


Yank's Quest of Identity in Eugene O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape*

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Abstract

At the dawn of the Twentieth Century, changes were rapidly taking place in our society. The word 'Modern' was, during this time, flying everywhere in the wind. Amidst all this, some people were in search of their own identity, as well. Societies across the globe were changing, and everyone was gaining consciousness about his/her identity, his or her place in society, we need an identity to survive in this world of ours. It's very hard to imagine ourselves without an identity; our quest for identity commences as soon as we arrive in this world and lasts till the graveyard. Identity is a must for everyone in this world of ours; therefore, in literature too, the characters were haunted with their own identity, their sense of belonging. The aim of the researcher and this paper is to point out the importance of identity for the character as well as a writer and why identity is so must for us if we want to survive in this world.

Keywords: Modern American Drama, Modern Man, Identity, National Identity, Primitive.

Introduction

In the 19th century man saw a dream of modern society, a society where everyone would be equal; man-woman, black-white, rich-poor, discrimination less society, a society utterly based on the science; 'logic and reason' a kind of 'utopia.' The 20th century witnessed many changes in our society; the economic, intellectual, military growth of human civilization. The industrial growth compelled the rural population to migrate to the cities, which were the center of all the activities. William Wordsworth, a renowned Romantic poet of the early 19th century, did try to highlight the rustic life in his work, but that was not enough. Charles Darwin propounded a theory of man's evolution in his seminal work *Origin of Species* in which he elucidated how man was evolved this shattered the age-old Biblical belief that all men are children of Adam and Eve and Roman Church's authority as well. Darwin's new theory regarding the evolution of man divided the society vertically. One section of the society believed in the new theory, and the other believed in the Biblical theory of men's evolution. *The Origin of Species* was a huge step towards modern society. Man has always been in quest of his identity and existence on this earth. Thus his quest for his identity and place, in this universe, began.

Identity

In the initial period of the 20th century, a large chunk of the rural population migrated to the cities, and there was a conspicuous rift between the city people and village people. Since then, the question of Identity is at the center stage of human life. The concept of identity is quite obscure and hard to comprehend because we in our lives carry multiple identities such as linguistic, cultural, national, state, personal, locality wise, regional caste, religion, and vice versa. The identity means who the person is or how he/she is known to others. It pertains to cultural descriptions of persons with which we emotionally identify and which concern sameness and difference, the personal and the social.

National identity, on the other hand, unifies the multiple identities a person carries, and he/she is known by the national identity. National identity is a larger identity that any cultural and religious identity, and it is a unifying factor of all the other identities in the nation-state.

Modern Man

Modern man is a very vague concept about the man, but in the 20th century, there was a sort of race to be modern in every sense. We find some qualities that make a person modern all across the globe, and this has not stopped yet. This idea of “Modern Man” evolves generation after generation. A Modern Man is:

- a. Educated
- b. Believes in science
- c. Anti-tradition or anti-culture
- d. Ready to accept new things
- e. Questions everything old

These above mentioned are some of the few traits which we can find exists in all of us and others as well. The two World Wars shattered the dreams of Victorian man and man witnessed the havoc that caused by these two World Wars; destruction and decimation of human lives. In this very period, our perception and perspectives about other started to change, and we witnessed tremendous changes in our culture and society which our forefathers would not even dare to dream of like; social equality, women’s rights, eradication of past social dogma (untouchability, slavery) and most important independence of others.

In these drastic changes, there was a group of people who were displaced by the World Wars and had to leave their native places and move to cities. These people were mostly from the villages, and it was very hard for them to adapt to the new lifestyle of the cities. Although belonging to the same country, they were considered outsiders, and even today to these people are outsiders in their own countries.

Modern American Drama

The history of American Literature is not as old as British Literature. American Literature is just two hundred years old, but it has been successful in making its distinct mark in the literary world. But it wasn’t that easy as it seems. An initial period of

American Literature, she has gone through ridicule and humiliation of British people who just considered the writers of 19th century America as a copy cat or copy masters. Post-1850 period of American literature is considered as the shift from the influence of English writers. Come the 20th century American literature surpassed the English literature, be it poetry, drama, or fiction.

The modern American Drama between 1900-1950 was dominated by three playwrights Eugene O’Neill (1888-1953), Tennessee Williams (1911-83), and Arthur Miller (1915-2005). These three great playwrights wrote about different issues of American lives and society, and the most important fact was that these three greats did not leave America to the most alluring and hot destination of contemporary American writers, Europe. These three writers touched the three different issues of modern American life and according to the changing times.

Tennessee Williams was very famous when he was writing and considered the best playwright of American drama he focused, in his plays, upon the declined status of white land owning families in the early 20th century. How difficult for the erstwhile heirs of landlords to cope with this new middle-class status of theirs and their psychological state. Due to industrialization and abolition of slavery affected these once ‘Masters’ and attraction of the new world was the subjects of his plays; *The Glass Menagerie* (1944), *The Street Car Named Desire* (1947), and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955).

Arthur Miller, another great playwright of 20th-century American drama he focused, in his plays, upon the middle-class man and criticized the American Dream through his plays. Although he was popular pre-1950s, he came to prominence post-1950. Throughout his plays he depicted the problems and life of working-class people and wrote about their tragic lives, most of his plays are tragedies mostly based on Greek tragedy, which we know as Modern Tragedy like *All My Sons* (1947), *Death of a Salesman* (1949), and *A View from the Bridge* (1955) are his most famous and popular plays.

Eugene O’Neill the first great dramatist of 20th-century American drama wrote about the changing society and times and the place of a Modern man in this society. He is also known for his poetically titled

plays, which were the first in the American Drama. He is also known for his expressionistic plays. In his plays the themes of human existence and identity dominate like; *Long Day's Journey into Night* (1956), *The Iceman Cometh* (1939), *Desire Under the Elms* (1924), *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1931), *Anna Christie* (1921), *Emperor Jones* (1920), *The Hairy Ape* (1922).

Yank's quest for Identity in The Hairy Ape

The Emperor Jones and *The Hairy Ape* are very hero-centric plays of O'Neill's. Both the characters in the play are in search of their identity in this world. Emperor Jones wanted to create his identity as a ruler and was quite successful as well simultaneously; he also wanted to be a free man or rather a white man. He wanted to eradicate his past as a slave. Although being black he was not equal in America still he dreamt of going there, this passion of creating his own identity in the 20th century America reflected the desires of many African-Americans. Yank, on the other hand, was in search of his identity and his belongingness in the world. He feels isolated in the world and just wanted to know where he belongs and his identification as a part of a group. It's very difficult for a man to live an isolated life we have belong somewhere we must have an identity in this world an identity-less man is worthless in human society.

Yank is stoker in a ship most of his life he has spent in the engine area of the ship and was proud that he ran the ship, and he is also most respect by the other workers. Therefore the stokehole of the ship is a kind of country for him, and he believed that he belongs there. Yank, in the play, described as a primitive man, full of strength, no culture, rough nature, and want of sophistication. As the play opens, all the workers in the stokehole were drinking all are white, half-naked, blackened due to the grease and smoke, and had natural stoop because of ceiling bending downward, which made workers stand in an erect posture. Yank enjoyed the respect as a leader among the workers. When the other workers long for their home, he says that he is our home and says that he had left his home when he was a kid. But no information was given about his native place; therefore, as a worker of a ship and spending all his

life in stokehole, he did not belong to any country, and now the ship was docked in New York City. It is also very clear that he traveled along with the ship and spent all his life in the engine area of the ship and probably never left it. Hence he was unaware of the changing society that means he was remained primitive by nature and bent back also indicates to his primitive nature like Neanderthal Man. If any complaints about their state like Paddy, who says that they were like the caged ape in the Zoo. Paddy was the oldest worker of the stokehole, and he had seen life, and he was not satisfied.

Yank says to him, "...Yuh doesn't belong anymore, see... Yuh's too old..." (Tilak:78). He is very proud of his identity as a worker and proudly says that he runs the ship, and he makes the coal burn, and he belongs to the stokehole, and the stokehole is their home everyone should accept it. Yank was unaware of his status as a worker, and he did not care for the outside world. He had confined himself the ship for him stoke hole was his country, home, and everything as if he owns the ship. But the other character in the play, like Long, very well knew that the owner of the ship is not them and they are just workers and don't own the ship.

Yank's dream was shattered when he realizes that he is not part of stokehole. Mildred Douglas, a socialist, decides to visit the stokehole, and she wanted to something for them against the wishes of her aunt. Mildred is here the representative of the Modern Man educated, clean and sophisticated. But her socialist was phony as her aunt calls her 'Poser.' Mildred very well knew her belonging and identity in society. She knew very well that she is the daughter of the ship owner, and no one could prevent her from visiting the stokehole, and she lies that she had permission from the ship owner, but she had lost it the engineers do not cross-check and takes her to the stokehole. The engineers insist her to change her cloths as she was wearing white gown it might gate dirty she refuses and says that she had fifty of such white gowns. In the stoke hole, she comes across Yank, and he petrifies her. She screams, "Take me away! Oh, the filthy beast!" (Ibid:87). She faints and taken out of stokehole, her screaming, fainting and calling him 'filthy beast' was like an insult to the Yank, here for the first time he realizes that he

does not belong to the stokehole because he wasn't the only filthy one there all were more or the same way like Yank filthy, blackened and cultureless. She isolates Yank. She thinks that he does not belong there. He is an outsider; therefore, she faints and screams. Because Yank for her like a beast like Ape, hairy, strong and aggressive like an animal and she might have thought that he may attack her, therefore, she screamed and fainted as if she saw an Ape. This was very shattering for the Ape, in way demoralizing and breaking his belief that he was a stakeholder. But does not belong there, then where does he belong to?

In Scene, IV Yank was thinking Long approaches him, and he says to him, "I scared her? Why de hell should I scare her? Who de hell is she? Isn't she de same as me? Hairy ape, huh?" (ibid:91). Yank was pondering upon his identity here he thought that I'm also a human as she is, then why did she scream? He was unable to find the answer to this question. He wanted to teach her a lesson and show her who he was. It was quite mortifying for him because of the respect he used to of, all his fellow workers used to scare him, but her scaring was humiliating. He knew that very well. Long also realized why she scared to see Yank, but he was unable to elucidate this fact to Yank. Yank, now, wanted to take revenge, but actually, he wanted answers to his questions which were haunting him; why me? How did I scare you? I am not the only filthy one. All workers are filthy and like me, then how did I scare you most? And the most important one, don't I belong to the stokehole? And thus, Yank's journey to quest his identity commences.

In Scene V Yank is looking for Mildred and he along with Long arrive at Fifth Avenue a posh locality in New York City, the locality was very clean and tidy and the shops of costly ornaments, furniture. Long was dressed in shore clothes and wearing black tie and cloth cap while Yank is dressed in his dirty dungarees, not shaves for days, and black smudge still stuck like makeup. As from the attire of Long, we can guess that Long has been outside the stokehole, and he knows how to dress up in the cities while Yank remains in his worker's attires. It was Sunday morning, and they were in from of church, and Yank recalls that when he was a child, his parents forcefully sent him to the Sunday mass, which he, of

course, did not like. Since he left his home, although not mentioned in the play, he has never been out of stokehole, and this was the first time he was outside of stokehole. He realizes that he does not belong to this world, and it gives him pain all cleanliness. Yank did not like this world that he knew; therefore, he possibly never left stokehole, but now that if he did not belong to stokehole, then where does he belong to? He was looking for an answer. Getting frustrated not to find the girl, the church mass ends, and people exit the church, and Yank was standing in the middle of the road, but no one paid any heed to him, and he was just snorting at them. He approaches a gentleman, but he too runs away from him and then a lady who calls him "Money fur." The bus arrives, and he stumbles on a gentleman he hits him on the face. Still, the gentleman does not move as if nothing happened, that startles Yank because he was not used to of sophisticated behavior he had expected a fight the man misses his bus and he calls for police and Yank is arrested. The man does not react to Yank's hitting on the face could be construed as an animal hitting a man. Therefore he ignored the man shouts for police not to hit him, but because of Yank, he missed his bus. Yank, in this scene, is presented like a loose animal wandering on the streets, and police to arrest him as if they are arresting an animal. No one pays heed to his arrest; this indicates that no one considered Yank as a human; they considered him an animal out of Zoo.

In Scene VI, Yank lands in prison and put in the cage as if an animal is put in the cage and all the cells were vertical position next to each other. He calls it, "Steel. This is de Zoo, huh?". There he comes to know about the IWW and also that they could take his revenge with that white girl. Out of prison, he goes to that office of IWW (International Workers of the World) as the name indicates it is for all the works of the world. Yank enters the office very secretly and very easily becomes a member of IWW, and finally, he thinks that he belongs to IWW, and he asks the secretary that how they are going take his revenge. The secretary did not understand what Yank was saying he asks Yank to explain. Yank says that he is ready to do the work. He knows how this is done. He just wants Dynamite so that he will blow the Steel Factory of Douglas, and he just wanted to

destroy the factory not to kill the Douglas, and after blowing, he wished to write a letter to Miss Douglas informing her that the hairy ape did it. The secretary of IWW threw him out, and Yank realizes that he does not belong to IWW, “So dem boys don’t think I belong, neider.” As he was babbling on the street, a policeman arrives and asks him to live, and Yank asked him to arrest him, but the placeman says that station is far away to that Yank says that I was born too. I was born, too indicates that Yank realizes that he is also a human-like them only a bit different. Still, no one’s ready to accept him as a human and arresting and prison cell would give him the identity of humans, but the policeman shoos away him as an animal that goes from here. Yank asks him where he should go. The policeman replays go to hell.

In the last scene of the play, Yank finally arrives at the Zoo, and at gorilla’s cage, he stares in the eyes of a gorilla, and he identifies himself with him. He says that he has not seen tough gorilla-like him; he talks with him as if he is speaking with his friend. Yank wanted to prove to others that he is also a human-like them, but no one was interested, and that irritates and frustrates him. Finally, he accepts himself as Ape and tries to relate himself to the gorilla in Zoo as if finally he got the place where he belongs. When he gives a hug to the gorilla, he tightly squeezes Yank, and he dies. Searching for his identity and belongingness, he dies as identity-less as any other animal dies, heedless. Yank had thought he belongs to an animal, but he was not although he was hairy and had strength like an animal. He was not an animal. He was human. Yank accepts death because he realizes that a person like him who belongs to nowhere has no right to live in this world, and even if he had decided to live, where would he have gone. He thought that he is a stoker and belongs to the stokehole, which he considered his home and everything, but he did not belong to the stoker. Therefore, there was no pint going back to the stoker after getting out of prison. Death was the only option he had; therefore, he embraces death happily. He born as Bob Smith, but he loses that identity when he runs way from his home and lands in stokehole and becomes a stoker and Yank. He even forgets his real name and identifies himself as Yank, which was not the name he was christened by his parents; therefore,

“Yank” was not his real identity. He was living as Yank for most of his life and forgotten about his Christened name Bob Smith which he recalls in the office of IWW. For most of his life, he lived as identity-less, “Yank” was not his real identity.

Yank in the play is a representative of the people who are others and have no identity of their own; cultural, political, or social in a way out castes. But he did not bear as outcast he was born in the society, but when he left the society and became stoker, he did not realize that he became identity-less. Most of the stokers had left their homes and lost touch with the society and have accepted as they are outcastes and have no place in the society Paddy for instance, who longs for his home but cannot go to his home. They were also aware that his stokehole is not their home but had no option to live there till their last breath. All the stokers were different parts of the world and lived their life in stokehole and traveled the whole world. Their rough and animalistic nature indicates that as the outside world does not think about them, therefore they too do not care for the manners of the outside world. Stokehole is just like a Zoo, and they are animals in that zoo, and Yank is the strongest animal of them, so they all respected him. Mildred went to a zoo to see them, and she saw a strange animal and thought that he might attack her; hence she screamed and fainted. If she wanted to meet them, she could have met them on the deck. Thus Yank’s journey in search of his identity and belongingness ends in death.

Conclusion

Yank’s journey was not his journey in search of his identity and belongingness he journey is symbolic of all those communities who were outcastes and had no place in the society. Stokers are outcastes, too, as no one considered them as human. The whole world had forgotten about them, even the people living on the ship they were responsible for the running of the ship. Yank was not searching for his identity, but he was creating his place in society, he was just trying to identify himself with someone like himself, but he was unsuccessful. In the end, he identifies himself with a gorilla and thinks that he belongs to the zoo where other people would pay a visit to see him. But the gorilla does not relate to Yank, and he dies

in the zoo. If Yank neither human nor animal, then who was he? The answer could be that he was an alien-looking for his home and belonging, which he did not find. Yank could be related to the erstwhile untouchables of India and slaves of America, where no one considered them as human beings, and they had no identity if them except untouchable and slave.

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