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AN ECOCRITICAL STUDY OF EUGENE O'NEILL'S *THE EMPEROR JONES*

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ABSTRACT

In the latter part of the twentieth century many influential writers and activists were instrumental in awakening global sensibility on an impending ecological disaster which eventually led to the inauguration of Ecocriticism. Superficially it seemed as an aberration from Romantic ruminations on nature as a mere background or setting. Ecocentered reading of familiar texts differed from traditional reading for its critique of anthropocentric views on nature. Ecocritics rejected western culture and religious beliefs which upheld man's supremacy over nature. Conventional reading of the play *The Emperor Jones* (TEJ) by American playwright Eugene O'Neill focused on Expressionism and other such critical debates. But from an ecocritical perspective the focus of attention is shifted to the outside or physical environment. Representation of nature is brought into the critical center from the critical periphery. Ecocentered reading helps to identify the malaise of civilized man, represented by Jones in the play, is his alienation from nature. This civilizational illness can be cured by a reunion of humanity and nature. Jones, frightened of the revolt of the natives, flees from the palace to the forest and is haunted by his own sins which emerge out of the darkness as formless fears. His own misdeeds radiate negative energies and such an entropic system leads to his deterioration and breakdown. Jones' journey from palace to forest, from civilization to primitivism, from culture to nature is not regression but his realization of reality. Finally he kills himself with his own weapon, self-sacrifice for the expiation of his sins.

Key words: Civilization, ecocriticism, entropy.

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INTRODUCTION

Theatre is a unique medium that simultaneously entertains and enlightens people. From time immemorial plays have exposed and criticized political and social situations. In the twentieth century numerous socially committed playwrights have used myriad themes and techniques to expose the malaise of modern culture and modern man's fear, frustrations and despair. Playwrights of post-modern era were keen to

explore the inner recesses of human psyche and in order to objectify, dramatically, the basic inner reality of man they have resorted to technical innovations. The most important feature of the American Theatre after 1916 is its unyielding experimentalism-rejection of conventional acting and staging techniques.

Eugene O' Neill, one such experimental playwright has exhaustively availed himself of all expressionistic techniques to expose inner conflicts

of man. O' Neill's *The Emperor Jones* is a one man play and in Brutus Jones we have a powerful dramatic characterization of an individual impaired by two paradoxical instincts in his nature. On the one hand, he is an imperious, self-confident man, disdainful of the peonage and superstitiousness of his own race and on the other there is the mystified, agitated Negro, victim of his own past sins. There are in the play, dramatic devices, inanimate actors, external to Jones and which do not pertain directly to his nature. The protagonist, Brutus Jones is not an individual, but a representative of a type – human race – and the play can be interpreted as a critique of the dehumanizing impact of industrialization.

The play *The Emperor Jones* explores the tribe bound heredity fettered soul of a Negro lying underneath the mask of an impotent and alien culture. The play falls into eight short scenes of which first and last are realistic and the intervening short scenes are scenes of fantasy. Brutus Jones, a Negro Pullman porter comes to a West Indies island, with the help of a white cockney trader, Smithers, he becomes the emperor of the island. He fabricates a story that he cannot be killed by a lead bullet; only a silver bullet can kill him. By dint of good luck, he just misses a gunshot aimed at him and the natives are convinced, they deify him and he is considered a miracle out of the Bible. Later the natives stand in rebellion and Jones escapes from the palace to the forest. The natives assemble at a distant hill and beat the tom-tom to announce the beginning of their religious ceremony.

O' Neill uses fear as an anesthetic to dissect the schizophrenic personality of Jones. He tries to explore the true colour and texture of his soul covered by assumed culture and borrowed religion. The shattering potency of this emotion, fear, disintegrates his personality. Jones fear is both external and internal. His external fear is that of being chased by rebellious subjects and the internal fear arises from memories of his own sinful past. So his flight through forest is not from his subjects alone but from himself. But there is no escape either from his own men or from his own misdeeds. He is trapped in the dark forest.

(The WITCH-DOCTOR points with his wand to the sacred tree, to the river beyond, to the altar, and finally to JONES with a ferocious command. JONES seems to sense the meaning of this. It is he who must offer himself for sacrifice. He beats his forehead abjectly to the ground, moaning hysterically). TEJ32

The evil of the self-represented by crocodile god demands sacrifice and Jones kills himself. He realizes evil has been his god and the sins of the self-demand expiation

In the first scene of the play Brutus Jones is a confident emperor but has the foresight that he will not be emperor forever. As the play proceeds Jones is gradually deprived of his own overwhelming self-confidence and the accoutrements of borrowed culture. He undertakes a journey from slavery towards wealth and freedom. He falls a victim to socio economic pressures as he desperately attempts to find meaning in life. In order to liberate himself from bondage to certain human institutions he revolts against them but after having achieved the desired freedom he himself falls victim to such institutions. He feels comfort in an alien culture and becomes emperor through conceit and treachery, using all instruments of exploitation. He embraces business philosophy and dollar idolatry of western civilization. He has the craftsmanship to skillfully employ dehumanizing neo-colonial ideologies to subjugate the natives of the island. Driven by the ruthless predatory impulses he enters the territory of the natives and subordinates them. But their ritualized submission gradually gives way to a threat display. Jones knows his palace is not an insular comfort zone. He obviates the revolt of the natives. When he knows that the Emperor game is up he places his reliance upon nature. He flees from his palace to the forest. He loses himself in the great forest and realizes that the imitated values of an alien culture are only temporary defence. Unknown forms of fear and terror emerge from the forest. He is panic-stricken when he hears the pulsating rhythm of native drums. The phantoms, witchcrafts and the eerie atmosphere, all intensifies his fear. He is haunted by visions of Porter Jeff, the Prison guard, slave market and slave ship. The more he tries to

run away from the forest the more he gets entangled in the forest.

Peter Barry states, "The ecocentred reading, by contrast, focuses *outside*, on the house and its environs, rather than inside, on the owner and his psychology." (251)

An ecocritical reading of *The Emperor Jones* will focus on the outside or the physical environment. Only the first scene of the play is set in the palace of the Emperor – a cultural artefact. "The palace is evidently situated on a high ground for beyond the portico nothing can be seen but a vista of distant hills, their summits crowned with thick groves of palm trees." (TEJ 3) The sunlight is blazing yellowly and there is the oppressive burden of heat in the air, what we see here is an Aesthetic Loss which hinders a clear view of nature's beauty, the oppressive burden of heat in the air caused by dust and smoke signals Jones's migration to a colder region, to the forest. The scene of action then moves to the forest, nature. If we turn to the four environmental areas or the landscape schema given by Peter Barry, the setting from scene two onwards is the 'scenic sublime.' Scene two begins in another ecotone and when Jones reaches there he strips off the vestures of emperor, civilized man's outfit and realizes that he stands where he ought to be. He has reached the place from where he began his journey. Civilized man's cataclysmic activities done to nature and other beings on the earth will bounce back upon him and he has to seek asylum in nature. Science and technology has alloyed nature and modern man's aesthesia.

Forest is not a mere place but becomes an elemental force literally and figuratively stripping of the paraphernalia of civilization. As expounded by ecocritics, here also forest or nature exists not as a concept but as an entity. Forest is biotope where Jones, finally sacrifices himself for all his sinful activities.

Emperor Jones flight from the palace to the forest is significant not for his reversion to the savage past but for his realization of the truth. Once he escapes from the palace he is disillusioned and understands that he has come to the place where he belongs to. "Then, apparently satisfied that he is where he ought to be, he throws himself on the

ground, dog-tired." (TEJ 17) He strips of all the emblems of emperorship. "Dere! I gits rid o' demfrippety Emperor trappin's an' I travels lighter." (TEJ 23) Though he is haunted by his own past sins, the formless fear he confronts in the forest are self-purgatory devices. Forest is the right place for meditation, for reunion with nature and expiation of worldly sins. The formless fear produces a cathartic effect on his guilt ridden soul and after absolving for all the sins he offers himself at the altar only to attain salvation.

When he enters forest he fails to recognize the place and is unable to find out stored food. He hears only the loud beating of tom-tom, fails miserably to listen to the voices of nature. The loud beating causes anxiety and stress and in its rising crescendo it frightens him. It is true that loud noise increases rate of heart beat and blood pressure and impairs sight and color vision. Such loud noise causes emotional disturbance in him and affects his psychomotor performances. Ultimately it leads to his mental breakdown and death. The loud beating of drum aggravates his fear and causes defective vision. He can't see anything clearly. He gets trapped in an entropic system. All negative energies from formless fears and noise pollution get diffused into the forest. After running for a long time he reaches the foot of a gigantic tree pursued by evil spirits and he becomes completely hypnotized. He is destined to kill himself with his own weapon.

Brutus Jones artfully dumbs down the natives with his fabricated story of silver bullet. It is ironic that the silver bullet he has treasured for his own safety boomerangs upon him. Likewise humans accrue arms and nuclear weapons under the pretext of self defence but ironically use them to annihilate his own race.

This play reiterates the failure of science and materialism. Scientific knowledge is required to have awareness on ecological catastrophe but as M.H. Abrams observes, "...all ecocritics concur that science-based knowledge of looming ecological disaster is not enough, because knowledge can lead to effective political and social action only when informed and impelled, as it is in literature, by imagination and feeling." (75) Ecological crisis can be averted by rejecting anthropocentrism ingrained in

western culture and relying on ecocentrism where
at divinity of nature is promulgated.

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