



A CRITIQUE OF 'HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS' IN DAVID WILLIAMSON'S *TRAVELLING NORTH AND AFTER THE BALL*

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ABSTRACT

David Williamson's dramatic oeuvre is multidimensional. He says many things simultaneously. His work is what Roland Barthes calls 'writerly' texts full of potential and so needs a professional readership. The present study focus on human relations: marital bond; kinships; love affairs; and it is emphasized how these relations affect overall human existence whether it is individual life or collective socio-cultural makeup. These associations and correspondence can either make or mar life depends on their nature and understanding. If relations are built up on the pattern of ethical code, then altruistic life taking care of all may be expected, otherwise egoistic people prowls on everything but for their own selfish ends. The same is being attempted at to demonstrate in this paper through textual illustrations and critical assessment.

Key words: Relation, male, mother, wife, female, family, society, behavior and responsibility.

INTRODUCTION

David Williamson is a prolific and versatile playwright in the contemporary Australian dramatic milieu. He is a man of multidimensional self. His contribution is both qualitative and quantitative. His work has proved its worth and endurance both in entertaining and instructing public-- two main objectives of great and good art. Although his plays hold a mirror up to the Australian socio-cultural establishment in general, yet his main domain is its middle class people. But this does not imply that he lacks the universality and variety – the attributes which endow upon the literary productions with cosmic significations and eternal motivation. Williamson's readers easily identify themselves with his characters and find similarities between the projected world and the real one. The writer not only dramatizes the sociological complexes of his society but also externalizes the mysteries and secrets of his characters' psyche. In this way, he provides a holistic view of man in relation to society.

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Efforts have been made right from the very inception of mankind by all great social and literary thinkers to comprehend the nature of human relations and affiliations within home as well as in socio-cultural milieu. Literature being the reflection of the whole life scenario leaves no stone unturned to point the loopholes of these relations and thereby provides remedial measures to overcome them in order to lay basis for sound familial life and enriched social existence. Generally a home with adequate understanding between male and female whether it is wife-husband case or any other affair among the family members is supposed to flourish. Such a pacific and conciliatory environment also provides good psychological nourishment to all. If it is otherwise, it tells upon the solidarity and tolerance level of all adversely. The sweet home in that case becomes a hell instead of heaven as it is called commonly. Therefore, the mutual understanding and respect for each other in domestic affairs is mandatory, if the individual happiness, familial contentment, social welfare, and balanced cultural growth are the goals to be attained.

Travelling North is one of the successful plays which can be evaluated on the patterns of domestic affairs and relations. It demonstrates mature love relation between the couple along with their hopes and expectations, insecurities and duties of family life. The play is acclaimed as one of Williamsons superb achievements as Peter Fitzpatrick proclaims it the 'best'. Katherine Brisbane in the "Introduction" to *Williamson's Collected Plays volume II*, compares the introspective themes of *Travelling North* with Shakespeare's *King Lear* where Lear's personal conflicts and the fatal ramifications of his daughters ingratitude are in line with Williamson's characters. The play is basically familial love story which includes in its domain a seventy seven years old socialist named Frank, and his newly found love fifty five year old Frances. The plot of the drama shows the development with the lives of these central characters and their descendents, and thus the dramatist touches a new ground unbeaten hitherto. That is way, one of Williamsons avid scholar Leonard Radic while reviewing the play for *The Age*, says that Williamson has taken, "one of those artistic leaps which every playwright needs to take from time to time if he is not to become typecast and repetitive". This illustration hints at the complex and deeper analysis of the human relationships as the playwright does it successfully.

Frank and Frances decide to live together and leave Melbourne for the North. The two appear satisfied and contented to each other despite their age variation. Frances wish to marry if only to please her two daughters Helen and Sophie living in Melbourne, but Frank is not willing to tie the bond as he is not too well and is growingly irritable. As Frank's physical condition deteriorates more and more, he makes an expedition to South but returns to die on the veranda listening to classical music. After the lover's death, Frances makes up her mind to go towards North.

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By weaving a tangled net of relationships among the characters in the play, David Williamson seems to portray a more universal picture than he has undertaken earlier. It also seems that this plan has same resemblance with his long cherished intention to rewrite Shakespeare and thus to re-modernize the language and dialogues of English master. After *The Club*, David Williamson has gone to join The Alexander Theatre Company at Monash University to adopt *King Lear*. In *Travelling North*, there is a direct reference to Shakespeare's masterpiece as Frank calls Frances' daughters "Goneril and Regan". Both plays share their main themes like love and relationships, life, old age and death. Brian Kiernan in his evaluation of Williamson's plays refers to the constant changing of scene in *Travelling North* as he writes: "draw attention to the structure as expressive: as the play develops, the audience sees a significant pattern, and a view of life that is not articulated by any one character, emerge. Structure becomes form, a metaphor for life". (Kiernan, Brian. "Comic-Satiric-Realism: David Williamson's Plays since *The Department*, " *Southerly*, 1, 1986, p 11)

Travelling North leisurely shifts scene between Melbourne and Northern New Wales and is comprised of some thirty three scene. The plot lacks the close knit unity due to its fragmentary nature. It foregrounds multiple threads and concerns simultaneously happen to characters. Its themes can be identified as family love and relations, motherly care, responsibility, fidelity, alienation in domestic affairs, and final demise. All these things occur within the circle of domesticity. Frances' two daughters-Sophie and Helen who appear in scene second reveals through their conversation that Frank and Frances have been writing for some time twice a day to each other. The two sisters are apprehensive about it as Helen says: "I think the whole thing is sick" (*Collected Plays, Vol.II*. Australia: Currency, 1993. 174). The episode is very crucial if considered in the light of future doubts and dilemmas faced by Frances. Moreover, the stage direction also expresses that the two girls are "stylishly dressed in a conventional middle class manner". Sophie possesses a "quality of self-absorption about her", while as Helen has a "neurotic compulsion to ferret out the facts" (193). Through irony Williamson satirizes the middle class girls with modern pose both in their appearance and behavior. Williamson's power of observation and examination to project these younger middle class is praiseworthy. His depiction of two daughters' off hand dismissal of their mother's love affair and their immature understanding with which they look upon their own relationships is also an evidence of the fact that Williamson is a critical social philosopher. But it is not all about these girls. In the moments of uncertainty and difficulty, these new women also show broad mindedness when they take care of their mother and share her concerns. In Scene Three, Sophie shows her feeling with: "We're very glad for you, mother" and "...we're very happy for you", and again "I'm really very happy for you". These instances of loving attitude beneath the cover of egoism are suggestive of modern tight schedule of life where everyone is caught in his or her individual world. Through these



character constructs, the playwright displays the universal attributes of 'being' and thus increases reliability and saves these female characters from becoming mere stereotypes. Also Williamson in the creation of these personages hints at the emergence of new women with new attitudes regarding their identity and position. He also refers to their affiliations with others within family.

Through this play, David Williamson attempts at exploring the common but complex issues of love and responsibility with emotions and sensibilities of two principal characters Frank and Frances. By showing it all, he uses a mixed temperament of bitter-sweet tone. Frances is delineated as one of his fully 'round' characters with dynamism. The drama records her journey as she wonders at new found love. She reflects a commitment and mutual responsibilities and in the course of action, becomes vulnerable to the uncertainties and insecurities that result from this relation. She is realistic representation of her sex and class. Through her portrayal, Williamson discloses the inner conflict and the guilty nature of her decision to develop such a romantic affair. She makes confession of all internal chaos in these words: "I've dodged my responsibilities when I was younger, but I'm not going to do it now" (216). Frances also exposes her hard times like this: "They were very days" (223). She also displays the maturity of feeling in this dialogue: "Frank how many times do I have to tell you? I love you and I'm staying with you..." (233). After the four years of relation of love, hope and dreams, Frank dies, and Frances goes on stoically: "I'll go travelling further north" (*Collected Plays, Vol. II* 249). Her mature and placid acceptance of Frank's death makes her a practical woman with patience and courage. Her feelings about love, death and loss do not turn her into sentimental figure. She is determined to shoulder the responsibility of life and move ahead with all experience in order to face challenges fearlessly. The avoidance of emotions and sentiments in her character is the deliberate effort of the dramatist to pull back from angst with positive attitude, and also to highlight the basic intention of *Travelling North* as regeneration and the perpetuation of life.

Thus, the text of *Travelling North* shows an accurate observation of the dramatist and also his scientific projection of personal interaction and cultural values. The more important aspect of the play is its empathic treatment of 'a slice of life' that the readers easily recall and identify. The play has a potential to be delved deep for the extraction of valid meanings and concerns. It brings forth familial affairs among two daughters and their mother, and unravels their mutual trusts and responsibilities. It also shows two aged people in love with renewed interest and thus, focuses on the fact that the life without a partner is only partial. At the larger scale, it can also be seen how Williamson through these personal relations and domestic affairs provides a clear notion of the socio-cultural reality of his nation.



In *After the Ball* (1997), David Williamson is again haunted by the family scenario as he is seen in the above analyzed plays. But in this play, he explores women of new generation and demonstrates them with more psychological depths and with more social responsibilities. The play deals with elder woman, Kate, and the recrimination and atonement of her two matured offspring- Stephen and Judy at her death bed. The play has similitude with *Travelling North* so far as its probing into the domestic relations and secrets are concerned. The two plays are also similar in their backgrounds and geneses. The subject matters of both are cast in naturalism. The *Travelling North* dramatizes a story inspired by Williamson's mother-in-law and her partner's associations, and his untimely and unexpected demise. The source of *After the Ball* originates from the death of the playwright's own mother as it is made evident in the "Introduction" of the play. The play brings out the social truth while exploring the domestic values and their devastating ramifications as these values are not adhered with tradition regard.

After the Ball commences with Stephen, son of Kate. He is professionally a successful writer. The son comes back from abroad to Australia in order to see bed ridden widowed mother. The play through a chain of analepses, over a time period of thirty years traces a life journey of Kate and her tough male- chauvinist husband, Ron. Along with these two main *dramatis personae*, the characters of Stephen and Judy also get enlightened. All these four personages are treated in a naturalistic way and are placed in serious domestic conflicts underpinning the whole text. As habitual of genre mixing and irony using, Williamson successfully taunts at the unbalanced married life.

Ron McCrae, is the deceased husband of Kate and father of Stephen and Judy in the play. He shares many characteristic traits with Frank of *Travelling North*, though *After the Ball* was written after the decades of the earlier ones. Ron is an experienced person having undergone many ups and downs in life. He has witnessed the great depression and the aftermaths of two world wars. So it is natural that a person with such hard times is bound to be at odds with the new generation people. He is utterly a male chauvinist and in response to an inference that he speaks to his wife wickedly, he excuses himself by saying: "I'm her husband"(19). He is also a downright realist. His racist attitude reminds Alf Cook of *The Day of the Year*, a drama by another Australian writer Alan Seymour:

I'm proud to be Australian. This is the best country in the world, but only because our origins are British... we'd be a lot better off if we'd stuck to being British instead of importing the refuse of Europe... by and large all we imported were the dregs... Bringing their Neanderthal quarrels with them. (7)



Williamson as usual gives a curtailed depiction of Ron's racism and the potential of this idea remains unrealized as it is truncated by Kate's off-hand comment: "You'll never change him, Judy. Get off your high horse, Shakespeare"(19). This analogy of narrow minded and obscure Ron McCrae with Shakespeare works as a dissipating force and overshadows the serious mode with ludicrous and preposterous ambience. Moreover, like Simmonds in *The Removalists*, Ron is a voluptuous and lewd fellow of first water. Judy once discloses to his brother how she has seen abruptly his father: "I ducked out of my room... and there he was in the kitchen with Claire [her Mother's bridesmaid], one hand on her bum and the other up her dress..."(15). The conversation between the two extends in like manner and provides a full glimpse of the episode:

Stephen: Did he see you?

Judy: Peripheral vision is quite restricted when you've got your nose stuck in a cleavage.

Stephen: Especially Claire's. (15)

The playwright creates an incongruity between the actuality of dramatization and the expectation of the readers. The readers are full of awe and solemnity as they just witnessed the sinking position of Kate who struggles between life and death. So they may scarcely think of such account as that of her husband's lecherous conduct. The result of this mingled funny-solemn situation is to provide a relief from a strained situation. It amuses readers and also disgust so far as the maturity and experience of the person is concerned. So it is out of expectation from Ron's disposition. This scene of voluptuousness is similar to that of *Brilliant Lies* in which the pangs of betrayal and treachery of children to their father is coated with funny words. In *After the Ball*, the appalling revelation of Ron's immoral behavior with brief and pointed remarks by Stephen and Judy not only entertains the readers but also satirizes. This is the main purpose of the dramatist. Williamson also makes use of shock tactics to make public identify the subtext of the situation. He delves beneath the façade to suggest bigger meaning. Though the moment is enjoyed with laughter, yet the unpleasant taste remains behind

Considering these two macho protagonists- McCrae Ron and Frank, it gets clear that they have been drawn by the writer with strong dispositions whose impact on their families and social circumstances is powerful. They are typical projections of patriarchal ideology believing in all is for men and all is done by men. Though Frank has his basis in stereotypical characterization, yet he is moulded with some 'roundness'. But Ron is entirely sketched on the image of the Australian 'bloke' of his time with bias and cramped perspective about life. He has been delineated as a model persona by Williamson for his technique of satire in order to expose the loopholes of loveless marriage and their repercussions on an individual



involved. It also appears that a fractured and split married life leaves a deep impact on the psyche of the children of such family. Thus, it involves the social spectrum at the larger scale and hinders in the overall progression of mankind.

Furthermore, when Ron's portrayal is compared and contrasted with his wife Kate, they seem poles apart as far as their temperament and individual comportment is concerned. She is projected with empathy and so is loved by the readers. Her lovable and careful attitude towards his descendents is praiseworthy and as per expectation. The opening scene of *After the Ball* displays her in a dying posture at hospital as she is waiting for her lone and beloved son who is expected to arrive from overseas. She is impatient to see him as it is clear from the conversation between her and Judy:

Kate: Is he coming?

Judy: He rang from the airport. He hired a car and he's on his way. (1)

In these two short dialogues, the dramatist is able to create a highly factual situation that shows a motherly love for her son, she looks eagerly rather anxiously for his arrival and the son, in turn, represented with a great concern for his dear mother. He is noticed urgently running to see her before she closes her eyes for eternity. This ideal relation between son and mother is commendable and it displays the great ethos of the society. It also provides an antithesis to the relation between Kate and McCrae Ron. Their affairs are full of chaos and misunderstanding. The husband does not show flexibility to shower compassionate love on his wife. He thinks it may emasculate his tough masculinity and reduce his macho ego. Domestic relations need mutual love and respect, care and concern for each other whatsoever the association may be, are indispensable for satisfactory and successful relations. Only then, one can look forward to see mentally fertile and emotionally balanced individual, and then at broader level an optimal socio-cultural construction congenial to all.

After the son's arrival, her communication is poignant as well as elegant. When she catches her past life through retrospection and analepses, she emerges full of ebullience, high spirited, emotional, and loving. She has also remained a central person in their marital life and thus, proved a sustained support to otherwise broken existence. Kate is really painted with ideal attributes whether it is her interior or exterior life. She is a creature of 'flesh and blood' revealing the attitude mind-set which support her stand with her husband's tough masculinity and narrowly carved racism: "Britain. Britain – you're always on about bloody Britain. You've read that biography of Winston Churchill three times" (6). Despite the hard and rigid stance of her husband, Kate does not falter to defend herself against Ron's prejudiced male ideology:



Ron: Will you shut up you stupid woman.

Kate: See. Stupid. Stupid. That's all he ever calls me. I had to leave school at fourteen because my father lost his job not because I was stupid. I was top of my class. Always. The only time I've even been really stupid is when I agreed to marry you. I was top of my class. Always. (8)

The playwright in this single dialogue of Kate demonstrates his mastery in showing the deep remorse and painful inner of the concerned character. It shows her extremely stiff married life with her husband who is worth of nothing except practicing male bigotry. Williamson also shows an ironic contrast between the seen reality and the unseen machinations in this relation. There is also an insinuation in the words of Kate that what has made their unbalanced married life going on despite all these strains. It is the mutual understanding and intimate relation between her and her children which continuously keep intact the family. Stephen is projected right from the very beginning as a loving and devotional son and it is this attitude on his part that always consoles Kate and inspires her to live on. In the last but one scene of the play, Kate as still stretched on the death bed, is made to listen her favourite music played by her son. He also pacifies her misery with these tender words:

I'll take your ashes up to be with Dad. The water will bubble and fume and you'll both be at it again for all eternity, but don't feel you have to hang on. It's too hard now and too painful. Go peacefully. Please. Go peacefully".(71)

The reply to message of son by dying mother is positive 'yes'. The scene foregrounds the emotional rapport and psychological understanding between the son and the mother. The character of Kate like Frances in *Travelling North* is given all motherly affection and warmth for which blood relation is known for. Both these female characters have been realistically delineated with both the sociological and psychological relevance. Despite their biased and chauvinistic husbands, they live with full determination and expectation of life. These two female are prototypes created by David Williamson for millions of middle class Australian. Perseverance and determination are their hallmark. They are represented to be followed in life whenever they feel difficulty in real situations as married life is generally haunted by the ups and downs. The two plays also reveal the fact that it is only male in marital affairs to be at centre and with full command over all matters in domestic circles, but female with qualities of head and heart can subjugate mentally males. Thus, they can play their roles as per their whim and live their life to the full.



Considering all these statements and illustrations regarding human relations with their negatives and positives, it is evident that David Williamson is truly a social critic and psychological therapist of his society. His observation is very acute and his framing of situations and drawing of *dramatis personae* are exact. He is generally censured for the stereotypical and underdeveloped treatment of the female characters in his *oeuvre* as Leslie Rees says that the female personages in his early plays “show very little differentiation ...they are not seen in perspective; we learn few facts about their earlier lives”(129). But this commentator assumes that perhaps female conditioning up to the 50s and 60s to behave modestly and evade the charge of ‘cheap’ may have made dramatist to deny the substantial roles to them in his plays written at the initial period of his career. This is partly true when Williamson’s dramaturgy is perused with critical bent of mind. His work is a sort of chronology of Australian history from 50s up to present. During these years several changes have occurred and such shifting scenario has also affected the social and domestic values. With the result, the traditional concept of woman as plaything and weak creature has also undergone modification and revision. They have slowly but steadily struggled for their inherent rights, and roles and responsibilities in familial affairs as well as in socio-cultural milieu. All this changed the traditional image of woman, and thus has led them to environment of emancipation and empowerment. David Williamson has traced this whole journey in his work in a very fascinating and factual manner.

David Williamson has emerged in his dramatic work as a social scientist. He dissects the situation with analytical mind but with a positive attitude. He is very popular for his social commentary as he hardly leaves any incident and occurrence untouched. He is a great reminder of what is happening around. His investigation of human life along with its dealings and apprehensions is multidimensional. He not only deals with such matters imaginatively, but also involves critical thought and approaches to see various facets of the problem. He unravels what is actual reality and thereby differentiates it with what is misrepresented. As a realist, he sketches characters as he finds them in domestic and social settings. He does not try to modify or idealize them unnecessarily as others do to twist the reality. His delineation of human image is factual and so it seems bitter-sweet. His crude realism which is not sometimes liked by the readers justifies the well-known saying that: “Truth is bitter”.

As it has been evaluated thoroughly that Williamson’s characters are multiple in nature, status, and class. So he provides a panoramic view of their behavior and dealings by involving them in real life situations, and thus has given them a chance to try their talent and shoulder the responsibilities. In this way, the panoply of his dramatic personages offers a psychological truth of their existence and so can be generalized to judge others also. In his early plays, he presents women as companion to men meant for their convenience. These females as has been seen, have no essence of their own except their existence. They are



utterly dependent and their conduct exhibits that their priorities and objectives are petty things of day-to-day life requirements. They are devoid of inquisition to scrutinize the matters and understand the essence. So they have no individuality and identity of their own. They always rely on males and are described only in relation to them. This is not David Williamson's subjective dramatization of females. He is an objective writer and writes systematically and impartially. He plays his role honestly as a writer and enlightens the public with the reality as it is in its actual form. Afterward in his career, Williamson has presented the autonomous and self-assured women. These women are shown absorbing the changes of the time and equipping themselves with the shields of education and profession. The female personages like these can be observed in the plays like *After the Ball* and *Travelling North* as they have been studied here. They have been delineated as prototypes of the new generation women- active, bold, confident. The empowered and emancipated females in these mentioned plays are the paradigms of the contemporary women who enjoy the rights and also carry out the responsibilities both in domestic affairs and social involvement with equal competency. Therefore, to censure Williamson for the seeming shallowness and superficiality regarding the portrayals of women may not be right judgment on the part of the reader, though he sometimes deliberately truncates their character construction to satirize the social institutions like unsuccessful marriage, and their indifferent relations with their partners and sometimes their unconcerned relations with other members in families. But the overall impression which one gets in his *oeuvre* about human relations is but a fact and ground reality of Australian society. Moreover, in his texts, it has been also found that he adheres the shifting and fleeting social circumstances and assimilate these changes in his writing. Therefore, he adheres the same and thus, bestows his writing with everlasting vigour and value.

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