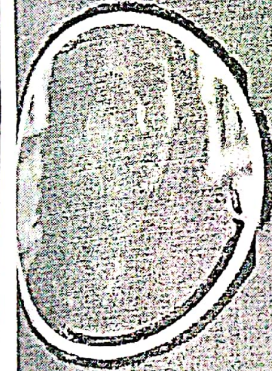


A Critical Approach to Contemporary Indian English Writing



Dr. Kanwar Pal Singh



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A Critical Approach to Contemporary Indian English Writing

Edited by
Kanwar Pal Singh

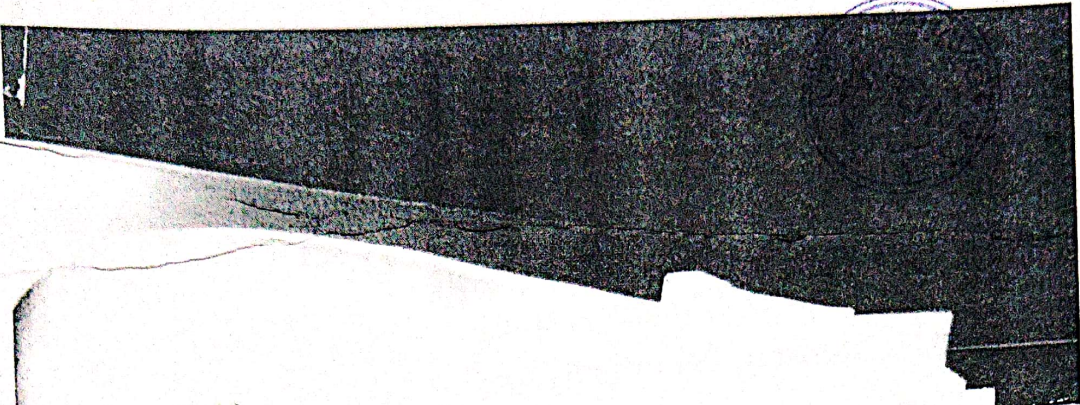


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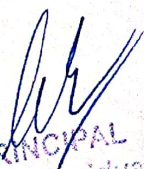
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A Critical Approach to Contemporary Indian English Drama

NIRMALA PADMAVAT

ABSTRACT

India has a rich heritage and glorious tradition of drama. Drama as a form originated in India in Sanskrit plays of Vedic Era. Natyashashtra (Theatre) dates back to approximately 2000 BEC. Ancient Indian drama was lyrical drama. The influences of Western theatre and culture shaped the contemporary Indian drama which marks a significant departure from the ancient Indian drama. Theory and practice of composition and stage performance of drama developed in modern India in both the pre-and post-independence period. Many famous Indian dramas have been translated into English and many Indian Writers in English started writing drama in English. Popular ideas associated with Existentialism, Globalization, Surrealism, Magic Realism etc. have influenced modern Indian drama in both composition and performance.

KEY-WORDS: Vedic Sanskrit Theatre. At

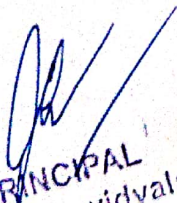
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Introduction

India has a rich heritage and history of Drama since ancient era. Drama as such originated in India in Sanskrit plays of Vedic Era. In Indian regional and typical writing, dramas were written in poetry form and in the lyrical form itself dramas were performed. *Natyashastra* (Theatre) is the popular name of Indian Theatre which could be invented in between 2000 BCE and 2nd century CE. This indicates that in India, theatre is an important feature of Indian culture. In ancient India, theatre is an aesthetic practice. In ancient India, we found an exhaustive treatise on the art of performance; drama was a gift from the gods to the humans. Kamlesh Kapur rightly pointed out his view on Indian ancient theatre as "Indian theatre is one of the most ancient forms of Asian theatre and it features detailed textual, sculptural, and dramatic effects." (2010:483). As said earlier, India has a rich heritage and glorious tradition of drama which has begun with Sanskrit Vedic Text and preserved in the *Natyasastra*.

According to the theory of drama, the oldest form of the drama found in Vedas. In other words the origin of Indian drama traced to the ancient rules and seasonal festivities of the Vedic Aryans. *Ashwaghosh, Bhasa, Shudraki, Kalidas, Harsha, Bhavabhuti, Visha-khadatta, Bhattanarayana, Murari and Rajeshkhora* are the most renowned and talented dramatists of the ancient era. These dramas enriched Indian theatre with their words like *Madhya-Mavyayoda, Urubhangam, Karnabharan, Mrichkatikam, Abhigyana, Shakuntalam, Malankagnimitram, Uttar Ramacharitam, Mudrarakshasa, Bhagavadajjukam, Mattavilasa* etc.


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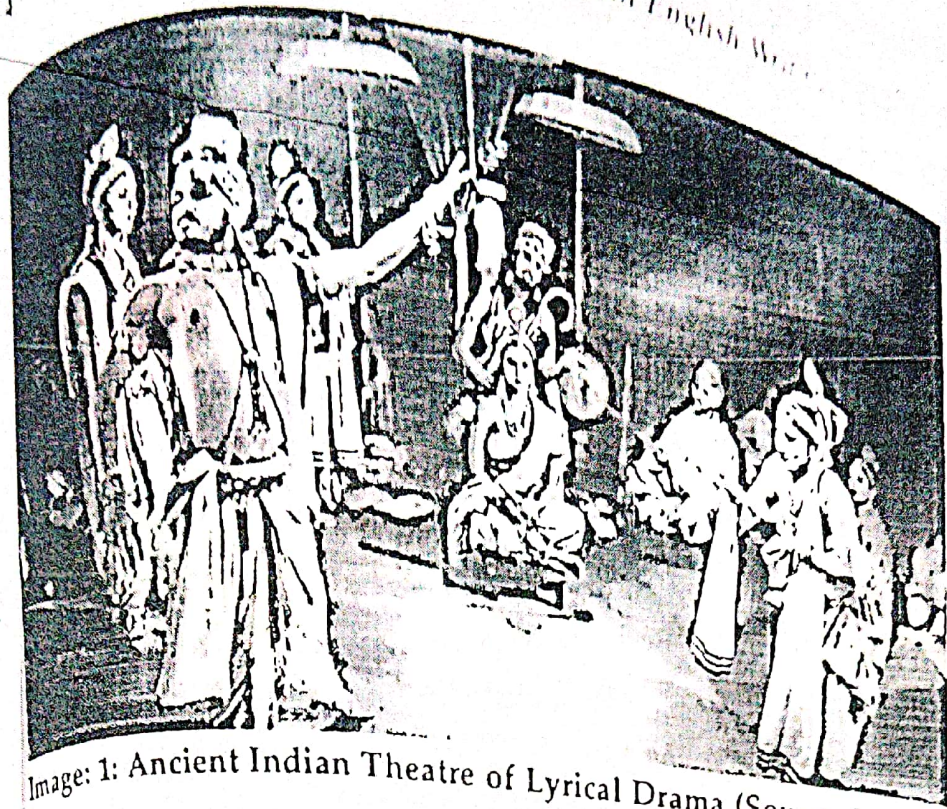


Image: 1: Ancient Indian Theatre of Lyrical Drama (Source- Internet)

The image reveals several characteristics of ancient Indian Theatre such as:

- a. The discourse used in ancient Indian theatre was sophisticated.
- b. Till the 5th Century, the Golden Era of Indian popular drama.
- c. During the golden period of Indian English Drama, we found the flow of Sanskrit drama.
- d. In traditional Indian Dramas, we found performance of drama through dancers, musicians, singers, Chorus singing and storytellers.

Thus, till 5th century, the dramas of Indian theatre were mostly influenced by Sanskrit language as a part the basic aesthetics of Bharata. Through the traditional folk and classical forms, it was survived and morphed into several variants. Later, due to the influence of Western Culture and Western craze, the contemporary Indian English drama was formed. This is not a part of its culture.



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... is that it follows the modern western drama in more than one aspect as well as it is manicured as a significant paradigmatic shift of ancient Indian drama into contemporary drama.

As far as Indian writing is concerned, during and after independence, in Indian English Writing, the writers have measured the length and breadth of the testing in the theory and practice of dramatic composition. Later, most of the dramas were translated into English. Modern writers started writing in English. They developed Modern Indian Theatre. These Modern Indian theatres were influenced by different sources. On the style of Indian writing, Charan Das in 'India Unbound' comments:

The Indian people have no clear ethos other than money. They have no heroes except cricketers and Bollywood stars. The old merits are gone from the middle class society in India and the aggressive capitalism has taken the place of idealism of the youth-
(web)

There are several features of Indian Drama in English to be kept in mind as we fathom the depths of writing. We find the influence of Existentialism, Surrealism, Dadaism, Globalization, Post Colonial issues and Magic Realism in Indian English writing during the modern era. Over the period of three hundred years as well as the matter of fact of colonial language and culture, we found the direct reflection in the Indian literary venues.

In current scenario, Modern Indian theatre has been influenced by several factors and many sources. It may be called as the Western proscenium style of theatre. At time of the consolidation of the British Empire in various parts of India before the late


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eighteenth century. Thus, through the British Empire, the Western proscenium style theatre reached in Indian shores. As per the report of Indianmediastudies.com, "Modern theatre reached the southern states in the beginning of the 19th century. The Tamil and the Malayalam theatre were prominent in them." (n.pag.) Later, Indian scenario in English theatre, the Dramatists of Indian Writing has scaled the length and breadth of the experimentation in dramaturgy of India during and after independence.

The Modern Indian English dramatist tried to cover aspects of Indian culture, religions, myth and other factors with the influence of western culture. There are many Indian English contemporary dramatists who have used new methods and new techniques in Indian English writing. Asif Currimbhoy, Badal Sircar, Chandrashekhara Kambara, Dharmveer Bharati, Girish Karnad, Gurcharan Das, Habib Tanvir, Harindranath Chattopadhyay, Javed Siddiqui, Mohan Rakesh, Nissim Ezekiel, Pratap Sharma, Ramesh Mehta, Sharad Joshi, Sri Aurobindo, Vijay Tendulkar, Kamala Das, Sunita Jain, Jayant Mahapatra, Mahesh Dattani, Mahesh Yalkunchwar, etc. are the known English writer. Among them two writers have been selected as representatives of contemporary Indian English Dramatist i.e. Girish Karnad and Mahesh Dattani and opted for detailed study.

Girish Karnad is the most popular Indian writer who wrote in regional language first and later translated into English. Sravana Jyothi D. has expressed her views on Kamad's writing in the following words:

"Karnad's concern is with the life of the modern man that is very complex and lacks in wholeness. The employment..."

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...with a conflict. His well known Dramas are *Tushtim*, *Hayavadana* and *Yayati*. *Hayavadana* is basically a Kannada scripted drama which is later translated into English. (n.pag.)

Hayavadana is a mythical and mystical play. It is the story of friends and love of Padmini. There are five characters in the play i.e. Bhagwata - the main narrator of the play, Devdutta - One of the two friends, Pandit an individual with knowledge, Kapila - Devdutta's Friend, an individual with physical strength, Padmini - A beautiful woman, who is interested in both, she wants the mind of Devdutta and the strength of Kapila and the last character is Hayavadana, a strange creature with the head of a horse and body of a man. Apart from these major characters, there are minor characters: Actor-1 who is an assistant to Bhagwata, Goddess Kali, the Goddess who brings Devdutta and Kapila back to earth, the Boy, the son of Devdutta and Padmini and Dyasagar, Devdutta's father.

Hayavadana has a well made plot. The play opens with the worship of Lord Ganesha. This scene is explained as a symbol of Hinduism. Ganesha symbolizes the concepts of completeness and incompleteness. There is also the suggestion thrown in at the very beginning that the idea of reality or perfection is best left to the gods, it is a goal beyond human comprehension and knowledge. It is the story of two friends i.e. Devdutta and Kapila. Devdutta married with Padmini. Padmini loves the body of Kapila and the mind of Devdutta. When Devdutta comes to know about it, these three are in temple of Kali (Indian Goddess of Power). They start to fight and kill each other by cutting the heads of each other. Padmini cries and worships Goddess Kali and

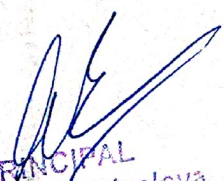
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stops her from killing herself and asks her to place the head of respective body immediately so that she could give life back to both of them. Padmini follows the command of Goddess Kali and Goddess Kali blesses life to both of them and disappears. But in hurry Padmini makes a mistake. She replaces the head of both, she places the head of Devdutta on Kapila and Kapila's on Devdutta. When she realizes it, Goddess Kali disappears.

Now the conflict arises here as to whom Padmini calls her husband. Due to her wish and self desire for the strong mind and the strong body, she claims Kapila as her husband with explanation that his head is the head of body and so body with Devdutta's head is her husband's body. She goes with Kapila with the head of Devdutta. She gave birth to a child. But after few years, she found that the body of Kapila was converting in weak mode as of Devdutta and when she came across Devdutta with the head of Kapila converted with the same strength of Kapila, which he has pre-changing the head.

After having this power, Devdutta goes to the forest in search of his wife where he sees the body of Kapila is converted as he was having in the past. He challenges him to fight. Both again kill each other and Padmini remains lonely for her further life with her five year old son. The audience listen to this story through the narrator Bhagwata who says that this boy of five years never expressed his any kind of feeling, neither joy nor sorrow. But he laughs when he saw Hayavadana, a horse with human head. At the end of Drama, the Hayavadana appears with the horse head and horse body. It has happened due to the blessing of Goddess Kali. But without listening what Hayavadana wants, he is


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not still he is happy because no combination of horse and woman is there in his life.

Karnad has used Indian Myth in his drama *Hayavadana*. His mythical characters emerge as archetypes, manifestations of general human characteristics, placed in a contemporary context. With the Indian mythology, we found the plot of drama with the theme of love, sex and desire of every body of a woman who wants to make herself fully desired lady. For her desire, she cheated with her husband and finally remained alone and isolated in her life. 'As you sow, so you reap' is the moral which Girish Karnad has explained in his Drama *Hayavadana*. According to Indian mythology Goddess Kali is the Goddess of strength and power. She blessed life to both friends Devdutta and Kapila when Padmini was killing herself. But the desire of Padmini with selfishness kept her alone in her life. Another blessing that Goddess Kali gave to *Hayavadana* - a man headed horse who at the end of drama is converted into complete horse with head and body of horse. Thus, the blessing and power of Goddess Kali given in Indian mythology is found in this drama.

There are three major elements which Girish Karnad has selected in this drama : love, lust and friendship. Devdutta falls in love with Padmini. Devdutta is the friend of Kapila who helps him to convey his love to Padmini, and finally Devdutta married Padmini. This is the theme of love. Next one is the lust. Behind the Devdutta, Padmini and Kapila were having sexual relationship because for Padmini, Kapila's body was more powerful to fulfill her sexual desire. Her desire of lust kept her alone and lonely at the end of drama because Devdutta and Kapil killed each other.

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The end of drama with killing each other is the result of ending friendship of two best friends as well as the loss of life. This happens two times, at first one by the blessing of Godless Kali. They got life but at the second, they both fight each other and kill each other. Padmini remains alone.

The title of Drama *Hayavadana* is based on one of the characters of this drama. This character has man's head and horse's body as given in the below image:

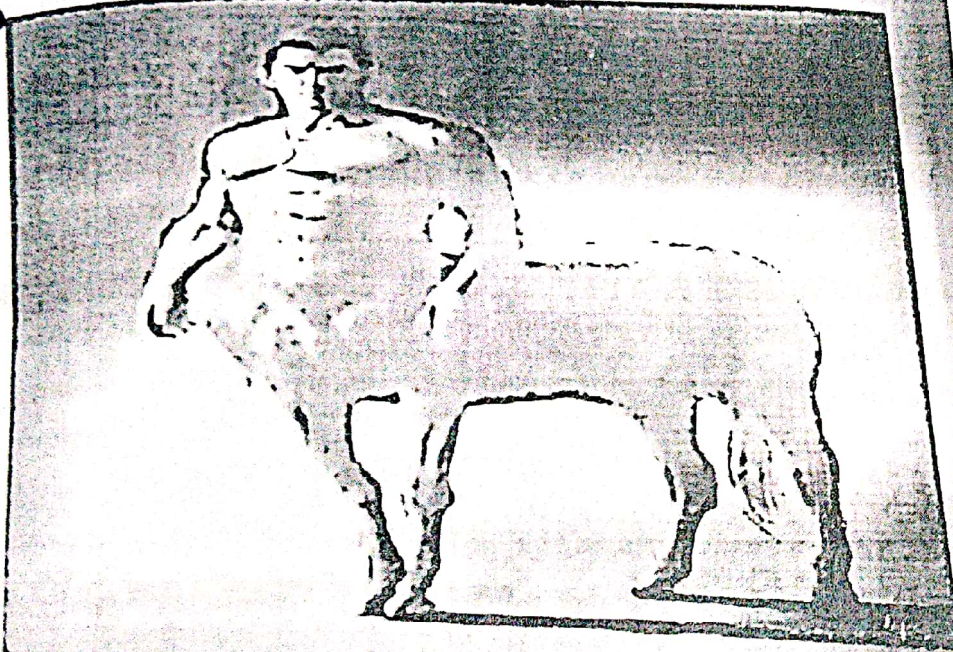
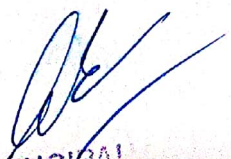


Image: 2 Hayavadana- Main Headed Horse Body.

Thus, the title given by Girish Karnad to this Drama is given by the name of the imaginative character with mysticism i.e. Hayavadana.

Another important contemporary Indian dramatist, Mahesh Dattani, is a Post Modern Dramatist who openly talks about the several social issues lying in the Indian Society. He is the one who dared to talk about transgender, homo-sexuals and *hijras* (eunuchs). Mr. Hemanta Sharma


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Comments on Mahesh Dattani's writing style in the following

words:

Mahesh Dattani has touched a number of issues which are of great interest of the world today. Dattani mainly deals with the public issues like globalisation, gender discrimination, same sex marriage, marginality and other touching areas of Indian life. Another important motif of Dattani's play is social exclusion. However, he underlines this theme not on the basis of social customs and bindings, but on unbiased gender. (2015:145)

Mahesh Dattani is the writer who dared to spoke openly on such issues which are taboos and avoided. How hard it is to those who are the part of these all sufferings. Mahesh Dattani's *Seven Steps Around the Fire* deals with the lives of hijras. The play dramatises the worst aspects of the lives of hijras. Uma, the wife of Police Superintendent, Bangalore, is an important character who works seeking justice for eunuchs after the death of Kamala, one of the eunuchs. Other eunuch characters are the politician, Mr. Sharma, and his son, Subhu, who secretly married beautiful Kamala.

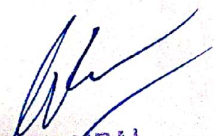
The plot of *Seven Steps around the Fire* moves around Uma who is the daughter of the Vice Chancellor of Bangalore University and the wife of the Chief Superintendent, Suresh Rao. She is a research scholar pursuing her research study on the paper entitled '*Class- and Gender- Related Violence*' and working to find out the truth of the lives of hijra. She teaches Sociology in Bangalore University. During working on her research project, she uncovers the reality behind the murder of Kamla. This is an extra-ordinary play in which the truth behind the murder of Kamla is uncovered in the play through


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relationship. Kamla loved Subbu Sharma- the son of Mr. Sharma, an influential politician and minister. They got married secretly. However, Mr. Sharma killed her due to the social positioning of the trans-sexual community existing in modern India. Kamla's body was found in a decomposed condition in a pond. Kamla was a beautiful eunuch and her murder raises the suspense. The investigation of the murder of Kamla, is the main plot of *Seven Steps Around the Fire* which highlights how the community of hijras is a target of victimization in the Indian society; how they are kept away from social mainstream; how badly they are treated and tortured as elements of chaos in the society, etc. Obviously, the plot of this drama is based on a detective thrill. Kamla's marriage with Subbu was a secret but his father, the Minister came to know about it and he killed her to protect his family honour. Uma, the wife of Police Superintendent wanted to open the secret of Kamla's murder and support Anarkali who has imprisoned and punished for the crime of Kamla's murder.

The play deals with conjugal relationship in the Indian context. Indian relationships of a husband-wife are bounded with loyalty, which Kamla has shown here in the drama. As per the wishes of Suresh, she destroyed all the notes, which are evidence of Kamla's murder and Sabhu's suicide. For the wish and desire of husband, a wife has to keep silence to show her loyalty towards husband. *Seven Steps around the Fire* symbolizes the marriage ritual in Indian Society. Fire-God is the part of Indian marriage system, and seven rounds are taken around the fire during the marriage with seven vows which are the symbols of conjugal bondages for further married life with each other. In this drama, this tradition and ritual of Fire-God and seven rounds during the marriage


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ceremony in the Hindu marriage system. There are main three aspects, which expresses the significance of the title *Seven Steps Around the Fire* as shown in the Image No. 3 below:



Image-3: Seven Steps Around the Fire- Ritual of Indian Marriage
(Source Internet)

Conclusion

The dramas of Girishi Karnad and Mahesh Dattani present a realistic vision of the contemporary Indian society. The social, financial, discrimination of society by gender biases, discrimination towards homosexuals, greed, and facility of relationships etc. are treated in an unconventional manner. They dared to write openly on many issues which are not talked openly in Indian society. The dramatists of modern era like Girish Karnad and Mahesh Dattani selected the theme of love, myth, ritual of Indian society, Indian social structure, the life of hijras, the concept of real love, the desire of sex, the limitation and loyalty of Indian wives and so on.

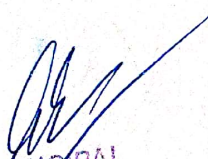

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Indian social structure is mostly based on the beliefs and traditions. Mythological approach is always an issue, which is followed by Indian society. Current era is the part of modernism and post modernism, but traditions and beliefs are strictly followed in Indian society. The prevailing gender bias gives no importance to the lives of transgender, gays, lesbians, homosexuality etc.

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