

Existential Nihilism in Forging The Fate: O' Neill's *Long Day's Journey Into Night*

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ABSTRACT

Existential nihilism itself is rather a critical terminology that has a certain inherent ambiguousness about it. Generally, it refers to such notions as life has no intrinsic meaning, value or purpose but rather a despairing, sorrowful and catastrophic condition. If it is confined to such technical or general definition, there can be no other interpretation for it outside and beyond the above said points. But a modern aesthetics of existential nihilism has evolved through the passionate involvement of metaphysical and cosmic anguish. O' Neill, the playwright who lived the tragedy he wrote projects the concept of existential nihilism in thematic effort in his play, *Long Day's Journey into Night*. Thematically, he was drawn towards his preoccupation with humanitarianism. His humanitarianism is the outcome of the blood and tears of his life. The absence of love and loss of faith in the inscrutable force within the dramatic personae of *Long Day's Journey into Night* highlights the imbibed existential nihilism of his self. This play has exposed the tragic core of the Tyrones by disclosing the existential forces which crush the faith. It reveals the backdrop of the death wish of the Tyrones which is more than a justification for the fate of the modern man are forged by the embodiment of existential nihilism.

Keywords: existential, nihilism, fate, tragedy, psychic

The philosophy of existential nihilism had undergone profound changes from the last half of 20th century. It shows a radical shift from searching objectives truth or divine manifestation towards subjective address like emotional instability, alienation, sense of rootlessness and psychic trauma. Man has lost the grounding share of traditional beliefs, collective correlations and mass beliefs rather they are enveloped by the feeling of suspension in an abyss surrounded by his own overwhelm existential finitude, and ultimate absurdity. This sensation of tragedy was clearly evident from the time of Shakespeare and Marlowe which had shifted the tragic flaw from the character to the society in the later period. But in this contemporary modern world, the tragedy is neither derived from the Elizabethan character nor the later period's society; it is in the psyche of man. So the mental conflict of tragedy is basically psychic and experiential. This is largely due to the subconsciousness of the conflict between opposite perspectives inside the modern man's psyche. Such psychotic dilemma of contemporary man in this hectic world is portrayed penetratingly in many of the contemporary plays. There are evidences of tragic occurrence due to the loss of faith, belief and social norms in many of these plays. Most of the play depicts the lost and lonely characters any hope of finding themselves through their centuries old shared social patterns of practice, convention, faith and belief. This tragic experience due to this existential nihilism is felt within the contemporary man of this century.

The pitiable image which mirrors modern man's existential nihilism and anxiety has started featuring in many literary works among the contemporary writers and playwrights. With this turmoil of tragic anguish, Eugene O'Neill depicts in many of his plays the existential nihilism of man which sprouted from modern man's loss of faith, sense of belongingness, feelings of emptiness and void. So, in this era of nihilism, divine intervention of God's work is questioned and if human story is to be narrated, it would be based on hollowness, emptiness and futility. As John Gassner has once pointed out that O'Neill's existentialist sense developed from the fear of his failure

to locate any soothing meaning of life in the world and so most of his works have depicted this with piercing insight into the psychic realm. Despite his set back to find a reassuring meaning of human life on earth and his compliance of failure, existentialism seems to be the core of his playwright's essence. He highlighted man's futile struggle against fate as the magnanimous action for it could exhibit his psychic preoccupation. To locate the core of the psychic mentality of the existential nihilism, a comprehensive study of the characters of this age is pertinent. No conceptual and structured attempt to define and identify the existential nihilism in literary work can be said to present until Murray Krieger's critical essay "Tragedy and the Tragic Vision" was published in 1958. It was an innovating critical endeavour to outline and identify the existential nihilism in the light of tragedy. Another important study on this topic was Charles Glickberg's *Tragic Vision in the Twentieth Century Literature* published in 1963. His work emphasised very notably how the psyche of the 20th century expressed its essence of existential nihilism in tragedy. But in spite of the profound concentration on this theme, it is not easy to specify existential nihilism as the root cause of the tragedy in contemporary human life. From this point of view of Charles Glickberg, the psyche of the twentieth century man revealed a complex, closely knitted mentality of Promethean defiance and Sisyphean despair. These discord and divergence are the root cause of existential nihilism which resulted in the tragedy of modern man.

Even though Murray Krieger's concept of tragedy arises from existential nihilism, it is confined and limited to be accepted in its totality, he however comprehends that it may be feasible to identify existential nihilism by eliminating from formalistic aesthetics to the thematic of tragedy. Further it is observed that existential nihilism was inherent inside tragedy, as a part and as the psychic mentality of the characters. The essence was deliberation in the domain of the thematic of the tragedy. These facts show very vividly that the existential nihilism in the twentieth century tragedy is practically the

Dionysian concept that the contemporary man is totally lost for there is no spiritual redemption.

One of the most arduous tasks of the modern man tragedy is how to live life meaningfully regardless of the void and nothingness. This insight of issue of existence in the face of nothingness emerges the sense of existential nihilism. When a man realised his drawback to perceive what existed beyond his control, the tragic strain started to inflict in his psyche. Man is neither competent of spiritual realisation nor the aesthetics of mysticism. His yearning for a meaning in the futile world always resulted into confusion within himself. There is neither any structure nor pattern of values with which he can identify himself with or belong to. Thus these notions and concepts become the tempering features of the character's fate and the playwright of the twentieth century tragedy. The character being the creation of the playwright, it is not possible to isolate the playwright's psyche of existential nihilism from the characters by overruling the Shakespearean concept of detachment and objectivity.

Grounding by this view O'Neill in his play, *Long Day's Journey into Night* attempts to mitigate the trauma of existential despair through a thematic study. In this play, he stripped men of their illusions to find a cure for their existential decay. O'Neill himself expressed it in his dedicatory note, "a play of old sorrow, written in tears and blood." Even if O'Neill was fascinated by the utilitarianism of the period and for him life was essentially not happy, he loved life passionately. Being a playwright his main objective of this play was to depict how tragedy is manifested in modern man's life and how it sanctifies the soul through realisation of emotions. This play reveals the background of Tyrone's family that nourished the death wish of a tormented existence, the paradoxical love- hate relationships between Tyrone Jr., his mother, his father James, and his younger brother Edmund.

In this play, James Tyrone's living room of the summer house is the main backdrop where four members of the Tyrone's slit, spite and

reprimand one another in a futile double bind. None of them achieved the jubilant exultation in the feud. They are all frustration, anguish and vulnerability; yet at the same time, they felt a strong connection between them in their frantic fury of rage. The fate of these four Tyrones is intertwined in an intricate way such that finding who is mainly responsible for the existential tragedy is near impossible. In fact, the problem lies in all the four Tyrones. But it is James Tyrone Sr. who intensified the trauma pattern resulting into existential tragedy. Even though he had acquired a quarter of a million dollars worth of property, he keep on whining he is broke. Moreover, his incessant desire for more money aggravated the situation to a dreadful junction. Moreover, because of Jamie, the alcoholic eldest son and Edmund, the youngest son afflicted with consumption resulted the Tyrones into a dishevelled family with frequent uproar and irritation among themselves. Mary, the mother who ceded to morphine addiction from enduring the birth of her last son and wrecked by her long years of wandering tour with her husband theatrical group, she succumbed to this formidable habit. Her drug addiction affected among the family members with host of accusation, self- reproach and contrition and divulged their emotional reciprocity and mutual reliance.

Finally, the Tyrones were conscious of their guilt for the wreckage of their life and its angonising realisation made them mute and vulnerable. But they failed to fix the cause to one particular reason rather it was very vague so they renounced themselves to faith. In this helplessness stage, Mary sank deeper into world of chimera and hallucination of dope in this play *Long day's Journey into Night*, O'Neill depicted Mary as a central character with the three Tyrones- James, Jamie and Edmund obsessively attached to her. She, though a docile and revered-like woman, Mary is not totally faultless for the family's mental psyche. She had two ardent desires- to be a nun or a concert pianist during her young years. But destiny did not favour her rather she fell for the sensual appeal of the young good looking romantic guy, James Tyrone. She then tied the nuptial bond with him which later on

resulted her to remain a tormented and repressed wife all her life. In this play, Edmund is overshadowed by the other Tyrones. Regarding his brother Jamie, his was also less colourful and dominated by the senior Tyrones. Since both the junior Tyrones were emotionally obsessed with the feeling of betrayal from the senior Tyrones, faith and religious sermon failed to provide them with spiritual consolation. The wants of understanding and love from the family lead them to alienation. The two juniors Jamie and Edmund were depicted as alienated and dejected characters throughout the play. Their sense of alienation was aggravated by their mother Mary, the neurotic woman who inducted in them a hope by imposing her belief in God. She had once remarked to Edmund in the play-

I never lied about anything once upon a
time. Now I have to lie, specially to
myself. But how can you understand,
when I don't myself...

This assertion to her son shows her spiritual dilemma which is in fact the cause of the Tyrones existential nihilism including herself. She placed her faith to the Tyrones that only spiritual person can hope. But as for the other Tyrones spiritualism is meaningless thing.

Thus opposite to what Mary Tyrone had believed, the other Tyrones had distasted her philosophy. Edmund leaning on Nietzsche's philosophy had said to his father once in the play that what is the use of hope in God if hope must come from the man himself. Both the Tyrones failed to find a resort in faith and spirituality and eventually alienation spring forth, this shows the cause of the crumbling of the mutual relationship and emotional attachment of the family resulting into the existential nihilism. The theme of existential nihilism is precisely the core of the tragedy of contemporary man as seen in this play *Long Day's Journey into Night*

It is in this realm of existential nihilism, the reality of the contemporary man's life is gripped and grind. It is this hollowness in whose jaws the characters of *Long Day's Journey into Night* are caught as they drifted down their life. James Tyrone's phobia of poverty leads him to economise on the healthcare of his family. A cheap quack had treated his wife Mary resulting her into drug addiction, his young son died of consumption at the state sanatorium for the poor. Thus, Modern man's life represented by the Tyrones is not a mere abstract presentation in this play; rather it is a meaningful social representation. The key to its potential meaning is catered by the fate resulting from the sense of existential nihilism in the characters. Thus, this play *Long Day's Journey into Night* has finally revealed the tragic core of the contemporary man by exposing the existential forces which grind the human faith and redefine salvation through despair.

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