

Representation of African-American People in E. O'Neil's *The Emperor Jones*

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ABSTRACT:

In every nation's literature in the world, a play or a playwright often becomes the most predominant one and plays an effective role in the contemporary society. Accordingly, *The Emperor Jones* by Eugene O'Neil, an American, is considered one of the best and the well-known masterpieces which are written in late 1920s. This study, entitled "Representation of African-American People in E. O'Neil's *The Emperor Jones*", attempts to examine the representations of African -American people in terms of socio-historical background, culture and tradition; language and belief in E. O'Neil's *The Emperor Jones*, in the light of African-American history through the main character who struggles to resist for being an emperor while denying his own identity as an Afro-American, and, through imitating his exploiter who eventually led him to represent his own ethnicity and people. The play depicts an image of African-American society historically through several hallucinations which happened within the mind of the main character.

KEYWORDS: E. O'Neil, *The Emperor Jones*, Afro American, Culture, Language and Tradition.

1. Introduction

Literature in general, along with all its various genres, helps to create a collection of variety of information about specific nations. It apparently illustrates the role of great authors and the huge impact on their contribution to the humanity in which it could save different aspects of life such as language, culture, tradition, belief, and history. Each literature deals with the specific issues are related to the target nation. Henceforth, American literature mainly tends to emphasize particular themes and issues that are related to the American society including African-American people since it deals with the actual image of American ethnicity and culture entirely.

American drama emerged by the effort of great American playwrights who set the real American theater and cooperatively enhanced this genre into better forward by using various techniques and styles of writing. It largely played a huge role in changing theater and audience in America. Eugenie O'Neil is one of the most well-known American playwrights who used a modern style of writing such as expressionism and included the sincere image of American society in this play. *The Emperor Jones* is to be considered as an expressionist play in which it depicts the life of a part of an American society. It sheds light on the various points related to the Afro-American people through the main character, Brutus Jones. It shows an afro American society in different aspects of life. It mostly focuses on the historical and social background through a number of hallucinations in the play. Along with numerous main themes, the play attempts to represent Afro-American people through the main character in terms of socio-historical context, culture, tradition, language, and belief.

The study aims to highlight the important role of literature in terms of saving historical facts, language, and to present the image of the representation of Afro-American in E. O'Neil's *The Emperor Jones* by a white writer in American literature so as to be introduced to different readers.

Concerning the value and limitation of the study, the data collection depends on the quotations that are brought from the primary text of the play. The value of the study is to present the reliability of the literary texts in representing the targeted people and society to the world that how a character or a group of characters can stand representing a specific nation in most of the aspects of life. Therefore, the role of the main characters in *The Emperor Jones* and the writing style of the author could

create a realistic world of representation. The plot of the play is well-arranged by the author to characterize African-American people in recent years.

2. Socio- historical Background of Afro -American People

Apparently, the African-American history is to be regarded as part of American history since it deals with ethnic groups as Black American or so-called African-American in the United States of America. However, the maximum numbers of Afro-Americans are the descendants of people in Africa (Africans) who were brought by force and detained to be enslaved in the USA around 1555 to 1865. Black immigrants from Caribbean to the United States have also conventionally been regarded as Afro-American who commonly shared the same history of West Africa or probably the roots of Central Africa, and the slavery itself. (Morgan, Marcyliena 2002). Thus, it illustrated the correlation between the social norms and historical events in the African-American community.

Meanwhile, America was constructed from a variety of ethnics or cultural groups and backgrounds. Thus, people were from different parts of the world particularly Europe. Many of these people brought their own philosophies and thoughtful notions about lifetime as well as their own cultures and own cosmology. They actually had very dissimilar languages; they religiously honored diverse gods, and they had dissimilar habits of interaction with their children. Consequently, when they crossed over the Atlantic, their challenge as how one can adopt, or speak so as to know how to make certain mutual knowledge from this varied and mixed background. Thus, in spite of the fact that Africa is considered to be the most diverse continent that the Black people came from a variation of experiences who seemingly shaped the USA. They started generating a culture while all began a process of establishing several bases for interaction mainly and connecting one with another and building a future. (James 2007). Therefore, these people have most natively followed their ancestors rather than the new community which is newly constructed for them.

3. The Emperor Jones: as an Expressionist Play

In general, Expressionism is regarded to be a revolution against realism and naturalism; it searches for achieving a mental or spiritual realism more than recording external events or actions in logical sequence. (Gordon 1987). *The Emperor Jones* is

primarily an expressionistic play and the expressionist looks for solving the problematic issues by representing the soul of man in the form of external symbols: He produces figures moving vaguely on a dark stage to personify good or bad motives. O'Neill uses several literary devices including metaphor, fable, or allegory in the text. He provides captivated and powerful words to hide the voices to express the secret views and ideas in one's mind. (Grande 1948, P: 62)

The play is well-structured in which clearly shifts from an individual level of interaction to another level as a social one, distant relationships of man to humanity. In the play, O'Neill has utilized the realistic discourse that the only actual dialogue is in the first and the last scenes. In the rest of other six scenes, there are no realistic dialogues. It depends on the monologue and what precisely happens inside the mind of the main character, Jones. Due to the use of the expressionistic technique of dialogue, throughout the six scenes, the play turns into another type is mono drama. All the actions in mono dramatic events occur within the diseased and infected mind of the character Jones. The tone of the expressionistic play is disappointing and pessimistic (Sharma 1985. P: 2). Eventually, the play leads to an end with a very tragic event.

4. Cultural and Traditional Representation

Apparently, the concept of culture is certainly hard to be defined in a wider prospective since it refers to the cultural studies and sociology. It is a set or a collection of thoughts and meanings that are shared among a specific ethnic or group of people in a particular society. It is sociologically well-defined by a number of sociologists in lots of studies; it comprehensibly elucidates the role and meaning of culture itself. "Culture is about "shared meanings*" (Hall, 1997, P: 5).

Meanwhile, a tradition is a process of conveying customs or beliefs from one generation into another that has happened anciently and existed for a long time. Moreover, people do often start revitalizing the past into present in a way which they glorify the ancestors and historical or cultural heritage is well-preserved as a part of their privatization and home properties. O'Neil depicts the traditional way of Afro-Americans' life since the beginning of the play to its end. It is clear that the main character and other islanders believed the tradition which made them think differently as other people. During the ritual ceremonies, African-American people believed in certain shapes and figures as it is found in the play, "the figure of the CONGO WITCH-DOCTOR appears." (O'Neill 2011, 16). In addition, the announcement of breaking the wars out to the people in the play could reflect the beliefs and communicative signs such as the sound of beating Drum, - "What's dat drum beatin' fo'?" (O'Neill 2011, 8). Throughout the play, the traditional aspects of islanders were deeply rooted.

However, the practice of representation comprises many aspects to produce the actual image of an ethnic group or nation to represent cultural needs to centralize the essential elements of the society such as language, beliefs, tradition, culture, and history. Language with its various communicative types is all thoughts, meanings, ideas and feelings are represented. Hence, to culturally represent a specific nation one need to make use of a language as an active mean for conveying and carrying ideas along with powerful meanings. Additionally, the rest of social aspects including history, tradition, and beliefs are correlated to the representation processes by which meaning is culturally produced (HALL, 1997, P: 4). Therefore, meanings or expressions are given verbally or by a symbolic practice to the notion of belonging to a national and cultural identity in any literary work is considered as a definite representation.

5. Society and History

The term Society is generally defined as a community or a group of people living in an organized way and in a specific

location in which human beings are sharing in terms of culture and tradition by a powerful mean as language to create an effective social territory. Society contains a set of different group of people who commonly live and work together in a specific place are regarded as a moral community where they really feel that they belong to a nation which forces them to act and behave suitably towards one another (Eriksen 2004, P: 8). However, the concept of history is considered as a study of the past and documentation of the previous periods of time. The most eventful occurrences are historically documented as well-known memorial events by various historians. Based on the realistic descriptive records and academic papers, they objectively survey and analyze the series of the past events. As it is very clear from the text of the play, the playwright depicts the historical events of slaves in the main character's life. "Finally a batch of slaves are led in from the left by an attendant—three men of different ages, two women, one with a baby in her arms, nursing. They are placed to the left of the stump, beside JONES." (O'Neill 2011, 14), It describes the image of historical events where African people were sold and transferred to another country. Even though, the process of sealing is expressively stated by the author and how salved: were auctioned "AUCTIONEER", "slave-market", "They group themselves about the stump". (O'Neill 2011, 14)

Commonly, history of slavery is very ancient and it began with the emergence of empires and colonization from various periods since the ancient time of old Roman empire to nineteenth century. Traditionally, it consists of enslaving people with their properties in favor of the other ones. Nevertheless, it is almost increased by developing the societies to gain the advantages by an inexpensive human employment. Apparently, slavery seemed to be emerged in America in the late 17th century as an outcome of the business marketplace. Many of that enslaved people were from Africa; they were brought by ships so as to be laborers working in huge agricultural farms as free labor in US "letting themselves follow the long roll of a ship at sea" (O'Neill 2011, 13). The playwright attempted to document all the steps of the process of African slavery through Brutus Jones' hallucinations very descriptively.

Historians regarded that African American crime and punishment: since the first coming ship of enslaved people to US from the time of slavery to the present. It takes in certain greatest dramatic and notorious events in the American history, from discrimination, exploitation, and wars on drugs (Morgan, Marcyliena 2002). It also investigates how African Americans have been historically challenged and forced to reform them by using tactics as varied as legitimate demands, non-violent protests and armed self-defense.

Finally, history is an attempt to reveal the entities in their presences (Heidegger 1985); it examines the historical facts on a precise nation. There is a strong correlation and well-connected relationship between history and society. More interestingly, society makes history, while history could document the social events more realistically. "Archaeologists and historians alike were delighted to uncover a priceless map of the past" (Bell 2002.P: 18). Accordingly, each historian provided various documentations to notice the socio historical background of a nation including African American people.

6. Language and Beliefs

Language is an active means of verbal expression, plus, one of the fundamental principles which helps human beings to convey and exchange ideas, feelings, and information from one to another. It is highly regarded as a communicative method which comprises a set of sounds and written symbols that are used by the people of a specific country or region. Each nation has its own formal and regional or vernacular language that varies from one ethnic group to another. People are most

clearly familiarized by the influence and the type of language itself. More importantly, it is the basic and essential element for identity and culture. Language is the key connection between society and culture. One can culturally represent his own society by his own language and its most distinctive features (Wareing USA, P:112). There are several systematic ways that language is used to produce texts that are alike or dissimilar from one another; it can also link various selections in the texts to social and cultural context.

Throughout reading the text of *The Emperor Jones*, it is written in English in which it is totally different from standard and

modern English, or even the language which was used by white people in the contemporary time. In the following quotation “Dey’s some tings I ain’t got to be tole. I kin see ‘em in folk’s eyes” (O’Neill 2011, 4). It shows the misspelling and the sound or pronunciation are vary from Brutus’s speech. While a speech by a white character is in a Standard English language such as “They got silver bullets?” (O’Neill 2011, 18). It is actually obvious that the playwright wrote the text in African- American English language with its structural and grammatical mistakes as broken English, as it is shown in the following table:

Table 1: Language differences

<i>Afro- American English Language In the text of the play</i>	<i>Standard English Language in America</i>
“I has de silver bullet “ (O’Neill 2011, 5)	I have the silver bullet
“Dey was only “ (O’Neill 2011, 11)	They were only
“Dey’re gone” (O’Neill 2011, 11)	They’re gone
“Tse got five lead bullets in dis gun “ (O’Neill 2011, 8)	I have got five lead bullets in this gun

Source: O’Neill 2011

Accordingly, the play itself is a collection of Afro-American (Black) English dialect and vernacular, Black English Vernacular (BEV), or it is a controversial term which is the variety of English natively spoken by highest working- and middle-class African Americans and certain Black Canadians, particularly in metropolitan communities. In a Sociolinguistic analysis, having this type of unique pronunciation, syntax, and features of vocabulary, Vernacular English of Afro-American is engaged by middle-class African Americans is considered as very casual and also informal when it compared with the Standard English language.

7. Belief

Beliefs and faith are set of ideological values to accept something or the existence of someone is true. Most of these beliefs are traced to the ancient religious theories or social constrictive norms that people practiced in the society. They are also collective perception of major facts of leading behavior. Psychologically, the impact of beliefs is playing a great role in the behavior of human beings such as personal commitments, in particular. Beliefs are the key representative for a one who would endeavor to represent his own nation and social or cultural identity.

In spite of the fact that historians have earlier explored the role of magical acts in the African American culture, considerably; the play is regarded as a historical documentation of those who believed in the concept of witchcraft; magic and that belief in its presence has persevered throughout documented history. In the play, islanders and including Brutus Jones believed in the magic power as Jones pretends to be only killed by a silver bullet, “De silver bullet! You don’t git me yit!” (O’Neill 2011, 17). The characters have presented the magic power between cultures and religions worldwide; they might have been defined by the writer as a primitive in their cultures, and they continued to give an important role to it in many ways.

8. Conclusion

The Emperor Jones is the play which is full of strong historical context that was born since the emerging of American culture which developed throughout the renovation of modernizing process during the 1920s. Likewise, the problems and issues of discrimination and corruption as well as racism are found with the full of tragic events in the text of the story. In accordance with the playwright O’Neill, modern tragedy is the mental type

that affects the human beings. Humans could not get rid of fate or history that was built based on the Western culture to inform the humanity to control those people around one or to be powerful as being. The play is indicating that it is the documentation to prove the growth and collapse of a black character as an emperor. *The Emperor Jones* is a traumatic play which involves America’s ethnic history as racial which makes a painful hostility between the manner and the people or audiences. It is also an attempt to examine the race and discrimination on a number of levels while it indirectly shows the main characters and other black ones to represent the Afro-American people with different prospective. Therefore, O’Neill believed that the only way to escape from reality was through insanity, drink, drugs, and dreams. He used different approaches like: realism, expressionism, naturalism, symbolism, and fantasy. The playwright found hallucination as a tool to determine the inside of the black character which expresses the aspects of human tragedy. Moreover, he strongly thought that there was a conflict between man’s ambitious and hard life which holds back man’s unfaithful dreams.

The importance of this study is to highlight the most effective aspect of representation not only for Afro-American people also for the other nations. The representation is creating an image to show the reality of one’s being. It includes certain tools and measures to figure out the most important parts. The study pointed out that language and belief, society and history which are correlated to each other, and tradition and culture are the key factors of representation. The play creates an image of a black man in the shape of white emperor who truly tries to be as an imitator of white colonies. But, he was unable to get rid of his own black heritage which enforced him to represent as pure Afro-American as he was. However, the playwright is criticized as a racial author while he was successful to present the inside of a black skinned murderer who brought himself to be a failure emperor. The study examines other sides of the play to figure out the pure image of an Afro-American character among all the characteristics of white people as a tyrannical emperor over the nation that he had in the story.

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تمثيل الأمريكيين من أصل أفريقي في مسرحية الإمبراطور جونز للكاتب يوجين أونيل

الملخص:

في أدب كل دولة في العالم ، غالباً ما تصبح المسرحية أو الكاتب المسرحي هو الأكثر انتشاراً ويمارس دوراً فعالاً في المجتمع المعاصر. وفقاً لذلك ، يعتبر الإمبراطور جونز من قبل يوجين أونيل ، الكاتب الأمريكي ، واحداً من أفضل وأشهر الروائع المكتوبة في أواخر عشرينيات القرن العشرين. تحاول هذه الدراسة ، تحت عنوان " تمثيل الأمريكيين من أصل أفريقي في مسرحية الإمبراطور جونز للكاتب يوجين أونيل" ، فحص تمثيلات الأفارقة الأمريكيين من حيث الخلفية الاجتماعية والثقافية والتقاليد. اللغة المعتقدات في مسرحية الإمبراطور جونز ل يوجين أونيل، في ضوء التاريخ الأمريكي الأفريقي من خلال الشخصية الرئيسية التي يكافح من أجل المقاومة لكونها إمبراطوراً بينما تنكر هويته كأمركي من أصل أفريقي ، ومن خلال تقليد مستغله الذي قاده في نهاية المطاف لتمثيل عرقه وشعبه. تصور المسرحية صورة للمجتمع الأمريكي الأفريقي تاريخياً من خلال العديد من الهلوسة التي حدثت في ذهن الشخصية الرئيسية.

الكلمات الدالة: يوجين أونيل ، الإمبراطور جونز ، الأمريكيون من أصل أفريقي ، الثقافة واللغة والتقاليد.

نوينه ريا گهلی ئەفریقی-ئەمریکی د شانویا یوجین اونیل (ئیمپراتور جونز)دا

پۆختە:

د ئەدەبیاتا هەر نەتەوێهێکی د جیهانی دا، پری جارێن شانویک یان شانونفیسەک بەرچاف و بەرەلەف دین و رولەکی کاریگەر دگێن د جفاکەکی هەچرێ دا. ل گوری فێ یەکی ، شانویا ب ناف و نیشان (ئیمپراتور جونز) یا نغیسەری ئەمریکی یوجین اونیل ، دەیتە هژمارتن بەک ژ شانویین هەری نافدار و هەری باشە کول سالیڤ 1920 دا هاتیە نغیسین . ئەف فەکولینە ل ژیر ناف و نیشان " (نوينه ریا گهلی ئەفریقی-ئەمریکی ل شانویا یوجین اونیل ئیمپراتور جونز) ، هەول ددە کو فەکولینێ ل سەر نینەرانتیا گهلی ئەفریقی -ئەمریکی د رەسەندا ل سەر بنەما یا جفاکی- دیروکی: زمان و هزرویر د فێ شانویین دا خویابکەت. د فێ شانویا ئیمپراتور جونز دا ، د روناها یا دیروکا گهلی ئەفریقی -ئەمریکی دا ب ریکا کارەکتەری سەرەکی کو هەول و تییکوشینێ دکت ژبو بدەستفە ئینانا هێزی کو ببە ئیمپراتور و بسەرکەفیت دەما کو ناسنامە یا خو وەکی ئەفریقی -ئەمریکی ئینکار دکت ، و ب ریکا لاساییکرنا داگیرکەری خو کو دبە سەدەمێ نینەرانتیا کرنا گهلی خو بقی شیوێ د چیرۆکی دا. ئەف شانویە وینە یەکی جفاکی دیروکی یی گهلی ئەفریقی -ئەمریکی ددەته خویاکرن بریکا چەند هەلوسا کو د هزرا کارەکتەری سەرەکی دەیتە رویدان .

په یقین سەرەکی: یوجین اونیل ، ئیمپراتور جونز، گهلی ئەفریقی-ئەمریکی که لتورو زمان، دابونەریت.