

THEME OF WAR IN EUGENE O' NEILL'S MOURNING BECOMES ELECTRA

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Eugene O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra* is a modern adaptation of Aeschylus' *Oresteia* trilogy, transposed from Agamemnon's return to Argos from the Trojan War to Ezra Mannon's return to the Mannon House in a New England town after the American Civil War. Trojan War as the background of Aeschylus' play lends a sense of doom and pre-destination to it. O' Neill chooses the American Civil War as the historical background for his adaptation, because the war possesses "sufficient mask for time and space and New England as the place of action, because of its "Puritan conviction of man born to sin and punishment". O' Neill understands his exercises in tragedy as an attempt to find a modern analogue to the ancient mode of experience. Accordingly, the American Civil War springs from O'Neill's attempt to negotiate the chasm between ancient and modern. For O' Neill, the Civil War provides a setting that would allow audiences to locate the tragic in their national history and mythology while retaining enough distance in time to lend the tale its required epic proportions and the sense of doom, destruction and tragic foreboding.

But war in *Mourning Becomes Electra* emerges as a thematic essence. The play starts at a moment when the external war is over. But Civil War contributes to the diegesis of the play. External war contributes to dramatic action. External war is given here internal, esoteric dimension. As the backdrop of this play First Civil War of 1865 is primarily a political war, but simultaneously it is also a cultural war waged by the people living within the taboos of Puritan society. They were tired, so they tried to establish an antithetical place to Puritanism. Patriarchy is a bifurcation of Puritanism. So, there is also protest against it by women. This is integrated with Civil War (a war between industrial north and feudal south), therefore war is not only without but also within.

In this poignant tragedy O' Neill attempts to interpret the old Greek story of *Oresteia* in Freudian terms, and presents it with the theatrical devices and styles of 20th century expressionism. Apart from the Civil War he presents in this play two other levels of war: war between different individuals, that is, intra-individual war; and war within different disparate incongruous antithetical elements inside human psyche. One kind of war is not separate from other. Individuals in the play are always engaged in war with each other. Being driven by the urge to take revenge on the Mannon family, Adam Brant in association with Christine murders Ezra Mannon. Orin kills Brant to possess his mother and to take revenge of his father's death. Lavinia drives Christine and Orin to suicide in order to take revenge of her father's death. Lavinia herself is so much in love for Brant that she detects mother's love affair. This is a reversal of the normal mother detecting on her daughter. Therefore, mother-

daughter rivalry intensifies. Here, women always fight to get possession of the men, which is a reversal of the earlier tragedies, and daughter wins all the battles.

But this intra-individual war is nothing but the outer manifestation of the war within. Living itself is a continuous process of war. Human beings have a strong libidinal drive that grows naturally. Moral and social proprieties, that is, Reality Principles have also become a part of our psyche. The two segments of human psyche – unconscious and conscious – pertain to libidinal drive (that is Pleasure Principle) and Reality Principle respectively. Human psyche is the battlefield where the two engage in war continuously. And this war is prominent in the characters. Mannon house stands for conscious and Reality principle that is ethos of Puritanism. Falling in love after marriage is not acceptable in Puritanism. Christine being unable to follow the repressive of Puritanism develops an extra-marital relationship with Adam Brant waging war against Puritanism and patriarchy. Lavinia falls in love with her father which is not endorsed by Puritanism. Orin and Lavinia also refer back to a time when they were young. While growing in society one internalises the stipulations of society, which do not allow people to gratify all pleasures. Pre-natal stage is polymorphously perverse. No distinction is there between Self and Other. Child does not know about the Reality Principle. As it grows up its distinction from mother's body becomes prominent. Union between mother and child is not permissible by society as it is incestuous. Father emerges with the threat of castration symbolising laws of different institutions. Father figure drives the child to the internalisation of the question of morality and propriety. The child learns to adjust in adulthood. Orin's attraction for his mother implicates that Orin is projecting children who do not accept Reality principle though he is well read in Freud. He has still not entered into symbolic stage but is trying to emulate imaginary stage, which drives him in war with other male members. A girl's journey towards adulthood is much more complex. Learning language a baby gains proper gender subjectivity. Before entering the symbolic via mirror stage there is no gender identity. So the girl child also desires for her mother finding similarity with her as both of them are castrated and have penis envy. Gaining symbolic she desires for father and wants to beget child by him and to become mother of her brother. But this is incestuous and not sanctioned by society. These elements of Oedipal Complex and Electra Complex are found in Orin, Adam Brant and Lavinia who wage war against law, society and religion, and always strive for the South Sea Island (Blessed Island) which is an antithetical place to the Puritan concept of Sin and Punishment reminding of Pre-Lapsarian state both of which being unaware of reality are analogous to Imaginary stage.

This is a play about continuous usurpation of psychoanalytical vacuums because unconscious cannot remain empty. This is done by theatrical device of Masks. Psychoanalytical vacuum, which is created in Lavinia when Ezra leaves, is filled psychoanalytically by Brant, and not by Peter. This is also war within.

Adam Brant also wages war against patriarchy by taking his mother's name instead of acquiring the name of his father.

In case of Ezra Mannon external war comes as a respite from internal war. Frustration in married life drives Ezra Mannon two times to Mexican War and Civil War respectively. Being unable to tolerate war within he joined war without. But finally he is killed as a result of war within.

The theme of war results in the isolation of Lavinia in the Mannon house and the death of all major characters except Seth, Peter, Hazel and local people. Lavinia's closing herself within the house indicates another kind of war. Hence, Lavinia engages herself in a life-long war of enduring psychological pain of confronting the reality.

Finally, it can be said that, whereas in classical tragedy war brings a restoration of order and social propriety with the purging of the evil, in a modern tragedy like *Mourning Becomes Electra* war does not come with any fruitful result of justification.

Works Cited:

O'Neill, Eugene. *Mourning Becomes Electra*. Ed. Shakti Batra. New Delhi, India: Surjeet Publications, 2007.