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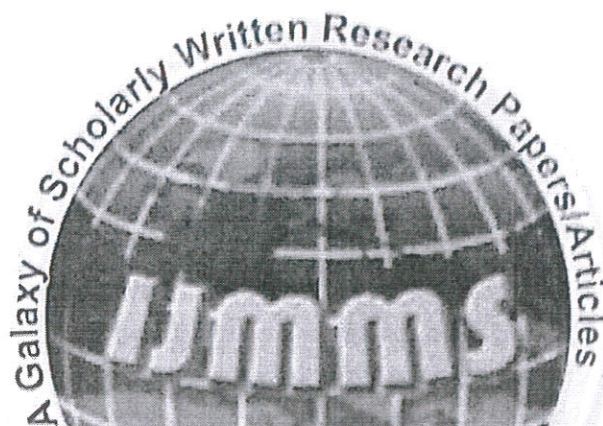
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Index

Sr.	Name of the Paper	Name	Page No.
1.	Women Empowerment in Shobha De's <i>Starry Nights</i> and Manju Kapur's <i>Difficult Daughters</i>	Dr. Vijay D. Songire	1-4
2.	Gricean Analysis of Samuel Beckett's <i>Endgame</i>	Dr. Sagar S. Waghmare	5-7
3.	Critical Estimate of Presupposition: A Pragmatic Notion	Dr. Madhav Kamalakar Raul	8-9
4.	Implicatures and Turn-Taking: A Brief Overview	Mrs. Kunda Dattatraya Shimpi	10-11
5.	Pragmatic Study of Non-Linguistic Features in Absurd Drama	Dr. Samadhan S. Mane	12-14
6.	Culture: A Critical Survey	Dr. Minakshi Prakash Tilekar	15-16
7.	Portrayal of Immigrants in Rahul Varma's Selected Plays	Mr. Tulshiram L. Dabde	17-20
8.	Eco-friendly and Greener Synthesis of Benzopyran Derivatives by Using Gel Entrapped Catalysts	S. R. Shinde R. S. Gaikwad R. S. Salunkhe ^{a*}	21-24
9.	Challenges of Teaching English in Rural Area in the Present Set up	Shri. Hegade Navnath Dharmaji	25-28
10.	Gender and Caste Discrimination in Arundhati Roy's <i>The God of Small Things</i> and Bama's <i>Sangati</i>	Panjabrao Chavan	29-33
11.	Element of Absurdity in Vijay Tendulkar's <i>Silence! The Court is in Session</i>	Dipak P. Ganmote	34-39
12.	English Language Teaching and Learning through Technical Methods	Vaishali Shivaji Miskin	40-42
13.	Microscopic Crystal Structure Explorations of The Substituted N-Phenyl Succinimides and Glutarimides	Ravindra S. Dhivare ^{1*} Shankarsing S. Rajput ² Prashant P. Chaudhari ³	43-51
14.	Synthesis of Spiro-fused Heterocycles under Aerobic Conditions by using Polymer Gel Entrapped Catalyst	Shital Shinde Popat Pawar Rajashri Salunkhe ^{a*}	52-55
15.	A Case Study of Rain Water Harvesting Methodology in Sangola Taluka of Solapur District Maharashtra	¹ Mr. Parmeshwar T. Lokhande ² Mr. Revannath V. Ligade ³ Mr. Dattatray K. Narale	56-60
16.	Electrochemical Study of Galvanostically Deposited Polypyrrole thin film for supercapacitor	P. M. Kharade ^a S. S. Mane ^b D. J. Salunkhe ^{b*}	61-63



Portrayal of Immigrants in Rahul Varma's Selected Plays

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Abstract:

A South Asian Canadian playwright, Rahul Varma wrote plays on the issues of immigrants' in host country. Immigration is a response to the ongoing process of globalisation and its implications. He portrayed the socio-political scenario of South Asian society. The underlying theme of his plays is to promote cross-cultural problems faced by the working class immigrants in host country like Canada and their response at newness of their environment. He has taken another international issue for his play - inhuman treatment to non-whites by the white officer. His play also depicts the double code of conduct being practiced in Canada - one for whites and other for non-whites. So this paper attempts to show the non-natives face many problems in the society of Canada.

Canada is a country that populated by people who came here from all over the World. The earliest of migration to Canada took place thousands of years ago from Asia and became what are today known as the native peoples of Canada. Amongst the immigrants many were from India but East Indian community has a number of outstanding individuals who have used their talent and efforts to make significant contribution to not only economic life of Canada but also in the creative field and literature.

Rahul Varma is a playwright, artistic director, essayist and an activist who migrated to Canada from his birth country India in 1976. In 1981, Teesri Duniya ('Third World' in Hindustani) Theatre, co-founded by Rahul Varma and Rana Bose, which is dedicated to producing socially and politically relevant theatre examining issues of cultural representation and diversity in Canada. TeesriDuniya has staged a major production every year. Some of their plays are *Job Stealer* (1987); *Isolated Incident* (1988); *Equal Wages* (1989); *Land Where the Trees Talk* (1990); *No Man's Land* (1993); *Counter Offence* (1996); and *Bhopal*, translated as *ZahreeliHawa* into Hindi. The themes dealt with by Teesri Duniya Theatre are racism, gender equality, identity crisis, Native Land Rights, work-place hazards, wife battering, and environmental colonialism among others. Rahul became the company's artistic director in 1986. Rana Bose later split to make his own theatre company, Montreal Serai. There are two theatre groups functioning in Montreal.

In 1986 Rahul Varma started writing plays about the peoples migrating to Canada for livelihood. In his some of the plays he has shown the harassment of non-whites in Canada especially by the white officers on workplace. Rahul Varma's another play '*Equal Wages*' (1989) deals with the exploitation of immigrants and refugees, particularly the female labor force in urban Canadian sweatshops. The fundamental violation of the dignity of a people by using them as mere instruments in successfully running sweatshops across Canada and in the third world, the immigrants' helplessness, and the systemic apathy to their plight all are reflected in this play. The play opens with a middle-aged immigrant woman, Shyamala working for a cloth merchant Mr. Shabby. She is working in Sly Textile Corporation and is afraid of losing her job. Hence she starts working early in the morning. She has to work a long shift as she cannot refuse her master. However, she is denied equal wages. The women workers are threatened to be removed from the job that's why these workers have to give money to the company's X'mas fund even when the workers don't celebrate. As Shyamala says, "I give money to the company's X'mas fund even though I don't celebrateI get along fine with all white women even though I'm paid less than them. (Rahul Varma P.30)



Women have to work both at factory and office in order to earn as much as men. Shyamala and her daughter Rita speak with each other.

Rita : Why do you have to work in the factory as well as at home for this ceeep.

Shyamala : because working twice as hard, I can make as much money as man.

Rita : Money, money, money . . . Is there anything else in life?

Shyamala : Yes taxes . . . (Varma 23)

Mohan Patel is another example of unemployed man is denied job because he has no Canadian experience exploited. The people from other nations especially from Asia are denied the jobs due to lack of Canadian experience. Mohan Patel panicky says, "I've got children, I've got to work. I'm working for food" (Varma 32.)

These workers are paid less wages and are exploited. The immigrant workers have fear in their mind because they can be removed anytime without any reason. With Shyamala another woman Romilla, is doing work of two people alone and getting less salary. Once she is pregnant and expects light work from Sly the owner of Garment Industry. But instead of showing her sympathies, Sly lays off Romilla. Thus the playwright shows that how the white officers and owners do not have that kind nature to spare the pregnant woman like Romilla because she requests for light work but those white owners do not allow her to do so.

Counter Offence (1997) by Rahul Varma was about a case of conjugal violence being twisted into a crime against race. In this play an immigrant is arrested for beating his wife and he ends up becoming a mere instrument to air the racial fire in the hands of a community leader, a human rights activist and the two contrastive elements of the police force. *Counter Offence* blends the twin issues of the violence against women and crime against race in such a manner that the crime against gender is subordinated to the crime against race by an opportunistic leader who is given voice by the policies of multiculturalism of the government. Here it seems that leaders of ethnic groups are sometimes bought off by political recognition or patronage. Such leaders are therefore unwilling to and incapable of formulating any ethnic interests. As a result ethnic groups get reduced to preserving quaint customs and folklore but their social mobility is not advanced in real terms. An individual of a particular group may gain but the group as a whole does not. The leaders of ethnic groups not propagating the interest of an ethnic group fits entirely on Moolchand. But there is a paradox here. He does play the racial, ethnic card, but not to get Shapoor any respite, only to manipulate his own political ambitions, and to manipulate Shapoor's parents' entry into Canada. For example, he is shocked to learn that Shapoor has applied for his parents in the family class.

You are a certifiable idiot." Why in the family class? With that kind of money, they are investors before they are your family. (163)

In order to explain further, he says,

They should be put in "investor class". You fool. If you had listened to me, by now your father would have been buying up real estate in Ival.

Now you can't transfer them to a different class. (Counter Offence: 163)

Moolchand's speech in the opening scene (149) is-factually, emotionally and politically correct but he is using it all for the wrong reasons. He sees everything with colored glasses-"If you don't mind helping a colored man." In the same breath he tries to play with the word, Brotherhood. As



also "...a white officer?" "a large number of citizens are uncomfortable with the way white officers treat other people" (156). He himself introduced the colored vs. white conflict in the police station and now he testifies in the court "Mr Prougault seemed quite nervous when I introduced myself in the overconfident way as a member of a "race tribunal. " By his tactful approach, he tries to prove Galliard guilty. It is perhaps a case of "reverse racism". His typical East Indian attitudes towards women makes him patronize Clarinda, and he also makes light of the suffering of Shazia. "I expected to see somebody black and blue" (Varma 160.)

Moolchand rapidly can change his accent to "a Canadian accent instead of his usual East Indian" (Varma 169.) It is his way of identifying with the Canadian environment. Even after moving to Canada, the Asians carry their family hegemonic values with them. Moolchand is astonished at "why should an East Indian wife behave in such a strange way?" (Varma 158.) (Read = why should an East Indian wife report her abusive or violent husband to police?). In trying to color the immigration department's decision as racist, he caustically comments to Prougault. "One more ethnic out of Canada eh Mr. President?" (163) He vehemently seeks justice for Shapoor but never once does him mention that Shazia is ethnic too, that she is a victim, not of a racial crime but of a crime against her gender. She has been battered and ironically she is the one who is and is supposed to be ashamed. The typical Asian and East Indian concept of shame associated with battered women is used in the play to show how the so-called multiculturalist leaders use the situation to their advantage.

In Rahul Varma's *'No Man's Land'* we may observe an aspect of cultural compromising. A young immigrant, Teja, openly expresses his loss of sincere touch with his own religion:

Jeena: We did not want to be refugees.

Teja: Do you know I am a Sikh from Pakistan side of the Border?

Jeena: You don't look Sikh.

Teja: Just because I am not wearing my turban? Well, with a turban-less head I don't look Sikh. But I had to change my appearance just to escape alive. Ah, well, such were the times and such was the racial hatred. Now I am a weekend Sikh. I put on the turban on weekends only when I have to go for weekly worship. Ha. Have to keep the culture alive, you know. Rest of the time they take me for a Hindu who prays faithfully to a thousand different Gods. I'd rather not say anything about the Muslims – minimum punishment, death. (Varma, 171).

'No Man's Land' set in present time against the backdrop of Quebec separatism from Canada. Quaiser, Jenna, and their daughter Samreena's flee communal violence in India and arrive in Montreal in 1970, with a charred brick as a reminder of their home back home. Home in the new country is identity to Quaiser. Determined not to let the misfortunes of other impede his desire to own a home Quaiser buys his house below market price from an Anglophone owner who is forced out of Montreal, but finds himself in difficulty again when separatist movement shuts down his factory and the restaurant. Worse, Quaiser fails to see that his obsession to own a house had destroyed Jeena's body and mind. *No Man's Land* is a play that considers the predicament of Muslim refugees from India who are uprooted for a second time by separatist struggle in their new home. *No Man's Land* with emphasis on abusiveness of the workplace for immigrant women trapped in sweatshops.

For a refugee or an immigrant to some extent, an alien land often becomes a territory of suffering and exploitation. Whereas for an immigrant, the new place of adoption may not seem so hostile, for a refugee or exile the circumstances of his home country drive him from one land to another.



The will of a refugee remains immaterial as he is forced to leave his homeland. The option of choice, therefore, does not remain with a refugee who has to bear racial discrimination to a greater degree. In all cases, however, the diasporic people are always haunted by a sense of loss and nostalgia. Rahul Varma has used the new technique in *'No Man's Land'* that is internal voice of Jeena. Jeena, a Indian-Canadian protagonist in this play confirms the situation of worker who worked harder as dog.

".....I worked like a dog. Part time, full-time, overtime, all the time. Because Quiser wanted to buy a house. No matter what sacrifices I had to make and no matter what I had to do." (Varma, 173).

Jeena's internal voice throws light on the hard work and careful supervision of poverty taken by the family in Canada.

Rahul Varma's this play continues with theme of exploitation of an immigrant couple who fled the violent aftermath of the partition of India and Pakistan - only to find themselves in the midst of Quebec's separatist movement. Quiser, the head of the family gradually works his way up to the position of manager from a factory hand and also to part ownership of a restaurant. Quiser's wife Jeena has the ambition was to become a teacher teaching students making them knowledgeable in life. At the same time, Jeena has to sacrifice her school teaching ambitions and she has to work as sewing the cloths for living. This play brought forth the permanence of loss of identity and self across borders and cultures.

So, this play illustrates the experiences of Jeena and other women in the textile industry, and how the politics of compensation for work related injuries affects the mutual relationship of this couple mentioned above. The flashback technique worked through music aspires to show the merger of the riot experience in the Indo - Pak partition to the Quebec separatist movement, and its impact on the immigrants trapped in sweatshops.

Conclusion: Thus, his plays deal with the exploitation of immigrants and refugees, particularly the female labor force in urban Canadian sweatshops. The fundamental violation of the dignity of a people by using them as mere instruments in successfully running sweatshops across Canada and in the third world, the immigrants' helplessness, and the systemic apathy to their plight all are reflected in this play, with racism, gender equality, identity crisis, Native Land Rights, work-place hazards, wife battering, and environmental colonialism among others. I tried to show through this present paper Multiculturalism is in the plays of Rahul Varma. His plays throws light on hard work of the women, exploitation by the officer as the workers don't have Canadian experience, equal wages are denied. This shows the multi-culturalism as they are not from one place, they from various countries.

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