

THE ELEMENT OF CRIMINALITY IN THE PLAYS OF GEORGE F. WALKER

M. Ramana Raju
Asst. Professor,
Dept. of English,
Vignan's University.

George F. Walker, one of the eminent playwrights of the Canadian theatre, was born in 1947 in a working-class family. His education was limited to only high school level after which he had to work for living. He was impelled to do different odd jobs. He worked even as a taxi driver. This experience of hard life would have moved him to choose the field of writing. In an interview, he says:

"My struggle to live in the world is part of the reason why I write."

His debut of writing plays occurred in an unusual way. Once, he observed a note calling for scripts at the newly created factory theatre lab, while he was driving a taxi. It was the moment when he decided to try his hand at writing plays. He never expected that it would be a turning point in his life and career. This is how he started his career as a playwright directly, though he has had little experience. In an interview with Stephen Haff, he says:

"I learned mostly about writing just by writing. And then writing for theater by being around actors a lot. That helped."

He started his career of playwriting with a one-act play, *Prince of Naples*, a farce with two characters. It marked the beginning of his long association with Toronto Free Theatre, in which he served as the playwright-in-residence from 1971 to 1976. He also served as its artistic director from 1978 to 79. Walker's career has been unprecedented in English Canada. He bagged two *Governor General's Awards* for his plays *Criminals in love* and *Nothing sacred* respectively, for the life time achievement. He also won the *Toronto Arts Award for Drama* in 1994. He was made a member of the 'Order of Canada' in 2006.

Walker produced twenty stage plays and numerous radio and television scripts by 1997 which made him the most published and produced playwright in Canadian English theatre. Moreover, he is a noted director of his own productions.

His plays have been mounted in hundreds of productions around the world and have been translated into several languages. This is the reason how he could get a critical and popular respect as one of the most powerful playwrights of the world. He is also considered as one of the hundred most powerful playwrights in American theatre in 1993. He is known for the publication of a critical anthology of his work, *Shared anxiety* (1994).

The problem of criminality takes the major berth in the plays of Walker. He feels that this problem is the major threat to the society as a whole. He tries to bring out the serious and severe consequences of the problem. His concern towards this problem can be compared to that of Bond, one of the eminent playwrights of Britain, who shows a lot of concern towards the problem of violence. Edward Bond does not compromise to show the acts of violence to the greater extent on the stage because he feels that the weapon of writing must reflect the social conditions of the contemporary society or else the purpose of writing becomes meaningless. This is the reason why he feels that the Shakespeare's play '*King Lear*', is inadequate, even though it was enormously successful. In this regard, Hilde Klein says:

"Bond argues that Shakespeare gave an answer to the problems of his particular society, which is not valid for our age. Therefore Bond feels the need to rewrite it so that we now have to use the play for ourselves, for our society, for our time, for our problems...."

He opines that it could not reflect the social conditions of the present society. This inadequacy of the play led him to adapt and rewrite in the name of '*Lear*'. Contemporizing Shakespeare is also one of the

reasons for undertaking the play. Hilde Klein agrees with the playwright's view that the Shakespeare's play is inadequate in its vision for the contemporary society. Hilde Klein says:

"Shakespeare for his powerful criticism of the human condition, he does not share Shakespeare's focus on Lear's personal hardship rather than on the society that Lear had subjugated and tyrannized. Thus whereas Shakespeare's play transmits the idea of total resignation, Bond is anxious to show that this model is inadequate now. In his play Bond tries to make the audience reflect on the fact that an acceptance that mistakes have been committed is not enough; one has to proceed towards action and change." (71)

In this perception, One can understand that Walker also, through the study of his work, has had the similar ideology that of Bond. Hence, it can be concluded that both the playwrights are similar in their social concern.

Walker shows the consequences of the crimes effectively and analytically at the end of his plays. It is understood from his plays that the irresponsible and indifferent attitude of the youth ultimately jeopardizes not only their life but also the life of the innocent. It creates such a vision of morality among the audiences either directly or indirectly. It makes the audience aware of the value of dignified and peaceful life. They become precautionary regarding such criminal attitude and its disastrous consequences. By this individual as well as social awareness, the audiences do not resort to any of such crimes and not get their families disturbed. In this regard, his thought provoking plays reveal his greater concern towards the betterment of society.

For example his play *Criminals in Love* starts with a simple and petty crime. The character Junior, in his guilty attempt to protect his father, who is imprisoned from being murdered, is convinced to help his criminal uncle and aunt. Helping to criminals is also a crime because it increases the nature of criminality in their minds. In this sense, he and his girl friend Gail are motivated by his criminal aunt Wineva to commit the more offensive crimes like bomb blasting. He was unaware of the real motif of his aunt. However, they become the terrorists in spite of being innocent. His life took a wrong path with a minor mistake. But finally he was entangled into serious and the most dangerous problems. Once an individual commits a crime he wouldn't have any chance to escape but to be immersed into the stream of problems and crimes which spoil his peace of mind. So the writer says not to commit crimes and not to spoil the peaceful and comfortable life.

Gail, ruled by her emotions, chooses to be with Junior even though she is against the culpable attitude. Wineva coerces Junior and Gail into carrying out her escalating plans. Ultimately, everyone is betrayed by Junior's father when he is pressured by the police for information. Wineva's end is watching her revolutionary plans fail. For everyone, imprisonment is the ultimate end. In this play, Walker cautions that the power in the hands of a manipulative, greedy person leads to confusion, chaos and finally destruction. His plays also exhibit a sense of morality. This morality evidences itself in several ways, all of which connect to his very distinctive style.

The characters of his plays reflect the emotional attitude of society. They express extreme emotions which are common in the present society. He depicts the characters effectively which reveal the criminal and mean mentality of the contemporary society. It shows his clear and analytical understanding of the present society. Women characters, in his plays, play a stronger role than those of men. When asked whether he dislikes men, he answers:

"No, I don't dislike men; in fact, I specifically love the men in this series of plays. I think they're still in transition, and not quite as heroic as the women, but I think they're getting better, in my own little universe".

His characters are so well-written and developed that anyone can play them and the character will still represent the original vision. In this respect Walker says:

"I believe that I put the character in the play and that they are who they are, and that five or six different actors can do them and they'll still be who they are"

This notion of Walker is believed to be true when we have close and comprehensive study of his characters. Each character of Walker, with one or two exceptions, could change in body type, vocal range, and overall nature.

George F. Walker has a strong sense of depicting the social elements, especially the element of criminality, effectively and impressively. In this sense he is greatly commended by different sections of Canadian as well as the global society. New York Times praised his talent:

“Walker has an eye for the ridiculous and an imagination that packs his plays with action,”

Different books in Canada appreciated his greatness that Walker is :

“A vital and inventive dramatist with a technique and highly coloured imagination all his own.”

Hence, his contribution towards the Canadian theatre is said to be far-reaching and remarkable.

Dr. M. Ramana Raju

M.A., Ph.D., APSET,

Assistant Professor,
Vignan's University,
Vadlamudi,
Guntur – 522213.

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