

# Challenges and Internal Conflicts of Refugees in Asif Currimbhoy's Play *The Refugee*

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**Abstract**—Asif Currimbhoy's play *The Refugee* presents a compelling examination of the challenges and internal conflicts faced by refugees, set against the backdrop of the Indo - Pakistan war of 1971 and the resulting partition. This narrative explores the tumultuous experiences of individuals who are forced to navigate the complexities of identity, belonging, and survival amidst geopolitical strife. The play delves into the psychological and emotional turmoil of refugees through its characters, portraying their struggles with loss, displacement, and the quest for a sense of home in an unfamiliar and often hostile environment. Through the journey of its characters, the play intricately details the multifaceted aspects of the refugee experience. The play serves as a poignant reminder of the enduring human spirit amidst adversity, offering deep insights into the challenges and internal conflicts of refugees through a rich tapestry of characters and settings that resonate with the complexities of real-world refugee experiences. The study focuses on the need for a humane approach to the refugee crisis, one that transcends bureaucratic and administrative measures and acknowledges the complex human emotions and needs at play.

**Index Terms**—refugees, internal conflicts, challenges, survival, partition

## I. INTRODUCTION

Asif Currimbhoy's *The Refugee* stands as a seminal work in South Asian English literature, bringing to the fore the poignant and complex narratives of refugees against the backdrop of the Indo-Pakistan war of 1971 and the subsequent creation of Bangladesh. This play not only captures the geopolitical upheaval of the time but also delves deep into the personal and internal conflicts experienced by individuals uprooted by war and sectarian violence. The introduction to the challenges and internal conflicts of refugees as depicted in Currimbhoy's play requires an exploration of the historical context, character analysis, and thematic considerations that underscore the refugee experience. Rani (2013) mentioned about Currimbooy.

Currimbooy handles his subject matter with ease. His plays include comedy, tragedy history, farce, melodrama, etc. In his plays, he deals with different aspects and problems of life. He does not worship beauty and does not present idealism. He presents life with its reality. In his plays, we find Art finds itself telling the truth. He has taken unusual themes from contemporary Indian society and skillfully used them in plays. (Rani, 2013, p. 40)

At the heart of *The Refugee* is a narrative that unfolds within a war-torn landscape, where the demarcation lines are not just geographical but deeply etched in the psyche of those displaced. The play commences with the harrowing events of March 25, 1971, known for the mass killings in East Bengal, which catalyzed a massive exodus of refugees to West Bengal. Through this setting, Currimbhoy articulates the immediate and visceral responses to displacement, loss, and the quest for survival in an increasingly fragmented world. Readers have been presented with the events in a genuine manner by Asif. "In fact, Currimbhoy's humour is generally bitter, cynical, and seldom joyful. One such example from his play *The Hungry Ones* can be found in the scene where the two Americans are introduced. The yogic feats of the two Americans produce humor" (Chelliah, 2018, p. 1666).

The characters in the play are emblematic of diverse refugee experiences, each navigating their own path through the turmoil. The protagonist's journey is emblematic of a broader quest for identity amidst the disorienting forces of war and migration. This search for self-amidst the chaos of displacement is a recurring motif, highlighting the internal conflicts that accompany physical dislocation. Characters grapple with questions of allegiance, identity, and the possibility of return, embodying the psychological and emotional turmoil that defines the refugee experience. The play also addresses the societal and communal reactions to refugees, exploring themes of empathy, alienation, and the complex dynamics of host - refugee interactions. These narratives underscore the multifaceted challenges refugees' face, not only in terms of physical survival but also in seeking acceptance and understanding from the communities that receive them.

Because his plays are connected to significant historical or present events or happenings, they all have an element of reality. His focus is on how societal issues affect people's lives. He thinks that literature should serve as a social commentary. Asif Currimbhoy's ability to depict the minor changes that affect the characters deftly exposes him as a

psychologically skilled playwright. He demonstrates his skill as a social critic by accurately describing the state of society in the modern era. The topics covered in Currimbhoy's plays include politics, religion, society, human life, and relationships.

No other dramatists had ever produced the number of dramas compared to Asif Currimbhoy in the field of theatre. He is a writer who emphasized the Indian ethos, cultural values, heritage, political ideology, historical views, and many more aspects to present India in Indian English drama and earned worldwide as an Indian English dramatist. (Dalwadi, 2019, p. 553)

He gives a realistic portrayal of a specific incident in the nation. In Indian English dramatic literature, Asif Currimbhoy has made a remarkable and significant contribution through his plays meant for acting. At the same time, his predecessors, like T.P. Kailasm, Chattopadhyay, and Sri Aurobindo, wrote plays that are lyrical, symbolic, and allegoric in form (Selvam & Ganesan, 2012, p. 20).

At different times, Bengal and its issues have been on their minds. *Inquilab*, set in Calcutta and the gorgeous, verdant countryside, explores the Naxalite uprising that shook Bengal in the 1960s. *The Refugee* tells the story of the 1971 Bangladeshi refugee crisis in India, with the backdrop of West Bengal's west Dinajpur area. *Sonar Bangla* depicts the paths leading up to the creation of an independent Bangladesh, using the border villages of Bengal as its backdrop. Currimbhoy has gone to great lengths to convey his ideas through innuendo, indirection, and insinuation rather than outright declaration, even though he is not an explicitly political writer. His play *Inquilab* is a direct reaction to the violent Naxalite uprising in West Bengal, where the rural population chose to use force. The play is an unbiased and truthful portrayal of the terrible events that swept over Calcutta in 1970, delving deeply into the Naxalite revolt. *Inquilab* introduces the issue of migrants as a side topic, but in *The Refugee*, it takes the front stage. Currimbhoy has a strong interest in the 1971 migration of 10 million Bangladeshi migrants to India. The drama also aims to investigate how the status of refugees in 1947 and 1971 differed.

The internal conflicts of refugees, as portrayed in *The Refugee*, stem from a profound sense of loss - loss of home, identity, and a sense of normalcy. The play meticulously explores how these losses compound the external challenges faced by refugees, including cultural dislocation, economic hardship, and the often inhospitable environments of host countries. Through its nuanced portrayal of refugee life, the play calls for a reevaluation of our responses to refugee crises, advocating for a more humane and compassionate approach that recognizes the deep-rooted complexities of displacement and loss.

## II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Gopi and Sambaiah (2015) pointed out the refugees' political and economic issues in response to the political unrest in East Pakistan. Currimbhoy reacts to things around him dramatically and quickly. Asif intertwines significant difficulties with communalism, which is also influenced by other factors. It implies that one issue leads to other problems. The current play centers on the challenges arising from the arrival of refugees. Rajkumar (2017) discussed the distress and challenging circumstances during the Partition. It also highlights how refugees are victimized by political turmoil. Bhargavi's (2017) research examines the refugee situation through the characters Yasin and Ramul, highlighting the contemporary topic of migrants and refugees and comparing the condition of refugees in the past and present. The artwork portrays the embrace and integration of refugees while addressing humanitarian issues that realist stories have previously criticized.

## III. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Based on the detailed exploration of Asif Currimbhoy's play and the complexities surrounding the themes of displacement, identity, and the struggle for peace, the following research questions are formulated to guide a deeper investigation into these issues:

1. How do the personal narratives of Yassin and other characters in the play reflect the broader human costs of political turmoil and decisions during the Indo-Pakistan war and the partition of Bengal in 1971?
2. What are the systemic and societal factors that contribute to the inability of refugees to find peace and stability in their new environments?
3. In what ways does *The Refugee* challenge the conventional narratives of independence associated with the partition of India and Pakistan, revealing the complexities and contradictions of freedom for individuals caught in the crossfire?

## IV. METHODOLOGY

For this investigation, the researchers employed a variety of qualitative research methodologies and procedures. An investigation of the experiences of refugees was carried out for the study. Through the use of this research, one can gain an understanding of the visual culture and daily life of those who are affected by political issues.

## V. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

### A. *Historical Portrayal of the Refugee*

The drama *The Refugee* opens with a recounting of the first intellectual massacre that took place on March 25, 1971, at universities in East Bengal. Consequently, a few thousand refugees go from East Bengal to West Bengal. The partition case was the Indo-Pakistan conflict of 1971. The first wave of refugees arrived in West Bengal during the East Bengali liberation movement. Yassin is one of the refugees who fled East Bengal, which Pakistan seized during the 1947 Great Partition. He gave Yassin a warm welcome.

The 1971 India-Pakistan War not only led to a stunning and comprehensive victory for India and the people of East Pakistan, with the highest standards of military professionalism and timely strategic decisions, but it also saw the birth of a new nation-Bangladesh. War represents one of the most significant events of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It changed national boundaries, and this was achieved over 13 days after the commencement of hostilities on the part of Pakistan on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of December 1971. (Chinoy et al., 2022, pp. 3-5)

He feels sorry for him. Yassin reminds him of recollections from his past, he finds. He urges Yassin to move past his painful past. Sen Gupta changed all of a sudden. Being an Indian immigrant, he distinguished between Pakistani refugees, the majority of whom are Muslims. Because he was a refugee from Pakistan, he departed from Yassin. Sen Gupta is not interested in harming him. He is unhappy because Yassin is treated kindly by him. Sen Gupta's son, Ashok, is eager to participate in the Mukti Bahini battle. Babu and Swamalatha (2017) states, "Through these parallels and contrasts, each character grows and evolves. The skill with which Asif Currimbhoy traces the subtle change that comes over the characters reveals him as a playwright of great psychological skill" (p. 61). He claims he is acting in a patriotic manner. Sen Gupta is not in favor of it. Sen Gupta is more concerned with his son's well-being than his nation, despite Ashok's assertion that Bengalis must fight for their freedom.

Though Yassin is not his son, he is willing to accept him as a fighter. "There are other able-bodied men from East Bengal who should do so... Go now," he tells his son (Currimbhoy, 1971, Act I, Scene ii, p. 16). The issues faced by the refugees paradoxically impacted the psychological well-being of Yassin and Ramul. Yassin saw thought and action as complementary. He said, "I became involved—through no choice—and now I'm searching for a way. . . to abstain" (Currimbhoy, 1971, Act I, Scene i, p. 15) in the independence struggle. He was going to be put to death. He had to excavate his grave, but he got away and made it to West Bengal. Ramul is deeply worried about the camp's refugees.

He misses his native land. Being somewhat of a half-madman, he keeps saying that the territory he encroaches on is his. He even claims Sen Gupta's house as his own. He anticipates pity from Indians such as Sen Gupta. He felt upset when he realized Sen Gupta had no sympathy for the refugees. He desires to deploy every capable body to fight in the conflict. However, he is refusing to leave the community. Similar to Yassin, he does not take action but acts as though he does. Mita, life encounters. Sen Gupta changed all of a sudden. Being an Indian immigrant, he distinguished between Pakistani refugees, the majority of whom are Muslims. According to Gupta (2021):

The play explores the Naxalite revolt in depth and is a non-partisan and honest account of the violent events that overtook Calcutta in 1970. The problem of refugees, introduced as a minor theme in *Inquilab*, becomes central in *The Refugee*. Currimbhoy is deeply interested in the exodus of ten million Bangladeshi refugees into India in 1971. The play also seeks to explore the change in status between the refugees of 1947 and those of 1971. (Gupta, 2021, p. 278)

Because he was a refugee from Pakistan, he departed from Yassin. Sen Gupta is not interested in harming him. He is unhappy because Yassin is treated kindly by him. Sen Gupta's son, Ashok, is eager to participate in the Mukti Bahini battle. He claims he is acting in a patriotic manner. Sen Gupta is not in favor of it. Sen Gupta is more concerned with his son's well-being than his nation, despite Ashok's assertion that Bengalis must fight for their freedom. The issues faced by the refugees paradoxically impacted the psychological well-being of Yassin and Ramul. Yassin saw thought and action as complementary. Mita, Yassin, and Sengupta's *Voyage Two* individuals similar to Sengupta and Yassin are at the story's center. Yassin is a young scholar who, in a complicated society, tries to find his conscience. Yassin is a refugee who runs away from East Pakistan to India at the start of the play. Sengupta, a self-assured middle-aged man of approximately fifty, welcomed him. As long as there is food to distribute and a place to stay in his home, Sengupta declares that he is prepared to accept migrants. Since Sengupta and Yassin's mother were born in India, they grew up and completed their schooling there, which is why Sengupta's family has shown Yassin so much love. Ultimately, Sengupta maintains that all East Bengalis, Muslims or Hindus, have a deep longing for their former hometown. In the wake of Partition - the break-up of British India in 1947 millions of people moved across the new borders between Pakistan and India. Although much has been written about these 'Partition refugees,' a comprehensive picture remains elusive (Rahman & Willem, 2003, p. 551).

Afterward, Gupta asks Comilla University in West Pakistan about the Awami league. Gupta was infuriated by the Awami League, which encouraged the students to engage in cruel and immoral behaviors. Asif has depicted the communal strife between Sengupta and Yassin here. "YASSIN: The university . . . learning . . . offered a way of life...nonpolitical, non-party; scholarship became an end in itself. Do you understand? SEN GUPTA: No! (Currimbhoy, 1971, Act I, Scene I, p. 6). Sen Gupta concludes that since they have wasted so much time up to this point, it is time to declare war and march in. "PROF. MOSIN : (Feeling old and weak) What...What would you have us do? SEN GUPTA: Huh? (His reverie broken) Do? Adopt a more aggressive posture. The refugee exodus is an undeclared war by Pakistan. (Yassin comes in unnoticed) We've wasted too much time already. It's costing us money and lives anyway. We've

wasted too much time already. It's costing us money and lives anyway. A quick kill, that's what we need to do. Declare war and march in! (Currimbhoy, 1971, Act I, Scene I, p. 21).

Yassin cuts them off at this point and disputes Gupta's assertion regarding Pakistanis. We are unable to profit from this kind of killing, which instead harms innocent people. In addition, he must be Pakistani as he was born there. Yassin's sentimental demeanor: "Nobody! But if you'll push me, I'll tell you. It was born in Pakistan not India like Mosin here. If I am anybody, I have to be Pakistani!" (Currimbhoy, 1971, Act I, Scene iii, p. 22). Since other issues also drive Currimbhoy, it blends the main themes with additional topics like communalism. It implies that one issue leads to several issues. In addition to causing social upheaval, the refugee crisis in certain areas also gave rise to communalism. History plays a vital role. According to Kumar and Prakash (2023), "New Historicism theory is a tool to analyse literary theory that re-reads the literary text in the light of history" (p. 20).

### B. Religious Crisis

Tension arose between Hindus and Indian Muslims as a result of the majority of the refugees being Hindus who arrived in India in such a vulnerable situation. Another crucial factor is politics, a major factor in the refugee crisis. Bangladesh's refugee dilemma necessitates a political solution. According to Ollapalay (2008):

South Asia is home to a range of extremist groups from the jihadists of Pakistan to the Tamil Tigers of Sri Lanka. In the popular mind, extremism and terrorism are invariably linked to ethnic and religious factors. Yet the dominant history of South Asia is notable for tolerance and co-existence, despite highly plural societies. (Ollapalay, 2008, p. 2)

He also discusses the status of the Muslim community in India. Sengupta and Professor Mosin's roles in this play reveal it. Sengupta's expression: "Well, you can't deny it, Mosin! There's a massacre taking place out there—in a Muslim country—and their Islamic brothers keep quiet here! (Currimbhoy, 1971, Act I, Scene iii, p. 17). Asif Currimbhoy goes on to illustrate how the significant refugee inflow caused a divide between Muslims in Pakistan and India. It embodies Yassin's and Professor Mosin's personalities. Professor Mosin discusses Indian Muslims, their mindset, and their standing in the country.

Additionally, he draws comparisons between Indian and Pakistani Muslims. Lastly, he backs Muslims who are Indian. Professor Mosin's expression. In society, there is a delicate and natural balance. As a minority, Indian Muslims have adapted to coexist, sometimes in dangerous situations. The refugees upset the equilibrium when they arrived, as they were primarily persecuted Hindus. "There is a difference between the Indian Muslim and Pakistani Muslim" (Currimbhoy, 1971, Act I, Scene v, p. 25).

Here, Yassin misinterprets the views of Prof. Mosin regarding Muslims in Pakistan. Mosin then attempts to persuade him. Yassin later realizes this and says he doesn't want to sour the bond between Mosin and the Gupta family. Furthermore, Mosin must spend his entire life in India. The way Yassin expressed herself: "No, no, Professor. I thank you...for your liberalism . . . your frankness. Our friendship matters to me too, and I would rather it were on a realistic basis" (Currimbhoy, 1971, Act I, Scene v, p. 26).

On May 24, 1971, Mrs. Indira Gandhi addressed the Indian parliament and expressed her deep concern over the influx of refugees into Indian Territory. She said, "We all felt our country was poised for rapid economic advance and a more determined attack on the age-old poverty of our people" ([https://hcidhaka.gov.in/History\\_02](https://hcidhaka.gov.in/History_02)). This strained relations between India and Pakistan and placed a heavy burden on the Indian economy. She said in a thoughtful tone. We were getting settled into these new responsibilities when we were suddenly overwhelmed by a massive new issue that wasn't our fault. There has never been a large migration in such a short time. Three and a half million have arrived in the last eight weeks; according to current estimates, the aid provided to the Indian government might have helped more than 180 corers over the six months.

In this play, Asif has taken a realistic approach to present the economic difficulties. He also illustrates the impact on the lives of middle-class people. As a result, the individual's idealism diminishes. According to Heizmann and Huth (2021), particular mechanisms link the current state of the economy to the conception of immigrants as a potential threat. As a result, we also contribute to theoretical discussions based on the notion of group threat and realistic group conflict by revealing the dominating source of competition relevant to these connections. The character Sengupta makes it extremely evident. He first took in all the migrants and gave them food and shelter. His idealism begins to fade as the number of refugees rises.

The grating looks on Sengupta's face. "I didn't mean my own garage. Next, they'll be moving into my stud... (Stops halfway from saying "study" and guiltily lowers his voice) Shhh...do you think he heard me." (Currimbhoy, 1971, Act I, Scene ii, p. 17). Asif Currimbhoy's talk represents his opinions on the subjects. Numerous characters in this drama reveal something to us. Mita, Sengupta's daughter, is another significant character in this play. She has a strong interest in volunteer social work. She even participates in the rehabilitation of refugees. Mita questions Assi on his mindset. In particular, even though he is a refugee, the motive is to avoid refugees. Even so, he acts as if they don't exist and doesn't discuss or assist them. Although Yassin is better than others in understanding the difficulties refugees face, he cannot demonstrate concern for these issues. It's a manifestation of emotion.

MITA: (Looking at him) You...you avoid the refugees. You don't talk about them, or help them. As though they didn't exist. (In Yassin's eyes a haunted expression) (He still does not reply, then softly) Why don't you come with me. With me, Yassin. YASSIN : No. MITA: There is so much you can do. You'd understand their

problems better than the others. You could help...in their rehabilitation. (Currimbhoy, 1971, Act I, Scene iii, p. 24)

She also eloquently describes the real-world difficulties faced by refugees, and as she reads this, tears well up in her eyes because she can't bear to see them suffer. Mita says, 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. The need and its recognition. If...if all of us were to abstain the way you do, we'd be doing harm, don't you see, the kind of harm that is deliberately done through neglect" (Currimbhoy, 1971, Act I, Scene iii, p. 27). She has provided a clear account of refugees and their situation in the camp through her comments. Yassin changes his perspective on refugees after hearing Mita's words, saying, "I shall try, Mita, I promise you I shall try" (Currimbhoy, 1971, Act I, Scene iii, p. 27). Mita uses an emotive tone as she reports the epidemic of cholera in the camp. She expresses concern for the refugees, saying that many of them perish like flies and that no one can see it. In particular, she prays to God to relieve their difficulties and worries.

Mita: (Looking straight at Yassin, the tears at last streaming down her face.) They...at last... (Laughing and crying hysterically) ...the conscience of the world is aroused. At last in crises. The conscience. THE CONSCIENCE. What a word, oh, my God, what a meaning. Don't tell me it escaped us all along. The morality of it all. Here we are talking about politics and rescue and refugee and war and even taking sides. It's not the lack of\* commitment that matters; it's the lack of morality that does. And we must...both for aggressor and giver of shelter...search for our own conscience. (Currimbhoy, 1971, Act I, Scene iii, p. 30)

### C. Political Issues

His strong commitment has influenced his language, conveying a sense of urgency through physical movements, inquiries, exclamations, and shifts in tone that captivate our attention. It illuminates the speaking character, the character being discussed, advances the plot, and serves as a form of irony by expressing a different meaning to the viewer compared to the characters. Currimbhoy's language throughout the play is highly impactful and significantly enhances the theatrical aspects of the production. Kaur (2015) pointed out Currimbhoy as a social commentator; Currimbhoy demonstrates his skill in capturing the state of society as it exists in the present. Drama production is something that Asif Currimbhoy is interested in doing, and he thinks that literature should reflect society. His plays make clear how deeply he cares about dramatic impact. His plays are mostly intended for theatrical productions. He created 'actable plays' with great success. He is referred to as "India's first authentic voice in theatre" by Faubion Bowers. "Currimbhoy bases his plays on themes about human existence, relationships, politics, religion, and society" (Kaur, 2015, p. 23). Sen Gupta household and refugee camp depictions are vivid and detailed. Yassin vividly and descriptively recounts the 'intellectual carnage'. Currimbhoy deserves praise for his ability to adjust tiny variations in tone and style in the conversation to match the character's changing mood.

The playwright demonstrates keen political insight and employs language with creativity and precision. The playwright demonstrates keen political insight and employs language with creativity and precision. The play's structure deviates from the typical one-act play format. Currimbhoy has condensed a complete drama into a single act. The play *The Refugee* contains all the essential elements of a well-crafted play, including exposition, rising action, climax, denouement, and conclusion. It also features dramatic settings and elevated conversation. The initial scene serves an explanatory purpose by setting the background and introducing nearly all the characters. The plot gradually builds up to a climax with Mita's frantic outburst, motivating Yassin to overcome his laziness and reflect on his morals (Scene III). The drama's climax occurs in Scene IV when Yassin departs from the Sen Gupta household. Mita's dramatic declaration of the cholera outbreak and emotional speech connect Currimbhoy with his Western-inspired, well-crafted plays.

## VI. CONCLUSION

The climax of the play unfolds as Yassin opens the cupboard, retrieving the uniform of the "Mukti Fauj" and a rifle, signifying his resolve to join the Mukti Bahini in their fight to free East Bengal from the grip of West Pakistan. This moment marks his departure from a state of indecision to one of determined action. He bids a heartfelt farewell to Mita, who has been instrumental in his journey of self-discovery. He assures her that she will continue to be his beacon of inspiration across the border, mirroring the way his mother was a guiding light for her father. *The Refugee* is crafted with a clear narrative structure, encompassing a beginning, middle, and end. The narrative commences with Yassin's arrival, transitions into his transformative stay at Sen Gupta's residence, and culminates in his commitment to the liberation of East Bengal. Initially, the play maintains a slow, steady pace, reflecting Yassin's internal disorientation and search for purpose. However, as he resolves to assist his fellow countrymen in their plight, the tempo of the narrative notably intensifies. This dynamic shift in pacing not only heightens the dramatic tension but also mirrors Yassin's internal journey from a state of confusion to one of clarity and purpose. Throughout the play, we witness Yassin grappling with his conscience, challenging circumstances, and interactions that test his beliefs. Ultimately, he discerns truth from tumult and elects the path of righteousness, marking his evolution and the thematic progression of the play. Through the characters' journeys, Currimbhoy emphasizes the resilience of the human spirit. Despite the immense challenges, refugees find ways to cope, hold onto hope, and rebuild their lives.

In conclusion, Asif Currimbhoy's *The Refugee* delves deeply into the multifaceted challenges and internal conflicts faced by refugees, offering profound insights into their experiences. Through the protagonist's journey, the narrative highlights the complexities of displacement, trauma, and the struggle for identity and belonging. The play underscores the urgent need for empathy, support, and systemic changes to address the plight of refugees worldwide. By engaging with these themes, Currimbhoy prompts readers to reflect on the human cost of conflict and displacement, urging society to foster inclusivity and compassion towards those forced to seek refuge. Ultimately, the play serves as a poignant reminder of the resilience and humanity of individuals caught in the midst of upheaval, advocating for a more compassionate and equitable response to their plight.

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