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**Voice of the Voiceless: Eugene O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape* and
George Ryga's *Indian***

A Comparative Study

Diwakar Thomas, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D.

Importance of Comparative Literature

Comparative literature is a literary discipline and ought to be recognized as a vital academic activity of the modern age. Etymologically, the term "Comparative Literature" means any literary work that compares. Such a comparison could be in terms of structure, style or philosophic vision. The concept of self-enclosed national literature is becoming outmoded as well as harmful even from the aesthetic point of view. It tends to blur our vision and conventionalise our responses. "We need both national and general literature, we need both literary history and criticism and we need the wide perspective which only comparative literature can give!"¹ states Rene Wellek.

The primary aim of Comparative Literature is to widen one's perspective by discovering certain dominant trends in literature and culture. Even a single literature course may be illuminated by comparative insights. Certain insights become all the more valuable not because they are repeated, but they are rediscovered on a new context. If authors, taking divergent roads, arrive at the same truth, they become universal.

The Problem of Belonging

Eugene O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape* (1921) and George Ryga's *Indian* (1962) deal with the basic problem of belonging. The theme of these plays may be summed up as man's endless striving to belong. The protagonists' story is in a way the story of Everyman, because each individual in some way or other, shares this human predicament. In an
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interview given in 1932 O' Neill insisted on this saying. "Yank is really your self and myself."² Like Yank, the protagonist of the play **Indian**, the nameless Indian is a universal symbol; the name of any oppressed man can be his name.

Some Structural Elements of *The Hairy Ape*

The Hairy Ape, written in eight short and abrupt scenes tells the story of a steamship's super stoker, Yank. He discovers his shortcomings from a chance meeting with one of the passengers, a cultured and wealthy Mildred. He has so far considered himself as the Atlas of the world, but stung by Mildred's revulsion at his greasy appearance, he leaves his job and goes forth to find a place where he can belong. He decides further to avenge himself on those who have destroyed his self-confidence by their superiority. But Yank finds he cannot even avenge himself on the rich.

Finally in his puzzled despair, he reaches the gorilla's cage in the zoo and discovers he has no place even in the brute world as the beast crushes and tosses him to the cage, where he dies behind the bars. O'Neill concludes the grim drama with the comment. "And perhaps the Hairy Ape at last belongs."

Problems of Machine Age Becomes the Focus

A close examination of the play reveals that there is a definite suggestion in the play. It deals with some of the problems which are of the machine age. The actual problem of Yank is not material but psychological. Even though he has a family he is alone. This isolation of the individual is a most serious problem of the present age and it is this that forces itself most daringly on us. Yank does not seek work, what he wants to know in where he belongs³.

A Native Dialect

In the opening scene Yank speaks a dialect grotesquely ungrammatical and more subtly mechanical than that of others. To the other stokers he is the leader, "their most highly developed individual" (P.40). While speaking of the Capitalist class, he asks: "Who makes dis old tub run? Ain't it us guys? Well den, we belonging, don't we? We belong and dey don't. dat's all" (P.44).

Yank takes pride in his devotion to the machines claiming, "I' m de ting in coal dat makes it boin; I'm steam and oil for de engines...And I'm that makes iron into steel. And I'm steel –steel! I'm de muscles in steel, de punch behind it! (P.48). His very being is enmeshed in the power and energy of a metal which obviously symbolises the modern industrial world and he has sold his soul to this mechanical devil.

Destruction of Confident Self-Image

In the Second Scene the confident self-image of Yank is soon destroyed by Mildred, whose father is the President of the Steel Trust. A neurotic poser, she represents a world entirely different from Yank's. He unexpectedly sees Mildred, the steel heiress in the stoke hole who looks like "a white apparition is the full light from the open furnace

doors.” (P.58). He glares into her eyes. She is horrified to see the Gorilla like face of Yank and ejaculates, “Take me away! Oh, the filthy beast!”(P.58) and faints.

Yank’s sense of pride receives a rude shock by the contemptuous and derogatory remarks of Mildred. He feels insulted in some unknown fashion in the heart. He feels that the exclamation of Mildred has destroyed the very foundation of his being. No longer does he feel that he “belongs”.

A Changed Man Now!

In the Fourth Scene, Yank is a changed man. He starts to cogitate after Mildred’s insult and is seen “seated forward on a bench in the exact attitude of Rodin’s “The Thinker” (P.59). Travis Bogard observes that the sculpture here has the evolutionary significance of “brutish man attempting to puzzle out the truth of his existence and perhaps to better it.”⁴ When he hears from Long the purpose of Mildred’s visit, he is angry and bursts out that he would blow her brains out and have his revenge on her.

Enacting Revolt – Craving for Social Recognition

The Fifth Scene takes place three weeks later on a fine Sunday morning on the Fifth Avenue, the locality where the rich people live. The psychological wound of Yank is lacerating, and since it is impossible for him to avenge on Mildred, he decides to revolt against the society which she represents.

His ‘being’ craves for social recognition, but this is a world to which he can never belong, a world which is indifferent to people of his creed and class. Yank who is completely frustrated by their disregard seeks recognition through physical violence. A fat gentleman passes by and Yank lands a terrific blow on his face. The very next moment, alerted by the fat gentleman, he is arrested and clubbed to the pavement and even then the ‘capitalist class’ does not take a look at him.

Prison Cell and Its Significance

In the next Scene Yank is seen in a prison cell seated again in the position of Rodin’s Thinker. His fellow prisoners tell him that if he wants to get even with Mildred, he should join the organisation known as **I.W.W.** (Industrial Workers of the World) whose members are “jail birds, murderers and cut throats” (P.75).

Yank is released after a month and comes to the office of the **I.W.W.** in order to join the organization. He is welcomed by the Secretary of the organization. In one of his utterances, he tells the Secretary that he would burn and blow up the factory of the steel of Douglasses. But Yank is soon disillusioned as the Secretary gives a signal and his men overpower Yank. He is regarded as “stupid” person, “dirty guy,” a “rotten agent provocateur” (P.82), a secret service man and a “brainless ape” (P.83). The very next moment he receives several kicks and is thrown out of the office into the narrow cobbled street. With a growl he gets up, sits there, brooding and is convinced that the main source of trouble is not in society, nor in Mildred, but in himself.

Failures Lead to Withdrawal

Since Yank faces a series of failures, he decides to withdraw, and to surrender to the only self-image with which he thinks he can identify himself – the image of the ape. The last Scene opens in the monkey house at the zoo. The gorilla is seen sitting very much like Rodin's 'Thinker'. He talks to the gorilla which stands up as if to greet him. He regards the gorilla as his own brother, as a member of his own family. "Ain't we both members of de same club – de Hairy Apes?" (P.85).

Final Effort to Belong to the World

In his final effort to belong to the world he opens the door of the cage and tries to shake hands with the ape. But the ape seizes him in "a murderous hug" and throws his "crushed body" in the cage and "shuffles off menacingly into the darkness" (P.87), "a symbolical warning for negligent society."⁵ As Yank dies, he mutters painfully that even the gorilla does not think that he belongs. Bewildered and in deep despair he questions: "Christ, where do I get off at? Where do I fit in?... In de cage, huh? ... Ladies and gents, step forward and take a slant at de one and only –... One and original – Hairy Ape from the wilds of –" (PP87-88). Saying this he dies in the cage and the author comments that now, perhaps, "the Hairy Ape at last belongs." (P.88).

Indian

Shifting to Canadian scene, it is seen that the non-native George Ryga's landmark play *Indian* discusses in detail the plight of the Indians on and of the reserves. It is based on Ryga's own experience when he recuperated from a bout of pneumonia by working alongside Cree Indians on his father's Alberta farm. Ryga was born in Deep Creek, Alberta in 1932 and he recalls that the Indians referred to themselves as "breeds" for somehow they got the notion that mixed blood was superior to the original article. They were transient labourers, gay, naïve, open-hearted to the verge of being self-destructive. When they worked, their pace was fiendish. So were the excess –fighting, drinking, gambling and women.⁶

Ryga in an interview⁷ admits that "*Indian* is the only play I can look back on over all these years that I would not write any differently". Commenting on the form of the play Ryga admits that he had seen Albee's *The Zoo Story* on television and was influenced by him. It should be stated that of all his plays only *Indian* employs a specifically prairie milieu."⁸

Indian is short. It is a one-act play and is about an identity crisis in a young Cree Indian labourer. The Indian is seen as "drunken, undependable and lazy"- the sins white society historically attribute to them. The action confines itself to one extended scene (landscape a 'flat, grey, Stark, non-country) in which the Indian is harassed by his bossman, Watson, and later by a nameless Indian Affairs Agent. The Agent does not have the clear-cut malignancy of Watson the bossman. He is just an average well meaning white liberal. However he finds his ethics severely abused when the Indian tells him how after his brother had been critically injured by a cave-in while digging the clay pit, he (the Indian) performed a mercy killing.

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Ryga here shows very subtly the white society's refusal to recognize the humanity and the despair of a degraded and dehumanized people. At the end, the Agent flees the scene, his car driving dust across the state, and the Indian is left driving his hammer at the head of a post, an indicator of what he would like to do the white "sementos," the soul trader's of the world⁹.

The Central Fact of Personal Despair

The crux of the play is its attempt to understand the puzzling character of the Indian. Ryga tries to draw the audience into the Indian's experience and thought process. At first, from the outside, the Indian seems like a racist cliché: lazy drunken and dangerously moody, changing quickly to nihilistic violence. But with the movement from the employer Watson to the Indian Agent, we are drawn gradually into the Indian's experience.

All his behaviour is revealed from the central fact of personal despair, expressed in his speech at the end:

I never been anybody. I not just dead....
I never live at all. What is matter?
What anything matter, sementos? (P.32)

which, in turn, summarises the wider racial despair of "All Indians same-nobody." (P.32).

From this centre springs his feeling that white society is merely the Indian's prison.

Religious Despair: Traditional Religion is of No Help

In exposing this despair Ryga also brings in the religious despair. The traditional religion is no help to the Indian. "But Jesus Christ not hear my brother" (P.24). He tells despairingly to the Agent about his trapped brother in the well.

"Ours is a civilized country..." (P.30) says the Agent in the play. But in the so called civilized country, some people are being prejudiced and discriminated just because the colour of the skin happens to be black or brown. They are segregated from the white people just because they belong to different ethnic group whose culture, language and food are different from those of the white people. The Agent's encounter with the Indian vividly dramatizes the insurmountable cultural differences between them.

Why Just Indian?

Ryga titles his play as *Indian*, omitting the article and the nameless Indian becomes a universal symbol. He is **Everyman**. Through him Ryga expresses his concern for the oppressed minority all over the world. The Indian has no identity of his own; yet he can be identified with all suffering men. When demanded of his name by the agent the Indian replies, "Mebee I forget.... Mebbe I got no name at all." (P. 16). Later he questions the Language in India www.languageinindia.com

Agent, “How many of us got birth certificates to give us name an’ age on reserve?” (P.20). According to Albert Glapp, “Names and birth certificates do not mean anything to him.... Some of them are given individual names only later in their lives as rewards for special achievements”¹⁰ (P.101).

A Stimulating Comparison

A Comparative Study of *The Hairy Ape* and *Indian* has been rewarding. Each play has thrown light on the other. Both Yank and Indian stand for Everyman, for what happens to both in the plays is happening to millions in the modern world. Both undergo a plethora of suffering and fall a prey to despair. Both suffer from identity crisis. Both are oppressed by the dominant ‘white society.’

Mildred Douglas symbolizes the rich capitalist class and can be compared to Watson who represents the dominant white society. The confrontation of Mildred and Yank symbolizes the modern class conflict, the confrontation of the rich capitalist class and the proletariat. Watson, the white employer of the Indian treats his labourer like an irresponsible child and he threatens the Indian to make him work.

Like O’Neill’s ordinary stoker Yank, the Indian is an ordinary labourer. Both are crippled emotionally, if not physically, and the very intensity of their suffering ennobles and exalts them.

While *The Hairy Ape* has made use of expressionistic method, *Indian* is a realistic play– in event, dialogue and setting. From a thematic perspective the dramatists fight for the cause of the oppressed and that is the unifying theme which brings the American play and the English Canadian play for a discussion, thereby evolving a concept of universal literature. Thus a study of these plays exposes a universal truth – namely, whether they are in America or in Canada the underdogs have to suffer.



Notes

1. Rene Wellek, “Name and Nature of Comparative Literature” **Discriminations : Further concepts of criticism** (London : Yale University Press, 1970), P.36.
2. Frederick I. Carpenter, **Eugene O’Neill**. (Newyork: Twayne Publishers, 1964), P.100.
3. Josph Wood Krutch, **Nine Plays by Eugene O’Neill** (1941:rpt. New York: the Modern Library, 1959). Further page references for **The Hairy Ape** are from this text.
4. Travin Bogard, **Contour in Time** (New York: Oxford University Press 1972), P.246.
5. Clifford Lecch, **O’Neill** (London: Oliver and Boyd, 1966), P.42.
6. Quoted by Ryga in **George Ryga: The Ecstasy of Rita Joe and Other Plays** (Toronto: General Paperbacks, 1991), P.XI. Further page references for Indian are from this text.

7. Quoted in **Canadian Drama And the Critics**, ed. L.W.Conolly (Vancouver: Talon Books, 1987), P.155).
8. E.Ross Stuart, **Canadian Theatre History No.2, The History of Praoiree Theatre**, (London: Simon & Pieve Press, 1984).
9. Lawrence Russell, **Canadian Literature**, 50, (Autumn 1971), 81-82.
10. Albert R Glaap, "Indian –A Short Play by Ryga". **Very Short Plays** Ed. Sonderdruck (Heidelberg, 1986).PP 97-106.

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