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## ALIENATION AND AESTHETIC SENSIBILITY IN EUGENE O'NEILL'S THE ICEMAN COMETH

Dr. Vinod Kumar Maheshwari  
Associate Professor & Head , Department of English ,  
Agra College, Agra.

### ABSTRACT

*In this article, a discussion that is being contemplated is developed first with a treatment of subject matter through the opinions on what is meant by 'alienation'; and in what matter it is related to aesthetic experience of a creative artist. Then, as the argument is built up, its justifiability is examined in the light of its relationship with Eugene O'Neill's The Icedman Cometh. In this play of Eugene O'Neill, alienation and aesthetic sensibility worked in tandem. The Icedman Cometh is a typical modern play in which the different characters caught in the whirlpool of time and circumstances take to boozing and pipe dreaming just to avail some sort of satisfaction, even for a shortwhile. However, in the deeper context of life, their hopes are misplaced, for through drinking and pipe dreaming they can only postpone the hour of reckoning, but they just cannot ward it off.*

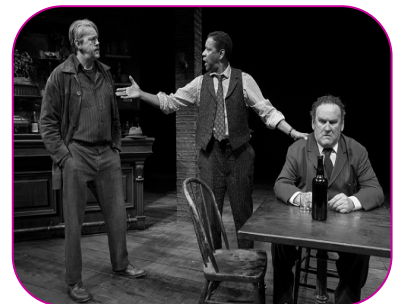
**KEYWORDS:** *The Icedman Cometh , mode of social behaviour , man's intelligence.*

### INTRODUCTION

The aesthetic sensibility of an artist helps man to maintain his equipoise, moment to moment and from one day to another. Alienation is as pervasive as the air we breathe because the vice of commercialism and money-rolling in unpent-up limit has made men doubt one another owing to the alienated persona in each of us. When Matthew Arnold wrote the lines:

And we are here as on a darkling plain  
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,  
Where ignorant armies clash by night<sup>1</sup>

he had an apprehension that humanity might take to this colouring and mode of social behaviour on account of the money-oriented values in which man more often than not finds himself at odds with his fellow-men. Thus, in this setting the role of sensitive and creative artists is very much necessary for average educated person; otherwise men and women in general are bound to get disintegrated at the level of individuality. For example, Eugene O'Neill's plays have proved to be yeomanly in sharpening the awareness among the educated people all the world over about the grave shortcomings of the modern civilization. American society must be indebted to such men of literary distinction. It is through the aesthetic sensibility that men and women become aware of the complications of life, of which some are curable by reshaping one's personal conduct; and for those which are not resolvable by man's ingenuity, one has to surrender to the inscrutable forces higher than man's intelligence. The aesthetic sensibility liberates man from the weird clutches of the chaotic



social environment; and even when, it is for a few moments, as Robert Frost was wont to look at, it is worth any effort.

Howsoever may be the debilitating impact of the external environment on ordinary man's sensibility, one just cannot forego the healing touch of serenity and equilibrium. Since the world is getting complicated more and more on psychological and social planes both owing to serious imbalance in social economy along with the dehumanization of men and women, widespread unregeneracy sets in human behaviour. It is in this background, the role of creative writers gains importance. In his essay *Poetry and Drama* T.S. Eliot remarked that 'it is ultimately the function of art, in imposing a credible order upon ordinary reality, and thereby eliciting some perception of an order in reality, to bring us to a condition of serenity, stillness and reconciliation.'<sup>2</sup>

That the creative art and artist have a liberating impact on common man's sensibility is recognized all the world over. The American playwright, Edward Albee has specifically pointed out that 'the usefulness of art in a more general sense has to do with the fact that it makes us understand consciousness and bring some order into the chaos of existence. That is the useful function of art – to direct our attention to a sense of rhythm, to a sense order – to a sense of order – to a comprehension of what it is to be, to be aware of oneself.'<sup>3</sup>

Consequently, one can say that the study of alienation can be meaningfully interpreted in the context of individual's sensibility. Since the subject-discussion covers the inter-relationship between 'alienation and aesthetic sensibility', it would be worthwhile also to know succinctly the basic ideas behind aesthetics. Aesthetics in the modern sense has been attributed to Alexander Baumgarten (1714-62). "Aesthetics, since Baumgarten's time, has been defined as 'the study of the beautiful in nature and art, of its conditions, and of its conformity to law. 'Thus defined, it has a broad scope, including at least two major modes of approach, the philosophical and the psychological. Philosophers since Plato have been intensively concerned with problems of art and of beauty. They have been pursuing questions like the following: What is art? What is beauty? Is beauty objective? What is the relation of beauty to other value, *i.e.*, What is the relation of the beautiful to the true and to the good?'"<sup>4</sup> In its root meaning 'aesthetics' is derived from the Greek word: *aesthesis* which in English means sense-perception. In its extended meaning, aesthetics is also concerned with the vital equations of truth and goodness. Anybody who feels alienated from social environment, reacts to the elements of falsity and ugliness in the surroundings. Victims of racial discrimination or class differentiation are prone to aestheticise the factor of ugliness and distortion in the life style of their oppressors. Now, to link aesthetical element with sensibility, it is possible to say that the concept of aesthetic sensibility essentially connotes an intenser form of human experience which gets acceptability in terms of the extract quoted below:

The modern meaning of sensibility 'was anticipated by Baudlaire. In his essay on Constanti in Guys he suggests that the child, convalescent, and the artist are alike in possessing 'the ability (*la faculte*) of being vividly interested in things, even those that appear most trivial ..... The child sees everything *afresh (en nouveau)*, he is always drunk.'

The man of genius is he who adds powers of analysis and expression to the sensibility of the child. We can see here the linking of physical and emotional responsiveness that is the essence of the modern meaning of the word. Baudlaire's view of sensibility involves an emphasis on the physical strain of thought, a special awareness of flux, and a mingling of the senses.'<sup>5</sup>

Before India got stratified into rigid caste-system, the ancient Hindu wisdom as enshrined in the Vedas enjoined upon every able-bodied person to expose themselves to physical work and the world of nature; for the Veda's creators thought that this helped man to know *Brahmand*; and the upper class Hindus fell to evil days more and more as they started shirking physical labour. The classical wisdom of the west also thought the same way. The impoverished sensibility and an unhealthy sense of life are the malevolent gifts of the riches. It is a paradox arising out of the dissociated sensibility of modern man. Only a unified sensibility can save man from the lacerating paradox. If the riches tend to distort the sensibility of the rich people, the riches with its glamour make the ordinary men of the world crazy about it. They want money to

indulge in drinking and then to go for pipe-dreaming. In this way, they want to experience a surrogate life satisfaction.

Apparently, this was the underlying purpose of O'Neill's writing *The Iceman Cometh*. It is a typical modern play in which the different characters caught in the whirligig of time and circumstances take to boozing and pipe dreaming just to avail some sort of satisfaction, even for a shortwhile. However, in the deeper context of life, their hopes are misplaced; for through drinking and pipe dreaming, they can only postpone the hour of reckoning, but they just cannot ward it off. Since through these devices, the beaten and defeated individuals who generally assemble over drinks at Harry Hope's saloon hotel located in New York's lower west side, are generally fugitives from life. Unable to face the rigours of actual existence, these drunken members of the community try to find a surrogate satisfaction of life through wine-taking and pipe dreaming.

From this play, it is also made clear that once men become habitual to drinking they just cannot overcome it; and even as they indulge in pipe dreaming as a necessary follow-up of drinks, they miss the zest and fervour of life which is vouchsafed only to those who without any kind of argument face the challenges of actual life. Consequently, having missed the joys and sorrows of life, they resign themselves to the final hour of death. Of course, the exceptions are also there. The free-spending, boisterous Hickey is one who tries to come out of the doleful circuit of drinking and pipe dreaming; but unfortunately, he could not maintain his balance of mind for long with the result he vacillated into love-hate syndrome. His shifty stand is related to the murdering of his saintly, long-suffering wife, Evelyn; and then reported the horrid incident to the police with punishment to follow. Nonetheless, he boasted of a better face before the drinking friends at the Harry Hope's Saloon; but his boast only indicated that he was a murderer of his innocent wife but not a forgiver and self-rehabilitator.

The play is concerned with the truth-illusion theme with which the groggy tipplers assembled at Hope's Saloon in New York's lower west side were deeply involved. They are a set of degenerates. Only Hickey is an exception but that too, only partly. He frees himself from pipe-dreaming only for a very short spell of time. To Moran, Hickey says: 'Do you suppose I give a damn about life now? ... I haven't got a single damned lying hope or pipe dream left.'<sup>6</sup> The pipe-dreaming goes hand in hand with drinking habit; and by virtue of the weakening of one's physique, one's resolve to give up the ingrained habit of boozing gets considerably weakened. Precisely, he becomes what the others are. Without a pipe dream, he, like his fellow-tipplers is lost, and nothing can bring his companionship with anyone again. Since he has freed Harry Hope and his friends to dream again by explaining that his whole treatment of them has been mad, he had some parts of nobility too.

The main object of *The Iceman Cometh* is to find peace. Hickey attempts to help each of the entire band of drinkers and pipedreamers to find peace within oneself but he could not succeed; partly because he himself was not sure of his having found peace; and it was also because the tipplers were also not very much enthusiastic and also not very much fit for crystallizing peace within themselves. After all, the drinks have an adverse effect over power of self-restraint. 'The irony is something like that of Oedipus' striving 'to find the culprit', when it is he all the time. Hickey has to admit that he has failed to bring the men peace. He does come to the understanding that he has lost his own, however, and goes willingly to his death. Oedipus recognizes with tragic anguish that he is the culprit. As King Oedipus restores his country, Hickey restores happiness to the crowd, and so the little man partakes of the heroism which is Oedipus' in great measure.'<sup>7</sup>

If the salesman Hickey was a man of parts to make a break-through the misbegotten concept of drinking and pipe-dreaming, even for a very short period, Larry Slade – the one time Syndicalist Anarchist – was also a man of thought who wrestled with the question of truth and illusion. This question has an engaging point with Eugene O'Neill who has tackled it directly or indirectly in many of his plays. Talking to Rocky, one of the boozers at Harry Hope's Saloon, Larry said: 'To hell with the truth (As the history of the world proves, the truth has no bearing on anything. It's irrelevant and immaterial, as the Lawyers say. The lie of a pipe dream is what gives life to the whole misbegotten mad lot of us, drunk or sober.'<sup>8</sup> He has his own logic of giving up the anarchist movement. Larry felt that any cultural and political movement can only

succeed provided the people themselves want a change and that they are prepared historically to welcome the change. To Parritt, he said that the people in general are like swines wallowing in mud and dirt. For this reason, he got frustrated, 'For myself I was forced to admit, at the end of thirty years' devotion to the Cause, that I was never made for it. I was born, condemned to be one of those who has to see all sides of a question. When you're damned like that, the questions multiply for you until in the end it's all question and no answer. As history proves, to be a worldly success at anything, especially revolution, you have to wear blinders like a horse and see only straight in front of you. You have to see, too, that this is all black, and that is all white. As for my comrades in the Great Cause, I felt as Horace Walpole did about England, that he could love it if it weren't for the people in it. The material the ideal free society must be constructed from is men themselves and you can't build a marble temple out of a mixture of mud and manure. When man's soul isn't a sow's ear, it will be time enough to dream of silk purses.'<sup>9</sup>

Larry has a point that revolution is made by men who are idealistic and at the same time, wide-awakened in their sensibility. Similarly, when he says: 'man's soul isn't a sow's ear', he touches on the nub of a problem; for before man is able to achieve anything exalted, he must develop his soul or deeper self which is not as easy as it is spoken of. The soul's discovery – in terms of Jung's deep psychology and the writings of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche – is only possible when man has trained his mind in overcoming the evil imbedded in social existence but has also detached himself from the polluting temptations, having grown in legion through the mass-oriented entertainment technology of today. Precisely, from the second part of the twentieth century, there has not come any worthwhile revolution in modern world. In the context of the present discussion on 'Alienation and Aesthetic Sensibility', it is possible to say that as man finds it hard to discover his self or soul; and as he is unable to withstand the chaos of the external world, he goes for easy options like drinking, pipe-dreaming and sentimentalized sex-indulgence. Even then, there is no respite, for the inner tick-ticking of the inner soul, having remained inarticulated, continues to buzz his mind. Thus, one just cannot overcome the feeling of alienation despite all the ingenuity associated with money power and electronic technology. As already referred to in the preceding chapter, Eugene O'Neill has been greatly concerned with the loss of faith in man, following the scientific and technological achievements; for he knew that science just cannot provide a living, vibrating faith to man in the twentieth century, which is equally so in the twentyfirst century, for man finds himself confronted with devious contradictions of modern life.

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**Dr. Vinod Kumar Maheshwari**

Associate Professor & Head , Department of English , Agra College, Agra.