

Research Article

Reconstructing Identity from the Margin: Ambivalence in Eugene O’Neil’s play: The Emperor Jones

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Abstract

The paper seeks to explore, from a post-colonial perspective, the issues of ‘ambivalence’ as adapted into colonial discourse theory by Homi K. Bhabha, perceived in the protagonist Jones in Eugene O’Neil’s play: *The Emperor Jones*. The study attempts to place the subjectivity of the central character, which is apparently and temporarily in the centre of the hegemonic circle, in the margins of it where it actually belongs. It surveys the problems of cultural appropriation as well as ghettoisation relevant to both Jones and Smithers, the only two characters with individual identity in the play. The paper finally looks into the complexities of the psyche of Jones as a representative of them, face to face with history and unable to escape from the trappings of a colonial past.

Keywords: Identity, margin, center, ambivalence, post-colonial, discourse, cultural appropriation.

‘Yes suh, yes suh, I’se comin’ (O’Neil, 40)

‘I kill you, you white debil, if it’s de last thing I evah does! Ghost or debil, I kill you again!’ (O’Neill, 41)

Edward Said and Homi Bhabha, two of the stalwarts in post-colonial philosophy constitute a kind of sequence within the discourse by way of the difference in their ways of assessing a (post) colonial situation. Said considers margin and centre, in his case named as Middle East and colonizer West, as constituting a binary opposition of other and self. Bhabha, in his theory and praxis, has deconstructed this concept of binary in his famous idea of ‘ambivalence’, a word that has its use

in common parlance, in the psychoanalytic study and in the post-colonial sense as well. A constant oscillation between craving for one thing and wanting its opposite is what defines the term in a psychoanalytic sense. Adapted into colonial discourse theory by Bhabha the term means the state of participation and resistance exist(ing) in a patchy relation within the colonial subject, 'a simultaneous attraction toward and repulsion from an object, person or action' (Young, 1995). In the ordinary sense of the term, it, nonetheless, has the concept that helps one understand the term in its fullest sense.

Emperor Jones written by Eugene O'Neil with a black 'emperor' protagonist in the company of a white 'cockney' trader exemplifies, as is prominent in the excerpts quoted at the beginning of this paper, the conception of ambivalence in its fullest and all encompassing sense.

The quoted lines above can, perhaps, serve as pertinent beginning of a discussion about the psychological challenges of reconstructing identity from the margin that the paper is all about. As my paper concerns the concept of and the tension between margin and centre, Bhabha's rendition of the term is the closest, though not the only one, to the situation, as that explains the problems of the relationship between the central self and a decentralised other to a great extent and I would try to look at the matter in this case from that angle. Nevertheless, the paper takes into account the psychological aspect of the situation in the play. Here, we have a black jail breaker in the States, namely Brutus Jones, who consciously or unconsciously bears the collective memory of slavery and individual memory of racial discrimination against him, happens to sport with the idea of holding an 'emperor job' for himself and getting 'a mighty big bankroll' in his pocket by 'grabbin' right and left' in his empire and 'squeeze(ing) em dry'.

The ironic use of the adjective 'emperor' is an apt beginning to this tale of Jones, a Black American, and a convict in a murder case, who has killed a white prison guard and fled to an island in the West Indies because he knows that 'it ain't 'ealthy for a black to kill a white man in the States'. They burn 'em in oil'. He also knows that the 'ignorant bush niggers' in the island are 'too easy' for him and so he banks on the simplicity of these people, fools them, and declares himself an emperor, starting a tyrannical rule over them. However, even in this distant island and in his own 'empire' he is not without any white interference in his things. Here we have a white man, Smithers, initially his 'business' partner in the island and eventually a timid but malicious subordinate to the emperor. This role reversal taken place between the two has never been complete though. Smithers has always been a 'white man' to Jones and Jones has always been 'the bleedin' nigger- puttin' an 'is bloody airs' for Smithers. These two characters represent the knotty issues of margin from the points of view of both the coloniser and the colonised. They serve as voices from the centre and margin and both of them hold hybrid identities.

Smithers, staying in the Carribean Island for long time and spending time with the locals, has picked up the local accent as well as the local rum. His very appearance, as described by the author, with tanned 'sickly yellow' skin, and a 'startlingly red nose painted so by the native rum' speaks of the hybridity of his situation. The more prominent fact of the use of Black English by both Jones and Smithers undercuts the concept of binary opposition between them in this respect.

The importance of language in shaping one's or a community's identity cannot be over-stated. Language says who we are and where we come from. The 'Emperor', in this story has a heavy, almost a caricature of Black English language. He aspires to more than what he could find in the place he comes from – the margin but he stays within the language of that place. However, at the same time he speaks the white man's language in calling blacks as 'fool no-count nigger'! This constant shuttling between axis and periphery, of which language is but one example, shapes the challenges of re-articulating identity from the margin. The relation between Smithers and Jones; as between Jones and the other blacks in the play and perhaps most importantly between Jones, an aspiring emperor, and his individual and collective memory and heritage play a crucial role in problematising the clear-cut case of opposition or resistance between the centre of hegemony and the margin of it. They serve as testimonials of the challenges of movement across such lines and in thereby deconstruct the mutual and interdependent binary opposition of central self and decentralised or marginalised other and brings in the concept of 'ambivalence' in all its interpretations– literal, psychological and colonial.

The journey of Brutus Jones, an oppressed turned oppressor, from being a stowaway to being an emperor depicts the inward mobility from the fringes to the nucleus of the society and system on the whole with all the challenges concomitant to it. The most difficult challenge lies in the mind of the 'transgressor'. To survive the challenge Jones, in the play has turned himself to a one-point agenda of getting himself a 'pile o' money' by hook or by crook. As money and power lie at the centre, he has to leave his root that lies in the periphery and exploits his own people. He attempts to reject his own heritage in the process. Though his contempt for white men is easily recognisable in all his acts and speeches to Smithers and to himself, at the time of self-appraisal, he seeks the recognition of the white man only because he is the only one whose recognition matters as all the rest are only 'black trash' to him. His statement to Smithers is a case in point:

'Look-a-heah, white man! Does you think I'se a natural bo'n fool? Give me credit fo' havih' some sense, fo' Lawd's sake! Don't you s'pose I'se looked ahead and made sho'of all de chances? I'se gone out in dat big forest, pretendin'to hunt, so many times dat I knows it high an' low like a book. I could go through on dem trails wid my eyes shut.Think dese ign'rent bush nigers dat ain't got brains

enuff to know deir own names even can catch Brutus Jones? Huh, I s’pects not! Not on yo’life! Why, man, de white men went after me wid bloodhounds where I come from an’I jes’laughs at’em. It’s a shame to fool dese black trash around heah, dey’re so easy.’ (O’Neill, 21)

At the same time, it was the white prison guard whose skull he broke open in the jail and fled. It is the white planters who come in his hallucinations in the dense forest and start the bidding for auction in order to sell him as a slave and make him scream that he is a ‘free nigger’. The individual and collective memory of Jones as a Black American has shaped his opinion of whites and that becomes evident in his dealings with Smithers the moment he tries to take an upper hand on him.

‘Talk polite, white man! Talk polite, you heah me! I’m boss heah now, is you fergettin’? (O’Neill, 11)

But, the ambivalence of the situation comes from the fact that he does not want to reject ‘white’ altogether. Is it only a co-incidence that in Jones’s palace the walls, the floor and the pillars are all of white colour? His throne, painted ‘dazzling, eye-smiting scarlet’ is placed right in the centre of the white room, symbolising the act of placing himself prominently at the centre of the power structure. Is it mimicry of the white or a mockery? It is difficult to say, as both these terms are not terms in black and white. They have their shades of grey. From that, grey area originates the sense of ambivalence between the two. This dichotomy of situation is most prominently evident in the scenes set in forest because it is here where Jones is with himself without the trappings of an emperor and it is here he can converse with his own identity. With the drum beats going steadier and closer every minute reminding him of his approaching death, Jones has to, inadvertently, peer into his soul and decide his place. An expressionistic play as *The Emperor Jones* is, it has beautifully described the doubts and fears, the cravings and desperations of someone trying to reconstruct his identity from the margin in the most candid way possible.

It is interesting to note that Jones has gradually progressed in his world of inward contemplation. At the beginning it was only a group of ‘little formless fears’ that appears. At this time, his fears did not have a particular shape. There was a fear of death and the fear of ghosts or ‘hants’ in the forest. And he tries to dismiss such fear, which is a norm in his culture, but it is very much there in his mind. There were conflicting senses of guilt and achievement. There was a clash between his collective memory of slavery and his present status as an ‘emperor’. There was yet another clash between his traditional belief in witch doctors and sacrifice and a newfound support in the principle of Christianity. Each of the scenes in the forest acts as invitation for the emperor to join in that heritage to which he belongs but he seems to reject each one. The reason behind doing that is simply to disengage

himself from the 'low-flung, bush niggers' he rules and proving himself as worthy of the white world.

There are different realities for different people. As black people, Lem and his group see things differently. Their belief is strong and unfaltering. They stick to it and they get what they want. As Jones has fooled them by saying that he has got a 'strong charm' and no ordinary bullet can kill him, they have made 'stronger charm' in their side and moulded a silver bullet to kill him and waited patiently for him to step on their trap, which he does. The emperor is apparently rejecting that reality but at the same time, he is very much influenced by that. He has dismissed the existence of Hants in the forest but at the same time, he is afraid of them. Jones, it can be said without a doubt, has been leading a life of hybrid identity. His current position in the hegemonic circle clashes with his ancestral roots in a culture that for centuries has been relegated to the margin.

He has tried to sever himself from his past and from his heritage but at the same time has not been able to get another legacy to fall back on. He is not one of those people of African origin who are inseparably joined with the beliefs, folktales and the superstitions of their land. At the same time he has not been able to embrace another belief system totally from his heart as the two are mutually exclusive and in order to embrace one, forgetting the other is required which he cannot do either. Therefore, in the end he is not connected to any heritage. There is nothing to sustain him. He comes full circle by succumbing to his own past of marginalised existence. But this existence is worse than the original one. Here, neither the witch doctor nor Jesus can help him or save his life. He weeps bitterly in the lone forests. Literally brought down to a state of a man in the bush with his clothes torn, his body gashed in several places and most importantly his mind lost; he runs here and there. But there is no place for him. His cultural identity and origin that he has been trying to subdue unsuccessfully has finally not allowed him to escape into the world of plenty. On the other hand, his conscious severance of all ties with his roots has stopped him from going back to where he has come from. With a dislocated existence and a hybrid identity he unknowingly comes, symbolically and literally, to the fringes of the circle of the jungle and is killed with the silver bullet at the hands of the blacks themselves.

The concept of hybridity is very much evident in case of Smithers as well, because being a white man he can be considered as being decentered from his position of power and becoming hybridised when placed in a colonial context. Smithers finds himself dealing with and inflected by the 'other' black culture here.

The linguistic and cultural hybridisation that these two characters have gone through stresses the interdependence and the mutual construction of their subjectivity. This ambiguous and ambivalent space of cultural identity essentially deconstructs the

fixed binary opposition between the centre and the margin. In Smithers's dealing with Jones, there is a queer mixture of contempt and admiration for him. He has to admit the fact that the 'nigger' in question has got the 'nerve' that he does not have and anxiously stops Jones from going through the front door while trying to escape from the palace. But at the same time it is he who 'opes they nabs 'im an' gives 'im what's what!'

Brutus Jones is a member of a community long marginalised. Though he individually has crossed the lines of inferiority, he has not done without paying a high cost for it. Jones suffers from a constant inner contradiction. On the one hand he is a black and he cannot and does not attempt to ignore his black identity. That sense of identity is most prominently expressed in his hatred towards whites. The fact is illustrated by his statement when he threatens Smithers saying:

'You mean lynchin'd scare me? Well, I tell you, Smithers, maybe I do kill white man dere. Maybe I do. And maybe I kill another right heah 'fore long if he don't look out'.
(O'Neill, 17)

But, on the other hand he wants to go away as far as possible from his black identity because of the stigma of being uncivilised, superstitious and foolish people that they have. He has accepted western belief system at least apparently and he does that because he wants to move away from the fringes of society and hegemony and prove himself to be cultured, powerful and sophisticated. That is why, when trying to talk himself into confidence at the time of one of the series of nervous breakdowns he had in the forest, he chastises himself by saying, 'Is you civilised, or is you like disignirent black niggers heah?' But the fact that he is one of *these* 'niggers' is clear to the audience and also to himself from everything around him that even he has to see and admit even if he does not want to. His looks, as is described by the author, as that of a full-blooded 'negro' with features that are 'typically negroid' is the first thing that greets the audience. The language he speaks and most importantly his culture, heritage and belief system that he has internalised and that constitute his part of being are things that do not allow him to be anything else other than a black man. The more he tries to go away from his roots, the more forcefully he falls flat and face down into the trappings of it because these are all within him. Maybe that is why, he spontaneously calls himself in one of his soliloquies, 'You full nigger'.

This is a terrible conflict that can and does rock an individual from within. The simultaneous sense of love and hatred; belongingness and repulsion towards a particular cultural and racial identity have eventually left him without any sense of identity at all.

This pull of opposites is very clearly expressed in each and every of his hallucinations in the forest at night when he was trying to escape from the land.

When the ghostly prison guard in the dark forest points at him with his whip, he succumbs with a servile mumble, 'Yes suh, yes suh! I is comin'. But almost immediately his hatred and defiance gets better of him and he shouts, 'I kills you, you white debil'. No matter how much powerful he becomes as an emperor, he cannot escape from his individual experience of racial discrimination and his collective memory of slavery. In another of the hallucinations of the forest where a ghostly slave auction market is shown to be in full business, Jones becomes an easy 'object' of auction almost spontaneously as if that is the most normal thing ever. He stands cowering on the stone resembling an auction block with illusionary auctioneer and potential buyers around him. But again the second identity within him comes out and 'over his face abject terror gives way to a ... gradual realisation' and he shouts with overwhelming hatred and fear:

'What you all doin white folks? ... And you sells me? And you buys me? I shows you I is a free nigger, damn you souls'.
(O'Neill, 45)

A series of such inner contradiction combined with fear of death, sense of guilt breaks Jones down totally and it is his black identity with all its concomitant features that get an absolute upper hand over him. It is the witch doctor, in yet another hallucination, with his stained red body and charm stick who gets his obedience; and as audience even we can identify the uncanny similarity between the witch doctor's red body and Jones's 'bright eye smitting scarlet' throne in the white room, shown in the opening scene, as both seem to point towards his cultural identity. In the forest, with the order from the witch doctor, Jones in a fascinated way, readies himself to be sacrificed and devoured by a magical monster crocodile. This is supposed to be the punishment meted out to him for his sins. He accepts the fact, though at the same time he cannot forget the preachings of the Baptist church and pleads to Lord Jesus for mercy. But finally sacrifice is done, not to the waiting crocodile but to the waiting black protestors on the edge of the forest. It is in this occasion that he wasted his last bullet in his revolver to get rid of the witch doctor and the monster and also in the process gave clear indication of his exact location to his enemies by the sound of the gun shot. After this, the completely broken down Jones had just to fall in the hands of the enemy to be killed by them very easily. Literally and symbolically, he comes out in the margin of the forest after losing his path in the density of the centre of it. And his enemies are again both literally and symbolically the ones who reside in the margin. Lem and his associates belong to the margin and they did not have to go to the centre to kill Jones, rather Jones comes back to the margin to be killed by them. Therefore, it is the black identity situated at the periphery of the hegemonic circle but, at the same time constituting the central core of Jones as an individual that wins in every respect. It is not the 'strong charm' of Lem that killed him rather it is the ambivalence within Jones that made the 'strong charm' stronger and did the trick.

The ambivalence that existed within a ‘stowaway’ turned ‘emperor’ is too wide in meaning to be defined by colonial, psycho-analytic or mere dictionary connotation of the word. Rather it consists of all of them and may be even something more.

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