

**The Sonar Bangla: A Past too Terrible to Remember**

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**Abstract:**

*The most important historical event of our age as is evident from the writings of Indian English writers was the partition of the subcontinent. The religious and political differences between Hindus and Muslims which climaxed with this event led to widespread disturbances, causing large scale destruction of human life in the recent history of the subcontinent. The play 'Sonar Bangla' written by Asif Currimbhoy deals with the emergence of Bangladesh. The atrocities of Pakistani forces ruthless massacre, exodus of refugees, the rise of Mukti Bahini (liberation force), the final war and the liberation of Bangladesh have been vividly and realistically presented by Currimbhoy. He has unfolded the deepest misery of the humanity: 'An existence devoid of hope, a past too terrible to remember, a future of further futility' and the inmost meaning of this historic event. The title is taken from Tagore's poem sung often in the play. The play depicts various phases of the emergence of the nation of Bangladesh after the Indo-Pakistan war in 1971.*

**Key Words:** Asif Currimbhoy, history, subcontinent, refugees, futility.

The most important historical event of our age, as is evident from the writings of Indian English writers, was the partition of the subcontinent. The religious and political differences between Hindus and Muslims which climaxed with this event led to widespread disturbances, causing destruction of human life on a large scale in the recent history of the subcontinent. In the massacres, which immediately heralded the partition and continued for several months afterwards, at least one million Hindus and Muslims lost their lives. There was large-scale migration of people from one country to the other. In the process, thousands were killed; women were raped, children were flung on spears and property was looted on a vast scale.

Many of the works in India have been written in response to historical movements such as the Gandhian movement, imperial rule, partition of the country and the emergence of the New India. Historical drama is history dramatized. According to Lessing, historical drama is ‘a creation of fiction woven around the Historical characters.’(134) Infact in the Indian context *Itihasa* (history) does not denote merely an event that took place – but an event that would always happen and repeat itself in certain circumstances. Also the historical reality, in terms of time and space, forms an integral part of a work of art and is transmuted in the process of giving it a creative expression; in the process it achieves wider dimensions of universality and at times a state of timelessness. A pertinent question that arises is the relevance of history in a work of art. The factual and informational values of history illuminate the subject and increase the reader’s curiosity.

The play *Sonar Bangla*, deals with various phases of the emergence of the nation of Bangladesh after the Indo-Pakistan war in 1971. The title is taken from Tagore’s poem sung often in the play. The story of the play begins shortly after March 25, 1971 when talks between the 3rd president of Pakistan, Yahya Khan and a politician and statesman, Sheikh Mujib fail which led to the partition of East Pakistan and flood of Bangladesh refugees to India. It not only created bitterness in Indo-Pak relations but also put a heavy burden on Indian economy.

The play consists of four Acts dealing with four important phases of the war: The first act is 25<sup>th</sup> March 1971 - *The Slaughter*, the second Act is *Exodus*- the refugees, the third act is Liberation force-*The MuktiBahini* and the fourth act is the Final War. The place of action is a village outside Dacca. The first Act deals with the slaughter that took place in East-Pakistan on 25<sup>th</sup> March 1971 “...the fateful day when genocide began at East-Pakistan and seeds of resistance for Bangladesh were sown.” (9) This genocide is defined as the deliberate and systematic destruction, in whole or in part, of an ethnic, racial, religious, or national group.

The play opens with Hussain, a refugee “dressed in unostentatious Muslim cloths laying a chadder, a sheet of tied mogra flowers, over the four corners of the engraved tomb.”(9) He retreats slightly, the prayer on his lips changing to a distant look in his eyes as he sees the tomb. Hussain’s stumbling over a grave, removing the mud, going back to the tomb and praying, the gushing out of tears from his eyes are all transformed into living action.

The following scene introduces the notions and plans of both West and East-Pakistan. Mr. Hussain, Professor Aziz and a few students of Dacca University are busy discussing the political situation in East Pakistan. They are all unhappy because planeloads of West Pakistan troops are being flown in under the guise of civilians and West Pakistan troops are preparing

a big military build-up. The professor wants to start the civil disobedience movement with a view to balance the West Pak army with the Bengali paramilitary. But others believe in *Mukti-Fauz* - a new liberation force to protest the West Pak army.

The next scene opens with Yahya (the 3rd president of Pakistan) and Mujib (a statesman) having the final discussion with each other and realise the eventual breakup of the country.

**Yahya:** My hands are tied, Mujib. Unless you come to terms with Bhutto there can be no meeting of the National Assembly. (p.14)

Finally Yahya says, “. . . ah. . . Bhutto’s point of view is that your six-point autonomy plan for Bengal . . . cannot be granted. It would mean an eventual breakup of the country.”(15)

After the talks with Mujib have failed, Yahya appoints Tikka the Martial law administrator and instructs him to cleanse East Pakistan. Lt. General Tikka Khan, formerly known as “the Butcher from Baluchistan” got message from Yahya Khan on 25<sup>th</sup> March:

TALKS BROKEN . . . MUJIB TRAITOR...GUILTY OF TREASON . . . APPONTING YOU MARTIAL LAW ADMINSTRATOR FOR EAST PAKISTAN . . . SORT OUT ALL TRAITORS . . . THE FINAL SOLUTION... APPLY...THE FINAL SOLUTION...THE CLEANING PROCESS . . . (17)

Then the West Pakistani soldiers indulge in the slaughter of the intellectuals and others in East Pakistan. One Mr. Anderson, a foreign correspondent, gives a graphic account of the slaughter which looks like some mad Nero’s Feat.He reports as follows:

THE NEWSMEN HAVE BECOME SILENT SPECTATORS TO A GRIM TRAGEDY. CONFINED TO THE HOTEL BY THE WEST PAKISTAN MILITARY, THE BURNING AND KILLING IN DACCA FROM THIS DISTANCE SEEMS LIKE SOME MAD NERO’S FEAT. (25)

Thus the first act provides a peep as it were into the ghastly slaughter of 1971 in East Pakistan.

The second act deals with an unending stream of refugees who do not know “where they are going, but just following, for it must lead somewhere, to escape . . .”(42) There is panic and despair all around the refugee camp as streams pour in. The scene presents a very moving account of the refugees. “An existence devoid of hope, a past too terrible to remember, a future of further futility.” (42)As it grows darker, more and more refugees move in, sick, maimed, in want and despair. They grow in numbers, getting warmth and comfort from each other. Each one is almost lying over the other, partly out of lack of space, mostly

to clutch on to someone real and protecting. Father, mothers, sons, daughters, young, old, everyone, including domestic animals like ghosts and cows.... (51)

Each refugee relates a story to the other, incredible, nightmarish story, which is overheard in the play. The atrocities committed by the west Pakistani soldiers are narrated by the refugees thus:

They raped my daughter . . .

. . .my wife . . .

. . .they have special curved knives to cut off breasts ... bit off her nipple . . .

... over and over and over again, one by one, like brutes...”

Now we're refugees, one and all...

...something. Someone's missing ...

...our homes, belongings, someone from our family, our house and village... .

...do you know what it means to be a refugee ...

...to be torn away from mother's breast... (51-52)

Then the action shifts to Hussain and Ray (stands for India) at one of the several refugee camps mushrooming along the border of West Bengal. “There is frantic activity all around the place as streams of refugees pour in.” (54)

**Hussain:**... There's only one way of stopping it...only one way. (Ray looks at him questioningly) Build up, support, and militarize the liberation force in East Bengal. That's the root of it all. Arm them, recruit volunteers, cross borders, and build logistical military support for the *MuktiFauz* (liberation force). That's the only way ... a total liberation, an independent Bangladesh. (55)

Mr. Ray explains the problem of the people of West Bengal (India) thus:

You know the kind of problems we have in W. Bengal...in Calcutta. Unemployment, Naxal threats, inter-party warfare, poverty, violence here, and our hospitality being ...strained...when the hell will this stream of refugees end ... (55)

Ray sounds very much rational when he says there are many problems in India and it is suicidal to support East Pakistan and fight with West Pakistan as it leads to economic ruination of the country.

**Ray:** You want temporary refuge, we'll give it. We're Bengali brothers after all. You want war, we won't give it. It will mean economic ruination for my country, and permanent enmity with a neighbour we have to live with. (55)

Then Hussain says firmly, the only way to solve the problem is to raise the liberation force in East Bengal and he makes it clear that it is useless helping the refugees without supporting the Mukti Fauz. Hussain further asks Ray for arms to *Mukti Fauz* (liberation force). He says one without the other is meaningless and useless.

Act III presents a vivid account of the activities of the liberation force, the *Mukti Bahini*. Mr. Hussain wants Ray (India) to provoke the West Pakistanis so that they declare war on India. First it was a little help to guerillas; then a full-scale border provocation invited nothing short of a declaration of war from Pakistan. Ali and Mullah are very busy with the operations of the liberation force. The Pakistanis find it very difficult to control the *Mukti Bahini*, which is gaining an impetus and a momentum, especially in the country side. The officers of the Pak army are between the devil and the deep sea. If they stay out, the *Mukti Bahini* will overrun them. If they retaliate across the border, they will be inviting war from India.

The last Act deals with the final war and the liberation of East Bengal and the emergence of Bangladesh. India decides to lend a hand to East Pakistan. It strikes at the enemy with five hundred sorties and within two days it gains total air supremacy. There is a naval blockade of all East Bengal ports and in concert with the *Mukti Bahini* (liberation force).

On the 3<sup>rd</sup> of December, a full-scale war was launched by Pakistan. It's a total war. "The Army have already started to move in. They're on the way to Karachi in the West, Chittagong in the East." (87) On the 16<sup>th</sup> of December the United Nations relays the surrender of Nazi (p.91). Under the leadership of Mujeeb, different religious groups (Hindus and Muslims) together organize the fight against Pakistan and the final victory is achieved with the help of the Indian forces. This act throws light on International politics. Currimbhoy is satirical about countries who act as the World's super police.

As Peter Nazareth observes, Currimbhoy skillfully interweaves the public and the private, the historical moment and the individual human being (142). In the play Currimbhoy skillfully interweaves the character's personal struggle with the historic moment. Simita having been detached from her only solace- her child Maya at the time of revolt, turns from a `cow` to `lioness`. She joins Mukti-Fauz not out of patriotic feelings but rather of her motherly affections. Her child Maya, as per Sumita's knowledge is in Jessore. Thus, she is well aware that the only road to her child is Mukti-Fauz, the liberation force. Just like lioness she tactfully proceeds forward towards her goal.

Sonar Bangla or the Golden Bengal is Home Incarnate for Hussain. The following dialogue between Hussain and Anderson clearly reveals the kind of attachment one has with mother and motherland: **Hussain:** ...My home, where my mother was buried...and where ...the life of my country ...my feeling exists. (101)

In the last scene, Hussain recuperating, walking heavily with the stick, looking over the ruin of his house, walking to the grave of his mother. The play concludes with Hussain hearing the sound of Tagore's "Golden Bengal".

My golden Bengal, you are my love!  
Your heavens and your atmosphere  
In my heart play the flute  
In the month of Falgun your mango woods  
With fragrant honey make me mad ... (105)

Mujib, who has been sentenced to a solitary confinement for nine long months at Minawali, is released. He weeps when he sees desolation, destruction and bloodshed in his Sonar Bangla. After his release from the solitary confinement he says: "I never wept when they put me on trial but, I wept when I arrived back here and saw my wonderful Sonar Bangla." (105)

*Sonar Bangla* is built on conflict. The main conflict is between East Pakistan and West Pakistan. Then there is conflict between the Hindus and the Muslims in East Pakistan resulting in the conflict between Bengali Muslims and the Bengali guerillas. Besides the external conflict there is internal conflict. There is conflict in Hussain's mind as he is worried about "the pain and scars that're going to tear his Sonar Bangla once again ..." In the mind of Mujib too there is conflict when he arrives in Bangladesh after his release, and weeps over the pathetic condition of his "Golden Bengal." (105)

Currimbhoy uses the system of parallels and contrasts to make the play more effective. Mr. Hussain, professor Aziz and the colonel have the same objectives and aspirations. They want to rescue East Pakistan from the clutches of the West Pak army. They have a deep concern for the refugees. The concern of the refugees is contrasted with the unconcern of the martial law administrators and with their brutalities. There is contrast between Mujib and Yahya. The former is more worried about Sonar Bangla and its liberation whereas the latter does not care for the plea of Mujib. These contrasts add to the thematic ramification of the play. Before partition, they've been in the same military academy. But now they are on two sides. "Now we're Indo-Pak enemies." (78)

In the words of Martin Banham,

*Sonar Bangla* is described as being possibly ‘a part theatre...part movie and indeed its form is semi-documentary and would be assisted by a multimedia presentation.’ (87) As he said, the play is fast moving but sharp and precise, and manages to range widely through action and location without becoming dramatically loose. Currimbhoy engages the attention of the audience through the adventures of particular characters.

M.K.Naik observes, “One wonders whether the dramatist is trying to write the script for a documentary film rather than attempting a viable dramatic composition.”(131) And Satish Kumar puts it this way, “The atrocities of Pakistani forces ruthless massacres, exodus of refugees, the rise of *MuktiBahini* (liberation force), final war, the unity of all religious groups and Pakistani tyranny under the undisputed leadership of Sheik Mujeeb and the liberation of Bangladesh have been vividly and realistically described. It is a well-documented play in cinematographic technique.”(57)

According to Bayapa Reddy:

The very nature of the play seems to forbid Asif from portraying well-developed characters. Except for Hussain and Mujib, almost all other characters are dull and drab. They do not grow and develop. Hussain is a refugee. Naturally he shares the misery and suffering of other refugees. He is very close to Mujib and hopes fervently that *Sonar Bangla* is going to emerge soon. He takes an oath to avenge himself on all the enemies of *Sonar Bangla*.(50)

History imposes limitations on the author. The author is not free to distort history; factual accuracy has to be strictly adhered to. The play is not a documentary in cinematographic technique; it is really a projection of the ideological conflicts in various individuals. On the whole it is one of those plays that project the playwright’s deep involvement in a quest for human values. Currimbhoy experiments freely with a variety of theatrical techniques to create the desired effects. He thinks more in terms of scenes and actions on the stage which provide visual images to stimulate the minds, the ears, and the eyes of his audience. He uses astonishing variety of stage devices to bring his drama alive on the stage.

This play contains very powerful dialogues and the style reminds one of American Playwrights of Absurd theatre like O Neil, Samuel Becket etc. The following dialogue reveals the depth and power of his dialogue: “An existence devoid of hope, a past too terrible to remember, a future of further futility.” (42) The play with its moving dialogue and fast action presents a realistic picture of some terrible events of the war. Currimbhoy tries to depict in a very realistic way how the refugees are torn away from their mother’s breast, how they lost their home and belongingness, and how hunger consumes them,

cyclones strike them. Bayapa Reddy observes, "Currimbhoy's dialogue, like Pinter's, contains gestures as well as words, and so it must be seen as well as heard. He seems to aim at a concrete language that is independent of speech."(51)

Currimbhoy has thus unfolded to us the deepest misery of the humanity and the inmost meaning of a historical event. It is hazardous to infiltrate too much history into the plot of a drama; history puts the author at a disadvantage sometimes since a great majority of characters who have an independent historical reality can hardly be made amenable to the author's designs or the exigencies of the plot. Currimbhoy's interest ultimately is 'man'. His plays speak for the man and they provide a vigorous plea for human values.

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