

DLC Image: Pratibimbo

ISSN: 2583-8881

<https://image.dispurlawcollege.org>

The Emperor Jones and the Study of Identity and Racial Memory

Sumanta Rajbanshi

Assistant Professor, English

Tyagbir Hem Baruah College

Author E-mail: sumantarajbanshi@gmail.com

Introduction:

With *The Emperor Jones* (1920), Eugene O'Neill unmistakably established himself as a major American playwright. The other two important plays published during this period were *Anna Christie* and *The Hairy Ape*, and such productions paved the way for new experiments in American drama giving the audience a new experience of theatrical inventiveness. But, although O'Neill was greatly inspired by the zeal for new experiments, his genuine interest was somewhere else. He was greatly motivated by his desire to bring to the limelight of drama the conflict within human soul and his theatrical techniques were used only as devices for doing that. Lionel Trilling rightly points to the fact, "O'Neill's techniques, like those of any sincere artist, are not fortuitous - they attempt to say things which the accepted techniques cannot express. Of contemporary dramatists, O'Neill is unique in his preoccupation with the kind of thought we call philosophical" (Trilling, 1947:9). Here our attempt is directed towards exploration of the major thematic concerns of O'Neill in his play *The Emperor Jones* to understand his basic premises based on the contemporary psychological and philosophical ideas.

Psychological and philosophical approach in the tragic vision of O'Neill

Various attempts have been made to analyse the theme in *The Emperor Jones*. The theme, as popularly assumed by different critics, is that, here the playwright endeavors to explore the panic experienced by the Negroes, who have not yet fully seen the light of civilization. But it is a great mistake on the part of the critics to look for very narrow and parochial implication like this in O'Neill's plays. Though psychological elements are not denied, critics like Edwin A. Engel put much emphasis on the socio-economic implications of the play. Edwin A. Engel thinks that O'Neill presents Brutus Jones to criticize the materialistic civilization of the whites represented by him (Engel, 1953: 50). But quest of such socio-economic implications rarely helps us to understand the true O'Neill. Because he is least interested in social issues, as he regards them as ephemeral and parochial. But, if we carefully look into the play we can grasp the universal significance of the play in the treatment of the problem of human identity. O'Neill tries to show what might be lying behind a mask. The identity that one often tries to impose upon one's own-self might prove false as identity might have also an unavoidable history. The

identity that we notice outwardly is often, merely an illusion. In *The Emperor Jones* O'Neill defines this problem in terms of the conflict between the conscious and the unconscious mind, which he holds as the modern manifestation of the same conflict depicted in great literature - the conflict between the individual and the Force behind him. It cannot be concluded that the Negroes, who have undergone prolonged experience of persecution and distress. Rather he is a representative of man, who is burdened with the curse of pride and gross ignorance. What happens in the play is only projection of the internal drama going on in the mind of Brutus Jones? So the play has a sound psychological base and it is best revealed in the psychological regression of Jones. It emphasizes the probe into the recesses of the unconscious. O'Neill himself acknowledged in a letter to Barret Clark that he owed to some of the modern psychologists, particularly to Carl F Jung (Clark, 1948: 136).

In the *The Emperor Jones* O'Neill portrays how ideas and symbols from the hazy world of collective unconscious unfurl one by one with progress of action in the play with crisis faced by Brutus Jones's. O'Neill through the response of Brutus to every phase of crisis brings into light the inescapable influence of collective unconscious that he shares with the rest of his community. ***The Emperor Jones and the question of identity***

Four plays of O'Neill, *Gold* (1920), *Different* (1920), *The First Man* (1921) and *The Emperor Jones* have similarities in their thematic pattern. The protagonists of these plays think they know exactly who they are and what they are and what they want. Fulfillment requires them to betray and destroy other human beings. All they create a grand self-image or a false ego-image. In his ignorance or fear of the nothingness behind that image, he is desperately propelled towards integration with that grandiose, chimerical self-image. His monomania ignores the opposites of life and of self and causes his madness or death. For instance, the protagonist of *Gold*, a whaling skipper obsessed by desire for wealth creates for himself a false-image. He instigates two of his shipmates to commit murder for grabbing wealth and pretends to be innocent. But reality begins to show the hollowness of his self-image. Finally, the pronouncement of his son Nat, that the gold is false tears away the last remnant of his self-image and gradually he loses his sense and dies. The ironic symbolism of the title of *Gold* portrays demolition of the self-projected notions opposed to reality and created by pride or ego. As Bartlet is driven by his lust for gold, so the Emperor Jones is driven by the lust for power. Like Bartlet, Jones cannot rest until he has been united with and destroyed by an impossible, self-projected image of himself as an absolute and invulnerable dictator. Jones assumes to have a false-identity of his own self, and the core of the action of the play consists of the gradual stripping off of this false-identity and revelation of the truth. The terms of this revelation of the true identity are those not only of O'Neill, but also of Jung. Jung's concept of collective unconsciousness or the racial memory has been used as a device to lay bare the identity behind an identity.

Brutus Jones is one of O'Neill's heroes who fall due to pride. Like Oedipus or Faust, Jones is inordinately proud of his mind, he attempts to identify his self with the false image of an invincible emperor. Moments of realization of the true identity comes, but only through destruction. The Emperor Jones, Brutus is an ex-Pullman porter, who, through deception and corruption, has become self-styled emperor and possessor of great riches of a West Indian island. The significance of the play lies not in the journey undertaken by Emperor Jones, that

O'Neill visualizes by expressionistic technique, but in the exposure of the true facet of Jones - that the false-image peels from him like the layers of an onion. The process leads to destruction of conscious ego and expression of the personal and collective unconscious. Along with the drum beat he moves across the forest and comes back eventually where he began. He ends with realization of the truth with stripping off of his uniform and ultimate nakedness.

The playwright tells us, at the very outset of the play how Brutus was driven by his lust for riches and power. This ex-convict with a long history of crimes boastfully describes to his partner Smithers how he had grabbed power through trickery, murder and power. He spread among the natives, when once a native failed to kill him with his gun, that without silver bullet nobody can harm as he is in possession of magical power. Brutus did it because as he assumed silver was not available in that island. Similarly, he swindled the inhabitants of the island following different deceptive means and introducing taxes and became a rich emperor. Finally, the exploitation compels the natives to stand against him. Earlier, Jones did not let his past history come between his present identity and his real self. He said that it is useless to bother about the past, what once he was is not his concern, he is interested only in what he is today. But as the rebellion is imminent the moment of dissolution of the self-image comes. His self-knowledge comes through death and now he realizes that his pride is the cause of his death.

When Jones takes his flight through the jungle the individual and racial memory haunt him like a ghost bringing into surface the sense of fear and guilt which so long lay hidden in the depth of his mind. Brutus tries to drive away each of the ghosts that appear one after another embodying a secret action or motive from his life in the past for which he keeps spending the bullets of his revolver one after another. The "formless fears" first creep out from the darkness of the Great Forest. These mysterious creatures rise quietly with deliberately towards Jones. Suddenly he is reminded of his loaded revolver and fires at them to scare them away. Through presentation of two apparitions, one of Jeff and the other of the guard the guilt of Jones is hinted at in the play. Jeff was killed in a fight and the guard was killed in the United States, when Jones escaped from prison. O'Neill shows here what emerges from his personal and collective unconscious, or what is called "racial memory".

Jones's glory and pride as an "Emperor" have been leaving him and he is instantaneously reminded of his Negro inheritance. His royal panama hat is lost and he looks completely exhausted. He removes the spurs, takes off his coat and is thus seen stripped to the waist. Then to him appears the mysterious vision of the slave trade that he was also supposed to be sold. He is shocked to see the planters standing all-round him in excitement and he is made to stand on an auction block. Jones is found in the attire of a slave transported from a far remote forest in Africa. He is seen there cowering, paralyzed with horror. Failing to control himself, Jones shoots at the Auctioneer and the planters whose visions disappear on hearing the sound. In Scene VI Jones's voice is heard between chattering moans. When he takes rest he feels like surrounded by the ancestors from the past with mournful crooning which he tries first to elude and then joins them by raising his voice above others. Finally, Jones is found, who is by now without even the last shred of his outward self, reaching the dusky, savage and mysterious domain of unconscious, near an altar of stone. He realizes that his journey comes to a full circle now, he comes back to the spot where he started his soul searching journey. Thus Jones comes back to his real self, real identity. Like the tragic pattern of the Greek tragedy this integration

is possible only through sacrifice, which is demonstrated here by calling of a crocodile by the doctor practicing black magic. This means a salvation - salvation from the evil, salvation from the false self-image and getting integrated with the true self. He fires at the crocodile, but it costs him his silver bullet, which is the symbol of his pride.

Conclusion

Thus O'Neill shows that one's present identity is formulated, besides other factors, by his biological or racial past. One cannot escape his past, one's attempt to overlook it is only a foolish act against the law of Nature, which may result in catastrophe of the individual. Instigated by pride, Brutus Jones creates a grandiose and chimerical self-image and tries utmost to be identified with that image. To do that he acts with foolishness to obliterate his biological or racial identity, but he cannot. Through the conflict between the consciousness and unconsciousness he comes to realize the real self or identity, but it takes his life. The haunting personal and collective memory or unconsciousness lays bare his real identity to him. So his flight in the darkness is the flight from the false identity or self-image to the real one. And through the theme we see a kind of reconciliation between the assertions of his conscious ego with that of the unconscious. His flaw is the ignorance of the fact that he is ever haunted by the force of collective unconscious. His real identity lies in the foggy, mysterious realm of the unconscious.

References:

1. Alexander Doris. 1962. *The Tempering of Eugene O'Neill*. New York : Harcourt, Brace and World.
2. Clark Barret. 1950. *Eugene O'Neill : The Man His Plays*. New York : The Modern Library.
3. Krutch, J.W.ed. 1954. *Nine Plays by Eugene O'Neill*. New York : The Modern Library.
4. Lewis, Allen. 1970. *American Plays and Playwrights of the Contemporary Theatre*. New York : Crown Publishers, Inc.
5. Trilling, Lionel, ed. *Three Plays by the Foremost American Dramatist of Our Time Eugene O'Neill*. New York: The Modern Library, 1947.