Class

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness.

(United States Declaration of Independence)

America both as a culture and as a nation has been striving to defend and determine the claims laid by the founding Fathers of America. The history of America seems to have been annals of struggle between the capitalist white Christian Euro-centric Americans and the people of other ethnicities and beliefs, the latter demanding the Constitutional rights as promised to the people. Consequently, the bright face of the defender of Democracy and equality has shaming scars of Jim Crow, Ku Klux Klan, Slavery, Civil War, Prigg and Dred Scott, Civil Rights and many more. Instead of ameliorating the plight of the deprived and marginalized people, America always tends to gloss over this glaring exploitation and dispossession of these people. The white politicians (for example George W. H. Bush in 1990s) and cultural architects claim to make America a classless society, leading to the popular confusion about it. T.V. Reed in his study, “Class and Culture,” insists that “Perhaps the most definitive thing one can say about ‘Class’ and ‘Culture’ in America is that, as long as there has been an American culture, Americans have been confused about class. At its most extreme, this has led to the claim that class does not exist, or at least does not matter, in the United States” (358). Considering class to be a typical European phenomenon, these thinkers further see America as a land of equal opportunities and other rights as enshrined in the Constitution. But it is quite ironical that American culture keeps producing an image of itself as a classless society whereas it has been very hostile to African-Americans and other marginalized entities. Chuck Barone in The Foundations of Class and Classism opines:

Classlessness is a myth, along with the attendant cultural mythology which on the one hand denies the existence of class while at the same time rationalizing economic inequality in individual meritocratic terms. This dominant cultural mythology, masquerading as reality, has resulted in a crippled conceptual framework for understanding class and an impoverished public discourse on class and classism. (3-4)
Similar views are expressed by Gregory Mantsios: “Myth 1: The United States is fundamentally a classless society. Class distinctions are largely irrelevant today, and whatever differences do exist in economic standing, they are – for the most part – insignificant” (183).

This myth of classlessness is relentlessly produced in order to pre-empt the possibility of the need of its eradication. Various symbols and icons have been erected to serve this function. One such icon is the American Dream, claimed to have been essentially founded on the principles of the Constitution. The concept came in 1931, coined by James Truslow Adams in his book, *The Epic of America*, stating “‘life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement’ regardless of social class or circumstances of birth” (qtd. in “American Dream”). There is no doubt that people moved to America with this ever-evolving cultural ethos of “American Dream” in mind to escape the aristocratic tyrannies of the Europe. *The Oxford Guide to English and American Culture* further suggests the following definition: “It is ‘the belief of Americans that their country offers opportunities for a good and successful life’. For minorities and people coming from abroad to live in America, the dream also includes freedom and equal rights” (qtd. in “The Evolution of the ‘African American’ Dream”). But, at the same time, the people of African descent have found it a distant illusion to follow and live American dream. As European feudalism was replaced by even more barbarous and dehumanizing system of American slavery, the underlying guiding principles of exploitation, violence and dehumanization for the material advantage even worsened the experiences of the working class people on this side of the Atlantic. Slavery exploited the people of African origin and grabbed their fruits of labour under the capitalistic system. Capitalistic ideology relentlessly and continuously reproduces not only the structures of domination, but of its own subversion to keep things smooth. This can be seen in the fact that the Emancipation didn’t bring the immediate relief and redemption. It was so because when slavery was abolished, the capitalistic economy had already been preparing ground for new structures of domination and exploitation. With the help of an implied notion of the American dream – inherent in the upward social mobility and cultural freedom – a new cultural monolith was floated in
the form of class. The dominant white people ensured that the American society should remain divided in order to keep the black people in subservient position.

The ground was ripe for the European class system to be grafted on the American cultural scenario. The new capitalistic economy, to appropriate Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels’ words, did not simply abolish the older system of exploitation, rather “It has but established new classes, new conditions of oppression, new forms of struggle in place of the old ones” (22). These new classes “. . . look upon, and deal with, one another basically as opponents who depend on one another nevertheless as a result of their mutual interests” (Toennies 41). Apparently, these relationships are means of production and distribution. When slavery was abolished, the southern Whites owned most of the land and huge plantations whereas in the north, they owned the industries. Consequently, the white capitalistic economy was in the driver’s seat to determine the fate of the black people. Moreover, the established racial ideology and stereotypes proved handy to maintain the system of Black subordination, now, in the name of class system that further created the deceptive cultural devices of meritocracy.

Max Weber defines the economic ascendancy/power and honour as the determining features of the dominant class. In the post-Emancipation economy, the white Americans naturally grabbed the elite and bourgeois status, consigning the blacks in the working class category. The slavery and race dynamics still informed the class relations and issues because irrespective of the status, property and position, all blacks were seen as the working class individuals. So much so that poor working class whites refused to consider the rich, land owning blacks as their superiors. Arnold Rose in his study highlights this issue: “We have seen that Southern Whites, especially in the lower brackets, often refuse to recognize class differences in the Negro community and that they, until recently, have succeeded in retaining a legal and political system which corresponds closely to this view. They will say ‘niggers are all alike,’ although they distinguish between ‘bad niggers,’ ‘good niggers,’ and ‘uppity niggers’” (27). Thus, instead of opening up new avenues for the Black liberation, the class system strengthened their subordination to the Whites. Through institutional racism, capitalistic economy endeavoured to ensure the protection of white man’s interests and domination.
This disinclination of the white capitalism to recognize the dynamics and the dynamism of the black class structure underlines the desire of the white people to keep the black masses in the subordinate positions. Despite attempts at mannerism, sophistication, education, dressing, clothing, eating habits etc., blacks find it tough to ascend the ladder of class as their feet are tied to the poor working class monolith by the racist ideology. These hard working black people are made to undergo psychological trauma as well since they are denied which they are financially, educationally and culturally entitled to. They feel frustrated when they are addressed as equals of the poor, criminal, base, gambling classes of the African-Americans. This homogenization of the black community as a classless, identical, ill-mannered, degraded, unsophisticated, uneducated and unrefined group of people has a pervading ‘Orientalist’ inclination of dis-recognizing the dynamism, plurality, discreteness, variety, cultural and artistic drives of the others to ensure their participation in the process of their own subordination.

Undermining this pervasive construct of blacks as a classless homogeneous group are the plethora of studies that discuss and highlight the layers of black class system, its distinctions from the mainstream white class system owing to the impacts of slavery and underlying background of African-American values: “Even under slavery, there already existed a ‘mulatto elite,’ a segment of the black population who, by virtue of their light skin and blood relations to the white, slave-owning class, received benefits such as assignment of choice work tasks, training in skilled occupations, and for some, freedom” (Cole and Omari 786-87). This small section of elite blacks, owing to their hard work, opportunities and training, accumulated economic resources and maintained family, educational and religious mores that they deemed necessary to get respect in the society. Racial dynamics intersect with the class boundaries as the black elite developed a range of contrasting attitudes towards the black community. Some felt an urge of participation and obligation for the redemption of the larger black culture, whereas others, intending to be assimilated, developed aversion for the poor, working class brethren. Notwithstanding their contribution to the advancement the race, they remain a small and comparatively insular group. In the immediate wake of the Abolition, the largest part of population formed the poor, working class section without money, without job, preyed and hunted by the dominant white culture at will. As majority of them started moving towards the
urban north, they found the mills, industry and capitalist system waiting to exploit them, just a refined and subtle extension of slavery plantation culture. Some of these poor negroes came in the contact of elite blacks, the abolitionists, and by virtue of their hard work, education and guidance, they could rise above the doomed poor working class section – a section that flourished to include the larger part of black population in the post-war era – and enter into the middle class. This plurality and variety of the black class system undermines and refutes the “myth that black society is a homogeneous mass without significant and illuminating distinctions in background, prestige, attitudes, behaviour, power and culture” (Gatewood IX).

Black experience of class system is thoroughly addressed and informed by the racial ideology. Hence, it is quite distinct and different from the mainstream class categorizations. It can only be comprehended from its inter-sectionality. In the post-bellum society, they had to negotiate the twin demons of upward social mobility and the restrictions of the structural racism still prevalent in American culture. This “upward social mobility” or the pursuit of American dream on the basis of American mainstream cultural and educational mores tends to lead African-American people away from their community-centric ethnic values. Thus, in the 20th century this twin-edged weapon of classism sharpened further by racial ideology necessitates a careful and attentive treading. It further complicates the black American brotherhood, cultural composition and identification. Unless this upward movement, the pursuit of American Dream and establishment and maintenance of class system is thoroughly understood and identified in African-American cultural terms, the threat of cultural disintegration looms large. Since African-American is a distinct culture different from the mainstream White culture with equally discrete value system, rituals, traditions, religious values, spirituals and blues, the contours of Black classes should be determined in a typical Afro-centric way that accommodates cultural and individual integrity, self-respect and honour.

The African-American negotiation and experience of American Dream have been treated extensively by black writers. Since American Dream is a cultural ethic which keeps evolving, it has been accorded a befittingly dynamic and multi-dimensional treatment by Black writers in different genres. All of them have an implicit consensus
that the slavery turned the African-American Dream into a nightmare. Olaudah Equiano and Frederick Douglass through their Slave Narratives emphasized the dehumanizing role of slavery in deferring the African-American Dream of “... moral character, religious faith, hard work and determination” that could be achieved through education (Wilson-Harris). Similarly, Richard Wright (*Native Son*), Ralph Ellison (*Invisible Man*) and Langston Hughes through their narratives highlight the complex dynamics of the pursuit of American Dream and the inimical and hostile forces that thwart their dreams. Their protagonists are finally offered redemption in the Afro-centric values and mores. In drama, Lorrain Hansberry shows how the pursuit of American Dream is never as smooth and straight as the American rhetoric claims it to be. August Wilson also undertakes the task of highlighting the politics of American capitalistic rhetoric that, through its mechanism of class, endeavours to thwart the pursuit of American Dream. Wilson’s drama questions the legitimacy and viability of the American Dream in the lives of African-American people. He identifies an African-American Dream that is culturally identical, ethnically unifying, self-integrating and a fulfilling experience. He further shows the politics of capitalistic system of classism that projects and disseminates a very denigrating and condescending image of black people as eternally belonging to the poor working class. Wilson, in an implicit way, proposes a redefinition of classism that is not governed by capitalism. But this does not mean that Wilson’s oeuvre deals exclusively with African-American experiences. His Century Cycle includes characters of various inclinations, natures, and personalities that adopt diverse survival strategies in the face of overarching capitalistic rhetoric.

Wilson experienced this politics of class and subsequent marginalization as a child. From being born in a poor family to a celebrity award-winning writer, Wilson practically had the first hand experience of the system of racism and classism in the lives of the black people. Seeing that the times were tough, his mother encouraged him to learn fixing cars, do other odd jobs and get an L. L. B. He had been a dish washer, gardener, drama teacher and done many more things. Having closely observed the politics of the capitalistic class system, he gradually developed a personal counter-discourse that he would later transform in his theatre, but the lessons from his mother were the most important shaping influences. He often cites her influence, and calls her a woman of
integrity. He mentions how, when a radio station found out that the woman who won the quiz was black, they offered her a used washing machine instead of a new one: “And she told them exactly what they could do with their certificate, and she didn’t want no used washing machine because she was due a brand-new washing machine like they said on the radio” (Wilson, “Cool August” 47). He further elaborates how the white insurance companies exploited his family on account of their color: “Mary [a white woman] had her house insured. And Mary is payin’ $40 a month. The same insurance company charged my mother $300 for the same thing that they’re charging Mary $40 for. What the hell’s the difference?” (Wilson, “Cool August” 49). His mother’s resistance to this capitalistic upper class’s exploitation on the grounds of their poverty and color encouraged him to assert his identity and never accept less than what was his due. The working class was forced to face so much of trials and tribulations that the American Dream became a chimera for him. He could comprehend the pressure of the white elites on the black people who wanted an entry into the respected middle class. He stresses the significance of a careful treading on the turf of upward social mobility:

But the real struggle, since an African set foot on the continent, is the affirmation of the value of oneself. If in order to participate in American society and in order to accomplish some of the things which the black middle class has accomplished, you have had to give up that self, then you are not affirming the value of the African Being. You’re saying that in order to do that, I must become like someone else. (Wilson, “August Wilson” 79)

His Century Cycle entails a wide array of characters, engaged in different occupations, trying to make it big, to achieve and realize the American Dream. Since majority of them hail from the poor working class, they are pitted against the capitalist elite that relentlessly thwarts their pursuit to transcend the working class category. His spectrum includes characters of different educational, professional and occupational levels. Memphis, Jim Becker, West, Roosevelt Hicks and Harmond Wilks are amongst those characters who belong to the middle class; whereas Ma’s band members, Troy, King Hedley II, Floyd Barton, Citizen Barlow, Harold Loomis and Boy Willie belong to the poor working class category.
His oeuvre further defies the compartmentalization of characters owing to their complexity and dynamism. Their success or failures need to be understood in terms of values of the African-American community. Harmond foregoes his chance of mayoral candidacy and making more money on account of his ethnic scruples of honesty, truthfulness and duty towards community; whereas, Roosevelt ascends the very ladder because of his willingness to eradicate his blackness and becoming a plaything in the hands of white capitalist elites. Jim gives his son good education so that he can be successful; Troy dissuades his son, Cory Maxson, from playing professional football as he sees it full of segregationist politics. Wilson’s characters, belonging to different classes, manifest and register behaviour and attitudes that tend to complicate the issue of class in the black community. They defy the neat compartmentalization of society into poor, middle and upper class as his drama traces and explores the vibrancy, joys, pains, aches, trauma and relief of all sections of the black society.

In all of his plays, the primary antagonist remains the white society. But Wilson saves his theatre from becoming a saga of black victimization in the hands of all powerful white society. He has kept the white characters as much off stage as possible. This aesthetic device lends multiple artistic, thematic and cultural dimensions to his treatment of class through theatre. The white society and its capitalistic economy, in its on stage and off stage role tries its best to thwart poor working class blacks’ pursuit of American Dream. This white absence also underlines another dynamic dimension of intersectionality of race and class. As mentioned above, even the poor white people refuse to recognize and respect the middle class and upper class blacks. Wilson makes this statement by white absence that black class hardly matters to the white society so long as the latter measures and understands the black culture with white yardstick. All blacks are treated as the homogeneous mass of people irrespective of the class differences of sophistication, education, exposure and values that distinguish the black middle and upper classes from the lower class poor people.

The white capitalistic forces, directly and indirectly, remain the principle opponent to the upward mobility of Wilson’s black characters. As compared to slave era, white elites take recourse to institutional exploitation in the 20th century through labour
rules, education system, segregation in professional arena and a harsh and bitter judicial
and police system. So blacks find the avenues and channels of American Dream closed
for them. Their condition is epitomized by Sutter’s ghost in *The Piano Lesson* that
appears nowhere but is everywhere. Almost all the black characters of Wilson show the
signs of having been duped and robbed by the white system. Citizen Barlow, in *Gem of
the Ocean*, gives a long account of the devil of the mill that relentlessly snares the poor
proletariat blacks in the vicious cycle of debt:

CITIZEN. They say they was paying two dollars a day but when we got
there they say a dollar fifty. . . . Come payday they give me three
dollars say the rest go on my bill. . . . I told the people at mill I was
gonna get another job. They said I couldn’t do that ‘cause I still owed
them money and they gonna get the police on me. I was gonna go to
another city but then before I had a chance I killed a man. (23)

This was the plight of the unskilled simple black youth who escaped to the south
in search of better life. To tighten the grip of the capitalistic ideology, the white upper
class finds a black overseer, Caesar, quite too ready to surrender his cultural ethics;
through his loan and other aids, he holds the black poor youth in his clutches. Aware of
his problematic class status in the larger American society, he confesses: “In the valley of
the blind the one-eyed man is king” (Wilson, *Gem of 39*). Thus, despite his accumulation
of resources, job and position, his own class status is problematized by his racial
blackness that holds him to the poor working class status in relation to the white
capitalistic elite. He gets his job with the contract that underlines his subservience: “. . .
you fry the little fish and send the big fish to me” (Wilson, *Gem of 40*). In *Joe Turner’s
Come and Gone*, Harold Loomis, a deacon in the Church, narrates the saga of his
dehumanization at the plantation of Joe Turner where he was forced to toil for seven
years. Living the life of modesty and religiosity and moving into the centre of middle
class where he could maintain his life by his position of a deacon, Loomis is abducted by
the chain gang of Joe Turner and forced to retreat back to the working class poor people.
Further, this whole event has underlying but apparent Marxist dynamics of capitalist
economy. Simply because the white elite, Joe Turner, owns the plantation and resources,
he forces the black people to toil hard to produce good crops in which they don’t have
any share. This reification, epitomized by the forty chain links and the resultant
alienation, underscores that “Capitalist goals and questions of profit and loss are paramount, workers are bereft of their full humanity and are thought of as ‘hands’ or the ‘the labour force’, so that, for instance, the effects of industrial closures are calculated in purely economic terms” (Barry 151). It disintegrates his sense of self and blows away his family. This capitalistic reification is again reinforced when the slavery’s discourse of racism intersects with classism so much so that it sees human beings merely in terms of property and commodity. In *The Piano Lesson*, the Sutter family trades the ancestors of the Charles family for a piano in “one-and-a-half niggers” terms that shows how the elite master treated his slaves in purely capitalistic commoditized terms. This narrative of commodification also entails the saga of dispossession of the black worker of his own fruit of labor: “See, everything my granddaddy made Mr. Sutter owned ‘cause he owned him” (Wilson, *The Piano* 46). These structures of reification, alienation and commodification also inform the family life and class status of the Charles family even in the 1930s.

As the migration continued, it reinforced the black unemployment. Consequently black men found it difficult to hold their jobs because of the competition and unscrupulous treatment by the capitalist elites. A worker shares his experiences: “He knows us colored folks has to put up with everything to keep a job so he asks for two-three dollars anytime an’ if you don’t pay, you get a poor paying job or a lay-off” (qtd. in Trotter 3). These words appear to be an apparent reverberation of Jeremy who has to lose his job because of his refusal to pay bribe:

Jeremy. It didn’t make no sense to me. I don’t make but eight dollars. Why I got to give him [white fellow] fifty cents of it? He go around to all the colored and he got ten dollars extra. That’s more than I make for a whole week. (Wilson, *Joe Turner’s* 62)

In *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*, besides other procedures of dispossession, Sturdyvant and Irvin endeavour to enact the Marxist script of capitalistic exploitation. They own the studio and gather the black artists to record the blues and pay them like wage labour. Alan Nadel offers an illuminating critique of the recording process: “The play thus pivots around the historical moment when her song, in its unique moment of production, becomes the property of white company. As the play represents it, that
moment comes in such a way as to reduce ‘art’ to ‘labour’ in that Ma is paid a fee for the session rather than receiving contractual residuals” (Nadel 105). Floyd Schoolboy Barton in *Seven Guitars* also becomes a victim of dispossession when, like Ma, he trades off his song only for wages of his labour, instead of signing the contract and claiming the royalty for his hit blues song. He is duped by an array of capitalistic snares that thwart his upward mobility. This exploitation of the working class poor blacks is dramatized in terms of the segregationist politics of the professional leagues. Wilson himself has a lot to say about the appropriation of the black art, body, skill and labour by these professional leagues: “You couldn’t play in the white baseball league, so you started your own, you had a negro baseball league” (Wilson, “The Historical Perspective” 162). He opines that with the passage of time, things have gone from bad to worse for the American people of all the classes. Troy also underscores the vicious cycle of segregationist culture that assigns only menial jobs and marginal positions to the black people. Troy also finds that segregation systematically shuts the door of upward movement for the black people as they could not get promotion from “‘pickin’” the garbage to driving the van.

Furthermore, the post-50s setting Wilson’s drama, the white animosity and aversion to black culture and its desire to realize American Dream is accumulated and established as a monolith – the Redevelopment project. In *Two Trains Running*, a middle class black businessman, Memphis faces the threat of demolition of his restaurant in the name of redevelopment. It is not a solitary case because the white capitalist development projects plan to demolish this and many more burgeoning and blooming black neighbourhoods within a few years. In *Jitney*, Becker’s Jitney cab station also faces a “blitz”. The Jitney station is owned, run and managed by all black people and thus it doesn’t count much in the scheme of things of the capitalistic elites. This demolition and redevelopment project reaches its climax in *Radio Golf* when Aunt Ester’s house, Wylie Avenue 1839, a symbol of African-American culture, heritage and experience is scheduled to become the target of redevelopment project.

Besides it, in order to restrain the black mobility and growth, the capitalistic economy resorts to incarceration as one of the tools. Majority of male characters have been incarcerated at some time in their life. For arresting the rise and growth of the black
working class, the elite capitalists developed a penal system that would restrain the black people from realizing their dreams. According to David M. Oshinsky “. . . in the post-Civil War justice system, convict leasing was the South’s answer to prisons and jails overcrowded with unruly blacks incarcerated under the infamous Black Code system for misdemeanours and felonies” (qtd. in Snodgrass 149). He further elaborates, “When populist pressures ended the merchandizing of prison labor, penal farming, a form of convict bondage similar to medieval fiefdoms, took its place” (149). This account is a naked testimony to white man’s urge and desire to keep exploiting the black man’s labour for his own interest. The construction of such prison system was merely a legalized mode of slavery when the capitalist state government forced the working class poor blacks to offer their labour and hard work in the name of penal and corrective measures. Wolf relates in *Two Trains Running*, that he would give “. . . a dollar for every nigger you find that ain’t been to jail. . . . I been to jail. . . . Ain’t done nothing but walk down the street” (50). Further, it becomes a panopticon system that not only maintains ideological surveillance over the poor blacks by means of penal punishment, but institutionalizes the appropriation of black labour by the capitalist government. It seems that the white capitalists have inscribed incarceration in the script of black man’s upward social mobility. If the black man abides by rules, he is bound to remain poor and at the mercy of the white system. And if he is determined to rise above the doomed poor brethren, he is likely to be incarcerated as a necessary rite of passage for upward social mobility.

Wilson’s characters respond to this upward social mobility and American Dream in a variety of ways. But it strengthens their desire to move upward. Even this desire is a sign of Wilson’s subversion of the capitalistic white classism that renders the black culture and people as homogeneous mass of poor working class. His characters manifest a desire to have cars, land, plantation, as well as dressing and eating habits of the dominant white culture. Levee is so engrossed in his new Florsheim shoes that everything else takes a second seat. Similarly, Sterling wants to have nice clothes and big cars. Floyd too is guided by similar desire. On the other hand, the upward social mobility for Memphis and Becker means claiming with their hard work what is rightfully theirs, whereas, people like Hambone are driven crazy by the denial of his right by Lutz.
In the face of overarching capitalist culture, the African-Americans have to adopt various strategies of survival. These strategies are inexorably informed by their sense of self-respect, self-integrity and relation with the black community and larger white society. The colossal capitalist powers generate certain class distinctions or myths that affect or construct one’s identity. These distinctions are gradually accepted and vigorously maintained as natural structures of the society. Wilson underlines how these class demarcations affect one’s self-identification. This identification may also lead one to develop aversion for the poor class as such individuals crave to identify with the white world and thereby seek entry into the white upper-middle class, severing their ties with the black people. Wilson dramatizes the process of denial of money, power, and opportunities on the basis of race and shows how its repercussions are monetary or financial in nature. When these black people are forced to remain dispossessed they begin to doubt the significance and value of their own color and community, because they can see how the white man enjoys and relishes life on account of being white. And these doubts stimulate in them a desire to emulate the white man.

Caesar Wilks in *Gem of the Ocean* is a black character who, as a coping strategy, opts to lick the boots of the white master and denigrate his own community, and by extension necessarily his own self. When he is recruited as a policeman and assigned the duty “. . . you fry the little fish and send the big fish to me” (40), he gradually starts identifying with the white capitalist society and ideology. Consequently, in order to appease the white authorities and rise the ladder of success, he resorts to “defensive othering or intra-group othering” as defined by Karen D. Payke: “. . . 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. This is the double bind of oppressed identities, as previously noted, for the subjugated cannot so easily escape their otherness” (557). His obsession with the lure of power and position inculcates in him hatred, aversion and disgust not only for black people but for black ways of life, culture, rituals and above all for Aunt Ester. He sings the sharks of the Industry and mill’s glory and makes all attempts to keep it running: “Industry is what drive the country. Without Industry wouldn’t nobody be working. These nigger can’t see that” (Wilson, *Gem of 35*). The
industry that enslaves people through the vicious circle of debt is praised and protected by him. His language, correct structures, and his linguistic attitude towards blacks reek of the hatred he has for his own community. His upward rise is ensured by his reverent gestures towards the whites and his acting white in the absence of the white masters: “Too many niggers breed trouble. . . . My name’s Caesar. I’m the boss man around here” (Wilson, *Gem of 32*). He exploits the poor, disempowered and dumb black people through his bakery, lodging and debts. In contrast to the poor conditions of the black accommodation, he has clean lodges. Caesar’s internalization of the capitalistic ideology is so acute that he abhors the Emancipation Proclamation. His adherence to and upholding of Law, murder and arrest of fellow black people, fascination with the middle class ethics of correct English, cleanliness and order corroborate the fact that Caesar has severed his ties with the working class poor blacks. Harry J. Elam asserts about his “internalized racism”: “Like West in *Two Trains Running*, he has accepted the rewards of money over the possibilities of collective action and consciousness. He exploits his own people. . . . As a consequence, he is bereft of the sort of spirit and spiritual justice that Wilson ultimately promotes” (Elam 83).

Another example of urge to move upward white way is dramatized in *Two Trains Running*. West, through his business as undertaker, and his connections with the white system, rises in the rank of upper-middle class of the black society. His management of his business, his dressing style, his language and attitudes towards the black people and their issues highlight his middle class ethics. Just like Caesar, he also claims to have had a number of experiences in different professions—gambler, numbers runner, and bootleg liquor seller. He owns seven Cadillac cars, operates four or five viewing rooms. His refusal to throw the twenty dollars in the river underscores how he has embraced capitalist ethics. The paradox of this black man’s life is that he ascends the ladder of success by burying the fellow blacks. He commercializes the business of mortician and makes money in all possible ways. In contrast to raggedy, unkempt dressing style of the poor blacks, West asserts his elitism by supporting a “white shirt and black hat, suit and tie, . . . shines his shoes until the heels run over” (Snodgrass 212). The upper-middle classes with money and power demarcate themselves distinct from the poor people by virtue of fashion, style, food/dietary tastes, penchant for luxury cars and obsession with
cleanliness. Apart from distinguishing the rich people from the poor ones, it also functions as enticement to encourage people to pursue the American Dream. By dint of his commercial attitude, and liaisons with the white capitalist system, he has realized the American Dream of prosperity and wealth: “He own every other building around here. Them that Hertzberger don’t own” (Wilson, *Two Trains*13). Memphis further says “West gonna get richer and everybody else gonna get poorer” (14). There’s no doubt what West has achieved is commendable for a black man in those times. But Wilson’s drama also considers the cost at which all this prosperity comes. The American Dream remains a bait in his case also as West has severed his ties from the community. In his narrative, the self remains central as compared to community and family. He fails to comprehend the redemptive power of the rite of passage suggested by Aunt Ester. His preoccupation with the dollar and American Dream blurs his vision:

WEST. I offered to give her the twenty dollars just for her time . . . but she wouldn’t take it. Told me to throw it in the river. I’d rather see her with it than to see it at the bottom of the river. I just wasn’t gonna do that with my money. (Wilson, *Two Trains* 70)

West claims to love his wife, but can’t shed twenty dollars to ensure if she is happy after her death. Wilson also reiterates here that American Dream takes the ethics of community, family, self-respect and self-pride away from the black people.

Actually, these black people who reach the top were the ground wherein thinkers like Du Bois anchored the hopes of the rise and sustenance of the black community. He estimated that these ten percent people of African origin, by dint of their education, skills and guts, would be able to participate and achieve “bigness” in the capitalistic society. But in his project or dream, these “talented tenths” should come forward and deliver the remaining poor ninety percent. These ten percent should become leader of the masses and emancipate them. But gradually, Du Bois “became aware that the Talented Tenth were separating themselves from the working classes, and instead of providing leadership, they were taking part in a capitalistic society, sometimes to the point of exploiting other blacks. Du Bois saw these class divisions as a threat to the unity, and as such, it would also be a threat to social reform” (Horne and Young 180). Wilson creates characters like West and Caesar that “gonna get richer and everybody else gonna get poorer” (Wilson,
Two Trains 14) to show the harms and dangers inherent in the mad pursuit of the myth of American Dream.

Roosevelt is another upper-middle class person who has dissociated himself from the issues, lives and problems of the black people. He is “avid golfer, soon-to-be Mellon Bank Vice-President and part owner of and golf talkshow host on WBTZ radio” (Booker 185). His desire to succeed is so intense that he agrees to play and live by white man’s rule. He loves playing golf, “an upper-class individual sport played on manicured greens” (Booker 185). His penchant for the golf that is symbolic of elitism, royalty, individualism and leisure time sets the stage for his gradual trading and selling his roots and community ethics to appear white. As the elite white people denigrate the black people homogeneously seeing them as ill-mannered, backward, primitive, criminals, and drug-addicts, people like Roosevelt try to get acknowledgment from the white people by marking their class and taste distinction. His game, manners, speech habits and use of correct grammar all set him apart, he thinks, from the black people. He even goes to the extent of demolishing Aunt Ester’s house. When Harmond tries to procure it, Roosevelt plans to cheat his best friend, a manifest erosion of community ethics of honesty, faith and truthfulness under the impact of capitalism. Sterling’s dialogue with him puts in the bright light where his erosion and degradation becomes distinct and palpable:

STERLING. You a Negro. . . . I know the truth of it. I’m a nigger. Negroes are the worst thing in God’s creation. Niggers got style. . . . A dog knows it’s a dog. A cat knows it’s a cat. But a Negro don’t know he’s a negro. He think he’s a white man. It’s Negroes like you who hold us back. (Wilson, Radio Golf 76)

When provoked by Sterling, he severs his ties from “us” and asserts his identity in terms of money and job. Wilson also reiterates through him that African-Americans are doomed the moment they start measuring, manifesting, and evaluating the others as well as themselves with the capitalistic yardstick of material possession and power. Wilson, in his interview to Suzan Lori Parks, registers his intension and apprehension in writing Radio Golf:

My idea was that the black middle class seems to be divorcing themselves from that community, making their fortune on their own without
recognizing or acknowledging their connection to the larger community. And I thought we have gained a lot of sophistication and expertise and resources and we should be helping that community, which is completely devastated by drugs and crime and the social practices of the past hundred years of the country. (viii)

Registering his apprehensions and dramatizing his concerns, Wilson makes the statement in bold letters that this blind adherence to the mythological American Dream and desire to ascend it at the cost of community can be detrimental to self, others and community members. Through the example of Roosevelt, Wilson critiques the American Dream as a tool to institutionalize cultural and capitalistic whiteness as the only available yardstick. He also tends to alarm African-Amercians about the erosion and disruption of cultural roots, ties and ethics. But such characters/individuals tend to forget that however hard they may try to appease the white middle class people by resorting to “intraracial othering,” they themselves cannot escape the process of subjugation. He does not know that people like Bernie Smith use him and throw him, as he is blinded by the prospects of rising high. Wilson’s oeuvre contains many such characters who try to make it big by means of submission to the white man and turning indifferent, harsh and apathetic to the people of African-American community. Seth Holly in Joe Turner’s Come and Gone, Avery in The Piano Lesson, Holloway’s Grandfather in Two Trains Running and Levee in Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom are other such characters who yield to the capitalist society for their material gains. Besides, Prophet Samuel, although there is no account of him going to the extremes of self-denigration and humiliation, adopts the capitalistic model of religion and by his consumerist-religious practices, he manages to accumulate good money. Wilson’s oeuvre includes variety of characters that resist ideological straight-jacketing and show diversity and multi-dimensionality.

His assignment of antagonistic roles to these characters who submit their African-American values makes it clear that in Wilson’s scheme of things, such strategies and success achieved through them will never be celebrated and eulogized. Further, this cultural and class antagonism keeps them outside Wilson’s redemptive model for the African-American community. Their own wrong choices alienate them from their community, family and even from self on the one hand; on the other, they remain
marginalized, subservient to the white capitalistic middle class. Especially people like Caesar, Levee and Roosevelt reinscribe their commodification; they remain property of the white man. Their submission and desire to emulate the white man make them objects or playthings in the hands of the white capitalistic society which they can put to use the way it can accrue maximum profit.

Wilson critiques equally vehemently the pursuit of American Dream by those characters who don’t outrightly submit to the white man. Actually, in Levee Green, the narcissistic antagonist in *Ma Rainey*, Wilson has created a multi-dimensional and complex character that resists simple categorization. Having seen his mother being raped by the white men, his father being lynched in the process of revenge and himself having been dealt a deadly blow of knife across his chest, Levee grows up with the whole sea of anger, disgust and hatred against the white man. But from his father, he claims to have learnt: “. . . go up and grin in this cracker’s face . . . smile in his face and sell him his land . . . I can smile and say ‘yessir’ to whoever I please” (*Ma Rainey’s* 56). Rash, brat and flaring as he is, Levee’s strategy to achieve or realize American Dream by suppressing his rage makes him and his behaviour a complicated study. Having internalized the capitalistic ideology of class hierarchy and attendant issues, he attempts to register himself in terms of distinction from the other black band members. He ridicules the country working class manners of Toledo and Slow Drag who wear clodhoppers (southern) in contrast to his own brand new Florsheim that are costly, stylish and modern. Through his pursuit of capitalistic ideals of money and status, Wilson highlights how many of attendant capitalistic behavioural traits have possessed Levee very intensely. He, time and again, snubs and meddles with the band members for their southern working class manners. His tempering with Ma’s song and selling of his own version to Sturdyvant highlight how he lacks in community ethics. He relentlessly refuses to be a part of the community and it is shown in the way he keeps playing his instrument in his own distinct way. He fails to realize that blues, as African American cultural symbol, entails the ethics of community, unity and togetherness. His individualism is the impact of American Dream and other capitalistic ideals that eulogize self over group. He disowns his own being and essence as he attempts to escape the stigma of being black by marking, time and again, his distinction, style, Florsheim, his version of song. But double
consciousness problematizes his integrity and sense of self badly. When Sturdyvant tends to frustrate Levee’s plans, he misdirects his violence on Toledo and kills him. This rage is triggered by Toledo’s making dirty Levee’s Florsheim by his clodhoppers. Thus, the pursuit of American Dream necessitates the adherence to a behavioural pattern and priority ethics that Wilson marks as completely opposite to African-American values. Levee is just like Shakespeare’s Coriolanus who is an enemy unto himself because both carry a rage, a temper that flares up in the most complex and critical situations in the undesirable directions.

Sometimes, poor blacks with desire to rise high find all the avenues to succeed closed for them. Especially people like Levee and Floyd are more prone to find the going tough as they anchor their dreams and desires in the capitalistic sand/soil. Wilson also intends to show that black person can hardly achieve success solely by adhering to the capitalist value code. Consequently, many of his characters who even manage to make it big find themselves forlorn, alienated and uprooted. Floyd SchoolBoy Barton is another narcissistic musician, complementary to Levee. Brenda Murphy captures his dream of bigness aptly:

Everything Floyd does in the play is meant to be a step towards his goal of getting his guitar, his sidemen and Vera to Chicago, which is synonymous for him with ‘opportunity’, a concept he can articulate only in terms of the material status symbols of a Buick or a Cadillac, a telephone and expensive furniture; ‘The white man ain’t the only one can have a car and nice furniture.’ (130-131)

Immature and volatile as he is, just like Levee, he finds his chance to opportunity stalled by the white establishment. Like Ma, he is denied the royalty for his hit song and paid a flat fee. His obsession for the opportunity and desire to ‘make it big’ turns him almost mad when recurrent failures frustrate him: “If I have to buy me a graveyard and kill everybody I see. I am going to Chicago. I don’t want to live my life without” (Wilson, Two Trains 78). But he forgets that his ‘chances’ to “opportunity” are stalled by the intersecting powers of race and class. The white world sees him in terms of a labourer and his blackness strengthens this approach. He ultimately gets killed by King Hedley when he is unearthing the money he has stolen from the bank. In his case, Wilson
highlights a range of issues related to black class. The white world remains the primary obstacle so far as a black man’s chances of ‘bigness’ are concerned. But Wilson’s critique is not concerned about it. In all black literature and life, it is apparent and given and it would be contradiction to gainsay otherwise. Further, even his dream of money and luxury seems to have nothing that Wilson’s theatre abhors. But Wilson critiques the cost at which such choices, opportunities and chances are materialized. Just like Levee, Floyd too, like a big child, lets the devil of capitalism take away his soul, his spirit, his song. It is good to have firm determination to succeed and advance, but this determination should never entail the elimination of fellow blacks, their sense of self and integrity as the norm. Even Vera Dotson stands tangential to his dream. He commits theft and, in the process, has a fellow black shot dead by the police. Floyd is oblivious as to when he gets uprooted from the soil of African-American community while all the time pouring himself out exuberantly with eyes firmly fixed on the future dream of Chicago. Brenda Murphy makes a very relevant remark:

Floyd’s dream of the future was a dream of material gadgets and empty status symbols, uprooted from the community that had nurtured and supported him. Even his music was played on an electric guitar that he sold his old acoustic guitar to acquire and at a further remove, on the radio. (133)

Wilson’s theatre project entails the twin objectives of proving the futility and dangers of capitalistic ideology, class and American Dream and establishing a vibrant, pulsating and self-integrating model of community and ethnocentricity. His project underscores galvanizing the African-Americans to measure and weigh the cost of class fluidity and advancement. Capitalistic values, class system and American Dream all assume white Christian European Anglo-American mores and traditions as the centre. Hence, by establishing this ideology of bourgeois superiority, they institutionalize aversion in blacks against poverty and working class ethics. Consequently, aspiring black individuals tend to frame their behaviour and attitudes to suit the white middle class mentality. Through Roosevelt’s correct grammar, love for Golf, West’s obsession with neat dress and standard waiting rooms, Seth’s repeated attempts to keep the lodging tidy and ordered, Levee’s and Floyd’s penchant for and pride in having luxury cars, clothes
and what not, Wilson underlines their conscious attempts at erosion of their African-American attitudes, behavioural patterns and style. It is as detrimental to themselves as to the whole community as Sterling snubs Roosevelt that it is assimilationists like him who smear the reputation of the whole community by submitting to the white man. Consequently, such characters remains disintegrated, uprooted and alienated without any possibility of redemption.

Actually in Wilson’s ethnocentric world, even those characters are integrated who develop coping strategies American way. When they find the capitalistic power stalling their progress, they take judicial, constitutional and legal route to fight discrimination. As human beings, born in poverty, it is natural to have a desire to live a life with luxuries and amenities. But their pursuit should not stem from or lead towards aversion for the working class poor blacks. Troy, Memphis, Jim Becker and Booster and Harmond all decide to take the judicial or legal route to fight discrimination on the basis of race and class. Unlike the assimilationists, they remain anchored to culture and community. Troy in *Fences* raises his voice against the capitalist system that enforces the myth of black inferiority by assigning the job of garbage picking to the blacks. He, as a proletariat, reiterates his demand before the union and becomes the first colored man to become a driver: “Your daddy got a promotion on the rubbish. . . . He’s gonna be first colored driver. Ain’t got to do nothing but sit up there and read the paper like them white fellows” (Wilson, *Fences* 44).

Troy accumulates this wisdom from his exposure to the exploitation by segregation of the capitalist system. He too is full of rage, and anger, but he neither resorts to submission nor to self-destruction. Similarly, Memphis Lee in *Two Trains Running* faces the threat of the redevelopment projects that plans to demolish his restaurant. West, like a leech, comes and offers to purchase the land with confessed desire to make some money. But Memphis, after seeing Aunt Ester, decides to fight the case in the court. After initial failure, he hires Bartomoro, and manages to secure $35,000 not $25,000 even against his own expectations. Having seen Aunt Ester, he plans to go back to the south and reclaim his land from Stovall and his white gang. In his scheme of things, money becomes a means to reclaim his roots, his land, his self and integrity unlike
Roosevelt who makes the money an object, the ‘ultimate signified’ of his identity: “If you drop the ball, you got to go back and pick it up” (Wilson, Two Trains 8). Jim Becker too resolves to fight the demolition orders by raising a voice against it. However, he dies; his son seems to carry forward the dreams, decisions and duties of his father. Harmond Wilks too in Radio Golf resorts to using the legal path to forestall the demolition of Aunt Ester’s House. After tracing his roots, and their vital significance, a sudden change occurs in his nature and attitude. He takes it upon himself to stop and revert the decision of demolition of Aunt Ester’s house. Without doubt, he is likely to face many political, financial and class-status losses; his mayoral candidacy stands challenged and Roosevelt begins to desert him the moment he realizes that Harmond’s decision and intent will irate the white capitalist bosses. So, in order to save the house, Harmond takes recourse to law:

HARMOND (Taking this all in). Okay. Okay. Bedford Hills owns 1839 Wylie. Okay. But Bedford Hills acquired 1839 Wylie illegally. It bought it from me. But I didn’t own it. I bought the house before it went to auction. That’s against the law. That’s corruption. I’m going down to the courthouse and file an injunction to stop the demolition. (Wilson, Radio Golf 70)

However, Wilson leaves the matter of Aunt Ester’s house unresolved as his primary focus through this issue was to see if in the 20th century, blacks still respect and claim the African-American heritage. Moreover, as Harmond’s intent to procure and respect Aunt Ester’s House is an affirmation of African identity, his decision to save it through legal action as an American citizen underlines the American part of the legacy. Thus, dreams and actions of these blacks are rooted in their African-American identity and they draw sustenance, vitality and meaning by claiming both parts of this hyphenated identity.

It is obvious that August Wilson’s project of redefinition lays claim to both the dimensions of the hyphenated identity term, this claiming has to be balanced lest one should eliminate or overshadow the other. Because this identity locates them in a culture where the issue of their being, self and status is problematized by the problematic nature of this term, as traditionally both the African and the American stand in opposition to each other. Wilson’s drama also traces how this dynamic and complex identity
problematizes or influences classism as well. Class influences and shapes the routine
habits of food, dress and fashion, architecture and language. But when black people
become class-conscious, it tends to demand a change in their manners and behaviours in
accordance with the standards of lifestyle of the upper class white society as if they were
universal at the cost of their own. Wilson’s oeuvre subtly establishes the ramifications of
both the approaches; of the ones who consciously adulterate their behaviour to get
acceptance in the white society; and of those who live their life spontaneously
uninhibited and uninfluenced by this class issue. Caesar, in *Gem of the Ocean*, gives
account of how he started the business of bakery: “I look around and see where niggers
got to eat and niggers got to sleep. I say if I had some bread I’d be a rich man” (Wilson,
*Gem of 39*). But as a man preoccupied with money, in the hunger of people he sees an
opportunity to become rich. His richness thrives on black man’s devastation and hunger.
He improvises his dishes as per people’s demands, but hikes the price as well. After he
becomes the police officer, he offers at his bakery the magic loaf: “Got a big sign say.
You only have to eat half as much to get twice as full. And I charge one and a half times
for it” (37). His preoccupation does not stop at exploiting the already poor blacks, he kills
a black boy “over a loaf of bread” (38). This amount of depravity over food shows how
he has sold his soul to the demon of capitalistic system where making money is the sole
priority. The same motif of thriving at the African-American poverty and loss recurs in
*Two Trains Running* where West makes money by buying the dying blacks. As his dress
and manners show, he tries to assert his identity not through identification but through
distinction from the fellow blacks. When he visits Memphis’s restaurant, he keeps
demanding sugar, a sign of inner bitterness of his soul that only another black individual
can satisfy by offering sugar. It is symbolic of his greed of money that can be satisfied by
the death of black people. It also tantamounts to the inner bitterness caused by his self-
denial, self-exploitation and self-depravity by remaining aloof from the black community
and, its panacea can be found only in the black community (restaurant) and only through
a black individual (Risa); but his difficulty is that he would not accept it. In another case,
Wilson constructs the narrative of white denial and black resistance and affirmation
through Lutz and Hambone’s problem predicated upon food. Lutz gets his fences painted
by Hambone and instead of a ham as promised, he offers him a chicken. But Hambone
resists it for nine and a half years. He would go daily to Lutz’s store and demand his ham. To Memphis’ idea that it’s Hambone’s foolishness, Holloway affirms: “He might be more in his right mind than you are. He might have more sense than any of us” (30). Through the metaphor of “ham and chicken,” Wilson underscores that black people must resist “whatever the white man throw at him” (31) and claim what is their rightful due, a reverberation of Wilson’s mother’s refusal to accept the used washing machine because she won and deserved a brand new machine.

These cultural dynamics of food are reflected in terms of drinks being served and shared as a symbol of status among affluent blacks. They also act as bonding agents of the elite group, asserting the exclusive nature of the small group. The above discussion bears that food is also reflective of class consciousness, money-making, money-losing and demarcation of classes. In Ma Rainey’s, the black troupe members have to demand for their food and it arrives again with scarcity and dearth for the black members. The delis, sandwiches, coca-cola all are symbols of white culture and black characters are not served these foods easily. This scarcity shows white man’s lack of warmth, denying the blacks their due, negation of civil manners, and intent to increase their own profits. Toledo elaborates an allusion of food and eating to signify the black man’s lot in the American culture:

TOLEDO. The white man knows you just a leftover. ‘Cause he the one who done the eating and he know what he done ate. But we don’t know that we been took and made history out of. Done went and filled the white man’s belly and now he’s full and tired and want you to get out the way and let him be by himself. (Wilson, Ma Rainey’s 45)

To counter this metaphor of “historical leftover” and scarcity, and withholding of food, Wilson employs a great variety and richness of soulfood in his drama. Marry Ellen Snodgrass opines: “In urban surroundings, the newcomers cultivated soulfood, the comfort foods that linked them to home and the ingredients raised in humble kitchen gardens, fruit and nut trees, and poultry pens or gleaned from woods, rivers and seashores” (188). Wilson places the denial of food and its scarcity in the white world and the black middle class in the context of black poor class’s hunger for food of body and soul. Levee, Citizen Barlow, Jeremy Furlow, Boy Willie, Hambone, Sterling and Elmore
all come to north with a parching body and soul. The only saving grace is that there are characters who are capable and ready to help them. In the first encounter with Citizen, the first thing Aunt Ester does is to offer him food: “. . . Are you hungry. She [Black Mary] got them pigfeet on but they ain’t done yet. She gonna make a pot of soup when she come back” (Wilson, Gem of 20). Food may be scarce, but these ethnocentric individuals offer all they have. The same motive is repeated in Joe Turner’s Come and Gone. Jeremy asks for extra biscuits from Bertha who never fails to supply them. In fact, Bertha fills the lodging house with warmth and care by offering every citizen the food she has irrespective of class and color. Levee too is hungry but the zeal and excitement with which he devours the deli and sandwiches, typical symbols of American consumerism and capitalism, shows his willingness and readiness to do anything to make it big: even if it includes devouring the share or right of a fellow black person. Subscription to the myth of American Dream inculcates the ethics of competition, eradicating fellow feelings and it is apparent in his hunger and strategies to satisfy it. Boy Willie too arrives hungry to the north and he along with Lymon is served the soulfood. Doaker offers them his bottle as well as his grilled bread. His characters preserve a major portion of their agrarian heritage in the form of southern meals of pigfeet, short ribs, striped watermelons and the fried chickens, grits and biscuits. Even at Memphis’ restaurant, the menu shows abundance and richness of African-American food – collard greens, mashed potatoes, meat loaf and chicken, green beans etc. Barbara C. Bigelow notes that traditional African-American food consists of “southern fried chicken, pork chops, fish, potato salad, turkey and dressing, and rice and gravy. In later years, this diet – which grew to include pigfeet, chitlins (hog intestines), collard greens (a vegetable) and ham hocks – became known as ‘soul food’” (32). Wilson’s catalogue of food not only underlines the richness and vitality but it also functions as the necessary ingredient for the parched spirit of the black people. In contrast to the theme of withholding, these black characters manifest the ethics of sharing, spreading and celebration. Even when Seth Holly, typical northern born black, tries to withhold, Bertha resists this idea and seeks fulfilment through sharing. Rose too does the same thing and finds meaning and contentment in sharing – typical black ethnic feature. This food also serves as a token of love, emotion and camaraderie and family. Risa, Rose, Aunt Ester and Bertha also find contentment and
realize their self against the capitalistic agenda of selfish accumulation. Risa keeps offering free coffee and food to Hambone that temporarily silences the cries of his soul-“I want my ham.” After Hambone’s death, Sterling steals a ham from Lutz’s shop and seeks to bury it with Hambone; thus food becomes a central metaphor in the life of Hambone who becomes mad because of its denial and an otherworldly resurrection and redemption is attempted through the act of stealing.

Food in Wilson’s redefinition signifies the African-American ethics of sharing, abundance, richness, warmth, love, responsibility and ethnocentricity. He further extends the project of African-American cultural and class redefinition to the sphere of such routine activities as clothing, language and mannerisms. By using the dramatic device of contrast in dressing styles, he highlights the role of class ideology that exacts the performance befitting the desired class. It is the myth of American Dream that prescribes the do’s and don’ts even in the ordinary day-to-day activities. It tends to rob the middle class blacks of their spontaneity, vibrancy, fluency and natural rhythms of life. Caesar wears a tidy and clean suit and a hat. Similarly, West wears a white shirt and everything else he puts on is black with shining shoes. He is always too tidy, neat and clean, using gloves in his profession and at other places also. Roosevelt and Harmond too, who have to see the rich whites daily, follow the middle class standards of dressing. Roosevelt appears wearing gold dress, a sign of middle class richness. In contrast to them are the ethnocentric poor blacks who wear simple apparel, most of the time their work clothes. Solly supports a coat and a battered hat. Boy Willie asserts his agrarian farmboy personality by refusing to purchase and support the stylish dress offered by Wining Boy: “That look nice . . . if you like that kind of thing. I don’t like them dress-up kind of clothes” (Wilson, *The Piano* 63). Similarly, Troy’s and Bono’s dresses are explained as: “The men carry lunch buckets wear or carry burlap aprons and are dressed in clothes suitable to their jobs as garbage collectors” (Wilson, *Fences* 9). But it does not mean that all the ethnocentric and poor blacks abhor and deride fashion. Correcting Seth’s opinion of Loomis, Bynum comments: “He ain’t no gambler. Gamblers wear nice shoes. This fellow got on clodhoppers. He been out there walking up and down them roads” (Wilson, *Joe Turner’s* 24). And Wilson repeats this divide between clodhoppers – symbols of southern agrarian black society and Florsheim – modern, fashionable symbols
of wealth and style of the northern society. Levee kills Toledo for stepping his clodhoppers on his new Florsheim, signifying that he harbours the aversion for his own roots and culture to the extent of murdering it. Further, even minor characters in different plays like Lymon Jackson, Lyons and Mister support neat stylish dresses reinforcing Bynum’s opinion that hustlers and gamblers wear good and stylish clothes. But they don’t let the neatness and style of dress drain their vital emotions, feelings and expressions. On the contrary, Ma Rainey’s dress is an affirmation of her own being in her own style. Her lavish style with “. . . a full length fur coat with matching hat, an emerald green dress, and several strands of pearls of varying lengths” (Wilson, Ma Rainey’s 36) is an affirmation of her identity, style and standard. Given the style and standards of the times set by the white patriarchal society, she appears a tiny ugly woman. But Ma doesn’t let her being, her spirit and her body be defined and measured with the yardstick of the white middle class beauty standards. Her dress is an extension of her mood and spirit befitting a blues singer, uninhibited by the white standards of class, beauty and behaviour. Her spirit and soul remain as spontaneous, emancipated and direct as her fashion. The assumed superiority, order and discipline are symbolic of adherence to system, order and white culture, reflected in the dresses Wilson’s assimilationist characters wear. But ironically, it appears to disrupt the order of their being, their essence and cultural roots. In order to adhere to the elite discourse that necessitates sternness, control and withholding of emotions and expression, these characters lack in spontaneity and vibrancy. Their each act is the denial of their essence, their spirit and soul. Even Seth Holly, sometimes, manifests these traces of his lineage of a black northern American. He also distances himself from the southern blacks. Consequently, Seth as well as other middle class aspirants fail to participate in the rituals of life and its celebrations. They never smile, cry and freely express their emotions. West, despite his love for his wife, fails to throw twenty dollars in the river as he is too much possessed by the capitalist ideology. Caesar, at his disowning by his sister, stands stunned and then moves on, failing to appeal to her emotionally to review and reconsider her decision. Roosevelt too snaps his ties from Harmond very coldly. As compared to them, Troy, Boy Willie, Jeremy and Solly and other ethnocentric characters ooze a spontaneity that is conspicuously missing in the middle class blacks. Memphis cries at the death of his
mother; Solly cries at the realization that his freedom is meaningless till his fellow blacks live in slavery. Troy too cries when he has to leave his father’s house. In *Joe Turner’s*, Bertha coaxes Mattie:

BERTHA. You hear me, Mattie? I’m talking about laughing. The kind of laugh that comes from way deep inside. To just stand and laugh and let life flow right through you. Just laugh to let yourself know you’re alive. (*She begins to laugh. It’s a near-hysterical laughter that is a celebration of life, both its pain and its blessing. Mattie and Bynum join in the laughter.*). (Wilson, *Joe Turner’s* 80)

This buoyancy, rhythm and joy is the cost what the middle class blacks pay in order to ascend the ladder of success and class.

Considering the socio-cultural exigencies of the racial society in America, an individual cannot manage to be by himself/herself. Since the larger white capitalistic world remains hostile and cruel to the blacks, it is the community that provides sustenance and nurturance to such black individuals. They draw vitality and get redemption and healing on the bruises given by the larger capitalistic society. But Wilson reiterates throughout his oeuvre that the individuals too owe a sense of responsibility towards community. As noticed above, during migration, the northern capitalists would keep changing the black men on the same post from day-to-day: “They were ‘free’ to be hired at the lowest wages, and ‘free’ to be fired at a moment’s notice” (Jones 19). It inculcated in the southern blacks, besides financial insecurity, a feeling of jealousy, competition and rivalry. This motif persists throughout his theatre and Wilson’s characters seem to uphold and eulogize the significance of community and culture. His characters negotiate the atmosphere of insecurity, competition, jealousy and individualism established by the capitalist culture. Although given such an atmosphere, commitment to community never comes without personal, economic, political losses. In *Jitney*, Becker employs many blacks as drivers. Being the boss and owner of the station, Becker practices his authority to maintain discipline and order, a necessity to thrive in a consumerist culture. But his life has been a saga of hard work and assiduousness. He acquires property, looks after his family and retires from the mill with pension in good health. He also chastises those who tend to spoil his business reputation. This cab station
and culture of Jitney stations are firmly entrenched in the economy and culture of African-Americans. As the larger capitalistic world denies the blacks job opportunities and fair consumer services, the black people like Becker develop a parallel economy: “If enforced separation denied access to the market place as suppliers, the reasoning went, why should African Americans support mainstream business? Jitney cabs were part of a larger internal infrastructure fostering an economy, milieu and even folklore” (Krasner 158-59). And this collective sense of Negro Life in America is embodied in the nature and operations of jitney cab station (Richard Right). Despite his position and property, Jim Becker hasn’t severed his ties from the community. Rather, he helps poor black in running their households in all possible ways. Further, his jitney station doesn’t only employ the drivers; but by locating it in the segregated black area, Wilson shows how a whole black economy may develop. Becker’s resolve brings profit for all, and not only for himself. His spirit is the embodiment of Toledo’s “we” (Ma Rainey) and Sterling’s “us” (Radio Golf):

BECKER. And if we don’t do something they’ll put Clifford out of business. Put Hester out of business. Put us out of business. Let Clifford go on and sell his fish sandwich till they get ready to build something. Let Hester go on and sell her milk and butter ‘cause we gonna run Jitney’s out of here till the day before the bulldozer come! (Wilson, Jitney 68)

This “collective sense of life” entails the good of all the people of the black community. He imagines his Jitney station to be more than a commercial business: “We providing a service to the community. We ain’t just giving rides to people. We providing a service” (69). In Becker, Wilson embodies his idea of black community whose members understand a sense of duty and responsibility to it. Once such blacks are in financially sound position, they help others live a life of dignity. The capitalistic society has not eroded his sense of integrity and community. In his view, it is the whole black community that is pitted against the financial, racial and ideological encroachment of the capitalistic white America and his characters counter it through an ethnocentric economy. Similarly, Memphis Lee in Two Trains Running provides a safe haven to have-nots. His restaurant has a number of black visitors where they are greeted and served as more than customers. And it functions as home for those who have lost their way in the world. In an
atmosphere of structural injustice and violence, “that is capable not only of marginalizing them in the workplace, but also annihilating them and their dreams altogether” (Shannon 112), Memphis, like Becker and Ma Rainey, achieves some measure of success and adheres “. . . to what seems to be an understood code that compels them to reach back to help those of his race who are less fortunate” (Shannon 114). Wilson’s theatre makes this statement of duty and responsibility towards community vis-a-vis the capitalistic rhetoric that propagates the ethics of narcissism and self-centricity. Although, Memphis keeps complaining and grudging about Hambone and other black people’s issues, his restaurant never fails to supply food, coffee and whatever it can offer to them. Time and again, Memphis snubs Wolf for using his phone for illegal numbers game, but this snub never goes to the extent of denying the use of the phone and Wolf also finds accommodation and welcome. Memphis becomes further entrenched in the African-American ethics once he sees the supreme guiding spirit, Aunt Ester. After coming in contact with her, most of the characters manifest some sense of community, thus turning their struggle against the capitalistic forces into a blues performance, where through their distinctive voices/ways, they contribute to the final outcome – the song of ethnic integrity and vitality. Memphis’s “I” is transformed into “we,” into “everybody” at the death/funeral of Hambone:

MEMPHIS. Risa take this fifty dollars and get some flowers. (Gives her some money). Get him a bunch put on there where it say who it’s from . . . say it’s from everybody . . . everybody whoever dropped the ball and went back to pick it up. (Wilson, Two Trains 99)

And Sterling returns carrying a large ham “that’s for Hambone’s casket” (99). Here, varied and nuanced responses to Hambone’s death aim at the integration and resurrection of his parched, craving and dispossessed spirit. Hambone’s stance that the black men should not accept anything less than what is his due is justified. The capitalistic forces try their best to exploit and uproot the black people. But Wilson highlights the fact that although material possession and accumulation too is necessary to run life but it should not turn them hostile and indifferent to the poor blacks. Memphis even plans to open a restaurant on his return that would give opportunity of job and service to more blacks. Ma Rainey also fights against the capitalistic industry that relentlessly dispossesses blacks on account of their color. Conversant with the crude and
cold procedures of structural injustices employed by the capitalistic music industry, she circumvents this system and asserts her authority through all she has – blackness, blues and voice, and employs counter-discursive tactics. She asks to be treated respectfully, demands food and coca-cola, more heat in the studio and a microphone for her stuttering nephew. Unlike some other middle class characters, she has not blinded herself by her status, as a blues celebrity singer, though she remains aware of her position in capitalist music industry that inexorably attempts to commodify her.

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 to be treated no matter how much it hurt them . . . . As soon as they get my voice down on them recording machines, then it is just like if I’d be some whore and they roll over and put their pants on. (Wilson, *Ma Rainey’s 63*)

Her circumvention is not individualistic and self-centred. She does not counter them just to extract the money that Sturdyvant is withholding. She endeavours to get respect, honour and financial gains extended to her band members. Discounting her arrogance and authoritative tone owing to the fact that it is necessitated by her struggle against the multiple forces of class, race, patriarchy and black patriarchy, her attempts are ethnocentric. She thrashes capitalistic and elitist forces whether they are white or black. Again, Wilson underlines the idea of middle class people’s responsibility to community. Consequently, the band she forms is all black.

Ethnocentricity is redefined in the last play of the Cycle – *Radio Golf*. Here, Wilson negotiates the transformation in the lives and class of the blacks with the transformation in their ideas. For most of the part, Harmond and Roosevelt, the middle class black realty developers, remain a threat to the black community. The threat is symbolized by the impending demolition of Aunt Ester’s residence. But even after Sterling and Old Joe visit them and coax them Roosevelt remains unmoved. However, Harmond’s attitude changes and gradually the apparent signs of capitalism and middle class give way to ethnocentric and African-American values, ideas and priorities. After he has visited Aunt Ester’s house, he gives a very touching, spiritual and communal account of the house, uncouth for a man who has been trained to be a middle class.
aspirant of American Dream. He elaborates it as a “Federalist brick house” with Brazilian wood and stained glass window:

HARMOND. You should feel the woodwork. If you run your hand slow over some of the wood you can make out these carvings. There’s faces. Lines making letters. An old language. And there’s this smell in the air . . . the air in the house smells sweet like a new day. (Wilson, Radio Golf 62)

This feeling, breathing and sighing account oozes the dormant deeper spiritual connection with the African-American community that Harmond comes to realize. As he visits Aunt Ester’s house, the thin veneer of capitalist values is removed and his bond with the community is revived. His account and penchant for the old architecture also stands in contrast to Roosevelt’s plans about his new office that has an apparent capitalistic aura: “My new office is getting painted today. Light money green. Wait till you see the view. When stadium’s built, I’ll be able to almost watch the Pirates play” (61).

Roosevelt’s architectural preference reveals that he has given his soul over to the devil of money and greed. But Harmond gradually becomes more committed to save Aunt Ester’s House – a place that now signifies the haven and home for blacks. In short, Aunt Ester’s house becomes a trope carrying the potentialities of transforming and sensitizing blacks to their ethnicity and history. Wilson also makes the point clear that such a commitment by a middle class person would invite a backlash from the white control system. Harmond braces to face the loss of mayoral candidacy, and he finds the gates of financial ladder closing on himself and Mame faces loss of her political and financial positions. Towards the end, he sacrifices not only personal and familial benefits but his friendship also for the community, history and heritage. He removes the poster of Tiger Woods from the wall – a symbol of individualistic rise of a black person through an apparently capitalistic and royal game. Harmond’s further actions and accompanying voices on the stage that close the play are highly symbolic that continue the symbolic removal of the poster. The message is clear; Harmond crushes and removes the middle class layer and puts on a new ethnocentric hue: “He takes off his coat and rolls up his
sleeves. He picks up the paintbrush and exits. ‘Hail, Hail, the Gang’s All Here’ is heard as the lights go down on the scene” (81).

Wilson’s redefinition of class seems deceptively simple. A close reading reveals the underlying paradoxes as well. All blacks are positioned by the dominant ideology at the lowest rung, be it class or race. Their pursuit of money and American Dream is seen as upward movement. American society has this myth of upward mobility inculcated in the citizens. But for the African-American people, the upward movement has to be guided and accompanied by ethnic and communal feelings of history, heritage and shared past. Consequently, those middle class blacks who prefer to desert their roots might move financially upward, but Wilson’s dramaturgy, inherently ethnocentric and pro-African-American as it is, constructs their rise aesthetically as a downfall, a fall in an endless abyss where only loneliness, desolation and alienation waits for them. This is the fate of Caesar Wilks, Holloway’s grandfather, West, Roosevelt Hicks, and Levee. Whereas, those affluent blacks who have affinities with their roots and community, face the threat of the mainstream capitalistic society – Harmond, and the Beckers – their apparent fall from their prominent positions is deemed aesthetically as birth, rise and integration. It becomes clear that Afro-centric values of community and class should remain as free from capitalistic ideology as possible. The Western yardstick or centre of class poses eminent threat to the community and individuals and Wilson’s theatre is an attempt at its subversion.

Capitalistic economy also shapes and catalogues the family relationships and roles in terms of money and profit. For example, it constructs the family roles and responsibilities in a pattern that privileges the money-making and out-of-the-home activities – apparently performed by males – and undermines and invalidates the duties performed at home. Consequently, women on the domestic front are seen as the subordinate class under the rule of the husband. Since the hierarchy assumes the ascendancy of the patriarch, it enfranchises the male to take decision in financial matters also. But Wilson’s drama demolishes this myth of capitalism as well. There are man-woman relationships in Wilson’s theatre that assert and acknowledge the role of women in maintaining the family economy— no matter how small and trivial their contribution
may be. In *Fences*, Wilson underlines how the American Dream of a job, a decent house and a car remains a distant chimera for the black man whose avenues to growth and money are closed through the segregation. Troy is forced to do the job of a garbage man when he was denied entry into the professional basketball leagues that were mainly owned by white people and governed by segregation politics. He carries this grudge throughout his life and even stops his son from playing football, citing the same reason. He encourages him to start earning. His discourse with Cory underlines poor conditions of his house. In contrast to the missed “opportunity” of playing in the basketball league that could have saved him all the hardships and bad times, Troy further says: :That ain’t what I’m saying, woman! I’m just stating the facts if my brother didn’t have that metal plate in his head . . . I wouldn’t have a pot to piss in or a window to throw it out of. And I’m fifty three years old” (Wilson, *Fences* 31).

Through his example, Wilson marks the predicament of other black people who have to struggle throughout their life to have a roof over their head. But in his bitter struggle with the harsh and indifferent materialistic world, his family and his wife always function as the redemptive agents and institutions. He hands over the money to Rose who has a say in family matters. The fence is being built as Rose wants it. Troy also acknowledges her contribution that gives him a sense of self and integrity: “When I found you and Cory and a halfway decent job . . . I was safe” (Wilson, *Fences* 66). Although, he acknowledges it as his failure to have an extra-marital affair, he maintains the reverence for his wife. And here, Rose further asserts her role in the family matters. She chides Troy for finding comfort, care and healing in Alberta’s bed: “What the hell was I there for? That was my job, not somebody else’s” (66). She asserts her role and duty in maintaining their household, and Troy’s act sounds blasphemous, and irreverent for her services and gifts. She reiterates her contribution through the metaphor of hard, barren soil where her hopes could not bloom. Troy keeps waiting with his baby in arms for Rose’s approval: “And right now your daddy’s scared ‘cause we sitting out here and ain’t got no home” (73). Rose lets them in but disowns Troy saying “you a womanless man” (69). In Wilson’s dramaturgy, capital holds the value to purchase things. But it should never affect the feeling, emotions and attitude of a person. So, a culture that values emotions and feelings more than capital, a housewife’s contribution in the form of
comforts, cares and love she provides gets due appreciation. Wilson tends to weigh and value the duty, responsibility and integrity of such characters more than money. This again is a subversion of capitalist system that measures individual’s contribution only in terms of money. Rose internalizes and represents African-American ethics and asserts her authority in family matters at crucial moments. But her economy of emotions and humanity, unlike capitalistic economy, never lets her pride swell to turn arrogant and inhuman; rather, it accommodates even the bastard child of her husband. Further, she continues to live with Troy but denies him the fruit and gifts of her womanhood. This humanistic and familial economy is Wilson’s alternative to capitalistic economy that makes and sees black community merely as a commodity. Bertha in Joe Turner’s Come and Gone and Coreen Becker in Jitney employ the same economy of emotions. Through these characters, Wilson subverts the white ideological stereotypes of black women as mammy and matriarch that through their active role in capitalistic system castrate the black man leading to the demolition of black family. Wilson’s women, through their emotions, love and care, participate in the family matters and try their best to keep the family fabric intact in the face of threats from the mainstream culture.

In The Piano Lesson, Boy Willie wants to trade the family piano for a piece of land in the south. Despite being conversant with the history of piano, he fails to appreciate it and preserve it. His fascination with land again is a capitalist patriarchal construct. The carvings on the piano, and struggle of his ancestors to get it and preserve it do not have cultural significance for him in the same terms as for his ancestors though his intention of buying the same land where his ancestors toiled may be construed as an attempt to right off one chapter of history to right another. But in the climactic scene, when Boy Willie battles with the ghost of Sutter, in an epiphanic moment, Berniece begins to play the piano and conjures and requests her ancestors to come to their aid. Wilson again highlights the importance and significance of culture, heritage and history to counter the ghost (myth of capitalism). The conjuring of the ancestral spirit not only exonerates the ghost of Sutter, it also expels the patriarchal black who seeks to counter the white system of discrimination by his own tools. The success of Berniece and failure of Boy Willie present the case obviously.
Wilson’s theatre is a thorough critique of capitalism and its myth of American Dream that implicitly reveres the dollar and the things it can buy. The strategies and methods employed by Wilson’s characters are firmly rooted in both the mainstream American and the African-American values. Aunt Ester is the embodiment of the black experience in America. Characters visit her and seek her guidance and counseling when they feel down and depressed. In *Two Trains Running*, she establishes a rite of passage for the people who come to her. She asks them to throw twenty dollars in the river. It is a ritual through which she helps her visitors get rid of the influences and considerations of capitalistic culture. People like West have sold their souls a long time back and hence, they fail to comprehend significance of this act. They try to evaluate it through the prism of capitalism. West says he would have given the money to Aunt Ester, had she demanded but throwing it away appears to him a waste of money and capital. He fails to transcend the consumerist culture where money becomes the measure of status and power and means of exchange of valuables. He can’t understand the mores and ethics of the black culture. When characters throw money in the river, they show the desperation of their soul for remedy and their willingness to sever ties from capitalistic culture and ideology. That is why, she always values the ethics of love, truth, honesty, heritage, past, history and self-integrity. Sterling quotes Aunt Ester saying that all you can do with money is spend it on something. Holloway also underlines this issue: “Aunt Ester gives you more than money. She make you right with yourself” (Wilson, *Two Trains* 24). Money and capital are seen as transient things. She washes the souls of the bruised black people whose growth had been arrested by the dominant ideology. Caywood and Floyd opine in this context: “One of the tragic ironies of contemporary black life is that individuals succeed in acquiring material privilege often by sacrificing their positive connection to black culture and black experiences.’ Aunt Ester appears, then, in the historic moments when there seems hope for African American” (91).

Further, Aunt Ester’s 1839 Wylie Avenue and she herself defy capitalistic norms of money, possession, accumulation, power, elitism and superiority in very subtle manner. In *Gem of the Ocean*, she observes the dog shit, calling it “pure”: “Look at that. God made that! Ain’t nothing in God’s creation that ain’t good. Look at that. See he ain’t been eating nothing but bone. Give me some of this, Solly” (Wilson, *Gem of 17*). This
Pantheistic view of the world sans hierarchies adores the beauty of all creation – civilization and nature all. It also undermines the enlightenment categorisations of the universe which later capitalism ordered in political hierarchies. And this hierarchy evaluated and assigned value and status to everything in terms of its monetary and market value. The elite and middle classes flaunt a certain sophistication that establishes its class and aristocracy in terms of its tidiness, neatness and cleanliness, in contrast to dusty, dirty, stinking working class. But Wilson challenges this Euro-American class system through Solly and Aunt Ester who having a larger accommodative Pantheistic worldview consider nothing trivial, petty and below standard. Wilson here underlines the eco-centric worldview and culture of African-American community that reveres the co-existence of all creatures, in contrast to the capitalist American ethics of man’s superiority over nature. It also extends the message that no work or job is trivial and petty so long as it helps in running one’s house. Wilson is critical of such figures who in their attempts to be “big shots,” keep running after big opportunities, leading most of the time to frustration. Many of his characters are plagued by this bug of “bigness” – Booster, Levee, Boy Willie, Floyd Barton, and Roosevelt Hicks. Their pursuit never lets them be at ease with themselves and alienates them from community, family and their own African self, leaving them in abject alienation. Wilson’s theatre redefines and recasts Du Bois’ idea of the “Talented Tenth” in ethnocentric terms. He is preoccupied with the life and experiences of the dispossessed and poor ninety percent. His characters are musicians, mill-workers, number runners, thieves, cons, drivers, restaurant owners and workers, “pure” collectors, craftsman, gamblers and garbage-collectors. People belonging to this poor class of society are likely to face the adversity caught up as they are in the intersecting vectors of class and race. Also, in order to run their household and lifestyle, they need money which is denied to them by the capitalistic society. Wilson acknowledges this fact and sets his characters in confrontational conditions where they are forced by the pulls of both their identities to maintain their integrity, saving themselves from being “torn asunder”: “The fact is that the American Dream has by and large remained a mirage. African American thinkers and artists like, W. E. B. Du Bois and Zora Neale Hurston wanted blacks in America to recognize the true meaning of their lives, the aesthetic richness of their folk culture and ancestral traditions, and the industry
and potential of their communities, so they would not be ashamed” (qtd. in Wilson-Haris). American Dream, being a product/construct of the dominant capitalistic white class, remains chimerical and detrimental to the growth and integrity of the black individuals. But it does not mean that blacks can manage to waive off materialistic advancement. The only difference being that Wilson urges black Americans to recognize and understand the vitality and significance of their ties to their community, family and their black self. By doing so they would feel ‘right by themselves’. Adherence to this notion also locates the centre of their life within themselves, thus giving them a fair, humanistic and emotional idea of themselves as well as the world around. And it is the only thread that can keep the fabric of the black culture across different classes in America intact, firm and meaningful ensuring dignity to all.
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