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Asif Currimbhoy's *The Doldrummers*: An Analysis in Theme and Style

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Asif Currimbhoy (1928-94) has carved a significant place among the contemporary Indian playwrights in English with his skills as a playwright. Critics have reacted both ways. Some of them have showered praise on his skills as a playwright while others have criticised him in harsh tones. Here is an attempt to analyse the theme and style of one of his plays *The Doldrummers* to ascertain his worth as a playwright. Written at a time when existential issues were in vogue, the play *The Doldrummers* (1960) has issue of human relationships intertwined with themes like purposelessness of life, love and sex, and sin and expiation at its centre. The play appears an influence of the western ideology called existentialism on it. The degeneration that crept into human life in the twentieth century, which was effectively represented in the works of many of the western writers, appears to have influenced Currimbhoy's play. With the social issues preoccupying his mind, Currimbhoy concerns himself with the social issues of significance. The form of a play he writes in is usually embedded in its content. The language of his characters is a true reflector of their state of mind. Thematically too, the play is quite intriguing and suggestive in depicting the complexities, frustrations and disillusionment of society with which the playwright consciously and conscientiously feels concerned. He not only records events from contemporary social world but also seeks answers for the vital issues of life.

Asif Currimbhoy (1928-94) has carved a significant place among the contemporary Indian playwrights in English with his voluminous production of twenty nine stageable plays which are substantial in content and rich in theatrical appeal. His dramatic work has diversity of theme drawn from a wide variety of fields like contemporary politics, history, social and economic problems, psychological conflicts, metaphysics and art encompassed in forms like tragedy, history, comedy, farce and melodrama. However, the graph of Currimbhoy's literary career does not appear to be sailing smoothly; it appears to have sudden jumps and 'wild' curves in it. While some critics have raised his work to the skies, others have found only a few of his plays creditable, and yet others have found innumerable faults in his plays. An eminent critic Faubion Bowers opines that "Currimbhoy's plays reveal him to be India's first authentic voice in the theatre"¹ and Peter Nazareth agrees with him when he says that Currimbhoy has got the felicity of weaving "good plays out of events that boggle the moral imagination."² However, a distinguished theatre critic from India Shanta Gokhale asserts that only "four plays written by Asif Currimbhoy . . . deserve attention. They are *The Doldrummers* (1960), *The Dumb Dancer* (1961), *Goa* (1964), and *The Hungry Ones* (1965)."³ On the extreme is A.K. Bhatt who finds Currimbhoy's plays "badly conceived, badly constructed, and very badly written."⁴ Another critic makes indignant remarks about all the Indian dramatists in English, including Asif Currimbhoy: "butcher them, castrate them and force them to write in their native Hindi or Urdu or whatever Indian languages their fathers and mothers used to speak."⁵

Notwithstanding these harsh voices, we find that some of the renowned practicing writers such as Graham Greene have found in Currimbhoy "a forceful playwright."⁶ Currimbhoy is among the rare Indian dramatists who wrote in English, devoted

the whole of his life for the cause of playwriting and his plays have been staged with enthusiasm at home as well as abroad. At a time when English was seen as a language of the coloniser, he not only kept the flame of Indian drama in English burning but also added new dimensions to it by liberating it from the earlier static traditions. C. V. Venugopal rightly acknowledges his contribution to Indian theatre:

If Indian drama in English has had a significant breakthrough of late, only a handful of playwrights can take the credit of it. Among these few, Asif Currimbhoy most definitely figures prominently. For sheer fecundity of a dramatist he has no equal. . . . Nevertheless, viewed as a whole, what he has achieved is singularly impressive. Also, some of his plays, even considered individually, do show signs of a mature artist who knows what he is after.⁷

To some extents, the credit of the present success of contemporary Indian drama in English goes to Currimbhoy who brought the drama from the page to the stage. The present paper, in view of the two extremes of existing criticism, aims at analysing the major thematic and stylistic features of the play to ascertain its real value.

While studying at Wisconsin University, California, Currimbhoy closely observed theatrical activities, conceived the intricacies of drama and also obtained knowledge of the major trends in drama of the times. Among the other major influences that shaped his creative faculty are the incidents that took place around him and the conflicts that grew within him at the sight of such incidents. At the time of Indian independence Currimbhoy was nineteen, mature enough to feel the trauma of partition that crushed the spirit of fraternity and devoured human values extensively. The torrent of violence that the partition brought with it seems to have made a deep influence on the psyche of the young man. Probably because of this, various forms of violence are manifested in his plays. The expectations of the masses from the independence, and later the discontentment as an outcome also seem to have left an indelible mark on the dramaturgy of the playwright.

Written at a time when existential issues were at their peak in the works of western writers, *The Doldrummers* (1960), a play in two Acts, has issue of human relationships intertwined with themes like purposelessness of life, love and sex, and sin and expiation in it. The play appears to be influenced, though in short measure, by the western ideology called existentialism. The degeneration that crept into human life in the twentieth century, which was effectively represented in the works of T.S. Eliot, John Osborne, Strindberg, Camus and the Absurdists like Beckett and Pinter, must have influenced at least 'epicurean' stratum of Indian society also which is the subject of Currimbhoy's play. The playwright could present the complacent upper class through a set of degenerate characters in *The Doldrummers* because he himself belonged to the same stratum of society and has gathered a lot of information about it during his wide travel all over the globe.

An Indian playwright whose work has already been tagged with the title of "a blatant expression of the Western life"⁸ chooses four young Anglo-Indians – Tony, Rita, Joe and Liza – to delineate a life of drinks, sex, prostitution, intrigue and double standards. He registers a protest against the morally depraved society which holds out nothing except boredom and meaninglessness. Though the four persons do not belong to the upper section of society but their habits are somewhat similar to those of the lethargic well-heeled people. They lead a low life which is worthless and meaningless reminding us of the life of existential anguish portrayed in the dramatic works of existential writers. Moreover, there are references to the prevailing western thoughts like the 'death of God' in the play: "There is no

God in man”⁹ says Joe. But the life represented here is not as deeply devoid of meaning as it is in the existential writings of Sartre and Camus or the Absurdist’s writings of Samuel Beckett and Ionesco.

Revolving round the four above mentioned characters the plot of *The Doldrummers* moves on a straight line with only a few curves towards the end of it. The scene with which the play begins is of a shack at Juhu beach in the suburbs of metropolitan Bombay and the setting remains the same throughout the play. Spanning a period of a few months, the action of the play begins with Tony lying in shorts with a guitar in a hammock between two coconut trees. Rita, the young and fully physical lady, appears to be very much in love with him. While she plays with his hair, his friend Joe ogles at her legs and thighs. Tony and Joe drink, and Rita falls for a long passionate kiss with Tony sickening Joe. Soon “a Technicolor doll” (TD 143) Liza joins them. She appears to be interested in Tony who has recently received a watch in the form of a gift from her. Rita, a girl with a poor pocket, has objection to Tony’s receiving of presents from other girls including Liza. But Tony shows his stubbornness in receiving gifts and says that he will not oppose if Rita gets gifts from others. At Joe’s dictation Rita becomes a prostitute so that she can earn money and reserve Tony for herself by presenting him costly gifts.

A few months later in Act I Scene (ii), Tony gets upset when he finds that Rita has developed an affair with the Fat and Bald man Uncle Lollipop. He decides to ring his ears. But when he actually is face to face with the Fat and Bald man and finds him to be his former boss, Tony cringes before him and does nothing. Rita repeatedly asks Tony to hit the Fat and Bald man but he keeps on crying helplessly. Now Joe makes systematic arguments with Rita and persuades her to adopt prostitution if she wants to keep Tony to herself. After getting convinced that ‘Tony won’t mind’ she makes hers an open house and welcomes Joe as the first customer. Even when in Joe’s arms, she moans Tony’s name.

But Tony, contrary to what he had declared earlier, minds Rita’s getting presents from others as is evident from his exchange of hot arguments with her. Now he slaps her hard knocking her to the floor and goes away. Liza consoles her. Rita tells Liza that she is carrying Joe’s child in her womb. Tony returns with Moron Moe, lassoed like a dog and calling him Tony. He tells her that Moe is his substitute and he is “the hottest thing in bed” (TD 196). At this Rita breaks down under mental strain and rushes to the sea for committing suicide. Tony runs after her to save her.

The brief final scene, Act II scene (ii), reveals the irony that Tony, who hardly knew how to swim, is rescued by Rita. It is also divulged that Joe has committed suicide by drowning. The play ends with Tony singing with his guitar from his hammock:

...So hold my hand,
Cause I understand,
Cause I understand... (TD 201)

Thus the play does not appear to possess a traditional plot as the most part of the action consists of doses of dialogue. There are detailed interactions of characters in their sexual affairs, rivalries and the consequent conflicts in their minds. In the form of denouement it is shown that Joe is drowned and that Rita is carrying his child in her womb. The plot leaves scope for improvement in development of characters, convincingness of events and unpredictability of human behaviour. The only consolation regarding the plot appears to be in the possibility that the playwright might have left the plot loose and crude intentionally to

represent the same attributes of the characters and situations in the play like the Absurdist of the West.

However, the improbabilities in the plot pointed out by P. Bayapa Reddy in his work *The Plays of Asif Currimbhoy*¹³ do not seem convincing. The three main charges that the critic levels against Currimbhoy are: (1) we are not convinced of Rita's adoption of the profession of prostitution in order to keep Tony within her arms; (2) equally improbable is the incident of Tony's standing like a helpless animal in spite of his woman's asking him to take his guitar and smash it on the face of the Fat and Bald man; and (3) the drowning of Joe and his death sound farcical.

Looked from a different perspective however, these charges do not seem to hold good. It can be argued that Rita is a poor girl who earns money by stitching clothes to make both ends meet. She is passionately and sincerely in love with Tony and cannot tolerate even his accepting friendly gifts from other women. She is shocked to learn that the wrist watch Tony is wearing has been presented by Liza and that her lover Tony has tried to hide this fact from her. She does not want to lose her lover at any cost. Moreover, Tony's repetitive emphasis on his not minding her accepting gifts from others not only gives shudders of insecurity but also contributes to drifting her towards the immoral path out of necessity. When Joe, whom her 'God' Tony respects for his education and perceptive power, pushes her on the path of immorality, she, with a heavy heart becomes ready to whore herself for the sake of sustaining Tony's affection for her. Moreover, Rita is not mentally strong, she can break under stress. It is highly convincing that she becomes a whore though it is against the traditional principle of morality. But it should not be forgotten that after all Currimbhoy's characters are real life like people who have not been created under the constraints of dramatic conventions. Moreover, the meaninglessness of life can drive one into an irrational act, and even immoral one. Thus when Rita is to lose the meaning of life if separated from Tony, she goes all out to save herself from the extreme situation by adopting prostitution as a profession. Therefore, it is probable that even a virtuous person like Rita can succumb under the force of circumstances beyond her control. In addition, in the world of Currimbhoy, the passion of love is too strong as displayed in *The Doldrummers* and in his another significant play *Goa* (1964). In both the plays people under the passion of love go crazy, commit rape or even murder, adopt prostitution and commit suicide. Thus Rita's act does not appear unconvincing in the given circumstances.

As far as the second charge is concerned, there are two possibilities. One, that Tony gets terrified of the physical strength of the Fat and Bald man or he, a boozier and a lethargic lover, has hardly any interest in fighting for the cause of Rita, his unfaithful beloved, and thus he fails to act against him in spite of her pleadings to hit him with the guitar; second, that when he finds that the Fat and Bald man is his ex-employer he can not do anything. The second argument is also supported by the text as Tony holds his ex-employer in high esteem because he dreamt to raise Tony to 'first class' heights. Hitting such a well-wisher perhaps becomes a daunting task for a sensitive music lover like Tony.

The third charge that 'the drowning of Joe sounds farcical' is again unconvincing. Perhaps Currimbhoy has designed Joe to be what he is: a sensible, highly educated man, though essentially human and thus weak to bend in the face of temptation. Being weak, perhaps he fails in defeating guilt. After victimising Rita sexually, he appears only once in the play. His absence seems to be a part of his sense of guilt. Another testimony of the guilt is that in his only meeting with Rita, after his immoral act, he is heavily drunk and expresses his

lack of interest in life. The pangs of guilt that derive him to commit suicide are perceptible in the words that he utters to Rita before his final departure:

You're raw yet, I can make it out. That's good. I'll be back, honey. I'll be back. Now don't become different while I'm gone. You can still feel. *You're not dead yet like me.* I gotta get that spark before you die too. *It won't get me alive,* but I need it badly, because then I can d-r-e-a-m. (*Giggling*) Hee, hee. (*He goes. Rita covers her face with her hands...*). (TD 182) (*emphasis added*)

His suicide is perfectly in keeping with his sensitive nature. His absence from the scene after the immoral act is a proof of his sense of guilt and the extreme step of suicide is expiation for his role in making Rita a prostitute.

The purposelessness of life is the main theme in the play under study. It is out of this stem that all subsidiary branches like those of human relationships, sex and violence, and sin and expiation come out. The main substance of the play concerns itself with the lives of four youth - Tony, Rita, Joe and Liza who belong to the lower stratum of Bombay and are leading a meaningless life in a shack. The four people represent cross sections of urban society – lethargic, fervent, philosophical and sensible respectively. To beat the void of their existence, they escape into amorous talk, passionate love making, exchanging gifts and playing/listening to music. All the characters in the play are together in doldrums as they all get indulged in shallow love affairs to forget the frustration of their existence. The harsh music that Tony plays, and the women listen to, underlines the triviality of their tastes as well as coarseness of their life. Three of them are too lethargic to even search for some meaning in their lives, the only exception being Rita, the best developed character in the play. No brave causes appear to be the guiding principle of the life of these people. Joe is disappointed with what he has got from 'independence':

We were proud, satisfied. The cause fulfilled. Mirrors straight. Identity ...found. But something was still missing. A distortion in the seed. They chose to ignore it, resting on past laurels. Gradually, unknowingly, the tree decayed, the landscape changed into desert, and the fight for survival... was inverted. We became monsters. Reptilian. With scales insensitive. With breaths of fire and venomous spittle. Since the mirror showed almost everyone the same, they all thought they were the human, and we...we...the half ones. Those with heads human and bodies like monsters. (TD 170)

The imagery used here appears to be the perfect objective co-relative for the disappointment of the characters that Currimbhoy intends to represent. The four people live a kind of life where people "look before and after, /And pine for what is not."¹⁰ They have to 'fight for survival' while 'decay' and 'desert' are their companions. In a word, they painfully drag their 'reptilian' existence of cold blood on this sorry planet of ours. That at the end of the day, they achieve 'nothing' is manifested in Joe's pathetic 'independence' and Rita's hopeless situation in love for Tony in spite of her best efforts and sincere affection for him. Obviously the human condition in Currimbhoy's world is marked with a mystique of life that gives feeling of incomprehensibility.

Currimbhoy appears to achieve a cathartic effect by presenting the purposeless and miserable band of youth on the stage. The spectacle of the purposeless people creates a positive enthusiasm for life among his audience. The sorry state of life presented on the stage is expected to interact with the deeper levels of spectators' mind. Apart from warning the audiences against vices like immorality, irresponsibility and lethargy, the play endeavours to

liberate the audiences from the latent fears. Again by serving repulsive meaninglessness and disintegration on the proscenium, the playwright tends to rejuvenate audience's interest in the opposite, thus activating the process of integrative forces in their mind. Without moralizing, the play presents the reality of human relationships and the boredom of post-modern purposeless life of the youth in true colours inviting courage of the audiences to face the harsh music that life may offer them intermittently.

The game of love in the play becomes harsh and crude because it is not played with gusto. It offers a good distraction for the purposeless wastrels – it is a source of sensual pleasure and animal satisfaction, for Joe, Liza and Tony. They appear to live on a lower plane as they care only for food, sex, tainted drinks and illicit relations. Currimbhoy uses the motif of sex as a theatrical strategy to bring to the fore the ugliness, meanness and shallowness of the life of urban people for whom love is a game to satisfy animal desires, to kill time and to entertain the lethargic minds. Here there appears to be an echo of T.S. Eliot's poem *The Wasteland* where love and sex are found in decadent form as they have become a matter of intrigue, a matter of moves and counter-moves, a source of momentary pleasure, a sordid game of seduction and exploitation. Man feels alienated and frustrated, like the one living "in rat's alley/Where the dead men lost their bones."¹¹ Consequently, sex generate neurosis, boredom, ennui, frustration, disillusionment and hopelessness rather than happiness, excitement and satisfaction in the life of modern man. It is the spectacle of the wastrels indulging in filthy sexual activities through which Currimbhoy, like Eliot, exposes them as degenerated people. Further the passion for love and sex is also a game in the hands of the wastrels who play it for their survival. They shove off their boredom by kissing each other and by falling in love embraces. Here Currimbhoy's characters foreshadow another important Indian playwright Vijay Tendulkar's characters whose men as well as women love wine, foster irresistible sexual instincts and are interested in subverting social codes of conduct.

However this does not mean that there is a dearth of idealistic love in Currimbhoy's plays. Idealistic love as well as carnal lust both find place in equal measure. The conflict between the two is a sort of battle that is fought by the virtuous people against the vile minded ones. The playwright presents two kinds of attitude towards love and sex. One is represented by the immoral band consisting of Tony, Liza and Joe for whom the end justifies the means, and the other by Rita whose commitment to the passion of love presents a contrast to the maverick attitude of the rest of the characters in the play. If illicit sexual love is a highlighter to mark ugliness of life, sincere and true love is used to underline a life of virtues. It is against Rita's sincere love for Tony that the devious love of others shines bright. Though she whores herself for quite sometime, the act seems to be a manifestation of her love for Tony whom she gives presents earned through prostitution. Her reaction, when Tony brings Moron Moe "the hottest thing in bed" (*TD* 196) as his substitute, is a testimony of the purity of her attitude towards love and sex:

TONY: ...No, stay! Stay here and watch, until doomsday itself.

RITA: Let me go!

(*Tony slaps her violently.*)

TONY: Stay here and watch I said! And listen! Listen to the dog whine. He's got no tongue, but he can still whine. I got me substitute now. I'm not Tony any more. I'm Joe. This here is Tony. He'll serve you well. I have even taught him to play the guitar. And he is the hottest thing in bed. He doesn't talk much. He doesn't even feel much. He's almost like a portable, do-it-yourself kit. He'll take my place well, and I will be gone far, far away.

RITA: (*Screaming*) No! Tony! Please, I beg of you.

TONY: (*Turning to his friend*) Tony she asked you to beg. Beg, you dog!
 (*His friend does the begging act again.*)
 RITA: (*Walking, crouching back slowly, hysterical wide-eyed*) Tonee...
 Tonee...my Tony-boy...my only love...
 (*She turns around and flees. The sound of the waves seems to grow louder. . .*).
 (TD 195-96)

Rita loves to die for love if she cannot live for it. She offers herself to the waves which reject her by inviting Tony to accept her. On the other hand, it appears that for Tony love is nothing more than an animal instinct. To satisfy this instinct in Rita he brings Moron Moe, a beast in the form of man who scratches the flea behind his ear with his leg rather than his hand like an animal (TD 195). To Liza and Joe love and sex come naturally like leaves on the boughs of a fertile tree that need to be pruned time and again.

Sex has been used in The Doldrummers as a tool to offer a shrewd expose of changing values in Indian society. The degenerating values in human life are underscored in the playwright's representing love and sex as materialistic bargains. Presentation of prostitution in unfavourable colours in one play after the other shows Currimbhoy's disgust at the sight of human bestiality. His vision of human fate appears to strongly hold that the hell and heaven are right here on the earth. The pangs of pains are to be borne by those who afford to err. In *The Doldrummers* the characters that err have to atone for their misdeeds. Joe's act of drowning himself is not illogical or absurd but natural and justified. It is he who prepares Rita, the virtuous girl, to adopt prostitution to keep Tony to herself and he himself becomes her first customer. He makes his argument strong by putting the instance of Liza who can please Tony in her own way by gifting him costly items. Once Joe turns the mirror of values upside down Rita finds herself no different from Liza. But the pain and conflict that she faces to balance her real and assumed self makes Joe a sinner in the eyes of the spectators. Immediately after his immoral act with Rita he goes missing. Here Currimbhoy misses a good opportunity of depicting Joe's conflict and suffering that he undergoes owing to his sin. The playwright seems satisfied with making Joe go missing from the scene and perhaps wants to represent his sense of guilt in his silent absence. Once more Joe visits Rita in full booze and looks perturbed to irreparable extents, his condition almost sounds like a death knell. His expiation is complete only in his unnoticed death by water. The suicide of Joe is clearly an act of atonement for what he has done to Rita. Moreover it is a reward for his sense of guilt. Now he achieves peace which transcends all understanding. The doldrummers, who hitherto nurtured the sole aim of self-gratification, undergo a sea change after the drowning. Parallel to the news of drowning of Joe, there comes a transformation in Liza which makes her benevolent and sympathetic towards Rita. At the end of the play Tony is seen singing a melody invoking the spirit of Joe, the dear departed, to accompany him to where the doldrums end. Now he is a changed one, one who understands.

With the social issues preoccupying his mind, Currimbhoy turns the psyche of his characters inside out and exposes the poverty not only within the individuals but also in the system. To give an artistic voice to the social concerns of his countrymen he creates intricate and suggestive plays using contemporary situations as food for thought. The form of a play he writes in is usually embedded in its content, and sometimes this surprises his critics. He appears to have a design in his mind when he makes the plot of a play well-knit or loose. Moreover, he adopts characters that are fit for the situations he intends to create and develops them only to a certain extent that is needed for a particular effect to be produced on the stage. The language these characters speak is usually a true reflector of their state of mind.

Sometimes Currimbhoy even uses fractured plots and purposeless characters for his plays, for instance *The Doldrummers*, and thus he makes form represent the content.

Observed with deliberate concentration and effort, Currimbhoy's play *The Doldrummers* appears to be quite intriguing and suggestive in depicting the complexities, frustrations and disillusionment of society with which the playwright consciously and conscientiously feels concerned. He not only records events from contemporary social world but also seeks answers for the vital issues of life. The play is not merely a social document but an imaginative recreation of the egocentric man in conflict with the circumstances. Thus while dealing with social situations, he also deals with existential dilemma of Man.

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- ⁶ N.S. Iyer, *Musings on Indian Writing in English: Drama* (New Delhi: Sarup & Sons, 2007) 98.
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- ⁸ Anita Myles, *Contemporary Indian English Drama: An Overview* (New Delhi: Sarup, 2010) 28.
- ⁹ "The Doldrummers" *Asif Currimbhoy's Plays* (New Delhi: Oxford & IBH, n.d.) 178. All the subsequent references for *The Doldrummers* have been taken from the same edition; cited hereafter in the text with the initial letters of the play *TD* and corresponding page number(s) in parentheses.
- ¹⁰ P.B. Shelley, "Ode to Skylark". 12 Dec. 2015 <en.wikisource.org>.
- ¹¹ T.S. Eliot, *The Wasteland*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 2007) 39.

Because identifying theme can be challenging and subjective, it is often a good idea to work through the rest of the analysis, then return to the beginning and assess theme in light of your analysis of the work's other literary elements. Here is a good example of an introductory paragraph from Ben's analysis of William Butler Yeats's poem, "Among School Children." "Among School Children" was published in Yeats's 1928 collection of poems *The Tower*. It was inspired by a visit Yeats made in 1926 to school in Waterford, an official visit in his capacity as a senator of the Irish Free State. In the co