

A Kaleidoscopic view of Contemporary Social morality presented in William Congreve's *The Way of the World*

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Abstract: William Congreve is the foremost dramatist of the Restoration Age. He was born in Yorkshire. During his age, the heroic tragedy and the comedy of manners became very famous. These products were very peculiar at that time. Congreve brought perfection to the form, which we call comedy of manners. His "*The Way of the World*" is full of illicit love, loose morals and adulterous relationship. In short, all the qualities of comedy of manners are found in this play. "*The Way of the World*" gives us a complete picture of the morals, habits, affection, behavior, and fashions of the women and men of the period in which it was produced. It is Congreve's masterpiece but it was great failure on the stage.

Key Words: salient characteristics of comedy of manners, satire on social problem of women, illicit relationship, the scandalous places, social evils, love intrigues, extra marital affairs, vanities and fashions of women etc of the restoration period.

1. INTRODUCTION:

William Congreve was the one of the most important writers of the restoration age. He has enriched the form comedy of manners. He has no rival in depiction of the contemporary life of the restoration age. His "*The Way of the World*" is a masterpiece. It is the story of misfortunes of lovers. Though it has a complicated plot, it is surpassed in characterization. Even his style and dialogue are perfect in the true sense of comedy of manners. There is great combination of aphorism, feeling and melodrama. Eulogizing his "*The Way of the World*", Leigh Hunt says...

"Every page presents a shower of brilliant conceits, it is a tissue of Epigrams in prose and a new triumph of wit.

The real greatness of the play lies in portrayal of characters, intrigues, love affairs, fashions of women, sensational parties, and the scandalous places. Only difficult thing in the play is to discover the relationship among the characters. However, the play remains the real blossom of restoration comedy. It has purity and perfection in depiction of the society of the time.

2. COMEDY OF MANNERS: Its Meaning, Development and Characteristics:

William Congreve gave birth to the comedy of manners. This type of comedy reflects the habit, manners and conventions of the upper classes of the time of Charles II. That is why this comedy has been called as "*The Comedy of Manners*". Moliere and Calderon are the chief exponents of comedy of manners. Under their influence this particular form of comedy is developed. The English dramatists took idea for the plot and characterization from these dramatists. This type of comedy began as a reaction against the realistic comedy i.e. "*The Comedy of Humours*". With the restoration of Charles II, the theatres were re-opened. A large number of plays were written. The writers imitated the French blindly. That is why a critic A. Nicoll observes...

"Much of what we know now as the comedy of manners would have remained unwritten or would have been written in a different style, had the English literature not possessed Moliere, the French dramatist for a guide."

This type of comedy advocated a new theme of love, rivalry and intrigues. It developed during the restoration period that is why it is also called the restoration comedy. It focuses on the activities, intrigues and scandals of frivolous kind of men and women. Let us see its salient characteristics.

- The presentation of realistic manners is one of the chief features of the comedy of manners. London is the centre of the comedy of manners. Whatever happens in coffee houses or clubs of London among the upper class people is described here. The people would prefer to pass their time in parties and love making. Thus, as the name suggests, the comedy of manners presents the manners of aristocratic people.

- The dialogues are full of humour as there is a touch of wit and intellect. It covers the world of rules and conventions. We can see the combination of best language, wit and humour in the dialogue. Wit and laughter are produced without worrying about its theme.
- Parks, clubs, gambling centers, cafes, taverns, drawing rooms, clubhouses etc of the aristocratic people are its general setting. The writer is simply busy in creating to generate laughter and satire. Its setting is public parks like 'Hyde Park', 'St. James Park', 'Mulberry Garden' etc.
- In comedy of manners, the characters belong to the world of fops, fools and gallants. They are the fashionable people of the upper class society. They always indulge in love and love intrigues. Even the secondary characters imitate the life and manners of the upper class people. They live very artificial life.
- Generally, plot and sub-plot are complicated. Act I is an exposition of major characters. Act II, III and IV are related to planning, schemes and mistakes of the characters. Act V is a revelation of tricks and happy conclusion.
- The life presented in these comedies is based on love. Therefore, the comedy of manners had been criticized for its obscenity and immorality. The whole drama is full of immorality and vulgarity. However Nicoll says... "The restoration drama may be immoral and vulgar, but it possesses the divine gift of laughter."
- We can observe love, marriage and sex as its main theme. Love is presented as a physical appetite and as a profession of life. Even women do marriage for social status. They considered it is fashionable to have extra marital love affairs. Women considered fashionable only when they have lovers in opposition to husband.

3. THE WAY OF THE WORLD: A Mirror of Society

"The Way of The World" is a mirror of society in a realistic manner. The infidelity of married women, cuckold husbands, the scandalous life of people, jealousy, gambling, intrigues, the fast taste of the people have been depicted in this drama. London is the centre of comedy of manners. Whatever happens in coffee houses or clubs of London among the upper class people of the society is described here. In "Way of The World", Congreve depicts the world of fashion of restoration period. We find that the characters like Lady Wishfort, Mirabell and Millamant are come from the upper class of the society.

Life of Women

Women are flirtiest and commercialized. They would betray their husbands without any compunction of conscience. The women of the time live in an atmosphere of social vices which result in jealousy and mutual suspicion. In "The Way of the World" this problem has been solved ultimately by the marriage of Millamant with Mirabell who agree to unit themselves in wedlock after scanning and finally stipulating certain conditions.

Love Affairs

The chief aspect of the comedy of manners is to depict love and love intrigues. In "The Way of the World", we find many illicit relations and love affairs. Mirabell says to Mrs. Fainall... "You should have just so much disgust for your husband as may be sufficient to make you relish your love". We find another love affair between Mr. Fainall and Mrs. Marwood. Though Mr. Fainall is a married fellow, he has illicit relation with Mrs. Marwood. Fainall faces the situation without fear and shame. He says... "If it must all come out, why let them know it is but the way of the world".

Vanities and Fashions

The play makes us aware of the affections, vanities and fashions of women. We find that women talking about ill of men and hatched something against them. They exchange notes of the latest scandals. Lady Wishfort has too much attraction for cosmetics even at the age of fifty-five. In her alluring appearance, we find comic vanity. Even intelligent woman like Millamant, encouraged a crowd of admirers together around her. Women were fond of wearing masks. Pregnant women used to wear tight dresses to maintain their own figures. Mrs. Marwood, Mrs. Fainall and Millamant dress up themselves just for show off their beauty.

Travelling

Travelling was something adventurous in those days. People had much interest in it. They were keen to pick up French as a fashionable language. Sir Wilful is so attractive to travelling. He is always ready to out for travelling. He hardly thinks of advances as desired by his aunt, Lady Wishfort to Millamant.

Intrigues

Intrigues were a part of the social and domestic life of the restoration age. A maidservant could be an agent for this sort of intrigues. Women are seduced through intrigues; sometimes for physical appetite and sometimes for economic factor. Fainall marries Lady Wishfort's daughter for the sake of money. Besides, Mr. Fainall in league with Mrs. Marwood tries to grab Millamant's legacy as well as Lady Wishfort's whole property. Mirabell woos Lady

Wishfort though he acting wishes to marry Millamant. Thus, the play went on in the form of intrigues prevailing in the society.

The Scandalous Places

Generally, we find some scandalous places like chocolate house, clubs, parks, coffee house etc. in the play. These scandalous places are the setting of the restoration comedy of manners. In “The Way of the World”, we find this type of places like... ‘Blue Garret’, ‘St. James Park’, ‘Hyde Park’ etc. These are the places where lovers met. The confidential talks took place among them at these places. Moreover, ‘the play houses’ were the places of scandals where the gentlemen and ladies went there for some other purpose rather than seeing the plays.

Role of Servants

The servants play a very vital role in the comedy of manners. Especially the maidservants are loose and without any moral. Their main business is to indulge in intrigues and exchange of secret letters. In the play, Petulant says... “I go to bed with my maid”. We see that the house cleaner belong to very low level to serve the aristocratic people. These prostitutes were dangerous to the moral security of home.

The Night Life

The nightlife of the restoration period does not appear to be innocent like any civil club life. People met for the reasons of sexual living, drinking and for a company among women. Though the people did not approve of excessive form of drunkenness, yet it seems to have been favoured by the society. Millamant entertains men at her place. The love life could only be conducted in the night. Sir Wilful is the king to the immoral climate of the night time.

Thus, the comedy of manner has been criticized for its licentiousness, obscenity and immorality. Congreve paints a realistic picture of the contemporary society in this play. That is why the present play can be called a mirror of the society because it reflects various shades of life including love, marriage, sex, intrigues, disguises and so on.

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