

Who is afraid of Imprisonment? Alienation and Articulation in Edward Estlin Cummings' *The Enormous Room*

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Abstract

Set against the backdrop of World War I, *The Enormous Room* (1922), an experimental autobiography, written by the poet and novelist Edward Estlin Cummings, articulates the writer's temporary imprisonment in France. The narrator is thrown into the world of imprisonment in which he feels the empty existence of God, and meets the prisoners of various kinds. Having interacted with the prisoners, he realizes the evident polarization between the oppressors and prison victims. In fact, the prisoners' condition can be compared to Heidegger's concept of 'broken hammer'; it refers to a bounded world for the individuals who are judged by certain determinants of the social code of conduct as implemented by those who are in power. The present paper seeks to show how the dehumanizing quality of modern society has been inoculated into the education, religion and others which have reduced the position of the prisoners to *others*; and it also aims to reveal the narrator's constant attempt to forge his existence from such nihilistic ambience. So, he challenges the authoritarian power by bringing in wretched syntax, poetic descriptions, and shocking imagery. Thus, his emancipatory potential has come to the fore through his semantic potential which is indicative of his self-discovery and articulation.

Keywords: Autobiography, power/knowledge, docile bodies, lived experience, semantic potential, self-discovery



Edward Estlin Cummings is an American poet, essayist, playwright and author. Apart from writing several poems, essays and plays, he has written two autobiographical novels. *The Enormous Room* (1922) is one of his autobiographical novels. An autobiography is a personal account of a person's life written by the author. Since the author is in charge of exposing the details of his life, the work is personal. It shows how the author's positive and negative experiences impact his life, beliefs, values, feelings, and opinions. It includes his recollections, influences, and accomplishments, as well as his goals and ambitions for the future. Autobiographical books are based on true events, but they are not constrained by them. Autobiographical fiction is a superb blend of fiction and non-fiction that creative writers enjoy to violate conventions and blend genres. E.E. Cummings in his *The Enormous Room* describes a number of scenes based on his personal experiences in the imprisonment. Such life experience stimulates him to write this novel. Hence, the novel truly contains the autobiographical elements, and the novelist shows his creative power by resorting to imagination in order to make it a hybrid of fiction and non-fiction.

The Enormous Room, which is set against the backdrop of World War 1, is an autobiography of Cummings. It defines the deplorable condition of the writer who is mistakenly arrested and forced to stay in the French Concentration camp wherein he interacts with various prisoners of different languages on a daily basis and observes their abominable condition. They are robbed of their tenderness and generosity, and consequently, they are reduced to 'others' by their captors. Cummings is the victim of circumstances. He and his friend, who are the members of American Ambulance Corps in France during World War 1, are mistakenly suspected of treasonable correspondence; it results in their imprisonment. Such imprisonment and the torture upon the prisoners creates, to put in the words of Hegel, 'Unhappy Consciousness' in the mind of Cummings which helps him go beyond the shackles of the Captors by reinforcing his creative or imaginative faculty. It refers to a kind of spirit which Hegel terms as *Geist*; it brings out a horizon of freedom which is yet to be circumscribed by any cognitive denominators as implemented by the Masters. Cummings becomes frustrated because of the paranoid condition which the war offers to him. Moreover, the ponderous discourse of officialdom, bourgeois jingoism drive him to initiate nonsense songs, childish games and others; such artistic experimentations bring out not only the freedom of the writer from such impasse to prove his existence, but are instrumental also in dismantling the officialdom as generated by the oppressive authority. It is indicative of ushering in the new literary movement in the realm of literature.

Cummings uses Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* as a metaphoric journey which refers to the Christian Pilgrims' odyssey from the city of destruction to have attained spirituality; it resembles the writer's own journey from the darkness towards Enlightenment. As David E. Smith has pointed out,

In the preceding pages I have described my Pilgrim's Progress from the Slouth of desponds, commonly known as Selection Sanitative Vingt-t-n (then located at Germaine), through the mysteries of Noyon, Gre and Paris to the Portede Triage de La Ferte, Ovne (113).

In fact, the narrator's spiritual transformation takes place in the confines of the enormous room itself. The imprisonment for him appears to be a boon which helps him consider the prison to be 'the finest place in the world' (111). His arrest, and a release from 'an official nonexistence' (7) seems to be providing him a 'new dignity' (9). He himself proclaims,



“An uncontrollable joy gutted me after three months of humiliation, of being bossed and herded and bullied and insulted. I was myself and my own master” (23). In fact, the exchange of letters, done between Cummings’ father and the state department, has been referred to in the foreword of the novel. All these letters bear the imprints of dehumanization on the part of the State Department and reveal their inane officialdom which falsely victimizes him. The entire exchange of letters is misconceived. The official hierarchy is evident in the process, and they intend to sabotage the dignity and liberty of the prisoners including Cummings.

While too much officious attitude of the state seeks to eclipse his mind, he tries to feel joy within the four walls of imprisonment; it is akin to his existential freedom. Although his imprisonment generates an acerbic condition, it brings to him scope for transgressing his self from such imbroglio by utilizing his creativity. Cummings deems such condition as a ‘real non-existence’ (176) which is supposed to be contrary to his ‘official non-existence’ in the Ambulance Corps. Having been arrested, he goes through a series of the official hierarchy, which is involved with some kind of confusion regarding his name, nationality, religion or family. This confusion brings out the problem in his life. And he desperately tries to tarnish those officially relevant documents which determine his social identity. Such identity formation is usually regulated by the nation-state ideology. Thomas Hobbes and John Locke define the state as the body-politic in which the bodies of the citizenry combine into undivided body of the Sovereign, with whom they form a single unity or will. Prisoners, including Cummings are under the panopticon mechanism which otherizes him. The condition of the prisoners, especially Cummings can be understood by bringing in the Foucauldian concept of Power and Knowledge which is conducive to the formation of ‘docile bodies’. Sertan Yegenoglu delineates the Foucauldian process of subject construction in modern society by stating,

...by conceptualizing the interlocking of bodies and discursive regimes, Foucault enables us to understand the process of subject constitution in modern society. As a body subject to modern, colonial technology of power-Knowledge, the colonized should be produced as a new body and mind with certain skills, characteristics, and form; she/he needs to be remade. But to understand this remapping and re-territorialization, we need to position the body of the other within a frame which can account for it as a historical and cultural effect of power...(117).

Amid such a claustrophobic situation, he does not become hopeless like Arthur Schopenhauer. He is inspired by the Nietzschean ‘will to power’ which rekindles immense courage within his mind. The arid tradition and outworn values, which seem to determine his existence, need to be replaced for his survival. He understands at his core that he has to find out an alternative path which can provide him the staple of his sustenance. So, art can be his alternative mode of living which might surpass the meaninglessness of the Post-cataclysmic world. Cummings’ advice ‘Don’t be afraid’ (X) proves his courage to debunk the authoritarian power, and thus justifies his process of becoming. According to Heidegger, human beings are thrown into this world and one has to survive on his own. Cummings also experiences the futility of World War 1 and also sees how absolute nothingness looms large in the society after the war. He loses his faith in God too, because He is absent to save the prisoners. His condition can be defined from the vantage point of the Heideggerian concept of ‘everydayness’. Heidegger in his *Being and Nothingness* attempts to propound the idea that human beings are not mere spectators, but ‘engaged



actors' in everyday situations which is best articulated through the expression- 'Dasein-Being-in-the World'. However, Cummings is not in fact a mere spectator in the prison, he appears as an engaged actor who tries to reconstruct his existence from such broken condition. So, he starts his journey anew, hinging on his aesthetic and artistic prowess.

The official symbolic structure implies the process of instrumentalization of the authority. Medals and insignia, which the authoritarian figures usually carry with them, encapsulate their inauthentic identity, indeed. Cummings makes raillery of the authoritarian figures for carrying such trivial things, and reveals the meaningless pretentiousness of those who firmly believe in the official symbolic structure as meaningful. On the helmet of the gendarme who arrested him is like, to put in the words of Cummings, "an emblem, as a sort of flowering little explosion, or hair-switch rampant. It seemed to me very jovial and a little absurd" (8). The most horrific aspect in the novel lies in the presentation of Apollyon, who is the principal local authority and acknowledged spokesperson of the existing society. He functions as an epitome of values, standards, priorities, which are the markers of official social structures. Child molestation, the torturing of women, the exploitation, repressive instruments of power, and the continual use of the cabinet-all these vindicate the catabolic nature of his modern world. Such negative energy has transmuted him into an artist. The individual by exercising his imaginative faculty is capable of making a close rapport with others. It is mainly his aesthetic experience which expedites Cummings' regenerative process of becoming.

The narrator's spiritual mentors are certain characters who participate in the non-rational, intuitive form of empathy. Though, there are plenty of criminal sages, types of the 'holy fool', it is in the presentation of the Delectable Mountains- the Wanderer, Zulu, Surplice, and Jean Le Negre which Cummings sets up those qualities leading to an authentic self-development. Cummings brings out the redemptive qualities as shown by the four characters by introducing allusions. The 'Delectable Mountains' signifies the 'Gate of the Celestial City'(55). He feels that the 'Delectable Mountains' bear within themselves the essence of the true aesthetic energy. Each is segregated from the external world by means of his individual selfhood, each refuses to engage in the false values of the established society. All these four characters are referring to the utmost individuality and imagination which help them to be non-conformist. They are bereft of the Nietzschean 'herd mentality', and reveal almost Blakean energy; it drives them to come into contact with the vital impulses of life itself. About Zulu, the narrator says,

There are certain things in which one is unable to believe for the simple reason that he never ceases to feel them. Things of this sort-things which are always inside of us and in fact are us and which consequently will not be pushed off or away where we can begin thinking about them-are no longer things; they, and the us which they are, equals A Verb: an IS. The Zulu, then, I must perforce call an IS (231).

The Delectable Mountains represent the archetypal instances of the artist. They are individuals who remain purely human within the confines of an inhuman system. They are engrossed in the process of becoming one's own self.

Cummings's connection with these 'Unknowable[s]' helps attain his spiritual regeneration. His life into the underworld of the enormous room has led towards oscillation as to what he should choose: the Delectable Mountains or Apollyon: being or



nothingness. He undoubtedly chooses 'being' and strives continuously to create his existence through his artistic capability. His journey probably indicates his redemption from such nothingness.

His association with the enormous room or prison isolates him from familiar cultural experiences, events, ideologies, and habitual symbolic representation of them. He goes through linguistic deception. As a young idealist, he had enlisted in a foreign war the terms which were vaguely described with the aim at dismantling the language barrier for attaining the complete mutual understanding; and it is very important if one wants to have victory. But the linguistic deception and the sense of unreality create psychological chaos. So, he says,

This was a city of Pretend, created by the hypnotism of moonlight. Yet when I examined the moon she too seemed but a painting of a moon, and the sky in which she lived a fragile echo of colour. If I blew hard the whole shy mechanism would collapse gently with a neat, soundless crash. I must not or lose all (55).

Cummings enters the enormous room which refers to the linguistic confusion. This disorder carries a primordial or aborning meaningfulness: "the hitherto empty and minute room became suddenly enormous: weird cries, oaths, laughter, pulling it sideways and backward, extending it to inconceivable depth and width, telescoping it to frightful nearness" (60). As he becomes more familiar with the inhabitants of the Enormous Room, he finds a communal personality embedded in their illiteracy. Hence, he proclaims, "my very good friends, all of them deeply suspicious characters, most of them traitors, without exception... the majority of these dark criminals who had been caught in nefarious plots against the honour of France were totally unable to speak French" (116).

Traditional religious symbols in the prison appear to be trivial, which has nothing to do with the prisoners. Cummings seeks to destroy such institutional symbolic misrepresentation by bringing out his own style of representation. Being a prisoner, Cummings states his condition by saying, "Staring ahead, I gradually disinterred the pale carrion of the darkness- an altar, guarded with the ugliness of unlit candles, on which stood inexorably the efficient implements for eating God" (59). This confrontation achieves its force from one preceding it, in which Cummings had come upon a crucifix in a tree on an isolated dark road. Cummings with the help of his linguistic skill narrates the event in such a beautiful way that it expresses its natural magic and elemental truth, too:

a little wooden man...clumsy with pain burst into fragile legs with absurdly large feet and funny writhing toes; its little stiff arms made abrupt, cruel, equal angles with the road...On one terribly brittle shoulder the droll lump of its neckless head ridiculously lived. There was in this complete silent doll a gruesome truth of instinct, a success of uncanny poignancy, an unearthly ferocity of rectangular emotion (53).

His deft handling of allusions and giving them into an art form is extraordinary. He says,

Who was this wooden man? Like a sharp, black, mechanical cry in the spongy organism of gloom stood the coarse and sudden sculpture of his torment; the big mouth of night carefully spurted the angular actual language of his martyred body. I had seen him before in the dream of some medieval saint with a thief sagging at either side, surrounded by crisp angels. To-night he was alone (54).



This is a revelation of the passion of Cummings which reaffirms faith.

The religious rituals seem to be containing inane aspects of life. The purpose of religion is to serve the people, but it has deviated from its path already. It acts as a means of temptation rather than purification. Cummings reveals the symbolic perversions of the priest by reading the prayer book upside down. He focusses on making his own relationship with divinity. He believes that God's true responsibility lies in liberating the prisoners from their prolonged bondage. So, he redefines the concept of heaven by means of his imaginative fiat:

For he has the territory of harmonicas, the acres of flutes, the meadows of clarinets, the domain of violins. And God says: Why did they put you in prison? What did you do to the people? I made them dance and they put me in prison... And He says: O you who put the jerk into joys, come up hither. There's a man up here called Christ who likes the violin(268).

The liberty of prisoners is robbed of; the tenderness, generosity and other human qualities of the prisoners are regulated by the repressive agencies of the Masters, which have reduced them to objects.

Cummings being the prisoner has been the passive recipient. With utmost grief, he says, "I felt myself to be, at last, a doll- taken out occasionally and played with and put back into its house and told to go to sleep" (317). His individual self combats with the organizational tools of the prison on a daily basis. Prison to him is "like a vast grey box" (113). His physical appearance in the prison dwindles, and he defines his condition eloquently,

" I wallowed in a perfect luxury of dirt. And no one objected. On the contrary, every one... beheld with something like admiration my more and more uncouth appearance. Moreover, by being dirtier than usual I was protesting in a (to me) very satisfactory way against all that was neat and tidy and bigoted and solemn and founded upon the anguish of my fine friends." (323)

Cummings challenges the inherited traditional and non-functional symbols by reinforcing his positive move towards self-realization. In-fact, the Empirical Philosophers such as Locke, Hume and others by emphasizing upon the cognitive faculty make people compelled to be engaged in the world of experience. So, the mind of the people is overshadowed by the empirical aspects only which relegate the imaginative faculty. Immanuel Kant, a prominent Enlightenment Philosopher, talks about 'Phenomena' or 'things as it is' which denotes the empirical aspects of the object. He also gives emphasis on another part of the object called 'noumena' or 'things-in-itself' which refers to the *a priori* concept of the object. Kantian philosophy thus refers to the perfect division between finite and infinite which restricts the scope of our knowledge. Hence, Hegel dissolves Kantian dichotomy by referring to his significant concept of *Geist* or 'spirit' as mentioned in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*; it helps one go beyond the already given existence of the world through one's own imaginative faculty. Cummings seems to take recourse to the Hegelian concept of *Geist* by dint of his imaginative power which leads him to articulate his passion, and thus he places his mark as an artist, who craves for his authentic self:

Snow was falling, gradually and wonderfully falling, silently falling through the thick, soundless autumn...It seemed to me supremely beautiful, the snow. There



was about it something unspeakably crisp and exquisite, something perfect and minute and gentle and fatal...After a long time I returned to my bunk and I lay down, closing my eyes, feeling the snow's minute and crisp touch falling gently and exquisitely, falling perfectly and suddenly, through the thick, soundless autumn of my imagination...(317).

Despite he belongs to the world of verbal deception, it can hardly confine him to the arid atmosphere of the jail. It brings out a series of events which help him release from the imprisonment. He describes the imprisonment thus: "The enormous Room is filled with a new and beautiful darkness, the darkness of the snow outside, falling and falling and falling with the silent and actual gesture which has touched the soundless country of my mind as a child touches a toy it loves" (317). He interrogates his own position in the Enormous Room and finds himself caught in the conflict between his own self and official representation of the events. He responds to the official events in a beautiful way.

I? Am? Going? To? Paris? Somebody who certainly wasn't myself remarked in a kind of whisper...Who the devil is myself? Where in Hell am I? What is Paris- a place, a somewhere, a city, life, to live: infinitive. Present first singular I live. Thou livest. The *Directeur*. The *Surveillant*. La Ferte Mace, Orne, France. Edward E. Cummings will report immediately. Edward E. Cummings. The *Surveillant*. A piece of yellow paper. The *Directeur*...I turned toward the door, I turned upon the Black Holster, I turned into what was dead and is now alive...I am standing in The Enormous Room for the last time. I am saying good-bye. No, it is not I who am saying good-bye...It is in fact somebody else, possibly myself. (325)

Cummings is a born artist who has his emancipatory potential to re-create his identity amid such artificial atmosphere. He generates his individual world by dint of his imagination which hardly restricts him to the world of artificiality. He starts his journey from the Dionysian to Apollonian. His strong conviction in his semantic potential help him provide the natural world a new dimension, and thereby affirming his position as an artist. In fact, words, symbols, and language are the important ingredients which a creative artist must possess; and it tends to provide a ground of selfhood. Cummings does it exceptionally well. His comment in the Introduction reveals his artistic self. In fact, his plea to come out from the arid ambience, which imprisonment provides, comes to the fore: "Thanks to I dare say my art I am able to become myself" (ix).

He always tries to escape the orthodox world which imposes certain rules and regulations upon him; consequently, it tries to hush up his creative potential. But the filthy atmosphere of the imprisonment in which he is bound to live generates a spark of protest in his mind. And he exalts his militancy through his semantics; language is the essential part of creating one's own identity. So, he seeks to have his spiritual regeneration, depending on his poetic language. The dirtiness of the imprisonment appears to him as 'luxury of dirt' which gives birth to fine art. It paves the ground of his transgression from bondage. He says,

Simultaneously with my arrival at the summit of dirtiness-by the calendar, as I guess, December the twenty-first-came the black Holster into The Enormous Room and with an excited and angry mien proclaimed loudly: "*L'american! Allez chez Le Directeur. De suite.*" (324)

His deployment of symbols, which are akin to the seasonal cycle, indicates the narrator's personal experiences. His emancipation from the rigid system and panegyric of his aesthetic energy is conducive to the formation of his regenerative self. Like Christian narrator, he attains a spiritual regeneration from his bondage.

In, fine, the novel unveils the inner sanctum of the author and his journey from 'being' to 'becoming'. His sudden abduction, imprisonment, meeting with the other prisoners, disbelief in the Almighty, and his constant attempt to get rid of such impasse have nicely been dealt with in the story. The official hierarchy, captivation has almost reduced his position to an object. Despite being metamorphosed into a mere object, he attempts to realize his own consciousness. The imprisonment refers to a space in which Cummings, the prisoner or the colonized as the 'being-in-itself' encounters the 'being-for-an-other'. 'Consciousness' in this encounter goes through a transformation, so that it is no longer only consciousness of the object, but also conscious of itself, of its own knowledge. Hence, the consciousness of Cummings ignites him to create his existence which provides him a distinct quality among the prisoners. His deplorable condition and alienation in the prison stimulates his imaginative faculty to transcend the authoritarian repressive agency. Above all, his semantic potential to create his own world not only challenges the authoritarian power, but connotes his redemption from being a lost soul.

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