

## **Impact of Rousseau on Eugene O'Neill's *Desire Under the Elms***

Dr. Balwan Chahal  
Govt. College for Women, Karnal (Haryana)

Paper Submission Date : 20<sup>th</sup> March 2016

Paper Acceptance Date : 25<sup>th</sup> March 2016

Rousseau believes that man is born free but is everywhere in chains. An average man, living in a civilized society, has both an 'actual will' and 'real will'. The 'actual will' of the individual is his impulsive and irrational will. This 'actual will' is transient and conceives of the present only. It is based on self interest and is not related to the well being of society. Such a will is narrow and self-conflicting. On the other hand, the real will of the individual is a rational will which wills his real interest in relation to the general welfare of the society. 'Real will' thinks more of common good or interest than the good of the individual. 'Real will' of the individual therefore, promotes harmony between the individual and the society. Such a will is not transitory. It is 'the real will' of the individual which represents his true freedom because it is purged of selfishness. This will takes into consideration not the momentary interest of the individual but his whole interest. It also thinks of the society and is based on reason. Hence, an average man, according to Rousseau, has a 'divided self'- the individual self and 'the social self' (Rousseau. *The Social Contract*, 112). When he follows the commands of his actual will and disregards his real will or 'General Will' of the community disturbance and decay sets in his relationships.

On the basis of Rousseau's Social Contract, each one in giving himself to all gives himself to none. The contract terminates the state of nature and ushers in the civil society. It turns the individual into a citizen also changes natural liberty into civil liberty. Constant participation in the formation of General Will makes a man a moral being. The general will is the sum total and synthesis of the real wills of the individuals in the society. It integrates the individual with the state. It is for the well being for the society. Family being the microcosm of society, all that applies to the society also applies to the family. The study assumes 'will' as 'desire' which is the title of the play.

The play *Desire Under the Elms*, posits the basic and insoluble problem of perverted unnatural and unsocial human desires that come in the harmonious family relationship. As the play opens, we meet two elder sons of Ephraim Cabot, who are happy in the beginning as they are following the Real will. Later on when they desire for liberty, freedom and gold, their relation with the family starts distorted. Simeon says to Ephraim: "You old blood sucker, good-by" (O'Neill, *DUTE*, 158) before leaving for California. They know that their father's third wife is in and she alone is the heir of the property of their father. Following the dictates of their respective actual will, the father and the sons come in conflict with each other. Their relation with each other becomes unsocial and unnatural as they disregard their 'Real will' which aim at proper relationship.

Eben, the youngest son, passionately desire to possess the farm. He believes that farm belongs to his dead mother. he thinks that money belongs to him. He says: “It ‘s her’n-the money he hoarded from her farm an’hid from maw. It’s my money by rights now”(sic, O’Neill, *DUTE*, 147). Beside the farm he desire to have revenge on his father for the wrong he has done to his dead mother. His memory of his mother causes him to attack the life around him. He blames his brothers for their failure to help her or take moral responsibility for what happened to her. After his first night with Abbie, Eben is bold, confident and at peace with himself. O’Neill here shows that when a man follows the dictates of his ‘actual will’ and disregards his ‘real will’ his relationship with other members of the family becomes perverted, unnatural and unsocial. The decay and distortion also sets in the relationship between Abbie and Eben when he comes to know that he has very cunningly been befooled. He says:

Ye’ve made a fool o’me-a sick, dumb fool-a purpose. Ye’ve been on’y playin’ yer sneaki’, stealin’ game all along-getting’ me t’ lie with ye so’s ye’d hev a son he’d think was his’n an’ makin’ him promise he’d give ye the farm and let me eat dust, if ye did jit him a son. (O’Neill. *DUTE*, 193)

When Abbie kills the baby in the womb, Eben thinks that she has murdered Ephraim. His will rather ‘desire’ of money, Abbie disorient his relationship with his father, also perverted his relation with the society. Here, comes the point that when a person follows the dictated of his real will his relationship with the society are good, when he disregards his relationship becomes perverted, distorted, which is the motto of the philosophy of Rousseau.

Abbie Putnam, the young wife of Ephraim Cabot, desire a home and security, which is her real will so as to see the society. Later on she desire for whole kitchen, even Eben his relation starts distorted. At one place she says: “ This is my farm-this be my hum-this be my kitchen, exclaims she” (O’Neill. *DUTE*.161) She even says ti Eben: “I don’t want t’ pretend playin’Maw t’ ye Eben,(Admiringly) Ye’ re too big an’ too strong fur that. I want t’ be frens with ye”.( O’Neill. *DUTE*, 159)The domestic felicity is ruined and family life disrupted because of this moral transgression of Abbie, the step-mother. There is no denying the fact that Ephraim would leave the farm not to her, but to one of his own blood, she proceeds cold bloodedly to seduce Eben, thus to kill two birds with one stone. Her desire for Eben for outweighs her desire for the farm. It is in order to possess him that she murders her child and is content to go to the gallows with him. O’Neill here shows that man is unable to establish harmony between his self- regarding and altruistic instincts. This, in turn leads to unnatural and unsocial family relationship.

For old Ephraim, farm is a symbol of security and stability. He nursed it with his life blood. He desires for the farm so much that he would take it with himself to the other world, if he could. He desires a son who may inherit the farm and then the farm would really belong to him after his death. He tells Abbie:

A son is me—my blood—mine. Mine ought t' git mine. An'then it's still mine— even though I be six foot under.  
D'ye see?( O'Neill. *DUTE*, 169)

Beside the farm, Ephraim desires the warmth the company of women. He goes to prostitute Min, and then to seek and marry Abbie Putnam.. O'Neill here tries to show that Ephraim, Eben and Abbie follow the commands of their 'Actual Will' and disregards their 'real will'. They are unable to establish harmony between their self-regarding and altruistic instincts and this, in turn, is at the root of unnatural and unsocial relationship among them. Besides, the inequality springing from differences of age, bodily strength , qualities of mind and privileges of wealth and power also brings about disorientation and decay in their relationships with one another.

Abbie, Eben and Ephraim are trapped not only by circumstances but also psychologically. Eben bears two figurative masks-one ruthless and self-centered like his father, the other sensitive and hungry for beauty and love as his mother was. The desire, which flows through the elms and drips from them, pervades everything under them id, God; the pagan god, a Dionysian deity; this omnipresent god id fundamentally a cosmic sexual urge, spontaneous, beautiful and immoral. The 'life force' is the God of repression and lonesomeness and hardness.

O'Neill seems to suggest that man should under the circumstances go back to nature. He cannot live by defying the code of moral conduct of the society of his times. In order to develop harmonious relationship with others he should discard his perverted desires which he imbibes from the perverted society of his times. This, in turn, will happen only when a new and just society is formed based on Rousseau's theory of 'General Will' as pure as was that of the 'noble savage' and will govern the laws of the society in the making of which he himself is a party .

#### WORKS CITED:

Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. *The Social Contract*. London: Penguin Book, 1962. Printed.

O'Neill, Eugene. *Nine Plays*. New York: The Modern Library, 1959. Printed.