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Post-Independence Disillusionment and Struggle for Identity in Asif Currimbhoy's *The Doldrummers*

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Abstract: *The Doldrummers* (1960) is a play by Asif Currimbhoy in two acts subdivided into a total of four scenes that deals with the lives of four Anglo-Indians caught in the meaningless struggle for survival which leads to their disillusionment with the society they live in. Colonial hangover persists which has its hold on the lives of these characters due to which they are unable to create their identities. Their inability to succeed in professional and personal life lead them to a feeling of frustration and despair. The degeneration that follows is the result of immoral life which they lead due to a lack of purpose in life. Currimbhoy has earnestly portrayed the life of shack dwellers living in the suburbs of Bombay with all its poverty and disagreements, its loves and small joys and has successfully portrayed their basic humanity. The play aims at studying basic human emotions and relationships. P. Bayapa. Reddy, in his book titled *The Plays of Asif Currimbhoy*, says, "It (*The Doldrummers*) deals with the problems of youth in today's western-oriented society and depicts a life of sex and illicit drinks through a set of degenerate characters." Currimbhoy has coined the term "doldrummers" by modifying the word "doldrums" which means a state of inactivity. He has used the word in the title to indicate a state of inactivity which marks the life of major characters in the play. Currimbhoy understands the fact that the shack dwellers are eventually human beings, so they are driven predominantly by two primitive needs of the body: food and sex. They act by their instincts, even though one of them, Rita gets emotional at times.

Keywords: Post-Independence India, Love, Sex, Satyagraha, Purposelessness, Inactivity, Disillusionment, Stagnation, Misanthropy.

Born in the year 1928, Asif Currimbhoy is considered by many to be the first Indian English dramatist of any consequence. His plays, more than thirty in number deal with contemporary political and social issues. His dramatic output is the result of his keen observation and emotional response to what he sees. He admits, "There is a sense of a trigger- I think the trigger was life itself, of what I saw around, of how I reacted to it, in other words, and emotional reaction"(Currimbhoy, *Commentary* 39). Deeply hurt by the partition of India in 1947 and the violence that ensued, Currimbhoy dramatizes the condition of people in post-independence India in many of his plays. The trauma and the loss of human values that marked the post-independence era are emphatically portrayed by him in his plays including *The Doldrummers* (1960). Peter Nazareth comments on this quality of Currimbhoy in the following words: "Asif Currimbhoy interweaves the public event with the private to create exciting drama which asks moral questions about humanity in the cataclysmic period of decolonisation" (Nazareth 18). Currimbhoy's *The Captives* (1963) is a play that has the Indo-Sino conflict as the basis of its plot. *Goa* (1964) deals with the theme of the liberation of Goa by India. It is a play in two acts dealing with the life of an Indian boy who is in love with a native girl of Goa. *Monsoon* (1965) deals with the theme of colonisation while *An Experiment with Truth* (1969) deals with the internal conflict of Mahatma Gandhi. *Inquilab* (1970) deals with the theme of Naxalite rising in Bengal in the 1960s while *Sonar Bangla* (1972) deals with the theme of the 1971 Indo-Pak War. *The Refugee* (1971) concerns itself with the mass migration of Bangladeshi citizens into India. *Om Mane Padme Hum* (1972) deals with Chinese invasion and occupation of Tibet along with Dalai Lama's flight to India while *Angkor* (1973) deals with Indo-Chinese theme. *The Dissident MLA* (1974) is a political satire based on a contemporary student agitation which took place in the state of Gujarat. *The Miracle Seed* (1973) has drought and famine in Maharashtra as its theme. *The Tourist Mecca* (1959) is about four groups of tourists visiting Agra. *Darjeeling Tea?* (1971) focuses on interracial love affairs. *The Hungry Ones* (1965) focuses on the visits of two American poets- Allen Ginsberg and Peter Orlovsky to Calcutta and deals with the condition of Calcutta in times of riot and famine. In this play, Currimbhoy tries to portray the similarities between Indian yogis and American beatniks, Bengali Muslims and the Black Muslims of America. *This Alien...Native Land* (1975) deals with the feeling of alienation which an Indian Jewish family feels. *Thorns on a Canvas* (1962) was written as a kind of protest against the ban which had been imposed on Currimbhoy's another play, *The Doldrummers* (1960). The play is a satire on government-funded cultural academies and institutions. *The Dumb Dancer* (1961) is a three-act play dealing with the life of a Kathakali dancer "who so completely identifies himself with the character of Bhima that it leads him from one misapprehension to another, one disaster to another." *The Clock* (1959) is a one-act play dealing with the life of Henry who is caught between idealism and the stark reality of life.

The setting of *The Doldrums* (1960) is a shack at Juhu Beach in the suburbs of metropolitan Bombay (Mumbai). The play starts with Tony lying in a hammock tied to two coconut trees. Rita and Joe are also present while Tony is singing. After Tony finishes his song, Joe starts singing a different song which reveals his disillusionment with this world. Joe's words and behaviour reveal his disgust and disappointment. His character speaks volume about disillusionment among youth in the post-Independence era. The relevance of satyagraha and its misuse is sarcastically expressed by Joe in the following song:

JOE: Satyagraha, Satyagraha,
Hurrah for satyagraha
This passive resistance
Tickles our existence

...day we just...no-cooperated
Sat around and merely waited
Others came and waited too
Not knowing what, where or who (Currimbhoy, *The Doldrums* 11).

A misanthrope and a nihilist, Joe satirizes the practice of paying lip service to the idea of satyagraha. Joe has come to believe that people in independent India have lost their purpose in life. They do not understand the spirit of satyagraha and follow it like an automaton. This was not the case before Independence. The Indian Freedom Struggle made it possible for people of different classes, castes and religions to come together to fight for a common cause but after Independence was achieved a void came into existence. There was no purpose in life to follow, a fact which is true for all the four major characters in the play. The reason for Joe's misanthropy can also be understood in the fact that he is an illegitimate son. His mother was denied admission into a hospital to deliver her baby (Joe) because her husband was not there to accompany her. Joe becomes a symbol for Currimbhoy, as in Joe we can find the struggle for identity which illegitimate children born either of wedlock or premarital sexual relationships go through. It is also to be noted here that Joe like all the other characters in the play is an Anglo-Indian. After India achieved independence, many British men left the country forever leaving behind women some of whom were pregnant at the time. Joe's character raises an important issue. After Independence, the future of Eurasians became a big question-not just their future but their status in society. They were no longer respected and received. Moreover, they were treated as outcasts. Joe expresses his agony for this situation. Being a part of the community his survival becomes difficult. This is one of the problems created by colonialism. Joe's agony is expressed in the following words:

JOE: We became monsters. Reptilian. With scales insensitive. With breaths of fire and venomous spittle. Since the mirror showed everyone the same, they all thought they were the humans, and we...we...the half ones. Those with hands human and bodies like monsters. We...we...became the still-born ones. Partial monsters all the more horrible because we still retained the basic elements, was the natural distortion, on the distortion the natural? Nobody quite knew. But because we were different, and we were few, we had to be wrong (51).

So, Currimbhoy, in his depiction of Joe and his agony, portrays the struggle for existence of illegitimate children in a society which considers legitimacy a prerequisite for leading a respectable life. Joe, who is a misanthrope, himself talks about the dead feelings in human beings. It can be a soul-search or a satire against the society which turned him into a nihilist. He says, "some things within us also die. For while nothing in the dead can live, something in the living can die" (27.) For Joe, there is no difference between love and sex as commented by Rita. Joe always perceives himself as an intellectual who is rejected by the world which is much below his level and so could not understand him. Although the characters do not seem to have anything serious to discuss, songs in this play, like Joe's words, explore political and social problems. The first song in scene two of the first act discusses the question of world peace in an atomic age:

Better still let's shoot
Like an as-tro-naut.
Suspended in space
In this doomsday race.

We'll eat atoms for breakfast
Hydrogen for lunch
And when it's time for dinner
We'll chase gals like the old sinner (43)...

Joe is a PhD and a bastard at the same time. He spends most of his time drinking with Tony. He uses satirical comments to present his views on contemporary society and the rest of the characters. Joe does not believe in sentiments and relations. He describes himself as,

JOE: I'm the little man with the large pair of scissors. I'm kill-joy and kill-truth put together, and when I can't cut any more, I cut my own nose to spite my face. I'm the public that has no opinion, because I can't bring myself to care a damn. I am spineless, because it is easier to crawl around that way. Damn you! I'd like to spit in your eye... [then weakly] only I don't salivate enough [giggles]. But I've got a pair of scissors...and with this little axe, I can lop off all the big shady trees in my Papa's garden (14-15).

Love and sex are important themes of the play and are used by Currimbhoy to dramatize the animal passion devoid of a sense of responsibility. Tony and Rita simply indulge in passion when the “intellectual” Joe becomes critical of the situation. Asked by Tony to “get a girl” Joe replies that it is “no fun having one” and that his mind “gets deeper and deeper.” Here Currimbhoy seems to point out that in modern society there are only mechanical sexual relationships and no real love. Joe tells Rita about the mechanical routine of the gay modern young men and women who with “the red bottoms and the curly tops” are fit to be in the zoo. Here one is reminded us of the world of *The Wasteland* particularly to the routine mechanical life as described by T. S. Eliot.

JOE: They wear hats and ties and carry umbrellas and work from ten to five. I see them in tram-cars with their long snouts buried in the papers. They blow their noses in clean handkerchiefs and pay four annas to the boot-polish boy. All neat and tidy...Their bloodshot eyes are full of murder and rape as they read the cheap papers (24).

The play probably seems to suggest that fight for survival will bring people together and bind them with an enthusiasm for a common goal. That is what the freedom struggle made possible for Indians. But after Independence was achieved, a vacuum came into existence. There was no noble common goal for which people could fight. The same obsession with the past and disappointment with the present is echoed in the words of Joe. He compares the flag to a giant tree which started its life as a tender plant. It was the memorial of the martyrs' blood. Identity, says Joe, was found and people were satisfied after Independence. He adds,

JOE: But something was still missing. A distortion in the seed. They chose to ignore it, resting on past laurels. Gradually, unknowingly, the tree decayed, the landscape changed in to desert, and the fight for survival...was inversed. We became monsters. Reptilian. With scales insensitive. With breaths of fire and venomous spittle (50-51).

Joe encourages Rita to take up the profession of a slut to gain control over her life because being a bastard he did not have any respect in society so he applies his evil designs to Rita and Tony's life to sabotage their relationship and prove himself right that there is no such thing as true love in real life. For Joe, every woman is the same as long as she is sexually available to him. He says,

JOE: Love! Respect! Love! Respect! What does it mean? I get sick hearing people talk about it all the time. And what does love have to do with respect anyway? They are the very opposite. You think of the word love something from a fairy book, patented and germ-free. Like it had to have respectability .Well it's not. It's love that the whore dispenses around the street corner, and it's the most respectable that pays its price (41).

Joe's world and behaviour reveal his disgust and disappointment with the world. His world is postcolonial, post-independence India. His character speaks volumes about disillusionment among youth in post-independence India. He cleverly manipulates others and creates situations to suit his needs. He knows very well when, where and how to strike. He waits patiently for the right moment to change Rita's attitude towards love and life and succeeds. For him, there is no difference between love and desire, relations and business. He defends his ideas by giving examples when Rita accuses him calling him crazy, he says:

JOE: No more than anybody else, Rita. It's just that I get crazier than most. I see how their minds work, and bloat it on a screen. Sure it looks ugly, like little Gulliver noticing the warts on the breasts of the female giants, but it's there. It's large as life, wearing the shackles of the original sin. So why blame me? (38-39)

We see in Joe a scholar turned into a cynic. Joe is not only a misanthropist but also a misogynist. He reveals his disrespect for women. All women are the same for him. They have only one thing in common that describes them that is their female identity: “Rita or Liza, you're all the same to me. Women with something nice between their legs. No more.” But this statement does not distract us from Joe's concern for women suppressed by men. Joe says, “Man always pins a woman 'neath him. Like a butterfly, with beautiful wings, carried out and *pinned*. For a woman, it's *crucifixion*” (35). It appears as if Joe is testing human values and relations when he encourages Rita to take to prostitution and when he gives clue to Tony that Rita is enjoying with other men and leads him to a fight with his rival. He succeeds in his attempts, and his opinion that all these sentiments are illusory is proved once again. He tells Rita:

JOE: We started a game, don't you remember? As long as it was a present and it came from a *friend* of Tony, it was mutually acceptable. Tony wouldn't mind...you saw for yourself he didn't, right in the face of it. So we started the game with one party, and now I offer myself as another candidate. There's no difference, Rita. It's my right, as much as it is his as long as we are not Tony (62).

He continues: “...Wear the ring, Rita. It carried the witchcraft of humanity. But wear it only for a while. It has to be passed on to others, so that everything still-born may live in its transfiguration.” Rita comments:

RITA: Sometimes I think Joe never existed. That he was only part of you and I. Something evil hidden within us. That it appeared one day as an apparition, and called himself Joe. That his absence does not mean that he has been exorcised, like the devil, because he's already set into motion a train of events...and knows where it will end (71).

Tony is a character with no thinking of his own. He is “as brainless as a banana.” He is seen in the hammock with nothing but his “shorts and nothing else, except for a guitar that forms very much part of him” (10). He is most affected by Joe though he agrees with Liza and Rita too. Rita is in love with Tony but he likes to receive gifts from other women as well. Tony is unemployed as commented by other characters that “he hasn't worked for a year of Sundays.” Tony visits Liza every Thursday and receive gifts from her. Rita who is in love with

Tony raises an objection to Tony receiving presents from others especially Liza. She asks, “Why did you do it, Tony? Why did you do it? Isn’t my love enough for you? I’ve given you all of it. Why shouldn’t I expect all from you. Woman’s no different from a man.” Rita is jealous because of this and despises Liza the most. Rita is emotional and believes in conventional love relationship while Tony is a materialistic wretch who neither works for a living nor reciprocates Rita’s love. Instead, he receives expensive gifts such as a watch or a silk shirt which enables him to lead a life of drudgery wasting away his youth drinking and singing. He loves his guitar more than he loves Rita, the woman who provides him with food and a place to live by stitching clothes for a small amount of money. Tony says that he will not mind Rita accepting gifts from other men so Joe instigates Rita to enter flesh trade. She, at Joe’s instance, agrees to earn gifts herself so that she could keep Tony away from other women. The first man introduced to Rita by Joe is the Fat and Bald Man who was once Tony’s employer. As the story progresses Rita becomes a professional prostitute with Joe as one of his customers. Rita, however, continues her love for Tony and desperately tries to rekindle their love. After a few months, Rita tells Joe about the state in which they are living: “We three, like blind mice or better still, like three monkeys, see nothing, hear nothing, do nothing...” Tony is upset when Joe tells him about Rita’s affair with the Fat and Bald Man. Joe provokes Tony to catch the Fat and Bald man and Rita in the middle of the act but Tony proves to be a coward when he faces his previous boss. Even after Rita’s request to hit the Fat and Bald Man, Tony is unable to even lift a finger on him. He plans to wring the Fat Man’s ears but when he confronts him he cowers before him and does nothing.

Rita becomes pregnant with Joe’s child but Joe is not there with Tony and Rita when this is discovered. She is, no doubt, as much in love with Tony as ever, but Tony, in low spirits, looks up at the sky with his hands folded behind his head. Tony becomes extremely jealous and possessive and he does minds Rita getting presents from other men at a high moral rate. But Tony who cannot forget the reality slaps her, knocks her down and goes away. Rita, who is beaten into a state of misery tells Liza about her pregnancy and shudders at Liza’s idea of abortion. After a few months, Rita is shocked to see her ideal Tony returning with Moron Moe, and asking her to face him. She breaks down under the deep mental agony and runs towards the sea to drown herself but Tony desperately rushes after her to save her even though he did not know how to swim. Rita saves Tony from drowning so once again Rita becomes the saviour of Tony. The next day Liza is informed by a policeman that Joe’s body was found washed up on the shore the previous night. He died by drowning exactly at the same time when Rita ran away towards the sea to commit suicide.

The brief last scene of the play is full of surprises: the saving of Tony by Rita, the suicide of Joe and Rita carrying Joe’s child in her womb. The curtain falls with Tony, who seems to have understood “something” sings a song about the state of the doldrums. Thus the playwright attacks the modern youth and their purposelessness in life. He ridicules the lack of courage and vigour in modern youth. The modern youth and their inhuman treatment of women becomes a target of Currimbhoy’s attack. Liza tells how Tony ill-treats Rita and how “That brute of a man does the dog-the-monkey act (that I told you of before) and it has an impact on her like a hundred hells-bells. Then he slaps her and says he’s leaving her.” The playwright exposes the death-in-life state of the characters. Here one is reminded of T. S. Eliot’s classic account of the death-in-life state of modern European society in *The Wasteland* (1922). Eliot suggests that the people crossing the London Bridge are no more human than the waters flowing under it.

Liza tells the policemen about the saving of Tony by Rita. The news of Joe’s death makes Tony withdrawn into the hammock. From the hammock comes the melody of a guitar. It is Tony, rocking in the hammock in the breeze. This withdrawal of Tony is significant. First, Tony acquiesces meekly the meeting of the Fat and Bald customer with Rita. He simply keeps quiet like a dumb animal when he knows that the customer is no other than his former boss. He “almost doubles up covering his face. His body goes mute convulsions, in the agony of one who feels but cannot speak.” This internal conflict continues and makes Rita feel that he who was singing like some beautiful bird looks like a helpless animal. This internal conflict moves alongside an outer conflict, the conflict between himself and Rita. He does not like her to become an “openhouse.” He asks her to face his friend but she negates the proposal and runs away. He also runs after her to save her. It is this conception of an inner struggle moving alongside an outer conflict, the one mingling with the other, that contributes to the essence of the play.

In *The Doldrums*, Rita seems to be the only character, in which heart springs up true love. But this love is projected as blind and indiscriminate. She always tries to project herself as an independent and self-reliant person whereas the truth is the opposite. It is Rita who always tries to elevate Tony beyond human beings, place him on a higher pedestal and worships him. She expects the same affection and sincerity from Tony. Unfortunately, she, who is an epitome of sincerity, becomes a wench to appease Tony. Joe encourages her to take Tony’s model. But in reality, it is Tony who is responsible for this transformation. He is a parasite for whom his survival and pleasure are more than anything else. Tony says to Rita: “You smell of two dozen kinds of sweat” (73). Rita fails to discriminate between possessiveness and love. She takes the clue from Joe and after some conflict becomes a doll following the example of Liza. Rita returns Joe’s ring saying that it has become a business so he can pay in cash for the services she provides him. But his child and his ring both remain even after Joe’s death. When asked about the father of her unknown child, Rita says with contempt, “You’re back-dated on your news, Liza, or don’t you know. Visit the Circus Inn sometime and catch up on the gory details. They must be betting there in ‘which one dun it’” (75).

Liza, who is described by Asif Currimbhoy as a “technicolour doll with everything about her painted” (17), talks sensibly at times smashing the prejudices and inhibitions of the other two characters: Joe and Rita. Liza is used by Currimbhoy to provide commentary on the other three characters in the play. At first, there is enmity between her and Rita but when she comes to know of Rita’s pregnancy the woman in Liza is awakened and she empathises with Rita. She offers Rita help by giving a doctor’s reference for aborting Rita’s yet to be born child. Although Rita decides to keep the child yet she is thankful to Liza for offering help. Rita has similar feelings about her love, morality and devotion. Liza says:

LIZA: ...You know you’re all crazy, the three of you, you know it. You’re all...somewhat schizophrenic as Joe calls it...and you know it and can’t be bothered even to allow it to change. God almighty, what a smug little world you three have created for

yourselves. You look down on others because they all have, as Joe says, hyena-like red bottoms and curly tops. Well, what the hell do you think you have? Turn the mirror upside down sometimes and you'll see yourselves no different (49).

Liza is a practical human being and throughout the play, she gives an impression that she has no emotions and feelings. But when she learns about Rita's pregnancy, she responds in a different way because as a woman she understands Rita very well. Liza knows how to enjoy life to the fullest. She can manipulate people and circumstances according to her needs. She never expresses her love for anything. In this respect, she is different from Rita. She confesses that Tony never belonged to her completely. There was something in him which longs for and which belongs to Rita. Her words also throw light on society's influence on her character and lifestyle. She advises Rita:

LIZA: Look Rita, I've got a far more practical solution. Listen to me. I have a friend. He kept reassuring me that I was completely safe with him because he claimed to be doctor. At first I thought he mean safe the other way...know, a *platonic* friendship...until I found out that he meant otherwise. It turned out he really was a doctor...and what's more a *practicing* doctor. He told me if I ever knew anyone in trouble, he could fix her up...you know...(76)

All the major characters in the play: Tony, Rita, Joe and Liza, make no real progress in life. They neither advance in professional life nor in personal relationships. Tony and Rita's relationship which seemed innocent and full of affection at the beginning of the play gets marred by the feeling of jealousy which Tony develops due to Rita's involvement with other men. Rita who is in love with Tony at the beginning of the play becomes a professional prostitute at the end. Instead of entering into a conjugal relationship with Tony, she loses Tony's affection. She becomes pregnant with Joe's child, a person who does not care for even his own life. Instead of gaining something in life, she complicates her life and in the end, she is stuck with Joe's child which is the result of her profession. Her child, in absence of a legitimate father, will earn the title of a bastard. Rita proves to be an emotional fool who spends her hard-earned money to pamper Tony, the money which she earns by stitching clothes. She becomes a professional prostitute and in the process loses her minuscule chances of improving her status in society. The type of life which the characters lead is a life with no ambition. Joe who is an educated young man never talks about finding a job. Instead, he just wastes time pointing out the errors of others. Tony who knows to play the guitar and has "magnetic aspect to his singing" (10) never bothers to perform in a band or elsewhere to earn a living. Liza who seems to be a practical woman is complacent and has no ambitions. So all four characters lead a life of complacency making any progress impossible. They are living in "doldrums" leading a stagnant life.

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