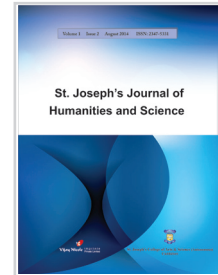




St. Joseph's Journal of Humanities and Science

ISSN: 2347 - 5331

<http://sjctnc.edu.in/6107-2/>



Expressionism in the Play *The American Dream* by Edward Albee

- A. Julie*

Abstract

The play '*The American dream*' is used as a tool to express the concern over the change in the society. The world is becoming materialistic and consumeristic day-by-day. This change has an adverse effect in the people and in their way of living. The play portrays what would happen if people of the golden days will be made to live with this society. The play mainly focuses on America and the effect of the term "American dream". Two characters are personified for the old and the new American dreams. Through them the impact is made clear. The major characters of the play picturize the bad practices and institutions followed in the American society. There are advantages and disadvantages in both the dreams and they are revealed through this play. Owing to its simplicity, the expressions are so clear and direct.

Thus, it features the positive effects for the change and also suggests that the society would have socially been much better without the change.

Keywords: Consumerism, American dream, Materialism, Expressions, Better change, Revolution.

Introduction

Expressionism is a form of art in which the artist attempts to bring out his points not by objective reality but by personal emotional feelings which arise through the events and situations around the protagonist or the main character of the art. It can be explained that expressionism is a form in which the artist tries to exaggerate in a violent or jarring way such that it presents a dynamic application of the formal elements and also brings out clearly the point which he wanted to describe.

Expressionism is notoriously difficult to explain in part because it overlaps with other major 'isms'; they are futurism, cubism, criticism, realism, surrealism, socialism etc.. Expressionism can also be explained in the context of consumerism. It was actually created as a tool against materialization and to mock the growing urbanization in the society. It was first introduced and practiced in Germany. The critical persons who thought that the rapid mechanization was changing and reducing the love among the people and their family, tried to express their concern, anger and advice through

*Assistant Professor, Department of English, St. Joseph's College of Arts & Science (Autonomous), Cuddalore-1, Tamil Nadu, India.

their works. This genre of work came to be known as expressionism. This work started its domination after World War I as a social protest.

Expressionism is mostly chosen by the authors only because it is one of the types in which the author can portray his own personal vision towards the society or towards any situations in which he tries to bring a revolution or a change. It emphasizes the subjective feelings of a writer, to convey their emotion and interpretation. The factors of ideas and emotions are more obvious in expressionisms. Also it is focused on ideas to express an object or an abstract thing, to get a new and spiritual space. They use many arts such as intense emotion, forms, exaggeration, shape and abstraction, to break the feelings, etc.

Edward Albee gratefully expressed himself as a good thinker, by his play 'THE AMERICAN DREAM'. In the play, he talks about an American family whose dreams are drawn back and forth and also the emergence of new dream from the old dream. This is a one act play with one scene structure. The play begins and ends in one setting and the action occurs in the living room of Mommy and Daddy. Edward Albee had set this play on five characters. They are Mommy, Daddy, Grandma, Young Man and Mrs. Barker. Without using their name he has used only the relationships. The usage of the general terms is an indication of two dreams, the old and the new dream. She has named only the character of Mrs. Barker, who is the manager of an orphanage. She comes to see the child who has been adopted by Mommy and Daddy twenty years before, and therefore he uses only one specific name and the rest is mentioned by using relationships.

Mostly, expressionism uses symbols rather than the boring characters and the exaggerated dialogues. The other positive aspect is the intriguing dialogues. Those words make us think the secret meanings behind them. Albee has neatly handled the paradoxes which add beauty to the play. In this play the two main characters GRANDMA AND YOUNGMAN belong to the dreams of the AMERICAN SOCIETY (old and new dream).

Grandma is represented as a person belonging to the old dream. She represents the older generation. In the old dream the Grandma is represented as coming from the rural society where the money is not given much importance. The money is considered as

something unwanted in this society and family because they consider that happiness is the most wanted thing that man needs to have in this world. We also find this when Grandma mentions about the department of agriculture. They live in the setting of nature and they are so mingled with the nature. Old people are the ones who are so attached towards nature. And they are the ones who carry the traditional policies.

Grandma brings hope to the family by bringing the Young Man as a worker. The Young Man represents the future generation and the new dreams. He is also considered to be the new hope of the family to bring Mommy and Daddy out of the commotion. He reaches home after seeking job in many places. He arrives home exactly when there was chaos, because the Mommy has killed the child she adopted. Mrs. Barker has come home to see the child after twenty years. The Young Man is about twenty years when he joins the family. Grandma finds the young man to be the perfect man to show Mrs. Barker. Through that gesture the Grandma gives the happiness to Mommy and Daddy. And finally we find that Grandma orders the young man to take the boxes from home and keep them outside.

The Young Man develops his knowledge and becomes an intellectual. He was very attractive. He attracted Mommy, Daddy and Grandma very much through his hard work. Though he is physically well settled, mentally he still carries the pain of finding a job. He remembered that he was tortured to death when he could not find any job. The dream of the Young man is to become rich. When he asks for a job from Grandma he says that he is ready to do anything for money. Grandma finds a way to fulfill the dream of Mommy and Daddy and also of the Young Man. She gives Mommy and the Daddy, the Young Man to fulfill their dream and she gives job to the Young Man to make him rich.

The play does not give any information about contents of the box, the reason for Daddy's mute characterization, the reason for not having the Grandma as their head and the identity of the young man and the purpose of his arrival. The next scene conveys about the new dream and the old dream. 'The American Dream' depends on its characters to bring out the intended ideas and themes. The characters like the Young Man and Grandma play a typical role in speaking the author's mind. The characters like Mommy, Daddy and

Mrs. Barker contrast these characters to show brightly what is good and what is bad.

THE AMERICAN DREAM is an expressionistic play which focuses on the degrading values of the old American dream in the society of America. The story indirectly criticizes the audiences' way of living and their interests which have no meaning, that is, the way the American dream has shaped up now. And this is otherwise known as the new American dream. This is a one-act play which focuses and criticizes the increasing consumerism in the society. And this type of criticizing the society can be called the urban satire.

In the play there is a clash between the old and the new dream. The old American dream represents those who are all still able to increase the value of what the nature has given them. They believe that the natural life is the truest life that one gets in this world. They follow the traditional life; they like to live with the nature. They believe that the physical life is gifted to them directly by God. Totally the old American dreams are full of their hopes, tradition, culture etc... They like to live an eternal life with harmony and nature. The old dreams are considered to be eternal where there is no end but in the American society, they are forced to be sent out rather than cherishing their presence.

The people of this world are unwilling to face their true conditions. They do not want to live in truth but just live a masked life. According to Albee this is not the true living. He tries to express the point that people should accept their positions, standards, birth and even the skin color as it is. Arguing or mourning over these topics are a mere waste of time and energy.

And Albee tries to push the people towards that better society where one would not be able to reject others or their request for silly reasons. These are the ways that are not harsh to listen but are just a bit difficult to follow, or at least to know, such that we could all make a better society to live in. Symbolism is not mostly used in absurd plays. But in *The American Dream*, a prominent symbol is used which gives a prominent meaning behind it. They are the NEATLY PACKED BOXES. Those packed boxes represent the discipline and treasure of the old American dream. And another point to be noted is that when these boxes are kept Mommy and Daddy continuously keeps commenting on its beautiful wrapping and its outer appearance. They are too much attracted by the outer appearance and do not bother what it contains.

In the play, at a certain point Grandma decides to leave the house and simultaneously Young Man decides to stay in the house. This is a beautiful representation done by Edward Albee in this play. Here he symbolizes that the old American dream which was enriched with values and discipline leaves the society and the new American dream which is full of consumerism and materialism enters the society which are harmful to the people.

Thus, 'The American Dream' is a play in which the author does not use many symbols but just tries to reveal his expressions through certain in-built stories, dialogues, situations and characterization. Symbolism occupies a major part in the absurdist plays. But, in this absurd play, the author did not want to confess his ideas through symbols. This might be because, the situations and characters which he used to explain were far better than any other symbols in the play. Though not many symbols used, it is perfect in its position and stands right for appreciation and applause.

As per the comments of the various critics, Albee has written many satires on American society in the hope to change the silly and ridiculous practices which have started to gain recognition among the people. Like all the other absurd playwrights, even Albee thinks that the present situation has changed the people and led to the loss of faith in everybody. So, he considers these plays as a media towards the revolution against consumerism and materialism. Expressionism is the master key of Edward Albee. Like others, he also expected a healthy change in the society. And, he uses this amazing technique to remove the masks from the lives of the people.

Conclusion

The play supports the theme that the old, honest American Dream is progressively getting displaced by a new society concerned with consumerism. The plot revolves around an American family with a dominated Mommy, an emasculated Daddy and a clever witty and an epigrammatic ironist Grandma. It also captures a lady, Mrs. Barker, who forgets everything. The play takes a major turn with the entry of the Young Man who is in quest for a job. Of the five characters of the play four characters belong to the first category and only one character belongs to the latter one. And this one character plays the role of the protagonist of the play

and is named by her relation called GRANDMA. This mission of mocking is accomplished by the author by his shapeless and simple characters that are completely opposite to each other.

References

PRIMARY SOURCE

1. Albee, Edward. *The American Dream* William Morris Agency INC, 1350 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY10019, USA. 1960-61.
2. Albee, Edward. *The Zoo Story*, Samuel French Ltd. 1960-61.

SECONDARY SOURCE

1. Kernan, Alvin, ed. *Classics of the Modern Theater: Realism and After*. (New York, 1965).
2. McGowan, Kenneth and William Melnitz. *The Living Stage: A History of the World Theater* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J, 1955)

3. McCarthy, Gerry. *Edward Albee* (Macmillan Modern Dramatists) (London, 1987)
4. Barrett, William. *Irrational Man - A Study in Existential Philosophy*. New York: William Heinemann Ltd., 1958.
5. Bigsby, C.W.E. *Edward Albee - Collection of Critical Essays*. New Jersey: Prentice - Hall, 1975.

WEB SOURCES

1. <http://ej.lib.cbs.dk/index.php/assc/article/download/1212/1211>
2. 20th Century American Drama: A Background for Albee and Others.
<http://media.leidenuniv.nl/legacy/lezing%2020th%20century%20american%20drama.pdf>
3. www.achievement.org/autodoc/page/alb1bio-1