CHAPTER – II

AUGUST WILSON’S PLAYS 1900s-1920s

Gem of the Ocean 1900s
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The twentieth Century cycle of August Wilson initiates with the play *Gem of the Ocean* which is set in 1904 at the Parlor of Aunt Ester’s house, 1839, Wylie Avenue, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. At the outset of 2004, *Gem of the Ocean* was produced on the Broadway theatre where it won various Tony Awards nominations. The play is outstanding record of the African American experiences of the 1900s. Wilson tries to explore the socio-economic, religious and mythical dimensions of the African American life of the 1900s.

The first act and first scene of the play opens at morning hours on the Saturday. The character, Citizen Barlow, waits outside the home of Aunt Ester 1839 Wylie Avenue in order to meet Aunt Ester to purify his soul. Citizen Barlow comes from the South, Alabama to Pittsburgh for a new lease of life. Aunt Ester is 287 years old matriarch who is soul washer and spiritual supporter of the African Americans. When Citizen Barlow comes to visit Aunt Ester’s house, Black Mary, a housekeeper and Eli, a doorkeeper of Aunt Ester do their daily routine. Meanwhile, Rutherford Selig, a peddler comes to the house in order to sell some homely goods. Moreover, at the same time, he brings a bad news that a native man died in the river because of a blame for stealing a bucket of nails. Solly Two Kings is a suitor of Aunt Ester who comes with the news that the local mill workers have gone on strike. Furthermore, Eli, doorkeeper of Aunt Ester peruses to Solly Two Kings to build a wall in order to secure them from Caesar who is local police. As the play goes, it also opens that Solly Two Kings wants to help her sister who is trapped in the South. Thereafter, Solly and Eli move to attend funeral function of the person who is died in the river.

The second scene of the first act of *Gem of the Ocean* starts on the morning hours of the Saturday. Citizen Barlow is tired and hungry;
hence, he enters in the house of Aunt Ester through the window and tries to find out food. However, Aunt Ester notices him and gently offers food and other needy things. Moreover, she also informs him about the person who died in the river. Citizen Barlow discloses his recent past to Aunt Ester and Aunt Ester liberally gives him shelter at her house.

The third scene of the first act discloses at Sunday morning when Eli works on the rock wall. Meanwhile Solly comes with the news of riot at the mill. Thereafter, Black Mary writes a letter to solly’s sister in order to escape her from whites in the South. Moreover, Aunt Ester tells to Solly about Citizen Barlow and they all discuss about the African American values, beliefs and ethics. During their discussion, the brother of Black Mary, Caesar comes and expresses his opinion against the mill workers who initiated riots against mill owners. Moreover, he expresses the importance of capitalist system in the U.S. He also offers a quarter to Citizen, however, Citizen refuses to accept it. Therefore, Black Mary also refuses to work with her brother, Caesar.

The fourth scene of the first act opens on the Sunday noon. Black Mary a housekeeper of Aunt Ester and Citizen Barlow meet at the alone place. During their discussion Citizen Barlow, requests her to come to his room at night. Citizen Barlow believes that Black Mary will fulfill his need as a woman. However, she neglects him blaming that men only want to use woman and throw them out after their use.

The final scene of the first act begins on the Sunday evening when Black Mary washes the feet of Aunt Ester. Thereafter, Aunt Ester discloses that her age is 287 years. Moreover, Aunt Ester convinces Black Mary to continue the same job but Black Mary doesn’t clear herself. Thereafter, Aunt Ester guides Citizen Barlow to move to the journey of the city of the bones and purification of his soul.
The first scene of the second act begins on the Sunday morning when Selig brings the news about mill fire. Thereafter, Citizen comes and Aunt Ester asks him to be ready in order to move to the journey towards the city of the Bones.

The second scene of the second act starts on Monday morning. Solly wants to move to the South in order to escape her sister. Eli and Solly tell their experiences to Citizen. Moreover, they also tell the predicaments and harassment of them by the Southern white people. Solly prepares to move to the South; however, Aunt Ester peruses him to stop in order to help Citizen to go to the journey of the city of the bones. At the outset of the journey, they all start the African rituals, songs and dance. Aunt Ester gives proper directions to the magical journey of the Citizen to the city of the bones. She also gives him a magical ship, which is known as Gen of the Ocean. Citizen begins the magical journey towards the city of bones; through his journey, he faces many obstacles. Aunt Ester guides him to enter in the gate of the city where Citizen sees Garret Brown as a gatekeeper who died in the river blaming to steal a bucket of the nails. In fact, Citizen steals the bucket of nails; however, Garret Brown is made the victim. Aunt Ester guides Citizen that if he wants to enter in the city of bones and wash his soul, tell all truth to the gatekeeper and the gate of the city would open for Citizen. Citizen watches various wounded people and their chain in the city. The link of the journey is disturbed when Caesar comes to arrest Solly.

The third scene of the second act opens two hours later on the same Monday when Black Mary and Citizen share their views about their lives. Furthermore, Aunt Ester asks Citizen to find out Selig and bring him to home because Solly is in danger.
The fourth scene of the second act opens on the same Monday later when Selig enters in the house of Aunt Ester. Aunt Ester tells Selig that Solly is in danger because Caesar is searching him to arrest in the crime of mill fire. Aunt Ester asks Selig to move down towards the river with Solly, however, Citizen helps Solly to move towards the down of river. Selig stops at Aunt Ester’s home to manage Caesar. At the outset of Caesar’s arrival at Aunt Ester’s house Selig leaves and joins Citizen and Solly. Caesar shows a warrant to Aunt Ester for aiding and abetting (committing a crime) and arrests her.

The final scene of the play begins on the Monday when Eli brings Aunt Ester back from the jail. Thereafter, Citizen comes and informs that Solly was shot by Caesar and Selig is bringing him to the home. Aunt Ester and Black Mary take care of his wounds, unfortunately Solly dies. Thereafter, Eli Sings a eulogy on Solly’s death. Caesar comes to arrest Citizen, however, Citizen hides himself in the room of Aunt Ester. Black Mary, a sister of Caesar, does not accept him as a brother of her. At the end of the play Citizen takes Solly’s coat, hat and stick and his sister’s letter and leaves the house without speaking a single word on the incident.

*Gem of the Ocean* explores fundamental issues of the African American life of the contemporary time. The play is set in 1904 when many African Americans were migrated from the South to the North in order to escape from the tyranny and harassment of the Southern white landowners. Although, they have freedom from Slavery, the Southern white feudalists do not allow them to enjoy their natural freedom. Therefore, the exodus of the African Americans come to Pittsburgh to find new opportunities in the industrial sector. The migrated generation of the African Americans was also in cultural and religious dilemma. They
want emancipation from their sin. Citizen Barlow also comes from the South to wash soul from Aunt Ester who is 287 years African American matriarch who lives in Pittsburgh. Although many African Americans come to Pittsburgh, they have to face many routine problems in the city. Black Mary the housekeeper, points out about migrated Citizen Barlow, “He probably go down under the Brady street Bridge to sleep. They got a whole bunch of people sleeping down there.” (GOTO, 10). The migrated people suffered from having shelter, food and job in the Northern cities. In connection of the turmoil of African Americans appeared in the Gen of the Ocean Sarah Bellamy rightly illustrates in his article entitled, “The Birth of a people: spirit, self and God in August Wilson’s Gem of the Ocean”:

August Wilson begins his century-long cycle chronicling black American life with Gem of the Ocean (1900s). Bewildered by the collapse of the old slave regime, the first generation of black Americans recently freed from slavery are unprepared for the backlash against their newly acquired freedom by whites. Many venture north and find themselves at the mercy of family and kin who are barely making ends meet themselves. Some, those most desperately in need of healing, end up at Aunt Ester’s door. Gem of the Ocean opens with Citizen Barlow doing just that.1

Many African Americans migrated to the North not only to acquire newly jobs but in search of their spiritual salvation. Wilson’s Gem of the Ocean explores the same theme of the African American life. The characterization of Solly Two King is most significant aspect of historic background of the play. Solly is former social activist in the Under-
ground Rail Road Movement who helped many African Americans to escape from the South. Although, he escaped from the exploitation, he does not escape to his sister who is still in the South. She writes a letter to Solly in order to seek her to escape. Black Mary reads her letter.

BLACK MARY (Reads):
I am writing to let you know the times are terrible here the most anybody remember since. I can’t hold on here anyone. The white people is gone crazy and won’t let anybody leave. They beat one fel - low on the road so bad this mama say, “Who is he?” They killed some more and say the colored can’t buy any tickets on the train to get away. Say they will sink the ferry if any colored on it. I want to leave to come North but it is too bad. It is a hard time for everybody. Write and let me know what to do as I try to hold on what to do as I try to hold on but can’t.

Your Loving sister - Eliza Jackson

Solly’s sister, Eliza Jackson, rightly illustrates the predicament and harassment of the African Americans who remained back in the South. Those who migrated to the North, however, their families and relatives suffered from the ruthless white people. As Bellamy Lou points out, “Gem of the ocean takes audiences back to the beginning of the 20th century, to a time and place when black people were struggling to “navigate” the variable rules which excluded them from full participation in society.”2 The play exposes the tactics of the whites to exploit the blacks though they got freedom from the slavery by law.

Wilsonian dramaturgy is characterized by various significance and symbolism. The names of the characters are most significant aspect of his dramatic art. The name Solly Two King is changed to escape from the
terror of the whites because Solly was working in the Underground Rail Road Movement and the government was looking for him to arrest. Therefore, he has changed his name. At the same time, the name symbolizes the freedom of Solly. The name citizen is also symbolized the freedom of Citizen Barlow from white and exploitation.

SOLLY : My name is Two Kings. Used to be Uncle Alfred. The government looking for me for being a runaway so I changed it.

CITIZEN : My mama named me Citizen after freedom came. She wouldn’t like it if I charged my name (GOTO, 27)

Wilson gives significance to the name in order to make his dramaturgy more significant and effective.

Wilson attracts the attention of the readers towards the mythical and spiritual world of the African American ethnic minority in the U.S. In order to explore the mythical and spiritual tradition of the African Americans, Wilson uses the paramount character of Aunt Ester who is 287 years old. The age of Aunt Ester is most central for the curiosity of the readers of the play. Aunt Ester knows the whole history of the African Americans. She is most religious character of the play and helps to purify the souls of the African Americans. Saraha Bellamy notes:

Wilson explains that Aunt Ester is not one woman but many-a little passed down through the generations. The woman we encounter in Gem was not born Ester Tyler, but has vowed never to repeat her given name. Instead she steps into the
The oral history of the African Americans transforms one generation to the next generation; Aunt Ester is a representative of their historic tradition. Although, her actual age is not 287 years, her knowledge of the African Americans is 287 years old.

Wilson’s dramaturgy presents complex men and women relationship between the African Americans. Citizen, an African American man, believes that every woman needs a man in order to fulfill her desire. On the other hand, an African American woman, Black Mary believes that men want woman only to fulfill their desire and having completed their intention, they want to throw her out of their circle. The firm belief of Citizen and Black Mary represent the contemporary African American life.

BLACK MARY : What you got for me?
CITIZEN : A woman’s got needs. I can fill you up.
BLACK MARY : What you know about a woman’s needs.
CITIZEN : I don’t know all about a woman... but I know a woman needs a man.
BLACK MARY : You got a woman in your hands. Now what? What you gonna do? Time ain’t long, Mr. Citizen. A woman ain’t but so many times filled up with? (GOTO, 43)
Wilson’s presentation of the African Americans’ religious and spiritual world is most central aspect of the *Gem of the Ocean*. The concept of sin and its purification through religious path is dramatically presented by August Wilson. Citizen Barlow, an African American man, steals a nail of bucket. However, another person becomes the victim of it and he commits suicide, therefore, Citizen Barlow believes that he is a sinner. In order to purify his soul he moves to the house of Aunt Ester who is 287 years African American matriarch and knows how to purify the souls of the people. In order to purify Citizen’s soul she guides Citizen to move to the journey of city of the Bones. The journey of the city of Bones is most magical journey where Citizen meets a person who died because of Citizen’s mistake. Citizen tells him the truth, the gate of the city of Bones opens to enter and Citizen purifies his soul.

CITIZEN : There it is! It’s made of bones!
All the buildings and everything. Head bones and leg bones and rib bones. The streets look like silver. The trees are made of bones. The trees and everything made of bones.

AUNT ESTER : Who is the Gatekeeper, Mr. Citizen? Is it somebody you know?...

CITIZEN : The Gatekeeper... the Gatekeeper... it’s Garret Brown the man who jumped in river.

AUNT ESTER : You got to tell him, Mr. Citizen.
The truth has to stand in the
light. You got to get your soul washed.

CITIZEN : It was me. I done it. My name is Citizen Barlow. I stole the bucket of nails.(JOTO,59)

The religious path of purification of soul is most fundamental ground of *Gem of the Ocean*. It is based on the acceptance of own’s sins. Citizen accepts the sin he has committed and God purify his soul. Saraha Ballemy notes:

Citizen Barlow’s trip to the city of the Bones is a purification ritual in preparation for a life of service as well. He must atone for his sin before gaining entrance. The city is a place of reverence; it is searched, holy. One must be washed before entering its doors.4

The religious faith of the African Americans is explored throughout the play. The African Americans preserve their culture and heritage though they were subjugated to accept other culture and religion. The name of Aunt Ester’s house is 1839 Wylie Avenue is symbol of existence of their tradition. The year 1839 symbolizes the journey of the African Americans. As Saraha Bellemy notes, “Indeed arriving at 1839 Wylie Avenue will require a journey back to a point of origin. For an African American people, those born in the New World, Wilson locates this points in the city of the bones.”5

*Gem of the Ocean* explores socio, economic and cultural milieu of the 1900s African Americans in the U.S. All characters in the play are victims of the American Social and political patterns. Moreover, their cultural and religious life is more disturbed because of heavy migration
from the South to the North. Wilson through *Gen of the Ocean* artistically incorporates the harassment and predicament of these people.

**JOE TURNERS COME AND GONE 1910s**

August Wilson’s second play in his ten play cycle is *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* which was published in 1988. However, before, its publication it was produced at Yale Repertory Theatre in 1986. At the outset of its publication, it got New York Drama Critics Circle Award and Tony Award Nomination for the best play in 1988. The title of the play is a title of Blues song, which was recorded by W.C. Handy who was known as greatest blues artist in the U.S. Although, law in the tenure of Abraham Lincoln abolished the slavery in 1863, Joe Turner, the brother of the governor of Tennessee, enslaved many African Americans for plantation. Therefore, the blues song *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* was most popular among the African American women who lost their family members because the enslavement of Joe Turner. “*Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* was also inspired by a Bearden’s painting, *Mill Hand’s Lunch Bucket* and also contains spiritual and supernatural elements.”

The play is set in Pittsburgh boarding house in 1911. Wilson deliberately selected the location of the play considering its historical background. Pittsburgh is key city in the North where many African Americans migrated in order to escape from racist practices in the down South of the U.S.

This two acts play opens in the boarding house where Seth Holly, the owner of the boarding house complains Bartha against Bynum Walker who is an African American conjure man and one of the residents of Seth’s boardinghouse. Seth complains against Bynum because he kills Pigeons in the yard of Seth in order to fulfill his African religious faith.
Seth does not like Bynum’s act because he does not believe in such old practices.

Thereafter, they talk about Seth’s other job in steel mill as well as tinsmith. Moreover, through their discussion it also clears that Seth sells some metal items to white Peddler, Rutherford Selig. Seth wants to do the business of tinsmith, however, he does not get loan because he refuses to sign his boarding house for sanction. Despite this discussion, they also talk about the problems and plights of migrated African Americans in Pittsburgh.

Rutherford Selig is white peddler and people finder who come to Seth and buy some posts from him in low price. Thereafter, Bynum wants to visit him. Because Shiny Man gives Bynum the magic to bind “Binding Song” in order to find scattered people together.

Through the discussion between Seth and Jeremy Ferlow it opens that Jeremy is harassed by police without any rhyme and reason because of his race. He has also negative experience regarding the white examiner in guitar contest. White examiner makes partiality in the final decision of guitar contest against him. Meanwhile, Herald Loomis and his daughter Zonia come to boarding house from South in order to search Herald’s wife Martha, who is lost after the enslavement of Herald Loomis. Bynum tells Herald that he should hire Selig (people finder) in order to search out Martha. During Herald’s stay in boarding house, he also advises Jeremy to participate in guitar contest.

Seth Holly suspects Herald Loomis as a thief, though Loomis has told him that he came here in search of his wife Martha. However, Seth already understands that Zonia looks like Martha. Hence, she is the daughter of Martha. However, he does not tell anything to Loomis. Meanwhile, Mathie Campbell comes to live in the boarding house in
order to search his boyfriend Jack Carter. Jeremy wants to develop relationship with her in order to gain material property. At the end of the play, there is discussion between Zonia and Reuben regarding their life and African religious faiths. Reuben lives next door of Seth’s boardinghouse and wants to develop relationship with Zonia. He also tells zonia that his friend Eugene died against his will and she sells Eugene’s Pigeons to Bynum Walker for the sake of African religious performance.

Set and Bartha discuss regarding the background of Herald Loomis. Through their discussion, it also reveals that Martha, the wife of Herald has already visited Bynum in order to search her daughter in the past. Rutherford Selig tells his ancestral history of people finding business to every tenant in the boarding house of Seth. Therefore, Herald Loomis hires him for searching his wife. Thereafter, there is a discussion between Seth and Bynum. Seth tells Bynum that he did not get loan to initiate his own business. Moreover, they discuss its reasons and ideas to start new business. The tenants of Seth, Jeremy and Martha, develop relationship between each other and decide to run away from the boardinghouse. However, Bynum already tells to Jeremy how to respect women and how to be away from them regarding physical relationship. Thereafter, this discussion, a young woman named Molly Cunningham comes back to live in the boardinghouse as a new tenant.

On one evening, the tenants of Seth gather around the dinner table in order to have dinner. However, Seth starts to play Harmonium. Thereafter, all tenants besides Herald Loomis, start their African dance which is known as Juba. Therfore, Loomis comes and tells them the name of holly ghost. Bynum, an African American conjure man directs Loomis towards the imagination and vision. Through the flow of Juba Loomis imagines that he can see into the ocean wherein the bones of African
slaves who are their ancestors. Moreover, in his imagination he could see that the bones of their ancestors become alive and walk on the water towards the African shore. However, they sink in the water because of the burden of slavery imposed by the whites.

At the outset of second act Seth, decides to discontinue him from the boarding house because he is not able to pay the rent. However, Herald Loomis disagrees with him to leave the place for some days. Moreover, there is vital turmoil between Jeremy, Molly and Mathie. Jeremy decides to leave Mathie and develops relationship with Molly in order to run away from the boarding house.

In this Scene, the story of Herald Loomis’s enslavement is disclosed by himself. on one evening when Bynum and Seth play a game when Bynum sing the blue song *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*, while listening the song Herald memorizes his plights as a slave of Joe Turner and ask Bynum to stop this song. Thereupon, Herald tells his story of slavery and ask to Bynum that why Joe Turner enslaved him? Bynum tells him that Joe Turner wanted to steal his song but he does not do so because Herald Loomis has already forgotten it because of the burden and harassment of slavery.

In the next scene through the discussion of Herald Loomis and Mathie Campbell, it clears that Jeremy wants to develop his relationship with Mathie. However, he is not able to do so because the burden of the slavery enforce him to forget how to keep relationship with woman. He says, “I done forgot how to touch” (JTCG. P. 274).

Early in the next morning, Zonia and Reuben discuss about the ghost of Miss Mabel. Reuben tells Zonia that Miss Mabel has told him to free the pigeons of Eugene because he has already promised Eugene to free the pigeons. Thereafter, Zonia tells him about her departure from the
boarding house. Hence, Reuben feels bad and kisses her promising that he would come in search of her again in order to marry with her. He says, “When I get grown, I come looking for you (JTCG, 280).

The last scene of the play is most significant because of its mythical and religious grounds. Mathie and Loomis discuss about their lives especially lost wife of Herald Loomis. When Loomis prepares for departure for searching his wife, Matie says, “Eleven years is a long time. Your wife ... she might have taken up with some one else ...” (JTCG, 282).

Thereafter, Selig (people finder) comes with Loomis’ wife Martha Pentecost. Loomis and Martha tell their stories of predicaments to each other. Martha, the wife of Herald Loomis, suggests him to pray for Jesus for emancipation. However, Loomis denies the faith on Christianity and slashes his own chest with a knife, and rubs the blood on his face. According to Loomis, doing such ritual, he is emancipated from slavery and burden of Christianity. Moreover, he has his own song (own’s identity) and self-respect. He leaves boarding house believing that he is an independent human being. While watching this act of Loomis, Bynum feels that Loomis is his shiny man, hence, he says, “Herald Loomis you shining! You shining like new money! (JTCG, 289) And the play ends with this final articulation of Bynum Walker.

August Wilson’s Joe Turner’s Come and Gone contains various themes such as identity, migration and existence of the African traditional religion amongst African Americans. In addition to this, it also contains various myths and tenets of Christianity.

Herald Loomis is the protagonist of the play who is enslaved by Joe Turner. During the enslavement of Loomis, he is enforced to forget his cultural identity. It seems that the slavery of Herald Loomis was based
on two major aspects, which are mental as well as physical. After seven years, he made free from slavery. However, his social and cultural identity was in crisis. When Loomis comes in search of his wife Martha to the Seth’s boarding house, Bynum (Root worker or conjure man) introduced him African Traditional Religion. They developed antagonistic perspectives to each other. However, at the end of the play, it reveals that Bynum (root worker) is his director and guide in order to self-realization. Therefore, the role of Bynum has its own significances as a (root worker) conjure man. C. Patrick Tyndall puts:

Wilson uses his protagonist, Loomis, to clarify the connection between oppression and identity, using an old song and ancestral spirits to facilitate this understanding. When Bynum introduced, he and Loomis have antagonistic relationship. By the end of the play, however, it is clear that Bynum is actually Loomis’s guide to self-discovery.\(^7\)

Root workers or conjure men are vehicles to carry cultural heritage of African Americans. Bynum’s character, throughout the play, promotes other character towards the realization of their root culture.

*Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* contains the essential tenants of Christianity. Herald Loomis’ wife Martha Pentecost represents the tenants of Christianity; her name Pentecost symbolizes the Christian religion. Although, her cultural roots are in Africa, the whites Christianized her, hence she believes Christianity is her identity. Moreover, advises her husband Herald Loomis to accept the path of Jesus in order to gain salvation. She says, “Jesus bled for you. He’s the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” (JTCG, 288) The influence and strong trust of Herald Loomis’s wife in Christianity absolutely works
against the traditional African religion of African Americans. Amanda M. Rudolph states:

[S]trong proponent of Christianity is Martha. She is part of the church, and even her name, Martha Pentecost, reflects the dominant religion. These elements create the opposing force to ATR (African Tradition Religion).\(^8\)

Almost all characters of Seth’s boarding house are African Americans who have migrated from the South to the North. During the slavery days, they were enforced to accept other religious values and faiths. However, they preserve their African traditional religion. Their present is dark because of the hegemony of the whites over their race. In order to escape from the dominance of the whites, they try to reconnect themselves with their past that is Africa. Bynum is root worker who needs Shiny Man, who is self-sufficient as per Bynum’s thinking. Bynum pays a dollar to Selig to find out his Shiny Man. However Selig does not find any shiny man. It means that the Whites cannot understand black folks and their culture. Bynum to says Selig, “You around here finding everybody how come you ain’t found my shiny man?” (JTCG, 211). Therefore, all characters in the play want to know their past Hayes Corlis Angela notes, “the characters in the Holly boarding house are bisected as they try to navigate spirituality and their own past. They are trying to connect with their African ancestors.”\(^9\)

Wilson incorporates various images and incidents of African traditional religion (ATR) as well as Christianity in order to present the racial experiences of the African Americans of the 1910s. The ritual of Bynum to kill Pigeons in the yard of Seth goes back to the roots of the African culture. Moreover, the juba dance was most famous and key
aspect of African culture, which Wilson uses in the play. In addition to this, the ghost of Miss Mabel in the play also plays significant role to explore the African religious faiths. On the other hand, the faith of Christianity is also crucial aspect of the play. The shiny man and Martha Pentecost represent Christianity. Amanda M. Rudolph illustrates:

Throughout Joe Turner, Wilson used images related to ATRs. The rituals, the juba, the ghosts, and the shiny man all helped to define the African path. The shiny man and Martha also represented Christianity. As this dichotomy became clear, the triumph of one over the other was the only alternative for resolution in Joe Turner, ATR won.10

Although, there is struggle between African Traditional Religion and Christianity throughout the play, at the end of play Herald Loomis refuses Christian faith and emancipates himself by cutting his own chest instead of surrendering to Jesus. It is the victory of the African traditional religion over Christianity.

The significant example of African traditional religion in Joe Turner’s Come and Gone is shown at the end of first act of the play. Reuben a boyfriend of Zonia tells her about the ghost of Miss Mabel who was the mother of Seth who told Reuben to release the Pigeons of Eugene, because before the death of Eugene Reuben promised him about the freedom of pigeons, However, in fact, he did not release them. Therefore, the ghost of Miss Mabel told him to free Eugene’s Pigeons because if Reuben would not free them, Eugene would not walk toward proper place.

ZONIA: Who Miss Mabel?
REUBEN: Mr. Seth’s Mother. He got her picture hanging up in the house. She been dead.

ZONIA: How you seen her if she been dead?

REUBEN: It was early this morning.... I went out to the coop to free the pigeons. I was down on the ground like this to open up the door to the coop ... when all of the sudden I seen some feet in front of me. I looked up ... and there was Miss Mabel standing thre. (JTCG, 280).

The conversation of Zonia and Reuben conveys the existence of ghost in the play. Wilson wants to explore the traditional African beliefs and consciousness of the African Americans. In this connection, Amanda M. Rudolph observes:

[A]tenet of ATR [African Traditional Religion] is the appearance of Miss Mabel, a ghost, Reuben, who lives next door to the boarding house, lost his best friend Eugene when he died. Eugene asked Reuben to release his Pigeons after he died. Reuben kept the Pigeons, breaking the promise to the dead boy. Miss Mabel returns from the after world to tell Reuben he must release the Pigeons or Eugene will not be able to travel on to where he should be.¹¹

The use of history, memory and metaphor are most significant characteristics of Wilsonian dramaturgy. In order to connect past with the present, Wilson uses “Bones People” as a metaphor. Bones people are the ancestors of the African Americans who died in ocean while coming to American as the slave. Loomis watches these people during his vision in
the Juba dance guided by Bynum (a conjure man). Loomis says, “I done seen bones rise up out of the water. Rise up and walk across the water Bones walking on top of the water.” (JTCG,250). Bones people are ancestors of the African Americans and they have cultural and religious relationship with them. Using the metaphor of Bones people Wilson connects the past memory of African Americans with their present. Harry J. Elam Jr., States:

Loomis’s odyssey, his desire to stand and walk along with the bones people, symbolizes the need of African Americans to reconnect with their past and with each other, to renegotiate their perceptions of and relationships to history.¹²

History plays pivotal role while discussing the identity of African Americans. Although, the history of African American culture is in the form of music, dance, and myths it is useful to promote their consciousness as the African Americans. Wilson, therefore, uses history in order to examine the experiences of African Americans. Harry J. Elam states, “A central concern for Wilson throughout his cycle is examining how “Africanness” becomes historically manifest in African American experience and identity.”¹³

The migration of African Americans at the outset of the 1910s is most leading thematic concern of Wilson’s Joe Turner’s Come and Gone. After the abolition of slavery in the U.S., the South property owners harassed the black population. Hence, they preferred to migrate towards the North in search of industrial job and opportunities. Anderson Douglas notes in his article entitled saying Goodbye to the past: Self-Empowerment and History in Joe Turner’s Come and Gone regarding the scenario of migration in Joe Turner’s Come and Gone. He notes:
Joe Turner’s Come and Gone appropriately treats a transitional phase in African American history. The great migration over a period of twenty years, from 1910 to 1930, some one and a half Million African Americans, a sixth of the nation’s black population, left rural and urban areas of the South for industrial cities of the North – New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, Detroit and the city that is the setting for August Wilson’s play, Pittsburgh.\(^\text{14}\)

Wilson’s present play explores the predicaments of African Americans who migrated to the Northern cities of the U.S.

The exploitation of the African Americans in musical and sport industry is also prime exploration of August Wilson throughout his ten-play cycle. In Joe Turner’s Come and Gone, Jeremy Furlow is young black guitarist; white examiner in guitar contest exploits him. Although, he is best guitar player, he could not get whole prize of the contest, it was distributed among the other white guitarists. Hence, Jeremy is not interested to participate in any guitar contest. He says, “I don’t play no contest, Mr. Bynum. Had me of them white follow cure-me of that. I ain’t been nowhere near a contest since” (JTCG, 210). “Wilson’s character does his best to demonstrate his skill against his two black opponents until he realizes that the white man is tone deaf and can not distinguish the quality of each man’s music.”\(^\text{15}\)

Wilson’s women characters play central role in the development of the plot of Joe Turner’s Come and Gone. Bertha Holly, Mathie Campbell, Martha Pentecost, Molly Cunningham and Zonia Loomis are women characters in the play. These women are victims of racism as well as patriarchal social pattern in the American society. Each woman in the
play has her own predicament in relation to her family, husband and society. Bartha Holly is the wife of Seth who is victim of her husband’s strict temperament as well as she has to do all housework as a female. Mathie Campbell is in search of her earlier boyfriend Jack Carper who left her. She tries to develop her relationship with Jeremy and Loomis; however, she does not get success in it. Martha Pentecost who is Herald Loomis wife and her daughter Zonia Loomis are directly victims of racism. Thereby, Wilson explores the plights of African American women in the present play.

The economic exploitation of African Americans of the 1910s is also foremost theme of the present play. Almost all the characters in Seth’s boardinghouse are homeless and migrated people. They do not have their own roots or place. They suffer from joblessness and many other needs in their life. James Keller explicates:

[M]ost of the characters are displaced people, weather uprooted by the desire to find economic opportunities in the industrial North or compelled to flee “the eyes of watchful tyranny” in the South.

The harassment by the Southern feudalists leads them to migrate to the North. Hence, Wilson’s characters express the sense of homelessness and rootlessness.

BYNUI : Where are you coming from?
LOOMIS : Come from all over. Whichever way the road take us, that’s the way we go
(JTCG, 217)

Rutherford Selig, only one white character in the play is economically independent. However, his economy is dependent on the African Americans. The African Americans did hard and heavy work to improve economy of the whites in the U.S. However, they kept them aside from the financial opportunities and enforced them in poverty and unemployment. Joe Turner’s Come and Gone is socio-economic and cultural milieu of the 1910s of the African Americans in the U.S.

MA RAINEY’S BLACK BOTTOM 1920s

August Wilson’s Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom is set in the Chicago in 1927. Having performed at the Yale Repertory Theatre in 1883, the play got New York Drama Critics Circle Award, Tony Award and Drama Desk Award nomination. Moreover, it also explores the complex social relationship between the whites and Blacks of the 1920s of America. Two acts play tells the story of the recording session with blues legend Ma Rainey, her band members and the white producers.

The play opens in a recording studio in the Chicago in 1927. The four African Americans musicians, Cutler, (trombonist), Toledo (pianist), Slow Drag (Bassist) and Levee (trumpeter) wait for Ma Rainey who is mother of the Blues. Moreover, she believes that the Blues are important means of African American culture. Hence, musicians should not rectify them in order to attract the audiences for business and other materialistic gains.
The title, *Ma Rainey’s black Bottom* comes from a song of the same name, which is the heart of a major conflict in the play. Sandra Shannon observes:

> To Ma Rainey’s audience, the image of a black bottom undoubtedly conveys sexual overtones and lively folk humor, yet the title also sends a stinging message of disrespect to their white oppressors.¹⁷

As the play unfolds, the four African American musicians discuss their experiences in the past and share their hopes in order to lead better life in the future. However, through their discussion we come across the fact that they are the victims of socio-economic and cultural injustice in America. Although, they are acquainted to injustice, they have to follow the white established values and rules in order to live in the racist society.

As the play runs, it also clears that Sturdyvant (the white studio owner) and Irvin (Ma Rainey’s white manager) are interested only in the business of the black music, especially Blues. Hence, they want Ma Rainey and other black musicians in order to structure musical form and sell them among the black audiences in the North to achieve enormous money. However, throughout the play they do not treat the black musicians with respect and dignity. They humiliate them indicating Ma Rainey, one of the leading African American Blues singer. The white producers want to use her like machine and throw her out. Ma Rainey says, “If you colored and can make them some money, then you alright with them. Otherwise, you just a dog in the alley.” (MRBB, 65)

During the recording session of Ma Rainey and her band members, the central conflict of the play rises. The conflict has its own significance because it happens between the old and new music or blues and swing. Cutler, Toledo, Ma Rainey and Slow Drag are old believers whereas
Levee (the band member of Ma Rainey) is a new believer. He wants to change the structure and style of Blues to please the white producers and audiences. On the other hand, old musicians of the music believe that Blues are their cultural identity. Hence, they should not change the style and structure in order to gain money and fame. Making business of the old music is absolutely loss of their cultural heritage and glorious tradition of their music.

The play is especially centralized to the issue of black music and artists and their exploitation in the musical industry owned by the white producers of 1920s. Moreover, the play glimpses the personalities and temperaments of the black musicians while facing the racist American social life of the 1920s.

Ma Rainey’s nephew Sylvester is a victim of racism. Hence, he could not get proper education and atmosphere in his childhood. This predicament leads him towards many physical and psychological problems. His main problem is articulation of his thoughts. He cannot communicate himself in smooth and clear dialogues. He has the inhuman treatment by police officer in a minor accident case by him.

Wilson’s another minor character of the play is Dussia Mae who is a female lover of Ma Rainey. However, she does not want to depend on Ma Rainey. Hence, she traps Levee in order to secure her life.

At the end of the play, Levee the young musician of Ma’s band, stabs Toledo in intoxication mood.

Ma Rainey’s Blacks Bottom is set at pre-depression era in the U.S. Therefore; the play is most pivotal and crucial to explore the economic predicaments of the contemporary African Americans in general and African American musicians in particular. In order to promote the white dominated musical industry, many Black artists and musicians were
indirectly enforced to work for them. Wilson also explores the predicaments of the African Americans regarding unemployment and education during the 1920s. Although, the African Americans got freedom from slavery, they were the victims of socio-economic and cultural injustice of the time. Sandra G. Shannon rightly illustrated the condition of African Americans, especially musicians and artists, in connection with Wilson’s *Ma Rainey Black Bottom*. He illustrates:

*Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* is a disturbing look at the consequences of waiting, especially as it relates to the precarious lot of black musicians during the pre-depression era. Although the play features a still shot in lives of several members of Ma Rainey’s 1920s band, it is also suggestive of the many and varied oppressive forces under which the entire Afro-American population labored at that time. From education to employment, black got the smallest share of the American pie, which clinging to an often self-destructive ideology of tolerance. Wilson rightly explodes the deep exploitation of African Americans of then 1920s throughout the play.

At the outset of opening of the play through the conversation between white producer and managers, we can understand that they want to record the Blues in order to earn money. However, the Black musicians can record these Blues. Hence, they enforce the black musicians to record the songs and throw them out after the completion of their intention. Ma Rainey is the outstanding contributor of Blues music. Therefore, she is known as “Mother of the Blues.” However, the white producers, Sturdyvant and Irvin behave with her in arrogant and dictatorial fashion.
They do not accept the dignity and originality of Ma Rainey. This is revealed in dialogues such as:

IRVIN : Mother of the Blues, Mel.
Mother of the Blues.

STURDYVANT : I don’t care what she calls herself. I’m not putting up with it. I just want to get her in here.... record those songs on that list.... and get her out just like clock work, huh?
(MRBB,12)

Irvin tells Sturtevant that Ma Rainey is the mother of Blues. Thereafter, the reaction of Sturdyvant is absolutely ruthless and humiliated. He says, Ma is just like “clockwork”, it reveals the inanimate attitude of Sturdyvant to term Ma as a thing. Wilson pinpoints the brutal and pitiless intention of the whites to exploit the blacks of 1920s.

Ma Rainey, the central figure in the play represents all African American musicians of 1920s who were the victims of social fabric of America. Although, Ma Rainey, Toledo, Cutler, Slow Drag and Levee have their artistic originality, they are not free to exercise their art in order to propagate among the audiences. Moreover, they are mere puppets in the hands of the white producers and managers. These horns of dilemma of African American musicians lead them towards the loss of their cultural identity. C. Patrick Tyndall notes:

With Ma Rainey, Wilson created black characters in 1927 Chicago who are allegorical representations, musicians suffocating under an
The oppressive American social structure that continuously tells them they are nothing. The sense of nothing is most serious dilemma of African American musicians of the 1920s. The social structure of the contemporary American society does not allow them to be independent in order to survival themselves and exercise their genius to propagate their art. Moreover, presentation of such kind of dilemma and predicament is most important characteristic of Wilsonian dramaturgy.

The most significant character of the play is Levee, who is the young African American trumpeter in the band of Ma Rainey. However, he is against Ma Rainey and her other band members. He wants to record the new style of music and change the structure of Blues in order to attract the white producers and audiences. However, Ma Rainey does not allow him to do so because making such changes in the structure of blues is the loss of African American culture and heritage. On the other hand, Levee wants his own band to record new music like Jazz and Swing. Moreover, his temperament is hot and does not care anybody who goes against his thinking. He does not believe in African American musical and cultural heritage. He is non-believer because of his exploitation and negative experiences of childhood age by whites. Hence, he hates the God and white people. He says, “God ain’t never listened to no nigger’s prayer. God take a nigger’s prayers and throw them in the garbage... God hates niggers’... (MRBB, 81) The childhood of Levee has strongly affected his psyche. There is strong connection between his childhood and young hood. When, he was a child, his father was killed by the white men’s gang moreover, they raped his mother. This incident affected his career and life. He wants to take revenge through his musical talent in order to take revenge of racist white people. Kim Pereira states:
His father’s death and the persistent memory of his mother’s rape have imputed Levee with a deep desire for revenge, and he regards his musical talent as a weapon to get even with the white man.... Although he rejects Ma’s style of singing, he admires the way she holds her power over the white man.20

Levee wants to establish his own identity by initiating his own band in order to emancipate from the white hegemony and dominance. Moreover, he also wants to escape from his own cultural heritage, which leads him towards poverty and exploitation. Therefore, he wants to use his musical talents to overcome from the predicament of his life. C. Patrick Tyndall observes:

Levee’s Passion for Jazz and innovation would under different circumstances, be a perfectly legitimate choice. But he chooses to adopt Jazz, individuality, and improvisation in order to run away from his heritage, which disconnect him from his fellow band members.21

Wilson presents two important aspects of African American people through the character of Ma Rainey and Levee. Ma Rainey is alert to her glorious cultural heritage and does not make compromise in order to get money and fame. It seems us that she is not confused about her cultural identity. On the other hand, Levee is egger to compromise with his culture for materialistic gain. Therefore, his psyche is divided in two ness hence, he is destructive by his temperament. This confusion leads him towards the killing of Toledo at the end of the play.
Ma, who sings the blues, understands life. Levee, who doesn’t want to sing the blues, doesn’t want to accept his being. This is his fatal mistake. Levee could have learned about himself by simply looking around the band room – for Kernels of both music and spiritual knowledge.

Wilson wants to suggest, how identity crisis leads men towards the total destruction of their lives. Ma wants to use her past as a weapon against the whites; whereas, Levee wants to escape from his past, that is his great mistake. Because, of this mistake he disconnects himself from his culture and other friends.

Cutler is a religious person and believer in African American cultural. He always tells to Levee that he should follow Ma Rainey in order to preserve the African American identity through the art of music. He believes that the North Americans are interested in listening new music and not the old one. Cutler warns him to walk on the way of Ma Rainey. This is revealed in a dialogue:

LEVEE : I don’t care what Ma say! I’m talking about what the intro gonna do to the song. The people in the North ain’t gonna buy all that tent show nonsense. They wanna hear some music.

CUTLER : Nigger, I done told you time and again... you just in the band. You plays the piece... Whatever they want! Ma says what to play! Not you ain’t here to be doing no creating. Your job is to play whatever Ma says!

(MRBB,53)
Cutler is alert to the exploitation of African American musical tradition. Hence, he wants to make Levee conscious about it. Therefore, he advises Levee to follow the way of Ma Rainey who is ideal woman to them.

The character of Sylvester is most suggestive example of the marginalization of African Americans in the American society. He is not able to articulate words in proper order. Hence, he cannot sing a song. However, Ma Rainey believes that he can sing an intro to the song of *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*. She promotes Sylvester to be a musician because she wants to make him independent human being. Kim Pereira suggests:

> It is significant that a non-musician plays an important role in the recording. The inarticulate Sylvester represents those black people with little or no voice in this society. By letting him do the introduction, Ma Rainey suggests that they too can participate in the blues – all blacks have a voice through their music and in a large sense that they can contribute to the successful advancement of black culture.\(^{23}\)

Kim Pereira’s observation regarding the character of Sylvester is most meaningful. Sylvester is a representative of average African American culture. Ma Rainey gives him opportunity to sing a song is significant trial of her in order to participate him in musical industry.

Dussia Mae is young African American woman who is a female lover of Ma Rainey. However, she does not want to depend on Ma Rainey in order to survival, Hence, she wants to trap Levee’s security and success. However, Levee’s interest in Dussia Mae is only fulfillment of sexual desire. Wilson presents the immature and complex relationship
between African American man and woman through the characters of Dussia Mae and Levee. Kim Pereira notes:

Dussia Mae’s character is not explicitly defined. Cutler refers to her as “Ma’s gal” and tries to warn Levee to stay away from her. She two of them make an interesting study in contrast.  

Both of them want to develop their relationship for material gain from each other. They come closer in order to take benefit from each other, Hence, it is absolutely immature and ruthless relationship with each other.

Toledo, the pianist in the band of Ma Rainey has deep sense of his own cultural heritage and sorrow of his destruction by the whites. He believes that they have sold the African values and faiths in the price of tomatoes. In addition to this they have imitated the artificial values of the white men which is a great loss of their cultural identity.

TOLEDO : We done the same thing, Cutler. There ain’t no difference. We done sold Africa for the price of tomatoes. We done sold ourselves to white man in order to be like him. Look at the way you dressed...That ain’t Africa. That’s the white man... We’s imitation white men. (MRBB, 78.)

The white value’s domination over African Americans is responsible for the loss of their cultural identity and glorious history. Therefore, Toledo wants to enlighten his friends, especially slow Drag, to understand their cultural loss and identity problems.

The whole play is centralized on the life and attitude of Ma Rainey who is an outstanding contributor of Blues. Wilson presents Ma’s social, economic and cultural exploitation to the audiences in order to explore
racist practices in the America of 1920s. Sandra Shannon states, “Ma would also fall upon financial hard times. For a variety of reasons, chief among which were the onset of the Depression and changing regard for blues singer.” Moreover, the leadership of Ma Rainey is only limited to her band members. The white producers intentionally suppressed her and do not accept her leadership as a genuine Blues singer. “Ma Rainey is no more a leading lady than the black band members or white promoters are leading men.” Ma’s leadership is limited to her band members only. She does not lead the whites. However, she is very devoted to the blues and its propaganda among the African Americans in order to empower their culture. She says, “This be an empty world without the blues. I talk that emptiness and try to fill it up with something.” (MRBB, 67). It reveals her truth and faith in the Blues and African American culture.

Wilson suggests in his different plays that the career of African Americans is limited to the sports and music only. His play Fences, presents the character of Troy Maxon who is the victim of racism in sports. Hence, his career was damaged and it deeply affected on his later life. Sandra Shannon illustrates:

In several recent publications, August Wilson has consistently noted that the careers of blacks have traditionally been limited to sports and music. Yet he also acknowledges that even these areas became targets for racial discrimination. As Ma Rainey’s case illustrates, the music industry- Which suffered no lack of excellent black talent -was unmercifully pirated and regulated by opportunistic white promoters.
Wilson presents new tactics of racism by the whites in various public services and markets. *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* is penetrative presentation of African American experiences of the 1920s. It explodes the harsh reality and deep exploitation of African Americans in white racist society.

Thorough these three plays of August Wilson he tries to explore the socio- economic and cultural life of the African Americans of the first three decades of the twentieth century in connection with race religion culture and identity. *Gen of the Ocean* artistically incorporates the harassment and predicament of these people. *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* explains that the African Americans did hard and heavy work to improve economy of the whites in the U.S. However, they kept them aside from the financial opportunities and enforced them in poverty and unemployment. *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* reveals the harassment of African American musicians though they are genius artists.
REFERENCES AND NOTES:


2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid.


9. Hayes, Corlis Angela, Quoted in, C. Patric Tyndall.


11. Ibid. PP. 562 – 575.


15. Ibid. PP. 433 – 457.


18. Ibid.


22. Ibid.


25. Sandra Shannon.

26. Ibid.

27. Ibid.