Introduction

You’ve taken my blues and gone –
You sing’em on Broadway

And you fixed’em
So they don’t sound like me.

You also took my spirituals and gone.

. . . but what’s about me –
But someday somebody’ll
Stand up and talk about me,
And write about me –
Black and Beautiful –
And sing about me,
And put on plays about me! (Hughes)

These lines by Langston Hughes allude to the constant struggle of the black actor, director and playwright to fight the stereotypes imposed by the American mainstream theatre establishment on the people of African descent. Produced by the capitalistic American society and promulgated through the Musicals and other genres, these stereotypes saw blacks in America as primitive, ignorant and submissive people, almost untouched by civilization to whom any notion of culture was alien. Throughout their history, the Euro-American mind conceived and promulgated a very negative image of African-Americans completely distorting and reducing it to a simplistic portrayal or grotesque caricature. But it does not mean that there was no black resistance to it. Ever since the production of the first black play by James Brown, *King Shotaway*, black dramatist had been endeavoring to counter and change these stereotypes. But it could not be done without a concerted cultural and artistic enterprise like the Harlem Renaissance. During the Harlem Renaissance, there was a burgeoning production of artistic and
imaginative works entrenched in black culture. At that time, Du Bois and Alain Locke imparted their ideas of the black aesthetics so as not to let new budding artists be swayed away by the American mainstream aesthetic canon:

Negro dramatic art must not only be liberated from external handicap and disparagement, but from its internal and often self-imposed limitations. It must more and more have the courage to be original, to break with established dramatic convention of all sorts – It must have the courage to develop its own idiom, to pour itself into new molds, . . . one can scarcely think of a complete development of dramatic art by the Negro without some significant artistic re-expression of African life and the traditions attached to it. (qtd. in Filipowicz 167)

It bespeaks the black artists’ perspicacity towards the subtle and insidious ramifications of adhering to the oppressor’s coercive aesthetics. However, until the 1960s, barring a few writers like Langston Hughes, Richard Right, James Baldwin, Alice Childress and others, majority of black playwrights had to hew to the white dramatic traditions and stereotypes owing to their dependence on white sponsorship and patronage: consequently, the black dramatic production appears to be cowering under Broadway standards. But this oppressive artistic ambience gradually coincided with a growing understanding of the self, politics of capitalism and an urge to counter this system more aggressively amongst the black artists. It culminated in the Black Theatre Movement in the 1960s. In compliance with the Black Power Movement and the Black Arts Movement underscoring ‘self-recognition and introspection’ and ‘self-determination’, this theatre turned out to be “more committed political and anti-white” as compared to its Harlem predecessors (Olga 23). Self-representation became a major focus of the movement – “art was created by, for, and about black people” (“Black Arts Movement”). Artists like Amiri Baraka, Ed Bullins, Nikki Giovanni, Adrienne Kennedy, Larry Neal and Sonia Sanchez inaugurated a subversive dramatic revolution. This movement soon engulfed the whole of America. These dramatists challenged different aspects of the established dramatic canon that tended to misrepresent and denigrate black life and experience. Larry Neal asserts: “The motive behind the black aesthetic is the destruction of the white thing, the destruction of white ideas, and white ways of looking at the world” (“Black Arts Movement”). Moreover, the influence of Baraka and the Black Theatre Movement has
not been confined to the writers of the 60s and the 70s. This influence, transcending the cultural and artistic conditions of its production, has also shaped the cognitive and artistic structures of the mind of August Wilson. Wilson who always considers his art and dramas as the product of four influences – Romare Bearden, the Blues, Amiri Baraka and Jorge Louis Borges – very candidly acknowledges the role of the 60s on his art:

I was a participant in the Black power movement in the early sixties and I wrote poetry and short fiction. I was interested in art and literature and I felt that I could alter the relationship between blacks and society through the arts. There was an explosion of black theatre in the late sixties – theatre was a way of politicizing the community and raising the consciousness of the people. So with my friend, Rob Penny, I started the Black Horizon Theatre in Pittsburgh in 1968. (qtd. in Wilson, “August Wilson” 21)

Embarking on a theatrical voyage across the black experience in America in particular and human experience in adverse ambience in general, with his Black Horizon Theatre, Wilson went on to become America’s one of the most original and powerful dramatists. He has been recipient of many awards for his work in theatre, including two Pulitzer prizes, one for *Fences* (1986) and another for *The Piano Lesson* (1990) and Whiting Writers’ Award (1986). Through his magnum opus, the Pittsburgh Cycle, an array of ten plays, Wilson weaves the diverse experiences of a vital and dynamic community, African-Americans, decade by decade in the 20th century. Besides the awards, the long and successful run of his plays at some of the mainstream theatres in America – the Broadway and the Yale Repertory Theatre – speaks volumes about his discerning insight into human nature, his perspicacity to construct a holistic experience in theatre, his dexterity in inventing an aesthetic/dramatic form that includes the African folk elements and addresses the needs of Black community, and an acknowledging reception that his oeuvre is accorded by the audiences of both the colors, and critics and scholars. Lloyd Richards hails Wilson as the “Culmination of political, social and aesthetic objectives presaged by the Harlem Renaissance in the twenties and the Black Arts Movement of the sixties” (qtd. in Mckay and Gates 2409). His design “to write around, through, and against recorded history in order to give voice to the nameless masses of Africans in America and to tap the never-ending supply of untold stories about
African American life and culture” (Shannon, “Framing African American” 127) and its execution have invited a wide range of debates from scholars, academicians, theatre aesthetes and community workers. If many hail him as the cultural architect and revolutionary chronicler of the black experience, he has also been accused of producing the drama that fails to spur a desire in or galvanize the young, budding generation. If a few critique him for failing to depict the routine and inevitable feuds between the blacks and the whites, many glorify him for spotlighting exclusively the black people, community and experience. However, a close look at the critical corpus available on his drama evinces that despite the wide range of studies and the issues they claim to undertake, all the dimensions of his creative genius have not been studied and explored with the desirable critical insight. One such dimension is, much educed by Wilson in many of his interviews but not till now undertaken and explored holistically, his treatment of the ‘centre’, the Euro-American mainstream yardstick that defines and determines the meaning and interpretation of human experience, and how he redefines it from the point of view of African-American community, traditions, folks and aesthetics. Majority of critiques are available in the form of research papers and articles, leading thereby to a lopsided and imbalanced overview of his interests and designs as a community writer and theatre aesthetician.

Mary Ellen Snodgrass’s *August Wilson: A Literary Companion* is one of the few full length studies available on Wilson’s work. The main thrust of the book is its chapter on Wilson that arranges the issues – plays, characters, rituals, songs and the blues etc. – in an alphabetic order. It also traces Wilson’s genealogy and time line of the Hill District residents and events. Thus, it claims to provide the readers and scholars “a source of basic data” (1) on a wide range of issues and serves to use his own words “the ideal introduction.” Snodgrass’s attempt may be illuminating for the beginners, but so far as a rigorous scholarly exercise is concerned, this book fails to plumb the larger cultural and aesthetic paradigms that form the core of Wilson’s theatre. Although it does touch the topics of ethics and artistry, it offers a rather shallow and thin study of the plays except *Radio Golf* as the book was published before the publication of this play.

Charles Patrick Tyndall undertakes in his doctoral research how Wilson recuperates “the experiences and politics of black rage as a means of healing for
contemporary African Americans” (“August Wilson’s Play Cycle” v). He finds Wilson’s characters orchestrating this black rage variously. Characters like Loomis (Joe Turner’s Come and Gone), Berniece (The Piano Lesson), Rose (Fences) and Ma Rainey (Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom) successfully sublimate this rage, leading thereby to self-integrity and identification whereas Levee (Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom), Troy (Fences) and Hedley (Seven Guitars) fail to channelize their rage and end up murdering the fellow individuals and splintering the family units. Tyndall further undertakes the issue of black rage in his study, “Using Black Rage to Elucidate African and African American Identity in August Wilson’s Joe Turner’s Come and Gone.” He opines that Wilson’s theatre enacts the evolvement of historical identity through rituals, songs, storytelling and black rage. He concludes, “Though Loomis spends most of the play trying to find his place in the world . . . and raging, it is his rage that finally leads him to realize who Herald Loomis is, a man with a story to tell” (170). He doesn’t apply Freudian and other psychoanalytical measures to further probe the repressive agents that lead to accumulation of this black rage. This application could have led to appreciation of the strategies Wilson’s characters adopt. He also doesn’t take up all the plays that leave the study lopsided and imbalanced.

But Harry J. Elam’s The Past as Present in the Drama of August Wilson appears a richer contribution to the Wilson criticism. According to Elam, “With each work, Wilson re-creates and re-evaluates the choices that blacks have made in the past by refracting them through the lens of present” (xv). Besides the topics of music, history, time and memory, the study provides critical insights into the issues of gender, separately addressed under the categories of men, and women in Wilson. Wilson’s comment that “His work is decidedly malecentric” (14) informs Elam’s interpretation of the male and female characters. He studies the male characters vis-a-vis “White men” and the economy of Masculinity (152), black revolution, significance of prison and their role as father and son; whereas, the female characters are probed solely in relation to their black male counterparts. Elam tends to downplay the palpable sites and instances of black female agency and determination either as a threat to black masculinity or a chimera that, on closer unbosoming, tends to disappear. But even the piercing gaze of Elam misses the structurally nucleus role of Berniece and Ma. Besides, he overlooks the character of Aunt Ester who is the embodiment of Africanness that, as a guiding spirit, remains an
illuminating presence throughout the Cycle. Thus, the significance of embodying “the Africanness” in a female lead and Wilson’s designs behind it have not been identified by Elam.

Other critics too have taken up the study of male and female characters in Wilson’s plays. Kim Marra, in her study, “Ma Rainey and the Boyz: Gender Ideology in August Wilson’s Broadway Canon,” hails him as a “premier theatrical mythographer.” Her study is an attempt to ascertain as to what “extent his plays perpetuate a gender ideology which oppresses American women across lines of race, ethnicity, class, and sexual preference” (125). Marra evaluates Wilson’s understanding and depiction of women in terms of their relation with the protagonists and the role of women in precipitating the process of protagonist’s self-actualization. The established stereotypes of the black women and the 60’s confrontations between the black men and women seem to have seeped through Marra’s understanding of Wilson’s figures to such an extent that the ambivalence towards black characters becomes perceptible. The assertive and multidimensional figures of Ma Rainey and Berniece are termed, in toe with the stereotypes, as doggedly emasculating for the black males, whereas self-sacrificing and self-evading women like Martha (Joe Turner’s Come and Gone) and Rose (Fences) are criticized as unenlightened, domestic and ineffective individuals that are ditched even by their own husbands. Marra fails to underscore the politics of gender stereotypes. For example, the stereotype of the black “Mammy” or matriarch defines those powerful, aggressive, spirited women who are always dogged and demanding as emasculating. But in a coercive ideological ambience, this aggression, spirit and proclivity is required to survive Meaningfully. Hence, this stereotype, and its apparent politics, as a strategy to co-opt and pre-empt any space or possibility of female agency and subversion eludes the critic’s insight. Moreover even those spaces or instances where women are given a culturally rich position have not been interpreted properly. Berniece’s stance on retaining the piano in The Piano Lesson, her acceptance of using the piano and finally joining hands with Boy Willie in exorcising the ghost of Sutter has not been highlighted. And much alike other studies, it takes up only five plays, thus leaves numerous possibilities open to study gender in Wilson’s canon.
Amelia Grabowski comes up with another study of female characters in Wilson’s canon. In “She’s a Brick House: August Wilson and the Stereotype of Black Womanhood,” Grabowski avers that “Within the Century Cycle, Wilson’s portrayal of women leans dangerously close to classic stereotypical tropes of African American women, most notably the maternal tropes of the ‘Mammy’ figure and the black matriarch” (9). Rena, Ruby and Tonya, according to Grabowski, as they stray from their prescribed stereotypical motherly roles, have been condemned and criticized since they wield a negative influence on other characters, and, thus, reinforcing the stereotypes. The structural centrality of the motherhood can be seen in the fact that almost all the female characters are defined by their maternal roles or the lack thereof, whereas the male figures have many other cultural, political, economic, and ethnic parameters. However, Grabowski finds Wilson challenging these stereotypes as he “subverts the stereotypes of the Mammy and the black matriarch, making maternity a source of power . . . endowing these female characters with greater power and authority within the scope of each play” (18). And she fattens her argument by citing the roles and significance of the characters of Aunt Ester, Berniece, Ruby, and Tonya. However, the absence of unanimously hailed Ma Rainey and Mame from this study is conspicuous as both these characters challenge not only patriarchy but also racism by subverting the stereotypes.

Cynthia L. Caywood and Carlton Floyd offer an enriching insight into the operations of gender discourse in Wilson’s plays through their article, “‘She make you right with yourself’: Aunt Ester, Masculine loss and Cultural Redemption in August Wilson’s Cycle Plays.” They opine that the black male figures who adhere “to European American patriarchal notions” (79) are systematically shut out of this masculine category. Under the duress of this emasculation, they writhe, convulse and sometimes get perished. Further, embracing this brand of masculinity disconnects them from traditions and “culturally rooted African definitions of masculinity” (83). Aunt Ester, “the repository of African American culture, history, hope and spirituality,” has been vested with the potential to undo the effects of white establishment which corroborates Wilson’s faith in women’s significance in cultural revival. Though the study is quite illuminating, its range is very narrow. It discusses only Aunt Ester as the feminist figure and doesn’t even touch the other equally important female characters who challenge patriarchy. So, what kind of
orchestration reverberates in the decalogue can only be seen when the male and female characters, under the exigencies of coercive patriarchal regimes and their coping strategies to meet the demands of this regime, are studied together. An equally cogent illustration but on a much smaller scale is Doris Davis’ “‘Mouths on Fire’: August Wilson’s Blueswomen.” Focusing on three of the most important female characters in Wilson’s Cannon – Aunt Ester, Ma Rainey and Berniece – Doris asserts, “Using their voices to transcend societal and gender restrictions, these forge a music that reconfigures their world” (166). Through their songs and resilience, they provide “an anchor for themselves and for others” (166). Having an eye for details, Doris outlines how these women assert their significance and fight for the survival and sustenance of those who are dependent upon them. However, “While they do not hold centre stage, at their strongest, they represent the centre of Wisdom” (163). Although insightful, the critic discusses these three female figures – their decisions and struggles – more in relation to a white establishment or in relation to a threatened community and less in relation to patriarchy – be it white or black, nor does the critic make any effort to put and to see their choices in the tradition of black feminism. As the study focuses on three plays and on three characters only, it does not to give a comprehensive view of Wilson’s treatment of women.

This potential of Ma Rainey and her agency as a black individual in the face of adverse racial world have been underscored in my paper, “Redefining the Centre: Women in Wilson’s Plays.” This paper attempts to study the treatment of women characters in his plays. Wilson’s task of redefining has been discussed with reference to his portrayal of Ma Rainey, Risa, Rose, Berniece and Aunt Ester. Conscious of the challenges from within and without, Wilson “realized the significance of black women and endeavored to construct an inclusive culture where men and women shared the bonds and ethics of reciprocity, communication and partnership” (85). Consequently, his “women ooze the fervor and hues true to their cultural pride” (85). No doubt, Wilson’s acknowledgment of women’s significance to the black culture has been highlighted, but given the scope of a paper, a wide range of issues and concerns of Wilson’s mind and design could not be taken up in this paper.
Besides the specific gaps left in the above mentioned studies, the overall critique of gender in Wilson’s plays has been handicapped by negligence of some of the very vibrant, dynamic and obvious issues by the critics and scholars. Firstly, so far as the study of gender in Wilson’s plays is concerned, the term has been treated very reductively. It does not include the treatment and position of gays and lesbians. For example, Dussie Mae, Ma’s girlfriend, is very openly in a lesbian bond with Ma Rainey, but no critic has realized and discussed the significance of this bond, the desires and conditions that force or motivate both of them to be in this bond, and its strategic and subversive potential. Secondly, a majority of critics, who have focused upon the women characters, seem to have studied women as entities marginalized by the patriarchal society, whereas patriarchy as an ideology, as a belief system can turn out to be as much hostile, indifferent and oppressive to men as it is to women. Just like women, black men too can be seen struggling to abjure or imbibe certain gender-specific traits. But this struggle of the black male characters in carrying the torch of African-American culture (as the 60s ambience preached), to be the bread earner, producer, provider and protector of the family appears to have been neglected by these critics of Wilson. Consequently, Troy Maxson, Levee, Boy Willie and King Hedley’s negotiations with patriarchy remain buried so far.

Since Wilson openly claims to embody and thereby revive the black cultural history in his œuvre, a great majority of critics and scholars have devoted their critical endeavors to study and explore various dimensions of the treatment of history, African-American culture and cultural identity, economic issues, the dramatic principles adopted by Wilson, and his relation to and place in the African-American and American theatre. Harry J. Elam, Jr. in “Gem of the Ocean and the Redemptive Power of History” explores Wilson’s treatment of history in Gem of the Ocean: “Wilson delves into and rewrites the African American past, addressing and righting the wrongs of historical amnesia and social oppression” declaring that the black people “are not tangential to the central motion of history” (76). And in this project, Aunt Ester, “mediating the redemptive power of history” (76), helps her supplicants relieve their burdens and feel connected. History, in this play, as a collective memory, is “the place from which the power of the world, its intellectual and cultural thinking, its humanity emanates” (80). The idea is brought home
through the choices of different characters. But the critic does not substantiate his idea that Wilson “rewrites” history. Wilson’s redefinition of the western concept of history as well as enriching of the African-American historiography and history escapes the critic’s glance. Further, how Wilson’s attempt at redefinition is facilitated by his history and historiography as a subversive unit does not come up for discussion. A similar concern with the exploration of history in Wilson’s work permeates Alan Nadel’s “Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom: Cutting the Historical Record, Dramatizing a Blues CD.” For Alan, the blues in Wilson’s canon is elevated to become “an alternative form of historiography” (102). He opines that Wilson’s idea of the nature of history as to “how the record is produced, whose voices it includes, what arrangements it uses and who has the right to control its distribution and accrue its revenues” (104) reinforces the plasticity of history. The events inside the recording studio are studied along the process of history writing. The white establishment’s attempts, emblematized by Sturdyvant and Irvin, to record the blues song of Ma Rainey and then sell the records illuminates our understanding how white men write the history of the marginalized people the way they wish as they own the power (in the present case the recording studio). History “belongs to whoever owns the eraser” (104). But each character attempts to subvert the coercive force of history and historical forces. In the recording studio, “. . . various musicians come together to create an art which finally resists co-option” (106). But, it appears that the fascination with the historical and racial coercion and African resistance to it overshadows the apparently far more complex and multidimensional issue of the overlapping of race, history, gender and aesthetic (the blues) that manacles the marginalized African-American people so subtly and insidiously that it tends to stymie the possibility of resistance. For example, Ma’s struggle is not only on account of being black; rather, her gender, her community, her class (she does not have a recording studio of her own) and her aesthetics – the blues, allconcertedly inform her negotiation with those in the power.

In Felicia Hardison Londre’s critique of the treatment of history in “A Piano and its History: Family and Transcending Family” the piano in The Piano Lesson is seen as something designed or decorated by “family portraits” and “the horrors of slavery” (115). Boy Willie and Berniece recognize the historical significance of the piano, but where they differ so “acrimoniously is how the historical part should be allowed or used to
impact on the present” (115). The issues of rituals, stereotypes, and aesthetics encourage the critic to conclude: “The African sense of history emphasizes ‘continuity of experience’ that is often cyclical, and, like black storytelling and song, involves repetitions, variations, polyrhythm and musical vamps” (120). The critic glorifies Boy Willie’s approach to family history. But in doing so, Berniece’s realization that she is a potential legacy career of her family, her sense of history and its significance do not get the incisive attention these issues actually deserve. A feminine historiography or the role of a female character in preserving the family history and her strategies could have ushered in a parallel, counterintuitive understanding of history.

Sergei Burbank’s paper, “The Shattered Mirror: What August Wilson Means and Willed to Mean,” studies Wilson’s oeuvre in the light of racial cultural milieu and offers insights into the ramifications of this interaction in terms of theatre aesthetics, Wilson’s project and his concept of history. Burbank is critical of Wilson’s conception and execution of the idea of history. He says that more than being a reflection of the decades and times they claim to embody, the plays are a statement on the conditions of their production. He takes cudgels against Wilson’s definitive and monolithic conception of history and its presentation in his plays: “Wilson’s play cycle is a chronicle of an identity in flux: how can it be fully appraised while its real world corollary refuses to stand still for a comparison” (125). This approach is evident in the fact that the language of his plays remains the same, resistant to change.

The survey of Wilson’s attitude towards history shows that this criticism is colored by his claim that historical resuscitation informs his artistic endeavors. Consequently, in critics’ opinion, history appears to have been treated by Wilson as “collective memory,” “continuity of experience” and Africanness. Though, Nadel underscores the ‘plasticity’ and ‘orchestration’ of history by those in the power, none of the critics endeavors to adopt the ideas of history ushered in by the developments of literary theory. For example, a new historicist approach can take each play as a document and study it in parallel to a non-literary text to unravel how the discursive structures of the conditions that produced these texts happened to construct not only the economic, gender and racial values but the aesthetic and cultural practices also. Wilson’s famous
speeches and his aesthetics can also be studied as located within the totality of discursive framework of the times.

As Wilson was writing his plays as the embodiment of black culture and community, a number of critics have undertaken to explore various aspects of the black culture – rituals, songs, music, the blues, supernatural elements and spirituals. These critics delve into the cultural and ethnic significance of these aspects. Sandra G. Shannon in her paper, “Framing African American Cultural Identity: The Bookends Plays in August Wilson’s 10-Play Cycle,” avers: “He wanted to magnify the African American experience – to write around, through and against the recorded history and to give voice to the nameless masses of Africans in America” (27). She opines that the African values often referred to as memory and re-memory function as the largest and the most central block in Wilson’s dramaturgy. Aunt Ester in *Gem of the Ocean* and Bynum in *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* as spiritual mediators facilitate the revisiting of the disoriented and lost souls to the “city of Bones” through certain African rituals. This revisiting forms an essential part in African cosmology. Though the study is very illuminating as it is by one of the most renowned critics on Wilson, still the fact that it undertakes only five plays leaves the possibility of further addition to the criticism on the issue of culture by bringing the remaining five plays under consideration. Even the evaluation of the five plays taken up for study doesn’t turn out to be a thorough one. *Radio Golf* and *Two Trains Running* get a very partial treatment leaving many cultural, social and communal dimensions of African-American people and the aesthetic devices adopted by the playwright.

Patricia M. Gantt explores the role of cultural practices in her paper, “Putting Black Culture on Stage: August Wilson’s Pittsburgh Cycle.” In his pursuit of “dramatic historiography of America,” Wilson, the critic asserts, presents America “through a black cultural lens” (2). Gantt traces the trajectory of Wilson’s black cultural projection from his childhood days, the influence of the four Bs, early exposure to theatre and then ripening into a theatre giant. If *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* is about “intra- and interracial conflicts” (7), *Fences* enacts the “fences society builds around us and those we construct” (10); *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* “contains the aspects of cultural history” (12). Gantt elucidates that Wilson abhors the “forgetfulness of tradition” (14). She finds that
community and African spirit permeate his dramatic canon, and the culture “he represents forms a bridge between Africa and the United States” (12). In another article, “Ghosts from ‘Down there’: The Southernness of August Wilson,” Gantt traces various aspects and subtle nuances of “southernness” as manifest in Wilson’s plays and how they reveal the responses of the characters towards slavery and the south. His characters refer to the south as “down there.” References to the south for them are a scene of slavery and sharecropping, of oppression and cruelty, of rejection, bittersweet memories and only restricted happiness. But whatever be the nature of experience, Gantt avers, “Wilson seeks reaffirmation which can inform, strengthen and empower these oppressed people” (85). Gantt’s study is felt to be deficient in exploring the psychological repercussions of these images and how these psychological reflections affect their present life and affairs. Further, the study is based only on five plays, so an inclusion of the other plays and re-reading of the whole oeuvre together can promise a dynamic and holistic image of Wilson’s project and attitude. Alice Mills’s study, “The WALKING BLUES: An Anthropological Approach to the theatre of August Wilson,” offers a rather cursory anthropological reading underscoring the motifs of journey, obsession for railways and underground railroads, songs and the blues. Predicating his study on the European, American and African-American myths, the critic fails to outline as to how Wilson’s penchant for the black and Africa-based myths far outweighs his use of the European and non-black elements. Sandra G. Shannon in her article, “A Transplant that Did not take: August Wilson’s Views on the Great Migration,” brings forth Wilson’s stand on the question of the Great Migration in the light of his speeches and through the responses of his characters towards the issues, aspects, images and memories of the south and southern experiences. Shannon finds that “Blasphemy, self-mutilation, convulsions, arrested speech, unexplained scars, incarceration, domestic turmoil” and schizophrenia are the evils that “plague Wilson’s Northern-bound characters” (660) and in the case of Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom and Seven Guitars, they are elevated to tragic proportions. Shannon dissects the apparently impulsive reflections of Levee and School Boy Barton as a manifestation of deep-rooted traumatized unconscious structures of aversion towards the south. She goes on to indict Levee for his attempts at liberation and traces a Wilsonian remedy that Levee should have avenged his father’s murder and re-claimed the
paternal land. Shannon’s reading of the play comes out to be a simplistic one as it ignores
the realities of the south. It is not viable to accept her solution as Levee at least makes
efforts to start life afresh and anew. Had he been this much violent in the south, he would
have not only been kept outside the studio, but might have faced other violent
consequences, but her reading overlooks this aspect. Similar concerns of community and
culture are taken up as addressed in Wilson’s oeuvre in the paper, “. . . If You Live Long
Enough the Boat Will Turn Around: the Birth and Death of Community in Three Plays
by August Wilson,” by Richard Noggle. He claims that at the heart of “many of Wilson’s
plays are the ideas of absence and loss” (58). And this loss can be recuperated “through
connection to the ancestors and to the community of the present” (62). Aunt Ester
facilitates this recuperation not only in Gem of the Ocean but throughout the Cycle. Both
these studies, like many others on this aspect and dimension of Wilson’s dramaturgy, stay
focused on the presentation of the black culture on stage while the role and significance
of an offstage, absent and subtly silent white culture goes unnoticed. White establishment
is the primary antagonistic cultural unit that fosters in the black people the feeling of loss
and nostalgia and a subsequent urge to reunite with their African roots and it
reverberates, despite its absence, in the minds and consciousness of the blacks, and in its
presence – in the responses of the white characters, with the projected black culture and
community. Hence it deserves special attention that is not granted to it.

Unlike these papers which remain absolutely silent on the issue of white
significance, Trudier Harris, in her article, “August Wilson’s Folk Traditions,” goes a bit
ahead and highlights Wilson’s use of folk traditions as a strategy to counter the white
establishment: “The process Wilson employs constantly encourages a rewriting of history
and folklore as it relocates religious expectations and patterns firmly within folkloric
tradition” (50). But this deployment of folk traditions in artistic, cultural and theatrical
domains transcends the urge and need to challenge the white establishment; and Wilson
uses them as means to locate one’s “song.” Taking most of the references from Joe
Turner’s Come and Gone, Harris dissects the use of the blues, ritual, song, spirituals,
sacrifice, memory, precedence-of-circular-over-linear motif and ghost lore as a strategy
to enable Loomis and, thereby the black community, find his/its “song.” The article is a
compact, and succinct statement pregnant with multidimensional insights into the nature,
function and repercussions of the use of ritual, but the gaze is concentrated merely on one play, and in that play, on one character alone, Loomis. The critical paradigms to dissect the play adopted by Harris can be extended to study the other characters not only from this play but from the other plays as well. Similar cultural elements are traced and studied by Mary L. Bogumil in her study, “‘Tomorrow Never Comes’: Songs of Cultural Identity in August Wilson’s ‘Joe Turner’s Come and Gone.’” She opines that uprooted and traumatized Africans when moved towards the north often underwent the feelings of “displacement, and virtual destruction” (465). Juba, for these people, “signifies the recurrence (in memories, in deeds, and in visions) of remote ancestral ties – a paternal, cultural legacy from the characters’ African forefathers” (465). Mary discusses how the characters respond, in accordance with the relationship between their complex racial, communal and familial experiences and this juba – dance and song. A mark of African-American culture is left on the stage. She also unveils the ‘dissolution of a myth’ – in that “each woman is more psychologically complex than the creatures who dwell within such a mythic construct” (475), but this argument remains uncorroborated by the evidence from the text and thus what could have been a multidimensional and extensive study of cultural enactment ends up being a character study. Equally rich in the exploration of the ostensible issue of African culture and rituals in the same play is the study of Samuel A. Hay’s “Joe Turner’s Come and Gone.” He assesses the play in terms of its ritualistic structure. Hay offers an incisive evaluation and interpretation of the choices and decisions made by major characters in the light of traditional Christianity, African ethics and rituals. The role of each character in the boarding house in assuaging the oppressed psyche of Loomis is analogous to the role of community in the life of the individual. But like Bogumil, Hay too stops short of offering a thorough critique of the relation between gender and the African rituals. His statements on female characters are an exception to Harry J. Elam, Jr.’s view who sees female characters in Joe Turner’s Come and Gone operating within the patriarchy and traditional gender roles. It leaves the reader disillusioned as the argument is carried no further. It is quite imperative to note that while traditional Euro-American Christianity vilipends the feminine gender and assigns her only secondary place in all spheres, in African rituals and cosmology, they are hailed as equal participants in the cultural orchestra or ritual chorus, but the issue fails to draw the
attention of any of the critics on this play. Even when the role of Aunt Ester is discussed as the sacrosanct African deity, the contemporary gender relations and the writer’s inclination towards them are too rarely addressed, and when discussed, they are not granted the recognition and attention they deserve.

Elvira Jenson Casado’s “Transgressing and Transcending the American Identity with August Wilson’s ‘Bones People’, Ghosts and Aunt Ester” sees Wilson’s plays a “combination and a connection of non-naturalistic elements moving away from traditional Western forms and traditions, and speaking through racial and cultural lines” (102). Casado finds his plays full of myths, storytelling, unreal and magical surroundings, music, dance, ritual, all emblematic of African spirit. Herald Loomis in Joe Turner’s Come and Gone, Berniece and Boy Willie in the The Piano Lesson, and Memphis in Two Trains Running all “have to reconnect and redefine their African identity” (103). This concern is shared by Amadou Bissiri who, in his paper, “Aspects of Africanness in August Wilson’s Drama: Reading The Piano Lesson Through Wole Soyinka’s Drama,” evaluates Africanness in the light of the aspects and elements of Africa established by Soyinka in his drama. Bissiri outlines these elements as ritual, ghosts (good and evil both), music, song, storytelling, family and supernatural and highlights how adroitly Wilson weaves these elements in The Piano Lesson: “Africanness characterizes the aesthetic of Wilson’s drama and determines its functionality” (15). Bissiri studies Berniece’s and Boy Willie’s stances on the piano in terms of these aspects of Africanness and in the light of Booker T. Washington’s and Du Bois’s ideas. What startles the reader is the fact that throughout this study, Bissiri tends to idealize Boy Willie and his Africanness and villifies Berniece’s stand: “In any case, in posing the family problem in terms of Willie versus Berniece, Wilson also seems to argue for the vindication of the black male” (13). This opinion and many others in the paper reek of the gendered bias or simplistic reading of deceptively simple but otherwise complex situations. How Berniece’s psyche and proclivity is encroached upon and designed by a multiplicity of adverse factors and circumstances that people like Boy Willie don’t have to cope with and that is ultimately accountable for rendering her outlook austere, solemn, and perseverant goes unnoticed and unappreciated in the study. Further that their gendered
exposures and experiences and their economic/occupational domains inform their approach to the piano in particular and life in general also find no mention in the study.

James R. Keller studies *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* along the capitalist and spiritual divide. He finds that the majority of characters are preoccupied with capitalist inclinations and its corollary sensual preoccupations like in the cases of Seth and Selig, Jeremy, Mattie and Molly who “are antithetical to the spiritual yearnings of the shamanic characters” (473). Keller emphasizes the meaning of this shamanic tradition with elucidation as to how it incorporates an aversion and rejection of Christianity, capitalism and white Western values. But nowhere does the critic specify and substantiate as to how the issue of class/material conditions is averse to shamanic or African tradition as in *Radio Golf* Wilson seems to suggest that accumulating riches needn’t be emblematic of anti-ethnic. Joan Harrington explores the same pattern of rituals and spirituals in “King Hedley II: in the Midst of all His Death” and traces the significance and meanings of Aunt Ester’s death and severance from the community, ritual and spiritual attempt of her resurrection to community. And the critic opines, “King’s death is necessary for the birth of the child” (181). What in Euro-American world view is a heinous case of murder, in African worldview can be seen as a sacrifice and become a site of celebration. Margaret Booker’s study zeroes in on this conflict between spirituality and capitalist pursuit embodied in Harmond Wilks and Roosevelt Hicks respectively. She finds, “Unlike Roosevelt, Harmond discovers the value of history and memory contained within the community whereas Roosevelt threatens its very existence” (191). Brenda Murphy in “The Tragedy of Seven Guitars,” Matthew Roudoni in “Safe at Home?: August Wilson’s Fences,” Stephen Bottoms in “Two Trains Running: Blood on the Tracks” and David Krasner in “Jitney, Folklore and Responsibility” carry on the same concern to study the treatment of community and aspects of African traditions in Wilson’s plays. Kim Pereira even goes to the extent of calling him a mythmaker: “Wilson does more than recording myths, he creates them; he continued doing so throughout his ten play cycle” (66). Donald E. Pease in “August Wilson’s Lazarus Complex” offers a re-definition of the Biblical character who was raised by Christ from the grave to relive the horrors of the death. Wilsonian redefinition of “the Lazarus complex represents the processes through which the dead oblige the living to relive their deaths” (6). Jackie M. Roberts offers a
critique of *Gem of the Ocean* and concludes that this play was “not spurring a desire” in the black students to “form a new insurgent black theatre” (147) primarily owing to a “deformation of diversity” at work. Consequently, the play ends with a severe critique of radical action. Roberts, it seems, attempts to understand Wilson from his own radical perspective. Even in his other plays also, those who adhere to aggressive confrontation get perished. A strategic channelization of aggression and anxiety into constructs of redemptive and aesthetic potential is supported by Wilson which the critic fails to comprehend. What, by now, has become apparent from the critique of the treatment of the community and Africanness in Wilson’s dramaturgy is the fact that the opinions in this domain come in the form of papers and articles on the one or the other play undertaking one or the other dimension; consequently, no cumulative, succinct and complete opinion is developed. Further, very crucial issues of the relation between class and community are not even touched upon by any of the critics. The significance of the redefinition of rituals and Africanness for the black women is discussed in a rather cursory way.

Wilson’s treatment of and response towards class has got even lesser attention of the scholars. This area is marred by a glaring paucity. Stray remarks and opinions might be found but a complete study on this issue is not yet available. Cigdem Usekes explores this issue in “‘We’s the Leftovers’: Whiteness as Economic Power and Exploitation in August Wilson’s Twentieth-Century Cycle of Plays.” He finds that “property or capital bestows power on whites in American society so that they can make decisions which determine the course of other people’s lives” (3). On-stage or off-stage, the whiteness wields authority and power by virtue of the property and resources the white people posses. Sturdyvant, Irvin, Selig, the Sutters, Lutz, and other off-stage characters use “blacks to attain their goals and to build an optimal society for themselves” (9). Still the dramatic and artistic devices are so orchestrated by Wilson as to give a “more complete sense of the struggles and achievements of these black warriors” (11). Another study in this domain is by Sandra G. Shannon titled, “August Wilson on a century of Black Worklife.” She avers that “those who are in power and those who establish the ground rules for advancement” are whites (112). But Wilson’s characters, she says, marshal their resistance to this overarching system through “sheer wit, stamina and persistence” (112).
She also emphasizes the strategy of successful or advanced blacks of “playing by the rules” (114). All these black people, Ma Rainey, Becker, Troy Maxson, Memphis Lee and others hew to the African code “that compels them to reach back to help those of his race who are less fortunate” (114). Unlike Cigdem Usekes whose focus in his study remains largely on the white characters, Shannon explores the codes of working conditions and advancement and progress of the black community. But both the studies fail to offer an incisive, multidimensional, penetrating, inclusive and interpolative critique of class. Neither of the studies includes the whole range of plays and characters while the latest play of Wilson, *Radio Golf*, deals with the middle class black people who have resources as well as power. Further, how the boundaries of class, gender and community intersect and inform the attitude of the people towards their day-to-day issues is not even pointed out. It can be said that class is the least explored area in Wilson canon.

Just like the studies on Wilson’s gender, ethnic and cultural, class, historical concerns, his aesthetics repertoire – his art, technique and other dramatic and theatre devices and concerns – has also riveted the attention of his critics. And here too, the opinions come in the form of articles and papers, rendering the studies, therefore, scanty and truncated. Furthermore, they are in the form of some broad generalizations without offering a penetrative close textual study. Gunilla Theander Kester studies the “metaphorics of body” in two plays – *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* and *Fences*. Colored in the postmodern discourse, the study reveals that Wilson uses the black body as a locus for a new and dynamic metaphorics of African-American history “to reformulate the African American poetics of memory” (105). It reveals Wilson’s attitude towards body as a potential and dynamic agent of change. The study is, though illuminating, limited only to two plays and could easily be extended to include Levee’s scar, Risa’s scars, and Hedley’s injury mark on his face. The linearity of the history challenged in this play is true not only of one play, but all of his plays. Mary L. Bogumil traces Wilson’s relation as an artist to community, black theatre and black aesthetics. Penny and Wilson started their journey to create a theatre that would embody the voices and local colors in their art. Wilson’s characters “exist in and through their community and are designed to appeal to a community” (54). His aversion to multicultural inclusion of the black theatre and urge
for the construction of an exclusive black theatre has attracted the ire of Brustein and others. As a black writer, the critic says, Wilson has his own reservations. Actually, instead of being the study of textual devices and techniques, it is the study of Wilson’s commitments as an artist. Furthermore, neither does the critic shed light on Wilson’s redefinition of the black theatre in relation to the white theatre, nor in relation to the black theatre. This paucity of study of the aesthetic and artistic devices corroborated by textual evidences persists as a majority of critics prefer to study August Wilson as an artist only and none explores his artistic ideas in the domain of his texts. Joanne Gordon goes a step ahead and in his article, “Wilson and Fugard: Politics and Art,” offers a parallel study of the political and artistic concerns of Athol Fugard and August Wilson, predicating it upon the reading of their plays – Master Herald . . . and the Boys and Fences respectively. Fugard’s dedication to expose “the political system of his native South Africa” and use of his “art to define the reality of oppression” puts him on par with Wilson whose theatre “eschews the melting pot metaphors of liberal white America and rejects assimilation rhetoric” (18). Both the writers understand and highlight that the bonds between their characters are defined, not by their humanity, but by their sociological context. They share the same set of “narrative structures,” ‘characterization’ and “subtle political weaving”. But Wilson surpasses Fugard in his brilliant evocation of the supernaturalism. Again, to the dismay of the reader, the article is less about the textual use of artistic devices and more about artistic commitments of the playwright.

Devon Boan explores the latent patterns of ‘Slave Narrative’ tradition in Wilson’s drama. For Devon, Boy Willie’s “actions seem to fall logically within an evolutionary series of phases through which the slave narrative, as a literary form, has passed” (265). Devon further enlarges her lens to see the actions and choices of other characters through ‘eclectic’, ‘integrated’ and genric phases through which the slave narrative develops. Unlike other studies, Devon zeroes in on the textual evidences. But barring a few instances, the study does not explore as to how the goal of challenging the white establishment in the cultural and existential domain is transformed in the aesthetic realm as well where Wilson not only refuses to acknowledge or adhere to the Western artistic traditions, but he also projects and weaves his narratives in a fabric that is purely African – slave narrative.
Harry J. Elam, Jr. locates Wilson’s theatre in the context of the Hip-hop and rap culture. He asserts that Wilson fathoms the possibilities and “strategies for how the black artist in America confronts the dilemma of achieving the commercial success” and suggests “that black artists ‘keep it real’” (“‘Keeping it Real’” 85). The critic finds Wilson concurrently conforming to and decrying the mainstream hegemony. Reggie Young studies Wilson’s two plays, *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* and *The Piano Lesson*, as sites and attempts “to overcome a fragmented African American past under a Western religion of forced submission . . . with an art that offers the hope for personal redemption through ritual renewal” (135). Tara T. Green in “Speaking of Voice and August Wilson’s Women” analyzes Wilson’s women characters using their voice not only as a personal instrument but an aesthetic device as well. The critic also opines that speaking is necessary as much for claiming one’s rights on cultural front as much for harmony and integrity of the self: “Risa’s inability to articulate her feelings and to protect herself suggests the consequences of what happens to the African American culture, and any culture, that does not speak for itself” (160). Samuel A. Hay’s *African American Theatre* probes Wilson’s early plays from various perspectives. According to the critic, Wilson’s plays combine the features of Lockean and Du Boisean theatre aesthetics. He further opines, “Wilson’s extensive utilization of music to structure the prologos (beginnings of the scenes), stasima (middles), and exodos, or epilogos (ends)” and in other ways is so innovative that it warrants close study (62). According to Hay, music and songs are so intrinsic to the structures of Wilson’s plays that they “economize the exposition” (63). They also serve to build up the tension, release it, and foretell an event and much more. He quotes Lloyd Richards, the Broadway director of Wilson’s plays, “he handles Wilson’s plays as though they were music” (68). Though a very probing and innovative exploration, the study is marred by the great range of plays that it excludes. However, the parameters and strategies of evaluation are multi-dimensional. Since critique of Wilson’s oeuvre forms part of a larger study, the attention that the plays deserve is found missing.

This review of the criticism on Wilson’s artistic and aesthetic concerns brings forth several limitations. This area is plagued by lack of full length studies. Even the papers available on this issue focus more on Wilson as a theatre person and artist and lesser on Wilson’s sublimation of his political and ethnic commitments into an
aesthetically pleasant, intellectually enlightening, emotionally alleviating and performatively cathartic medium. Besides, no critic has undertaken the task of studying the way Wilson, as he was writing as a direct response to racism and cultural marginalization of the black community, redefines the theatre aesthetics established on the Euro-American canon by his subtle, deceptively simple attitude towards the stereotypes, characterization, plot arrangements, irony, song and music. The studies available in this domain do not pay due attention to these concerns of Wilson’s art and theatre and consequently, they fail to conjure a holistic, dynamic and realistic picture of the mind and art of Wilson.

This brief critical appraisal of the criticism on Wilson’s dramatic works reveals that certain gaps and imbalances have been left by the critics and scholars. This is because only a few critics have undertaken to decipher Wilson’s canon with a framework expandable to a book length study. Further, these take up one or the other issue or concern and explore it in one or a couple of plays. Although the insights and assessments of Wilson’s art and mind from different angles that these studies offer are appreciable, they fail in arresting, analysing and presenting a holistic and inclusive artistic, and realistic approach of Wilson to redefining the historical, cultural, racial and economic experiences of African-Americans through a medium that is aesthetically and artistically embedded in the folk cultural elements of black culture. Different critics do study the aspects of African culture and history, but none of them captures that dimension of Wilson’s theatre which undertakes to unveil the subtle coercive violence of the established ‘centre’ which permeates the racial, gender, class and aesthetic discourses in a way that marginalizes the black people; nor does any study explore Wilson’s treatment of these issues in an intersecting manner. Thus, these gaps and imbalances in the studies on Wilson warrant a comprehensive exploration of the motif of ‘centre’ and Wilson’s redefinition of it through his oeuvre. But before moving ahead with examining and exploring Wilson’s treatment of the motif ‘centre’, it appears in place to enunciate in detail the meaning and the sense in which the term ‘centre’ has been used in the present study.

The term ‘centre’ has been defined so variously by different dictionaries and thinkers as to include a wide array of significances in different contexts. The Oxford
English Dictionary, Vol. II, defines it as “The point round which things group themselves or revolve, or that forms a nucleus or point of concentration for its surroundings” (def. 6), “A point towards which things tend, move, or are attracted” (def. 6b); A Collins Free Online Dictionary defines it as “a person or thing that is focus of interest” (def. 5), “a place of activity or influence” (def. 6). According to Wordnet 3.0, ‘centre’ is “the object upon which interest and attention focuses” (def. 7), “the choicest or most essential or most vital part of some idea or experience” (def. 7). Merriam-Webster Dictionary puts it as “a point, area, person, or thing that is most important or pivotal in relation to an indicated activity, interest, or condition” (def. 2a); “a source from which something originates” (def. 2b). The Random House Dictionary of the English Language explains ‘centre’, as “the source of an influence, action, force etc.” (def. 3). The accounts of these definitions and meanings from various dictionaries suffice to form a broad understanding of the concept ‘centre’. Taken together and studied in cultural context, it can be said that the centre is a source or origin wherefrom certain experiences, things, ideas originate, and owing to this originatory function, it yields immense reverence, indelible authority and perennial influence. Moreover, its interaction with its peripheries, it appears, battens upon a tacit subordination of the later. The aura and authority of the centre vindicates that the nexus between the centre and the margin is informed by a belief system so thoroughly that even the peripheries tend to participate in their own subordination. Carole Boyce Davies in her study, “Beyond Unicentricity: Transcultural Black Presence,” explores the idea of unicentricity and avers that it “functions to centre some experience and marginalize others” (1). She further explains that in any system, this centre or its centricity turns on “the idea of a certain essential meaning, beginning, parentage, ancestry, origin” (1). To highlight the political intent of this centre-margin dialogue, she asserts:

Unicentricity thus can not imagine multiple and equal centres but instead has to operate with one constantly expanding centre. Unicentricity, then, legitimates its gains, seeking and expanding the set of peripheries that it gradually pulls into its orbit and thus inevitably can become a colonialist project. The single centre logic, then, is the basis of dominance and control, for it functions with other communities in terms of competition, hierarchy, and subordination. (1)
This account of the nature of the centre can be used to study the Euro-American centre, its construction, dissemination, reception and interaction with the marginal agents. “At its most basic, Eurocentrism is the perception that Europe constitutes the centre of the universe. Eurocentrism is an internalized intellectual space that inculcated biased cultural centreing” (Orser 738). The seventeenth century onwards, the Western Europe and later its successor, America, have been extending their influence all over the world in political, economic and military matters. However, this influence is not confined to these domains only and spills over other aspects of cultural life across different continents. Stephen Horton refers to this global expansion involving “massive economic imbalances between the core, or ‘the west’, and the periphery, or ‘the non-west’ yet this distinction between ‘the west’ and ‘the non-west’ is also an invention of the western cultural imagination in an attempt to assert the dominance of the core over the periphery” (537).

Different scholars have read the procedures of the centre-construction from various pivotal positions – Marxist, Feminist, Post-colonial, Postmodernist, to name only a few. It unanimously acknowledged that in the personal and public imagination, the Euro-American culture has established itself as the centre. This centre – the “beliefs, values, and ways of thinking and feeling through which human beings perceive, and by recourse to which they explain, what they take to be reality” – “legitimizes and perpetuates” (Harpham and Abrams 159) the interests of the dominant white, male, Christian, Western Euro-American population in such insidious manner as to procure the co-option and subordination of the non-white people: “The residual traces of centuries of axiomatic European domination inform the general culture, the everyday language, and the media, engendering a fictitious sense of innate superiority of European-derived cultures and people” (Shohat and Stam 101). The subtle and insidious encroachment of this centre in the apparently autonomous and neutral domains – education, literature, religion, family, media etc. – further serve to underline the rigor and asperity of the centre to maintain and sustain the culture of relentless subordination and dehumanization of marginal cultures and their inhabitants through an ontology and ‘episteme’ exclusively designed and spread to serve the dominant class. The narcissism of Euro-Americanism also entails cultural distortion, disfiguring and denigration of the margin – non-white cultures and communities and their peoples. As the present study zeroes in on the acts and procedures
of redefining this Euro-American centre from the point of view of African-Americans, it seems in place to take due cognizance of the historical and cultural events and movements through which this centre not only evolved but also got established as the ultimate universal referent.

Like the Greek, Roman and Mesopotamia civilizations, Euro-Americanism has specific period, location and conditions wherein its relations and negotiations with its own internal elements – individual, family, religion, politics and economy – as well as external forces – Judaism, Islam, middle east, Africa and non-Western people – facilitated its supersession as the enviable cultural model during the Renaissance in the Western Europe and Eurocentrism came to occupy the centre. Although, no “movement in life or literature is an absolute break with the past,’ as the past always lingers on the present, but it does not mean that it “is not a break with the past” (Dahiya 26). So, the modernist thought registered a marked break with the medieval world view in/across some areas, but at the same time, endeavored to carry on with the others. As the history of evolution indicates, on each stage, some “transcendental signifiers” or the referents or centres – “God, the Idea, the World Spirit, the Self, substance, matter and so on – have thrust themselves forward from time to time” (Eagleton 113). During the Renaissance, a cataclysm that witnessed the overthrow of “dominant metaphysical preoccupations” (Amin 165) and other dominant socio-cultural modes, a parallel cultural model was erected that either demolished the medieval values and institutions or adapted them to the interests of the changing cultural scenario. Highlighting it more as a shift in attitudes and understanding towards the cultural practices and lifestyles rather than the change in the nature and structure of these cultural practices, Jurgen Habermas defines Modernism stating that in the wake of the dilapidation of “the world conceptions of religions and metaphysics,” “. . . the problems inherited from these older world-views could be re-arranged so as to fall under specific aspects of validity, truth, normative rightness, authenticity and beauty” (8). And this shift was ushered in partly by Western Europe’s access to the treasures of Greek and Roman literature, art and philosophies. The new light of Classical literature and its act of invalidation of the pre-Renaissance European cultures inaugurated the need for reshuffling the centre-margin domains. As the Greek and Roman world views permeated the Renaissance— art, literature, culture, politics, education and
what not – it penetrated the apparently public as well as personal domains of individual’s life. Gradually, it stimulated in the Western Europe a desire to claim and establish Greek and Roman ancestry. But its capitalist interests also prohibited it from acknowledging the impact of Egyptian civilization on Greece as it would have countered its colonialist retribution of the African people as barbaric, animalistic and living in primitive conditions. Juliet Uccelli and Dennis O’Neill in their paper, “Challenging Eurocentrism,” opine that “for progressives seeking to understand white supremacist ideology, the most striking point is that up until the early 1800s, Europeans generally respected Egyptian civilization and acknowledged its formative influence on Greece” (39). But after the colonial, imperial interests grew so stronger that it led to slavery in Americas, “the notion of separate races (rather than a continuity of variation in human skin color) emerged – with the corollary that those races had unequal intellectual and moral capacities” (39).

Martin Bernal also explores in his study, *Black Athena: The Afro-Asiatic Roots of Classical Civilization* how the earlier versions of Greek history were rejected as mythological and unscientific and were replaced by an ‘Aryan Model’ of invading culture bearers from the north. Stressing the process of “fabrication of Ancient Greece,” Bernal avers that “the nineteenth century Hellenomania” was inspired by the racism of the Romantic Movement, whose architects were, moreover, often the same people whom Edward Said cites as the creators of Orientalism” (qtd. in Amin 168). This ‘fabrication’ of and retreat to Greece was ideologically designed and conducive to the construction of European myth – a centre – which by its retreat to Greek ancestry, could claim a certain historical origin and lineage, and authority and influence in the construction and promulgation of universal episteme.

Parallel to it, under the complex influences of ancient Greeko-Roman literature and culture, mushrooming capitalistic economy and societies, developing science and discoveries, the Western Europe began to register its resistance to the authority, and dominance of the Roman Catholicism – an institution that remained in the centre of the European existence during the medieval period as “... modernity compelled a reinterpretation of religious beliefs” (Amin 8). In the face of challenges from Reformation, Calvinism and Protestantism, this medieval religious myth gave in, foreboding and necessitating the ascension of a new myth. This new myth was the
concept of Man. As in the rising capitalistic economy, the material conditions replaced the other-worldliness, and scientific discoveries denuded the illusions of the life hereafter, man came to occupy the pivotal position in all the discourses. Man became the measure of all values, truths, discoveries and explorations as is apparent in the rise of humanism as a school of thought. Abrams and Harpham, making this distinction, succinctly suggest that the “term humanist often connotes those thinkers who base truth on human experience and reason and who base values on human nature and culture, as distinguished from those who regard religious revelation as the warrant for all truth and values” (129). But the construction of this concept of man through various procedures of inclusion and exclusion, and its distribution and elevation as the ahistorical, atemporal, universal normative category to comprehensively address and ascertain the questions of humanity have been questioned by many thinkers. This myth/centre of man inherently thrives and predicates upon the ‘Manichean aesthetics’ which “organizes everyday language into binaristic hierarchies implicitly flattering to Europe” (Shohat and Stam 1). Edward Said opines that “. . . the development and maintenance of every culture require the existence of another different and competing alter ego. The construction of identity . . . involves establishing opposites and ‘others’ whose actuality is always subject to the continuous interpretation and re-interpretation of their differences from ‘us’” (332). Thus through the Eurocentric discursive procedures, the experiences and values of the Western (hu)manity came to be established as the norm or yardstick. In order to underscore the intelligence, reason, ingenuity, originality, innovation, aesthetic and imaginative fertility and dexterity and progressive orientation, the myth of ‘otherness’ of the Asian, African and ‘non-Western’ peoples was floated which saw and projected them as primitive, innocent, barbaric, exotic, mystical, lazy individuals. Thus, the blacks and non-Westerners became repository of those values which the centre relentlessly invalidates. Furthermore, the Western identity is seen as a dynamic entity, ever-evolving, enterprising, striving, whereas, to stymie the possibility of rebellion, a monolithic fixity is imposed on the ‘others’, that, lacking the orientation, intelligence and urge for growth, would remain the same. Trinh T. Minh-ha opines in this context: “Members of dominant groups have always defined their subjectivity as mobile, changing, flexible, complex and
problematic . . . whereas the subjectivity of their others remains uncomplicated, unsophisticated, unproblematic, verifiable and knowledge” (15).

While rendering the imaginative, social and cultural primitivism of the other with deliberate condescension, the European centre assumes the supreme responsibility of studying, defining, categorizing the phenomena. As the faculty of reason and its corollary, the objective comprehension of the world and reality, are the defining traits or feature of the Western humanity – and its absence that of its ‘other’ – a discourse of ‘monologuism’ is established which muffles and invalidates the interpretations of the other and disseminates the western perspectives of the world as the truth. The inherently polar ideal types, the dominant mechanisms during the nascent capitalistic enlightenment period, that were used to develop “broad and comprehensive perspectives” about the social realities came to claim to be the only ways of defining and understanding the world. These enlightened, Western, White, Cartesian individuals turned out to be the capitalistic agents who through epistemological violence turned the marginal others into passive hearers, receivers and recipients, inherently incapable of comprehending and plumbing the reality on their own. Thus, the enlightenment reason and its categories tend to confine the dynamic plurality and cultural diversity of the other cultures as it refuses to appreciate them from the cultural centres of the margins.

The logical heir of this Eurocentrism which claims to have a certain historical origin – in terms of culture is Greece, in terms of religion is Christianity, in terms of knowledge is the enlightenment reason, in terms of identity is the white Christian capitalistic ‘man’ – is US-centrism. Aime Cesaire elaborates it very succinctly and lucidly: “The hour of the barbarian is at hand. The modern barbarian. The American hour. Violence, excess, waste, mercantilism, bluff, conformism, stupidity, vulgarity, disorder” (76). In all its dimensions – cultural, economic, political and religious inception, progress and governance – America has been the culmination of the Western European/British modernism. Riding on the repercussions of strengthening capitalist rhetoric of accumulation, the enlightenment discourse of logical positivism, exploration and subordination of chaotic nature to orderly Western civilization, people from Europe discovered America, enslaved or decimated the native Indians and established their colonies. As they needed manual labour to transform the American wilderness into a
nicely organized garden, they started the Atlantic slave trade, uprooting black Africans from Africa to America. It was practiced through the 17th and the 18th centuries, as it was cheaper and plentiful, robbing the continent of its almost 6 to 7 million ablest, sturdiest and robust men and women. These slaves were kept in the most inhuman conditions, coerced to toil from dawn to dusk and surveillanced and dominated through a rigorously capitalistic and inhuman regimen. But this coercion, surveillance and domination required besides what Althusser calls ‘Repressive State Apparatuses’, the ‘Ideological State Apparatuses’ which “consist of an array of institutions and multiple realities that propagate a wide range of ideologies such as religious ISA, Educational ISA, Family ISA, Legal ISA, Political ISA, Communication ISA, Cultural ISA etc.” In America, the European master/self was residing in spatial proximity to their other in conditions where the divide was more perceptible and immediate along the skin color as compared to Euro-Asian conditions. Furthermore, routine negotiations with the other and need to force the blacks to toil hard to reap the benefits of American wildness, and that too in a way that obviates the rebellion and resistance, the Euro-centric centre was grafted in America in a way that implicitly entitled the white Christian people to the position of the masters. It also coincided with the rendering of the black people to the status of the other. In American context, to uphold and vindicate the slavery system, all the ideologies as mentioned under ISA above were orchestrated to suppress the racial discord under the imposed harmony.

American slavery and African slave trade were vindicated by traditional Christianity. According to Cesaire, “the chief culprit in this domain is Christian pedantry, which laid down the dishonest equations Christianity = Civilization, paganism = savagery, from which there could not but ensue abominable colonialist and racist consequences, whose victims were to be the Indians, the yellow peoples, and the Negroes” (33). The Great Chain of Being confined the black to the status of apes and beasts, (similar were the scientific studies of human beings by Linnaeus who likened the African men to animals and apes in terms of features and intelligence) and hence liable to be subordinates to the white people. Even during the mid-nineteenth centuries, the bi-racial Churches openly preached the ethics of being good slaves in the presence of the white and the black people.
Legal system of America had been an active participant in the construction of the white-superiority myth. The silence of the Constitution, framed by American fathers who themselves had slaves, on the issue of slavery left it to the judiciary and the congress to determine the status and nature of slavery. As the American politics was dominated by the hostile southern planters, they commodified the slaves through certain statutes, decisions and laws. On the issue of taxation policy after the independence that proposed that population be the basis of tax allocation, Thomas Lynch of South Carolina said: “Our slaves being our property why should they be taxed more than the land, sheep, cattle, horses, etc.?” (qtd. in Finkelman 116). A spate of judgments vindicated this commodification – Prigg 1842, Fugitive Slave Law, Commerce Clause of the Constitution before 1808 and laws framed and judgments delivered before the 1860s – but Dredd Scott thrust the final, the most glaringly shameful nail, in the coffin of slave’s status and image in the society. Chief Justice Roger B. Taney fumed that blacks were

... not included, and were not intended to be included, under the word ‘citizens’ in the constitution... they were at that time [1787] considered as a subordinate and inferior class of beings, who had been subjugated by the dominant race, and, whether emancipated or not, yet remained subject to their authority, and had no rights or privileges but such as those who held the power and the Government might choose to grant them. (qtd. in Finkelman 128)

This exclusion from the category of ‘citizens’ or ‘normal human beings’ and the consequent commodification, a typical plantation cultural construct, robbed the black man of speech, agency, rights, liberty and all human entitlements. It encouraged the whites to rape, butcher, lynch, misuse and mistreat the black population in all possible inhuman ways, as black testimony was not deemed a reliable source to run a trial against a white individual. As a result, rape of the black women was institutionalized and justified by the capitalist white Christian discourse that vindicated it as a natural right of the owner to use or exploit one’s property as it best served his interests. Furthermore, the amount and degree of violence of this system can be gauged from the fact that it robbed a race of its very humanity, reducing it to commodity, property, animal, or ‘three-fifth’ status. Even the abolition of slavery in 1865 didn’t bring immediate relief. Since the white supremacist establishment was not willing to embrace the black people as their
equals despite the constitutional prohibition of slavery, people of African descent had to wage a war against the myth of the Euro-American centricity, to ‘unlearn’ the racial normativity and codification and to corroborate the humanity, beauty, imagination, creativity and intelligence of the black people.

In the context of this colossal Euro-American centre and its political, cultural and economic vehemence and brutality that stigmatized the black culture by commodification and animalization, withholding the essential human traits, emotions, intelligence and sensibility from the black people, ‘redefining’ became a survival strategy. Redefinition became a necessity, a mandatory ritual to exorcise the ghosts of the white supremacist value systems and prejudices. The tradition of ‘redefinition’ can be divided into two parts – upto the 1960s and post-1960s. Broadly, a community whose natives have been disembodied of their humanity, feelings, emotions, reason/rationality, drive to learn, grow, progress and liberate, virtuosity to produce and appreciate refined literary and cultural artifacts, any act of resistance – be it a systematic planning of escape from the plantation and move to the north, urge and audacity to learn and get educated in inhumanely hostile conditions, acts of writing slave narratives or poems or any other document, establishment of the underground railroad and other black brotherhood groups – was an act of redefinition. As the black people were commodified by the capitalist regimen, the act of revolt or emancipation was an implied challenge and ‘redefinition’ of the ‘establishment’ values as commodities never revolt, but humans do. Gradually, those fugitives who could make it successfully to the north realized the significance of education and learning. Many slaves in the south would try their best to impart education to their kids. From among these kids came David Walker, Frederick Douglass, Phillis Wheatley, Sojourner Truth, Henry Highland Garnet, Harriet Tubman, William Wells Brown, James W.C. Pennington, Harriet Jacob, Harriet Wilson and many others. These black individuals by the very act of getting education set out sails to counter the master’s episteme. Conscious of the oppressive politics of slavery and need to counter it, Douglass declares in his narrative: “You have seen how a man was made a slave: you shall see how a slave was made a man” (qtd. in Ross 154). Furthermore, they excelled in their own ways and domains by producing novels, plays, newspapers, journals and an altogether new genre, wholly soaked and immersed in their experiences as blacks – slave narratives.
They formed various political and religious groups to emancipate the black people. The postbellum era witnessed the rise of even more black thinkers as blacks in the north could get education. As the black struggle moved towards and entered into the 20th century, it turned increasingly subtle, multidimensional, wide-ranging, with thinkers and activists taking one or the other dimension of the white racist mythology and proposing strategies to counter them. For example, Booker T. Washington, who was born a slave but, through perseverance, hard work and spirit, emerged the Dean of Tuskegee Institute, proposed an accommodationist model, enticing blacks to pursue the accumulation of wealth and means instead of striving to challenge and change the white establishment: “Cast down you buckets where you are” (qtd. in Ross 159), he said rhetorically castigating the mass move to the north in the cities. His brand was repelled and attacked by W.E.B. Du Bois. In his *The Souls of the Black Folks*, he viscerally quips: “He insists on thrift and self-respect, but at the same time counsels a silent submission to civic inferiority such as is bound to sap the manhood of any race in the long run” (qtd. in Ross 159). In the 1920s, the era of the Harlem Renaissance, this site of redefinition further widened its scope by further lending a subtlety, sophistication and ingenuity to its methods. Alain Locke’s *The New Negro* was a political and aesthetic attempt to encode the New Negro, smashing the Bookerites, the NAACP and any other versions as the old Negro type. Rooting his ideas in the modernist aesthetics, he proposed, according to Marlon B. Ross, “Renaissance New Negroes were unapologetically objective, scientific, self-disciplined and self-reflective – in a word, modern – in their social outlook and cultural expression” (164).

This generation of artists and thinkers built their intellectual and aesthetic premises on the ground work prepared by Euro-American modernism. Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Claude Mckay, Wallace Thurman, Richard Bruce, manifesting iconoclastic gestures toward the values and ways of redefinition proposed by the old Negroes declared artistic independence. And as this war of redefinition moved on, the focus too shifted from proving the black man’s humanity to vindicating the validity and truth of a parallel black culture that had its own history, origin, community values, literary and artistic aesthetics; many even went on to project, through their works, the ascendancy and superiority of the black culture wherefrom, they maintained, all modern science, techniques and methods emanate. Many black intellectuals, asserting their disbelief in
getting equality in the Christian community on Christian terms, turned to Islam. A few like Richard Wright and James Baldwin fled the country as they didn’t find the American racial conditions conducive to the overall development of the individual. These diverse individual endeavors at redefinition coalesced in the 60s when the black people, under the aegis of Martin Luther King Jr., Rosa Parks, Malcolm X, John Lewes and others, came forward with Civil Rights Movement to curb discrimination based on race, color, sex etc. in employment and voter registration. They achieved a considerable success in the form of Civil Rights Act of 1964, Voting Rights Act of 1965, and Fair Housing Act of 1968.

With hindsight, the struggles and achievements of the black leaders and community in the 60s appear a giant leap from reduction to ‘beasts’ and ‘commodities’ to acknowledgement of their humanity. Their active participation and contribution in diverse cultural arenas across the world highlight the inherent mythological myopia of the Euro-Americanism. Events like Charleston massacre in 2015 suggest that in order to restore the dignity, humanity and equality of the African-American people, the centre, the mythology, the ideology of the Euro-Americanism needs to be removed.

In the 1960s, the struggles of the African-Americans found allies in a diverse range of groups that claimed to wage a war against the politics and procedures of the centre: “the persistence, expansion and rearticulation of this discourse [of the margin] have been connected with the ongoing performance of a cultural and political critique from feminist, African-American, third-world, gay, lesbian, and other positions self-identified as marginal, or capable of being so regarded” (Crewe 121). And it was in Derrida’s works that centre and margin became available as terms of a radical critique. His works offer the identification and deconstruction of the concepts of margin and centre. His deconstructive procedures and proclivity offer the rhetorical strategies for the articulation of subversive discourse – directed against the metaphysical centrum or phallogocentrism of the Euro-American centrum. Derrida’s critique denuded “production in traditional Western discourse and from the putative centre – of a set of valorized oppositions in which the marginal term was always devalued” (Crewe 122). Derrida’s methods were the logical culmination of a spate of great thinkers with radical ideas – ‘Nietzschean critique of metaphysics’, ‘the critique of the concepts of Being and truth’, ‘the Freudian critique of self-presence, that is the critique of consciousness of the subject,
of self-identity’ and Heideggerean destruction of ‘metaphysics, of onto-theology’, of the determination of Being as presence. Derrida was later joined by a huge group of subversive thinkers who adopted Derrida’s methods or developed their own strategies to fell the cultural and intellectual premises of the Euro-American centrisim. Lyotard declared this move as the “incredulity towards the metanarratives.” These metanarratives had been functioning as the universal yardsticks or parameters of normalcy, validity, truth and knowledge. Michel Foucault offers a commensurate subversive critique of the enlightenment and modernity, claims of reason and truth, strategies and methods of ordering the apparently sublime, inchoate world in a specific, dominant discourse that, through the procedures of inclusion and exclusion, claim to validate and censor the aspects of human experiences. Lacan and Baudrillard nihilistically carry this post-60s re-definition project to an extreme where, instead of proposing or suggesting new alternatives to the marginal communities, they profess the groundlessness, play and floating as the only alternatives present in the postmodern world. Thinkers of diverse interests and orientations from Feminism, Post colonialism, Gay and Lesbian Theory, Eco-criticism, Marxism, New Historicism, Psychoanalysis, Anthropology, Social Theory and African-American criticism borrowing the strategies of radical subversion from dominant deconstructive and post-modern thinkers have critiqued and exposed the Euro-American myth/centre from distinct critical perspectives.

In this scenario where Euro-Americanism was attacked by the black African-American thinkers, artists and activists with an orientation and goal to establish the validity and authenticity of the black culture and life, the alterity, the margin on the one side and by postmodern and post-structural developments that invalidate “the violent, Euro-centric, developmentalist, hegemonic reason” (Dussel 473) and thereby hurling everything into indeterminacy and chaos emerged August Wilson with his distinct artistic challenge to and redefinition of the centre. Through his magnum opus, the Pittsburgh Cycle, he subverts and challenges the mainstream myths that tend to define the existential significance in all walks of life, and through his redefinition, endeavors to establish and explore the dynamism, plurality, and intellectual, spiritual, emotional dimensions of life and artistic prowess that are beyond the comprehension of the white American society. This urge to rewrite the African-American history was instilled in him by his exposure as
a black boy to the white society. But initially, it was only a rage, angst and frustration that was, through the 60s and 70s, sublimated into an artistic endeavor by several influences on his life that he candidly cites. One of these influences was his mother, Daisy Wilson Kittel. In the absence of his ‘German-American-baker’ father, Frederick Kittel, he adopted the name, as well as cultural baggage, of his mother: “The cultural environment of my life, the forces that have shaped me, the nurturing, the learning, have all been black ideas about the world that I learned from my mother” (qtd. in Bryer XI). In response to the question of Bill Moyers as to who “brought the poet to life in you?”, he candidly quips: “. . . it was my mother. She’s the one who taught me how to read . . . . She stressed the idea that if you can read, you can do anything” (Wilson, “August Wilson: Playwright” 65). The impact of his mother went beyond his childhood days and seeped into his art of playwrighting and characterization as well: “The men need support and nourishment, and in the black community, there are always women who can supply that for them. My mother’s a very strong, principled woman. My female characters like Rose come in large part from my mother” (72).

After moving from Pittsburgh’s Hill District (the setting for nine of his plays) to Hazelwood, his family encountered rigorous racism. Someone threw the brick through the window that said, “Nigger-Stay out”. The tender sensibility of the young Wilson started receiving many such blows once he entered the Central Catholic High School where he was the only black student. He was forced into fights: “The Principal on various occasions would . . . walk me through these forty guys who were waiting to beat me up” (qtd. in Bryer xii). This desperate racial scenario coerced him to move to Gladstone High School. Here, what shocked him, besides other dimensions of racism, was the negation of his intellectual worth as his teacher gave him a failing grade for a paper on which he had done extensive research. Hereafter, he left the school and started spending time in the library reading voraciously all the books in the ‘Negro Section’. This firsthand experience moulded his psyche profoundly. Gradually, he came to develop new and subtle dimensions of understanding of race issue: “In order for themselves to be good, the black has to be bad. In order for them to be imaginative, the black has to be dull. . . . We are a visible minority in this linguistic environment, and we are victims of that” (Wilson, “August Wilson: Playwright” 69). And as soon as the fact of the permeation of racial
ideology through the apparently innocuous and benign turf of language, religion, education and aesthetic dawned upon him, he came to realize that to counter this hostile racial mythology, an equally vehement, multidimensional and assertive array of strategies needed to be developed and adopted. And for this sensibility and orientation to flourish and mushroom, the fertile soil was afforded by the Civil Rights Movement and Black Arts Movement of the 60s. It was here that he could put his personal racial experiences in wider perspective and develop an extensive and widened sense of identity. Under the impact of Malcolm X and Baraka, he came to foster a new sense of history, identity, culture and the past. History was no longer an objective account/record of the past, rather, it was the constructed and constructive agent that had to be mediated and negotiated. Further, as the dominant mainstream society necessitated the evasion of blackness in order to be assimilated in the American melting pot, many African-Americans were succumbing to the temptation. On it Wilson says, “Blacks in America want to forget about slavery – the stigma, the shame. That’s the wrong move. If you can’t be who you are who can you be? How can you know what to do? We have our history. We have our books, which is the blues. And we forget it all” (qtd. in Burbank 118).

Ascertaining the role of coercive ideology/history for the plight of the black people, he began to see the ways of unlearning this ideology. So he began his career as a poet, but it was the dramatist in him that overshadowed the poet. With Rob Penny, Wilson founded the Black Horizons Theatre company. In 1976, Wilson attended Athol Fugard’s *Sizwe Bansi is Dead*, a theatrical response to the complicated and dynamic cultural conditions of apartheid. Here, his faith in using theatre as a platform, a site for cultural communication, negotiation and assertion intensified. In 1978, with Claude Purdy in St. Paul, Minnesota, he started writing plays. His early plays include *Black Bart and the Sacred Hills* (1978), *The Homecoming* (1979), *The Coldest Day of the Year* (1979), *Fullerton Street* (1980) and *The Mill Hand’s Lunch Bucket* (1983). Gradually, he started sending the drafts of his plays to the O’Neill and other reputed theatres, but were rejected. He further opines:

There’s no way that you can dispute the fact that we are African people, and we have a culture that’s separate and distinct from the mainstream white American culture. We have different philosophical ideas, different ways of responding to the world, different ideas and attitudes, different
values, different ideas about style and linguistics, different aesthetics.  
(Wilson, “August Wilson: Playwright” 69-69)

He faced problems partly because the black theatres didn’t have good sponsors and government support; hence there were not many standard black theatres whereas in the mainstream theatres, the white aesthetics and dramatic yardsticks made it a daunting task for a non-white playwright to get acceptance. But finally his play *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* was selected at the O’Neill’s in 1982 and then was produced at the Broadway. After he met Lloyd Richards, his artistic prowess was pruned and groomed. He went on to complete his Pittsburgh Cycle that has ten plays, each play set in a different decade, exposing and revealing the black life in America during the 20th century. His Cycle includes *Gem of the Ocean* 1900s (2003), *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* 1910s (1986), *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* 1920s (1984), *The Piano Lesson* 1930s (1987), *Seven Guitars* 1940s (1995), *Fences* 1950s (1985), *Two Trains Running* 1960s (1990), *Jitney* 1970s (1982), *King Hedley II* 1980s (1999) and *Radio Golf* 1990s (2005).

A critical gaze at his plays reveals that the motif of centre and its redefinition is not only forms the nucleus but operates as a unifying force also. His treatment of it is as multidimensional as his own exposure to this phenomenon had been. His searching gaze exposes the politics of this centre, but he also proposes the need and strategies of redefinition. Although this mythical but overarching construct is so ubiquitous, subtle and pervasive that it touches all aspects of life – religion, education, cultural codes, class, politics, language and what not, for the convenience of comprehension, centre’s prevalence and redefinition can be plumbed in such sequestered categories as race, class and gender. They overlap and reinforce the impact of the white hegemony. Race and ethnicity are at the core of his theatre. But his approach to these issues is quite different and innovative. His plays transcend the reductive labels/categories used for the black artistic works. Instead of presenting his plays as a site of explicit conflict between white and black cultures and individuals, providing as much space to the white characters as to the black ones, Wilson reduces the number of white characters in his plays. In most cases, they remain absent or off-stage. Consequently, he could zero in on how racism affects the life of the black characters. As most of his characters undergo the emotional, spiritual and psychological turmoil – be it Citizen Barlow in *Gem of the Ocean*, Loomis in *Joe
Turner’s Come and Gone, King Hedley II in the eponymous play, Memphis and Sterling in Two Trains Running and Harmond Wilks in Radio Golf, their redemption is facilitated through African rituals and spiritual practices. August Wilson celebrates these practices as a typical African-American world view, but for the Euro-American culture they might reflect a primitive outlook or barbarism. Some of the characters are so emotionally wrecked that they often question the very nature and presence of God. Levee, in Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom, having seen his mother raped and father murdered, and now finding that the gates to success and prosperity are about to be closed on him, cries foul saying God is only on the white man’s side. Songs are also an essential defining aspect of the black illiterate community.

He deals with the gender issues with the same insight. But here, his theatre orchestrates the redefinition not only of white patriarchal canon, but also of black patriarchy. He explores in a multidimensional way the constructedness and complicity of genders, its categorization, hierarchical ordering and validation of complex human nature and self into bipolar categories of men and women thus overlooking and undermining the polyphony and diversity of human personality. Apparently, his male characters far outnumber his female characters. He himself accepts this fact on the ground that he knows men more closely. But instead of taking sides with one or the other gender, Wilson’s theatre seems to be a critique of the very metanarratives of capitalistic patriarchy and genders. Wilson shows that these gender ideologies manacle as much women as men. And when these gender ideologies are interpolated by the narratives of race, African-Americans have to face even more ferocious demons of survival. His male characters negotiate and define the capitalistic stereotypes of black masculinity as unenlightened, dull, irresponsible figures with heightened libido. Wilson’s oeuvre contains characters like Jim Becker (Jitney), Memphis and Sterling (Two Trains Running), Troy Maxson (Fences) and Boy Willie (The Piano Lesson) who counter and redefine these stereotypes by transcending the derogatory categories and showing their human and genuine selves. Similarly, his drama also counters the dominant myths that codify the black woman in the worst stereotypes. Wilson has created a range of complex women characters rooted in black ethnic culture and through his drama probes the psycho-spiritual impacts of racial and gender oppression. But he has also created
powerful black women characters who refuse to identify with the dominant canon of womanhood and beauty like Ma Rainey (Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom) and Risa (Two Trains Running). They also perform their duties towards their family but never let their male counterparts take them for granted. Rose (Fences) and Berniece (The Piano Lesson) are such women. Further, each play is peopled by female figures that are not only essential to his black world, but also leave an indelible impression on the mind. Aunt Ester is a 386 years old woman. She is presented as the embodiment of Africanness. Her presence in four plays and her role as a spiritual counselor, song-finder and redeemer and peoples’ faith in her make her the most important figure of the Cycle. Wilson appears to look beneath the veneer of this Euro-American centre and show black men and women, full of all emotions, love, hate, anger and laughter. He also appears to underline the damage this centre has done and keeps doing to African-Americans as men and women and suggests the necessity to emancipate the black people from these racial fetters so that they as well as the world around can see them as they really are.

Further, the way he conceptualizes his male figures is a statement on black masculinity as well as on class. Defying the defining document of America – the Constitution that claims democracy, liberty, equality and justice as the natural rights of American citizens, American society developed as an inherently hierarchical unit. As the system of class evolved under the impact of European class system, capitalism, racism and slavery, blacks were relegated to the status of poor, working class community. Further, homogeneity was imposed on them as if being black means being poor irrespective of material and financial accomplishments of the black people. Wilson’s canon challenges these and many other dimensions of class system. Reacting to this homogeneity, Wilson peoples his plays with characters belonging to different strata. If Citizen Barlow (Gem of the Ocean), Loomis (Joe Turner’s Come and Gone), Levee and other Band members (Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom), are poor, working class individuals; Ma Rainey (Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom), Harmond Wilks, Roosevelt Hicks (Radio Golf), West (Two Trains Running), Memphis, (Two Trains Running), Becker (Jitney) are rich people who have transcended the limitations of their race and color. Besides this categorization within the community, Wilson’s oeuvre also highlights the significance of communal values and Africanness. August Wilson explains in this context: “Today I
would say that the conflict in black America is between the middle class and the so-called underclass . . .,” “If you leave all that African stuff over there and adopt the values of the dominant culture, you can participate” (Wilson, Interview 206). Contrary to the capitalistic ethics of accumulation at any cost, Aunt Ester asks the spiritually traumatized figures like Citizen Barlow to shed a coin to get redemption. Material prosperity at the cost of communal/African ethics is discouraged. Harmond Wilks and Roosevelt Hicks are polarized as good and evil on the basis of their decisions to embrace/desert their Africanness. Thus his theatre seems to explore the possibility of negotiation between the African and American poles of identity. But how does he explore and establish this possibility warrants a thorough study of his plays.

It is evident from this brief critical outlook at his major plays that his treatment of the issue of centre and its various dimensions is necessary for a better and comprehensive understanding and assessment of his art and mind. This effort is also necessary to put his worldview and art in proper perspective. Furthermore, how the overarching and colossal nature of this centre poses challenges for the individuals and how they cope with these challenges will also help us appreciate conflicts, pains and struggles of these people. Wilson’s art and virtuosity in making this conflict – emanating along the lines of race, gender and class – a theatrical/dramatic element out of which not only does drama his drama evolve, but his characters too transform. In order to fully appreciate the range and scope of his canvas and viability of his project, a detailed critical study of his dramatic oeuvre becomes necessary. So, this is a modest attempt in this direction. This study has been divided into five chapters, including this chapter of Introduction. The second chapter will study the treatment of race. The third chapter will probe how Euro-American myth tightens its grip through the categories of genders. Class will be explored in the fourth chapter. An attempt will be made to sum up the findings in the fifth chapter.


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