

SUBJECT NAME : SUBALTERN LITERATURE

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UNIT – IV

DRAMA

- 1. The Dumb Dancer by Asif Currimbhoy**
- 2. Death and the King's Horseman by Wole Soyinka**

1. The Dumb Dancer

by Asif Currimbhoy

About the Author

Asif Currimbhoy (1928–1994) is an Indian playwright who wrote in English. He was among the very few Indian dramatists writing plays exclusively in English. He wrote and/or produced over thirty plays in several genres. His work incorporated monologues, choruses, chants, songs, mime, slide projections, and filmed footage.

Introduction: “The Dumb Dancer”, a highly acclaimed Psychological play of an Indian playwright Asif Currimbhoy, is a fascinating story of a Kathakali dancer’s emotional plight in the competitive world. The central characters in this play seem to be affected with Schizophrenia. The text has elaborate footnotes and numerous illustrations to explain to a foreign reader the history and tradition of Kathakali dance. The play was written in 1961 and was staged in 1965 in United States later it was staged at the British Drama League Festival. The kathakali dance with the accompaniment of drums, cymbals, gongs and songs can easily hold the foreign audience spellbound. Currimbhoy recalls its effect on the audience when it was staged at the British Drama League Festival: The timing and the tone of the play were just right. Everything was bizarre to the point of fascination and the audiences were absolutely thrilled. I don’t think we will ever forget the experience.”

About the drama

“The Dumb Dancer” is a story of a Kathakali dancer Bhima, who plays the mythological role of Bhima and over identifies himself with the role to the extent of forgetting his own identity in this world. He gradually turns insane and becomes a patient in a mental asylum. Bhima, the kathakali dancer is under the delusion that he is the real Bhima of the Mahabharata, who had avenged the humiliation of his beloved wife Draupadi by killing Duryodhana. He becomes mentally deranged at the thought of his having become a murderer, the victim in his insane fantasy. Dr. Prema, the psychiatrist who treats him, becomes so strongly involved emotionally with his problem that, instead of curing him, she herself becomes insane. While treating him she gradually starts identifying herself with Draupadi, the beloved wife of Bhima and slowly turns insane.

Theme : The Psychological thriller of valour from Mahabharata, combined with the stigma and struggle attached with mental illnesses, expressed through the traditional dance form , Kathakali.

Summary

The play begins with a scene in the operation theatre of a mental asylum where ‘a dance sequence from Duryodhana’s slaughter’ is enacted with the sane on one side and the insane on the other side as its audience. The surprising thing is Bhima, a Kathakali dancer but an inpatient in the hospital plays the role of Bhima. No one knows this fact till Prema, the doctor who is treating Bhima reveals it to Dilip a house surgeon. Through the conversation between Prema and Dilip, one comes to

know the illness of Bhima and his over identification with the mythological character Bhima to the extent of forgetting his real identity. “Your patient is a Schizophrenic who calls himself Bhima and identifies himself with a mythological character in a historical play. The case is not an uncommon one.” When Dr. Dilip asks Dr. Prema why she had allowed the patient to enact the violent scene, Dr. Prema explains that she gives him a shock therapy which would bring back to his real-self. To give Bhima a shock treatment Dr. Prema wishes him to go through the performance again, as close to reality as possible.

Act II is a flash-back which takes us to the training center where Bhima is exposed to the strict and rigorous training in kathakali center. He often lapses into contemplation and tries to identify himself with Bhima of “The Mahabharata” who stands for courage, strength and ferociousness. He is very ambitious to achieve perfection in his art. In “thundering accents” he recites a few verses from the vow of revenge from “The Mahabharata” and performs the kathakali dance. His competency with a co-student, the singer Madhu a blind one, his intimacy with Guru’s daughter Shakuntala, his mental illness in the budding stage which from time to time is corrected by Guru, his fierce act of cutting his tongue to become greater than Madhu and also the greatest in the art field, he gradually turning insane and becoming a patient in asylum are seen in the second act. The verses chanted by Madhu, a blind pupil in the kathakali training centre, and a rival to Bhima are intended to give the background of the play. In a moment of elation, Bhima asks his Guru if he will ever attain the greatness of Madhu at all. The teacher says ‘No’. Then Bhima becomes upset and insists his Guru to explain why and how Madhu is greater? Then the Guru says, perhaps Madhu’s genius is due to his blindness, as those who lack one of the senses develop an unerring accuracy in another. He advises Bhima to – get back to work ‘since there can be no greatness without sacrifice. He also tells Bhima that his speech interferes his practice. Bhima who wants to excel Madhu is instructed by the Guru to practice dance ‘silently’. He grows restless, contorts his body into an agonizing dumb dancer and cries out. The dumb dancer...the dumb...dancer ... These words electrify the situation and express the mental agony of Bhima. Immediately, he recedes into darkness, cuts his tongue and emerges again into the flickering light and throws his severed tongue at the feet of his Guru.

The III Act consists of Prema’s efforts to bring Bhima back to normalcy. She wants to place a dead corpse with torn abdomen in the place of Duryodhana to give a kind of shock therapy to Bhima to bring him back to normalcy. As a part of shock therapy, Dr. Prema keeps the corpse with a mask of Duryodhana on it when Bhima is playing the role of roudra (ferocious) Bhima getting ready to kill Duryodhana. Dr. Prema’s fascination for Bhima grows stronger and stronger and she slowly starts identifying herself with Draupadi, the beloved wife of Bhima. Her identification is interrupted by Shakuntala whom Bhima identifies as Draupadi. She feels jealous of her. Sensing that she is drawn very much towards the dumb dancer, Dr. Dilip wonders at her behaviour and asks her to come out of this illusion. In the final scene, Dr. Dilip finds Dr. Prema standing with her tresses dripping blood, on her head with the hands of Bhima who stands impassive. With wild eyes she declares that she has killed Shakuntala for her complete identification with Draupadi. The play ends with Prema turning insane, identifying herself with Draupadi. Prema, the superintendent of the mental asylum murders Shakuntala, her rival in order to own Bhima. In her ecstasy of identification, she puts Bhima’s arms around her, making his hand caress her hair.

The drama symbolically displays the indispensable struggle between the real self and the self that is projected and takes the audience to the inner depths of mind to show that alienation is an indispensable factor in the human life. Bhima the kathakali dancer and Prema the psychiatrist who treats him are the characters that show this inner struggle which in turn turns them insane. Through these two characters Currimbhoy presents the conflict between the real-self and the projected self in human mind which leads to the contemplation of human existence. Bhima feels comfortable in the dark and feels it difficult to come into light. This symbolically presents the conflict of real self and projected self in Bhima and he retreating himself into the inner depths of mind to find the real identity. As the degree of identification grows he forgets his existing identity in the world and becomes insane in the eyes of society.

Prema is another rare and sensitive individual who is aware of the conflict between the natural self and the image projected. Dr. Dilip comments on the tension in her mind. The more she thinks in terms of exercising her psychiatric skills the more she grows restless and is drawn towards Bhima. She tells Dilip about the restlessness in her mind. She develops emotional intimacy with her patient and even feels jealous of Shakuntala for her hold on Bhima who considers Shakuntala as his Draupadi and is very tender to her. Such behaviour is against her professional ethics as dictated by the society in which she lives.

Thus the play highlights conflicts in man. Currimbhoy uses one of the moods in the Kathakali dance "Distraction" it is the mood that symbolizes the man growing mad by lapsing into the inner depths of mind. When Shakuntala asks Bhima to show the mood Distraction, he immediately recedes into darkness and tells he can't come out of it. He invites Shakuntala to come into it. Shakuntala rejects as it is a terrifying world full of darkness and so many masks hanging on the wall. Shakuntala goes back but Prema ventures, she goes into it comes with the mask. She is comfortable in. Inner depths of mind are a vertex. Once you get into it, there is no point of returning. For Prema "Distraction reaches higher than Sanity."

The element of suspense makes the play more and more interesting. In the very opening scene one does not know why the pantomime is tried and why the psychiatrist is very anxious to make clinical assumptions about the dancer. The audience may be very much interested to know why Dr. Prema asks Dr. Dilip to conduct a shock therapy. The audiences are kept in suspense in act III where the nurse tells Dr. Dilip that a scalpel is missing. After the conduct of autopsy, one hears a scream in darkness and Dr. Prema tells Dilip that she has killed Shakuntala because she thought that she stood as a snag in reaching Bhima. In the end, she goes to Bhima and puts his arms around her. A faint echo Draupadi... Draupadi is heard and we do not know who has called out the name. Thus suspense engages the audience throughout the play.

Currimbhoy uses some effective theatrical devices in the play. He uses kathakali dance as a powerful dramatic device. Light and shadow, music, and masks are used to draw the narrow line between the two worlds – the sane and the insane; conscious and subconscious; external and inner life. By using all these modern theatrical devices and experimenting with the form and content Currimbhoy displays the universal questions related to human behavior and existence. And the play has attracted a great deal of critical attention, an interest which is certainly due to Currimbhoy's attempt to combine the theatrical code of kathakali with western dramatic form.

Conclusion: The central characters in the play suffer from alienation. They dramatize man's need for belongingness and the sense of identification. Thus, the play "The Dumb Dancer" portrays the frustration of the kathakali dancer, Bhima to achieve perfection in his art, his sense of insecurity, and his inarticulate groping for identity in the competitive world. And Dr. Prema identifies herself with Draupadi but in the process she finds Shakuntala as an obstacle, and to make her identification complete, she murders Shakuntala. The play ends with the sane psychiatrist turns insane.

2. Death and the King's Horseman by Wole Soyinka

About the Author

Akinwande Oluwole Babatunde Soyinka (Yoruba: Akínwándé Olúwọlé Babátúndé Šóyíinká; born 13 July 1934), known as Wole Soyinka, is a Nigerian playwright, novelist, poet, and essayist in the English language. He was awarded the 1986 Nobel Prize in Literature, for "in a wide cultural perspective and with poetic overtones fashioning the drama of existence." the first sub-Saharan African to be honoured in that category.

Characters

Elesin

A chief and the King's horseman who is supposed to die thirty days after the King does, Elesin prepares himself to die but is thwarted from that goal by Pilkings.

Pilkings

The District Officer who is committed to duty and enforcing English law, even if it interferes with the local traditions and rituals.

Jane Pilkings

Naive and somewhat ignorant, Jane is more likeable than her husband since she tries to understand the Nigerians a bit more.

The Praise-Singer

He sings for Elesin as the chief makes his passage to the other side

Iyaloja

The mother of the marketplace, she is initially solicitous of all Elesin's needs, but is fiercely critical of him after he does not die during the ritual.

Olunde

Elesin's son. He was educated in England but returned to Nigeria to bury his father.

The Bride

Chosen by Elesin for her beauty, the Bride couples with Elesin before he is supposed to depart, and, it is assumed, conceives his child. She is completely mute and passive.

The Resident

Pilkings's superior, who demands that Pilkings control the situation with Elesin.

The Prince

The visiting dignitary whose presence sends Pilkings into a tizzy.

The Aide-de-Camp

Also referred to as Bob, the Aide-de-Camp assists the Resident. He is officious, but does not seem to like the Africans and is quick to find Olunde hostile.

Joseph

The Pilkings' houseboy, who becomes sullen when Pilkings says something negative about Christianity.

Amusa

Pilkings's Nigerian sergeant, who is offended by his boss's egungun costumes in the first part of the play.

Theme

Duty is a major theme throughout the play.

Literary Elements

Genre: Drama

Language: English

Setting and Context

Nigeria, in the 1940s. Nigeria is still a colony of Great Britain.

Narrator and Point of View

The point of view is third-person limited. There is no explicit narrator (it is a play).

Tone and Mood

The tone is ironic. The mood varies. In the first and third acts it is ritualistic, celebratory, and vibrant. In acts two and four it is tense and ironic. In act five it is mournful, ironic, and bittersweet.

Protagonist and Antagonist

Protagonist: Elesin, Olunde. Antagonist: Pilkings. (More abstractly: the main antagonistic force is the English.)

Summary

The play opens with Elesin and his praise-singer entering the marketplace. Elesin is traveling there to see the women on the eve of his death, for he was the King's horseman, who, now that the King has died, must also die and travel to the afterlife with him. Elesin is an expansive, gregarious, and zesty man, and he and the praise-singer banter back and forth.

The women, including the mother of the marketplace, Iyaloja, arrive and watch and listen. Elesin boasts of how he is not afraid of death and is prepared for his fate. When the women call him a man of honor, Elesin takes on an air of mock-anger. He tells them his attire is not very honorable, and, relieved, they help garb him in beautiful clothing.

Before Elesin moves on, he notices an incredibly beautiful young woman and proclaims that he wants her. Iyaloja and the women are conflicted, because she is betrothed to Iyaloja's son. Nevertheless, they give Elesin what he wants, and a wedding and consummation are scheduled before his ritual death. Iyaloja warns Elesin to keep his goal in mind and leave no curse with his seed.

The District Officer and his wife Jane prepare to attend a gala. They are dressed in the clothing of the egungun, taken from the rituals of a Nigerian death cult. They find the costumes amusing, while they frighten the local Nigerian constable, Amusa.

Pilkings, a typical Englishman in colonial Africa, is annoyed by Amusa's reluctance to talk to him while he is wearing the costume. Amusa does convey his message, which is that he has heard that Elesin, a local chief, is preparing to kill himself for the ritual. Jane is horrified and Pilkings groans that he thought this sort of thing was stamped out.

They hear the drums in the distance and wonder if this is what is truly going on. Pilkings calls in his houseboy, Joseph, a Nigerian who recently converted to Christianity. He asks about this chief and the ritual and Joseph confirms what will happen.

Pilkings recalls that he has clashed with this man Elesin before, as he helped secure the passage of his son Olunde, to England where he would study to be a doctor. Elesin had been incredibly angry and Olunde was more or less smuggled out. It is also true that the rules of the ritual state that if Elesin could not perform the suicide for some reason that his eldest son would have to complete it. Jane giggles that that might be the reason why the chief was angry his son left.

Pilkings tries to decide to intervene or not, and Jane encourages him to do so, as she thinks it sounds barbaric. Pilkings instructs Joseph to take a note to Amusa, ordering him to arrest Elesin. Pilkings and Jane prepare to go to the ball, and he tells his wife that a special guest –the Prince – will be there tonight.

Back in the marketplace Amusa and two constables arrive to arrest Elesin. The girls and women viciously taunt them, and they leave, warning that they will be back. Elesin triumphantly exits from his consummation of his wedding with the Bride, and begins to prepare for death. He announces that he is eager to make his journey.

His dancing and speech are accompanied by the praise-singer's chanting. Elesin's eyes droop, his movements become heavy, and his trance deepens. It seems as if Elesin is sinking deeper and coming close to death.

At the party the Prince greets the revelers. The Resident and the Resident's aide-de-camp assist him. The Prince admires the Pilkings's costumes.

The Resident talks to Pilkings privately and admonishes him for not knowing about this Elesin situation earlier. Amusa brings word to Pilkings about the arrest of Elesin, but is still nervous about talking to Pilkings because of the costume. Pilkings, frustrated, relieves him from duty. Pilkings leaves to take care of the affair.

Jane notices a man waiting in the wings –it is Olunde, newly returned from England. He is smart, reserved, and composed. They exchange pleasantries but the conversation becomes tense when Jane says she does not understand the ritual and thinks it is crass. She is especially confused when Olunde says that he came home to bury his father as soon as he heard the King died. She comes across as very naïve, but calms down a bit and tries to genuinely understand.

Pilkings returns, urgently asking for the aide-de-camp. He sees Olunde and is surprised. He acts awkwardly. After he turns away and begins to take care of things, Jane and Olunde wonder if Elesin's death could be causing this apparent turmoil.

Suddenly Elesin's voice booms across the hall as he is brought in, bound and struggling. Elesin sees his son and stops short. He begs him to heed him, but Olunde turns away in disgust and calls him an "eater of leftovers."

Elesin is put into prison. The Bride sits silently outside his cell. Pilkings visits him and they speak for a bit, disputing what the notion of duty means. Elesin claims that his son did not betray him and that his disgust was warranted; Olunde was indisputably his son.

Iyaloja wants to visit Elesin and Pilkings reluctantly lets her in. She chastises and condemns Elesin for being a coward and not going through with his death. She and the other women feel betrayed, she tells him angrily. Elesin is chastened and mournful.

The women from the marketplace march to the jailhouse, carrying a burden wrapped in cloth. Jane counsels Pilkings to let them in because she assumes they are affiliated with Olunde, who would do no harm. The women enter, put down their burden, and Elesin begins to clamor to get out of the cell. Pilkings, confused, refuses.

The praise-singer chants and condemns Elesin as well. The burden is unwrapped; it is Olunde, who has committed suicide to carry out his father's duty. Swiftly, Elesin strangles himself before Pilkings can stop him.

Iyaloja wearily tells Pilkings not to interfere, and stops him from stooping to close the chief's eyes. The Bride does this silently, and the two depart. The women chant and sway.

Conclusion

Elesin is devastated, so he strangles himself with the chains binding him before the authorities can react. While Elesin was always supposed to die, instead of dying with honor, he ends up dying in embarrassment and terrible grief.