
August Wilson: The Unrestrained Voice of Black America

Arpita Mitra

Assistant Professor,
Department of English, Murarka College,
Tilka Manjhi Bhagalpur University,
Bihar, India

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Abstract

August Wilson, one of the most prominent figures in American theatre, explored the experiences of African- American community through his plays. He is best known for his series of ten plays which is collectively called The Pittsburgh Cycle/ Century Cycle/ Decade Cycle. In his works he dealt with the issues related particularly with black life like diaspora, dislocation, racism, slavery, segregation and in general with love, relationships, human predicament, spirituality, life and death. He used theatre very powerfully to present black life on stage and to raise voice of protest against subjugation of the blacks by the whites. He strongly believed that the black people as a community and their cultural heritage can thrive only if they remain connected to their origin, ancestry, history and the African spiritualism.

Keywords: Black experience, Black theatre, Diaspora, Race, Slavery

As a playwright August Wilson was gifted to find the universal truths within largely overlooked background of African-American life. He was inspired by W. E. B. Du Bois' principle of play writing and from the very beginning of his journey as a playwright, he clarified his purpose behind writing plays. The purpose was to create "true black theatre" --- a theatre that will be "about us", "by us", "for us" and "near us" (Herrington 132). As a member of diasporic Afro-American community, Wilson wrote with the cardinal intention of exploring of the Black experience in America and his works were often politically motivated. Still they do not hide the pure creative intention of the author. They stretch beyond race and class and encompass universal themes like love, honour and duty.

Afro-American struggle against the white oppression and their search for the ways to change their destiny as a community; this motif serves as the background of majority of his plays and amidst this background Wilson expresses some universal human quests. He specifically asks questions about our relationship with God. In almost every plays there are questions about God, struggle, life and death.

He was basically a poet who turned into a master story-teller. A friend pestered him into writing plays which he later found unexpectedly attractive and got captivated in the labyrinth of play-writing. In an interview (conducted by Bonnie Lyons and George Plimpton in 1999) Wilson said, "The ability of the theater to communicate ideas and extol virtues that

drew me to it. Novel reading is a solitary act but theater is communal in nature, a large number of people respond to it and I find that thrilling.” He told that he could hardly disassociate himself from his concerns over the theatre and the life led by a black man as an inseparable part of his community. He lived his life with the conviction that art and life are “inseparable and indistinguishable” (Wilson *The Ground on Which I Stand* 494). The purpose of an artist according to Wilson is; “You create the work to add to the artistic store house of the world, to exalt and celebrate a common humanity” (Wilson interview conducted by Bonnie Lyons and George Plimpton in 1999).

Wilson’s plays are typically not aligned with the contemporary trends in African diaspora literature. A post-Afrocentric trend has been emerging there, it subverts both Eurocentric and Afrocentric inclinations. Whereas Wilson’s dramas appeal to the human psyche, they evoke a voice that bids the blacks to return to their own sources. Wilson endeavoured to present a transformational redemption of the colonized subjects through their diasporic memory, he reconnected the Afro-Americans to their diasporic existence of horror during segregation. His plays remind the black community of their lost history so that they never lose their cultural identity, never forget to recognize their ancestors. Through his plays, the black people can reconnect with their ancestors with respect, can gain positive self-knowledge, can transform their memory into the source of love, power and hope. His plays teach the black Americans that they are basically Africans and as Africans they have their inherent historical and cultural values which are part of their life.

Wilson tried to reconstruct those parts of black history which are lost due to dislocation or displacement. During this process of reconstruction he had to prioritize memory. Hence, Wilson’s plays contain both history and memory in inscribed form. He informed his people of the conditions of the black people while undergoing slavery and segregation and the abuses they had to go through so that the people of his community can carry on their legacy proudly and perceive life as meaningful as other Americans.

Black Mary (in *Gem of the Ocean*) declares, “People say it too much to carry, but I told myself somebody got to carry it” (*Gem of the Ocean* Act I Sc. I). Lately, the African legacy has become a burden for the majority of Afro-American population because they have practiced to imitate the white Americans and they have also adopted “materialistic values at the expense of human values” (Nadel 32).

Wilson’s ten play *Odyssey*, each play set during a different decade of twentieth century (from 1900 to 2000) explores the diasporic experience of the African-Americans as perceived by Wilson. The success of the project is comparable only with that of Eugene O Neill’s cycle of plays about James Tyrone family. Wilson’s decade cycle covers the history of the black people, tainted with the trauma of slavery, displacement from the motherland, dislocation from The American South and concomitant sense of rootlessness in mainstream America. Like most other diasporic writings, Wilson’s writings too become a response to the issues such as lost home and dislocation. Nostalgia and dislocation are the common features of any diasporic literature including Wilson’s.

Black people of African diaspora in USA strive to locate themselves in the past in nostalgia. Through nostalgia they try to escape from the reality of life on the “other” land where they resettle.

In *Gem of the Ocean*, we see Citizen Barlow, a young African- American, arrives in Pittsburgh in 1904 as a part of the wave of freed slaves and their children migrating from South to North following the Civil War. He sets out an imaginary journey to the City of Bones, a city built under water in the Atlantic Ocean with bones of slaves who lost their lives on the treacherous voyage to America. With help of Solly, Elig and Black Marry, Aunt Ester guides Citizen to the City of Bones. He is plunged into the ship, named, “The Gem of the Ocean” and experiences the slaves’ dreadful journey across the Atlantic:

CITIZEN: The people....They chained to the boat.

BLACK MARRY: Look at me, Mr. Citizen.

CITIZEN: Where am I?

BLACK MARRY: You on the boat, Mr. Citizen. You going to the City of Bones.

(Act 2 Sc. II)

Wilson grounded his separatist artistic stand on the principles of The Black Art Movement and considered himself primarily as an African only and consecutively as a victim of American politics which had been isolating the blacks since their arrival in America. He found it quite shocking that the mainstream America had never considered The Black Power Movement of the 60s as an important social movement in the history of America. So he consciously wanted to carry the realities of the black people as a part of his consciousness.

He saw himself as a “race man” and did not feel himself restricting due to the fact that he only write about the black people and their life. He was unhesitant for writing about “black experience” only because he considered it as natural as a “white” playwright writes only about “white America” and no one accuses him of racism or “limiting” himself to “white life” only. He believed that race matters and it is the most important part of one’s personality. It influences our view, how we see the world and how we respond to it. It sets one’s behavioral patterns and beliefs. Racial mixing is almost missing in Wilson’s plays. Mixing ups are rare in Wilson’s plays and he does not consider them as worthy of delving deep into. Crossing, transgression, hybridity; these are not his concerns. For Wilson, blackness is the key issue. According to Alice Walker, Wilson took care of black peoples’ “racial health”, his works have provided them with a sense of completeness, portray them as complex and undiminished human beings. Wilson’s signature figures are middle aged black men who are angry, thwarted and hurtful. They believed there is always a wall between ‘white’ and ‘black’ America and that wall protects the blacks like “wall of Troy” that stood for protecting Priam, Hector and Paris. Race is the dominant issue in Wilson’s plays because he experienced that “race is everything in America” and he thought that the blacks are the living examples of American hypocrisy. Wilson said,

We are not a menace to a society. We are not ashamed. We have an honorable history in the world of men. We come from a long line of honorable people with complex

codes of ethics and social discourse, people who devised myths and systems of cosmology and system of economics. Nor do we need the recognition of our blackness to be couched in abstract phrases like “artist of color”; we are unique and we are specific. (*The Ground On Which I Stand* 4)

Issues related with racism and discrimination are explored in the most of the plays of *Century Cycle*. *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottoms* (set in 1920s) revealed the racial tension that defined America in the 1920s. The story of the play revolves around the famous blues diva Ma Rainey and her band of musicians. The conversations between the black musicians and the white businessmen who run the recording studio highlight the racial discrimination and its exploitative nature that lie at the heart of America. The characters fundamental insecurity due to discriminating racial relation is brilliantly shown through their dramatic outbursts of hopeless grief and rage.

The play shows that racism not only generates acts of violence, it kills the sensitivity, particularly, that of whites in America who enforce Afro-Americans’ status as second class citizens. Ma Rainey briefly drops her diva mask and explains that she has to be so demanding to the white people she works with because it is only way of getting the respect she deserves. She goes onto explaining that although she has been working with her white manager Irvin for six years, the only time he ever has invited her to his house was to sing for some of his white friends. Everything from Levee’s hot headedness to Cutler’s rigid obedience to Ma’s vision for the band can be read as a way of trying to recapture a sense of dignity that has been denied by the whites because of the colour of their skin. *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* is a gripping narrative of the pain of racial inequality and the joys and sense of freedom that music can bring as a great leveler against social injustice. Wilson’s 1985 play *Fences* (set in 1950s) uses “fences” as a metaphor for separation, difference and even self-loathing. This play highlights both material separation caused by fences between the blacks and the whites and the symbolic role fences play in dividing families. It is a discourse on racist white America that is biased against darker skin and tries to restrict their movement and does not hesitate to label them as murderers, rapists and criminals. *Fences* explores how the ghost of slavery still has impact on the socio-political scenario of the USA.

Joe Turner’s Come Gone takes place in 1911, forty eight years after the Emancipation Proclamation, which legally liberated all slaves in the Union. Even though the plays characters live in post-slavery America, their lives are still influenced by the nation’s racist past and present. Herald Loomis and Jeremy’s everyday lives are directly impacted by the prejudiced and inhumane precedent set by slavery. The characters of the play continue to be affected by the legacy of slavery. Wilson suggests here that the acts of profound bigotry and dehumanization have long lasting effects. The characters in *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* continue to re-live the horrors of slavery on a daily basis, proving that the law cannot stop the crime against Afro-Americans who are still living with the trauma of slavery and segregation.

The characters in this play react to racism in different ways. Jeremy acknowledges injustice without letting it break his spirit. He is at the mercy of white police officers and

white employers. He frequently has to face racism and poor treatment but he does so with an optimistic and cheerful attitude. He does not let virulent racism ruin his optimistic outlook on life or suck his spirit and zeal for life. Wilson describes him like, “About twenty-five, he gives the impression that he has the world in his hand, that he can meet life’s challenges head on. He smiles a lot” (Act I Scene I).

But not everyone in the play is able to deal with racism with such a sense of unshakeable optimism. Seth chooses to ignore bigotry altogether in order to lead a stable life. Seth and Jeremy follow different paths to deal with racism and realities of life in general. Seth is a pragmatic man who prizes stability. He is preoccupied with making a living and attaining economic security. He thinks only in financial terms, ignores the issues of social injustice. Jeremy, on the other hand, looks at the situation in terms of principle, not in terms of money. He cannot accept the unfaithful treatment he receives due to being black. Seth views unequal treatment as a mere fact of life. Thus, Wilson presents two ways of dealing with racism- either a person can stand up for himself and his people and shoulder the unfortunate consequences or he accepts his limitations. Apart from Seth and Jeremy, there is Herald Loomis- the worst possible victim of racism. Though he is a free black man according to the law of the land but he was captured by Joe Turner, a white man who forced him to work for seven years as a slave. These seven years completely derailed his life, split up his family and stripped him of his humanity. Joe Turner was the brother of the Governor of Tennessee- it is a significant fact because it suggests that though laws have changed since the time of slavery, the government has hardly shifted away from the practice of systematic dehumanization of the black people by the whites. The legacy of racism cannot be easily dismantled. Joe Turner is no longer physically present in Loomis’ life but his presence lingers because of the terrible after effects of his actions. Loomis’ inability to forget Joe Turner and the ways of Jeremy and Seth to deal with racism; suggest that America cannot simply move on from its own racist history.

This is further supported by Bynum’s song; “They tell me Joe Turner’s Come and Gone” (Act II Scene II). This refrain is a testament to point out how much the figure of Joe Turner has entered into national consciousness. It suggests that Herald Loomis is not the only person who is affected by the trauma of racism. The entire history has gone turbulent and consequently has been shaped by it. Wilson has shown that racism has so badly affected the psyche of the blacks in America that Tonya in King Hedley II does not want to bring another life into this world that does not respect a life. Tonya’s shocking realization is that one way to end the violence against black children is to stop having black babies.

The fact that most of the people of the black community feel themselves so isolated from the mainstream that they suffer from identity crisis and it takes forms of frustration and agitation and they develop self harming tendencies. Levee, the talented, arrogant and temperamental musician in Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom feels intimidated by Sturdyvant, the white owner of the Chicago recording studio. But Levee is not ready to accept the fact and he keeps on saying that he is not cowed by the whites. Levee’s growing anger and frustration are

experienced by thousands of the blacks in America. He embodies those aspirations and disappointments of the black males during 1920s which are still relevant today. Levee, actually, cannot forget his past that causes his present bitterness. When he was a child, he witnessed his mother's rape by a gang of white men. He tried to stop them but he could not. After that incident his father sold their farm to one of the rapists, killed four of them and finally killed himself. Levee quarrels constantly with Ma and rest of his fellow musicians during the action of the play. Levee's frustration culminates when he is told that Sturdyvant would not let him record the songs which he previously promised to do. Out of misplaced anger and frustration Levee winds up stabbing Toledo, another member of band.

Wilson has suggestions too for the blacks to drive away the resultant anger and frustration generated by the gross racism. To make life flow African people should respond to the collective consciousness. The response is required to generate spiritual continuity and empowerment. It acts like a tool against oppression, it cleanses the soul, binds the individual with the community and heals.

Garbed in "blackness", Wilson's dramas rekindle the relegated human beings, encourage and lead them to follow the trajectory to be enlightened enough to live with convictions of their own. He proclaimed:

I believe in the American theatre. I believe in its power to inform about human condition, its power to heal, its power to uncover truths.... Act of art is a search for ways of being, of living life more fully. We who are capable of those noble pursuits should challenge the melancholy and barbaric, to bring the light of angelic grace, peace, prosperity and the unencumbered pursuit of happiness to the ground on which we all stand. (*The Ground On Which I Stand* 46)

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