CHAPTER - IV

AUGUST WILSON
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The Black theatre after the 1960s was an artistic war waged by the black playwrights on the stage against the dominant white ideology. From this platform they declared their political manifesto that the blacks are a separate nation within America. It was militant in its nature and the playwrights were desperate for action. It was, in a way a platform burning with the black fire.

The Militant theatre did incorporate the issues like adherence to the history of the African Americans, the restoration of the black value system, exploitation of the black in America, but the emphasis was on showing black man as a victim and as a revolutionary.

In recent times, the anger and rage of the blacks in general and black playwrights in particular have developed into a more matured form. Their writings reflect the meditative mood by turning back to the revaluation of their own state of living, the restoration of black culture in America, reaffirmation of their history and their own set of rules. The need to redesign the relationship with their own society and with the white mainstream is felt by the black artists on a broad scale.

Lonne Elder III’s Ceremonies in Dark Old Men (1969, Philip Hayes Dean’s Sky of the Blind Pig (1971), Joseph Walker’s The River Nigger (1972), Leslie Lee’s The First Breeze of Summer (1975), Charls Fuller’s A
Perfect Party (1968), My Many Names and Days (1972), Candidate (1974), A Soldier’s Play (1981) were some of the major plays of this era.

August Wilson emerged as a major voice in American theater in the 1980s. His plays are a part of a planned play-cycle about black American experience in the twentieth century. He committed himself to write the history of African Americans from the beginning. He is honoured with various prizes such as the Tony Award, the New York Drama Critics Circle Award and the Pulitzer prize.

Beginning his writing-career as a poet, Wilson switched to drama in the 1960s. Poetry, as Wilson considers, is the bedrock of his playwriting. He envisions theatre as a means to raise the collective consciousness of black people. He no longer considers himself as a poet, but his fine ear for black speech and his ability to infuse the language of ordinary people with the stuff of poetry is an essential, distinguishing factor of his plays. His poetic sensibility, therefore, remains highly sensitive to the Black Consciousness and finds expression through his plays.

Wilson accepts that the ground on which he stands has been pioneered by Greek dramatists, by Shakespeare, Ibsen and Shaw and by the American dramatists like Eugene O’Neill, Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams. The other ground which has provided strength to his art has been pioneered by his socio-political cultural forefathers - Nat Turner, Denmark Vesey, Martin Delaney, Marcus Garvery and Elijah Muhammad.
Though Wilson accepts the ground laid by Western tradition of drama, he disconnects himself from it. He says "I haven't read Ibsen, Shaw, Shakespeare ...I'm not familiar with Death of a Salesman. I haven't read Tennessee Williams I very purposefully didn't read them".¹

August Wilson is a poet turned dramatist as most of the Black playwrights are or were. Wilson says that he was writing scripts without knowing that he was becoming a playwright. Writing a play is a journey for him, "walking down the landscape of the self, unattended, unadorned, exploring what D.H.Lawrence called 'the dark forest of the soul'".² August Wilson's theatre world is inseparable from black life since blackness is a part and parcel of his consciousness. He once told "... it is difficult to disassociate my concerns with theatre from the concerns of my life as a black man and it is difficult to disassociate one part of my life from another."³

Black theatre, as August Wilson believes, has a tradition of brilliant and provocative theatre of LeRoi Jones and Spirit House Players and Movers, which sought to inform and provoke as well as entertain.

Black theatre, for August Wilson is a target for cultural imperialists who seek to propagate their ideas about the world as the only valid ideas and seek blacks as woefully deficient not only in arts and letters but in the abundant gifts of humanity. It is "alive ... it is vibrant ... it is vital."⁴
For August Wilson, theatre is a tool to politicize the community and raise the consciousness of the people. He strongly feels that American Theatre is not the property of any one race or culture as some people think. He says: "All art is political. All my plays are political but I try not to make them didactic or polemical. Theatre does not have to be agitprop. I hope that my art serves the masses of blacks in America who are in desperate need of solid and sure identity."

August Wilson argues that the roots of the Black theatre tradition lie in the past, the slave plantations of the South. Slaves were entertainers for their white masters. The second tradition occurred when these slaves sought to invest their spirit with the strength of their ancestors. They found new spirit in their traditional songs, dance and art. The art form helped them to survive themselves from their dehumanizing status.

The past for African American writers in general and August Wilson in particular is a living experience. Whatever these people suffer from, they do not suffer from amnesia. History, though hostile, is significant to them and acts as a force of self-definition and also a source of defining their future.

The history of blacks in America has not been written by blacks and the whites have a different attitude, a different relationship to the history. August Wilson's plays attempt to rediscover history. He sincerely feels that history is a valuable tool. To create future, it is necessary to know one's
past. In each of his plays, Wilson uses past as his back-drop for the social and political atmosphere. His excellent sense of history and firm grasp of the fluctuating social changes in the lives of black people throughout the course of the twentieth century enable him to capture the mood of the decade without resorting to mere commentary. Although racial discrimination casts a deep shadow over all the plays, and prejudice and harassment are continually present, Wilson’s primary objective is not to blame the white America. Wilson’s focus is not so much on what black people were denied, but on what they possess. He admires their indomitable spirit, a bottomless capacity for survival, and a rich sensibility informed by a music born in an ancient culture. He tries to present positive images of black males in America.

In order to understand the nature of August Wilson’s plays an analysis of the influence of four B’s would be of great help.

“In terms of influence on my work, I have what I call my four B’s: Romare Bearden, Imamu Amiri Baraka, the writer; Jorge Luis Borges, the Argentine short-story writer; and the biggest B of all: the blues.” Wilson has noted that he liked *The Four Revolutionary Plays* which became the force of his Black Horizons Theatre. The use of history, the enactment of ritual dance and quest for one’s own self in blues; these are the elements which August Wilson borrowed from LeRoi Jones. Wilson’s love for blues reflects in his plays. For Wilson, blues is a sacred book, something that is very near to his heart. It reflects the complexities of African American
culture. The blues are a connective force that links the past with the present, and the present with the future.

Another influence that shaped his dramatic art is that of Romare Bearden, the African American artist best known for his collages of black life created during the 1960s and 1970s. Bearden offered Wilson a new visual language. The characters’ names in *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* are supplied by Bearden’s painting. August Wilson has followed aesthetic pattern of Jorge Borges. His interest in story telling has the basis of his strong bond with Borges.

Apart from these, Wilson is indebted to the rich folk tradition of his culture. He includes recognizable patterns of the lore in his dramas. His plays fit into the historical conception of African American folk love. This tradition helps to unfold the history of a people and also provides strength. All these forms and influences exhibit the uniqueness and sociocultural tradition of the black race. August Wilson believes that race is the most influential factor in creating the identity of the blacks. “It is the largest, most identifiable, and the most important part of our personality. It is the largest category of identification....”

According to him, the term black or African American not only denotes race, it denotes condition and carries with it the episodes like slavery, social segregation, abuse of opportunity. According to August Wilson, these social condition have tremendous potentials for dramatization.
As Jay Plum observes: "Wilson’s dramaturgy challenges the secondary position of African Americans within American history by contextualizing black cultural experiences and, in turn, creating an opportunity for the black community to examine and define itself."^8

In his plays, Two Trains Running, Seven Guitars, Fences and Joe Turner’s Come and Gone, August Wilson explore the metaphoric relationship between African American history and the blacks. In his search for history memory plays a vital role. Wilson brings the past into present as an active component of people’s daily lives. Through history, he establishes a strong bond between the blacks and the African culture which he defines as the behavioural patterns, arts, beliefs, institutions and all other products of human work and thought as expressed in a particular community of people. August Wilson strongly affirms that black Americans are Africans who need a value system that includes their contributions as Africans in America.

August Wilson’s plays are part of a series in progress. Each of Wilson’s plays is modelled on the well-made play. He develops conflict step by step to a crisis that is based on a crucial and traumatic incidences from the protagonist’s past.

Wilson has explained about his planned play cycle that “I am taking each decade and looking at one of the most important questions that blacks confronted in that decade and writing a play about it.... Put them all together and you have a history.”^9 His plays often centre upon conflicts
between blacks who embrace their African past and those who deny it. Each play mixes European and African elements. They reflect Wilson's vision of a more equitable and respectable society.

To cover the history of four hundred years in ten plays was not something planned by the playwright. He says that he did not start out with a grand idea. He says:

"I wrote a play called Jitney! set in '71, and a play called Fullerton Street that I set in '41. Then I wrote Ma Rainey's Black Bottom, which I set in '27, and it was after I did that that I thought, "I've written three plays in three different decades, so why don't I just continue to do that?".¹⁰

Ma Rainey's Black Bottom is the first in a cycle of plays by August Wilson. It is set in 1927. The play examines the relationship between black artists and white recording company owners. The play exhibits the position of black people in the society at large a society dominated by white racism. Ma Rainey's Black Bottom opened on Broadway in October 1984. It won the New York Drama Critics Circle Award. Floyd Gaffney says that August Wilson deals with the problem of racism through musical imagery and idiomatic language. The play depicts the vulnerable state of African American Jazz musicians creating music in a decade when majority of the African American population was preoccupied with relocating to crowded, urban areas during great migration.

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The play Ma Rainey's Black Bottom is based on an imaginary episode in the life of a legendary black singer Gertrude Ma Rainey who is regarded by some artists as ‘the mother of Blues’. August Wilson’s love for Blues tradition is apparent in Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom. It is one of the Four B’s that has influenced his creative sensibility. He looks upon blues form as “African American’s response to the world”.11

Wilson best elaborates the monumental importance of Blues to his plays. He says:

“The thing with the blues is that there’s an entire philosophical system at work. And I’ve found that whatever you want to know about the black experience in America is contained in the blues. So it (the blues) is the Book. It is our sacred book. Every other people has a sacred book, so I claim it as that Anything I want to know, I go there and find it out”.12

In August Wilson’s plays, the Blues are what Houston Baker, a critic identifies as “the expressive sight where American experience is named”.13 In Wilson’s plays, blues is an expression for confronting with the tragic reality of the blacks in America.

August Wilson came to Ma Rainey by the way of Bessie Smith, the blues singer. In Bessie’s voice August Wilson found the true expression of his own culture. When Wilson heard the music he felt that “for the first time someone was speaking directly to me about myself and the cultural environment of my life. I was stunned by it’s beauty, by it’s honesty, and
most important, by the fact that it was mine. An affirmation of my presence in the world that would hold me up and give ground to stand on.”

From Bessie Smith, Wilson learn that all black people have a song, their own way of presenting themselves.

Ma Rainey is considered as one of the first Blues singers. Sandra Lieb in her book Mother of Blues: A study of Ma Rainey, observes that Ma Rainey first heard the blues in 1902 in a small town in Missouri where she was appearing in Vaudeville tent shows. A girl from the town came to the tent and began to sing. Ma Rainey was so impressed by her song that she learned the song from the visitor and began to specialize in the singing such songs. Rainey further claimed that it was she who gave the songs the name “Blues”.

By 1923, Ma Rainey became the leading black female singer. Through her songs, she became the spokesperson of the black womanhood. Between 1927 and 1929, Ma Rainey recorded Solely for Paramount label, including the song that gives this play it’s title.

Wilson sets his play in a recording studio in Chicago. The white owners of the company are profiting from the race division which records songs of black artists aimed primarily at black audiences.

August Wilson has chosen to focus on the African Americans oppression in the world of music to symbolize the collective struggle of all
African American people in America. The play begins with the introduction of the four black band members Cutler, the trombonist and guitar player, is the “most sensible” with a playing style that is “solid and almost totally unembellished” (p.14). Toledo is a pianist. He “recognizes that (his instrument’s) limitations are an extention of himself” (p.14) and his insights are “thought provoking” (p.14). Slow Drag is bassist who is “deceptively intelligent, though, as his name implies, he appears to be slow” with a “rakish and bright” (p.14) temper and strident voice. Everybody is waiting for Ma’s arrival. From the beginning Levee, the trumpet player, scorns the conservative musical style favoured by Ma Levee is young, stylish, flamboyant, energetic and ambitious. He prefers new improvisational jazz style and dreams about forming his own band.

Sturdyvent is the representative of the white exploitation. He is an executive of the company and preoccupied with money. Moreover, he is “insensitive to black performers and prefers to deal with them at arm’s length” (p.11). He has nothing to do with the Blues or any black musical tradition. He just makes money out of recording songs by black artists. That’s why there is no reason for him to cultivate any respect for Ma, the black Blues singer.

The approach of the whites towards black music is purely commercial. Irvan is another white man “who prides himself on his knowledge of blacks and his ability to deal with them” (p.11), and manages to keep balance between the artists and the owner.

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As the details of the black musician’s lives unfold, the audience becomes aware of the racism that these successful black performers have had to face throughout their careers. The musician engage in recalling past events in their lives.

August Wilson feels that music is an integral part of the life of blacks and racial identity. Therefore, much of the conflict centres around the music and music players. Kim Pereira observes that “Wilson affords us glimpses into the development of their personalities and allows us to be privy to their efforts to survive the social and economic injustices that beset blacks in the early part of the twentieth century”. Each musician has a “solo turn” to talk about past experiences. Wilson relates their experience sharing the art of storytelling as an ancient mode of expression. Toledo believes that blacks will have position in the society only when they start believing in their own capacities. Self-help is their real option. He is well aware of the fact that whites will always regard them as unwanted leftovers.

Slow Drag, the bassist, embodies some of the solid characteristics of his instruments. He is optimistic about the future of his race. He replies Toledo expressing faith in the ability of his race to survive.

Cutler and Slow Drag have been together in the same profession for the last twenty two years. For both, the band is a source of strength and comfort. Culter plays guitar which has a limited role in a band, strumming and pulse keeping. Culter is closely associated with Ma.
He has strong sense of the blues tradition in which he finds the source of inspiration.

For all the musicians, music is a matter of something of their own. It is “the springboard for the transcendent resolution of the spirituals and the hopeful resonance of the blues”.\(^{18}\)

Slow Drag and Cutler know that music is that joy with which they can survive in the white world. All the musicians exhibit a rich sensitivity toward their art. “The rich sensibility of the music these men play” as Eileen Crawford says, “is an indication of their belief in culture-as-affirmation. The music gives available expression to the inner dimensions of otherwise inarticulate men”.\(^{19}\)

Levee, the trumpet player, is different from his fellow musicians. To fulfil his dream to have his own band, Levee has surrendered his art to the white music. He has no patience with the old sytle and is unwilling to rehearse with “old Jug band” (p.19). He has compromised his own music for his set goals - wealth, power, glory and sexual gratification. As a result, he has failed to understand the real motive of the Blues. He fails to understand that “the oral tradition is an integral part of the lives of black Americans, a legacy from their African roots when the history and myths of a tribe were kept alive by griots”.\(^{20}\)

For Levee style is more important than the content. He needs to put on his new shoes to play some good music. His style reflects his
attitude towards life. To play well he must look good. However, Levee’s talent is acknowledged by Culter, who accepts that Levee plays good music. He accepts that he is capable of producing brilliant notes but unfortunately his ambition has stunted his musical growth.

Levee’s decision to modify the original version of songs shows his ignorance towards his sense of tradition and his inability to understand the vigour of the cultural heritage. For him, the song should be attractive enough to satisfy the company owners and the public. By modifying the traditional tunes, he gives secondary importance to the content which is soul of the song. Levee totally surrenders to his white masters and doesn’t consider Ma, as the mother of Blues. He refuses her authority on the African American culture.

Against the background of this discussion, Ma enters the studio. She is accompanied by Dussie Mae, a young, dark-skinned, sensual black woman and her nephew Sylvester. Wilson has purposefully delayed Ma’s entry. He lets other musicians to talk about Ma and her art so that the curiosity is enhanced about her appearance. She is delayed by a traffic accident. Her entry indicates her status. The sense of pride of being a blues singer reflects through her actions. She is fearless and confronts the policeman with extreme clarity. She says to Irvan “Tell these people who I am” (p.39).

Ma has a complete knowledge of the exploitation that is taking place in the music world. Ma knows that her success depends on the musical
tradition of her own people and not on the white owners of the company. For her, Blues is that spirit which makes their life meaningful.

Ma considers Blues a companion. She has fused her artistic connection with her cultural roots and doesn’t allow Irvin or Sturdyvant any changes in her music.

Kim Marra observes that Levee’s struggle with Ma Rainey is more one of sexual power politics than of artistic or generational differences. The song Levee has modified explicitly has references to female buttocks. Levee’s attempt to rearrange the song, symbolically becomes a phallic gesture.

Ma Listens to her heart only. It is the voice inside her that she values much. It is her roots that she sings for. Therefore, she resists every attempt made by Levee to swing the Blues. By compromising her music, she doesn’t want to discredit her tradition. Blues plays an important role in her career and her life. For her, it is a source of identity, a source of strength, and a way of affirming her own place in the society. She gives her stammering nephew, Sylvester, a chance to perform with dignity. Ma helps him to overcome his disability. Kim Pereira observes that Sylvester represents “those black people with little or no voice in this society”.

By making Sylvester confident to do the introduction, Ma wants to assert that all blacks have voice through their music. Music is a

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form that incorporates the whole black community. In contrast to Ma’s views, Levee’s attitude towards music seems to be very casual. He looks upon Levee as an agent of his commercial network. He fuels his ambition by promising him to record his tunes. Levee embraces Jazz dance style that has become a craze among black people in the urban North.

Levee is desperate to prove his talents. He faces the eternal dilemma of minorities, where success often is dependent on the approval of the majority. To get his records produced, he pleases his white boss. Unlike Ma, he has kept aside his pride and has designed the music that Sturdyvant wants to hear. Levee’s philosophy is moulded by a need to survive and prevail. He wants the respectability his parents never had. His behavior is related with his childhood horror of witnessing his mother being gang-raped by whites. This atrocity led to the lynching of his father, who, forced to take justice into his hand, had killed two of the rapists. Levee has learned from his father how to deal with the white man. His father’s death and the memory of his mother’s rape have imbued Levee with a deep desire for revenge and music is the weapon by which he can get back the respect his parents were forced to lose.

Levee’s attitude has been forged from his tortured personal history of white economic and sexual abuse. Kim Marra observes: “though invested with the ambition needed to fight oppression, Levee lacks the vital perspective on his quest provided by his more literate and philosophical band mate”.

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Father's agony and mother's tragedy have generated anger in Levee. It has left him alone and confused. The first act comes to an end with Levee's revelation of injuries he has suffered in the racist society.

Kim Pereira observes that Levee's outrageous behaviour is the result of a defiance of tradition. His pride has generated his indifferent attitude towards Ma and her music. "By shunning the blues, he turns his back on the most important aspect of his musical heritage. It is also a denial of an essential part of his identity as Black American...."\textsuperscript{23}

The second act begins on a humorous note. Ma and her band members are waiting to do another take on the introduction of the song. Sylvester is unable to say few words without stammering. Ma shows great patience towards Sylvester and says that her nephew knows his job. She disapproves Irvin's idea of recording Levee's version of the song.

Dussie Mae "Ma's Gal" (p.23) has no identity of her own and is dependent on Ma for everything. She is in search for a meaningful relationship. Except her sexuality she has nothing more to offer. "The relationship between Ma and Dussie Mae" as Floyd Gaffney observes, "is not spelled out, though it is implied that the attraction is sexual".\textsuperscript{24}

Through Ma's dialogues, it is soon realized how deeply Ma is affected by the racial environment in America. She tells Cutler her understanding of the white company executives, Irvin and Sturdyvant; Ma can read the faces of the white opportunists.
Ma’s views reveal the fact that white people do not consider black artists as human beings but a marketable commodity. She doesn’t allow the whites to use her talents as per their will. Moreover, she is aware of the ignorance and inability of the whites to understand the substances and essence of the Blues tradition. Against this background, one has to appreciate Ma’s dominance on the music industry. Even, Levee also appreciates the way Ma has cultivated her respect.

Levee wants to fight back. He wants to change his life and music. He rejects all the previous institutions. Levee’s frustration reaches to the level that he discards the God. He says that the God is also on white man’s side. He has no sympathy for colored people. “God aint never listened to no nigger’s prayers. God takes a nigger’s prayers and throwsin the garbage..... God can kiss my ass” (p.81). Cutler can’t stand for Levee’s insulting talk about God and knocks Levee down. Levee pulls out a knife which is an indication of Levee’s upset disturbed mental state. Levee is thrown out of the music world when Ma refuses to sing his notes.

Ma finally completes the recording session but refuses to sign the release form until Sylvester is paid his own twenty-five dollars, separate from her personal fee. Ma is aware of the economic exploitation of the black artists and she doesn’t allow Irvin and Sturdyvant to extract Sylvester’s money.

Levee finds himself totally cut off from his own roots, religion, music, heritage and also from his own friends. He looses everything:
recording contract, job and his future. Sturdyvant cancels the original contract with Levee. Levee is disillusioned. His ambition, pride and future dreams have vanished. The final action is focused on Levee. Toledo accidentally steps on one of Levee's new shoes. It is sufficient reason for Levee's hate and frustration to take a pereversive mode. Levee plunges a knife into Toledo's "back up to the hilt" (p.92). Levee remains a powerless black artist, a victim and a murderer. The act of killing Toledo is "tentamount to Levee's self destruction and, in a larger sense, to race suicide". It is not that Levee stabs Toledo because Toledo steps on his shoes. Levee's act is an involuntary reaction to his supressed ambition. Levee has got very much energy which remains unchannelised and takes a pervertive form.

Frank Rich has pronounced this play "a searching inside account of what white racism does to it's victims."26

To some extent, August Wilson deals with the theme of Great Migration in Ma Rainey's Black Bottom. Shandra Shanon rightly points out that the migration of the blacks from the South to the industrial North made them totally uprooted. The search for jobs led them to face the tragic situation. Ma Rainey's Black Bottom conveys Wilson's understanding of the subtle curse inflicted in the North on the black Southern migrants. Sandra Shanon also points out that Levee, who has left behind him an emotionally painful South and who aspires to make a name for himself in Chicago by recording his own lyrics, "is a product of the Deep South."27 Similarly,
Clive Barns also observes that "the grand dramatic design of Ma Rainey's Black Bottom relies on the repeated echoes of the South." 28

Critics have praised Wilson for the vitality of the play as well as for the authentic, lively dialogues. Wilson has fused poetic imagery with the colorful verbal presence of black colloquial language. Pointing out the capacities of August Wilson as a playwright Floyd Gaffney believes:

"What distinguishes Ma Rainey's Black Bottom from other plays in its genre, plays that echo similar voices against racism, self-hated, and class exploitation is the electric genius of it's author. Wilson’s concerns are primarily examined through a dramatic structure that encompasses social crises and renders them visible, and in a language that adds a vital new voice to American stage." 29

By setting the play at the end of the 1920, when black music was at a crossroad, Wilson explores the roots of African American culture and identity. Instruments in the play have invaluable function to perform. They are metaphors to explore the future of each of them as a black musician and a black American. The play is an answer to those who deny their African past. Africa remains a pervasive force, a kind of psycsic balm available to 20th century blacks through Blues songs, communal dances, talltales. Similarly, Sandra Shanon observes:

"Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom is not really about Ma Rainey. Even though the play revolves around the life of the one time blues legend Ma Rainey, Wilson includes her not as a leading lady
but rather as a less conspicuous though uninhibited commentator on the callous, white controlled music industry. Instead, it is the trumpeter, Levee, who ultimately conveys Wilson's more powerful message of the veritable "rape" of black blues performers whose talents were exploited by greedy white promitors".\textsuperscript{30}

However, August Wilson won his first Pulitzer Prize for \textit{Fences}, a play set in the late 1950s, on the eve of the Civil Rights movements. This period saw many changes in the lives of blacks on social, economic, political and cultural grounds. This period may be called the transitory period of their life because the situation was not the same as it was in 1920s and 1930s. The black community was moving closer to the mainstream white society and the doors of new avenues and opportunities were made open for the Black minority of America to certain extent.

It was also a period for the black community to claim full citizenship since blacks had responded positively to their country's call for the participation in the World War-II. This period of 1950s witnessed a complete radical mood of the Black as the vehemently demanded the Civil Rights for them.

Though blacks were free legally, practically they had little or no access to any of the benefits like law, equal employment opportunities and education. Kim Pereira analyses this period "a time of some protest, much hope, and great skepticism".\textsuperscript{31} In his plays, Wilson, with extreme

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subtlety examines the racial oppression activated in various walks of life by the dominant white society and reveals how blacks were denied chances and opportunities.

Though *Fences* is one of the planned cycle of plays by Wilson, there are other reasons behind designing this play. It is the commercial pressure and criticism on *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* that inspired Wilson to write this play. *Fences* was an answer to the critics who had levelled charges against him.

August Wilson explains: "*Fences* was me sitting down and saying, Okey here is a play with a large central character".  

In *Fences*, the central character, Troy, appears in virtually every scene and the whole play spins around him. As Wilson says, “the play almost be called the life of Troy Maxson”. *Fences* opened at Yale Repertory Theatre in New Haven; Connecticut in April 1985 and on Broadway in March 1987. Wilson places his protagonist within a familial organization and demonstrates the impact of political and social changes on the individual and the community. In *Fences*, Wilson traces the fortunes of the Maxson family for three generations; their hopes and ambitions, their pride, their fear, their faith and ultimately their survival.

The title *Fences* indicates barricades that exist in various relationships as well as a symbol of protection and reconciliation. From the
beginning of the play, Troy Maxson is engaged in building a fence. Rose, Troy’s wife wants him to build it so that she can keep her family safe from the forces that threaten her stability.

The focus of the play is on Troy Maxson and Rose. Troy is a middle aged husband and father. Moreover, he, as a black male, is crushed economically and sexually by white racism. His home and job situation both reflect the condition of the blacks in the 1950s. Troy owns his house by playing paltry sum, the government awarded his war-injured brother Gabriel.

Much of the conflict of the play derives from Troy Maxson’s refusal to accept the fact that the social situations are changing for the black man in America. His stubborn attitudes create problems between him and his family, particularly his son, Cory who aspires to make his career in sports. Troy, who is working for garbage company, is an ex-baseball player. He does not allow Cory, his son, to attend the college on a football scholarship arguing that there is no future for blacks in sports.

Examining the destructive and far-reaching consequences of racial injustice in both Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom and Fences August Wilson says that his concern was the idea of missed possibilities. Music and sports were the traditional inroads for blacks, and in both Ma Rainey’s and Fences, with both Levee and Troy even those inroads fail.
Troy’s refusal to accept the change in situation stems from his own past experiences and the injustice he has suffered as a black man. Though ordinary white players have became stars despite his skills and talent, he could not play major league baseball. From his own example, Troy has drawn certain conclusions that restrict Cory from defining his own way in sports career.

Born in poverty in the South, Troy has fought hard throughout his life. Though having all the talents, Troy could not use baseball to earn his living and was pushed back by the white establishment. Therefore, Troy prevents Cory from playing football; for, he considers his own life as an athlete a failure and wants to protect his son from the same fate. He says: “I don’t want him to be like me!”34

Even though Troy is not ready to accept the social change, it is marked in the first scene. Troy tells his friend Bono that he protested to his bosses the unfairness of having black workers lift garbage while white workers drive the trucks. Though Troy is the first colored man to be promoted as the truck driver, his new job does not give him much comfort. In the company of the whites, he feels lonely. More he goes closer to the white society, the more he feels isolated from his own people. His new job brings separation between him and his friend Bono and strengthens his relationship with his mistress, Alberta. He strongly believes that one’s skin becomes a decisive factor in the workplace, the playing field or the street.
Cory can not understand why his father is refusing him to play football. Cory has been recruited to play in the football matches but feels disappointed with his father’s negative response in not signing the contract papers. This misunderstanding deteriorates their relationship with each other. Troy fears that Cory will suffer the same disappointments that he suffered as a black man. Although Troy tries to protect his son, he is unable to show him any affection. Examining their relationship, Joanne Gordon comments that “there are elements of jealousy and unreasonableness in Troy’s attempt to thwart Cory’s ambition to get a football scholarship, but the driving force that determines his action is his perception of his place in a racist society.”

Rose, Troys wife, who has suffered much because of her husband’s cruelty, infidelity and thoughtlessness, understands the relationship between father and son. She tries to convince Troy of the changing situation of the society. But Troy has been determined to cut himself off from Cory in order to prevent him from making the same mistakes as he did.

Kim Pereira observes that “in venting his anger on athletics, Troy is actually turning against himself.” When Bono praises Troy’s talents and ranks him among the best players, Troy reacts more bitterly. “Troy: What it ever get me? Ain’t got a pot to piss in or a window to throw it out of” (p.128). The racial politics has altered his love for sports into scorn.
Troy knows that Cory is his blood and has the same passion for sports. He fears that his son is going the same way he had chosen in his youth. Don Palmer defends Troy’s behaviour saying that Troy is correct. “As a man born in 1904 and illiterate he’s telling his son to get a job so he wont have to carry garbage”.

Troy insists Cory to join ‘A & P grocery’ because he doesn’t want Cory to repeat the case of Lyons, his elder son by a former marriage. Both Troy and Lynos have suffered a lot and paid heavy cost in pursuing their personal destinies, both Lyons and Troy have failed in making their life in music and baseball respectively.

Lyons does not work and lives off his wife’s earnings. Every now and then he come to borrow money from his father. He is trying to make out his carrier in music. He dresses stylishly and leads an easy going life. Wilson’s stage directions describe him as a man who “fancies himself a musician (but) is more caught up in the rituals and ‘idea’ of being a musician than actual practice of the music” (p.115).

Troy criticizes Lyon’s choice not to work and his irresponsible behaviour towards his family. Lyons feels that music helps him to get up in the morning and find his place in the world. He refuses any job that would place him in vulnerable position. He tells: “I dont wanna be carrying nobody’s rubbish. I dont wanna be punching nobody’s time clock” (p.118).
However, it is also important to note that whenever Lyons borrows money from his father, hereturns it the next Friday. Analysing Loyn’s personality Kim Pereira rightly observes that “Loyns is just another confused man dealing with a difficult world.”

When Cory complains of a lack of understanding and support from his father, Troy, on the contrary, asserts that he has provided his sons more than what his father did for him. Troy’s father, who had eleven children, provided him “feet and bones that pumping heart. I give you more than anybody else is ever gonna give you” (p.179). Troy feels that by providing the basic necessities to his sons, he has fulfilled his responsibilities towards them. All the actions and behaviour of Troy are clouded by the memories of separation from his family which later on becomes the dominant theme of the play.

When Troy was fourteen, his father found him fooling about with a girl and beat him so severely that he decided to leave home. Troy’s separation from his father led him to freedom and which allowed him to form a new identity of his own. However, it has not altered his admiration for his father’s responsible attitude towards his children. With the separation, Troy’s journey for survival began. He left the slavery of white masters and accepted the slavery to poverty. He got married and had a son, Lyons. The economic oppression led him to rob a man and an act of killing. In prison, separated from his family, Troy found a new meaning and opportunity to
define himself in baseball. Moreover, it saved his life in prison. Since then baseball became an inseparable part of his life.

_Fences_ has strong ties with Wilson’s own life. Wilson was abandoned by his natural father and got strong guidance from his step father, David Bedford. Bedford’s personal life resembles Troys life. However, Wilson denies any autobiographical element in the play.

Cory’s hopes and dreams are crushed when he comes to know that his father had been to his football coach and asked him not to send the recruitier to him. Cory’s relationship with his father turn into bitterness. He also accuses his father of being jealous of his skills. He thinks that his father did it because he thinks “I’m gonna be better than you that’s all” (p.153).

Cory’s open protest against his father is his first step towards personal freedom from his father’s wings. It is the same feeling of separation that Troy had experienced in his life. The fence which has been a metaphor for protection and safely, now turns into a symbol of alienation and separation and keeps on dominating the whole plot of the play.

The conflict within the family and detoration of relations are further projected through Troy’s violation of his marital responsibilities. Throughout the play, there are only two characters, Bono and Rose, who seem to understand Troy’s emotional and psychological needs. Bono met
Troy into prison and since then they have been intimate friends. Troy’s friendship with Bono has been one of the major influences in his life. Troy spends more time with Bono. They work together, celebrate weekend in drinking. From the beginning of the play he is worried about Troy’s growing relationship with Alberta. “The hallmarks of Bono’s character” says Kim pereira, “are comfort and contentment” 39 He has high regards for Rose and chides Troy for his affair with Alberta, that “big-lagged Floridagal” (p.108).

Rose understands the importance to acknowledge Troy’s efforts. She knows that she has married a restless man. Her devotion to Troy stems from the recognition of the possibilities of life without him. When she met Troy, she was in search of security in a relationship. When she got her family, she diverted all her energy in keeping it together.

Bono is very right when he explains the importance of fence in Rose’s life that she wants to keep her family in and the world out. Her constant prayer is for security. When Troy confesses his affair with Alberta, Rose’s world receives a great shock. For years, Rose has merged her personal life to stand by her husband. Troy’s betrayal brings separation in their emotional bond. Troy loves Rose but claims she stifles him with obligations and responsibilities; with Alberta he finds freedom and laughter. Alberta gives Troy “a different idea, a different understanding” (p.163) about himself. In the company of Alberta as Troy says, he feels a different man, free from all the constrains of life. Rose realizes that by investing her
dreams, her hopes and her personality she has neglected her ownself. By giving Troy her strength she has weakened herself.

Rose is matured enough to understand the situation. She doesn’t give up her marriage immediately. She takes time to recover from this shock and renew her strength. It is her fate which finally protects her family. Alberta dies in a child-birth.

All the chances for reconciliation are shattered when Troy brings his baby girl, Raynell, to Rose who agrees to rise her but peramantly withdraws her emotional involvement from Troy. She becomes a mother once more. She continues to be the woman of the house. As she tells Cory; “By the time Raynell came into the house, me and your daddy had lost touch with each other” (p.190).

Throughout the play, Rose’s behaviour has been extremely mature to sustain Troy’s stubborn attitudes, haughtiness, and irresponsibility towards his family. She maintains her dignity and at the same time clearly defines her role in the house after the arrival of Troy’s illegitimate child.

The separation that arises from Troy’s infidelity is unbridgable. Whatever Rose does for Raynell, the illegitimate child of Troy, comes from a deep realization that “you can’t visit the sins of the father upon the child” (p.173). For her, family means everything. It defines her very existence without which she would be lost. Whereas Rose stands as an epitome of
understanding, Troy as a father, repeats his father’s behaviour towards Cory. He is determined to give his son the same sense of loss and the desire for home. Throughout his life, Troy has been trying to find out the sense of home which his past had spoiled. It is the strong influence of memory that haunts Troy to repeat himself in Cory.

The play leads to the dramatic tension when the physical and emotional conflict between Troy and Cory becomes inevitable. Cory has recognized that there is no room for him in the house and he should make out his own way. By recognizing the flaws in his father Cory has become a man. Cory would leave the house but not without making his father realize his stubbornness and making him disillusioned about his claim of being responsible for his family.

The climax of the play explores the complex relationship between Troy and Cory, between Troy and his father. Troy asks Cory to get out of his house, Cory reminds his father that the house belongs to his uncle Gabriel. The verbal conflict turns into physical. As Troy advances on Cory, he grabs the bat. He swings and misses. Then he swings again and misses. Troy gives him one more chance to swing a third time. He positions himself as a target impossible to miss. Cory can not swing. The two men struggle for the bat. Though Troy takes it away, he can not swing. He stops himself and let Cory go. Cory leaves the house with the feeling of a diffident. With his departure, a new cycle begins. Fence, in a sense, becomes a symbol for emotional and physical separation.

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The final scene takes place in the morning of Troy’s funeral seven year later. Cory, has returned home after his fathers death. He has joined Marines and is about to get married. His career in Marines is not an echo of his past. He asserts his new manhood by refusing to attend his fathers funeral. He says; “I can’t drag papa with me everywhere I go I have got to say no to him” (p.188).

Though Cory says that he has given his father his seventeen years of life and he will give no more, still the memory of his father always haunts him. He wants to deny his father who was like a shadow that followed him everywhere. Rose, in a self-reflective speech reminds Cory about that which Troy did offer to them and how his offerings could be reconciled with their expectations.

Rose knows that Cory will have strength only when he accepts reconciliation, a union between him and his father and Separation will only increase bitterness. By rejecting his father, Cory will reject his own self. Rose convinces her son to tear down the emotional fences that have long separated him and his father.

By talking of Troy’s goodness, Rose moves towards greater forgiveness and understanding. Cory is moved by his mother’s reflections. Honouring his father’s memory, he joins his sister in singing Troy’s favorite song about his old dog blue. At the end of the play, the familial bonds of the Maxson family are tightened again.
Jim O'Quinn says that Wilson’s purpose in *Fences* is “to demonstrate the healing effect of self-empowerment that comes when people establish bonds with their own ancestry”.

*Fences* is more a conventional play and has a simplicity in the direct relationship between Troy and Cory. The conflict within the characters is central to the effectiveness of the play. Since the play has got conventional structure, Wilson has made apt use of the art of storytelling. It is with this device Wilson juxtaposes fact and fiction, past and present. Anthony A. Bibus III describes Troy as an expert story teller who -

“uses stories to demonstrate his love for his wife, to teach values such as fair play and responsibility to his sons, to pass on his philosophy for coping with adversity... and to preserve family history and instill dreams for the future”.

Wilson chooses baseball as a metaphor to explain the emotional entanglements of Troy. He attempts to explain his relationship to the whole world and his son in terms of baseball. Throughout his dialogues, it is felt that for Troy life is a baseball game riddled with fast balls, curve balls, sometimes strike outs. He adopts the language of the game he knows. The rules of game become the basis for his own ethics.

In *Fences*, death has close relevance with human relations. For Wilson, the breakage of relations is another form of death. Whenever Troy fails to protect his relations with his wife and son, death appears before
him. It haunts Troy through his failed relationship with his father. Troy grapples with death by placing it within the contest of his convenient baseball metaphor. Death as he says is a “fast ball on the outside corner” (p.133). He re-enacts fight against Death in baseball terminology.

*Fences* has rightly been called by Kim Pereira “an odyssey of survival”, which deals with the pain of psychological separation among the Maxson family members and the reconciliation that the forgiveness brings about. Both Cory and Troy must understand that past is never dead and they must learn to forgive the sins of the father in order to find their own sense of self.

Migration and separation have been the recurring themes of August Wilson’s plays. He examines the effects of separation on the descendents of slaves who migrated from the rural South to the urban North. Reconstruction practically failed to accommodate blacks as equal shareholders in the new society. Disillusioned with the situation, many blacks moved to the North and sought refuge in Northern cities. The separation from their past and families in the deep South caused physical and psychological restlessness. By 1936, thousands of blacks settled in industrial North aspiring for freedom and American dream but unfortunately their dream ended up in a nightmare of poverty and discrimination. August Wilson in his plays, poses questions about the conditions of the blacks in the rural South and the causes that led blacks to the North.
His another play, *The Piano Lesson* deals with the historical phenomenon of the African American migration from Southern, agrarian way of life to the large industrial cities of the North in search of dignity, and freedom from economic oppression. The play is set in 1937 when the black migration was gaining momentum. August Wilson believes that it was the mistake of the blacks to leave the South and they could have eventually gained economic power by owning the land. In the South, though subjected to race prejudice, blacks have had roots in the soil and in their families. In an interview he explains:

"we were land based agrarian people from Africa. We were uprooted from Africa, and we spent 200 years developing our culture as black Americans. And then we left the South. We uprooted ourselves and attempted to transplant this culture to the pavements of the industrialized North. And it was a transplant that did not take. I think if we had stayed in the South, we would have been a stronger people. And because the connection between the South of the 20s, 30s and 40s has been broken, it's very difficult to understand who we are.". 43

Wilson believes that those blacks who felt South in search of jobs are still victims of racial discrimination and oppression in the North. "The move" Wilson says, "to the cities has not been a good move. today... we still don't have jobs...". 44

Wilson suggests that the South is the place for blacks to pursue their destinies as free people. *The Piano Lesson* reflects growing realization
of Wilson that the blacks can call the South their home. It is the place where several generations of blacks paid a high price on the plantations. The characters in the play reflect Wilson’s urge to return to the South.

In The Piano Lesson Wilson emphasizes the importance of embracing black cultural heritage and economic opportunity for racial survival and prosperity. The whole conflict is centered around a piano which symbolizes the cultural identity of the blacks as well as a source of money. Kim Pereira observes that “for blacks the only avenue into mainstream America was through their music.”

The play opens in Doaker’s house, located in a black neighborhood in Pittsburgh. “The house is sparsely furnished. There is a lack of warmth and vigour”. The house reflects the life of the migrants who are cut off from their family roots and history. Their life is cold and often lonely. “Dominating the parlor is an old upright Piano” (Wilson’s note about the setting of the play). Bernice and her brother Boy Wille create the dramatic tension by fighting for the Piano. Bernice is widowed and the mother of a nine year old daughter. Boy Wille, as his name suggests, is less mature and a bachelor. He is determined to sell the piano, Bernice is equally determined that he will not. Throughout the play, piano becomes an object by which the characters can meet and revaluate their past. The piano is the centre of attraction for the whole family because its legs are covered with mask-like figures, artfully carved in the manner of African sculpture. The
piano celebrates the events of the past for it records the history of the Charles family for several generations. The piano becomes “a touchstone by which antithetical attitudes about the past may be evaluated”.47

When the play begins, it is five o’clock in the morning and Boy Willie is at the front door shouting and banging. He is accompanied by Lymon and they have just arrived from the South with a truck of watermelons. He informs his uncle, Doaker that Sutter, a descendent of the white family that once owned the Charles family has died and Sutter’s brother wants to sell Boy Willie, Suttar’s farm. Boy Willie has come to his sister, who is living with uncle Doaker after the death of her husband. Boy Willie has came with an intention to sell the piano so as to raise some financial help for himself to purchase the land. The conflict begins when Doaker calmly tells Boy Willie that Bernice is not going to sell that piano to any one at any cost.

The discussion is abruptly discontinued when Bernice comes screaming from upstairs because she has seen Sutter’s ghost, whose land Boy Willie wants to buy. The appearance of the ghost links Wilson up with the concept of Mantu which Jane Campbell calls “a belief that the spirits of the dead influence the living”.48

Berniece is still in mourning mood and has not been able to forget the memories of her tragic past; the death of her husband, Crawley, three years ago. She doesn’t like Boy Willie’s arrival, and suspects that he
has stolen the truck in which he drove North. When Sutter’s ghost appears to her and calls for Boy Willie’s name, she assumes that he has murdered Sutter. She asks Boy Willie to leave the place immediately. Boy Willie clarifies Berniece his future plans and declares that if she doesn’t allow him to sell the piano, “I am gonna cut it in half and go on and sell my half” (p.28).

The piano which becomes the source of conflict between the brother and sister represents the familial legacy of the Charles’ family. In the scene II of the Act I, Winning Boy and Doaker tell Lymon that Sutter’s grandfather, white Slave master traded Doaker’s grandmother, also named Berniece, and Docker’s father, then a small boy, to another white man for a piano as an anniversary present for his wife Miss Sophie. Since Miss Sophie started missing her slaves, Sutter ordered one of his slaves to carve on it the pictures of Berniece and her son. The slave also added the pictures of the other members of the family and the important family events. After Sophie’s death, Boy Charles, Daoker’s father, felt the need to take the piano back from Sutter. It is only through the act of stealing he could get it back.

He stole the piano because “it was the story of our whole family as long as Sutter had it, he had us” (p.45) Charles family believes that the pictures and stories of their past control their spirits. Kim Pereira observes that “the act of bringing back the piano to their house was an act of daring. It transformed their identity from slaves to free men and women unafraid to die for their freedom.”

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When Boy Charles got the piano back and hid in a railroad box car, the vindictive whites burnt him in the boxcar where he was hiding. It is through the piano that much of the family history is brought forth. For the Charles family, the piano is the belonging of their family not only because the history of their family is carved on it but it is a powerful reminder of the whole episode of the sacrifice done by their ancestors to reclaim the visual symbol of the family’s past.

Wilson has emphasized the importance of the piano with a special attention because it is a symbol that refers itself to the blues tradition which played a vital role in the period of struggle of the blacks. Moreover, Kim Pereira appreciates the carved pictures as a unifying symbol saying: “The power of art to transcend the restraining barriers of time and space is dramatically portrayed in the way these images have kept together a dispersed family; the piano seems to possess a mystical power that keeps alive the spirits of the dead, encouraging the communion between past and present”. 50

The contradictory opinions about the piano dominates the whole play. Every character looks at it from a different point of view. “The piano”, says Kim Pereira “also has the potential to reflect the personalities of those who come into contact with it. Every living member of this family reacts according to his or her past actions, hopes, fears and desires”. 51

To Berniece, the piano is not merely a musical instrument but a monument which bears the marks of generations of racial oppression.
The masklike images carved on its legs reveal the history of their family for several generations. It includes portraits, weddings, funerals and slave sales. The carved faces of her family members and events represent history of pain and oppression of their family. For Boy Willie, the piano is an opportunity for their future, a chance by which he could buy the land where his ancestors were slaves. He envisions piano as a means of gaining equality with the white land owners, “something under his feet that belonged to him” (p.92). The piano, for Boy Willie, bears no sentimental value, rather it offers him a chance to escape the economic and social oppression that has burdened him and his family. He feels that the piano is “a gift bestowed that will allow him to follow in his father’s footsteps but with a freedom and security his father was denied”.52

Boy Willie is contained to stay in the South as a free landowner. It is a beginning of a new era which asserts that the slavery is now over and the land belongs to him who can buy and cultivate it.

Berniece wants to preserve the memory of her family’s history. She will not sell the piano for it is a “sacred relic”.53 The piano is also a strong link that connects Berniece with her mother.

Berniece feels that the piano is the ancestral legacy that her mother preserved with care and now it is time she should continue the tradition.
She played the piano for mama Ola who sought to keep the past alive through it. With the death of her mother Berniece stopped playing it.

Boy Willie can’t understand why Berniece would not allow to sell that piano when she has stopped playing it. According to him there is no point in keeping the piano in the dust. “You can sit up here and look at the piano for the next hundred years and it is just gonna be a piano” (p.51). Devon Boan calls Boy Willie a survivor “who has learned, in the process of surviving, to steal, cheat, and lie, and who now sees his chance to emerge from the cycle that has killed more of the men in his family than he wishes to remember”.54 But keeping the piano as a momento, Berniece, pays a homage to the sacrifices of her parents. Therefore, the piano is priceless for her. Therefore, she asserts:

“Berniece : Money can’t buy what that piano cost. You can not sell your soul for money. It won’t go with the buyer. It’ll Shrivell and shrink” (p.50).

Berniece’s love for the piano stems from the fact that she doesn’t want to forget past, which has shadowed her life of with death and violence. It is “a milestone round her neck, trapping her in a vortex of painful memories”.55 On one hand it is a pride and on the other it is a painful memory. Mei-Ling Ching in her essay “Two notes on August Wilson” writes that the piano to Berniece is “both a legacy and a toboo”.56 When Willie decides to take the piano from her, her emotional security seems to
be Shaken and the anger and frustration bursts out in accusing her brother the killer of her husband, who died in a shootout with the Sheriff during a wood stealing with Boy Willie and Lymon.

Wining boy has a very different association with the piano, a kind of love-hate relationship.

When he left the South, he took blues as his companion. It was the strength of this cultural tradition that made him moving and even bringing him luck at the gambling tables. Very soon he started hating the piano and the music because wherever he went, people started forcing him to play the piano for hours. It became a burden for him.

Arvey, an enterprising young man, is “a toned-down version of the frequently caricatured Baptist Minister”. Working as an elevator attendant in a downtown building, he has ambitious plans to start his own church. He has been pursuing Berniece to donate her piano to his new church where she could play it and even start a Choir. As a preacher, he claims to have been called by God to lead black people to a better life. Avery is an honest and an intelligent man who manages the balance between black and white society. Berniece tries to get Avery to rid the house of Sutter’s ghost by blessing it. Thus, the piano is a catalyst for much of the debate and action of the play.

Wilson has used the ghost of the white landowner Sutter as a powerful dramatic device. The appearance of the ghost creates another
setting in a form of collective memories of the characters. The haunting spirit of Sutter reminds enslavement and oppression of blacks by whites. The whole play is driven towards the liberation of all the characters from their past history which haunts them in a form of a ghost. Wilson asserts that the past for the Charles family has not passed but still exists in the form of the Southern ghost. The ghost haunts Berniece because she has disconnected herself from her past. She has told Marethia, her daughter, no stories of her heritage. On the contrary Boy Willie does not see the ghost until the very end of the play because he has looked at the stories of his ancestors as a source of pride. He doesn’t accept any attempts of the white to define him. He says: “I am living at the top of lifo I am in the world like anybody else” (p.92). Boy Willie’s plan to sell the piano is not the rejection of his cultural legacy but an attempt to use his heritage to create a new beginning. He feels that by selling piano he would be following his father’s footsteps.

In scene IV of the act II, Boy Willie wakes up Lymon to tell him that he has been offered eleven hundred and fifty dollars for the piano by a white man. They try to move the piano but fail. Doaker doesn’t allow Boy Willie to take the piano in the absence of Berniece. Boy Willie is contained to remove the piano and goes out to get some rope and wheels. The act of selling the piano to the white man is an ironic comment made by the playwright on the cultural oppression of the blacks. By selling the piano to the white man he would be losing the pride and identity of his

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family. Even though Boy Willie’s intentions are honourable and admirable, he must realize that the piano is not mere a piece of wood but an incessant flow of spirit. Wilson wants to remark that in the 1930s, though blacks got recognition, still the process to rob the blacks of their music and cultural identity was continued.

The last scene is a direct confrontation with the ghost. By bringing a ghost into action, Wilson goes back to his African traditional beliefs. He encounters with the supernatural phenomena which is a linkage to “the same creative folkloristic vein as Dumas and Morrison”.58 The ghost creates a tremendous dramatic effect. The fight between the supernatural agencies and human beings transcends the function of a dramatic device and exemplify the universal and historical struggle of the black community with their oppressive past.

Wilson creates many dramatic situations at the same time. Avery enters with the Bible, Lymon arrives with the rope, winning Boy comes and sits down to play the piano. Amid all the confusion Sutter’s ghost appears. “This is a final round in a fight”, says Kim Pereira, “that his father and the ghosts of the Yellow Dog have waged for a long time”.59

Avery begins an exorcism and sprinkles the place with water. Unfortunately christian rites are insufficient to dispel the ghosts of christian oppressors. Boy Willie has lost his faith in christianity. Frustrated with Avery’s attempts, he sprinkles the air with water from a pan on the store and

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shouts profoundly: “All this old preaching stuff. Hell, just ask him to leave” (p.68).

Boy Willie engages in a deadly struggle with the ghost. Berniece realizes the empowering force that can come through embracing one’s history. She is suddenly aware of what she has to do. She starts playing the piano and calls out the names of her ancestors in the song. Her act indicates that “solutions to present problems lie in the past”.60 By bringing their ancestral strength back in the action, they are able to set themselves free from the ghost and ultimately their past. With the blessings of the ancestral spirit, they have suspended their burden of past. Berniece turns to the spirituals because she knows that it is the final battle and the whole community must be bound together. Though spirituals were influenced by Christianity, they are more African in form and substance. In the final scene the whole family is united to fight against their common enemy. “This is the lesson” says kim Pereira, “that the piano teaches them: only as a united family can they transpose the discordant rhythms of bondage into the harmony of full freedom”.61

Boy White believes that in the innocent hands of Maretha, Piano will fill their house with happy notes. He leaves to catch the train with no money but some wisdom. He has realized that the identity and pride of his family are intact and he does not need to gain these qualities. “Through music”, says Patricia Gantt “the piano’s song reaffirms the stories
of the past, transforming the ugly and awful, along with the beautiful and tender, into a joyous melody of hope".  

In The Piano Lesson Wilson has used the art of slave narrative. The story of the piano which is imbued with rich images is handed down from generation to generation. Doaker and Boy Willie both narrate the past in an improvisational and emotive language that “become both song and dialogue, as in the black religious tradition”.  

The narratives also bear the characteristics of black folk tradition of call and response. The call is presented through the carved pictures on the piano whereas Willie tries to respond to it through transforming that myth into reality. 

The piano has mythological connection to the past. Wilson borrows heavily from the myths. The accidental deaths of white men being attributed to the ghosts of the Yellow Dog have mythical implications. Another source of myth is the piano itself. Berniece believes in the mythical power of the piano and considers it as a connector with her ancestral heritage. The retelling of myths offers some sense of power. It ultimately resolves the conflict over the piano. Berniece reclaims her faith in the myth when she plays the piano and calls on her ancestors to help Boy Willie to defeat the ghost of Sutter. 

The central question The piano Lesson poses is “how do you use your legacy?” Though the piano doesn’t give Boy Willie the money to
make the payment for the farm, it gives him and his family an identity as
truely free black men and women, free from the shackles of psychological
and emotional wounds of the past.

Joe Turner’s Come and Gone is Wilson’s another favourite
play. Regarded as more mystical than Wilson’s other works, the play records
the struggles of migrants in the post-civil war era in the North. Set in 1911,
the play records the attempts of the residents of a boarding house in Pittsburgh
to redefine themselves historically and socially as free citizens. These
children of newly freed slaves attempt to make a place for themselves in the
polyethnic and hostile environment. The play highlights the “metaphoric
relationship between African American history and the black body”.

Wilson tells in Joe Turner’s Come and Gone about:

“the sons and daughters of newly freed African
slaves wander into the city. Isolated, cut off
from memory, having forgotton the names of
the gods and only guessing at their faces, they
arrive dazed and stunned, their hearts kicking
in their chest with a song worth singing. They
arrive carrying Bibles and guitars, their pockets
lined with dust and fresh hope...”

Joe Turners Come and Gone problematizes the issue of the
Great migration; a transitional period in the history of the African Americans.
From 1910 to 1930, some one and half million African Americans left rural
South and migrated to industrial cities hoping for higher wages, political
and economic equality and social justice. Unfortunately, nothing did work
out what they had hoped. James Grossman observes in this regard that “the dreams embodied in the Great Migration eventually collapsed under the weight of continued racial oppression and the failure of industrial capitalism to distribute its prosperity as broadly as the migrants expected”. 67 August Wilson, like Grossman, sees the Great Migration not merely as a geographical shift but a historical transition to a new identity.

Wilson, in Joe Turner’s Come and Gone concentrates upon cultural fragmentation of the blacks and the emotional and physical effects associated with the displacement of the newly arrived blacks in the North following the Civil War. The devastating effects of alienation and dislocation of identity, resulting from oppression are presented through Herald Loomi’s personal quest to find his wife, Martha. Loomis’s predicament strongly suggests allegorical parallels to the entire race of African Americans who have been separated from their past and wandering aimlessly in search of their own place in the society. As Kim Pereira observes; “Wilson investigates their poignant yearnings for meaningful relationships and their struggle to sing the song of their true identity”. 68

The chief wanderer in Joe Turner’s Come and Gone is Herald Loomis, who was captured and pressed into illegal bondage for seven years by Joe Turner, the infamous Southern bounty hunter. “The predicament of Loomis”, according to Wilson, “can in fact represent the four hundred years of slavery”. 69
Joe Turner, whom the title of the play refers to, is a personification of the racial oppression of the African Americans. He is a part of the past that haunts Loomis throughout the play in a form of memory. As a result, Loomis is alienated from his own-self and is unable to form bonds with others. He is robbed of his own song because he has no sense of self or belonging. "Loomis", says Wilson, "is driven by his search for a world that speaks to something about himself. He is unable to harmonize the forces that swirl around him, and seeks to recreate the world into one that contains his image" (p.216).

Loomis became separated from his wife ten years earlier when he was forced to work on a chain gang.

Eventhough Loomis is freed from Turner's net, he is in mental imprisonment. Joe turner has separated Loomis not only from his family but from his sense of self-worth and identity. "He told me I was worthless. Worthless is something you throw away" (p.269).

Loomis has lost his vision of life and wanders without a clear sense of either his origin or destination. Asked where he is from Loomis replies “come from all over whichever way the road take us that the way we go” (p.217). By finding his wife, Loomis thinks that he would be able to reconnect himself with his roots and identity. He has been looking for his wife to get “starting place” in the world. After four years of searching, Loomis and Zonia, his daughter arrive at Seth Holly’s Pittsburgh boarding
house “a microcosmic community in which various types can come together”.

Bynum, a root worker and a conjuror represents the spiritual world which is quite opposite to the material and practical world of Seth. His unconcern for Bynum’s spiritual activities springs form the fact of not having the recent Southern background that several others share.

Wilson has placed this Northern/Southern clash at the very beginning of the play. By placing Bynum and Seth in the same place Wilson wants to evaluate the difference between the world of spirit and the material world. Seth’s disparaging comments on Bynum and his rituals bring out “the inability of those who attempt to escape their folk heritage to do so in reality”.

Wilson builds up comparison between two parallel systems of meanings, two different worlds: Spirituality and materialism. Bynum is deeply connected to his race and culture through religious rites. It is through the metaphysical rituals he expresses the whole body of black culture. Bynum’s actions are “Wilson’s’s revision of the function of African American lore to the people it has served over the years.” By making folk traditions central and public, Wilson assigns them more power and potential to the life view of the African Americans.

Bynum has a special connection to nature whose strength derives from “a tradition that stretches directly back through slavery to his African roots. He is highly evolved descendant of the medicine man of African tribes and the conjurer of slave plantations.”
In *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, Engene D. Genovese observes that conjurers might be evil doers as well as an instrument of good. Bynum’s demeanour is one of compassion and love. Bynum owes his mythological ancestry from the tradition which is, as Clara Odugbesan points out “a system whose function is to promote orderliness in the world, one that corrects all wrongs. and produces certainty”.

Seth’s world on the other hand, is a pragmatic world of everyday life, disconnected from his social, cultural, religious roots. He has established himself and has put down his roots in Pittsburgh. He directs his anger against migrating blacks who are leaving the safety of their Southern farms and coming to the North without any knowledge of the hostile social climate they will encounter.

Seth criticizes his black brother because he knows that living in the North is not so easy as it seems to be. Every moment blacks have to face agonizing struggle for survival and working almost twenty four hours is not enough. Seth has refused finance from the white creditors who demand his house as collateral. For Seth, his house is a security, a stability, “an emblem of success and security of his position as a family man and entrepreneur”.

The oppression, most of the Wilson’s characters experience is material and economic. Seth’s guitar playing tenant, Jeremy, is jailed without cause and fined two dollars and later fired from his job when he refuses to give a white co-worker fifty cents as protection money.
A regular visitor at Seth’s boarding house is Rutherford Selig, a white peddler, also known as the “people Finder”. Selig has inherited this art of service to finding out African American people from his father and grandfather which he sells and makes money.

Douglas Anderson observes that “Selig represents economic forces which not only exploit African Americans but deny their intrinsic worth as persons....” Anderson has commented so because in order to be found by Selig, a black man or woman must first buy something from him i.e. he or she must become a customer of his market economy. Bertha claims that Selig is a fraud who never really finds anybody. However, Wilson defends Selig saying that “he’s performing a very valuable service for the community”.

The economic system represented by Selig can not help African Americans in defining their own past and self because this search is more mystical and needs spiritual exploration. Wilson has presented the possibility of self-discovery through Bynum’s mystic experience of “the secret of life” (p.212) and discovery of his essential self or “song” (p.213). Bynum’s experience of self discovery is described in terms of a spiritual journey. He is searching for his “shiny man”, a person he met in a dreamlike vision. He showed Bynum the secret of life and led him to a mystic place where he received instruction from his father’s spirit.
Bynum’s father encouraged him not to sing someone else’s song but to find one of his own. Bynum chose a “Binding song” because he observed the lack of unity in his people. Having found his song, his life’s work now is to help others find their song. Kim Pereira observes:

“He (Bynum) looked around at a fractured race of wandering people and knew he had to spend his life healing the wounds caused by shattered relationships, bringing together these people dispersed by chance and circumstances”.

The spirit of Bynum’s father tells him to find the shiny man by which Bynum will know his song has been “accepted and worked it’s full power in the world” (p.213). Therefore, Bynum has engaged Selig’s help and paid him a dollar to find out that “shiny man” for him. Anderson observes that Bynums narrative of revelation and self-recovery resembles African Baptist conversation narratives. “In these narratives”, says Michael Sobel, a seeker makes a journey that leads him not only to rebirth in Christ but to recovery of his essential self, “the ‘little me’ in the ‘big me’”. By recovering his self i.e. ‘little me’ Bynum is “brought back to his African heritage”. Bynum can not express his mystic experience in words and wants everybody to feel it. For that, the black man must prepare himself or the journey within.

The shiny man, as Bynum tells Selig, is not a special fellow. He could be anybody. The shiny man is an ordinary man who possesses his own song and “a voice inside him telling him which way to go” (p.212).
When Selig commercializes his talent of finding people both before and after slavery, his African counterpart, Bynum Walker, freely shares his spiritual gift of ‘binding’ people to help reconnect them with their past.

Douglas Anderson remarks that Bynum’s use of Selig’s service is highly ironic. Selig or his economic system will never be able to understand African Americans as persons or individuals. For Selig, the shiny man is the one who “shines like new money” (p.211). Privileging the African spirit over the Western, Wilson implies that, Selig’s materialistic approach can never discover the shiny man’s spiritual or inner shine. This irony is further exhibited when Loomis, in search for the past and himself, enlists the services of Selig.

Throughout the play, the theme of separation and exploitation reflects through the quest of the characters for their respective goals. Loomis is searching for himself through recovery of the past, Bynum is searching for the man whom he can guide to himself and will affirm his own song. Mattie Campbell, a woman in the boarding house, is searching for a man she can feel a sense of belonging with. Mattie’s husband, Jack blamed her for the loss of their two babies and walked away. Her two children are dead and there is nothing to bind her to Jack. Bynum knows that Mattie’s relationship with Jack is potentially destructive and that her only hope is to break free. Jeremy is looking for his girl who left him without a word “wake-up morning and she was gone. Just took off no parts unknown” (p.225).
Aware of the uncertainty of the world, he is in search of love and companionship. Molly is searching for self-authentication. She too is a product of broken relationship. Having seen her mother enslaved by babies and household chores, she is determined to avoid familial trap. She thinks that marriage is a slavery and motherhood a curtailment of freedom. Among these characters, Bartha seems to have found the real life. She has learned to compromise with the situation. Her troublefree mind has led her to happiness. Her strength derives from a blend of Christian and African religious traditions. This “Afro christianity, with its blend of ritual and prayer, has informed Bartha’s deepest sensibilities and shaped her identity as an African American”.81

Bynum’s role against this background seems to be vital. He accepts the role of a philosopher and a guide who helps others to define their own way. He offers Mattie some solutions to her problems and helps her to push Jack Carper from her mind. He also helps Jeremy to understand the true nature of relationship. He tries to explain Jeremy that a woman is not a sex object but a true companion made in the image of his mother.

The lodgers of Seth’s boarding house perform ‘the ring shout’, an African Christian ritual of frenzied dance and ecstatic shouts. This dance is believed to be inspired by the Hdly ghost. Loomis enters and screams at the lodgers to stop dancing and singing about the Holy Ghost which has failed him. He is angry and contemptous of the boarder’s envocation of a
past. In a cathartic ceremony of call and response, Loomis is overtaken by his own vision in which he describes the journey of the bones travelling across a body of water.

These bones symbolize slaves, Loomis’s ancestors who perished in the holds of slaverships and whose bodies were tossed into the Atlantic ocean. By referring to Bones peoples, August Wilson wants to suggest that the dead Africans are an integral part of the whole black experience.

Trudir Harris notes that:

“the bones people walk on water without sinking,certainly evokes Jesus, but the phenomenon more immediately evokes for Wilson’s characters African American history and the enormity of the loss of lives and human potential during the middle passage”.

In the second journey,Loomis envisions resurrection of the Africans. It adds new dimension to self-determination.

“Loomis. They just walking across the water...and then ..they sunk down...When they sink down they made a big splash and this here wave come up..

Bynum. A big wave, herald Loomis. A big wave washed over the land.

Loomis. It washed them out of the water and up on the land. Only..Only...

Bynum. Only they ain’t got bones no more.
Loomis. They got flesh on them! Just like you and me!...they black. Just like you and me. Ain’t no difference” (pp.251,252).

The second journey brings out the transformative redemption of the black community.

Paul Carter Harrison notes that:

“Despite, the trauma of slavery and the consequent degradation of the body, the ancestors achieve spiritual ascendancy as they “walk on water” and arrive in the New World with flesh on their bones. Inside the spiritual dynamism of the ancestors -perceived and made useful in the present as opposed to being arrested in the past -is the true song of redemption and liberation”.

The journey narrated by Loomis marks the beginning of Loomis articulation of his song. He wants to recover from his mental paralysis. He tries to stand up but collapses. He must understand the importance of the song fully in order to stand firmly on his feet. He lies on the floor as exhausted as the bodies of his ancestors on the sea shore.

Though Joe Turner doesn’t appear over the stage, still his presence is made felt through the memories of Loomis. Trudier Harris remarks; “By making Joe Turner a living white, legendary Villain, Wilson gives flesh to the force that has historically separated black men from black women...” Bynum has recognized that Loomis lived his life under the impact of somebody else’s song and hence could not define his own self. Joe turner captured black men because he wanted their song and soul.
Bynum recognizes the importance of the song which functions as the collective energy, communal bond healing power and self-realization. Without this song people are doomed to wander throughout their life aimlessly. "This song" as Kim Periara observes, "is the music of each person's essential nature, his or her true identity. And that identity, with its special rhythms, dictates the course of each one's destiny". Bynum wants Loomis to understand his past which victimises and proves him worthless in order to say good bye to it. He feels that the tune that would remind Loomis of his past will provoke him into remembering his song. Bynum assures Loomis that his song "has not vanished, just gone underground". At this point another dramatic turn takes place. Selig has found Martha and appears with her. When Loomis asks her why she did not wait for him in Tennessee, Martha recalls the danger inherent in staying in the South.

Martha expresses the agonies she suffered in the South. After waiting for years for her husband to return, she was forced to give him up for dead. She adopted christianity and changed her hand Martha Pantecost. Loomis realizes that their lives are different now and there is no compelling bond between them any more. He must say good bye to her. The moment of reunion becomes the moment of separation that will lead Loomis to his self affirmation. Loomis strongly disapproves her idea for he feels that christianity is at the root of the problems of his people. Wilson has employed the conflict between christianity and Africanism with great intensity. Loomis's denunciation of christianity stems from the fact that white christian
sold black Africans to slavery under Christ's name and Christianity never brought them relief from sufferings.

Loomis rejects the Christian tradition for salvation which reflects through suffering scapegoat figure of Christ. "I don't need nobody to bleed for me! I can bleed for myself" (p.288). This declaration connects Loomis with the collective identity and a heritage of self-empowerment. Calling Christ another white man looking for sacrifice, Loomis cuts himself across the chest and rubs his cleansing blood over his face. Paul Harrison comments that "Loomis's act is a reenactment of the osirian mythos, which invites the death of the body in order to allow for the resurrection of the spirit/body...". With the final act of resurrection, Loomis's search has also ended. He has become the shiny man who knows his own song and is 'shining like new money'. Loomis's war with Christianity leads him to the true spirit of African-ness.

August Wilson has designed Joe Turner's Come and Gone with reference to a folk song that interconnects past and present with the people in order to lead them into a unified whole. Both stage direction and dialogue depict the movement of the characters toward achieving this song. As Patricia Gantt has rightly observed that "character's speech is often rich with folk lyrics..." Since Wilson wants to emphasize the African tradition, the elements of folk belief and folk wisdom come full into play. Though the spiritual world of Bynum is off stage, it is connected with the practical
and material world of Seth by a window. Seth’s commentary on Bynum’s off stage ritual interspersed with discussion of more material concerns.

Singing and song in the play have historical importance. Songs have folkloric, religious, spiritual and metaphysical connotations. Bynum’s songs are “pre-blues and post gospel”.89

The most important scene which needs to be seen for its theatrical effect is the characters assembling together for ‘ring shouts’ and ‘juba dance’. These are the important African ancestral ceremonies. Wilson’s stage directions regarding the juba should be followed explicitly - “the dance should be as African as possible with the performers working themselves up into a near frenzy” (p.294). Juba represents African celebration of spirit.

The art of Storytelling which is Wilson’s most powerful device, reflects through the tale of “the Shiny man”. The play is full of sound and memories of the South. It will be remembered for the issues like question of identity, spiritual isolation, spiritual discovery and redemption. Wilson’s play are full of fresh portraits of America. It provide the African Americans multiple opportunities for redefining their identity. In each of his plays, Wilson uses social and political atomosphere as his backdrop and uses past as a lens through which the present condition is seen. Wilson puts down the theory of multi-culturalism and yet strongly advocates that black culture is very much alive and Black Americans still practice the values of their forefathers. To support his statement he fuses the folklores, storytelling,
songs, myths as strong African cultural stations. His plays are a potential source of empowerment that help African Americans shape their future. It challenges the secondary position of African American within American history and emphasizes the need to participate in the society as Africans. This is the only way he assumes to get out of the vicious cycle of poverty and neglect.

Wilson favours drama which focuses on an individual and his or her family construct. He places the protagonist within a familial predicament and examines the impact of social and political changes that influence him. In all his plays, Wilson emphasizes the personal transformation that comes from accepting own tradition and heritage.

Wilson’s plays attempt to go back to the African roots. Wilson believes that without knowing one’s past, blacks don’t know their present and they certainly can’t plan their future. The purpose behind writing the history of the 20th Century African American was to re-examine the time African Americans spent in America “Let’s look at this again, see where we’ve come from and how we’ve gotten where we are now.” Wilson’s plays demonstrate the healing effect of self-employment that comes when people establish bonds with their own ancestry.

Wilson’s characters record the local, everyday life of the blacks. They face the disappointments and challenges that every black
knows. Like most of the theorists and playwrights, Wilson accepts the functional and political aspects of Black theatre.

Wilson calls himself a cultural nationalist who believes that the African mythology, history, social organization have creative motif. He demonstrate how culture and tradition can sustain through any hardship and challenge. By celebrating the history of African American, Wilson has earned the title of a mythmaker and a chronolizer.
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