Abstract:

The present paper deals with the different themes and techniques deployed in the plays of Zubin Driver, Ninaz Khodaiji and Ramu Ramanathan. The paper studies Zubin Driver’s wormplay (2000) directed by the author himself, Mahadevbhai (1892-1942) (2004) by Ramu Ramanathan and Ninaz Khodaiji’s Insomnia (2004). These plays have had many performances till date and have been successfully performed in Europe and America.

Introduction:

Indian drama in English does not have a long history. In the pre-independence era there was hardly any Indian dramatist in English whose plays were performed on the stage. Shanta Gokhale in her well documented chapter entitled “The Dramatists” in her book Illustrated History of Indian Literature in English says that Krishna Mohan Banerjea’s The Persecuted, or Dramatic Scenes Illustrative of the Present State of Hindoo Society in Calcutta, in 1837, was the first play written by an Indian in English. Then we have Sri Aurobindo writing plays such as Perseus the Deliverer and Savitri between 1890 and 1920. Harindranath Chattopadhyaya wrote plays like Chokha Mela and Eknath between 1918 and 1950. In the South A. S. Panchapakesa Aiyer was writing between 1913 and 1942. T. P. Kilasam wrote his famous plays The Burden and Karna between 1930 and 1945. The plays of these playwrights were for readings and not for performance. They were hardly staged. S. Krishna Bhatta in his book Indian English Drama: A Critical Study lists more than 200 plays written after 1950 and mentions that most of them were not performed or even published. In the 1960s and 1970s, however, some playwrights’ plays were staged.

The Indian drama in English, today, has moved far away from the plays of Gurcharan Das, Asif Currimbhoy and Girish Karnad. Different theatre movements and awards in India have paved the way for young playwrights who not only write plays in English but also direct their own plays. The Theatre Group, Bombay (Mumbai), established in the 1970s, announced the Sultan Padamsee Award for the Indian playwrights for writing plays in English. The Royal Court Theatre has been arranging workshops in India to encourage budding playwrights in India. Today, we have young playwrights like Dina Mehta, Rahul D’Cunha, Shiv Subramanyam, Farahad Sarabjee and Anupama Chandrashekhar etc. There seems to be a dramatic revival, especially, in Mumbai and Bangalore, where young people are turning to the stage again. The current trend is being a writer- cum-director of one’s own play. The contemporary playwrights like Zubin Driver, Ninaz Khodaiji and Ramu Ramanathan direct their own plays. Thus, the shift is from the hesitant Indian English dramatists of 1960s and 70s to the young, confident writers-cum-directors.

Zubin Driver’s wormplay reminds us of Beckett’s Waiting for Godot (1952) or Pinter’s The Birthday Party (1957). It is an absurd play with no formal plot or characterization as it reflects the idea that there is no purpose in life and human actions are futile. The emphasis in wormplays to show the monotonous nature of life and repetitiveness of human actions. Throughout the play the author uses the lower case and other techniques of absurd drama, such as that the characters have no names, the setting is abstracted and the motivations of characters are not explained etc. the ‘worm man’ becomes Stephen who becomes the audience...
who again reverts to Stephen, all this shows that the characters are not important – it is their thoughts that are important. The play opens in dim light with the sentence

“We are sitting in a basket of worms… but we have no hands just shattered gestures and memory of movement”

The imagery used in this play is that of ‘worms’, who are “a dubious race, expert at duplicity” where “chaos is the ethic”. Act two begins with the instructions “(all black)”. The master says in the end:

Worm… it’s not that nature has ended, or human life has been wiped off this planet by some catastrophe, nothing so easy. It’s just that one day, like any other day, a giant worm swallowed us, and we accepted it that is terrifying.

In a broad sense wormplay symbolizes the pathetic condition of the middleclass people in the world. They have, simply, become ‘worms’ in today’s capitalistic and internet governed world. We have lost identity and are living monotonous, identical lives.

The absurd drama which is a European-American literary movement has been brought into Indian drama by Zubian Driver and has linked the theme of monotony of life to the people in India. He puts Indian drama in English on the international level.

Ninaz Khodaiji studied theatre in the U.K. and the U.S. and has written three plays so far. She was a writer in Residence at Oval House Theatre, London from July 2005 to March 2006. Her play Insomnia has been staged in India as well as in Europe and America. Insomnia is an expressionistic play which ‘happens’ in the minds of the characters. The innovative technique of presentation of action and the presentation of the conflict in the minds of the characters have won many international awards for Ninaz. There are no dialogues in the play; the four characters in the play- Mohan, Aliya, Abhay and Tanya- speak in monologues. There are four sections (Acts) in the play and each character speaks in monologue in each part. Through the monologues of the characters we get to know the action of the play and it is difficult to decide who gives the ‘right’/ ‘true’ version of the action because each character has his/ her perception of ‘reality’. The title of the play-

Insomnia- is symbolic. Insomnia is lack of sleep or inability to sleep which causes restlessness or frustration in a person and makes him/ her fatigued. All the characters in the play are tired with life; they are restless and frustrated with the people around them. Thus, the title of the play is apt as it reflects the mental condition of the characters.

Aliya- the heroine of Mohan’s play- might have been raped during a riot in Mumbai. Mohan was with her when she was captured and assaulted by the hooligans but he escaped from the place and ran away instead of helping Aliya. This is Mohan’s version of the incidents in his monologue. Similarly, we have other characters’ versions through their monologues. But no one is sure about the incident; no one knows what happened to Aliya that particular night.

The four parts of the play are: “Missing”, “New Year’s Eve”, “The Impulse to Speed” and “A Place Called Home”. In “Missing” Mohan Chawla speaks his mind and he is seen as a coward; he sees himself as a coward because he knows that he did not save Aliya from the hooligans and instead of helping her, he ran away from the place. Therefore, he says: “Where do I run from her now?” His guilty conscience does not let him sleep peacefully and he suffers inwardly. Hence the title of the play- Insomnia- describes Mohan as well. All the characters are linked to each other by the fact that all of them worked in the play “Romeo and Juliet” and all of them were together on New Year’s evening.

In the second section of the play “The New Year’s Eve”, Abhay expresses his views. He confesses that he was in love with Aliya but she showed interest in Mohan and therefore he chose Tanya. Tanya was in love with Mohan but because Aliya openly doted upon Mohan and he also showed some interest in Aliya, she accepted Abhay’s ‘offer’. Thus, the relations between the characters are complicated and it’s difficult for us to trust any one character in the play, entirely. Abhay explains how they partied on the New Year’s Eve, how
they got drunk and how Mohan and Aliya left the party. Abhay later heard about the ‘incident’ that happened to Aliya but he is not sure what actually happened to her.

“The Impulse to Speed” is Tanya’s monologue where she narrates incidents in her life. She tells us how much she loves drives on the empty roads in Bombay during nights. She parties till late every night, she drinks and is unhappy in her life. Deep in her mind she is lonely because of her unsuccessful love relationship and her jealousy towards Aliya. She seems to be pleased with Aliya’s misfortune and she is glad that the love between Aliya and Mohan failed.

“A Place Called Home” is the last part of the play where two characters- Aliya and Abhay- speak their monologues alternately. After the mishap with Aliya no one visited her as if she was at fault and she was left alone. Only Abhay pitied her, consoled her and visited her at her home; he tried to bring her back to normal. But, later, he became possessive of her and soon they had to break up. Her parents sent her to the U.S. for rehabilitation but there also her relatives and friends avoided seeing her. It shows the attitude of the Indians towards rape; instead of showing sympathy to the victim and providing support to the woman, the people avoid her because they believe that the woman has lost her character and hence is not worthy of keeping relationship with. Through the monologue we come to know that she is returning to India. As her plane is landing, the events in the past run through her mind rapidly. She is quite nervous about her new beginning of life in India. At the same time Abhay is leaving India and is going abroad to try his luck. Thus, the characters instead of speaking in dialogues and revealing the action speak in monologues and ‘narrate’ the action. The use of spotlights and background music are used to express the moods of the characters. The play appears similar to Tennessee Williams’ *The Glass Menagerie* in technique. The innovative technique used by Ninaz in the play has won her several international awards.

The third play chosen for the paper- *Mahadevbhai* (1892- 1942) - is about Mahadev Desai, Mahatma Gandhi’s secretary. The technique of narration is employed in the play to show the action. In the process of narrating Mahadev’s life, Ramu Ramanathan gives a picture of the freedom struggle, about Mahatma Gandhi, Godhra, Bardoli and the Dandi march; about Gandhi and the relationships he enjoyed with Sardar Patel, Dr. Ambedkar and others. According to the playwright, more than five years of research went into the fact-finding exercise before writing of the play began. The form chosen to present the play is that of storytelling interspersed with humour. It is an attempt to juxtapose the freedom movement with the events in today’s India, a mingling of the past and the present. Ramu Ramanathan belongs to the new breed of writer-directors that make up the current scene in Indian plays in English. He has written and directed more than half- a dozen plays. His plays have won many international awards such as the BBC Radio Playwriting Regional Award in 2003; he was invited to the Berlin Literary Festival and our National Theatre Festival in 2004. He believes in removing the four walls of the stage and ignoring the audience, In *Mahadevbhai* (1892- 1942) there is only one actor who plays roles of about thirty characters on the stage. The actor tells the story of Mahatma Gandhi’s secretary- Mahadevbhai and he directly talks to the audience. It is a docudrama; the facts are presented in front of the audience with the help of narration, humour and acting occasionally. It is an attempt to make today’s India aware of the freedom struggle and the unrecognized hero of the freedom movement- Mahadevbhai.

In *Mahadevbhai* an old man- Dadaji- narrates the story of Mahadevbhai to his grandson- the Actor. The grandson wants to become an actor and needs a recommendation from someone. Dadaji gives him, a photograph in which his granduncle is seen with Mahadevbhai. The grandfather feels that the photograph is enough for the son to get a role in films. But the grandson is not sure and asks him about Mahadevbhai; who he was and what he did. Thereupon Dadaji starts narrating Mahadevbhai’s story and the main play starts. Thus, Ramanathan ends a play- with- in- a play. The characters in the outer play – the grandfather and the grandson- give way to the inner play. Thus, the story of Mahadevbhai is revealed from the grandfather to his grandson and ultimately to the audience. What is remarkable in the play is that one actor plays roles of all the
characters in the play; he becomes Dadaji, the Actor, Mahadevbhai, Mahatma Gandhi and Saradar Patel etc. since the characters in the inner play are Gujarathi (the play is set in Gujarat at a Gujarathi family), the playwright retains some dialogues in Gujarathi; at times the father and the son speak in Gujarathi to give a picture of reality. Each incident is given a title in the play for eg. “MAHADEVBHAI and GANDHI at CHAMPARAN”- shows Mahatma Gandhi’s struggle at Champaran. Every narration on the stage is followed by acting and then followed by narration. In each section/ part the actor plays the role of a character in history. Dadaji and Dikra- his grandson work as narrators and through their question- answer we understand about Mahadevbhai. Dadaji often satirizes the present socio- political events in India such as the overuse of English, lack of sympathy about the freedom struggle and biased views about the historical figures etc. Ramanathan uses classical Indian music and songs in the play to give an Indian flavor to the play. The songs and Bhajans of Bheemsen Joshi, KishoriAmonkar, Pandit Paluskar and Kumar Gandharava etc. are chosen to suit the action of the play. In the end when Mahadevbhai dies we hear the tune- MAIN TO TUMHARO DAAS by Bheemsen Joshi which is very apt for the ending of the play; Mahadevbhai lived as Mahatma Gandhi’s ‘Daas’ (servant) and died in the service of the Mahatma in 1942. The scenes of the play are episodic in nature and the lifespan of Mahadevbhai- 1892 to 1942- is presented before the audience.

Conclusion:

The plays chosen for the paper are the representatives of the recent works of the playwrights. As mentioned earlier, there is a large number of young playwrights in India writing and directing plays in English. Mahesh Dattani is, generally, considered a new face of Indian drama in English who has shaped and given directions to modern Indian drama in English. But along with Mahesh Dattani a group of dramatists has emerged in India with the help of international programs for drama. Different scholarships, workshops and seminars arranged for the budding dramatists in India by America and European countries have helped them in their works. The international techniques, themes in drama such as realism, absurdism and expressionism etc. are brought into plays by these playwrights. They form an ‘avantgarde’ movement in India and continuously experiment with new ideas and techniques in theatre. The change in Indian drama in English is remarkable; earlier playwrights were not confident about writing plays in English, about staging their plays but the new writers not only write plays but also direct them. This might be to seek the recognition as artists from the national/ international audience and may be because they want to pass their ‘version’ of the play to the audience. Being a writer- cum- director of one’s play helps him/ her to stage the play as per his wish. The writer- director is confident with the casting, staging and other theatrical elements of the play. Writer and director combination is an augury for future plays being written more for staging than for reading.

Bibliography:

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