

A Study of Family Economy in the Select Plays of Clifford Odets

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Abstract

This paper tries to explore the financial position of the family and its members in the plays of Clifford Odets. The plays discussed in this paper describe the tyranny and frustration caused by the Great Crash that prevailed in the families of the then America. During the 1930s, America was challenged by a great economic crash. In the world history, America's financial plight was more significant and it impacted a great social, economic, political and moral turmoil worldwide. On October 24, 1929 the stock market business faced a great crash resulting in a major setback in the world economy. People of all quarter of the world were affected and likewise the Americans. The consequence and the economic challenge of the Great Crash changed the outlook on life. The American literature of the 1930s was backed up with themes based on the fallen economy. One among the many dramatists who penned plays that portrayed the accurate dismay of the people affected by the Great Crash was Clifford Odets. Having the Great Crash as background, almost all his plays including *Waiting for Lefty*, *Paradise Lost*, *Golden Boy*, *Rocket to the Moon* and *Awake and Sing!* focus on the problems of family and its members, especially of the working class and their clash with the capitalist class and of Jewish family respectively during the Great Depression of America. Odets was able to understand the life of the members of the family struggling under financial constraint caused by the Great Crash and wrote about the characters that were walk in the streets of the great nation in a vivid manner.

KEYWORDS: Family, Economy, financial, frustration

Economy is a major factor that has control over the happiness of a family. A family with a sustained economy relishes and enjoys the beauty of life whereas a family deprived of sustainable economy is pushed to an extreme where its members strive hard to cope with the financial crisis for a living. The two extreme ends of economic condition fix the standard of living of a family. The economic condition of a family in any given nation cannot be a constant phenomenon and is prone to fluctuation. If fluctuation is meagre and makes no impact on a family well and good. If the fluctuation is herculean and affects a family, it becomes a concern of not only the family but of the nation.

When we talk of family economy, in pre-industrial era, family served as an economic unit whence they produced their own needs and exchanged with goods that they were in need of and the excess produce to be sold off in market. Their production were culture and tradition based and mostly were of agricultural produce. And it in turn demarcated their social and economic status. There came a remarkable change in the system when European countries blooming in with industrial development and family as an economic unit, once a producer, have become a unit of consumption. The members of the family were pushed to the state where they would become labourers, especially of industry to earn their livelihood. This changed the economy of the family. This shift from family to industrial labouring was also happening in

America simultaneously. Family, large and small, as a single unit started enjoying the benefits of industrial labouring and they were flourishing until the country witnessed the great crash in 1929.

During the 1930s, America was challenged by a great economic crash. In the world history, America's financial plight was more significant and it impacted a great social, economic, political and moral turmoil worldwide. On October 24, 1929 the stock market business faced a great crash resulting in a major setback in the world economy. People of all quarter of the world were affected and likewise the Americans. Economists and Businessmen attributed several causes to the Great Crash and pinned over-production as the most important among the factors that caused it. Over-production has been there since World War I and it made many men paupers. The impact not only affected the working class, but also the capitalists who thought otherwise. They thought of cutting the wages of the workers or they simply laid off leaving the workers to their fate. People lamented over under employment and unemployment and it became a national phenomenon. Family of the workers started disintegrating under disillusionment and the earning members were wriggling their hands not knowing what to do. Most of them lost their job or underpaid for their labour and as a result they lost their command over their family members. Pessimism ruled the nation and people were driven mad psychologically. Bread queues were on road sight and agitations were most common phenomenon nationwide. Poverty, despair, anger and depression ruled over the nation and people lost faith in democracy. The consequence and the economic challenge of the Great Crash changed the outlook on life. The people of the country, irrespective of the social or economic status, become homeless and unemployed. Many were harvesting the impact of the Great Crash and so were the writers. The American literature of the 1930s was backed up with themes based on the fallen economy.

One among the many dramatists who penned plays that portrayed the accurate dismay of the people affected by the Great Crash was Clifford Odets. Born in Philadelphia in the year 1906, Clifford Odets grew up in a Jewish section of the Bronx in New York. He belonged to a middle-class family that was secure during the Great Crash. Quitting his high school studies, Odets took up poetry writing and later with his parents' approval became a stage actor. The Group Theatre founded by Harold Clurman, Cheryl Crawford and Lee Strasberg provided him asylum and Odets was not recognized as an actor in the Group. The idealistic agenda of the Group Theatre was to train amateur actors and to change society through the presentation of their stage performances. Odets, penned his thought and succeeded writing plays that would instruct the society what to do and what not to do. The social force and economic pressure of the Crash fed Odets with responsibility to write with a purpose and he learnt the art of understanding the human miseries that were the outcome of the Crash. Once the land of plenty and now a land of poverty provided Odets with subject such as fear, anxiety, insecurity and lack of confidence among the masses. He used his senses to perceive the plight of the people of the country and wrote plays that suited the situation well. This in turn fetched him name and he was considered to be a most prominent playwright of the Depression era. He became the "White Hope" and the "Golden-Boy" of the Depression era. His plays feature the economic collapse and the frustrated capitalistic society striving for a better world. The family in his plays were the most endangered group. Influence of theatrical technique and political didacticism of many other playwrights can also be seen in his plays. His plays, during

the Crash, were propagating Leftist ideals advocating revolutionary change in the social, political and economic status of the mass. Clurman observes:

The left movement provided Odets with a platform and a loudspeaker; the music that came through was that of a vast population of restive souls, unaware of its own mind, seeking help. To this Odets added the determination of youth. The quality of his plays is young, lyrical, yearning, – as of someone on the threshold of life. (Clurman 150-151)

Having the Great Crash as background, almost all his plays including *Waiting for Lefty*, *Paradise Lost*, *Golden Boy*, *Rocket to the Moon* and *Awake and Sing!* focus on the problems of family and its members, especially of the working class and their clash with the capitalist class and of Jewish family respectively during the Great Depression of America. One play that can be excluded from the list may be *Till the Day I Die*, for it focuses on the issue that prevailed in Germany during the Nazi rule. The play features the conflict between the Nazis and the Communists. The other plays depict members of the family broken by economic hardship caused by the Great Crash. Odets's plays exhibit his talented commitment and he established himself as a forceful political voice of the era of the Great Crash.

The family in the play *Waiting for Lefty* comprises of young couples and members of a family who fight against each other as they find it difficult to make both ends meet or to find their dream come true. The play is structured in the manner that the family of the working-class characters are possessed with personal problems, especially of money and reflects the conflict between the labor union and the taxi company. This confrontational work vigorously and explicitly portrays the political messages whose ultimate goal was nothing less than the promotion of a Communist revolution in America. The play created a critical and popular sensation during the height of the Great Crash. The characters were aware of themselves and they feel the reality that they belong to the oppressed class in relation to the powerful ruling class.

The play, telling the story of the taxi drivers' union strike, addresses much of social concerns and political upheavals and economic thwarting during the Great Crash. The play created a critical and popular sensation during the height of the Great Depression. This confrontational work vigorously and explicitly portrays the political messages whose ultimate goal was nothing less than the promotion of a Communist revolution in America.

In the play, taxi drivers are very much affected as the company to which they are hired declared lock-out and they were to protest against their boss. Joe who joins the strike has been persuaded by his wife Edna who has said that she couldn't manage the financial position of their home and that their furniture was repossessed for not paying the due. Joe dissuades his comrades not to involve in strike for it would further worsen their financial position that they may lose their salary for the strike period. The financial crisis of the family forces this man not to raise his voice for his right even though their owners have pushed down their wages to the minimum possible.

On the other hand, there is the brother – sister conflict in another family; Florence, the sister, tells her brother Irv, she can no longer hold on to their family and would soon take Sid as her companion who would provide her with the comfort she needed. The brother and the mother of Florence strongly oppose to her strand, for Sid, the boy whom she loves, may not be a successful man for he is also a taxi-driver who earns very low and has the commitment for taking care of his ailing mother. The financial crisis of these families is none other than the actual scenario that were

prevailing in the then America after the Great Crash. The play was so didactic that the audience related the scenes to their life and reacted accordingly, making the play a great success. As Gerard Rabkin observes, “Lefty’s success lay in the fact that it appealed to the unconverted as well as to the committed; it swept all of a liberal persuasion into militant participation, at least in the theatre, by virtue of the precision with which Odets enunciated the Depression malaise. Odets’ achievement lay in his ability to humanize the agit-prop without foregoing its theatricality and didacticisms” (173).

America, being one of the largest countries that hold Jewish population in the world, attracted more and more Jewish immigration. The post-World War effect and the Great Crash joined hand in hand and fueled the process of Jewish migration and the immigrants joined the native Jewish community shedding all their indifferences for common cause. Abraham Malamet observes in his book, *A History of the Jewish People*: “The great majority of non-Jews reacted negatively to the intensification of Jewish political activity, and it became one of the important factors in the exacerbation of differences between Jews and their surroundings that cast its shadow over the two inter-war decades” (944).

Having this backdrop, the play *Awake and Sing!* speaks of the problems of the Jewish family hit by the Great Crash. The play was one among the earliest American Jewish dramas that presents honestly the economic hardships of the Jewish family. The characters are portrayed honestly as to what they are and how they struggle to lead the least possible life. The family is broken to pieces as a result of the impact of the constraint caused by the Great Crash. The members of the family run helter-skelter in need of money. Their concern for money, success in business, concern for food, focus on profession, concern for health, obsession for match-making and pursuit of intellect were all well-wrought in the play.

The play narrates the story of a poor Jewish family. The poor Bergers plot to manipulate the relationship of their children and meet out their ends. On the other hand, the children themselves struggle for their won needs. The members of the family struggle for their survival and all are possessed by some sort of dream and those dreams allow them to escape from reality. Each of the characters in the play strives for their full and rightful place in the world, hoping to make things better for themselves and their family. Jacob expresses the dream of a world where “life shouldn’t be printed on dollar bills.” (48) Bessie dreams of a world of respectability and appreciation. She always reflects a mentality, which keeps exiles alive, always holds on to the hope of better future. Myron dreams of winning the lottery. Bessie protests at Myron’s wish to buy a fifty-cent Irish Sweepstakes Ticket from Moe Axelrod, says, “I’ll give you money. Buy a ticket in Hennie’s name. Say you can’t tell – lightning never struck us yet. If they win on Beck Street, we could win on Longwood Avenue.” (43) Moe dreams of Hennie. Ralph wants to see all the teams work together. However, individually they differ in their dreams but intentionally they are linked. Set during the Era of Great Crash, the dreams of the individual characters are compromised, regardless of their actions and intentions, good or bad. The economic collapse has changed the world so that all the old values and models for behavior are useless or actively dangerous. The poverty and hunger brought forth by the Great Crash clearly caused society at times to neglect not only their souls but also their dreams. Howsoever, amidst their struggle there always is a streak of hope

that lingers in their heart for a better tomorrow for themselves and their family. Ellen Schiff observes:

This quintessentially American Jewish play presents an accurate, sometimes harrowing portrait of Depression-era life. The play was the centerpiece of the legendary 1935 season of The Group Theatre, a major player in national theatre history. Examination of this play evidences the influence of the 1930s theatre on subsequent drama in America; the play is also an index of how Jews perceived America and how America perceived Jews. (Schiff)

The Play Rocket to the Moon focusses on interpersonal relationships of a family and the financial pressures on the life of the individual. The play takes the waiting room of a dentist housed in a street of New York city as its setting and all the central characters revolve around it. Dialogue plays a prominent role rather than action and added to the scorching financial crisis, the heat of the summer serves as the backdrop of all actions involved in the play. As the play opens, we see Belle Stark, the wife of the Dentist, Ben Stark, arguing against Ben's idea of moving his clinic to a more affluent place. Belle's views are based on their restricted financial position and that it has become so dear that they cannot afford to go for such a big move. On the other hand, the optimism of Ben is always curtailed by the financial constraint which pulls him down to think of buying an Aladdin's lamp with which he could get money in the wink of an eye. There is one more female character, Cleo, the secretary of Ben Stark, whose youthful beauty admires many male characters of the play. Her beauty and intelligence do not provide much to her and she hails from a family that suffocates under financial impingement.

Mastery of Clifford Odets in creating characters affected by the Great Crash can be seen in the creation of the character Dr. Cooper, a veteran who shares Ben's dentist office. He is the embodiment of the people of America of the 1930s under financial crunch and serves us better to understand the worse of the life. Cooper could not afford portable water, his favorite "Municipal Champagne" and drinks it from Ben. He cuts a sorry figure when Belle reminds him of his default in paying the monthly rent for sharing Ben's office. The financial worth of Cooper is miserable that he would not even pay the medical bills for his son, who had recently broken his arm. And when he receives the phone call from the bank that rejects his plea for a loan, he is at his wits end and shouts in anger, "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 . . ." (339). The playwright goes one step ahead to display the financial emptiness of his character that Cooper hands over his blood donor registration card and tells Stark that he is going to sell his blood to make enough money so that he can pay him the default rent that he owes him. Stark advises him not to go for that, whereas Cooper substantiates him: Why not? It's a legitimate business, like pressing pants or cleaning fish." (377) Cooper finally offers Ben a check for thirty dollars, earned by selling his ware – "blood". This particular episode of Cooper speaks of the ingenuity of Clifford Odets who understood the plight of the mass reeling under the financial burden caused by the Great Crash.

Odets was able to understand the life of the members of the family struggling under financial constraint caused by the Great Crash and wrote about the characters that were walk in the streets of the great nation in a vivid manner. There can be no anti-thesis of the fact that the economic conditions of the 1930s had been a great

botheration and of misery to the masses. The three plays discussed in this paper describe the tyranny and frustration caused by the Great Crash that prevailed in the families of the then America. His plays had an impact on the then audience by creating an everlasting impression and channelized and oriented them to understand reality and act accordingly.

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