

VICTIM OF CAPITALIST CONSCIOUSNESS: A MARXIST READING OF EUGENE O'NEIL'S THE HAIRY APE AND LONG DAY'S JOURNEY INTO NIGHTS

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Abstract

In the modern world human beings are controlled both internally and externally by the hegemonic power of capitalist society. It sheds off the individuality of a person and objectifies them into a machine-like state. Eugene O'Neil with his keen observation sketches the predicament of human beings in this modern world. He delves into the psychic landscape of his characters and reveals the nature of consciousness under capitalism. However, this article concentrates on O'Neil's two plays, *The Hairy Ape* and *Long Day's Journey into Nights* to show how apparently characters from different worlds face the same sufferings under the shed of this capitalist world and attempts to unmask the invisible control of the capitalist society. It also examines how hegemony of capitalist society controls the perception and thought process of an individual.

Keywords: Hegemony, Consciousness, Predicament, Capitalism, Perception

Introduction

Eugene O'Neil, one of the most renowned American playwrights of the twentieth century, is considered one of the pioneers of modern drama. He has transformed American drama from the world of artificial one into the world of terrifying reality. Being a critique of contemporary capitalist society, he examines human beings not in relation to fate and God but in relation to the social environment. He shows how human beings, psychologically if not physically, are caged in an impersonal, mechanical, urbanized and industrialized social environment. O'Neil's plays are mostly known for his expertise to delve into the psyche and sketch the inner landscape of the characters. In most of his plays he focuses on the inner dilemma that an individual faces due to the class tension in the society. His two most well-known plays, *The Hairy Ape* and *Long Day's Journey into Nights* are no exception to this. Both the plays uphold two different realities of modern world. On the one hand Bob Smith, the protagonist of *The Hairy Ape*, commonly called as Yank, upholds the wretched picture of working-class people living within capitalistic society; on the other hand, one of the main characters of *Long Day's Journey into Nights*, James Tyrone, by profession an actor, represents how one ceases to live in present status due to the past financial constraints. Many scholars have analyzed O'Neil's *The Hairy Ape* through the lens of class struggle and *Long Day's Journey*

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into nights as a psychological play. But a close glimpse of the plays shows, though apparently the setting and plots of the plays seem to be different from each other, since it is Neil's expertise to depict internal reality, both the characters represent the plight of living in a world where their decision, mode of thought and perceptions are shaped by the hegemony of capitalist society. They also highlight how the choice and decisions of the common people are generated and constructed in the name of freedom and liberty. This paper examines that both Yank and Tyrone are victims of the capitalist society the crisis of Yank being more apparent while James's crisis is far more intricate and complex.

Yank is caged both inside out within capitalist society

O'Neil's *The Hairy Ape* represents a critique of capitalist society. This play, not only projects external dominant factors of capitalism, but also shows how an individual is entangled psychologically in this machine era. He has set his protagonist, Yank, in a world where class distinction is at its height. "From a Marxist perspective; differences in socioeconomic class divide people in ways that are much more significant than differences in religion, race, ethnicity, or gender" (Tyson, 2023, p.54). In this play the social position of the characters play a crucial role in determining their identities. O'Neil has taken much endeavor to depict the first scene of the play to highlight the class discrimination of the contemporary society. The very first scene represents a ship which is divided into two halves. On the lower part there are workers, "the bewildered furious, baffled defiance of a beast in a cage" (O'Neil, 2012, p.6). The place looks like a cage "imprisoned by white steel" and "the ceiling crushes down upon the men's head" (O'Neil, 2012, p. 6). On the other hand, the upper part of the ship is something just the opposite side of the same coin. It is "one of the beautiful, vivid life of the sea all about-sunshine on the deck in a great flood, the fresh sea wind blowing across it" (O'Neil, 2012, p. 6). This ship is actually the symbolic representation of capitalist society where the privileged class enjoys all the amenities whereas the lower class is deprived of basic human rights. O'Neil further describes the workers as "hairy-chested, with long arms of tremendous power, and low receding brows above their small, fierce, resentful eyes" (O'Neil, 2012,p.6). Such intentional animalistic depiction projects the condition of the workers in a capitalistic society where human beings are dehumanized into animals. In this world, "workers are bereft of their full humanity and are thought of as 'hands' or 'the labour force' " (Barry, 2020, p.157). They train the workers to do the work repeatedly and cage them in an environment that stifle their ability to think. As a result they cease to exist as human beings and become things. But, contrast to the workers, O'Neil presents his protagonist, Yank, as a very strong, proud and confident individual. "He seems broader, fiercer, more truculent, more

powerful, more sure of himself than the rest" (O'Neil, 2012, p.6). While the other workers are only involved in physical labor, Yank is capable of thinking. However, O'Neil skillfully presents the machineries that transformed a thinking individual into an animal-like existence in this capitalist world. He minutely depicts how a confident and proud worker is crushed and fragmented and dehumanized into an animal under the machinery of capitalist control. In this world individuals are compressed into a machine-like existence where they have lost the connection with their work. Here human beings are transformed into an object which is operated according to the laws of the capitalist world. They are rather regarded as commodity. To show wretched condition of the workers O'Neil has shown them in an animal like state. Like animals these workers just do the work repeatedly without any emotional bonding or belonging. They are just treated like a machine to gear the economy of the country. Yank used to think he belongs to this steel era since workers are the nuclear power of this steel age. But the irony is even though the workers like Yank who is the integral part of this steel age, are neglected and denied of the basic human rights. In the opening of *The Hairy Ape* we see Yank is very confident and proud. He thinks of himself as an integral part of his work and believes "we belong and dey don't. Dat's all" (O'Neil, 2012, p. 13). He maintains that he belongs to the ship as opposed to the passenger in the first class. But at the end of the play Yank himself declares he does not belong to this steel era anymore. He says, "Even him didn't tink I belonged. Christ, where do I get off at? Where do I fit in?" (O'Neil, 2012, p. 76). This line explains that Yank has lost the belonging to his work. O'Neil points out the hegemonic operation of capitalistic society where the society squeezes the use value of human beings and then throws them out. To use an individual in this way it is important to control the mind lest he should deny to be used. Through the play O'Neil highlights Yank's transition from the position of "a thinker" to an ape to show, how not only the economic condition but also the mind is controlled by the capitalist super power. When Yank says he is thinking the other workers reply,

"All (repeating the word after him as one with the same cynical amused mockery): Think! (The chorused word has a brazen, metallic quality, as if their throats were phonograph horns. It is followed by a general uproar of hard, barking laughter)" (O'Neil, 2012, p. 10).

The reaction of the workers explains thinking is something that possibly this proletariat class is not supposed to do. They are very much convinced with the idea that they should not think. This indirect control over the common people is identified by Marx as 'Ideology Critique', that explains how class interests operate through different forms. "It is the nature of ideology to conceal the reality of class struggle from our perception and consciousness; and insofar as working-class people unconsciously absorb bourgeois values, they are unwittingly carriers of false

consciousness" (Leitch et al., 2010, p. 649). In a capitalist society proletariat class is used as a tool for earning money. But if this class starts to think they might create a threat against the whole system. So, this false consciousness controls them in such a way that the working-class people willingly participate in the process of control where they remain oblivious of the fact that they are being controlled. This indirect control is defined as hegemony, 'the manufactured assent to its beliefs and practices' (Leitch et al., 2010, p. 650) by the British Marxist Raymond Williams. It explains how a privileged social class can achieve cultural "hegemony" upon the mass people. Although in the beginning of the play, Yank was able to distinguish himself as an individual but as the play proceeds it is seen how gradually he nurtures the same consciousness within himself. Yank was confident and proud in his own world but Mildred, the daughter of the steel company owner, mirrors a different world in front of him and the confrontation shatters the confidence within him. When Mildred comes to meet Yank, looking at Yank, she says, "Take me away! Oh, the filthy beast" (O'Neil, 2012, p. 32). Later Long repeats Mildred calling Yank "the hairy ape". From here a noticeable change is evident as Yank internalizes the word 'beast' and starts to think himself as an ape instead of a human being. He can no longer retain his identity rather he accepts himself the way capitalist society looks at him. The point is it is not Yank who decides his identity rather it is the capitalist society that determines who he is. The "economic structure of society" develops "the fetishism of commodities" (Leitch et al., 2010, p. 648) among the individuals that they fail to respond to any other humane appeal. As it is noticeable Yank fails to develop any human relationship with his surroundings. After the confrontation with Mildred he starts to see himself through the eyes of capitalistic society. He starts to think himself as a man with a fragile sense of self. He fails to anchor his belonging to anywhere whether it is IWW or Fifth Avenue. He is rejected from everywhere and in consequence he experiences a sense of fragmentation and ultimately realizes he does not belong to the human race anymore and similarizes himself with the ape. Here O'Neil projects the similarity between the ape and Yank is both are caged as the ape is caged within the iron bar and Yank is caged by capitalist power. So, the question remains how far individuals are free in this capitalist world. Engels reiterates "economics is not the only determinant in a society and upholds the influence of human minds" (Leitch et al., 2010, p. 648). The triumph of capitalism rests on controlling human mind to perpetuate its legacy. So, Yank is caged in the society where his choice, thoughts and decisions are scarcely controlled by himself rather the control is at the hand of capitalist super power.

James Tyrone falls under the same false consciousness

Long Day's Journey into Night is known as the magnum opus of Neil's literary life. Tinged with autobiographical tone, this play presents the crisis that

Tyrone and his family goes through under this capitalist system and project show under the shade of capitalism value of money surpasses love and emotion. The plot of the play presents a story of four members in a family where all the members find fault with one another and blame each other. A close analysis will show that the problem they face is actually they look at others through the lens of capitalistic world and in consequence fail to develop family bonding among them. Tyrone's family members blame him for buying properties rather than spending for them. For their sons, Tyrone is the "OldGasperd, the miser in *The Bells*" (O'Neil,2009, p. 142). They criticize him for sending his son Edmund to a cheap sanatorium to save money. Jamie says, "Hardy only charges a dollar. That's what makes you think he's a fine doctor" (O'Neil, 2009, p. 20). They also blame their father for not taking proper care of their mother, Mary, as Jamie blames his father saying,

"The bastard of a doctor was! From what Mama's said, he was another cheap quack like Hardy! You wouldn't pay for a first-rate-" (O'Neil, 2009, p.28).

They think it is due to this cheap treatment that their father chooses for his family members, Edmund is suffering from consumption and Mary has become morpheme addicted. In the same way for Mary, he is close fisted. She blames him saying, "Everything was done in the cheapest way. Your father would never spend the money to make it right" (O'Neil, 2009, p. 31). So, from the perspective of each and every family member, Tyrone is a very materialistic person who values money rather than his family and the same attitude is present within Tyrone as well. As for Tyrone, he measures human relations in terms of "productiveness" or "use value" (Leitch et al., 2010, p. 648). For him his elder son, Jamie is an evil minded loafer since he has failed to achieve anything materially big, and his younger son, Edmund is unproductive as he is weak and sick. Being a product of capitalism, Tyrone fails to identify which one is more important for him. It is quite clear that these people are judging their relationship in terms of materialistic value. For Marx 'Under capitalism, human relations are increasingly characterized by more or less throughgoing alienation, monetization and commodification'. (Leitch et al., 2010, p. 650) Instead of appreciating each other or sharing love and understanding, they value their relationship in terms of materialistic value and in consequence they become alienated. To judge every aspect of life in terms of material value is something that falls under this 'false consciousness'. What they fail to realize the other part of the reality that O' Neil sketches with intense care through the crisis of Tyrone's family. He also points out human beings are chained both physically and mentally in this capitalist world. While talking to his sons Tyrone opens his mind in front of them and their conversation reveals how deep rooted the control of a society can be upon an individual. He reveals his father committed suicide because of financial constraints, he continues saying,

"My mother was left, a stranger, in a strange land, with four small children, me and a sister a little older and two younger than me. My two older brothers had moved to other parts. They could not help. They were hard put to it to keep themselves alive. There was no damned romance in our poverty. Twice we were evicted from the miserable hovel we called home, with my mother's few sticks of furniture thrown out in the street, and my mother and sister crying. I cried too, though I tried hard not to, because I was the man of the family. At ten years old! There was no more school for me. I worked twelve hours a day in a machine shop, learning to make files. A dirty barn of a place where rain dripped through the roof, where you roasted in summer, and there was no stove in winter, and your hands got numb with cold, where the only light came through two small filthy windows, so on grey days I'd have to sit bent over with my eyes almost touching the flies in order to see! You talk of work! And what do you think I got for it? Fifty cents a week! It's the truth! Fifty cents a week!" (O'Neil, 2009, p. 131).

In such situation the only fear that his mother had was to get old and sick and die in the poorhouse and "it was in those days" he "learned to be a miser" (O'Neil, 2009, p. 132).

This long speech explains from the childhood the financial constraints that Tyrone has faced, still control his consciousness at present and he cannot go beyond it. In Marxism "the mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life process in general. It is not consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness" (Leitch et al., 2010, p. 648). Here Tyrone is the victim of this false consciousness generated by the society. Tyrone was very destitute in his past life but at present he is quite well off. He has invested much money in different properties. "Every family wants to own its own home on its own land'-is a capitalist ideology that sells itself as natural by pointing, for example, to the fact that almost all Americans want to own their own property, without acknowledging that this desire is created in us by the capitalist culture in which we live" (Tyson, 2023, p. 58). As a result, even if he is no longer poor, he cannot come out of the cocoons of insecurity of being poor or the society did not let him to come out of it. Back of his mind, he still has the fear of being poor again as he said "once you've learned the lesson, it's hard to unlearn it" (O'Neil, 2009, p. 132). The point is the misery that capitalism imposes on the masses is difficult to unlearn. So it is not only money that matters rather the consciousness of a person matters to a large extent to mould one's character. Tyrone has become successful to change his economic status but fails to cater the insecurity imprinted within his mind. It would be wrong to say that Tyrone does not care for his family. He cares but the control of the society has outnumbered his emotion. As the play develops its plot reveals how integrally Tyrone's life is

constrained by the socioeconomic condition of the society. Under the triumphs of capitalism Tyrone could not choose his profession to chase his passion rather he choose his profession only to earn money. According to Karl Marx, industrial capitalist economy alienates individuals from the whole work that they do; unable to control their own labor, which they must sell to another, they lack control and knowledge of themselves and never achieve their full human potential. However much they resent their situation, they believe, that is, they are conditioned to believe that it cannot be changed, and that ultimately they have themselves to blame for their discontent and failure. Tyrone's passion is acting. He chooses acting for his profession but instead of revealing his inner power as an actor he has to enact one character again and again to earn money. Tyrone says,

"I'd lost the great talent I once has through years of easy repetition, never learning a new part, never really working hard. Thirty-five to forty thousand dollars net profit a season like snapping your fingers! It was too great temptation. Yet before I bought the damned thing I was considered one of the three or four young actors with the greatest artistic promise in America" (O'Neil, 2009, p. 134).

Tyrone sacrifices his passion his dreams to earn money, since Tyrone is what capitalism has made him, he values money rather than his artistic self. It proves even if there is no direct control how every individual's action and thought process is controlled by the society.

Yank and Tyrone both is victim of the tyranny of the society

Apparently the difference between Yank and Tyrone is quite obvious that both belong to two different social positions, Yank is a worker whereas Tyrone is an actor but from the above discussion it is quite clear that both are caged in the same capitalistic world where they are controlled both internally and externally. The question may arise why the people like Tyrone and Yank let them to be controlled by the capitalist society. Due to this control on the one hand Tyrone is losing his bonding with family members, on the other hand, Yank ceases to exist as a human being and still they remain under this control. From Marxist perspective all social phenomena are cultural productions, and culture cannot be separated from the socio-economic status. In a capitalist system the reality is constructed and the individuals are bound to follow it. So, the "false consciousness" compels the individual to absorb the values of capitalist system. It is not that they are nurturing the capitalist value consciously within them; rather, they are the unconscious carrier of those values. In the capitalist era when everyone talks about class tension, discrimination and sufferings, O'Neil shows the rapaciousness of capitalism is not limited to these factors rather it signifies more. Instead of depicting the imaginary

world, he shows the reality that lurks underneath the apparel of capitalism. In this machine age it is important to control the mind of the proletariat class to maintain the status quo of the society, since there remains always a threat of revolution. Through these plays O'Neil shows how the control of capitalism has changed its mechanism. He has set his two characters Yank and Tyrone in the backdrop of contemporary American society where everyone talks about equality and freedom. Everyone is blinded by the "belief in the American dream which tells them that financial success is simply the product of initiative and hard work. Therefore, if some people are poor, it is because they are shiftless and lazy" (Tyson, 2023, p. 58). Being a social critique O'Neil has upheld the loopholes of the society which are not apparently identifiable in the society. He has shown Yank who is very hard worker but caged in the society where his identity is signified by what the upper class people think of him and the same goes for Tyrone as well. Tyrone's decision is not his own rather manufactured by the insecurities of his past. Through his plays O'Neil questions the society that apparently claims equal rights to every individual. For example, for Yank there is Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). This union is there to protect the rights of the workers like Yank but when Yank sought help from them he was thrown from there. Through the incident O'Neil shows how the machinery of the society works as an instrument of control. On the other hand, the financial security that Tyrone sought in his life is not his personal choice but rather a result of the American dream which many people of that era blindly followed.

Conclusion

Being a modern dramatist O'Neil shows the reality that lurks underneath the capitalist society. Through these plays O'Neil has depicted how the control of the capitalist society works on two distinct levels. The apparent class distinction is quite visible but O'Neil has plunged within the minds of his characters and sketches how people from different backgrounds fall victim to the same false consciousness perpetuated by capitalism. This paper shows the control of capitalism is far intricate than it seems. Along with controlling the external reality, it controls the mind of the people in such a way that even if they want they cannot come out of it. As a result, in spite of belonging to two different worlds Yank and Tyrone become victims of same capitalist consciousness.

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