

Vol. 8, Issue-III (June 2017)

ISSN: 0976-8165

The Criterion

An International Journal in English

Bi-monthly, Refereed & Indexed Open Access eJournal



The Criterion

UGC Approved Journal [Arts and Humanities, Jr. No. 768]

Editor-In-Chief - Dr. Vishwanath Bite

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Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

Bi-Monthly Refereed and Indexed Open Access eJournal

www.galaxyimrj.com

ISSN 2278-9529

Women Empowerment: A Study of Two Women Characters in Clifford Odets' *Rocket to the Moon*

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Article History: Submitted-24/04/2017, Revised-17/06/2017, Accepted-22/06/2017, Published-05/07/2017.

Abstract:

Womenempowerment in any given nation would be basically an empowerment through economic self- dependency or financial stability. In the play *Rocket to the Moon*, Odets portrays Belle and Cleo as empowered women amidst the economic crash of the Great Depression of America of the 1930s. Belle withstands the disappointment of Ben's empty hopes. Though she blames Ben at times for the frustration and failure of their relationship, she proves to be a caring wife. As a counterpart, Cleo Singer's youthful vitality stands in contrast to the middle-aged characters of the play. Her role is insecure and flighty and as the play develops, she becomes mature enough to leave at the end of the play with a sense of hope and optimism. These aspects of the two women reflect on the promise brought out by women empowerment in spite of the socio- economic crises of the 1930s America.

Keywords: Women Empowerment, The Great Depression and Socio-Economic-crisis.

To empower women, the methods deployed will include: firstly, through land rights which will empower them by giving them the confidence they need to tackle gender inequalities. Secondly, by giving them economic security that will make them economically empowered and stand on the same platform as their counterparts do. Thirdly, freedom in political and practical aspects would enable them to glitter in the wide realm of politics. Providing a participatory provision in Micro-credit schemes will instill hope in them for developing small business that would certainly bring a great favour to their family. On the whole, women empowerment would be an empowerment through economic self- dependency or financial stability. With a focus on these criteria, a study of the two of the women characters in the play *Rocket to the Moon* by Clifford Odets will enable us to have a glimpse of women empowerment during the Great Depression of America of the 1930s.

The stock market crash on a Tuesday, on October 29, 1929 set in motion the official beginning of the Great Depression. People tried to sell their stocks into but no one was ready to buy. The banks that had invested large portions of their clients' savings in the stock market were forced to close due to the stock market crash. This caused another panic across the country. People dreaded that they would lose their own savings and rushed to banks to withdraw their money. This made the banks to be closed indefinitely. Business and industry were also affected. The capitalists and small scale industrialists lost much of their own capital due to the stock market crash and the closure of banks. This resulted in a financial disaster that many businesses started cutting back their worker's hours and wages. This resulted in a drastic change in consumer behavior. Eventually, consumers began to curb their spending and refrained from purchasing luxury goods. They even cut short the purchase of the most essential commodities. This consumer trend caused additional businesses to cut back wages and layoff their workers. Big business persons as well as the poor farmers struggled to feed themselves and their family. Default became their norm. Finally, the people of the country, irrespective of the social or economic status, became homeless and unemployment became pertinent. The then president Herbert Hoover spoke of optimism whereas the people blamed him for the Great Depression. This made people to have high hopes on Franklin D. Roosevelt and elected him President. He closed all the banks and let them reopen only once they were stabilized. Next, Roosevelt began to establish programs that became known as the New Deal.

This backdrop allured the writers of the 1930s to focus their writings on the then socio-economical factor that is the Great Depression. The playwrights were not the exceptions. They voiced their social concerns in their plays and their plays served as a reflection of the problems caused by the economic collapse of the 1930s. Clifford Odets registered his footprint in the annals of American drama for he had four of his plays produced on Broadway. One such play of his that focuses on interpersonal relationships and the pressures of the life on the individual is *Rocket to the Moon*.

Rocket to the Moon was first produced by the Group Theatre, New York, for the stage in 1938. It was Odets' second play produced after his return from Hollywood where he sojourned as a scriptwriter for a while. With the summer being too hot, the play is set entirely in the office of the waiting room of a dentist in New York City. Dialogues have an upper hand than action and it is prevalent throughout the play. The focus is mainly on the relationship of the central characters. The time is between June and August, and the oppressive heat of a stifling New York suits well to the mid-life crisis of the characters. The play also portrays the effects of marriage and personal relationships on the artistic talent of Odets.

The play opens with an argument between Ben Stark and his wife, Belle. He wishes to shift his Dental office to a more affluent part of the town and to specialize in orthodontics with the financial help that is to be extended by his father-in-law. But, Belle, who hates her father, wants Ben Stark to refuse it and she desires Stark to stay where he is. As a practical man, Stark believes that his wife is trying to limit his aspirations. Also, he attempts to escape

the confines of his life by having an affair with his secretary, Cleo Singer. Despite these misgivings, Stark agrees and decides not to move.

Stark's colleague and the one who shares his dental office, Dr. Cooper enters during this conversation to get a drink of water from the cooler. Cooper owes four month's rent due to his dull business. Belle views Stark's refusal to press Cooper for the money as weakness, and criticizes him for it. Belle is much depressed all the morning as it is the anniversary of the death of their son, who died during birth. Presently, Stark's secretary Cleo enters and is immediately criticized by Stark for taking a two-hour lunch break. When Dr. Cooper re-enters the waiting room, Belle demands that he pay Stark the money he is owed and accuses Cooper of drunkenness. Cooper tells Belle that he cannot even afford to pay the medical bills for his son, who recently broke his arm. Belle looks on Cooper more sympathetically and tells him to take another month before paying off his debts.

This opening scene of the play foretells the financial crisis that reflects in the rest of the play. Stark's financial constraint pulls him down to think of buying an Aladdin's lamp for thousand dollars if he could. He says, "We'd rub it, we'd rub it down – slam! We'd be in China –!" (333). But none of his attempts to evince his need could succeed. Cooper's entry into Stark's office for a drink of water from the cooler portrays him to be sailing in the same boat as Stark. Cooper poeticizes his deficit to meet out his contingencies. He could not even afford to buy a water cooler of his own. This is implied when he says, "I'm hot – hot hot hot! In my younger days, I was inclined to poetry. In my older days I'm inclined to poverty" (337). When Belle demands Cooper, he says that he had asked for a loan from the bank and he is expecting it soon. Instantly, he receives dismaying news that he will not get the money sanctioned by the bank authority immediately. He is outraged by his poverty and goes to the extent of saying: "No, no dice . . . no shoes for baby . . . I don't know what I'll do with my baby – children are not like furniture – you can't put them in storage. If his mother was alive . . ." (RM 339). Touched by his miserable position, Belle allows him to stay for one more month.

It is clear that Belle has no problem standing up to men; this is a depiction of a new found strength for women fighting Patriarchy. She interrupts Cooper to remind him that he owes her and Stark money. She is not employed and she does not seem to have any desire for employment. She does stand up for herself and make decisions for her husband. She knows what he needs to do in order to provide for his family. A slight shift is seen in the freedom and amount of involvement they have in their husbands' lives.

In Belle, Odets presents a different kind of housewife. Belle breaks the traditional workers' theatre stock female character. She not only runs the Stark household, but also her husband's business. She controls and tracks all of the finances that go along with the dentist's office. Belle has a voice in the business. In fact, she decides that Stark will remain in his office in the Bronx, instead of moving uptown as Belle's upper class father wants and has offered to help finance. She even handles the business transactions on her own. Margaret Brenman-Gibson observes:

Belle, like Odets' father, gives practical reasons which stifle his (Ben's) growth. By a most economic exchange, Odets ends the first round with the controlling wife, Belle, the victor. Indeed, she has won even before the play opens, and when she concludes the opening beat with, "Any day now I'm expecting to have to powder and diaper you." She has established herself as the parent, the boss, the obstacle in the path of the aspiring Ben Stark's creative growth. (525-526)

Cleo Singer too is in financial constraint. But she conceals it. She tells Stark that she does not really need her job for she hails from a wealthy family. Cleo reluctantly narrates her familial set up where she finds only discomfiture:

CLEO: My home life is fearful – eight in one apartment. My father had

a very hard life; he ran the store. He, my father, he shrank – shrank? – What is it?

STARK (not sure): Shrank or shrank.

CLEO: My father got littler and littler . . . and one morning he died right in bed while everyone was sleeping. Mom and Gert and two married sisters and their husbands and babies – eight in one apartment! I tell them I want to be a dancer – everybody laughs. I make believe they're not my sisters. They don't know anything – they're washed out, bleached. . . everybody forgets how to dream. . . (RM 373)

She finds a best companion in Stark. She remarks, "You're kind and you're good" (RM 373). She has gained a degree of maturity while working for Stark. She, as free as a bird, now can go out into the world hopefully.

Belle, throughout the play, withstands the disappointment of Ben's empty hopes. She hates her father for the reason that he had troubled her mother by alarming misconduct. Belle is of the belief that her father had effectively killed her mother by treating her badly. She persuades Ben that he would refuse the offer of financial help from her father. Many of Belle's actions seem to stem from her desire not to endure the same fate as her own mother. Despite Ben's desire to expand his practice, Belle wants him to curb his ambitions and be content with what he has. Belle frequently blames Ben for the frustration and failure of their relationship, she proves to be a caring wife. Even at the time of financial constraints, she motivates Ben to act prudently and wisely to demand Cooper the money he owes to them. She disguises herself to be a strict woman in terms of money and she herself plunges into the demand that Cooper pays back the debt and rent.

As a counterpart, Cleo Singer seems to be the most important and complex female character in the play. However, Cleo is a relatively ambiguous character. Like Ben Stark, she lacks enough substance to be a compelling central focus of the play. She exclaims, 'I want to live it' (RM 416), 'I don't ask for much,' (RM 416) looking for 'a whole full world,' (RM 417) – but, in fact, she asks for a great deal. Her ability to leave the confines of her affair with

Stark and the confines of her job at his dental practice seemingly comes from nowhere. She has gained a degree of maturity while working for Stark. She is a free bird now and can go out into the world with hope. When Cleo leaves, Stark and Prince reconcile their differences. Stark tells Prince that because of his affair with Cleo, he has also gained a new perspective on life. Prince leaves asking Stark to return to his wife. Stark almost laughing, bolts the room behind him and exits. As Gerard Rabkin observes: “Cleo, the young secretary, rejects both Stark and Prince, the denizens of a dying world, to seek fulfillment elsewhere” (200). Despite this ambiguity, Cleo is an important and interesting character.

Her youthful vital stands seem to be in contrast to the middle-age characters of the play. Till the end of the play, she is portrayed to be in love with Ben Stark. At times, she even wants him commit to it by leaving Belle and marrying her. Almost all the men in the play objectify her and she magnanimously rejects the numerous advances from Wax and Mr. Prince, for she knows that she is an object that is seen as something that can be hooked up and will be discarded when her youth and beauty comes to an end. In the beginning, her role is insecure and flighty and she finds it difficult to make both ends meet by having a penniless boss who has become unsuccessful in the advent of the Great Depression. As the play develops, she too develops and grows. This development and growth allows her to become mature enough to leave at the end of the play with a sense of hope and optimism.

As most women of America of the 1930s were married and mostly homemakers, their role in their house became more significant. The Great Depression reinforced their traditional gender roles and their workplace also made no significant change. The economic crises made a general shift in the role of woman as wife and mother to a renewed force with a demand to feed her family. Seventy-five percent of professional women were either nurses or schoolteachers, which remained traditional roles for women. Working women’s wages were lower than those of men in domestic service. Women had faith in the ideology of working-class and joined hands with unions, unemployed councils, and started fighting for the rights of workers. However, they had to fight for their own right as well. Historian Sara M. Evans briefs:

In the absence of a movement specifically devoted to women’s rights a feminist critique of gender roles, radical women and labour organizers found it difficult to manage multiple roles and assert the importance of women’s needs; thus, the striking achievements of women within the New Deal were rapidly erased from memory. And so, although some women were powerful in the thirties, women as a group were not empowered. (217-218)

Juliet Mitchell in her book *Women’s Estate* outlines the political, social and economic insights and refers to the economic exploitations of women and its social consequences and alludes to feminism as a “movement which strongly supports the rights of women to emancipation” (65). Feminism would eventually result in empowerment. Kate Millet in her book *Sexual Politics* examines how thoroughly culture and society are dominated by men. She observes “sex roles assign domestic service and attendance to infants to the female, the

rest of human achievement . . . to the male –” (37). There is a reversal of the role in the women characters against what was considered to be the usual role designation of Odets's era. They dominate men and their dependency diminishes as the play progresses. They symbolically represent the social and economic emancipation in the society where their male counterparts live.

These two women characters of the play convey Odets's belief in the empowerment of women to overcome the hardships of the despair meted out by the economic factor – the Great Depression. Belle is married to a man of questionable strength and self-assurance. However, he needs a woman like Belle to tell him what to do. Even the backdrop of the Depression makes it clear that Belle would maintain her authority over her husband to deal with the financial part of the family irrespective of the virtual absence of patients in the corridor of the dentist and the false pretense of his secretary Cleo Singer turned to a bright future wherein she moves into the society with a great hope and confidence. These aspects of the two women characters serve as a great reflection on the promise brought out by women empowerment in spite of the socio-economic catastrophe of the 1930s America.

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