

“Reconnecting the Migrant Selves: The plays of August Wilson”

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Abstract:

The proposed paper entitled “Reconnecting the Migrant Selves: The Plays of August Wilson” examines the study of the prominent play of August Wilson, the contemporary African American playwright. It is an attempt at locating the self in the context of racial exploitation of the collision and collusion of African, American and European cultural values. It is based on the hypothesis that the agenda of African American writing is the disruption of the black self that has been dismembered by forced displacement, brutal enslavement and restless migration before and after emancipation. Under the disorienting effects of the brutal system of slavery and racial discrimination over the ages, the socio-cultural life of black Americans underwent fragmentation. Their families, communities and cultures broke apart and remained separated over the ages through many generations across the continent. This severe physical dislocation at multiple levels led to psychic disintegration and mental imbalance. In the face of disintegration, there have been consistent attempts on their parts for reconnection, both at social and psychological levels during and after slavery. There have been attempts at searching out the lost and separated members of the family and community, reconnecting the cultural roots they have been alienated from, uniting the fragmented parts of culture and maintaining psychological balance and stability.

Key Words: Fragmentation, Reconnection, Separation, Migration, Dislocation

August Wilson’s ten-play cycle covers chronologically each decade of 20th century. The plays deal with social disruption and spiritual dislocation caused by migration and separation. Wilson has delineated the themes of separation and reconnection of the migrant selves. August Wilson’s *Gem of the Ocean* (1900), Joe Turner’s *Come and Gone* (1910) and Ma Rainey’s *Black Bottom* (1920) explore the African American life of first thirty years in the twentieth century. Each play is separate and contains ten years experiences. The *Piano Lesson* (1930), *Seven Guitar* (1940) and *Fences* (1950) reflect the African American myths, rituals, folklores, racism, migration, reconnection, legacy and heritage. The four plays of August Wilson’s ten play cycle *Two Trains Running* (1960), *Jitney* (1970), *King Hedley II* (1980) and *Radio Gulf* (1990) exhibit urban renewal, migration, racism, American dream, man-woman relationship and the relationship between father and son.

The present paper focuses on the reconnection of selves. The play is the most outstanding contribution in the African, American theatre, which explores various socioeconomic and cultural dimensions of the 1930s African American life. The heritage and legacy of the African American family are the most leading issues of the play. It also contains various supernatural elements in order to present the African American culture on stage.

The play is set in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania in 1936, was first produced in 1987 at the Yale Repertory Theatre. Moreover, it also owns Pulitzer Prize (1990), New York Drama Critic Circle Award and Tony Award Nomination (1990) for best play.

All the scenes and actions of the play take place in the house of Doaker Charles at Pittsburgh. Doaker is 47 years African American railroad cook. Boy Willi, thirty years nephew of Doaker Charles, comes to Pittsburgh with his friend Lymon from Mississippi in order to sell watermelon and piano. Boy Willi wants money to buy Sutter’s in the Mississippi who was their master in the slavery era. Hence, he wants to sell family piano and watermelons to Pittsburgh to be a landowner like other white people. However, his sister Berniece migrated

three year before at Pittsburgh with family piano in the house of her uncle Doaker Charles because her husband Crowley was killed in the Mississippi in the wood robbery. In addition, she considers her brother Boy Willie responsible for her husband's death.

The fundamental clash between Boy Willie and his sister Berniece is 137 years old family piano. When Boy Willie tells his plan to sell the piano and to buy Sutter's farm, Berniece goes against him saying that the piano is family's legacy and heritage. Although Berniece does not welcome Boy Willie, he stays there asking his uncle about the drinks. Thereafter, they enjoy the drink on the death of Sutter's ghost who was their family's master during the slavery days.

Avery Brow is a Southern 38 years old sharecropper who also comes to Pittsburgh after Berniece husband's death in the South. He comes to the North and becomes a preacher in order to marry with Berniece. He wants Berniece's piano in order to build a church of his own. However, Berniece does not agree with his and never gives her piano. Thereafter, at upstairs Berniece shouts loudly and tells to Boy Willie that she has seen the ghost of Sutter. She says, "... Sutter....Sutter's standing at the top of the step." (TLP,13) Boy Willie consoles her that the ghost of Sutter is already died in the well. Thereafter, he tells her the plan to sell the piano. However, he does not respond to his plan.

The second sense of the first act begins after three days when Doaker's brother Wining Boy a 30 year old blues musician brings recent news about Willie, Lymon and Crowley. He informs that Boy Willie, Lymon and Berniece's husband Crowley were working in the Parchman farm where they stole woods. Hence, they were hunted by some men and Berniece's husband Crowley was killed and other two were imprisoned. Having completed the news, Wining Boy sings a song.

In the act ii, Doaker Charles dictates the history of 137 years old family piano to Lymon and Boy Willie. He illustrates that in the slavery days Robert Sutter owned the Charles family. However, he did not have money. Hence, in order to purchase the piano, he traded

Doaker's grandmother, Berniece and her father for the piano. However, in the course of the time, Robert Sutter's wife missed her slaves. Hence, Robert Sutter ordered Doaker's grandfather to carve the pictures of his wife and son on the piano, thereby Mrs Sutter can see them. Mr Charles carved many scenes of his family on the piano.

After the slavery and a generation later, Boy Charles, Boy Willie and Berniece's father stole the piano from Sutter because he believed that the piano itself a heritage and legacy of Charles family. Hence, keeping piano in the house of Sutter is a kind of slavery of his ancestors. However, after robbery of the piano from Sutter, he was hunted and fired alive in a train boxcar with his hob and became a ghost. His widow preserves the piano for 17 years and passed it to Berniece. After Berniece husband's death in the South, she carries it to Pittsburgh to her uncle's house.

Though Boy Willie knows the history of piano's legacy, he wants to sell it because he believes past could be used to protect the future. He tries to move the piano. However, Berniece comes and warns him that he cannot do so because doing so is the destruction of family legacy and heritage. Thereafter, Meritha, an eleven years daughter of Berniece cries in fear on the top of the house. It indicates the presence of Sutter's ghost.

The first scene of the second act of *The Piano Lesson* opens in the following morning when Doaker sings a cook song. Thereupon, Boy Willie comes with a suit. He sells his suit to Lymon saying that it is magical which helps to play magic on women. Then, they plan to watch movie and finds some local girls. The second scene of the second act opens at the evening when Berniece sets a tub for bath in the kitchen. Then, there is knock on the door and Avery comes in the home. He proposes to Berniece to marry. However, she denies the proposal saying that why a woman cannot be a woman without a man. Moreover, she requests Avery to bless her house in order to get rid from the ghost as a holy man. On the other hand, Avery asks her to give the piano to him in order to help to build Church. Berniece tells him that piano is untouched because the ghost of Sutter would awaken. The third scene of the second act begins when Boy Willie enters with Grace, a local girl, in the house. Berniece orders them to get out from the house. Meanwhile, Lymon comes there with his magical suit and perfume. He gives it to Berniece and plays its magic on her.

The fourth scene of the second act discloses the plan of Boy Willie to move piano from the house and sell it. The final and crucial scene of the play opens on the next day when Boy Willie sits on the sofa. Boy Willie tells Meretha about the ghost of yellow dog. He tries to move piano from the house. However, Berniece comes and warns him with Crowley's gun. Meanwhile, Wining Boy comes and the tension of the situation is released to

some extent. Thereafter, Avery tries to bless the girl to get rid from Sutter's ghost. He reads the bible and throws some water from the bottle on the piano. At the end of the play, Sutter's ghost comes and Boy Willie struggles against him. Berniece understands that the only Christian faith is not sufficient in order to save her brother from Sutter's ghost. Hence, she takes piano and sings a ritual chant to call her ancestors to save Boy Willie. Finally, Sutter's ghost defeated Berniece, and Boy Willie is reconciled. Boy Willie prepares to move to Mississippi after thanking his sister and the play ends.

The African American family is central and pivotal subject of *The Piano Lesson*. Wilson's dramaturgy indicates through accepting family history, culture and faith they can move further in order to save their future. If the African Americans forget the legacy and heritage of their family, they would be found in cultural dilemma. Hence, Wilson's present play appeals to the community to preserve their family history and heritage because this is authentic source of their culture and religion. In this connection, C. Patric Tyndall notes:

"With this play, Wilson suggests that only through acceptance of a family's experience both good and bad, and the power that is derived from long gone family members can African American families move bravely into their future, healing old wounds."

Therefore, Wilson explores the history of an African American family through this play to enlighten and empower the community towards their cultural consciousness in order to strengthen their consciousness. Although family history and its legacy are important themes of the play, Wilson does not go back to Africa in order to search the roots of African American culture and heritage in *The Piano Lesson*. He suggests that they should search their identity within their family history in the South America. Wilson wants to lead the community towards the proper direction in order to grand them from the tyranny of cultural dilemma. C.P. Tyndall notes, "although this play makes use of past, it does not go back to Africa, rather, the play finds its strength and its history by the more recent, southern, African American family tree." The playwright avoids the complexity and turmoil in the identity of the African American.

Boy Willie, a major character in the play believes that the past of the family should be used in order to save family's future. He wants to sell the 137 years old pian which is the symbol of his ancestry. Boy Willie wants to sell this piano in order to buy the land of Robert Sutter where his ancestors have worked as slaves. Now, the last heir of Sutter is ready to sell his land to Boy Willie. He is the man of new generation and believes that one can find one's destiny only when one can have his land. His ideology symbolizes the American capital and social order and dilemma of the American dream to be a land owner. As Qun Wang observes:

"Boy Willie represents the new generation of African American growing up in the South. He believes that the only way for African Americans to gain freedom, dignity and respect is to stand up for what belongs to them." (89)

Boy Willie is practical and wants to be like white man as independent and self-dependent. On the other hand, his sister Berniece wants to preserve his family's legacy and heritage. She does not want to sell piano.

Boy Willie: Sutter's brother says he selling the land to give me. He waiting on me now. Told me he'd give me two weeks. I got one part. Sell them watermelons, get me another part. Then we can sell that piano and I'll have the third part.

Berniece: I ain't selling that piano, Boy Willie. If that's way you come up where you can just forget about it. (TPL ,27)

Berniece is aware about the struggle of her ancestors in the past. Her ancestors suffered a lot to save the piano. Her father was killed in the robbery of piano and mother suffered for 17 years in order to save this piano. Hence she does not want to use the past to change her future. It means she wants to preserve her identity as an African American.

The use of dramatic devices and symbols are most significant characteristic of Wilsonian dramaturgy. In order to connote deeper meaning and significance of events, he uses various dramatic devices. The *Piano Lesson* contains the qualities of epic, which are incorporated in the names of characters. The names such a Berniece, Boy Willie, Doaker and Wining Boy symbolize some significant event or history in past. As Qun Wang illustrates:

The *Piano Lesson* takes on an epic scope that is emphasized in the characters names. For example, Berniece is named after the great-grandmother who was traded for piano, and Boy Willie is named after a great grandmother named Willie Boy. Doaker and Willie Boy also remind the audience of the bards in Greco-Roman epics , whose responsibilities are to ensure that the past and the present are connected. (5)

Wilson studies the history of the African Americans and decided to write the experiences of the African Americans. In order to write dramas, he uses various techniques of dramatic art. The use of ghost throughout *The Piano Lesson* is most momentous feature of Wilsonian dramatic art. Past is key tool of the African American community to reestablish their identity after freedom from slavery. To remember past from African American, the use of the ghost in the theatre is panoramic in order to explore the African American culture on the stage. In *The Piano Lesson*, the use of Sutter's ghost arises many events of the Charles family in the past. Tyndall notes, "Narratively, the ghosts and spirits often are manifestations of the past, so it is highly appropriate that they are present in the play." Wilson strongly believes in the past of the African American in order to strengthen and direct them towards the darkness to light and ignorance to knowledge. Wilsonian dramaturgy repeatedly suggests that the past controls the present. Patric Tyndall observes, 'In *Piano Lesson*, the sin of the past controls the present.' The plight and predicament of Charles family in the past affect the lives of Berniece, Boy Willie, Doaker and Meretha in the present time. The past for Berniece is her husband's death before three years earlier affects her present life.

Wilson presents the unset and greedy life of Boy Willie and Wining Boy. Both of them come from Mississippi to Pittsburgh in order to save their future. However, they live free and unsatisfied life in Pittsburgh. They want women to enjoy. Boy Willie and Lymon were imprisoned in the South and suffered in Parchman's farm. Hence, they got chance to live free life in Pittsburgh and they enjoy it. Wilson follows the black aesthetics in order to present the African American

culture on the stage. The black aesthetics lies in various cultural, mythical and musical oral traditions of African Americans. He uses blues, work songs and plantation songs to highlight various faiths and beliefs of the African Americans. In order to illustrate the scenario of musical tradition, Wilson creates many musical characters throughout his plays. He creates Boy Willie who is a singer of blues and symbolizes the vehicle of African American music. Blues, Jazz and Swing are most leading sources of the African American oral history and cultural heritage. Although Wilsonian musicians have their great knowledge and quality, they do not know its importance because they get very lower status as musicians in the established white social and economic system. Hence, they suffer and struggle in order to establish their identity as musicians in the American society. Harry J. Elam Jr. observes:

"Wilson's musicians don't realize the power they possess. Lymon in *Fences*, Jeremy in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, Wining Boy in *The Piano Lesson*, Floyd in *Seven Guitars* all represent blues musicians who to varying degrees have not recognized the spiritual force of blues song and cultural responsibilities inherent in their musical ability. As a result, they are exploited for their music and fall victim to those who wish to control their spirit and song." (10)

The tradition of storytelling is also important part of black aesthetics, which Wilson uses in the present play. Various facts about the African American history are transformed from one generation to next generation through the art of storytelling. Doaker who is 47 years of old African American is known his family history and he dictates to the young generation of his family. Art of storytelling was developed in slavery days. Slaves did not have education and the art of writing. Hence, they passed their experiences through the art of storytelling wherein the literary genre, slave narratives were developed. Wilson studied the African American history, which was incorporated in various myths and oral tradition in order to avoid the cultural dilemma and crisis of the African Americans. Because of the domination of slavery, the identity of black was found in crisis and turmoil. To reestablish their self-respect and identity, it is obligatory to go back to their family history that is what Wilson is strongly agreed with it and applies the same ideology in the play. Pamela Jean Monaco states, "The play teaches the necessity of accepting one's family history. This history is symbolically by the piano that has been passed down to the siblings, Berniece and Boy Willie." (12)

Wilson also beautifully presents the predicaments of the houseless African Americans. Although Wining Boy is prime African American singer, he suffers a lot to establish his status in the American capitalist society. He is socially boycotted and useless in the eyes of whites. He expresses his predicaments in the following song. He sings:

"I am a rambling gambling man
I gambled in many towns
I rambled this wide world over
I rambled this world around

I had my ups and downs in life
And bitter times I saw
But I never knew what misery was
Till I lit on old Arkansas.” (TPL,47)

Torturing from the Southern feudalists to the black community is responsible for heavy migration from the South to the North. Although many African Americans migrated to the North for the new lease of life, they suffered a lot to earn their bread and butter. They wandered from town to town to fix their location. However, they were termed as the social boycott in the U.S. Wining Boy, the significant character of Wilson represents the circumstances of the African Americans of the 1930s. August Wilson’s point of view to see towards the sufferings and the predicaments of the black community is to some extent unmatched to the other dramatists and critics. One of the interviews with Vera Sheppard, he states:

“The suffering is only a part of a black history. What I want to do is place the culture of black America on stage, to demonstrate that it has ability to offer sustenance, so that when you leave your parents’ house, you are not in the world alone. You have something that is yours you have a ground to stand on , and you have a viewpoint, and you have a way of proceeding in the world that has been developed by ancestors.”(13)

Wilson believes on the cultural heritage of the blacks. He repeatedly appeals to the community that they are not culturally and socially marginal in American society. They have their rich cultural heritage to stand as independent human being , though , they were separated from their family and society.

The Piano Lesson represents the African Americans experiences of the 1930s , wherein the legacy and heritage of the family are highlighted in order to attract the attention towards great ancestry of the community. The issue of accepting one’s legacy and neglecting it is central plot of the play. Both Berniece and her brother suffer from their painful past. However, Boy Willie tries to safe his future by using his past. On the other hand, Berniece does not want to use her past or legacy to grand her future. Boy Willie wants to sell piano to buy Sutter’s farm , to safe his future, on the other hand Berniece wants to preserve the piano as legacy and heritage of their ancestors. Hence, the central conflict of the play is raised. However, at the end of the play both agree that the family legacy and heritage are more important to live their lives with respect and dignity and reconcile.

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