



REVIEW OF RESEARCH

ISSN: 2249-894X

IMPACT FACTOR : 5.7631 (UIF)

UGC APPROVED JOURNAL NO. 48514

VOLUME - 8 | ISSUE - 9 | JUNE - 2019



RE-PRESENTING THE CONCEPT OF THIRST AND MADNESS AS A FORM OF ECO SICKNESS IN EUGENE O'NEILL'S PLAY "THIRST"

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ABSTRACT:

What is it like to die of thirst? Thirst which means an ardent desire for something also clings on to the biological dimension of the basic amenity of human life – the feel of needing or wanting to drink something. This paper explores how the basic feeling thirst and state of madness raises to the level of a typical form of eco sickness which results in the psychic trauma of the characters who could be depicted as the 'climate refugees' by drawing reflections from Eugene O'Neill's one act play "Thirst". It depicts the struggles of three ship wreck victims surviving on a small white raft, surrounded by sharks. Descending into madness as a result of thirst, they prey on each other until they all perish.



Eco sickness could be defined as a condition able to stimulate social reorganization, create new identity formations and inspire ethical environment thought and action. The sickness is a relational state that links up the biomedical, environmental, social and political, a connection between the human and the more than human. Climate refugees or the Environment migrants are the persons or group of persons who predominantly for reasons of sudden or progressive change in the environment that adversely affect their lives or living conditions are obliged to leave their habitual homes or choose to do so either temporarily or permanently and who move either within their country or abroad. In this paper, I would be exploring the experience of thirst as a constructed form of eco sickness which resulted in the deep rooted psychological change- madness in characters who could be portrayed as the climate refugees affected by the forces of nature – sun, sea and sharks. Regardless of their identity, they become mere spectators of their own hunger and thirst which made them the objects of ecosickness - physically crippled, psychologically crushed and imaginatively invaded.

KEYWORDS: *Thirst, Eugene O' Neill's Thirst, Eco sickness, Madness, Climate Refugees, Psychic trauma.*

INTRODUCTION :

Climate change is defined as a phenomenon which results in the seasonal change over a long period of time which is inflicted by the nature's thrash against the exploiting human activities. This phenomenon could occur

in two dimensions – the climate of one's habitat changes or he himself changes his habitat and moves to another, pushing himself into a climate change. The meanings of the words climate and weather merges at this point. Climate which is a

long term phenomenon sometimes takes the dimension of weather which has a shorter time-span. A minute change in the biotic and abiotic factors around an individual could be categorized under climate change for which the individual may or

may not be a reason for it. The Climate change could be explored in literature by analyzing its impact on the characters and the plot. Nature which once stood as a mere setting now came to the forefront revealing its impact on the psyche of the characters.

The word 'refugees' refers to people who are forced to flee away from their place by an external agency or by themselves and are forced to seek shelter in another place. Climate Refugees are those people who become the victims of climate change – a change in their day to day environment which includes the heat, temperature, sunlight, humidity, cold etc. They are people who are leading their life in the frontline of climate change, who lost their lives and is displaced from their familiar climatic conditions. These changes in climatic factors can lead to a state called 'Eco sickness'. Sickness which is relational state that links up the biomedical, environmental, social and political, a connection between the human and the more than human – the Nature. Eco sickness refers to the change in the mental and physical state and the biological patterns of an individual due to the change in the climate or the climatic factors around the individual. This can range from the dizziness caused due to the scorching sun to the numbness felt during the chilling cold. Recent studies prove that the change in climatic factors can alter human behavior. This alteration in human behavior could be traced back to the Nazi reign when people were packed in the small rooms of concentration camps, thereby inflicting a psychological trauma in them. Eco sickness is a state of mind and body which is induced by his surroundings. This is not voluntarily done by the affected. The external environmental factors like heat, temperature, cold etc affect the individual pushing him into the state of Eco sickness. This is very much different from the environmental disease as the sickness will be diminished when the individual retires to his normal life or favorable environment.

Drama or play is said to be the most effective tool to convey a message to the audience. These climate changes and environmental issues are incorporated into the stage by setting proper stage conventions which is referred to as Climate change theatre. These theatres bring out the real scream of the earth through their presentations – how they are affected by the human interventions and its consequences. This will create an awareness among the audience as they are watching it like a real incident. The stage conventions, settings, dialogues and costumes of characters are so precise and perfect that the stage becomes equipped to create a rethinking by the audience, related to environmental issues. Nature which acts as a third person, a silent observer comes and stands in the forefront of the individual confronting its past, present and future.

Eugene O'Neill, an American playwright and Nobel laureate in Literature has been noted by his plays for its simplicity in plots, characterization and construction. He creates his plot to carry out an investigation into the psyche of the characters in the play. The reason why he opts for selecting a minimum number of characters is that he wishes to develop these characters to the full and explore them in greater depth. O'Neill's tackling of tragedy was appreciated well by the audience. His major play was *Beyond the Horizon* (1918) that established him as a renowned playwright and brought him his first Pulitzer Prize. His other important works include *Anna Christies*, *Strange Interlude* and *Long Day's journey into Night*. He was particularly interested in stage directions. He has set them out in great detail. This precision and detailing of both characters and stage is marked as his style.

The play *Thirst* was written in 1913 as an influence of a shipwreck – the traumatic sinking of Titanic in 1912. The play opens with the image of stasis where everything is still and silent creating a monotonous atmosphere.

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 sharks may be seen slowly cutting the surface of the water in lazy circles. (O'Neill)

Thirst presents three characters – a Gentleman, a Dancer and a West Indian mulatto Sailor – stranded helplessly on a boat. All of them are victims of a ship wreck and are desperate to reach the shore. The strong wind lashing at the boat, the sharks surrounding the boat and the scorching heat squash their plans. Both the Gentleman and the Dancer starve and yearn for a drop of water to drink

while, seemingly unaware of these desperations, the Sailor crooning an unidentified native song. The Dancer and the Gentleman talks about the bitter memories of the shipwreck and about the Captain who shot himself since he thought he was responsible for the disaster. The playwright presents the abysmal picture of human life through the words of these two characters. The Gentleman narrates the story of his escape from the ship and sarcastically presents menu from his pocket which lists many delicacies – a bitter irony when they do not have anything to eat. Now, the Dancer starts to ponder over her past and even talks about a man who gave her a kiss just before the tragedy. She has a precious diamond necklace with her, which was gifted by a Duke. The Sailor's presence irritates the two and they beg him for some water. The Gentleman believes that the Sailor has hidden water somewhere and is not willing to help. The Dancer asks the sailor for some water. The latter says he doesn't have any. The girl offers him her precious necklace and even herself, but the sailor is not lured by money or lust. She turns desperate because of thirst and starts dancing and talking in a frenzied manner and dies. This marks a turning point in the play and the Sailor begins to speak. He says that it is good that she's dead and now that he can feed on her body. This shocks the Gentleman and a huge commotion follows. In the end both of them die and the play closes with only the necklace left shining on the deck of the boat.

The play is a dismal statement on the meaning of human life. It presents thirst as a major theme. The three characters presented in the play embody various classes in the society – the Dancer and the Gentleman represent the dominant, white upper-class while the Sailor stands for the marginalized lower class. The Dancer aspires to live and she represents hope, dreams, arts and culture and the glittery side of life. The Gentleman is more practical and materialistic, while the Sailor is closer to nature.

The play exposes the intense psychological dilemmas and tensions of people facing a critical moment in their life. They are being secluded from their normal life pattern and environment. Their mindset is getting altered by the scorching heat of the sun and thirst. The Sailor at the end of the play goes back to the primordial human instincts as a cannibal when he utters "We shall eat, We shall drink" at the sight of the dancer's dead body. The Dancer loses her mental state and starts telling illusions like ship approaching and water. Her statements reveal that she has lost her consciousness. The scorching heat and the intense thirst has made her lose her senses.

DANCER .It is gone. Yet I am quite sure I saw one. It was right out there quite near us. It was all green and clean- looking with a clear stream that ran into the sea. I could hear the water running over the stones. You donot believe me. You, Sailor, you must have seen it too, did you not? I cannot see it any more. Yet I must see it. I will see it.(O'Neill)

DANCER .Stop! Yes, there was something I had forgotten. I think that someone kissed me. Yes, I am sure that someone kissed me. But no, I am not sure. It may have all been a dream I dreamed. I have had so many dreams during these awful days and nights – so many mad, mad dreams. Mad, mad dreams.(O'Neill)

DANCER .While now my brain is scorched with sun-fire and dream-fire. And I am going mad. Yes, we are all mad.(O'Neill)

The climatic change and the harsh environmental factors prevailing in the raft has created a state of madness in the behavior of all the three characters. The term "mad" has been often quoted by the characters which reveals their mental status. Only difference is that the madness is portrayed in different ways by these characters. The Sailor who doesn't speak much except "I have no water." is singing a song which is felt meaningless by others, which he believes can drive away the sharks. He even gets into the extent of eating the dead body which is seen as obscene. The Dancer sees illusions and her continuous conversation to the Gentleman reveals her unstable mind. The Gentleman often states that he is mad and accepts that he has also seen illusions.

GENTLEMAN .I think at one time I was going mad. I dreamed he had a knife in his hand and looked at me. But it was all madness; I can see that now. He is only a poor Negro sailor – our companion

in misfortune. God knows we are all in the same pitiful plight. We should not grow suspicious of one another.(O'Neill)

The feeling of thirst could be depicted as a form of Eco sickness as this ardent feeling for the water is instilled by the climate or the environment in which the situation is taking place – a raft in the midst of the sea. The Sun played its part in creating a desire for water in the midst of water with its scorching rays. Though the three characters are spending their life in the middle of sea- the ultimate source of water, they are denied water to drink which created feeling of mental agony in them. As the Sun's hot rays were falling on them, they were losing their energy and was literally feeling drowsy. Hence the feeling of thirst is reflected as a form of eco sickness since the sickness – the thirst is being advocated by environment – the Nature. The characters also undergo a mental trauma with the prevailing atmospheric condition there. They go through the trenches of madness which is revealed from their dialogues. Hence the imbalanced state of mind or madness could also be considered an Eco sickness. Both the conditions could be categorized into Eco sickness as both occurred when they were struck in the raft and they were being shifted from their usual environment. They could have been retrieved from this sickness if they were subjected to the availability of drinking water. The characters could be categorized under the Climate refugees as they were affected by the ravages of nature - the burning sun, the devilish sharks and the salt sea. Their lives became the aftermath of the harsh changing climatic condition. Though they wished to move out of this situation, the natural factors denied them their wish. They were being continuous prey of the changing climatic factors – the heat and the sharks. The Dancer met her end dancing in the Sun screaming for a drop of water. She blames the Sun for heating them so badly that her skin was getting damaged.

The one act play *Thirst* gives a vivid description of the setting of the play. The play begins by describing the heat of the sun, the waves, the colour of sky, sound of the waves etc. All these factors are given in detail in the script. Hence when the play is staged, all these elements could be depicted well. The presentation of the play following these minute details can evoke a sentimental impact on the audience. Hence this play could be categorized under the Climate theatre as this a play reflecting the changing climatic and environmental factors. In theatre presentations, colours are given great significance as they can create the mood of the situation in the audience just like the music. In this play, colour red is used as a signal to denote the danger, that the situation is collapsing and that there is a threat faced by each character. O'Neill has very well incorporated the colour indications through the dialogues of different characters. He has knitted this with the plot and the impact was made on the audience through careful use of words indicating the theme which was observed to be moving with the dialogues and the plot. The Sea and the Sky which is often depicted as blue is portrayed as red here which shows the rude and uncompromising nature.

DANCER .Everywhere I look I see great crimson spots. It is as if sky were raining drops of blood. Do you see them too?(O'Neill)

GENTLEMAN .Yesterday I did – or some day – I no longer remember days. But today everything is red. The very sea itself changed to blood. Perhaps it is the blood of all those who were drowned that night rising to the surface. (O'Neill)

GENTLEMAN .I see nothing – nothing but a red sea and a red sky(O'Neill)

The three characters are chosen from different strata of the society so that the discrimination and the social hierarchy could be presented in the play. The Gentleman and the Dancer were ascribed as white and hence dominating over the scene. The West mulatto Sailor was often ignored by the other characters and was even pictured to be a thief. He remained silent even after he heard them speaking ill of him. The Gentleman even went to the extent of calling him “rotten pig” and “black dog.” The girl calls him “ the dirty slave” and “black animal.” The Dancer who was proud of her beauty was of materialistic nature, was ready to submit herself to the sailor in return of water. She valued her jewels and beauty more. She could be pictured as a less dangerous “femme fatale” as we could figure out that

she was ready to give her body to the sailor and was trying to seduce him with her beauty. Though she was talking ill of the Sailor, she told him that she likes him to get her things done. This reveals her manipulative nature. The violent nature of her character is reflected when she orders the Gentleman to kill the Sailor.

DANCER . We will kill him then. He deserves to be killed.(O'Neill)

DANCER .Do you not understand? I will love you, Sailor..... I am offering myself to you! I am kneeling before you - I who always had men kneel to me! I am offering my body to you - my body that men have called so beautiful. I have promised to love you - a Negro Sailor - if you will give me one small drink of water.(O'Neill)

In the play *Thirst*, the three characters become mere objects in the hands of the powerful nature. It reveals man's helplessness in the power of nature. A slight change in the environmental factors can bring out the end of life. The diamond necklace twinkling on the deck of the raft shows the powerlessness of material things in front of the supreme power - the Nature. As in his other plays, in *Thirst* O'Neill has made an ample number of his sea-revoing experience throughout the work for atmospheric and structural symbolism. The smallness and loneliness of man in the vast unsympathetic universe is suggested poignantly in the very opening and closing of the play which have an almost Existentialist Bearing.

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