

THEATRE AS A TOOL FOR SOCIAL PROTEST: A STUDY WITH REFERENCE TO THE PLAYS OF AUGUST WILSON

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ABSTRACT

Literature is the progressive revelation of the mind and spirit of common people. Any literature can be generally considered as the chronological record of events literally. Every literature is concerned to reflect the society, its nature and contemporary situations. Literature reveals the mind and spirit of the people. The chief feature is to bring out the nature and value of the people to the society. As a community art form Drama is considered as a literary art comprises a plot, characters and dialogue. It presents (reflects) the contemporary society. The chief feature is to bring out the nature and value of people and society. Every literature is concerned to reflect the society, its nature and contemporary situations. Literature reveals the mind and spirit of the people. The chief feature is to bring out the nature and value of the people to the society. Drama tends to explore the complex relationship between society and the individual. It focuses on the social and political organization of the society which questions the precarious social order and its disorder. A play is concerned with individual characters involved in various social organizations and order. This paved way for political plays which often undermine social convictions. African American theatre was used as a tool to protest against whites. African American performers started to act and produce plays. During the later part of nineteenth century African American theatre companies were established. African American literature emphasizes mainly on the African American people, their culture and history. Their literary works are known as literature, which focuses on the theme of slavery and struggle for freedom. The Characteristics of African American literature begins from Oral Poetry which was easily understood. Then emerged the Prose form, which was basically a slave narrative. This paper tries to portray the suppressions of the African Americans through the voices of August Wilson, a significant playwright who used Theatre as a tool and recorded their sufferings.

KEYWORDS: African Americans, Theatre, Freedom, Slave Narratives.

Literature has many forms / genres namely poetry, drama, novel and short story. Among them drama gains more significance in relating performance with people. Unlike other genres, drama cannot be produced in isolation. As a community art form Drama is considered as a literary art which comprises a plot, characters and dialogue. It presents or reflects the contemporary society. The chief feature is to bring out the nature and value of people and society. Drama as a literary genre creates a new world of art forms. As a literary art form, it chronologically records the events literally. Such events bring out the relationship between writer and the society. Every literature is concerned to reflect the society, its nature and contemporary situations. Literature reveals the mind and spirit of the people. The chief feature is to bring out the nature and value of the people to the society. Literature on the whole develops and changes from generation to generation. Such change brings out the relationship between writer and society. Each period has its own particular way of thinking and growth in creating literature. Every literature emerges as an art form initially in oral tradition.

AFRICAN AMERICAN THEATRE

Civil Rights movement in America ends the racial segregations among African Americans and whites. Similarly social movements in Tamil Nadu

helped to end discriminations among social communities. Leaders like Du Bois, Martin Luther King represented for African Americans. In United States of America the problem of slavery was a great problem. Slaves of African origin were uprooted from their native soil and made as bonded slaves in America. Revolutionary activities abolished slavery with Emancipation Proclamation made by Lincoln paved way for freedom.

African American Theatre is called as protest Theatres. They deal with the life of suppressed people. African Grove theatre paved way for the African American theatre in America. African American Movements also initiated the racial problems and extended it to the African American audience. African American theatre can be classified into three divisions. Initially performers used minstrels to propagate stage shows. Secondary place occupies with creoles show and finally migration of African American from downtown to Harlem around 1910.

African American theatre was used as a tool to protest against whites. African American performers started to act and produce plays. During the later part of nineteenth century African American theatre companies were established. The National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (NAACP) held a platform to propagate fearlessly against racial

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discrimination. This made Du Bois to proclaim his four fundamental principles for a Negro theatre, they are African American theatre must be, "About us . . . By us . . . For us . . . Near us".

Harlem Renaissance became a new movement during 1920s to 1930, helped to promote African American dance, drama and visual arts. Moreover it was a revolt against the issues highlighting equality, racial discriminations and human rights. This was a success and African American identity was established in America as an integral part.

In the United States, dramatic movements encompassing plays written by, for and about African Americans is called African American theatre. Theatre has been an apt medium for representing the African Americans in America. It became both as an art and an industry. More consciously it dealt with social and political issues. African Americans wanted to find a solution for their self identify through theatre. The main aim of the African American theatre is to protest against condemned racism.

The legacy of African American theatre in America started with Mr. Brown who opened a tea garden behind his home in Manhattan, New York City during the early 19th century. Small shows were performed for his customer's entertainment. Slowly it was developed and years later it has emerged as African American Theatre. In the recent terminologies the term is reformed as African American Theatre.

Occasional songs, dances and plays were expanded as African Company. James Hewlett a leading actor of that time established the African Grove Theatre. An institutionalized African American Theatre emerged during 1915. The minstrel phenomenon of 1890's and 1920's influenced the history of African American Theatre Movement. Weldon Johnson divides the African American Theatre into 3 phases.

First phase begins around 1865 Georgia Minstrds by Charles Hick, the second phase from Sam.T. Jack around 1890 Creole show and the third phase began with migration of African Americans from the down town theatre's of Manhattan, to the uptown theatre's of Harlem around.

1915 – NAACP – National Association for the Advancement of Coloured people started performance in the service of its cause as an instrument for social reform. W.E.B. Du Bois in 1900 predicted that the relationship between the darker and lighter races of man would be the chief problem of the 20 century. He

joined NAACP in 1910. Du Bois initiated Krigwa play contest and it resulted in creating new musicals and the growth of African American drama and expansion.

Alain Locke, the then Prof of Howard University was a theorist and spokesman for African American theatre. His *The New Negro* was the finest literary work of Harlem Renaissance. Some of the prominent writers associated with Harlem Renaissance were Langston Hughes, Jessie Redmond Fauset, Countee Cullen, James Weldon Johnson, Claude Mac Kay, Wallace Thurman and Jean Toomer. Harlem Renaissance was associated with the New Negro Movement. Later some of the other African American writers associated with Harlem Renaissance are James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, Zora Neal, Lei Roy Jones.

Before 1914, in drama African American roles were enacted by whites. In 1934, the then American government set up a Negro theatre wing of the federal Theatre project to enable Negroes to make experiments in dramatic art. The playwrights create African American Theatre from the African American experience primarily for African American audience. Modern plays deal with a wide variety of themes and styles, but had the concern with political emotional and spiritual needs of the African American community.

The two great concerns of African American writing before the civil war were the institution of slavery and the destiny of free African Americans. After world war II African American Theatre grew more progressive, more radical and more militant. Councils were organized to abolish racial discriminations in Theatre.

An African slave, Phillis Wright, Gwendolyn Brooks James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison are a few African American writers who have earned International acclaim since 1920. Cultural and social circumstances restricted the African American playwrights. In United States, Drama was an expensive field than any other field. Broadway Avenue in New York City is one of the largest theatres and theatrical capital in United States. The slavery in, James Baldwin's essay "Slave Culture" identifies "slaves came to America from a great variety of African backgrounds. Certain regions predominated, however, and particular ethnic, linguistic and cultural forces were thus more apparent than others among the slaves." (357).

Since African American peoples represent a minority of the entire population, their life is regarded as a exotic subject for American stage only a limited number of plays of Black themes are approved. Wallace Thurman was the first Negro playwright who wrote for

Broadway about African American life. In thirties 1980, Playwright like Hall Johnson used African folkways in his work of arts. Augustus Smith and Morel's Turpentine dealt with gang labour. Moreover the creation of Federal Theatre project in 1935 provided opportunities for a number of African American playwrights.

AUGUST WILSON

Frederick August Wilson was born poor into a family of seven in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Due to the intense racism, he left school at age sixteen, opting to educate himself independently at the city library. While working a variety of jobs, Wilson began to write, eventually founding, in 1968, the African American Horizon on the Hill Theatre company. It was not until 1978, however, when he moved to St. Paul, Minnesota, that Wilson began to produce mature dramas. His first piece, *Jitney*, a tale of a group of workers and travelers in a taxi station, was well-received locally and praised especially for its experiments in African American urban speech. Fullerton Street, however, Wilson's subsequent play, brought no comparable success. Wilson turned to an unfinished project that would prove to be his breakthrough.

American race relations have been an important topic of study Since 1619, When the first African was brought to Jamestown, as witnessed by a plethora of books, articles, plays, and dissertations on racism. Wilson, a major playwright, whose works continue to be produced from Broadway to California, illuminates the African-American experience in his cycle of history plays.

In producing this African-American genealogy, Wilson uses different types of African American rage to show his African-American audience how to navigate their way through American society. African American rage is a useful tool for analysing Wilson's plays since he uses his characters' respective embodiments of African American rage to define his characters. Their respective rages often lead to their own self-discovery, which delivers a powerful message to his audience about the importance and necessity of African American rage. In an interview with Wilson, he elaborated: "African American rage is certainly within the plays. Certainly what I would call political elements that deal with outrage: moral outrage, social outrage. Yes, that is a part of it, that's a part of the plays, yes, that's a part of African American life" (Wilson). In Wilson's plays, African American rage exposes the various facets of African-American life and

history. African American rage can help us discover what it means to be Africans in America.

THEATRE AS A TOOL

Since 1981, Wilson has been writing a ten-play cycle of history plays dealing with African-American life, each play in the cycle chronicling a specific decade of the twentieth century. Wilson has written the following plays: *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* (1988), set in 1911; *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (1981), set in 1927; *The Piano Lesson* (1990), set in 1936; *Seven Guitars* (1996), set in 1948; *Fences* (1986), set in 1957; *Two Trains Running* (1992), set in 1969; *Jitney* (1979), set in 1977; and *King Hedley II* (not published), set in 1985.

With each decade, Wilson tracks a slice of African-American life, never losing sight of the ancestors who came before. Although Wilson does not write about his own specific lineage, he shines as massive spotlight on an African-American family tree, illuminating those niggers, Negroes, Coloureds and African Americans who made American history simply by existing and surviving, paving the way for contemporary African Americans.

These triumphs and tragedies in Wilson's plays are the building blocks of his theatrical genealogy and uphold the legacy for present and future African Americans. For Wilson, the tribulations are as important to African-American self-understanding as the victories; the suffering played a part in developing who African Americans are today. There is no growth without struggle; rage and resistance are symbiotic.

Wilson believed that ignoring the pain and struggle of the past will prevent present-day African Americans from growing. This is why Wilson argues that African Americans have to embrace the past, even the odious parts, in order to move forward. Each play in Wilson's cycle is a branch that makes up the African-American family tree; these branches do not define African-American history, they are merely a part of it. Accordingly, Wilson has become an ambassador for some members of the African-American community.

Wilson writes his characters to expose the grief and pain that they carry as a direct result of their African Americanness. Wilson's characters rage because a large percentage of them have been unjustly imprisoned by white men, because they cannot see a way out of their lives, and because they are always fighting for a foothold in a societal system that only pays attention to the man on top. Wilson knows the social history of African Americans; his characters

speaking about the sting of persecution inherent in their situations. Wilson allows his characters to grieve, because he knows that their real-life counterparts could not find their own unique voices in American society. This is Wilson's job—to give voice to these unknown African Americans. Consequently, Wilson trumpets the unbalanced "playing field" between European Americans and African Americans by making his characters feel anguish and express rage, in order to guide modern-day African Americans through these obstacles.

In Wilson's plays, racial oppression at the hands of Americans is always the catalyst for African American rage; however, the articulation of African American rage is more complex than simple African American vs. White. Although European Americans serve as catalyst for African American rage, this is the extent of their involvement in healing rage. The healing rage that Wilson trumpets in four of his six plays is not about the tribulations of being African American in White America, but rather is about using healing rage to benefit members of the African-American community.

In Joe Turner's *Come and Gone*, *The Piano Lesson*, *Fences*, and *Two Trains Running*, a character's display of African American rage, although oftentimes presented as destructive originally, eventually makes every African-American character in the play stronger, and thus the community becomes more powerful. He suggests that African American rage does not have to be a totally detrimental phenomenon, but rather can heal the people it affects. Hooks urges using the power and energy behind the rage to achieve revolutionary goals that will improve socio-political conditions in America.

Wilson's plays fall into at least one of the following four categories of African American rage: the African American rage that comes from not knowing one's identity, African American rage that leads to African American-on-African American violence, familial African American rage, and African American rage that results from injustice.

In Joe Turner's *Come and Gone*, set in 1911, African American rage motivates the protagonist, Loomis, to find his "true identity," after it had been hidden during an unjust imprisonment. In Wilson's plays, "true identity" means at least one of three things: a connection to Africa, a link to the American South, and/or a bond to one's ancestors. How, then, is African American rage used to determine and elucidate this identity? By the end of the play, Loomis realizes his tie to his African self because of his African predecessors.

Wilson uses African American rage in Ma Rainey's *Black Bottom*, set in 1927, to emphasize the results of the protagonist Levee's rejection of his southern past because of the painful memories it holds. How can African American rage lead to self-destruction and displaced violence? Wilson's cautionary message is that you cannot reject who you are, where you are from, or your connection to your people without paying a heavy price either self-destruction and/or the devastation of those around you.

The presentation of African American rage in *The Piano Lesson*, set in 1936, centers on the value of a family's piano, a symbol of their ancestors. A sister's (Berniece) and brother's (Boy Willie) respective familial rage collides as both characters present their arguments about their ancestor's agonizing southern past.

In *Seven Guitars*, set in 1948, Hedley's African American rage intensifies two things: one, his soft grip on his sanity, and two, his desire to be somebody. How does African American rage and confusion over one's identity foster violence? Hedley wants to be a big man because of his low position in American society and because he wants to please his deceased father; his rage-fueled drive leads to a tragic murder. Again, Wilson's message is clear not knowing who you are can only lead to devastating results.

Fences, set in 1957, depicts how African American rage can move across generations, causing families to separate. As the protagonist, Troy and his family wife Rose and son Cory battle each other, what results? Previous generations both precipitate and temper the rage, leading to a healthier, more solid familial unit.

In the progression from Civil Rights to African American Power in *Two Trains Running*, set in 1969, how is African American rage expressed, and is this rage effective? Manifestations of African American rage distinguish the difference between the old way of being African American (Civil Rights Movement) and the new (African American Power Movement). While both articulations are striving for the same goal the triumph over oppression in different ways, the end result finds the opposing political ideas helping each other. The new African American Power ideologies (with support from ancient Africa) finishes the fight begun using the old Civil Rights philosophies, with the protagonist (Sterling) bleeding for his cause.

Jitney, a play about African-American taxicab (Jitney) drivers in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in 1977,

tells the story of men trying to find respect and fulfillment in a world of diminishing prospects. Only recently published, this is one of two Wilson plays that I will not examine in this study. Wilson has been working on this play since 1979, perpetually doing re-writes.

Wilson's last play, *King Hedley II*, set in 1985, in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, is a quasi-sequel to *Seven Guitars*. As *Seven Guitars* ends, Hedley is led to believe that he has fathered a child. In *King Hedley II*, Hedley is long gone, but his "son" is in the here and now, fighting both his past and his present. Named *King Hedley II*, he is trying to figure out what it means to be a African American man in the 1980s, especially as an ex-convict. Some of the problems the play tackles include crime, joblessness and an old Wilson standby the family. In addition to this, *King Hedley II* has to deal with a second wife who is pregnant, and does not want to bring a African American child into the world because of the inherent hardships of being African American in America. This play is not included in the study because it has not been published as of this writing. However, intend to include this play in future examinations of Wilson's history plays.

In order to understand Wilson's connection to African-American culture and history, we need to comprehend the formative influences on his technique and cultural beliefs.

In each of the plays examined in this study, a character's song, and how he/she treats his/her song, is critical to the character's development and identity. Alan Nadel, editor of *May All Your Fences Have Gates: Essays on the Drama of August Wilson*, states, "Since the song, as Wilson represents it, is one of the sites of African American American history, ...the song is... the source of ...African Americans'... claim to human rights" (101). Characters either find their song, literally or figuratively, at the end of the play *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, *The Piano Lesson*, *Fences*, *Two Trains Running*, or they do not, with devastating

results, usually murder *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* and *Seven Guitars*. When a character vigorously disregards his/her song, or is disoriented by it, Wilson's message becomes an admonishing one—do not be like these characters. If a character has forgotten his/her song and how to sing it, this means that the character does not know who he/she is.

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