

The Refugee: An Anguish of Millions

Mallam Naveen
Assistant Professor, (Selection Grade)
Department of English
Government Degree College, Parkal
Hanumakonda District, Telangana State - 506164
Affiliated to Kakatiya University, Warangal
E-mail: mallamnaveen107@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The partition of India left a dark and ineradicable mark in the history of India, which created painful anguish among millions of people, especially in Bengal and Punjab. The sea change about the independence of India made an inexplicable turn of events in the annals of history. The spirit of brotherhood and the generation of human values collapsed suddenly with the advent of independence in the country. This socio-political aspect touched upon the playwright Asif Currimbhoy in making the play *The Refugee*. Currimbhoy tried to generate compassion through human suffering in and around Bengal, especially in Calcutta.

The present play, *The Refugee*, draws the parallel between Yassin, the young refugee from East Pakistan, and Sen Gupta, a refugee to India from East Pakistan many years earlier. In the beginning, Yassin is cloudy and undecipherable with his indecisive acts towards the cause. On the other hand, Sen Gupta crossed borders many years earlier as a refugee, and he is now well settled in India with his friendly attitude and hardworking nature. Surprisingly, both are at present unperturbed towards the worsened situation of millions of refugees, who are in the camps and outside of the house of Sen Gupta and who need to be addressed by the concern. This play is about the anguish of millions of refugees. It is an act of resolution of dilemma in irony about the influx of refugees growing in number.

Keywords: *Refugee, anguish, partition, dilemma, compassion.*

INTRODUCTION

The human condition is drawn and explored by the prevailing social situation and social consciousness in and around society. The stigma of the social and cultural aspects engulfs the spirit of the persona, which makes the history of being written or told. Asif Currimbhoy is a playwright of choice, and he is deeply concerned with the problems and upheavals of the social environment consciously webbed in the inner world of human beings and their family affairs. In the play, *The Refugee*, Currimbhoy tries to reinvent the disturbances of the Partition of India, especially in Bengal. He makes an effort to bring out the political upheaval in East Pakistan, which occurred in 1971. This is the year, which witnessed the fate of millions of refugees from East Pakistan to India and which has to be marked red for the plight of the millions of refugees for their endangered lives. The growing number of refugees from East Pakistan to India started surging into the democracy from tyranny was a shocking sight to many during the year 1971. It was a massive inflow of refugees from the borders, and the then Government of India was in

a dilemma with a concern towards democracy and humanity; it couldn't stop the inflow, but it had to wait for the right decision to be taken at the right time.

During the years of struggle caused by the massive number of refugees into West Bengal, Asif Currimbhoy, the playwright of the play *The Refugee*, was working in Calcutta on his official work at the time of the incident. He toured his choice of work in and around West Bengal of the times extensively. He had witnessed every inch of the situation, and the dire state of affairs caused by the influx of refugees poured into India from East Pakistan. He is put into deep thought as he is a man of social concern, and the humanist in him is totally reflexive to the predicament. He is moved by the sudden breakdown of the values and sad plight of the people in the united Bengal, which had a flourished legacy of British India before independence and has been into the altitude of democracy in its whole. The author, as a humanist, could not control his own reflexes towards the social, economic, political concerns of the day, and he immediately started penning his own thoughts and reflexes in the same year in 1971, as the events were in deep force, as a play in the name of *The Refugee*. Currimbhoy's intentions as a writer are put forth his ideas of his immediate social concern, which are evident in the reference of the time frame, which was mentioned in the play, also establishes it as:

Shortly after 25 March 1972, when talks between Yahya Khan and Sheikh Mujib broke down, the initial massacre of intellectuals at Universities in East Bengal took place, and the first flight of few thousand refugees occurred across the border into West Bengal (Currimbhoy 9).

It also clearly establishes the fact that the playwright had an immediate concern with his dramatic reflexes taken from outside the social environment.

Asif Currimbhoy is a playwright not only with a social concern but also with an attitude of setting the play in a realistic situation which is immediately taken from the outside world of his thoughts. Being a realist in his own ideology, the playwright is moved by the events in and around him and he is not in dilemma to incorporate his ideas of the then Bengal and its milieu of the society for the backdrop of the play with a deep sense of ability towards the society and the problems of the refugees in Bengal at the time, where his eyes witnessed the facts, since he worked in West Bengal at the time of writing of the present play visualised by the playwright. The playwright's deep sense of realistic presentation is totally evident in the description of Sen Gupta's house and the illustration of identities of the refugee camp which are set in the play. If the truth to be told, the account of the facts set in the refugee camp are picturesque in creating the setting of the play is very realistic. The following scene of the play about the refugee camp is explained by Currimbhoy thus:

The refugee scene grows with early dawn or evening shadows like an ominous prehistoric beast's death pangs. Groans and wails, skeletoned men and sunken eyed babies sucking on to shriveled breasts. Maimed human beings reduced to inhuman existence, robbed of dignity and essential life (Currimbhoy 18).

Here it is a splendid passage describing a refugee camp which adds a new dimension to the realism of the play. Currimbhoy is thus successful in portraying the miseries of the refugees. He focuses on such aspects as the political insecurity and the physical as well as psychological alienation of the refugees from the mainstream society.

It is a full-fledged play and it consists of all the characteristics like, “exposition, rising action, climax, denouement and conclusion, and also other ingredients like melodramatic situations, high-flown dialogue” (Chandrika 61). Sen Gupta is one of the most assertive characters in the play and makes the play in swing to the upheavals and psychological exploration about the surge of the refugees. Most of the refugees had been driven from their native land under the inescapable conditions of indescribable horror and misery, in which Sen Gupta was no more exception and he was one of the uprooted millions with a terrible mental state.

The play begins with an invitation by Sen Gupta to Yassin into his household. Yassin is a young refugee from East Pakistan and also the son of his childhood friend Rukaiya. Here Sen Gupta tries to explain to Yassin the particular situations of the time which were set at the time, when he was intending to cross the border for his family's safety and security. He explained Yassin regarding the works of intelligentsia of Pakistan in the own land of East Pakistan. He also gives a brief picture about the vanishing state of Awami League and its future leadership in the hands of tyranny. The play always moves around Yassin, an intellectual, who flees to India to take a shelter of refugee. He escaped the massacre, which he feels himself an intellectual massacre in the universities at the time. He crosses the border in a spectacular escape of the shots of the infamous tyrant military lead by Yahya Khan, the then military ruler of Pakistan. In the very beginning, Sen Gupta welcomed all the refugees with a friendly gesture. He felt the integrity of himself towards the refugees, as he was also a refugee to India twenty-four years ago. Here we can also draw the point of view of K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar on The Refugee:

Refugees are masses of people, but they are also composed of individuals, and each of them is unique. It is because this primary human dimension is ignored, history is so replete with stupidities and brutalities. The 'refugee' of Currimbhoy's play is Yassin – he is also Sen Gupta – he is any refugee; he is all refugees (Iyengar 246).

At this point of time in the play, Sen Gupta was very anxious of his own country East Pakistan and especially Comilla, his native town and he rolled back in a deep sense of nostalgia to

recollect and cherish his unforgettable memories of his maiden love, as he is now a father of two, Ashok as well as Mita.

At the beginning of the play, Sen Gupta sympathizes with the miserable condition of the refugees who have fled from his native country East Pakistan. His sympathies with the refugees are very genuine, and along with him, his family is deeply heartened by the sad situation of the refugees. As the days passed by, there was a heavy influx of refugees to the household and refugee camp at Sen Gupta's place. They double in number, and they try to inhabit all the empty places and occupy even the garage of Sen Gupta and the sewerage pipe, which is idle and not in use. By seeing the problems caused by the refugees, Sen Gupta feels losing of his own sympathy towards their condition and he is degenerated and his idealism towards the refugees vanishes, as he now feels that they are the real threat to Indian society. The enraged problem of the "massive influx of refugees combined with India's own post war population explosion, led to Calcutta becoming an international urban horror story. The mere name was enough to conjure up visions of squalor, starvation, disease and death" (Thomas et. al. 480). Sen Gupta is now realising the situation in the refugee camp outside of his house and the total influx of refugees poured thousands of refugees from East Pakistan. He is thoroughly unhappy about the situation of the refugees who have grown in multiple numbers and who try to barge in the open fields and all by Sen Gupta's house. He is very much alarmed at the growing number of the refugees:

Now it's a holocaust and we're completely unprepared for it. Why, there are more refugees today in this town than local inhabitants. Our development projects have come to a standstill. The refugee, with his minimum rations, is better fed than the local unemployed (Currimbhoy 29-30).

He strongly feels that the government in Bangladesh, East Pakistan, must have a political solution for the problem of the refugees.

In this dire need of the situation, the idealism of Sen Gupta has been torn into bits and pieces as he now feels them a threat to the nation. At the other hand, Yassin, who has witnessed the massacre in his home country, remains unnoticed to the situation and the problems around him. He is cosy enough to be silent in his thoughts, and he keeps himself busy with his regular new job at the university. He always spends his whole time in Sen Gupta's study room and he has no mood to discuss the problems in his home country or here at the refugee camp. On the other hand, Ashok, a son of Sen Gupta, deeply involves himself voluntarily for the rescue of the refugees. He even wants to join the Mukti Bahini, a terrorist outfit which is formed to save its mother country East Bengal. He is concerned for the cause and he doesn't like the idea to be

unperturbed by the problems of the refugees and being cosy like Yassin. He strongly believes in to fight for the cause for his home country East Pakistan to be liberated from the clutches of Pakistan.

Through the character of Ramul, Currimbhoy tries to establish the fact that the cause more than anything else. He is shown to be a man of eccentricity, but his acts are more realistic in nature and more responsible than Yassin. He declares himself a kind of the refugees in the refugee camp and he starts governing the refugees from his own kingdom, the sewerage pipe in the open fields of Sen Gupta's house. Though, a full-grown character of himself in the play, Ramul acts like a shadow to Yassin. In the refugee camp, we hear Ramul's 'eerie baboon-like mad laugh' from the sewerage pipe. Ramul knows it clearly, "that the initial warmth and welcome for the refugees would end soon, that people would want them to be out of sight, and that millions of unwanted refugees would then have nowhere to go" (Chandrika 65). He becomes a leader himself to the whole refugees and he divides them as his own military troupe. He also passes orders to the refugees to occupy the space not only in the open fields and but also Sen Gupta's own garage. Though Ramul seems to be an eccentric in his attitude towards addressing the problems of the refugees in the camp, he is shown more realistic than Yassin. In the initial days of the play, Yassin was silent and unconcerned to the fact and his attitude was unperturbed towards the millions of refugees in the camp.

Ramul, who is now the leader of the refugees, has grown himself diametrically opposite to Yassin and makes an attempt to address the problems of the refugees in his own eccentric way. At the same time, Yassin is undisturbed to the prevailing conditions of the refugees. However, he is refugee himself, fled from his own country, he acts normal with his job and activities. Though he witnesses the struggles and problems of the people in his own country and the problems faced by the refugees here at the camp, he does not want to involve himself in the liberation of the millions of constraints. Mita is a character blended with realism and humanism by Currimbhoy. She is a daughter of Sen Gupta and she very concerned and active in associating herself with all the programs regarding refugee-rehabilitation. She directly blames Yassin, for whom she feels who avoids the problems deliberately. She is portrayed to be realistic and she involves herself to the uttermost possible in the rehabilitation of the refugees. She feels others be the same for the cause and when she talks to Yassin about the problems in the camp, Yassin too becomes disturbed and restless. By this, Currimbhoy tries to instil human concern through the characters of Mita and Yassin to fight against subjugation.

Yassin is quite against to the idea of Sen Gupta in protesting Hindus in East Pakistan. Being a Muslim and a Pakistani in his thought, he raises his voice against the idea of being prosecuted and declaring a war against the tyrant acts of Pakistan. The scene in the play regarding the spread out of Cholera in the refugee camp makes Yassin to open his eyes to reality. When Mita announces and bursts out that the refugees are dying like flies in the camp due to Cholera, his ideology is shaken to its roots for the first time, and he is completely disturbed. When he visits the refugee camp for the first time along with Professor Mosin, he tries to introspect himself in tune with the reality outside and as it is suggested by Mita. He watches the trial of a death sentence conducted by Ramul, and he intervenes in it and makes the prisoner free from Ramul. But Ramul announces that this is a mockery and they are playing a game. In high tone, Ramul warns Yassin for his cold attitude:

“RAMUL: What have you done since you’ve come here?
YASSIN: N...Nothing.
RAMUL: How do you know you’re not a Pakistani spy?
YASSIN: I’m not.
RAMUL: But you might be...without knowing it.
YASSIN: Meaning.
RAMUL: ‘They also serve who stand and wait.’
YASSIN: But I haven’t harmed anyone.
RAMUL: Depends on how long you do nothing” (Currimbhoy 56).

At the same time, he is thrown into deep thought as Ramul makes him think that they are on the verge of death in the refugee camp and they must plunge into action to save them.

Now is the testing time for Yassin, as he is completely torn between existence and ideology. Yassin is in a hell of thoughts, his psychological approach regarding the refugees and the reality which is depicted in front of his bare eyes make him to be torn apart from the obsession of trust. He is in a dilemma between the position of Indian Muslims and Pakistani Muslims. When Professor Mosin argues about the endangered status of Indian Muslims due to the rebellious attitude of Pakistan Muslims, Yassin supports the latter to convict his sympathy. Yassin is really perturbed of the fact between the cultural configurations of the same people in view of the different religious ideologies. With the self-realisation and with a deep commitment and concern, Yassin decides finally to move forward to liberate his mother country from the clutches of Pakistan. As he leaves Mita, for whom he finds the inspiration to be a part of the

new world, he is in a firm decision to liberate the millions of people who are still in subjugation by the tyrant leadership. He is awakened by the fact of the situation with regard to the influx of the refugees to India from his home country East Pakistan and he realises the cause, which focuses well on fighting against the political ideology of his home country.

At the very beginning of the play, Yassin is thoroughly detached from reality, and he is not empathetic to his fellow refugees. By observing his cold nature towards the refugees, even Sen Gupta blames him for his inhospitable concern for the refugees. Professor Mosin worries about his thought process towards the refugees and warns him against his escapist attitude. Mita, too, wonders why Yassin does not talk about the refugees as he feels that they don't exist on the earth to any extent. After he heard the deliberation from Mita, he slowly started realizing the situation of the refugees at Sen Gupta's place and in the refugee camp. At the same time, Mita feels empathy towards the refugees as she is much concerned with herself with the refugees' problems. The characterization of Mita in the play *The Refugee* just reminds us of the character of Elizabeth in Asif Currimbhoy's other play *Sonar Bangla*. Elizabeth is also drawn to the problems of the refugees, and she says: "I came plainly and simply because there was a need, and it didn't matter to me whether it was in my country or in any other. Because the need seemed greater here, I was drawn to it" (Currimbhoy, *Sonar Bangla* 58). Slowly, Yassin tries to shed his inhibitions and wants to visit the refugee camp along with Professor Mosin on the same night.

It is portrayed as more melodramatic from Yassin's first visit to the refugee camp along with Professor Mosin to his second visit alone on the same night. As he feels he does not find his conscience anywhere, he gropes for a solution. When he leaves for the graveyard at night, which is on the outskirts of the refugee camp, he is shocked to witness a heart-throbbing scene of a young woman digging the grave alone for her dead mother. Then his realisation comes to his senses, and he tries to muster up his courage to speak the truth to the young woman:

Is she dead? Your mother? What did she die of? Broken heart, Cholera? And then they told me to dig my own grave...It's the only positive thing I did in life before they shot me...here, give me that spade. We'll bury your mother...and pray for my salvation (Currimbhoy 39).

Yassin ameliorates his thoughts to bring up courage, and finally, he decides to liberate his own country. Here Currimbhoy's "acquaintance-even intimacy, imaginative if not actual-with human types seems to cover the entire spectrum of humanity" (Iyengar 245). He strongly feels that one should be conscious of preserving the freedom of thought and action in one's own

country. What is more, he realises his own duty not only towards the liberalization of his own country, but also the entire humanity.

Mita always lives in the reality in tune with the outside world, and she is obsessed with the problems of the refugees at her place. She wants the youngsters like Yassin to rise upon and act against the brutality of the nations' political will, which makes the lives of refugees more and more vulnerable in the democratic nation. Mita directly blames Yassin, who is not concerned about the problems of the refugees as a whole. She feels bitter as he avoids the refugees and he does not want to talk about them. She asks him to come along with her to the refugee camp to serve the refugees in rehabilitation. Mita is firm at her belief that a human-like Yassin, who is a refugee of himself, can understand the problems of fellow refugees than anybody else can, and he can address their problems as his own. She cries desperately, "Refugees dying...like flies. Disease...spreading...Trying hard...to contain it. Much sympathy...from outsiders. They say...at last...the conscience of the world is aroused. At last, in crisis. The conscience. THE CONSCIENCE" (Currimbhoy 34). At first, Yassin seems to be cozy with his circumstances, happy to withdraw from the problems around him. Being an introvert of his nature, he always wants to be in a shell of comfort for himself than to face reality outside. But the scene smacks him of his inhumanity and cold attitude, and Mita's concern towards the cause uprights him to be an individual of concern for virtue of thought.

CONCLUSION

The play by Asif Currimbhoy, *The Refugee*, tries to balance the situation between humanity and ideology. The main character in the play, is at the beginning torn apart between political and psychological alienation. The playwright hopes to bring about a solution in the name of Mita, who is so concerned and sympathetic in understanding the problems of the refugees than her father, Sen Gupta, and Yassin, the young refugee. She is deeply involved in the rehabilitation activities of the refugees, and she is the torch bearer for others, especially Yassin. Through her involvement in the process, she becomes the inspiration to others to follow the action. She says:

The refugees exist the same way. They're alive, and oh! Only too real. They bring tears to my eyes, their suffering touches my heart. I can't bear to leave them alone. All of life draws me...the human condition (Currimbhoy 29).

Here in this splendid dialogue from Mita, one can eventually think that her thirst for humanity is the same as the playwright's thirst. The playwright's point of view tends to focus that the

government should not be officious in handling the problems of the refugee, which has to be looked at from the human point of view but not the administrative point of view.

In spite of all the bare facts, Yassin is inspired by Mita, who displays humanity on the whole in rescuing the refugees. Even Ashok, the son of Sen Gupta, makes Yassin ponder over the problems and makes him to open up his eyes and stir into action. When Yassin feels strong in his will to do something for his mother country in the process of liberation, he decides to plunge into action. He now realizes that preserving freedom of thought in his mother country should be his first choice. What is more, he realizes his duty towards the entire humanity:

I almost said 'nothing' through force of habit. But something has—the inevitable. Man really has little choice in life. He is often forced into a situation...where there is no way out. A decision an action gets destined, almost involuntarily (Currimbhoy 40).

The play thus concludes as he decides to liberate East Pakistan from the clutches of Pakistan. He pushes himself into action, and he goes to the cupboard to take out the uniform of Mukti Fauj and the rifle to join the Mukti Bahini.

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