

Asif Currimbhoy's *The Clock* as a Social Commentary

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Drama: Splendid and Supreme Art

Of all the literary forms, drama is the most splendid and influential one as it appeals to all our senses. It is a visual art and an effective medium of communication through which the whole saga of human life can be illustrated in a better way. It not only presents the moral, political, ethical, philosophical, and religious conditions of the human society all over the world, but also takes a deep insight into the consciousness and sub-consciousness of human mind and represents man's joys, sorrows, conflicts, hopes and visions with great beauty. Bharatmuni in *Natyashastra* states: "Theater is life. There is no art, no craft, no learning, no yoga, no action, which cannot be seen in it (qtd. in Adya 35).

Currimbhoy: India's First Authentic Voice in Drama

Asif Currimbhoy (born 1928) emerged as a notable Indian English Playwright in the post-independence period. Faubian Bowers commented about him that he is "India's first authentic voice in the theatre" (7). He is a social dramatist. He has 30 plays to his credit which cover a wide range of themes from history and politics, society and religion, art and metaphysics. His plays are necessarily "emotional reaction" (Baratham 39) to what he feels and sees around him. As a dramatist he deals with the contemporary world of changing values. His plays represent and make an appeal to all humanity. He presents life as it is, not as something it should be.

The Clock

The Clock (1993), a one-act play by Asif Currimbhoy, covers a vast range of social issues. It is a mirror to contemporary life with all its concomitant frustration, isolation, helplessness, materialism, lust, loneliness and moral degradation. *The Clock* portrays the travails of Henry, a salesman or a tired salesman to be exact. It is also apparent on a bigger scale that this

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play is a social commentary. It touches all the problems brought on by wealth and success in our culture. The play is an exposure of middle-class delusions.

Henry Finding His Place under the Sun

Henry is the product of modern materialistic society. He lives in a competitive world where his only worry is “deadlines, quotas and bigger and better sales” (Currimbhoy16). His only desire is to be successful as success matters a lot in this world. Here, business, money and sales represent the accepted norms of social values. Like Willy Loman, Henry is just one example out of thousands and millions of those who try to find their place under the sun – the sun which is always hidden behind the confusing set of material values. Business success and the number of zeroes on the bankcheque of the professionals are the only parameters that determine the success of a man in today’s world. For that reason everybody is after the “pot of gold at the end of the rainbow” (Currimbhoy 24).

A Representative of Modern Man

Henry is a true representative of modern man. He lives a drab, purposeless and meaningless life. He is tired of his dull routine, of “getting up, dressing, going to work, returning home, going to sleep....sorta purposeless” (Currimbhoy 17). It is New Year eve and his birthday. Instead of celebrating, all he concerns is that he “must sell 5000 worth before midnight or nothing at all” (Currimbhoy 27). His wife, Mary, also wants him to be successful like his friend Joe and earn more and more money.

Under the strain of the sales targets, Henry has lost even the track of time. He finds a solution of his problems in wine and he is not ready to change himself even at the risk of life. He is fed up with his job as a salesman. He says that “last twenty years of service as a salesman. But the sum total is that I am fed up . . . right upto here [he indicates his throat forcefully] (Currimbhoy15).

Disturbed Human Mind

The Clock describes the disturbed human mind and the consequent frustrations of a salesman who has resigned his job. Every now and then, Henry gets lost in his own thoughts

even in the presence of others. His mind keeps wandering all the time-nursing old grievances and thinking of the past stupid mistakes. He finds nothing to look forward to. He has lost ambition and hope and looks older and more tired before time.

Loss of Innocence

The materialistic attitude of modern man marred the innocence of his relationships with others. He suffers from isolation. Henry belongs to a lower middle class family and his job matters a lot for him and his family. Henry decides to resign as he can't continue his job. He does not discuss with his wife, Mary, while taking such a serious decision. He prefers flipping a coin to discussion with her. He informs her only after resigning. It shows the communication gap between husband and wife. Mary blames Henry of not thinking about her, about her wishes. But she, herself, is not concerned with the pressure under which Henry works. She wants him to be successful at any cost. She forces him to meet the targets and continue the job. Neither does she respect his decision, nor bothers about the tension he undergoes in his job as a salesman. She compels Henry to ask his friend, Joe for help. After Joe's visit she says that "He looks quite prosperous. Why can't you be like him?" (Currimbhoy 23).

Soft Targets of Patriarchal Society

Women are the soft targets in this patriarchal society. As in the play itself, Henry blames Mary for everything wrong that is happening with them. He makes Mary responsible for his unfinished university education because he had to look after his pregnant wife at that time. Mary was responsible for this unwanted pregnancy-he thinks. Mary earns extra penny by doing odd jobs. She does not think about her pride in doing so. But Henry, as he is a man, and therefore his pride matters a lot. He hesitates to ask even his old friend for help. For Henry, the pride of others and especially that of a woman does not matter. Rather even at a time, when his family is in a tight position, he gives Joe an impression of prosperity just to satisfy his sense of pride. The economical condition of Henry does not allow him to move out of the locality but even for it, he blames Mary. The condition of Mary which shows the predicament of modern woman reveals what Simone de Beauvoir says in her seminal work *The Second Sex*, "One is not born rather becomes a woman"(267).

Money-minded Modern Society

People have become completely money minded in modern society. Joe and Henry were once good friends and neighbours but now time and distance have increased differences in their status. They meet after years and when they meet they start talking about money matters. Henry is in tight situation and Joe can help him but Henry does not tell him about it as there is no intimacy left between them. Henry pretends to be happy and satisfied with life and when Mary asks Joe for help, he replies that “it’s simple because he’s successful and I ain’t. That’s why!” (Currimbhoy 25) and when Henry asks for help he gets none.

Children – A Burden for Henry

Henry’s innocent children also become a victim of his frustration. Henry returns from office and in place of spending a good time with his kids, he finds them a nuisance. He cannot control himself and give them a hard hit when they quarrel. His responsibility towards his children becomes a burden for him.

Henry, the symbol of modern man finds himself trapped in the web of life. He finds life “a one way street with neat little blocks sliced up in years”, and “the gutter waters flow all the way” (Currimbhoy 14). Like Jimmy Porter of *Look Back in Anger*, he feels disgusted with everything – his wife, life, children, job and even his ordinary name ‘Henry’. He is sick of it all and wants some way out.

Devaluation of Moral Values

The fall and devaluation of moral values in the modern society find a presentation in the present play. Commercialism and materialism are eating into the moral fibre of our society like a cancerous virus. Sexual exploitation, adultery and lust have become common things. Women are not safe at work places. Jean, young girl-secretary in Henry’s office tells him that the boss made a comment at her the other day. Henry, a 45-years old man, who is enough to be her father, commits adultery in thoughts. The Boss crosses all the limits. He has rapist’s intentions for Jean and wants Henry to help him in this matter. The Boss is rich and for that reason he is important. The honour of a girl values nothing before money. As Henry says: “We must all sell, sell and

sell” (Currimbhoy41), modern man sells not only merchandise but also his character for materialistic gains.

Symbolic Significance

The title of the play *The Clock* has a symbolic significance which shows the condition of modern man. He is bombarded from all sides to become successful which means to be rich and powerful. Time passes and he feels more pressurized by the burden of his responsibilities. Henry looks, again and again, at the wall clock because he has a target to be achieved before twelve at midnight. No one can stop the hands of the clock. The tick-tock of the bell is like the “harnessing bell” of the horse that reminds the traveler to go ahead because there are “miles to go” before he sleeps (Frost 63-65).

Therefore, the play presents a true picture of modern society where money dominates moral values and man dominates woman indicating that materialism has corrupted man completely. Man has turned a worshipper of mammon. Society, friends, family, children and even his own ‘self’ are not his own due to his materialistic attitude. And this reality of the modern ‘waste-land’ has been presented honestly by Currimbhoy in the present play.

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