upheaval in East Pakistan in 1971, deals with the psychological aspects of the refugee problem from East Bengal on one hand, and on the other, the play throws ample light on the effects of the refugee problem in the social life in India. This paper focuses on how Currimbhoy has touched the humanistic concerns and predicament of humanity in the background of political turmoil. Through the presentation of mental workings of mainly two refugees Yassin and Sen Gupta, Currimbhoy has dramatized the inner agonies of refugees who were uprooted from their homelands to lead an inhuman life at the mercy of others. The paper shall also examine his endeavour to show that the cause of human suffering and persecution is the man himself.

Keywords: Deracination, Predicament, Humanity, Refugee, Agonies

Asif Currimbhoy's *The Refugee* (1971) deals with the psychological aspects of the refugee problem. It is a one-act play written against the political upheaval in East Pakistan in 1971. During 1971 there

Predicament of Humanity and Political Turmoil in Asif Currimbhoy's *The Refugee*

Dr. Ranjit Kaur

was a large influx of Bangladesh refugees into India and the same year saw *The Refugee*. Some critics have grouped it along with Currimbhoy's *Inqilab* and *Sonar Bangla* and called the group 'The Bengal Trilogy'. Through the presentation of mental workings of mainly two refugees Yassin and Sen Gupta, Currimbhoy has dramatized the inner agonies of refugees who were uprooted from their homelands to lead an inhuman life at the mercy of others. In a well-structured one-act play, Currimbhoy has touched the humanistic concerns in the background of political turmoil; his endeavour is to show that cause of human suffering and persecution is the man himself. Man has confined himself in a little space, he has bound his ego with a particular region and religion; he has narrowed his self into a specific belief that is in no way good for humanity.

Yassin, a refugee from East Pakistan, takes shelter in the house of Sen Gupta who himself came to India as a refugee twenty-four years ago at the time of partition. Sen Gupta claims to understand the emotional condition of Yassin and he tries his best to soothe the pains of refugee Yassin and to make him feel at home. The members of Sen Gupta's family are surprised as they find Yassin quite non-committal as far as the refugee problem is concerned. With the help of Prof. Mosin, he gets a job in a local university and immerses himself in his daily routine. He never talks about his home, political situation or refugees. He seems to be totally oblivious of the term refugee and in order to erase his image as a refugee, he starts calling himself a Paying Guest in Sen Gupta's house. Somehow Sen Gupta's wife is able to learn that what happened to Yassin was so horrible that he even wants to forget the side he was on.

Yassin has been a victim of Pakistan's massacre of intellectuals in the universities there. As a student of Comilla University, he saw the twin path of contemplation and action. But the cruel administrators, instead of giving them liberties of thought and action, started them killing mercilessly. This cruelty of military rulers is well represented in Currimbhoy's another play entitled *Sonar Bangla* (1972). In *Sonar Bangla* Asif Currimbhoy shows that the nation of Bangladesh (Country of Bengal) emerged as the people of East Pakistan started yearning for a separate country of their own. They were fed up with the continual negligence of administrators and the atrocities of military rule. The callousness of politicians and helplessness of university intellectuals is resonant in Yassin's speech:

"... But politics see all people in the same colour and the military ruler; considered it dangerous to give us the liberty of thought, and future leadership, students, professors, teachers alike in all forms of studies and research become the target of their attack. ... the rattle of machine guns is all I remember. A shattering reality that erased all that followed, blocking pain, suffering, and death. I survived, miraculously, if living means surviving". (p.16)

While Sen Gupta represents the social consciousness of the typical Hindu in India, Prof. Mosin represents the social consciousness of the typical Muslims in India. It appears that Yassin gets along well with Prof. Mosin since both are Muslims. But in the end, they subtly bring out the difference between the Indian Muslims and the Pakistani Muslims. Though both of them belong to the same religion Islam, the presence of the Pakistani Muslim refugee in India jeopardizes the position of the Indian Muslim in India. The rift between both becomes clear when we find that in the heart of his

Predicament of Humanity and Political Turmoil in Asif Currimbhoy's *The Refugee*

Dr. Ranjit Kaur

hearts Prof. Mosin wishes the Pakistani Muslims like Yassin to go back to their home. In a poignant discussion with Mosin, Yassin sharply grasps this point and spells out the Indian Muslim's inner fears:

Professor Mosin: ...there is a difference between the Indian Muslim and the Pakistani Muslim.
 Yassin: You mean there is a difference between me and you. You also mean the presence of the Pakistani Muslim, the refugee, jeopardizes the position of the Indian Muslim in India... I know you mean this. Very subtle, very delicately put. Like a placard saying: MUSLIM REFUGEE, GO HOME. (p.42)

Though Yassin is detached in the beginning, he is not apathetic to his fellow refugees. His non-committal attitude gets the first trigger from Sen Gupta's son Mohan who leaves his house in order to join *Mukti Fauj* because of his opinion "someone has to do the fighting" (p. 23). The second and most effective trigger he receives from Sen Gupta's daughter who does volunteer social work and is concerned with refugee rehabilitation. Mita brings the grim realities of refugees before his eyes, from which he was trying to escape; and she asks him to follow the dictates of his conscience. His mental conflict and Mita's arguments are presented in a highly dramatic manner:

Yassin: (moved, miserable, yet oblique, removed) It was an accident, Mita. It was all an accident. I have been killed. Perhaps I was and the part you see wasn't. All pain comes attachment, all wrongs come from self-interest. That is why we should each... lead our lives...

Mita: No; no. I don't agree with you. Life for me means action. Leave it alone and you commit wrong.

Yassin: (surprised, affected for the first time) What do you mean?
 Mita: Oh Yassin, touch me! Can't you see I'm a human being? Can't you see I'm real? Aren't you moved? (She touches her face tenderly) The refugees exit the same way. They're alive and only too real. They bring tears to my eyes; their suffering touches my heart. I can't bear to leave them alone. All of life draws me... human condition. (p.29)

Sen Gupta, the second refugee in the play is also one of the uprooted millions who were in terrible mental states and who had been driven from their homes under conditions of indescribable horror and misery. At least, he should have understood the agony and a pitiable lot of present-day refugees. No doubt he gives shelter to Yassin in his study room and is prepared to help all the ill-fated refugees. But very soon we find that as an expert politician, there is a big difference between his speech and action. He turns out to be a highly ambitious and selfish man who is more worried about his personal property and possessions than the pathetic condition of refugees. His pragmatic and self-centred approach to life is quite evident in his speeches:

"... It takes me a lifetime to build this house and garage and that refugee out there points a finger at it... and occupies it. (p.19)

"... Of course, I feel sorry for refugees outside, but look at what a filthy mess they've made of things. Where's my open field and coconut palms and pond? They are encroaching. How long

Predicament of Humanity and Political Turmoil in Asif Currimbhoy's *The Refugee*

Dr. Ranjit Kaur

are they going to stay there? When will they turn... anti-social? And they're growing in numbers all the time. We've called an emergency meeting of the town elders. This can't go on. We'll seal the borders. (p. 20)

According to Sen Gupta refugees and *Mukti Fauj* are not the problems that India is facing, rather he sees refugee exodus as an undeclared war by Pakistan. He did not help Yassin because he was a helpless refugee, but because his mother Rukaiya was Sen Gupta's young love and close friend of childhood days. In his eyes, Yassin is an odd character who cannot be completely trusted. He has biases too; he is a typical Hindu and does not like Bengali Muslims. He is so fed up with the refugees that he wants to seal the borders and kill them. His hatred for refugees can be observed in his conversation to Prof. Mosin:

Prof. Mosin: (feeling old and weak) What... What would you have us do?

Sen Gupta: Huh? (his reverie broken) Do? Adopt a more aggressive posture. The refugee exodus is an undeclared war by Pakistan. We've wasted too much time already. It's costing us money and lives anyway. A quick kill, that is what we need to do. Declare war and march in! (p.32)

The Refugee explores the predicament of humanity caught in the political turmoil that results in psychological alienation. The root of the problem is that even educated and responsible citizens have bound their selves with petty notions and interests. Feelings of universal love and brotherhood are overshadowed by material and political preferences and religious blindness. Yassin and Prof. Mosin are both Muslims, but the contrast is made evident in the last scene when one identifies himself with Pakistani Muslims and the other with Indian Muslims. In spite of being aware of the pros and cons of the whole situation even the educated Hindus like Sen Gupta are worried about the welfare of their own community only and ignore the burning problems like war, refugees and *Mukti Fauj*; Sen Gupta does not see the problems of East Bengal as his own, as it is clear in his statement, "... it's for the East Bengalis to fight for their liberation." (p.24) Asif Currimbhoy has been criticized as a wordy playwright mainly because of his excessive use of dialogue. But his descriptions of the Sen Gupta household and the refugee camp are picturesque. The way Yassin recalls the 'intellectual massacre' is also vivid and descriptive. It is to the credit of Currimbhoy that he is able to adopt subtle variations in tone and style in the dialogue as the mood of the character varies, though the over-use of ellipses seems to be unnecessary. It is, however, true that Currimbhoy succumbs to the temptation to yield to melodrama, as the instances pointed out earlier prove. He over employs dialogue. Bayapa Reddy's opinion that the language in Currimbhoy's plays helps the Indian spectator to identify himself with the characters may not be fully applicable to *The Refugee*.

***Assistant Professor,
Department of English
St. Xavier's College
Jaipur (Raj.)**

Predicament of Humanity and Political Turmoil in Asif Currimbhoy's *The Refugee*

Dr. Ranjit Kaur

References

1. Anand, Mulk Raj. *The Indian Theatre*. London: Dennis Dobson Ltd., 1950. Print.
2. Bower, Faubion. *The World of Asif Currimbhoy*. Calcutta: A Writers Workshop Publication, 1979. Print.
3. Currimbhoy, Asif. *The Refugee*. Calcutta: A Writers Workshop Publication, 1993. Print.
4. Iyengar, K.R. Srinivasa: *The Dramatic Art of Asif Currimbhoy*, Indo-English Literature, ed. K. K. Sharma, Ghaziabad, Vimal Prakashan, 1977, p.253.
5. Ravichandran. T. "Beyond the Critical Bias: Approximating the Partition Pain in Asif Currimbhoy's *Refugee*" in *Flowering of Indian Drama* Ed. K. Venkata Reddy and R.K. Dhavan. New Delhi: Prestige Books, 2004. Print.
6. Reddy, P. Bayapa. *The Plays of Asif Currimbhoy: A Study*. Calcutta. A Writers Workshop Publication, 1985. Print.
7. Singh, R.B. "Asif Currimbhoy's *Inquilab* and *The Refugee*." *Indian Drama in English: An Anthology of Recent Criticism*. Ed. K.L. Khatri and Kumar Chandradeep. Jaipur: Book Enclave, 2006. 147-154. Print.