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Existential Alienation and Psychological Descent in *The Emperor Jones*: An Analysis of Man's Predicament

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Abstract

O'Neill's major theme was man's disorientation and bedevilment from within and without. Society could not provide him comfort and political systems proved to be a means for self-aggrandizement. Freud and Jung turned inwards to find out various unconscious mechanisms that guide the actions of man. They found that if the external world was understandably, cruel and selfish, the internal world of man was also dark and devilish. O'Neill was not concerned about the temporal, problems, he sought to explore the internal and the external realities. This was his sole concern during the period 1916-1922, when he wrote his realistic and expressionistic plays. The burning issues of the day no doubt interested him but what arrested his attention most was the loneliness of man among men. His plays deal with existential dilemma- man's incapacity to cope with a world that is absurd and senseless, where primeval fears haunt man beneath smooth surface of man's superficial life. *The Emperor Jones* portrays man's existential dilemma in face of irrational and unpredictable universe. The paper attempts to examine the existential alienation and psychological regression in the play *The Emperor Jones*.

Keywords: Alienation, fear, inheritance, unconscious, primeval.

Introduction

O'Neill's *Emperor Jones* (1920) first called *The Silver Bullet* is a play about fear, guilt, despair, anguish, dread and death. It depicts the existential predicament of a man. It furnishes a clinical study of man's guilt, his moments of perplexity and arrest of life in the cruel, uncaring world. Human life, in the play is, portrayed as an unremitting struggle for survival and its defeat takes away any vestige of dignity from man's life. It created a landmark in the history and growth of American drama. The play enjoyed great popularity and was a craze among the theater goers. It was a brilliantly original account of a disintegrating private and public world of Brutus Jones - the protagonist of the play. A piece of experimental drama, the play probed into the recesses of the unconscious, and established its relationship with the racial memory of man.

Character's Background and Rise to Power

The play observes certain patterns; it starts in the evening when rays of sun lose their force and continues till the dusk, when night ends and the sun is to shine again. Jones's life starts from the night of obscurity as a pull man porter and then a killer and culprit gives way to the dawn of his successful life on the island of the West Indies. Using craft and trickery he becomes the emperor of the natives. Scene 1, presents parallelly glimpse of Jones's present life on the newly discovered island and his past life in states. It shows that Jones is not the creation of the present but a character whose

roots lie deep in the past. He is an Ex-convict with a long history of crimes and murders. He has risen from the petty position of a porter to an emperor in a short span of two years only. He has through murder and deception imposed himself as a self-styled emperor on an "island in the West Indies yet too self-determined by the white Mariners" ^[1] (O'Neill 9). Jones has deliberately adhered to the imperialistic concept and keeps his interest supreme in the day-to-day functioning of his administration. He has been accepted as a symbol of the white American materialism on the Island.

Jones features are that of a negro but he is different. "An underlying strength of will, a hardy, self-reliant confidence in him-self that inspires respect." ^[2] (O'Neill 9) The very first sentence he speaks establishes the fact that he had been continuing as a ruler on the strength of his tricks, the most important of them being his readiness to use his pistol," who dare whistle dat way in palace? Who dare wake me up de Emperor? I II git the hide frayed off some of you niggers." ^[3] (O'Neill 9) But hearing from Smithers that it was he who had whistled and that too to alert him, Jones relaxes but finding Smithers critical of his position, he threatens to use might; "Talk polite white man! Talk polite you wah me! I'am boss heah now, is you forgettin." ^[4] (O'Neill 10) Jones is a rich man and he had continued as emperor not for the glory but because there was money in it. Natives of the place are staging a revolt against him. Smithers rightly but mockingly puts it. "Bloody ship is sinkin' an' the bleedin' rats' ve slung

their ooks" [5] (O'Neill 11) Jones has fully realized that people are up against him and his end is in sight.

Psychological and Physical Journey through the Forest

Jones decides to run and is confident of crossing the forest easily. He says that he knows the passage leading to the jungle and he could run on those trails with his eyes shut. He feels that the niggers who could not write even their names would not be able to catch Jones. He was sure to make the niggers look sick, and once in the woods at night, they will not be able to find him since by the dawn next day he would have reached the other side of the forest. There he could take a French gut-boat and reach Martinique where he had kept his money in bank.

As he runs, a mournful foreboding overtakes him and wild terror seizes him. The tense state of his mind is reflected in the quickening beat of the distant tom-tom. He consoles himself. He says:- "Ain't nothing' dere but de trees" [6] (O'Neill 32). O'Neill's dramatic method comes alive as Jones makes his desperate flight through the dense forest, accompanied by the rhythmic, ever-quickening beat of the tom-tom. The jungle is not merely a physical setting but a powerful metaphor for Jones' psychological journey—a landscape where social masks fall away and primal fears take over. The dark, labyrinthine woods symbolize both the irrational universe and the unconscious, as Jones re-lives traumatic events from his own history as well as collective memories associated with his race. During this nightmarish escape, the forest becomes an agent of Jones' undoing, exposing his vulnerabilities and stripping away each layer of acquired self-assurance. This process, reflected in the gradual physical disintegration of his costume, parallels the peeling away of his ego. O'Neill's forest is thus more than scenery; it is a character in its own right, embodying the environment's hostility and the protagonist's existential dread.

His self-reliance and pride begin to peel bit by bit as his splendid dress turns to tears and tatters while he stumbles and claws through this grove of death haunted all among by the tremors of the weird and wild far-off drums. Suddenly he sees Jeff, whom he had killed over a game of dice and is visibly shaken. "Dey tol' me you done died from dat razor cut I gits you" [7] (O'Neill 36) when it becomes difficult to bear any longer, he shoots at the phantom Jeff. "Nigger, I kill you dead once. Has I got to kill you ag'in." [8] (O'Neill 36) His mounting nervous tension is apparent in the louder and more rapid beat of the voodoo drums. After this act of killing the same man twice, an eerie feeling comes over him and he plunges deeper into the colossal jungle, with a stifling fear of the self and survival anxiety crippling his normal mental perceptions. As a result, he loses his way.

His innermost fear further accentuates the agony and takes Jones into the next vision that comes to Jones at about 11 p.m. at a crossing of roads under clear moon light. His uniform is by then ragged and torn. He is completely tired of running. He strips himself of his coat, "Dere I gits rid o'dem frippery Emperor trappin's an' I travels lighter" [9] (O'Neill 37).

Brutus Jones's paralytic run becomes an exercise in futility because after, "runnin' an' runnin' an' running," [10] (O'Neill 38) he finds "dat damn drum sounds Jes' de same nearer even." [11] (O'Neill 38) He had been very sure of his knowledge about the forest and surer of a straight run through it but it springs many surprises for him in the form of new roads and new sights. "Dese woods is sho full o'de queerest things at night." [12] (O'Neill 38) and prays to lord "Let me see no more o' dem ha'nts!" [13] (O'Neill 38) But his fears take

concrete shapes and appear as negro prisoners, Brutus Jones is one of them, with picks and shovels. The dreadful vision captures and re-enacts the murder of the white prison guard by him. He utters a cry of despair and fires at point blank at the Guard's back. "Instantly, the walls of the forest close in from both sides" [14] (O'Neill 41) with Brutus Jones trapped inside. Forest becomes his prison, symbolizing the despairing paradox of the human existential condition. He leaps away in mad flight from that place. The true terror haunting Jones is rooted in memory and guilt. The visions appearing in the jungle—formless fears, the ghost of Jeff (whom Jones had murdered), the auction block and enslaved figures—re-enact critical moments from his life and the larger history of racial oppression. Each apparition corners Jones, forcing him to face the repressed traumas and crimes that have shaped his identity and worldview. The tribulations in the jungle not only bring him face to face with the consequences of his actions but also embroil him in a struggle with deeper, ancestral anxieties.

Racial consciousness shocks Brutus Jones' individuality as being a negro is a debilitating experience that is not of his choosing. The essential Black experience is one of insecurity and is born out of a sense of fragmentation and alienation. According to Horst Frenz, *the Emperor Jones* dramatizes the psychological process by which Brutus Jones "regresses from civilized state of his present consciousness to the primitive state of his personal unconscious and the collective unconscious of his race" [15] (Frenz 31). Seized by the courage of desperation, he looks up: "Is dis a auction? Is you sellin' me like dey uster befo de war?" [16] (O'Neill 45) He shoots each at the two of them and the terrible vision disappears.

Jones is by now a completely exhausted, despaired and mystified creature with no bullet left in the pistol, except the silver bullet and his exhausted mind visualizes a number of negroes sitting crumpled in despairing attitude. They are silent and motionless. This increases the anxiety of Jones and he feels under some uncanny compulsion to be one with them. He himself rises to a sitting posture and sways back and forth singing along with them the song of sorrow. That is a horrible sight which undermines his whole race and he runs off farther and farther into the forest. Lisa M. Schwerdt observes that as Jones "runs in the same circle over and over again, he assumes mythic proportions, a powerful man whose reason leads him ultimately to disaster" [17] (Schwedt 67).

He has only one bullet left. He feels as incapacitated as the race of the negroes used to feel in the jungles of Africa. This kinship between him and his racial unconscious indicates how he has come back to his original self. Bereft of the acquired grandeur of the ruler of the island of the negroes, he himself becomes a miserable negro. Jones' trajectory is one of regression from the veneer of civilization to the rawness of primitive survival, echoing levels of both personal and collective unconscious. His journey is cyclical: after endless running and confrontation with ghosts both personal and racial, Jones winds up in the same clearing where he began. Having shed all trappings of his imperial persona, he is reduced to a state of utter exhaustion and existential defeat.

This regression is not simply a racial commentary but a universal motif, positing Jones as an archetype for the human condition. Just as Oedipus is undone by the limits of rational intellect, Brutus Jones succumbs because reason cannot ward off the inscrutable terrors of existence. In becoming both victim and agent of his destruction, Jones illustrates not only the frailty of power but the ultimate solitude and incomprehensibility of the self.

Doris V. Falk comments, "Evil has been his god, and he has sacrificed all other values to it; now it demands his life" ^[18] (Falk 29). The witch doctor summons from the river a terrifying crocodile, whose glittering eyes fasten upon Jones. He stares at them in paralyzed fascination at first, then, shouting defiantly "De silver bullet | You don't git me yet" ^[19]. (O'Neill 54). He fires at the crocodile, with which, the witch doctor, disappears, as Jones falls to the ground.

With this comes to an end the monologue of terror depicting the absurdity of human predicament and the existential dilemma which overtakes everything else in its stride. O'Neill presents Brutus Jones as a man whose hidden and repressed truths and feelings and his complexes of inferiority and superiority come out in this arcane forest. In the night with one stroke goes Emperor Jones's stability, security, and serenity. Thus, *the Emperor Jones* shows that terror, perdition, annihilation dwell next door to men.

Brutus Jones is a reject of the civilized society as well as of the forest, a stranger in both the places, His alienation is twofold. Instead of Identifying himself with the blacks of the island "he isolates himself from them and becomes a black "White" man who is destined to break apart under the weight of his own compulsions and contradictions, " ^[20] (Singh 43). Jones signs his own doom when he dismisses the old times as irrelevant to his present regal status. This severs his roots and he begins to dangle in the air. Chabrowe sees man's alienation projected through Jone's predicament when he observes" it is not only Jones who does not belong. It is man at large who is alienated by the civilized world from his real self" ^[21] (Charbrowe 122). O'Neill has dramatized the alienation of man from himself and from his environment in terms of a psychic regression to the primitive.

Symbolism of the Forest

The great forest looms in the background as a symbol of something primeval and sinister. The disintegration of Jones' ego, his voyage of self-discovery, begins there. This deracinating forest generates a debilitating feeling of gloom and with Jones' entry into the forest begins the process of his undoing. Maya Keronova is right when she observes that in *The Emperor Jones* "the antagonist is the environment, the hostile world," ^[22] (Keronova 160) and this world is represented by this insular forest. For the fugitive Jones the forest becomes an alien world where he is constantly threatened by disasters. It is in this absurd and hostile world of the forest O'Neill gives us a peep into the derelict condition of man's existence, a condition which entails no deliverance.

Existential Dilemma and Alienation

A salient theme is the multidimensional alienation inflicted upon Jones. Alienated from both his own black heritage and the society he has sought to dominate; Jones is rendered an outsider everywhere. O'Neill makes clear that Jones' predicament is not solely a product of race but of the broader human experience of estrangement—estrangement from others, from one's past, and even from oneself. Jones' crisis is consequently both uniquely personal and metonymic, standing in for the dilemmas faced by mankind in a world where certitudes have collapsed and meaning is perpetually deferred.

Normand Berlin is right when he observes that Brutus Jones journey symbolizes man's disorientation in this world. Jone's Predicament represents human predicament: "Jones' long night journey, so vividly realized, is physical and psychological and racial and universal. It reveals the

condition of that one black man, of all black men, and of all men" ^[23] (Berlin 99). Like Conrad's Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness*, Brutus Jones Lives" his life again in every detail of desire, temptation and surrender" ^[24] (Conrad 52) during that night of flight. For Virginia Floyd, Jones, journey, through the forest which takes him into the realm of his past is" a religious quest as well as a personal search for identity." ^[25] (Floyd 209)

Although *The Emperor Jones* contains clear motifs of imperial exploitation and racial prejudice, its scope transcends social specificities to function as a psychological and philosophical allegory. O'Neill critiques the mechanisms of governance, manipulation of opinion, and the coercion inherent in colonial power, but he is equally concerned with dramatizing the unconscious forces within individuals. Jones' struggle is not to be read simply as a satirical or political episode, but as an emblem of human fate in a universe bereft of meaning—a relentless journey from apparent mastery to utter defeat. The narrative foregrounds the futility of relying on rational intellect and the unavoidable encounter with irrational, primal forces, a theme resonant with much existentialist literature.

Brutus Jones' outer struggle and inner struggle have a synergetic relationship. His life depicts the plight of modern man, the disturbing complexities of man's nature and the tragic paradoxes of human existence. His repeated references to himself as Emperor and his nakedness make him both pathetic and comic, at the end, he stands out as an isolated man with a sense of over whelming desolation and who finds himself friendless and alone. His existential situation makes him suffer all the ambiguities of his condemned freedom. Brutus Jones fails to belong to the civilized society as well as to the bush people. He belongs, like Yank of *The Hairy Ape*, at last in his death.

Conclusion

Existentialists feel that this world is unreasonable and illogical and can't be understood through rational approach. This is what constitutes the existential dilemma of man. Man equipped with weapon of reason tries to integrate himself with the false gods and creates a glorious place for him but reason deserts him when he thinks himself to have reached the moment of integration. Brutus Jones through his trickery thinks he can easily dodge the natives and escape the island but when he comes face to face with his primeval fears his reason is reduced to an inanity and he becomes an ordinary nigger wailing, chanting and praying for mercy.

In modern times all of us believe in supremacy of reason which controls and restraints our instincts. We limit ourselves to reason as an instrument and basis of man's existence. We try to dodge away the ultimate questions of life and death. But O' Neill does not opt for limited views but deals with ultimate questions, of man's hysterical fears, his unconscious self and of individuals as Brutus Jones who take pride in their rational capacities but contain their own assassin within, of reason's incapacity to cope with the ultimate questions that concern each man's existence and man's hope in ultimate acceptance of this universe.

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