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EUGENE O'NEILL'S THE EMPEROR JONES AS A 'SPIRITUAL WASTELAND'

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ABSTRACT

The play *The Emperor Jones* discusses not only the socio-cultural issues but also the spiritual issues. First World War, Russian Revolution and other upheavals of the world made man uncomfortable. These events changed man's views towards life. Man's belief on religion and religious dogmas became futile due to the killings, bombings, injustice and inhuman acts. O'Neill has also elucidated the contemporary problems in the play. He has discussed the problems of Negro in the play. Although the plays deals with social problems and economic exploitation, but it has also spiritual degradation.

Key words: Spiritual decay, cynicism and brutishness, isolation, ethical and religious values.

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The present paper focuses on the spiritual aspect in *The Emperor Jones*. The play is an excellent synthesis of realism and expressionism. The playwright has explored the contemporary social issues in the play. While discussing socio-economic problems, he also peeps into the soul of the modern men through the character of Brutus Jones. Like T.S. Eliot, he is a flash-bearer of the ethical and religious values not only of western society but also of the whole world. Although the play has social and cultural dimension, it has also spiritual dimension. O'Neill has searched his identity at social and cultural level at the same time at spiritual level. We find the socio-cultural issue at surface level but at core spirituality lingers in the play.

The play is an evidence of dissatisfaction of earlier dramatic tradition. O'Neill wanted to write about contemporary life. Earlier playwrights had little relation to the facts of life. His plays are concerned with the minute observation of modern men.

In the pursuit of material joy of life men became isolated in the world. They are careless about the religious and ethical values. The whole human race decayed due to the First World War. Modern men's spirituality lost its way in the forest of materialism, cynicism, corruption and treachery. Brutus Jones, a self-announced King of the Island, thinks himself powerful man than other Negro natives. He takes advantage of their simplicity, superstition and illiteracy. He compels them kneel down on the ground in the way ringmaster compels to kneel down animals of circus. He himself says that he put aside Christ and Christian values in the self. The use of Negro clearly indicates the nature of the spiritual struggle especially Jones fantasies, recedes, the days of slavery and the bondage in the galleys. It is not an issue of superiority or inferiority of race.

O'Neill has depicted monotonous and tortures life as desolate and hopeless as Eliot. It is the world of horror, obsession, cynicism and brutishness. The native people or inhabitant's lives under the threat of upper class people. He defied the terrible structure of the world. The defiant courage is the keynote of the characters of O'Neill.

O'Neill tackles the problems of religion, war, women and men mercilessly in his plays. He tried to unravel the hollowness of the society and disintegration of old values in the materialistic world. Although it concerned with racial differences like O'Neill's *The Dreamy Kid* and *All Chillun Got Wings*. Under the differences of colour man is same everywhere. The language of Brutus Jones and Henry Smithers is an indication of moral corruption of society. Smithers appear not merely as a foil to Jones, but an essential figure of cultural degeneration. He runs illegal business among the poor and ignorant natives. He also helped for the establishment of power of Jones on the Island. This cunning and hypocrite businessman has no sympathy for poor and superstitious natives. Both Brutus and Smithers exploits the natives mercilessly.

Brutus Jones is an everyman. His journey from emperor to great forest signifies the journey of civilized person to primitive ancestors. Civilized man becomes soul less. The native people terrified by Jones cruelties and murders. He thinks himself more powerful than god. He acts as a soul less dictator in the beginning. But as the natives begins to over through his Kingdom he get into critical conditions. For few moments' he prays to god. It is a hypocritical prayer. But he is a proud and arrogant. He killed a white guards and Negro Jef for minor reason. He has criminal past of murders, deceptions, treachery and illegal business. People are living in such Hippocratic and treacherous kingdom. They became dead in the sense of religious value. Although the world has flourished in each and every field of knowledge, the growing discoveries in science made man engines. The man is trying to find a primitive religious instinct in modern world. Brutus Jones, in the night, waits for the light of moon through the canopy of leaves. It suggests the spiritual decay in the world. He lost in the dark forest of treachery, killings, revolt and wars of modern world and hopes of better world.

The Negro represents evil deeds, superstitions and fear full society. The beats of tom- tom identified the bombings of the First World War in which terror stricken society lived. As the beating of tom-tom increases the normal pulse rate of Jones began to increase. It makes upset to Jones.

The silver bullet is the symbol of superstitions of rich and dishonest people of the world. They have false pride of their richness and exploit the poor people ignoring ethical value. O'Neill tried to teach moral lesson to the contemporary people. By reading the play the audience can take the lesson of morality. Jones is the symbolic figure of degenerated contemporary generation. As he came in power, he ignores all religious dogmas. The pride of emperor hood, pride of power, pride of his egoism destroyed him. Man has come naked in the world and has to leave everything in the world. Money even clothing (hear trousers are in tatters, cut and misshapen shoes) of our body and other materialistic things etc has to left in the world. The real happiness lied in the welfare of the humanity.

O'Neill's personal life was not so peaceful. A failure of first marriage, the drugs addicted mother, the illness and health problem; death of his father all these instances made O'Neill dull spiritually. His lack of faith in supreme power and too much materialism is cause of his tragic fate. That is why personal experience and external circumstances forced O'Neill to write tragedy. The character of O'Neill fights against contemporary adverse circumstances. O'Neill gives us impression that modern man's life is tragic, because he has lost faith in god.

Jones represents modern mans greed. Recently people run after money to live a better life. They became greedier in this industrial age. To live a luxurious life, they extort money from poor people. Ruler, like Jones, overburdens their subjects with heavy taxes. People keep their stolen or corrupted money in the foreign banks. They rule the country not for the glory of the people but for their own benefit. Like Brutus Jones, he cares only for wealth and pelf. Even local trader and business man help in robbing natives. Like Henry Smithers, the self-interested and crafty people over ruled the innocent natives. The materialistic and greedy nature of the people made world isolated and spirituality dead or dry.

The quest for happiness is a very important aspect of O'Neill's tragic genius. The tragic aspect of O'Neill is undertaken by various critics. It is seen that it directed towards the discovery, through tragic form of the secret of happiness in the world of evil and suffering. The artist generally concerned with a quest or an exploration of reality. This exploration is undertaken with reference to a central character who is a tragic hero. The character becomes the symbol of all humanity. The tragic hero sets himself a goal towards which he struggles and pursues. The powers thwart him and lead him to his ruin which may climax with his death.

The play presents the passage of Jones towards a regenerated state. In his despair Jones begins his flight in infernal agony through dark forest. He suffers pangs of remorse of past crime. The moon does shine but its light is pale. Physical and spiritual anguish, past crimes, suffering of his race, all these shows the deep despair of the age. The great river on whose shore he finds himself. This river is the final stage his spiritual journey. Modern man is not happy with his own wrong deeds and crimes. Man's surroundings and his own life are responsible for the spiritual sterility. He wants to reach river of spiritual journey. In nutshell, there is a dilemma in modern man's mind. Like Brutus Jones, man's own sins, misdeeds ill acts and cynicism on the one hand and final ecstasy or spiritual goal is on the other hand. There is contrast among the modern people at one level they are doing inhuman activities while at other level they are recollecting Christ for help.

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