

# Impact of Great Depression on the American Playwrights

Dr. Ubaid Akram Farooqui\*

Lecturer in English, BSR Govt. Arts College, Alwar, Rajasthan

**Abstract –** *The Great Depression had affected all aspects of life in America. Poverty, unemployment, housing-problems, strained family relations, strikes, agitations and protest-movements had become the order of the day. But the most important and positive result of the depression, however, was that it gave ample scope to the writers to write on a variety of topics-social, economic, political and psychological. The change in the social climate of the thirties from prosperity to adversity marked the rapid development of the literature of protest and the so-called "left-wing" literature and made the writers of the period more explicit and realistic in their approach. As a matter of fact, "the tradition of protest and revolt had been dominant in American literature since Emerson and Thoreau, but then, as Henry Steel Commager points out in The American Mind, "protest had been, for the most part, political or social rather than economic" (1950). In contrast, the literature of the thirties was essentially a literature of socio-economic protest. The bitterest protesters of the ailing economy were revolutionary writers-Marxists, Communists and fellow travellers-whoused literature as propaganda to present their political perspectives. They highlighted the blemishes of capitalism, glorified the "little people" and made their art virtually a weapon to attack the social and political evils. In his essay entitled Theatre and Living, Tynan asserts:*

*... the artist and particularly the dramatist, is forced to involve himself with political issues, to immerse himself in the world of which he is a part. Art which ignores social questions is a shrinking flower that conspires at its own death by ignoring the soil in which it grows(94-95).*

**Key Words –** Depression, Strikes, Agitations, Protests, Marxism, Communism, Propaganda Capitalism, Corruption, Oppression, Injustice, Greed, Materialism etc.

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## INTRODUCTION

The socio-economic climate during the Great Depression attracted many talented writers. Drama, of all forms of literature, particularly offered a very powerful means to voice protest against the flaws of capitalism. Writing about the drama of this period, John Gassner said in *Dramatic Soundings* that it "was born in rebellion and cradled in criticism" (337). The revolt of the social playwrights against corruption, oppression, injustice, and eventually against family and something that called the "social order" was not a blind revolt; it was more of an inquiry into old and established institutions and ideas. They called for careful understanding of the forces-social, economic political-which oppressed mankind, and condemned all social and moral evils like-greed, materialism, power etc., that prevented the ultimate triumph of the individual. The dramatists of this period preferred to be "faulty and alive, instead of perfect and dead or .... meticulous and tepid" (Gassner 387).

The spirit of Great Depression is represented by two groups of writers. The first group of dramatists comprised John Howard Lawson, Robert E. Sherwood, Elmer Rice, S.L. Behrman and Maxwell Anderson who had already achieved distinction by contributing many outstanding plays to the theatre of the twenties and may conveniently be called the older generation of dramatists. The second group consisted of the younger generation of dramatist like Clifford Odets, Lillian Hellman, Irwin Shaw and Sidney Kingsley, who made their literary debut during the thirties. There is still the third group of even younger playwrights like Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller, whose work first appeared on the professional stage in the forties, however, their early writings were shaped in the decade of the Depression itself. The older dramatists were less severe in outlook, preferring to react slowly before committing themselves to change. On the contrary, the younger dramatists reacted sharply to contemporary problems and demanded prompt action to make the conditions of the people better and worth living.

Lillian Hellman and Clifford Odets are the two of the well-known dramatists that emerged during the Depression. The problem of good and evil is basic to all Hellman's works. *The Children's Hour* (1934) pits two industrious but hard-pressed young women, Karen Wright and Martha Dobie, against a rich and ruthless woman, Mrs Tilford, and shows them suffering under the weight of her power to destroy. Clifford Odets in *Awake and Sing!* introduces psychological problems, but passes them over to investigate social questions. Here the class struggle manifests itself as an occurrence within a single family, the Bergers of the Bronx. The point in this play, as in *The Children's Hour*, is that man can do irreparable harm to others.

Gerald Wales notes that "Odets is so identified with the 1930s that a mention of his name elicits stock responses, the recollection of a time when literature was a weapon and leftist opinion almost mandatory" (15). Harold Clurman in *Fervent years* called Odets "the voice of his day, reflecting, even more than he proclaimed or-knew, the urgent need of the people in his time and place (181). Odets rose out of the Depression to give voice to a world in crisis. He put the middle-class on stage and gave them courage, dignity and stature. His immediate sources of inspiration, his point of view, even his weaknesses-all are typical of the thirties.

S.N. Behram's *End of Summer* (1936) projects the Depression period from a different angle: that of the "privileged" classes. The play is a realistic picture of the privileged rich of America pursuing their sensual pleasures because of their precarious existence in a trouble-ridden world. The capitalistic rich in the play find themselves in danger of losing everything they have, and therefore, try to have a good time as long as they can. This is the principle operating in the life of Leonie Frothingham. For her, a continuous hunt for new love-affairs is the only solace and the only means of happiness and self-fulfilment.

Neither a fascist nor a Communist, Sherwood was an articulate and fearless spokesman of democratic faith. He strongly advocated liberal reforms to be incorporated in a society affected by the Great Depression. This inspired Sherwood to write *Idiot's Delight*. This play echoes the American fear of and profound estrangement from the facts of European intrigue which led to war. One merit of this play is that it gave an inkling of the moral climate in America at the outset of the Spanish Civil conflict.

John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* (1937) is a parable of American loneliness and hunger for "brotherhood" - two feelings the depression generated. This play concentrates on the unemployed of the farmlands, the workers, while it alludes to the bus and truck drivers whose travels through the country permitted them to observe the state of the nation in its broad horizon.

No account of the theatre of the thirties can convey any sense of its true nature and its contribution to American culture without emphasizing certain purely

theatrical factors which played as decisive a role as the plays themselves. Gerald Rabkin states that in the years 1930-34, the young radicals "felt compelled to act, and Marxist philosophy and the Communist Party as an organization, seemed the most effective means of realizing this desire; in short, they accommodated themselves to what they felt were revolutionary necessities" (25). This was the result of the economic chaos and unemployment to the working class caused by the Great Depression of 1929-30.

## CONCLUSION

With the unprecedented prosperity after that second world war, the theatre of social protest fell into disrepute. A public enjoying the booming economy preferred not to be reminded of the terrifying days of the Depression and Hitler's rise to power. The need of the hour was leadership in arts that could rally reluctant and divided allies. Instead, during the days of senator McCarthy, it fostered the suppression of the artist. The writer, in particular, fearful of the investigating committees, remained silent or was silenced. The Theatre concentrated on light comedy, musicals and case studies of psychological frustrations. Under such circumstances, the writers of the thirties found it difficult to make the transition. Odets passion for writing plays cooled down considerably. Irwin Shaw lived in Europe and wrote novels.

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#### **Corresponding Author**

**Dr. Ubaid Akram Farooqui\***

Lecturer in English, BSR Govt. Arts College, Alwar, Rajasthan

[ubaid.farooqui90@gmail.com](mailto:ubaid.farooqui90@gmail.com)