

PERSPECTIVES ON DEATH IN SELECTED PLAYS

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Death is a violent happening and brings man and his life face to face with its termination. It disrupts and affects not only an individual life but also the social pattern. The preoccupation with death has its manifestations in several ways some of which have been examined in Marsha Norman's **Night Mother**, Robert Bolt's **A Man For All Seasons**, Arnold Wesker's **The Friends** and Edward Albee's **All Over** reveal that the fact of death provides an insight into the psychology of the characters and their relationship to each other. The termination of life arouses two responses—one from the victim and other from the survivors; and the reactions to suicide, martyrdom, terminal illness and natural death vary considerably.

In **Night Mother** Jessie's pre—dominant attitude is that of a deep sense of futility and hopelessness. She is a lonely and a pessimistic person who, apparently, has been unable to establish any meaningful relationship and whose purpose or ambitions in life have not been fulfilled. She is overwhelmed by a sudden realization that her hopes will never be fulfilled and that her dreams have been nothing but cobwebs of fantasy. Consequently, there is no reason for Jessie to continue an existence which has become intolerable. Such realization gives her courage to take the final step of terminating her own life.

Esther in **The Friends** temporarily withdraws from the external world and appears to be calm and reposed thus putting up a facade before the others. It is as if she is unmoved by the fact of her impending death and having accepted the fact of death has risen above the mundane claims and anxieties of life. But her behaviour is not consistent. There are occasions when she lapses into a sudden irritability and demands attention from others. At such times her behaviour is immature and her dependence is characteristically adolescent.

In **All Over** the old man dies a normal death which is like going to sleep and simply not awakening. For the protagonist in the play, death does not provide any struggle, nor does it bring about a state of indecision or fear. In fact, it seems a desired state at a time when life with all its complexities has become too burdensome to cope with. Death for the central character in **All Over** is a suitable ending to a life full of vitality and action and from the reminiscences of his wife and his mistress one can gauge the situation. He is obviously mentally prepared for the end and there is neither any regret nor any resistance to it. Yet **All Over** succeeds in focussing attention on the requirements of life more than any other play discussed above.

The man's life and his attitudes become the norm for others to measure the richness or the paucity and the success or failure of their lives. It is only when the end is in view, it becomes possible to review the years gone by. The play also highlights the psychology of the bereaved. It is not the loss of the loved one, but the loneliness of one's own self, the sense of futility, of having been abandoned, of being overcome by the forces outside one's control, of the chances missed and the roads not taken, which govern the sense of sorrow.

Esther, in **The Friends** is quite young and is intensely in love with vibrant colours, emotions and the largeness of a human soul. She is trapped by the fact of death right at the moment when she is full of life.



Her situation offers a direct contrast to the one in **All Over** where the reaction of the dying man is of hardly any significance. Esther does not want to die and possesses a strong yearning to live which is a typical reaction of a person suffering from terminal illness. The thought that she is on the brink of death is so shocking that her first response is denial. At a time when she is so close to death, life appears to be

increasingly desirable. There is a conflict between her mind and body. Her physical powers are on the verge of collapse but her will, her unconscious mind wants to live.

In **All Over** the protagonist is in a state of coma, therefore, he does not have to bear the pangs of suffering caused due to old age and illness. However, Esther in Wesker's play is fully conscious and aware that she is very close to death. It is her consciousness which makes this period of waiting one of suffering. She lives with the feeling that she is dying, as the days of her life decrease, her agony increases. She is scared of death. The long periods of sleep induced by medication make her oblivious of the pain and suffering.

In contrast to **The Friends** the protagonists of **Night Mother** and **A Man For All Seasons** choose their own death and exorcise themselves of the terror of death. However, the drama which is going on in their minds is very different. Jessie commits suicide due to hopeless sense of depression and psychic disintegration. As opposed to Esther who has a strong will to live she has lost the desire to live. She thinks that her act of committing suicide will be like getting off a bus fifty years before she reaches her final destination because she will be in the same place as she is now. She has been living in the world of pessimism for the last ten years. She feels that it is difficult for her to achieve anything and withdrawal remains the only option. Suicide for her is the only answer.

Due to her terminal illness Esther's character undergoes a transformation. And one watches this change taking place as she moves towards a positive position in comparison to the others. Her friends who are with her yield increasingly tenaciously to life, wanting to live every moment of the time left to her, and wishing to extract as much as she can out of life. She becomes the only positive character in the play she knows that she has to live for a limited time so she wants to live it fully. She thinks that life is full of joy and variety and she does not want to miss anything. Her life is a waiting period before death but illumined by hope. Similarly Jessie in Norman's play takes the decision to end her life because she has become utterly hopeless but after she announces her decision to commit suicide, it seems that she is not the same Jessie, there is an alteration in her character, too. She has sufficient courage to discuss the post—death arrangements with her mother. She has made a mess of her life but in comparison her death is very orderly. She instructs her mother about what she should do after her death. Earlier, she never felt like communicating with anyone but on the night when this final step is to be taken she converses freely with her mother and does whatever she can do in those two hours. This change in her, throws light on an additional aspect of suicide. Perhaps those who commit suicide do so as much out of a desire for a neat ending as out of a sense of failure or lack of courage to confront their loneliness.

In the plays of Wesker and Norman the cause of death is important only so far as it signifies termination. What is more important is the manner in which it is approached, and the indifference or vitality with which the interim period is lived through. Death by its proximity highlights the quality of life and compels one to think of the material of which dreams are made of and the manner in which they may or may not be realized. In Robert Bolt's play the opposite is true. Life in itself is of no significance, and specially so if it is to be bereft of honour and dignity. Death is akin to salvation. It becomes an act of honour and a symbol of integrity. Thomas More holds on to his integrity unlike Esther and Jessie who allow their characters to disintegrate and be fragmented and their core self to multiply and proliferate at several levels. It is true the act of death in both these plays, **The Friends** and **Night Mother** also acts as a unifying factor, but in **A Man For All Seasons** integrity is central to the play.

The survivors, too, in these plays react to the fact of death in a different manner. In **The Friends** and in **All Over** they gather around the death bed of the person doomed to die but watching a young person die is different from watching an old man die. In Wesker's play the expected end is advanced and nobody is prepared to face the loss. Esther's friends, too, like her, are in a state of shock. They do not want her to die and are extremely terrified as they watch her dying. They like Esther, find themselves helpless in the face of death. This represents the existential situation of extreme loneliness. In Albee's play the family members and other people sit calmly by the old man's bedside literally waiting for him to die. They are prepared to face the loss and accept the coming of death like the birth of a new child as it is a proper time to die. In Norman's play, after Jessie tells her mother that she will commit suicide, the mother is very calm in the beginning.

Gradually, her terror mounts up as she becomes aware that Jessie is serious about it. She tries every possible method to dissuade her from committing suicide, but in vain. In **The Friends** and in **Night Mother** death leaves a vacuum and a sense of bewilderment and shock. In Bolt's **A Man For All Seasons**, More's family members like More himself, have the courage to face his loss with fortitude and dignity. Death becomes an act of defiance and freedom. More's wife and daughter do not want him to die but then they reconcile as they know that there is no other alternative. Norfolk, Rich and Cromwell lay a trap for him and they succeed in driving him towards the inevitable end.

In **All Over** the characters are not even concerned about the dying man. They are engaged in sorting out their own lives. The man is old and has discussed not only the possibility of death but also the details of the disposal of the body. Death is accepted and has become a reality even before the physical termination of life, for it comes at a ripe age. Although the old man is a silent character hidden behind the screen yet he is present in the minds of all the other characters. Significantly enough all the other characters are also old or middle aged. The Doctor, the Nurse, the Wife and the

Mistress are his close contemporaries, and even the Son and the Daughter have entered middle age. They all look back at their past lives and through their reminiscences, they unveil themselves and reveal their past antagonisms, present hatred and fragile relationships among themselves.

Similarly in **Night Mother** Thelma, too, sits near her daughter trying to find out why she has decided to commit suicide. Her interrogation is indirect, it finds expression in statements- Life is good and is worth living. Through several indirections she tries to reach out to Jessie and in the process the past is revealed, and the attitudes of both mother and daughter become clear. She tells her that life is good, go she need not put an end to her life. She resents Jessie's casual rejection of her life and is horrified and overcome by the realization that the daughter whom she has lived by proxy is beyond her reach. All her endeavours to prevent Jessie from killing herself are useless and a sense of guilt overcomes her as she realizes that Jessie is doing it because of the mother's mistakes. This also brings out the interconnection of human lives. No matter how free or strong an individual may be and no matter how lonely the existential situation may be, men and women relate to each other, influence each other through their actions, emotions and attitudes.

In these plays, with the victims imminent death the characters become aware of their own mortality. They exhibit their naked selves behind the pose and the moment of death is the moment of truth for them and they hide nothing from each other. The awareness of mortality establishes a kind of bond between them which brings them close to each other.

These plays are also about the relationship between existence and non—existence and about authenticity and the absence of it. The victim does die but the survivors wistfully remember and feel the loss. Thelma in Norman's play would miss her daughter very much. She cries out pathetically when she realizes that she will be left alone.



She pleads with her not to leave her alone. In Wesker's play, too, Esther's friends think that her death would create a deep wound in their hearts which would take a long time to heal. Similar is the case in Bolt Is play. In contrast in Albee's play death would be an emancipation for others and brings them an added awareness. The old man's son and daughter think that with his death his sway over their lives would weaken and it would be possible for them to start living their own lives.

All these playwrights employ death as a metaphor to assess the meaning of life. These writers are concerned with existential human problems. They deal with man's relationship with others and portray a picture of the world in which communication is not possible. In these plays the characters confront existential human problems such as estrangement, ageing, loneliness, authenticity and death. These plays centered on brittle, broken people at the edge of life become an overwhelming metaphor for what people think of their own condition, which in Leslie Fiedler's view is the "reigning metaphor of our age".(5) These plays depict characters on the brink of despondency lost in a situation of pain and agony and characters cornered, subjugated to the will of an overwhelming social setting.

Death, in its various form, is the inevitable end of human life, but the twentieth century writer is unable to think in terms of religion, or even in terms of posterity and the passage as a way towards immortality. Time and the passage of time become his obsession. Man, in his need for human assurance, is overwhelmed by his finitude. Life is being constantly expended, and there appears to be no way of preserving it or continuing it endless. Therefore, it appears to be a very precious commodity, but one which cannot be valued if it is in disuse, or time and death which to take possession of it. These plays depict the most intricate aspects of human life and focus one's attention on basic issues arising out of mans confrontation with mortality and through light on the value structures necessary for life.

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