CHAPTER - V

CONCLUSION
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In *BLK Love Song #1* by Kalamu Ya Saleem, a woman asks where is the seed of Africa? Where are the first men who walked the earth? Have they vanished? The chorus answers that they are gone to America. They are gone to the new world. As the Chorus suggests, a black man was just like a seed that Europeans brought from the coasts of Africa which could not be transplanted successfully in the white soil. Deprived of the socio-economic and cultural benefits, blacks were thrown to the shackles of slavery.

However, with the sufferings on the plantations a great theatre was destined to be born. The dehumanizing experiences that black slaves suffered needed an outlet. This led to the birth of Blues form and slave narratives; the oral expressions of their horrifying experiences in the New World.

Since a black man was cast in a double role, a slave and an entertainer, he had to please his white master through Minstrel shows. All these roles founded the bricks of the black theatre. As August Wilson says:

“Black theatre...on which we have laboured from early 17th century and which has borne so much fruit, so much abundant sweetness, this field of endeavour in which we have made to do with next to nothing, in which we have made theatre with scraps and made it with rest and joy”.¹

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The Black theatre made its way through tough times. Lack of theatres created a major problem for this movement and threatened its existence frequently. However, the performances never stopped. They continued in church basements, barrooms and gymnasiums. Therefore, when the questions regarding the future of the black theatre are raised by critics, the leading dramatist like August Wilson replies them in a sarcastic manner. He says:

"This theatre...which we have lit with $1.99 flood lights... costumed from our closets and the salvation army, this theatre which we have made with genius and ingenuity...this theatre which we have made with some force of creativity as James Brown and the Fabulons Flames Charlie Parker and Duke Ellington... this theatre which we have jump started with the sheer force of our verbal agility...and fueled with the blood of Africa...the muscles of our hearts are playing its trade, the blood racing to all of its legal appointments. Does it have a future???

This needs no explanation to prove the intimacy of the blacks with their theatre. It is a part and parcel of their body and mind. Despite all the problems they face, the economic crises they suffer, blacks have not left theatre at any cost.

When we talk about black theatre, we are invariably talking about the predicament of the black man in America. The black theatre has become an emblem of the endurance of the black man's life.
The emergence of Black theatre is a revolutionary event in the world theatre in general and the American theatre in particular. It has established its identity as a creative, mature and fertile mode of expression by projecting a different dramatic experience and techniques created the world of its own quite different from the mainstream of American theatre. In Black theatre, the actors and the audience, both, re-live their traumatic past, heal their emotional and psychological wounds and derive strength to stand on their own feet as a respectable society. This theatre records the journey of the collective consciousness from denial to dignity. To this extent, the Black American theatre seems to have attained its goals and objectives. It has created a credo of self respect and confidence among the blacks. Therefore, there is a strong reason behind the affinity and affection of the blacks for the Black theatre. This theatre has witnessed the socio-historic journey of the black community so closely that it has become a part of their social life. Moreover, it has enabled them to sustain the racial oppression and culture shocks.

The various art forms became almost the parents of the orphan blacks in the New Land. Witnessing a play for the black audience is a cathartic experience. Moreover, it has helped them to redefine their own place in the white society. The African American dramatists right from the beginning have presented on the stage a faithful dramatization of the lives of black people. Their works stand as a monumental record of black artistry, culture, history and racial consciousness. The theatre examines the fractured
psyche of the black community and tries to correct the distorted image of the black man. It restores the fragmented life of the community into an order. This theatre re-evaluates the tragic past of the community on artistic level and transforms the agony into life-force and harmony.

All the playwrights of this theatre have one common objective; to define Black consciousness. This consciousness as W.E.B. DuBois calls ‘two-ness’, is projected through various mental phases of the characters, like fear, anxiety, revolt, rage and protest. This consciousness has brought special intensity to the expression of the black writers. Though this Black consciousness is immensely complex, and difficult to understand, it bears tremendous potentials for drama and instruction. As Mance William observes:

“within Black theatre, the black consciousness plays, rather than black revolutionary plays successfully used the dialectical approach by confronting black with the negative aspects of their consciousness and prescribing more positive alternatives. So the purpose was to build a stronger and more militant psychology conditioned by a history of forced servitudes, discrimination, and racial denigration.”

This consciousness creates two types of conflicts, ‘the within’ that takes place in the psyche of the characters and ‘the without’ that takes place with the white society on socio-economic, political and cultural levels.
The body of Black American drama, since Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s, exhibits progression of Black consciousness which reaches its peak in the 1960s.

Early attempts to understand Black consciousness were made by white playwrights like Eugene O’Neill, Paul Green, David Belasco and many others. However, these white writers took black themes not out of a genuine interest but they wanted to encash the commercial aspect of the Negro material.

The efforts of generating Black consciousness gained momentum with the nationalism of Marcus Garvey, intellectual power of DuBois and other thinkers. Harlem Renaissance and the New Negro Movement established and glorified blackness. It demanded that an African American should explore his blackness, dramatise it and describe its roots and still remain safe within the general framework of American civilization. This black consciousness is reflected in Langston Hughes’s Mulatto through the problem of mix blood. It is more intrinsic. Bert, a mulatto, is torn between two cultures, two races and his duel consciousness leads him to the realization that he is “neither white nor black”. Though the play is melodramatic in its tone, it has some seeds of militancy. In Soul Gone Home this consciousness is shaped by the economic realities of life. The play is a fantasy, through which Hughes brings out the disappointing picture of a black family totally crushed by poverty. In Simply Heavenly and Little
Ham, Langston Hughes chooses a group of African American people to project his pride for the black race as well as their victimization. Hughes fuses dance and songs with drama in order to enhance the theatrical effect. Sparking dialogues, slapstick movements, colloquial language techniques have made these comedies memorable. Hughes’ Tambourines to Glory deals with the religious aspects of the blacks in Harlem. The play is a fable, a folk ballad in stage form.

The 1960s witnessed a radical change in the black art. LeRoi Jones became an exponant of the Revolutionary theatre. He is more militant in his message. In Dutchman, his much discussed play, Black consciousness reflects through Clay’s desire to be accepted by the white culture. He allows Lula, a white Bohemian lady to dominate him and in the end to kill him. Though Clay replies Lula’s sexual and racial insults in a speech, he fails to convert his words into action. His Black consciousness fails him to grow into a militant black and hence he is killed. Clay’s speech just before the murder becomes an act and a prophecy of rising Black consciousness. Jones uses cinematic technique to accelerate the speed of the action of the play. The Slave is a companion piece to Dutchman. It is a fable in which Walker fulfills Jones’s concept of a militant black. However, though Walker, the protagonist of the play, is blowing up cities and marching ahead with his black revolutionary army, he is a slave to his past. His visit to his former white wife Grace, is an indication of his torn personality. He fails to cut off all his roots from his former white wife. Jones’s message is very clear.
Unless the black man is not freed from this split, he will continue to be a victim of dualism. Jones uses theatre techniques like circular ending, flashback technique, the sound of blasts and light effects. Ray Fooots, in *The Toilet*, is another example of Jones’s presentation of duel-identity. He is divided into his love for the white boy, Karolis, and his own black community. *The Toilet* stands for both, the microcosm of the white America and a place of communal strength for the black boys. The realistic setting, imaginary games played by the black boys are the special techniques Jones uses in this play.

August Wilson has taken different decades of the African American history for the exploration of Black consciousness. He uses different settings to design his experience. Levee in *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* has surrendered his music to the whites in order to achieve success in music industry dominated by whites. He wants respect in the white society. His black consciousness is presented through violence which drives him to murder another co-musician. Wilson makes apt use of music instruments for dramatic effect. *Fences* is closely linked with the social environment. Troy, the protagonist of the play does not allow his son Cory to choose football as career. The Black consciousness in Troy is turned into bitterness. The setting of *Fences* becomes a symbol of protection and separation. In *Joe Turner’s come and Gone* the past always haunts Loomis. The Black consciousness is deeply ingrained in Loomis memory. This ‘two-ness’ or ‘duel-personality’ exists in the psyche of the characters in different phases.
of their experience. Wilson's *The Piano Lesson* emphasises the importance of embracing black cultural heritage. The history of Charles' family is presented through the symbol of piano.

With all these themes and techniques, black playwrights try to create their separate cultural world. They declare that black is the colour of cosmos. They try to erase the imposed connotations associated with blackness. Considered as evil and ugly, the black was always neglected. The white was always praised as pious, fair, beautiful, dignified and majestic. Black playwrights try to subvert this traditional concept in order to glorify the strength, beauty and originality of the black color. They do not wait for the White's approval, on the contrary elevate it on the higher level.

One of the prominent feature of the Black theatre is that it has been closely associated with poetry. Black theatre groups were most likely to spring up around black poetry workshops. The audience that took interest in New Black Poetry, and eventually in the New Black Drama, was primarily young, College based audience. All the three playwrights Langston Hughes, LoRoi Jones and August Wilson consider poetry as the bedrock of their dramatic activity. Leroi Jones has added special emphasis on this aspect. In his plays *Dutchman* and *The Slave*, the protagonists are essentially poets.

Black Theatre, since it is geared towards the awareness and upliftment of the Black community, is more close to the audience. It
incorporates the elements of street theatre, the theatre of protest and the theatre of revolt in order to reform and educate the black society.

The black American writers have always been feeling and saying that they are a nation within America. They may perhaps be a nation within a nation but the future of the Black American theatre seems to be bright.

It is usually argued by scholars that the life of a reactionary theatre is very short but the life of the Black theatre doesn’t seem to be as short lived as it has been thought and said. Mance Williams observes that “...the fact that the circumstances which necessitated the development and perpetuation of a Black American Theatre for a full century and a half still exists means that the tradition will be extended”.

The aims and objectives of the black theatre as they were visualized in the beginning have not changed. Black’s predicament in the American society is not completely changed. The theatre has to serve the same function of instructing the blacks and inculcating into them an awareness of the situation and infusing a sense of self respect among them.

At present the Black theatre movement is going through a hard financial crisis. The movement flourished in the 60s and 70s but now it seems that it is facing a setback because of obvious financial reasons. However, the black theatre and playwrights are concentrating more on social problems. It has gone beyond revolution.
NOTES AND REFERENCES


4. Williams, p.162.