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Mangalam: Crossing the Language Barrier

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The plays by Poile Sengupta bring contemporary India face to face with its struggles. The issue of language plays a prominent part of her plays. She depicts the struggles of the characters both through the use of language and its utterances. She experiments with language and other barriers that earlier inhibited the realistic portrayal of Indian life in a supposedly foreign tongue. In her plays Poile Sengupta does not shy away from creatively crafting the language to appear more Indian and contemporary so as to deal with life as it is lived in the Indian households, amongst the conflicting pulls of familial bonds. The present paper endeavours to study Poile Sengupta's *Mangalam* for the issues and experimentations in the use of English language.

Drama depicts culture visually on stage. It is difficult to dissociate the language from the characters and milieu portrayed. Unlike poetry and novel the fundamental difference between drama and other literary genres arises from the dependence of drama on theatre and audience.

[a] play, in order to communicate fully and become a living dramatic experience, thus needs a real theatre and a live audience.¹

As drama evolves and survives primarily through performance it also requires an immediate connectivity between character and audience, through a living language of cultural significance. The initial arrested growth of Indian English drama, primarily during the nineteenth century, owes a great deal to the lack of meaningful communication between the playwright and the audience. The early Indian dramatists writing in English seem to have mostly, found themselves in a dilemma regarding their target audience. They wrote plays either with the hope of performing on an English stage or for being read by the ruling British. Lack of patronising audience, might have encouraged them to imitate Shakespeare, Ibsen and the other western models. But even while playing to the foreign gallery the Indian playwrights possibly could not visualise Samuel Johnson's advice:

The truth is that the spectators are always in their senses, and know from the first Act to the last, that the stage is only a stage and that the players are only players (M K.Naik: 162).

Creating living characters in living situations was the biggest hurdle for the dramatists. The elite admired the English language but could not appreciate its relevance in dramatic portrayals of the Indian situations on stage. Drama cannot appeal if it loses its link with life. P. V. Rajamannar aptly points out:

If the theatre is to be really potent and great, it must be an embodiment of the contemporary life of the nation . . . contemporary life includes not merely the present which is current but everything in the past which has a meaning

for and influence in present. It includes the seeds which sprout eventually in the future.²

In the early decades of the twentieth century, the theatre movement in the Indian languages had already gathered momentum whereas the theatre in English received little support. Drama in Indian languages succeeded and secured a vital leverage. In this context the confession and warning inherent in Adya Rangacharya's statement came too late for the early Indian English dramatists to benefit:

I was one of those who first opened the doors of the Indian theatre closed for centuries. In my enjoyment of the fresh breeze that suddenly started blowing in from the West, I forgot that the breeze could give me only fresh energy. Unthinkingly, we opened our theatre and bewitched by the breeze we forgot it and just walked over to the Western theatre. It would make me happy if youngsters learn from our mistakes.³

During the last two decades of the twentieth century a revival in Indian English drama became perceptible, especially with the new breed of dramatists like Mahesh Dattani, Manjula Padbhnanaban, Poile Sengupta and the like. The self-assurance with which writers used English and the fluency with which English mingled with other Indian languages brought acceptability for the playwright, audience and the actor. *India Today* in its January 26, 2004 issue has an article entitled "Dramatic Revival" written by Nirmala Ravindran. She talks of this generation moving away from malls and Play-Stations towards theatre, seeking "the archaic thrill of the stage" which "the culture watchers are calling the second coming of theatre." Towards the end of her article she aptly concludes:

It is a generation that refuses to stay in the wings. As it takes its passion centre stage, theatre aficionados can sit back and relax. It seems the show, after all, will have a happy ending.⁴

Poile Sengupta belongs to this generation of writers who wrote with a consciousness of immediate reality and the awareness of cultural inheritance, both from the colonial and pre colonial past. This new breed of dramatists molded the English language to serve the needs of their craft and social reality. They had the ardent task of portraying characters whose repertoires do not include English. But they did not turn away from writing in English like the oft quoted example of the African writer Ngugi Wa Thiong who deliberately chose to write in his native language, rather than English, in a bid to "Decolonize the Mind"⁵ The case in India was different. English had acquired the status of a link language. The grudge against the language during the colonial rule had subsided with the passage of time. English became a link language and gained a pan India presence and later even a preference as a link language over other Indian languages. Brij B Kachru is right when he writes about the English language "in the case of India one wonders: has India played the age-old trick on English too, of nativizing it and acculturating it- in other words, Indianizing it?"⁶

Salman Rushdie, on the other hand suggests how working in new Englishes can become therapeutic act of resistance, by remaking a colonial language to reflect the postcolonial experience. "... I hope all of us share the opinion that we can't simply use the language the way the British did; that it needs remaking for our own purposes. Those of us who do use English do so in spite of our ambiguity towards it, or perhaps because of that, perhaps because we can find in that linguistic struggle a reflection of other struggles taking

place in the real world, struggles between the cultures within ourselves and the influences at work upon our societies.”⁷

The plays by Poile Sengupta bring contemporary India face to face with its struggles comprising these cultural issues and aspirations, problems and perspectives. She is courageous enough to experiment with language and other barriers that earlier inhibited the realistic portrayal of Indian life in a supposedly foreign tongue. In her plays Poile Sengupta does not shy away from creatively crafting the language to appear more Indian and contemporary so as to deal with life as it is lived in the Indian households amongst the conflicting pulls of familial bonds. Her plays make the Queen’s English serve the creative accomplishments of its erstwhile colony with a turn of phrase, a twist in the syntax, a change in the tone, etc. In the preface and acknowledgements to the collection of her plays; *Women Centre Stage*, Poile Sengupta acknowledges that

The collection also underscores, I hope, my attempts at manipulating the English language. I enjoy the challenge of fashioning the grammar of an English sentence into what is essentially an ‘Indian’ syntax.⁸

It is largely due to her bold experimentations with the language in drama that an appreciating audience thronged theatres to applaud Indian characters self-assuredly speaking an English that sounded more like an accepted local dialect.

In *Mangalam* she profusely uses Tamil syntax in the first act to show how a middle class Brahman family will speak at home. The audience/ reader immediately realize that the accent, tone and even the flow of language employed depicts characters who do not speak English at home.

...what the writer has tried to do is to use an un-English syntax to show that the characters are not meant to be speaking in English. The things they said, the images they used, they were not English (53).

In the second act the characters speak with flawless competence. But they do not possess the same competence while using their mother tongue, Tamil. Suresh cracks a joke wherein an M.A in Bengali has to work in a zoo as an orangutan or a tiger whereas, Sumati an M.A in English “got the job [as a lecturer] straightaway” (51). The issue of language is again discussed when Vikram “with mock pomposity” (51) rattles the memorised definition of communication which he seems to have learnt without understanding its implication.

VIKRAM: ... You see it is only language that can give form to my feelings, my deepest thoughts.

SUMATI: So if there was no language, there would be no thought, is that what you are saying

VIKRAM: (*Slowly.*) Yes that is what it would seem to be.

SURESH: Well, in that case, I’m glad Vicky knows English.

RADHA: Why?

SURESH: Because if he were to use Tamil, he would have no thoughts.

SUMATI: Isn’t it sad that with so many languages in our own land, we use English when talking to each other.

SURESH: Why should it be sad? English is also one of our languages; it's been with us for more than two centuries. And you saying it Su, having studied English literature all these years and now with a brand new job as a lecturer in English; how can you say it's sad?

SUMATI: It is. I feel it. I feel as if I don't belong anywhere. I'm not English because I am brown and eat with my fingers. I don't belong to India because I think in English and have all kinds of ideas that are not part of the culture I was born into (52).

Being an adept theatre artist, drama for Poile Sengupta is not limited to the written word with ornamental and poetic language. She sees drama primarily as performance where the printed word becomes a meaningful utterance, a verbal expression that subordinates the action and enhances the overall effect on stage. She says "the challenge of writing drama in English is, for me, that of being true to the spoken word" (1). The issue of language plays a prominent part of her plays. She depicts the struggles of the characters both through the use of language and its utterances.

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