

“Another Immigrant Comin’ Up From The Bottom”: Hamilton An American Musical As Political Theatre On Immigrant Identity In The Altered Scenario Of Contemporary American Politics

Avira Kheni

*Grade 12, Singapore International School, Mumbai, India
Individually Supervised Research Paper*

Dr. Sonali Pattnaik

*Poet, Academic And Visual Artist
Former Professor Of English, Kirori Mal College, Delhi University
External Expert In English, St. Xavier’s College, Ahmedabad, India*

Abstract

The Broadway hit Hamilton An American Musical (2015) has rightly received much critical attention, given its impact on the audience and artistic and cultural significance. There is, however a dearth of critical examination on its role as political theatre in a considerably altered environment in American, and world politics. This research paper is an analysis of the songs, lyrics and background score, delivered by a multi-racial cast and inspired by a diverse musical tradition that is multi-racial and multi-cultural, to interrogate the heightened relevance of a narrativization of a forgotten immigrant founding father of the American nation. Employing a methodology of close reading of lyrics, foregrounding their rich and layered meanings, the movement and progression of background scores and how these reflect on characterization and narrative strategies and by placing these in a contemporary context where immigrant identity faces several socio-political challenges, the paper analyses how this piece of art has gained new meaning in these altered times through its innovative and culturally inclusive theatrical mechanism and through a prescience which is embedded in its musical expression. It concludes that Hamilton can emerge as a commentary on the choices available to immigrants today, on their shared and diverse cultural tapestry and as a means of rethinking the future of the American nation.

Keywords: *Immigrants, Diversity, Race, Multiculturalism, Post-Racial America, Music, Lyrics, Chords, Musical Score, Nation, Identity*

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“Immigrants, we get the job done” this definitive line from the unprecedented Broadway hit *Hamilton: An American Musical* (2015) encapsulates not just the story of America’s founding, but the ongoing struggles and triumphs that shape the nation today. While it does not always convey its sentiment with historical accuracy, it certainly hits home in the background of a nation that has had a considerable shift in its political paradigm which has reshaped the nation’s perception of immigrants, transitioning from regarding them with pride to leaving them disrespected and threatened. *Hamilton*, while being the story of one of the founding fathers, the eponymous Alexander Hamilton, and the American Revolutionary war, extends its influence and message far beyond its original 18th and early-19th century setting to create significant contemporary resonance, thus establishing itself as a piece of political theatre for the times.

With a cast built of almost entirely people of colour, and a score rooted in R&B and hip-hop, *Hamilton* embodies a multicultural modern American identity, one that heavily engages with the contemporary debates about race, immigration, and nationalism, breaking away from realism and historical fidelity to place the film as a historical text within a contemporary context. Given that it chooses to resurrect a forgotten founding member of the revolution that brought freedom to the nation, forgotten perhaps due to his status as an immigrant, this choice alone deserves greater introspection in today’s altered environment. Although the musical has rightfully been hailed for bringing about a new era of inclusivity in American politics and cultural representation it is unclear what the work of art, with its emphasis on diversity and inclusivity, represents in the new, right-winged majoritarianism brought about by the anti-immigrant and anti-black policies that have recently been brought about¹.

This paper aims to explore the social impact of the musical, in the contemporary USA, particularly in the context of the recent rise in right-wing political ideologies. By reimagining the nation's founding through a racially diverse cast, modern music styles, and a distinctly present-day political lens, *Hamilton* celebrates a more inclusive vision of American identity, but also prescient response to growing anti-immigrant sentiment, systemic racism, and the weaponization of history by conservative political movements, making the musical a significant piece of contemporary political art that must be revisited through new lens.

Critics were right to hail this piece of visual art as heralding something new and radical but may not have realised how much the musical was more than just a celebration; it was also a work of political theatre that eerily foreshadows the serious threat to cultural diversity that the country would soon face, becoming both a prophecy and claiming a new place in its role as art and as a performance of resistance to contemporary social and political oppressions in the country. The paper will argue and prove the significance of the musical as a political commentary on the present and the past by analysing pertinent song lyrics, unusual musical score and thought-provoking visuals. This is in contrast to the arguments made against the musical's ability to stand for a post-racial America arguing instead that it does indeed harken such a reality, a reality which acts as a reminder of the foundational values of the nation and just how close to a post-racial world America had once come and how much further away from this truth it has now veeredⁱⁱ.

When *Hamilton* was first premiered, in 2015, it echoed the optimism and political reality of its context to a great extent, as the United States was presided over by the Obama Administration which was in its final years, a period in the country that was marked with cautious optimism about racial progress and a celebration of the diversity within positions of powerⁱⁱⁱ. As the first African American president Barack Obama's presidency, symbolised in many ways the radical possibility of a truly "post-racial" American society. Movements like the 'immigration reform' that included the possibility of securing a legal status for undocumented immigrants, debates over police brutality that called for police reforms in order to prevent acts institutional brutalisation, and the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement, a response to systemic violence towards African American people, were all aiding this national conversion, even as right-wing media and political figures were mobilizing narratives of American decline and threats to "traditional" identity^{iv}.

It is within this atmosphere of a dynamic people's protest, promise of possibility and inclusivist transformation that the musical's version of America flourishes, with its story told through people of colour, and its creative and subversive use of Black and Latino music, a marker of their cultural heritage and lived reality. The musical's celebration of diversity reaffirmed the administration's inclusive rhetoric. However, 10 years since, the political climate has taken a drastic turn, reflecting the global rise in right wing conservatism. Debates over border control, "America First" protectionism, and the denial or distortion of historical injustices have fuelled a cultural climate in which pluralism is increasingly contested^v. This right wing turn is not merely a phenomenon of the USA, as similar movements in Europe, Latin America, and Asia have started emphasising nationalism, traditionalism, and hostility toward multiculturalism, revealing a worldwide struggle over identity and belonging. In such a climate, *Hamilton* operates simultaneously as resistance and as caution: it champions a pluralistic America while also anticipating the fractures and injustices engendered when pseudo-nationalist and exclusionary ideals are brought to the forefront of political discourse.

To return to the statement on immigrants, that the paper highlights in the beginning, it is not mere coincidence that one of the most striking moments in the musical arrives when Marquis de Lafayette and Alexander Hamilton, both immigrants themselves, celebrate and reassert, speaking both in the present from within the narrative and from the pages of history, their contributions to the American Revolution with the line, "Immigrants, we get the job done." It is important to note that this is the lyric possibly most celebrated each night the musical is performed, so much so that the staging punctuates it with a high five and a two-bar pause to accommodate the inevitable eruption of applause from the audience^{vi}. The lyric serves as a reminder to the immigrant contribution to the nation, affirms the musical's broader project of reimagining American identity through marginalized voices, and as a counterpoint to the current exclusionary narrative in modern America. To validate the contribution of immigrants in the story of the founding fathers of America, the narrative, cast and lyrics significantly rewrite the role and identity of the immigrant population, acknowledging their history as entwined with the very birth of the nation.

This celebration of immigrant identity is not confined to a single lyric, and as the paper will demonstrate it is established from the musical's very first number, "Alexander Hamilton," which frames the founding father's life through the lens of displacement, ambition, and belonging. The song starts off with the 'Alexander Hamilton' chord progression (Bm, F#, G, D, F#/A#), the bass within the chord progression itself literally climbs, from B up to A# (the leading tone) before resolving to B again, which creates the sensation of reaching upward. That stepwise pull (F#/A# → B) is tiny but urgent, straining for resolution, symbolising Hamilton's refusal to remain static. It also represents the narrative drive within the musical, accompanied by Aaron Burr's first question, "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?" This verse immediately situates

Hamilton as an outsider marked by poverty, illegitimacy, and immigrant status, yet destined to carve out a place in history. In doing so, the number not only introduces Hamilton's character but also positions the immigrant story as integral to the American mythos.

The ensemble then continues to build the rest of Hamilton's story, emphasizing that Hamilton's rise is not just an individual triumph but part of a broader, shared immigrant narrative, acting as an implicit rebuke to nationalist ideologies that seek to exclude or erase such contributions. The lyrics indicate the allegiances between black and immigrant lives in the nation, an insight whose full measure is experienced today as both communities face severe challenges. The lyrics "And every day while slaves were being slaughtered and carted away / across the waves, he struggled and kept his guard up," "Then a hurricane came, and devastation rained/ Our man saw his future drip-dripping down the drain," and "Left him with nothin' but ruined pride/ Somethin' new inside/ A voice saying Alex, you gotta fend for yourself" embed his story within the violence of colonialism and slavery, highlighting racialized contexts often ignored in vainglorious versions of American history. Further, the lines, "see him now as he stands on the bow of a ship headed for a new land / In New York, you can be a new man" and "Another immigrant comin' up from the bottom," foreground the moment of 'departure' as both literal and symbolic, dramatizing the immigrant's hope of reinvention while underscoring the precariousness of beginning from "the bottom." They gesture to the American Dream, specifically through an immigrant lens, in turn also confront modern anxieties around immigration, asserting that America's foundations themselves are bound up with the contributions of those who arrived as strangers.

The lyrics frame and describe several characters beside Hamilton and in doing so, various facets of immigrant reality emerge as linked to heroism, beyond character flaws, engaging with the question of political and personal morality and mortality. One of the major juxtapositions is found in the difference of personalities and beliefs established between Hamilton and Aaron Burr. As the analysis of lyrics, chord progression and song styles will demonstrate, the marked variations in them do not only reflect these two characters, but also the two manners in which immigrants can live their lives: question everything and fight for yourself, as Hamilton embodies or stay quiet and wait for justice to bring itself to you, as Aaron Burr does. Not unlike a typical Shakespearean tragedy, Burr's character is set up as a foil to the protagonist, and is introduced in the songs "Aaron Burr, sir" and "My Shot" which marks the first meeting of the two, as well as the introduction to, what is commonly known in fandom culture as the "Revolutionary set", which includes Alexander Hamilton, John Laurens, Gilbert Motier Marquis de Lafayette, and Hercules Mulligan^{vii}. When Burr offers his "free advice" of "Talk less / smile more" he introduces himself as a man who survives by calculation and caution, one who seeks to "double his choices" by withholding opinions. This starkly contrasts Hamilton's own approach to ambition, where he strongly believes in "not throwing away his shot," as seen when he says "God, I wish there was a war/ Then we could prove that we're worth more than anyone bargained for." As Hamilton asks Burr, "If you stand for nothing, Burr, what'll you fall for?" it is made clear that Burr's reluctance is a product of his mindset of "doubling his choices" as he mentions in "My Shot" revealing a moral ambivalence in his character.

This calculating and cautious nature is further emphasised in the lyrics "Fools who run their mouths off wind up dead" and "You spit. I'm 'a sit. We'll see where we land." Within My Shot, Hamilton frames his disadvantages as catalysts for ambition, rather than hindrances, through "Every burden, every disadvantage / I have learned to manage." This ambition is then layered through the Revolutionary set's introductions: "I'm joinin' the rebellion, 'cause I know it's my chance / To socially advance, instead of sewin' some pants" added with John Lauren's call of "Ay, but we'll never be truly free / Until those in bondage have the same rights as you and me," linking immigrant aspiration with abolitionist struggle. This is ironic, considering the fact that the Revolution's promise of liberty was deeply uneven, extending primarily to white men while excluding women, enslaved people, and most immigrants. Laurens's insistence that "we'll never be truly free / until those in bondage have the same rights as you and me" shows an early, somewhat deliberately anachronistic recognition of this irony, inviting the audience to also consider the fact of how such inequalities persist in contemporary America, where systemic racism, immigration policy, and economic stratification continue to render some 'less free' than others.

"My Shot" is also an expression of what is commonly known in musical theatre as the 'I want' song, a song that expresses a statement of desire, which leads the protagonist on their journey. The chord progression of "My Shot" follows the usual skeleton of the 'I want song', with a few additions. The chord progression (Gm - Bb - Cm - Eb - D), moves from the minor 1 chord to the major 3 chord, which feels like a lift, reflecting Alexander and the Revolutionary Set's ambitions. The repetitions of the phrase "I am not throwin' away my shot" intensify this effect rhythmically and harmonically, creating a cumulative drive that mirrors both Hamilton's persistence and the broader revolutionary fervor. The hip hop's percussion fused with the rhythmic harmony of traditional Broadway situates this song simultaneously within the tradition of musical theatre protagonists and within a situation that emphasizes resilience, defiance, and upward mobility.

Yet this ambition is shadowed by an awareness of mortality. Already in "My Shot", Hamilton admits, "I imagine death so much it feels more like a memory," a soliloquy-like interruption that pulls the song into existential territory. The juxtaposition of boundless ambition with an obsessive preoccupation with death suggests

that Hamilton's "shot" is not only an opportunity but also a wager with mortality, an awareness that his ascent will require risk and sacrifice. This soliloquy is reprised in "Yorktown The World Turned Upside Down", which is interrupted by the lyric "Then I remember my Eliza's expecting me/ Not only that, my Eliza's expecting / We gotta go, gotta get the job done / Gotta start a new nation, gotta meet my son!" showing the commitment to love, family, and the stakes of survival.

By the time we reach "The World Was Wide Enough," Burr's gunshot makes good of this soliloquy, and Alexander is forced to reckon with his mortality and the legacy he has managed to build. The phrase, first voiced as an aside in "My Shot", repeated here becomes the character's final reckoning. His ambition and his death-consciousness, always intertwined, crystallize into a vision of legacy, as he asks rhetorically with foresight, "What is a legacy? It's planting seeds in a garden you never get to see" a reference to the current scenario regarding immigrants of colour who are haunted by the erasure of legacy.

Burr's legacy is proclaimed through the song "Wait For It": the weight of his family name and the need for precaution. Wait for it opens with the Aaron Burr chord progression, which we are introduced to in "Aaron Burr, sir" (C[I], Am[vi], Em[iii]). This chord progression is built off of three chords, however it spans over four bars ending on the third minor chord, which leaves the listeners feeling like the chord is stuck, literally making the listener "wait" for a resolution that never comes. Furthermore, this chord progression does not remain stagnant throughout the song, changing the final chord every four bars, alternating between two final minor chords. This captures Burr's state of arrested motion: thoughtful, deliberate, yet perpetually holding back. Even in a song that ostensibly reveals his inner life, Burr sounds as though he is still editing himself, rewriting his ambitions, doubts, and philosophies in real time. This cautiousness can be read as more than character detail; it is an embodiment of a survival strategy familiar to marginalized figures, including immigrants and racial minorities, whose choices carry higher stakes. Every decision must be calculated, every risk weighed against potential loss. Burr's credo, "I'll keep all my plans close to my chest" and "Keep outta trouble and you double your choices," reflects not simply personal prudence but a worldview shaped by systemic precarity.

The opening line expresses Burr's ambitions and legacy, introducing his love interest, Theodosia, in the line, "Theodosia writes me a letter every day," anchoring his ambition not in politics or revolution but in personal love and stability. This yearning contrasts Hamilton's relentless public striving, framing Burr as someone whose ambitions are quieter but no less consuming, even though done in a manner much differing to Hamilton's consumption. Further, Burr's family legacy also weighs heavy on him, through the lyrics "My mother was a genius, my father commanded respect / My grandfather was a fire-and-brimstone preacher," Burr is placed within a lineage of talent and authority, but his philosophy diverges. Where Hamilton externalizes ambition, Burr internalizes, shaping his guiding principle into "I am the one thing in life I can control." The piece, "Wait For It" is characterised by its asymmetry, echoing an aspect that Lin Manuel Miranda states was the core characteristic when writing anything about Aaron Burr's character. The song breaks the standard verse-chorus-bridge pattern, drifting instead through fragments of thought, as if Burr is still 'editing' his own worldview. His lines, "I'll keep all my plans close to my chest" (Non Stop) and "Keep outta trouble and you double your choices" (My Shot), show a philosophy of loss-aversion, preferring safety over risk. The grave, swelling harmonies of the ensemble within the song lend Burr's stagnancy a weight, showing how inertia can still hold power.

The casting choice is also essential in lending Burr's character dialogues weight. Burr has almost always been played by a Black actor, which racializes his caution. His philosophy of restraint, in contrast to Hamilton's reckless ambition, becomes legible as a survival strategy in a society that punishes Black boldness disproportionately. The recurrence of his chord motif when Burr's "someone on the side" is mentioned before (Story of Tonight - Reprise) underscoring how personal love continues to define Burr's cautious political stance. If "Wait For It" establishes Burr's stagnancy, "Non-Stop" dramatizes its clash with Hamilton's recklessness. Written in Nevis, the birthplace of Hamilton, the song carries a Caribbean hip-hop pulse with an adrenaline-charged intensity, reflecting Hamilton's relentless drive. Their divergent philosophies are seen as they work through the Levi Weeks case together where Hamilton's insistence on advocacy clashed with Burr's careful deliberation, forging the two paths for immigrants: fight by declaring everything, or protect oneself by questioning and withholding forever.

This clash brings Burr to his repeated refrains, "Why do you assume you're the smartest in the room?" / "Why do you write like you're running out of time?" / "Why do you always say what you believe?" which also echoes his 'editing' mode from "Wait For It", in an attempt to critique, contrasting his usual silence with expression. This small moment of expression is cut through by Burr's resistance to Hamilton's invitation to co-author the Federalist Papers: "The Constitution's a mess." / "So it needs amendments." / "It's full of contradictions." / "So is independence. We have to start somewhere." Burr's repeated "No, no way" and Hamilton's rebuttals dramatize the clash between inaction and ambition. When Hamilton presses, "What are you waiting for? What do you stall for?" the words reverberate against Burr's earlier refrain of waiting, turning his philosophy of caution into paralysis.

This is also heightened musically; while "Wait for It" is based on the inadequate sounding chord progression, "Non Stop" consistently uses strong drum lines and restless energy, reflecting Hamilton's persistence. The lines "I'll keep all my plans close to my chest / Wait for it, wait for it, wait / I'll wait here and see which way the wind will blow / I'm taking my time watching the afterbirth of a nation / Watching the tension grow" encapsulate Burr's tendency to withhold, observe, and calculate; a man waiting for the opportune moment rather than forcing history's hand. This also expresses how Burr's waiting is not just compliance, but rather self-preservation reflecting his need to remain cautious in a society where even a minute mistake will be disproportionately punished. Conversely, Hamilton's ambition in Non-Stop is revealed not only through his ceaseless productivity but also through his reframing of others' words, a form of over-action that is in sharp contrast to Burr's cautiousness. When Eliza sings "Look around, look around, at how lucky we are to be alive right now," it is done through a sentiment of love and appreciation. When Washington sings "They are asking me to lead," it is an admission of duty and responsibility. Hamilton, however, twists these words, stripping them of their original humility and intimacy. His "Look around, look around at how lucky we are to be alive right now" and "They are asking me to lead" become refrains of self-justification, signalling that for Hamilton, love and duty are always subsumed by ambition how? Taken together, *Wait For It* and *Non-Stop* crystallize the musical's central dialectic: Hamilton's hunger versus Burr's hesitation, risk versus restraint, voice versus silence.

This consistent upward climb is then broken by the middle of Act 2, particularly by the song "Hurricane," where Hamilton confronts the systemic forces that shaped his precarious position as an immigrant, orphan, and outsider, while simultaneously reflecting on his own agency and responsibility. Hurricane expresses the hardships and the literal storms Alexander faced as a child, "When I was seventeen a hurricane destroyed my town," "I wrote my way out of hell," "I couldn't seem to die" framing his self-fashioning as an act of resistance and need for survival. The hurricane is both a literal event and a metaphor for the external pressures that define his existence; it represents the violent, structural inequalities of colonial and early American society that Hamilton must navigate to assert his identity. The rhythm of the song also represents the hurricane itself: a slow build up, which transitions to a melancholy hum, to a frantic, unrelenting violin, invoking a sense of anxiety or fear, which perfectly represents the fear that immigrants may face. Hamilton's fear is seen evidently though, "This is the only way I can protect my legacy," expressing the need to formulate a legacy, something to be remembered by, rather than his personal identity. This self-awareness not only deepens Hamilton's characterisation but also places the audience in direct conversation with the broader socio-political realities that constrain marginalized individuals, particularly immigrants and racial minorities, whose lives are structured or shifted completely by forces beyond their control.

While the paper has focussed on the contrast between the two major male protagonists and how their struggles represent the two aspects of immigrant culture and future today, women too occupy an important role in this representation. The song "Burn", clearly critiques this male-centric ambition narrative; the song is Eliza Schuyler Hamilton's response to Hamilton's publishing of the Reynolds Pamphlet, where she burns the letters of correspondence between Hamilton and herself. The act of burning the letters operates as both a literal and symbolic gesture: by destroying the physical remnants of her shared history with Hamilton, Eliza exerts control over the narrative of their lives, reclaiming autonomy in the aftermath of betrayal. Her act of burning letters transforms a private grievance into a radical assertion of control over the historical narrative, intervening in how the story of the nation, and Hamilton's legacy, will be remembered. This is further emphasized through her repeated refrains of "I'm watching it burn," which both internalize and monumentalize her response, creating a sense of solemn authority in the midst of devastation. "Burn" thus expresses the consequences of unchecked male ambition, foregrounds gendered limitations in early American society, and interrogates who gets to shape history. In the context of the musical's broader engagement with immigrant and marginalized narratives, Eliza's deliberate curation of memory parallels the struggles of those historically excluded from public power: both require navigating structures of authority, managing risk, and asserting one's voice in ways that may not be immediately visible but leave lasting impact.

The musical effectively connects these character traits of immigrant Americans, not only with their own histories and personal trajectories but also by asking about their relationship with political power and exclusion from it. This, has far-reaching resonance in today's climate where immigrants remain frightfully removed from direct political power and aspiration towards it, a fact that has been punctured to a certain degree by the electoral win of the immigrant, mixed race politician Mamdani as mayor of New York, the very city that Hamilton foregrounds. "The Room Where It Happens" dramatizes Burr's desire to be included in decisions that shape the fledgling nation, using a jazzy, syncopated rhythm to mirror both the negotiation and performativity of political power. The phrase, "No one really knows how the game is played / The art of the trade," embodies the inaccessibility of power and the precarity of those excluded from it. It underscores the performative and transactional nature of political exclusion, where its basis is not off of merit, but rather of access and networks, reflecting the historical reality that immigrant and marginalized actors often had to navigate social hierarchies

strategically. "Your Obedient Servant", the song that recounts the fatal duel between Hamilton and Burr, extends this discussion to the question of honor, reputation, and the consequences of conflict.

In conclusion, *Hamilton* functions as a profoundly political piece of theatre, not because it reproduces historical fact with accuracy, but because it re-stages America's founding as a contested site of identity, ambition, and exclusion. By centering immigrants and people of colour within the retelling of the formation of the country, it acknowledges that they cannot be disentangled from their historical marginalisation. Seen against the backdrop of resurgent conservatism and authoritarianism, where immigrants and Black citizens increasingly face shrinking rights, *Hamilton* does not merely celebrate diversity but actively challenges exclusionary narratives. It expresses the nation's origins as those that can be reclaimed by the very groups that have been targeted throughout history, and are done so even within the present day. *Hamilton* also reasserts art's power to critique, reimagine, and contest what many believe to be a concrete truth of our contemporary society.

The tragic protagonist, Hamilton's relentless drive, Burr's strategic hesitation, and Eliza's reclamation of narrative authority all dramatize the various ways marginalized voices must negotiate survival, ambition, and legacy within systems designed to silence them. At the same time, as the paper has hoped to demonstrate, songs like "The Room Where It Happens" and "Your Obedient Servant" underscore how power operates as a closed network, inaccessible to those outside these established hierarchies, which continues to resonate in contemporary debates over who gets to belong, who gets to lead, and who gets remembered. The musical's moral purpose is essentially to remind us that "You don't control / who lives, who dies, / who tells your story" but also perhaps that art can alter our view of history to resist power in the present.

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