



## AFRICAN-AMERICAN CULTURAL RESISTENCE & SIGNIFICANCE OF MUSIC AS A CULTURAL EXPRESSION IN “Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom”

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**Abstract:** This paper deals with the oppression faced by the African Americans, and how they form a cultural group for music naming it "blues". Ma Rainey, a famous African American singer, is the protagonist of the movie. August Wilson's play “Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom” discusses the idea of theatre and related folk culture of 1886-1939, keeping Ma Rainey, an acknowledged singer and mother of the “Blues” (culture and expression of life). The movie is the biopic of the famous Ma Rainey. This paper focuses on the life of African-Americans and their struggle to protect their music and folk culture, inclusive of the life of the blacks which is expounded through their music.

**Index Terms -** racial oppression, August Wilson, Ma Rainey’s Black Bottoms, theatre, Blues, culture, music, biopic, African-Americans.

### I. INTRODUCTION

This paper takes into account the cultural resistance shown by the Afro-Americans as in August Wilson’s play ‘Ma Rainey’s Black Bottoms’. The manifestations of the Afro-Americans for equality and the usage of blue music or the jazz as their medium of resistance is seen throughout the movie as discussed further in this paper. Blues, a musical genre originated in the subregions of the US during the 1860s, are simple African-American traditional ballads. Rather than being lyrical stories these secular folk songs are expressive and emotional. These are vocal in form accompanied by instruments. Emotions mentioned here are of the oppressed blacks. These melancholic notes were mainly the effects of the Harlem renaissance, and some of the problems in their personal love life. They were microtonal pitch influences employing the call and response pattern. Usually, the work songs sung by the black slaves came from the agricultural workers, and such influences of these work songs can be seen in the blues. It is the ‘blues’ that made the foundation for popular music culture. These were both presented in theatres as well as sold after recording in professional studios, later featured in films or as musical albums. ‘Moonshine blues’ and ‘black bottoms’ are the two songs mentioned in this movie as the song sung by the mother of blue Ma Rainey.

The term apartheid is an Afrikaans word which literally means ‘setting apart’. This culture separated people in southern parts of America on the basis of their race. Music played a vital role in the movement that revolted against the apartheid culture within south Africa. Elevating awareness and unity by putting forth a surrogate vision of culture was the key feature of music during then. In the 1950s came the protestant music followed by apartheid music with lyrics and tone dedicated to address the melancholy and hardship of the people.

Mamie smith, a black woman marked the beginning of the ‘blue’ recordings in the 1920s. Then came Perry Bradford’s ‘crazy blues’, 1920. These were successful that a series named “original race records” was launched by the general phonograph company. Perry Bradford was an American composer and pianist. Bessie Smith, Clara Smith, Ma Rainey, Ethel Waters, Alberta Hunter, Louis Armstrong, Lonnie Johnson and King Oliver were some prominent figures of The Blues. Some of them, say Bessie Smith, Ethel Waters and Clara Smith recorded their voice for Columbia, whereas Ma Rainey, Alberta Hunter and Ida Cox did it for the Paramount. It was after many years that the director of the black music, Clarence Williams agreed to sign in for recording for ‘Okeh’- an American race recording label. ‘Okeh’ was founded by Otto Heinemann, it was spelled "OkeH" formed from the initials of Otto K. E. Heinemann which later became "Okeh". This was a periphery for epic records, also an alternative of present-day Sony music. ‘Okeh’ now is an imprint of the jazz. The news advertisements of the blue music came exclusively to the Afro-Americans particularly through the black-owned newspapers, whereas other white-owned companies were expeditious to

pinpointedly attack the black recordings with their own “race recordings”. The blues which were unknown amongst the audience now came to light, parallelly rising with the ‘race record industry’.

The blues slowly began to extend its influence on other existing musical forms and styles. Blues is no different from that of the jazz, both are intimately related to one another. Elements of the blues can be spotted in the jazz too. For instance, we have some pioneering Jazzmen such as Jelly Roll Morton, Louis Armstrong, and the like whose music employed elements of “the blues”. Another example to substantiate this is of the ‘soul music’, a kind of pop music that embodied rhythmic elements like the blues, including gospels. These were performed by the black American musicians like Marvin Gaye, James Brown and Aretha Franklin, by prioritising the vocals characterised by intense feelings of these vocal embellishments. Similarly, ‘rhythm and blues’ also exhibit clear tones and forms of the blue music. Elvis Presly, an early rock singer employed materials of the blues which directly mentions of its influences even on the early rock music. Like the American musicians the British were also influenced by the blues. Rolling stones, Eric Clapton, John Mayall- some of the 1960 British musicians are some examples to show the influence of blues, unlike Mike Bloomfield, Paul Butterfield and the Allman brothers who were Americans.

The blues not only had influenced the arena of music and vocal artforms, instead it has unending effects and influences on literature, mainly the American literature during the Harlem Renaissance, 1918-1937. Langston Hughes, Sterling Brown, and Jean Toomer some of the black authors saw the indigenous art in the blues valuable to write upon. “Fine Clothes to the Jew” 1927, written by Hughes explores the poetic form of the blues and of the aesthetic sensibilities of the subaltern working class specially, the oppressed blacks.

Harlem renaissance, a prominent African American movement in the district of Harlem (New York), was something that embraced literature, music, theatre, as well as visual arts. Participants of this movement re-stated “the Negro” concept to break free off the shackles of Victorian morality, followed by the bourgeois shame imposed upon the black lives. This movement was against all the white stereotypes that reinforced racist beliefs taking the blacks far away from their own cultural heritage, and even causing disputes amongst themselves. Anyhow Harlem renaissance is not related to any school of thoughts or ideologies, instead it is purely based on debates which later laid the foundation of the influential black literature. The intellect and reason of this renaissance made up the symbolic capital for awakening the overthrown culture.

The quest of suppressed black musicians for identity and recognition can be seen throughout the movie. Ma Rainey, an acknowledged black singer known as the ‘mother of blues’, the movie’s protagonist is a brave lady who keeps on fighting for the justice of the blue musicians. In this paper the characters are analysed on the basis of how they choose to react against the cultural oppression, and even the problems they had to face in their personal lives which basically shapes their behaviour. In this movie, Cultural resistance is the point of focus. How music becomes the medium of resistance which they use to come to the forefronts so as to represent themselves. The lyrics of these songs clearly represent melancholic emotions and hardship of these people. Ma Rainey has her own principles that she has an unflinching courage to stand for what she believes in. The way in which the oppressed blacks show resistance against unjust rules of the whites using their folk-culture music as a medium of expression makes this paper relevant. The biopic of another blue singer Bessie Smith titled ‘Bessie Smith’, substantiates the same. Similarly, we have the documentary on Langston Hughes that adds up to the latter.

Ballads of dissent later became a musical tool that enabled people to reconsider thoughts of the African laws. These were songs that showed deviation from the upheld accepted laws of the community. These are slow, sentimental, romantic songs which people used to express themselves, linking itself to the way of ‘blues’. Like the blues genres, say the reggae, hip-hop, afro-beat also had to face issues regarding their existence. This clearly points out the way international law and the whole system of laws tried to oppress the subaltern group within the nation. Since these kinds of ballads were against racism and unacceptable financial and power hegemony, corruption, injustice and created poverty, they were seen as a medium of social reform. They used simple yet effective methods necessary to plot a change in the nation’s cultural discriminations. It is important to ponder over the songs of the French rapper Claude M’Barali, professionally known in the name M C Solaar. He had sung about intersectionality of slavery, colonialism and modern forms of exploitations. His songs were also about different phases of discriminations. ‘Brown Paper Bag’, ‘Monsters You Made’, ‘Niger Delta’ and the like substantiates the above statements. Corruption done by the national elites and their manipulative nature was a dominant theme of these songs. ‘Niger Delta’, by Nneka is wholly focused on the role of multinational corporations and of the national elites specially in creating environmental degradation causing misery and hardship to the people of Nigeria – Niger-delta region.

According to Daniel Newman and his observations, music is something that indeed which acts as a valuable device. Particularly to the render since what is expected to be dry and quiet, always dull and unattractive, suddenly became or seemed to be fun and of more interest. This engaged the readers, the listeners.

Music is not just a plain thing; it is not flat surfaced. The conclusion on music types along with their history, which we reach by the end of this paper is of the music as an effective medium and mechanism of communicating even basic yet stronger suppressed emotions.

Not only do the music becomes the medium of communication, but also the way in which it had become the identity of certain groups, say the blues. Music assists even in the wider disseminations of problems, developments and even strategies for critical intervention. Therefore, music becomes reportorial, interrogative and provocative, which makes itself being capable enough to be a strong medium of cultural resistance as in the movie.

Characters of the movie, like Levee talks about his personal life and his own sufferings due to the racial oppression and the continuous provoking deeds of the whites. The way he presents his own story as a young boy who had to see his parents suffer at the hands of the whites itself is the reason, he simultaneously hates them as well as behaves the opposite as he is well aware of the consequences if he did not. Sylvester is yet another character introduced by Ma herself. He is a young boy who wish to build his career with Ma as a singer, to the contrary he stammers. Ma puts all her effort on the boy and convinces everyone around, including the whites in the studio, to give him the chance to sing again and again till he completes the song without stammering even for once. This shows the representative strength and courage vested within the black women and others to overcome the powerful, all-dominating whites. This makes them feel less powerful since they need their folk music to gain profit by selling these recordings. Music, here is a mechanism for communication and more like an introductory material enabling people to know about the existing critical social issues and conflicts. The persuasiveness and rhythmic beats to which the powerful, intense and meaningful lyrics adds up makes ‘the blues’ multidimensional and a vital. It helps one understand the

nuanced perspectives as it approaches the challenge of the international system. Some of these musicians have been social actors and activists at their time which enabled them to write with such transparent emotions. Their stories of experience must come to light, they must be given platforms to perform their own life lessons, in order to present the history for the upcoming generations. 'Music is the Weapon', a documentary targeting politics and music of 1982 is another example. Similarly, Amandla: A Revolution in Four-Part Harmony is a 2002 documentary delving deep into the role of music in challenging apartheid culture in south Africa.

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