

Racial Otherness in the American Modern Theatre

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Abstract—“Racial Otherness in the American Modern Theatre” critically examines the black otherness of Eugene O’Neill and the white otherness of August Wilson by investigating their representative plays. The plays of both playwrights reveals their deep and consistent involvement with their racial other. This paper studies Eugene O’Neill’s “The Emperor Jones” and August Wilson’s “Joe Turner’s Come and Gone” with the intention of exploring how their racial narratives can be read in relation to each other as well as to postcolonial theory in general. Members of two ethnic groups with histories both opposed and complementary, O’Neill and Wilson provide invaluable information about the nature of racial conceptualization and indoctrination in America.

Index Terms—otherness, Eugene O’Neill, August Wilson, blackness, whiteness

I. INTRODUCTION

Surveys of black characters in American fiction date back to the earlier part of the twentieth century, for instance, William Stanley Braithwaite in the 1920s, and Sterling Brown in the 1930s studied the image of the Negro (a term I use here and elsewhere in historical context) in Euro-American literature only to decry the stereotypical black portraits. Yet relatively few scholars have undertaken to analyze depictions of whiteness in American letters, although “white studies” is slowly assuming legitimacy in the academy in the 1990s (Delgado, 1997, p.82). Among these pioneer examinations of whiteness, we can count Richard Dyer’s *White*, Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic’s *Critical White Studies*, all published in the same year, 1997. In the light of these recent works, current theories of race, and of postcolonialism, this study will endeavor to analyze how two major American dramatists of this century, Eugene O’Neill, an Irish-American, and August Wilson, an African-American, have constructed images of their Racial Other in their plays.

I have deliberately chosen to focus on the writings of these two playwrights for a number of reasons. First of all, both Wilson and O’Neill’s work attests to their deep and consistent involvement with their Racial Other, who resurfaces in play after play. Interestingly, this is not the first time these dramatists have been compared with each other. Although he himself might not appreciate such appraisals, August Wilson, after the production of his first few plays, namely, *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* (1984) and *Fences* (1985), was saluted by drama critics as the new O’Neill. A more striking tie between the two writers is their commitment to an ambitious historical project, a cycle of plays, to cover extended periods of American history. O’Neill worked for years on a cycle of eleven plays, *A Tale of Possessors, Self-Dispossessed*, which “was to span a period of more than 175 years [from 1775 to 1932] in the history of an American family” (Gelb, 1973, p. 5). But O’Neill quit his idea in a moment of despair and destroyed most of the existing drafts. While O’Neill failed to bring to fruition this monumental project, August Wilson has made consistent progress in his dramatic re-creation of the African-American experience in different decades of the twentieth century. I hope that taking a closer look at their portrayals of the Racial Other will not only shed light on the racial thinking of these two playwrights but also furnish a framework through which to reconsider racial representations in modern American drama.

II. “RACE”, POSTCOLONIAL STUDIES, AND THE UNITED STATES

An in-depth analysis of racialization in the United States is outside the scope of this study. But it is essential to point out from the start that race in my study is not a biological (that is, “natural”) but a social construct. I agree with scholars like Henry Louis Gates, Jr., who define that “race is not a real category other than in the reality of its pernicious effects experienced by people of color. As a sociohistorical concept, race, then, functions primarily to legitimize hegemony and racism by denoting Otherness, hence superiority/inferiority”.

In her discussion of the origins of racialized thinking in the United States, Ann Louise Keating likewise maintains that race is not a “permanent, transhistorical” marker:

In fact, the Puritans and other early European colonizers didn’t consider themselves “white”; they identified as “Christian,” “English,” or “free,” for at that time the word “white” didn’t represent a racial category. Again, racialization was economically and politically motivated. It was not until around 1680, with the racialization of slavery, that the term was used to describe a specific group of people. As Yehudi Webster explains, “The idea of a homogeneous white race was adopted as a means of generating cohesion among explorers, migrants, and settlers in eighteenth-century

America. Its opposite was the black race, whose nature was said to be radically different from that of the white race”(9). Significantly, then, the “white race” evolved in opposition to but simultaneously with the “black race.”(912)

Ann Louise Keating’s claim that the institution of slavery gave rise to the black and white races in the United States is not uncontested. But because of the difficulty, if not the impossibility, of determining once and for all which originated first and instituted the other, it is more accurate to maintain Ania Loomba’s position that they went hand in hand: “the relationship between racial ideologies and exploitation is better understood as dialectical, with racial assumptions both arising out of and structuring economic exploitation”(113).

Before I investigated further the links between racialization and oppression, let me establish how postcolonial theory can be usefully applied to the particular case study of the United States. Although many scholars of postcolonialism confine their analyses to Third World nations, like India and Algeria, many others have begun to include the United States as a postcolonial society in their studies. I agree with those who maintain that ongoing racial struggles and racial exploitation in America bear a certain resemblance to the histories of postcolonial nations.

Scholars of postcolonial theory take great pains to warn us that each and every colonial scenario is unique. Likewise, I am not arguing that the colonization of blacks in America fully replicates the colonial archetype. One major distinction, for example, is that in most postcolonial models formerly colonized nations have successfully ousted their colonizers as a result of the nationalist movements of the twentieth century. However, the two racial groups under investigation in this study, white and black Americans, continue to inhabit America together despite black activists’ call for a return to the motherland, Africa. This enforced coexistence has naturally prolonged the black nationalist struggle since the exploitation of this minority group has not ended with Abolition, whereas the termination of colonial rule in other cases might indicate the end of exploitation. Another peculiar aspect of American history is the displacement of colonial subjects, which led to not only the loss of African land(s) but also cultures and tribal languages. Most colonized groups, on the other hand, have had access to these sites of resistance in their nationalist struggles. Furthermore, while we may surmise that the latter had a national or at least communal identity prior to their colonization, Africans, who came from different tribes, had to construct a communal identity after their relocation to America. Consequently, African-Americans’ claim to national identity/culture/homeland had to lie elsewhere: in African. Such significant differences between the colonial history in the United States and elsewhere would obviously further complicate racial relations in this country (Mongia, 1996, p.45-46).

Current postcolonial theory traces its beginnings to the work of Frantz Fanon (1925-1961), a psychoanalyst educated in France who, for a considerable part of his life, considered himself “white” and French. Upon realizing that France did not regard its black subjects equal to its white citizens, he turned his back on this culture and the West in general and began his resistance work against colonialism in Algeria. Fanon’s psychoanalysis of the relationship between the Negro and his white colonizer had a profound impact on much of the more recent postcolonial studies. Ania Loomba maintains, therefore, that

In recent years, Fanon has been treated (often to the exclusion of other important figures) as the most important anti-colonial writer-activist; he has become, in the words of his comrade and critic Albert Memmi, “a prophet of the Third World, a romantic hero of decolonization.” (143)

Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978), another landmark in postcolonial scholarship, investigates how the Orient was constructed as a concept by the Occident to fit its colonial desires. Even if Said had not launched colonial discourse analysis, *Orientalism* is still considered by most postcolonial scholars to be a crucial work in the field.

III. THE WHITE SELF AND ITS NON-WHITE OTHER

In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon interprets how the colonizers invent a non-or-sub-human identity for the natives in order to demarcate themselves from the subordinate group with the ultimate goal of establishing their “superiority” and justifying their rule. In return, the colonized respond to this process of inferiorization first by identifying themselves with their colonizers, but later, when they find out assimilation is not to be, they seek validation by insisting on the value of their native culture. Fanon based his hypotheses on the theories of the Self and the Other, according to which the Self (the white colonizer) constitutes everything outside of it, alien to is as “the Other”. Thus, the Other (the colonized black) emerges in opposition to the Self, symbolizing what the Self is not or does not have. Such opposition is, by definition, a Manichean one: one is what the other is not. This dualistic positioning, ensures that both groups are also locked into a symbiotic relationship; without one, there can’t be the other. Yet in *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon did not merely put to use the psychological implications of these terms but redefined them to stress their political significance in the colonial context.

Likewise, in *Orientalism*, Edward Said argues for the necessity for polarized images of the Oriental and of the European in order for imperialism to survive and thrive: “The Oriental is irrational, depraved (fallen), childlike, ‘different’; thus, the European is rational, virtuous, mature, ‘normal’” (40). The comparison holds true in other colonial/racial contexts, more specifically, in the American one, as I will demonstrate later in this study. Thus, Othering, as exercised by those in power, associates the Self with positive, “superior” attributes and the Other with negative, “inferior” ones to rationalize their subordination.

Another strategy the colonizer employ to dehumanize their subjects is to represent them in the plural so as to deny their individuality and, consequently, their humanity. Albert Memmi remarks that statements like “‘They are this.’ ‘They

are all the same,” constrain the colonized to an “anonymous collectivity”, which in return both establish and uphold stereotyping (85). Homi Bhabha exposes the inherent contradiction in this strategy when he says: “The colonial discourse produces the colonized as a fixed reality which is at once an ‘other’ and yet entirely knowable and visible” (23).

Yet it is neither easy nor credible to generalize about the psychological and political mechanism of Othering. One of the underlying reasons for the paradoxical nature of Othering is that, as Catherine Hall points out, “the projection of ‘the other’ is also always about repressed aspects of the self. Relations between colonizer and colonized are characterized by a deep ambivalence, ‘the other’ is both an object of desire and derision, of envy and contempt...” (70).

IV. WHITENESS AND THE COLONIZED

Examinations of the concept of whiteness have been long in the making. Richard Dyer, a pioneer in this field asserts in his influential essay “White” that the dominant group presents itself as the norm, thereby making whiteness the norm, “the natural, inevitable, ordinary way of being human” (44). While “black is always marked as a color...white is not anything really, not an identity, not a particularizing quality; because it is everything - white is no color because it is all colors” (45). Therefore, Richard Dyer argues, by rendering itself invisible, whiteness has evaded analysis, further safeguarding its indomitableness. “It is the way that black people are marked as black (are not just ‘people’) in representation that has made it relatively easy to analyze their representation, whereas white people...are difficult, if not impossible, to analyze *qua* white” (46).

Other theorists also stress the socially “unraced” nature of whiteness. For instance, Ross Chambers calls whiteness the “blank” category, the unmarked and the unexamined.

[Whiteness] has a touchstone quality of the normal, against which the members of marked categories are measured and, of course, found deviant, that is, wanting...Whiteness is not itself compared with anything, but other things are compared unfavorable with it, and their own comparability with one another derives from their distance from the touchstone. (189)

Whiteness is not only invisible but also indivisible, that is, singular (Whites), whereas it presents nonwhiteness as plural (blacks, Hispanics, Asians, Native Americans, etc.). These diversified groups are further homogenized with the assertion that “all Xs are the same,” while the opposite applies to whites, who are all perceived as individuals (Chambers, 1997, p. 192).

What all these theories have in common is their denial of a voice and a separate consciousness to oppressed groups. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has directed our attention to this implicit premise with her essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” In it, after answering her own question in the negative, she determines that the intellectuals should speak for the subaltern. Ania Loomba further complicates these issues by asking:

In what voices do the colonized speak—their own, or in accents borrowed from their masters? Is the project of recovering the “subaltern” best served by locating her separateness from dominant culture, or by highlighting the extent to which she moulded even those processes and cultures which subjugated her? (231)

Frantz Fanon introduces the so-far absent voice of the decried group when he states, “Because it is a systematic negation of the other person and a furious determination to deny the other person all attributes of humanity, colonialism forces the people it dominates to ask themselves the question constantly: ‘In reality, who am I?’” (*Wretched* 250).

As the oppressed groups strive to overthrow the yoke they have been suffering under for centuries, they re-define their Other and themselves, as Catherine Hall illustrates:

For colonization is never only about the external processes and pressures of exploitation. It is always also about the ways in which colonized subjects internally collude with the objectification of the self produced by the colonizer. The search for independence and the struggle for decolonization, therefore, had to be premised on new identities. (69)

So American blacks claim a separate and positive self-identity especially during the Black Arts Movement and Black Nationalism in the 1960s. Fanon’s prophecy had been fulfilled. He had foreseen that “the construction of essentialist forms of ‘native’ identity is a legitimate, indeed necessary, stage in the emergence from the process of ‘assimilation’ imposed by colonial regimes to a fully decolonized national culture” (Moore-Gilbert, 1997, p. 179).

Therefore, blacks or other oppressed groups have never been merely objects. They as subjects have participated, directly or indirectly, in the processes that were meant to shape them. For example, although white Americans desired to “control the black gaze,” to be invisible to black people, blacks, while seeming to have accorded with this wish out of fear, did indeed observe whites, according to bell hooks:

An effective strategy of white supremacist terror and dehumanization during slavery centered on white control of the black gaze. Black slaves, and later manumitted servants, could be brutally punished for looking, for appearing to observe the whites they were serving as only a subject can observe, or see. To be fully an object, then, was to lack the capacity to see or recognize reality. (168)

bell hooks proves here that despite Richard Dyer’s insistence on the “invisibility” and alleged normalcy of whiteness, those qualities were not just handed down and accepted by non-whites. bell hooks’s contention that “black folks associated whiteness with the terrible, the terrifying, the terrorizing” illustrates the often-ignored subject-position of non-white (170). Dyer’s and other such scholars’ analyses of whiteness exclude the perspective of non-white communities, who perceive whiteness in widely divergent terms. For blacks, whiteness is neither a good nor a benign

power, but one “that wounds, hurts, tortures” (hooks, 1997, p. 169). My analysis of August Wilson’s play should contribute to amending the limitations of “white studies,” which has highlighted thus far only the perspective of whites themselves.

The above postcolonial theory helps us better understand racial thinking in America. But we cannot disregard the various problems arising out of this theoretical framework. The polarized construction of the colonizer and the colonized inevitably invites controversy. Stuart Hall critiques concepts of fixed, stable cultural identities, and hence the basic premise of nationalist movements:

Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they [cultural identities] are subject to the continuous “play” of history, culture and power. Far from being grounded in a mere “recovery” of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which, when found, will secure our sense of selves into eternity, identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past. (“Cultural Identity” 112)

Cultural identities, according to Hall, are problematic; they are “Not an essence but a positioning” (113). Stuart Hall, like Homi Bhabha, sees ambivalence in postcolonial narratives and constructions, an intellectual position which has the potential to dismiss any attempt at identity formation as artificial and arbitrary.

V. CONCLUSION

This article studies Eugene O’Neill’s “*The Emperor Jones*” and August Wilson’s “*Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*” with the intention of exploring how their racial narratives can be read in relation to each other as well as to postcolonial theory in general. O’Neill is an Irish-American, he is white, so his racial other is non-white, in America generally, the white self is opposite to the black other. O’Neill’s otherness is blackness. O’Neill’s black characters present a bewildering heterogeneity to scholars. Especially his earliest attempts at depicting blackness promote some of the contemporary racial stereotypes; hence, the association of blackness with the jungle, cannibalism, and primitiveness. While *The Emperor Jones* made a striking break in Eugene O’Neill’s approach toward his Racial Other as he shifted his focus from the exotic West Indians to the burdensome fates of black Americans. (How did O’Neill manage to disown the privileged white perspective? I am not sure one can provide a definitive answer to that question. Nevertheless,) it is obvious that O’Neill the man as well as O’Neill the dramatist befriended the subordinate: sailors and prostitutes, for example. Maybe because of his sympathy for the underdog, Eugene O’Neill was able to see, more often than not, African-Americans as human beings, not as people with a skin color darker than his. His work draws attention to the economic, social, and political injustices affecting them while highlighting their following psychological and mental anguish. August Wilson is an African-American, so his racial other is the white. His otherness is whiteness. Wilson’s fictive black world, as seen in *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*, on the other, is peopled with many whites, most of whom remain off-stage, but nevertheless play a tremendous role in the lives of his black characters. Wilson’s vision of whiteness is homogeneous; he stresses in this play how whiteness is associated with economic power and exploitation, social privilege and law in the black imagination. August Wilson thinks Whiteness as economic power and economic exploitation, Whiteness as social privilege and whiteness as law. Whiteness, has many evil attributes in Wilson’s drama, but its predominant quality for the playwright is that of economic power derived from proprietorship and its aftereffect, economic exploitation. Whites, since their initial contact with blacks, have approached them as free or cheap labor and have capitalized on their labor. Thus, even after the Abolition, the American history of the twentieth century—which Wilson had been rewriting in his cycle of plays—remains one of abuse and bondage for African-Americans. Black Americans, now free, can still not enjoy sovereignty, economic independence, or cultural equality and are unfortunately still within the tight grasp of the white majority. *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* (1988) examines the lives of African-Americans in the 1910s in a Pittsburgh boarding house. The black owners of the establishment, its residents, and the travelers frequenting it while on their personal quests, frame the dramatic interest in *Joe Turner*. Among these displaced black characters dwells one white man, Rutherford Selig. A peddler, he provides Seth, also the owner of the boarding house, with raw materials and then sells the end products to other blacks in the community. Although Selig does not exploit Seth, Selig’s relationship with Seth is still mainly one in which the white man symbolized the capital, and the black man the labor, While Selig’s main difference from the other white characters of Wilson is that he is not mean. He is, for example, clearly welcome in the black boarding house, where Seth’s wife Bertha hopes to make him feel at home: “Sit on down there, Selig. Get you a cup of coffee and a biscuit” (7), and “You know you welcome anytime, Selig” (11). What distinguish Selig from all other white characters Wilson has created is his likeability and his sense of belonging in the black community. Members of two ethnic groups with histories both opposed and complementary, O’Neill and Wilson provide invaluable information about the nature of racial conceptualization and indoctrination in America. The political and social consequences of their racial identity, both received at birth and deliberately chosen later in life, illumine the narratives they have constructed about their Racial Other. Unfortunately, I have had to limit the scope of this comparative study to the texts of the plays under consideration, thus ignoring the wider implications of performance.

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