

Asif Currimbhoy's "The Refugee": A New Historicist Reading

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ABSTRACT

India Today in its Jan. 26th 2004 issue has an article entitled "Dramatic Revival" written by Nirmala Ravindran. She talks of this generation moving away from malls and PlayStations towards theatre, seeking "the archaic thrill of the stage" which "the culture watchers are calling the second coming of theatre." Indian Writings and its History knit together, is the only way the rest of the world can know about its glorious past which connects with its bright future. This article attempts to discuss the historicist percept of analyzing and thus tries to highlight Indian English Playwrights for their contribution to the Indian Theatre. According to one of the founder-proponent of new historicism, Greenblatt, believes that literary histories need to take account of "accidental judgements" and other disruptive forces more than organic narrative or cultural legitimacy that "shape the history of languages." We should never forget that a language slips, crosses borders and is mostly unpredictable and uncontrollable.'

(Key Words: New Historicism, Refugee, Indian English Drama)

The Bangladesh liberation war was a great incident in the South Asian history in 1971 which lead to its liberation ultimately and, like the rest of the World, Currimbhoy would have been acutely conscious of its political and religious implications. In August 1947, the official birth of two states, Pakistan and India¹, gave presumably permanent homes for Muslims and Hindus respectively following the departure of the British. The Dominion of Pakistan comprised two geographically and culturally separate areas to the east and the west with India in between². The western zone was popularly (and for a period of time, also officially) termed West Pakistan and the eastern zone (modern-day Bangladesh) was initially termed East Bengal and later, East Pakistan. Although the population of the two zones was close to equal, political power was concentrated in West Pakistan and it was widely perceived that East Pakistan was being exploited economically, leading to many grievances. Administration of two discontinuous territories was also seen as a challenge³. On 25 March 1971, after an election won by an East Pakistani political party (the Awami League) was ignored by the ruling (West Pakistani) establishment, rising political discontent and cultural nationalism in East Pakistan.

Based on this history, as given by Greenblatt lays down four "enabling presumptions" of new historicism in Genre, which have acquired the force of law.' They are:

1. Literature has a historical base and literary works are not the products of a single consciousness but many social and cultural forces. In order to understand literature one has to take recourse to both culture and society that gave rise to it in the first place.

2. Literature is not a distinctive human activity hitherto believed, but another vision of history. This has obvious implications for both literary theory and the study of literary texts.

3. Since literature and human beings are both shaped by social and political forces, it is not possible to talk of an intrinsic human nature that can transcend history. And since history is not a continuous series of events but ruptures, there is no link between one age and another or between men belonging to different ages. This

being the case, a Renaissance man is rooted in his Renaissance idiosyncrasies just as a modern man is rooted in his. A modern reading of a Renaissance text cannot be the same as a Renaissance reading. At most a literary interpretation can reconstruct the ideology of the age through a given text.'

4. Caught in his own historicity, a historian cannot escape the social or ideological constraints of his own formation. And, therefore, he cannot fully understand the past objectively on its own terms.

The four presumptions basically imply that new historicism does not try to retrieve the original meaning of a text but locates the original ideology that gave rise to the text, which the text disseminates, within the boundaries of culture and sometimes beyond it. Since literary texts are built in such a way so as to suppress the means through which they create their ideology, new formalism's assumption that texts are self-contained entities, could not help it unmask the ideological instruments or "representations" that construct the texts. The new historicists claim that since they see the texts as another artefact of the ideology of a given age, they can go directly to the instruments that constructed the text unmasking their hegemony. And in claiming this, new historicists appropriate two assumptions of post-structuralism: firstly, that a text can only be understood if we lay claims to the ideology of the age and not the intention of the writer; and secondly, the doctrine of textuality (that a literary work is another historical document or a text rooted in the context) is the only means to understand the contextual meaning. Both the assumptions are lifted verbatim without original investigations or philosophical arguments. So every historicist worth his salt seeks multiple meanings of a text and relates it to its context without questioning why he is doing what he is doing. Given these assumptions new historicists reposition the text in the original discursive reality of the age in which it was produced.

Things started changing with the arrival of Asif Currimbhoy on the Indian English drama scene. He was one of our first playwrights to produce plays that could be performed. Other playwrights writing at this time, the 1960s, with more success than the earlier ones, the primary reason being that they were writing plays to be acted, were the primary reason being that they were writing plays to be acted, were Nissim Ezkiel with his *Nalini* and *Sleepwalker*. Currimbhoy, as said by his wife, is a "Karma Yogi", wrote on the issues that bothered him. As so much history is used in the play, New Historicism is the best approach in analysing this play as said by Peter Barry, that new historicism is "a method based on the parallel reading of literary and non-literary texts, usually of the same historical period"⁴.

The title of the play gives the exact problem, the play tries to tackle. The play provokes the Bangladesh War as is given in its first scene, which begins indicating the specific time and exact place of the play and after the talks between Yahya Khan and Sheik Mujib broke down. The play sensitively shows the treatment of refugees in general, Yassin the protagonist in particular, it depicts the traumas he go through and how he was misunderstood and maligned.

The Refugee begins with Sen Gupta's warmth welcoming of Yassin, a refugee, with phrases like, "Rememberthis is home....and we are your family"?(p.81). He always comforts Yassin in his speaking. Being a man in fifties, Sen Gupta is an active, restless man with plenty of energy.

You see why we're one. The East Bengali, whether Muslim or Hindu always yearns for his old home town. (p.82)

Yassin a young man in his twenties, is depicted as a soft spoken intellectual, sensitive to his surroundings and is anguished, troubled and miserable. In Sen

Gupta's dialogues come across historical incidents like: "I came here myself a refugee when partition tore us apart 24 years ago". (p.82).

Things Change very quickly and within a few days of time the invasion of refugees puts a strain on all the residents of this little border town, showing how quickly hospitality can turn into hostility-the two don't seem to be too far apart. Here it is clearly seen that the social status of people was set by politicians. The conversations like 'Shortly after 25th Mar 1971', 'Universities in West Bengal', 'the boarder of West Bengal', 'I came here myself a refugee when partition tore us apart 24yrs ago', 'their newly found Bangla freedom and friendship', (pp.81-82) all these clearly give the play's connection with history. Entire play tightly knitted around refugees of two countries; India and Pakistan. This is reflected in the dialogues of the two refugees, who supposed to be the key roles.

The play deals with politics, with history and yet, the characters are not historical. Here they are ordinary people caught up in the turmoil of the times.

Sen Gupta: My dear Professor, the affairs of government are all dictated by politics...Even the problem of refugees and Bangladesh must have a political solution. We all know that.... (p.95)

The refugee problem is a real situation, but how many Yassins could be there? Is there any solution left for these people? How do these people get respect from the people around? To which country they belong? What is the situation now for Sri Lankan Refugees? Governments in ruling may change but they should find a possible solution for these people. Yassin, a Pakistani Muslim Refugee, Ramul, Hindu-Muslim Refugee Asif tries to depict a sensitive line in between.

When Sen Gupta and Yassin have an argument and Sen Gupta calls Yassin a traitor, Yassin replies "traitor to whom! To Pakistan, To India, or to this household! Who should I owe allegiance to?" He goes on to ask for "freedom of thought and action, or else you deprives me of refuge in this very house of yours." A little later on Asif gives these stage directions: "Yassin flushes, feeling guilty and oppressed once again; without knowing why, without being able to escape his identity, the indelible stamp of the unwanted refugee." (p.96)

After talking to Mita, to whom Yassin seems to be getting very close, rethinks and decides to leave when Mita questions him he says, "Because I want your respect. It's as important as if it were my own....."(p102) Yassin also realizes how the Pakistani Muslim in India jeopardizes the position of the Indian Muslim, by identifying the difference between Prof. Moshin and himself.

Yassin: You mean ... there is a difference between me and you. You also mean the presence of the Pakistani Muslim, the refugee, jeopardizes the position of the Indian Muslim in India. No. No. Professor.....Like a placard saying: Muslim refugee, Go Home. (p.103) is being waved in his face. And to Sen Gupta who also asks why he's going back, Yassin replies, "Because I want to...preserve our friendship. It means a lot to me.

Yassin never discloses how his mother had died. Sen Gupta knew his mother, may be had some romantic attachment to her, after all, Yassin does say she died of a broken heart and even at the end Sen Gupta longs to hear from Yassin what she said before she died. But Ramul is another refugee and there were millions like him. The refugee problem existed – that is fact. May be new historicism would work here too,

especially when we look at the problems faced by the residents of small border towns, when we look at the Hindu-Muslim divide and when we compare the plight of the Hindu refugee versus the Muslim one.

To conclude, though we have both New and Old Historicisms there are few differences between these two; New Historicism gives "equal weighing" to literary and non-literary texts, and deals with history as text. Derridean view is that there is nothing outside the text, or that everything is available to us only in textual form, so it is a parallel reading and no more hierarchy like the Old. The aim is not to represent the past as it really was, but to present a new reality by re-situating it.

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