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History and Sense of belongingness in August Wilson's Plays

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Abstract

Location is incredibly important to cultural life. It could be a particular group's social, political, economic, cultural, or geographic situation. It has a significant impact on how certain individuals think. Slavery from 1619 until 1865 left its influence on the history of African Americans. African Americans have endured years of racial discrimination, low self-esteem, and constant cruel treatment that portrays them as inferior to whites. This chapter examines the spiritual, cultural, and historical quests of African Americans for their racial origins, redemption, and sense of self. Usually presented in chronological order, August Wilson's plays address the historical plight of African Americans. August Wilson dramatises the commitment to using African American perspectives to examine significant historical eras. His plays give black men and women the chance to write about and perform their cultural identity and experiences. In the midst of a dominant white culture, the drama expresses concern for the regaining of black cultural values. "Leave your Africanness outside the door," is the American message. "Claim what is yours," is Wilson's advice.

Key Words: History, culture, African Americans, identity, race.etc.

African-American cultural history can be traced back to the very beginning of the 17th century. During that time, America's isolated cultural identity was influenced by the importation of African slaves. The majority of African slaves were distinct from white Americans in terms of colour, race, and lifestyle. Even decades after they were freed, the descendants of African slaves in the New World still experience fundamental genetic differences and social marginalisation. Slave masters first purposefully forbade them from engaging in their native culture. Its primary goal was to prevent the independent political or cultural activities of the slave rebellions, which occurred in various parts of the United States.

Throughout American history, African American authors have defined a rich and varied corpus of literature. Slavery dates back to 1619 and is considered as the beginning of its history. It began with slave memoirs written by escaped slaves like Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs, who discussed the sexual abuse of slaves and detailed his time as an enslaved worker in Maryland in their respective works, "Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass" and "Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl" respectively. Their contributions to literature—poetry, fiction, theatre, short stories, essays, and academic writing—were linked to years of racial prejudice, dehumanisation, and lack of self-worth. These conversations featured stories of adversity, survival, and the search for one's origins and identity. It is reasonable to conclude, based on Stuart Hall's concept, that identity is fluid and constantly evolving. Stuart Hall argues about it as:

Identities are about questions of using the resources of history, language, and culture in the process of becoming rather than being: not "who we are" or "where we have come from" so much as what we might represent ourselves. (Hall 4)

Wilson has faith in the nuanced conception of the past that includes the age of slavery, Africa, and the modern South. Wilson thinks a sense of abundance can be attained by knowing African American identity. Wilson uses the dispute between his brother and sister, Boy Willie and Berniece over the piano, to dramatise his concern for and awareness of Africanness, his past, in the play. For him, the piano symbolises the legacy carvings done by Grandfather Willie Boy, the history of the Charles family, and slavery. Since they still feel like they are slaves of white masters as long as Sutter retains the Piano, they want it back from the white master after they are freed. Wilson asserts that having a sense of one's background and culture can help black people connect to their past and recognise their value for the present and a better future. In the play, the piano stands in for both the collective soul of Africans as a whole and the Charles family specifically. Berniece and Boy Willie's perspective on the piano indicates special links to their shared hobby, which leads to their interactions with the future and identity. Wilson's handling of the Piano appears to be combining characteristics of the two leads. Selling the piano to Boy Willie represents an auction of history, the past, and identity, which is a clear expression of black thought regarding Booker T. Washington's support of blacks in the 19th century. To buy Sutter's land in the South, where his ancestors toiled until death, he does not, however, want to sell the Piano. It illustrates how nuanced Boy Willie's personality is. Boy Willie wants a piece of the American pie or understands the symbolic value of the property connected to his father, according to Wilson's claim that Willie "took his grandfather's shoes" in order to discover what made up his father's identity. One interpretation is that it represents a son's desire to continue his father's heritage.

History, according to Nadel, is performative and "History" generates events rather than "describes events." By enacting them, narratives are given the appearance of being factual. He explains his position in straightforward language using the example of a witness to an accident: the witness's perspective is spoken, documented, and then becomes a part of history. (Nadel 224)

The play *The Piano Lesson* was initially produced as a staged reading at the National Playwrights Conference at the Eugene O'Neill Theatre Centre in December 1987. It was eventually published in 1990. The play takes place in Pittsburgh during the Great Depression's aftereffects in 1936. *The Piano Lesson*, a story about a family's struggle to decide what to do with an ancestral piano with strong family connections, was inspired by the Romare Bearden picture. It effectively humanises paranormal and spiritual concepts like ghosts and spirits. It implies that a person's difficulties are more significant than their overt content. It depicts the consequences of three generations of slavery on history. The piano, which contains both past and present events, serves as the focal point of the play's main conflict. The playwright urges active engagements with past suffering and celebrations of the positive for a better future. He argues that history should not be avoided but rather actively confronted. In this context, Martin Luther King Jr. has rightly said that "We are not makers of history. We are made by history."

The events of *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* take place during the Great Migration, when many members of the first generation of African Americans to be born free fled the rural South for the metropolitan North only to discover that discrimination and loss had followed them there. In *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, a liberated black man travels to the north in quest of his wife, who vanished when he was still enslaved. Its main issue is the early 20th century movement of African Americans from the agrarian South to a new set of tribulations in the industrial metropolis of the North. According to Joe Turner, since blacks sprang from agrarian origins in Africa, they would have been stronger if they had not moved from the countryside to the city.

The first decade of the 20th century, specifically 1904, is when *Gem of the Ocean* takes place. The play depicts African Americans' battles for liberation 41 years after the Emancipation Proclamation of 1904 and the ratification of the 13th Amendment to the US Constitution in 1865. According to August Wilson, the worst problems of African Americans begin after the two histories of White America mentioned above. In *Gem of the Ocean*, racial inequality is shown as the historical continuation of slavery, depriving black people of a dignified existence as human beings. Black people are excluded from mainstream socioeconomic and political life in America.

Wilson distinguishes African American history through *Radio Golf* by emphasising their freedom of choice, struggle for survival, and quest for what is inherently theirs. Characters finding refuge in history are explored in the premise that history is a measure to understand the present and plan for a brighter future for African Americans. It claims that African Americans may use history and identity to understand the present and make plans for a better future. The Hill District, or Pittsburgh, connotes cultural and thematic meanings and acts as a site of identity conflict. The Hill's very soil contains the origins of African Americans' identity. Harmond is so defending his past and legacy in his battle for Aunt Ester's home.

Slave customs, African memories, slave uprisings, civil rights movements, later migrations, religious practise, political and economic unrest, and family life are all part of the African-American culture. In the process of forming African Americans' cultures, literature, languages, music, oral tradition, and other forms of expression have all remained important. Notably, African-Americans' oral traditions contributed to the preservation of traditional culture's earliest-period recollections. They could only maintain a connection to their ancestors' culture through it. African slave owners consciously eschewed formal education.

Wilson uses music in his plays to let the audience connect with the characters' past and history and to better understand them. Troy's suffering in *Fences* is shown through blues music. Blues music has always had persistent notes of suffering meant to make the listener feel a part of a continuum. In Joe Turner's *Come and Gone*, Wilson fervently argues that African Americans suffered disproportionately from the damage caused by fleeing from the South to the authoritarian and discriminatory North.

Wilson is of the opinion that it is not advisable to choose to learn about one's past. It is essential. It has both spiritual and educational value. Wilson firmly believes that history should be taught in this way through even play. He states that "the whole idea of drama is that it educates us about ourselves. I think this is vitally important for our children. They need to learn something about their history." (Gravatt, p.3)

Wilson makes an effort to show how resilient black people may become in the face of white supremacy. He exhorts African Americans to oppose white supremacy in order to fully free themselves from racial subordination. *Jitney* Wilson illustrates how urban renewal poses a threat to the neighbourhood. He thinks it's crucial to show "Jitney" drivers struggling to survive while working professions they created for themselves. *King Hedley II* depicts the battles for a family's safety and security as well as the quest for ancestry and self. The Piano Lesson serves as a reminder to African-Americans that they should celebrate their history in the same way that Jews do at Passover each year to mark their emancipation as a race from Egypt. Wilson notes that many African Americans are ignoring the legacy of slavery.

Thus, the above discourse asserts that the only way to gain control of their existence is to go back to the roots, culture, and stories of Slavery, Africa, and Harlem Renaissance to the present. Wilson brings the black culture as an artifact on stage. It also outlines the escape from slavery to freedom and conflict between present and history for African Americans.

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