Race

Slavery, and racism that followed it in its wake, scarred the American history/psyche and its repercussions linger on even to this day in America. Democratic claims are compromised in their praxis every day in America. Incidents of this nature appear regularly in international media, which suggests the intensity of the problems, the extensive reach of which is spread across the national and local media. The genesis of the problem lies in the first serious attempts of colonizing and inhabiting the land that was to become USA. Slaves have been reported to have accompanied the founding fathers when they landed in Jamestown in 1619. But these early Puritan settlers were not the first to have slaves for themselves. Almost five centuries before 1619, a new empire known as Delhi Sultanat was established in the North India. Early rulers of this Sultanat are known in the history textbooks as members of the ‘Slave Dynasty’. Slavery as it was known and practiced in ancient Greece, India and other societies recognized slaves as human beings, usually with a proviso to attain freedom. Slaves could be bequeathed with heritage, political positions and could be adopted as sons or sons-in-law. Contrary to this, slavery as an institution in America and Europe during the early modern era was reconfigured exclusively in economic terms. Slaves were procured in the same manner as other objects with economic values were procured, i.e. by way of purchase, gifts and war-booty.

The African slave as economic object was the most suitable and necessary tool for converting the then American wilderness into an economically vibrant place to hold the weight of incessant volleys of European white settlers sailing as much in ships as much on the wings of the myths of America that were being created every day anew in America. The need to supply an adequate number of slaves to an ever increasing American economy made slave trade a lucrative venture. To maximize profit, the most inhuman ways were used to procure slaves and far more inhuman ways were used in transporting them from Africa to America. But the political and administrative structures available in America at that time fell short of keeping the teeming population of the African slaves under control. To supplement and complement the administrative and political structures, the concepts of race and racism were developed by the contemporary Euro-Americans.
Slavery as an institution “predates both Christianity and Islam” but what makes the American slavery peculiar is the fact that “it was incompatible with the ideals of equality that the nation claimed to endorse” (Arthur 90). Especially after the Revolution, the abolitionists and others registered their dismay and anger against slavery. But the economy had become so dependent on slavery that it could not have been wished away simply without causing great harm to industrial and agricultural production. Further, this economy needed relentless submission of the Africans without the use of external repressive measures. The concept of race and racism, intended to solve economic problems, created ethical, spiritual and philosophical contradictions as well.

This socio-cultural construction of racism assumed the white, Christian Anglo-Saxon establishment as central or normative. The “gradual establishment” of this Centre “depended upon a stable hierarchical relationship in which the colonized existed as the other of the colonizing culture” (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffins 32). Every aspect of the Anglo-Saxon culture and life was used as the yardstick which depended upon the denigration of the African slaves. This process took on the shape of binary in which the Centre – the whites – were seen as civilized, cultured and advanced race whereas the blacks came to be perceived as primitive and barbarians. Binary commenced with the distinction in the skin color which became more marked as the two races shared the same space. Actually, race per se seems to be no problem as it categorizes people on the basis of their physical\genetic features. So, being white is as good a fact as being black is, but things turn complicated when these physical\genetic features too are colored and controlled by racist ideology. Consequently, whites were deemed as beautiful, intellectual, artistic, dominating, and civilized and their fair skin was just a sign of it; on the contrary, the blacks were projected as ugly, dumb, primitive, submissive, unenlightened species and their dark and sweaty skin reflected it. This binary, that segregated the black people in America, was not a reflection of the objective truth; rather, it was merely a machination, orchestrated for the construction of a myth that would serve the interests of the establishment. Racism and its machinations can best be understood “functionally” with reference to “the role they play in maintaining the capitalist economic order and preventing conflict from undermining social stability” (Arthur 61).
In order for people to receive and internalize racism ‘as truth’, various ideological state apparatuses were employed. Religion was one such apparatus. To reinforce the racial hegemony, God’s mandate was evoked. It was propagated that racism and slavery, instead of being anti-religion, inhumane and moral curse, were part of “God’s plan to Christianize an inferior race and teach its people how to produce raw materials that benefited the world’s masses” (Goldfield 39). This religious rhetoric also concealed and furthered the capitalist exploitative nature of hegemony. It erected a cultural/religious platform or altar where the white man assumed the position of God’s chosen people with the aim of civilizing and Christianizing the barbaric and heathen blacks. This dialogue-on-the-altar further replicated itself in myriad ways in the society where whatever the white man delivered to the silent unenlightened black listeners was right, just and accurate. Aime Cesaire highlights the role of religion in slavery: “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). Besides it, many pseudo-scientific theories and ideas were floated to stress the moral, artistic, intellectual and creative inferiority of the blacks. Cobb substantiates it thus: “. . . they have never comprehended what they have learned” (qtd. in Arthur 111). As they were deemed beasts with immense caliber and stamina sans intelligence, they needed to be Christianized with ethics of work and labour.

By the time of the Civil War and Abolition of slavery in 1865, racism had already been institutionalized. Through different arbitrary laws and Court judgments, blacks were relegated to the status of property, to be used and exploited as their white masters wished. It finally culminated in Chief Justice, Roger B. Taney’s remarks in the now infamous Dred Scott decision that black 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 being” (qtd. in Finkleman 128). This exclusion from the category of ‘citizens’ or ‘normal human beings’ and the consequent commodification, robbed the black people of speech, agency, rights, liberty and all human entitlements on the one hand, and encouraged the white supremacists to rape, butcher, lynch, abuse and mistreat the black population in all possible ways on the other.
Racism had become so entrenched in the American ethos that even when slavery was officially abolished, people were unwilling to embrace the new constitutional reality. Through literature, many stereotypes were created and circulated in the society. For example, Musicals in the 19th century created a whole battery of stereotypes that denigrated and caricatured the black experience. Every aspect of African ethnic values was treated with a studied condescension. It damaged the sense of self and community of the black people. Amongst many, it triggered a feeling of self-hatred and disgust. Racism had two broad objectives: one, to project the white Christian establishment as the Centre/yardstick so as to secure the submission of the blacks; and two, to rob them of any sense of community, race, etc. denying them anything to bank upon. It was done to make blacks see in their white master a perfect embodiment of humanity which they must appreciate. Consequently, blacks looked at themselves and their cultural practices through the lens of stereotypes. The mechanics of the stereotypes is so total that any transcendence seems impossible in the post-structural times of the late 20th century as much as it was in the post-bellum years of the late 19th century.

It is this bogey of complex cultural configurations and reconfigurations that became operative agents for Wilson to dramatize the history of racism. Along with deciphering the inherent politics of history and Centre, he undertakes the task of redefinition, of unmasking and removing the veil of ideology from the African-American culture. In his interview with David Savran, he underscores this issue of history and past: “Yes, because the history of blacks in America has not been written by blacks. And Whites, of course, have different attitude, a different relationship to the history” (Wilson, “August Wilson” 27).

History as a record of traditions and values tends to be used as a guiding force for the future generations to identify who they are and where they have come from. But Wilson’s views are quite bold in stressing that the history and past should be embraced wholly and not in parts. He further opines: “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). Thus, ascertaining the role
of coercive ideology for the plight of the black people, he architects his Century Cycle that dramatizes the operating mechanisms and politics of this ideology which leads to an acute awareness among the audiences of the internalization of ideology. In other words, ‘the catharsis’ of his drama is attained in unlearning the culturally learnt.

Wilson divulged in *The Ground on which I Stand* that he was a “race man,” i.e. his art is deeply rooted in his experiences as a black man: “I believe that race matters – that is the largest, most identifiable, and most important part of our personality. It is the largest category of identification because it is the one that most influences your perception of yourself” (14). Consequently, he writes “. . . around, through, and against recorded history in order to give voice to the nameless masses of Africans in America” (Shannon 27). As the member of a threatened, exploited and wronged community, he realized that art/theatre could be a potential and powerful medium in effecting a change. “All art is Political” avers Wilson in his interview with David Savran (“August Wilson” 37). But in his hands, theatre never plummets to a reductive place where art and aesthetics are relegated to a secondary propagandist position. Transcending the mere propagandist position, he designed the aesthetics of cultural construction in which art is weaved seamlessly with cultural practices and ethnicity.

Although Afro-American community is subsumed into the mainstream white American culture, Wilson in his theatre tries to keep the white characters as much off-stage as possible. In his dramatic oeuvre, the number of white characters that come on the stage and participate in the action is indeed small. In *Gem of the Ocean*, Rutherford Selig is the only white character who actually participates in the action. In *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*, Rutherford Selig reappears as the people finder, who first leads black people to certain places, but if somebody wants to know their whereabouts, he charges money for it from them. He accepts that it has been their family business. In *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*, Sturdyvant and Irvin, both white, occupy the stage for a bit longer time. Both are the music studio owner and manager respectively. They have a troupe of black singers and musicians led by Ma Rainey. Sturdyvant is quite dictatorial and treats the troupe with a deliberate condescension. He does not know the songs – the blues – he desires to record, sell and make profit, thereby testifying how mechanical money-making is whites’
sole concern. They do not respect the ways and manners of the black people and their art. Ma and her troupe members are paid wages for their sessions and not royalty, thereby reducing their ‘art’ to mere ‘labour’, a continuity of antebellum era, when blacks were forced to work on the plantation from sunrise to sundown to make money for the white masters who had robbed them even of their humanity. Just as white man wished to see his slaves on the farm, Sturdyvant is eager to get the songs recorded as soon as possible: “Preoccupied with money, he [Sturdyvant] is insensitive to black performers and prefers to deal with them at arm’s length” (Wilson, Ma Rainey’s 9). Racism is a matter of attitude, attitude of hatred, abhorrence and disrespect towards the tangential community. Sturdyvant’s language, behaviour and manners all ooze this. Though some of the band members are elder to him, Surdyvant, assuming the status of a master adult, addresses them as “boys”: “. . . you boys are rehearsing” (52). This adult/boy binary assumes the agency and authority of the adult.

In The Piano Lesson, the ghost of Sutter, the Charles family’s master during slavery, visits Berniece’s residence to get hold of the family piano. Sutter’s ghost lays claim on the family piano; Wilson uses simple dramatic technique of bringing in Sutter’s ghost as a trope for the invisible supremacist context of American society as the ghost has been shown visible only to the black characters. This trope of invisible supremacist context and it’s ghostly or absent presence further magnify the focus on the black characters and their dogged struggle. Felicia Hardison Londre in her article, “The Piano and its History: Family and Transcending Family,” opines that the fight between Boy Willie and Sutter’s ghost is “. . . emblematic of black frustration, grappling with something that most people don’t see at all” (119). The subtlety of racism is also underscored by this act of fight that indicates that despite its perceived absence, racism do affect black people’s life. Moreover, since he intended to create this cycle of plays as an embodiment of African-American ethics, cultures and traditions during the 20th century, he also needed to stress the idea that black life is not just tangential or marginal that draws its significance and meaning only in relation to the white people. For Wilson, black community in America has a very vital, dynamic and nurturing tradition with a rich and diverse range of myths, rituals, ceremonies, beliefs, dance and songs that sustain black people.
Race and slavery are as pervasive in the Pittsburgh Cycle as they are in American society. Slavery was abolished in 1865. But in the post-Abolition era, whites became quite fierce in their desire to retain their slaves. It was likely to demolish their economy and shatter the southern plantation culture and their quasi-aristocratic life style. According to Mary Ellen Snodgrass, “Emancipation did little to free African Americans from ignorance, want, oppression, and fear, thus elongating the miseries of a marginalized non-white people” (185). Gunnar Myrdal also underlines this issue: “After the War and Emancipation, the race dogma was retained in the south as necessary to justify the caste system which succeeded slavery as the social organization of Negro-White relations” (90). Having been long debarred from any exposure to culture, education, public sector services and business, blacks didn’t have any infrastructure to predicate their community. Nor could they hope to realize the Constitutional ideals of equality and American Dream in the southern states, as the decision of the abolition was taken by northern leadership, much to the dismay of southern senators and politicians who, mostly, happened to possess big plantations. It triggered a mass move towards the northern cities to seek job or other means of survival. The setting of Wilson’s plays starts unfolding the black experience from the first decade of the 20th century. In the initial plays, many characters face the horrors of slavery in Antebellum and post-bellum conditions. Exposure to slavery and racism had precipitated in them complications ranging from delirium, mental disorder, disorientation to rootlessness and alienation. In Gem of the Ocean, set in 1904, “the Jewel of the cycle,” “the mother of all the plays” (Rashad XXVIII), Wilson foregrounds the life of blacks in Pittsburgh’s Hill District. It was the time when Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois had become celebrities. But Wilson, as he had divulged in so many of his interviews, is concerned with the way blacks lived and organized their lives as “they grapple with the question of freedom” (xxviii).

Solly Two Kings, suitor to Aunt Ester, receives a letter from his sister, Eliza Jackson, who lives in Alabama. It is worth quoting at large as it states the conditions of the blacks in the deep south:

Dear, Solomon.
I am writing to let you know the times are terrible here the most anybody remember since bondage. The people are having a hard time with freedom. . . . The White peoples is gone crazy and won’t let anybody leave. They beat one fellow on the road so bad his mama say, ‘Who is he?’ They killed some more and say the colored can’t but any tickets on the train to get away. Say they will sink the ferry if any colored on it. I want to leave to come North but it is too bad. (Wilson, *Gem of 15*)

It is 1905, and the black people still have to fight their way to escape. They are forced to toil hard on the plantation. Blacks are treated like mules and beasts who are good only for crude physical labour. Blacks were denied their humanity or any such entitlements in the slavery. Like Eliza, Citizen Barlow too comes from Alabama. He recounts how blacks had to suffer inhuman treatment in the south. As the white people would not let black people escape, they have to desert their families and leave one by one. Citizen Barlow too leaves his mother behind only to face ferocious experiences because she couldn’t come with him. The southern governments registered their frustration at the Abolition of slavery, and did not discharge their duties while whites continued their exploitation of blacks. Blacks had to develop their own networks to ferry the southern blacks to north. Popularly known as the Underground Railroad, it was “a network of secret routes and safe houses used by the 19th century enslaved people of African descent in the United States in efforts to escape to free states and Canada” ("Underground Railroad"). Both Eli and Solly Two Kings had been railroad Conductors. Solly too had been a slave in the south. He recounts how he was kept in chains like so many other slaves, thus confirming their animal status who couldn’t be trusted and left free. Solly was helped on his way by many people including the white Abolitionists. Dogs and Ku Klux Klan members and other chain gangs posed a great threat to black lives. Those who escaped the elimination had to undergo severe physical hardships and that was a price to be paid to get freedom: “I’d guard the rear. You had to fight a lot of times. I done been bit nine time by dogs” (Wilson, *Gem of 60*). But after facing all kinds of afflictions, when Solly reached Canada in 1857, he realized that individual liberty meant nothing so long as “my mama and all the other people still in bondage” (59). Defying the prevailing slavery notion that blacks lack in intelligence, management and
leadership skills, African-Americans like Solly developed this railroad and liberated and migrated large number of slaves without any training and weapons from under the nose of the white dictators. Further, Wilson highlights the ethics of community, and cultural identity that tend to bind majority of black people. This black ethnicity puts the culture and community above self, thereby subverts the white capitalistic rhetoric that eulogizes the self. Consequently, for people like Solly, individual emancipation meant nothing so long as the fellow blacks remained shackled in the south.

Solly orients Citizen Barlow as well who says he was named Citizen by his mother “after freedom came” (Wilson, Gem of 27). Solly opines that “You gonna have to fight” to get liberty and citizenship. Solly is well aware, seasoned and experienced to see through the American system for its ambiguity and duplicity: “They never made Emancipation what they say it was” (62). In the absence of any support and infrastructure, mere declaration of Emancipation could not bring deliverance to the blacks.

Its repercussions are alarming. As the blacks reach north, they have to wander in the streets, facing hunger and bad weather without any accommodation. As they don’t have good education and professional training, they are not offered good jobs. They are not even given jobs involving crude physical labour. The mill, the symbol of the northern industrialized progressive civilization, exploits the blacks in multifarious ways. It aggravates their emotional frustration and culminates into further disintegration of their being. With no family to soothe their anxieties and frustrations, blacks develop different measures of retaliation. Citizen Barlow, when he is denied his wages, steals a bucket of nails. The mill owners, in the absence of any trace who committed this theft, charge another black, Garret Brown, with robbery, thus consolidating the popular image of a black man as a thief. But Brown, an honest man, drowns himself in the river to assert, “I’d rather die in truth than to live a lie” (Wilson, Gem of 47). Through Brown, Wilson undermines the popular white-constructed myths that view the black people merely as thieves, primitive and animalistic beings. Brown’s suicide corroborates that he, like many other blacks, is an embodiment of vital and complete human sentiments and capable of taking existentialist decisions. Solly Two Kings reacts to his experiences in America in a
diametrical opposite way. Solly sets the mill afire surprisingly. Solly does it under the spate of a complex of emotions – experiences as a slave, then as a railroad conductor, and now as a poor black person residing in White dominated Industrialist society, and the letter of his sister from Alabama adds fuel to the fire. As Solly is kind of a person that legends are made of, this complex of emotions precipitates into his burning of the mill, the symbol of White might, economic control and hegemony.

The animalistic and beastly treatment of the blacks, “pecks of animals” as Caesar refers to them in Gem of the Ocean, is also evident in the saga of exploitation and torture that Harold Loomis undergoes. Joe Turner’s Come and Gone, much like Gem, also entails the events of migration with the only difference being that here Wilson highlights the emotional, psychological and cultural trauma that afflicts the victims of slavery. In the setting itself, it is made explicit that the narrative of the play is about “the sons and daughters of newly freed African slaves” who, “. . . [I]solated, cut off from memory, having forgotten the names of the gods and only guessing at their faces,” arrive dazed and stunned (Wilson, Joe Turner’s 6). Harold Loomis’s life is turned upside down because of racism. In the supremacist south, a deacon by profession, he was abducted in 1901 by the gang of Joe Turner and taken to a plantation to toil for seven years. It is a routine exercise for the Joe Turners of the rural south. This act implicitly acknowledges the beastly and primitive status of the black men. It further undermines the fact of black life as worth with vital and vibrant institutions like family attached to it.

Loomis’ abduction cuts him off not only from his family, but from himself. When Loomis is released in 1908, he finds that his wife, Martha Pentecost, has already moved to north leaving their daughter, Zonia, with her mother. Loomis, a deacon, an average man with a loving wife and family, finds his life meaningless in the absence of family. His sense of self is dealt another shock when a different dimension of slavery dawns upon him. He associates Christianity with the dominant Whites. Everywhere, he finds Christianity complicit with the coercive power structures that only intend to undermine the humanity of the black man:

LOOMIS. Great big old white man . . . your Mr. Jesus Christ. Standing there with a whip in one hand and tote board in another, and them
niggers swimming in a sea of cotton. And he counting . . . I done been baptized with the blood of the lamb and the fire of the Holy Ghost. But what I got, huh? I got salvation? My enemies all around me picking the flesh from my bones. I am choking on my own blood and all you got to give me is salvation? (Wilson, *Joe Turner’s* 85)

As white people identify God in their own image – a white man – Christianity tends to engender ambiguous and complex responses in the black people. Besides salvaging the conscience of the white people, coercive capitalist economy mushroomed a conducive Christian discourse that was supposed to constrain the black people to accept their predicament as the law of Nature and mandate of the Almighty. This is what Martha does: “The Holy Spirit may have made Martha spiritually pure, but reliance on religious faith has also offered her an escape from life in this world” (Monaco 93). Such characters, yielding before the power that be, accept the dominant ideology of racism as God’s will and that they will get redemption in the world hereafter. On the contrary, the victimized marginal community members may question the sanctity of Christianity itself. Close genetic and racial proximity between God and the White master snaps the faith of the black people. August Wilson expresses his feelings in his conversation with Vera Sheppard: “But I have a very simple viewpoint toward that when you look in the mirror, you should see your God. If you don’t, then you have somebody else’s God” (Wilson, “August Wilson: An Interview” 110). Disillusioned with Christianity, and its ways of redemption, Loomis gradually re-establishes a connection with the African roots and spirituality. In contrast to the rhetoric of submission to and dependence on God, he is endowed with an agency and a sense of responsibility for his own redemption: “I don’t need nobody to bleed for me! I can bleed for myself” (Wilson, *Joe Turner’s* 85). Loomis finds his song in an epiphany that entails the ethics of self-sufficiency and sense of responsibility. When Loomis finds his song “fully resurrected, cleansed and given breath, free from any encumbrance other than the workings of his own heart . . . he is free to soar above the environs that weighed and pushed his spirit into terrifying contractions” (86).

Much alike Harold Loomis, Levee too ends up being disillusioned and irreverent towards Christianity and God. He gives an account of how they used to live in Jefferson
County, Tennessee. Owners of good farming land, their status didn’t settle down with the racist whites. One day, when his father, Memphis Lee Green, was out in Natchez, some nine White men entered their house, and took hold of his mother “just like you take hold of a mule” and raped her (Wilson, *Ma Rainey’s* 55). Levee was “whacked” across his chest with the knife when he intended to intervene and save his mother. His mother had to run from one doctor to another to save Levee’s life. His father comes back, sells his land to the cracker who raped his mother and moved out of that place with a smile, only to return to avenge the brutality and atrocities meted out to Levee and his mother. This dehumanization goes a long way in shaping the mental make-up of Levee. bell hooks probes the sexism during slavery as an essential and inevitable part of racism and colonization: “Rape was a common method of torture slavers used to subdue recalcitrant black women. The threat of rape or other physical brutalization inspired terror in the psyches of displaced African females” (18). Thus, rape had been a prevalent weapon to terrorize the black people into believing that they were slaves. Rape and its repercussions – pregnancy and delivery without any medical attention – subdued the black women. It was done primarily to ensure that they served their masters, their families and kids and performed other tender jobs without any threat to the dominant’s family. Gradually, an identity of “sexual savage” (33) was imposed on black men and women. Black women were seen as the “embodiment of female evil and sexual lust” (33). This sexist discourse was necessary to transform the white woman as a sign of purity. On the other hand, rapes also dehumanized the black males, stripping them of their patriarchal roles and duties. And routine acts of rape of the black women in the presence of male members of their family hammered the idea of their inferiority and sub-humanity in the minds of the blacks.

However, in the case of Levee and his family, the dynamics of rape are reversed by Wilson. The White neighbors rape Levee’s mother out of frustration as they can’t stand the fact of a black man living a life of worth and dignity. And their act was an attempt to assert their superiority in the American society. When his mother is being raped, Levee, who is just eight years old, tries to save her. Later, his father sells his land to the perpetrator himself and moves to the north. But Memphis returns and kills four of the eight rapists, though, he was later lynched. Here, Wilson undermines the complacent
White culture that deems blacks as too docile and passive to resist the inhuman acts of rape. It leaves a lifelong scar on Levee’s psyche, but he imbibes the lesson his father imparts to him: “I seen my daddy go up and grin in this cracker’s face . . . smile in his face and sell him his land. All the while he’s planning how he’s gonna get him and what he’s gonna do to him” (Wilson, *Ma Rainey’s* 56). Levee learns to contain his rage, instead of channelizing it. His rage keeps erupting at times. Like Loomis, he questions the sanctity of Christianity and Christ when Cutler narrates the events of Reverend Gates’ life:

LEVEE. He a man of God . . . why didn’t God strike. When some of them cracker down? ‘Cause he a white man’s God. That’s why! God ain’t never listened to no nigger’s prayers. God takes a nigger’s prayers and throw them in the garbage. . . . God hate niggers. God can kiss my ass. (80)

This blasphemy is a spontaneous reaction of a black person who has witnessed and experienced all his life nothing but exploitation. His self-image is dealt several blows as a male protector, breadwinner, and as an American Citizen and dreamer of success. The colossal mighty ‘Centre’ robs him of all sense of self and integrity. As the seething rage grows too intense for him to contain, he vents it on the one who is racially, ethically and physically nearest to him – Toledo. Wilson delineates the impacts of disruption of black family and integrity through rape and other cultural and economic measures that continues in the 20th century. He also foregrounds the prevalence of several subtle as well as crude forms of slavery and racism which further stresses his conviction that past is not immaterial and unimportant as it keeps shaping their present lives.

Yet another dimension of slavery and racism, i.e. reducing them to property, is explored in *The Piano Lesson*. The play entails the mechanics and impacts of dehumanization of the black people. Set in 1936, the history of the Charles family goes back to the times of slavery, somewhere in the 1860s when Robert Sutter owned the elders of this family. The Sutter family sells Willie Boy’s wife and their nine year old son to a slaver of Georgia, an implicit reference to Dred Scott decision of 1857 that eliminated blacks’ claims to personhood, and rendered them as the property of the master. This capitalist rhetoric disembodied all human virtues and traits from blacks and
relegated them to the status of objects of material value. Paul Finkleman opines that “Taney found that slaves were a form of private property” (128). He further quotes Justice Taney who avers that blacks “were not intended to be included under the word ‘citizens’ in the Constitution, and can therefore claim none of the rights and privileges” offered to the White citizens of America (qtd. in Finkleman 128). It also gave the white master authority to use or abuse his property in whichever way it pleases him. In The Piano Lesson, the dramatic conflict arises out of a situation that, in turn, is a repercussion of the act of sale of Willie Boy’s wife and son. Robert Sutter wanted to present a piano to his wife, but didn’t have money so he had a deal with Joel Nolander that “. . . he would give him one-and-a-half niggers for it” (Wilson, The Piano 45). As Nolander wanted to “have the pick of the litter,” Sutter “lined up his niggers and Mr. Nolander looked them over” (45) and took Berniece and their nine years old son away. This process, the auction of the black slaves who are scrutinized by the buyer the way one observes the cattle, corroborates the inherent beastification and commodification of the black people during slavery. Further, the slavers not only claimed and owned the slaves, but their progeny and the products of their skills and labour as well: “See, everything my granddaddy made Mr. Sutter owned ‘cause he owned him” (46). Thus, the multiple jeopardy of being a slave also involved the disruption of the family as a unit, and an exposure to alienation as blacks, just like proletariats, couldn’t claim and enjoy the fruits of their own labour. Wilson further exposes the duality inherent in the white supremacists structures. Sutter’s wife, Ophelia, took “sick to bed” out of longing for her sold slaves. As Sutter fails to procure the sold slaves, he asks Boy Willie to carve the images of the Charles family on the piano so as to alleviate the longing of Ophelia. The irony is obvious: Sutter, who is so much sensitive on the issue of longing and separation experienced by his wife, is so blunt and indifferent to the actual pain the Charles family will undergo by this act of sale. The racist ideology operates to preclude all human emotions and feelings among the objectified blacks.

However, in The Piano Lesson, this act of sale boomerangs on the Sutter family. In 1911, Boy Charles, Winning Boy and Doaker realize that the piano “. . . was the story of our whole family and as long as Sutter had it, he had us” (Wilson, The Piano 47). On the 4th of July 1911, they bring the piano back from Sutter’s house when the Sutter family
was out at some picnic. In this process, Boy Charles loses his life. In this play, Wilson’s arrangement of the events on 4th of July explain that for the black families, this cultural symbol and its celebration doesn’t mean anything so long as their histories, heritage and roots are shackled by the Whites.

His early plays entail candid manifestations of crude procedures of control. Peculiar to the early plays are the references to slavery and racism and how as an institution they controlled the lives of the people of African descent. Racism was not culturally abolished with the constitutional abolition of slavery is agreed upon to be a historical truth. Even after Abolition, the southern planters constituted several groups like Ku Klux Klan with the sole motive of maintaining fear and threat in the minds of black people. And it has been embodied by Wilson in his plays. Most of his characters experience racism first hand. They are sold, beaten, raped, dehumanized, marginalized, abducted, separated from their families and denied the products of their own labour and what not. But several characters do not accept passively and docilely these brutalities. They retaliate in their own fashion and in accordance with their proclivity. It is Wilson’s acknowledgement of black man’s humanity in the face of brutal canon of American culture that categorized Blacks in primitive, inhuman and persons-as-property terms. As one moves up the decades, the crude measures of control and suppression get somewhat milder in Wilson’s œuvre. But it doesn’t mean that his theatre was intended to effect a fictional harmony by showing the gradual evanescence of violence from the American society. He declared time and again his purpose was to “present the unique particulars of black American culture as the transformation of impulse and sensibility into codes of conduct and response” (qtd. in Elam, “August Wilson: the Ground” 17). These “unique particulars” have been facing the threats and challenges even in the second half of the 20th century, only these ideological state apparatuses and their procedures have become more subtle and latent. In the second half of the 20th century, particularly after the end of cold war, American interference increased across the globe with the stated aim of restoring democracy and equality. It was becoming increasingly difficult to keep smothering the black people, to keep them at the margin, at the periphery.
Cultural, political, economic, academic and philosophical atmosphere since 1890s was shaped and dominated by such black leaders as Booker T. Washington, Du Bois, Alain Locke, Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, Amiri Baraka and many others, and such movements like Harlem Renaissance, the age of Jazz and Blues and places like Greenwich Village. This cultural complex forms the socio-psycho-spiritual context of August Wilson’s several plays. When Rosa Parks refused to leave her seat as “. . . she was tired of giving in” with the realization “the more we gave in with that kind of treatment, the more oppressive it became” (“Rosa Parks”), it was the culmination of persistent resistance to the establishment. But after the 40s through the 60s up to present, the nature of racism has become quite soft and subtle. This is a result of epistemological manufacturing of otherness. Before engaging other institutions, agencies and machinery, the knowledge or construction of the ‘other’ is very important. This knowledge of the other or blacks “thus constructed and catalogued in turn confines those so defined within the constraints of the representational limits, restricting the possibilities available to those rendered racially other” (Goldberg 155). And in American culture, the black was an accumulation of racially and ideologically constructed political and ethnic identities; hence, an institutional shift in racial praxis has been comparatively subtle and elusive.

This shift can be understood in terms of institutional racism. John Arthur postulates that it includes “. . . violation of private rights, failure to respect civil liberties, denial of political rights, refusal to provide educational opportunities and much more” (137). The historical Plessy vs. Ferguson case established the provision of “equal but separate” for the white and the colored races. This was enforced and practiced despite the black resistance to it. To the colored peoples’ assertion that the Plessy case decision stamped “the colored race with a badge of inferiority,” Justice Brown reacted that “If one race be inferior to the other socially, the Constitution of the United States cannot put them upon the same plane” (qtd. in John Arthur 139). In Wilson’s early plays, there are thin but explicit references to this “equal but separate” practice. In Gem of the Ocean, one comes to know how the mill exploits the workers. In Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom and The Piano Lesson, there are a number of incidents that refer to institutional racism. But in Fences, set in the 50s, the dramatic conflict hinges upon this very issue. Since conflict is essential for drama, the whole narrative tends to revolve around the institutional racist
forces that had been thwarting the life, and survival of Troy Maxson, and its protagonist’s ardent and adamant spirit to survive at any cost. Troy Maxson is forced to leave his home by his father whom he describes as “the devil himself” (Wilson, *Fences* 50). He reaches Mobile travelling 200 miles barefoot. In such destitute condition, he takes to robbery and in a conflict, ends up killing a man and is sent to penitentiary for fifteen years. After learning baseball there, he seeks a position in the major professional baseball leagues. He intends to enlighten Cory with his experiences and insights:

TROY. If they got a White fellow sitting on the bench . . . you can bet your last dollar he can’t play! The colored guy got to be twice as good before he get on the team. That’s why I don’t want you to get all tied up in them sports. Man on the team and what it gets him? They got colored on the team and don’t use them. Same as not having them. (Wilson, *Fences* 35-36)

He tries his level best to forestall his son from becoming a victim of segregation. He engages Cory at A&P and asks him to leave football. Actually, burdened by the perils of his own history and haunted by his own experiences of racism, he becomes so crass, bully and crude that he does not, even for once, appreciate the scholarship that Cory wins. It might be seen as a testimony to the changing times. When Troy was growing up, in 1910s and later, times were tough for the black man. Now, it appears that the establishment intends to slacken the chain a bit to avoid either the suffocation or the violent eruption of the black man or both. Even in *Seven Guitars*, there are slight and oblique references to changing times. King Hedley suffers from T. B., but surprisingly finds a standard hospital willing to accommodate a person of color. In *Fences* also, Troy Maxson registers his voice against the segregation in garbage lifting profession: “Told him, what is the matter, don’t I count? You think only White fellows got sense enough to drive a Truck.” He again marks, “Why you got the White mens driving and the colored lifting?” (Wilson, *Fences* 10). But when he takes the matter to the union, to his own surprise, he becomes the first black driver in his department. These slight traces of changes in the conditions and race attitudes remain ineffective so long as they are governed by a superordinate capitalistic economy. Mark Robson in his book, *Stephen Greenblatt*, opines: “Subversion becomes the foundation of a power that is reinforced precisely through its capacity to contain that subversion” (72). He further stresses that
“Power and subversion are not opposed in any simple fashion; they are, instead, intricately related and interdependent” (72). Hence, as per Greenblatt, these little spaces of resistance are bound to remain counterproductive so long as they are ‘contained’ within the larger racial, capitalistic and cultural milieu. Foucault opines in this respect, that “under a dominating ‘regimen of truth,’ all attempts at opposition to power cannot help but be ‘complicitous’” (qtd. in Hartman and Abrams 194). A close analysis of Wilson’s plays shows how this racio-cultural dynamics of power and domination operates in American society.

The victory that Troy registers in his claim for the position of a driver finds its echo in another play, *Two Trains Running*. Memphis Lee owns a restaurant, but is coaxed to sell it by the Pittsburgh authorities as a part of the urban renewal project. He asks $25,000 for it and at several stages fights the system. Throughout the play, people keep insisting that he should sell his property at the rates offered by the authorities. But towards the end, to everyone’s surprise, he succeeds in security not $25,000 but $35,000 as part of the purchase. “Is the ‘train of life’ suddenly picking up the speed?” exclaims Stephen Bottoms in his article, “*Two Trains Running: Blood on the Tracks*” (153). This urban renewal project in Wilson’s plays is a part of the structural racial hierarchy as it spirals the lives and experiences of the Pittsburgh residents along the chronological development of the Cycle. In each play, it affects the lives of the characters in different ways. In *Jitney*, Jim Becker’s titular jitney station faces the threat of demolition as Turnbo reports: “They’re tearing everything down hear. All along Wylie there. You see they done tore everything down. They gonna tear this building down. . . . We’re gonna have to move. Either that or split up. We can’t stay here no more” (Wilson, *Jitney* 38).

A man of diverse experience and firm integrity, Becker appears like a small fish swimming against the mighty, engulfing and roaring tide of renewal. This project and its inherent politics stands revealed when one observes that this project is carried out in a primarily black dominated area where the establishment and authorities focus more on demolition than on reconstruction. It threatens the business that mushroomed here because of the black population. Michael A. Fuoce opines: “In essence, the heart had been torn out of the community. Longtime residents were ripped from the only
neighbourhood they had known…. Some likened it to a nonsurgical amputation that threatens the rest of the body” (qtd. in Snodgrass 157-58). This project recurs in the last two plays as well. Margaret Booker asserts, “The Hill’s current desolation and impending demolition could lead to a redevelopment of black culture and community or to the erasure of African American memory and history when faced with the appeal of material success, wealth and status promised by the American Dream” (183-84).

The authoritative establishment creates and regulates other repressive measures as well. The penitentiary remains a recurring threat to assertive and vocal black figures throughout the Cycle. Actually, many of Wilson’s men have been at some stage in penitentiary: Doaker and Boy Willie (The Piano Lesson), Floyd Barton (Seven Guitars), Troy, Bono and Lyons (Fences), Booster (Jitney), King Hedley II in the titular play and many more. It appears going to jail is a part of ritual of masculinity that all black males must undergo. Incarceration is just another institutional racial threat that tends to control and constrain the black men. Their “hyper-visibility” makes them subject to systems of racial surveillance and authority: “Attacked by and trapped within this system of constant White surveillance, the power, access and agency of black men becomes severely restricted” (Elam, The Past as Present 146). The functions accorded to panopticon by Michel Foucault in Discipline and Punish explains this phenomenon suitably: “The Panopticon was to function as an apparatus of power by virtue of the field of visibility in which individuals were to be located, each in their respective places . . . for a centralized and unseen observer” (Smart 88).

Given that black people are located in such a regressive white supremacist cultural milieu, it becomes important how Wilson’s characters survive. This ideological or Centre-margin conflict between the white system and the black people becomes the site where the dramatic conflict of Wilson’s drama is located. His plays become a study of the ways the white-created stereotypes and cultural myths arrest the vibrancy and growth of the African-Americans and their complex and varied reactions against these practices. Wilson’s drama being non-reductive also successfully avoids clichéd characterization, hence, captures the subtle nuances of these multiple, sometimes contradictory, reactions. A broad categorization and cataloguing is necessary to ascertain
Wilson’s project of redefinition. Given the constrictive, regressive and strenuous ideology of racism, some characters internalize the dominant perspectives of their own being. This internalization may take various shapes and forms. It may start with denigration of the African-American culture, their roots and self-hatred. This strategy to negotiate the inevitable friction tends to co-opt the self and being of these characters leading towards alienation, anger and frustration. In Gem of the Ocean, Caesar Wilks is one such character. Having internalized the dominant ideology, he becomes the symbol of white legal system and directs his hatred towards his own black community: “Caesar exemplifies internalized racism” avers Harry J. Elam Jr. (“Gem of the Ocean”83).

Solly’s words capture the position of Caesar in the White system tritely: “Caesar’s the Kind of people I would want working for me. If I ever get me a plantation I’m gonna hire him to keep my niggers in line” (Wilson, Gem of 15).

This is what the White authorities seem to have done to him or/and what Caesar has done to himself. W. E. B. Du Bois avers in this regard: “It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (qtd. in Pyke 551). Caesar, having experienced racism and slavery in the north on all grounds wherever he moved, tends to put on this white mask of authority when opportunity throws itself on his way. He had tried his hand in various professions but everywhere he was defeated by the supremacist system. Along this journey, he had to kill a few other Blacks; but when he kills John Hanson, a rioter, after a few months of incarceration, the mayor calls him and giving him this job of police says, “. . . you fry the little fish and send the big fish to me” (Wilson, Gem of 40). The realization of Caesar’s hatred for the black people and culture and apathy for the newly freed, homeless Blacks stimulates the mayor to use him as a tool to control the system. He exploits the black people in all possible ways and speaks white man’s language:

CAESAR. I’ll tell you whose fault it is. It’s Abraham Lincoln’s fault. He ain’t had no idea what he was doing. He didn’t know like I know. Some of these niggers was better off in slavery. They don’t know how to act otherwise. You try and do something nice for niggers and it’ll backfire on you everytime. (35-36)
He becomes so engrossed in his power that he tends to overlook his own color and roots. Schwalbe et. al. call such measure of the subordinate others as “defensive othering” or “intra-group othering”: “Furthermore, intra-group othering allows the oppressed to present themselves as like the oppressors. By demonstrating that they share the same attitudes and disdain towards co-ethnics who fit with the stereotypes, they attempt to join the dominant group” (qtd. in Pyke 557). As seen from the very beginning of his struggle, he had dissociated himself from other blacks and thus lacks in amicability and brotherhood associated with black culture and ethnicity. Even his language is reflective of his assumed graces and hatred: “Too many niggers breed trouble” (Wilson, *Gem of 32*), though his dialogue with black Mary further bespeaks his dilemma:

CAESAR. There was a fellow named Harry Bryant had a place on Colwell Street he sold me . . . charged me three times what it was worth. Took the money and ran. They tried to kill him for selling to a Negro . . . Niggers got mad at me said I must have thought I was a White man. ‘Cause I got hold to a little something. They been mad at me ever since. Everybody mad at me.

This “defensive othering” is bound to lead to this alienation. Whites would never embrace him as the normal member of the dominant group. And in his pursuit to appease the white master, he himself has to sever his ties with his family, community and roots. Such acute alienation and ‘no-whereness’ is likely to irate the person. Consequently, he tries his best to assert his worth and authority amongst the black people. He arrests Aunt Ester, upholding law as his “Bible” and later kills Solly Two Kings. His colonized psyche finally culminates into Black Mary severing her ties: “I don’t know who you are but you are not my brother. You hear me, Caesar? You not my brother” (88). Karen D. Pyke puts it succinctly: “This is the double bind of oppressed identities, as previously noted, for the subjugated cannot so easily escape their otherness” (557). Thus, the strategies Caesar adopts to survive by assimilation and falling prey to psychological colonization are not liberatory at all; rather, they are pre-emptive without letting Caesar know about it. It is further reflected in the dynamics of his name. According to Harry J. Elam, slavers used to give names of the great people in order to ridicule their slaves. Whereas Solly and many others change their names after liberation, Caesar retains this name. The ambiguity in this fact is highlighted when Caesar, assuming himself as the boss, like Julius Caesar,
carries the law of the white system and exploits his fellow black brethren without ever knowing that the white master is still ridiculing him, for the supremacist system he remains just a tool to maintain law and order.

Another character that falls within the category of ‘defensive othering’ is Roosevelt Hicks. In his case, structural racism has been indoctrinated in Hicks even more subtly and evasively. An avid golfer, soon to be Mallon Bank Vice-President and part owner of WB72 radio, he has shut his eyes towards his community and his roots therewith. In his love for golf, cars and what not, he tries his best to emulate the white man. When Sterling intends to teach him a lesson by showing there’s no difference between him and Roosevelt, the latter’s assertion, “I got some money” indicates his aversion to the black community and faith that money matters more than anything else. Sterling’s extensive discourse with Roosevelt sheds light not only on the latter’s position and psyche vis-à-vis African-American community, but also exposes the mindset of most of the black middle class:

STERLING. You know what you are? You a Negro. White people get confused and call you a nigger but they don’t know like I know. I know the truth of it. I’m a nigger. Negroes are the worst thing in God’s creation. Nigger’s got style . . . a dog knows it is a dog. A cat knows it’s a cat. But a Negro don’t know he’s a Negro. He thinks he’s a White man. (Wilson, Radio Golf 76)

Roosevelt consciously dissociates himself from the community and fellow blacks. But his hatred, apathy and disgust surface when he, in his mad pursuit to make money, doesn’t care a hoot for the houses and business that his projects would demolish. Even Harmond’s advice “you realize you’re never going to get to that Centre” (Wilson, Radio Golf 79) fails to budge him. He does not know that the White people are using him for his black face as with it they would be procuring federal subsidies. Instead of toiling for the preservation and growth of African-Americans, he is the one who poses the greatest threat to its existence. His penchant for golf corroborates the idea that he is an avid capitalist figure who prefers individualism, elitism and self-interest to community-centric ethos.
Another assimilationist figure is West in *Two Trains Running*. He is a prosperous undertaker who counts on high mortality in the black-dominated Pittsburgh. How his ethnicity in him is withering can be seen in the fact that he once visited Aunt Ester, but refused the advice of throwing twenty dollars into the river. His rejection of the spiritual life indicates his heavy dependence on money for survival. Given his business, he is a very rich person, thus inviting suspicion of all kinds from the local people. His profiteering from the black’s misery suggests the ghoulishness of a man who makes money every time a black dies. As a seasoned businessman, he has got a way with Whites. On account of his business sense, relations with the authorities and lack of scruples, he has amassed big property. In another case, Holloway relates the tale of his grandfather who was so mesmerized by the white system that it affected his own estimation of his own community and people: “That was the worse Negro I ever known. He thinks if it wasn’t for White people, there wouldn’t be no daylight. If you let him tell it, God was a White man who had a big plantation in the sky” (Wilson, *Two Trains Running* 71). In Wilson’s assessment, the community and ethnicity precedes the self and even family. Those figures that tend to rationalize their assimilation in the name of family or self-interest find themselves alienated gradually not only from the community but also from the family and the self. In *Gem of the Ocean*, Black Mary snaps her blood relations from her brother who forms a threat to the people of African-American. Similarly, Holloway develops hate and disgust for his own grandfather and even wishes him dead.

Diametrically opposite to the assimilationists or conformists, who manifest a reverence and desire for the American values, traditions, ways and institutions are the ones who opt to be Afro-centric; here, too, the identity formation predicates upon the neglect or reprobation of the other – American mainstream culture. Wilson’s Century Cycle has a number of such characters who are proud of African roots, connections, spirituals, rituals and history. But the character whose model rests on negation of the American culture and values that form the major threat to the survival and existence of black people is Hedley in *Seven Guitars*: “As an inchoate Shaman, Hedley is a curious blend of Bible reciter, militant afro-centric, killer of chickens, peddler of sandwiches, and imbiber of moonshine” (Snodgrass 101). In his fanatic rants, obsessive musings, biblical references, he appears a true and avowed follower of Marcus Garvey. Marcus Garvey
believed that Blacks don’t stand a chance in America and that the black people should retreat to Africa and work for the rise and betterment of the African people: “. . . every White man is a Klansman as far as the Negro in competition with Whites socially, economically and politically is concerned. . .” (“Marcus Garvey”). Hedley’s discourses in the play are replete with allusions, symbols and events about the black experience and pride. At the same time, he never hides his anger and disgust for the white mainstream establishment. He makes numerous references to Malcolm X, Toussaint-L’overture, Garvey and others: “Marcus Garvey say the black man is a King” (Wilson, Seven Guitars 41). He again says:

HEDLEY. The black man is the Conquering Lion of Judea, you know. He like Toussaint-L’ouverture. He is the king! . . . . He knows himself what blood he got. They say, ‘Hedley, go on, you too serious with that.’ But Hedley knows the white man walk the earth on black man’s back. (41)

Even slight mention of black culture and people makes him proud. The extent of his Afro-centrism can be seen in his subversive interpretation and preaching of the Bible: “Jesus is the obedient Son of the Father. He was a black man. The Bible says his hair was like lamb’s wool and his skin the color of copper. That’s ‘cause Mary was a Moabite” (28). His sense of self and his structures of perceptions are permeated by persecution complex that instigates him to define everything in opposition to the white ideology. Unlike the other victims of racial Christian discourse that render the Christianity suspicious for characters like Levee, he, having a parallel Centre – Africanism – goes much ahead than simple questioning and doubting. Hedley Africanizes Christianity. To him, all the problems that he and other black men are forced to face have unidimensional solution – African wisdom and practices. No doubt, characters like Bynum Walker, Aunt Ester, Stool Pigeon adopt the similar mystical, ritualistic, Afro-centric measures and practices to cure and redeem people. But unlike Hedley, their strategies don’t draw their significance exclusively in opposition or reference to Americanism. Nowhere do they explicitly deride the American ways. They cure and redeem their visitors and make them ‘right with themselves’ and fit to survive in the American milieu. Again, Hedley seeks to be, as an act of mimicry – amalgam of hate and reverence – a plantation owner, “Just like
the white man. I grow tobacco. I grow oats. Anything” (Wilson, *Seven Guitars* 27). Whereas Wilson’s project in this Cycle and in real life was to restore dignity to African-American life and ways, without making it ‘tangential’ to or referential to the mainstream American ideology. Expressing his opinion on Wilson’s project in theatre and in sociocultural activism, Harry J. Elam opines, “Taken comparatively, Wilson’s (W) righting history through his plays and his radical claims in his historic manifesto presents a prescription for decentring American normative whiteness and reflect a politics of difference that offers not separatism, but a recognition of diversity” (*The Past as Present* 216). Thus, it is clear that the project includes neither the ascension of the ladder of success by means of assimilation at the cost of Africanness, nor the rejection and retribution of all aspects of Americanness. Actually, his theatre derides the exclusionary dynamics of identity. His theatre is not a radical and indiscriminate condemnation of all aspects of American culture, nor does it see all whites through the same glass of racism. Solly and many other characters do acknowledge the goodness of a few white characters but, however, this amount remains scanty and scarce. Hence, his plays are very subtle but strong statements on his project of black culture and identity that appears to be quite dynamic, inclusive, wide ranging and ever evolving.

The ideology of race and culture evolved through history, rather it colored the history of America in a way that excluded the contribution or even presence of the black people from the American political and cultural discourse. And wherever black culture finds mention, it is only in derogatory, ridiculing and condescending terms. This historical effacement almost renders the Blacks as non-entities in the mainstream discourses. But Wilson undertakes to redefine it. James Baldwin avers, “If history were past, history wouldn’t matter. History is the present . . . you and I are history. We carry our history. We act our history” (qtd. in Elam, *The Past as Present* XI). This history, that is embodied in this Cycle, records, promotes and eulogizes a mélange of African-American culture that has been evolving ever since the arrival of the first African on the American soil. And to do it, Wilson carves a range of black characters with diverse psycho-socio-spiritual leanings that tend to define a system or Centre which can facilitate the dignity, honour and respect to them and thereby redefines the Centre by reconfiguring the hitherto effaced constituent elements of American culture. As a playwright, Wilson’s
feat lies in the fact that he doesn’t locate these characters only in positions of victimization, subordination, or objectification; but, by placing them as the subjects of his dramaturgy, which itself is an act of aesthetic redefinition, he intends them to be the agents of resistance, change and redefinition. And for these varied reasons, it has been very difficult for the serious critics of his drama to accuse him of being explicitly propagandist.

Wilson in many of his interviews has reiterated the dynamics of hyphenation of the identity of Africans living in America. In his interview with Sandra G. Shannon, he raises questions vital to American culture per se: “What are we going to do? Do we assimilate into American society and thereby lose our culture, or do we maintain our culture separate from the dominant cultural values and participate in the American society as Africans rather than as blacks who have adopted European values” (Wilson, “August Wilson Explains” 130), and goes on to eulogize and propagate the latter. His oeuvre is replete with such characters who embrace this brand of Africanness even at the cost of their survival and prosperity. Thus, Wilson’s project, it seems, is two-fold so far as redefinition on the racial grounds is concerned. The adherence to the African part of the hyphenated identity— Afro-American that negotiates peculiarly with its American part, underlines the behavioral codes, loyalty, honor, truth, redemption, responsibility, and commitment to larger community welfare. And American part largely entails their claims to equality, dignity and opportunity as enshrined in the American Document. Wilson’s dramaturgy intertwines these projects in a seamless theatre experience.

Slavery severely impacted all the vital sources of emotional, psychological and spiritual succour available to the black people. As the masters abhorred and strongly discouraged and often barred the open practice of African religious and spiritual activities, the blacks had to turn to the religion of the master – Christianity. But how this faith stands bruised and shaken in the case of African-Americans can be seen through the hoarse, bitter, anxious and forlorn cry of many of Wilson’s characters. Levee, Troy, Hedley, and Loomis all stand disillusioned at the disinterest of Christ and impotency of Christianity in the face of racism. But their frustrations indicate the urge and need of a new spiritual-religious ground. Parallel to it runs the definitive spiritual discourse as well,
thus emphasizing the polyphonic nature of his plays. Wilson, simultaneously, erects a religious edifice very often an amalgamation of diverse Christian and African elements.

*Gem of the Ocean* deals with the psychological and spiritual crisis faced by the newly emancipated slaves moving towards north. Citizen Barlow suffers from guilt of causing the death of fellow black, Garret Brown, and seeks to “wash his soul” with the help of ageless and wise counselor, Aunt Ester. This intention and act itself tend to be subversive since in those times, black churches were not allowed to hold confessions and offer pardons. The ways, methods, strategies that Aunt Ester adopts are quite bizarre and peculiar. She asks the seeker to either find pennies or throw away dollars in the river. She does this just to restore their faith in the ritual and in themselves. This throwing of property also implicitly denigrates the capitalistic ethics of mechanical accumulation. The rituals she performs seem to have the traces of Africanism, slavery, racism and emancipation all at the same time. She makes a boat of her “Bill of Sale” and uses it to ferry Barlow to “the City of Bones” an underground graveyard at the bottom of the Atlantic. These bones are of the people who couldn’t make it to the Americas and drowned in the sea. This city has twelve gatekeepers, and Barlow’s entry is ensured when he confesses his crime. At the end of the ritual, Citizen Barlow, “now reborn as man of the people, sits down and begins to cry” (Wilson, *Gem of* 73). Aunt Ester’s mediation and elaboration is worth quoting here:

AUNT ESTER. Them people you see got some powerful gods, Mr. Citizen. . . . They don’t know to call him on their own. God don’t answer to no one man. God answer to the all. All the people. They need all the people. . . . When we get to the City of Bones I’m gonna show you what happen when all the people call on God with the one voice. God got beautiful splendors. (Wilson, *Gem of* 69)

Here, the spirituality practiced and projected has quite explicit socio-cultural dynamics. Aunt Ester, as she claims to be 285 years old in 1904, thus was born in 1619, the year first ship came to America carrying the African people to Jamestown. As a trope, she is an embodiment of the experiences of African presence in America that facilitates, as a formidable matriarch and counselor, the reconnection and redemption of the black people. This ritual, in it’s cumulative and collective experience, necessitates and, thereby,
prescribes the ethics of community. “The City of Bones” as the destination of visit and shrine for redemption corroborates the fact that Wilson’s definition of African-Americans goes back to the time when the first slave ship embarked off the West African shore with slaves. Thus, only those figures who underwent through the ordeal of the middle passage and their descendants can subscribe to Wilson’s normative African-American pool. Unlike Garvey and many of his followers, he does not refer to Africa as a continent or site where he seeks to retreat; rather, in his definition, Africa, instead of a spatial location, “is but a ritual, a dance or a nuance” (Shannon 30), a cultural-spiritual-ethnic totality that the slavery as a system tried to extinguish. But the connection and resurrection to the “City of Bones” and consequent redemption requires the personal ethics of faith, honesty, truthfulness and confession. Wilson’s dramaturgy thus is a responsive African-American spirituality that negotiates the living presence of the dead in the contemporary times. Aunt Ester remains an absent presence in *Two Trains Running* and *King Hedley II* as well; her presence throughout the Century Cycle underscores the significance she comes to carry and possess for the African-American community to sail through this and many other centuries.

The same idea of ritual and spirituals persists in *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* also. Much like Citizen Barlow, Herald Loomis reaches north in search of his wife, Martha Pentecost. The saga of his past life contains enough reasons for the disillusionment and irreverence towards Christianity. He was abducted in 1901 by Joe Turner and forced into slavery for seven years, ironically, when as a deacon, he was spreading the word of God. Meanwhile his wife moves to north leaving their daughter with her own mother. Ever since his release, he has been looking for his wife. His stay on the plantation disrupted his connections with and faith in Christianity. He begins to see Christianity just as an instrument of slavery. Psychologically and spiritually crippled and symbolically unable to stand or “sing,” Loomis craves for his song without knowing its source and method. Here again, Loomis is guided by another Counselor or mediator, Bynum. Bynum is a root worker, who has acquired from his father the ritual of binding people. In equally mystical and bizarre style, he looks for his “shining man” whom he remembers to have encountered on the road. His mystical meeting with him and a dialogue with his father makes him realize that he should find his own song instead of
finding other people’s songs. A “bones people,” he binds only what clings, i.e. his binding depends upon the intention of the person being bound. Thus, just like Aunt Ester, Bynum too underscores the value of agency of the people in turmoil. The counselor can only mediate, instruct and guide, but the major part of the responsibility rests on the people.

Loomis’ pent up anger and agony flares up when he finds the inmates of the boardinghouse engaged in Juba, a ritual song-and-dance activity, as much African as possible. Having his world being tossed by the White devils, he questions or even blasphemes their Holy Ghost: “Why he got to be bigger than me? How much big is there? How much big do you want? [Starts to unzip his pants]” (Wilson, Joe Turner’s 50). Loomis’ attempt to measure his own potency and power vis-à-vis God is an attempt to blaspheme him as he doesn’t have faith in him. When Martha comes, he goes on to call him a “White man.” He rejects Martha’s brand of Christianity that promises redemption only in the afterlife. He intends to reconcile the teachings of the Christian God with experiences of his own life. Salvation to him appears an insufficient reward for the massive amount of despair and degradation in the racist America. Martha, seeking to resurrect Loomis’ faith, and Loomis, seeking to find a meaningful spiritual enterprise, get involved in an African kind of call-and-response act, but remain discordant till the end of the play. But finding Christianity inherently racial and oppressive, he carves out or redesigns new spirituals by replacing God or lamb with himself for bleeding for him. He cries in a moment of near frenzy: “I don’t need nobody to bleed for me! I can bleed for myself” (Wilson, Joe Turner’s 85). This new structure of spirituals is both a critique of Christianity and its re-definition. His ‘blood sacrifice’ functions as a syncretic blending and revision of African and Christian religious practices. As a consequence of this bleeding, Loomis is able to find his song, fully cleansed and resurrected, fully emancipated from any encumbrance. Loomis’ new spiritual act relying heavily upon himself has been elaborated by Harry J. Elam: “Wilson’s spirituality overcomes the conventional Christian divide between the spirit and the flesh, between God and individual, between body and soul, through enactments that bring greater psychological awareness, spiritual empowerment, and re-evolutionary determination” (The Past as Present 169). Further, the intensity of the utterances and the rhythms that accompany
these spirituals as well as other African activities like Juba tend to have a near participation of the audiences and have redemptive repercussions for them. The major presence of spirituals and the religious issues prominently in these plays and obliquely in others suffice to establish Wilson’s brand of spirituals that his characters follow. His dramaturgy appears as an extension of what he elaborated in an interview with David Sarvan: “Blacks have taken Christianity and bent it to serve their African-ness. In Africa, there’s ancestor worship, among other kinds of religious practices. That’s given blacks, particularly southern blacks, the idea of ghosts, magic and superstition” (Wilson, “August Wilson” 34). The hyphenation in his brand of identity tends to engulf religious understanding and definition as well.

The cultural practices and activities act as a source of succour and alleviation for African-Americans. Gradually, they developed certain such practices and events that could attend to and encode the anxieties, pains, sufferings, alienation and other horrors of slavery and racism. At the same time, they would alleviate their anxieties and relieve their hearts. Gospels and spirituals on the religious front and the blues and Jazz on the cultural front are typical and epitomical African-American aesthetic constructs. Ralph Ellison defines the blues in a compelling fashion:

> The blues is an impulse to keep the painful detail and episodes of a brutal existence alive in one’s aching consciousness, to finger its jazzed grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism. (qtd. in Mckay and Gates 23)

This vernacular form originated and flourished on the plantation as singing amongst the blacks. It too negotiated the experiences of slavery and rendered them in musical forms that may also have borrowings from the Euro-American models. Wilson, time and again, mentions the blues as one of four influences that shaped his sensibility: “Well, the blues are without question the wellspring of my art. It is the greatest source of my inspiration” (Wilson, “August Wilson: An Interview” 110). He further elaborates, “I think that what’s contained in the blues is the African American’s cultural response to the world . . . passing information, knowledge, ideas, and attitudes along orally” (Wilson, “Cool August” 58). This cultural response of the African people to American milieu persists in most of his dramaturgy. All his plays are full of blues music. But in Ma
Rainey’s Black Bottom, it attains structural and dramatic aesthetic dimensions. It revolves around the life and experiences of the legendary blues singer, Ma Rainey, and her band members. The recording studio is owned by Whites who record the songs and sell them. It is an extension of the plantation culture where the whites control and reap the fruits of black slaves’ labour. However, Ma Rainey is quite conversant with it. Her candid familiarity with this fact shows that she is not fooled by white man:

MA RAINEY. They don’t care nothing about me. All they want is my voice. Well, I done learned that, and they gonna treat me like I want them to be treated no matter how much it hurt them . . . as soon as they get my voice down on them recording machines, then its just like if I’d be some whore and they roll over and put their pants on. (Wilson, Ma Rainey’s 63)

She exercises her authority in all the spaces she can. Like a celebrity, she has her own aura, attendants and a lesbian friend. It indicates how she has defined her own way and style of resistance in the face of joint forces of racism and patriarchy. Her band is dependent on her and, like a matriarch, she fights the White system to get the worth of her art and songs. No doubt, after relinquishing her authority over her songs once she has signed them away, she is no more than “a whore,” but she keeps postponing it and forces the supremacist and racist owner, Sturdyvant, to acquiesce to all her demands. Her performance fills her pockets but also runs the life of the band members. She even manages to ensure that her stuttering nephew becomes a part of the performance and is paid at par with other members. In the true spirits of the blues, the performance alleviates the frustration of the Black band members as they find that under the aegis of Ma they do count. She too works for the people around her. Further, it is the prowess of Ma that she, despite being full of anger, attitude and swelled ego, sublimates it all into the blues, a medium that is emotionally relieving and ethnically integrating. Conversely, Levee fails to achieve sublimation through his songs because his music is aimed at pleasing Sturdyvant rather than being a source of emotional relief and integration of the fellow blacks. His frustration and rage due to a long history of exploitation can not be justification for ditching his band members and leader, Ma. Toledo voices his dismay with Levee and others like him.
TOLEDO. . . . We done sold Africa for the price of tomatoes. We done sold ourselves to the White man in order to be like him. Look at the way you dressed . . . That ain’t African. That’s the White man we trying to be just like him. We done sold who we are in order to become someone else. We’s imitation of White man. (Wilson, *Ma Rainey’s 77*)

But towards the end of the play as he finds his future plans of ascending the ladder of success turning to failure, his rage flares up, erupting the pent up emotions against Whites, the system and Christianity. This rage gets directed against Toledo who has been trying to orient the whole group with his musings and ideas. He stabs Toledo because Levee’s art is a sham, a fake, governed by capitalistic ideology of self-interest at the cost of community and other ethnocentric values. Hence, he is denied sublimation, and owing to his misdirected rage, he is likely to end up in prison. The blues becomes the aesthetic dynamics of the play also. All the members in their own way use their different musical instruments to creatively express blacks’ life and experiences. Levee’s killing of Toledo in the play suggests that if a black internalizes capitalistic values of personal profit and projection of the self, it is bound to be detrimental to one or the other member of the community and through it, the community symbolically. It can also be viewed as destruction of sanity, wisdom, and reservoir of ethnic experiences, in short, by way of logical extension the lynching of the philosopher. Levee’s trumpet and his antiphonic playing on it are extensions of his being and destiny. Musically not in sync with the group very soon makes him severed from the band and community. The emotional and psychological violence he feels within leads to extreme physical violence against Toledo.

*Seven Guitars* reverses the pattern of violence in the form that the blues musician is murdered by a seemingly vocal African figure, Hedley. Floyd Schoolboy Barton in many of his methods, temperament and ambitions appears an extension of Levee Green. He is a rash, self-destructive narcissist who deems himself above all rules. After giving a hit song, he hits an impasse as, lacking the business sophistication like Ma Rainey, he fails to demand royalties. In the course of the play, he suffers a spiral of defeats and in all the cases stood a white person on the other side, a symbol of repressive regime ensuring the curtailment of opportunities for the blacks. Motivated by his desire to move to Chicago, he exhausts himself and his resources only to find the doors closed on all sides.
Ultimately, he teams up with Willard Ray “Poochic” Tillery and robs the bank, getting his partner killed in the process. In the climactic scene, King Hedley in a trance takes Floyd as Buddy Bolden and kills him and takes his money as promised to him by his father. Here also, in the face of challenges thrust by the white establishments, Floyd becomes uprooted.

Music – with blues, Jazz, spirituals and vernaculars came out to be an essential and inevitable part of African American culture and has been invariably used as the edifice of black theatre aesthetics. This music transcends the boundaries given/perceived by ordinary people. It’s not just a source of entertainment and recreation, rather different musical tropes, songs and instruments represent, embody and express the soul and spirits of the black people. Songs and music become the metaphors of cultural and ethnic values. For example, “song” in Joe Turner’s *Come and Gone* becomes a metaphor of dynamic and complex racial experience. In this play in particular and in this Cycle in general, the recuperation, recognition, reaffirmation and performance of this song is essential for integration of African-Americans to their blemished, smeared and shaken sense of African past. Similarly, in *The Piano Lesson*, the conflict hinges upon a musical instrument – piano. Although a European instrument, the Charles family owns it by virtue of the carvings of their family history on it. Even in the climactic scene, the ghost of Sutter is exorcised when Bernice plays upon this piano and summons all her ancestors to exorcise the ghost of Sutter. The play has other songs and call-and-response activities. Here, desire and then success of an African-American family in laying claim over European instrument and Wilson’s desire to integrate it in the black family testifies that the African identity and its negotiations with the white culture relentlessly evolve it, inexorably adding many aspects of the white American culture. His brand of Africanness is not immutable; rather, it keeps on evolving in itself and through its interaction with the mainstream American culture. But as one moves chronologically along Wilson’s dramaturgy, it appears that the number of songs and prevalence of music become thinner and less prominent. Besides madmen’s or fool’s musings and spiritual callings, there is a considerable dearth of music. In the last play, *Radio Golf*, Roosevelt and Harmond engage in a demonic capitalistic song as it sounds the demolition of the Pittsburgh area: “Blight! Blight! Blight! Blight! (Wilson, *Radio Golf* 49) They continue, “Hail! Hail! The
gang’s all here, It’s one for all, the big and small, the big and small, It’s always me for you” (49).

Withering away of music in the Cycle indicates Wilson’s perception of the trajectory of African presence in America historically. The music, a metaphor of cultural vibrancy, polyphony and diversity, is gradually replaced by prose, a sign that African-American identity is shedding or compromising its essential cultural heritage. And the presence of only one song and that too of this nature, a sign of middle class’s apathy towards the poor working class black people, suggests that in the pursuit of capitalistic values and American dream, blacks might be committing a mistake of compromising their roots.

A record of this Africanness, roots and legacy – history – is one of the most persisting obsessions of Wilson, especially in a cultural conflict where the dominant Centre tries to efface the history and record of the marginal cultures. That is why, Wilson’s dramaturgy manufactures those complex sites wherefrom a debate about the issue of legacy, past and its utility or importance in the future emanates. Most of his plays allude to it. *The Piano Lesson* constructs a complex dynamic cultural symbol, the piano, whose significance keeps on altering from one context to another, from personal to cultural and political. It is imbued with diverse meanings as a metonym. For the Charles family of the 1936, its cultural significance, and the way it can be carried and used forms the central dramatic conflict of the play. When Willie Boy Charles carved the images of his family on its wooden legs, he transformed a seemingly European object into an African-American family symbol. Later, Papa Boy Charles steals it from the Sutter family, and while bringing it home he is murdered, leaving his wife and kids mourning. Thus, through carvings of the images and sacrifices in regaining it, the piano becomes the embodiment of history, slavery, struggle and family honour. Berniece and Boy Willie “differ so acrimoniously over how the historical past should be allowed or used to impact on the present” (Londre 115). Berniece values the piano only an object, a commodity lying in the house but she doesn’t want to use it. Boy Willie is taken aback when he discovers Berniece’s silence on the history of the piano:
BOY WILLIE. . . you ain’t even told her about that piano. Like that’s something to be ashamed of. Like she supposed to go off and hide somewhere about the piano. You ought to mark down on the calendar the day that Papa Boy Charles brought that piano into the house. You ought to mark that day down and draw a circle around it . . . and every year when it come up throw a party. Have a celebration. (Wilson, The Piano 90)

These words of Boy Willie are not just a reverberation, but an echo of Wilson’s opinions expressed in an interview:

. . .the fact of slavery is something that blacks don’t teach their kids—they do not tell their kids that at one time we were slaves. That is the most crucial and central thing to our presence here in America. It is nothing to be ashamed of. Why is it, after spending hundreds of years in bondage, the blacks in America do not once a year get together and remind ourselves of our history. (Wilson, “August Wilson” 27)

The voluntary amnesia of the history, shared by larger African-American community, shackles them and arrests their growth and development as integrated individuals and self-respecting community. For example, Berniece’s act to let this piano lie unused is countered by Boy Willie’s utilitarian and pragmatist approach to heritage and history. Hailing from south, with the knowledge of farming, Boy Willie wants to sell the piano and purchase the land of Sutter, the same land where his family toiled as slaves: “I am talking about trading that piece of wood for some land. Land the only thing God ain’t making no more” (Wilson, The Piano 52). Boy Willies’ brand of masculinity battens upon the material possessions, especially property and land. He also assumes that as his father too shared the same masculine value, he would have been proud of Boy Willie for doing it. Besides these two, Sutter’s ghost also lays his claim over the piano. In African-American spiritual terms, the piano is the ‘song,’ the identity, and neglect of this song amounts to the choking or neglect of one’s identity or past. The same conceptualization of identity operates in Joe Turner’s Come and Gone, particularly in the case of Loomis. The ghost of Sutter stands for the white establishment that tries to rob the blacks of their song without letting the latter see them. In the climactic scene, each character is galvanized to counter the ghost of Sutter (white racist society) according to their own preoccupations and mental makeup. Avery, the deacon at the church, tries to
exorcise Sutter’s ghost taking recourse to the Biblical sermons, oblivious to the cultural dimensions of the conflict. He also remains blissfully unaware of the potentially corrosive nature of blacks’ dependence on any white institution including Christianity. Boy Willie, agrarian, masculinist and an early nationalist, goes to counter the ghost with his brute force, without realizing his corporeal limitations and a ghost’s massive potential. At the same time, as if in an epiphany, Berniece sits on the piano and starts playing on it, with songs summoning her black ancestors and the song ends with the eviction of the ghost and Boy Willie both. Here, as an African-American, the acknowledgment, acceptance and identification of the history and heritage – slavery, spirituals, song and ancestors – redeems Berniece and her family. It also elevates the piano and the ancestors from their commodity or symbolic value to an encoded treasure that needs to be consulted and referred to whenever one moves on in life: “Wilson’s dramaturgical project emphasizes the importance of slavery in the construction of contemporary African American identity” (Elam, “The Dialectics of August” 374).

Wilson’s oeuvre contains many such characters that carry their past and/or heritage with them. In *Gem of the Ocean*, Aunt Ester uses her “Bill of Sale” as a spiritual boat. Solly Two Kings carries his “chain links” with him. In *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*, Loomis discovers his song with the aid of Bynum and sings it and embraces it. Memphis also recognizes this fact – value of his land in Jackson which Aunt Ester too verbalizes “If you drop the ball, you got to go back and pick it up. Ain’t no need in keeping running” (Wilson, *Two Trains* 98). He, after getting more than the desired compensation for his restaurant, plans to move to south and take his land, his property, his legacy, his heritage back from which he was forcefully evicted by the southern Whites, Stovall and his gang. As a communal/cultural enterprise or ritual, Hambone is accorded his due, his Ham, though posthumously. King Hedley in *Seven Guitars* subscribes to his African roots, heritage and past to an extent that he doesn’t let anything or anybody temper with it. In *Fences*, Troy Maxson intends to extend his advice or order, colored as it is by his experience in a segregationist society, as a family legacy to his son, Cory Maxson. Troy – himself a victim of slavery, plantation culture, disturbed family experiences with a brute father, incarceration, and as a sportsperson, of segregation and White politics and dominance – forces his child, Cory, to concentrate on studies and
securing some job. He intends to pre-empt Cory from falling prey to the same racist politics that thwarted his own growth.

TROY. The White man ain’t gonna let you get nowhere with that football noway. You go on and get your book-learning so you can work yourself up in that A & P or learn how to fix cars or build houses or something, get you a trade. That way you have something can’t nobody take away from you. (Wilson, *Fences* 37)

This Booker T. Washington-like advice is a result of the torturous and exploitative experiences Troy has been through. Towards the end, when Cory comes for the burial of his father, he still feels the grudge against his father he left his home with. His anger is alleviated by Rose’s advices that his father meant Cory more good than harm. His growing bond with Raynell and assent to his mother’s advice suggest that he is willing to take the legacy and experiences of his father however belated they may be. Cory, now serving in the US forces, is reunited with the family. Troy’s legacy is acknowledged by Wilson in an interview also:

I think Troy’s right. Now with the benefit of historical perspective, I can say that the athletic scholarship was actually a way of exploiting... In the sixties the universities made a lot of money off of athletics. You had kids playing for free who, by and large, were not getting educated, were taking courses in basketweaving. (Wilson, “August Wilson” 32)

This generational conflict, with underlying parental concerns and kids’ urge to fly free, highlights the ethics of family, responsibility and a tempered love. The same legacy is claimed, owned and recognized by Booster Becker in *Jitney*. After a long period of separation and tension, Booster recognizes the “largeness,” goodness and hardwork of his father, Jim Becker: “I’m proud of my old man” (Wilson, *Jitney* 76) and gets ready to take charge of his father’s legacy, Jitney station.

In *Radio Golf*, this issue of heritage and legacy again becomes nucleus of the action. Aunt Ester’s house (she dies in *King Hedley II*) faces the ‘blight’ or threat of demolition from the Realty sector developers – Harmond Wilks and Roosevelt Hicks who are felt to be the black front of the white capitalistic structures. The house becomes a metaphor of the African culture and community on the American soil and, hence, the
threat of demolition assumes greater proportions. Sterling and Old Joe insist on saving it for its cultural significance. On the contrary, Roosevelt Hicks is depicted as the embodiment of the rising black middle class’s apathy towards the poor blacks and everything attached to them. Karen D. Pyke opines, “By attributing these traits to poor African Americans and blaming the values and morals of these ‘bad blacks’ for their poverty, class-privileged blacks can distance themselves from the negative stereotypes and create a positive self-identity as the ‘good Blacks’” (565). But these self-constructed illusions of “good Blacks” rob them of everything that entitles them to the cultural and ethnic blackness. This emulation of the White in order to ascend the ladder of success tends to land them in a distractive/lethal liminal space where White society would never let them enter in their bastion and they themselves had already shut doors to Black community. As one moves along Wilson’s Cycle set in a wide time-line – from antebellum to the end of the 20th century, it appears that the cultural and ethnic values have been undergoing through a radical change portrayed through a vast range of characters: black band members, Floyd, Boy Willie, Herald Loomis, Citizen Barlow, almost all of them illiterate; the likes of Booster Becker and Cory Maxson, educated; apparently poor wretched people like Troy’s father; West, Harmond Wilks and Roosevelt Hicks, new rising middle class; disenfranchised to mayoral candidacy of Harmond Wilks; women as objects of sexual gaze and appetite of the dominant discourses to the Governor’s potential press representatives like Mame.

The imaginative characters and events, certainly not real historical personages, spread across various times including specific years help Wilson bring to the limelight the life and events, trials and tribulations of uncountable blacks who lived their lives on the margins. He contends that historical figures are taken care of by historians. So, as a dramatist, he zeroes in on capturing the nuances of marginalization of blacks in the mainstream American culture, and also within the African-American community. His aim is not to write the history as it happened, but to creatively project as it might have happened. His drama, in a sense, becomes a chronicle of the ‘lived history’, i. e. as the historical circumstances shape the individual and the shared experiences of blacks. And this constructivist project has been spurred by a complex dynamics of reasons. As quoted above, Wilson, as an enlightened black artist-thinker, is suspicious of white designs
towards blacks. His drama may also be read as the rhetorical postulation: how the historical records of the society that constructed the capitalistic system to exploit and marginalize Blacks could be approved? Thus, his drama revises and reevaluates the life and events of Black people.

Where does he see the black culture and people in his re-definition? In his interview with Bill Moyers, he avers, “Yes, because it is without question that they are African people. We are African who have been in America since the seventeenth century. We are Americans. But first of all, we are Africans.” He continues, “. . . 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 . . . . The way we participate in life is very much different from White America” (Wilson, “August Wilson: Playwright” 69). From his own opinions, and the way he architects his plays, he makes it clear that he identifies himself and the black people in America with the African culture in America since slavery. He embraces both the parts of the hyphenated term African-American. He again in his Afterword to King Hedley II makes it clear:

Yet the characters in the plays still place their faith in America’s willingness to live up to the meanings of her creed so as not to make a mockery of her ideals. It is this belief in America’s honor that allows them to pursue the American dream even as it remains elusive. The conflicts with the larger society are cultural conflicts. (113-14)

But he reconciles the Du Boisian dilemma of “double consciousness” where the latter saw the black body as under threat of being “torn asunder” by the dual, conflictual identity pulls or forces. Wilson’s accentuation on the Africanness is a panacea for the “double consciousness” problem. In an implicit way, Wilson’s theater manifests an aversion to Marcus Garvey’s brand of African centrism that encouraged the blacks to embrace the African self to the denigration and extinction of the American part. Further, assimilationists or conformists tend to appear a threat first to their own being and then to fellow blacks. Both these brands have been embodied in Hedley in Seven Guitars (Garveyism), and West in Two Trains Running, Seth in Joe Turner and Roosevelt Hicks in Radio Golf, besides other less apparent cases. He further questions Du Boisian concept
of the “Talented Tenth” as it creates an “artificial superiority”: “I am not willing to throw away as untalented ninety percent of my blood . . . . It is a dangerous idea to set one part of the populace above and aside from the other” (Wilson, The Ground 39). His theatre becomes a gallery where blacks with diverse intentions, goals, backgrounds, potentials and dreams come and reveal and enact their being: “They shout, they argue, they wrestle with love, honor, duty, betrayal; they demand justice, they love, they laugh, they cry, they murder and they embrace life with zest and vigor” (Wilson, King Hedley 114). And they do so despite the fact that their relation to the larger society and culture is that of servitude and marked neglect. Here, it further highlights the fact that Wilson doesn’t let his political designs/goals affect his aesthetic performance or execution. His characters remain essentially human beings facing hardships, problems and crisis just as in any other playwright of worth. His gallery contains such a great variety of multidimensional characters that many of them resist the readymade categorizations. It further attests to Wilson’s prowess.

This resistance to fixities is a part of his redefinition. Wilson’s range of characters undermines the reductive ways of looking at the black men and women. His gallery has a wide variety of characters – good, bad, average to show that they are human. The considerable absence of the White characters highlights the fact that the Black characters and world is not tangential to the White presence or White presence is not necessary to testify the worth or meaning of the Black art and culture. Wilson puts forth in so many of his interviews that his characters are in conflict with the dominant supremacist culture that invariably exploits them, confines them, contains them. The number of white characters in Wilson is indeed small; however, they too are not stock characters – necessarily evil and supremacist. Solly in Gem of the Ocean talks of good-natured White abolitionists who helped the black migrants in reaching north. Sutter’s wife too loves her servants so much that she takes to bed when her slaves are taken from her. His conception of dramatic personae transcends the narrow race politics as his White characters are as much multi-dimensional and complex human beings as much multi-dimensional and complex human beings his Black characters are. His second part of redefinition contains or reacts to the ways African-American thinkers have projected and
seen the black culture and identity. His theatre in various ways reacts to Booker T. Washington, Du Bois, Marcus Garvey, Amiri Baraka and others.

August Wilson being a serious artist, racial conflict forms only one of the many vectors that shape his drama. A human being inevitably defines herself/himself from multiple identity pointers like race, gender, age, nationality, language, religion, and region and so on. All these identity pointers come with a lot of concepts with them. And their admixtures in varied proportions give rise to the morphology of the ideology. In order to make the scope of the artistic work manageable, most works of art in general and dramatic works in particular usually pick up only a limited number of identity pointers as highlighted constituent elements of the human personality of the characters. In American culture ‘race and racism’ emerge as macro concepts and so do gender and class. The next chapter takes up the discussion of gender as it operates in Wilson’s drama.
Works Cited


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