

# **THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL STUDIES**

## **Partap Sharma: Playwright and a Rare Talent in Theater**

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**Abstract:**

*Partap Sharma is one of the leading playwrights in India today. In the realm of Indian English literature Sharma occupies a quite large place as the most powerful of Indian dramatists who search out the realities of contemporary society in order to hold them up to focus. His writing output is rather meager, not prolific but whatever he wrote; caters a lot of sources to any researcher of Indian English arena in general and particularly history and other contemporary aspects. Though not a prolific writer, to understand him we should have to peep in his major works, in which he is at his best with the plays. His plays did not fully flower until the readers' interest and audience' response came towards his techniques and stage crafts. His fame chiefly rests on his plays and a lone famous novel. Partap Sharma achieves this by employing history, myth and struggle for identity which hold him unique position as a modern dramatist. Indeed, his literary success comes with some of his dramas. Present article aims to glimpse in the dramatic writings of Partap Sharma which may assist to bring out different facets and literary merits of his plays and this paper will also try to measure his dramatic talent in brief.*

**Keywords:** *Indian english drama, contemporary concerns, historical structure, myth, spirituality etc.*

As intrinsic wings/genres of literature writing poetry, fiction, story or prose ever provides a window into society. Apart from these, through a play it can be ventilated in societal, political, cultural and other facets of human history. As a playwright, Partap Sharma (1945-2011) created a niche in the circle of Indian writing in English. He is one of the well-known and little bit established, Indian-born Punjabi writers. Besides, he has a multitalented creativity as an actor, director and documentary film maker. In this regard Alka Sahani, a leading journalist and columnist of *The Indian Express* praises with paying homage to the playwright as,

*"Partap Sharma a rare talent in Indian theatre, radio and cinema passes away in Mumbai. [.....] he was more than a mere voice. Anybody who thinks of Partap Sharma as a playwright, a writer, a voice over artist or actor, misses the point a little as he is all of this but when all the four are put together, they made a character and a talent that's rare."*

Partap Sharma was born in a well-settled and rich family at Lahore, a part of pre-independence India on December 12, 1939. He was the eldest son of Dr. Baij Nath Sharma and Dayawati (Pandit) Sharma. By profession his father was a civil engineer who served as Technical Advisor to governments in Ceylon, Tanganyika and Libya. After retirement Dr. Baij Nath Sharma moved to Punjab, his patriarchal property and resided as a gentleman farmer till his last. And this Punjabi life style and entire village activities are echoed in Sharma's sole novel, *Days of the Turban*. Partap Sharma took his initial education from Trinity College, Kandy, Ceylon (now Srilanka) when his father was working as a technical advisor at the same. While originally he was Punjabi but acquired entire education from English medium. Later he returned in India with his father and got his higher secondary education from Bishop Cotton School, Shimla and completed his graduation (B. A. Honours) from St. Xavier's College, Mumbai in 1959. He started his conjugal and mundane life with an English lady Susan Amanda Pick on October 21, 1971. He has two daughters, Namrita and Tara. Tara Sharma is a beautiful and well-known actress in Bollywood movies. And recently leaving behind him his wife Susan and two daughters Namrita and Tara, co-workers and well-wishers he breathed his last on 30th November, 2011 due to emphysema. Tara Sharma, an actress has started with John Abraham in 'Saya' and Abhishek Bachchan in 'Om Jai Jagdish' and she is also the host of 'The Tara Sharma Show on Imagine'.

A voracious reader by instinct, he studied English Literature extensively and opted drama for creative outcomes. From the pen of this Punjabi writer, half a dozen plays came and some of them are mostly read and appreciated like *A Touch of Brightness*, *Sammy*, *Begum Sumroo*, *Professor has A Wacry* and *Zen Katha*. Unfortunately his plays were failed to be staged in the country but received highly appreciation and performed successfully in abroad and especially his *Sammy* and *Begum Sumroo* have extremely applauded by the international audience. His dialogues are effective and themes are relevant to contemporary Indian English drama as sex, poverty, identity, and myth and full of historical aspects. Though, he emerged as a dramatic voice on the Indian literary scene along with various contemporary tools, he became an intellectual island at where the reader can subdue his or her inquiry.

While operating the contemporary concerns, Partap Sharma occupies a very distinct position as Girish Karnad. Partap Sharma's plays tend to focus on the current realities under the light of the past. Basically his readers are belonging to foreign rather than native audience. Readers and audience of his plays get moved. He made them think and reflect over certain issues by presenting the situations before them. After peeping in the major plays of Partap Sharma, it is asserted that he may be looked upon as the symbol of the new renaissance in the dramatic field for his brave experiments and innovative directions. No doubt, he is unquestionably one of the most prominent playwrights of the present century. Partap Sharma's plays have staged in India and mostly abroad due to his knowledge of contemporary theatre and his exposure of the past linkage with the present. His flair of acting almost with all the fields of theatre and its sensibility is noteworthy. He has added to the Indian theatre as well as to the world how our past and present can combine to give our present existence some meaning to daily activity of human race.

*A Touch of Brightness* is Sharma's literary debut which saw the light of the day but it ruffled the literary masses at large, due to the presence of some unsavory elements. As a result, it was banned immediately. The ban on the play, further added to his popularity and he began to be studied home and abroad with much deeper interest. Finally it was produced by the Indian National Theatre in 1973, in Mumbai. In recognition of Sharma's literary creativity, it was also broadcast over radio by the BBC, on November 3, 1967. *A Touch of Brightness*, the theme of which is prostitution, effectively deals with the seamy side of life in Bombay's red-light area but it is highly related with mythical solution and philosophical thoughts. It has been concretized into small eight typical scenes and not parted in traditional or formal acts. It is the delineation of some callus veracities and backdrops of life, man and so called society. The interest of the play heartens round a girl – the daughter of a Devdasi, Prema from South India who is compelled to run away from her home in Mysore to Bombay and sold at a brothel by a pavement dweller, Banarasi Baba. Bhabhi Rani, a shrewd middle aged brothel keeper persuaded Prema for a long stay as a prostitute and also introduces her as a new physical entertainer only for her own gains. Meantime a young boy, Pidku comes to contact of Prema who later on makes some fruitless efforts to free her from the clutches of Bhabhi Rani. But she plainly denies eloping with him. This play is little bit mingled with spiritual ethos and philosophical talk. Sharma evidently intensifies to show the backdrop of the 'Spirituality' of India. It is symbolic, poetic and a significant contribution to the contemporary social issues while having a realistic presentation of the sensitive world.

His second famous literary creation is *Begum Sumroo*. This is a historical play. This play is set in the late 18th century during the decline of the Moghul Empire, when Shah Alam was the emperor, and India was swarmed with variety of European mercenary soldiers and adventurers. By choosing chiefly a historical theme Sharma depicts the extraordinary life of a very bold dancing girl named Farzana, later known as Begum Sumroo after courting with European Soldiers. The play deals with the mechanics of power. It is the power of Col. Walter Reinhardt Somber, a Swiss German mercenary military officer and commander-in-chief of the military brigade which proposes Farzana (an Indian nautch-girl) the head of the troop and ultimately makes her to lead the soldiers of the brigade. In brief it deals with the political conflicts among the British, Swiss-German and French colonizers and the native kings of India. It was a great success on the stage.

His next venture *Zen Katha: The Story of Bodhidharma*. This drama tells the story of how Bodhidharma born a prince in the south Indian kingdom of kanchipuram in the fifth century, had to discover ways to excel at unarmed combat because the royal Pallavas prided themselves on their wrestling skills. The prince became the monk and travelled to China. There his strange and somewhat eccentric behavior led the various piquant situations. And he became not only the founding Patriarch of Zen but also the first peaceful fighting monk. As chief abbot of the monastery of Shaolin, he initiated the tradition that now makes it unique. This is another historical play. It is about the founder of Zen and martial arts. It was produced by the Primitive Theatre Company, Mumbai and was directed by Lillete Dubey. It was opened for the public view on 15 August, 2004 at the Sophia Bhabha Hall.

His last but highly celebrated play in two-acts is *Sammy!* It has a solid historical cultivation of Gandhi's deeds of India's freedom struggle. It exhibits the historical journey of Mohan and how he becomes Mahatma. It deals with the disintegration of the British Empire. It also recounts Mahatma Gandhi's unrelenting struggle for the freedom of India. It was first produced by Prime Time Theatre Company, Mumbai, in both English and Hindi. On the stage, this play has received wide acclaims home and abroad.

Among his other well-known staged plays *Brothers under the Skin*, a one-act play which is the beginning of his dramatic career and staged during his college life in a drama competition at St. Xavier's College, Bombay with winning two prizes. *Bars Invisible* is a three-act play and it is firstly produced in Bombay by the Indian National Theatre (1961). His *The Word*, another three-act play is written for the Bombay Arts festival. It is brought to stage by the Theatre Group and directed by Alyque Padamsee. This drama is come first for the public view in 1966. *The Professor has a War-cry*, a five-act play and it is first produced in Bombay by the Impermanent Theatre on 15<sup>th</sup> January, 1970. It is full of irrelevances and is a hotchpotch of mantras, dancers, burning ghats and horrors of partition. It deals with the dilemma of a university professor. Sex is the main theme of this drama. In such plays Sharma used English as a spoken language. There are some Hindi dialogues and phrases. But this one might be linked with uprooted ancient Indian addictions and unfortunately I didn't get the copy of this play. His *Queen Bee* is a wonderful full-length play and the speciality of the drama is all the characters are female and it is produced and directed by Sam Kerawala in Bombay, 1976. And *Powerplay* is a satirical farce produced by Hosi Vasunia and the Dynasty Club, Bombay, 1978.

Partap Sharma has captivated one and all with his staged dramas and fictional writings. Through his works he takes us back to that period of history (pre-independent India) which has nostalgia associated with it. Whether it is description of the Mughals or the British Raj, he has described it all in a very fascinating and interesting manner. But this does not mean that he lives in the past only. He is a writer who is very much aware of the issues of the times and thus the contemporary issues also find an expression in his writing. Depiction of historical events, characters and places, use of mythological figures and events, existential philosophy etc. seem to be his main pre-occupations. Partap Sharma really possesses a unique place in the present scenario of Indian English drama. He has an equal awareness of the Indian custom and deeply knowledgeable about obstacles of Indian society which were soundly rooted since its routine. Unquestionably his dramatic genius reflects his mastery over form and its delineation. As being a

succeeded actor and director he exposed neatly the fundamental requirements of the performance. Besides, his plays manifest social concern. His artistic excellence has fascinated the attention of the world-wide play watchers and theatre goers. In a nutshell, Partap Sharma's literary contribution is vast and varied. Partap Sharma seems to be an outstanding writer in the galaxy of creative Indian English writers. One who reads the plays and novel of Sharma finds in him a superb craftsman, a great storyteller and also a thinker who has striven to give artistic expression to his views on life and human destiny. After identifying his sanity with the passage of time Sharma is acclaimed as a master in dramatizing major aspects of human life. He is also revered as the 'Golden Voice of India'. The attempt of this paper on Partap Sharma in this particular sphere would give us a fresh orientation to understand him. Eventually it can be said that one cannot shut one's eyes against the superb creations of Partap Sharma and that is his dramatic representation. No doubt, this paper would quench the thirst of the modern reader of drama prominently in the Indian context and Partap Sharma's place must be considered unique in the galaxy of creative Indian English writers.

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