

PORTRAYAL OF ROSE IN ELMER RICE'S *STREET SCENE*: A PERSPECTIVE

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Elmer Leopold Reizenste is popularly known as Elmer Rice is unquestionably a major American playwright. His durability of almost fifty years and the sheer scope of his output ensure his stature in the history of American drama. He has written more than thirty produced plays in his life time. Elmer Rice is not only a dramatist but also a novelist, autobiographer, nonfiction writer, scriptwriter, essayist, short story writer and director. Rice's contribution to the American stage is more significant for both the thematic and the technique point of view.

Feminism is a movement and ideology that aims at establishing, defending and achieving equal civil, political, social, economic and personal rights for women. It fights against any kind of exploitation that the women experience because of their sex. Rose in *Street Scene* is the only character who energizes the spirit of feminism. Unlike her mother, Rose liberates herself from the lonely crowd, the crowded tenement, the crowded neighborhood. She acts differently by not yielding to the destructive and negative forces of life. She wants to cultivate uniqueness in her by travelling far and wide to enjoy the treasure of natural beauty. She is conscious of the value, existence and right of her own sex. Woman is after all a human being and she must be treated as equal as man. She has the right to think about things for herself and cannot be fettered by the age-old social conventions and believes. In Act II when Frank Maurant advises her, she boldly refuses by giving an apt remark:

Things are different nowadays, Pop. I guess maybe you don't realize that. Girls aren't the way they used to be sort of soft and helpless. A girl nowadays knows how to look out for herself. But not her, Pop; ... I guess I've got a right to think about things for myself. (SS-159)

Rose feels that the excellence of human spirit cannot be achieved by marrying a rich man. This we can see through the wooing of many youngsters. She prefers a life of love and music to a unconcerned wealthy husband. Rose is equally conscious of the limitation of womanly power and even longs for a being a man. Getting marriage at the early years of a woman is really an obstacle because after marriage, a baby comes out and definitely be deprived of being free, happy and dignified.

Rose, in fact, is endowed with the spirit of self-reliance, self-respect and self-composure. She teaches almost each and every one to discover his own entity and not to poke his nose into somebody's personal affair. Grieving of her mother's loss she suffers from an acute helplessness, she never accepts the assistance of Easter and tells that she is strong and able enough to take care of herself. She displays an immense courage and girt, as her father, being arrested by police, sobs into tears; she hugs him consoling that she would look after Willie, her brother at her best.

Again, Rose cheers Sam, who is sick of existentialist problems. Being perturbed with oppression, exploitation and alienation, he wants to immune from this life by taking carbolic acid. This world is no worth living because in life there is

... nothing but pain. From before we're born, until we die: Everywhere you look, oppression and cruelty: If it doesn't come from Nature, it comes from humanity trampling on itself and tearing at its own throat. The whole world is nothing but a bloodstained arena, filled with misery and suffering. It's too high a price to pay for life isn't worth it: (SS- 146-147).

Seeing such a disorganized situation in life, Sam Kaplan comprehends that God and religion are only a sort of superstition where man takes refuge from reality because it is too horrible to face. When Sam is knocked down by Vincent, he sobs bitterly realizing that he has no existence. In this aspect a kind of alienation is felt and he thinks that he belongs nowhere. He asks Rose a very appropriate question: "What is use (of living)?" Rose lessens his anger by reminding his ability and learning, but he denies: "What's good of having brain if nobody ever looks at you if nobody knows you exist?" (SS- 145)

But Rose, fired with the zest for life replaces Sam's pessimistic approach to life by her humanistic sermons. She tells him to be self-reliant, independent, practical and rational and not to be too emotional. Instead, he must be proud of his own talent and smartness. . He is free and has choice to do something amazing so that one could get astonished. Though for the time being, Rose also feels herself "blue and discouraged", she realizes that life is enjoyable and worth living. There is a lot of things to compensate life for the pain of living; just being alive, breathing and walking around. As she walks down the park, in the morning, she gets a solace in the lap of natural beauty the fresh blowing breeze, the fragrance of flowers and the green dewy grass. Thus, she gets a "kind of feeling of, well, maybe it's not so bad, after all" (SS-147).

Though the play "Street Scene" seems to be dealing with the theme of infidelity the main plot actually involves in Rose's gradual realization of life through the hard-learned lesson. The theme of the play is clearly shown when Sam Kaplan, son of Mr. Kaplan attempts to console her and asks her to flee away with him after the familial catastrophe, Rose replies:

I don't think people ought to belong to anybody but themselves. I was thinking, that if my mother had really belonged to herself, and that if my father had really belonged to himself, it never would have happened. It was only because they always depending on somebody else, for what they ought to have had inside themselves. Do you see what I mean, Sam? That's why I don't want to belong to anybody, and why I don't want anybody to belong to me (SS-188)

This conversation shows that though she longs for love "more than anything else in the world" (SS-188), still she knows that there are a lot of things to be considered beside love. For her loving and belonging are entirely different. It also shows that the deprivation of individualism and crippling dependence is shown as the reason for Rose's refusal of Sam.

Rose, as her name itself proves, breeds in the thorny environment and prickly circumstances. Still she spreads the fragrance of her determination and courage everlasting man's value and dignity as the front position. Her speeches act as a stimulating substance and help to bring out the hidden consciousness and bloom out the sick potentialities.

If you'd only believe in yourself a little more, things wouldn't look nearly so bad. Because once you're sure of yourself, the things that happen to you aren't so important. The way I look at it, it's not want you do that matters so much; it's what you are (SS- 188).

Rose finds that the entire city is always screaming. Its noise, fall and intermingle. The distant roar of trains, the automobile sirens and the whistle of boats on the river, the rattle of trucks and indeterminate clanking of metals, fire-engines, ambulances, musical instruments, radio, dogs barking, human voices calling, quarrelling and bellowing overlap in the atmosphere. About the tenement, Robert Little through his "Brighter Lights: Broadway in Review" gives a very graphic remark:

The grim, shabby, melancholy beauty of the old brownstone facade, overhangs the story, and folds its strong arms found round the play like some inscrutable malevolent urban God. (pp- 165)

Rose thinks it is the environment which is corrupt, polluted and crushes human spirit. Sam is also hateful with the environment to that extent that he calls it 'sewer'. In the city, there does not seem to be a breath of air. Rose cannot bear the human bear the human spirit crushed by the environment.

Frank Durham is also right in his estimation:

The city, too, is an elemental force in the shaping of human being in the modern capitalist society. A fervent environmentalist, Rise sees the city, itself the product of the mechanized, impersonal society, as the environmental molding and dehumanizing the individual. With cobra-like magnetism, that attracts irresistibly, even as it repels. Out of this fascination “Street Scene” grew. (pp- 58)

The structure, representational figures, and setting of the play focus mainly towards the resolution of Rose's situation. Describing from the outset as a sensitive and perceptive girl, her utmost realization realistically and sympathetically exists. Rose at first believes, as the events of Act I and at the beginning of Act II show, the matters would improve if she moves along with her family to a new environment. She even momentarily considers her own escape when Harry Easter offers her a kind of freedom from her depressing circumstances. Unfortunately it does not take long time for her to find that this kind of freedom would be just another kind of bondage in which she would belong to him.

Rose finds that lack of self-integrity is another prominent factor beyond her parent's slummy atmosphere. She notices their constant need of others support. They always long for others to whom they can belong. Frank Maurant believes that his children shall give him love and respect regardless of his brutal behavior towards them. As he is not self-assured, he strives to possess others in order to fill the vacuum within himself. Anna Maurant, on the other hand, does not find fulfillment neither in herself nor in her family but from Sankey through an illegal relationship. Even though Mrs. Maurant knows fully about the disastrous consequences, she desperately clings to her illicit connection.

Rose identifies the same problem in Shirley Kaplan who pleads with her not to take Sam, her brother since he is her only reason for living. Towards the end of the play when she finds Sam's own pathetic need for her, it is too difficult for her to accept the situation. She realizes that Sam's love is merely a desperate need to find his fulfillment in someone who has the selfhood he lacks. The lesson is, indeed, a cruel one for Rose who feels so sympathetic toward all these characters. Judging from the apparent commonness of the condition, the audience cannot but be sympathetic also. Sympathy in general weakens one's resolution, but it is not the same in Rose. Richard Dana Skinner states that “Self- fulfillment comes from within the individual in spite of environmental conditions” (pp.53).

The dignity that Rose enjoys is particularly appreciable when she is compared to Rice' previous protagonist, Zero in “Adding Machine.” Unlike Zero who at first protests and then submits, Rose demonstrates the courage to resist the unbearable circumstances that threaten to engulf her. The opponents of both the plays are related by their connection to modern society. What makes Rose's characterization more impressive than that of the earlier protagonists is its psychological complexity. It is true that Zero also has this appreciable complexity, but then Rice has the tools of expressionism to develop it. Here in “Street Scene”, Elmer examines into the psychology of the individual within the bounds of a realistic mode of presentation. His character, then, is psychologically as well as dramatically convincing.

From the above, it is quite clear that Rose is the only character who vitalizes the inner strength and resists the environmental evils. Rose has been identified with all the best values in American society- care, love, courage and humanity. Of all the characters in “Street Scene” she remains as a very sympathetic character. It is very apt to quote the words of Arthur H. Quinn. He says, “The character nearest to reality was the daughter, Rose Maurant, and Rice is entitled to credit for a depiction of a girl with just that amount of refinement and ambition which her parentage and surrounding permit” (pp-269).

Works cited:

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