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The Predicament of Siblings in Tennessee Williams' *Out Cry*

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Abstract:

The present paper traces the predicament of siblings Clare and Felice who struggle to escape the reality in Tennessee Williams' play *Out Cry*. It deals with filial relationships and the predicament of the siblings in the modern, unsympathetic world that result in their cruel confinement. The play depicts the strange circumstances that reveal their plights and inability to escape from their roles as they dip in their performance. It is an illusion within illusions and 'out cry' from isolation, panic and fear of sexual relationship.

Key words: Tennessee Williams, predicament, plights, isolation, modern world

Tennessee Williams, winner of the Pulitzer Prize for Drama, remains iconic figure in the history of American drama. He is considered among the three foremost American playwrights of the 20th century. He has been influential dramatists of the contemporary period who rebelled against the conventional themes and styles of presentation and experimented with new forms and thematic patterns. He offers a new idiom to the theater through his bold representations of violence and physicality and celebrates Lawrentian freedom of expression on the stage.

With the advent of rising influences of industrialization and urbanization, the 'family' as an institution is threatened to disruption and disintegration in the post-colonial world. There is a sea change in the life style of modern man and tremendous decline in moral values. The collapse of the nuclear modern metropolis establishes an intimate connection between economic decline, emotional upheaval and the space of home. The wreckage of marriage, family and relationships has become central to modern drama that is worked out under a substantial typology of home. The newly emerged cultural anarchy in the post-war world demands a redefinition, reinterpretation of relationships that in turn derive their complexities in the spatial, ideological referent called 'home'. One such play that enacts the predicament and plight of siblings in the modern hostile world is *Out Cry* (1973) written by Tennessee Williams. Incidentally this play has been preceded by masterpiece and has been overshadowed by the successes of the earlier plays. This play that has remained obscured and abandoned from critical acclaim, dramatize the 'confinement' of the siblings and the resultant disillusionment and desolation that mark their suffering.

Tennessee Williams was preoccupied with the *Two Character Play* during his 'stoned age', a period of acute depression triggered by death of his companion Frank Merlo in 1963 that culminated in his involuntary three months confinement at Barnes Hospital, St Louis, in autumn 1969. Williams wrote in his Memoirs "Confinement has always been the greatest dread of my life that can be seen in my play *Out Cry*". Confinement for Williams was not merely physical constraint but it was more a consciousness of being enslaved by his own nostalgic memories that had developed an everlasting attachment for the agrarian South. The earlier version of *Out Cry* was *The Two Character Play* and Williams referred to the later version entitled *Out Cry* as the most significant work and very personal play, and considered it as his own human outcry. He

further added in *Memoirs* that "it was very close to the marrow of his being" and mentioned "I considered *Out Cry* a major work and its misadventure on Broadway has not altered that personal estimate of it" (233).

The *Out Cry* is rewrite of the *Two Character Play* written in 1966 and was staged in 1967 and published by the New Direction Publisher in 1969. It can be read as the repeated but ultimately unanswered calls of two characters to each other and to a world that is unreachable and antagonistic to them. The play commences with Felice and Clare, a pair of brother and sister sibling actors about to perform a play within a play entitled *The Two Character Play*. They are forsaken by their company in a nameless theater of an unidentified foreign country. They find themselves in a dilemma since audience present consistently demands them to perform. Within the theatrical performance, they recollect a violent heritage in a small town of the American South. Their gloomy past looms large at the background. Their astrologer father, threatened by their mother with detention to a state asylum, has shot her and then shot himself. The orphan siblings, deprived of insurance money, bereft of supplies, severed from communication, fear to venture outside their house. In an enlightening study Thomas Postlewait states in *Cambridge Companion to Tennessee Williams*, "Williams regularly portrays the interior thematically as a realm of entrapment and confinement" (239).

In the play enacted, however the interior seems to offer a refuge to the siblings. The metatheatrical embellishment that affords the oscillation of the action from one level to the other is not a superfluous technique to impress the readers but it offers a degree of complexity to the plot. The deliberate dissolution of the margins between the two dramatic worlds that thematize the breakdown between reality and representation and knits a fabric of schizophrenic insanity around the characters. The word 'confinement' is deliberately forbidden but there is a tacit understanding between Felice and Clare about their imprisonment. Felice is cognizant of the reality when he says "when a word can't be used, when it's prohibited, its silence increases its size. It gets larger and larger till it's so enormous that no house can hold. These words justify the intersection of the spaces of home, asylum, prison or theater. The new Bethesda house is an incomplete stage setting on a larger stage "in a huge mausoleum of a theater somewhere that seems like nowhere" (16).

On that darkened stage, in a cold claustrophobic theater, Felice and Clare of the framing play manifest the vulnerabilities of the artist and his art in a cruel world. The artist's turmoil and inspiration either genuine or externalization of the psychic energy springs forth from that darkness. In *Out Cry*, the house is surrounded by "sacred flowers" (39); it has a door that sometimes stands open and is sometimes locked (48); it is a place of "unexpected collisions" (29). For Felice and Clare, as inhabitants of the house in the inner play, there are threats all around: "those vicious boys" (45), "voices from the street" taunting them as loonies (49), neighbors who "gave their son a slingshot to stone the house!" (57). Williams presents his characters with an overwhelming confusion that wrecks and annuls both as people and as actors, as persons and as *dramatis personae*.

In their attempt to respond to the blows of life, Felice and Clare reduce their art and act to themselves. The actor's quintessential task is that of embodying someone else's passions and emotions is turned upon itself, as both performers are engrossed in mere self-dramatization. They find it difficult to differentiate from their roles and reality from illusion as they dip in performance. As Kalliopi Nikolopoulou analytically observes, "endlessly rehearsing their professional failure in their "real" dialogue, they persistently enact their subjective trauma in the

play within". In other words paralyzed by the ordeal of their family history, the two siblings incarcerate themselves voluntarily, inflicting law and penalty to themselves. Even the hope of acquiring aesthetic transcendence by acting out their affliction vanishes as they enact in an empty theater. Ironically, the empirical audience is forced to confront its own potential nullity in the weird situation. It is illusion within illusions.

This psychological and emotional intimacy between the siblings attests to Williams' intense attachment to his sister, Rose, who undoubtedly remained the powerful inspiration for many of his female protagonists. The unsuccessful lobotomy of Rose and her confinement due to schizophrenia left an indelible mark on the dramatist's mind. The mental impact was of such magnitude "that brother-sister incest becomes in Williams' work a figuration of a profound psychic transaction through which two polar principles (gendered or otherwise) interpenetrate to form a totality". Thus the autobiographical strain in *Out Cry* adds a new dimension to the play.

Such a sense of enclosed space is peculiarly presented in the *Out Cry*. Every attempt of Felice and Clare to transcend their family is defeated, they remain stranded within it. The only effort of Felice to step beyond the door is doomed to failure as he is summoned by the house back inside: "Yes, I'm already defeated. The house is so old, so faded, so warm that, yes, it seems to be breathing. It seems to be, don't go away. Give up. Come and stay". Such a gentle command! What do I do? Naturally, I obey". (55) The only available alternative in this game is to trail the parental model: murder and suicide. Felice alludes to the likelihood of Clare's suicide and relates his denial to leave the house to his concern for Clare who might attempt to kill herself if left unguarded.

On the other hand, Clare refutes any intentions of suicide and conversely accuses Felice of homicidal fantasies, her fears being aggravated by his custody of the pistol. After their last attempt to exit the house is foiled, Felice realizes that there is "nothing at all left to do" (58) other than (re)turning to the revolver as the remedy. Clare's movements and actions tantamount to hysterics intermittently display moments of rationality, realism and resolution. Their conversation discloses turmoil in their mind:

Felice: We're going to do The Two Character Play as we've never done it before.

Clare: Impossible.

Felice: Necessary.

Clare: Some necessary things are impossible.

Felice: And some impossible things are necessary.(19)

Clare as a realist shows very often in his arguments that the engagement with the impossible is a worthless endeavor. The only escape for Clare and Felice seems to be death, the ultimate end of their ordeal. Felice and Clare's subsequent efforts to leave the house are completely paralyzed. They find themselves in a catastrophic situation in which there is no alternative for them except giving performance or meeting a tragic end of their lives. They are helpless and restless as they were deserted by their troupe. It is an evidence of mercilessness and cruelty on the part of adults who left them all alone on their own.

The play deals with the predicament of the siblings in the modern world which is unsympathetic and unaffectionate. It evidently evokes an atmosphere of suffocation and the helplessness of the human beings under the pressures of callous, dispassionate, modernized world that configures complete alienation of man. *Out Cry* is the emotional appeal of the siblings who are utterly desolate and forsaken. Clare and Felice never try to grab the opportunities they get to move out of their world.

In the urbanized and industrialized modern world it is purely the utilitarianism that thrives and the women are again destined to be perpetually commodified and disgraced despite their capabilities and potentials. *Out Cry* revolves around personal axis of delivering a passionate consideration of filial love. Selfishness and greed for material things is a buzz word in a modern world that replaces the moral values and a principle of 'live and let others live' in tranquility.

In this way, it may be said that Tennessee Williams has tried to put the issues of social importance at the forefront through an intricate pattern of filial relationships and boldly displayed the fabric of social life that denies individuality and significance to these kinships. Beyond these claustrophobic fears are masked the greater truths about the mute sufferings of the imprisoned souls and the deaf social institutions that define 'home' as the secure abode but virtually transform it into a prison- house that becomes a smothering, enclosed space. The play effectively highlights the psychological traumas of the siblings and the futile efforts to dismantle themselves from their endless turmoil. Williams' play delves into the innermost recesses of human psychology but reveals the soul- shattering darkness within.

The characters of the play struggle with the fear of isolation, of entrapment and of sexual relationship. Tennessee Williams is succeeded in portraying the realistic picture of siblings reeling under the pressures of changing post-colonial scenario where unhealthy competition for survival is leading us to isolation and feeling of restlessness and insecurity. It highlights the hazardous psychological effects of urbanization and modernization on mankind.

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