



## ELMER RICE AS A DRAMATIST RICHLY PICTURIZING SOCIAL REALITY AND ENVIRONMENTAL VISION: AN APPRAISAL

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“Man is a social animal” said Aristotle. This Aristotelian dictum is applicable to all great realist literature. Characters like Oedipus, Don Juan, Antigone and Anna Karenina cannot be distinguished from their social and historical environment. Their human significance and their specific individuality cannot be separated from the context in which they were created. Their environment is what sociologists term as society. The movement of man from savagery to civilization aids in the rise of society. Society has been divided into two major types. They are ‘primitive society’ and ‘modern society’. One critic remarks:

“The study of literature in its relation  
To society is as old as Herder (1744-1803)  
And Vico (1668-1744). Coleridge had  
Flashes of insight into the connection  
Between literary and social phenomena, as  
When he saw the Greek State in the Greek  
Sentence and the individualism of the  
English in the short separate statements  
Of Chaucer’s prologue” (Lodge 246).

‘Literature’ represents ‘Life’ and life is in a large measure ‘social reality’. For literature has been written by a person who belongs to the society and has been moulded by the society in which he lives. Literature is divided into three major fields: poetry, prose and drama. As “literature is really not a reflection of the social process but the essence, the abridgement and summary of all history” (Wellek 95). It is necessary for the artist to get the society’s view of his work of art. A poet reflects the changing milieu of his time but poetry can be understood only by a few. Prose as another branch of literature mirrors life. But it has a very small reading public. To change society and to depict society, drama is the right medium and the dramatist is one who sees his own work of art alive before his eyes and identifies the audience with the characters to bring home the point that society can be made or marred by his work of art.

Elmer Rice is one such dramatist who has richly depicted social reality in a commendable way in his plays using ‘drama’ as the right medium for changing and depicting society in all ways possible. Before moving to Elmer Rice, it sounds important to see the social milieu in which he was born. For like any other sensitive artist, he has been affected by the ups and downs of the American society. To know and to understand his plays, one has to see the society of his time. At that time, America was at cross-roads. Hoover had become the President when the country was confronted with the worst economic depression in history. It had a deep impact on the history of United States. A substantial portion of American people got deprived of homes and savings and lost confidence in their capacity to support themselves and people’s faith in democracy and capitalism was shaken and a large number of people showed willingness to forego freedom in the hope of economic security. They started looking with favour at Communism which promised them a planned economy and a classless society. Hence, the depressed condition of the American society provided a spate of dramas of social consciousness in America. One critic by name Bigsby says, “It is a world in which the relationship between man and environment had



been destroyed- a theme which runs through Sidney Kingsley and Elmer Rice to Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams” (P 124)

Eugene O’Neill, deeply rooted in contemporary life, quite fascinated as well as repelled by the American civilization, saw that the material prosperity of the United States was its strength and weakness. In his play **The Hairy Ape**, the vision of America as a land of plenty and equality is pictured in reality as a spiritual wasteland where man would degenerate back to the ape. Following O’Neill is Arthur Miller whose **Death of a Salesman** is nothing but a powerful authentic social document. It powerfully depicts the sufferings of a common man at the hands of an inhuman society. Willy Loman, the protagonist in search of the American dream forgets his own innate qualities. He thinks that salesmanship would bring him fame and money. But he is proved wrong. Like Loman, the modern man’s disease is not only physical but also spiritual and material prospects can no way fill in the vacuum of spirituality. Just like a blade of grass which is unable to grow in Willy’s compound, man also cannot flourish in the claustrophobic American society.

Elmer Rice, the dramatist following O’Neill and Arthur Miller, was also not lagging behind. His plays mirror the American society in all its murky details. **The Adding Machine** “in form, content, intention, and effect, it is a satiric comedy, and its hero a comic character” (Hogan 121). The play reveals the harsh truth that the technological advancement is usually accompanied by human retrogression. Human being has become a Zero. And depression affected very many zeroes for during that period the introduction of labour saving devices led to greater productions with less labourers. As a result, a large number of people were thrown out of job and failed to secure alternate jobs. Mr. Zero, one of the characters in **The Adding Machine** is one such example. The effects of industrialization are vividly portrayed in this play.

The next play **we, the People** is also a social document. In the words of Palmieri,

“Rice’s chief targets in **We, the People**  
Are capitalism and the restrictions on  
Individual freedom. As for capitalism,  
His main lines of attack are the competitiveness  
Of the system, which virtually forces bigness, thus?  
Eliminating the little man with his limited.  
Resources; its impersonality and indifference  
Towards the individual; its creation of a vast  
Economic gulf between the owners and the workers”

(Palmieri 121)

This play also satirizes the moral hypocrisy prevailing during that period in the character of Helen. Closely connected with this moral hypocrisy was the impersonality of the social system and its indifference to the welfare of the employees. The Government seeing the protest which became the order of the day started using police brutality to stop it. This is also reflected in this drama” The play is a more stronger indictment of the American social system than **The Adding Machine**. It is, according to Palmieri, unquestionably a propaganda piece. It is obviously committed to political consciousness the playwright calls for political as well as social reform.

Rice’s belief in the importance of the individual is an important hall mark in all his plays. **On Trial** is one such play. This presents “a searing indictment of governments and ideologies which flout this concept of dignity and sanctity of the individual. And this belief in human rights underlies most of his



so-called propaganda drama” (Frank 24). This play also reflects Rice’s interest in law. He is against the impersonal law for he feels “If impersonal law and the goodness of the heart clash, the law must give way” (P 25). This play reveals the fact that he wanted to implement the American brotherhood.

Elmer Rice, like other dramatists, was not confined to American society alone. And this is proved by **Judgement Day**. This play is based on the ‘Reichstag fire trial’ and ‘the Leipzig trial’ of certain communist leaders. With this play, he hoped to awaken the American society to the true nature of Fascism and Nazism. His plays are usually propagandist in nature. Biting satire is missing. Yet there is a harsh judgement passed on the contemporary American society.

What has to be kept in mind is that an artist especially a dramatic cannot exist in a vacuum. The dramatist is a product of his age he becomes effective and significant only when he expresses and mirrors the thoughts and feelings that prevail in his society. The basic theme of all his plays is the nature of man and his relationship with others. But at the turn of this century, Freud altered man’s conception of himself. Along with this psychological break-through came the outbreak of two Wars. As a result, an increasing emphasis began to be placed “upon mental derangements that beset humanity” (Frenz 116). The Wars had robbed millions of psychic as well as of physical security also. In this prevailing social condition, the tragic hero as a protagonist has ceased to exist:

“The heroes are bewildered creatures,  
Floundering in a morass of self-delusion,  
Self-pity, and frustration; drugging  
Themselves with wishful fantasies;  
Destroying those closest to them with a  
Surfeit or dearth of love” (P 117).

These heroes are the representatives of the struggles and dreams of the lower middle class people who are caught in a hopeless circumstance. So Rice, as a critic, criticizes the capitalistic economy which creates a gulf between the labourers and the owners. He also lights up the listless life of the labourers. But it is not his main target, for he was more highlighting the loss of human potential. It is this unavoidable economic consequence which he condemns in his plays.

To conclude, Elmer Rice portrays the oppressive conformity and the loss of individuality in modern American society by showing the robot like behavior of the mechanical characters in the play **The Adding Machine** where characters are labelled by numbers rather than by proper names like Mr.Zero, Mrs.Zero, Mr. and Mrs.Oneto Six. By numbering his characters, Rice shows their dehumanized life and their lack of individuality and dignity. With the use of expressionistic techniques, Rice portrays his characters as representatives of mankind and also this technique captures the spirit of his age more clearly. In this play, Mr.Zero is shown as a representative of the whole mankind for he is not only person who is suffering from the mental agony and conflicts due to the effects of the machinery world. On the country, this is the pathetic plight of everyone who is living in a materialistic world. So Mr.Zero can be seen as Mr.Humanity.

Unlike Prufrock, Rice does not want to “linger in the chambers of the sea” (Green 186). Rice’s characters depict the whole of American society as Krutch calls:

“The twentieth century America a night  
Mare of soul-destroying drudgery and  
Of grubbies dreams unrealized and of the



Charnel babble of long dead clichés- mere  
Tribal noises reassuring the maker as  
Well as the others that he is still alive” (Frank 41).

This state of being alive is the theme of many modern plays. Rice also follows this tradition in his plays. One important dominant theme is the exploitation of the have-nots. This theme finds a form in his play **we, the People** where in he describes as “the misfortunes of a typical skilled workman and his family, helplessly engulfed in the side of national adversity” (Palmieri 119). To conclude, Elmer Rice can be seen as an artist who is able to penetrate the sordid realities of life with an earnestness which is very rare.

### Works Cited

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