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**A Victorian Farcical Comedy: Social Satire in Oscar Wilde's "*The Importance of Being Ernest*"**

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**Nynu V Jamal**

Assistant Professor

Al Azhar College of Arts and Science, Thodupuzha

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**Abstract**

*The Importance of Being Ernest* is a farcical Victorian play that satirizes the rigid norms and conventions of the Victorian era. The paper tries to explicitize the various ways in which the author uses the play as a means to mock at the societal norms of the era, especially the concepts like marriage, class and wealth.

**Keywords:** farce, satire, earnest, Victorian era, norms

Oscar Wilde is an Irish poet and playwright who is best known for his epigrams. He is a proponent of Aestheticism, the movement of nineteenth century that argued that art should exist for art's sake. His only novel *The Importance of Being Ernest* (1895) is a farcical comedy deliberately plotted to mock at the Victorian mannerisms and responsibilities as well as the deceitful ways that the manipulate themselves to escape the burdensome social obligations. The play focuses on the different Victorian norms

and satirizes the concepts of marriage, wealth and family heritage.

*The Importance of Being Ernest, A Trivial Comedy for Serious People* is a farce or a "comedy designed to provoke the audience to simple hearty laughter—"belly laughs", in the parlance of the theatre" (Abrams 98). The beauty of the title of the play resides in its satirical significance which is maintained till the end of the play. Both the satirical and farcical elements are a deliberate incorporation of Wilde to recoil the conventional inefficiencies of the Victorian era.

Oscar Wilde elucidates on the Victorian society with all its rigid conventions. He tries to cover each and every aspect of Victorian men's mannerisms and behavior. He considers it as his responsibility to make the audience aware about the foolish behavior of the public. As an individual, literature is his best means to use the weapon 'satire' to attack the rigidity of the period. According to Molly Ivins, "Satire is traditionally the weapon of the powerless against powerful"

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(Ivins, 67). All the characters in the play directly or indirectly contribute to the objective of the playwright. Even the simple elements, including the title, indicate the brilliant use of satire. A satire is “the literary art of diminishing or derogating a subject by making it ridiculous and evoking” (Abrams, 297).

Jack Worthing who lives in Hertfordshire creates a fictional invalid Ernest Worthing in order to escape the responsibilities of his country life. The very action shows both the rigid societal expectations of the Victorian era and the deception of men. Though they are abided by the rules of the period, they somehow want to get rid of them. Jack flees into London frequently claiming that his (imaginary) brother Ernest Worthing has been accused of his scandalous lifestyle and he is called by the people there. And reaching the town, he changes himself to Ernest Worthing and enjoys the so called scandalous life style. The fictional invalid of Algernon, Bunbury, too shows the deceptive nature of Victorian men.

The institution of marriage is also satirized through the play. Both Gwendolen Fairfax and Cecily Cardew demand the name Ernest for their husbands and make it clear that they wouldn't have accepted the proposals of Jack and Algernon respectively unless both of them were named as Ernest. The approach of Lady Bracknell towards her daughter's marriage

also satirizes on the illogical concepts of marriage. Disregarding the love of her daughter she enquires Jack about his family, wealth and belongings, and objects the relationship on the single fact that he is an orphan. She opposes the marriage between Algernon and Cecily too until she comes to know that she is the heiress of a great fortune. Thus, it is shown that the concept of Victorian marriage is confined within the walls of families and wealth.

When Algernon confronts Jack with his personal cigarette case with the inscription, “From Little Cecily, with her fondest love to her dear Uncle Jack”, Jack blames Algernon's action as “ungentlemanly”. Even in the midst of lies and deceptions, Jack expects codes of conduct from his fellow beings. Wilde showcases the mentality of the Victorian public in a sarcastic manner.

The vast distinction between the rich and the poor, the elite and the common, the urban and the rural are completely portrayed in the play. In this context, both Jack and Bracknell are important. Jack's attempts to get into the lives of the town folks give us the clear picture of extreme opposite pole; one of complete freedom and the other burdensome. Lady Bracknell's enquiries about Jack's family highlight her intention to connect to the family lineage so that she could identify the wealth and class of the family. At the end of the play, when she identifies that Jack is actually her

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brother's son, she whole heartedly accepts him as her daughter's husband.

The play is a direct attack on the Victorian society of strict rules and conventions. It satirizes on the societal expectations of "being". The very title itself is a satire. On different stages, Jack Worthing, and even Algernon, realizes "the importance of being Ernest". It is important to be Ernest for escaping from the boredom of responsibilities; it is important to be Ernest for wooing and marrying Gwendolen; and finally, when he identifies himself as the son of Mr. Ernest John Moncrief, he "realized for the first time in my life the vital importance of being Ernest" (89). At an instant, for Algernon too, being Ernest is important. Thus the name Ernest is used throughout the play to mock at the Victorian necessity of being an earnest man.

*The importance of Being Ernest* is a play that ridicules and satirizes the rigid cultural norms of the Victorian era. Thus it shows the diversion of social orders by making use of ridiculous standards, morals and manners. All the characters exemplify the different character traits of Victorian people. The use of farce also intensifies the satirical effect of the play.

References

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