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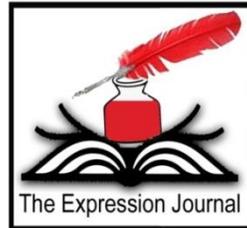
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WILLIAM CONGREVE'S *THE WAY OF THE WORLD*: TREATMENT OF LOVE AND MARRIAGE

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Abstract

The literature of an age is the reflection of life, traditions, cultural and religious practices of that age. The Restoration period saw many deviations and changes from the Puritan age. Theatre was opened for the entertainment and, for the first time, women started playing the roles of the female characters on the stage. Various social issues such as marriage, love, gender disparity, liberty, hypocrisy, pretentious behaviour of the city people etc. were the thematic aspects of the drama. The dramatists of the time bring out the life and style of aristocratic class and city people; their disdain for simplicity. It is reflected in the restoration comedies like *The Way of the World* through different stock characters. Although the Restoration comedy caters to the limited class of the aristocracy and court people, the issues dealt with touch upon the life of society at large. Some of these are the views on love and marriage. Money and social status overpower emotion of true love in marriage and in relations. Vanity, hypocrisy and duplicity of such people are satirized by Congreve. They are put in direct contrast with the characters who attach value to honest feeling of love and trust in marriage. Through such characters Congreve argues that rather than money and social status, it is the harmonious balance based on trust and honesty between individual and society, man and woman that is essential for a meaningful human relationship in love and marriage.

Key-Words

Restoration; Drama; Licentiousness; Hypocrisy; Liberty; Love; Marriage; Truthful.

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Introduction:

William Congreve is one of the famous playwrights of his age. The restoration period saw a resumption of theatre and entertainment during the reign of Charles II. Puritanism, which preceded Restoration, focused on moral up righteousness, religious practices as the way of life. Reinstatement of monarchy saw many changes from the rule of Cromwell. Strict moral taboos in all aspects of life were imposed as a reaction to the growing casualness in relationships and in life at large. Theatre and entertainment; considered to be the nursery of all moral licentiousness; were banned and song singing England turned into a psalm singing nation. When the monarchy was reinstated with the return of Charles II amidst popular acclamation, the reaction to Puritan manners and morals was inevitable. The restoration was followed by an immense change in the general temper of the English people. Religious extremism also softened because of the Church of England. The return of the cavaliers from exile in France; who had become expert in French wit and gallantry, also added to the changes in trends in English society that happened during this period. Certain stock characters and themes became popular as these were entertaining. For example, country bumpkin, young rake, immoral young woman, licentious middle aged woman, young woman of unblemished reputation and gallant etc. The Restoration comedy catered mostly to the upper classes.

The effect of these conditions on literature would be inevitable because it is a social product and reflects the life of the era out of which it springs. The restoration comedy was a popular trend of the time in the field of literature. Restoration comedy reflects the ideal social world of the court wits of the reign of Charles II. Its relation to the spirit of the age is thus easily discernible, even though the literary form, once established, developed a momentum of its own which carried it beyond the limit of the age that produced it. These revolve around the life and conduct of rich upper class people. The difference between city and country life could be seen vividly in the restoration comedies. Like a great deal of Restoration comedy, *The Way of the World*, written in 1700, attacks the customary 'marriage de convenance' in the late seventeenth century upper and middle classes. It argues that love is not about money or interests but also about

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feeling. This paper tries to explore how William Congreve satirically has reflected the social trends and manners of the age. *The Way of the World* is a serious and intensive study of love and marriage. It seeks to bring out within its limits the necessary conditions for a harmonious relationship. Whereas Congreve's treatment of the attitudes of the characters like Fainall, Witwoud, and Petulant is critical; that of Mirabell and Millamant is approved by him. Congreve has focused on the thoughts of people towards women, love and marriage in the contemporary society and also about the thoughts of women themselves.

Congreve's concerns and themes spring from the difficulties which confront the individual's need to fulfil his inner self and yet attain material security to reconcile sexual gratification with respect for his partner's integrity as a human being. These issues are relevant because contemporary society lacked the protection of married women's property Acts and where the financial security of both young men and women depend was dependent on the whims and fancies of an older generation. Like most of the restoration comedies, *The Way of the World* deals with love and marriage as the central subjects. Marriage settlements are thought of as contractual expression and embodiment of personal relationship. It contains one of the most interesting and sensible analysis of marriage in the form of a dialogue between two young folks who are far too fashion-conscious to talk about these matters but still long to find happiness in each other; and, as a counter poise, there is a portrayal that is funny, horrifying and understanding the effects of youthful desire in an aged, unloved woman. Wealth and property are the bases of the relationships. There are illicit love affairs, adulterous relations, true and false wooing, courtship, unhappiness in marriage and desire for divorce, marriage for the sake of love and the conditions governing an ideal marriage.

The differing ways of the world endorsed by Mirabell and Fainall question one another. Fainall's marriage based on mere interest is set against the prospective marriage of Millamant which is based on trust and mutual respect. The two wits, Mirabell and Fainall, represent the contemporary norms by which other characters are measured. His characters mostly fall into different categories depending on their attitude towards love and marriage. Witwoud, Petulant and Sir Wilful represent those who live very shallow life and full of crass materialism. Their love is governed by momentary pleasures. Their life is full of vanity and false pride. Witwoud would love Millamant for fashion's sake, "I shall never break my heart for her" (Congreve, 1; 422). Petulant would be satisfied if Mirabell permits him to love her as suitor and not because he has any hope of winning her heart. Here Petulants go out and come back in disguise to ask for their selves and sometimes they employ whores to call on them while they are at some public place just to show that they are irresistible to women,

Fainall: Call for himself? What dost thou mean?

Witwoud: Mean! Why, he would slip out of this chocolate house....then trip to his lodging, clap up on a hood...drive hither to the door again in a trice, where he would send in for himself, that I mean...not finding himself sometimes leaves a letter for himself." (1; 315-22).

This indicates their vanity and inner vacuity. Their behaviour is pretentious. Congreve exposes such characters by ridiculing their mannerisms. These characters belittle each other in the presence of others in order to project their selves as witty. They are so blinded by their pride and vanity as to pretend not to recognise their own relative. Witwoud refuses to recognise his brother because he belongs to country, saying that it is a fashion in London not to recognise one's

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relations from the countryside, "it is not the fashion here; 'tis not indeed dear brother"(3;486-87). They are always in pursuit of pleasure and mirth. The writer has shown his despise for such people through Millamant who laughs at them and Mirabell who objects Millamant taking pleasure in the company of such coxcombs regarding them as "occasion for scandals" (Sharma, 104). He further says, "The greater the coxcomb, always the more scandal; for a woman who is not a fool can have but one reason for associating with a man who is one" (728-30). Congreve also brought out city's disdain for the country through Wilful. Shirshendu Chakrabarty observes, "...The country was commonly identified with plainness, honesty and bluff sincerity and the town with duplicity, hypocrisy and affectation" (p.xii).

The marriage of Mr. Fainall and the daughter of Lady Wishfort is completely based on mercantile motive, not on mutual love and respect. This is revealed through his dialogues with Mrs. Marwood, "....and wherefore did I marry, but to make a lawful prize of a rich widow's wealth, and squander it on love and you?"(2;197-99). Both of them are flirting outside marriage which brings to light the fact that the likes of them in the society do not believe in either the sanctity of the wedlock or the true love. Their true love is for money. Further, the basis of the relation of Mrs. Marwood and Fainall is money and lust. Witwoud, Petulant and Wilful reflect the fops of the age of Restoration who strive to ape the accomplished gentlemen but fail to do so for want of wit, judgement and manners. Congreve presents them as caricatures to the disapproval of the values that they represent. Mrs Marwood and Fainall join hands to rob Mrs Fainall of her wealth by threatening Lady Wishfort to divorce her daughter on the basis of extra-marital affair with Mirabell. Through this action, Congreve introduces reader to yet another type of class of people who could sacrifice everything to save their social image. Lady Wishfort is one such character.

The writer has ridiculed the lopsided approach of the class of people who care only for their sense of social reputation through the follies of Lady Wishfort. Such people exhibit contradictory behaviour. On the one hand they are amorous and try to capture young gallants who cannot but despise them; on the other hand they conform to the prevalent norms of the society as far as marriage is concerned. Consequently, they often come into clash with youth on the question of matrimony. Her amorous behaviour is so much at variance with her pretensions. She exists as a challenge to that more cerebral attempt to rationalize sensual relationships which Bonamy Dobree regards as the main purpose of Restoration drama. She exhibits a peculiar blend of folly and dignity,

"Lady Wishfort: And-well- and how do I look Foible?

Foible: Most killing madam.

Lady Wishfort: Well, and how shall I receive him? In what figure shall I give his heart the first impression? Shall I sit....?"(4; 15-32).

Her follies indicate the breakdown of traditions of respect for age and rank; degree and place. Like Lady Flippant, Lady Wishfort too is in distress for a man and will "do anything to get a husband" (2; 265). Mirabell also speaks of her as "full of the vigour of fifty five" (1; 56) and refers her as "my old lady" (1; 23). People like Lady Wishfort control the fortune of young people and their future plans depend on their whims and fancies as they are the guardians. This is clearly seen in the case of Millamant and Mirabell. Lady Wishfort is against their marriage. It is because of her follies and double standards that she gets entrapped in the design laid by Mirabell in order to

seek her permission to marry her niece Millamant. Congreve brings out the shallow life people across socio-economic spectrum of the age who show complete disregard for goodness, nobility and wisdom of old age. Sharma opines that Congreve has seized “senile folly to the exclusion of other aspects of old age” (p.10). But the relationship of Millamant and Mirabell echo the ideas of Congreve about love and marriage.

Millamant and Mirabell believe in sanctity and mutual trust in marriage. They have respect for the sentiments of their partners in love and marriage as the foundation is laid on honesty in relations. It is not driven by lust for money as we see in other characters in the play. Both Mirabell and Millamant belong to the age in which the income which a woman may bring with her was an important consideration while selecting a bride. The importance of an estate or jointure was well recognised in spite of the fact that the notion of economic independence of women had not then so well crystallised as it has done now. But Congreve presents the ideal view of love and marriage by being different to financial status of each other. She represents educated and emancipated women of her times who believe in equality. Sharma has observed that Millamant is “a little laughing, giggling, highly lightly, prattling, tatling, gossiping mistress” (39). Congreve asserts love for liberty and independence of spirit in marriage through her. *The Way of the World* is devoid of all mystical significance attached to feelings of love. Perhaps that is why she prefers to be solicited to the last saying, “oh, I should think I was poor and had nothing to bestow if I were reduced to an inglorious ease; and freed from the agreeable fatigue of solicitation” (4;154-56). Solicitation is suited to the sophisticated notions of ladies and gentlemen like Millamant and Mirabell because it saves the free gallantry sinking into sheer lust and women are free to choose or reject the lover. Nicoll has rightly observed that it is only because of the “frank equality shared by the sexes” (104) that this comedy has come into existence. The traditional matrimonial position of woman is rejected when she says, “I shan’t endure to be reprimanded, nor instructed. This so dull to act always by advice” (2;431). The equality is expected to extend to all the domains of life including intellect. Millamant shows her consciousness about the conflict in marriage and of the need to maintain her own independence in order to be able to love wholeheartedly.

Similarly, Mirabell is an embodiment of the ideal of the gentleman that prevailed in the times of Congreve. He is portrayed in contrast to Witwoud, Petulant and the likes. It is his view, along with that of Millamant which is supported and advocated by the playwright. His true love is revealed when he tells Fainall that he likes Millamant with all her faults, “Nay like her for her faults” (1; 142). The proviso scene clearly shows important conditions for a successful relation. Both of them strive to arrive at an understanding. Theirs is a marriage of true minds and there is no reason why, given love, the marriage should not prove successful. Some critics are of the view that his victory depends upon coincidence which could be read as providence. But Mirabell manipulates the elements of polite society in order to quite that society. The whole point of his attempt to hoax Lady Wishfort through the Sir Rowland plot is to enable him to force her to agree to his match with Millamant.

Conclusion

The Way of the World is Congreve’s masterpiece of literary art as well as his final vindication of positive human impulses. It is a mature and humane exploration of the necessary artifices of feeling and passion. It rejects dissimulation in favour of lasting and reciprocal relation between man and woman. His serious moral undertone can unmistakably be perceived. This also

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shows that Congreve closely observed the fops and flirts and thus exposed the hollowness of their philandering. Congreve suggests a discreet and judicious balance between liberty and conformity. He completely rejects anarchic liberty and rigid conformity. Mutual understanding in relations can prevent disenchantment and alienation. Also, through different characters, Congreve puts across revolutionary ideas about the freedom of women in society. The parity in status of men and women is desirable for mutually satisfying and dignified relationship. It was certainly a boldly liberal attitude towards women in seventeenth century. This view is further supported by satirical treatment of characters that represent attitudes disruptive of harmony in personal relations.

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