

From Black Shame To Black Pride, Evolution Of African American Identities With Special Reference To The Piano Lesson

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ABSTRACT

This study depicts the evolution of blacks who suffered racial discrimination and humiliation in the hands of white people. It focuses on how blacks shift from black shame to black pride and adopt a positive attitude towards themselves and their culture. The purpose of the study is to highlight issues like land ownership, economic independence and family heritage. Besides, relationship between black music and cultural identity is shown in it. This study exhibits the bad experiences of black people in America. The objectification of black people is described as they are the slaves of white race. They are sold and bought like things. They are unable to gain any individualistic identity. It demonstrates the western culture and their superiority complex about their culture. This study is based on the play 'The Piano Lesson' penned down by August Wilson. In the end of this play, almost all characters come to know about the importance of their black history and their identity.

Keywords: - African, American, Boy, Mother, Pride, Shame, Identity, Racial Discrimination, Independence and History.

INTRODUCTION

August Wilson was an African American writer who talked about black and white cultures in his works. He was aware of the hardships and prejudices from his childhood that black people had to face in American society. He used important periods of black history as the background of his plays. He had celebrated African-American culture in his plays. Black people had suffered racial discrimination in the hands of white people. They were exploited, dominated and treated as slaves. Due to this reason, African-Americans had lost faith in their culture and felt ashamed of being blacks. Wilson's plays depict characters searching for their identity in the world. For him, it was very important to study a person's cultural identity that helps to understand his/her personal identity. Most of the characters of his plays were blacks. He, himself, felt Pride in his black culture which he gained from his mother. That is why he adopted his black mother's maiden name to show his dedication to black culture.

Black shame is a term that is used to describe how African American people view themselves among societies in which they feel oppressed. The black people when migrated from Africa to America, lost their own culture and religion and became the 'other' in America. They started to feel inferiority complex. Black shame dimension, here, refers to negative attitudes, negative feelings about being African American because

of bad experiences like exploitation, oppression and domination. On the other hand, Black pride dimension refers to positive feelings of black people about their African and African-American heritage and culture. This pride can be seen in one's cultural practices and behaviors related to their race.

Wilson brought up such compelling issues like African American land ownership, economic independence and family heritage. His overall story is the reconstruction of African American identity and family life in the cities of the North over the course of the 20th century. Through his plays, Wilson showed the evolution of African-Americans' feelings of black shame to black pride. The play 'The Piano Lesson' shows this evolution clearly. It describes how African Americans had experienced racial discrimination earlier and towards the end of the play start to develop positive attitudes and pride in their culture. This play covers the story of four generations of a black family. First two generations are shown in slavery time, having bad and shameful experiences and last two generations are shown as getting free from the shadow of bad experiences of their ancestors to a position that they feel pride in. In the play, Wilson showed his concern over the issue of black identity and focuses on an African American family's struggle to face the past and to embrace the future. It is just because Charles family's bad experiences in the South, Berniece goes away from South towards Pittsburgh and her brother, Boy Willie goes on a journey to the North. Finally, due to economic crisis reasons and the fight over the piano, they are confronted with the question of identity.

The feeling of shame forces Boy Willie to sell the piano to collect enough money to buy Sutter's land that his ancestors had worked on as slaves. As he tells, "Sutter's brother selling the land. He say he gonna sell it to me. That's why I come up here. I got one part of it" (9). He wants to be the owner of the same land because he wants to remove the shameful that is caused by slavery. By doing so, he hopes that he will be treated equally like the white men. He doesn't want to be like his father who had spent his whole life working as a slave on white man's land, so he wants to sell piano to secure his future. He feels that his father had no other option but to work as a slave on somebody else's land, because he had nothing that might help him to overcome the life of slavery. But Boy Willie has a piano that he inherits. By selling that, he can get enough money to buy the land not to work as a slave but to be an owner of it. He wants to fulfill his father's dream, as he tells:

"If my daddy had seen where he could have traded that piano in for some land of his own, it wouldn't be sitting here now. He spent his whole life farming on somebody else's land. I ain't gonna do that." (46)

Berniece considers the piano very powerful because it is the reminder of pain that her black ancestors had to suffer. She doesn't tell the history of piano to her daughter, Maratha because she doesn't want Maratha to be burdened by that history. Piano is the symbol of oppression and exploitation of the Charles family that still continues to burden Berniece. She doesn't want to play on the piano as she tells Avery:

"I was only playing it for her (mother). When my daddy died seem like all her life went into that piano. She ... say when I played it she could hear my daddy talking to her. I used to think them pictures came alive and walked through the house. Sometime late at night I could hear my mama talking to them."(70)

Wining Boy is aware of the fact that white and black are treated differently. He tells a story about blackberries. If a black person likes to eat blackberries and sees berries in the courtyard of a white man who has not made any fence around that and goes to eat there then the white man can call the police to arrest the black man to give a warning to all the other African- Americans not to do so again. Because white man thinks that the berries and the land belong to him, so he is the only owner of that if the white man sells the same land to a black man. Then still he can claim that the berries belong to him and can come to pick berries that are now in a black man's courtyard, whenever he wants. That is the difference between a white and a black man according to Winning Boy as he further tells, "The colored man can't fix nothing with the law" (38).

Historically speaking, an African American has been defined not by his real individual identity but by his role. Same is the case with Wining Boy; he is feeling same kind of conflation taking place in his life, until the piano becomes a sign of his personal nonexistence for white men. That is why sometimes he feels like "... to shoot the piano player" (41). He moves to North but he can never forget the white racial attitudes toward blacks in the South. He cannot trust a white man so he asks Boy Willie, "How you know Sutter's brother ain't sold it already? You talking about selling the piano and the man's liable to sold the land two or three time" (36).

Doaker tells the family history and experiences that members of Charles family had to go through as slaves. Originally, Charles family: Willie Boy, the first Berniece and their sons were the slaves of Robert Sutter, a white man. On Sutter's wedding anniversary, he wanted to give a piano as a gift to his wife, Ophelia. He bought a piano but didn't have cash at that time so he traded his two slaves: first Berniece and Boy Charles for the piano. It shows how badly they were treated and exploited, they did not have any identity, and they could be sold and bought like things. Doaker tells further that although Ophelia liked the piano but she missed her slave servants badly and fell ill. When Sutter was unable to bring back the slaves, he ordered Willie Boy, first Berniece's husband to carve the faces of first Berniece and Boy Charles on the piano for Ophelia. But Willie Boy carved not only the faces of the traded slaves but the history of his family all over the piano. As the piano has been described in the starting of the play:

On the legs of the piano, carved in the manner of African sculpture, are mask-like figures resembling totems. The carvings are rendered with a grace and power of invention that lifts them out of the realm of craftsmanship and into the realm of art. The carvings are rendered with a grace and power of invention that lifts them out of the realm of craftsmanship and into the realm of art. At left is a stair-case leading to the upstairs.

In the play, there is a reference to Parchman Prison Farm that was opened by a white governor in 1904 as a profitable labor camp. In that prison, there was a sawmill, a brickyard, a vegetable canning plant and two cotton gins. The prison farm was a place where black slaves had to do work under very poor conditions. As it is written in epigraph of the play:

Gin my cotton
 Sell my seed
 Buy my baby
 Everything she need.

African Americans had to suffer physically as well as morally. Many times they had to compromise their morals and had to do things that they might not in favor of doing. But they had to do because they had no other option. Same was the case with Lymon's mother. There was a time, when Lymon's father was arrested for fighting with a white man. In order to get him out of the jail, Lymon's mother approached Wining Boy to help her with money. Wining Boy helped her but she had no money to return, she could not afford money to return it to him so she invited Wining Boy to spend a night with her.

Wilson has shown through his play that although black's people had to face racial discrimination but now they have started to feel pride in their culture. According to Wilson, Blues, that are songs and music of African- Americans, is actually their cultural response to the world. There is a shift from shame to pride that can be seen in the case of blues and musical instruments of blacks. As there is a reference in the play, "Some white fellow was going around to all the colored people's houses looking to buy up musical instruments. He'd buy anything. Drums. Guitars. Harmonicas. Piano" (11). Wilson himself felt very proud of African American music, as he said in an interview that:

I have always consciously been chasing the musicians. Their expression has been so highly developed, and it has been one expression of African American life. It's like our culture is in the music. And the writers are way behind the musicians I see. So I'm trying to close the gap." (558)

'The Piano Lesson' shows the relationship between black music and cultural identity. Characters are shown frequently singing songs and playing on black music. Thus black music serves to connect the individual and the collective.

For Berniece, piano is the symbol of her family history, So, she doesn't want to sell that piano, she scolds Boy Willie who wants to do that by saying, "Money can't buy what that piano cost. **You can't sell your soul for money**" (50). She tries to tell the value of piano to Boy Willie. She explains that she is not ready to sell the piano for some land because it was her mother's favourite. It reminds Berniece of her late mother. Her mother spent seventeen years taking care of that piano very carefully.

Boy Willie suggests Berniece that she must tell the history of piano to her daughter, Maretha because it is not something that they should feel ashamed of. He suggests her to celebrate every year the

day, when papa Boy Charles brought the piano into their house. As he says, “Invite everybody! **Mark that day down with a special meaning**” (91).

Early in the play, Berniece rejects to believe in the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog, “I don’t want to hear that nonsense. **Somebody down there pushing people in their wells**” (5). Her refusal to accept the ghosts of the past is equal to his rejection to connect herself to her ancestral spirits by playing on piano. But she accepts their presence only to Avery. Later, she tells Avery to bless the house. In the end, when she plays the piano, she reconnects herself with the past. Thus finally wins over her fears and plays the piano to call on the help and strength of her ancestors as well as of power of the African American race.

William E. Cross notes that investigations that are carried out after 1967-68 shows the shift of African Americans self- concept from negative to positive. This shift is frequently linked to changes that take place in the life of Blacks. Whites were the ones who controlled and exploited the blacks, the evolution of African American identity and culture was made possible when some of the black slaves were separated from the constant influence of the white owners. With the passage of the time, African-Americans started to adopt new techniques to raise their children, moral values, linguistic patterns, religious orientations, musical traditions, stories and folktales etc. As a result now, African Americans have a high sense of personal worth. As one sees in ‘The Piano Lesson’ Charles family was in the possession of Sutter. Boy Charles feels that piano describes his family history, so as long as it stays in Sutter’s house, it is like his whole family is still the slave of Sutter. So, with the help of Doaker and Wining Boy he steals the piano. Now the members as well as piano are no longer in the possession of Sutter. After that Doaker and Wining Boy adopt different professions. Doaker serves as a railroad cook and Wining boys earns money by playing piano and he makes his identity with the help of Blue music. Their next generation Boy Willie and Berniece are also become self-dependent. Berniece becomes strong woman after the death of her husband, Crawleyand. She refuses to remarry and dedicates her time to bring up her daughter, Maretha.

Maretha is the future of Charles family. She is the representative of the struggle with the past that leads to a new future. Maretha learns the lessons that her mother and uncle could not learn, through the fight between the two. Throughout the play, she is not allowed to know who she is and where she came from. She is galvanized to develop love for playing the piano. The battle of past that is going on in her family, haunts her and she sees the ghost of Sutter. In the end, she becomes able to understand where she came from and also gets the opportunity to build upon her family’s legacy and go forward, something that her previous generation weren’t able to do. Through Maretha’s character, Wilson has tried to show that it is very important and significant to pass the past into future generations so that they can add to it.

Avery earlier is an elevator operator but that simple job cannot satisfy him, so he wants to establish a home at the expense of religion. So, he becomes a clergy man to get an opportunity in the cultural institution of the black church. He is the only man in the play who has settled down in the society of white people. As Wilson tells about him:

"Thirty-eight years old, honest and ambitious, he has taken to the city like a fish to water, finding in it opportunities for growth and advancement that did not exist for him in the rural South. He is dressed in a suit and tie with a gold cross around his neck. He carries a small Bible."(22)

A very becomes a preacher, when he reads Bible he also becomes able to live his life happily as he motives Berniece when he sees that she is not coming out of the memories of her dead husband. He tells Berniece that the life is not easy for anybody. Everybody has to face problems in their lives. These problems are like stones in the passway, one has to step over these stones in order to go ahead in life. He informs Berniece that she is walking by carrying these stones because she is remains lost in the memories of Crawly. He tells her that. "All you got to do is set them down by the side of the road. You ain't got to carry them with you" (70).

There is another character in the play Lymon a friend of Boy Willie from South and his partner in his work of selling watermelons. He is very simple guy who takes things as they come. He is that black man whose mother had to compromise her morals to save his father from the white police. In the end of the play, he becomes able to gain a will and a new identity of his own. He tells Berniece that he is going to get a job that is related to unload the boxcars. He further tells her that after finishing the work of selling watermelons, he will join his new job next week.

To conclude, Wilson's plays invite white as well as black audience to think over their cultural differences which he feels should be treated as the source of pride not as the source of inferiority and shame for Blacks. He is of the view that African Americans should recover their dignity by recognition of their cultural values left in the past days. The old black identity is a repressed and marginalized one which is given by white society. Because of this old identity, African Americans lose confidence in their own culture and encounter an identity crisis and refuse to respect it. In 'The Piano Lesson', Wilson deconstructs that type of black history. While writing about black experiences. Boy Willie's fight with the ghost, Berniece's invocation through music, Boy Willie's final decision to return home means their recognition of their past culture, lets them to find their identity in the world.

Wilson shows that past is very valuable and worth more than anything else so it should be cherished, especially in the African American past with its constant struggle for self. He also believes that there is no future for those African Americans who do not want to fully embrace their past under racial slavery. Wilson as a spokesperson of the black community has dramatically portrayed the significance of upholding black cultural rites. With the final scene of The Piano Lesson, Wilson reifies African oral tradition and questions the validity of African American faith in conventional Christianity. Western culture has embraced the miracles of saints, the appearance of angels, the power of otherworldly forces within the testament of the Bible, but has dismissed traditional African Religion's magic and worship of invisible spiritual beings as primitive and unreasonable. Wilson's juxtaposing of ghost, religious traditions and spirituality within the narrative of The Piano Lesson argues against such western cultural superiority. In the end of this play,

almost all characters come to know the importance of their history and their identity. Thus, August Wilson through his characters in *The Piano Lesson* has transformed the black shame associated with the black history into a site of glory and celebration.

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