



International Journal of Research Publication and Reviews

Journal homepage: www.ijrpr.com ISSN 2582-7421

The Construction of Selfhood in Marginalized Protagonists: From Yank to Munoo

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ABSTRACT:

This study addresses the emergence and dissolution of selfhood in two marginalized subjects—Yank from Eugene O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape*, and Munoo from Mulk Raj Anand's *Coolie*. Through a cross-cultural comparative lens, the study examines systemic structures—including industrial capitalism and colonialism—that shape, distort, and efface the concept of individual identity. Using Marxism, postcolonial theory, and intersectionality, the study considers the impact of labor, class, caste, and race in interrupting identity for both protagonists. Yank's identity emerges from the physicality of his labor, yet collapses after an encounter with class-based rejection. Munoo's selfhood is denied from the outset and, following experiences of impoverishment, exploitation, and social invisibility, becomes eroded through direct and indirect means in colonial India.

While historically and culturally distinct, both texts illustrate how marginalized persons grapple against brutal systems of dehumanization, and yet they both meet symbolic and literal death without social recognition from the very personhood each protagonist so clearly sought. In communicating the tragic psychological impact of alienation, O'Neill's play utilizes expressionism while Anand's novel employs realist style. The existence of such literature serves to highlight the emotional and existential impact of marginalization, and the study further highlights the importance of cross-cultural textual analysis in exploring conditions surrounding alienation.

Keywords: Selfhood, alienation, marginalization, industrial capitalism, colonialism, Marxist criticism, postcolonial theory, intersectionality, comparative literature, identity erasure.

Introduction:

This research paper considers the rise, the establishment, and final dissolution of selfhood in two oppressed literary protagonists—Yank in Eugene O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape*, and Munoo in Mulk Raj Anand's *Coolie*. Although they emerge from vastly different contexts—industrial America and colonial India—both texts depict systemic oppression and the impact of oppression on identity. Both characters exist within the laboring class and ultimately become subject to systems that determine, contain, and, finally, destroy their selfhood.

Yank begins the play with a stable identity determined by physical labor and class belonging, only to become entirely derailed by a single act of rejection that leads him to an existential crisis. Munoo, on the other hand, never has a coherent self. His identity is sliced and diced due to the caste system, complete exploitation of labor, and colonial domination. This study examines, through Marxist, postcolonial, and intersectional theories of identity construction, how both literary protagonists become voiceless and invisible in the systems that govern their lives.

By looking at a modernist American play and a realist Indian novel, this paper aims to demonstrate how literature can address the psychological impacts of alienation across cultures, and, moreover, whether it is conceivable that stable selfhood is possible.

The two texts do not only demonstrate the suffering of the working class; but they also provide a critique of the socio-political systems that determine whose subjects matter and whose does not, neither subject receiving value. The notion of self and labor, and the violent diminishment of both writers find in their social reality. Resources and economic systems flatten people into the commodity nature of their labor (a tool of production), stripping them of any autonomy, or emotional and psychological wholeness.

In addition, the two different literary styles used by O'Neill and Anand which represent their characters' stage of disintegration from each author's perspective is noteworthy to the above. Yank's breakdown occurs through the broken language, surreal settings, and symbolic figures in the text, while Munoo's disintegration occurs through a linear narrative, grounded in emotional references to the authenticity of everyday injustices.

This work recognizes Munoo's unique intersectional burdens whereby Munoo's marginalization expands well beyond class due to caste and colonial identity, thus making his erasure more systematic and insidious than Yank's working-class alienation. The ultimate goal of examining the two characters in their own historical context, is to illustrate the literary medium shows the ways in which resistance, truth and reflection can implicate readers to alert to the underlying human costs behind exploitation and invisibility.

Methodology:

This study employs a qualitative, comparative literary methodology to analyze the particular ways in which the essence of selfhood is created or destroyed in the experiences of the protagonists of two marginalized literatures. Two primary texts, *The Hairy Ape* by Eugene O'Neill and *Coolie* by Mulk Raj Anand, will be analyzed and compared because of thematic similarities regarding labor, identity, and marginalization in two different socio-political regimes, namely colonialism and industrial capitalism.

There are three theoretical frameworks underpinning the analysis of the two texts. Marxist theory provides the backdrop for the critique of labor and alienation in O'Neill's prose, and we use postcolonial theory for the discussion of colonial hierarchies and the suppression of identity in Anand's work. Intersectionality assists in articulating class, caste, and race as intersections of marginalization or compounded marginality. Using techniques of close reading, the analysis will emphasize language, symbols, metaphors, and narrative devices used to represent the various psychological tortures experienced by both protagonists. Thematic analysis will be used to compare alienation, resistance, and death within the two texts.

Comparison and contrast, in this case, provide a cross-cultural analysis of how the same systemic structures operate the same way, though geographically and culturally different. The analysis also accounts for aesthetics; we take into consideration forms such as expressionism exemplified in O'Neill's work and realism as depicted in Anand's work and how those forms reinforce meaning. Ethics in the study will include prominent engagement with closely describing sources and when engaging sensitive socio-political narratives, being respectful.

Results

The comparative analysis of *The Hairy Ape* and *Coolie* find a consistent pattern of systemic alienation and fragmentation of identity and psychological erasure for the two protagonists, even if they operate in distinctly different cultural and literary contexts.

In Eugene O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape*, the protagonist Yank enters story as an assertive, self-knowing protagonist, defined by his physical labour and sense of belonging among fellow stokers. Yank's self-understanding is obliterated following this rather brief engagement with Mildred, a figure of the upper class or elite, who calls him a "filthy beast." It is here, on the cusp of Yank's existential crisis, that he begins to search for belonging in social, political and ultimately an animal dimension - culminating in a figurative death, confined in a cage alongside an ape - a total absence of humanity. In

Mulk Raj Anand's *Coolie*, Munoo's identity is never permitted to come to full fruition. Munoo is born into a lower caste identity, and despite the unrelenting violence, humiliation and starvation from job-to-job to job, Munoo cannot free himself from this identity. Much like the procedures of dehumanization and marginalization that Munoo experiences are cumulative and structural, he dies anonymously from tuberculosis and his death is the final act of ontological denial.

What this shows is that labour while it is at first a source or expression of identity, becomes a tool of alienation, and death is not a failure, but a symbolic erasure.

Conclusion

This research paper has discussed the role of systemic structures—industrial capitalism in *The Hairy Ape* and colonial-capitalism oppressing the coolie in *Coolie*—in constructing and dismantling selfhood in marginalized protagonists. In both cases, the main characters, Yank and Munoo, show how the act of 'working' denies materially or imaginably an individual sense of selfhood. Instead, it is the labor that alienates and dehumanizes the individual. Whereas Yank's identity is expelled with a rejection of social acceptance, Munoo has a slow expulsion through caste, poverty, and colonial oppression.

While there are four crossed cultural and stylistic differences in the considered relationship—the expressionist theater of O'Neill, and the realist prose of Anand—in terms of collapsing subjectivity and invisibility both texts have much in common. Both protagonists die symbolically, highlighting not individual impotence, but the brutal efficacy of oppressive systems erasing subjectivity and denying identity.

This research paper demonstrates the importance of literature as a means of critiquing and reflecting on selfhood experienced at either an emotional or existential level. This research paper is significant in its contribution to comparative literature and the relationship between migrant narratives in the West and India. In addition, this study calls for further research into how gender, forms of sexuality, and other intersecting models, seemed to have far less power to shape experiences of selfhood as observed within systems of oppression.

Yank and Munoo undoubtedly further remind us that systemic injustice is not just the exploitation of bodies—but also the fracturing of minds and erasure of identities.

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