



The elms and a tamarind: A study of the tragic vein in o'neill's *desire under the elms* and sundara Ramaswamy's *Story of a tamarind tree*

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Abstract

The paper seeks to study the tragic element that permeates Eugene O'Neill's play *Desire under the Elms* and the contemporary Tamil writer Sundara Ramaswamy's novel *Story of a Tamarind Tree*. It identifies the spirit of tragedy, blatant or subtle, as the point of similarity between these works even though the two literary sensations are different by genre as well as milieu. As we may categorize the play as modern tragedy, in which the main characters are not elevated in social status but ordinary people whose predicamental journey ends up in catastrophic loss of lives or hope, it is more precisely recognized as American Tragedy in which what is at the core is family alongside its grey shades of complex human relationships. Whereas, Ramaswamy's novel that quaintly fits into a category analogous to Hardy's tragedies portrays the death and disappearance, or, murder and extermination of a tamarind tree. The tamarind that once occupied the central place of a rustic and then an urban life in a given area eventually falls victim of differences, rivalries, and divides that have been plaguing India before and after independence.

Keywords: desire, elms, tamarind, fallacy, story, history

Introduction

For one who believes that there is a close linkage between Humans and Nature, the latter's participation in the ever-unfolding human drama does not come as a surprise. For instance, a popular literary device called the 'pathetic fallacy' stems from the idea that man and nature are bound to each other. It presents "something non-human found in nature—a beast, plant, stream, natural force, etc.—performs as though from human feeling or motivation" (Shaffer 343). We can see how nature partakes in the life of man and how the inseparable bond shows itself when the humans are caught in the grip of catastrophe as it is often destined to be. This pattern is found in innumerable illustrations: be it the first man and woman in the garden of Eden who disobey God by eating the forbidden fruit and make the earth groan in disapproval and pain; or the old King Lear who is humiliated and driven out of imperial household by his two villainous daughters into wilderness, darkness, and storm that results in the "unwatchability" of the play for many including Samuel Johnson; or the fall of Jesus (preceding the rise of Christ) who is betrayed by the same people who supported him once and ate loaves and fried fish from his hands. There is howling of wind, lightning and thundering when the King of England is driven out of home and one can add tremor of earth, darkness, and tearing of curtain in the Jerusalem temple into two when the 'King of the Jews' dies on the cross.

Two Writers

Since the earliest of days, man has loved to think that there is an inexplicable and inextricable union between him and Nature. Although Joseph Wood Krutch rues the perceived loss of such union by saying, "We need contacts with the things we sprang from, man needs a context for his life larger than himself, he needs it so desperately that all modern despairs go back to the fact

that he has rejected the only context, which the loss of his traditional gods has left accessible" (qtd. in Suttle), it is comforting that not the entire humanity has lost such sensitivity that made it bond with Nature. We see authors such as Eugene O' Neill, a twentieth century American dramatist, and Sundara Ramaswamy, a contemporary Tamil novelist, who weave their own versions of human drama entangled with that of the non-human; unfolding in proximity with Nature. Indeed it corroborates the idea that "we all have someone or something as a witness to the ups and downs; good feelings and the bad ones we experience in our lives. Such witness can be one's great granny, an outdated pendulum clock, or even a tamarind tree" (Ramaiah). Despite the glaring differences between the American writer and the Indian counterpart, I have chosen both for a comparative study, with special reference to their respective works such as *Desire under the Elms (DUE)*, a play, and *The Story of a Tamarind Tree (SOTT)*, a novel.

Tragic Vein

Published in 1924, *DUE* presents characters full of anxiety about their economic security and further prosperity. It makes us consider the mood as one presaging the Depression to follow. As Simeon and Peter leave for Californian gold mines, Ephraim, Eben, and Abbie want to have the farm for themselves. It is interesting to note how even the sheriff who appears in the last scene blurts out his desire for the farm. Similar situation is found in Ramaswamy's novel *SOTT* in which characters such as Khader and Damu, as accompanied by their supporters, squabble for commercial and political success at the cost of everything. It is this rivalry that results in the killing of the tamarind tree. O' Neill

personifies the elms as two “exhausted women” and Ramaswamy visualizes his tamarind “like an old woman”. O’Neill presents the elms as follows:

“Two enormous elms are on each side of the house. They appear to protect and at the same time subdue. There is a sinister maternity in their aspect, a jealous, crushing absorption. They have developed from their intimate contact with the life of man in the house an appalling humaneness. They brood oppressively over the house. They are like exhausted women resting their sagging breasts, and when it rains their tears trickles down monotonously and rot on the shingles” (1).

And Ramaswamy who puts the tamarind tree, visible or invisible, at the center of the story, both graphically and figuratively, introduces the tamarind tree in the following passage:

“The Tamarind tree stood at the crossroads....It was a very old tree, and signs of its great age were all over it. From distance it looked like an old woman, crooked and bent, hair grown grey, lost in a world of her own, reliving memories of happier days. The tree had survived in dignity for many many years, and left to itself, would have come to a natural end, but that was not to be” (Ramaswamy 1).

Meeting the norm that there is ‘family’ at the core of the American tragedies (Wallace 47), O’Neill’s *DUE* portrays how a family in a rural part of New England is up in arms against itself. Grim human qualities such as materialistic greed, unrestrained passions of sexual attraction and revulsion, possessiveness, exploitation, hate, jealousy and betrayal culminating in adultery and infanticide are enacted in the expressionistic dark shade of the elms who have been mute witnesses to the oppression and eventual death of the first two wives of Ephraim. Similar qualities and situations are played out in Ramaswamy’s novel, but the striking difference is that, the main victim of the evil emanating from the human players is the tamarind tree itself. However, the presence of the tree is felt by readers even in its absence. Even when Coolie Ayyappan poisons the tree and the stroke of the axe falls on its trunk we cannot think it was simply a tree...” (Saravanan18dec).

In O’Neill’s *DUE* the events that happen to members of the family and the ensuing drama contribute to the tragic vision of the author and his treatment of the same. Lust, incest, exploitation and betrayal within family, and murder committed by closest relative, almost like what we find in the trilogy of *Mourning Becomes Electra*, are witnessed in the play without exception. The tension that the play creates in the audience or readers culminates in Abbie’s killing of her illicit child born to Eben and the arrest of the couple by the sheriff. It is suggested that both may go to prison or the gallows and the farm is to be abandoned by Ephraim who says that he would go to California to join his sons and discover the Solomon’s Mines. If one is to see this last point as a mark of ongoing progress at large it is a different argument which may not have much to do with the literary aspect of the tragedy in question. The same way, one may set out to commemorate the urbanization of the village and the presence of a park, pool, cinema theater and bus stop in the place once occupied by trees including the tamarind. But, it can only be treated as a non-literary and anthropocentric admiration for human civilization and materialism with scant regard for deep ecological sensibility (Saritha 233) and similar attitude toward the status of personification accorded on the non-human protagonist.

An apparent similarity between both the works is the striking presence of tree/s as well as the tragic vision that the works are born out of. Each work is centered on the unity of place—a single geographical space where the characters converge on to enact the roles assigned to them. In the process, they also demonstrate their passions which decide the course of the respective works, O’Neill’s drama and Ramaswamy’s novel, which invariably end in catastrophe, the former in the destruction of a family and the latter in that of the tamarind tree and all the pleasant aspects of country life interwoven with it. Both the works reveal how the dominance of the Dionysian excess over intellect, and also the unceasing quest for material wealth do irreversible harm to those involved. The passions have potential to burn reason that individuals are supposed to possess and destroy not only them but also the environment. Both the play and the novel present the dangers of such excesses that invariably turn eschatological. It may help one to remember that that tragedies always caution us against untempered impulses.

The passion in *DUE* is of erotic nature. The heat it generates simply consumes Eben and Abbie who find it impossible to extricate themselves from each other despite a mutual awareness regarding the toxicity of their relationship that would simply reduce to ashes the repute and peace of the family they belong to. The lusty bond between Eben and, a twenty five year old step son and step mother who is elder to him by a decade is at the core of the play mentioned. Eben is introduced as follows:

“He is twenty five, tall and sinewy. His face is well formed, good looking but its expression is resentful and defensive. His defiant dark eyes remind one of a wild animal in captivity. Each day is a cage in which he finds himself trapped but inwardly unsubdued. There is a fierce repressed vitality about him. He has black hair, moustache, a thin curly trace of beard. He is dressed in rough farm clothes. He spits on the ground with intense disgust, turns and goes back into the house” (O’Neill 2).

Likewise, the professional rivalry and the simmering hate between Khader, the Muslim trader, and Damu, his rival, in Ramaswamy’s novel accounts for the catastrophe that strikes the characters. Their moves and counter-moves to attain supremacy over the other in trade and then politics keep the plot drifting toward a tragic end. If tragic protagonists such as Oedipus, Prometheus, Medea, Faustus, Hamlet, Othello, Macbeth, and Lear, for instance, who we have seen in Greek tragedies and the Elizabethan, embrace doom due to error in their judgments or flaw in their own characters. Eben and Abbie in the American tragedy follow suit. Besides, the ecstasy with which they embrace doom: the way Abbie tries to save Eben from punishment and the truthful passion that makes Eben to share the punishment, even death, with Abbie proves that man (Read: the tragic protagonists) “may be wretched and...awful, but...not small” (Bradley 15). They wreak disaster on themselves and the environment as legitimate tragic protagonists do. However, Ramaswamy’s *SOTT* ends not in ecstasy but in agony; the cut throat politics between Khader and Damu loosens disaster first on environment, the murder of the tamarind in particular, and then the extension of the disaster to individuals in focus. If the child is smothered to death in *DUE* and its parents end up in prison or on gallows, the tamarind in *SOTT* is poisoned to death followed by Ayyappan’s murder, Khader’s imprisonment, and Damu’s self-imposed exile. Ramaswamy’s *SOTT* is different in the sense that the tamarind takes the place of the protagonist. As the novel starts, the tree has

been surrounded by the polluted tank water and then, thanks to the cleaning work carried out by Maharaja Pooram Thirunaal, it stands in a main location which is called the Tamarind Tree Junction. And then the tree that has been a witness to so many events including the unnatural death of Cellathayee, the exciting story- times and fellowship shared by Damodara Asan and his young listeners, the rise of ambitious men like Khader and Damu, and the ensuing commercial rivalry between them. It has also witnessed the parts played by Gopal Ayyer, Janab Abdul Aziz, Chairman F.X. Fernandez, Municipal Chairman M.C. Joseph, Kambaramayanam Anandhan Pillai, Coolie Ayyapan, Archbishop, Isakki, Groundnut Grandpa and others. But, the same tree has also fallen a victim to the conspiracy hatched by one of the competing traders whose rivalry / animosity spills over in the political sphere as well because of the ambitions of the aforementioned individuals.

The elder sons of Ephraim Cabot in *DUE* appear only in the beginning and they soon vanish as they are driven by the desire to amass wealth by joining the Gold Rush in California. But, the characters such as Ephraim the old patriarch, Eben, his youngest and “untamed” son, the self-willed and tempting step-mother, represent a passion which the individuals are unable to control. The three, as opposed to Simeon and Peter—the older sons of Ephraim, seek to pursue an authentic life by yielding to their passions. Ephraim married a young woman as his wife, despite knowing that a virile and young son lived in the same house. He does that by saying, “A hum’s got t’ hev a woman” whereas, the young wife retorts by telling, “A woman’s got t’ hev a hum” (23) and finds in her young step-son a potential mate for herself.

None of the three is naïve to ignore that this arrangement is rooted in materialistic aspirations—particularly to retain or to acquire the farm to himself or herself—but the individuals, along with the idea, are cursed with afflictions to which the elms bear witness. The problem with Ephraim is his desire to continue to own and control the farm and his tendency to brush aside any apprehensions in that regard. Another aspect of the problem is that his passion to control a young son and to own and control a young wife is apparently dominant in him. He also hopes that he would continue to work hard in the farm and amass wealth as it would keep him happy and commanding. His own elder sons desert him; the youngest one betrays him and the new wife cuckolds him. The passion that pervades O’Neil’s works in general and *DUE* in particular is catastrophic and makes one feel like Hammond who says,

“Mr. O’ Neil’s dramas always make me glad that I am not one of the characters involved. My tire trouble; my battle with Kronos and the composing room after the play; my loss of appetite and other discomforts, vanish as I observe Mr. O’ Neil’s people writing and wailing in difficulties much more incorrigible. I leave his theatres with a song on my lips, congratulating myself that my glooms are insignificant.” (O’Neill xv).

The tribulations that we find in O’Neill are on par with those that we find in classical tragedies. It’s known that *DUE* draws on the mythology of Hippolytus, Phaedra, and Theseus. When Abbie kills her child to prove her love for Eben one can see in her a Medea who killed her own children to avenge the betrayal meted out to her. The mythological Medea killed her two kids to make Jason, her husband, feel the extent of the hurt he had inflicted on her through his betrayal. She did that to take revenge on him for abandoning her for the hand of Creon’s daughter.

Conclusion

Abbie kills her own baby to prove her love to Eben and convince him that she would do anything, lose anything, just for him. It may not be very welcome or sound very mature if one asked whether Abbie’s feeling was to be considered love or lust. Perhaps we find it as lust in the beginning which ripens into love ultimately when she is ready to go to prison or the gallows alone, after declaring that she killed the child. She has both love and lust for Eben. While “(putting both her arms around him—with wild passion)” and telling him “I’ll sing fur ye! I’ll die fur ye!” O’Neill writes as stage direction, “(In spite of her overwhelming desire for him, there is a sincere maternal love in her manner and voice—a horribly frank mixture of lust and mother love)” (47). That apart, the Cabots leave the farm and the elms in the concluding part of the play whereas the tamarind is poisoned and axed, and the two rivals, Khader and Damu, who are the contenders for the ultimate victory in the elections lose even their existing positions and vanish from the scene. It makes one recall Eagleton’s assertion, “Not all tragedy is about breaking and renewal. It may end simply in waste or rancour, despair or defiance” (58).

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