

## Expressionistic Elements in Arun Sarma's Play *Purush*

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### **Abstract**

*Expressionism is a modern movement in art and literature developed in the 20th century. It emerged as a reaction against naturalism and impressionism. It was the dominant literary movement in Germany during and immediately after World War first. In its initial period of development expressionist drama was a medium to protest and react against the pre-war authority of the family and community, the strict social order, and mechanization of life. In an expressionist drama, the subsidiary characters lose their individuality and appear as 'types', impersonal and grotesque.*

*Purush (The Man) a play by Arun Sarma, one of the major playwrights of modern Assamese drama, was written in 1964. In 1968, the 'Pragati Sangha', Guwahati performed the play on stage for the first time. The tragic end of Sukanta is the central theme of the play. The play is centred round the unhappy married life of Sukanta and Hiramoni which finally leads both of them to their fatal end. Attempt has been made in this paper to analyse Purush as an expressionist play. Both primary and secondary data have been used for the analysis.*

**Keywords:** *Expressionism; Arun Sarma; Assamese Play; grotesque; conflict.*

### **1.1 Introduction**

Expressionism is a modern movement in art and literature developed in the 20th century. For the first time it was used by a painter Julian Auguste Harve to refer to his paintings, while trying to distinguish them from Impressionism. Expressionism reacts against naturalism and realism. It was the dominant literary movement in Germany during and immediately after World War first. In its initial period of development expressionist drama was a medium to protest and react against the pre-war authority of the family and community, the strict social order, and mechanization of life. Later on, the form was exported to Britain and America. The expressionists were influenced by the works of psychoanalyst such as Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung. Freudian thought of the role of subconscious life in determining human motivation and action particularly influenced them. Again, the Marxian concept of conflict of the social classes was one of the central ideas of the expressionist works. One of the major forms of literature came under the direct impact of expressionism was theatre. August Strindberg was the first recognized expressionist playwright.

Due to the social, political, economic changes and intellectual progress after World War II and freedom struggle, subject matter and style also changed in Assamese literature. In drama, subject-matter was changed from mythological and historical to social. Real life conflict and problems influenced all the genres of literature including drama. Various social issues such as class conflict, oppose of capitalism and imperialism, idealization of socialism, generation gap and conflict, family conflict, life struggle of downtrodden, issue of unemployment, hopes and aspirations of middle class, and strange psychological expression are started treating as subject matters in drama (Sharma 271). Introduction to the contemporary world theatre, and adaptation of the style and techniques enriched Assamese theatre tradition in post-independence period. Concepts such as realism, social realism, poetic play, expressionism, the theatre of absurd, stream of consciousness, epic theatre etc. drew the attention of the post-independent Assamese playwrights (Patgiri 81).

Arun Sarma is one of the major playwrights of the post-independent period of Assamese theatre. Sarma started his literary career with *OrukhāPajā* (1954). In most of his plays the Assamese society after the fourth decade of twentieth century finds its depiction. A few of the full length plays written by Sarma are *Jintī* (1960), *Sri Nibaran Bhattacharya* (1961), *Parashurām* (1962), *Purush* (1964), *Ahar* (1964), *KukurnesiaManuh* (1965), *Sionr* (1972), *BurañjiPāth* (1974), *Chitralkha* (1975), *Padma-Kunti Ityadi* (1976), *Poster* (1982), *Bāghjāl* (1984), *Napoleon āru Desiree* (1985), *AnyāEkAdhyāi* (1994), *Agnigarh* (1996), *AditirĀtmakathā* (2000), *Chakrabuyh* (2003) etc.

*Purush* was written in 1964 and first staged by Pragati Sangha, Guwahati in 1968. The play is centred round the unhappy married life of Sukanta and Hiramoni which finally leads both of them to their fatal end. Sukanta is the protagonist of the play. He was a student of English literature but couldn't finish his study as he had to return home to take the responsibility of the Rupali Circus after the sudden demise of his father. The sudden burden of responsibility as well as unkind behaviour of Hiramoni lead Sukanta to his fatal end. The present paper is an attempt to discuss *Purush* as an expressionist play.

### 1.2 Review of Literature

Review of related literature is the primary step of a research work. It helps to set the objectives, recognise scope and gather sources of data for the study. The review of the following literature helps in the present study.

Harishchandra Bhattacharya in his *AsamīyāNātya-SāhityarJilingani* (1968) traces the evolution of Assamese theatre along with certain discussions on Arun Sarma. Satyendranath Sharma in his *AsamīyāNātyaSāhitya* (2005) discusses the history of Assamese drama. He also mentions modern techniques applied in the plays of Arun Sarma.

*Arun SarmarNātak: SamikshātmakBislekshan*, an extensive research work of Ranjan Bhattacharya chiefly focuses on the literary work, traditional dramas, unique style applied in plays, characterisation, dialogue, social context of the plays of Arun Sarma. He mentions about expressionism found in *Purush*. Another research based work by Sekh Abdul Hakim on Modernity in *Assamese Drama: with special reference to Arun Sarma, BasantaSaikia and HimendraBarthakur* (2012) is a comparative study of the three major playwrights of Assamese literature. In his work Hakim discusses *Purush* as an absurd, naturalistic and expressionistic play. SachidanandaSaikia in his research based work *Arun Sarmāaru Vijay TendulkārarNātakarSamājattva*(2017) discusses the social elements present in the selected works of the two literary stalwarts. In his discussion on *Purush*, Saikia mainly analyses it from a sociological perspective and mentions it as an expressionistic drama.

The review of literature gives insight to the present status and reveals the probability of a further and detailed study on *Purush* of Arun Sarma from expressionistic view point. Hence, the present study on expressionism in Arun Sarma's play *Purush* is found relevant.

### 1.3 Aim and Objective

Expressionism along with many other styles and techniques developed in Assamese theatre in the post-independent period. Arun Sarma is one of the Assamese playwrights who has experimented with various modern styles and techniques. In this paper attempt has been made to discuss the expressionist techniques applied by Sarma in his play *Purush*.

### 1.4 Methodology

In this paper attempt has been made to analyse Arun Sarma's play *Purush* as an expressionist play. I have adopted a descriptive and analytical method to achieve the objective. The data have been collected both from primary and secondary sources. The primary source includes the play *Purush* and dramatic works of Arun Sarma. The secondary source consists of the references, research articles, theses, dissertations and other research works related to the research topic.

### 1.5 Area and Scope of the Study

The study mainly attempts to analyse the expressionism and how the expressionism is reflected in Arun Sarma's play *Purush*. For this study I have selected the *Purush* play to analyse the expressionistic technique reflected in the play.

### 2.0 Arun Sarma and His Plays

All the plays of Arun Sarma exhibit ample evidence of modernity in them. In some of his notable plays like *Āhār*, Sri Nibaran Bhattacharya, Agnigarh, *Purush*, Cioñr, KukurnechiāMānuh, AditirĀtmakathā, BurañjīPāth, Sarma has experimented with absurdity and expressionism to some extent. *Āhār* is the first Assamese absurd play while in Sri Nibaran Bhattacharya absurd elements and expressionism are found influential at the same time (Bhattacharya 94). Sri Nibaran Bhattacharya reminds Ionesco's *The Chairs*, especially when Nibaran is seen addressing the empty chairs in the final scene. In Agnigarh, Sarma has tried to focus on father-daughter conflict, a less ventured field in Assamese theatre. KukurnechiāMānuh, on the other hand focuses on the theme of alienation. The play reminds of expressionistic plays like *The Emperor Jones* and *The Hairy Ape* by O'Neill of whom Sarma was a passionate reader. Just like Yank in *Hairy Ape* who feels secure and confident in his physical power until the rich daughter of an industrialist refers to him as a "filthy beast", Romu too faces the crisis of identity when he is deprived of his rights. In *Purush* also Sarma employs expressionist techniques though absurd elements are found present at the same time.

### 3.0 Expressionistic Technique in *Purush*

The tragic end of Sukanta is the main concern of *Purush*. In the beginning of the play Phutuka enters the stage along with the band music of the circus. Phutuka introduces the story of the play. The story of *Purush* runs like this- Sukanta, an educated twenty eight years old person has to take the responsibility of Rupali Circus after the sudden demise of his father. He returns home without completing his studies and falls in love with Hiramoni, the ring mistress of Rupali Circus. But, Sukanta has the least interest in circuses. After marrying Hira he realizes that he has already lost his identity some far away. Trapped in the love of Hira, Sukanta feels, "One day I belonged to myself". Living among the caged animals of the circus, Sukanata loses his former identity. Sukanta loves Hira, but he fails to be himself by loving her. Therefore, by murdering her he tries to give permanency to their love.

*Purush* is a partly absurd and partly expressionist play. Its alienation effect, symbolic and poetic image, the love-hate relationship, the lack of communication between the characters establish *Purush* as an absurd and existentialist play (Hakim 166). However, it does not justify that the whole play is absurd. *Purush* distinctly bears some elements of expressionism.

The conjugal life of Sukanta and Hiramoni is not at all happy. Although Sukanta is the manager of the Rupali Circus, it is Hiramoni who controls both the circus and Sukanta. With a whip in her hand Hiramoni appears as an ambitious woman. As she says:

*Hira: ...I said, from tonight this is my kingdom. This house of Sukanta Chaliha, owner of Rupali Circus is mine now. I will reign here alone. (Sarma 129)*

Hiramonni was born in the environment of the circus. For her circus is everything. Sukanta would have been a lecturer living a comfortable life, but Hira's sudden involvement gives a new turn to his life. When his friend Bhabananda tells him to write an introduction to his novel, Sukanta turns his request down. Sukanta's mental conflict is clearly brought out in his words.

*Sukanta: If the owner of a circus company, a ringmaster, keeping the circus and playing of tiger aside begins writing introduction to novel, will that be a novel anymore? (Sarma 143)*

"The expressionist artist or writer undertakes to express a personal vision-usually a troubled or tensely emotional vision - of human life and society" (Abrams 85). Sukanta's conflict reaches its climax after his marriage with Hiramoni. One day, Sukanta is seen playing upon his violin alone in the lawn with his back to their residence just after a few days of their marriage. Hiramoni cannot bear this inner conflict of Sukanta and breaks the violin severely. She considers the violin as her co-wife and envies the instrument. Just like she uses her whip to control the animals of the circus, she uses the same whip to control Sukanta also. For her Sukanta is none but another caged animal who must be kept under control.

*Hira: (whipping Sukanta) Shut up. Go and open the cage. Take this whip with you.*

*Sukanta: Keep the whip with you Hira. You must have that whip to flog me at any time. Otherwise, you may fall into some trouble. (Sarma 141)*

The constant use of the whip by Hiramoni reflects her dominant nature. She appears as a 'type', a representative of an over-ambitious, dominant person with less emotion and feelings. In expressionist play, the subsidiary characters in the expressionist drama are always 'types' and frequently grotesque. This grotesquery evolves from the personal prejudice of the protagonist which determines his view of people.

Sukanta could not bear the domination of Hiramoni for a long time. His friends have already given up visiting his home for literary suggestion and criticism because of Hiramoni's offensive behaviour. Sukanta is an alien to the world of circus. Hiramoni's cruel treatment makes this sense of alienation more intense. He prefers to live inside the cage like the other animals in the circus:

*Sukanta: I am living a caged life already. Let me live inside the cage. There is no hypocrisy here. I do not have to wear a mask inside the cage. (Sarma 151)*

Sukanta's decisions to stay inside the cage out of his great mental anxiety is expressionistic. By entering into the cage he becomes passionate and proves his male identity like a beast.

#### 4.0 Findings and Conclusion

The key findings of the analysis of *Purush* as an expressionist play can be summarised in the followings points:

- (a) *Purush* distinctly portrays the conflict between two classes of people believing two different ideologies. The protagonist Sukanta represents sensitive, non-materialistic people while Hira stands for the people concerned only with the carnal desires.
- (b) Being deprived of his aesthetic transcendence and torn from inside Sukanta goes to live inside the cage which reflects his mental anxiety.
- (c) Although not all but in some context, the language is poetical which suggests an expressionistic technique.

- (d) Characters like Hira, Phutuka, and clown are types who represent a class or a type of people of the society.
- (e) Although Arun Sarma has applied a few expressionistic techniques, *Purush* is not completely an expressionistic play. Certain characteristics of absurd play and existentialist play are also found present in *Purush*.

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