

INDO-ENGLISH WOMEN PLAYWRIGHTS

S. Krishna Bhatta

In Indo-English writing, drama is a sparsely-cultivated field. Yet we find some 400 plays and playlets as shown in the latest bibliography prepared under the auspices of Karnatak University; and there may be some unaccounted plays published in periodicals and elsewhere. A survey of these plays reveals causes for the poor output and quality in the field—of course, except in the case of a few stage-worthy plays. The true success of a play is to be tested only on the stage; but the Indo-English playwright had to suffer mainly on account of the absence of living theatre. Further, while some playwrights seem to have written just for light entertainment and some have artificially aped the west, others (in spite of dealing with their themes seriously) have mostly failed either in fully exploiting the rich sources of the ancient lore and the history of our country or in making the best use of the models and techniques of our rich dramatic tradition (both of our Classical Sanskrit Drama and the folk-stage) or in employing the spoken English suitable to particular characters and situations. Dr. M.K. Naik is right when he remarks, "It is a shocking fact that he (the Indo-English playwright) has mostly written as if he belonged to a race which has never had any dramatic traditions worth the name, and must therefore solely ape the west."¹

Yet, here and there we can find some silver lining in the clouded atmosphere of Indo-English Drama. In spite of some glaring drawbacks, major playwrights like Sri Aurobindo, Kailasam, Harindranath Chattopadhyaya and Asif Currimbhoy and a few minor playwrights have conducted some worthy experiments in the field. Likewise, though less in number, there are women playwrights who have contributed their bit. Among them, mention may be made of Bharati Sarabhai, Mrinalini Sarabhai, Swarnakumari Devi Ghosal, K.B. Thakur, Shanta Rama Rau and a few others. A brief study of some of their works (taken almost in the chronological order of their publications) is attempted here.

The earliest among these women playwrights is Bharati Sarabhai who has, to her credit, two plays; *The Well of the People* and *Two Women*. In

both the plays the author tries to give a new meaning to age-old beliefs and customs. The Vedantic concept that God is within, is presented in them in different ways and the two plays seem to be complementary in presenting types of Indian womanhood. While symbolism and poetry are the specialities of the former, there is realism in the latter and it is in prose.

In the play *The Well of the People*, Sarabhai projects a picture of synthesis of religion and social service. Moved by a story that appeared in *Harijan*, she wrote the play; according to which, an old woman fails to achieve her ambition of going on pilgrimage to Kashi and Haridwar, and decides to please God by building a well for 'the untouchables' in her village with her savings. It is evident that the story is symbolically charged with Gandhiji's socio-political ideologies; and as Dr. Prema Nandakumar says, it is "a bold attempt on the part of Bharati Sarabhai to have taken up the challenge to present a spiritual problem in terms of physical action."² A voice calls the individual soul to turn inward:

Why do you go to Haridwar, to Kashi,
O my Soul, when I am within?
Pilgrim, pilgrim, why, what is it you seek outside?³

The same concept is presented in *Two Women* in another way. The westernised Kanakaraya faces conflicts and temporarily compromises with his wife Anuradha who is very much inclined to go to the Himalayas in her quest for spiritual peace. At last, Kanakaraya gives up his rigid stand, and coincidentally enough, Anuradha does not find any meaning in her desire as she could see the Himalayas everywhere. But the sudden death of Kanakaraya renders the new-found realisation useless for the couple. Thus Sarabhai breathes a new meaning into our old beliefs and customs, and thereby tries to view modern problems with a cultural background of ancient Indian womanhood.

Svarnakumari Devi Ghosal resorts to allegory to illustrate the eternal universal truths in the guise of a story of the demoralised India of the pre-Independence period. In her three-act play *Princess Kalyani*, (with a Prologue and an Epilogue), Kalyani the embodiment of goodness and beneficence is the princess of Devagiri. The General who is the brother of the wicked Queen, incites people against the good King in order to occupy the throne. His attempt is foiled by a sincere soldier, Dhruvakumar the embodiment of truth. Finally the Queen satisfies her jealousy by offering the good princess as a sacrifice in the temple. In the Prologue there is a prayer to Saraswati the Goddess of Learning by a clairvoyance joined by the presiding deities of heaven, earth and ocean; while the Epilogue contains a prayer by the King who, upset by Kalyani's fate, renounces the world. The intention of the didactic author is made clear in the woman-devotee's prayer itself: to awaken "in the hearts of men the supreme sense of truth and brotherhood".⁴ In the

play, a distinct contrast is drawn between two sets of allegorical characters, one representing the good (Kalyani, the King, Hashi, the Jester etc.) and the other (the Queen, Matangini etc.) the evil in the world. Apart from the network of too many characters, Mrs. Ghosal employs allegory with considerable success in dramatising the universal conflict between the good and the evil forces, the temporary triumph of the evil over the good and the need for sacrifice to conquer the evil.

The Freedom Movement in our country draws the attention of Mrinalini Sarabhai, a celebrated dancer and choreographer, and her work *Captive Soil* is a powerful verse-play in two acts with a Prologue and an Epilogue, presenting the actions and reactions found among different sections of our country during the Movement. The Prologue presents a few policemen as the only substantial figures guarding a cemetery and the voices of a few ghostly figures (of martyrs) giving the details of injuries sustained on account of police firing; while the Epilogue projects silhouettes of some men and women in a march-past and a figure representing freedom-fighters who move with renewed zeal and declare with one voice their urge for freedom. In between the two, the playwright effectively brings a series of sequences starting from the arrested girl-rebels demanding the resignation of the judge and ending with the scene of a newly-wedded young man beaten up by the police and going back to jail. But, while Mrinalini's theme and language deserve admiration, lack of an organic coherence in the plot-construction mars the full success of the play on the stage. Dr. Balarama Gupta is not totally out of place when he comments, "Notwithstanding the noble theme, the dramatist must be reckoned to have failed to concretise her ideas in dramatic form".⁵

The life of the mystic princess Mira forms the theme of *The Beggar Princess* a play in 5 acts written by Indira Devi in collaboration with Dilip Kumar Roy. Fully devoted to Lord Krishna, Mira cannot accept anybody else as her husband; and Bhojaraj her married husband takes some time to understand her spiritual power. Meanwhile, wrongly interpreting her peculiar behaviour in society, Bhojaraj's sister Udayabai and others give her all sorts of trouble; while her devotional singing becomes more and more popular day by day. Her inner spiritual urge gradually accelerating, she leaves Mewar in her middle age, wanders like a beggar in many places and finally shakes off her mortal body at Brindavan. While handling the historical-hagiological theme, the playwrights develop their plot around the significant title *The Beggar Princess*, which, while appearing a bit paradoxical, blends, in the heroine, both the beggar and the princess—from the material as well as the spiritual points of view. The conflict is between the limited power of man and the infinite Grace of the Lord as can be seen in the lives of saints "who defy the weights and measures of the human superbazaar".⁶ This conflict and the consequent suspense are presented in the queen's dealings with her husband, Udayabai's acts of villainy and the robber's episode. While the scene of the Emperor Akbar and the gifted musician Tansen, enhance the dramatic effect,

the most touching scene is that of Mira's leaving Mewar, as she hears a 'call from Krishna the Lord of Brindavan'.⁷ The presentation of the theme would have been more natural if the playwrights had adopted the mode of introduction of our Classical Sanskrit Drama and also the folk-songs to demonstrate the popularity of the saint among the masses.

Drawing from the history of the Rajputs, S. Janak conceives some scenes of their fight with the Mughals, and her 3-act play *The Siege of Chitor* (a Bhavan's Journal Prize winner) deals with Akbar's final successful bid to conquer the formidable Chitor fort. In handling the theme, it appears that the playwright has a faint design of lessening the Indians' apathy towards foreign rule (here, that of Muslims) and hence tries to ennoble the character of Akbar even beyond the extent to which he is generally portrayed by historians. The fact can often be noticed in his speech: for example, here are his instructions to his General before leaving Chitor, "Temper authority with lenience. Do all in your power to win the hearts of those who remain here"; also "The valour of these Rajputs compels even my admiration Perhaps they deserve to win".⁸ But, in giving prominence to the Mughal Emperor, the playwright does not relegate to the background the staunch patriots like Patta, Jaimal, Jaya and Padmini. There is suspense, particularly in the scene where Padmini and Jaya attempt to kill Akbar though the probability of two women engaging themselves in this risky job is somewhat far-fetched.

In a compendium of human knowledge and experience like *The Mahabharata*, K.B. Thakur's motherly heart is attracted towards the inseparable bondage between a mother and her son, and in the three-act play *Mother and Child* (a Bhavan's Journal Prize-winner), she deals with a few important events of Karna's tragic life. As in Tagore's *Karna and Kunti*, it is the mother and the child that pervade the entire play, and the playwright brings out the occurrence of her child's birth in a manner not sanctioned by the rigid society. While the first act presents the maiden Kunti's curiosity to test the effect of the sage's boon and the unfolding of her motherly feelings in respect of her child Karna, her motherly dimension is naturally broadened in the second act where, as the legitimate mother of the Pandavas, she is compelled to hide the birth of Karna. Here are the outpourings of her motherly heart: "A mother's heart trembles for the safety of her sons who alone are her life";⁹ and they remind us of what Kailasam's Radha says to her foster-son:

".....A mother that doth bear
And bring forth son....she may not, will not
See or know a world beyond her son".¹⁰

In the last act, Mrs. Thakur enhances the conflict in her Kunti who is helplessly swayed between her tender motherly heart and the artificially created code of conduct, vis-a-vis the loyal and outspoken Karna. Of course, as the natural attraction between the mother and the child forms the nucleus of the

play, the playwright judiciously chooses the events directly pertaining to the theme. But it is rather an unbearable strain on the imagination of the spectator regarding the hero's life in the big gap left between the first two acts, between Karna's birth and the commencement of the war; where a technique like the *pravesuka* of our Classical Samskrit Drama could have been used with advantage.

Shanta Rama Rau sets an example in converting a novel into a play, and her work *A Passage to India* is a dramatised version of E.M. Forster's novel bearing the same title. The play presents a picture of mistrust and unjust treatment shown to Indians by the British during their regime in India. The playwright seems to have judiciously selected four scenes of dramatic and narrative interest, and distributed them in her three-act structure as follows: I Tea-party at Mr. Fieldings; II (i) Picnic, Marabar caves (ii) English Club of Chandrapore and III Magistrate's Court. Thus, by dramatisation of almost all the main events conceived by Forster, she does justice to the novel. Further, though her sketch of characters of Dr. Aziz and Mr. Fielding slightly disappoints us, she maintains the novelist's general design of characterisation: a cool-headed hospitable Indian Dr. Aziz; Prof. Godbole representing the ancient learning of India; Miss Adela Quested who has eyes to see India and respect the country and whose integrity cannot be easily shaken; Mr. Fielding who can be singled out as an Englishman noble enough to understand an alien people; other Englishmen who have utter contempt towards Indians and are ready to mete out any injustice to them. A reviewer rightly remarks, "... Her arrangement of his material is skilful.... Much of the original dialogue has been used, and his gift for making his character talk intelligently and naturally at the same time appears to work almost as well in the theatre as in the novel".¹¹

In this land of variety in many aspects of life like customs and languages, occasional outbursts of fissiparous tendencies often necessitated serious thinking by cool-headed patriots about national integration; which forms the theme of some plays. In her play *My Songs*, J.M. Billimoria thinks of such a situation of five students of Bombay University who, in spite of sharp differences in their religion and language, live like real brothers sharing both the joys and sorrows of their life; the group consists of two Hindus, a Muslim, a Parsee and an Anglo-Indian. To project an image of their permanent brotherhood, the playwright imagines some relevant touching scenes like their response to the call of the nation during the Indo-Pakistan war, the moving spectacle of death of Rehman and his own brother Abdul (now on the Pakistan side) fighting each other on the battlefield, the breaking out of communal riots and the working for peace by the remaining four friends, their joint venture of running a co-operative store, the death of Rehman's mother and their carrying of her corpse to the burial ground even amidst the prevailing atmosphere of terror; and thus the whole play is full of suspense and action. But the play suffers from the playwright's excessive idealism in the

creation of her characters and sequences, and her inclination for the use of literary language in dialogue. Further she unnecessarily fits the plot into a long five-act structure, that too having an unwieldy number of scenes which render its staging difficult.

Kamala Subramanian's *Gandharee and Kaikeyee* is an example of a dramatic dialogue wherein the author extends her imagination and brings together two queens (probably in heaven) belonging to two different *yugas* (ages). Each explains to the other her standpoint about the peculiar situation which caused some mistaken notions among the people. Kaikeyee tells Gandharee how she first rejoiced at the news of Sri Rama's coronation and then how Manthara's words forced her to demand Sri Rama's exile and her son's coronation. According to Gandharee, it is her extreme affection for her son Suyodhana that urged her to hark the tinkling laughter of Droupadi insulting Suyodhana, but not her sobs when she was insulted by him at the royal court. Thus, within the scope available, the author projects the image of two epic characters: Kaikeyee as the victim of circumstances and Gandharee as a mother whose blind affection towards her son comes in the way of protecting another lady's honour.

Though it is very difficult to keep track of all plays published there are a few more worth-mentioning Arati Nagarwalla's *The Bait*, and Dina Mehta's *The Myth-Makers* among others. In spite of deficiencies in the use of models, techniques and plot-construction found in most of these plays, there is no denying the fact that the method of handling their themes by most of these women playwrights is unique; and their viewpoint is in consonance with their sensitive feminine nature. As already studied, Bharati Sarabhai extends the dimensions of age-old customs and beliefs deep-rooted particularly in women; and the method is almost similar to what playwrights like Sri Aurobindo, Mathuram Bhootalingam and Girish Karnad have done while interpreting the myth from a contemporary angle of view. Mrinalini boldly gives a picture of our Freedom Movement. At a later date, Shanta Rama Rau presents a similar theme about the British rule by transforming a novel into dramatic form. K.B. Thakur and Kamala Subramanian are fascinated by epic themes and, while the former highlights the inseparable bond between mother and child Kamala Subramanian questions as to why women like Gandharee and Kaikeyee disregarded the principles of justice. As regards historical themes, it is the valour and patriotism of the Rajput men and women that inspired playwrights like Janaki, while Indira Devi focusses on the spiritual wealth of the princess-saint Mira. If Mrinalini Sarabhai deals with the pre-independence politics of the country, Billimoria makes an attempt at national integration in the post-independence period. Some of these playwrights go out of their usual domestic sphere and probe history as well as politics of the country. Thus, though the output in the field of Indo-English Drama by women is small, the mind of the sensitive woman can be discerned in their handling of themes.

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S. KRISHNA BHATTA is head of the Dept. of English at Acharya Pathasala College, Bangalore.

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papers in India under No. R. N. 12760/65
