



PROBLEMATICS OF HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS: THE AMERICAN TRADITION OF COMEDY IN NEIL SIMON'S *PLAZA SUITE*

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ABSTRACT

Man is a social animal and in his relationships he can never be fully satisfied. The present paper will try to analyze the comic art of Neil Simon who offers a humorous look into this universal situation of man's dissatisfaction and his indifference in relationships. Simon uses low comedy and farce to portray the failure of human relationships in the American society. *Plaza Suite* is placed in the context of 1960s, the decade of sexual revolution in America. He employs popular theatrical techniques to portray the failure of 'American Dream' in private relationships. In *Plaza Suite*, all characters have achieved everything which they ought to achieve but still they feel culturally dislocated and dissatisfied. He makes the readers ponder over the American complacency over its abundance and revolutionary principles of individualism.

KEYWORDS: Human Relationships, Cultural Dislocation, Dissatisfaction, American Dream, Sexual Revolution, Plaza Suite, Neil Simon

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INTRODUCTION

Literature is the vital record of what men have seen in life, what relationships they have experienced and what they have thought and felt about those human relationships that have the most immediate and enduring interest for all of us. Man is a social animal and in his relationships he can never be fully satisfied. Man's satisfaction in his relationships never comes during his life and literature mirrors this irony of relationships. In the present paper, I will scrutinize the comic prowess of Pulitzer Prize-winning comic playwright Neil Simon who uses humour as a 'relief mechanism' to grapple with the pain, dissatisfaction, burden and the routine boredom of relationships. His plays expose human weaknesses and make people laugh at themselves. He uses innovative comic techniques set by popular taste to showcase the 'theme of boredom' without actually boring the audience. His portrayal of individual angst and dysfunctional

family relationships has been relieving audiences of their anxieties, fears and worries by making them laugh at their own foibles. In his study of human relationships, Simon keeps peeling away layers of psychological insight. The physical behaviour of his characters gets surfaced in their clownish physical behaviour. His aim is to purge the audience of the hardships of practical existence. His fans nicknamed him 'doc' because he relieves pain through laughter just as a doctor relieves pain through medicine.

Born in 1927, Marvin Neil Simon was the son of a Jewish fabric salesman who found it hard to express love for his wife and children. He has experienced a somewhat shaky personal life, but he has found that this only adds to the texture of his work. Desperate for the affection that his father withheld, the self-conscious young Simon found a substitute of sorts by teaming up with his older brother Danny to write gags for stand up comics and, later on, sketches for the Sid Caesar's "Your Show of Shows" and other

early TV variety series. He says- “When an audience laughed, I felt fulfilled. It was a sign of approval, of being accepted” (Teachout 72). His father Irving, a garment salesman, disappeared from time to time, leaving his wife, Mamie, to support their two sons by working at a department store and by relying on family and friends. After his parents divorced, Simon lived with relatives in Forest Hills, New York. Simon continued writing comedy after his brother quit to become a television director, and his work appeared on some of television's top shows. The pleasure was fading, however, so he began writing plays in 1960. Simon's first play, *Come Blow Your Horn*, was a modest hit. It was followed shortly thereafter with *Barefoot in the Park*, which ran on Broadway for four years. His third play, *The Odd Couple*, introduced two famous characters, Felix and Oscar, two men with failing marriages who move in together to save money and find that they have the same problems living with each other as they did with their wives. Simon's storylines usually presented conflicts between two people and were filled with funny one-liners. In the 1970s, Simon made an effort to add depth to his work by treating serious issues with comic touches. He presented works such as *Plaza Suite*, *The Last of the Red Hot Lovers*, the story of a married man in a mid-life crisis who has a series of affairs; *The Gingerbread Lady*, in which a one-time singer, who is now an alcoholic, struggles to make a comeback and *The Prisoner of Second Avenue*, which witnesses the nervous breakdown of a recently fired business executive.

With a fistful of Emmy and Academy Award nominations for screenplays, as well as a Golden Globe in hand, Neil Simon is one of the most honored popular playwright in the history of American comedy. Winning numerous Writers Guild Awards, not to mention a Lifetime Achievement Award from the American Comedy Association, Neil Simon has obviously led a lifetime filled with success. His most prestigious award was the Pulitzer Prize he won for his 1991 play *Lost in Yonkers*. The works of Neil Simon are evident everywhere you look. Having been successful in TV, film, and stage, Simon has recently completed a series of autobiographies, which covers just a fraction of his eventful life. His works, no matter what medium presented in, are appreciated by the masses.

In his use of black humour, Simon is greatly indebted to Chekhov. “In rejecting the traditional structure of interest and excitement in his plays, Chekhov set himself the task of presenting mediocrity, futility and boredom to his audience without boring them and making a broad general statement without losing the particularity needed to make sharp and realistic impact” (Satpathy 9). Like Chekhov, Simon focuses more on his characters rather than the plot. Instead of strong plot and striking events, Simon places weight on character's motive from the start. His comic art lies in juxtaposing individual attitudes in order to reveal an incongruous situation in its entirety.

The present paper will analyze the impact of the American tradition of comedy in Simon's portrayal of human relationships in his play *Plaza Suite*. In his use of popular theatrical techniques like vaudeville, jokes, gags, farce and one-liners, Simon is greatly influenced by the American tradition of comedy. American theatre has its roots in popular rather than elitist art forms. America is credited with popularizing and artistic perfection of these popular art forms which were earlier neglected in favour of 'elite' art forms in Europe. Its origins and evolution prior to the twentieth century were largely entertainment based, and Simon with his phenomenal success from both commercial and critical points of view has reached a wide audience through his comic techniques set by popular taste. To have a thorough grasp of his comic vision, let us have a look on the American tradition of comedy of which he becomes an indispensable part.

THE AMERICAN TRADITION OF COMEDY:

To get a glimpse of the American comic tradition it is not enough to study the history of American comedy, one has to study the roots of entertainment forms in America, as discussed earlier, their evolution and expansion is deeply rooted inside the American working class spirit. As no theatre forms are divorced from the culture in which they flourish, the native popular tradition of American theatre is rooted inside the American working class spirit. The roots of the American entertainment theatre are in popular mass cultural forms like the minstrel shows, the vaudeville, radio and sitcoms of the 1940s and 1950s.

Minstrel show was an American form of entertainment consisting of comic skits, variety acts, dancing and music performances by white people in black face or especially after the civil war, black people in black face. Despite reinforcing racist stereotypes, black face minstrelsy was a practice which provided relatively lucrative livelihood when compared to the menial labourhood to which blacks were relegated. American minstrelsy has its origins among the slaves of America's old South. In the 1930s, minstrel shows were replaced by more sophisticated theatrical forms like the vaudeville. Robert Toll notes:

"The vitality and vigor of the folk was brought into popular culture. It was immediate, unpretentious and direct. It had no characterization to develop, no plot to evolve, no musical score, no set speeches, no subsidiary dialogue indeed no fixed script at all. Each act- song, dance, joke or skit was a self-contained performance that strived to be a highlight of the show". (qtd. in Bordman 497)

The term Vaudeville in America is used to indicate an entertainment consisting of short, variegated acts, some musical, some comic, all offered on the same place.

Its vocal content was accompanied by many other kinds of acts; aerial acts, acrobatics and puppet shows. Vaudeville experience was not whimsical; it was planned to depict widely experienced American values, ideas, and problems. Bordman writes that the loose structure of many musical comedies of the period allowed artists who were essentially vaudevillians to find occasional homes there. The British counterpart of vaudeville, music hall comedy, was popular between 1850 and 1960. In England, the term vaudeville referred to more working class types of entertainment that would have been termed burlesque in America. These venues replaced earlier semi-rural entertainments provided by fairs and suburban pleasure gardens. The consequent change in musical taste from traditional to more professional forms of entertainment arose in response to the rapid industrialization and urbanization of previous rural populations during the Industrial Revolution. Alan Downer asserts that vaudeville, burlesque and

musical comedy contains the raw material for legitimate theatre (114).

THE AMERICAN TRADITION OF COMEDY IN *PLAZA SUITE*

In *Plaza Suite*, Simon exploits the formula of burlesque, vaudeville and sentimentality to portray cultural dislocation. However, he manages to retain sympathy for his characters. With the one-act structure of vaudeville, he can produce direct effect and immediate laughs. He can make serious points without losing mass appeal. His method is crucial both for commercial purpose and critical enquiry. *Plaza Suite* is flooded with one-liners and wisecracks that are at the heart of American comic dialogue. It successfully applies popular theatrical techniques of the vaudeville to portray serious condition of an alienated and centre less society. Nayar argues: "1960s in America was the era in which the limits between old and new, known and unknown, normal and abnormal were constantly being breached and plugged afresh" (23). The decade of the sixties can be described as the decade of illusion. With the urban situation turning into what Henry Miller once described 'as an air conditioned nightmare', the flight of middle-class America to the suburbia had begun, starting the second phase of urbanization. With the levels of income and consumption on a slow rise, the illusion of an affluent society was further strengthened. Beneath the razzle-dazzle of money and military power, the American society was fighting hard to come to terms with the growing threat of youth revolt and sexual permissiveness (Nayar 21). The imbalance of the public space was creating imbalance in private relationships. Problematics of relationships gives a sense of coherence and continuity to the plays of Simon. John Lahr rightly suggests:

"Simon's theatre is aimed at the silent majority- those people who have a romantic craving for sex, adventure, and new experiences but who are helpless to change wedded as they are to their bourgeois life. Frustrated, edgy, and insecure, Simon's characters have special difficulty maintaining long term relationships, whether it be within a marriage, a friendship, or a business

partnership. Material success alone fails to satisfy them; the prospect of aging frightens them; and in an increasingly fast-paced, impersonal world, they struggle to find a sense of belonging. Despite their personal problems, however, Simon's characters are essentially likable; indeed audiences readily identify with these imperfect, unheroic figures who are at heart decent human beings" (Koprince 2).

Plaza Suite comprises three one-act plays that take place in the suite no.719 of Plaza Hotel. All the three acts are united by the theme of marriage and boredom and are structured in the fashion of vaudeville. The first playlet, "Visitor from Mamaroneck", features Karen and Sam Nash, a middle aged couple, who, as they celebrate their twenty third anniversary, are experiencing marital difficulties. The second playlet, "Visitor from Hollywood", also deals with the issues of infidelity, describing how a suave movie producer, Jessy Kiplinger, attempts to seduce his former high school sweetheart, Muriel Tate. In the third playlet, "Visitor from Forest Hills", Roy and Norma Hubley discover that their daughter, Mimsey, has locked herself in the hotel bathroom on her wedding day, refusing to get married, as she is suspicious of the whole institution of marriage.

The first act, "Visitor from Mamaroneck", carefully portrays the sense of middle age panic where Sam Nash, in his determination to remain young, considers his wife Karen old fashioned and unattractive. Simon describes forty eight years old Karen as a "pleasant, affable woman who has let weight and age take their natural course" (497). Karen believes in the traditional saying 'old is gold'. In the hotel room, when she asks the bellhop whether hotel authorities are planning to build a luxury hotel in place of Plaza Hotel, the bellhop answers:

"Bellhop- Why? This is a luxury hotel.

Karen- Yeah, but it's an old luxury hotel. Today it has to be new. Old is no good any more (499)"

"Visitor from Mamaroneck" portrays the sense of loss and nostalgia over marital love. Traditionally, vaudeville is known to be a comic form that celebrates the idea of romantic love but Simon in

Plaza Suite uses vaudeville not to celebrate romantic love but to portray that it is gone. Karen has felt a steady decline, a slow recession in her husband's love for her over the years. She makes an effort to rekindle her marriage with Sam by celebrating their anniversary in the same hotel suite no.719 in which they celebrated their honeymoon twenty three years ago. For Karen, old age is a natural phenomenon and by getting slim she does not want to disturb the balance of nature. She lies on the bed and poses sexily to bear the indifference of her husband. She says:

"I like you flabby. I admit you look like one of the Pepsi generation, but it seems a little unnatural to me. A man of your age ought to have a couple of pounds of skin hanging over his belt. When you open your belt I expect it to go like a can of coffee- Pzzzz." (511)

Sam is not interested in saving their marriage, as he is content with the pleasures of his own good looks, which he attains through rigorous torture in gym, his work and his affair with his young secretary. He gives an absurd explanation about his affair. He replies to Karen:

"Sam- I don't know if you can understand this... but when I came home after the war... I had my whole life in front of me. And all I dreamed about, all I wanted was to get married and to have children, and to make success of my life... Well I was lucky... I got it all.

Karen- Then what is it you want?

Sam- I just want to do it all over again." (529)

Sam is standing at the border of old and new values. He wants the best of both worlds; the security of the institution of marriage and the liberty of the present consumer culture where one can get new partners every week, if one adopts a particular lifestyle. Being a product of the consumer culture, he wants everything that is easily available. He expects Karen to understand his obsession to revive his youth and his need for few extramarital affairs. She is expected to follow the respectability of a puritanical wife. Yet he expects her to act like a modern assertive woman who is equally aware of her feminist rights. She is in a cruel dilemma. If she acts like a submissive and

forgiving wife, she will become an unattractive and old-fashioned woman in the eyes of Sam because he says:

“Stop accepting everything in life that’s thrown at you. Fight back once in a while. Don’t understand me. Hate me! I am not going through a middle age adjustment. I’m having an affair. Aren’t we civilized? Call me a bastard. Throw the coffee at me”. (531, 533)

If she abuses him, he might get a chance to scream and leave her saying that she cannot understand his individual privacy. He may blame her that she has no autonomy of her own and is deriving her individuality from marital relationship. She cannot abuse him because it will make things easy for him. She says:

“It makes everything nice and simple for you. Now you can leave here the martyred, misunderstood husband. Well, I won’t give you the satisfaction. You’re a pussycat. I’ll have milk and cookies for you when you get home. I’m a forgiving woman”. (534)

In “Visitor from Mamaroneck” both the partners are disillusioned by their dream of reviving romance in their lives. Their dream of bringing romance back becomes instrumental in the failure of marriage. Here Simon portrays the changing perceptions of marriage among American middle-class couples. This act argues for a re-examination of the democratic principles of individuality and sexual permissiveness that dominated the American scene during the sixties and even today. The same conflict is at the heart of the second act “Visitor from Hollywood”, where two individuals indulge in momentary sex to escape their ailments that are result of a chaotic society to which they belong.

In “Visitor from Hollywood”, Muriel and Jessy cannot distinguish between love and sex. They engage in momentary sex to fill the emotional void inside them. Jessy Kiplinger is a famous Hollywood producer who has been cuckolded by three wives, and who has come to New York in search of his high school sweetheart, Muriel Tate, who can convince him that life is not all delusion and deceit. He says to Muriel:

“I’m trying to impress you with the fact that you are the only, solitary, real, honest- to-

goodness, unphony woman that I have been with since the day I arrived in Hollywood seventeen years ago”. (548)

He cannot believe the fact that there are any honest women. He wants to see Muriel, to reaffirm his faith in the world. He considers his three wives, as the worst bitches and sees Muriel as ‘the last of the dying breed’. In the eyes of Jessy, she is the quintessential innocent virgin who can assure him of his masculinity again. He is looking for a real and honest woman. But Simon implies that he would not recognize one if he gets one. He is a shallow person, desperately trying to prove that he exists by an endless succession of mindless sexual conquests. When Muriel asks him about his three wives, he replies:

“I gave them love, I gave them home, I gave them a beautiful way of life and the three bitches took me for every cent I got. They took the guts out of me. They were phony, unfaithful, all of them. Did you know I caught my first wife, Dolores, in bed with a jockey? A jockey! Do you know what it does to a man’s self respect to find his wife in the sack with a four foot eight shrimp, weighs a hundred and twelve pounds?” (553)

“Visitor from Hollywood” shows cosmopolitan male’s attempt to seduce the un-cosmopolitan female. The seduction scene is simple because both Jessy and Muriel want it to take place. What complicates matters is that each wants more out of the seduction than a sexual interlude (Johnson 37). Jessy wants to recapture the manly confidence he felt when young. Disillusioned by his success, he sees Muriel as a symbol of his comparatively more innocent pre-Hollywood life. Muriel admits that her own marriage is a mess. She and her husband Larry do not have much of a marriage. He has taken over her father’s business and sometimes he does not come home at night. Both hope the world can change for one hour. Jessy ignores the fact that Muriel has become a frustrated, calculating, hard drinking housewife. Both fornicate a fantasy to escape from their lives. (39).

For Muriel and Jessy, emotions towards each other are not important. What is important is the enjoyment of the physical act. Ironically, both

engage in mechanical sex to get rid of mechanical pattern of life. The mechanical act is not replaced by the emotional act, but by the other mechanical act which further increases their alienation. The life of modern man becomes a series of isolated mechanical acts. Simon's use of the structure of vaudeville is essential in portraying the mechanical alienation of modern man which would not be possible in a holistic drama. Form and content of the play are compatible with each other. The isolated acts of the vaudeville are instrumental in portraying life of the modern man which is similar to the series of isolated mechanical acts of the vaudeville.

In act 3, "Visitor from Forest Hills", Simon uses one-liners, jokes and gags to show the lack of communication between Roy and Norma. They lack serious communication and remain limited to firing of gags and repartees against each other. Frequent repartees portray their failure in parenthood and marriage. Simon is able to portray the lack of 'sense' between these two people by resorting to the technique of 'nonsense'.

Simon further intensifies his theme, lost values in a centreless universe, by using farce. In this act, he portrays the conflict between parents and children where lack of communication further intensifies the conflict between two generations. Present generation shows suspicion towards the sanctity of all social institutions, including marriage. Its distrust of the past values is branded as waywardness and spoilt behaviour by the older generation. The older generation is more concerned about the social reputation associated with traditional customs. The new generation, regardless of social reputation, attempts to re-examine the traditional customs and institutions according to its self. It is more concerned about the 'self' rather than the 'collective'.

In this act, Norma and Roy Hubble have rented the same suite no.719, mentioned earlier in two previous acts, and the Plaza Ballroom for their daughter Mimsey's wedding, but she has locked herself in the bathroom and refuses to get married. Hubbles are unable to communicate with their sensitive daughter because they are concerned about their own social reputation, marital and financial problems.

The hilarious and improbable situations in this act stem from the efforts of Hubbles to communicate with Mimsey. Roy, father of Mimsey, is indebted to every rental agency in New York City and very angry with his daughter's irresponsible behaviour. The couple screams, rants, pleads, whispers and tries to climb through the bathroom window to talk to Mimsey. Laughter evokes, as they are going through torture not because they are concerned about their daughter's future but because they have spent excessively on her wedding. Norma should focus her concern on what Mimsey is thinking and feeling on her wedding day. Instead, she switches her concern to herself. She is afraid of what Roy would say to her when he discovers what Mimsey has done. As soon as he enters the suite, he says:

"I got sixty eight guests, nine waiters, four musicians and a boy with a wedding license waiting downstairs. This is your father. I want you and your eight hundred dollar dress out of there in five seconds!" (564)

that wedding is costing him. Norma is more concerned about her reputation in her friend circle in New York.

Roy and Norma are caught up in a pathetic situation. They try to relieve their pain by engaging in jokes about the wedding. When Roy chuckles, Norma notes that there is no joy in his laughter. She asks him, if he finds this awkward situation funny. He replies:

"Yes, I find something funny about this. I find it funny that I hired a photographer for three hundred dollars. I find it hysterical that the wedding pictures are going to be you and me in front of a locked bathroom!" (573)

Tragic situation of Roy is portrayed through physical activity. He tries to reach Mimsey by breaking the bathroom door. In the process, he gets his arm broken. Then he attempts to reach her through the window of bathroom which is seven stories from the ground. When Norma asks him to handle the matter with calmness and advises him not to upset Mimsey by shouting at her, he loses all his patience and screams at her:

"Don't get her upset? I'm hanging seven stories from gargoyles in a pouring rain and you want me to worry about her...? You

know what she's doing in there? She is playing with her false eyelashes. I'm out there fighting for my life with pigeons and she's playing with eyelashes... I already made up my mind. The minute I get my hands on her, I'm gonna kill her. Once I show them the wedding bills, no jury on earth would convict me... And if by some miracle she survives, let there be no talk of weddings... Let her become a librarian with thick glasses and a pencil in her hair, I'm not paying for any more cancelled weddings". (575)

Hubleys cannot understand that they are doing exactly the same that is troubling Mimsey. She wants an easy assurance from them but they are busy fighting with each other.

Finally, Mimsey emerges, not at her parent's pleading but because her fiancé, Borden, storms to the door and shouts "Mimsey? This is Borden... Cool it!"(581). He finally exits without showing any more emotion. The Hubleys stare after, as he closes the door. The final moment of the play is very funny when Roy tells his daughter:

"I break every bone in my body and you come out for "Cool it"? Kid's today don't care. Not like they did in my day". (581, 582)

The comically cryptic words of Borden and the final melodramatic ending are effective in stating how little the Hubleys communicate in relation to how much they talk. Sheila Geitner notes that there is much physical activity in this sketch, which contrasts naively to the lack of constructive emotional activity between the parents and children.

CONCLUSION

From the above discussion it can be aptly said that *Plaza Suite* realistically portrays the failure of American dream in the private life. He makes the readers ponder over the American complacency over its abundance and revolutionary principles of individualism. Edythe Mc Govern notes that the characters in *Plaza Suite* discover that winning the goal does not necessarily bring the satisfaction (qtd. in Johnson 39). This play does not endorse the optimistic view of marriage found in his early comedies. His approach is more realistic, as he is

neither romanticizing traditional values nor criticizing modern values. Simon's approach towards family values is similar to Edward Albee who, according to C.W.E Bigsby, "substitutes faith in human relationships and a restored sense of community for the failure of individualism and American revolutionary principles" (qtd. in Nayar 24).

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