

**Racism and Xenophobia: The Crisis of Black Asylum Seekers  
in Donald O’Kelly’s *Asylum ! Asylum !***

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### Abstract

The Celtic Tiger Period altered the ethnic landscape of Irish society which suddenly became a destination for immigrants, asylum seekers and refugees. The socioeconomic and political transformations since the mid-1990s have given rise to experiences of racism by new racialised minorities, i.e. immigrant communities and refugees. This research paper highlights the racialisation of the government's immigration policies, its reasons and consequences through examining Donald O'Kelly's *Asylum!* (1994). The play deals almost entirely with the painful experience of a desperate Ugandan asylum seeker during the boom. As an early scene in the play depicts, the black asylum seeker Joseph Omara is framed as a victim of societal and State racism. He is subject to unjust discrimination, pain and suffering. Throughout the play, he is incarcerated, humiliated and finally deported to his home country for no other reason except his blackness.

**العنصرية ورهاب الأجانب : أزمة طالبي اللجوء السياسي السود  
في مسرحية لجوء سياسي! لجوء سياسي! لدونالد أوكيلى**

#### ملخص

خلال الفترة الزمنية المعروفة بسنوات "النمر الأيرلندي" شهدت أيرلندا طفرة في النمو الاقتصادي أدت إلى تدفق أعداد كبيرة من المهاجرين وطالبي اللجوء السياسي. لمواجهة هذه الأعداد المتزايدة من المهاجرين تبنت الحكومة الأيرلندية سياسه عنصريه ممنهجه تجاه الأقليات من المهاجرين وطالبي اللجوء السياسي. يهدف البحث إلى إلقاء الضوء على هذه الممارسات العنصرية الممنهجة ودوافعها وأيضاً النتائج المترتبة عليها من خلال دراسة مسرحية لجوء سياسي ! لجوء سياسي ! للكاتب المسرحي دونالد أوكيلى والتي عرضت لأول مرة عام 1994. تتناول المسرحية التجربة المريرة للاجئ سياسي أوغندي في أيرلندا في تلك الفترة حيث تظهر الشخصية المحورية في المسرحية كضحية للممارسات العنصرية للدولة والمجتمع. تكشف أحداث المسرحية عن معاناة هذا اللاجئ حيث يتعرض للحبس والاعتداء والإهانات المتكررة وأخيراً للترحيل في نهاية المسرحية ليس لأي سبب غير كونه أسود.

The aim of this paper is to examine Donald O’Kelly’s *Asylum!* (1994), a play critically engaged with racism and seeking asylum in Ireland as its major theme. The play appeared during a critical period in contemporary Irish history “when the state was being seriously challenged” (Singleton 141). It debuted at the advent of the economic boom of the Celtic Tiger, the years that marked a radical transformation of Ireland into a “racist state”. The term Celtic Tiger was first coined by the economist Kevin Gardiner in 1994 to mark a period of unprecedented economic growth. The boom was accompanied by social and demographic changes that lasted from the late 1990s to the first few years of the new millennium. The Celtic Tiger years (1995-2006) turned the Republic of Ireland from a country of emigration to a wealthy country of net immigration. As a result, Irish society that was claimed to be “fairly homogeneous” – in terms of whiteness and Christianity – transformed to what Ronaldo Munck describes as, “an ethnically, racially and religiously diverse society” (3).

The socioeconomic changes of the period were obviously marked by “neo-liberalism”. It has been argued, however, that this “period” also witnessed “growing racism within Irish society” manifested in “increasing racial attitudes towards refugees and asylum seekers and attempted justifications of these attitudes” (Loyal 74). In August of 2002, an *Irish Times* editorial warned that a “dangerous surge of racism and xenophobia has accompanied Ireland’s recent economic boom and the resulting opening of Irish society to a level of immigration it has not experienced before” (Immigration, 2002). The present discussion of the play, therefore, problematises this process of increased racism and the subsequent crisis of asylum seekers.

Ranked “the most globalized country in the world” (Villar-Argaiz 1), Ireland during the boom was radically open to immigration, a sudden phenomenon to the post-independence nation. Inward migrants included in part indigenous migrant returnees as well as foreigners drawn arguably by the ephemeral but intense economic prosperity or, in Loredana Salis’s words, “by the roar of the Celtic Tiger (15). Large waves of immigrants from Eastern Europe and Africa moved to Ireland to find work or to seek political asylum. Between “1995 and 2002” almost a quarter of a million people “(248,000)” immigrated to Ireland. This:

[A]mounted to an aggregated figure of 7 per cent of the population. About half were returned Irish emigrants. Some 18 per cent (45,600) came from the United Kingdom, 13 per

cent (33,400) came from other EU countries and 7 per cent (16,000) came from the rest of the world. (Brown 98)

An intrinsic feature of this period was also a significant increase in the number of politically-driven diasporas applying for asylum and refugee status in Ireland. The number of asylum seekers in 1992 was not more than “39”, but in ten years later, “the number peaked at 11,634” (Tuitt 54). In total there were approximately “40,000 applications for asylum in Ireland between 1992 and 2001” (Loyal 76). Although “exact figures are difficult to calculate, the majority of the asylum seekers were from African countries including Nigeria, Zimbabwe, Malawi, and the Democratic Republic of Congo” (Almirall 24).

The presence of this low but highly observable number of “black refugees and asylum seekers”, Ronit Lentin and Robbie McVeigh affirm, “triggered an escalation of racist discourse” (*After Optimism* 4). While migrants increasingly became a well-established part of modern Ireland, the notion of refugees “flooding into Ireland”, as Steve Garner affirms, “shifted the immigration debate to trepidation on par with impending natural disaster” (44). Asylum seekers and refugees have been collectively presented by the State and the media as a threat. State discourses manifestly demonised those who sought refugee status as “illegal asylum seekers” in order to “empty the state’s responsibility to the stranger / outsider so that rejecting the request for refuge becomes ethically acceptable” (Gelbert and Lo 189).

During the emergence of the boom economy, and “for the first time in the history of the Irish State”, Bryan Fanning asserts, “Ireland has consistently treated the influx of numerous immigrants and asylum seekers as a political problem” (122). Incoming migrants have been conceived as a crisis threatening the nation’s homogeneity and requiring immediate emergency measures. However, it would be mistaken to believe that the presence of asylum seekers, particularly the coloured among them, is disrupting the so-called monocultural Irish society or that their experience and impact on society are unprecedented. Ireland has always been multiethnic; the “presence of Travellers, Jews, Protestants and Black-Irish people”, Bill Rolston and Michael Shanon argue, “bear witness to the fact that the Irish society was always more diverse than it claimed to be” (66).

In defiance of the putative threat posed by the asylum seekers, Ireland, Lentin reiterates, has become a “racist state” where “governmental biopolitics and technologies of regulating immigration and asylum dictate the discursive and practical construction of Irishness and of Ireland’s racialized population” (*After Optimism* 4). This means that the restrictive

policies and practices adopted by the state to regulate migrant and other ethnic minority groups have been deliberately implemented to justify discrimination of particular groups, namely refugees and asylum seekers.

This discrimination, in addition to the hostile and racist State discourses, has culminated in the introduction of the Direct Provision and Dispersal Scheme. The measure has been taken to contain the “refugee crisis” and to prevent the country from being invaded by asylum seekers. Under this system, asylum applicants are dispersed in (DP) accommodation centres which only “provide for [their] basic needs; three meals per day at specific times”. Residents are not eligible to “cook their own meals and they share bedrooms and bathrooms with other residents” (Pieper et al. 29). They are also “required to remain in the accommodation centers”, not entitled to “work or travel outside the state without the permission of the Minister of Justice” (Breen 123).

Asylum seekers are thus subjected to a policy of non-integration. They are enforced into, what Steven Loyal calls, a “highly restrictive and institutionalised existence” (78). The DP system isolates them from the mainstream Irish society and keeps them in a position of destitution, humiliation and powerlessness. Accordingly, asylum seekers are “at the bottom of hierarchy when it comes to how migrants are categorised in relation to social rights and social policy” (Considine and Dukelow 419).

Held in these appalling conditions “at the very margin of Irish society”, asylum seekers “are to be reminded of their marginality through daily practices of self-identification and more punitive forms of control and containment” (Alastair 47). The Scheme for an Immigration, Residence and Protection Bill demands foreign nationals to provide, when necessary, “appropriate identification”, and if it is not provided by an asylum seeker or immigrant, “she/he can be assessed as failing to co-operate. Failure to co-operate with this requirement will constitute a criminal offence. The scheme also requires “foreign nationals” to “prove that they have permission to reside in Ireland”. If they “fail, they must remove themselves, or be removed, from the state.” Before being “deported”, they “may be arrested and detained for a period up to 8 weeks” (Scheme, 2006).

The present study of O’Kelly’s theatre piece is situated within these phenomena of increasing institutional racism, discrimination and prejudice. *Asylum! Asylum!* is “the first play to address asylum seekers and the issues of migration broadly in Irish theatre” (Merriman 55). The play, according to Christopher Fitz-Simon and Sanford Sternlicht, “was written to call attention to the repressive and inhumane Irish asylum regulations

and the European Union (EU) cooperative controls of borders that deny the human rights of asylum seekers throughout the Continent” (xviii).

Through the experience of Joseph Omara, an African asylum seeker in the booming Ireland, and the persistent opposition of Leo Gaughran, an Irish immigration officer, the play explicitly challenges the State’s blatantly racialised immigration politics to which incoming asylum seekers have been subjected. Though when the play was staged at the Abbey’s Peacock Theatre, the governmental processing and accommodation procedures were recently issued, O’Kelly’s “hard-hitting piece” (Wilmer 57) directly counters these racialised attitudes that the unexpected exponential increase in black refugees has engendered. Thus, the play is concerned not only with the Irish state and individual responses to black “outsiders”, but also with the process of racialisation that emerged in the Celtic Tiger era during which the Irish society became more racially diverse than it had ever been.

In the 1951 *Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees*, a refugee is defined as someone who:

owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted ... is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country ... [and] as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.

The experience of Joseph Omara, the protagonist of the play, exactly accords with the definition.

He is applying for asylum in Dublin due to the persecution, torture and military intimidation inflicted on him in his country of origin. Back in Northern Uganda, he was brutalised and forced by the army to dig a pit where five villagers, including his own father, were burnt alive. At the beginning of the play, O’Kelly notes that Joseph’s horrific experiences in Uganda were actually based upon a real event adapted “with some license”: an “incident in Bucoro, Gulu District, Northern Uganda, reported by Amnesty International, December 1991, where five prisoners were placed in a pit, the pit covered with logs, and a fire lit on top of the logs” (Act I 114) killing all inside. Joseph’s claim for asylum is based on his being persecuted in his country of origin. In his home country, he is jeopardised by the double threat of being killed by the military for “having witnessed the massacre” and by his own “tribe” who consider him a “collaborator” (Singleton 140). Such atrocious experience and its historical background

support Joseph's request for sanctuary and castigate rigorous asylum process in Ireland.

In Ireland he is a foreigner, an outsider and a homeless person. From his first appearance on the stage, Joseph is found in a "liminal state" (Wilmer 52). He is a fugitive from his home country and not yet a citizen or even a resident of the host country and he will never be. Therefore, he is in what Gilles Deleuze and Pierre Félix Guattari describe as, a "state of becoming (*passim*)" (52). Because of the immigration restrictions exacted by the Irish government, he is regarded as an "alien", unable to work or integrate normally into society, deprived of the basic human rights and subject to deportation at any time.

Since he is a non-citizen, he is beyond the law and his sacred and inalienable rights are completely unprotected by the state. Leo, "who has the support of Irish and European legal system" (McIvor 77), is aware of the fact that Joseph is not entitled to any legal protection and is consequently denied legal assistance. "No solicitor will ever take his case", Leo comfortably tells Mary, his sister, "he is African, he hasn't got a bean, [and] legal aid doesn't cover asylum-seeker cases" (Act I 124). Therefore, the government and the immigration officer, Steven Wilmer affirms, "continue to treat him on an ad hoc basis, subject to individual whim and communal emotion" (64-5). Joseph's hope is to gain asylum and secure a better future. Yet, neither his present nor his future is certain, and he lives in constant fears of the *gardáí*, Irish police, and most of all of expulsion and repatriation. When the play opens, the first African refugee on the Irish stage is "found in prison; on trial, and about to be deported" (Singleton 140).

Instead of eliciting sympathy and understanding, Joseph's traumatic experience and the subsequent claim for asylum are met with Leo's suspicion mixed with fear, anger and hostility. Consequently, the intercultural encounter between the African protagonist and his Irish antagonist occurs in a xenophobic atmosphere and results in a confrontation rather than reciprocal understanding. Leo's fear of Joseph, which is an abstract fear of strangers and foreigners, translates into an impulse to harm the African. He justifies his hostile actions as "being rightfully deserved by his victim" (Trotter 186). His hostility and prejudice are most evident in his desperate attempt to prove Joseph's claimed criminality and to justify his arbitrary detention. Leo accuses the latter of "smuggling crayons" into Ireland, and when he fails to prove the alleged offence, he disparages him as "liar", "alien" and "illegal". He then "*grabs*

*Joseph from behind, pulls his jacket down pinning his arms behind his back and exerts [much] pressure [that] Joseph screams in pain” (Act I 122).*

Leo’s hostile posturing and his extreme expression of aggression towards the “outsider” do not occur in a vacuum. When he expresses directly and through his legal authority hostility, contempt, antipathy and aversion, he just echoes state and media discourses. Governmental discourse not only manifestly demonised asylum claimants as “bogus refugees” and “economic migrants”, but also associated them with “criminality and breaches of state security” (Schuster 253). The national media has consistently described African migrants in particular as a “tidal wave” and an “army of illegals”. The state has been regarded as “so idiotic or feckless as [to] allow such vast numbers to enter” and the whole population as “so idiotic and so morally lethargic as to allow such massive inward population movements” (Myers). Racial terminology created a climate of common sense racism and xenophobia. People of African descent become seen as “illegitimate simply for being present in Ireland” (Perry 35).

Though the “Irish like to think of themselves as a compassionate, welcoming society, there is much evidence to the contrary” (O’Doherty). It has been assumed and proved that Ireland’s image of a welcoming, hospitable nation and the unprecedented economic prosperity camouflage societal and state racism. The celebrated neo-liberal values of “freedom, choice and opportunities” represent the obverse of what Lentin describes as “exclusionary nationalism, and growing xenophobia in relation to both the state and the general populace (*From Racial* 7). The majority of black diasporic communities have experienced countless incidents of racial harassment and “institutional discrimination” as a “feature of everyday life” (7) since arriving in the land of *Céadal Mile Fáilte* (one hundred thousand welcomes).

According to a survey conducted by the African Refugee Network and published in October 1991, “89.7 per cent” of individuals from black or ethnic minority groups living in Ireland stated that they have endured some form of “racism” or “discrimination” on basis of skin colour and ethnic origin. Lentin states that racism manifests itself as “verbal abuse 68,75 per cent, physical abuse 25 per cent [and] being arrested” (“Anti” 3). A particular cause of concern, according to Loyal, is “the high proportion of racist incidents experienced at the hands of immigration officers (twenty-five percent) since the group holds a significant degree of power within Irish society” (76).



It is because of this power as well as the “blind allegiance to Irish and European Immigration Law” (McIvor 77) that O’Kelly’s immigration officer adopts a persistently prejudiced attitude against the asylum seeker. “Through the character of Leo”, the play “demonstrates the seamy reality of power politics behind official policy and the determination to prevent the state being contaminated by foreigners” (Wilmer 57). He is fully conscious of the fact that it is impossible for Joseph to maintain any identification while surviving a horrible massacre and fleeing from his country entirely. However, in a blatantly intolerable manner, he requires Joseph as a foreign national to provide appropriate identification inquiring sternly “why [his passport] is not in [his] possession” (Act I 121).

Gradually and as the events of the play unfold the audience learn of the repressed trauma of the Ugandan. Joseph slowly reveals how he lost his father in a horrifying act of torture committed by Uganda military. He informs Mary, his volunteer solicitor and Leo’s sister, how he has disowned his father out of fear and watched him dying in the fire. While enacting those violent incidents, Joseph retrieves the horror, profound guilt and shame that have assailed him at having witnessed the atrocity:

We gathered up the straw and soil and covered the logs ... The soldier who took my passport handed me a lighter. ‘Light it’, he said. (*Pause*) ‘Light the straw.’ ‘I cannot light the straw’ I said. ‘Why not!? Do you know these men !?’ (*Pause*). ‘No I don’t know anybody here’. (*Pause*). The soldier lit the straw himself. He lit it at four different points. Lumps of the burning soil fell through the logs into the men in the pit. (Act I 143)

Joseph is obviously a victim of oppression. In addition to having watched the brutal murder of his father, he himself has been subjected to intimidation, persecution and torture. Despite the severity of the situation and the difficulty to recall the traumatic memories, which are too terrible to express aloud, he reveals to Mary and Leo how he was taken to the school where he was tied and hung up on a rafter for refusing to burn the straw:

They tied my arms, here, above the elbows ... They tied my feet, at the ankles ... They pushed me. Then they tied the rope on my arms and the rope on my feet ... together. They pulled my arms and feet together behind ... and they tied them. They picked me up [and] carried me around like *kandooya* ... a briefcase. A screaming briefcase. Then they tied me to the one remaining rafter of the roof. (Act I 128)

Though recounting these painful memories, accompanied by feelings of intense powerlessness, anxiety, humiliation and shame, generates Mary's sympathy, it elicits only "jeers" and "applause" (Act I 143) from Leo. Leo's extremely callous reaction is fuelled by "aggressive hatred" (Act II 145). He immediately expresses his suspicion and doubt concerning Joseph's account describing these heart-wrenching stories as "hard-neck fiction" (Act II 144) and Joseph himself as a "smart operator (Act I 129) and a "natural storyteller" who is obviously "trying to squeeze in uninvited" (Act II 135). Leo is aware of the fact that Joseph's "forced migration precludes [him] from having in [his] possession the very documents required" to prove his "need for refuge" (Galvin 207). Apart from the demonstrable "bruises above his elbows and ankles" (Act I 123), there is generally no other external evidence available to confirm Joseph's recounting in order to substantiate his asylum request. For this reason, Leo impulsively responds "it won't give you asylum. Unless you can produce proof. And that'll be impossible" (Act II 144). Seeking refuge is a humiliating process that, Treasa Galvin explains, "devalues and transforms the status of refugee from a respected and dignified position to one that is questioned and requires proof" (207).

O'Kelly exposes other ignominious forms of brutality, violence and oppression extensively enforced against incoming refugees like detention, intimidation and deportation. All these discriminatory practices are licensed and justified as necessary measures to secure deterrence. Since the 1990s Europe has resorted to detention as an instrument of deterrence. European countries impose a severe incarceration policy as a means of preventing asylum claimants from integrating into the receiving societies "until their status has been determined" (Wilmer 55). This means that detention is used, like other coercive practices, to stem migration flows. The European Council on Refugees and Exiles cautioned that the use of detention as a "tool to regulate unwanted migration is on the increase" and has become "a key component to enforce return" (Tuitt 19). In 2004, Amnesty International estimated that "there were over two hundred detention centres for asylum-seekers in Europe". According to the Jesuit Refugee Service, "asylum-seekers are being detained on quite arbitrary basis" and detainees are often "unaware of why they are incarcerated". "The period" for which asylum claimants can be detained "is lengthening and in some European countries asylum seekers can be detained for indefinite periods of time" (Detention in Europe 4).

As explained earlier, Joseph is *apolis*, uprooted, and homeless. He is fleeing persecution in his country of origin and seeking shelter in Ireland.

Yet, instead of providing him with sanctuary, Ireland is wreaking vengeance on him. Since his first appearance on the stage, he has been held in prison first in “Santry Garda Station” and then in “Mountjoy Jail” (Act I 114). Like thousands of asylum claimants in Europe, Joseph, who has already spent “six months in Mountjoy” (Act II 150), is detained on deterrent and punitive rather than criminal bases. At the very beginning of the play when Bill, the Gaughrans’ paterfamilias, astonished by the way Joseph is effectively deprived of his human rights, asks his son “if he did nothing, why is he in jail?”, Leo answers “that’s the way the system works” (Act II 134). Revealing complete ignorance of his legal entanglement, Joseph naively speculates that he “cannot” be incarcerated “for long time” since his detention costs the government “one hundred and seventy four pounds per day!” (Act I 130). Out of her knowledge of how the government is bent on using detention to deter refugees whatever the cost, Mary shockingly tells him that he “can” and he “will” (Act I 131).

Intimidation is another form of institutional racism, xenophobia and intolerance indicted in the play as a deterrent weapon but “within a wider European context” (Urban 556). The historical incident of the burning of asylum seekers’ hostel in Rostock, Germany, in 1992 is – like the Bocoro burning incident – handled by the playwright “with some license” (Act I 114). This widely reported attack is described as “the most violent xenophobic riot in the history of postwar Germany” (Neumann 132). During the arson, a racist mob of right-wing extremists – neo-Nazis – and locals hurled molotov cocktails, stones and flares at the hostel trapping 150 people – mostly Vietnamese – inside.

O’Kelly inserted this real event, which has aimed at spreading fear among asylum seekers, within the play through Leo’s recounting of the atrocity. Leo enacts his own memory of witnessing the dreadful incident in highly vivid sentences. His speech “recreates the horror” he himself has witnessed “for his [own] audience”, his father and sister, and “for the audience of the play” (Urban 558):

[e]very window in the hostel block was smashed. Then the petrol bombs flew. Blazing curtains hanging out of windows. The lights went out. The Chief kept gawking at the monitors. Flames spread through the floors. While people [were] running up the stairwell dragging children ..., the crowd cheered. Six or seven of the crowd danced and pelted the running [migrants] with bricks. The Chief was shaking with excitement, [he] acted sad and said nothing. (Act III 166)

Leo is deeply traumatised by this excessively barbaric act which undermines his idealistic vision of European civilization. This terrible experience renders him cognisant of the fascist nature of asylum policy and the prejudiced neo-liberalism which reserves human treatment for European citizens. Condemning fascist racism, he observes, “[w]e’re marking them! We’re impounding them in camps! We’re forcibly transporting them! We’re calling it a solution” (Act III 168).

Rather than preventing the resurgence of violence, the police forces explicitly reveal a lack of political will to stem it by deliberately ignoring the calamity and refusing to take any action to help the entrapped victims. When Leo, as a member of Europol in Berlin, asks the Chief “why [they] let it happen”, the man, without a shred of guilt or remorse, succinctly replies “[b]ecause fear is the only deterrent. Fear is the only thing they understand!” (Act III 167).

Like detention and intimidation, forced deportation is an inherently racialised practice anchored in the logic of deterrence. Leo affirms the fact that the “[p]ressure from Europe” to “stop immigration” by means of “expulsions and asylum rejections” is “rising fast” (Act II 138). Expulsion as a policy is designed and implemented to dissuade would-be asylum seekers from travelling and drive those already there to leave. Through his wide knowledge of immigration restrictions including repatriation, Pillar Boylan, Leo’s fellow officer, explains to Mary that “rejected asylum seekers” are “seen as chancers to be made an example of. They’re all to be deported to country of origin, to deter any other chancers” (Act III 153-54).

Ireland has “one of the lowest refugee recognition rates in Europe”. In order to transcend the problem which the increase in the number of immigrants inevitably created, the government turned down “more than 92 per cent of those who arrived during the boom seeking asylum” (Brown 99). Joseph’s case is not exceptional. He is being denied refugee status in Ireland since “his asylum request is rejected” (Act II 150) in court. Consequently, he becomes illegally resident in the State. Though Joseph cannot avail himself of the protection of his country where throes of a violent, internecine conflict and barbarous acts of torture and murder are committed, the court is unwilling to determine that his fear is well-founded. According to his deportation order, he is “not a refugee. There is no such thing as a Ugandan refugee [since] Uganda is [designated] safe and democratic” (Act III 165).

As aforementioned when an asylum application is rejected, the applicant has to remove him/herself from the State voluntarily. Yet,

O'Kelly's failed asylum seeker is not granted even the privilege of a voluntary departure and he has to bear the harsh consequences associated with forced deportation. In order to reveal the brutality of the procedure, the play "concludes with the ejection" of the protagonist "from Irish society through deportation". This finale dramatises "the existence of hostility, xenophobia and fear in Irish responses to the diasporic communities" (Villar-Argaiz 7). Because Joseph "has already resisted a deportation", he is classified a "category A deportee" (Act III 164) liable to arrest and detention for the purpose of effecting his deportation. This entails having him "tie[d] up and gag[ged] like a lunatic (Act III 160) and returned to where he came from. In more details and as Pillar tells Mary:

That means bursting into your father's house [where Joseph is living] with five officers, a bodybelt, mouth tape and binding, pinning the Ugandan to the floor, parcelling him up, taking him to the airport and strapping him to a seat on a plane back home. (Act II 154)

Forced repatriation is arguably a draconian measure; it involves violence, coercion and unnecessary force that infringe a deportee's human rights and dignity.

All these abhorrent policies – incarceration, intimidation and expulsion – have certainly created increasingly hostile environments for refugees where fundamental moral values are jeopardised. This may explain why the term jungle is frequently used by the three male Irish characters while referring to Ireland and/or Europe. The term functions as a metaphor for a place devoid of ethics where brutality, indecent demeanour and self-interest prevail. At the very beginning of the play, Bill employs the word in this sense to express his unfamiliarity with the dramatic transformations his country has been experiencing. He describes the pub, which is usually emblematic of Ireland, as "done up as if it was a clearing in the jungle" (Act I 114). More than once he calls Ireland a "jungle" (Act I 116), and he likens the presence of the African there to that of an "alien in the jungle" (Act I 118).

The term is also used by Leo in the same sense but for a different purpose. Before his Europol experience, Leo held the notion that Ireland is a jungle; a place where there is "no sense of forgiveness, second chance" (Act II 137), compassion or even understanding. He has been motivated by his disgust of his own country and a strong desire to abandon it for the more "civilized" Europe. Leo describes the "Irish jungle" as "fit for nothing" (Act I 117) and dominated by a "stifling atmosphere of oppressive parochialism and nepotism" (Urban 557). He shamelessly condemns

Ireland as a “small and parochial” place devoid of ethics where “nothing is decided on merit, everybody’s out to rattle the skeleton in the other fella’s cupboard ... it’s all back biting and back stabbing” (Act II 134).

It is worthy to note that though he is bitterly resentful of the “Irish jungle” for its corruption and duplicity, Leo himself is explicitly a corrupt and hypocrite person who “used” Joseph’s “pain to pump his own ambition” (Act III 154). Nothing can best uncover Leo’s Machiavellianism – his cynical disregard for morality, lack of empathy and his focus on self-interest and personal gain – than his pertinacious determination to deny the black man political refuge and his thoughtless exploitation of this man’s painful experience.

In order to join Interpol, Leo shows extreme cruelty and odiousness towards asylum seekers through keeping Joseph out of Ireland and Europe and denying him refugee status. As Maria Kurdi argues, “Leo’s hostile treatment of Joseph is fuelled by his determination to emigrate and rise in the first world of the continent, working for Europol” (93). As a heartless law-enforcer, he is taking pride in the fact that his job is “a bouncing business, [immigrants] try to jump in, [and] we bounce them out again” (Act I 115). Gloating at Joseph’s subsequent helplessness, he maliciously tells him “[m]y job is to keep a clean sheet. I’m a goalkeeper and I’m good at it and I’m going to punt you into orbit with the next kickout” (Act I 120). It is, thus, evident that Leo’s “ambition has blinded him to the refugee’s humanity” to the extent that he regards Joseph as “an object – an obstacle to his promotion that he must conquer for his own gain” (Trotter 186).

Moreover, Leo is unethically exploiting and profiting from the black man’s dilemma for his own personal advancement. He finally fulfils his ambition to join Europol by posing as an asylum seeker and enacting one of Joseph’s tragic stories so cunningly that he successfully passes the interview: “I acted it so well they told me ... this was unanimous ... they told me they’d have granted me asylum on the spot. These guys were the toughest enforcers around. I was able to soften them” (Act II 135).

According to Pillar, the whole European continent, not only Ireland, has turned into a jungle owing to the implementation of contemporary immigration politics. He adheres to the notion that the jungle is everywhere in Europe since “the criterion for enforcement of immigration barrier in Ireland” (Act III 165) is quite simply “survival ... survival of the fittest! Everybody knows it’s a jungle! That goes for here! Berlin! Anywhere!” (Act III 167). Accordingly, Europe’s hostile reaction to the influx of

coloured immigrants is based on Charles Darwin's theory of Natural Selection which essentially states that "the strong survive".

In colonial Western society, the widespread belief in the inherent superiority of the white race is justified. By implication, "the persistent belief that the non-white, or coloured other, belonged to a separate, inferior and subhuman race is validated" (Glaude 66). Social Darwinism purported to explain that at some future point the civilized races of man will certainly exterminate and replace the "savage" races throughout the world. Kenan Malik highlights that this essentialist theory supported the idea that human populations could be "hierarchically ordered" according to their "evolutionary progress". This hierarchy was based on a group's "similarity or dissimilarity to the European race" (5), which was considered to be the most advanced and evolved, and, consequently, elevated over primitive or underdeveloped others. These theories of scientific racism provided a "convenient rationalisation for the exploitation and marginalisation of non-white races" (Alderman 130).

In global society, race is "socially constructed". This means that "cultural difference" is used as a justification for the marginalisation and exclusion of targeted groups who are considered "resistant to assimilation" and culturally incompatible with "white" society. White societies are, therefore, allegedly entitled to "defend [their] way of life, traditions and customs against outsiders because they are part of different cultures" (Barker 23-4). Sub-Saharan African immigrants seeking refuge in Western states, according to Alana Lentin and Gavan Titely, are regarded as not only "inherently incompatible", but also "unable to assimilate and a threat to social cohesion" (76).

In addition to the parlance of protecting homogeneity and cultural superiority, another major reason influencing new European racism and prejudice is economic anxiety or the concern about the future of Irish and European economic prospects. The paranoid conviction that Europe has been overrun by immigrants, who hobble the continent's economic future, is articulated by Leo. In a rigid exchange with Joseph, he alleges that since "three hundred and fifty thousand here", and "eighteen million" in the entire continent are "out of work", there is "no room left for anybody else" (Act I 119-20), meaning refugees from outside the EU. Refugees, therefore, are considered competitors for work, space and social security. They are, thus, cordoned off as unproductive intruders, blamed and used to deflect fears and anxieties. It is widely argued that Europe has to become a bulwark against "the flood of immigrants" who threatens to "pour in and swamp the Continent" (Act III 153). As a corollary, Ireland should become

a closed fortress and bar the door to the oppressed to protect her economic prosperity.

The determination to safeguard the state and prevent it from being invaded and contaminated by “unscrupulous” asylum seekers, who are seen as a threat to native employment, was explicitly expressed by the Republican Party member, Noel O’Flynn, in 2002:

We’re against the spongers, the freeloaders, the people screwing the system. Too many are coming to Ireland ... I’m saying we have to close the doors. The majority of them are here for economic reasons and they are thumbing their noses up at Irish hospitality and demanding everything under the guise of Geneva Convention. (Fianna, 2013)

One could more credibly argue that the state’s overt racism and xenophobia are driven by concerns about the economic impact of immigration – pauperisation and unemployment – rather than the claims about “the existence of the Irish nation as a coherent and cohesive whole” (Myers).

Joseph’s “struggle for survival” in Ireland, which Jason King describes as “emblematic of the masses of African migrants” (164), is doomed. His weakness, vulnerability, helplessness and above all his colour make him unworthy of any potential for survival in a white society. The “stigma of his physical appearance” (164) (his blackness) makes his situation certainly quite hopeless. It asserts the impossibility of absconding to hide somewhere out in the country. When he naively suggests that, in order to avoid expatriation, he and Mary “could have fled together to the mountains, to some wild part of the country”, Mary shockingly responds “you can’t hide here! You’re black!” (Act III 160).

The mutual affection between the black protagonist and his white solicitor, which could be considered an alternative solution, is rendered impossible. It is undermined by prejudice and fear of exogamy. Leo is exasperated with such interracial affection which he finds eccentric. He considers Mary’s romantic feelings for Joseph as not only “hysterical”, but also as “the worst kind of racism” (Act III 144) and exploitation. He viciously accuses Mary of supporting Joseph’s dependence on her and keeping him “at [her] mercy” by “carrying the black man’s burden for him” (Act III 145). Joseph, on the other hand, doubts Mary’s real motives because he is overwhelmed by an inevitable sense of inferiority caused by his colour. He suspects her of loving not his real self, with all its vulnerabilities, but what she has conceived of him. He angrily protests, “you don’t want Joseph Omara the coward who stayed silent hanging from



a beam while my father burned alive! You only want the nice side of me ... Joseph the Noble Savage. That's what you want" (Act II 151-52). Joseph's sense of inferiority renders him oblivious to the sincerity of Mary's emotions.

He finally rejects Mary's offer of marriage. He considers it an "act of charity" (Act III 162), which he finds too humiliating to accept. When Mary suggests that she "could get an injunction" to halt the implementation of expulsion "on the strength of a solemn declaration of marriage" (Act III 161), Joseph collides with her. With dignity, he declines the marriage proposal, arguing:

I want to join my life to yours ... I have dreamed about it. How I bring that about is a matter of honour to me. I will not do it with a chain around my neck ... the bond of the slave. I want to come to you with strength, with pride, with freedom, and with a future. (Act III 162)

Joseph's refusal is based on his rejection of what he sensitively believes to be a patronising aspect of Mary's offer. He fears that her feelings for him are aroused in part by his suffering which "makes" her "feel safe and a little bit superior" (Act II 152).

In Irish context in particular, "some responses to the arrival" of new immigrant communities have been interpreted as a reflection of "Ireland's traumatic past". The inevitable intercultural encounters between the Irish host and the foreign guest, the incoming migrant, "reawaken Ireland's background" as a colonial country and as a country of emigration. Lentin suggests that this reawakening process, which she describes as "the return of the repressed", is necessary "to achieve a healthy relation with external Others" ("Anti" 233). Henceforth, true multiculturalism is based on the ability of the Irish host to acquire a sound understating of the origin of his/her identity by means of a thorough observation of the past.

Some theorists have advocated the need to recover Irish historical memory as a prerequisite for any act of accepting other cultural influences and establish a truthful relation with the incoming migrant. Luke Gibbons believes that "the ability to look outward, and particularly to identify with the plight of refugees and asylum-seekers, may be best served by reclaiming those lost narratives of the past which generates new solidarities in the present" (105). This means that the act of welcoming other cultural influences cannot be based on oblivion or historical amnesia. In other words, it is only when the Irish host acknowledges his/her past that a

genuine relation with the migrant can be established. Similarly, Declan Kiberd defends the need for “a sophisticated knowledge of history in order to be open to the presence of others” (314).

O’Kelly’s Irish host, Bill, is hospitable to Joseph, he provides him with a place of refuge and identifies with him despite his foreignness. The reason for this hospitality and acceptance is the fact that he does not lack this form of sophisticated knowledge of his origins both personal and historical. The trauma of his past both individually, as a husband and a father, and historically, as a postcolonial citizen, emerges and is fully acknowledged in his encounter with Joseph.

Bill shares with the African refugee the historical memory that his country, like Uganda, has been subject to British colonisation and, more importantly, that neither country has recovered from its implications. When Joseph deplors that the “wound” of colonisation which “Churchill carved through Africa” is “still pumping blood” (Act III 159), he simultaneously generates his Irish interlocutor’s understanding and sympathy. By making reference to Winston Churchill in particular, O’Kelly is skilfully reminding the Irish of the fact that “African postcolonial disorder [in Uganda] and the conflicts which divide Irish society most painfully in the North have a common denominator” (Pelletier 98). In this way, the play evokes Britain’s responsibility for the upheavals in the two countries.

Bill’s identification with his foreign guest is further intensified by another affinity which cultural and racial discrepancies conceal; the memory of emigration. During their warm exchange, Bill informs his African guest that Helen, his wife and Mary’s mother, like thousands of Irish people, belongs to a family of emigrants who were “displaced by poverty and underdevelopment exacerbated by a colonial past” (McIvor 123). He tells Joseph that Helen, is a “refugee of sorts” whose house in Dublin was burnt during the Second World War in “the bombing of the North Strand in 1941” (Act III 156).

The German bombing, which Churchill described as an “unforeseen and unintended result” of Britain’s role in the “Battle of the Beams”, had devastating effects “killing 28 people, injuring 90 and destroying and damaging over 300 homes” (Kearns 131). After more than half a century, Bill’s traumatic experience with the fascist attack has not sunk into oblivion. In an intimate encounter with Joseph, he recalls how:

[t]he sky was lit by the flames ... Next morning the smell of the black smoke was everywhere ... The North strand was

gone ... It was just a jumble of burnt beams and the odd crooked girders sticking up ... Helen Brietner and her mother were in a shocking state. 'Everything is gone', Mrs Brietner kep saying. (Act III 156)

Bill's recounting of the incident proves that despite cultural and ethnic differences, both the white host and his black guest have traumatic experiences and memories that enthrall their listeners.

It is through the reawakening of those painful memories that Bill is inclined to admire and empathise with the black other. He is now regarding the African not as an "alien" from the "arsehole of Africa" (Act I 118), as he once called him, or undesirable foreigner invading his country, but as a guest to whom he is extending sympathy and a warm welcome. Bill "believes real civilization to mean humane behaviour, love and compassion among people" (Urban 565). Accordingly, he takes the asylum claimant as "a second son" (Act III 146) and offers him shelter while his case is being examined at court.

For a very short time in the play, there seems to be a glimpse of hope for the African. Nonetheless, Bill's hospitality and Joseph's hope are spoiled by the State's racialised restrictions. Joseph's "potential for assimilation", Brian Singleton concludes, "never materializes" (142). He finds himself forcibly deported through "Operation Sweep" (Act III 153). Mary recounts how Pillar:

[C]ut Joseph's nose with the bodybelt. Joseph screamed. Pillar put the gaffer tape on Joseph's mouth. The squad tied his legs together with tape. They picked him up like a rolled up carpet. Two of them sat on him. Pillar, [who] was squatting on him in the back of the car, hit him [and] thumped him on the chest. Joseph cried. They drove away to the airport. (Act III 171-72)

The battered African is sent back to an uncertain fate in Uganda or, in his own words, he is "sent to hell" (Act III 155).

Through Joseph's dreadful experience, the play presents a rather dismal picture of the "Ireland of the Welcomes". The racialised Irish and European immigration policies suspect asylum seekers of being "bogus" and "unscrupulous", decree the detention of asylum claimants and leave them, with no legal protection, liable to forcible deportation. The study attempts to explore the reasons for such discrimination including economic anxiety and protecting homogeneity and cultural superiority. Both the father's hospitality, his attempt to take the African as a surrogate son, and the

daughter's romantic affection translated into her offer of marriage are doomed to fail as practical solutions. The prejudiced societal and State practices render the survival of the black asylum seeker in this white society impossible. *Asylum ! Asylum !* endorses cultural diversity and tolerance and reflects O'Kelly's belief in the necessity of changing Irish xenophobic and suspicious attitude towards asylum seekers.

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