



**METAMORPHOSIS OF BLACKS FROM AFRICAN SLAVES TO PROUD
AFRICAN-AMERICANS IN AUGUST WILSON'S PLAYS**

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ABSTRACT



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August Wilson, one of the leading Afro-American playwrights gave voice to the racially discriminated and socially abused Afro-Americans through his plays. He had been a vigilant writer who could see through the victimization of the so called 'Negros' and wrote plays to encourage them to recover their lost heritage. Some of his most influential plays are- 'Piano Lesson', 'Joe Turner's come and Gone', 'Fences', 'Ma Rainey's Black Bottom', 'Gem of the Ocean' and 'Seven Guitars'. Afro-American history tells us that Blacks were uprooted from their African homelands in sixteenth century; they were treated as animals, worked as slaves for the new White master. Even after their emancipation by Abraham Lincoln, their victimization continued in the form of racial discrimination. Notable Black writers of the Harlem Renaissance period and the Black Arts Movement (1960), Amiri Baraka, Langston Hughes, Ron Milner, Douglas Turner Ward wrote plays of Agitation-propaganda nature to enact Black-White confrontation. August Wilson directed his literary genius toward retrieving and reconnecting disparate parts of an African-American cultural identity which urged a spiritual and figurative return to the starting place i.e. Africa. Wilson donned the task of a cultural critic for his efforts to redirect and mould the cultural experiences of his readers as well as his audience including the performers. In this paper I wish to examine certain cultural building blocks in 'Piano Lesson' and 'Joe Turner's Come and Gone'. The metamorphosis of Wilsonian characters take place following their struggle to rediscover, reconnect and redefine themselves historically and socially as free citizens. Trapped between the dominant cultural values of America and their native culture, Wilson's characters like Herald Loomis and Boy Willie find their real self while assimilating to the American values but keeping their roots fixed in the native culture. This metamorphosis results in the birth of a proud African-American whom Wilson calls 'Shiny Man'. The Shiny Man represents an independent Black man who embraces his cultural heritage and forges a new self sufficient identity while assuming upon himself, the task of finding and binding other shiny men. In 'Joe Turner's Come and Gone', by tapping Loomis into their shared African heritage, Bynum guides his transformation into a shiny man, at which point, Bynum's search is over. He finds his true identity in his own blood. The play 'Piano Lesson' shows Boy Willie, the protagonist, owning up the degraded heritage in terms of embracing the family legacy i.e. the piano which he otherwise wanted to sell for monetary gains.

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August Wilson, one of the leading African-American playwrights spoke for the racially discriminated and socially abused Blacks through his plays. He had been a vigilant writer who could see through the victimization of the so called 'Negros' and wrote plays to encourage them to recover their lost heritage. His most influential plays are- Piano Lesson, Joe Turner's come and Gone, Fences, Ma Rainey's Black Bottom, Gem of the Ocean and Seven Guitars. African-American history tells us that Blacks were uprooted from their African homelands in sixteenth century; they were treated as animals, worked as slaves for the new White master. Afro-American history tells us that racial abuse of Blacks as a community was the order of the day. In the sixteenth century, Blacks were uprooted from their Africa in atrocious conditions. The natives treated blacks like animals. Sale and purchase of blacks was common those days. Some masters were very cruel to their slaves and punished them severely for minor lapses. The job of black woman was more tedious as she did everything that the white man and his family asked her to. The victims lived a life of misery in the tarpaper huts. The blacks were discriminated in every sphere of life including social, political, religious and moral. They were considered inferior by Native Americans. They were assigned the meanest jobs and were given meager wages, which were insufficient to fill their empty stomachs. They were openly abused, ridiculed, insulted and injured. In the marketplace, they were eyed with suspicion, while the white masters were treated with respect.

Even after their emancipation by Abraham Lincoln, their victimization continued in the form of racial discrimination. Notable Black writers of the Harlem Renaissance period and the Black Arts Movement (1960), Amiri Baraka, Langston Hughes, Ron Milner, Douglas Turner Ward wrote plays of Agitation-propaganda nature to enact Black-White confrontation. But August Wilson adopted a quite different approach in exposing black/white conflict through his plays. Credit goes to him for the service he has done to black community. He was a painstaking artist, who had a purpose in his mind- to make the blacks cling to their heritage. To achieve this aim, he faithfully recorded the chronology of black migration and injustices done to them. He wrote such plays as would help the blacks embrace their past and to grow into proud African-Americans.

August Wilson may be regarded as a diehard cultural architect as he directed his literary genius toward retrieving and reconnecting disparate parts of an African-American cultural identity which urged a spiritual return to the native place i.e. Africa. Wilson assumed upon himself the duty of a cultural critic to redirect and mould the cultural experiences of his readers as well as his audience. The metamorphosis of Wilsonian characters take place following their struggle to rediscover, reconnect and redefine themselves historically and socially as free citizens. In this paper I wish to examine certain cultural building blocks in 'Piano Lesson' and 'Joe Turner's Come and Gone'. Trapped between the dominant cultural values of America and their native culture, Wilson's characters like Herald Loomis, Boy Willie and Berniece find their real identity while assimilating to the American values but keeping their roots fixed in the native culture simultaneously.

In the play 'Joe Turner's Come and Gone', Herald Loomis's slavery for seven years strips away his identity as a free individual from him. Before enslavement though in a foreign land yet Loomis was with his family which shared his cultural heritage. His wife and daughter acted as a medium to help him stay connected to his roots. But his enslavement left him isolated and cut off from his roots. His isolation made him hollow from inside. After he became free he started searching for his wife so that he may be able to start his life afresh. Loomis himself admits-

Loomis: Got to find her for myself. Find my starting place in the world. Find me a world I can fit in. (pg 76)

He wants to meet her to know that the world is still there, everything still in its place. Just like Loomis, Bynum too is in search of somebody. It is the shiny man; who, as per Bynum, has no special look but is the one who goes before and shows the way. He met a shiny man earlier in the play who led him to his (Bynum's) self discovery. Bynum is required to meet another shiny man so as to get fulfillment. But for a person to become a shiny man, he must be searching for his identity. In Loomis, Bynum sees the trace of shiny man so he observes him thoroughly and questions him about his visions. Bynum has assumed upon himself the task of binding his people i.e. African-Americans through their self realization by adopting rituals from their African culture.

Bynum: I am a binder of what clings. You got to find out if they cling first. You can't find what don't cling. (pg 10)

He says that the secret of life is to be found out by the person himself.

Bynum: ...Cant nobody figure it out for you. You got to come to it on your own. That's why I'm looking for the shiny man. (pg 11)

In his vision, Loomis is trying to stand up on his legs but couldn't do so as he hasn't got any self realization by then. He is a lost man. Though physically free, his mind is still chained. His body is unable to reconnect to his soul which got crushed after seven years of slavery. Even Bertha observes his shattered personality–

Bertha: ...the only thing the man needs is somebody to make him laugh. That's all you need in the world is love and laughter. That's all everybody needs. (pg 87)

He thinks that his wife would lead him towards self discovery. On finding her he sees that she has embraced Christianity and is trying to persuade him to cleanse himself through the blood of Lamb, as per Christian belief. At this point Loomis realizes that only his own African heritage can cleanse him and lead him to self discovery. He makes it clear to Martha–

Loomis: I don't need nobody to bleed for me! I can bleed for myself. (pg 93)

He slashes his own chest and rubs his blood on his face. This made him regain his lost self, his identity. His own blood, which is very African, leads him to reconnect to his dead soul. He became a shiny man according to Bynum.

Bynum- Herald Loomis, you shining! You shining like new money! (pg 94)

Through the concept of 'Shiny man' Wilson emphasizes the need of blacks to regain their self respect and understanding their duty towards other blacks to help them reconnecting to their roots. One shiny man would guide another black man, struggling to regain his lost self, to self realization. In the play by tapping Loomis into their shared African heritage, Bynum guides his transformation into a shiny man, at which point, Bynum's search is over. He finds his true identity in his own blood. In the end of the play 'he slashes his chest his blood reminds him of his true self', which he otherwise was trying to locate in finding his lost wife. This way Wilson wishes to bind his African –American fraternity together so that they may live as proud African-Americans; throwing away the burden of past slavery. This metamorphosis would result in the birth of proud Afro-Americans whom Wilson calls 'Shiny Man'. The Shiny Man represents an independent Black man who embraces his cultural heritage and forges a new self sufficient identity while assuming upon him the task of finding and then binding other shiny men.

The same theme is dealt with by Wilson in the play 'The Piano Lesson'. Set in 1936 in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, the play has a brother and sister as the recipient of family legacy in the form of a piano. It offers the sister, Berniece, a special emotional value as the complete family history incarded on it in the form of pictures. The piano acts as a mirror to the painful life as slaves of their ancestors. It is also the only heritage of their African culture which Berniece is not ready to part with despite the continuous persistence by Boy Willie, her brother, to sell the piano. He wishes to be equal to the white man and see him eye to eye. In order to buy the piece of land, his ancestors worked on as slaves, he sees piano as an instrument to raise money. He aspires to become the owner of the land to make his identity in the white dominated society which stripped away the freedom of his ancestors. His ambition is quite clear in the following lines–

Boy Willie : ...He spent his whole life farming on somebody else's land. I ain't gonna do that...The only thing my daddy had to give me was that piano...I ain't gonna let it sit up there and rot without trying to do something with it...(pg46)

This is ironical that to become equal to the white owner, by owning his land he is ready to disown the slave past. He aspires to gain his self respect by losing the piano which is symbolic of the family's self respect. This is because he is unable to decipher that the piano wouldn't rot if he views the piano as a source of strength, as a medium to stay connected to his roots. Embracing the degraded heritage is the only solution offered by Wilson to his Black fraternity to regain their identity as free individuals. Boy Willie can't see beyond the materialistic pursuits offered by the piano which otherwise can lead him to his metamorphosis. Ironically, this is what he is aspiring for, at the cost of the piano. Unlike her brother, Berniece acts as the saviour of the family legacy but she is unable to understand the real worth of the piano. This is clear from the fact that she has stopped playing the piano after her mother's death. She otherwise could have played it and derived strength out of it. She even doesn't reveal its true value as a family heritage to her daughter. When asked about the reason for her silence, she admits–

Berniece: I ain't gonna burden her with that piano. (pg70)

She hides the cultural and historical significance of it from her daughter because she, like Boy Willie, herself doesn't see the piano as a source of strength, a medium to stay connected to the ancestors. She cherishes the piano only as a fond memory of her ancestors, a reminder of the family history. She thinks that playing the piano would awaken the dead spirits as she used to hear her mother taking to her father's spirit when she (Berniece) used to play the piano for her mother.

According to Avery, the Christian preacher, she is carrying the past memories just as the passerby who carries the stones; he comes across in his passage. She should rather keep them aside and move on. He asks her to play the piano immediately so that she can be able to move ahead in her present life with him. Just like Herald Loomis in the play 'Joe Turner's Come and gone', Berniece too suffers from identity crisis. She is an incomplete individual who is unable to keep relationship with Avery who wishes to marry her.

Berniece: Avery, I ain't got ready to get married now. (pg 66)

Avery : Anytime I get anywhere near you...you push me away.

Berniece hides her dilemma and defends herself-

Berniece : I got enough of my hands with Maretha. I got enough people to love and take care of.

Avery : who you got to love you. Can't nobody get close enough to love you. (pg 67)

Berniece : I got too many other things to deal with right now. Boy Willie and the piano...and Sutter's ghost. (pg 68)

Sutter's ghost, a reminiscent of the past, is crucial to the action and it plays a major role throughout the play, but especially during the ending, as he fights Boy Willie. Fear of Sutter's ghost is symbolic of the threat of the authority which still haunts her slave mind. She relies on Avery to exorcise the ghost through the Christian beliefs. Avery assures her to relieve her from the ghost.

Avery : The Bible says the Lord is my refuge...and my strength.! With the strength of God you can put the past behind you.

Then he promises to bless the house and show her the power of Lord. But he turn out to be powerless before the ghost. Ultimately she clings on to her ancestors for help. She plays the piano and calls their spirits-

Berniece: (Singing)

I want you to help me

Mama Berniece

I want you to help me

Mama Esther

I want you to help me

Mama Ola

I want you to help me

They certainly help her by deriving away the owner's ghost. As Berniece saves Boy Willie from Sutter's ghost, she recognizes that her roots are in her ancestors and that they are her destiny and she still belongs to them. They turn out to be powerful enough to relieve Berniece of the painful memories of the past and lead her to start her life afresh; she accepts the piano as a powerful tool to be used for familial enrichment. Both siblings come to learn how to respect their heritage. Boy Willie along with his sister cherishes the family legacy far superior to material possessions. *The Piano Lesson* is expresses Wilson's message that African Americans must embrace their roots so that they may truly be able to move forward. Wilson has conveyed to his black audience that if they wanted to live with pride, they first need to remove the inferiority complex from their minds and it is possible by embracing their own African heritage. The Blacks must consider that their heritage is as great as any other one. They should value it more than any materialist object. Through this play Wilson has advocated blacks to own up their degraded heritage.

To sum up, Wilson has done an invaluable service to the blacks as he has not only presented contemporary social reality but has recommended a way out to rise and prosper in the racially biased society. Wilson's importance as a dramatist stems from his own background as a black man born and raised in America struggling against alienation in his own country. He urged blacks to reopen their history books and choose their own destinies and inspired healthy spiritual and attitudinal adjustments within his people. He was not an

African-American playwright but an American dramatist. Reaching beyond the Black community, Wilson's art is appreciated also by non-Black audience which enjoys Wilson's drama for lyrical beauty and his character's "uncanny knack for conveying universal thoughts and emotions". Also Wilson's characters don't try to push a political agenda down the audience's throat rather "he pays tributes to his people's culture and exposes the unheralded nobility in their endurance". With this method both black as well as white audience can leave the theatre entertained and enlightened rather than alienated from each other.

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