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Existential Concerns in Eugene O'Neill's *Thirst*: A Study

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Abstract:

Eugene O'Neill's *Thirst* is an important one act play that centres round the predicament of three hapless passengers – The Gentleman, The Dancer and The Sailor – who are floating helplessly in a life raft on a tropic sea after a shipwreck. The play ends with their tragic death as they are all devoured by the hungry sharks that have been encircling their life raft. It unquestionably draws the reader's or audience's attention to the unbearable torment and anguish of the helpless survivors. O'Neill here shows how extreme thirst and hunger can rob one of one's morality and even humanity, how the masks of civilised behaviour can fall off in the face of impending death, and how the instinct of survival can lead us to any extent. However, the present paper seeks to explore the existential concerns in *Thirst*. In other words, the paper is to show how the play foregrounds the existential states like alienation, loneliness, rootlessness, despair, emptiness, absurdity, absence of God, quest for meaning in life, struggle against the odds of life, futility of human labour and aspirations and the insignificance of human existence.

Keywords: Existentialism, alienation, meaninglessness, despair, absurdity.

Introduction

Existentialism is a kind of philosophy that came into being in the latter part of the nineteenth century and became prominent in the middle part of the twentieth century. It brings to the fore the notion that man is leading a meaningless and absurd life in a universe where God is absent. It sheds ample light on the emptiness, futility and purposelessness of human existence. Ian Buchanan points out that this philosophy "foregrounds the perplexing condition of the modern subject who, in the absence of God, is forced to contend with the meaningless of life" (Ian Buchanan 159). Buchanan further holds that existentialism is not a secular philosophy since "the absence of God can be understood to mean that humans have forsaken God or that God has forsaken humans (i.e. God still exists, He just does not involve Himself in human affairs)" (Ian Buchanan 159). Soren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche are generally considered to be the fathers of existentialism. Jean Paul Sartre, however, popularised the term 'existentialism' in his short book *L'existentialisme est un Humanisme* (1946) which was translated into English as *Existentialism and Humanism* (1948). This short book is actually a simplified summary of Sartre's previous book *Being and Nothingness* (trans.). It is important to note that Sartre borrowed the term 'existentialism' from Gabriel Marcel who first made use of this term in the mid-1920s. Sartre's novels including *Nausea*

serve to foreground this concept. It should also be noted that the work of two German philosophers - Martin Heidegger and Karl Jaspers – greatly expanded the existential thought and proved to be the source of aesthetic existentialism. M. A. R. Habib observes:

How does a human being overcome such inauthentic existence, such loss of true being? Heidegger's response comprises one of the classic statements of existentialism. He suggests that there is one particular state of mind which is unique: "dread" or *angst* (BT, 227 – 235). This refers to a sense of nothingness, of loss, of the emptiness, when we look at life or existence in its totality, as essentially oriented toward death. In such a mood, the human self attains knowledge of itself as a whole, as "being-to-death". In other words, death is the fundamental fact that shapes our existence and the course of our life. And the mental state of "dread" enables us to rise above our immanence, our dispersion in the immediate and transitory affairs of the world, to reflect upon our life as a whole in the fullest glare of its finitude and its potential to lack meaning (BT 293-299). The vehicle through which we acknowledge our responsibility to ourselves is "conscience" [...] (M. A. R. Habib 221)

There is no denying the fact that Kierkegaard, the pioneer of modern Christian existentialism, expressed his views in his books such as *Fear and Trembling* (1843), *The Concept of Dread* (1844) and *Sickness Unto Death* (1848). It is in his thoughts that the aesthetic existentialism had its origin. However, he kept on "restating and elaborating upon the belief that through God and in God man may find freedom from tension and discontent and therefore find peace of mind and spiritual serenity; an idea that had prevailed in much Christian thinking over many centuries" (J. A. Cuddon 295). However, the version of existentialism given by Jean Paul Sartre, the high priest of modern existentialism, exerted the strongest influence upon the critics and writers of this school of thought. Sartre's dictum – "existence precedes essence" is often regarded as the basic tenet of existentialism. J. A. Cuddon has pointed out:

In Sartre's version, man is born into a kind of void (*le neant*), a mud (*le visqueux*). He has the liberty to remain in this mud and thus lead a passive, supine, acquiescent existence (like Oblomov and Samuel Beckett's sad tatterdemalions) in a 'semi-conscious' state and in which he is scarcely aware of himself. However, he may come out of his subjective, passive situation (in which case he will 'stand out from'), become increasingly aware of himself and, conceivably, experience *angoisse* (a species of metaphysical and moral anguish). If so, he would have then a sense of the absurdity of his predicament and suffer despair. The energy deriving from this awareness would enable him to 'drag himself out of the mud', and begin to exist. By exercising his power of choice he can give meaning to existence and the universe. Thus, in brief, the human being is obliged to make himself what he is, and he has to be what he is. (J. A. Cuddon 295)

Besides Sartre, other exponents of existentialism include Albert Camus, Simone de Beauvoir and Jean Wahl.

In her essay “Women in Isolation: An Existential Study of Anita Desai’s *Cry, the Peacock, Voices in the City* and *Fire on the Mountain*”, Sujata Rana has aptly pointed out:

All the existentialists commonly agree on the point that human condition is essentially and ineradicably absurd; that man lives by and large, in an alien universe which possesses no inherent human truth, value or meaning; and that his existence is both anguished and absurd and that man is totally lost after having snapped his links with his religious, metaphysical and transcendental roots. Because of this inescapable condition to which he is condemned man always lives in anxiety in which he faces various existential states such as conflict, anguish, lying, self-examination, dread and freedom of choice, and a sense of nothingness, boredom and despair. He finds his platform in life crumbling, with the awareness that the life he has been living is nothing. This feeling of barrenness and vacuity in existence is increased all the more when man finds himself alienated from his fellow men, from society, from God, and worst of all from himself. He becomes so anxious that he experiences death in life. (Sujata Rana 122)

Eugene O’Neill is the first American dramatist to gain international fame. In fact, he is the only American dramatist to receive the Nobel Prize for Literature. Being the son of an actor, he was nursed mostly in green rooms. Since his childhood, he had been haunted by the feelings of loneliness, alienation, rootlessness, boredom and emptiness. He gathered variegated experiences from number occupations that he adopted before starting his career as a dramatist. Thus, it is only natural that his plays are replete with manifold experiences of life. As a dramatist, he was never contented with one particular technique or mode of expression. Rather, he went on experimenting with different forms, techniques and modes. Though he started his dramatic composition in the realistic tradition, “he experimented unceasingly with new techniques of presentation, new dramatic forms, and original dialogue” (Edward Albert 552). His other experiments include the use of aside and soliloquy, “his revival of the chorus, his use of a highly stylised speech and of rather confusing masks” (Edward Albert 553). It is also interesting to note that O’Neill’s plays bring to the fore the feelings of agony, alienation, boredom and nothingness, and therefore demonstrate his tragic vision of life. He also emerges as a great exponent of the Expressionist drama in English. Edward Albert observes:

On occasion his [O’Neill] originality leads to obscurity, and his audience cannot always be certain of his meaning, but he is a dramatist of immense force and powerful imagination, and his best plays show a real sense of theatre. (Edward Albert 553)

Thirst is one of the earliest one act plays by Eugene O’Neill. It was composed in 1913 and published in 1914 in a volume entitled *Thirst and Other One Act Plays*. The play pivots around three characters – The Gentleman, The Dancer and a West Indian Negro Sailor – who are drifting helplessly in a life raft on a tropic sea after a ship wreck. All of them are being tormented by extreme thirst, hunger, scorching sunlight and dead silence. They hope in vain to be rescued by some ships or to arrive at a choral island. The Gentleman and The Dancer harbour a misconception that the Negro Sailor has some water hidden under his jersey. The

Dancer offers her diamond necklace to the Sailor to have a few drops of water in return. As the Sailor denies having water, she offers her 'beautiful body' to him in exchange for water. But her efforts go in vain. Out of humiliation and acute thirst, she goes mad, starts dancing grotesquely and finally drops dead on the deck. Finding a queer prospect for survival, the Sailor degenerates into a savage and proceeds to eat the flesh of the dead Dancer. But the Gentleman saves the corpse from cannibalism by throwing it into the sea. In a fit of rage, the sailor stabs the Gentleman with his knife. A scuffle takes place between them, as a result of which both of them lose balance and fall into the sea. They are all devoured by the hungry sharks and the play ends with the diamond necklace glittering in the scorching sun.

The opening of the play *Thirst* is replete with existential angst, dread and predicament. The stage direction at the very outset sheds ample light on man's alienation, loneliness and helplessness in an alien universe where God is absent.

Scene – A steamer's life raft rising and falling slowly on the long ground swell of a glassy tropic sea. The sky above is pitilessly clear, of a steel blue colour merging into black shadow on the horizon's rim. The sun glares down from straight overhead like a great angry eye of God. The heat is terrific. Writhing, fantastic heat waves rise from the white deck of the raft. Here and there on the still surface of the sea the fins of the sharks may be seen slowly cutting the surface of the water in lazy circles. (81)

It is crystal clear from the opening paragraph of the stage direction that the audience is going to witness a hostile situation far removed from the normal society. The setting, i.e., the vast tropic sea may symbolise the alien and dreary world where modern men live an absurd and meaningless life. The wild sea, the terrific heat waves and the scorching sun are emblematic of the existential anguish, dread and despair that enslave each and every individual on earth. Moreover, the sharks encircling the raft are, no doubt, agents of death and destruction. Thus, they represent the existential truth that man is perpetually tied to a life of dread and danger and that death is the only reality of life. Apart from that, the setting emblematises modern man's estrangement from one another, his sense of nothingness and his feelings of rootlessness and boredom.

The Dancer's first reaction – "This silence is driving me mad" – reveals the fact that all the three characters are emotionally and spiritually estranged from one another despite their coexistence in a small raft. It points to their inability to communicate with each other during their helpless floating. On the symbolic level, this situation represents the existential predicament of modern men who are emotionally alienated from their fellow human beings and who always suffer from loneliness, silence, and monotony. A dead silence continues to oppress the hapless survivors, especially the Dancer and the Gentleman. The white companion, i.e., the Gentleman agrees with the Dancer on the point that "anything is better than dead silence" (87), thus betraying the existential human fear of vacuity and nothingness that characterise the life of man.

Strangely enough, the Negro Sailor goes on singing a monotonous song, the meaning of which is unknown to his white companions on the raft. When asked about the meaning of

the song, the Sailor curtly says that it is a song of his people, and he adds: “I am singing to them. It is a charm. I have been told it is very strong. If I sing loud enough, they will not eat us”(86). The Sailor believes that his song will cast a magical spell over the sharks and so their lives will be saved from these creatures. His attempt to survive even in the face of impending death represents the existential notion of man’s struggle against the odds of life. It also foregrounds the existential view that man always tries to make his existence meaningful and purposeful by exercising free will and making choices, though he is destined to live a life devoid of meaning and significance. Again, the Dancer’s speech –“The world seems emptier than ever. I am afraid” (85) – not only reveals her anguish and unbearable pain but also points to man’s existential feelings of vacuity, nothingness and despair.

Time and again, the Dancer inquires about the arrival of a rescue ship. Despite her hopeless state, she keeps on cherishing hopes of being rescued from the desolate sea. But the Gentleman and the Sailor report that there is no ship in sight. Utter despair and dread grip the minds of these hapless people:

THE DANCER. (Weeping hopelessly) My God, this is horrible. To wait and wait for something that never comes.

THE GENTLEMAN. It is indeed horrible. But it is to be expected. (88 – 89)

This conversation unquestionably brings to the fore the sense of fruitless waiting and despair that goes on plaguing the Dancer and the Gentleman. In this connection, one may feel tempted to point out that these words quoted above shed a great deal of light on the existential feelings of hopelessness, barrenness, meaninglessness, anguish and dread. It also signifies the existential notion that man’s labour and aspirations are certain to go in vain. The gentleman once again echoes the universal human feelings of despair, nothingness and emptiness when he says: I have hoped for many things in my life. Always I have hoped in vain” (89).

The Gentleman and the Dancer continue to talk to each other only to avoid the pangs of dead silence. Their efforts to better their wretched situation may suggest man’s existential search for meaning and purpose in life. The awareness of the absurdity and insignificance of life cannot prevent man from searching for meaning in life. He always tries to come out of the void of life to make his existence meaningful and purposeful.

While conversing with the Dancer, the Gentleman unconsciously brings out a menu card containing the names of sumptuous food items and drinks which were actually served to him at his farewell banquet. It is no, no doubt, a cruel joke played by Destiny because the sight of the menu card simply intensifies the acute hunger and thirst of the Dancer and the Gentleman. The dancer cannot help lamenting: “This is too horrible. What have we done that we should suffer so? It is as if one misfortune after another happened to make our agony more terrible” (91). O’Neill thus lays much emphasis on the absurdity, meaninglessness and emptiness of human existence. The existential notion that man is eternally destined to live a life of anguish, despair and dread finds a bold expression here.

Utter helplessness and despair have given rise to a sense of nothingness in the Gentleman. He seems convinced that he and his co-passengers are going to be eaten up by the sharks:

THE GENTLEMAN. God! How still the sea is! How still the sky is! One would say
the world was dead. I think the accursed humming of that nigger only makes
one feel the silence more keenly. There is nothing but the sharks that seems to
live. (94)

These words not only show his awareness of impending death but also accentuate the existential angst and dread of the modern man. The sharks that symbolise death serve to strengthen the feeling that death is the only thing shaping our existence.

The present play also foregrounds the notion of fruitless labour. The Dancer laments: "Oh God! Must this be the end of all? I was coming home, home after years of struggling, home to success, and fame and money. And I must die out here on a raft like a mad dog" (96 - 97). This unquestionably lays bare the futility of her hard struggle and the barrenness of her hard toil. In a broader sense, this lament represents the existential premise that man's existence is fundamentally absurd, meaningless and purposeless. It also foregrounds the existential notion of fruitless labour. In this context, it is worth pointing out that Albert Camus, one of the main exponents of existentialism, has emphasised the modern man's predicament stemming from his fruitless labour in his essay "The Myth of Sisyphus". A similar feeling of despair and nothingness is also revealed in the Gentleman's lament: "Oh God, God! After twenty years of incessant grind, day after weary day, I started on my first vacation. I was going home. And here I sit dying by slow degrees, desolate and forsaken. Is this the meaning of all my labour? Is this the end, oh God?" (97). It once again accentuates the pangs of fruitless labour, the futility of human aspirations and the absurdity of human existence. Both these characters represent the existential states like despair, nothingness and anguish.

The absence of God in the alien universe inhabited by modern men is another important aspect of existential philosophy. Curiously enough, the hapless survivors of the shipwreck, especially the Gentleman and the Dancer, pray to God time and again for help or rescue. But God gives no response to their appeals or prayers. God seems to be indifferent to their predicament. The Gentleman laments: "But the blind sky will not answer your appeals or mine. Nor will the cruel sea grow merciful for any prayer of ours" (97). This pathetic lament sheds ample light on the existential notion that we are living in a world where God is absent and that He will never rescue us from danger or crisis. *Thirst* is thus pervaded by the feelings of helplessness and emptiness.

The existential angst has also been revealed in the form of mistrust in the fellow passenger on the life raft, i.e. the Sailor. Both the Gentleman and the Dancer suspect the sailor of having stolen the water. They also accuse him of keeping some water hidden under his jacket. They abuse and curse him for denying the allegation. However, the Dancer offers

her diamond necklace to the sailor to procure some water from him; but he denies having water. She finally decides to play her last card, i.e. her body which has never failed her. Despite offering her beautiful body to the Sailor, she gets no water from him. She is shocked to realise that neither her material wealth nor her physical beauty possesses value or meaning in this extreme situation. This scene once again gives rise to the feelings of helplessness, emptiness and nothingness which form the core of existentialism. The dancer feels ashamed and humiliated. She regrets: “Great God, have I abased myself for this? Have I humbled myself before this black animal only to be spurned like a wench of the streets? It is too much!” (107). Out of fury and humiliation, she goes mad and begins to dance grotesquely on the deck. While dancing frantically, she falls on the deck and passes away. Finding her dead, the sailor seems happy because he decides to eat the dead Dancer’s flesh and drink her blood: “We shall eat. We shall drink” (110). This is, no doubt, an act of cannibalism. But the basic instinct of survival makes the Sailor degenerate into a cannibal. From existential point of view, his decision to utilise the corpse for the sake for self-preservation represents the fact that man exercises his free will and makes choices in his absurd universe in order to assert his existence or make his life meaningful and significant.

The Gentleman, however, sticks to the model code of conduct prescribed by the civilised society, and so he throws the dead body unto the sea so that the Sailor may not commit a ghastly sin like cannibalism. Being deprived of his ‘food’ and ‘drink’, the Sailor goes mad with fury and stabs the Gentleman with his knife. Consequently, a scuffle ensues. Both of them lose balance and fall into the sea only to be devoured by the sharks. The diamond necklace lies glittering on the deck. Apart from showing the existential plight of modern men, the ending shows that man’s rat race for fame and riches is meaningless and futile. The ending thus brings to the fore the existential notion that the human life is absurd, meaningless and purposeless.

Conclusion

The play *Thirst* sheds a good deal of light on the existential angst, dread, and despair of man. The fact that the characters remain unnamed in the play points to the universality of their predicament. Indeed, the characters represent their respective classes in particular and humanity in general. They, therefore, lay bare the existential states of modern men, such as alienation, rootlessness, hopelessness, anguish, dread, emptiness, nothingness and absurdity. They also reveal man’s existential quest for meaning in life as well as man’s constant struggle against the hostile forces of the world. In addition to that, the play foregrounds the absence of God in the world of man. Last but not least, O’Neill echoes the existential concept that man tries to make his existence meaningful by exercising his free will and the freedom of choice. Thus, the present play teems with Existential concerns which serve to enhance the meaning and significance of the play itself.

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