



"AN EXPERIMENT WITH TRUTH AS A MANY SIDED TRUTH"

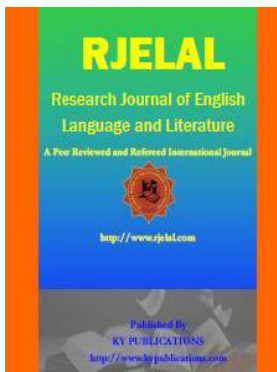
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ABSTRACT

History is often written with bias: the heroes become greater; the villains more base. The play, *An Experiment with Truth* highlights a series of historic episodes in quick succession and the inner struggle in Gandhi's mind. To depict this struggle the playwright Asif Currimbhoy has resorted to the 'stream of Consciousness technique' and as Bayapa Reddy mentioned perhaps for the first time in the history of Indian drama in English. *An Experiment with Truth* is not intended as a criticism but is intended as a fact of life; most of the people do admit the fact that great men have great faults. Currimbhoy proclaims that Gandhi should not be deified, as he was also a human with his blemishes and attainments.

Key words: Historic drama, Mahatma Gandhi, realism, influence, bias.



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An Experiment with Truth is an attempt at a dramatization of certain episodes in the later life of Mahatma Gandhi. The play begins with the first attempt of murder on the Mahatma and ends with his assassination. It highlights some significant episodes in Mahatma's life - his relation with the untouchable girl Manu, salt march, Kasturba's death and the Mahatma's martyrdom.

One of the greatest influences in Indian thought and Indian literature is Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhi's life, character and personality have fascinated the writers of that time. Gandhi exercised a potent influence on Indian life and literatures, both directly and indirectly through the movements generated by his revolutionary thought and practice. Though Gandhi's influence is a significant phenomenon in the history of Indian literature, Indian drama in English has not produced many noteworthy representations of the Gandhian impact. Prior to Currimbhoy, Bharati Sarabai's *The*

Well of the People (1943) based on a Gandhian theme and K.S. Rangappa's *Gandhi's Sadhana* (1969) seeks to dramatize Gandhi's life.

Historical drama is history dramatized. According to Lessing, historical drama is "a creation of fiction woven around the Historical characters." (134) 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 increasingly whet the reader's curiosity. History imposes limitations on the author. The writer is not free to distort history; factual accuracy has to be strictly adhered to. Many of 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. The freedom struggle caught the imagination of the entire nation and no significant writer could escape the impact of the mighty movement sweeping the country.

The play, *An Experiment with Truth* is episodic in structure. The play spans into three acts and adopts the stream of consciousness technique. It deals with so many things at the same time - the fast unto death of Gandhi to restore the Hindu-Muslim unity, the historic Salt March, the conflict in Gandhi and finally Mahatma Gandhi's assassination. The entire action of the play is in the form of the recollections and reminiscences of the journalist, Vincent Sheean. He is a kind of choric character in the play who helps in maintaining the unity. The play opens in Gandhiji's Ashram, where Vincent Sheean, recalls his experiences with the Mahatma from the Salt March to the freedom struggle. The action reveals itself through his variegated reminiscences in three sets.

In the first set Gandhiji is on his final "fast" to restore peace and unity following the holocaust of violence after the Partition. (10) Though surrounded by multitudes he feels quite lonely there. Currimbhoy shows Gandhi's mind and his ideology and people's impression of him in the conversations Gandhi has with different people and people have among themselves. Gandhiji feels that "...there can be no freedom without brotherhood between Hindus and Muslims, without unity with Sikhs and Christians...." (10) Therefore, he wants "...a pledge from all the Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs that these riots and killings will stop." (11)

Vallabhbhai Patel, the Minister for Security, wants to arrange sufficient protection to Gandhiji following an explosion there. Someone has attempted to throw a hand-bomb at Gandhi but missed the mark. The police arrive and the assailant is taken away.

Patel says, (to police Officer) I want the guards doubled and I want every man coming to the evening prayer meetings searched. (11)

Gandhi: This is a prayer-ground. It's hallowed. I can't permit a search being made of people who come here to offer prayers. (12)

Patel: That man was offering more than prayers. (12)

When Patel appeals to Gandhi to give up the fast, he says,

....but some people feel I force them to agree to my demands through fasting. They don't understand the premise, Patel. The premise of fasting is love. To see someone you love suffer. It can bring about a change. (13)

Gandhiji recounts to Sheean "...how experiments with truth have been the mainstay of his life and that the means has to be as important as the end, must be ethical." (15) When Sheean is worried about his fast, and the attempt to assassinate him, Gandhiji turns philosophic and says,

Do not worry; do not grieve. Nothing can happen to me, other than the great release from life. Our bodies are captives to the divine spirit. They recur in different forms. But our continuous striving should be for the release... (16)

In the following scene, there are three levels and stages of activity differing in time and space. On one side of the stage is Patel's interrogation of the prisoner. On the other side Madhav Desai, the secretary and confidante of Gandhiji, gives him the list of names of seventy-eight *satyagrahis* - who are going to participate at Dandi. Then Desai expresses his fear about the physical courage, "Physical cowardice. I know our truth-force, our passive resistance, relies on moral bravery. Are you convinced...of physical courage?" For which Gandhi says, "I would prefer violence to cowardice." (20)

The conversation with Desai makes him muse over the time when he experienced the physical cowardice:

Yes ... yes ... there was time when I might have shrunk ... through fear of physical violence. It was...one night in an African jail....There was a large African and a Chinese in the same cell with me ... They ... they were planning...a sexual assault on me. A ... feeling of shame and cowardice...overcame me... (22)

Then, there is conflict between Gandhi and Kastur Ba. Kastur Ba thinks in terms of possession of wealth and Gandhiji talks of renunciation.

Kastur Ba: I think of possession, Bapu, you talk of renunciationIt didn't make me poorer, Bapu: it made your sons and their

wives poorer ...I think of indulgence, Bapu and you talk of restraint. (25)

Gandhi: I have strange feeling ... that this long journey of tomorrow ... will go deep into day and night ... and bring revelations...of the past and future ... (26)

Savarkar, an emaciated old man, meets Patel and expresses his unhappiness about Gandhiji's fast. He says: "It's quite simple. Simple concepts, as Gandhi says. If he dies through fasting he achieves his object of Hindu- Muslim unity. Possibly it's the price of martyrdom."(30) After Savarkar leaves Ali joins Patel with an appeal. And from the conversation between Ali and Patel the intricacies of the Hindu-Muslim problem is known and the solution for which Gandhi has undertaken the fast unto death. Ali speaks about the nature of Muslims:

Ali:...So I hear. But as you are well aware, Patel, Islamic brotherhood is quite another thing. It's difficult for a Muslim to love anyone ... other than a Muslim.(33)...Gandhiji's fast always creates...pressures. Political pressures. He thinks it's a matter of reformation and conscience Gandhi alive is certainly more useful to me than Gandhi dead, whatever he may think. (33-34)

Patel also expresses his doubts openly about the Muslims, since Ali wants some plain talk: "Why the hell didn't you go to Pakistan! Don't give me that about believing in a secular state! For most of you it was a matter of political and economic convenience to stay in India."(34)

The second set of the play deals with the Salt march. In time sequence this event precedes the action in the first set in the recollection of Sheean. Gandhi and the satyagrahis "walk from village to village, from the hinterland to the sea..." (36)

Sheean: ...they came from far and wide, the rich and the poor, Hindu and Muslim, the intellectual and the tiller of soil...forgetting all differences, caught up in the heroic moment of a sacrifice involving human dignity...remembering the commitment of dissolutioned years gone by, reborn now of hope...till the seventy-eight satyagrahis

swelled like a tidal wave into mighty thousands... (41)

Gandhi:... They're not to raise a hand ... either to strike back or even to ward off a blow ...We shall see, Mahadev, whether it will be moral courage ... or cowardice. (42)

Again the scene shifts to Patel and the prisoner. A dark young woman partially nude is putting on her sari. Both the prisoner and Patel are looking at her. Meanwhile Ambedkar comes to ask Patel to persuade Gandhiji to call off the fast. He believes that his fasts are pure political stunts. He fears that if Gandhi dies the nation will point a finger at him. He further says that, "...I feel separate electorates will give us more power and say as a minority: Gandhi feels it will break up the Hindu fold and weaken us....If Gandhi dies in this fast, every untouchable will feel he's died for them and will vote for joint electorates."(47)

As the satyagrahis are on their way to the Darshana Salt works, the police beat them down. The satyagrahis advance slowly, without a murmur, in complete silence – there is no music or singing at this point. As soon as they pass the fence, the police charge, beating down the satyagrahis like ninepins. Not a single satyagrahi offers resistance.

None. None raises a hand either to strike back or defend himself. This infuriates the police further....The satyagrahis fall, bleeding, skulls broken – other columns advance – no resistance.(53)

From the conversation between Gandhi and Mahadev Desai one understands that such a sadistic brutality had never occurred in the past. Gandhi is happy that his followers simply tolerated the police excesses without any protest. He impresses on others that love alone can bring about a change in society.

Scene shifts to Kastur Ba on her death-bed. As it is rightly observed by Bayapa Reddy, "The playwright presents the restlessness of Gandhi after the death of Kastur Ba. It is the conflict presented in Gandhi that has made the play very powerful." (97) On the death of Kastur Ba, Gandhi says:

Though I always ... and yet never ... walked alone, the loneliness I felt after Ba's death never left me ...The ... the only thing that still haunted me...was my dream. After

almost forty years of practicing brahmacharya and abstinence, I was shaken to find my weakness still there...prayers and fasts for purification were not enough: the trail to overcome, the need to prove, became necessary.(58)

Gandhi believed in Brahmacharya and held the view that man becomes man only when he conquers sex. For him the 'act of love' was man's 'carnal lust' or 'animal passion', and the woman was the victim of this act. Hence he had designed for himself and his followers a very special and arduous mode of Brahmacharya. Indeed one of the pledges that his disciples had to undertake before joining the Ashram was to abstain from sex. (A.E.Punit 214)

In the words of Faubion Bowers, "one of the most electrifying scenes ever written by Currimbhoy occurs in *An Experiment with Truth*, a sexual biography of Gandhi". ("After Word", *An Experiment with Truth* 72) The scene in which Gandhi "leads her (Manu) to the bedroom...and undresses. She removes her clothes too. They both lie together on the same bed" is really shocking. (60)

The following scene opens with Patel and the "three wise men" - the Hindu, the Muslim and the untouchable - meeting Gandhi to urge him to give up the fast. Gandhi, who continues his fast, looks more tired and weaker now than in the first Act where he had presumably started the fast. Savarkar, a Hindu, tells Gandhi that there are thousands of R.S.S. workers who would change their hearts if only Gandhi gave up his fast. Ali says, "We have volunteers going all over the country carrying out our pledge of non-violence."(62) Ambedkar gives assurance that they have modified their original demand for separate electorates. They tell him that they are totally changed individuals but Gandhi has his own doubts about them. He says:

Well...gentle men, I hardly know what to say.You have...changed positions. I really can't ... expect more. Certainly not a change of heart ...you're not truthful: there has been no change of heart for any of you. (62)

In the end of the play- two actions take place separately and simultaneously so that the climax comes together. One is the end of the Salt-March; the profile of Gandhi reaching the ocean at dawn with thousands of followers, then with a prayer on his lips...and picking up salt, at which moment the people cry "HAIL DELIVERER!" "HAIL DELIVERER!"(66) The second is the physical action of his leaving the house for the prayer ground, full of people, being supported by two girls, amidst the sound of prayers of Hindu, Muslim, and Christian. As he comes down the steps, the assassin comes forward with folded hands, and then fires three shots, the Mahatma falling with the words 'HE RAM'.(66)

The play ends with the words of Sheean who recovers from the shock of the shots and assassination. He says:

...I have journeyed far and wide since that fateful evening of life ... thorough darkness and fear, courage and light, in this our mortal plight ... never will I forget, and always do I remember, this man who led me, his kindly light. (66)

Gandhi was more often maligned than understood. The British imperialists denounced him as a rebel, Hindus criticized him for being pro-Muslim, and Muslims for his being a Hindu. Here is a man too big to be pigeon- holed into any ready-made category. Whatever the problem is – personal, social or political -his solution had as its central factors truth and non-violence.

Gandhi: Politics is no different from any other activity in life.

Patel: Your political life affects millions, Mahatmaji: your religious life is your own. Mix the two and you bring about chaos. (64)

Gandhi: ... Surely you don't expect me to carry the political responsibility of a nation without being able to carry my own moral one. (64)

Gandhi had declared that the partition could take place only over his dead body. As Srinivasalyengar has observed "The blood-bolterd history of the Indian subcontinent in 1947 profoundly saddened Gandhi and took away from him the desire to live."

(269) But he had to accept the 'inevitable' though it almost broke his heart. Ultimately he lost his life trying to create a sense of brotherhood between Hindus and Muslims.

An Experiment with Truth is built on conflict. There is conflict between Indians and the British. The British government's monopoly on salt is opposed by Gandhi and his seventy-eight "hand-picked followers". There is also conflict between Gandhi and his wife. Kastur Ba is interested in the material prosperity whereas Gandhi is interested in renunciation. Then, there is the conflict of idealism between Ambetkar and Gandhi, the former pleading for a separate electorate for minorities and the latter asking for a joint electorate. (Bayapa Reddy 96-97)

It is the inward conflict in Gandhi that captures more attention. There is a struggle in Gandhiji's mind regarding his sexual abstinence. Though he has committed himself to 'Brahmacharya', celibacy he finds it difficult to practice. For instance, in the Satyagraha Ashram, he calls Manu, a teenage girl, to help him get up. When he puts "one arm around her neck" and gets up, his mind is "distracted". He exclaims:

I realize now. (his mind wandering)...the dream...that my great struggle...for chastity ... is n't over yet. And that my experiments ...to prove my detachment ... will have to be ... bolder. (27)

Through the use of flashbacks, shadow cutouts and special effects Currimbhoy has tried to make *An Experiment with Truth* theatrically vital. Special musical effects assert and maintain control over the audience. The march of the Satyagrahis to Darshana Salt works and the sound of the tabla that are heard on the stage reflect at once the mood of courage and fear of the marchers. When the Satyagrahis advance slowly the musical sounds are withdrawn.

The play thus highlights a series of historic episodes in quick succession, and the inner struggle in Gandhi's mind. To depict this struggle the playwright has resorted to the stream of Consciousness technique' and Bayapa Reddy says, "... perhaps for the first time in the history of Indian drama in English." (93)

According to M.K.Naik, there is no thematic organization in the play. The plot is loose in construction and has no recognizable thematic focus at all. The play lacks, "...a firm centrality of vision." (122) In the absence of this, the attempt to secure some kind of unity of purpose by beginning and ending the action with the words of Vincent Sheen appears to be only a stage-trick, even like the device of simultaneous action in the final episode. He further added that, Scattered incidents culled at random from Gandhiji's life- Madanlal's attempt to throw a bomb at him at a prayer meeting in 1948, the fast unto death on the question of separate electorates for the untouchables in 1932, the incident in South Africa about two decades earlier and Gandhiji's experiments with brahmacharya during his last years- are presented with apparently no attempt at thematic organization at all. (122)

Bhatnagar has said that, the period between August 15th and January 30th, 1948, "...has attracted the attention of Indo-English dramatists more than any other phase of Gandhiji's life. Although the event is tragic but no playwright has created a tragic character out of him." (127) The reason for this according to him is that, he led too open a public life to arouse curiosity or interest. Besides, he was not a character to create conflicts but to resolve them; not to possess power but to disallow the intensity necessary to create conflicts on which the dramatic art thrives. "His faith and beliefs were so absolute that they offered no room for any inner character conflict....Like Christ he had a tragic end but not a character full of tragic potentialities." (O.P.Bhat Nagar 127)

There are some drawbacks in the play. It is good and striking only in parts. Characters of Sardar Patel, Mahadev, Kasturba etc are only sketches and are not convincing. According to R.M.Mansur, "One fails to understand since when did the prologue and epilogue start becoming individual scenes." (67)

Gandhi believes that truth is many-sided and must be explored individually. His Experiments with truth are his spiritual revelation – a constant and successive metamorphosis from the life of body to the life of the spirit, from baser principles to higher laws. In this autobiography he described in candid detail the events and circumstances of his life

from birth to the launching of the non-cooperation movement in India in 1920. The latter part of Gandhi's life till he fell at the hands of an assassin on 30th January 1948 on his way to prayer was in considerable measure the life of the nation as well. It seems Currimbhoy took liberties with history especially in presenting the character of Gandhiji in *An Experiment with Truth*.

May be Gandhi was too big and complex a personality to fictionalize. It is too abstract or incomprehensible for art. He was easier to handle in poetry and novel than in drama. O.P.Bhat Nagar observes, Unlike Ceasar or Becket, whose careers were either political or religious, Gandhi's character was multidimensional, encompassing politics, religion, society, culture, education and such abstract issues like truth, justice, love, non-violence and the metaphysics of fasting and penitence. (127)

As Sheean exclaims: History is often written with bias: the heroes become greater; the villains more base ... (54) Speaking of this play, Currimbhoy comments thus: *An Experiment with Truth* was not intended as a criticism but was intended as a fact of life; most of the people do admit the fact that great men have great faults also a great sense of achievement. (Cited from Bayapa Reddy 93)

According to Bayapa Reddy, What Currimbhoy has done in the play, is, "to 'balance' the achievement and 'fallibility' of Gandhi. What, the dramatist seeks to convey in the play is that we should not deify our leaders without recognizing the fact that everybody is human." (93) What Currimbhoy purports to point out here is that Gandhi should not be deified, as he was also a human with his blemishes and attainments.

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