

Research Innovator

International Multidisciplinary Research Journal



Vol II Issue II : April 2015

Editor-In-Chief

Prof. K.N. Shelke

www.research-innovator.com

Research Innovator

A Peer-Reviewed Refereed and Indexed International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

Volume II Issue II: April – 2015

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Wendy Wasserstein's *An American Daughter*: An Analysis**Prof. Dr. Patil Vijaykumar Ambadasrao**

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Abstract

This research paper presents various characteristic features of *An American Daughter*. This play presents realistic events in America that needed immediate attention. Lyssa correlates the early Clinton era and represent the confused, cruel and more controversial psyche of post-modern America. It also throws light on the role and responsibility of media which may make or break the career even of a prospective candidate irrespective of his/her contribution to society and country. This play focuses on the fundamentals of post-modern feminism. The issues related to feministic and gay movements and their internal rivalry is presented very systematically in this play. Issues such as infertility, religious sentiments, personal choices and search for straight are the other issues that one may find in this play. This is a most successful, realistic, personal and political play.

Key Words: Post-modern America, Feministic and Gay Movements, Infertility-religious sentiments, Personal choices

Introduction:

An American Daughter is written by Wendy Wasserstein to present realistic events in America that needed immediate attention. As a playwright she is successful in representing the character of Lyssa to correlate the early Clinton era. Incidents from Zoe Baird and Hilary Clinton's life are skilfully used by Wendy Wasserstein to represent the psyche of post-modern America, which is confused, cruel and more controversial. It also throws light on the role and responsibility of media which may make or break the career even of a prospective candidate irrespective of his/her contribution to society and country. Through Lyssa's father, Wasserstein has presented a Conservative Senator, who strives for his personal gains irrespective of the prospects of his daughter. This play focuses on the fundamentals of post-modern feminism. It also indicates its directions, scenarios and essentials in

changed context. The issues related to feministic and gay movements and their internal rivalry is presented very systematically in this play. Issues such as infertility, religious sentiments, personal choices and search for straight are the other issues that one may find in this play.

Wendy Wasserstein:

Wendy Wasserstein was born in Brooklyn in 18 Oct. 1950. She is the daughter of Lola Schleifer and Morris Wasserstein. She grew up with chorus girls. Her parents took her theatre regularly. It helped her to be a successful playwright. When she was eleven years old, her family moved to Upper East Side of Manhattan and she attended a series of girl's schools. She studied at University at Mount Holyoke, in Massachusetts, a conservative institution. Her studies in this institution developed her idea of feminism and one finds a different type of feminism in Wendy Wasserstein which is realistic and belongs

to post modern era. She shifted the focus of feminists from gender politics to women's relationship. She has presented the women that speak each other and this context is unique and too meaningful. She has successfully destroyed the contemporary models of feminism to explore various aspects of contemporary women's life. Her studies at City College in New York in Writing Course helped her a lot. Her studies at Yale School of Drama really nurtured her as a playwright at par. Critics lethally attacked her. But her playwriting style, subject matter and treatment remained unique and appreciated in due course of time. Her popular plays are *Any Woman Can't*, *Uncommon Women and Others* (1972), *Isn't it Romantic* (1981), *The Heidi Chronicles* (1988) and *An American Daughter* (1977). According to C. W.E. Bigsby, "Wendy Wasserstein's dialogue is sharp and witty and if her dramatic structures generate a sentimentality born of nostalgia, as well as an irony generated out of failed aspirations, few writers have been as responsive to the shifting social and sexual realities of late twentieth century America."¹ Wendy Wasserstein was too serious in her writings and said about her plays that her 'serious plays that are funny.'² She has received Tony Award for Best play. For *The Heidi Chronicles* (1988) she has received the Pulitzer Award for Drama.

An American Daughter:

This is Wendy Wasserstein's personal and political play. It presents the plight of post-modern American women. . Basically, *An American Daughter* is "a work which seemed to shift her career in a new direction. Still with a strain of comedy, this nonetheless turned out to be a play

that addressed serious public issues as well as equally serious private ones to do with conflicting loyalties and responsibilities."³ In the last phase of twentieth century, the life of many high-profile women in America was depreciated by a rancorous, resentful and indignant use of media. It proves that postmodern Americans were confused. The feminism and other -isms were taking a new shape. Zoe Baird was a wealthy American woman lawyer. She was the nominee of Attorney-General. But she was forced to withdraw her name on the ground that 'she had not made social security payment on behalf of her children's nanny.'³ Wendy also seriously considered Hilary Clinton's campaign for the extension of health care which was wrecked. "It is not that Wasserstein believed the issues were clear cut-why, after all, should a wealthy woman not pay social security- but that the hostile campaign revealed something about the nature of American society, the moral confusion of liberalism, the inner contradictions of the new feminism and the destructiveness of a conservatism which itself now took different forms."⁵ These changes and scenario inspired Wasserstein to write this play.

Lyssa Dent Hughes is the daughter of a Conservative Republican Senator Alan Hughes of Indiana. Her father is a former president of Georgetown Hospital and a national advocate for women's health issues. She puts 'women's health care issues on map' and strives for 'good health care.' She has a brilliant health care administration. She even warns her husband, 'not to smoke.' She was aware of her financial conditions. She maintains good relations with her husband Walter. She gave birth to twins. She has warm

family values and she is a superwoman. She is ready to do anything for her family. She encourages her children to become 'cyber spies.' She is 'overworked' and 'highly emotional.' She believes that her family is 'American and has been for generations in all its branches, direct and collateral. According to Walter she is 'unconditional surrender's memoir.' Whereas according to her father she is 'always a do-gooder.' She is committed and determined to do everything well. She is a female lead, a liberal activist and pro-abortionist and even anti-gay. For her 'advancing health care is a matter of advancing scientific knowledge, but just as important as advancing every individual's knowledge.' She accepted the nomination for 'Surgeon General' as she is a 'popular choice with both pro-choice soccer moms and more conservative fast-food dad.' In her capacity she will "be in a unique position to further this administration's goal that every American male and female, adult or child, has access to the best heal... the best health care information." She is one of the 'truly empowered, self-actualized real women.' She believes that 'every woman in this country is assured reproductive freedom, I've nothing to hide. I am really good at what I do.' She is devoted to her duties. Many a times she feels 'exhausted' especially because of ignoring children.' For her, 'the women of America should concern themselves with the fact that their children are innocently smoking, falling prey to drug addictions, and the rapid growth of teenage violence.' Thus, she believes that 'she is at the confluence of historical currents.' Lyssa tries her best to perform her role as a mother, wife and doctor. She strives to follow the lifestyle that she has learned from her father. But these lessons are not

worthy to be followed by women in postmodern America. Though time changed, Americans are expecting from her a perfect feminist model who believes that Quincy Quince is one of the best students of her husband. Even Quince believes that Lyssa will be the reason of 'wonderful life.' As stated earlier, this is a political play and presents the vulnerability of Lyssa who has to reconcile and accept the personal life irrespective of strangled conditions.

Dr. Judith B. Kaufman, 42, is an African-American woman. She is a boisterous and an energetic woman. She is an oncologist and deals with breast cancer. She wanted to be 'specialized in something that woman don't have, like heads, necks or throats.' She has brought 'an amazing study environment versus genetics' in Long Island cancer. Her father was a French teacher at Boy's High. Her mother, a Baptist Piano teacher, believed that 'only art and education made life tolerable.' Judith says that her family never forgave her (her mother) for moving north with a freedom rider.' Judith believes that she is a 'technically Jewish.' For her, 'a woman's life is all about boundaries.' She involves in the festival of regrets, 'Holy Taslich', which happens a day after New Year's. Judith regrets her life. She is in 'no state of mind to be cherished.' She refuses to believe that 'she is middle aged' and 'the culture' isn't about her anymore. She has 'endured every in Verto to good doctor.' She is on 'mega doses of insane fertility drugs.' According to Walter, 'she is not angry. She's an accident waiting to happen.' She hates Quincy Quince. She has the ability to 'separate Church and State.' According to Morrow, 'She is non-practicing heterosexuality.' She views that

‘sexual satisfaction is the root of all societal happiness.’ She supports to sleep with ‘men for self-perpetuation.’ She never gets ‘intimate with over old predominantly gay men.’ Her former husband ‘lives in seattle. He is Shrink who started the gay and lesbian psychiatric clinic. He has a friend who’s an opera singer. Basically, he is a doctor’s wife. Rodney keeps in shape and wears a very nice engagement ring.’ According to Morrow, ‘She is increasingly sexy woman.’ She is concerned with matters of life and death. Through Dr, Judith, Wendy Wasserstein has presented the life of a woman in America who strives to be a mother and takes various steps to be a mother. Even the extreme doze of fertility pill is consumed by her to be a real mother. Her plight is the plight of a group of women in America whose husbands are gay and unable to satisfy a woman. It is really a serious issue and next generation of America needed to work out a solution for it. Considering the situation of Lyssa and Dr. Judith, Bigsby maintains:

Her (Wasserstein’s) heroines show what Hemingway called grace under pressure, but that pressure comes from the struggle to balance biological drives, social ambitions, political commitments with the need to discover the basis on which life can be lived with some dignity. For much of the time she generates humour out of these conflicts but beneath that humour there is a real battle going on which that humour only partly obscures.⁶

One more important character of this play is Quincy Quince. She is a pretty woman about 27 years old. She loves the ‘Air and Space Museum.’ She is ‘an aviatrix nut.’ She believes, ‘women in 20s and 30s were

able to excel in show, business, cosmology and aviation.’ She has included a chapter in her new book on ‘flight and sexuality in *The Prisoner of Gender*. She is a celebrity student of Walter. According to Lyssa she is ‘the rebirth of feminism.’ She is always on shows like ‘The Conan O’Brien.’ She believes ‘Sexism made simple.’ According to her Walter is brilliant. He is the only academic who can reshape liberalism into an active stance instead of a go-gooder whine.’ According to her, Walter is the only man who ‘gets it.’ Her father owns a coffee shop and caters office parties. She learnt from her mother that a woman’s life can have ‘no boundaries.’ This is the difference between her thoughts and Dr. Judith’s views towards life. She is proud of Lyssa when Lyssa ‘mentioned reproductive rights at the White House.’ It shows her seriousness regarding issues related to women in America. Basically, ‘women’s issues’ are her priority. For her, ‘Anger is healthy. Sweetness is a camouflage for repressed hostility.’ For Walter she is ‘valuable,’ as she is ‘committed to making tired ideology new.’ For her, ‘entire human agenda is politics, single, parenting, divorce and dating.’ She wants to write two more books. Her next book *Venus Raging* is about women and their sexual identity. For her ‘sex is important.’ She also believes that for last generation (Lyssa’s) sex was ‘something else to be good at.’ She believes that we come home to a ‘warm penis.’ She is bold and spokesperson of women of Lyssa’s generation. She speaks Timber about the ‘primary sexual essence’ of Pamela Lee. It proves that she is bold and anti-choice and abortion. She is representing feminism in twenty first century. For her Walter is ‘all time hero’ and ‘a practically a classic.’ She boldly asks Walter to kiss her when he

looks at her. She is also arrogant, self-assured, and profoundly selfish. Her affair with Walter is open and a motivation for her. Through Quincy Quince, Wendy Wasserstein has presented an upcoming feministic model in postmodern America.

Morrow McCarthy, a gay, is a right-wing alibi for Lyssa. His stand on anti-abortion is not exactly as of Lyssa. Lyssa thinks that he should find a boyfriend and leave women's reproduction rights alone. Morrow keeps his personal life separate from Lyssa and Walter. He constantly entertains the people. He prefers nice chat with Iowa corn Lobby. He is happy that Judith found the path of religion though he has ideological differences with Judith. The president reads his columns. He says that he has good time going online as a woman. His add 'Single available female' seeks dominating male for emasculating intrigue. He wants to tell America that he had a 'threesome' with Jesse and Strom in senate cloakroom. He always looks younger. He is ready to offer 'Hot and Sour Strawberry statement' to Chubby. Basically he is a worst kind of offender, gay, conservative and total media hype. His morality is based on logic and not on religion. He had discovered sexual preference. According to him Lyssa is 'gold, pure gold.' And it is Morrow McCarthy who calls Lyssa 'An American Daughter.' He strongly believes that 1/10 Republicans are gay. Thus 'Cincinnati airport transport homophobia.' Wendy has represented all these characters with their specialities. It indicates that Wendy Wasserstein has presented three different women in postmodern American to present three different perspectives to life. Of course the Senators wife, Chubby, also presents a different perspective of old women who just like flirt and grab a man

for their security. It looks too comic but it is a realistic picture in America.

Impasse of Lyssa:

It is interesting to note Lyssa's so called 'impasse' or 'downfall.' It seems that media has given hype to two normal things from Lyssa's life which took a new turn causing withdrawal of her nomination. First is (final) notice of jury. But according to Walter, the final notice came on a day when her both children had the chicken pox, their Nanny disappeared to elope with neighbourhood drug-dwelling security guard, and there was a crisis at the hospital that only Lyssa could solve. Thus, Walter puts it aside and she is unaware of the final notice of the Jury. It is just a normal thing and not a deliberate move by Lyssa. Second aspect that damaged her personality was her reference to her diseased mother as an ordinary Indiana housewife who made icebox cakes and pimento chees canapés. It seems that her reactions are the products of her husband and father's attitude towards her. Her husband, emotionally, is not in the state of appreciating her victory. Even he turns out a traditional husband who is not comfortable with a most successful wife in her profession. Same is the case with her father. Her bold initiatives would be a setback to a conservative senator. Even mousy wife of her father dares her move. It shows group in which Lyssa lives in her family. The outburst in America and the attitude of family members is astonishing for Lyssa which compels her to withdraw her candidanship.

Future of American Daughters:

Through the characters of Lyssa, Dr. Judith and Quincy Quince, Wendy Wasserstein has presented the future of

American daughters. These three characters belong to three different sections of American society. Lyssa is a successful doctor and has reached at the apex stage in her career. She would have been the Surgeon General of America. But neither her husband nor her father is able to digest her success. Their attitude and moves trap her. Timber introduces Lyssa on the channel as follows:

Lyssa Dent Hughes, descendant of president, one of the leading professional women of your generation, a pioneer in health care reform, truly American daughter of the highest calibre, in the mist of one of the great democratic and feminist maelstroms of this year.(p.64)⁷

This is a perfect analysis of Lyssa during her campaign. A bold, genius and open hearted Lyssa, who even accepts her husband's attitude and lifestyle surrenders to the situation. She goes to her children in the last segment of the play which is the end-result of the lessons she learnt during her childhood. Through the projection of this character, Wendy Wasserstein proved what Lance Lee maintained about the drama. According to Lance Lee "The oceanic feeling Freud traces to infantile omniscience is experienced in drama as the result of moral action carried to a successful conclusion by a hero or heroine who, through the fundamental story pattern of drama brings us personally, through identification, to the experience of such a perspective new beginning washed clean of the conflicts of the past."⁸

Dr. Judith tried her best to be the mother. Neither her husband, nor pill or fertility dozes help her in this context. She is a

successful in her profession. She wants to be a mother. Her dream may be fulfilled only if she adopts a child. It is a serious issue in America, where American daughters are unable to get conceived. Their husbands are responsible for this. It is too difficult for such daughters to live normal life. Religious philosophy supported by practical solutions is a must for such daughters in America.

Quincy Quince is a third type of American daughter. She represents a new feminist perspective to life. She dares to accept reality and openly accepts Walter. She is ready to take decision based on her priority. Such decisions may be vital in postmodern America.

Finally a word is needed for Charlotte. She likes to be called as Chubby by her husband. She is a mousy wife and stands by her husband. She threatens Lyssa the moments she feels uncomfortable with her attitude which may damage Senator. Her marriage at old age and moves present her efforts to be happy. Such an American woman can never be a mother of Lyssa. Thus, Lyssa's decision to look after her children seems to be most perfect and ultimate.

A playwright will be successful if (s)he projects the sensitive issues in style. Wendy Wasserstein is successful in this regards. She is a literary celebrity. According to Loren Glass, "Literary celebrity as a historically specific articulation of the dialectical tension between modern consciousness and public subjectivity persists only as a residual model of authorship."⁹ Wendy Wasserstein succeeded in this task.

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