

## **IDENTITY & PERSONAL FREEDOM IN A CAPITALIST SOCIETY: A STUDY OF O'NEILL'S *DESIRE UNDER THE ELMS***

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### **Abstract**

*Unlike Diaspora literature identity crisis is not merely the issue of American writings but some other burning social problems are also reflected there noticeably. Excessive individualism and searching personal freedom become a paradox to them where this personal freedom is never attained by the characters of the drama. The American society evaluates individualism as their primary standard which becomes a big social problem. The reflection of a capitalist society in American literature in Eugene O'Neill's *Desire under the Elms* is perhaps one of its best kinds where the identity and personal freedom is observed under threat. In American society does not perceive the meaning of a family as it mostly consists of highest number of migrating people coming for materialistic achievement. Family members from different country and culture face difficulties to make a 'family'. Searching for freedom and identity wastes a part of their lives. Quest for property, honor, position hasten their humane qualities to be dried up. They search for something that family cannot provide, what family provides they don't feel the need of it. This paper shows the reflection of American society in late nineties where the characters of the drama are in severe depression for identity crisis and lack of illusive personal freedom.*

**Keywords:** *identity, family, immigrants, individualism, freedom, Capitalism*

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**D***esire under the Elms* is widely discussed for incest, infanticide and illicit demonstration on theater. As a reflection of time and contemporary society it also indicates a social truth; declining humane relation, practicing over individualism, mental alienation of the characters. Though it is a country where individual freedom is given highest priority, the characters are longing for personal freedom as they are chained by invisible capitalistic dogma. It can be discussed here that how the characters are suffering from mental agony as their own family has been a prison house to them where the head of the family treats them as slave. So individualism becomes a meaningless thing where individual is bound to serve up without his own will. Another well discussed issue in American literature we have found here is searching for identity. There is a bit psychoanalytic touch; characters are feeling insecure as their family does not actually serves the purpose of family leading everybody living only for him or her. In America everybody is immigrant, self existence and establishment is very important here and this self centered ideology makes them alone. They start searching their identity, who they are and where they belong to.

Individualism is something which suggests man can drive himself by his own will without violating social norms and the right of others. Individualism is the another aspect of personal freedom: 'Individualism promote the exercise of one's goal and desire and so value independence and self-reliance and advocate that interests of the individual should achieve precedence over the state or social group.' (Wikipedia.org) American people practice individualism from much earlier though, this drama shows something different. They are in lack of personal freedom which is a sign of not consuming the fruit of that practice. The sons of the family; Saimon and Peter have been searching freedom for many days. At the beginning of the drama the relationship among the father and sons seems very much conflicting, the hostility of the three sons, Simeon, Peter and Eben, towards their father: 'slaved sim „n“ him „n“ Ebent death” by making stone walls “to fence them in.’ (p.1 s.2)

Perhaps the main obstacle of consuming the fruit of individualism is materialism; this materialism is obvious in capitalism. Practicing individualism become easier for the economical nature of America. People are free to pile property, have a competition to get the zenith of economical success, as they have land, mines, woods, crops, manpower everything they need to be rich. They just need a motivation and of course capitalism is that

push. When property becomes the idol to be worshiped, family members are considered either an obstacle or laborer only. Here Eben is describing the tyranny of his father on his mother: 'EBEN--(*harshly*) ... She can't git used t' bein' free--even in her grave.' (p.1, s.2)

In this drama only Ephraim Cabot is found free as it seems. But no one is free in a capitalist society. Cabot is a prisoner of his own goal. Cabot altered a barren hilly area to a big farmhouse. So he got no option rather than developing this land like other immigrants. He was an Adam of a wide land. This hard reality makes him hard and ruthless. 'In *Desire Under the Elms*, O'Neill creates the image of the "father" as a prototype of the primal, hard, and ruthless father.'<sup>1</sup>

Cabot is making his own identity in America. Without this farm he has no identity. His parents are not American. He is now, Ephraim Cabot, owner of the farm! He is on run for attaining more by making others slaves of him. To Ephraim his sons are only the day labor who increases his property: 'PETER--He's slaved himself t' death. He's slaved Sim 'n' me 'n' yew t' death--on'y none o' us hain't died--yit.' (p.1, s.1) Ephraim is only building his own identity in America. He seems pious act like puritans but has got a false image of God, a merciless God. Doris Falk finds Ephraim as, 'a self-centered, loveless man who has projected his own personality into that of his God, a tyrannical, ascetic restrictive embodiment of Puritanism'.<sup>2</sup> Ephraim has restrained his identity as a follower of God, finding self consolation even though made as he has no acceptance to his own family and that of society. His puritan God is his identity: 'CABOT- God's hard, not easy! God's in the stones! Build my crutch on a rock – out o' stons an' I'll be in them!' (p.2 s.2)

In American society identity is an issue which is different from that of other nationals of the world. Everyone of the world is a citizen of a nation-state. 'American' is a made citizenship as this country was discovered and named after a European. There was no American before discovering this land as there was only 'Red Indians' the aborigine people who did not bother about nationality or identity. They never felt it as they were the primitive inhabitants, there were they had no threat and no other nation to get differentiated them. Actually this tribal people or aborigines have the real identity in this world. They know who they are and where they belong to. But the 'American' characters shown in *Desire under the Elms* have to establish that their identity is American; an attributed, arbitrary & discovered identity. We see the desires of the American characters, e. g. Cabot's desire for reaching perfection; Eben's searching for identity, Peter, Simeon, and Abbie searching for position. In a materialistic world they are driven by their goal, which only leads to their fate into their tragic end.

We see an unaffectionate family in this drama. The youngest son Eben steals the father's money to allure his brothers who are leaving towards California. Meanwhile, Ephraim returns with his new wife, Abbie. In the second part of the drama we see the mounting hatred of Abbie to old Ephraim while she has married him only to have the farm.

It may be seemed that Ephraim Cabot has the personal freedom as he is the farm owner and head of the family. In a capitalist society no one is free to choose as it seems. Ephraim has nothing to do without developing a land after migration to New England.

Capitalist society always pushes and threatens the individual that if you want to sustain you have to be fast and first. This invisible pressure snatches the freedom away. Mental sublimity and happiness become a far cry. So becoming rich or being head of a family is not the surety of personal freedom here. Eben is describing the wall his father has made, physical wall as well as a psychological wall: 'Eben: An „makin“ walls-stone atop o“ stone, makin „walls till yer heart“s a stone ye heft up out o“ the way o“ growth onto a stone wall in yer heart! Something there is that does not love a wall.' (p.1, s.2)

The utmost urge for identity is found in the character of Eben. Eben is the youngest son of Ephraim and his second wife. So Eben is the successor of the farmhouse and a son of a rich American. But this existence is threatened as Ephraim brings a third wife and Eben may have been deprived of this property. Eben believes that his mother is killed indirectly by his father Ephraim in order to capture her own farmland. Even according to Eben his mother was chosen by Ephraim only for the assets. So there is no love issue as Eben doesn't feel love for his father without sheer disgust. In a capitalist society it is one of the influences that people want to pile capital only. Humane feelings, integration and empathy are useless here. The sons of Cabot want him die: 'SIMEON--Ye prayed he'd died.' (p.1, s.1) Their disgust and hatred to their tyrannical father have reached at a severe level that Simeon threatens Ephraim to rape his new wife 'an 'rape your new woman! Whoop!' (p.1 s.4)

We know the identity of colonized people; at least they know they belong to a country which is captured by another nation. But what happened to the immigrants. They belong to nowhere. What about Eben? He has no surety of shelter, father and future. Everything he has is under threat. He will lose the farm if he will get another brother from his step mother. His father is intolerable about his existence. His mother is killed indirectly as Eben believes. So his identity here is in danger. Mother is possibly killed by father, elder brothers don't care, father has married a new woman and a new successor may be born. So Eben is nowhere now, his identity is endangered. Ephraim explains the hatred between him and his sons. He tells Abbie that: 'the hated me 'cause I was hard. I hated them 'cause they were soft. They coveted the farm without knowin' what I mean.' (p.2 s.2) The two elder brothers foresee that trouble will soon take place between their father and Eben as they say again that: 'Dog'll eat dog' (p.1 s.4) then they accept Eben's offer to sign necessary documents and leave to California.

Before meeting Abbie, Eben has not realized the meaning of his existence, father doesn't call him with affection, brothers are on their own, mother has a mysterious death, only Abbie is there who feels a true love to him: 'ABBIE--(*wildly*) ... I love ye, Eben! God knows I love ye!' (p.2 s.3) Abbie's love makes him love her, when Eben feels that true feeling, it leads him to make the story before Sheriff where he confesses as a co-plotter of infanticide to become a false convict. This identity of convict seems annoying to the audience though, Eben discovers himself now and he has an identity now; a convicted lover:

ABBIE--(*shaking her head*) I got t' take my punishment--t' pay fur my sin.

EBEN--Then I want t' share it with ye. (p.3 s.4)

This identity crisis generates because of disintegration among the families of American society. What is that Cabot family? Mr. Ephraim Cabot conducted three unloved marriages, got some sons who do not love and respect their father. One believes Cabot is the killer of his mother, others feel themselves prisoner of Ephraim Cabot. Third wife comes to his life because of the attraction to this huge farm as she confesses:

American family, which substitutes love and mutual relations by materialistic demands. Abbie does not find her real freedom and the completion of herself as a person through making a new family with Ephraim but through her incestuous profounder desire for companionable warmth which for a time Abbie and Eben find in each other, which Ephraim has known only with his farm-animals. 3

How is this happened? American families don't have a distinct cultural background which can tie them up. The main cause of coming to America is materialistic success. So gaining spiritual purpose through economical endeavors must be jeopardized. Family is of course a spiritual need of human being.

American literature is not Diaspora literature though, there is a common thing with it; lack of identity of the characters. Americans without the Indians are immigrants. So though they are introduced as Americans, it is not still a nationality as the European immigrants know. The characters of American writings are found searching for identity. Not only that they are searching for national identity, their own family is unaffectionate. They are not in 'we feeling' or 'home feeling'. Two characters of this drama, Simon and Peter are always searching to escape 'home'. As they say:

[EBEN--(*gazing up at the sky*) Sun's downin' purty.

SIMEON AND PETER--(*pointing*) Ay-eh. They's gold in the West.

EBEN--(*pointing*) Ay-eh. Yonder atop o' the hill pasture, ye mean?

SIMEON AND PETER--(*together*) In Californi-a! (p.1, s.1)

Simeon and Peter are comparatively flat characters here. Still in this dullness, we see the agony of them. They want Ephraim die soon. There is no scope of fulfilling their target here, to become a gold miner. Their present identity does not satisfy them. They are searching for a new identity at California. In a capitalist society anyone can heap property on his will, target, skill or greed. Capitalist society enslaves people; consider the strength and effort of male to be only a commodity which can be sold. This society does not consider family, kin, and relatives on humane value. Cabot and his family are in that trap. Personal freedom is taken away by the capitalist stance. Characters are not free to think by their own.

Eben's desire for identity drives the story fast. Eben doubts his mother is murdered who owns the extended part of his father's farm. He feels his mother is the true identity as he doubts he will be thrown away at the first chance his father gets. This farm is the identity of Eben and his oath to take it back, plotted to keep his brothers aside by satisfying them with money he has stolen from Ephraim. 'EBEN--(*cunningly*) I know whar it's hid. I been waitin'--Maw told me. She knew whar it lay fur years, but she was waitin' . . . It's

her'n--the money he hoarded from her farm an' hid from Maw. It's my money by rights now.' (p.1 s.1)

Abbie, the third wife of Ephraim later lover of Eben, is also in search for identity. Abbie does not marry Ephraim out of love rather to won the farm: 'In *Desire*, O'Neill rebelled against American cultural development, which placed material values above spiritual goals. He saw beauty, art, and all human relations corrupted by the insane pursuit of gold.'<sup>4</sup>

Here in *Desire under the Elms* identity is a recurrent issue. It is not their choice that they will remain alienated from family that of society but the economic nature of the state. The characters are in dark about their current identity. The American family as portrayed may not resemble the definition of family. Materialistic mindset deprives them from the warmth of loving parents, siblings and kin. Characters are always searching unfound identity and freedom.

Everybody is longing for freedom in *Desire under the Elms*. Individualism as individual freedom is absent here for the materialistic drift. According to the capitalist indication individualism is necessary for progress and development of a capitalist economy as people can earn as much they wants, pile as much they can store, own as much property they wants to avail. Though it seems freedom but it keeps the psychological imprisonment. The more property gainer rule the less one here. Another thing is identity in a capitalist society. As we see in this drama, nobody is for anybody even in the family. Hostility is kept as explosives, son wants revenge to his own father, wife hates husband and the property owner hates all. The father thinks his land or farm will be consumed or captured by his son, wants to take it to his grave. In a land of immigrants identity is an elusive word of course. Identity, as it proves, is not attained by economical success of an individual only. A person's Identity is nurtured by others in a 'we feeling community' as it is shown in the drama.

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## Notes

1. Fredrick Wilkins, "Desire Under the Elms" in *The Eugene O'Neill's Newsletter*, 2 (1981), [Journal on-line]; accessed on 10th August 2018; available from [http://www.eoneil.com/The\\_Eugene\\_O'Neill\\_News\\_letter/Another\\_View\\_of\\_Ephraim\\_Cabot.html](http://www.eoneil.com/The_Eugene_O'Neill_News_letter/Another_View_of_Ephraim_Cabot.html); internet.
2. Doris Falk, *Eugene O'Neill and the Tragic Tension* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1958), p. 98.
3. Norman A. Jeffars, *Eugene O'Neill*, Edinburg: Oliver and Boyd Ltd., 1963, p. 55.
4. Alan Lewis, *American Plays and Playwrights of the Contemporary Theater*, (New York: Crown publishing, 1965), p.22

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