

A Projection of Immigrant Identity in Contemporary American Society from Musical Hamilton

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Abstract

The essay is a cultural study of American immigrant identity through the musical Hamilton (2015). By looking into the lyrics, the image of the historically-artistically-portrayed figure Hamilton is analyzed and evaluated. The depiction of specific immigrant identity in the musical may project certain preferred characteristics of immigrant in today's American society. With historical references and contemporary factors considered, this essay emphasizes several merits in the musical Hamilton in relation to present-day American society. In conclusion, the musical aims to convey and propagandize certain immigrant identity features with the figure of Hamilton in the musical, historically distanced but politically appealing, to resonate with the immigrants in American society.

Keywords

Hamilton; Immigrant; Identity; Contemporary American society.

1. Introduction

The musical Hamilton, a story about a founding father of the United States, Alexander Hamilton, is a game-changer in Broadway since its first public performance.

The musical has several keywords capitalized and bolded, and among them “race” and “immigration” are the two, which are too conspicuously illustrated to be overlooked. The vibrancy of diversity is seen in the cast members, as actors and actresses of different colour join in the play, in which their racial identities do not confine their roles. Also, according to the comments in The Guardian, “the song in the show works as a complex historical concert, layering musical past with musical present, just as historical past mingles with the political present.” With 46 songs sung, rapped and spoken in the musical Hamilton, the word “immigrant” only appears 11 times throughout the play. Nevertheless, the richness of the topic of “immigration” can be abstracted in the lyrics, as it is a story about an immigrant who made his marks on a piece of new land.

In this study, I would like to unfold the immigration identity in the musical Hamilton and find out the messages that they try to convey to the American society. Albeit only a fragment of immigration identity can be seen through the musical, as more or less historical events need to be portrayed or glossed in an art form, what is emphasized and what is deliberately omitted may answer the question. The Sociological Criticism is the theory which supports the development of the essay. For the method, what I would like to employ is content analysis, which functions as a tool to decipher the denotation and connotation of the lyrics.

2. The Immigrant Identity in the Musical and American Society

2.1. The Immigrant Identity Features Displayed in Hamilton

At Hamilton's age, the attitude towards immigrants was initially unfavourable even the number of immigrants was comparatively insignificant in the 1790s as compared to the figure fifty years

later (McCraw 2012: 379). New York State's first move toward immigration control was already stimulated by the growth of pauperism in New York City, mainly because of the influx of poor European immigrants around the American Revolution. Hamilton was one of them who fetched the niche.

The music sets the tone at the very beginning and over the whole play that the migrant identity is unappreciated during that period of history. Reiterating "How does a bastard, orphan, son of a whore and a—/ Scotsman, dropped in the middle of a forgotten / Spot in the Caribbean by Providence, impoverished, in squalor—/ Grow up to be a hero and a scholar?" (Miranda, Lin-Manuel. 2015. Alexander Hamilton. Hamilton: An American Musical (Original Broadway Cast Recording).), an outsider identity is linked up with degrading words to belittle Hamilton. As to the term immigration mentioned in the context, "This immigrant isn't somebody we chose / Oh! / This immigrant's keeping us all on our toes / Oh!" (Miranda, Lin-Manuel. 2015. Washington on Your Side. Hamilton: An American Musical (Original Broadway Cast Recording).), the untrustworthiness and an evident tendency of exclusion by his identity still linger whenever people try to vilify Hamilton.

Besides the efforts that the musical wants to display the character's intelligence, devotion and ambition, the immigrant's identity is another prominent part of Miranda's Hamilton, which partly contributes to his aggressive and strong personality.

As an immigrant and an orphan, Hamilton was an opportunist who was fostered by nothingness and a lack of security. Like any other immigrants at that time, he was an anonymous being who processed nothing, as he confirmed, "Well, I don't have your name. I don't have your titles / I don't have your land" (Miranda, Lin-Manuel. 2015. Meet Me Inside. Hamilton: An American Musical (Original Broadway Cast Recording).). He had his moments of self-denial and self-doubt when he was fully aware of his deficiencies in material and power, reflected in the rap "Liza, I don't have a dollar to my name / An acre of land, a troop to command, a dollop of fame / All I have's my honor, a tolerance for pain / A couple of college credits and my top-notch brain." (Miranda, Lin-Manuel. 2015. Helpless. Hamilton: An American Musical (Original Broadway Cast Recording).) Also, in Anglica's recall on the conversation with Hamilton, he tactfully declined to reveal his previous experience, "I asked about his family, did you see his answer? / His hands started fidgeting he looked he scanned." (Miranda, Lin-Manuel. 2015. Satisfied. Hamilton: An American Musical (Original Broadway Cast Recording))

Hamilton's identity as an immigrant is more aggressive than submissive. Hamilton took an audacious approach for his personal realization, and urged himself to be "young, scrappy and hungry / And I'm not throwing away my shot" (Miranda, Lin-Manuel. 2015. My Shot. Hamilton: An American Musical (Original Broadway Cast Recording).). Unlike other people who joined in the evolution, Hamilton always spoke his mind, uncovering his aspiration, like what he said, "Sometimes I get over excited, shoot off at the mouth" and being described by others as somebody who is "ready to beg, steal, borrow, or barter" (Miranda, Lin-Manuel. 2015. Alexander Hamilton. Hamilton: An American Musical (Original Broadway Cast Recording).). A stark contrast can be seen with Arron Bur, who waits and waits and not letting people know what he stands for.

So to speak, Miranda's Hamilton as an immigrant is endowed with determination, aspiration and strength to overturn his fate. But what makes the intended message for immigrant identity more profound is the monologue at the final duel.

"America, you great unfinished symphony, you sent for me.

/ You let me make a difference. / A place where even

orphan immigrants can leave their fingerprints and rise up.

/ I'm running out of time. I'm running, and my time's up." (Miranda, Lin-Manuel. 2015. The World Was Wide Enough. Hamilton: An American Musical (Original Broadway Cast Recording))

Hamilton fought for changes not for himself, but for future “refugees, migrants, and low-born persons”, who may enjoy the same chances and success that he experienced by living in the country he helped to found.

Hamilton’s immigration identity, which gives rise to so many outstanding virtues, is the reason for his legendary story. The consistency of the positive imposing immigrant identity penetrates the whole play. Miranda is aiming a coherence over presenting characters on the point that Hamilton is an immigrant and, indeed, it is his unique identity that brings him to where he is in history.

2.2. The Projection of Immigrant Identity in Contemporary American Society

Ironically, there is a sharp discordance between Alexander Hamilton in history and the musical character. In reality, Hamilton became an anti-foreigner as he supported the Alien and Sedition Acts in 1798, in which immigrants were deported and deprived from their rights to vote. Recorded within his letter, he brutally accused foreign people that they “ought to be obliged to leave the country”. Despite the fact that his instigated Act fell apart, it set a tone for the successive immigration policy, anti-Chinese and other out-ward xenophobic movements in the 19 centuries (Magness 2017: 507; Smith 1954). The musical deliberately overlooks the dimension of Hamilton’s attitude toward immigrants. Not only for a consistency of characteristics that Miranda wants to maintain, but the immigration identity is what the musical aims for. The omission over this part of the history can be interpreted as: the contribution made by immigrants shouldn’t be counteracted completely by their flaws and setbacks. Hamilton is neither a sinner nor a saint: on the one hand, he has his imperfection to have an affair in his personal life and his latter advocacy on immigration as his political opinion; on the other hand, his brilliant ideas and works have made history and framed American society. Like so many existing immigrants in the United States today, they perform their work and play indispensable roles in the society no matter being noble or humble. Their efforts and hard work should be recognized, but not stay in obscurity due to their identity as immigrants.

Referring to present political and social conditions, the musical Hamilton is striking to establish a positive image of the immigrant. In recent years, ample research suggests that American’s attitudes toward immigrant are becoming favorable, as immigration’s positive impacts outweigh the negative (Card 2005). However, the general attitude towards immigrants only started to shift in the 2000s, as there were still about two-thirds of Americans agreed that “immigrants are a burden on our country because they take our jobs, housing and health care” in 1993. (Fussell 2014: 3) The unrest for immigration has not subsided in American society even till now. With a finding from ADL, Anti-immigrant fervor has been increasingly mainstreamed over the last ten years, with the advent of a new administration focused on much stricter immigration policies and complementary executive actions, anti-immigrant and anti-refugee sentiment have made life substantially more difficult for all immigrants. The removals of immigrants are undergoing with greater enforcement, regardless of the decline of the total number of deportations in the latter years of Obama’s administration. However, the sense of uncertainty begins to aggregate and becomes more threatening than ever to the immigrants in America from 2016. President Trump blatantly expressed his anti-Latino and anti-immigrant attitude, enacting harsh laws for refugees, for asylums and countless vulnerable immigrants (Wallace, S., & Zepeda-Millán 2020: 1).

3. Conclusion

Under such a political culture background, Miranda expressed that “there is also a Broadway musical reminding us that a broke, orphan immigrant from the West Indies built our financial system.” What it tries to convey might be more in-depth over the topic of immigrant than

merely taking it as a means of entertainment. Immigrants in American society have constantly confronted adversities, and there is always hovering inequality in the air. But it doesn't mean that being an immigrant is being inferior or deserves to be belittled. The image of Miranda's Hamilton is just an example of what present society needs, hungry and scrappy, who may shatter the corruption and propel changes. The immigrants should be empowered so as to demonstrate their "aggressiveness" to hold on to life and be in the dominance of their own fates. It is made visible in the cast of the musical that people of color, white, brown and black, can play in all roles. The same condition will apply to American society where people from all walks of life, with different color, race and gender make a unity.

The noises made from the musical Hamilton is probably one of the best exemplifications, through which expectations over immigrants are voiced to American society.

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