

Patriarchy And Passion In Eugene O'Neill's *Desire Under The Elms*: A Critical Consideration Of Abbie Putnam As A Mother Or Murderer

Lutfun Naher

Senior Lecturer and Head
Department of English Language and Literature
North Western University, Khulna, Bangladesh

Abstract

Eugene O'Neill (1888-1953), an eminent American playwright, portrays the complicated, irresistible, and unpredictable aspects of the human mind through Abbie Putnam's character in his most celebrated play, *Desire Under the Elms* (1924). Maternal tenderness evolves into a murderer, but the indomitable power of passion exists in both of these opposite forms. Patriarchal society measures women, not as a proper self, but as the other. They are considered less than fully human, while patriarchy gives males the status of the embodiment of what a human being should be. There is a scope to consider Abbie Putnam from Judith Butler's theoretical perspective of 'Subversion of Identity'. Her gender identity does not allow her to claim any right over her husband's property until or unless she begets a son. Patriarchy denies her inner passion and labels her love as a polluted emotion. The focus of this paper is to present an explanation of Abbie's complex coexistence of being a mother and murderer.

Keywords: Mother, murderer, other, passion, patriarchy, property, subversion, women.

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Eugene O'Neill's *Desire Under the Elms* (1924) is an unconventional play in many ways. It is a psychological play that reveals the inner state of minds of different characters and revolves around the patriarchal socio-economic system. In this play, O'Neil portrays characters with every shade of color. Ephraim Cabot, Simon, Peter, Eben, and Abbie are all depicted with their inner psychological world. Through each character, the author explores different states of inner psychology: greed, conflict, power, possession, domination, obsession, lust, dream, and love; such love not only gives the joy of achieving but also gives the loss of snatching. Among all these characters, Abbie Putnam is a bit different. We find a complex mixture of motherly love and sexuality in her. To seize Eben's love, she crosses all the possible limits and leaves readers in a strange state of flux. It is tough to define her role as a mother or murderer.

In *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Judith Butler suggests that women's biology and desire are destiny formulated. She performs in a given patriarchal situation and shapes her identity according to social commandments. Whether she survives or not depends on her performance. As Butler says, "Such acts, enactment, generally constructed are *performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means." (Butler 173)

Abbie can perform her gender role only by giving birth to a male child, considering her succession of performances. Patriarchy does not believe that women can feel the way a man can. She is not permitted to express her passion and desire; if so, her passion is considered a polluted desire. Women need to compromise their inner and outer selves. Butler again states:

"inner" and "outer" worlds of the subjects is a border and boundary tenuously maintained for the purposes of social regulation and control..... "inner" and "outer" constitutes a binary distinction that stabilizes and consolidates the coherent subject. When that subject is challenged, the meaning and necessity of the terms are subjected to displacement. (Butler 170-171)

When Abbie expresses her sexual desire which ultimately turns into genuine love for Eben, patriarchy considers the feelings as a polluted one. This emotion ultimately challenges her femininity or her motherhood. She has to negotiate her role of being a lover or a mother.

The society advocates that women's "inner" passion should remain "inner." If it is ever disclosed, it brings calamity. They need to negotiate their emotion to maintain the patriarchal social order. In *Genders*:

'Femininity and Feminism', David Glover and Cora Kaplan point out; "In the late eighteenth century, sensibility and sentiments are the operative categories that women must negotiate." (Glover and Cora 39)

Abbie Putnam fails to negotiate her emotions. She prefers passion towards Eben and turns into the murderer of her child. Women have no right to claim or decide anything, not even their identity. They sacrifice their 'selves' without a thought of any return. There is nothing that can be considered as their property. In her article, "The Laugh of Medusa,"; Helen Cixous elaborates; "If there is any 'property of women,' it is paradoxically her capacity to deappropriate unselfishly" (Cixous 269). When Abbie claims her right over her husband's property, is denied just because she is a woman. She schemes to have a son to achieve property and gets closer to Eben for her purpose.

Patriarchy does not offer any space for active femininity. After all, activity celebrated supremacy over passivity. Toril Moi, in *Textual and Sexual Politics*, describes the ultimate destiny of femininity;

"In the end, victory is equated with activity and defeat with passivity; under patriarchy, the male is always the victor. [Cixous] passionately denounces such an equation of femininity with passivity and death as leaving no positive space for women: Either woman is passive, or she doesn't exist." (Moi 103)

Abbie Putnam pays for being 'active' as she chooses the subversive identity and loses femininity, ending up as a murderer.

The maternal entity of Abbie Putnam exists in a dual sense in *Desire Under the Elms*. She is a mother in a biological sense as she gives birth to a son. We cannot ignore the fact that Abbie never wants to be a real mother; instead, she wants a son to use him as a tool to assert her claim to the farmhouse. The idea of having a son comes to her mind when she senses that Cabot is thinking of taking Eben as his heir. Cabot mentions to her that he is getting old, and after Simon and Peter, Eben is the one who did not leave him. She reminds him that she is his wife; she has her lawful rights too. Abbie feels she has been deceived due to her husband's patriarchal stance. Cabot believes that leaving the farm to a son will be similar to possessing it to himself even after death. In a sense, a son is the extension of his existence:

CABOT: Ye're on'y a woman.

ABBIE: I'm yewr wife.

CABOT: That hain't me. A son is me- my blood -mine. Mine ought to t'git mine. An' then it's still mine - even though I be six foot under. D'ye see?

ABBIE: (giving him a look of hatred) Ay-eh. I see. (She becomes very thoughtful, her face growing shrewd, her eyes studying Cabot craftily (O'Neill 27)

Abbie is intelligent as nature schools her, and she can easily predict what will ultimately happen to her if she is unable to beget a son. Only a son can secure her existence. Cabot and the firm need an inheritance, and Abbie needs the firm for her security. Eventually, Abbie decides to have a son to inherit the farm herself:

ABBIE: (suddenly) Mebbe the Lord'll give us a son.

CABOT: (turns and stares at her eagerly) Ye mean a son - t' me' n' yew?

ABBIE: (with a cajoling smile) Ye' re a strong man yet, hain't ye? 'Tain't nowadays impossible, be it? We know that. Why d'ye stare so?

CABOT: (his face growing full of joyous pride and a sort of religious ecstasy) Ye been Prayin', Abbie? - fur a son? - t'us?

ABBIE: Ay-eh. (with a grim resolution) I want a son now. (27)

Thus, she figures out a way to possess the farm, and the only way of gaining it is by giving Cabot a new heir. Abbie even has not the slightest feeling of motherhood behind wanting to be a mother; if anything is perfect calculation and strategy. "I want a son" (27) "I need a son" (28); by this expression, she confirms to us that she never wants to be a mother in a real sense, and she decides to perform her gender role to serve her purpose. To secure her position and possessions, she badly needs a son. As she says to Cabot to make it confirm that "Would ye will the farm t' me then—t' me an' it." (28)

It is not anomalous for Abbie to feel selfish and greedy. We would rather say her surroundings are different. She could never enjoy either her husband's love or motherly affection. Survival was her prerequisite task. She chooses old Cabot as her husband because he offers her a home. Abbie tells about her life,

I was an orphan early an' had t' wuk fur others in other folk's hums. Then I married an' he turned out a drunken spreer an' so he had to wuk fur others an' me too again in other folk's hums, an' the baby died, an' my husband got sick an' died too, an' I was glad sayin' now I'm free fur once, ony I diskivered right away all I was free fur was t' wuk agen in other folk's hum, doin' other folk's wuk till I'd most give up hope o' ever doing my wuk in my own hum, an' then your paw come....(21)

In the mid-nineteenth century, women were considered unworthy and unfit to own property and employment. They did not have the right to express their minds and consciences. The only job they were believed to be fit for was begetting and raising a child. Abbie Putnam, a woman of thirty-five, gets married to a seventy-five-year-old man only for security. When Cabot says that his property will only be for his biological 'Son,' even

the son he hates most but not his wife because she is a woman, Abbie sinks into the fear of abandonment. Only a son can secure her place and position. To survive, she wants to be a mother of a son. The patriarchal system of society decides women's place; if she can be the mother of a son, she is rewarded with home and honor. Abbie's motherhood is not merely an expression of love and affection; rather, it is her key to existence. The patriarchy subverts her identity.

From the first appearance of Abbie, both she and Eben are physically attracted to each other; they possess a strong desire for each other. Abbie wants to be friendly with Eben, but he refuses her out of hatred though he cannot deny the inner urge. Clever Abbie soon realizes that young Eben's weak point is his immense love for his departed mother and hatred for his father.

She chooses to play the role of a mother to get closer to Eben. Here the second form of motherhood is revealed. His long-dead mother constantly haunts Eben's mind, and he is yearning for his mother's love. In Part I, Scene II of the play, we find him declare, "I'm Maw--every drop o' blood! . . . I'm her--her heir "..... (6) "It's Maw's farm agen! It's my farm!" (13) It seems that he is trying to keep his mother's estate, only to recurrent his mother's love. Here the farm and the mother become synonymous. Abbie gets a channel to gain Eben by showing him motherly love. She says, "Don't cry, Eben! I'll take yer Maw's place! Let me kiss ye, Eben! Don't be affered! I'll kiss ye pure, Eben--same's if I was a Maw t' ye--an' ye kiss me back's if yew was my son--my boy" (33)

In Part II, Scene III, when she becomes closer to Eben, O'Neil describes, "there is a sincere maternal love in her manner and voice—a horrible frank mixture of lust and mother love." (33). Travis Bogard indeed identifies in *Contour in Time: The Plays of Eugene O'Neill*: "The typical theme—the yearning for a lost mother, for a home, for identification with a life force to be found in nature, and for the discovery of a god in the marriage—are rooted, at last, in a credible fiction and characterization." (Bogard 200)

Abbie says, "I—I killed him, Eben." (46). The tragedy took its entire course when Eben misunderstood her as a betrayer, a witch who uses him to have a son to steal the farm from him. This misunderstanding leads her to the murderer of the child. She puts 'inner' passion before the love for the child. Arnold Goldman elaborates in "The Vanity of Personality: The Development of Eugene O'Neill" as; "Abbie murders her and Eben's child to prove her love for him, to prove she did not want a child to steal the farm Eben has so stolidly (and greedily) maintained was his by right." (Goldman 48)

In *Desire Under the Elms*, Abbie Putnam first appears in the play, in Part I, Scene IV, with Ephraim Cabot. Before stepping into the house, Abbie declares her right over the house. Her first dialogue is very significant, "Hum!...Purty—Purty! I can't believe it's really mine" (17); she utters her words with a solid sense of possession "A woman's got t'hev a hum!" (17). Her first impression reveals the hidden intention in her heart. From the beginning, she claims, "This be my firm—this be my hum—this be my kitchen—!" (21). Her relationship with Eben is complex; she takes him as her rival though she desires him. Eventually, nature beats them. They forget the intricacies of their current relationship and become involved in the primitive, simple bond between men and women. The fire of lust evokes a strange sort of love, which in the end, burns everything to ashes. Barrett H. Clark mentions in *Eugene O'Neill: The Man and His Plays*;

"In arousing the repressed passion of Eben, she has forgotten, or perhaps never known, that the sex instinct cannot easily be controlled; she has depended on her own craftiness to see her machinations through in cold blood to the end. Then suddenly she finds herself caught in her own trap." (Clark 152)

We cannot deny Abbie's schemes initially to get a son from Eben, as she says to Eben, "I on'y wanted ye fur a purpose o'my own." (31), But it is unknown to her that she is already falling in love with Eben. She represses her love for him. Moreover, when he used to go to Min, the village whore, she feels jealous. She unconsciously feels protective as she has emotions, desires, and love for Eben. Jealousy is the manifestation of the subconscious mind of love. She is finally successful in winning Eben through his motherly figure.

She reveals her "inner" passion for Eben and wants the same response from him. She says, "D'ye r'ally love me, Eben? (35). He replies that he likes her more than any girl; but she knows, "Likin' hain't lovin." (35)

True love stimulates fear of abandonment. She appeals, "don't forgit me." (35). At the celebration party of the newborn son, she is only looking for Eben; she is not happy, and everything becomes wholly reversed. Abbie should be the happiest person for her newborn, but she is not, her eyes and senses searching for Eben only. She also clears her stance, "I tuk his Maw's place" (35)

The seed of love that is sown in sin never brings anything auspicious. The instance of Abbie is not different; the consequences of this love are tragic. Although she takes Eben as a competitor, in the beginning, she willingly sacrifices her child to prove her love for Eben. Eben misunderstands and questions the motif of Abbie having a son; he wants to leave her. She is not able to believe that her beloved will leave her. With a dreadful and cold intensity, Abbie says, "He won't steal! I'd kill him fust! (45) But Eben is about to leave her, "I do hate ye! Ye're whore—a damn trickin' whore!" (45), Abbie's defenses momentarily break down, and anxiety seizes her, 'fear of abandonment, 'fear of betrayal' collapse her as she says "I do love ye "..... "Ye won't—leave me? Ye can't". (44)

Her extreme love for Eben puts her in such a situation where she can neither disguise nor handle her fear—and she is in severe crisis or trauma. This trauma leads her to the way of self-destruction. As Abbie's defenses break down, her death drive or 'Thanatos' arises; according to Sigmund Freud's theory, "human beings have a death drive" that is the "alarming degree of self-destructive behavior," which takes place in Abbie.

Her obsession leads her to destruction; she lets her 'inner' feeling coming out, "If that's what his comin's done t' me—killin' yew'r love—takin yew away—my on'y joy—the on'y joy I'veever knowed—like heaven t' me—purtie'n heaven—then I hate him, too, even if I be his Maw"! (45) For proving her love, she crosses all the limits; she is ready to kill her son, "I'll prove t' ye! I'll prove I loive ye better'n.... Better'n everythin' else in the world". (45)

R. Poulard in *O'Neill and Nietzsche*, remarks:

The baby died because he was conceived in a moment of animal passion. He was at first a means of gaining possession of the firm and revenge and later on become a possession to Eben. He was not born through the desire to create overhuman, (as Ephraim wanted him to be) and died in Abbie's attempt to prove all too human love for Eben. (Poulard 104)

It is not that Abbie does not have any love or affection for the newborn; she loves Eben beyond everything in the world. She compares her love, "I loved him. He was so purty—dead spit'n image o yew... But I loved yew more." (47). Eben cannot take all these things and wants to go to Sheriff, says, "Murderer an' theif" (48), but Abbie has no complaint about that; she is only thinking about his love for her. She says to Eben, "I love ye, Eben! I love ye!....I don't care what ye do—if ye' 'll on'y love me agen--". (48) She knows she will be punished for the murder but is ready to accept the consequence if only Eben acknowledges her love for him. When he says, "I love ye! Fergive me!" (50), she ecstatically replies, "I'd forgive ye all the sins in hell fur sayin' that." (pp. 50) And she is ready to take her punishment and also refuses when Eben wants to share the punishment with her, says "Ye didn't do nothing"...."No. It was me alone". (51) Her intention to save Eben from punishment also proves her unconditional love for him.

Abbie performs her mother role in a dual sense, once for the baby that she wants for her purpose of possessing property, again to Eben for seizing love, but unfortunately, she ends up as a murderer. She decides to be a mother to survive in a patriarchal society, but her passion for Eben is so strong that she denies motherhood and emerges as a murderer. She subverts her identity by breaking the patriarchal performative role and expressing her 'inner' passion as an active agent.

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