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RECONCILIATION THROUGH HUMOUR IN NEIL SIMON'S *THE ODD COUPLE*

Dr. B. SOUNDARY

Assistant Professor, Department of English, St. Xavier's College (Autonomous),
Palayamkottai - 627 002, Tamil Nadu, India.

Corresponding Author E-Mail: soundaryram@gmail.com



Dr. B. SOUNDARY

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ABSTRACT

The Russian dramatist Nikolai Vasilievick Gogol's artistic formula is that "art is a reconciliation with life" (15), Michael R. Kelly, an American author and Professor of Philosophy, in the article "*Art is a Reconciliation with Life*": *Gogolian Paradox and Aesthetic Credo* has searched for and treasured the perspectives of Gogol even amidst different contemporary opinions existing about him. Kelly believes that unlike other writers, Gogol refuses to admit the gap between art and life. Being hailed as a pre-eminent writer of realism in Russian literature, Gogol through his literary contribution has shared that both art and life have space for each other. The more space the better reconciliatory it becomes. He upholds the soothing and placating nature of art as the sum and substance of a real creative work. Any artistic work lacking these two qualities cannot be called as a work of art at all. Believing in the artistic formula of Gogol, this article spotlights the places of humour and the references to the past in Neil Simon's plays, most often in surprising contexts, and how these two bring in the revival of relationships at the end.

Key words: Neil Simon, *The Odd Couple*, Reconciliation, Humour,

INTRODUCTION

Human life may turn bleak without the sense of humour. The course of life on earth begins tough, most often bitter and ends terrible for the majority. As Abraham Cowley says, "Life is an incurable disease" (254), many people get the rancorous experience of life. Cowley's perspective on life echoes Thomas Hardy's view in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*: "...that happiness was but the occasional episode in a general drama of pain" (310). When life is full of resentment, humour can act as a relieving agent. Laughter has a high priority in human life. In other words, human species is gifted with laughter. The significance of humour and laughter is valued and assured by great writers time and again though comic form is often considered a less superior form of writing.

The concept of humour itself is an element of contrast. Even after knowing its high value, humour is most often looked down on. Another contrasting element is in its usage. It comes handy while extending friendship and relationship but at times, it is used as a tool to exclude people from particular groups or societies. Next contrasting feature lies in the fact that humour, comic amusement and laughter are wanted, enjoyed, and funny but books about them are not. No wonder why this term attracts a gigantic literature being written on it. John Morreall, an eminent writer of humour and the founder of International Society for Humor

Studies, in his book, *Comic Relief: A Comprehensive Philosophy of Humor*, wonders at the contrasting element saying that it is unavoidable a phenomenon in everyday life but is considered a castaway by Philosophers and serious thinkers of other fields. He adds, "Not only humor breaks rules of conversation, but it often expresses contempt or even hostility toward someone, appropriately called the 'butt' of the joke" (3). Morreall insists on the serious nature of humour when it comes to the person who is laughed at which even scar him like a physical assault would do.

Henri-Louis Bergson, the French-Jewish philosopher in his essay *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, insists on the need to laugh as it is vital to human beings and says that man is "an animal which laughs" (10). The ability to laugh is the hallmark of human kind that shall be considered a social symbol of healthy living. Though laughter is not always an essential feature of humour, it can serve as a beginning point of socializing. The very fact that laughter evolves in company strengthens its social bond. Bergson's idea, "Our laughter is always the laughter of a group", (11) indicates its significant role in constructing communal identities. The difficulty of comic translations from one language to another occurs because the humour of a group has cultural and social roots to its own group. Even response to it happens only if there is some kind of bondage or compliance among the group. Humour is received, enjoyed and appreciated only when there is no hostility on any ground. If any friction exists between the teller and the receiver, no humour takes place. The friction or the hostility kills it. This paper analyses the significance of reconciliation in the plays of the American dramatist Neil Simon, and discusses how it is essential a concept for peaceful living which is achieved through humour and revisiting the past.

RECONCILIATION

The *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* gives the meaning of the word 'reconciliation' as 'an end to a disagreement and the start of a good relationship again'; 'the process of making it possible for different ideas, facts, etc; and to exist together without being opposed to each other' (1061). Stemmed from the Latin term *conciliatus*, the word 'reconciliation' means 'coming together'. It connotes an unfolding of the refurbishment of the relationships, or of the situations that are pulverized. It proves to be a momentous activity, specifically in the post-tussle predicaments, despite its limitations in the process. There are two kinds of restraints in the reconciliation process. Firstly, it is infeasible and hard to refresh the long-gone mutual trust in the post-warring situations as the havoc done both physically and mentally to all the people involved and non-involved is still fresh in the air. Secondly, delimit is the absence of such a mutual harmony before the conflict between the inter groups in a given society. To state it clear, the intergroup compatibility is not already present in a society where war, of any kind, does a huge wreck to people and to places, and so the need and the function of reconciliation becomes intense and vital.

It is in the absence of the mutual trust and in the lack of co-ordination between the intergroup amidst which reconciliation has to be established. And, despite the unpleasant atmosphere, it attempts to revive forbearance among the groups. The people in conflict, either with the other groups, or with the government, or with society or with both, have to be trained to accept each other, and to learn to coexist peacefully even after having gone through the most trying moments of their lives. It seeks to enhance endurance that begins with the establishment of trust which will increase the understanding level of the affected people, the necessity to adopt the non-violent methods to refresh and to retrieve their memory from the trauma. Reconciliation comes in handy for such issues to be solved at a deeper level. It can truly and successfully amend and restore torn relationships for which it requires the understanding of the intergroup towards the need to change their socio-psychological approach altogether.

The reconciling intervention aims at achieving the following marks: to thwart violence by accelerating communication, providing structures for peace; to expel anger, partialities, misunderstandings and other negative emotions from the intergroup through dialogues, cooperative activities, and most importantly acknowledging the past; to strengthen the positive relationships among the opponent parties through revitalized activities and communications. To realize the above-mentioned goals, the experts in conflict resolution have proposed various measures which are fundamental for achieving the intervention successfully.

Some of the strategies are uncovering the past, promoting dialogue, promoting understanding through media, developing grass-roots structures for peace and collaborative activities. Of these five, the researcher strives to focus on the importance of uncovering the past to reconcile with the present. This particular strategy has become the first and the foremost in the reconciling process worldwide which eventually turns into a psychological process too.

REVISITING THE PAST AND HUMOUR

When an individual's bitter past is revisited, analysed critically, and combined with that of the opponent, it becomes a collective memory. When such a combination is attempted, a new dialogue emerges, though such a narrative is insufficient for peace due to accumulation of afflictions. Such hurtful feelings have not been accumulated over a night but over months, or over years of injustices which lead towards revenge. So, while revisiting the past, the injustice caused is not simply brought out, but is duly and truly acknowledged by the opponent as well. The rival group must own responsibility for what had happened in the past. It is the most sensitive process which makes the intergroup to uncover the past, confess their wrong-doings, relieve their grip over the past under supervision, mourn for their losses, receive the empathetic concern and support, and through these to revive the broken relationship. Thus, the reconciliation process gently attempts to create a space for forgiveness.

Victor E. Frankl, the founder of the Third Viennese School of Psychotherapy and a doctor by profession, elaborates on the surviving technique of the human mind through escaping into the past. In his book *Man's Search for Meaning: The Classic Tribute to Hope from the Holocaust*, he recalls, "This intensification of inner life helped the prisoner find a refuge from the emptiness, desolation and spiritual poverty of his existence, by letting him escape into the past" (50). He believes that the ugliness of the present moment shall be relieved by letting the imagination free to hold on to the past, and that memory gives adequate, or great strength and hope to live, and even to admire beauty in nature and art like never before.

Humour need not necessarily leads to laughter alone. It can also be a defence mechanism. Allison Ross in her book *The Language of Humour* says, "There may be a target for the humour - a person, an institution or a set of beliefs - where the underlying purpose is deadly serious. Humour can occur in surprisingly serious contexts, as in sick jokes about death." (2) Comedy is like an asylum for people who are gravely trapped in the hands of harsh realities. Whenever people face with traumatic incidents, oppression for a very long time, or difficulty in getting over their bitter experiences, they are more likely to resort to comedy. Sigmund Freud has provided a highly developed concept regarding the human psyche behind the 'resort to humour' attitude. He is of the view that the controlled emotions in human beings, which prevent enjoyments, may lead to pleasure if uncontrolled. Such repressed emotions take the form of humour. Freud also insists that a person's humorous tendency towards his own self indicates his/her attempts to get away from suffering. Thus, humour helps the human psyche settle inner turmoil from pain, and accelerates it towards reconciliation. His study on humour insists on the necessity of it for the balanced emotional life of the human beings.

NEIL SIMON'S HUMOUR

Experimenting different types of plays like romantic comedy, farce, musicals and serious drama, Neil Simon is conferred with many honors such as Tony Award for Best Playwright, New York Drama critics circle Awards, Pulitzer Prize, the Kennedy center Mark Twain Prize and more. His greatest forte is his mixture of humour with serious themes. The two characteristics of Jewish humour namely, reference to the past and the role of humour could be traced in Simon's plays, and they contribute to the reconciliation between two characters who mend their relationship after a crisis, or conflict at the end of his plays. Susan Koprince, in her book *Understanding Neil Simon*, comments on Simon's style of writing. She writes, "Most of all, I emphasize the serious nature of Simon's plays not just the serious themes that he addresses, but also the Chekhovian blend of humor or pathos which pervades his drama" (*Preface*).

Combining the tragic and the comic elements is not at every one's command. But Neil Simon's use of this mixed duo springs from his own attitude in life. He believes that humour is born out of painful moments,

most often. In addition, he has an attitude of finding humour in embarrassing moments. His foremost strength as a writer is his ability to present his funny lines through vivid characters and intriguing plot situations. He attempts a clever blending of the serious with the humorous, and so beneath the laughter lies the serious aspects of life. At the same time the essential nature of his plays being comic is never lost. And, by providing humour even in painful occasions, Simon echoes the pleasure concept of Sigmund Freud.

THE ODD COUPLE

The Odd Couple, the third play of Neil Simon which won him the Tony Award for the best original play, is his first attempt in writing a black comedy. With the production of the play in 1965, Simon became the celebrity dramatist in the American Broadway. The play features the incompatibility of Oscar Madison and Felix Unger who have been friends for a long time. The plotline is serious as it deals with two men who get separated from their wives, and they try to live in the same apartment to save some money, but soon they find that their new venture is as difficult as the former one.

Being a three-act play, the poker game is set as the backdrop of events in the play text. Act I begins with six poker players, who are friends. They usually meet at Oscar Madison's apartment on Friday, and are waiting for the sixth player Felix Ungar, who has never ever come late in the recent years. Oscar is an accomplished sportswriter but, is untidy and unreliable who is recently divorced too. He is unable to pay the alimony, and when playing poker he borrows from his friends. The broken refrigerator which he keeps, and his littered apartment with newspapers, mails, clothes and dirty dishes and so on, show that Oscar Madison is an easy-going and carefree man.

Felix Ungar is an extremely neat person who makes a complete contrast to Oscar. When the poker players are waiting for Felix, Murray's wife Mimi calls and informs him that Felix is missing. In the meantime Frances, Felix's wife, rings up him and tells Oscar that she wants to get out of the marriage, and Felix is upset and is gone. The friends are worried now because, they know Felix's nature and also his suicide telegram to his wife after she has asked him for a divorce. Murray says that Felix will kill himself, and he recalls what Felix did in the past: "... Remember he tried something like that in the army? She wanted to break off the engagement so he started cleaning guns in his mouth" (*The Odd Couple* 1.1.230). When Felix appears at the poker, the friends try to remain calm and as though they have not heard anything. The forty-four-years-old-Felix is seemingly calm but there is a great deal of tension in him.

Felix talks about his happy past life with Frances for twelve years, with two kids and a beautiful home, and he does not want to change the life pattern. Oscar comforts him that he has to face reality and forget the past. Felix admits that it is his own fault that his marriage is broken. He tells Oscar how he used to re-cook everything after his wife has done in the kitchen. He says, "...The minute she walked out of the kitchen I would add salt or pepper. It's not that I didn't trust her, it's just that I was a better cook. Well, I cooked myself out a marriage ... (*ibid*). Oscar tries to console him, and asks Felix to move in with him. Felix brightens up and responds that he can clean, cook and fix things in the apartment. When Oscar greets him, Felix, still holding on to the past, says, "good night, Frances." (1.1.251)

Act II Scene 1 begins with the poker night, two weeks after the previous game but, the scene has changed from the previous game scene. In Act I, Oscar's apartment was a mess but, in Act II, it is extremely clean. Felix's chair is empty, as in the previous act, but now he is playing the 'happy hostess' as he has been serving the players with drinks and food. While Murray and Vinnie enjoy the food Felix has prepared, Oscar, Speed and Roy are clearly upset with his behaviour. They leave one after the other, upset with the spoilt poker night. Speed blames Oscar, "(with the door open) You got no one to blame but yourself. It's all your fault. You're the one who stopped him from killing himself"(2.1.255). But, somehow, Oscar convinces Felix that they can have a double date with the two English girls namely, Gwendolyn and Cecily who are living in the neighbouring apartment.

The final act showcases the incompatibility of the odd pair as they are preparing for the Poker night. They do not talk to each other, and Oscar asks Felix to stay out of his way. He reciprocates that "This is my

apartment. Everything in my apartment is mine. The only thing here that's yours is you..." (3.1.286). First, they are arguing, then, no talking, and now they get into physical violence as Oscar attempts to throw the food plate towards the kitchen. Felix, after seeing the seriousness in Oscar's face, understands that he has to move out. The Poker players come and Oscar informs them that he has thrown Felix out. When they start to play, the door bell rings, and Oscar is happy that Felix has come and opens the door. It is Gwendolyn, his neighbour who has come to pack Felix's things. The friends and Oscar are amazed at the turn of event that Felix is accommodated by the two young girls living in the apartment upstairs.

Oscar and Felix part as friends by shaking hands just like most of the divorced couple who end up in friendship. At the right moment, Oscar receives a call from his ex-wife Blanche which looks like a kind insistence on the friendship between the two that has developed from Oscar's tidiness which was never there before Felix's arrival. He asks Felix if he will miss the next week Poker, Felix replies, "Me? Never! Marriages may come and go, but the game must go on. So long, Frances"(3.1.301). Till the last moment with Oscar, Felix is holding onto the memory of his wife Frances, and Oscar too mentions Blanche, instead of Felix. Though the two leading characters are complete opposites in their attitude, nature and way of living, they are able to overcome the difficulties and reconcile with each other at the end of the play with an understanding of each other.

CONCLUSION

Moving beyond the one-liners and the plays that are farcical in nature, Neil Simon has proved his mettle in writing serious dramas though not without his favourite tool called humour. As the happy ending has been the expected climax of the comedies, Simon's plays too either end with a happy note, or with an open ending that suggests happiness in the future. In each play, he has presented a different complication, an assorted set of characters who find their way out at the end with the help of dual canons: humour and reference to the past. In *The Odd Couple*, these two features play a pivotal task in undoing the complexities, and in achieving reconciliation.

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