

Identical Community and Communicative Identity in the Racial Map: O'Neill's *Thirst* in Perspective

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Abstract: O'Neill's one of the earliest dramas - *Thirst* (1913) deals with the typical attributes of human behavioural pattern when death threatens man on the face of ontological degeneration and degradation. My article, by focusing on the three characters of the drama – the Gentleman, the Dancer and the Sailor who are put at the crisis point of existential ladder, will concentrate on how the play vividly dramatizes the idiosyncrasy of appearance on the set of madness and the resultant reflection of the display of barbarism at the face of existential decadence.

Keywords: Race, Black/White, Identity, Existence, Madness, Psychology, Relationships, Communication

Thirst (1913), one of the earliest dramas by the eminent American dramatist Eugene Gladstone O'Neill (1888 - 1953), deals with the typical attributes of human behaviour in slump when death threatens man on the face of ontological degeneration and degradation. The play vividly dramatizes the idiosyncrasy of appearance on the set of madness and the ultimate maverick display of barbarism at the face of existential decadence. Three characters – the Gentleman, the Dancer and the Sailor – are put at the crisis point of existential ladder when Nature, to use Tennysonian phrase, is 'red in tooth and claw.' When "three sorry remnants of humanity (are) dying of thirst" (Clark 50), after the titanic disaster,¹ there is no wind to accelerate the direction of the raft; nor is there any immediate hope of rescue. These three maritime characters are struggling for survival against the hostility of the terrible natural forces – a vast companionless sea and the cruel extremity of heat in a topical climate; isolation, fragmentation and alienation become the key words at such geological and identical crisis. Both the topical sea and the situational heat are expressionistic modes of total apocalyptic subjugation that brings the sense of total anarchical fall down – both physically and emotionally.² In fact, *Thirst* too like O'Neill's other dramas is about "tortured souls": "O'Neill's, however, is a drama of personalities, of tortured souls." (Sen 119) Destiny mocks these three 'riders to the sea' with an element of material chaos – the "sun glares down" like "a great angry eye of God" – the sky is 'blind' - there is water all around, still they are dying of thirst - "if we only had some water!", reminding us

Coleridge: "Water, water, every where / Nor any drop to drink" ("The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" [1798], Part II, L 121-2). Thirst for the Mariner was a kind of imposed punishment. Even the two texts can be compared on the basis of capturing scenic images in abundance. In the play under discussion, three different characters chosen from different social status are marker of representation of entire gamut of society - the Gentleman, wearing a "white shirt", is in the white centre (the concept of 'whiteness privilege'),³ the Sailor is in the black margin and the Dancer is not in the white centre but is desperately towards it. She has an immense illusion of being centralized but actually she is 'in between', a consumer item for the both: "I thing that someone kissed me". Focusing on the characteristic nature of the Gentleman, one can even mention Dickens' idea of 'gentleman' that has basically been built on behaviour, not on inheritance.⁴ By not mentioning any particular names of the characters, what the dramatist is hinting is that *Thirst* is not about any particular incident, neither about any particular persons, but it is a general drama of human suffering where racism and racial sensibility matter most. Disraeli's famous quip comes easily to our mind: "All is race, there is no other truth". Moreover the setting of the drama reminds us Jerome K. Jerome's 1889 text *Three Men in a Boat*. Like O'Neill's own *Frog*, *Thirst* is about shipwrecked characters, but the difference between the two is that the shipwrecked are saved in the former, while exactly opposite happens in the latter. Critics like Tiusanen Timo have observed that the settings of *Thirst* or *Bound East for Cardiff* compactly combine realism with symbolic overtones.

Vis-à-vis existential crisis, O'Neill dramatizes the gradual ebb of psychological sanity and ideological humanity. In fact, the play, as most of the critics have observed, is a textual fusion of the Psychoanalysis of Jung and Freud, Philosophy of Nietzsche and the Naturalism of Strindberg. Nietzsche's conception of the 'death of God' can easily be seen as a stark source material of this present context. One remembers the voice of a character in Brecht's drama that says: "Rubbish. Because they (Gods) didn't look after the dam properly" (207). It is repeatedly suggested through the jerky language that how gripping fear is destroying the moral rationality and ethical fairness of human psyche. Since they are in the existentially "dead zones of boredom",⁵ the Dancer, being "haggard with hunger and thirst", complains in revulsion: "I cannot bear this silence." Sometimes she shrieks out in unbearable pain to confront the massive psychological strain; the Gentleman laments: "How my eyes ache! How my throat burns!" Vis-à-vis such all-encapsulating silence creative companionship or regular rapport of relationship can only redeem the degenerative predicament. By exchanging some discursive dialogues, the Gentleman and the Dancer try to communicate with each other, sharing their anguish, despondency, fears and all other sorts of mental shortcomings. Contrary to this redeeming camaraderie and bonhomie, ideological isolationism of the Sailor is being heavily

stressed.⁶ He croons a dull, “monotonous negro song”, having a talismaniac power and continually stares at the sharks those are visible around the raft. The hidden hint is that at the face of devastating death, the stolid Sailor is terribly perturbable and is totally obsessed with the superstitious fear of death of which the omnipresent sharks are the projected symbols. Further, one can mark the Dancer's tremendous nervousness when she becomes 'afraid' of the “black” Sailor. In fact, determinism presupposes that the present moment is simply the automatic consequence of the racial past. Even the tormenting menu card is described as “a black object”. In “The Fact of Blackness” (1986), Fanon rightly points out that 'blackness' is an ideological construct that strongly exists in our so-called cultural society. Utterances of sentences like “Look a nigger”, as Fanon shows us, are enough to capture the cultural incompatibility of an ideological society. In a so-called 'politically correct' age, such syncretic representations or reformulation of race-relation even bitterly touches the heart of a small child. Apartheid, bipartite coterie and rave racism have deeply been ingrained in human nature right from the beginning of the human civilization. As a result, even at the face of death, moral detriment on the cultural level gets a full expression and the Sailor becomes gradually marginalized from the center of two white characters. It would be relevant to mention Lionel Trilling: “Life and death, good and evil, spirit and flesh, male and female. The all and the one, Anthony and Dionysus – O'Neill's is a world of these antithetical absolutes such as religion rather than philosophy conceives, a world of pluses and minuses; and his literary effort is an algebraic attempt to solve the equations.” (97) In this world of “antithetical absolutes”, in this world of to use Gates' phrase “enforced marginality” (Introduction, xvii), deep conviction on the level of suspicion, even when living on the edge, leads them to a paranoid state. Indeed critics like Wideman are right when their scholastic philosophy opine that racial memories exist in the imagination; racial sensibilities are in fact a record of certain collective experiences that have been repeated generation after generation. The Gentleman confesses: “at one time I was going mad. I dreamt he had a knife in his hand ... but it was all madness”. Critics like Laing have pointed out that such 'madness', ultimately leads to enslavement and existential death. In spite of the fact that the binary formation of we/they or black/white is a suicidal attempt in such existential crisis, the process of discrimination still exists because racial assumption or racial presumption has its own history right from the beginning of human civilization and it is ingrained in human blood. Stark horror and dark terror are the existential *cul de sac* of racist standpoint.

Through the increasing unreliability and the lacking of understanding among the human beings of different skin colours, fear is compounded upon fear when the Dancer comes to know the devastating power of the “black things” – the sharks. Effete languor Dancer shrieks in terror: “Oh,

it is horrible, all this!" The Dancer who is generally supposed to be lyrically kinetic is now emotionally static. The Gentleman, driven by the cultural poise, tries to create courage in the 'weaker sex' by relating the sharks to be a fantasy element of the "children's tale". Like Marlow in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, the Gentleman seems to believe in the philosophy that a lie is sometimes more blessed than a bitter truth. Such an instantaneous act by the Gentleman appears to be chivalric, a proposed comforting towards the 'weaker sex'. But as the play proceeds, the mask of civilization gradually falls down vis-à-vis the crescendo of horror. Throughout the drama, the sharks remain the 'black' audiences of the 'white' drama by the Dancer and the Gentleman. 'Black' sharks have always been a guiding force in the literature of race relations: "According to Tony Morrison, it is the 'nurse-shark' image which pervades through the pages of *To Have and Have Not* (1937). The black female nurses as wives and lovers often wreck destruction on White men. They are often symbolized as predators or sharks or as unnatural women who combine the benevolence of a nurse with the destructive forces of the sharks. In a passionate love-making scene in *To Have and Have Not*, Marie asks her husband:

"Listen, did you ever do it with a nigger wench?"

"Sure."

"What's it like?"

"Like nurse shark."

Such an extraordinary remark is a pointer to Hemmingway's brutal figuration of Black female sexuality. Love making with a black female could be so alien to White imagination in this case, that no metaphor or metonym would have been so evocative had it been anything other than the 'shark' image" (Sengupta 32). The Gentleman projects a similar apocalyptic vision: "sharks or no sharks – the end is the same". The element of madness was in the very first sentence ('unreasonable'), now they are in the 'brink of insanity'. Like all other plays by O'Neill, *Thirst* too deals with the subject matter of "Dream, Darkness and Death" (Carpenter 82).

As the status quo does not improve, the growing conviction (through suspicion) about the impossibility of escaping death brings in ineradicable insanity in the sun-burnt minds of the Gentleman and the Dancer. The power of memory to memorize is in decline; consequential insanity ultimately leads them to suspect the Sailor of stealing and storing some water: "You stole the last drop we had yourself". The play can even be read in terms of confrontations of cultures; utterances like "folk song of *his* people", "Do not speak to *him* anymore" and "a song of *my* people" mark the inferiority of 'their' cultures and superiority of 'our' cultures (emphasis added). The Sailor can physically be 'stronger' than the Dancer or the Gentleman, but not intellectually. Cultural faith has immensely been based on the backing up of the eternal note of racial memory. The Dancer comments: "All the same, I am afraid of him. There

is something in his eyes when he looks at me, which makes me tremble". For such frenzied people in bigotry state, mere suspicion turns into a sheer conviction which Sartre called 'bad faith'. The first reaction of the Dancer, the termagant is hatred and violent violence, exposing inhumanity: "We will kill them. He deserves to be killed". In the throes of animal necessity, inner brutishness is revealed through the outer devilishness. In fact, ingrained violence, be it violently verbal or verbally violent, becomes a tool for survival – it is deeply rooted in human psyche. In such paradigm of aridity and existential vacuity what is ultimately produced is uninhibited savagery. The Gentleman is ready to "sell my soul for a drop of water"⁷ because, as the Dancer understood, "it is horrible to be dying of thirst with water so near". Throughout *The Old Testament*, water simply stands for spiritual blessing; consequently, cry for water means deviation from Christian holiness. With the realization that this schema of manipulative murder will not be fulfilled, the Gentleman makes an idea that the Dancer should tempt the Sailor with her expensive 'diamond necklace', a vanity of human wishes. Initially, she reacts with women's eternal greed for jewels: "It is worth a thousand pound ... I will not part with it". Greed for material wealth is so deeply stored in human nature that even at the time of impending death pompous asset becomes their ideological *raison de etre*. Even the Gentleman, when the ship wrecked, valued his purse as he rushed to the 'stateroom' to pick up his 'wallet'. Ironically, now he warns the Dancer that the value of her necklace would be zero when the sharks will drag her down into the water. The Dancer, realizing the Gentleman's plea that "Water would save us – just a little water – even a few drops would be enough", tempts the Sailor with a mode of reification. The Sailor immediately casts a tone of rejection: "I have no water". The Sailor puts a counter exchange offer: "Give me some water and I will sing". Cry for water to quench thirst reminds one of the "appalling thirst" of the Priest in Greene's *The Power and the Glory* (187). Driven by the frenzied thirst for survival, the Dancer finally decides to use her sexual politics: "I like you ... you are big and strong". Heavily resembling is Lula's first act of seduction to Clay: "That's why I came looking through the window ... so you'd have more than that to go on. I even smiled at you" and then "Am I exciting you now?" (Jones 7, 10) When the connotative language fails, she pours over the Sailor all the wiles of seductive art: "I am offering myself to you ... I am my body to you ... if you will give me one small drink of water". Probably, the nature's answer, in Eliot's words is: "Here is no water but only rock / Rock and no water and the sandy road" (*The Waste Land*, V, 331-2). So long all degrees of gentleman have knelt before her, and so long she has rose in the central socio-economic ladder, now she kneels before the socially marginalized, the black beast – the 'inferior' Sailor: "As Lawrence correctly points out, whereas the rapes of black women by white men were seen as a sort of favour to the black race, the mating of white women with black men was regarded as fatal. Whereas the first extended the power of the white man over all women, the latter

eroded his own territory, and allowed for the possibility of its 'invasion'." (Loomba 51) The international Dancer now becomes a local whore. Finally the stark border line between sanity and insanity is erased when she gives a total frenzied display of her zany, wacky existential dance that projects her as a travesty of beauty and attractiveness of 'Salome'. After such "automaton effect of her dance" (Tiusanen 121), she dehydrates, falls and dies; all these are for horrifying fear of sheer psychological thirst. Her sexually enticing body is revealed to be fragile under the mercilessness of crude nature. At the end of this stark humane drama, the international reputed consumer item is now completely consumed. In fact, O'Neill's *Thirst* is an osmotic projection of "inscrutable forces beyond life"⁸ in the crisscross zone of sanity and insanity. Blacks are generally subjected to be the objects to be watched suspiciously. The statement of the Gentleman about the Negro Sailor ("I am watching him. I will watch him as long as I can see") is not a particular context specific observation but is a general observance of the superior whites in the conflictual black / white model of society: "Racial struggles had marked every decade of the century, and ethno-national conflicts were as much a matter of concern and anguish in the 1990s as they were in the period leading up to the First World War. While social science had provided increasing insight into the nature of these conflicts, the practical means to prevent their recurrence seemed to be as elusive as ever." (Stone 01) When the Gentleman puts a general humane advice ("We should not grow suspicious of one another"), it does not properly fit their continuous racial standpoint. Probably it is his slip of the tongue! Civilization is a mask. When this mask falls down man is degraded into the level of bestiality ("you pig!", "You rotten pig!", "mad dog"); latent ignobility becomes potent and the hidden debauchery comes to the fore. Even at the extreme crisis, when the ship wrecked, the danseuse was 'kissed' by one – how brutal human sexuality is even on the verge of death – hence the cultural decadence in human psyche through a sign of cultural subversion. What is needed is the tremendous sense of *discordia concors* or *coincidentia oppositorum* to resist the screaming sense of racial antagonism. Similar text is Ellison's *Invisible Man*, a text of incompatible racial consciousness that heavily guides the cultural conflux of the characters. The Sailor – the 'black animal', 'black' fins of the sharks and the 'blackened' tongue are continuously torturing the Whites. Dimensions of thirst are both psychological and physical that ultimately brings the transformative formation of 'We' and the 'Other' in the existential game. In the beginning of the drama, the continuous utterance of the first person plural pronoun 'We' was simply used to mean the white bond of the Gentleman and the Dancer ("We must talk to each other"). At the end of the drama the liquid nature of the Dancer makes a new dimension of 'We' by putting the Gentleman in the existential corner ("We are going to be great friends, are we not?"). In a most macabre manner, in an aberrant behaviour the Sailor who is

supposed to be composed of patience and tolerance, finally, after loosing sanity, exults at the idea that now the Dancer is dead and he will be able to eat the body of the Dancer and be able to drink the blood of her body: "Now we shall eat ... we shall drink". Sudden transformation from adversity to prosperity, from gloom to glory, from doom to delight and from suffering to celebration is a marker of the possible quenching of human thirst. The first person plural marker 'we' is used in this resilient sentence just to mark the sorry remnants of fellow feeling and camaraderie in the Sailor, even when the sense of equipoise and civilization are at stake. Indeed, "race was fundamentally a phenomenon rooted in objective physical differences with concomitant behavioural characteristics that emerged from those biological facts" (Smith and Riley 23). To get the succulent taste of human blood in a waterless desert, he tries to stab the woman with his knife; but the Gentleman throws the Dancer's body into the sea. (Is this a marker of the white monopoly of civilization?) Being terribly furious, the Sailor cruelly stabs the Gentleman who tries to catch the Sailor's jersey and in the process drowns into the sea. Hence the human thirst for escape from death remains insatiable. O'Neill's *Thirst*, right from the beginning, is about the 'moral evil' of the Gentleman and the Dancer; only at the end the play focuses a bright light on the 'physical evil' of the Sailor. Fragile human being dies and destroys; only the material jewels glitter forever. While human body goes from this world to that world, material assets fly in different hands: "Property is always subject to theft and jewels can change hands" (Belsy 56).

O'Neill's play that began with 'monotonous negro song' ultimately ends with 'happy negro melody'. Indeed the "play is written in an exaggerated, violent and rhetorical style, but there is undeniably an air of sincerity about it" (Clark 51). *Thirst*, a traumatic play of illocutionary force, is about how thirst for water, thirst for rescue, thirst for sexual pleasure, and thirst for companionship destroy all human virtues. The play thus shows gruesome degeneration of human behaviour, culture and civilization when desiccating and devastating death inevitably confronts man. Hence the melancholic feeling before death and bodily oneness of human beings after death become the ultimate reality whether one tries to avoid it or tries to fight against it. Irrespective of racial difference, irrespective of black/white binary and irrespective of echelon, the ultimatum is: "From dust thou art /To dust returneth".

Notes:

1. Critics have agreed to the point that the great Titanic disaster may have an impact on O'Neill's thought.
2. Compare the impact of brain mapping in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.
3. See Valerie Babb's *Whiteness Visible: The Meaning of Whiteness in American Literature and Culture* or, David Roediger's *The Wages of Whiteness* where the argument of whiteness privilege has been built through the day-to-day cultural practices activities.

4. Dickens writes in *Great Expectations*: "... no man who was not a true gentleman at heart, ever was, since the world began, a true gentleman in manner" (Dickens, Charles. *Great Expectations*. (Ed) Margaret Cardwell, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1994, p 179.)
5. Phrase from Frederic Jameson. *The Modernist Papers*. Verso, Indian Reprint, New Delhi: 2007, ABS Publishers, p 55.
6. Compare the Negro in *Thirst* and the New York Negro in *The Emperor Jones*.
7. Compare Doctor Faustus' selling of soul for total amoral enjoyment in Marlowe.
8. O'Neill's letter to Barrett H. Clark [1919]. Quoted in Barrett H. Clark. *Eugene O'Neill, the Man and His Place*. New York: Dover Publications, 1947, p 59.

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