

Preface

Eighteenth Century English critic Samuel Johnson blatantly expressed his annoyance and disregard towards America's self-styled belief of equality by asking the question: "How is it that we hear the loudest yelps for liberty among the drivers of negroes" (Boswell 876)? Likewise, French philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville, in his *Democracy in America*, delved deeply into the "tyranny of majority" in the United States. The "tyranny" lay, in his view, in the irony that a democracy's equality of conditions eventually produced inequality. To Tocqueville, "desire" was synonymous to uncontrolled pursuit of unenlightened self-interest, and his phraseology, "desires inspired by equality," connotes that "desire" served the interest of only the mainstream Americans (536-38). On the other hand, "desire" of the minorities like Blacks in the same country was truly sidelined. Being the socio-cultural Others, the idea of "equality" was nothing but political rhetoric or mere pipedream for them. That is why Sara, wife of a rich Yankee businessman in O'Neill's *More Stately Mansions* (set in Jacksonian era during which Tocqueville wrote his treatise), claims that America is a land of abundant prospect and potential where dreams come true like sure thing as she reminds her migrated Irish mother, "this is America, not poverty-stricken Ireland where you're a slave! Here you're free to take what you want, if you have the power in yourself" (1.1.305). At such juncture of history, the Blacks were the slaves in America—powerless and living possibly under the most excruciating conditions where their family units were constantly split up, freedom denied even after promise of release, and hounded down all over United States if sneaked away to escape brutalities, simply because their purchase, propagation, and speculation generated a major source of revenue in American economy. History unfolds, the virus of acquisitiveness entered into America a long time ago with the introduction of Black

slave trade by Virginian planters in 1619 (Hart 862) after they crashed, burnt, and nearly wiped the native Indians out for not laboring for white explorers—the acts, *res ipsa loquitur*, are usually viewed by scholars as the reenactments of two original sins in the Edenic New World.

Eugene O’Neill chronicles the problems of Blacks in the United States in series of plays where he shows characters striving to survive as “free niggers” in the new urban condition of early postbellum era in which they find themselves as modern pariahs only to be oppressed, segregated, and hated by the parochial white society, that above all, unremittingly subdued their upward thrives. A keen observer, a taciturn, gifted, and *avant-garde* playwright who had a pioneering and burgeoning role on American stage at the turn of the twentieth century, O’Neill experienced ethnic dissension and racial injustice not only as *de facto*, but also as perpetrated and overtly ingrained in the fabrics of the land where democracy is *de jure* the golden rule. He, as one of the first authors to dig out this American “sickness,” confronts the menacing issue of racism by addressing it in five of his plays and in ideas for three unfinished dramas through the depiction of discrimination in socio-political, economic, and cultural contexts. Black Americans, who for centuries have been the victims of white hostility, subjugation, prejudice, and bias in America, will be the focus of the present dissertation where their plight, resulting from glaring and unrelenting injustice, will be dwelled upon to bring home the fact that O’Neill not only had grave affinity with and feeling for these cast-offs but also spoke for their racial equity in such a torrid and challenging time when white America gagged black race’s all sorts of rights for subsistence after they emerged from slavery to embrace further degradation and denigration with second-class citizenry. O’Neill’s five staged plays, *Thirst* (1913), *The Dreamy Kid* (1918), *The Emperor Jones* (1920), *All God’s Chillun Got Wings* (1923) and *The Iceman Cometh* (1939), and his ideas for three

dramas, “Honest Honey Boy” (1921), “Bantu Boy” (1927) and “Runaway Slave” (1935), apart from being reflective of his growing racial concern for blacks, project in themselves an exclusive cycle of plays chronicling the lives of African Americans from their uprooted past until the immediate post-World War I era which stands quite in similar with August Wilson’s series of ten plays depicting Blacks’ struggle for existence during each decade of the twentieth century. Yet the difference lies in the fact that the former produced plays under serious criticisms, life threats, and KKK’s tough reign of 1920s when racism in America was an acknowledged verity, and the latter started writing in the post-Civil Rights era of 1980s when ethnic disparity hardly posed any white defiance in the much evolved, globalized US.

O’Neill, nonetheless, abhorred the hypocrisy of those who for whatever reasons violated the fundamental concept of justice, irrespective of race and color, as advocated by the country’s Founding Fathers in the Declaration of Independence: that all men are created equal and free, can enjoy equal opportunity and have equal rights—a moral philosophy that he strongly felt was hardly put into practice. Instead, O’Neill saw America betraying Lincoln’s manifest proposition of equality for it is deeply entrenched into division and violence as it went for grabbing lands from the Native Indians, its voyagers with flinty hearts settling for gold while in quest for God, exploiting slaves for making money which had zero risk to crash if compared with today’s Wall Street, and embracing modernism through propagating rags-to-riches success of American dream where, as in case of James O’Neill, the playwright’s father, aesthetic values are sacrificed to avarice. Thus, unlike Whitman who projected to the world its outer face with showering praises, O’Neill exhumes its soul to show how America became a traitor to its professed ideals. Like historian Henry James, the playwright viewed American democracy as succumbing to gross materialism, centralization, and corruption where its problem lies in its own tragic history which no

romantic imagination as seen in Fitzgerald's conclusion of *The Great Gatsby* can get its sins rid of.

O'Neill wrote, as he claimed, to dig out the "sickness" in American psyche; the word "sickness," stock-in-trade in his mentor Nietzsche, is viewed as emanating from desire which in Nietzschean term was "will" (Diggins 7-9, 238). As he held on to Greek classicists' beliefs that "the drama, more than any other form of literature, is bound by many close links to the actual state of society" (Tocqueville 493), so through a series of plays, he tried to combat such "sickness," embedded (besides other symbolisms) as white materialists' prejudice in his black plays, prevalent in American culture over the years that "seeks to obscure the brutalities upon which it rest" (Niebuhr 205). In fact, O'Neill's claim that "America is the greatest failure in history" (*Time* 72), resonates in many an observation held by its critics, scholars, academics or historians, and hence William Pickett, in his seminal book, *The Negro Problem: Abraham Lincoln's Solution*, justifiably contends:

No contemplative mind could fail to appreciate the glaring inconsistency between the position of a race of slaves and the theory of a government whose cornerstone was based upon the equality of mankind, and of which the proudest claim of distinction was a document embodying the declaration that all men were alike endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, and among these rights were life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. (34)

The equal rights of "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" were part of the politics of rhetoric that in reality had no practice. Lincoln saw the problem and by upholding justice that paved the way for Blacks' emancipation, became the only political exception in American history. After his assassination, Civil War values became meaningless as the modern era's power game introduced new *modus operandi* for

oppression by inflicting scientific, institutional, structural, and cultural forms of racism on freed blacks, maneuvering Darwinian species-formation philosophy that flashed the white minds like gospel truth (During 163-65; Galtung) for the theory gave them the “privilege” they wanted in a peak era of Colonialism. Thus stern capitalist Simon Harford in *More Stately Mansions* feels the social structure has given him the rights to claim, as he directs his tirade towards Joel by saying: “Take your idiotic conscience to hell out of here ... the possession of power is the only freedom, and your pretended disgust with it is a lie” (3.1.392). Helpless Blacks in O’Neill’s plays, being the children of an uncaring history and acting out roles by a superimposed formation, wander about like slum dogs in ghetto neighborhoods of New York City after their parents migrated from South, leaving behind images of Sambos, Uncles, or Mammies, with a dream for a better life for next generation. They seriously want to make their presence felt and vie for assimilation into American mainstream to earn recognition, but are troubled with a bigger struggle within themselves. A severe identity crisis known as “double consciousness” (Du Bois 2) looms large over them and leaves them on a shakier ground where a racist society already put in place ground rules for them. O’Neill’s protagonists, thus, are found to be either on the run from law or from their racial past and since they are incapacitated to address properly either one of the above, are left languishing at the nadir of frustration and sprawling at lower strata of American society. Nevertheless, the playwright shows them as better humans in terms of dignity and intelligence, having good drives at heart and propulsion in soul, possessing strength, endurance, and intelligent faculty, and decodes their fall as resulting from White America’s *systematic ways*, developed through four-century long experience in killing or violating Indians, of prevention of the blacks from achieving their full potential.

Eugene O’Neill is virtually the first major American dramatist to confront racial intolerance and injustice on the stage during the first three decades of twentieth century in the United States. It is important to note here that the dreadful topic of slavery and racism had long been ignored by authors or dramatists, and JP Diggins, in his *Eugene O’Neill’s America: Desire under Democracy*, identifies two probable reasons for that after he compiles the findings of recent scholars. Firstly, American general people even of the late antebellum era seemed to be “less concerned about the institution of slavery”—this was noticed by Lincoln himself during his famous debates with Stephen Douglas that even in the new territories people supported slavery. Secondly, a big role was played by the “guilt over the institution of slavery” which repressed the story of subjected people for which, as Diggins contends, “in recent years contemporary historians, once young radical activists from the sixties, have criticized previous generations of academics for neglecting to include in the study of American history and society the story of African Americans” (135-37).

By voicing for the blacks when no author, historian or academic dared to bring the issue up either out of lack of concern or guilt, fear of Ku Klux Klan, or of losing reputation in the midst of white majority, O’Neill unearthed a remarkable inquest to test and scorn the American consciousness which inhumanly barred members of an entire race from exercising their rights, as well as killed, lynched, and kept them in segregation from jobs, churches, schools and neighborhoods in the modernist postbellum era of twentieth century—the comparison of which can possibly be found nowhere in world history. As a playwright who once claimed, “There is no superiority between races” (Gelbs *O’Neill* 552), O’Neill is regarded by critics and historians as “the leading American white [dramatist] to confront directly the psychological problems emanating from black-white polarity in the American society” (Griffin 12). In fact, O’Neill was a staunch and inveterate believer in the dignity of the human

person regardless of race, nationality, color, or status to whom “the oneness of mankind” (Gelbs 535) is what matters the most. As a “spokesman for the poor and the downtrodden,” who had deep compassion as well as “reverence for all living things” (Floyd *The Plays* xxv), O’Neill, as noted by his biographers, despised “discrimination of any kind” (Gelbs 886). Understandably thus, blacks, who were alienated, who were at the bottom of American society, won the sympathy and concern of the playwright, and hence, he used his dramatic and literary expertise as a strong vehicle to denounce racism and racial injustice.

O’Neill’s interest and concern for blacks coincided with and reverberated from what was in fact a historical verity at the turn of the twentieth century—the phenomenal event of Great Migration when nearly 1.5 million blacks migrated to the Northern cities from the South between 1910-1940 not only to escape racism, lynching, KKK, but also to seek employment in industrial cities, in arms manufacturing, and to educate their children. A significant point of black history in the United States, usually referred as the African American dream of leading a better life, this great expectation became the worst nightmare in the North for blacks as they found the left-behind Southern brutal memories exposed them to more atrocities in the urban North. Race riots, job discrimination, housing restriction, oppressive reality of ghetto existence, overall depression and the Southern cultural and linguistic traits that created “otherness,” dashed their dream or hope. Black literati like August Wilson, as late as 1990s, emotively recounts the great migration as “a transplant that did not take” (Rothstein 8), or “not ... a good move” (Moyers 167) illuminating the fact that the same problems of joblessness, brutality, and oppression for blacks waited in the North as well.

However, it is interesting to observe that the literature of Harlem Renaissance unfortunately covered very little of these serious problems encountered by the newly-

migrated African Americans. O'Neill wrote his Black plays during these torrid years, and became the only exception among writers, black or white, of the era to depict the "urban black problems." Nathan I Huggins narrates how and why even leading black writers or intellectuals like James Weldon Johnson deliberately stayed away from talking about these "problems" of the "common man":

[I]n those years [1920s] few Harlem intellectuals addressed themselves to issues related to tenements, crime, violence, and poverty. Even *Opportunity*, the magazine of the Urban League and social works among Negroes, did not discuss urban problems as much as it announced the Negro's coming of age. In part this was due, no doubt, to the desire of black leaders to stress black achievement rather than black problems. (Huggins 4-5)

Huggins rightly claims that the then black scholars' endeavor to bolster "a positive self-image," not only "annoy[s]" the "present-day readers" for ignoring such grave "urban black problems" like segregation, housing restriction, social discrimination, killing, etc., encountered by thousands of members of the race during Great Migration, but also renders Johnson-like intellectuals as "cultural elitists" who simply overlooked the crises as their objective was "to stress black achievement rather than black problem" (5). Huggins contends that such tactical move or "desire of the black leaders" proved futile at the end as he says, "It would take more defeat than [black leaders] had yet known for them to believe that what they were building would, in time, imprison them" (4). The only exception among them, as claimed by this acclaimed black historian, was Langston Hughes. Hughes' only Broadway success *Mulatto*, which came late in mid-1930s, however, is found to be trapped in the quagmire of "tragic mulatto" cult, set in the rural South, hence bypassing the "new" urban life or Black Renaissance of the North. In fact, *Mulatto* seems to carry the

common antebellum *motif* of protagonist's "tainted" skin color of naturalistic debacle, already experienced in Aiken's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and Boucicault's *The Octoroon*, considered the root cause of the marginalization, segregation, discrimination, and debasement of blacks in the hands of the dominant class in the United States. It did overlook the outer reality of the life led on the streets and slums of New York and its Harlem.

O'Neill's interest in racial justice and brotherhood was manifested throughout his creative career starting from his early efforts in the first year he began to write plays (*Thirst* 1913) to the last artistic period when he wrote one of the finest American classics (*The Iceman Cometh* 1939). In *Thirst*, O'Neill himself played the role of the Mulatto Sailor who is cornered, scoffed at, slandered, distrusted, and showered with most obnoxious racist remarks from his other two white companions floating on a lifeboat in the vain hope of being rescued. *The Dreamy Kid*, the first play to give African American actors *entrée* to Broadway (Sternlicht 47; Gelbs 399), presents Abe as a prototype of the thousands of migrated African Americans who came from slave South to industrial and presumably liberal North where the social parameters conditioned lack of opportunities for blacks who continuously confronted an identity crisis from within and fighting for life from without where law-enforcing agencies, projecting overt racial fanaticism, were used to hunt them down. *The Emperor Jones* studies a streetwise black man's evolvment from a sleeping-car porter to a kleptomaniac emperor of an West Indian island embracing the white pecuniary ethos of capitalism and individualism where, at the end, albeit he panics in front of his mirror image of an African, dies a martyr to Americanism. In *All God's Chillun Got Wings* an intellectual Black is shown as a white wannabe, and this *hamartia* brings his ultimate doom like Jones'; while he possesses Calvinist doctrinaires of honest work, perseverance, and enterprise like his sister Hattie, yet

unlike his successful, proud African American sister, his aping the white culture bites the dust in every step where visible and invisible forms of racism in American society foils his upward movement. Joe in *The Iceman Cometh*, although seems to belong to the gang of world-weary derelicts of immigrants who are renegades to reality and to whom desire is dead since tomorrow never comes, is never free from racist attacks because deep down in the American consciousness extreme prejudice towards the black color is perceived as *dejavu* that sometimes is let loose from the incubator to run havoc.

O'Neill's understanding of and insight into the complexities of the racial problems in America developed as he evolved as a dramatist going from the crude apprenticeship of the early One-Acters of *Thirst*, *The Dreamy Kid*, *The Emperor Jones* to the consummate craftsmanship of the later, longer plays of *All God's Chillun Got Wings* and *The Iceman Cometh*. These plays not only serve to envisage what the sociologists late in the twentieth century termed as “scientific,” “cultural,” “structural” and “institutional” mores of racism (During 163-165) existing in America propelled by the “complex ongoing cultural debates about citizenship, identity, and race” over the fact as to “who was and was not a desirable American and why” (Kaplan 146-47), but also function as a podium to demonstrate O'Neill's clarion call for racial equity and brotherhood, especially in relation to Blacks. His notes from the three unfinished dramas on African Americans, spanning the timeline of their early forced migration to US in slave-ships to the post-Civil War modern urban north also justify how nearly three century long slavery shows on one hand the white viciousness, inhumanity, and immorality (“Bantu Boy” and “Runaway Slave”) while on the other, projects a violence-prone culture of “tyrannical majority” segregating the black minority into second-class citizenry (“Honest Honey Boy”) for another hundred years significantly threatening, damaging their identity, and corroding their cultural

derivation *per se* in American society. The appeal and implication that O'Neill endeavored to showcase through these plays not only illuminate a dark, shameful era of minority-bashing in the United States of America but at the same time these also reveal and establish a disturbing, contemporary American image: "the domination of the international others has depended on mastering the other at home" (Lott 244). Therefore, these plays, while read and staged today, structure significant perspectives into the continuing presence of exploitation and conflict that characterize the cultural study of American history.