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## Religion and Guilt in Asif Currimbhoy's *Om*, *Abbé Faria* and *Monsoon*

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The present plays of Currimbhoy offer extensive scope for studying the conflict of the modern man with religion. Currimbhoy seems to consistently project that the modern man's spirituality leads to the victimisation of himself basically because his attachment with God and his adherence to religion is only through a war between his "ego" and the one placed above him in the hierarchy. When at times spirituality becomes the safe haven for absconding from sin, his ego does not let him acknowledge the fact that he is also governed or monitored by God. At the surface level, Currimbhoy displays this conflict of man with God but in the sublime, he is condescends religious ethics which work against humanity.

Svetaketu (*Om*), Andrew (*Monsoon*) and Abbé (*Abbé Faria*) are more the agents than characters which reveal the impact of religious and spiritual victimisation that in turn commandeer a person's psyche as soon as he identifies the guilt within himself. The rapture comes in when the person senses his failure in conforming with the norms of the society and recoils back as someone guilty.

Svetaketu feels guilty that he has killed one of the soldiers in the war; Andrew feels guilty and sinful for no reason suggesting an absurdity in his character but wants to achieve purgation by consummation with an innocent and pure virgin so that he can bring in "immaculate conception" much like God did with mother Mary; Abbé feels guilty that his father died soon after his birth and that he raped his mother. Guilt overtakes the conscience of man; he yearns for redemption and finally takes recluse of religion to reprimand himself. However, this ascetic step further pushes him to the dark as he starts committing one crime after the other against the lives of the people associated with him and eventually allows his life to be seized. He becomes more inhumane and indulges in adultery and murder.

While constructing these characters, Currimbhoy neither validates their actions nor legalises religious ethics. He takes an objective stance and does not allow the audience to emotionally get involved with the characters. His is much like the *alienation effect* of Brecht but he achieves it in a different way which appears surrealistic at times. He does it by breaking the flow of time and sometimes making both the past and the present appear together by using the shadow play technique and then shuffling the names of characters and their age so that there is no subjective involvement in the audience as in *Om*; bringing in the comic in unexpected situations as in *Monsoon*; and sometimes keeping things vague till the end and putting in unrelated images in the scenes much like in surrealistic paintings and making it more dream-like as for instance in *Abbé Faria* where one cannot realise till the end who is more sinned.

This paper deals with two aspects of relevance in the three plays taken under study. Firstly, it tries to analyse how guilt consciousness constructs/destroys the three characters Svetaketu, Abbé and Andrew in the plays. Secondly, how the women

become the site for violation and how the playwright uses them as agents to symbolise the exploitation of humanity that is exercised through the complex relationship of guilt and religion in the man.

## I

In *Om* which is a trilogy, the playwright, from the outset explains the philosophy of the Vedas and the Upanishads intermittently in the play. The play is set at the backdrop of Hindu religious practices trying to emphasise its impact on a man's life. The play highlights the religious philosophy that grew in the period between 2000 BC and 500 BC when the rituals began and the *mantras* or hymns were a part of the ritualistic tradition of the Hindus. Such rituals emphasised the two paths of meditation and unification with the deities as one thing and the *Bhagavad Gita* had this at its core. Not only is this, in all the three parts of the play Currimbhoy is unconvinced about the way *bhakti* and *dharma* are used as ways of achieving *moksha* in Hinduism. Currimbhoy shows the absurdity of such practices unless the man is free of his inner conflicts and has the freedom and necessity of going close to religion. Religion is soiled if it is taken as a safe haven to evade guilt in man. In all the three parts of the play, the main character Svetaketu appears in three different stages of life. The first Svetaketu is a young man burdened with the sense of guilt for killing a soldier during war. As a Kshatriya, he is expected to go for the war and his act of killing the soldier is just a "performance of his duty" which is "dispassionately done". But, Svetaketu fails to convince himself and justify his act of killing a man. He acknowledges that he has committed a crime against humanity and feels guilty. He is haunted for penance. He decides to forsake his earthly responsibilities and turn into asceticism. But then, he is persuaded by his father and wife not to do so. His guilt makes him blind of his responsibilities towards his father and his wife. Svetaketu is torn between the conflict of a desire to merge with the Divine to escape from his sense of guilt as early as possible but is trapped in the *maya* of the materialistic world. Svetaketu's close sense of recognising his guilt is a self-reflexive process through which he feels he is getting closer to the Divine Self or the *atman*. His guilt becomes a route to unification with the Divine whereas his wife and father try to hold him back in the materialistic world of *maya*. In Act II, Svetaketu is an old caretaker-priest of a temple who lives with his daughter. He is haunted by a dream where he carries a dead body on his shoulders. Svetaketu gets drowned in the river and tries to come out. He also tells his daughter that even though he is a Brahman and well-versed in the Vedas yet he is scared of such dreams. There is fear within him. He is not courageous to face death even though he is well versed in the Vedas. His knowledge of the Vedas is superficial because he classifies among humans and hates the stranger because he is from the lower class in society. What kind of a religion does the priest follow then if it divides man against man? The stranger poses a threat to Svetaketu through his knowledge, devotion and modesty. The stranger knows the divine in the world through *feeling* whereas the old man knows through *reading*. Currimbhoy, attacks religion owned through education and emphasises the necessity of internally feeling and experiencing what one learns keeping safe the modesty in oneself and giving respect to other human beings. Even then, the stranger acknowledges the old man as someone who is more learned than him whereas the old man denounces the stranger as ignorant and asks his daughter to keep away from the stranger and his song. The playwright thus satirises Svetaketu's superficial religiosity and spirituality which has no compassion for humanity. The stranger is healed at the end whereas Svetaketu gets drowned to death. The stranger and the daughter are seen playing in delight and unaware of the drowning old man

symbolising humanity forsaking vanity. The chanting of the word OM by the stranger is not mere superfluous devotion that he tried to put on show like the old priest. The playwright is critical of the way saints or priests are misconstrued of achieving God by thinking they are well versed in the Vedas.

In Act III, Svetaketu is hailed as someone who is the Truth, and the greater Self. The characters are interchanged and now there is only the Guru and the disciple. The Sishya has immense desire of achieving *moksha* but fails to achieve it. The Guru tries to convince his Sishya but the Sishya tries to strangle the Guru. This act of trying to strangle the Guru by a Sishya who is learning to achieve *moksha* through religion shows the corrupt attempts made by many in the name of religion to achieve salvation. *Moksha* is visualised as an object rather than a state of achievement through control over one's own mind and this is the satire in the last part of the trilogy by Currimbhoy. Svetaketu killed a saint and is now guilty but also acknowledges the moment as a meeting with God when for the split of a second he could feel it while severing the head of the saint from the body. Currimbhoy shows it in a paradoxical way where the sinner is close to the Divine and feels the Divine while committing sin. This is contradictory in itself. Guilt is sensed if the person finds himself going against the norms of the society where he lives and this can help overcome the evil in him. As John Carroll rightly points out, the twentieth century reads guilt as a "terrible sin" whereas it should have been taken as the "richest" and "most hidden resource", the "essence of humanness" in men.<sup>1</sup>

Currimbhoy's *Monsoon* is an extreme revelation of psychosis that can occur in the life of a man who identifies his existence with sin and guilt. The play is a narration of a story of one friend Andrew by the other Dr. Juan. Lies within the narration, layers of meaning that ultimately helps the reader to know how religion, superstition, instinct, learning, logic and race or colonisation can violate a man's existence. Andrew is such an example in the play that dwells on experiments, well-versed in Bible but shattered by instinct at times. He is captured with the fact that he is sinful. Andrew is so much blinded by his absurd guilt-consciousness that he victimises a small child and isolates her from the rest of the world. Andrew's treatment of the girl resonates with the treatment of Mary by God in the Bible. Andrew uses the body of Monsoon, the woman-grown-out-of-the-child under his vigilance to get his own child much like God used the commanded Mary for the "immaculate conception" of God's child Jesus Christ. The desire in Andrew for a child reflects the human desire for preserving his own lineage after his own death. Andrew had a strange belief that through the conception of the girl he will achieve purgation but such belief stands against humanity. He was aware that it was sin but then he later tells that "sin is a necessity in the purification process" (89) When Dr. Juan diagnoses the girl and finds that she was raped by a syphilitic man, Andrew gets fired on her and her grandmother. The fact that the girl lost her virginity irritates him since it had spoiled his perseverance to achieve salvation. However, he could never come out of the obsession he had for Monsoon and waited till she could reproduce. The grandmother left the girl with Andrew forever and went away after Andrew got fired on the grandmother for letting the girl get raped. Since then Andrew

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<sup>1</sup> From "His Excellency, the grey eminence..." in *Guilt: The Grey Eminence behind character, history and culture* by John Carroll. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul plc., 1985. 1-5. \_ Carroll also explains how terrible it was to be not ashamed after committing a sin after our first Judeo-Christian father Adam showed his disobedience to God and committed the first original sin. The critic adds Dostoevsky's point of how only the greatest sinners because of the enormity of suffering cast upon them by their guilt become good saints at the end.

enclosed her within his house by building a big strong wall which he imagined was the Noah's Ark. In this way, the girl was separated from the outside world and inside she only had the company of Andrew and she learnt only what Andrew taught her. Andrew initially taught Monsoon those lines from the Bible which tells about the "immaculate conception" by Virgin Mary.

Andrew's obsession with the small girl is only hinted as sexual and never made explicit until after years of staying with the girl Andrew suddenly meets an old woman who prophecies through card reading. It was by chance that Andrew meets the old woman. After many years of isolation in his own house he comes out one day and meets Dr. Juan and Daisy the prostitute at Ling's restaurant in the town. Daisy catches the old woman in the restaurant and asks her to tell her fortune. The old woman also reveals Andrew's fortune that he would make the girl conceive and that the girl will bear a child whom he would love more than anything in the world. However, the mother of his child would always thwart his influence on the child. And all this finally end up being true.

Andrew suffers from an implicit domination. This is the urge of the White man to teach and preach the native and christen them. The girl is first separated from her grandmother because Andrew believed that her grandmother practised black magic and was a "heathen" unlike him who was a "White man". The influence of the grandmother on the girl is repeatedly reminded by Andrew who shows a strong hatred of Andrew over the witchcraft or black magic of the native which has cast a spell on his life and for which he is suffering. He tries arduously to free the girl from the influence of the Grandmother but he is never successful till the end of the play. Therefore, his act of teaching the girl Bible can also be seen as his urge to educate the native heathen and his obsession for a child from her can also be seen as a desire of the white who remained in the colonies to get merged with the native and create his own progeny. The difference between the native and the White is suggested from the beginning when Dr. Juan and Andrew are seen meeting for the first time. They talk of why the one remained in the tropical island and why the other came back from the land of the Whites. And finally, when Andrew beats Monsoon and drags her out of the house he reveals his hatred to her and addresses her as the "cursed heathen".

It is interesting to note how Christianity is involved in the play. Andrew emphasises only that part of the Bible which deals with the "immaculate conception" of Mary by the Holy Ghost. He reads those lines and transforms himself into the world of imaginary. In fact there exists only a thin line of separation between the imaginary and the real for Andrew. Andrew hallucinates. Andrew imagines that he is God and Monsoon the Virgin mother. He wants Monsoon to conceive his child just as God wanted his child to be conceived by Virgin Mary. Andrew is not a blind follower of religion neither is he a fanatic. This becomes clear when he asks Monsoon to tear off the page that had the lines of "immaculate conception" by Mary. He is cynical about the whole concept of "immaculate conception" and this act of God seems to haunt him. For him then, God is also a sinner. He says all through that he is a sinner but what is the sin he has committed is never clear. On the contrary, he is about to commit a sin through his idea of making Monsoon pregnant with his own child. Andrew called Monsoon "child" when she was small and took care of her as her mother and father but then when she grew up he started calling her Monsoon and waited for her to give birth to his child. Till the time she was a child, Andrew called her "child/my child" but as she grew in years Andrew's obsession to see Monsoon as the "immaculate" mother became more and more deep. Finally, Monsoon gives up to Andrew and she gives birth to his child.

In *Abbé Faria*, Abbé is guilty from the beginning of the play for the death of his father soon after his birth and the loneliness of his mother due to the death of his father. Abbé is guilty for the rape of his mother which is again symbolic of the colonial rape of India by the Whites as will be discussed in the second section of the paper. His guilt makes him hallucinate and he sees the image of woman in black veil passing through him in a carriage very often. He took a Degree in Divinity in Rome and revolted against the National Convention in Paris and was elected a member of Medical Society in Marseille but then he is seen transcending all the norms of restrictions and reservations of a Christian life and visiting cafes, indulging into gambling, flirting and sex. Currimbhoy shows the sexual involvement of the Abbé with three women in the play. Moreover, his sense of guilt which haunted him is further bruised with the kind of exclusion he faces in society. Abbé is considered as “mysterious”, “evil”, “charlatan”, “imposter”, “false”, “anti-Christian”, and “devilish” and inclined to “immoral practices”. Thus, the other characters in the play construct Abbé as a negative character. He becomes a victim of Christianity as he is looked at as the son of “a monk and a nun”. Ironically, the incomplete address of the relationship of his parents reverberates as a *sinful* cause for his birth and the fact that people scorn at him for being so adds insult to his existence. The fact that his parents were ordained monk and nun was after their separation which nobody knows.

Abbé had been away from his mother since his childhood. Once again, we come across the example of how religious norms practised or believed by society is at disparity with humanity. He is distanced from his mother as she became a nun and forsook him; then he is removed from living the pious and spiritual life of a monk by the Christian society. Thus, he is twice displaced—firstly, from his biological mother and secondly, from his motherland. Similarly, he is excluded twice once, when the Whites colonised India and he had to go to Europe for learning divinity and second when he learnt divinity and stayed in Europe. It was after that that he was always looked upon as the exotic other of the Whites who is a native of India, no matter that he was by then well versed in Christianity. But Abbé gets a recluse in the Nimes girls’ school for being a rebel against Christianity and since he took a Degree in Divinity in Rome and revolted against the National Convention in Paris and was elected a member of Medical Society in Marseille.

After being excluded by the Christian society as “mysterious”, he joins Nimes school. The Rector allows him to join the school after going through his profile. He indulges into “both UnGod- and UnChristian-like” and experiments with hypnotism which is referred to as the “*magnetisime animal*” by the Padre and others in the academy. Abbé is a victim of Christianity and so gets solace by practising anti-Christianity as a vent out for his vengeance against Christianity. For him, there exist two worlds one is that of Christianity from which he is excluded though not overtly “excommunicated” as the Member of Clergy says, and the other is the world of anti-Christianity where he indulges into experiments of hypnotism trying to assert his “mysterious” power and prove his ability to see things through dark. Abbé mesmerises a girl to heal her in Nimes and gets involved sexually with her in the process of healing her. Not only with the girl at Nimes but with the can-can dancer Michelle and with Madame Florimond. Abbé is represented as an adulterer who mesmerises women and commits sin. This can be closely related to what Mother Isabella says about the Indians with so much hatred in her. She expresses with uncontrollable anger which turns into anguish against the Indians, “They were guilty! They mocked my abstinence and charity: they were guilty. Their swarthy bodies: copulating like animals. The whiteness of my robe, Abbé Faria, unsoiled by virginal blood. I kept my vows.

Always...remained...unshaken. You must know...what it means coming from there. Shameful and humiliating...to a woman...bearing its compulsion...resisting...Man's insatiable wickedness." (22)

Abbé's identity as an Indian also acts as a sense of guilt in him. In the dinner party at the house of the Countesse when the men talk about him as someone coming from the East, and so having mysterious powers, "He has mysterious powers, I know, coming from the East, he does..." (42) His identity itself makes him feel guilty and the character of the Indian males is synchronised with the sexual involvement of Abbé with three women in the play.

Finally, we see that Abbé becomes a victim of his own practise of hypnotism. When he asks the choir boy to speak after mesmerising him, the boy reveals the secret of Abbé and not his own. Abbé shuts the boy's mouth out of fear. He wanted to hide his guilt all through and run away from it but the revelation of the boy exposes Abbé and then the playwright has nothing left to tell about Abbé. The greatest secret about Abbé is revealed. The act of revelation acts as an act of pacifying the guilt in Abbé.

Currimbhoy brings in the technical closure of the play with the freedom of Abbé's burden. Soon after this, Abbé is found confined in an asylum and normal. Finally when Abbé is in the asylum and confined, imprisoned he is considered to be no more harmful as he forsakes his practise of hypnotism and so the Superintendent gives him the key but he lies within the room and writes and dies. This is symbolic of the confidence that the coloniser has after overcoming his threat of the colonised. Abbé being a colonised also symbolised the threat to the colonisers. He threatened them with his mysterious power of hypnotism or the animal magnetism. Later when the Negress, the voodoo woman comes in to share his skill of animal magnetism it becomes clear that the playwright's intention is of showing a kind of brotherhood that is deeply felt amongst the colonised nations. Abbé is more "sinned against than sinning", and this is what is indicated by him at the end when he says to the Superintendent of the asylum where he lives till his death: "I was wondering, how much humanity is needed...to make any condition supportable..." (62)

## II

In all the three plays women are seen as victims of the male paranoia and obsession. Although the men Svetaketu, Andrew and Abbé suffer from guilt and are in delirium due to their individual conflict with religion, women become more victimised. Svetaketu's affection for his wife shifts to the Divine. He tries to transcend the material world of reality forsaking his responsibility towards his wife. He tells her, "You make me more afraid" and expresses how her love can be a bondage for him. He expresses ruthlessly to her that her love is not greater than the desire or love for the Divine. But when Svetaketu talks of his death, his wife cannot bear his words:

WIFE: (*voice close to scream*) Don't! Don't say that! Don't ever say that, my love. (*she goes into his arms*). Never say that. My life would end if you should die. Don't die before me. Even in old age. I could not live without you...for I love you so. (18)

His wife is one of the *daughters of Shakuntala*<sup>2</sup>, who tries to bond her husband with her love but fails and is forsaken. She is deprived of the happiness of a wife.

In Act II, the woman is a daughter. She is ignorant of the Vedas and Upanishads and so innocent that she gets mesmerised by the song of the stranger. This threatens her father the old Svetaketu, who is already frightened by the knowledge and perception of

the stranger. However, the innocent attraction of the girl to the stranger could not be affected by the father who is corrupt and is a pretender practicing false religion. In the last act of the play, the female is a servant who belongs to the lower class than the class to which the men belong to. She is doubly oppressed because she is a woman and because she is from a lower class. At the end, she dies because she never gets the concern in the inevitable struggle of the men around her who always try to achieve something for only themselves. This symbolises the struggle with which a woman has to fight against her wishes and try to suppress them. She finds no space for herself in the world of men and sacrifices her own life at the end.

*Monsoon* is a sheer critic of how meek and powerless are women when they are oppressed through obsession. This play shows Andrew in a position of power who exploits a human life right from its beginning— Monsoon's rape as a child, her isolation in childhood. Andrew's obsession with "purity and innocence of a virgin" becomes madness and he creates a death-in-life for Monsoon. Monsoon never takes the liberty of exceeding her limits even though she is left with the key. The play highlights the way Monsoon could perceive Andrew's thoughts much before she is a grown up lady. Monsoon receives the teachings of Andrew. The repetitive teaching about the conception of Mother Mary through God by Andrew is a premeditated step. Andrew did not want the consummation to be recognised as a human activity and therefore, lifted it to a God-like act. He identified himself with God and Monsoon with Mother Mary. He was a symbol of patriarchy for Monsoon much as God was for Mary. Andrew uses the body of Monsoon, someone whom he calls "child" at the beginning and then the act of consummation which is adultery. Currimbhoy criticises the concept of "immaculate conception" through Andrew's relation with Monsoon. Monsoon is an agent for his redemption.

Even when Dr. Juan asks her she says Andrew has taught her what she wanted to learn and it becomes strange that she herself never tried to go out of his house. At the end, Andrew tries to consummate with Monsoon's child for achieving the redemption. But Monsoon kills her child before Andrew could her. Monsoon undergoes an extreme stage of brutality in every phase of her life. Monsoon had the wish of flying free like the love-birds although for short moments as she tells her daughter towards the end of the play, " Sometimes I see them flying...outside, free...and I get a sudden yearning, which all too soon passes away...."(135).

The male/female dichotomy is made analogous to the learning/instinct dichotomy in the play. Andrew emphasises more on learning and experimenting and this is how he fools Daisy and tells the fortune of Daisy in a scene later. Andrew could tell easily what happened to Daisy and what would happen to her by just learning Daisy's instincts. Andrew could manipulate Daisy easily. Andrew is a close learner of instincts and uses this against the people around, a way in which a coloniser would learn the colonised or the white would learn the native. On the other side emphasising the importance of instincts is Grandmother of the girl in the play. Grandmother always advised Monsoon to follow her instincts and what the ancestors said. Finally, Monsoon sensed that Andrew would use his own daughter for his redemption. Andrew is a "white demon" which Monsoon expresses at the end to him because he had always tried to colonise her with his knowledge and his obsessions.

In *Abbé Faria*, Abbé's relationships with the women are momentary and take place when he is under the affect of his hypnotic experiments. The white girl whom he

hypnotises at Nimes talks of the violence that was done on her body earlier and which was more bestial than done by Abbé. The woman speaks of her suffering due to violence and due to her desire. Currimbhoy allows the women to speak of the violation they go through—one being the instance of the girl at Nimes and the other being the instance of Mother Isabella.

The words of the nude woman covered by a sheet black veil who tells Abbé, “They don’t understand, Faria my love, do they, what drives you on to fulfilment and despair...There is no love so pure as our own, Faria, though you must bury me...alone...Beware, my love, there’ll be envy and hate wherever you go, and fear you they will...” (46-47) echo the bond that Abbé has with his motherland India. The words show the curse that Abbé has to bear through his life for being from the East and the estrangement that he will be met with. The woman in black veil symbolise his lost attachment to his country and therefore his mother. Mother Isabella is also such an image. She had to go to India because she was a White and had to be with the Indians whom she gradually despised. She was used by the Whites as an agent for colonisation and looked at by the natives as an object of desire. Mother Isabella’s hatred for the Indians is expressed through her abstinence from any sexual desire, denouncement and suppression of her sexual life.

## IN LIEU OF A CONCLUSION

Currimbhoy shows how the modern man carries the guilt like Svetaketu, Andrew and Abbé. This guilt becomes a paranoia leading them to seek redemption and chastise through themselves in ways which ultimately separates them from the society. The guilt germinates because they have gone against their religious conviction. In an attempt to redeem them, they indulge in more sin. The individual’s sense of guilt is also a contribution of the society as Carroll rightly puts, “What happens once culture fails to connect the individual to his fellowman in a way that will allow his guilt expression to be worked through, and out, in the social arena? Is it simply that guilt turns inwards and overwhelms its victim with depression?” And Currimbhoy’s plays show this to be true. Svetaketu, Andrew and Abbé shrink internally and externally exploit the women who become the target of such guilty men. Thus, Currimbhoy’s present plays delve deep into the ways in which religion affects humanity by creating absurd norms or rendering men to read the norms in absurd ways. *Either religion renders men blind and makes them inhumane or men are blind followers of religion.*

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