

# American Crises as Depicted in *A Clean, Well-lighted Place* and Its Islamic Solution

Aysha Sumayyah

Department of English Language and Literature, International Islamic University Chittagong, Bangladesh

**Abstract**— Ernest Hemingway's *A Clean, Well-lighted Place* is presumably one of his most written about short stories of all time. In this short story, Hemingway endeavors to sketch the frustrating and lonesome condition of the western old generation and the reaction of the younger generation to that frustration. He very precisely but beautifully has pointed out some important issues of the then American society which is exceeding its limit day by day. This study seeks to bring those problems on the limelight for one more time and also tries to give some possible solutions based on Islam.

**Keywords**— Hemingway, *Nada*, American society, *Al-Quran*, Prophet (SAW).

Ernest Hemingway, a 20<sup>th</sup> century noble laureate American writer, was born in Oak Park, Illinois in 1899. He was a journalist and a war correspondent in several important wars in history like the Spanish Civil War, The Greek Revolution and the World War II. He also participated in the World War I as an ambulance driver from Italian Army. Throughout his career he got wounded in many events that led him to a constant depression. In 1920s, Hemingway became a member of the group of expatriate Americans named the "Lost Generation" in Paris with Gertrude Stein, F. Scott Fitzgerald, James Joyce, and Ezra Pound et al. "His straightforward prose, his spare dialogue, and his predilection for understatement" are reflected in his writings (Ed. Frenz). Hemingway himself said in an interview that, "I always try to write on the principles of the iceberg." (Ed. Nina Baym et al.). Some of his famous writings are *The Sun Also Rises* (1926), *A Farewell to Arms* (1929), *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952), *Men without Women* (1927), etc. He won the Pulitzer Prize in 1953 and the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1954. In 1961 he died in Idaho due to a self-inflicted gunshot.

*A Clean, Well-Lighted Place* is Hemingway's one of the most known existential short stories which was published in his short story collection *Winner Take Nothing* (1933). James Joyce, one of the contemporary writers of his time, has remarked about this literary piece as follows, "He has reduced the veil between literature and life, which is what every writer strives to do. Have you read *A Clean, Well-*

*Lighted Place*?...It is masterly. Indeed, it is one of the best stories ever written..." (The Hemingway Resource Center). In this story he has tried to depict the crises and despair of older generation of his society which drove them to brightly lit cafes. He also has described the meaninglessness of human life.

In this paper, we are going to comprehend the social depiction the author has shown in this short story. What kind of society he has described in his writing, how he has viewed life from social and religious perspective and what is the actual meaning he hides under this series of simple but absurd dialogues.

We will also attempt to understand problems faced by senior citizens in today's western world. We will pick out the similarities that we find between the old men of this story and the old people of the western world in general.

Most especially we will try to know what Islam guides about solving the crises of this older part of the society. Surely Islam suggests how one can take them out of their despair and how one can take care of elderly people living around them.

**Background**

*A Clean, Well-Lighted Place* was published in a period which was between the juncture of the World War I and II. As a result the western society was undergoing through postwar frustration and countless difficulties and a deep social and political turmoil. According to the mass, there was no solid reason of this heinous bloodshed happened in the World War I but the selfish motive of the leading political figures. They were facing economic and spiritual depression heavily. Even religion could not propose any effective solution to their sufferings. Everyone started to scrutinize each religious and social establishment. Even they became doubtful about the very existence of God. People began to think their lives meaningless and purposeless which was incorporated with the concept of Existentialism. The basic idea of Existentialism is, there is no existence of God, human life has no innate meaning and people should not rely on God rather they should strive to give their lives a new meaning.

As an expatriate artist, Hemingway's works were greatly influenced by post-war situations.

In this short story, Hemingway has presented three generations subsequently young, middle aged and old generation. He has shown the old generation through portraying the rich old man of eighty. He is an alcoholic who passes most of his time in café. He has no family except a niece. This old man is the direct victim of the World War I. The postwar influence is observed in him severely as he has tried to commit suicide. The young waiter who has a lot of confidence, a good job and a beautiful wife, represents the young generation fails to understand the condition of the old man rather he is irritated by the odd behavior of this man. All he is bothered about his own life. On the other hand the old waiter who represents the middle aged generation feels sympathy for the old man because he can relate himself to the both of the generations. Neither he argues with the young waiter nor he gets irritated by the behavior of the old man for to him the behavior of the old man is justifiable. He also realizes that gradually he is going to face the same consequence of life.

Hemingway describes his own point of view about old age. He thinks old age as nothing but a slough of despair. So everyone must have the ability to deal with this ultimate struggle.

American Crises vs. Islamic Counterpart

Apparently *A Clean, Well-Lighted Place* seems to be a story of an uneventful night, but through a series of insignificant dialogues Hemingway points out a number of indisputable problems that exist even in the current society. The older generation is the most neglected part of the society. The young generation lacks time and interest to give any attention to the older people. That is why at the very last stage of their lives, old people still suffer terribly from several problems. These problems prevailed at the time of Hemingway, exist in today's western world and the only solution lies in the shade of Islam.

The nuclear unit of the society is family. In America this basic unit is getting fragmented. Day care center for kids and old home for older persons become a common tradition there. To meet their own end, the members of family are splitting easily but they do not concern about it. They take it as their way of life. This situation brings a life of alienation where people do not get any support from any near and dear one. In *A Clean, Well-Lighted Place*, it is seen that during the suicidal attempt of the old man, readers do not see any of his family member except his niece. Throughout the story Hemingway does not mention any whereabouts of the old man's children. Even the old waiter does not have any family

of his own. Islam does not support this kind of loose family bonding. In Islam family is considered as a blessing. It is important to keep the family bonding strong and smooth otherwise it can strain the family relationships and the very foundation of the society at large. As family member, everyone has specific obligations to take the necessary initiatives to strengthen family bonding. As the head of the family, a man must undertake the responsibilities of his family sincerely and must try to keep his family united. In this regard Prophet (SAW) said, "If a Muslim man spends on his family and expects a reward from Allah (SWT), it will be considered as a charity." (Bukhari and Muslim). Islam has given parents the most honorable status. "And your Lord has decreed that you not worship except Him, and to parents, good treatment. Whether one or both of them reach old age [while] with you, say not to them (so much as), "uff," and do not repel them but speak to them a noble word. And lower to them the wing of humility out of mercy..." (Al-Quran 17:23-24). Shaykh Yasir Kadhi has mentioned in one of his lectures that, "Scholars of the Arabic language tell us uff is an expression or phrase that actually doesn't have a verbal meaning. There is no noun that it is based off of... it is simply a sound. Uff is the slightest expression of contempt." Thus Allah (SWT) has forbidden not to show this slightest expression of irritation towards parents. Ibn 'Abbas said, "Had there been a word lesser than uff, Allah would have used it in this verse." (Kadhi). Moreover, In Islam rearing a child is an Amanah given by Allah (SWT) Himself. "Your wealth and your children are but a trial, and Allah has with Him a great reward." (Al-Quran 65:15). Abu Huraira (R:) reported that the Messenger of Allah (SAW) said, "When a person dies, all action is cut off for him with the exception of three things: sadaqa al-zariah, knowledge which benefits, or a righteous child who makes supplication for him." The western society is unaware of such significance of a family. When a person's family members get detached from him, he loses his interest in any kind of social bonding, he makes himself alienated and leads a lonely life. In this story, the readers are informed that the old man "had a wife once too." (Scribner 232). Later whether his wife is dead or they got separated Hemingway does not make it clear. The old man makes himself socially excluded. Even the older waiter considers the café as a shelter of his loneliness. But Islam discourages such kind of lonely life. "A Muslim who lives in the midst of society and bears with patience the afflictions that come to him is better than the one who shuns society and cannot bear any wrong done to him." (Prophet Muhammad (SAW)). Asceticism is strictly prohibited in Islam.

Lonely life leads a man to frustration. Whenever a person fails to share his inner grief to someone his frustration increases to an extreme level. He gets pessimistic towards life. In this story, the old man has a lot of money but he is in great despair because money cannot buy happiness and it cannot reduce loneliness. As a result he becomes so frustrated that he has tried to commit suicide. "Thus money is hardly enough to erase, or even ease,...Material wealth is inadequate, an enemy of perfection (or of the Absolute). It is not only does not bring happiness but is even instrumental in bringing about its opposite." (Bluefarb 5). Often person suffers from sleeplessness. The older waiter is a victim of it. He pacifies himself by saying that, "it's probably only insomnia. Many must have it." (Scribner 233). On the other hand, "...and do not despair of relief from Allah; surely none despairs of relief from Allah except the disbelieving people." (Al-Quran 12:87). Thus Allah has promised a way out for optimistic people. "...That is instructed to whoever should believe in Allah and the Last day. And whoever fears Allah - He will make for him a way out...And whoever fears Allah - He will make for him of his matter ease." (Al-Quran 65:2-3). The whole story revolves around the feeling of nothingness. With the three phases of life a journey of losing everything is shown. The young waiter has everything- "youth, confidence, and a job," (Scribner 232). The older waiter has nothing like that but a job. At the end the old man of eighty does not have youth, confidence and job. Even his inability of hearing symbolizes that he has nothing positive to live with (Christina). Losing everything is the reflection of Hemingway's existential point of view. According to existentialism there is no absolute meaning of life, a man must strive to give his life a meaning. It is his own duty to bring fulfillment to his own life. When a person attains his old age and looks back to his life with all of his experiences, he finds nothing but nonfulfillment. Thus his whole life seems a wastage to him even his belief upon God fades away. For instance, the old waiter mocks the Lord's Prayer by replacing most of the words with "Nada" because his life is full of nothingness. "Our nada who art in nada, nada be thy name thy kingdom nada thy will be nada in nada as it is in nada." (Scribner 233). The old man also finds his life meaningless that is why he wants to finish his life. As he has failed to commit suicide, he in order to escape this darkness of Nada, moves around to the clean well-lighted cafes. The café is the only orderly place in the old man's chaotic life. According to the older waiter, all men "need a light for the night." (Scribner 233).

Western people are running after some temporary destinations but do not get any satisfaction out of it. Out of

frustration they are in such turmoil that they have no mental peace. They do not believe in afterlife so to them death is the only solution to their despair. In search of happiness they are roaming desperately to and fro. In *A Clean, Well-Lighted Place*, the older waiter goes to a bodegas after his duty to avoid his lonesome home but he could not stay there for long. The old man is the victim of the World War I, because of his distrust upon religion he has become atheist. To him death is the end of his sufferings. So he is not hesitant to commit suicide. Survey shows that, "The United States has been experiencing very high rates of individual suicides as well as suicide mass shootings, mainly related to firearms. These rates are the highest in the world, exceeding their counterparts in any other society on Earth, by hundreds of times (In 2010, there were 38,364 suicides, and in 2011, there were 32,163 fire-arms related deaths)." (Alpers). On the other hand in Islam, concept of afterlife is highly supported. Even in Buddhism and Christianity, the idea of afterlife exists. It is the place where everyone gets the fruit of their actions. In every religion committing suicide is a grave sin. For this reason, the old man's niece cut his hanging rope down because she "Fear for his soul." (Scribner 231). Allah, may He be glorified and exalted, said: "My slave hastened his death; I have forbidden Paradise to him." (Bukhari 3276 and Muslim 113)

Also there is always a chance to be reunited with one's family. So Muslims always have a sincerity to take preparations for that and also to make du'a for his family members so that their reunion might be confirmed. In Islamic Sufism, death has been seen as a delight by the Sufis. They believe in spiritual death along with physical death. According to them, when there is no remembrance of Allah, one's spirit dies. They consider Allah (SWT) as their Beloved and yearn for the sight of Him. They see afterlife as the rendezvous of the Beloved. Hudhayfah (R:) said about death at his deathbed: "The Beloved has come at the time of want". (Sufi doctrine: Sufis about death). Sufis believe that, "When man ascends the ladder of real knowledge, he knows through both faith and unveiling that he is a dreamer in the state of ordinary wakefulness and that the situation in which he dwells is but a dream...The Prophet (SAW) said, "People are asleep, and when they die, they awake." (Hirtenstein 62). Their belief about death takes away much of the fear of death. To them death is not a frightful experience anymore rather it is the ultimate voyage to their Beloved. That is why, "Death, to the Sufis is natural, universal and necessary." (Sufi doctrine: Sufis about death). Islam inspires people to have an optimistic view about this eternal life waiting for them.

It is a common mistake of the western people that they find a way out of frustration through alcoholism. Whether it is a celebration of joy or a way to forget their grief, the use of alcohol is normal issue for them. As a result, various bars, bodegas, pubs, cafes have been mushroomed throughout the European countries. In these pubs, alcohol is cheaper than water. According to the BBC, "Some wines in Australia cost less than an Australian dollar (\$0.82), compared to about A\$2.50 for the average water bottle." (Kohli). These cafes are well-decorated and well-lit to grab the attention of the customers. In this story, it is seen that the old man is habituated with excessive drinking. He drinks until he loses his consciousness. This does not imply that the man leads a reckless life or drinks just for fun. Rather from the mouth of the older waiter the readers come to know that the old man is a dignified and composed person. "This old man is clean. He drinks without spilling. Even now, drunk." (Scribner 232). If drinking is the sole purpose, he would go to any ordinary bodegas but he chooses a clean, well-lit café to drink because the only reason behind his drinking is forgetting the harsh realities of life. But in Islam drinking alcohol is not a solution to escape from frustration rather it is strictly prohibited. "O you who believe! Intoxicants (all kinds of alcoholic drinks), gambling, idolatry, and divining arrows are an abomination of Satan's handiwork. So avoid that so that you may be successful." (Al-Quran 5:90). It is also narrated in Hadith, "Whoever drinks wine in this world and does not repent from that, he will be deprived of it in the Hereafter." (Prophet Muhammad (SAW)). Due to consuming alcohol the conscience of a man elopes, he becomes forgetful of God and it leads to all kinds of sins. "Researchers in Australia have also estimated that 47% of all those who commit violent crimes, and 43% of all victims of these crimes, were drunk prior to the event. Alcohol is responsible for 44% of fire injuries, 34% of falls and drownings, 30% of car accidents, 16% of child abuse instances, and 7% of industrial accidents." (Stacey). Alcoholism also leads to various fatal physical difficulties.

"In Australia, a country with a population of around 20 million, about 3000 people die each year from alcohol abuse while 65,000 others are hospitalized. Studies have consistently revealed a link between heavy drinking and brain damage and around 2500 Australians are treated annually for alcohol related brain damage. Research in the United Kingdom indicates that 6% of cancer deaths are related to alcohol abuse and Harvard Centre for Cancer Prevention says that drinking greatly increases the risk for numerous cancers. Alcohol is considered highly carcinogenic, increasing the risk of mouth, pharynx, larynx,

esophagus, liver, and breast cancers. Drinking alcohol during pregnancy can lead to Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, causing the child to be small at birth, have some facial malformations, small eye openings, webbed or even missing fingers or toes, organ deformities, learning disabilities, mental retardation and much more." (Stacey).

An abuse of alcoholism not only affects the alcoholic person but also his surrounding people are affected by it. So there is a great wisdom in prohibition of alcohol. Islam always encourages people to repent for his sins and to develop the relationship with Allah (SWT) because "Verily, in the remembrance of Allah do hearts find rest." (Al-Qur'an 13:28)

In this short story Hemingway portrays the young generation through the young waiter who is unable to understand the sufferings of the old generation. He is only bothered about his life, wife and job. According to William James, He is the representative of such kind of people who are living in "Healthy mindedness" which is in itself a sickness. They view life so positively that they turn a blind eye to the absolute vices of life. "...there is no doubt that healthy-mindedness is inadequate as a philosophical doctrine, because the evil facts which it refuses positively to account for are a genuine portion of reality; and they may after all be the best key to life's significance, and possibly the only openers of our eyes to the deepest levels of truth..." (Bluefarb 4). Even the young generation does not want to be old. According to the young waiter, "An old man is a nasty thing." (Scribner 232). In Islam life has been compared to a field where one can harvest his fruit. This mundane world is just a preparation period for getting success in the life hereafter. One of the popular western philosophies of young generation is "Hakuna Matata" or "You only live once" (The Lion King) but for the Muslims there is an eternal life after this life. They find themselves accountable to Allah (SWT) as He will question them on the Day of Judgment about "...His life and how he spent it, his youth and how he used it, his wealth and how he earned it and how he disposed of it, and how he acted upon what he acquired of knowledge." (At-Tirmidhi).

No sympathy or fellow feeling can be found in the western society. Young waiter is unable to understand the inherent meaning of old waiter's replies. Even hearing after the ongoing sufferings of the old man, the young waiter does not feel any compassion towards him moreover he has yelled at the poor deaf man. In the same way when the older waiter comes to a bar, the barman gives a deaf ear to him by calling him, "Otro loco más," (Scribner 233). One of the main features of Islam is fellow feeling. Abu Musa Al-Ash'ari (R:

) reported: I asked the Messenger of Allah (SAW): "Who is the most excellent among the Muslims?" He said, "One from whose tongue and hands the other Muslims are secure." (Bukhari and Muslim).

By 2009, 12.9% of the US population is older adults. More than 1 million senior citizens are served by the assisted living facilities of US government (Aging Statistics). It is evident from this survey that in the western world, the old people are deprived the love and care they need and deserve in their old age. Though they get provided with their basic maintenance, they get deprived of their expected dignity and respect rather they receive maltreatment. The American Psychological Association reports: "Every year an estimated 2.1 million older Americans are victims of physical, psychological, or other forms of abuse and neglect. Those statistics may not tell the whole story. For every case of elder abuse and neglect that is reported to authorities, experts estimate that there may be as many as five cases that have not been reported." (Saulat). Islam also pays a great attention to the importance of elderly care. Prophet (SAW) said, "He is not one of us who does not show tenderness to the young and who does not show respect to the elder." (At-Tirmidhi) He also said, "If a young man honors an elderly on account of his age, God appoints someone to honor him in his old age." (At-Tirmidhi).

#### Conclusion

It is a matter of concern that the vices that we observe in the western society here now been common in some of the Muslim countries. This happens because the Muslims have been derailed from their root and get attached to the vain glamor of the western world and becoming slaves of the worldly affairs. Those societies which highly regard moral values, are also failing to maintain their family bondings. "Even in countries that are known for relatively stronger family structures, the elderly are increasingly getting short shrift. According to Help Age India, most elders are ill-treated by their own children, who have emerged as the largest group of perpetrators at 47.3 per cent of all cases of abuse!" (Saulat). The use of wine, day care center, old home, lack of solidarity, selfishness, materialism all can be observed in these societies. Throughout this analysis it is clear that Islamic way of life is the ultimate solution of getting success in this life and the life hereafter. As a result, including 60 percent of world's Muslim exist in Asia, a large number of western people have also started to follow Islam. According to the 2003 edition of the Guinness Book of World Records, Islam is the world's fastest-growing religion by number of conversions each year: "Although the religion began in Arabia, by 2002 80% of all believers in Islam lived

outside the Arab world." (Guinness). People throughout the world have started to get the real message of Islam that is "Peace".

#### REFERENCES

- [1] Aging Statistics, U.S Department of Health and Human Services, June 2010. Web. 24 February 2016.
- [2] Al-Adab Al-Mufrad, Reported by Abu Huraira (R:) 38, Web 5 February 2016
- [3] Al-Qur'an, Surah At- Taghabun, 65:15, Print.
- [4] Al-Qur'an, Surah Isra, 17:23-24, Print.
- [5] Al-Quran, Surah At-Talaq, 65:2-3, Print.
- [6] Al-Quran, Surah Yousuf, 12:87, Print.
- [7] At-Tirmidhi, 2422; classed as hasan by al-Albaani in Saheeh al-Tirmidhi, 1969.
- [8] Bluefarb, Sam. "The Search for the Absolute in Hemingway's "A Clean, Well-lighted Place" and "the Snows of Kilimanjaro". The Bulletin of the Rocky Mountain Modern Language Association 25.1 (1971): 3-9. Web. 25 January 2016
- [9] Christina, Tabita. "Interpreting story "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place" – Ernest Hemingway" 2013. Web. 25 January 2016.
- [10] Ernest Hemingway Biography, The Hemingway Resource Center, [www.lostgeneration.com](http://www.lostgeneration.com), Web. 25 January 2016.
- [11] Hemingway, Ernest. *A Clean, Well-Lighted Place* The Complete Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway. New York: Scribner, 1987: 230-233.
- [12] Hirtenstein, Stephen. *The Unlimited Mercifier: The Spiritual Life and Thought of Ibn 'Arabi*, Oxford: Anqa Publishing and Oregon: White Cloud Press, 1999, Web. 24 January 2016.
- [13] Kadhi, Dr. Yasir. *The Etiquette of Dealing with Parents and the Elderly*, November 2011, Montreal, Canada: 2nd Annual United For Change Conference - Our Families: Our Foundations Conference. [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com). Web. 23 January 2016.
- [14] Kohli, Sonali. *These are the places on earth where wine and beer are cheaper than water*, 2014, [www.qz.com](http://www.qz.com), Web. 23 February 2016
- [15] McWhirter, Ross, and Norris McWhirter. *Guinness Book of World Records*. New York: Sterling Pub. Co, 2003. Print.
- [16] Nobel Lectures, Literature 1901-1967, Editor Horst Frenz, Elsevier Publishing Company, Amsterdam, 1969, Web. 25 January 2016.

- [17] Norton anthology of American Literature, 7th edition, Nina Baym, et al. New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 2007, Print.
- [18] Sahih Al- Bukhari (5147) and Sahih Al- Muslim (3736), Reported by ‘Abd-Allaah ibn ‘Umar (R: ). Web 5 February 2016
- [19] Sahih Al-Bukhaari (3276) and Sahih Al- Muslim (113), Prophet Muhammad (SAW), Reported by Jundub ibn ‘Abd-Allaah (may Allaah be pleased with him). Web. 11 February 2016.
- [20] Sahih Al-Bukhari and Sahih Al- Muslim, 18:2. Prophet (SAW), Reported by Abu Musa Al-Ash’ari. Web. 10 February 2016.
- [21] *Sahih Bukhari* and *Sahih Muslim*, Reported by Imam Bukhari and Muslim, Web 7 February 2016
- [22] Saulat. The Status of the Elderly in Islam, October 2014, whyislam.org. Web. 24 January 2016.
- [23] Stacey, Aisha. “Alcohol in Islam”, [www.islamreligion.com](http://www.islamreligion.com). Web 26 January 2016
- [24] Sufi doctrine: Sufis about death, The Chishti Website, Web, 24 January 2016
- [25] *Sunan Abi Dawud*, Prophet Muhammad (SAW). Web. 9 February 2016
- [26] *The Lion King*. Dir. Roger Allers and Rob Minkoff. Perf. Matthew Broderick, Jeremy Irons, and James Earl Jones. Buena Vista Pictures Distribution, Inc., 1994. DVD. Alpers, Philip, Amélie Rossetti and Daniel Salinas. 2016. United States — Gun Facts, Figures and the Law. Sydney School of Public Health, The University of Sydney. [GunPolicy.org](http://GunPolicy.org), 21 January. Web. 11 February 2016.