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Working of Human Mind and Society in Early Plays of Eugene O'Neill

Devender Singh*

Research Scholar,
CMJ University,
Shillong, Meghalaya

Dr. L. R. Yadav

Retd. Senior Lecturer,
Department of English,
Govt. P.G. College, Gurgaon, Haryana

ABSTRACT

Eugene O'Neill is one of the greatest modern dramatists. His Drama presents a psychological study of the working of human mind and society/humanity. He transformed the conflict between man and God or man and nature dramatized in Greek tragedy into a struggle within the suffering individual. O'Neill's attempt was to deal with the conflict between man's reality and his dope-dreams, i.e. his being in bad faith. In O'Neill, like in Sartre, bad faith is an attempt to stay put in the unconscious. Though the unconscious is an autonomous force, independent of individual man, it is not cut off from the conscious. Our approach to the unconscious post-dates Freud, in which the unconscious and the conscious co-exist, and in essence, bad faith is another name for the unconscious. Though O'Neill, in his plays, tries to extricate the conscious from the bad faith in which his characters often wallow, not to show that we should completely ignore the tendency to relapse, but to show that the conscious must not submit completely to the dope-dreams, because it then causes a complete withdrawal from reality and action, and similarly a complete suppression of the conscious.

So, throughout his life, as O'Neill's plays reveal, man is forced to wrestle with the bad faith of pipe-dreams and self-lies. If either of the two is ignored, the outcome would be the loss of self or of the existence. So, O'Neill's solution to the relapse into the bad faith, the past, pipe-dreams, self-lies is that man must asserts self-knowledge, and give up lying to oneself as early as possible, so as to become his authentic self, whatever it costs.

All his protagonists, whether male or female, are torn by the conflict between the conscious and the bad faith. Through his heroes and heroines, O'Neill wants to underline that mankind should recognize what damage the unconscious or self-lies does to the conscious.However, the dramatist finds that the dope-dreams, whether dragged or consciously indulged in, are thought to be congenial to mankind, and even necessary for human survival. O'Neill also finds this necessity to indulge in pipe-dreams is part of 'collective unconscious'. This explains the presence of myths in his plays – myths old and new. Indeed, O'Neill has created a whole mythology of his own, besides updating old myths, seeking not only their contemporary relevance, but also their recurrence, with various degrees of , as Northrop Frye would say, 'displacement of certain archetypes.' While in Frye the central myth is the quest-myth, in O'Neill it is appropriative-myth, the myth of possession, may it be a woman, a seat of power, a steamer, a farm, among others – all dreams, actuated by some lack or the other. In Early Plays (1920-1925), five plays, namely *Beyond the Horizon*(1920), *The Emperor Jones*(1920), *The Hairy Ape* (1922), *All God's Chillun Got Wings*(1924) and *Desire Under the Elms*(1924) have been taken up to bring out the conflict between the unconscious or bad faith and the conscious working in the psyche of his

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characters. In the plays of his early phase, O'Neill portrays such characters that are not even aware of their being in bad faith. They follow their dreams till the end, and even in the end, in their tragedy, they do not realize their mistake, or whether they are wrong at all.

Beyond the Horizon, O'Neill's seminal and first long play, was written in 1918 but not produced or published until 1920, when it made its debut in New York, and won him his first Pulitzer prize. *Beyond the Horizon* signaled a change in American drama. Critics and audiences responded favourably to O'Neill's tragic vision, which contrasted sharply with the unrealistic, melodramatic plays of the day. The play drew heavily on O'Neill's own experiences, including his tuberculosis and his sea voyages. During one of these sea trips, he met a Norwegian sailor who criticized his choice of going to sea as opposed to staying on his family's farm. Taking this cue as a starting point, O'Neill crafted a tale of missed opportunities and failed dreams. It is a dark and gloomy drama of despair and frustration. It is O'Neill's comprehensive portrayal of a dreamer who values his desires only, and takes them very seriously. He gets ruined both physically and mentally by his own doings and decisions. In O'Neill' words, it is, "a tragedy of man who looks over the horizon, who longs with his whole soul to depart on his quest, but whom destiny confines to a place and a task that are not his." (qtd. In Gelb 336)

The play, *Beyond the Horizon*, is O'Neill's first play and for that reason very schematic. As a story of two brothers, it unfolds itself in relation to existential psychoanalysis, wherein human reality identifies and defines itself by the ends which it pursues. Man, according to O'Neill, tries to be complete and full but everywhere he finds that he suffers from some lack, as Robert does. Something beyond the horizon draws him. The other brother, Andrew, thinks that he is complete in himself because he has the love of Ruth and the land to plough. But as O'Neill finds, consciousness has a hole in it. It is because human reality is contingent. Suddenly Ruth changes her mind, and expresses her love for Robert, leaving no option for Andrew to take to the sea.

Thus, the roles are reversed. The future determines what these brothers have to be. While the past determines their factuality, the future decides their possibilities. The sudden happenings in the lives of two brothers are no accidents; they do not burst forth from the outside. The hole lies within them, in their situation. O'Neill thus departs from Freudian psychoanalysis. Although some of the Freudian symbolism, of course, informs his plays, particularly with regard to human desires,but first of all, these desires are not entirely libidinal, and secondly, these symbols do not disguise man's ontological loneliness – the loneliness of the self which exists only in its free acts, with no values except which he himself creates. This explains the behaviour of Ruth – that she does not seek refuge in the comfortable doctrine that she is happy with one, and not the other. Man, in O'Neill's world, is not led by any illusion that loneliness is no more than a sexual need, not beyond human skill to satisfy.

O'Neill thus tries to handle a complex situation in a simplest possible manner in his very first longer play that human desires are not merely to do but to have, to be. They are not merely unconscious. O'Neill regards that a person is never either simple or complex; it is his situation which makes him one or the other. Therefore, most of the desires which actuate his characters need plugging what they lack. We find this expression of lack of being everywhere in O'Neill. Some value or the other haunts his personages. All these choices are determined by what they lack. In fact, freedom is really synonymous with lack. Therefore, the element of desire in O'Neill is not entirely unconscious. There is always a mix of the conscious in what Freud called unconscious. Therefore, O'Neill's psychoanalysis rejects the hypothesis of the unconscious on the basis that the psychic act co-exists with consciousness. It, however, does not mean that the subject is wholly conscious, i.e. he must be aware of what he seeks. There is always a preconscious level. But it is not an unsolved riddle, something in the nature of a complex, as the Freudians believe. All is there, luminous; reflection is full possession. But this mystery, as Robert's longing to go beyond the horizon, has earlier sucked Ulysses and Robinson Crusoe. It is a mystery of broad day-light, a longing for freedom beyond the stars. We know that Robert's unexpressed love for Ruth seeks to fulfil itself by going beyond horizon, and by the psychic acts, a conscious more than an unconscious act, makes Andrew take to sea, because he could have suffered if Ruth had married his brother.

The play depicts progressive disillusionment of Mayo family. All the characters are trapped in a situation wherein they find themselves alienated from the reality and their real selves. In running away from their true nature, they pursue their dreams and desires, which prove their undoing. They do not strike root anywhere, and constantly seek unknown goals and undetermined dreams. This leads to the disintegration of their personality, making them battle against their own reality.

The play opens by introducing two brothers, Andrew and Robert Mayo, and a female character Ruth – who seem to be helplessly driven to making wrong choices. She, indeed, longs to possess both the dreamer and the realist. The play unfolds the tragedy of a young, farm-born dreamer, whose romantic mind and frail body yearns for the open sea, the

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swarming ports of the mysterious East, the beckoning world beyond the line of hills which shut in acres of his longing. Robert feels attracted towards the beauty of the horizon. He wants to go on a sea-voyage. He wants to lead the life of a wanderer. As he says:

What I want to do now, is keep on moving so that I won't take root in any one place? (O'Neill I: BTH 83)

As O'Neill finds, Robert's will to wander forth is not an unmixed dream; it is inextricably combined with the conscious. He himself does not know what is calling him, or what is there beyond that horizon. But he knows that he has made a promise to himself to follow his dream, and that is why he wants to go on a sea voyage. He wants to be free from the bondages of the limits. He wants to find out the mystery and secret which are hidden over there. As he says to Andrew:

It's just as hard for me, Andy–believe that I hate to leave you and the old folks–but–I feel I've got to. There's something calling me–(*he points to the Horizon*) Oh, I can't just explain it to you, Andy. (83-84)

But his love for the horizon or his desire to go on a sea-voyage is not completely irrational. He had been in love with nature, with the freedom of the great wide spaces from the very childhood. He knows how his love for the horizon started. He tells Ruth that when his mother had to prepare meals, she used to get him away by fixing his seat to the west window, and asking him to look out and be quiet. But by and by this beauty of the horizon overwhelmed him, and he started to forget his pain. He used to be in dreams all the time. He just wanted to follow his dream, and made a promise to himself that one day he would go to the sea:

And I'd promise myself that when I grew up and was strong, I'd follow that road, and it and I would find the sea together. (*with a smile*) you see, my making this trip is only keeping that promise of long ago. (89)

So his decision to go on a sea voyage is not completely unconscious. But as he does not know what he actually is and what he seeks for, he is bound to make wrong choices and decisions. On the night before he is to set sail for a three years' journey around the world, love comes in the form of a neighbour's daughter whom he and all his people had thought was marked rather for his brother. But when Ruth tells him that she has been in love with him, he immediately decides to stay on the farm. He feels that he had been in love with Ruth for years butcould not realize it. But when the time to leave comes closer, this love becomes stronger and firmer. So, his love grows to the level of consciousness, and he decides to stay on the farm:

I've loved you all these years, but the realization never came 'til I agreed to go away with uncle Dick. Then I thought of leaving you, and the pain of that thought revealed to me in a flash–that I loved you, had loved you as long as I could remember. (91)

Thus, he rejects one dream to follow another. He completely forgets all thoughts of the world beyond the horizon and plans to settle at once on the farm with his jubilant bride. His first decision was partially rational but his decision to stay on the farm to marry Ruth is purely irrational because farming is not in his nature. So, O'Neill developed "the story of a born wanderer who had denied 'his instincts' and had 'stayed on the farm'." (Carpenter: 85) As Andrew says about him:

Can't be done. Farming ain't your nature. There's all the difference shown in just the way us two feel about the farm. You–well, you like the home part of it, I expect; but as a place to work and grow things, you hate it, Ain't that right? (O'Neill I: BTH 84)

So, Andrew sets forth on the ship as he could not see Ruth getting married to anyone else except himself. While taking the decision he just kept Ruth in his mind but forgot that he, a son of the soil, was born to do nothing but work on fields, and sure to whither if uprooted. Thus, the two brothers exchange their roles for each other's desires.

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Corresponding Author

Devender Singh*

Research Scholar, CMJ University, Shillong, Meghalaya