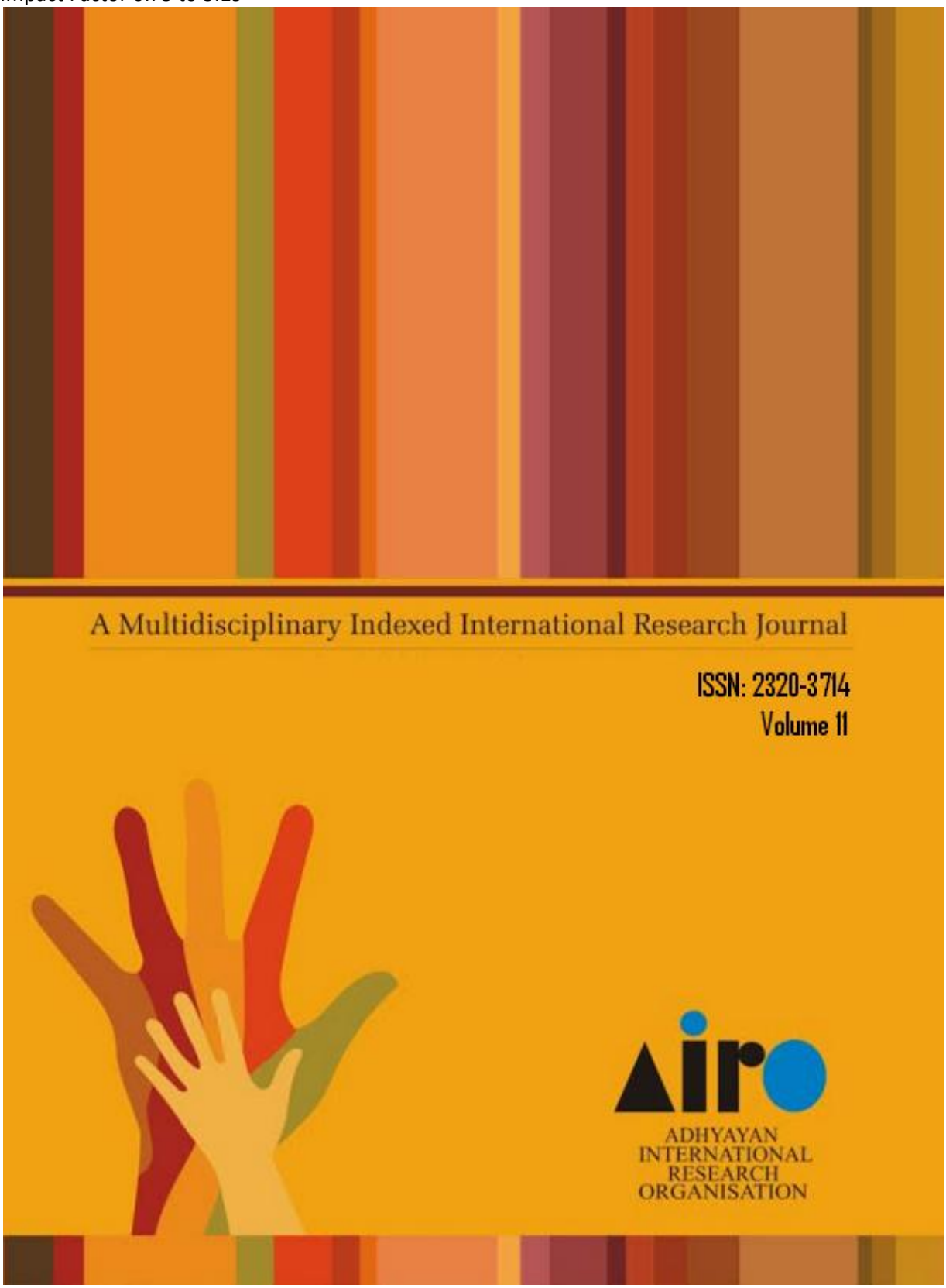
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Expressionism in Eugene O'Neill's The Emperor Jones and The Hairy Ape

Dr. Amit Verma
Assistant Professor
M.N. College, Shahbad

ABSTRACT

The term 'expressionism' is grossly misunderstood and greatly abused by dramatic critics. It is usually regarded as an anti-realistic style of theatre. To view it as a binary opposition to reality would be to undermine the importance of the concept. One must try to analyze his conception of reality first. There is a lot of hair-splitting among the critics regarding the exact meaning of reality. To most of them, the conception of reality is confined to the externally observed phenomena verifiable through their physical senses. But it is a matter of common sense that appearances are not always a warrant of reality. We cannot verify the truth of an objective reality unless it is testified by our intuitive knowledge. The expressionist, therefore, attempts to reveal the hidden world of man's consciousness in order to lay bare his vision of reality. The present paper deals with use of expressionism in O'Neill's The Emperor Jones and The Hairy Ape.

Keywords: *Expressionism, tragedy, reality, realism, unconscious, etc.*

Expressing his deep dissatisfaction with the surface realism of the so-called realists, O'Neill wrote in the playbill for Strindberg's The Spook Sonata, in 1924: "Yet it is only by means of some form of 'super-naturalism' that we may express in the theatre what we comprehend intuitively of that self-defeating self-obsession which is the discount we moderns have to pay for the loan of life." Like the term 'realism', expressionism is grossly misunderstood and greatly abused by dramatic critics. It is

usually regarded as an anti-realistic style of theatre. Before yielding to the confirmation of this viewpoint one must try to understand one's conception of 'reality' and 'realism'. There is a lot of hair-splitting among the critics regarding the exact meaning of reality. To most of them, the conception of reality is confined to the externally observed phenomena verifiable through their physical senses. But it is a matter of common sense that appearances are often deceptive. We cannot verify the truth of an objective reality unless it is testified by our intuitive knowledge. The expressionist, therefore, attempts to reveal the hidden world of man's consciousness in order to lay bare his vision of reality— The minutest fragments of human experience join together to form a unified whole, the complete unit of reality.

N. Scarlyn Wilson says:

> Expressionism deals with the subjective, with inner realities. It attempts to dramatize the inner life of man, to represent what is passing in his soul. The expressionist seeks to solve the problem by representing the soul of man in the form of external symbols. He uses metaphor, fable or allegory. He produces figures moving obscurely on a darkened stage to personify good or bad motives. He gives words to unseen voices to express the secret thoughts of a man's mind. He summons the producer to his aid and represents a brain-storm in the mind of a financer by flickering lights, eerie noises and the reiteration of the same few words in louder and louder tones."

John Gassner's views on the nature and characteristics of Expressionism are broader and more up to date. He writes:

> Expressionism is least confusing as a term when used to describe a single, more or less distinct, style of playwriting and theatrical production. It is the general style which, beginning in some of the work of Strindberg at the turn of the century became a theatrical movement in the years from just before to just after World War I. Strindberg struck the keynote of the expressionist theory of theatre when he wrote, in his preface to The *Dream Play* (1902) that in this play, 'Anything may happen; everything is possible and probable. Time and space do not exist. On an

> insignificant background of reality, imagination designs and embroiders novel patterns; a medley of memories, experiences, free fantasies, absurdities, and improvisations.'

The non realistic manner of Strindberg and Wedekind was, however, taken to an extreme, by some dramatist of the nineteen twenties. The harsh realities of the post war scenario made the new playwrights hasten to find an answer and declare it. Character was depersonalized, was given a typical, not an individual background. All these features of expressionism find an abundant expression in Eugene O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones* and *The Hairy Ape*. Jones and Yank are purely symbolic figures, moulded entirely by the social pressures of past and present.

As the focus of expressionism is on the psychological responses of an individual to the external circumstances, in *The Emperor Jones* O'Neill made thoughts more important than deeds by minimizing the external and maximizing the internal action. It was Jung's theory of the racial unconscious which influenced O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones*. The hallucinations that appear to Brutus Jones during his wild night in the forest are at first personal memories, and then become racial memories as he regresses deeper and deeper into his primitive past under the pressure of fear. The personal memories are of the pullman porter whom he killed in a crap game, the chain gang from which he escaped, and 'Little Formless Fears.' The racial memories are of a Southern slave auction in which he is for sale, a slave ship in which Negroes are being brought from Africa, and finally of a Congo witch-doctor who demands Jones' sacrifice. In a hypnotized state he crawls on his belly toward the crocodile at the command of the witch-doctor and finally uses his silver bullet to shoot the crocodile. Each racial memory, of course, might be explained as part of the folklore a Negro child could have heard from his mother; but the thematic basis for the play is apparently Jung's regression to the primitive – to the racial unconscious.

The Jungian psychoanalyst, C.P. Oberndorf, endorsed O'Neill's application of Jung's concepts:

> The archaic unconscious of Jung postulates a very far distant heritage which nevertheless persists in every person as a vital influence – the racial unconscious. Eugene O'Neill has relied upon this theory for the

> fears which grip a pursued Negro in his drama *The Emperor Jones.* Here, the threats to which his successive ancestors were subjected from the primitive jungle in Africa to slave days in America rise up before the terrified Negro as he gropes his way through the darkness of a tropical jungle night. (106)

In *The Emperor Jones* the use of a Negro as the leading character clearly indicates the nature of the spiritual struggle, especially when Brutus Jones, in his fevered fantasies, recedes, with atavistic directness, to days of slavery and bondage in the galleys. It is not a question of superiority or inferiority of race, but of the historical symbol which the Negro has become, through centuries of bondage. The beats of the tom-tom starting at the rate of human pulse and rising bit by bit as a fevered pulse would rise and blended with the visual images created in the jungle by a fevered brain are used to express an emotional climax of rare intensity. But the intensity of spiritual struggle is even greater. So terrible is the impact of the drum beats that the conscious resistance of the protagonist goes to pieces making it possible for the images of his mind to surface themselves. The beating of the tom-tom in the forest is symbolic of the growing fear in the heart of a half terrified negro; the witch doctor's grotesque contortions are the projections of protagonist's own proud and violent nature; the crocodile is an embodiment of the forces of evil within Jones' own perverted mind. The edge of great forest is an extensive symbolization of both the glory and horror of his freedom, of both his terrifying patience and his sensuous isolation. As Jones proceeds lost in the forest, the episodes from his criminal past haunt him, injuring his pride and crippling his will. He descends through successive levels of super-ego, ego and personal unconscious until he descends into the darkling maelstrom of his racial unconscious with an atavistic directness.

Another feature of expressionism is to be found in the structure of the play itself. Edwin Engel, like several other critics, is enchanted by the dramatic power and structural unity of the play. He says:

> O'Neill achieved a remarkable concentration of dramatic power by means of several unifying effects. After the first scene, the action occurs between the dusk of one afternoon and dawn of the following day in, or on the edge of, the Great

> Forest. The successive episodes are synchronized with Jones's revolver, the chamber of which contains approximately as many cartridges as there are scenes; as the gun is discharged the scene changes, approaching the point where the sixth bullet, the silver one, coincides with the completed reversion to savagery. The beating tom-tom also serves as an important unifying factor, symbolizing as it does the pervasive and inescapable presence of the primitive. Together with the revolver, it governs the inexorable movement towards the primeval spatially and temporally. For the tom-tom beats in the camp of the 'bush niggers' to which Jones is helplessly drawn, and it beats in Jones's body, representing the primitive blood which charges through his arteries. Beginning at a rate corresponding to the normal pulse beat and only faintly heard, it becomes perceptibly louder and more rapid as Jones becomes increasingly terror stricken, as his visions are regressively aboriginal, as he approaches the camp of the 'bush niggers'. When he is finally killed with a silver bullet, the tom-tom instantly ceases. An additional source of unity is to be found in the character of the play itself throughout the six middle scenes, for here it becomes a monodrama the action of which occurs within the infected mind of the single character.

Expressionism depicts the character as an embodiment of an idea. The scene of this final vision is laid at a stone altar near a tree – sexual as well as religious symbols. Jones has shed the last layer of his civilized outward self and has gone back to the dark, primitive world of the unconscious, where physical and spiritual birth is one. He kills his terrifying crocodile with the silver bullet he kept for himself as a talisman of good luck. From the symbolism of the dance and the use of the silver bullet, we know that the evil represented by the crocodile is the evil of the self, that in killing it Jones has killed himself – at least, that distorted image of the self which was his life motivation. He has performed the justice demanded by the dance.

In *The Hairy Ape*, expressionism finds its way in the quality of introverted fantasy which remains the hallmark of the play. Even the stage directions of O'Neill call for

deliberate unreality. Focusing on the setting of the play, Richard Dana Skinner says, "The treatment of this scene, or of any other scene in the play, should by no means be naturalistic. The effect sought after is a cramped space in the bowels of a ship, imprisoned by white steel". O'Neill repeatedly describes the chorus of stokers' voices as having a 'brazen metallic quality as if, their throats were phonograph horns'. The entire play evokes the impression of a subconscious dream, rather than an attempt at a realistic drama. The stoke hole becomes a symbol of hell. *The Hairy Ape* depicts the vision of O'Neill's Inferno. O'Neill makes use of the expressionistic devices to show the psychological responses of his central character. As the play develops it grows more and more fantastic, leaving realism behind. Everything is presented, not as it is, but as it would seem to the disordered mind of Yank. Fifth Avenue, a region of shops displaying articles of fantastic luxury bearing price cards marked with astronomical figures, is inhabited by a race of frock-coated robots incapable of becoming aware of even his physical existence. Somewhat later he is rejected from a radical meeting in which, now that he has grown violent, he believed he must certainly belong, and, finally, he wanders to the zoo where he beholds in a cage the great ape. At last he has found a creature who seems more like himself than any he has seen since he left the stoke-hole. He thinks, he has found the place where he 'belongs'. As he advances toward the cage the ape stretches out his arms. But it is not, as he supposes, to welcome him as a brother. It is to crush him to death and furnish the final proof that one variety of hairy ape does not 'belong' even in a zoo.

An expressionistic drama requires a fundamental change it its treatment of dramatic action and characterization. This characteristic fragmentation or distortion of their substance gives an opportunity to the dramatist to exercise his creative imagination. The distortion could be motivated either by a character's state of mind as he views reality from a fevered and deranged mindset as exemplified in *The Emperor Jones* or by the authors intention to make a figurative appraisal of man and world revealing his own point of view. In *The Hairy Ape* O'Neill uses both these features. Commenting on the psychological symbolism in the play Doris V. Folk says:

> Since Mildred has stripped away the ideal which dignified the body and the slow mind within it, the body has

> become the only symbol of self, and constitutes a prison. From this point onward, Yank devotes himself to an attempt to escape which only makes him more aware of the strength of the barrier, and the more hopeless it is for him to attempt to tear it down. (127)

Among the other changes brought into the structure and texture of drama by expressionism, the change in dialogue was especially notable. Dialogue was subjected to weird distortions and abbreviations, so that it became frequently telegraphic, enigmatic and sometimes violent. *The Hairy Ape* employs this kind of telegraphic and violent speech which shows the wrath and spiritual anguish of the protagonist. The last scene of the play is one of O'Neill's most memorable strokes of fantasy, when the bewildered Yank finds himself face to face with a gorilla in the Zoo. Yank talks aloud to the gorilla, which seems to understand him. He says:

> I s'pose yuh wanter know what I'm doin' here, huh? he asks, I been warmin' a bench down to de Battery – ever since last night. Sure. I seen de sun come up. Dat was pretty, too – all red and pink and green. I was lookin' at de skyscrapers – steel – and all de ships comin' in, sailin' out, all over de oith – and dey was steel, too. De sun was warm, dey wasn't no clouds, and dere was a breeze blowin'. Sure, it was great stuff. I got it aw right – what Paddy said about dat bein' de right dope – on'y I could't get in it, see? I couldn't belong in dat. It was over my head. And I kept tinkin – and den I beat it up, here to see what youse was like. (187)

This whole passage becomes a terrifying picture of a soul that has slipped its anchor to the world. Yank even feels that the ape is happier than him—a deep and rich recognition that man, even if he would, cannot find himself by going back to the beast.

O'Neill does not want this play to be the tragedy of Yank, an individual. Yank is more than an individual. He becomes a profound symbol of the deep protest that rises like a wave against the whole structure of modern civilization. He is a man crying out against a system which has not only exploited man's body but has also caused a continuous damage to his spirit. The play is not a protest against low wages and

unemployment as is the case in the traditional social drama but it is a condemnation of the whole structure of machine civilization, a civilization which succeeds only when it destroys the psychological well-being of those who make it possible.

The upshot of the above analysis is that in O'Neill's plays the dramatic form and styles of acting and stage production were more drastically altered by expressionism than by any other style.

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