

THE TRAVAILS OF MODERN AGE STAGED IN DRAMA AND THEATRE IN MANIFESTING THEORY OF EXPRESSIONISM

D. Krushna, Asst. Professor, Department of English, MVGR College of Engineering(A), Vizianagaram, India

T. Narayana, Professor, Department of English, Andhra University, Visakhapatnam, India

L. Manzula Davidson, Professor, Department of English, Andhra University, Visakhapatnam, India

Abstract:

Expressionism refers to a movement in Germany in which a number of painters sought to avoid the representation of external reality. It dominated the theatre for a time in the 1920s. The pioneers of Expressionism are Buchner, Strindberg and Wedekind. Theatrically, it was a reaction against realism and aimed to show inner psychological realities. In the beginning, expressionism in the Theatre was nearly extinct and not understood. In France, the influence has been negligible. In England and America the dramatists are really the only writers to have been affected; particularly Eugne O'Neil, Elmer Rice and Thornton Wilder. The expressionist writers and painters took the theme of man's inner suffering and misery. They preferred to deal with pure emotion, often in the raw state, as reflecting their own anxiety and confusion. They tried to depict man's struggle between the conventional way of living and the way he desired to live. The paper aims at vicissitude of human life and conditions of society in the Modern age.

Key Words: *Buchner, strindberg, wedekind, inner psychological realities, Eugne o'Neil, Elmer Rice, thornton Wilder, vicissitude, human life.*

Dreams are not nonsense but wish-fulfillment

- Freud

In the First world-war, Germany suffered a crushing defeat at the hands of the Allies. Many well-made houses were wrecked in the war, and the material wealth of the people was reduced to ashes. With inflation, the economic situation in the country became worse. The prices of essential commodities soared high. Misery and poverty were seen everywhere. All these unexpected developments gave rise to a disbelief in the materialistic world as visible to the eye. The external reality lost its significance; it became a Myth, a Maya. People doubted the very existence of God. Inner suffering and mental agony became the reality, with the result that the sub-conscious world was all that mattered to men, many times more than the conscious world. Out of this chaos and impotent anger emerged a new movement called "Expressionism" initiated by the painters, it filtered into the theatre soon.

The expressionist writers and painters took the theme of man's inner suffering and misery. They preferred to deal with pure emotion, often in the raw state, as reflecting their own anxiety and confusion. They tried to depict man's struggle between the conventional way of living and the way he desired to live. They were not satisfied with portraying the external reality which lost all its meaning with war's devastation. The subtle moods and temperaments of people, different from their normal behavior, interested the expressionists. Their ultimate aim and objective was to expose the man inside man: through symbols, dreams and abstractions.

As to when exactly Expressionism entered the theatre nobody can say clearly as in the case of Naturalism. It was August Strindberg, the Swedish play-wright, who set the model for expressionist plays.

His *Dream play*, written in 1902, and his *Spoook Sonata*, written in 1907, suggested the “form” to expressionist writers. “In a dream” Strindberg said, “things happen without logic”. People suddenly appear from somewhere and disappear. Everything is possible. Events take place without actual experiences. Time and space have no binding force on them. The subjective feelings of a dreamer get full opportunity to express themselves. Frank Wedekind, who married the widow of Strindberg, is one of the pioneers of expressionism in Germany. After him Georg Kaiser, the most interesting playwright of the expressionist movement in Germany was Ernst Toller a political thinker. Ernst Toller was an intellectual. In 1919 he led demonstration on behalf of the Communists in Munich. He was arrested and sent to Niederschonfeld prison. In prison he wrote his famous expressionist play, *Masse und Mench* (Masses and Man). This play was produced on October, 29, 1921, in the Volks Buhne under the direction of Jurgen Fehling. *Eugne o Neil's Hairy Ape* is one of the best examples of drama based on the theory of Expressionism in it we are more concerned about the emotion and feelings of the characters rather than the hard realities of Life.

The pioneers of Expressionism are *Buchner, Strindberg and Wedekind*. They defined the characteristics of Expressionism. They are treated as masters in Expressionism. The mechanism they used in Expressionism is adopted through Europe. Expressionism is adopted in German Theatre began with a Drama of Protest. The themes of the plays are on social order and authority. It explains subconscious mind of the people and the mechanization of life in the society. The hidden state of minds exhibited by Freudian and Jungian psychology. The disturbances caused by First World War gave rise to disbelief in materialistic world and doubts the very existence of God. It resulted the new expressionism in a view to build sophisticated man and society.

Arnold Bronnen's Vatermord which had written in 1915 caused furor. The play begins with A young man who loved his mother and stabbed his father. The dramatization exhibit hidden sub-conscious minds and inner voice of souls. It results to develop well-made play. George Buchner used many techniques of modern expressionism in his brief years of playwriting. His greatest work *Dantons Woyzeck* was the origin of the Expressionistic movement. It laid a path to take up new experiments in Expressionism. Buchner's perception of society and events are taken from French.

Expressionism used effectively in Buchner's unfinished work *Woyzeck*. The theme of the play was based upon the true and sordid case of regiment barber in Leipzig who stabbed his mistress in a fit of jealousy and was sentenced to death. Woyzeck's world is completely filled with common people. The play depicts how *Woyzeck* actions affected by external forces of society. The central character of the play is the victimised. Life is a torment for poor Woyzeck. He is beaten and humiliated by his rival the Drum Major. In another scene, Woyzeck is worried about his wife who was not loyal to him. He had become despair. He could not digest it. It is driven to kill her. After he has killed his wife, he tries to wash the blood from his hands in a pond, into which he falls and is drowned. It is an ironic touch which underlines the cynical, ambiguous theme of the whole play. The play has its own importance by psychological or symbolic expression. The scenes of the play tell the mood and loneliness represented by Woyzeck himself. This kind of rapid, serial presentation of scenes became one of the outstanding marks of the modern expressionism on the stage.

Spring's Awakening is the story of three children. Due to failure at school and anxiety about bodily functions, the character Mortiz shoots himself in the head. His friend Melchior is sent to change school. In the process Wendla dies from the abortion forced on her by her mother. The cause of the girl's death is given as 'anaemia'. An inflexible social code makes two, the adolescent boy and girl who attracts each other come tragic. The play moves around hypocritical life towards youthful sexuality. Expressionism technique had been clearly found in the depiction of “Lulu' plays. Wed kind's advocacy of sexual freedom became explicit. Echoing Wedekind to some extent, the comedies of *Carl Sternheim* also contributed to the theatrical undermining of bourgeois respectability in both content and technique. Sternheim gave his plays

the ironic title *From the Heroic Life of the Middle class*. He made his characters into grotesque types who already speak the characteristically staccato 'telegraphes' of the expressionists to come.

In the 1920s, the expressionist movement in Germany spread to other countries like America where playwrights like Elmer Rice took it up. In Rice's *Adding Machine* the name of the principal character is *Mr. Zero*, a dehumanized man. With the spirit of Germany, the Austrian expressionist painter *Oskar Kokoschka* started a new movement with his one act play, *Murder, the Hope of Women*. It was influenced by Strindberg's *The Dance of Death*. Kokoschka's work exhibits violent eroticism. He is known to public by emphasizing his anti-social attitude. His theatre posters also very shocked the people. *Murder, the Hope of Woman* was a grim battle of the sexes, set in vaguely medieval and mythological period, and played by characters labeled 'Man' and 'Woman'. Each had a choric band of followers. The characters of the play speaks in fierce, elliptical outbursts in blue armour, has a white face with a kerchief covering a wound, and is the leader of a savage crowd of men. The woman has loose yellow hair and wears red clothes. As soon as these two meet, the Man orders his men to brand the woman. So, she is able to imprison him in a cage, round which she creeps 'like a panther' and whose bars she 'grips lasciviously' before prodding his wound and 'hissing maliciously, like an adder'. At the end, the Man recovers his strength and kills the Woman, an action intended to represent the murder of all women. The dialogue is minimal, an invitation to the free expression of feeling and movement.

Kaiser continued the tradition in using Expressionism in Germany. Kaiser had become very popular by the play *From Morn to Midnight* which deals the subject of Poverty. It is a morality play. It is made up of Seven scenes or 'stations'. The idea is borrowed from the Stations of the Cross, and the scenes trace the cashier's progress through the day. Each scene is an expressionistic statement. His life resembles a piece of machinery. On his way through a field covered in snow, he sees the figure of death formed by the snow in the branches of tree like a giant skeleton. The scene at the races is like a madhouse, the promoters in identical silk hats behaving like automata. In the orgy of the cabaret, the beautiful girls he wants get drunk, fall asleep or turn out to be old and ugly. even the dancers has a wooden leg. And they all wear impersonal masks. At the end, the cashier punctuates his speech with blasts on a trumpet, and as he shoots himself, all the lights-bulbs explode and he 'sinks' with outstretched arms against the cross'. 'His death-rattle sounds like an Eee-his final sighed expiration like a Homo.'

This play had created huge impact in London theatre especially in *Peter Godfrey's* tiny Gate theatre where he plays himself as a Cashier. The production was so well received all over London. Later, it was transferred to the Regent Theatre, with *Claude Rains* as the Cashier. It was revived at the Gate several times in the years that followed. The facilities at the gate were limited. This production conditioned the British idea of Expressionism ever after. The actors played without scenery against a black curtain, and even the trick of evening the play by drawing the curtains on a dark stage and then bringing up the lights came about because Godfrey had no cloth thick enough to hide a bright set with curtains closed. As a result, expressionism was associated in London with bare stages and stark effects. In the unwitting words of James Agate,

All expressionistic scenery has this two-field appeal: it stimulates the eye by the little which it puts in, and the mind through all that it leaves out (Red letter Nights, p.135). A terrifying portrait of man in an industrial society appears in Kaiser's *Gas* trilogy, which shows human idealism defeated again and again by the progress of technology, a theme of utter pessimism. The three plays tell the story of an industrialist's family. The whole themes of the plays reflected around modern industry and the post-war mood most closely. A generation has passed, war has broken out and the factory is now producing a *poison* gas which eats away the flesh. In the most pessimistic of Kaiser's plays, the message is that civilization will finally be its own destroyer. These plays are the seen the characteristics associated with German Expressionism.

The most important play of the Czech playwright *Karl Capek* was influenced by Kaiser's *Gas*. This was *R.U.R: Rossum's Universal Robots* (1921), a piece of expressionistic science fiction which brought its

author a world-wide reputation, and also coined the word 'Robot' (from the Czech word 'slavery'). R.U.R. is an international company which manufactures machines that almost behave like human beings. These robots rebel and conquer the human race, but they cannot reproduce themselves unless they acquire the qualities of human love. The politically-inspired plays of *Ernst Toller* also speak to the whole condition of mankind and of general human suffering.

Austrian Max Reinhardt, the greatest director of modern times chiefly known in Britain and America used effectively expressionism in his play *The Miracle* by its costumes 'as fantastic as the architecture'. His versatility ensured that he was comfortable both with the realistic and the non-realistic play. He was well aware of contemporary developments in Expressionism. In 1906, Norwegian expressionist *Edward Munch* design his production of *Ghosts*. Reinhardt was instrumental in bringing Swedish and German Expressionism to the general public.

Along with their German contemporaries in using Expressionism shifted to Moscow Art Theatre by the greatest writer *Stanislavsky's* production *The cherry Orchard*, *Leonid Andreyev's Play The Life of Man*. It is continued by Meyerhold. He was able to work out in practice what he called 'biomechanics' in acting and he enthusiastically geared his theory to Soviet-Marxist philosophy. A notable theorist of the new movement, *Nikolai Evreinov* was a prolific writer and jack-of-all trades, actor and director, playwright and musician. He succeeded Meyerhold at the Kommissarzhevskaya Theatre in 1908. Evreinov's notion of theatre was straight forward and in some ways anticipated the theory of Expressionism. Another Director Alexander Koonen was influenced by Meyerhold. He broke away from MAT in 1914 to found the Kamerny Theatre with his wife Alice Koonen. 'Little by little the theatre has turned into an experimental laboratory for psychological research. Another writer Vakhtangov had joined MAT in 1911 and he put his theories into practice with great success. He introduced exaggerated expressionistic devices to underline a point unambiguously. Grotesque make-up and gestures were used to satirize the French bourgeoisie—a miser for example, would hold his hands palms up and with grasping fingers. The automatic movements of the figures turned the play into a grim farce.

It has been changed by Nikolai Pavlovich Okhlopkov who studied under Meyerhold. He modified his master's expressionistic style. The Theory of Expressionism modified with new techniques in modern times. It is adopted in America. The designer and director Robert Edmond Jones not only assimilated the new theories of space and light, but successfully put them into practice. It was Robert Edmund Jones who helped to start Eugne O'Neil (1888-1953) on his path as an experimental playwright. With the result, O'Neil produced greatest Expressionistic plays, *The Emperor Jones* in 1920 and *The Hairy Ape* in 1922. This is to suggest the extent of American interest in Expressionism. The conventional philosophy of *laissez-faire* in the United States, with its optimistic reliance on individualism exhibited in Neil plays. He turned to the new expressionism. He followed particularly to Strindberg, for a form which would better express his own disenchantment. O'Neil's reading in *Greek Tragedy, Strindberg, Weekend and Freud* prompted him to turn to expressionism as a way making a more personal statement. After O'Neil, Expressionism was used in the Great plays *The Adding Machine* by Elmer Rice (1923), *Death of a Salesman* (1949) by William Tennyson and *Camino Real* (1953).

The Adding Machine was a play of general social protest, putting on the stage a vision of a dehumanized, mechanical society dominated by commerce. Like *Kaiser's* cashier, the nameless Mr Zero, played first by Dudley Digges, is a book keeper, a pawn whose life as a human adding machine is worthless, an assumption confirmed when after twenty-five years of service to his firm he is replaced by an actual machine. In a fit of anger, Zero kills his employer, but his execution as a murderer grants him only a short time in the Elysian Fields before he is ironically set to work on heavenly adding machine. The play's seven scenes make sharp symbolic statements to illuminate the tragedy of Zero in the expressionistic manner.

The Theory of Expressionism used in the playwrights of Ireland by the master of Naturalism, Sean O'Casey in the play *The plough and the Stars*. It is popularized with *The Silver Tassier* in 1928. In the

brilliant act II of this play, the heated patriotic oratory of the shadowy figure outside the pub, heard in counterpoint with the increasingly noisy, drunken voices inside, is halfway to creating a ritualistic effect of the expressionistic kind.

O'Casey's interest in expressionistic technique was the immediate cause of his break with Yeats and the Abbey theatre, and the disastrous results of this quarrel can never be fully estimated. Act II of the *The silver Tassie* was a direct echo of German expressionism. Every feature of the scene seems a little distorted from its original appearance, reads the stage directions, and the set provocatively depicts the modern battlefield as some kind of hell. The scene is a ruined monastery, and it balances a broken crucifix which appears to point pathetically to the Virgin Mary, against a soldier spread-eagled on a gunwheel as field punishment like Christ on the cross. The whole stage is overshadowed by a giant howitzer to make an overwhelming symbolic statement linking human suffering with Christian compassion. As an expressionistic experiment, it is more than interesting.

In voluntary exile in England, O'Casey lost his connection with the Abbey company and its audience, and it became necessary for him to publish a play before producing it. He achieved the freedom to write in whatever way he chose, but at the same time he was denied the chance of working on his material in rehearsal. His first version of *Juno and the Paycock* had included the shooting of Johnny Boyle, with the death scene taking place on stage, but in the final copy of this material was wisely cut in order to keep attention on Juno, the true centre of the play. His next work, *Within the Gates* was an attempt at a modern morality play which would satirize the years of the Depression. The play was a total immersion in the techniques of expressionism.

In most of these plays, the principal characters protest. They desire to bring about revolutionary social changes. The world which they see from their subjective point of view is different from the world visible to a normal person. They never compromise with existing social circumstances; they revolt against middle-class morality. The expressionist playwrights ignored the conventional three-act structure. They preferred small scenes, quickly following each other. Their sentences were short and crisp. Their dialogue became staccato-like the ungrammatical language of a telegram speaking out the essentials to convey the idea. To express their inside they used soliloquies and asides, which the naturalists shunned as unusual to most persons. With the new style in writing, new Artist-Directors emerged to interpret plays to their audiences. Leopold Jessner and Jurgen Fehling were the most famous of these Artist Directors who directed expressionist plays in Germany. Producing an expressionist play required a new type of actor. Actors who practiced naturalism were not suitable. The expressionist actor was acquired to possess a volatile temperament, a tripping tongue and an agile body. Because of their unreal atmospheres, the expressionist plays were produced with practically no scenery. Further, due to the world war, the cost of paints, nails, canvas and wood went up, and they were not easily available. The expressionist Artist Directors used black-curtains, cut-outs, half walls and steps on their stage. The sharp rays of spot-lights picked up the actors. The stage was never flooded with light in expressionist plays. Light and shadow were equally important.

Expressionism, which entered the theatre with a bang after the World War, deserted it as quickly as it appeared, and ended with a whimper. As an experiment and a change. It was interesting, but it could not sustain that interest for long. Only a handful of expressionist plays were left behind by this movement which faded out in the late 1920s. Compared to naturalism or symbolism, expressionism had a short life in the theatre. As Robert Edmund Jones said, expressionism presented the "violent storm of emotion beating up from the unconscious mind". Perhaps because of the violent nature of emotion, it exhausted its energies too soon. Expressionist plays did not become as popular as romantic or naturalistic plays. With their de-personalised characters that discouraged identification, with their mechanized acting and with the display of fluctuating, violent and convulsive moods, they confused the audience. Their noisy and humourless situations did not retain the interest of the spectators for long. The failure of the expressionist movement in

the theatre to banish naturalism from the theatre, because naturalism had struck its roots deep, once again proved that on the stage the spoken word cannot be replaced by sound and light.

The greatest director of the German Expressionist Theatre was Leopold Jessner. He was a socialist. He began his career as a stage manager at the Thalia Theatre in Hamburg. In the year 1905 Jessner produced *Midsummer Night's Dream* on a revolving stage, which was a novelty in Hamburg in those days. He became the Director of the Staatliches Schauspielhaus in Berlin in the 1920s. In this theatre he made several experiments with new forms. For the first time, he dispensed with realistic backgrounds. He cleared his stage to the bare walls, exposing the bricks, in the true non-realistic fashion of Meyerhold in Russia. He nearly filled the stage with a flight of steps which he used in every production. Three steps were popularly called the "Jessner Treppe", and were later used by directors like Meyerhold and Tairov successfully.

Jessner's actors rattled off their speeches with bullet speed. They moved like people struck by intense emotion. The tempo of the expressionistic plays was very fast. And the din and noise of those plays would be too much to bear for a modern sophisticated mind. Eisenstein, a student of Meyerhold, who later became a famous film director, used the idea of "Jessner Steps" with great effect in his film, *The Battleship Potemkin*. When the Tsarist soldiers with their bayonets pursue innocent people a number of scenes are of the movement of citizens and soldiers up and down the steps, the legs and the feet alone sometime being photographed across the steps, which the cameras records very sensitively with much expression and meaning. The lighting of an expressionist play on many stage levels was difficult. It had to catch the change in the moods of the characters, in the overwhelming abruptness of which the expressionists reveled. Jessner used these lights very skillfully. He made light and shadow act in his dramas like human actors. He was more fond of shadow than of light. He never tried to create a natural effect on the stage. He only aimed at creating the "mood" of the scene. If the actors were not speaking, Jessner did not allow them even to move a limb.

Works Cited

1. David Wiles. *The Cambridge companion to Theatre History*, Cambridge University Press, 2012
2. Martin Esslin, *Brief Chronicles: Essays on Modern Theatre*, London: temple Smith, 1970, p.24.
3. Emile Zola quoted by Ibid., p.23.
4. Emile Zola quoted by Ibid., p.25.
5. D. J. Palmer Drame, *The Twentieth century mind: history, ideas, and literature and vol. II 1900-1918*. London: Oxford University Press, 1971, 447-74.
6. J. L. Styan, *Modern Drama in Theory and Practice, Volume I, Realism and Naturalism*, London: Cambridge University Press, 1981'
7. *Golden ages of the Theatre*, Kenneth Macgowan, William Melnitz, A Spectrum Book
8. *The English Stage, A history of Drama and Performance*, J. L. Steyn, CUP, 1996.