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**Social Realism in Asif Currimbhoy's *Inquilab***

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## Abstract

The Concept of Nationalism originated in the Western Europe with the growth of capitalism and industrialism. The nationalistic principle of self domination gives each nation the right to be independent and to form a suitable government of its own. Nonetheless, the act of colonizing ruled out the principle which in turn gave rise to nationalistic writing. A considerable part of the Third World literature presents nationalism as its chief concern. The literature addresses the issues that are political, cultural, economical, social and religious. Asif Currimbhoy, considered as *India's first authentic voice in theatre* writing plays of dissent, remains one of the major writers writing on nationalistic issues of post-independence India. He made creative explorations in the nationalistic writing by addressing the issues that emerged of partition of India at the time of independence. He made originative geographic expeditions on the subjects of state and patriotism in several of his 29 dramas. The dramatist explores universal human predicament through his social, moral, religious and political concerns in the plays. The paper looking into the issue of nationalism as portrayed in modern Indian drama aims at analyzing Asif Currimbhoy's construct of pain, terror and dilemma of landless agricultural laborers turning into naxalite expeditions in one of his celebrated plays *Inquilab*. This important drama dramatizes the subject the Naxalite struggle in Bengal, probes into the way violence breaks loose. The play is an assessment of the Naxal movement grew powerful in Calcutta in the 1970s.

Indian drama ,though unacknowledged as poetry and fiction, is to stay long with output made by the playwrights like Arobindo, Tagore, T P Kailasham, Lobo-Prabhu, G V Desani, Mohan Rakesh, Badal Sirkar, Mahesh Dattani, Vijay Tendulkar, Asif Currimbhoy and many others. Drama being the prime literary instrument for social reform played an important role in Indian reformist movement. Since cast and class divides rooted firmly in Indian social setup, several plays dealing with the issues of social injustice and struggle between classes have been and produced by these playwrights. The issues have remained of nationalistic concern for all sorts of writing in India. The country being colonized by different invaders for centuries had to undergo significant social, political, religious and economical reforms. The social reform thus remained a chief concern for the writers of pre and post-independence India. The paper studies Social Realism presented in Asif Currimbhoy's celebrated play *Inquilab*.

Asif Currimbhoy , born in 1928, had his early education from Jesuit School. After graduating in economics from Berkley University in California he started working as a senior company executive for the Burma Shell Oil Company which provided him wide range of experiences abroad. His study of the Indian classics blend with the Western exposure brought about a synthesis of the Eastern and the Western cultures when he started writing. Considered as "India's first authentic voice in theatre writing plays of dissent"(Bower viii), Asif Currimbhoy explores universal human predicament through his social, moral, religious and political concerns in his plays. Currimbhoy wrote his plays based on his observation of life. His genius as a playwright lies in his sheer observation of life in the middle of socio-political conflicts. He had produced 29 plays in his 17 years intense literary career .The *Doldrummers*(1960), *The Dumb Dancer* (1961), *Goa* (1964), *The Hungry Ones* (1965), *Inquilab*(1970), *The Refugee* (1971), *Sonar Bangla* (1972) and *The Dissident ML A*(1974) are some of his popular plays performed across globe.

*Inquilab* ,*The Refugee* and *Sonar Bangla* are set in the background of the naxalite revolt started in the Eastern India in 1967. These plays are clubbed together as *Bangal Trilogy*. In *Inquilab* the action takes place through three main scenes. The struggle starts from very opening of the play where Prof.Datta, professor of law having a conservative and old worldish British approach is seen lecturing his students reminding them to introspect on socio-political situations in his 'dying city' Calcutta. He admits that they are in difficult time and advices the youth not to be impatient. He says "Let us not get Carried away, young men. Difficult times... my Culcutta, a "Dying City"? Processions, Strikes?, Gheraos? Violence? Bandhs? Breakdown of law and order? Revolt naxal Revolt, my friends? Slogans of Gandhi or Mao?...Are there



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bombs in your head or brains,gentle man?...”(Currimbhoy 10) However his pointing out the tyranny of minority results into protest by some of the students led by Amar, Prof. Dutta’s Son, banging the classroom benches and shouting of slogans , “CLASS ENEMIES MURDABAD!JOTEDARS MURDABAD! POLICE MURDABAD! INQUILAB! INQUILAB ZINDABZD!” (Currim. 11).

The action moves to professor’s home where he is seen standing before the portrait of Gandhiji imbibed deep in his thoughts and soliloquizing. Soon Amar enters and their talk turns into arguing on proletarian internationalism. He declares himself a revisionist who is saddened by the poor dying of hunger due to the unequal divide between the rich and the poor. He represents the youth which is not happy with the way the country progressing after independent. He feels that the dreams of the poor and the marginal are shattered. The independence brought no equality or justice for them. Even educated youth is disturbed as it has failed to provide them any employment. He defends himself by saying, “you talk of EDUCATION, father! Institutes of education that have now shackled us for generations and generation. What for? ... I ask? So that there can be more unemployed millions? “He also challenges his father on ill intentions of the upper class “... So that your bourgeois hierarchy remains intact! So that you’ve doped the masses sufficiently into complacency and resignation?...” Amar shows no respect for what his father believes rather he feels that revolution is inevitable in the present state of despair and injustice. The tension between revisionist and capitalist reaches to its height in the scene that takes place at Datta’s house. Jain, a land lord capitalist and professor’s friend, is invited for dinner with his daughter Suprea. While talking about the prevailing unrest with agrarians the situation turns into abrupt anger between Amar and Jain, the former being the revisionist in his views challenges the other by saying, “ We’ll grab the land, old man, because the young like me are impatient and hungry. Then there will be no distinction between the good and the bad land lord...” (Currimbhoy19). Jain counter challenges Amar by saying that the land belongs to him, received from his forbears. Showing his hands to all he says that since he is a land lord doesn’t affirm that he doesn’t work. He has done all the hard work with laborers and no one dares to take his land away from him. Amar leaves to garden in fury where others ask Suprea to follow him and let her hero be cool.

The tension grows in the following scene where some student naxalite gather in the leadership of Ahmed, The Naxal himself and so called guru of Amar. Ahmed insists that revolution does not work on theories. Revolutionary practice is the only way out to bring about a change. In order to replace parliamentary democracy with socialist revolution, he advocates for armed struggle by the peasants. He holds Marxism Leninism and says, “force is the midwife of every old society pregnant with a new one”. Ahmed is of the opinion that revolution can only be brought by the poor peasants. He also supports his arguments with historical background of backward countries where peasants pioneered the socialist revolution. Though Ahmed appears for the first time in the main stream of action, his presence is felt since the beginning of the action of the play.

The action shifts to the village farm land where a group of peasants gathered for the meeting conducted by a naxalite student of Ahmed. He tries to sympathize with peasants and says that they toil for the greedy Zamindars who in turn exploits them, giving them only hunger, disease and death in return. One of the peasants in the meeting comes forth and advocates for landlord Jain and informs that they are not ignorant about ceilings on land holdings. Rather he shows belief in socialist government and ridicules the young revolutionary for not doing his homework right. A village young man named Shomik intervenes the situation and says that he with his fellow peasants have been working as laborers for landlords through generation and no government will form a law which rescues them. He advises for land grabbing, “we want our law! Not the landlord’s and not the Governments!” In following scene Shomik is seen talking to his wife on his fight for equality. He wants self respect and freedom which he feels can be acquired only by overpowering zamindars. While he is busy talking to his wife on the other side of the house Zamindar Jain and politician Devdas come searching for Shomik. Jain tries to bribe Shomik’s father by giving him money.



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When Shomik knows about the money his father has bribed, he forcefully takes the money and throws it on the face of Jain. Jain furious with anger leaves the place while Devdas tries to play trick by asking Shomik to work for his party. Shomik instead asks for the land for all, the equal rights. While Shomik and Devdas argue on rights of the peasants, Amar and Ahmed come there and Devdas leaves after arguing with them too.

Amar and Ahmed exchange their views of the revolution. Amar points out that they are giving too much emphasis to the villages, instead he opines that the unrest should begin from the industrial complexes with strikes, lockouts, bundhs and gheraos. Shomik on the other hand wants the revolution to strike roots in the rural areas and spread all over the country. Ahmed upholds both the views as revolution carries no individual ideology. He calls on each one to work out the revolution in their different areas of work – in the class room, field and factory. His search is for the ultimate “the cause and the effect. The cycle of generations that revolt. The great burning desire within us that is prepared to kill and recreate. Build the new world that is as close to God’s image as Man is ...It’s all here. In the seed” (40). This is a symbolic statement on the seed of a revolution bringing in destruction and further leading to construction of a new social order.

Act II opens with Professor Datta lecturing to his students about the turn of events. He doesn’t approve of the morality of land grabbing. He gives his legal opinion on the matter that land grabbing is an attack on the fundamental right. “under article 31, no person can be deprived of his property save by the authority of law” (41). The students show their indifference as teletype messages appear :CLASS ENEMIES MURDABAD...INQUILAB...INQUILAB ZINDABAD (41).

The scene shifts to a field where two peasants discuss the crisis situation. One suggests that if they join the movement they could also become landlords. His friend is of the opinion that they could also land up in jail. They realize that they are in a dilemma, caught between the devil and the deep sea. But they are worried “where to stop... how far to go. When the leadership is in the hands of extremists, ... it may not stop with the land grab” (43).

The scene shifts to the college corridor where the students are in discussion on the revolutionary views. One of the boys warns not to be carried away as , “Being a Naxal sympathizer is not being a Naxal. A lot of us in college are sympathizers...not all of it political” (44). One of the girls point out that 23 years after independence politicians have been perpetuating British colonialism. The diverse opinions leave them in a situation of dilemma.

The scene shifts to a prison where two prisoners are being interrogated by an officer. One of them looks like a goonda. The police inspector warns them of dire consequences. The sequence gives a peep into criminality that reveals its ugly face in the wake of a revolution. The scene further shifts back to the story of the cultivable field. A group of peasants are there armed with lathis, spears and sickles. They are very assertive as they make the land grab. Shomik, their leader, points to a spear and warns anyone who would dare to remove it. They do not care for anyone, be it the politician Devdas or zamindar Jain, who have been a party to the perpetuation of the oppressive system. He further asserts “We are taking the law into our own hands... because this is the only law that produces results!... The measurements of land are complete... each one equal share.. I want landlord Jain to share alike... If he resists...we shall have to try him out, according to our own laws” (50). The matter is to be tried in their Courts and Councils of Justice. The crowd keeps shouting slogans in collective threat.

There is a quick transition back to the college scene with sound of sudden explosion of a bomb on the road at the college campus. The screaming students keep running for safety. Amar is seen dashing up to Supra. Holding her hands, he tells her to warn her father of the danger he faces if he resists the land grabbing peasants.

As the scene moves to Professor’s residence, he is seen very disturbed as he awaits the arrival of his son



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Amar. After a while, Ahmed walks in to tell him to inform the police to search for Amar. The professor lets out his anger as Amar has been accused of having connection with the police slaying in the blast. Ahmed points out how the Professor is in conflict with his son. He acknowledges that they were both poles apart as father and son. However, he is convinced that his son is not guilty of any crime as he is too weak inside.

The next scene takes place in the field at night where the Council of Justice is holding its meeting to try landlord Jain who is tied up in the centre. Ahmed nominates Shomik as the prosecutor. Amar demands an honest trial. However, he is accused of being a friend of the landlord. Amar pleads with the council to give a fair judgment as Jain has been fair in his dealings, working hard on his land. Shomik does not accept his opinion as Jain belongs to the privileged class, having loyalty to his own people. Hence, he is to be judged as a class enemy. Shomik accuses Amar to be a defector, since he protects his father's friend as defence counsel. Shomik is willing to consider the case if Jain is willing to repent. Amar tries to convince Jain to surrender, pleading guilty. But he remains unrelenting.

The scene shifts to politician Devdas found in the company of a police inspector and a big-wheel politician from the Centre. They are alarmed at the prevailing lawless situation, yet are trying to make maximum political mileage from the grim situation. The Big-wheel politician threatens Devdas of the possibility of President's Rule. Devdas demands that he is not stripped of his position. As they discuss, Suprea comes all excited, searching for her father. They all accompany the girl to the field. Mesmeric teletape on wall appears, "RED TERROR...BATTLE OF ANNIHILATION... CHAIRMAN MAO... DEATH TO CLASS ENEMIES...JOTEDAR MURDABAD...ZAMINDAR MURDABAD"(65). Suprea's shattering scream is heard as Jain's severed head appears hung on two poles.

Act III opens a few months later with the scene of Professor Datta and Ahmed standing on two separate daises in the classroom. It is a meeting of the hardened inner-core-of Naxalite-students-in-clandestine-nighttime-meeting. They are to judge if Amar is a defector or a loyalist. The student leaders accuse Amar for having defended Jain who happens to be his father's friend.

The scenes shift in quick successions to Shomik's old blind mother and Amar's grieving mother. Focus is shifted to the politician Devdas and the Big-wheel politician in discussion. After a blackout we find Shamik bidding farewell to his wife Sarala. He tells her not to worry as he is going on his mission with the revolution.

Suprea and Amar appear on scene. Amar sympathises with her having lost her father. He was helpless in his attempts to save his life.

SUPREA; And yet you didn't do anything to stop it.

AMAR: I couldn't do anything to stop it... You must believe me.

SUPREA: ...my father looked upon you as his son. Felt that one day... we'd be married, and that you'd carry on the tradition.

AMAR: We will. We will, Suprea.

SUPREA: But you don't believe in marriage or traditions...you believe in causes, and martyrdom... and endless suffering.

...

AMAR: There's something merciless about a cause...There is something wrong in our society, your teaching – just as there was something wrong in the way your father...

was killed...when I tried to save your father...I almost had it there.

SUPREA: Then why do you persist in this madness?

AMAR: because... I'm coming close... from a pull...in opposite directions. My mind and heart are taxed... to the extreme. The next... will be the most revealing.



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The ultimate test of loyalty and guilt.

SUPREA: Are you going... to hurt more people... to prove things to yourself (75-6).

Amar's predicament makes him lose his sense of proportion. He is a mentally deranged person struggling in between a to be or not to be situation.

After a blackout, the scene returns to Professor Datta who stands alone in the library rearranging the statue of his venerated Sir Asutosh. Suddenly a group of Naxal students, led by Amar, invade the room shouting slogans to "OVERTHROW!...FILTHY BOURGEOIS LANDLORD UNIVERSITY! BOURGEOIS LANDLORD GOVERNMENT! REVISIONIST EDUCATION! REVISIONIST PROFESSOR!" (77). He requests the students to protest without violence being rational and constitutional. As the commotion continues a piercing scream is heard and the boys set ablaze the library. Seeing Amar, Professor attempts in vain to call him, but he pretends not to pay heed to him. They break down the statue of Asutosh. As Amar observes a boy push down his father, he threatens to kill him if he dares touching again.

Amar is appointed prosecutor carry out verdict in the execution of the statue of Sir Asutosh. Axe in hand he breaks apart the marble head of the statue, as though hypnotised by the fury of the crowd. The Professor, lying on the floor, staggers up. In the semi darkness he could see Ahmed holding a sickle coming forward. With a jerk he buries into Professor's back as he embraces him.

Act III scene II takes place a few months later. Amar tells Ahmed that though he believes in the socialist revolution, he disagrees with their methods. He feels his father's approach was right, "that change should come through the will of the majority...expressed through a free vote" (80). He feels guilty for his father's death. Ahmed convinces him that it all happened after Naxal raid. Amar feels that he has betrayed the cause. But Ahmed points out his outlook: "The cause is larger than either of us. And each of us still continues to follow it differently" (81). He further says Shomik is becoming a great leader and one day both he and Amar might differ in the methods employed in executing social justice. Ahmed speaks out his idea of revolution that brings life from death. "We were all caught in the vortex of struggle. Each of us searched the ultimate in our own emancipation... Yes, mine had turned full circle...People, events, this life, meant nothing to me...There is the harsh inevitability about it, the struggle for birth, for survival, where one has to kill to live again" (81). As the scene fades out, Suprea is heard calling Amar as Ahmed stands alone. Meantime from the balcony of Professor Datta's house his wife comes with a tray of rice from which she picks up a healthy seed and flings it into the fertile ground as Ahmed looks on.

The revolution takes its toll. Datta is killed by his own son's colleague who is a Naxal extremist. Jain the landlord is another victim of violence. Finally Amar comes to the realization that his father was right in upholding the Gandhian principles: "...my father was right...that change should come through the will of the majority...expressed through a free vote...I've found my path...and it will be the same as that of my father" (80-1).

The play ends symbolically with Ahmed confirming his stand of pursuing his Marxist revolution, while Prof. Datta's wife observing Ahmed, picks up healthy rice seeds from a tray and flings into fertile soil. The play pictures the futility of Marxist ideology bringing destruction through revolution.

As one reads *Inquilab*, the characters leap off the page and seize by the throat. "The canvas Currimbhoy paints here is one massive dilemma composed of a hundred small ones – 'the devil and the deep.'" (Bowers 7). Various predicaments are presented in the play such as : i) The peasants caught between – to join or not to join the revolution; ii) The politician's involvement to suppress the rebellion or bring in President's rule; iii)The wife of Shomik reminding him of choosing between his dreams. All he wanted was to possess a piece of land, but now he dreams of leading a national revolution. He forgets his ideals and takes up to violence with different motives; iv) Datta while lecturing on Gandhian ways, questions the new wave of revolution; v) Execution of Jain and the mockery of the court of justice; vi) Amar's continuous dilemma



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leading to destruction; vii) Predicament of Suprea after her father was killed by the revolutionaries. She still believes in Amar. Her love transforms him viii) Ahmed's double face – a friend and assassin of Professor whom he embraces to death; ix) Who is right? The Constitutionals or the Revolutionaries. The Constitutionals dream of a welfare state while the Naxals believe in establishing a classless society; x) Final sequence of Ahmed determined to continue pursuing the revolution and Professor's wife throwing the grain, as though it is like the fulfilment of Ahmed's statement: "The great burning desire within us that is prepared to kill and recreate. Build the new world that is as close to God's image as Man is ...It's all here. In the seed" (40).

Finally, Amar realizes that his revolutionary outlook will not bring about the utopian dream of social justice. His father was right and he should have listened to that mature voice. Only democratic rule of the people, by the people and for the people built on a secular corruption free society can usher in a final solution.

Currimbhoy believes in social realism and *Inquilab* is his thesis to prove it (Reddy 35). It is the character of Amar that strikes a balance in between the two positions of Constitutionalism and proletarian internationalism. In the beginning he stands in contrast to his father who stood for peace and stability through non-violent methods, but violence and bloodshed makes him give up Naxalism. In *Inquilab* the playwright affirms that the Naxal shortcut is no happy solution to any problem and that evil and hatred can be overcome only through love and understanding (Reddy 52).

Currimbhoy's plays are all centered on human predicament which puzzles him so much that he shares the pain and agony of humanity through the characters he creates. The pathetic human condition is uppermost in his mind. His imagination is built on the experience of life. There is a perfect fusion of thought and feeling as "the world of the mind as well as the social and political world that surround him... He has something to say... a message to deliver, a vision to fulfil and he must work, speak, write and act" (Meserve 10).

However, Scholars like M.K. Naik have pointed out certain incongruities in his work and art:

Most of these plays have a strong 'documentary' element about them and there is no attempt to understand and project in dramatic terms the ideological implications of the political conflicts dealt within. The dramatist appears to be primarily interested in the thrill of the exciting events rather than the thought processes which shaped them. The result is sheer reportage; and when Currimbhoy gives free rein to his imagination, the upshot is often crude and contrived symbolism... Unless Currimbhoy realizes that drama is something more than simply play of lights, plethora of sounds and parade of violence, all his enviable industry and enthusiasm are unlikely to produce viable and worthwhile plays (Naik 258-61).

Despite the flaws pointed out, his plays have been highly appreciated and successfully staged in several countries. A perceptive critic will also find it extremely difficult to separate his didacticism from his dramatic art. His dramatic techniques are meant "to provide visual images to stimulate the minds, the ears, and the eyes of his audience" (Meserve 15). In the process he makes excellent use of monologues, choruses, pantomime, music and visual effects.

Currimbhoy's compassion for humanity is the central motif as he details out the predicament of man in agony and ecstasy. His purpose is to make his audience/readers appreciate life in its totality. In the process he presents social evils and chaos letting his audience/readers to find the right answers themselves. At the same time one gets the impression that the playwright is personally involved in the plays and uses the stage to present societal issues with the intention of social transformation.



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