
Probing into the Psyche of Subalterns in August Wilson's

Joe Turner's Come and Gone.

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Abstract

The subjugation and suppression that blacks meet in America causes ineradicable wounds in the psyche of the blacks which they try to remove from their later generations. The present paper probes into the psyche of the African Americans in August Wilson's *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* in the Pittsburgh Century Cycle and delves how Wilson employs the 'blood memory' as a primary power to overcome the psychic exile suffered by his characters. By navigating back to the origin of the African American trauma, the play instructs blacks to see through their problems, to reconnect and rebuild themselves with their own historical ancestor slave trade. To solve their imminent problems blacks must seek a positive self-knowledge that transforms their misery into love, power and hope. Wilson persistently insists that African Americans have to upright their impending life only through the diasporic reminiscence. The remembrance makes an individual to transform his ordeal and captivates how to edify others' life with the history of the slaves' voyage.

Key Words: diaspora, blood memory, slaves, misery, power and hope.

“Art is beholden to the kiln in which the artist was fired.

Before I am anything a man or playwright.

I am an African American.”

- August Wilson

The Africans are captured by white slaves from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries and the Africans are shipped across the Atlantic Ocean to the America. African Americans of today cannot access their ancestors’ original tragedy as they do not have a common language, neither a written language nor a witness. This horrifying transatlantic experience has scarred the blacks psyche and accuses the whites for causing such inerasable awful memory in their humanity. The decade series playwright and two time Pulitzer Prize winner, August Wilson traces the journey of African Americans from the Post Reconstruction period of the 1900’s to the Information Society of 1990's. His plays exhibit how the widespread racial discrimination, economic disadvantage, social and cultural disruptions of forced migration grounds a sense of worthlessness and anxiety in the Africans’ psyche.

How does one can recover his cultural history after more than three hundred and fifty years? How can one renovate the olden times if it is vanished due to displacement? Why is this diasporic memory still essential to one’s survival? These are the vital questions that August Wilson constantly put forth in his decade-by-decade chronicle of dramas to represent the experiences of African Americans in the twentieth century. The victimization of African Americans by whites is not Wilson’s primary concern; rather Pittsburgh Cycle reveals the profound distress over multifarious problems which African Americans are confronted in their

daily life. The ruthlessness of Seth Holly and the aimlessness of Herald Loomis in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, Levee's propensity for violence out of frustration and rage in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, the overindulgence of mourning of Bernice in *The Piano Lesson*, the robbery of Floyd Barton in *Seven Guitars* and King Hedley in *King Hedley II* for easy money. Wilson constantly points out the rationale that lies at the bottom of these problems, instead of accusing whites for African Americans horrible situation, their problems come from the African American community itself: "an inability to come together, to discover power from within, to respect life" (64). All the ten plays of Wilson register the diasporic issues of each decade of the twentieth century happenings in America.

Joe Turner's Come and Gone is an overtly historical play; it alarms the life of African Americans in the 1910's. Wilson designates the deplorable experience of African Americans in the play as it transforms the psyche of African Americans through the remembrance of their ancestor's past diasporic issues. The individuals formulate them to resolve their impending difficulties by seeking an optimistic self-understanding that renews their depression into esteem, supremacy and confidence. Slavery is technically illegal at this period; the notorious Joe Turner ignores the law and illegally imprisons African Americans into slavery for seven years on his plantation. As Herald declares "kept everybody seven years. He'd go out hunting and bring forty men at a time" (25). Herald has come from all over "whichever way the road takes us that's the way we go" (51). Bynum refers to the causes of great migration as "See, Mr. Loomis, when a man forgets his song he goes off in search of it... till he find out he's got it with him all the time" (72). Seth has seen hundred of niggers like Bynum, Loomis, Jeremy and Mattie who wander through out the life without any knowledge to resolve.

Over a period of twenty years from 1910 to 1930, the black population left the South and migrated to the North mainly - New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, Detroit and the city of Wilson's Century Cycle Plays, Pittsburgh. The problem mainly arises because the migrants have left behind nothing but the racial violence, segregation, and disfranchisements in the South. Migrants like Jeremy and Loomis are drawn towards the North not only by the promise of higher wages but also with a hope of economic and political equality and social justice. The voting rights do not translate their political power and promotion practices but keep them at the bottom of the employment ladder. Even though Herald is released after seven years of imprisonment, he neither reveals his 'song' nor his wife Martha. As he bawls "I made it back to Henry Thompson's place where me and Martha was sharecropping and Martha's gone. She taken my little girl and left her with her mama and took off North" (72). The play rightly informs that reality is never matched by the dreams of migration. Loomis embodies the struggles that African Americans have faced in the United States in 1910s, a time when many of them are migrated to the Northern states to find work, as Seth reminds "word get out they need men work in the mill and put in these roads... and niggers drop everything and head North looking for wisdom"(38).

Wilson perceives the migration as not merely a demographic or geographical shift but a historical transition to a new identity. As Shannon declares "the historical context out of which the play evolves includes a backdrop of frustrated sharecroppers; hundreds of unemployed, unskilled laborers; countless broken families; and a pervasive rumor of a better life up North" (15). African Americans are too much caught up with the problems they have, they seek resolutions from their immediate surroundings without anticipations. Wilson inculcates his people to look back and profound into the cause of their sorrow to disentangle them to have a

fresh and healthy start. The problems in the psyche of Herald Loomis whose seven years of imprisonment and search for his wife Martha for more than three years mirrors a formerly imprisoned people's search for identity and emphasizes the redemption power of history.

Even though all the characters sense the effect of intolerance, Jeremy enters into the most discriminating and a deeper level of exploitation throughout the play. Rutherford Selig is paid by African Americans to find their own people, whom Selig's father relocates. The stroke of rasping money from Jeremy by white police officers and firing by white people for his refusal to pay the employment fees mirrors the domination and their hopelessness. Selig tries to get better price out of Seth for his labor emulates that African Americans are still treated as bits and pieces rather than human beings.

The play not only points out the serious problems of the twentieth century African Americans but also offers the solution to their problems. Wilson believes that if blacks are overly assimilated into the white ideology then they might be like Seth who has lost in profit driven desires. Even if this kind of diligent African American becomes successful they are tend to sacrifice their humanity and the best part of African culture. In addition to such a capitalist violating problem, Wilson suspects that African Americans remain self-reproaching as they are plunged in blaming themselves and still they believe in their low esteem. He intentionally reveals that the core of blacks' problem lies in their own adversity as it is to be recalled and remade by them.

Slavery, the chain gang and the migration entail a loss of identity, as Seth points out that the newly freed slaves and their children have lost all memory of Africa, the implied homeland. Bynum's search transmits that his tale of learning and finding his Binding Song which is handed

down to him by his father makes him to act positively in the world rather than wander aimlessly without self-knowledge like others. The song exists as a manifestation in the world; it is the act of expression of self that makes the world. As Bynum point out “I used all myself in the making of that song. Then I was the song in the search for itself” (9). As Bynum’s father helps him to recover his song and identity, he tries to restore others identity in the later part and mainly this recovery is seen in Loomis when he slashes his chest in front of Martha which shows that he has attained the stack of self-reliance. The world is created through the individual song and this song makes African Americans to reproduce their personal identity through the former remembrance.

The characters in the play draw towards the past to remake themselves. The image of the movement of travelling makes a historical transition and finally leads in search for self. The individual song guides each of them along the road in future; they are enabled to recover the song only through recovery of a collective past. At the same time Jeremy’s anecdote makes clear that the recovery of ‘song’ is not so easy in the continual threat of white racism. Talk of travel and the motives of migration which are frequent in the beginning of the play which indicates that people are losing and finding one another. Herald has lost his wife and is in search for her; Mattie’s man Jack Carper has abandoned her and she wants him to return; Jeremy desires a relationship but seems too young to experience a solid commitment with a woman; Bynum as People Binder and Selig as people finder show that boarding house function as a space where people come together to fulfill their wish. The road is an ever present image in the play as it literally leads people to and from the Holy boarding house. Herald and Zonia have been on the road for some time looking for Martha Loomis. While Jeremy’s job is related in construction of roads, Bynum discovers his identity while he is walking down a road. The road is significant for

former slaves; by the end of slavery freed slaves have travelled on the roads towards North in search of new lives. The stories of Herald and Bynum indicate that it is not an 'easy road' to travel as the road symbolizes both freedom and tribulation in the play.

Jeremy is a wander; he rather leaves any situation that intrudes his life style. Life is a constant vacation for him, lives in a drifting life without settling down with a job or family. He reflects the position of the black migrants from the South. Jeremy comes to North with a guitar in hand however confidences to find new jobs and freedom in the rest part of life. The migrant slaves like him are unaware that they must compete white immigrants from all over the world implies a rude awakening to the hopeful Southerners. He is taken to jail unfairly, been harassed by white policemen for out on the streets during late night, fires by whites in his refusal to pay an employment fees echoes the unfairness of the white man's action. As Wilson says "From the deep and the near South the sons and daughters of newly freed. African slaves wander into the city. Isolated, cut off from the memory, having forgotten the names of the Gods and only guessing at their faces, they arrive dazed and stunned, their hearts kicking in their chest with a song worth singing." (25)

Bynum is engrossed in a customary African ceremony of spelling the pigeons blood in the yard of the boarding house for blessing ritual. He acquires his song only through the act of cleansing the blood that he got when he has rubbed his handover the advice given to him by the strange man on the road. The man that Bynum meets on the road is an independent black man, he has made him to find his song that formulates him to be self-sufficient by excluding the chains of the past events. The blood symbolizes the resistance of remedy and salvation. The blood generates Bynum to have a vision in which life is magnified and the strange man starts shining

like new money. The blood memory in Bynum crafts him to recognize the shiny man as the One Who Goes Before and Shows the Way. This significance makes more sense towards the end when Herald hears from his wife.

Martha. You got to be clean, Herald. You got to be washed with the blood of the lamb.

Herald. Blood make you clean? You clean with blood?

Martha. Jesus bled for you. He's the lamb of god who takes away the sin of the world.

Herald. I don't need nobody bleed for me! I can bleed for myself. (93)

Herald slashes himself across the chest with his knife and wipes his blood on his face like Bynum who does with the shiny man in the beginning of the play. This indicates that Herald has untied himself from the past memories of slavery and liberates, cleanses and gives a long breathe, frees from encumbrance, promotes that he works of his own heart and the bonds of the flesh. He has accepted the responsibility of his presence in the world. The blood makes him free to soar above the locality which has pushed his spirit into terrifying contractions to persuade others to regain their strength and self-identity. Bynum's elucidation grounds Herald to shine 'like new money' as he clarifies to Herald about the vision of the bones that he has daily in the dreams. The bones are none other than his ancestors' who try to recall his identity to lead a new free life. To Bynum the strange man shines in the past just as Herald now shines in the present as Wilson notes "Having found his song, the song of self-sufficiency" (93).

The diasporic memory dictates Bynum, Martha, Jeremy, Zonia and Herald to recognize, admire and reconnect with the present life. The psyche is not passive; instead it encourages one actively embrace their own self to live. Wilson wants this wisdom to impart to his future generations through the 'diasporic memory bearer', Bynum in the play. He summons her fellow

blacks to look to the early history of their lost souls. In an interview in 2003, August Wilson instructs his people to remember their ancestors' diaspora to heal their trauma, unravel their troubles and find their position in the world, they must reconnect themselves with the sailing of Middle Passage. Wilson evidences the blood as the optimistic weapon to heal the unconsciousness in the psyche of his characters. This is epitomized through Herald Loomis act of cleansing himself with his own 'blood' at the end of the play. Loomis transmission is possible only through his recovery of past 'memory bearer' Bynum.

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