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**'INDIVIDUAL AND SOCIAL CONDITIONING': AN APPRAISAL OF DAVID WILLIAMSON'S
PLAYS**

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ABSTRACT

In contemporary Australian literary Scenario, David Williamson is a versatile playwright whose analysis of his society and evaluation of human behavior is utterly realistic. His writing covers almost every segment of the concerned socio-cultural environment. The present study deliberates on man *vis-à-vis* social milieu in his oeuvre. Through textual illustrations and critical assessment, it has been demonstrated how social conditioning of an individual takes place and gives it a unique but queer shape.

Keywords: Conditioning, Environment, Man, Society.

Man is the product of his time and environment in which he lives. Time is always on wings, and the changes which occur in the socio-cultural environment affect the behavioral pattern of the people. It has been seen that environment has in it a power to mould an individual, and the same moulding and framing of his character may be either positive or negative depends on the behavioral pattern- doings and sayings of the general people in the social setup. The values and ideals of every society have a crucial role to play in the proper and positive development of an individual both in terms of his psychological and sociological matters. In this way man and his social surroundings are complimentary, and it is difficult to think of an adequately nourished man in terms of his physical, psychological and mental faculties without an external congenial environment saturated with sound moral values along with pure natural ambience. So the relationship between the two is one of mutually interdependence and both are well-coordinated.

So far as literature is concerned, it is also a product and result of various social and environmental phenomena. The term 'environment' when used broadly in any cultural practice, it is never confined to outside nature generally called handiwork of god. But it is an umbrella term which covers all the elements in social, political and cultural settings along with its usual denotation of external nature. Modern man is materially considered progressed, but spiritually he is bankrupt. The reason behind the same is his rejection of ethical ideals and traditional social practices which used to support the edifice of that life full of satisfaction and bliss. It has been researched that well-being and invigorating life for people is possible only, when they are endowed upon with environment possessing all social, moral and spiritual ideals and principles. So the sound social setup is a prerequisite for a sound individual. If one is defected, then other is affected adversely.

David Williamson shows great concern with environment and its affiliation with and influence on man. He looks upon individual as a social and natural being in his dramatic work. To dramatize this type of relation between the two, he takes recourse in the technique of naturalism with its different dimensions. The literary

method naturalism is not his own invention, but it has been already used by the writers particularly playwrights across the European and American continents for the realization of heterogeneous purposes in the literary productions. But the application of the literary form called naturalism is diverse, and different authors have used it for different objectives. The common use of the method is said to give an accurate depiction of life and its whereabouts even more than traditional realism. But it is not all. Actually naturalistic philosophy is the result of post-Darwinian biology. According to this science that a human being exist in the order of nature, and does not possess a soul or does not have any nexus with a spiritual or religious and supernatural agency besides this natural visible world. Therefore, a man is mere a higher order animal whose behavior is determined by factors like- heredity and environment. The philosophy stresses that every person inherits instincts especially hunger, impulse to have possessions, and sexuality. Similarly, he or she is subjected to the social and economic pressures within the family, the class, and the environment in which they are born.

Williamson's application of the concept of naturalism is slightly different from the other writers of this mode. According to this new usage that everything that exists is a part of nature and can be well explicated by references to nature and natural causes rather than by any supernatural, spiritual and other paranormal causes. Therefore, it can be said that society, culture, and natural environment have a vital role to play in framing the sensibility of an individual. So he or she may be understood only in relation to them. They are framing factors responsible for both sociological and psychological upbringings of man. Actually Williamson has derived his thought of naturalism not from European and American fictional writers but from Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen. Ibsen wielded a strong influence on the nineteenth century dramaturgy throughout the world. He has used this naturalistic mode with great efficacy and has become a model to be followed. His play *Ghosts* (1881) is a prototype in this field. As a model in naturalistic mode, Ibsen's *Ghosts* assimilates all its principles and features: its themes that deals with the inner conflicts of the characters; a dramatic ambience that is closely related to the real people and cultural period of the play; and the milieu that favours individual interaction.

This naturalistic mode and environmental conditioning play a vital role in David Williamson's plays. One of his avid readers Peter Fitzpatrick defines the importance of naturalistic mode in relation to his dramatic oeuvre and says that naturalism is a 'slippery term' and goes on to explain that "sometimes it is used as though it were synonymous with a simple verisimilitude; on other occasions it seems to imply a particular set of philosophical assumptions, and a belief in the determining power of environment" (*David Williamson* 23). Applying this definition of naturalism to Williamson's dramaturgy, it aptly suits in both ways. He is a realist writer whose situations and characters are closely attached to social and cultural environment. This environment has an inevitable role in determining the role of a character and thereby to pattern his or her individuality in a peculiar way. The social and cultural setting also provides a suitable chance for a person to give vent his psychological motivation in the form of internal emotions, thoughts, and conflicts while dealing with the given situation. His recurrent themes are certainly like- insecurities, inadequacies, uncertainties and other related concerns and dealings of Australian middle class people as he asserts: "I was really obsessively interested in human personality, in group behaviour, in the psychology of human species" (Sammut 105). All these explications evince that Williamson exploits both the social and psychological grounds of man, and demonstrates their interaction and inter-influence in a natural background. The writer himself expresses it very pertinently: "Social life is the constant juggling of three of the deepest of human needs and one of them is our egocentric selves. We seek status, power, love, affection; all of those things we are very egocentric, but we are all highly social creatures" (Sammut 230-31). Moreover, his dramas are representation of local truth and ethos. He places his audience or readers in such a way that they may identify themselves with social situations and character constructs. These are iconic representations possessing not topical reality but also connote universal phenomena and psychological profundity. The same is affirmed by the playwright in an elaborate manner in an interview:

I think I have been reflecting over 35 years now fairly accurately the surface interaction patterns of Australian society that I have perceived, and how they changed with times, but as I said before I also have charted the eternal underneath that surface pattern. But in terms of how it's affected Australia I wouldn't be bold enough to countenance. So all I can do as a writer is to put it out there and to feel

gratified when it is having an impact, and hope that the impact – and it's not just an impact of recognition on surface behaviour, but an impact of truth, of core behaviour. (Sammut 229-30).

Williamson's early plays- *Dons Party*, *The Removalists*, and *The Club* create the caricatures in order to mirror the limitations of individuals who are stumped by the social roles and restrictions. Margaret Williams justifies the formation of the limited characterization or stereotypes in David Williamson's plays in this critical way: "the image of man in Australian drama is collective and social rather than individual ("Mask and Cage" 32). Similarly Brian Kiernan explains that the playwright's use of stereotypical characters has the purpose of exploring the patterns of social behavior, rather than individual and the same stems from his interest in social psychology. According to Williamson these "stereotypes have a dramatic function". Thus, it can be said that stereotypical characterization is a main device to show the real picture of socio-cultural system in which individuals are narrowly placed. And whenever they try to overcome unwanted condition and channelize their own ways and methods of life, they become victims. Their goals are determined by the outer environment which never let them to grow up to the full fledged individuals and develop their own identity independent from other attendant factors. Therefore, Williamson also creates the same situation suitable for such characterization. These limited and underdeveloped characters aptly represent their real counterparts. Moreover, the dramatist never binds these characters with the net of time and space, and curtails their significance. But he bestows upon them with common human elements seen at the universal level. His naturalistic mode of shaping characters is more like Donald Prizer than Emile Zola and also Henrik Ibsen. For these latter writers, naturalistic personages are men of flesh and bones taken from the reality and are analyzed scientifically without a mixture of any lie. But Donald later on modified the concept and redefined it as depicting individuals who deal with the raw experiences of everyday life as truthfully as possible. These *dramatis personae* are caught up and determined by heredity and environment as well as chance (214). Certainly, the outright naturalistic characterization shows individuals as conditioned and moulded by society and heredity. These characters are demonstrated as fighting with their inherent emotions, their uncertainties and inadequacies, and thereby they generally succumb to these forces, and rarely emerge as jubilant. Another feature of this naturalistic type of characterization is the use of 'subtext'. This concept of subtext can be better understood with the definition of J. A. Cuddon: "What is under or below, what is not said or done, what is implied, suggested or hinted at" (931). Through this 'subtext' device, the writer shows individual's innermost feelings and thoughts while placing him in social circumstances. Thus, he is able to highlight the natural bond between man and environment. This external environment motivates a person to lay bare, if not directly, his or her psychological pulls and pressures. Besides, Williamson's creation of 'subtext' also displays superficiality and facetious reality of Australian society. Through it, he has been able to express the idea that ordinary people like stereotypes too have psychological depth of their own.

Don in *Don's Party* and Maureen in *Face to Face* seem to be the personages that the dramatist perceives as 'natural'. When evaluated within the purview of the plot, they emerge certainly as full-fledged characters. They are both the outcome of their societies and environmental conditioning. Don's failure to run smoothly with his married life is an important issue for him. But as he is product of the outer circumstances, and as a male has been conditioned to emotionally free himself from his feelings and thoughts. Maureen Tregaskis is also a confined and helpless victim of her social moulding. Though she feels safe to express to display his motherly concern and passion for her son, Glen, yet she shies away to leak out much about the relation secretly developed with her son's boss, Greg Baldoni. David Williamson identifies such an emotional curtailment in her character and delineates her on the patterns of realism. She uses superficial mask over which she has no absolutely control, and so in the process discloses the awful personal matters. Maureen is indeed portrayed as a 'surface' caricature who is hesitant always to remove her social veneer. She is as realistic or naturalistic as the playwright perceives her in actual conditions, and therefore, has been framed to represent the social ethos and endemic truth. Thus, the critical study of her portrayal may lead to the recognition of general human concerns of her class and sex.

In his "Introduction" to *After the Ball*, David Williamson identifies the law that society conditions an individual, and adds that his engagement in his writing is to analyze these people in social circumstances

particularly when they are in conflict. By asserting this, he foregrounds the idea of mutual dependence and confluence between man and his enviring world. Williamson is surely preoccupied with the distressed social interaction within a particular environment of Australian middle class society. He ceaselessly shows his interest with the social conditioning and external influence on his personages, and how they see themselves and behave in accordance with this self-awareness and perception. It is this conditioning and its effects on the mentality of person that constitutes an essence in the characterization of Williamson's dramas. The dramatist himself confirms this view in relation to his play *Don's Party* in the following manner:

I believe that this cross-section [Australian middle class] may prove of interest dramatically because education has, in general, revealed to them the arbitrary nature of many social norms and institutions in a country in which these norms are enforced more rigidly than in most countries of comparable economic status (Kiernan: *David Williamson* 97).

In *Don's Party*, there is Don, the host and failed novelist, now a high school teacher; Evan the irritable professional; Mal who has a strong desire of becoming prime minister, is at present a worker in administer, and the notorious Cooley, is a lawyer, a larrikin. These people are delineated as men in familial affairs and social involvement and social interaction. All these issues provide the grain to Williamson's technique of satirical mill. The men along with their women are all sketched as stereotypes and apparently as superficial. Their social conduct at the party discloses everything regarding their nature and temperamental tendencies. Whatever they do in the form of saying and action show that they are child brains of post world war civilization devoided of all moral and spiritual concerns. They have been conditioned and patterned by the time and circumstances which were out of joint. The couples and lovers attending the Don's party equip the playwright with means to display how people let their identity and individuality to be fashioned and circumscribed by the environmental conditioning. Whether they express or repress their aspirations and feelings, their behavior reveal very well their inner reality. Their coarse conversation and communication by using one-liners dialogue act as 'teasers'. These dialogues do not say much about the persons and situation involved, but suggests a good deal of their social and psychological reality. This type of thinly drawn characterization permits the writer speed up the action of the plot without hanging on any particular point. All the things like pointed and quick retorts, swift pace of the action and farcical treatment of solemn situations do all belong to this community. Their social status and position are denoted by their disposition. If the text of the play be evaluated from the postmodern perspective, a reader may realize that the perceived surface treatment is an effective tool in itself to project accurately the *dramatis personae* with their own context of middle class Australian of the 70s. These people may be understood with many fleeting identities, but with none fixed and real one.

Moreover, the peculiar fascination of the play lies in its character of Cooley, a larrikin. He is delineated ironically and satirically. Named as Cooley, but has not an iota of coolness in his personality. He is an ambiguous character, concealing his mental potential, learning, and personal limitations under the veil of his social position. He is representation of urban Australian 'ocker'. Although the external characteristics of his character seem utterly shallow and superficial, yet despite the same Cooley has an inner inkling of truth in his overall makeup. Due to the same feature in his personality, he is identified with by the readers. This familiar part in his person encourages the readers or audience to go beneath the surface in order to see the common features. Since the publication of the play, Cooley is continuously liked by the Australian mass and has become an emblematic figure for a certain cohort of the community. In his character, Williamson has shown a force of social conditioning and community behavior works on an individual. Through this peculiar character, he shows a new but eternal truth about the typical masculinity of the suburbs. Thus, the playwright acknowledges rightly the value and significance of the stereotypes.

The portrayal of Cooley is a prominent instance of naturalistic characterization. The method shapes and shows characters in a literary work as natural beings who can be better understood in relation to material causes and natural environment. Cooley as also moulded by his social conditioning is worth of explication and psychological exploration prerequisite to naturalism. David Williamson, however, depicts his image as he sees him in social milieu talking and acting, and focus on his immoral and ludicrous bent of mind. Cooley is presented with sexual mania and with strange characteristics of larrikin, Australian male. Underneath this

blunt and crass manifestation can be discerned a chain of emotional and psychological currents which are only implied. It is on the basis of the same, that Cooley's character is indefinable. As soon as one gets a glimpse of him, he is recognized and even participated by the readers in his undertakings. He is symbol of human weaknesses inherited by one and all, and it is the same which make the readers to enjoy and embrace Cooley. Though his grossness and vulgarity is not liked by some sections of society, yet his uncertainty and confusion of existence which is a universal phenomenon make him likeable and acceptable for all. His susceptibility and sensitivity to surrounding environment foregrounds the facts which are true to all humans when seen in local or universal context.

All the male personages in *Don's Party* like Don, Cooley, and Evan are all realities of their own times. They have been framed with the mores and morals of their environment. The emotional reticence displayed by Cooley peculiarity is reminiscent of David Williamson's predecessor in Australian dramaturgy Ray Lawler's *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* (1957). Lawler's creates in this play character named Roo who is also a product of his social conditioning and environment. He is utterly deranged and displaced due to the loss of his lover. He breaks and destroys the gift, seventeenth doll, and thus expresses his unspoken anger and feeling of loss. Moreover, David Williamson, through such characters demonstrates diverse moments of being and belonging. He places these male larrikins or ockers in the historical context with adequate cultural and temporal evidences. They retain their meaning and sense through the passing time as they materialize the essence of their historical moments and the social circumstances. So these character constructs are iconic of their spatial and temporal reality as their study at once reminds readers the real people and their surrounding situations. It is thus on the basis of the same that they endure the fluctuation of time without losing the significance and strength. Therefore, if Williamson like Shakespeare may not be called "not of an age but for all times", but he certainly he can be called of his time and society as he has been able to hold the mirror up to the Australian society. And this mirror will persistently and pertinently reflect the said social setup with all its mores as well as taboos. All These ideas have been summed up by the playwright himself in the following critical manner:

Behaviour is never really different from age to age –we still lust after the opposite sex, we still in fact experience envy, we are still highly competitive, we are still acquisitive, and we still face the existential life problems. And what the characters in *Don's Party* are facing is the fact that they are into their 30s and the map they had of their lives, much earlier in their lives, isn't working out according to plan – the dreams of glory – the dreams of successful career – their dreams of perfect marriages – the wonderful children – their friendships – all of those dreams are being questioned at Don's party and that's universal in any society. (Sammut 228)

The characters in *The Removalists* do all have naturalistic origin. They are undoubtedly stereotypical and also typical of a certain cohort of community. They symbolize a significant epoch in their lives with historical and cultural consciousness. The three male *dramatis personae* Sergeant Simmonds, Constable Ross and Kenny despite with their personal limitations and weaknesses, reflect the endemic environment and signify the situational and a particular belonging. Due to such state of affairs of *The Removalists*, the character construct and the plot-construction can be diachronically evaluated as it possesses significations and relevance over time and space. Moreover, Williamson as already mentioned prefers to observe 'beneath the surface' the incidents and situations that form the behavioural pattern of these male characters particularly Simmonds and Ross. They represent the deeply entrenched brutality and corruption that lie beneath the façade of the concerned society. Williamson is able to notice the undercurrent of social foibles and faults and thereby manifests the same in a very concrete manner. His strategy of dealing with the grave themes by using the intersection of irony, satire and comedy along with truncated characterization enable his imagination to weave a social fabric which elucidate the post world war milieu accurately and exactly. The disturbing and horrifying end of *The Removalists* is the ultimate fruit of seed sown by Sergeant Simmonds and Constable Ross. Their projection as individuals in the play can never be redeemed and expatiated. The readers may hardly compromise with the atrocious roles played by these two police men through the play. It is on the basis of such stark reality of Australian society which lends to his depiction a crude realism full of potential to give a

strong feel of moral depravity and degeneration rampant everywhere there. David Williamson through this unique character-construct is able to show the influence of environment which affects every sphere of man's existence. It not only involves the social conduct of a person, but also it chisels one's psyche and thus it becomes a part of his or her upbringing and in that way the whole life.

Kenny, another drunkard and amorous character in *The Removalists* is also a creation of his time and environment. Williamson through his character sketch is able to "exhibit virtually all the manifested traits in human nature". He also manages to offset the darkness "with the noisy good nature of the larrikin Kenny" (Leslie Rees: *A History of Australian Drama Vol. II, 121*). While reading the play, it seems that it is not so much the 'good nature' of Kenny that offsets everything but the comedy inherent in various situations. The fact that the drama ultimately concludes in the death of Kenny cannot deny the comedy that reverberates throughout the play. It may not be mandatory to evaluate the play from Kenny's point of view whatever the approach may be. Kenny does not need to be gauged as the only good male character in the play. There is no really good man in the whole plot. If Kenny be sympathized, the same degree of sympathy or empathy can be extended to Constable Ross or even Sergeant Simmonds. They are products of their society and external factors. Even if Williamson provides some information for reading individually-psychologically, they are fundamentally the characters who enact the values and ideals of a system. The playwright himself feels so as he asserts:

To those critics who have suggested that I am unsympathetic to Kenny, the Sergeant and Ross, I can only answer that I'm not. I am deeply sympathetic. They are not horrific, but their conditioning is. (*The Removalists: A Conjunction of Limitations*" 416)

Like Sergeant Simmonds, Frank an elderly protagonist of *Travelling North*, also gives certain social and temporal moments of the Australian society through his role. Frank, a learned retired engineer hailing from middle class background is a sensitive person, fond of visiting museums and art galleries. Though different from Simmonds who is embodiment of dark and bleak characteristic traits, yet Frank shares his fellow protagonist's tough masculinity and macho ego, as his beloved France's expresses it candidly: "Very arrogant and irritating old man" (*Collected Plays, Volume II, 239*). But still the readers learn more facts about Frank's life and his environment than they get from the character study of Sergeant Simmonds. Frank's depiction is somehow empathic and sympathetic. He evokes feelings of personal understanding. It seems continuously that he is also the product of social conditions and mould of the cultural codes and conventions of the Australian tough male ideology, despite being highly educated and learned person. He represents a man good at 'mateship' and sexual heroism. His character manifests the 'blokey' culture and pub comradeship, so common among the Australian middle class people. The delineation of Frank's sketch is also based on naturalistic mode. His role in the play displays also certain feelings and ideas belonging to him only, in spite of being totally the creation of his society and historical moments. Frank's projection has the potential to be actualized as a 'round' construction made up of 'flesh and blood'. He also sometimes takes readers near to the point to be disliked by them due to his unconcerned attitude towards his near and dear ones particularly when he ignores the desires and demand of his beloved Frances. But the study of his portrayal and his part in the play leaves an impression behind that David Williamson has created a figure for Australian public to be identified. His personality shares many traits of his people both in terms of his mentality and his practical behavior which he shows while dealing with others.

Bearing in mind all the above elaborated explanations and textual references of David Williamson's plays, it is evident that social conditioning, environmental pressures, temporal and spatial impact have a very crucial role to play in moulding the temperamental and even overall personality of an individual. Man is a compendium of diverse aspects which are mostly conflicting in nature. These characteristic aspects can be seen in various socio-cultural forms such as social and moral obligations, traditions values, ethics, customs, economic pressures and pulls and above all religious bindings. All these forces are responsible behind the formation of man's psyche and are also motivating factors for any undertaking. It is this external visible miscellaneous world which determines the inner self of an individual. His or her involvement in any social and political activity is not as per desire, but as the socially constructed system demands. It has been persistently seen throughout this chapter that man is what environment makes him, and his role in life is always qualified

by it. Even though sometimes certain people try to go against the set rules of society by embarking on enterprises of their personal interest, but ultimately it is social environment which emerges more powerful. David Williamson in his plays indefatigably inclines to show a man as a marionette in the supremacy of set ideology in any society. This ideology has diverse dimensions like social, political, legal, economic, and religious and so on. All these forces wield a strong influence on a person irrespective of time and space. They are so powerful that he unwittingly accepts and assimilates them though sometimes he does not like it. Therefore, it can be said with adequate evidences that the essence of one's existence lies in his environment and social scenario. It is the same social environment which makes a man little or great depending on the nature of social customs and practices.

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Note about the writer of the paper: I am ALTAF AHMAD BHAT, assistant professor (English) at Govt. Degree College Shopian. I am M Phil & Ph. D (pursuing) and have published a number of papers in different nation and international journals. The present paper is the result of my own study and therefore, is authentic, original and fit for publication.
