



Colonial Residues, Diasporic Identity And Social Conflict In Asif Currimbhoy's Darjeeling Tea?

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Abstract:

Asif Currimbhoy occupies an important position in the development of post-Independence Indian English drama. His plays frequently examine the tensions produced by colonialism, cultural displacement, social hierarchy, changing values and the encounter between tradition and modernity. *Darjeeling Tea?*, first published by Writers Workshop in 1971, is particularly significant for its representation of the Anglo-Indian and expatriate planter community in a changing postcolonial India. Set against the background of the Darjeeling tea plantations, the play combines comedy, satire, irony and interpersonal conflict to expose the declining world of the colonial planter. The characters are caught between nostalgia for the British Raj and the emerging realities of postcolonial India. The play also interrogates gender relations, class distinctions, racial consciousness, diasporic displacement, economic exploitation and the commercialization of human relationships. Through characters such as Mac, Jennie, Bunt and Didi, Currimbhoy presents a society in transition. This article examines the play through the perspectives of postcolonialism, diaspora studies, Marxist social criticism and gender studies, arguing that *Darjeeling Tea?* is not merely a comedy of manners but a complex dramatic representation of the collapse of colonial social structures.

Key words: Postcolonialism, Diaspora, Colonialism, Tea Plantation, Gender, Class, Identity, and Indian English Drama.

Asif Currimbhoy is an important figure in the history of Indian English drama. His plays interact with the social, political and cultural changes which affected post-Independence India. His plays often explore colonialism, class and cultural differences, gender relations, political conflict and differences between tradition and modernity. One of his major plays, *Darjeeling Tea?* (1971) examines the waning world of colonial tea plantation and the evolving relationships between the people involved. The play is set in Darjeeling amidst a community straddling the past of colonial culture and the present of postcolonial India. The play is a mix of comedy, romance, and satire, yet it's a serious examination of social hierarchy, cultural identity, economic power and psychological displacement all under its apparently light surface. The tea plantation in *Darjeeling Tea?* is not just a geographical location. It turns into a symbol of the colonial social order. The plantation is linked to the British plantation class which gained its privileged status in colonial times. The perceptions and relationships of colonialism persist in the characters even after they have achieved political autonomy. The plantation thus becomes a space where the past and present meet. Beautiful in the woods, yet the people that live there have very high tension. Conflict relating to class, race, gender and economic power is lurking behind the seemingly peaceful environment. Currimbhoy thus makes the tea garden a microcosm of a historically changing society.

One of the major themes of the play is the fall of the colonial planter. Mac is the older generation that has a strong plantation identity and plantation lifestyle. His world is slowly vanishing and he's not coping with the new social landscape, exhibiting the psychological effects of colonial decline. No longer is the plantation a safe place. There is a gradual erosion of the British planter's social power and a new set of economic and social powers is on the stage. This decay is not directly chronicled in Currimbhoy. He presents it in the behaviour, conversations and relationships of his characters, however. Their anxiety and their nostalgia and their frustration, everything's gone wrong with the social order. Jennie's character offers a valuable insight into the relationship between identity and social expectations. Her discontent with her life as a planter's wife shows the restrictions placed on women in the colonial social order. Her remark, "I chose a man Mac, not a way of life" (49), is noteworthy. This is her wish to assert her own self as an individual rather than as a woman who is a part of a social group. She has found a husband but not necessarily the lifestyle, social status, and cultural norms that go with being a planter's wife. As such her statement is personal as well as feminist. It implies the impossibility of bringing women down to marriage, family or class, social roles allotted to them. The feminist theme is further emphasized by Jennie's state of mind. The stage directions in Currimbhoy convey the

playwright's emotions. One day, she is said to be "sometimes tired" and "occasionally dreaming," is even "embarrassed" and "confused" when she awakes from her trance (21). These gestures show an inner life that is inexpressible in words. Her fatigue and confusion reflect her discontent with the limited social space in which she has to live. The stage directions are therefore a potent tool in the dramatist's toolbox in that they show how Currimbhoy allows the reader to find out about the psychological oppression of his female character. The issue is not just a domestic issue with Mac, it is a clash of individuality vs. patriarchy. Diaspora and cultural displacement are other concepts that may be used to explore the play.

The characters in this book are all living in a liminal cultural space. They have spent a considerable part of their lives in India, yet they cannot completely identify with the changing Indian society around them. Meanwhile, the "colonial world" to which they are emotionally tied is vanishing. This is their longing for the past and fear for the future. They do not fit into either of the Culture worlds. Their situation represents a psychological paradox of being a diasporic identity where the issue of "belonging" becomes complicated. They are now living in the plantation, but with the changing of the world in India, they realize that their place is no longer guaranteed.

Another consideration for the play is colonial nostalgia. The older characters often appear to remember the colonial period as a time of order, stability and privilege. Currimbhoy, however, takes this sentimentality with a pinch of salt. To the planters it seemed a phase of tranquility, but it was also a time of racial and economic injustice. Thus, their memories are only one part of the story of Colonial history.

The play probes the audience into the romanticized image of the British Raj. The privileges enjoyed by the planter community rested on a hierarchy of status, ranking the workers and local people at the bottom. In his satire, Currimbhoy uncovers the irony of colonial memory. Class is intimately tied to the plantation system. The plantation is a hierarchical economic system, where the planters have the power and the workers are economically subordinate to the planters. The plantation is an apparent harmony that is disrupted when the workers are not happy and become resistant. Their resistance reveals the unequal power relations between the plantation and the oppressed people.

The workers' resistance could then be analyzed in a Marxist manner as an example of class consciousness. The plantation is not just a beautiful geographical area, but it is also an economic institution that is based on labour and ownership. Currimbhoy demonstrates that political freedom does not necessarily end economic disparities. Cultural mimicry is also the subject of the play, with characters imitating European manners and lifestyles. This figure of the Brown Sahib is especially pertinent. The Brown Sahib is the colonized subject who learns the cultural practices, language and attitudes of the colonizer.

Currimbhoy takes a light facetious and humorous view of this imitation. The characters' behaviour shows the lingering effects of colonialism on the consciousness of the colonized even after the political independence. They imitate European social behaviours, an identity crisis. This may be connected with the term 'mimicry' coined by Homi K. Bhabha, who states that the colonized subject mimics the colonizer, but cannot ever become the same because he is never able to 'become' the colonizer. The resulting identity then is thus ambivalent and unstable. Language as itself becomes an important representation of this cultural "hybridity".

The English dialogue of Currimbhoy is interspersed with expressions and forms of address used in India, like "Han" and "Burra Sahib." The interplay of English and Indian linguistic practices is illustrated in these expressions. Language of the play is indicative of plantation culture, which is a multicultural and multilingual environment. Currimbhoy doesn't try to cast an exclusively British imprint on the English drama. He, on the other hand, develops a language for drama that is very Indian and in which English is adapted to Indian expressions, relationships and meanings. Language is then a place where colonialism and Indian identity are met. Other factors like alcohol and over-socialization are also responsible for the image of the diminishing planter class. Expatriate planters' frustrations and insecurities are expressed in drinking, which becomes part of their lifestyle.

Alcoholism can be seen as a method of coping with the changing situation in their lives. Excessive conduct of the characters also makes this play satirical in nature. Drinking is not only just a weakness of the single individual; it becomes a symbol of the moral and psychological decay of a people who cannot adjust to a new historical situation. The social structure of the play becomes more complex with the relationships between men and women. Social structure is further complicated in the play by the relationships between men and women. Class, gender and cultural expectations have an impact on love and marriage.

Currimbhoy does not give the impression that relationships are entirely private experiences as these are influenced by the characters' social environment. The relationship between Jennie and Mac, for instance, is tied up in the social status of the planter's wife. She made it clear that she didn't select a marriage partner because she wanted to live his way of life, but because she would select a man. The romantic themes in the play are thus used as vehicles for the exploration of greater social and gender issues that are faced by Currimbhoy. Another trait of the character of Didi is the emotional imbalance in the family. Her experience has been linked to lack of emotional security and maternal love. The younger generation is affected by the shortcomings and discord of the previous generation. No longer unfailing, the family parallels the plantation.

Currimbhoy draws parallels between the breakdown of personal and familial relations and the collapse of the colonial plantation. The instability of the larger social order becomes apparent in the private lives of the characters and to some extent in their emotional development. Comedy and satire play a significant role in the dramatic structure of *Darjeeling Tea?* and it is noteworthy that Currimbhoy takes advantage of this in his writing. The play's themes include politics of colonialism, class, gender oppression and cultural displacement, yet it is not entirely tragic. Instead, Currimbhoy satirizes social contradictions with his witty, ironic, exaggerated and humorous settings. At first the audience will laugh

at the characters' actions, but the humour will slowly serve to explain the seriousness of the situation. Comedy is thus a critique of society. Many of the characters are absurd because they try to uphold values that are becoming obsolete, in the modern world. The treatment of the changing economic order is also important.

The British planter is gone but his place has not been taken by the disappearance of economic exploitation. Rather, new commercial forces start to enter the plantation world. Indian business interests have arisen which indicate the changing economic fabric of society. The old colonial elite is slowly being supplanted by new economic groups. So, while independence was a step from oppression to freedom, Currimbhoy does not make it sound so easy. The nature of the dominant group might change, but who is economically powerful, who owns and who is exploited is still a concern.

The title, "Darjeeling Tea?" allows for interpretation. The question mark takes on specific importance since it brings a state of uncertainty. Darjeeling tea is not just a product or a commodity which is connected with a gorgeous geographical region. In the play, it is a reminder of the colonial past, the plantation worker, economic exploitation and culture. The question mark invites the reader to consider what lies beyond the image of Darjeeling as a pretty hill town. The tea plantation is a place of history and social strife. The title, then, is descriptive of the greater uncertainty of the characters' and the society's lives. Darjeeling Tea? is a postcolonial text in the sense of being a drama of transition. Despite the end of British political rule, the past remains present. The workers and the younger characters and new commercial interests symbolize social change; Mac and the planter community, the old order.

The play offers evidence that colonialism is maintained by attitudes, cultural practices, economic relationships, as well as psychological habits, in addition to political institutions. The essence of Currimbhoy's accomplishment is his discovery of these enduring colonial traces in the mundane interactions of everyday people. It also has significance in terms of the process of individual identity and historical change. The characters do not merely symbolize political ideals. They feel the changes of society from loneliness, frustration, love, jealousy, insecurity and nostalgia. Currimbhoy's treatment of postcolonial change is particularly successful for this human dimension. The characters' personal crises are the expression of political change in India. As the plantation diminishes, the way of life diminishes and the way of life diminishes the sense of identity and belonging.

As such, Asif Currimbhoy's Darjeeling Tea? is a complicated work of drama that explores a society in limbo, where past and present, colonial and postcolonial, appear and disappear. The tea garden is a symbolic site where class, race, gender, economic power and culture converge. In a way, Currimbhoy examines the psychological impacts of social change through the characters of Mac, Jennie, Bunt and Didi. The concept of identity versus roles imposed by society is especially highlighted by Jennie's assertion "I chose a man Mac, not a way of life" (49). Using humour, satire and irony, Currimbhoy reveals the inconsistencies of colonial nostalgia and the ongoing inequalities of the postcolonial world. The book, in its interest, continues to be important as a text of colonial residues and cultural hybridity, gender consciousness and class struggle, and the challenging negotiation of identity in a society in transformation.

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