

Racism : A Colour Paradigm in Asif Currimbhoy's Goa

Yoosaph A.K.

Lecturer in English,
King Saud University,
Riyadh, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

Asif Currimbhoy emerged as a notable Indian English playwright in the post-independence period. Faubian Bowers commented about him that he was “India’s first authentic voice in the theatre”. His modern plays were well known in India and abroad. The dramatic groups of American Universities, repertory companies and the off Broadway theatre had staged his plays. Politics and public affairs found abundant expression in his plays and according to Peter Nazareth, “Asif Currimbhoy interweaves the public event with the private to create exciting drama which asks moral questions about humanity in the cataclysmic period of de-colonisation”.

Born as the son of an industrialist, Asif Currimbhoy ‘was brought up in an environment of new ebullient ideas which in later life formed an integral part of his temperament’³. British Government had honoured his family with baronetcy for their remarkable achievement in the field of industry. His father was an intellectual and mother, a social worker and naturally this intellectual background might have creatively influenced his dramatic career. His acquaintance with English language helped him attain mastery in the language and his later education at Wisconsin University enhanced his adoration for Shakespeare. Therefore, his experience with various trends in drama in the USA would have helped him to shape himself as a “man of the theatre.” In an interview to *Commentary* he talks about his basic education and its influence on his life. He reveals that his exposure to the pre-independence days and the colonial experience shaped his attitude to the colonial syndrome which was centred on English.

Currimbhoy’s job in New India Assurance Company in Paris gave him the opportunity to get in touch with French culture also. Later, he joined the Burma Shell in India as an executive and his extensive travel throughout India enabled him to familiarise himself with different locales and people. It is also certain that his keen

observation of people and their life during this time enhanced his theatrical vitality.

Bayapa Reddy in his seminal work analysed his plays extensively, dividing them into political, religious and social categories. These plays were again classified in terms of the period in which they were written. Being a political play written in 1964, *Goa* belongs to the first period of his creative output. This play is a significant example of Currimbhoy's treatment of colour and race as an inevitable tool of analysing postcolonialism.

The playwright identifies the dichotomy between the concept of self and the other is dovetailed with the concept of racism in some instances. This hypothesis is furthered by the fact that science did not fully help in the shedding away of any of the earlier suppositions about inferior races that had existed in the pre-colonial times. In fact, race functioned not only as an indicator of people's skin colour but also their civilizational and cultural attributes. It is in this context Loomba observes that the European scientists' prejudice about their own racial identities prevented them from "radically questioning scientific theories of racial difference" (p.62). This must have resulted in racial discrimination because people who were treated as inferior had no access to scientific training during this time. By conquering and marginalising local knowledge systems, European colonialism imposed their biased knowledge systems on the colonised.

Colour is claimed as a major signifier for racial identity, and racial superiority is easily translated into class terms but certain sections of people were always identified on racial grounds as the working classes. Capitalism in fact continues to depend upon racial hierarchies and it also intensifies them to facilitate capitalist production and possession. Fanon's observation on this is quite significant in this sense:

Western bourgeois' racial prejudice as regards the nigger and the Arab is a racism of contempt; it is a racism which minimizes what it hates
The racial prejudice of the young national bourgeoisie is a racism of defence, based on fear. (1963: 131)

According to him, the minimization of the object of racist hatred is a sort of turn of

phrase of racial superiority but it is claimed to be based on fear rather than original authority or eligible power. By considering certain races contemptuously and highlighting the negative aspects of the tradition and customs of the Arabs and the Blacks, the Western capitalist interests played down the significance of the natives' lives in colonised countries. In short, it could be interpreted that the interests of capital and the archetypal marginalization of human beings based on colour have insidiously worked in the internal culture of colonization which has paved the way for the self/other dichotomy in various dimensions.

It is quite perceptible how the whites who claimed themselves as superior and powerful masters, owing to their distinctive colour of the skin, treated the so called coloured people. They therefore represent, according to Said, the oppressive class, rulers, religious authority, educators, aesthetically superior etc.

Goa deals with the violent liberation movement of 1969 against the long lasted occupation by the Portuguese, that transformed the entire identity of Goa. Citing *Goa* as the socio-realistic presentation of the world, the Meserves, who have commented extensively on Currimbhoy's plays, assert that he has presented a realistic picture of Goa's disintegration during the time of its liberation from Portuguese. They refer to the colonised Goa and its urge for freedom that could be achieved by violent struggle. This statement therefore is notable:

There is, for example, the bitter anguish Currimbhoy feels for 'Goa', created by the union of Portuguese and Indian only to be destroyed by conflicts with that union. His socio-realistic plotting, however, expands into allegory in 'Goa', where rape the most violent personal abuse, symbolizes the final suffering and disintegration. (Preface to *The Hungry Ones*, p.12-13))

Nonetheless, apart from the socio-realistic plotting, the play presents the theme of colour distinction which takes a significant place in discourses on postcolonialism. Senhora Miranda who belongs to the privileged class, represents the white Portuguese and in justification for her dislike of the coloured, she treats the dark skinned people derisively and says: "They make me feel dirty." (p. 37) Colour consciousness enhances

one's own contented self-confidence. Her attitude seems not only to be a condescending one that the whites harbour towards the native black-skinned people but also as something that gives vent to their egocentric nature. Being cognisant of her skin colour she is gives off the confidence that it would increase the possibilities of her privileged aristocratic status in Lisbon. She articulates her self-confidence with enthusiasm, "See how white my skin is?" (p. 26).

It is exemplified how the skin of the black colour is perceived by an aristocratic white in the colonial context. Miranda's derisive attitude to the dark-skinned and her consciousness about the skin colour seem to have given her more self-confidence creating a sense of inferiority in the colonised. Her scathing remarks would have accelerated the colonised's internalisation of the coloniser's notion about the colonised that they are inferior and underprivileged.

Miranda's colour consciousness extends even to her daughter and due to this perceivable disdain of the coloured she does not allow anyone to approach her dark coloured daughter. She knows that "Only I am fair, and she's dark" (p.37). Even the traditional maternal attitude is destabilized by colour difference, which in turn functions as a harsh irritant and reminder to Miranda of her daughter's inferiority as demonstrated in her statement thus: "They say it should give rise to love when it's cut out from your own flesh. But the colour is different. A constant reminder." (37) What does this remind her of? Is it of an Indian parentage for Rose, as it is not evident who her father is? Though Miranda is conscious of the value of maternal love, she underplays its relevance in the face of her latent obsession with skin colour. Her notion of skin colour seems to be deeply rooted and it encapsulates her colonial elitist attitude even to her daughter whose dark colour is a constant reminder to her of something that she does not reveal.

Power is vested with the whites, based upon the same preconception of colour, and the coloured are treated as unusual and alien in colonised societies. In Portuguese-colonised Goa, Krishna, the black native is looked upon as a stranger and alien by the Portuguese. There is the repeated representation of the popular colonial equation that white is neat and black dirty, as expressed by Senhora Miranda in her reference to Krishna thus: "He is a stranger here. I can make it out. He is not like the others. Dark,

yes, but not like the others.” (p.43)

She looks upon dark Krishna as different from a white man and presents this viewpoint with the same confidence and firmness expressed earlier. Her judgement dwells upon the whites’ prejudiced notion about the black with the perception that coloured skin is an original sin and is “congenital” that passes from generation to generation. Her observation justifies the Westerners’ notion about the black as those who were born with blackness about them. Miranda asserts this notion of the whites about the biological presence of darkness in the black skinned people, for degrading them and achieving a relative upper hand in political affairs of the colonies as is seen below:

SENHORA MIRANDA. ... I always thought Rose’s defect was congenital having been originally there, rather than by accident. ...If something is inevitable, it becomes congenital rather than accidental... (p.64)

She feels that it is inevitable rather than fortuitous in the case of the colonised to be dark skinned. Moreover, it is depicted in the play how a double colonisation has taken place in the case of Rose. On the one hand her dark skin is a strong reason for her confinement at home and on the other, her life itself is being controlled by her mother, who is very much conscious of her superiority owing to her white skin. However, in the case of Krishna he tries to defend his black identity by arguing that the white is definitely hiding something black in his/her innate being. He compares the white-coloured people to albinos and tries to intelligently subvert the whites’ notion about the ‘coloured’ in his statement thus, “You may have white skin, but so also have albinos. It doesn’t prove a thing.” (p.60)

In the meanwhile, Krishna’s comparison of the white to that of albinos is presented as a paradigm of protest of the black-skinned against white discrimination. This protest against Miranda is not only for his own sake but for the sake of Rose also with the primary observation that the whites are not at all different from the blacks and that they have blackness inside them. Moreover, his metaphor has another connotation that like the albinos the ‘whites’ lack colour, which may mean that they lack the pigment that

they essentially require for their life suggesting not just the absence of pigment but the absence of the self itself. Essentially, it must be the consciousness of the “other” about the “self” that lacks in the necessary presence of the other. Thus he raises some questions about the identity of Senhora Miranda and people like her with a reminder of the inherent black in them: “You’ve got shades of black within you, Maria. See it right and you won’t be conscious of it anymore.”(p.61)

In this instance it is clear that Rose represents the internal dark side of Senhora Miranda whose unconscious black identity has come out with Rose’s birth. Krishna has internalised his feeling of being black and is questioning the authenticity of subjecting the coloured to discrimination by the whites. Thus his protest is also an inversion of the logic of the whites, as a measure of resistance.

It is worth noting here that the names of the characters in the play suit this dichotomy and these names themselves represent their colour difference. While the name Krishna stands for the black, the names Alphonso and Senhora Miranda represent the Portugese whites. Thus the play tries to subvert the ideology of colour difference by inverting the hierarchy implicit in it. Moreover, by employing a name familiar to the Orient, the play is presenting a parallel of the entire ideology. Parallelism is also employed as a technique to examine the difference between the two concepts and highlights how ‘black’ is treated as hard while the ‘white’ always as its opposite in a colonial situation. As a testimony to this Senhora Miranda says: “You are not soft Krishna, you’re hard. You don’t have love Krishna, you have hate”. (ibid)

Senhora Miranda talks about white as soft and loving, purely on the basis of their skin colour attributing hardness and hatred to the dark skinned with the same parameters. It seems to be a type of colonial strategy of the westerners to construct a commonly acceptable image about the Orient. However, eventually, through his exposure of Senhora Miranda’s identity, Krishna exposes the real identity of the whites. He engages in a discourse in which Senhora Miranda also participates and he proves to her that she belongs to a category of the whites with black spots in them. Thus he comes out with the argument that the blacks are no longer destined to be inferior to the whites on the basis of colour. Miranda’s internal colonisation of her dark skinned daughter is

reflected in the political colonisation of the enclave of Goa with her justification that the dark colour is congenital and therefore must be subservient to the white.

In short, Asif Currimbhoy reveals the dichotomy between the self and other in *Goa* by featuring colour difference as a parameter of the racist analysis in a postcolonial environment. It enumerates the significance of an existing paradigm of cultural and racial preconception about the postcolonial relationships among human beings. Even the family relationship is founded upon the dichotomy that distinguishes between upper and lower poles of society. In fact, as a postcolonial playwright in English, Asif Currimbhoy has carved out a niche for himself with the trendsetting presentation of a racial paradigm which is congenial to the analysis of a postcolonial dichotomy between self and the other in *Goa*.

Reference:

Ashcroft, Bill., Griffiths, Gareth and Tiffin, Helen. *The Empire Writes Back*. London and New York: Routledge, 2002.

Bowers, Faubian. Introduction to the *Plays of Asif Currimbhoy*

Bhabha, H.K. *Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse*. October 28, Spring, 1984.

————— (ed.). *Nation and Narration*. London and New York: Routledge, 1990.

Chandra, Bipan. *Essays on Colonialism*. New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1999.

Chris, Laura and Parry, Benita (ed.). *Postcolonial Theory and Criticism in Essays and Studies*. United Kingdom: Boydell and Brewer Ltd, 2000.

Dhawan, R.K. *Fifty Years of Indian Writing*. New Delhi: Indian Association for English Studies, 1997.

Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. London: Penguin, 1990.

Gramsci, Antonio. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. Chennai: Orient Longman, 1998.

Loomba, Ania. *Colonialism/ Post-colonialism*. London & New York: Routledge, 1999.

Nazareth, Peter. "Asif Currimbhoy: Dramatist of the Public Event" in *Journal of Indian Writing in English*. Madras: OUP, 1976.

Reddy, P. Bayapa. *The Plays of Asif Currimbhoy*. Calcutta: Writers Workshop, 1985.

Said, Edward. *Orientalism*, London. New Delhi: Penguin, 2001.
