

Traces of Postmodern Elements in the Play *4H-Club*

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INTRODUCTION

Martin Esslin writes in his treatise *An Anatomy of Drama* (1976), “The theatre is the place where a nation thinks in public in front of itself.” (101) Keeping this idea in his mind, Sam in the play *4-H Club*, takes a flamboyant step to reveal a true picture of young Americans who spend their time only in talking, wrestling and horsing around and are busy doing absurd things. The play *4-H Club* was premiered at the Cherry Lane Theatre in September 1965 and directed by Charles Gyns. There are only three characters in the play, namely Bob, Joe and John good enough to haul some characteristics of postmodernism from alpha to omega.

The title of the play is used ironically to represent contrast views of the characters. However, the mission of ‘*4-H Club*’ is to develop an insight among youth to know their potential, whereas all three characters are consuming their energy in meaningless activities that reward none. When I started reading the play I was under the impression of understanding the values and motto of ‘*4-H Club*’ with the help of its storyline and through its dialogues, but on further reading, the play proved to be an interesting paradox. The title of the play is of course used here as a parody.

The 4Hs of the club are head, heart, hands, and health which stand for the areas of focus for the organization to develop citizenship, responsibility, leadership and life skills of youth ‘to make the best better’. On the contrary, in this play, the floor of the kitchen is littered with paper, cans, and trash and its walls are very dirty that replicate disordered and chaotic world. The stage setting and light-sound arrangements are very realistic with minimal accessories almost keeping an empty stage. Only a hot plate with a coffee pot is placed in the kitchen. John is stirring the pot with a spoon and the other two i.e. Bob and Joe are laughing so much that they gradually become hysterical, fall on the floor, roll around and then suddenly stop laughing.

At the beginning, the audience seldom knows about the absurd behaviour of the characters but slowly gets acquainted with actions that suggest their impoverishment, without any concern for their struggle for survival. John is hardly convinced to regard this coffee made out of using all substitute materials in place of real ones, as real coffee. “You can’t call it coffee anymore. Brown powder for coffee, white powder for cream, saccharin for sugar. Water is the only thing that stays the same. Put it all together and it comes out coffee.” (Fifteen One-Act plays, *4-H Club* 185) All three sit and drink this so-called coffee together, in an uncouth manner. In between the slurping sounds, they all stand quickly and smash the cups on the floor. Bob and John do not even feel any regret and start kicking the pieces here and there on the stage. Joe

tries to sweep the broken pieces and collects them, but Bob and John continuously foil his efforts to turn the kitchen clean. Shepard's 'Wasteland' exhibits a real image of contemporary society in which there is always scope for upliftment even in the worst condition of scarcity of food, barely enough to supply for body and mind.

DESCRIPTION

In Shepard's plays, the audience is regarded as an attentive character and counted as one of the main characters of the play, who is expected to be detached or alienated from the storyline so that the playwright gets a spontaneous feedback. Sheila Rabillard in the article "Sam Shepard: Theatrical Power and American Dreams" rightly says, "Shepard anatomizes a profound need for audiences. His exploration of theatricality moves beyond the superficial exhibition of powerful American Culture beyond the violence of male performance to suggest the deeper anxieties of modern Western society." (Rabillard, Modern Drama)

John enters the stage carrying a fresh, red, juicy and crunchy apple in his hand as if holding a very precious thing and does not want to share it with his friend Joe. John highlights, "It is good. It's "Washington Delicious." (*4-H Club* 188) And John while eating apples is discussing with Joe on the different preparations made out of the apple, without sharing with his friend, showing lack of values that are against the motto of '4-H Club'. Apples have become the standard image of richness and prosperity and the only way to fulfill hunger. Joe truly voices the American youth, "I'll bring all the apples I can get my hand on! A ton! There's apples all over, you know. Not just in Washington!" (*4-H Club* 190)

Faction- It means Intermingling of fact with fiction. In this play, Shepard mentions well-known brand names of the food industry but paradoxically again comes back to the coffee pot in which only water is boiling. Reluctantly Joe asks his friends Bob and John to have some coffee, knowing that cups have already been broken. "There's coffee but no cups." (*4-H Club* 194) They all start walking in a circle, laughing harder at their adverse condition, not being affected by it. The play explores and touches a variety of elements like poverty, hunger, fear, and uncertainty of the future (paranoia) indirectly in their transformed state and sometimes with a touch of humour.

Mini-Narrative- In this play, Shepard's eloquent use of mini-narrative technique is helpful to develop a postmodern vision of the audience and side by familiarizing them with the past of his characters. The play unfolds the past experiences in a form of mini-narratives. Jean-Francois Lyotard analyzes the notion of knowledge in postmodern society as the end of 'grand narratives' or 'meta-narratives' which he considers a quintessential feature of modernity. Lyotard defines postmodern "as incredulity towards meta-narratives." ("The Postmodern Condition . . .")

At the very beginning of the play, Joe delivers a soliloquy addressed directly to the audience. Later, in the form of a monologue, he tells a tale of a strange young gardener who had

a monopoly on all the lawns and he charmed the old ladies of a town with his determined work like their son. His network was very strong and special driveway sweepers worked under his entrepreneurship, Joe was one of them. He and his business got so big that one day the mayor felicitated him for improving the community and one day fortuitously “he left the town and all those ladies died. One at a time.” (196) here there is no connection and justification between the two sentences mentioned above. Bob further asks Joe about why the old ladies died. Joe mysteriously answers, “That’s what they said.” (*4-H Club* 197)

Magical realism- Shepard skeptically used the pronoun “they”, means Joe himself did not know, he simply shared a folklore that he retells. The characters or the people mostly accept these weird things without questioning because they embrace the idea that reality contains magical element and can be expressed in popular or cultural forms. In the climax, the story is blended with this new element of ‘magical realism’ or ‘unrealistic events’ into the narrative that is otherwise realistic.

JOE . . . Each one of us walked from one end of the town to the other. The thing was, we had to keep our eyes closed. We couldn’t look. We could just feel the side walk with our feet. If we touched the grass we knew we were getting lost. This one guy, Ernie, he got lost once . . . later he was in this tiny living room . . . then he walked into the huge bathroom that was painted blue and there was this old lady lying on her stomach with a spoon in her hand. (*4-H Club* 197)

In this entire speech, the narration is fragmented and full of absurd ideas, blended with surreal images that can leave an audience and the reader bewitched and bewildered. As Michael Earley infers, “Sam Shepard takes it for granted that the mystery is soluble and will forever leave its imprint strewn throughout the imaginative landscape of both mind and body.” (132) the rise and fall of ‘mike’s Gardening Service’ can parallelly be understood as the rise and fall of pastoral America.

The conversation of the triumvirate reminds us of the ennui, and menial activities of Vladimir and Estragon while they wait for the arrival of someone named Godot who never arrives. Similarly, Joe and John want to leave the place but somehow they wait to get the place that is littered with garbage and debris cleared. John insists his inmates, “Sure! And sweep! Clean up the kitchen, goddammit! We can’t eat apples in a dirty kitchen!” (*4-H Club* 198)

The true aim of ‘*4-H Club*’ is to provide varied fruitful activities in science, literacy, and hygienic living to enrich the skills of youth that flourish throughout their lives. But here what we observe is that no one is cleaning the floor, and they waste their time and energy to trap or kill mice virtually.

Shepard’s early plays give distinctive characteristics of what director Robert Woodruff has called ‘Unity in Pieces’. “It is apart from the conventional unity of plot and character

development.” (qtd.in Marranca, *American Dreams* 152) Therefore the foremost element of postmodern literature is ‘breakdown of the plot’ - primarily Joe’s enlightened narration was centralized on how to take care of lawns and driveways. Then the plot slowly moved on to the action to wipe off the rodents present in the pile of garbage after which Bob started describing rats, bigger than mice. Finally, the discussion moves on to a fierce carnivore mammal wolverine and man-eater (omnivore), the largest monkey to be closely related to the baboon. John says, “I think it’s a toss-up really between the mandrill and the wolverine. Wolverines run in packs too. Twenty or thirty at once.” (205) Readers or viewers need to shift their attention and correlate accordingly with the floating pieces of the plot.

CONCLUSION

The play is an exaggeration of poverty and hunger. The appetite of Shepard’s characters not only sticks to the physical needs but also wishes to fulfill their emotional lacunae. In the text, there are many words we come across which have been deliberately used as similes to provide a better comparison. Rats are as ravenous as coyotes, like JOHN, whose compelling desire for food is so high that it could not be satiated only by apples (. . . *He is eating an apple and carries several apples inside his shirt.* . .) (4-H Club 202). Shepard compares his appetency with an animal instinct that has already surpassed humanity.

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