

“ The Neurotic Detachment of Eugene O'Neill's Heroine Emma Crosby in the play “Diff'rent” ”

Dr. V. Vijay Sarthi

Principal, S.P.College, Pulgaon

Eugene O'Neill “Diff'rent” is an excellent dramatic illustration of the tragic intra-psychic struggle of its heroine Emma Crosby. The 'inner disparity' of the character denies a happy life outside and becomes the fundamental cause in shaping her destiny. The play reveals the tragic consequences of Emma's attempt to go beyond her natural horizons and of basing her life on false ideals and illusions. Emma Crosby is completely obsessed with the Puritanic ideals of life and forms up a grandiose image of herself and begins even worshipping that unattainable 'idealized image'. In the process Emma is separated from her 'actual self' and the 'perfectionist' in her compels the young woman to choose neurotic detachment from surrounding people as a protective device to maintain in order to maintain the integrity of her character.

Explaining the symbolic significance of the play, O'Neill observes:

“ Diff'rent, as I see it, is merely a tale of the eternal, romantic idealist who is in all of us-the eternally defeated one. In our innermost hearts we all wish ourselves and others to be “Diff'rent”. We are all more or less “Emmas” – the more or less depending on our talent for compromise. Either we try in desperation to clutch our dream at the last by deluding ourselves with some tawdry substitute; or, having waited the best part of our lives, we find the substitute time mocks us with too shabby to accept. In either case we are tragic figures, and also fit subjects for the highest comedy were one sufficiently detached to write it.(1)

O'Neill's above explanation sets the theme of the play itself. Accordingly, The playwright has built the required psychological tension by presenting contrast both in characterization and in settings. The setting in Act I indicates the present state of mind of the heroine. The parlor of the Crosby home “has an aspect of scrupulous neatness...the walls are papered a brown color. The floor is covered with a dark carpet... Several enlarged photos of strained, stern-looking people in uncomfortable poses are hung on the walls... stiff, white curtains are at all the windows” (2) All these details indicate the puritanical inclinations and inhibitions of Emma. The photos of the “strained, stern-looking people” symbolize the repressed psyche of Emma and her fixed, inhuman obsession with the ideal of purity. Everything about the room is severe and spotless, hinting at the quality of Emma's imagination. Emma Crosby has always believed that her childhood friend, Captain Caleb Williams, to whom she is engaged, is “different” from all other men. But two days before her intended marriage she learns that Caleb, after all, is not really different from others. Though he has all the virtues that one would desire in a man,

he has committed the “sin” of allowing himself to be seduced by a brown native woman on the South Sea Islands. This one slip of his life tarnishes the unsullied image of Caleb that Emma has always carried in her heart. The “perfectionist” in her is so shocked and bewildered that she declares her intention of not marrying any one in her life. In her attempt to make Caleb Williams understand her predicament, Emma says with an anguished inarticulation:

“You have busted something way down inside me – and I can't love you no more”. (3)

A rumour of a joke played upon Caleb, a joke which involved one of the handsome women of the tropics – leaves the so-called virtue of the man in doubt and Emma sends him off. In order to preserve her uniqueness Emma detaches herself from the other men to maintain the integrity of her character. Of course the gains derived from detachment are indeed considerable. It is significant that in all oriental philosophies detachment is sought as a basis for high spiritual development. But we cannot compare such aspirations with that of Emma. There detachment is voluntarily chosen as the best approach to self-fulfilment and is adopted by persons who could, if they wanted, live a different kind of life. But Emma's detachment, on the other hand, is not a matter of choice but of inner compulsion, the only possible way of living. Torn with tensions and anxieties she longs for some integrity. But as she sees it, in a society in which there is much hypocrisy, cruelty and greed, in which there are no values- the integrity of any strong person easily suffers. However, keeping herself at a distance from such society helps to maintain it. Hence Emma chooses detachment as a protective device in order to allay her anxiety and temporarily suppresses her inner commotion and agitation. But in the process, Emma, in her moving away from people also gives way to a general estrangement from her own actual self. That is a numbness to emotional experience, an uncertainty as to what she is, what she loves, hates, desires, hopes, resents and believes. The same aspect of her personality has been presented. theatrically by her brother when he observes that Emma is “a bit diff'rent” and that they don't know what to do with her. Hence he questions: “what d'you want to marry, anyhow- a man or a sky-pilot” (4)

and that of her father:

“...what the hell d'you want Caleb to be a darned, he-virgin, sky-pilot?” (5)

Thus both imply a condemnation of his world of illusions, and her lack of contact with the real vital springs of life which alone lead to human understanding and communication.

And along with this egoism Pamela also develops certain feelings of superiority and uniqueness. Of course the feeling of superiority must be stressed here, because of its intrinsic association with detachment. Further her need for superiority also has certain specific features. Abhorring valuelessness she does not want to struggle at all. She does not want to excel realistically through consistent efforts. She

feels rather that the treasures within her should be recognized without any effort on her part; her hidden greatness should be felt without her having to make a move. And still another way of her sense of superiority expresses itself is in her feeling of her own uniqueness. This is a direct outgrowth of her wanting to feel separate from others. She takes extraordinary pride in having kept free of the leveling influences of environment and is determined to keep on doing so. Even any piece of advice given by others is felt as dominating and meets with formidable resistance. In this context it should be relevant to note the comment of Emma's mother against the rigidity of her young daughter :

“...it'd be just like goin' agen an act of Nature for you (Emma) not to marry him ”(6)

But the language of Emma remains characteristic and her solipsism becomes evident when she declares herself :

“...things being what they be and me being what I am – I won't marry no man. I'll stay single”. (7)

Thus Emma builds up a wall around herself in order to preserve her uniqueness. And any threat to this detachment, or “smashing the wall”, means more than temporary panic. There may be, for instance, a fear of becoming submerged in the amorphous mass of human beings, a fear primarily, of losing her uniqueness. This detachment is not merely confined to the relationship but the entire society itself. Conforming to the accepted rules of behaviour or traditional sets of values is repellent to her. So she talks on a heaping scorn on contemporary society and the targets of her attack include all other men. She is virtually a non-stop monologue protesting at the banality of life, too nervous to stop to think, she loses herself in a torrent of humorous cynicism.

However, gradually, as the time passes, Emma's feeling of superiority is temporarily shattered. Naturally she would not be able to stand solitude and reaches out frantically for human intimacy, affection and protection. She starts realizing as she grows older that her romantic dreams are not materializing. Aloofness then becomes unbearable and she is consumed by a compulsive drive for human intimacy. Thus a profound conflict is created within the 'soul' of Emma which in itself is unresolvable. The compulsive drives split her into two parts working in two different directions. That is, in one way she is driven to detachment since it is so bitterly needed. And on the other way she is also driven towards people by her desires for human intimacy. When she could not bear this torturing conflicts, Emma finds a temporary solution in 'detachment' and avoid the conflict. In this manner, detachment even though itself is an intrinsic part of the basic conflict, it also serves as a protection against its disruptive power. Thus Emma suppresses her desires for feelings and emotions and brings the opposite to the fore, and hence the rigidity in her behaviour, denies any existence of emotions or feelings. It is viewed by her as treachery from within and checks on that account. This is the reason why also Caleb Williams her lover in spite of his desperate efforts to change Emma, never succeeds. Emma enjoys people only if they are transitory and do not interfere with her life. They should be confined, as it were, to the compartment set aside. Emma's method of distance machinery becomes more explicit when she restricts Caleb almost cold bloodedly from his attempts to reach her emotionally.

Thus Emma's withdrawal is complete. So for in the First Act of the play the audience witness the gradual isolated life of Emma as all her relations fall away like autumnal leaves. Later on in the Second Act Emma approaching 50, finds that her own allegiance to a dying way of life cuts her

off from her present society.

The playwright Eugene O'Neill as we noted before builds the required psychological tension by presenting contrast both in characterization and in settings. The setting in Act I indicates the present state of mind of the heroine. The parlor of the Crosby home “ has an aspect of scrupulous neatness... the walls are papered a brown color. The floor is covered with a dark carpet... Several enlarged photos of strained, stern-looking people in uncomfortable poses are hung on the walls...stiff, white curtains are at all the windows. ” (8) All these details indicate the puritanical inclinations and inhibitions of Emma. The photos of the “strained, stern-looking people symbolize the repressed psyche of Emma and her fixed, inhuman obsession with the ideal of purity. Everything about the room is severe and spotless, hinting at the quality of Emma's imagination. But after thirty years, the complexion of the room changes completely, indicating the change that has come over Emma. “The room has a grotesque aspect of old age turned flighty and masquerading as the most empty headed youth. There is as obstreperous newness about everything. Orange curtains are at the windows. The carpet has given way to a varnished hardwood floor...The wall paper is now a cream color sprayed with pink flowers. ” (9) This grotesque appearance of the moon “masquerading as the most empty-headed youth ” is an exact physical and visual equivalent of Emma's psychic and emotional condition at this time As O'Neill describes it, “...there is something revoltingly incongruous about her, a pitiable sham, a too-apparent effort to cheat the years by appearances. ” (10) The time had cheated Emma of her one chance of happiness, and now she is trying in vain to cheat time in her desperate attempt to win back a little of that joy of life from which she was debarred through self-denial. But the wheel of time cannot be turned back, and the longings of Emma are bound to be destroyed.

The action of the Second Act of the play, after 30 years, externalizes the inner conflict of Emma. Now Emma yielding to the pressure of age chooses to suppress the ' idealized self ' in her and brings to the fore her ' actual self ' with all its desires that was discarded for 30 long years. Now Emma defies age and desperately attempts to win back the sensual pleasures of life that were debarred through self-denial. She paints she dresses in absurdly youthful fashion, she pouts and snickers, and she makes love openly and shamelessly to an unmitigated young rotter Benny who promises to marry her in order to get money from her. However after realizing her shameful act Emma soon turns her attention towards Caleb, for whom she cherished feelings of love but could not respond at ' that moment ' due to her own 'puritanic perfectionism.'

Thus Emma's rigid allegiance to her ' idealized image ' of living and now her emotional approval to Caleb's love inevitably leave the audience in a dilemma whether it is only an oscillation between the two extremities or is it a complete realization. For the confirmation of this doubt we can as well go back to the heroine's previous action which as been characteristically contradictory. Many an instance in the action of the play bears index to Emma's contradictory nature which is but the outcome of her own unresolved inner conflicts that are operating within herself. We can recall any of the intense passionate moments in her life for love which are immediately sublimated into dream rather than realized in action in her youth. Because she cannot accept anybody in this world that cannot conform to her ' puritanic ideals '. It is obvious that Emma passionately loves Caleb. And the

audience do not fail to pity her along with the other characters of the play. Why doesn't she accept him then ? It should be noted that it is not Emma who creates the gulf between herself and Caleb but it is the ' style ' of her living which separates her from human world itself - it is Puritanism of a kind. This symptomatic of her refusal or reciprocity - her refusal to give herself up to a lover's identity, or to adjust to any values other than her own. The irony here is double edged, both by and against Emma. She has brains enough : but she ' does ' live within her own ' puritanic ' walled-up world. Hence her neurotic detachment from other men in society.

In the closing scenes of the play, when Caleb, who has cherished an undying hope of winning Emma some day, learns that Emma is going to marry Benny, a young wastrel and rouge, his heart breaks and he hangs himself in the barn. Mean while Benny, hoping to get wealth from his uncle, deserts Emma and tells her plainly and brutally that his proposal of marriage to her was a joke. Emma is shoked into seeing her illusion in its nakedness, and in her final bid to redeem herself from the burden of guilt and regret she utters in a strange tone :

“Wait, Caleb, I'm going down to the barn.” (11)

Ironically, Emma wishes that she “could go back to the beginning”, but it should be chasing another mirage. She desperately struggles to cling to anything through whatever means that is available. But all her efforts necessarily result in vain. Emma's gradual receding sense of reality leads to a total incapacity for objective relationship. Further, she longs for her early kind of life when she was a stranger to the idea of detachment from people. But she had long back despised her actual self and went after the idealized image which she wanted to realize through 'detachment'. In the process the gap became so wide between the two that it could never be bridged. The heroin now does not have any middle ground to fall back up on but becomes a neurotic in life, 'a searcher in the darkness' that finally marks her spiritual death. Because her own inflexible allegiance to a 'dying way of life' and the consequent 'detachment' cuts her off from time present, and leaves her ' diffrent. ' from the human world for ever.

REFERENCES

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Address for Correspondence :
 Dr. V. Vijay Sarthi
 Principal, S. Patni Arts &
 Commerce S.P.College,
 Pulgaon-442302,
 Tq. Deoli, Dist.Wardha.

Mob No. 9423131033
 Phone : 07158-282208