PUBLICATION
CONTENTS

1. Displacement And Disorientation: A Study of Vladimir Nabokov's Novels - Dr. S. Kanakaraj

2. A Cataclysmic Reality of Indian Families with reference to Mahesh Dattani's Final Solutions - Dr. Gunasekharan Dharmaraja

3. Portrayal of Existential Crisis in V.S. Naipaul's The Mimic Men - Dr. S. Venkateswaran & Sadankhathra

4. Chinua Achebe's Girls at War and Other Stories: A Study - Dr. P. Satyanarayana

5. Neil Simon's Last of The Red Hot Lovers As A Domestic Comedy - Dr. P. Padma & G. Satya

6. Westernised Indian - An Algorithm of Emptiness or Empowerment? With Focus on Kiran Desai's The Inheritance of Loss - Dr. N. Kavidha & V. Sakthivel

7. Cultural Disintegration in Naipaul's Half a Life - Dr. V. B. Chithra


10. Dynamics and Relevance of Yellow Journalism in Vijay Tendulkar's Play Kamala - Dr. M. Sambaiah & K. Sandhya

11. English Drama in India from 17th Century to the Modern Times - A Review - Dr. B. Thiru Kumaran

12. Curiosity and Media in Language Classroom: A Video Lesson - Y. Sreenivasulu & Dr. R. V. Jayanth Kasyap

13. Narrative Techniques in Indian Diasporic Literature - S. Iliyas Ali & Dr. V. Anitha Devi


Volume III, Issue I : January 2014
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Author</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>The Marriage of Two Cultures in R. P. Jhabvala’s Novels</td>
<td>S. Prasada Rao</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Ruth Prawer Jhabvala’s Heat and Dust: A Critical Examination of Fictional Excellence</td>
<td>Sivakama Sundari</td>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Psychic Feminism and Realism in O’ Henry’s ‘The Skylight Room’</td>
<td>G. Sivasamy</td>
<td>139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Rabindranath Tagore’s Poetry – Relevant to the Present World</td>
<td>G. Reddi Sekhar Reddy</td>
<td>148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Vijay Tendulkar’s ‘Kanyadaan’: A Play of Modern Indian Reality Life</td>
<td>K. Janardhanreddy</td>
<td>154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Manju Kapur’s A Married Woman: A Feminist Reading</td>
<td>T. Murari</td>
<td>162</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Using Newspapers to Teach Regional Medium Students in The English Language Classroom</td>
<td>S. Mansoor Ali</td>
<td>170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>The Origin of Indian Drama</td>
<td>B. Lakshmaiah</td>
<td>178</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>A Micro-Cosmic World of Malgudian Nagaraj: A Perspective Study</td>
<td>A. Phaniraja Kumar</td>
<td>185</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>Human Predicament in Select Works of Thorton Wilder</td>
<td>J. Anil Premraj</td>
<td>193</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Human Predicament in Select Works of Thornton Wilder

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This is the most legitimate and valid question to the 21st century generation human beings, as many discoveries by the eminent Scientists, Paleontologists, and Archeologists found that many animals that existed ages ago, could not survive in the present due to various reasons mentioned. The present millennium throws many challenges to the higher mammals who boast of their life's sophistications with the advent of technology. The leaps and bounds of it know not its extent. With the challenges increasing day by day, the question of human existence remains a perennial doubt and has become a constant menace for the humanity. The present paper tries to focus on the struggles of humanity over the generations, as rightly pointed out by Thornton Wilder, a famous American novelist and playwright whose novels and plays portray the capabilities of human beings to survive in spite of the odds encountered.

Thornton Wilder (April 17, 1897- December 7, 1975) became famous for his two plays Our Town (1938) and The Skin of Our Teeth (1942) and the novel The Bridge of San Luis Rey (1927). These three made him win “Pulitzer Prizes”. The play that conveys the message of human struggles and teaches to survive is The Skin of Our Teeth. He projects the life as painful yet it has its own alluring, magnetic grandeur. He provides the soothing anodyne to the emotional and moral stresses of strife-torn, industrial societies of the 20th century. “Our Town and The Skin of Our Teeth are the most skillful works our theatre has to show and at the same time, market successes.” (Francis Fergusson, “The Search for New Standards in the Theatre” The Kenyon Review, XVII, Autumn, 1955.P.593.Print). Thornton Wilder experiments through this play, the expressionistic technique where the protagonist never becomes pure abstraction and at no time does the action become pure fantasy. The Skin of Our Teeth operates in varying degrees in the destinies of his men and women. In the play Wilder's characters are set forth for living. Living is not just going through life the best way
possible, doing good deeds and laying up treasures in Heaven. The type of life Wilder demands is a constant struggle here and now; there is nothing easy about it. Life is ultimately beautiful and people must face and accept suffering in order to be worthy of life’s beauty. Life is full of paradoxes and one is not allowed to take the better parts alone; but one must take all of it in order to fulfill his role as a human being.

The Skin of Our Teeth operates with a grim primordial urgency during the Second World War and the consequence of the first ever nuclear war becomes the original pointers for realizing the domestic catastrophe and the individual destiny therein. Mr. Antrobus, the archetypal perfect man, the original Adam, and the harbinger of the New World after the nuclear holocaust in the Second World War lays down the vast temporal backdrop of the play. He traces, hopefully though, the origins of this “planet, the spark of life of ten billion years ago”. Individual human destiny is amazingly realized against vast human race. On two occasions Antrobus decides life is not worth the struggle mankind makes to endure it and on both occasions the customary delight in living, which is essence of his being, departs. The first time is during the Ice Age. Antrobus is the person most interested in seeing that mankind pulls through. But when he is faced with the problem of evil incarnate in his son, he loses this interest: “Put out the fire! Put out all the fires. No wonder the sun grows cold.”(Thornton Wilder,. Three Plays, New York: Bantam Books, 1958.P.90) and the replies in disgust, “There is no mind. We’ll no try to living.” Give it up. Give it up trying.”(Three Plays, P.90). After the war, he again loses what he terms “the most important thing of all: The desire to begin again, to start building.”(Three Plays, P.133)

I’ve lost it. This minute I feel like all those people Dancing around the bonfire- just relief. Just The desire to settle down; to slip into the old Grooves and keep the neighbors from walking over my lawn..... But during the war......I’d have moments.... When I saw the things That we could do when it was over. When you’re at war you think about a More comfortable one. I’ve lost it. I feel sick and tired (Three
Plays, PP. 133-134)

The play does not end, as Antrobus and Mrs. Antrobus as the only archetypal Man and Woman, their “motif” of love becomes the basis of domestic, thereby the social and national life forever. Sabina, an archetypal damsel seducing and weaning Antrobus from his settled domestic ardour. He even announces his separation from Mrs. Antrobus and her reaction is typical of the play itself consisting of stoical optimism. She married Antibus not because she loved him, but only because he made her a promise. However, as the play alternates between the rather mundane trials and tribulations of life and grim catastrophe for human race and creation itself, Sabina under plays the original incident of her love for Mr. Antrobus. She tells him not to be overtly mindful of all the trivialities of life. After all, in life, “it doesn’t matter what” ultimately. The play converges on the domestic catastrophe of the Antrobuses with the threat of a colossal disaster of the human race in the background.

The love-hate relationship between Mr. Antrobus and his son Henry is the most poignant aspect of the broken domestic order in America. Henry is known as Cain, both in school and at home. The relationship between the father and son is in constant threat of being severed any moment. Their peculiarly “natural” enmity appears to reach its violent end. Henry’s killer instinct is quite morbid as he has “some big emptiness” inside him, he wants to “strike and fight and kill”. This morbidity of mind is instrumental for hating his father, the archetypal villain for him, who takes all his freedom. His problems aggregate with his feeling of being unrelated to anybody and anything. This fearful emotional and spiritual vacuum makes him a lone survivor of his own inner struggles and anguish. There is a gravely misplaced notion of heroism in him. Towards the end of the play Mr. Antrobus plays out the role of Noah, the Old Testament, biblical figure who survives after the great flood. Likewise Antrobus too retrieves all the humanity and all aspects of the universe into his raft and begins to launch a new world after the first ever nuclear holocaust in the Second World War. He launches out in newer directions to discover knowledge with a scientific spirit. He wants “to build a new world” by his innate creativity and purpose of life. However, the need for his own settled domestic order precedes any such move to “rebuild” the world at large.
In this new world of retrieval from the precipice of disaster, at many levels, domestically and universally, Sabina is intensely cynical in her apprehension that “the whole earth’s is going to have many wars and more walls of ice and floods and earthquakes”. In another part of domestic detail, Henry’s motives are still unsettled. His vacant quest for the myth of total freedom indeed stifles his growth. He is yet to discover his world “that is fit for a man to live in”. His retrieval is made possible with all the confession made by Mr. Antrobus with which he realizes Henry as a full-fledged member of the family in his own right. This is the exact locus for the complete retrieval of the Antrobus family that is the universe itself, in its primordial significance. Mrs. Antrobus announces, thus, the newly felt spirit of optimism:

Some light are coming on, the first in seven years. People are walking up and down looking at them. Over in Hawkins’ open lot

they’re built a bonfire to celebrate the peace. They’re dancing around it like scarecrows. (The Skin of Our Teeth, p.241)

The act of retrieval is realized in the medium of “Ideas”. Mr. Antrobus, the harbinger of the New World, in his role as Noah, expresses, “the desire to begin, again, to start building”. His struggle is symbolic of the struggle of the human race itself for greater civilization and endless refinement. He is our archetypal crusader for renewed life and newer vistas of security and happiness. He realizes, more than anybody else in the play that “every good and excellent thing in the world stands moment by moment on the razor edge of danger and must be fought for whether it’s a field, a home or a country”. Structurally the play continues to provide greater security for humanity against both natural and human catastrophes. Sabina announces the crusading zeal of Mr. and Mrs. Antrobus. They are “full of plans”. Ultimately the meaning of The Skin of Our Teeth is at various levels a grand retrieval from the precipice of many complex domestic, personal or even interpersonal and cosmic problems yet there is a basic centrality of vision and unity of an invincible purpose, to realize a temporal drama of his person-ages though represent an American microcosm yet has its appeal to the universality, as the themes of exploitation and manipulation convey their power of altering forever the ethics and dynamics of individuals in a society continues to change and pose a
threat at every age. The play though written at the backdrop of the Second World War, the human instincts for dominion over the other even after the fall of the iron curtain remains and continue to pose threats in others forms like curtailing individual's privacy and security etc. The increase in social, networking - connections hoist new challenges that make the humans of today to struggle for life in different spheres of life. The same instincts of struggle and survival continue and there would not be a possibility of human extinct at least till the "Dooms day"!

References