



CRAVE FOR CARE AND COMMITMENT IN LORRAINE HANSBERRY'S PLAY *THE SIGN* IN *THE SIDNEY BRUSTEIN'S WINDOW*

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ABSTRACT

Lorraine Hansberry's play *The Sign in the Sidney Brustein's Window* briefs the need of care and commitment amidst modern men. The protagonist Sidney Brustein, the careless and non-committed individual is made to understand how the world becomes a happy place when care and commitment fills the heart of the people. Published in the year 1964, Hansberry's *The Sign in the Sidney Brustein's Window* witnesses the modern day desperation and dejection presenting it with a gentle touch. Portraying the indiscipline and improper life of the modern world through her protagonist Sidney, Hansberry alarms the young people of the modern world to be caring and committed in all worst scenarios.

Key words: Hansberry, Sidney Brustein, Care, Commitment and Love.

Life is not by dying, Life is lost
Minute by minute, day by day,
In all the thousand, small uncaring ways.
-Stephen Vincent Benet (Trueblood 36)

Life is earned from physical survival. Conscious living becomes possible when there is love, care, concern and commitment. Caring is the source of conscious living. Rollo May in his work *Love and Will* elucidates, "When we do not care, we lose our being; and care is the way back to being" (290). Lorraine Hansberry's play *The Sign in the Sidney Brustein's Window* proves that care is the way of making best living.

Published in the year 1964, Hansberry's *The Sign in the Sidney Brustein's Window* witnesses the modern day desperation and dejection presenting it with a gentle touch. Emory Lewis in *The Fifty-year Childhood of the American Theatre* appreciates that the play *The Sign in the Sidney Brustein's Window*

holds, "a key place in the history of modern American drama"(xii) emphasising the need of commitment and care in the world. Marching to fulfil his aims, an individual starts over powering the other creating a wave of disturbance.

Staged on October 15, 1964, the play exhibits nihilism, absurdity, primal fears and urges, commercialism, selfishness, basic guilt and innocence among men. The play revolves around Sidney Brustein, a man deals all the elements of life with the touch of fantasy. Sidney, a man of thirty-seven fails in running a night club named Silver Dagger, later ends in purchasing a newspaper agency. Iris, wife of Sidney commits herself to become an actress. She attempts to change the skeptic and careless mentality of her husband. Sidney's friend Alton Scales, the only Afro-American character in the play requests for an endorsement in Sidney's newspaper favouring Wally O'Hara, an earnest political leader aspires reform. Betrayal in

politics makes Sidney refuses to do endorsement. However the continuous persuasion of Alton and O'Hara compromises Sidney to endorse Wally O'Hara.

Iris' elder sister Mavis is conventional in her attitudes. She dedicates her whole life for her children though her husband has an affair. Gloria, the younger sister of Iris who turns out to be a call girl loves Sidney's friend Alton. Unaware of her identity Alton agrees to marry Gloria. Sidney reveals about Gloria to Alton in a drunken stage which leads to her suicide. This fatal end of Gloria makes Sidney to rethink and re-establish himself new. Mean while the end of the elections rattles Sidney for O'Hara becomes victim of power and corruption. Sidney questions O'Hara about his sudden change over and vows to raise voices against him. Standing under the shade of power, O'Hara threatens Sidney not to risk his life and future. Sidney's personal loss as well as the disappointment in public life reinforces the values of life and principles. The death of Gloria reawakens and nurtures the need of care and commitment in Sidney.

In an attempt to perform the impossible, Sidney Brustein wails his kite high by insulting and ignoring the rest and overshadows them with pieces of witty and hurting remarks. Like a neurotic his inability to get along with other people makes him highly suspicious of others. He feels society to be his enemy, and he moves through life as though in an armoured car.

Filled with intellectual analysis, conflicts and confusions, Sidney offers too many solutions, none of these lights the flame of his life or the others. Lingering in his own world of fantasy, he aspires that people automatically change, accept and accompany his views fairly. The self-destructive pessimist Sidney argues and solicits diplomatically but never executes. From beginning till the climax his self-seeking travel causes his own way of unmaking his fellow beings by questioning, doubting and seldom believing in them.

Starting from clothing, Sidney is careless and dissimilar. Hansberry describes his style of dressing thus, "which ever pair of trousers he has happened to put on with whichever jacket he has

happened to reach.... He does not care" (SSBW 5-6). It is noted that every change in the customary attire, every little negligence, such as an unfastened button, every trace of exposure conveys his disinterestedness in man and matters around him. Sigmund Freud in *The Psychology of Everyday Life* asserts, "A habitual lack of care for one's appearance indicates a general lack of interest in other people. The neurotic individual who is always exhibiting the movement away from is precisely the one who cannot love" (220). This becomes true in Sidney's life. The modern civilized persons like Sidney loosen the ties that bind them with traditional and family bonds.

Lacking of self-care ultimately gives intense pain and frustration. Sidney neither fits in any frame nor has his own. As an embodiment of modern man he hates to be committed. While talking to his friend Alton, Sidney utters, "Presume no commitments, disarow all engagement, mock all great expectations ... avoid all the impulse to correct: and moments, causes, clubs, and anti-clubs" (SSBW 7). The attitude of carelessness quivers the happiness of his sweet home. Sidney's flee from commitments and reality results in misunderstanding of his individual autonomy.

The primary desolating defect in Sidney is that he never lingers within the walls of reality. Chewing the past equals one with dead and living in fantasy too links with the dead. Inefficiency and inability of Sidney dumps him in a dreamy island hoping the most favourable climate. He longs for the things to change automatically and even compels Iris too be a part of his ideology. He slips into his fantasy world furnishing the mood of escapism which can be seen reflected in the following words: "desires to take my books, my cameras, my records, and -my wife -and go-up to the woods!... Yes. And stay ... Forever" (SSBW 27). His escapism angers Iris who intolerably fights every moment of her life hoping to get a glimpse of change in him, but he disappoints her every time. In contrast Iris is bothered about future and the worth of her life in the end. She expresses:

I am twenty—nine and I want to begin to know that when I die more than ten or a

thousand people will know the difference. I want to make it, Sid. Whatever that means and however it means it. That's what I want" (SSBW 76).

Landing in the port of reality, Iris firmly aims to prove her worth to the world amidst of odd calamities.

Apart from the defeat in his personal domain, the primary external defeat in politics encounters Sidney at the age of eighteen when all his confidants have been engulfed by power and money. Later his acquaintance with political reformer Willy O'Hara changes his attitude and he expresses his support by hanging a sign board with the slogan of, "Clean Up Community Politics, Wipe Out Bossism: Vote Reform" (SSBW 112). The biggest disappointment hits him when Willy O'Hara yields to power. When power becomes the fundamental source of life, it leads to enormous conflicts among the men.

Sidney like a catalyst never adjusts his attitude to any degree with anyone around him, either in socio-political environment or in personal region. Being an extraordinary, sensitive, Jewish liberal Sidney strongly opposes all forms of social and political oppression and also displays overbearing concern to the point of meddling daily in the lives of those around him. Immature death of Sidney's night club sweeper Sal Peretti erodes his hopes on O'Hara's election vendettas of preventing the society from crime and narcotic deaths. Stained with corruption, the institution of politics thwarts the spirit of Sidney leading to his withdrawal from active socio-political life. When Wally O'Hara along Alton Scales approaches him requesting for an endorsement in the newspaper, Sidney's attitude of non-commitment neglects the request for endorsement which also expresses his disinterestedness. He says, "Politics are for people who have those kinds of interests, that's all. I don't happen to have them anymore... In my paper –no endorsements. And no editorials" (SSBW 21) which unleashes his disdain towards the dirty political throng. Boldly materializing his ideas against O'Hara, he warns, "I am going to fight you. Wally... And Wally I against you—I swear it to you—and you

machine"(SSBW 141) and also echoes, "This world—this scrolling, setting madness... emptied these rooms and my very bed. And now it has taken my sister. This world! Therefore to live, to breathe—I shall have to fight" (SSBW 141). Sidney's world of spirit gets illuminated when the corrupted O'Hara threatens him not to act against him. Reality strikes Sidney so hard and makes him ready to defend his life with an uncompromising protest against the ills. Turning to commitment, he totally relieves his self from the clutches of past and fantasy.

Sidney's world of fantasy finds a retreat when the moments of socio-political issues strike him painfully and his escapism at last becomes sore. Amidst painful experiences of the betrayal of his political candidate O'Hara and the suicide of his sister-in-law Gloria, Sidney learns the necessity of facing the realm of life head on without any refusal and regret. Finally through Gloria's immature death, Sidney visualizes the greatest disharmony and unbearable loss caused by his fantasy notions. Disappointed and deceived by the external world, Sidney's mental absence at last reaches the point of culmination. Sidney reawakens from the fantasy fossils and frees himself from the misconceptions of people. He also decides to fight against the danger of drugs which caused the death of many like Gloria and Sal Peretti. Sidney's acceptance of reality and the tactics of survival resound as follows. He shares, "If you want to survive you've got to swing the way the world swings!"(SSBW 138) and the world around him has tested Sidney with its uncompromising love and care.

As man of controversies and conflicts, Sidney slurs all, making the relationships to exist in doubt and despair. Filled with arrogant comments, there lies something in Sidney to cherish. "What makes Sidney outstanding is his willingness, at times, to really listen to others and to admit making errors" (87) opinions Steven. R. Carter. The moment man spares time to understand others; the line of reality gets activated as it is inevitable to be far away from it. Sidney patiently listens to the miseries and dejections of Mavis, Alton and Gloria, paradoxically excluding his wife Iris.

The play *The Sign in the Sidney Brustein's Window* hits the audience with the most potential and forceful message; the companionship of nature and need of care in the world. Caring initiates each life towards the next step. Caring for people fosters every individual. Sidney from beginning till the end of the play never behaves with the expected basic care and commitment until his carelessness murders Gloria. Anne Cheney unfolds, "To Hansberry, spiritual decay was tantamount to a lack of commitment, yet both can be reversed. With commitment comes renewal of both self and society" (90). It is evident that Sidney springs from a period of decay and commits himself in preserving his self as well the other.

Care and Commitment happen to be the fruitful tools in the hands of human beings leading to care the entire universe. Being an advocate of the troubled world, Hansberry recommends care and commitment from which each life sprouts with love and hope. Steven. R. Carter summarizes, "make it useful, one must be highly open to it, suffer for it, and live to the fullest when it comes" (86). In a simple term care is a state of recognizing a fellow being like one's self and also becoming a part of joy and suffering of others which become a part one's own experience.

Sidney's extreme withdrawal and non-commitment attitude alienates him from the progressive world and his timely coming back to the factual reality resumes his selfhood with courage to face whatever comes in his life. Going under a tremendous wave of transformation Sidney at last becomes aware that care and commitment are the ultimate sources of life and inspiration.

Though the death of Gloria shatters him, it also makes him to reencounter his life with a fresh spirit and as a true hero Sidney sorts new ventures to face the future. He utters, "We shall make something strong of this sorrow..." (SSBW 142) which is reflected by John. W. Gardner as follows. He writes, "To believe in something, care about something, stand for something"(165). Hansberry's play *The Sign in the Sidney Brustein's Window* carries a heavy load of the theme of care and commitment. It also embodies the transformation of the character

of Sidney in the midst of servile and suppressing scenarios nurturing the qualities of care and commitment. Sidney along with Iris enters into the conscience of everyone and implants the merits of leading a life with care, commitment leading to self-awakening.

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