



Black American Experience in Joe Turner's Come and Gone

Dr. T Eswar Rao

Asst. Professor, P.G Dept. of English, Berhampur University, Bhanja Bihar, Ganjam, Odisha, India.

ABSTRACT

Literary critics often do not indulge in forecasting as they seldom come true. But Earnest Schier proved it wrong when he proclaimed August Wilson is a better chronicler of the black experience than Alex Haley. Wilson has carved a special niche for himself as "a compelling new voice" of the American theatre in recent time. His reputation rests mainly on his deft chronicling of black experience which is a perennial source to supply him the necessary stuff that goes into the making of his plays in epitomizing his honest endeavors to confront in his works the glancing manner with which the blacks look at themselves and the majority community culture of Americans look at the blacks. He finds the gamut of black American experience as the inexhaustible source to provide a dramatist with relevant themes to write about. Wilson juts up his tribute to Loomis' search by delving deep into the complexity of black experience and thereby seeks not only to help other blacks towards developing deeper understanding and insight of themselves but also to be an agent of a voyage of self-discovery for the Americans at large - irrespective of caste, creed, color, and culture. This paper studies his work's deep involvement with his 'Racial Other'.

KEYWORDS: Black Experience, Caste, Creed, Perennial Source, Racial Other.

August Wilson considered Joe Turner's Come and Gone (1984) to be his favorite play of the ten in his award-winning Pittsburgh Cycle. It is a drama that truly examines the roots, crossroads, and intersections of African, American, and African American culture. Its characters and choral griots interweave the intricate tropes of migration from the south to the north, the effects of slavery, black feminism and masculinity, and Wilson's theme of finding one's "song" or identity. This book gives readers an overview of the work from its inception through its revisions and stagings in regional theatres and on Broadway, exploring its use of African American vernacular genres blues music, folk songs, folk tales, and dance and nineteenth-century southern post-Reconstruction history. Ladrica Menson-Furr presents Joe Turner's Come and Gone as a historical drama, a blues drama, an American drama, a Great Migration drama, and the finest example of Wilson's gift for relocating the African American experience in urban southern cities at the beginning and not the end of the African American experience (Zhang 173).

Wilson's talent as a dramatist of the most efficacious theatrical powers finds its expression in his yearnings to Evoke and explore the experience and burden of slavery in his profoundly moving plays particularly Joe turner's Come And Gone which deals with the problem of Herald Loomis Who was abducted into enforced labor on a cotton plantation in 1901 for 7 years by a slave Hunter named Joe Turner. He

has spent several years in search of his wife, Martha who was left behind, though he is a free man in his body, yet he is continuously haunted by the scars of enslavement and a nagging sense of operating alienation which he can overcome to an extent by seeing his wife again-lost in the labyrinth of life.

The play is set in August 1911 Pittsburg interspersed with sons and daughters of the newly freed black wandering into the city in search of something inexplicable. "Isolated, cut off from memory, having forgotten the names of the Gods and only getting at their faces, they arrived dazed and stunned, their heart kicking in their chest with the song What The singing... which is both a wail and a whelp of joy." Seth, the owner of the boarding-house, considers them unwelcome, presence because of their "old black country style of living." He says:

Ever since slavery got over with their ain't been nothing but foolish acting niggers...but these niggers keep on coming...walking...riding...carrying their Bibles...niggers coming up here from the black woods... coming up here from the country carrying Bibles and guitars looking for freedom. They got a rude awakening. (Wilson 7)

Seth's acerbic resentment of the liberated 'Niggers' spells out the two paths-of entertainment and sport, which are traditionally open to blacks in America. Unfortunately, both



of these roles have failed Wilson's black characters, as his play fences depict the dilemma of a former baseball player, and Ma Rasiney's Black Bottom deals with the failure of the black musicians. Consequently, the protagonists seeking their identities in a world dominated by the whites, find themselves as Black again for whom the way out may be to contribute to the world when they recognize themselves as Africans and respond to the world, in the same manner. The play Joe Turner's Come and Gone presents a slight shift in the roles of blacks - shown as carrying their Bible and guitars which suggest that Wilson has assigned music and religion as the two roads for his black characters that are filled by their profession. Loomis earlier a deacon in the church, has tried religion in the tumultuous days of slavery and found it to offer no answer to his problems. The same may be said about Bynum and his 'spooky stuff' though he claims instantly that he can find and bind people as "a binder of what clings".

Jermy, "a proficient guitar player, though his spirit has yet to be molded into song" represents the next course usually open to blacks. He too has been a victim of the majority communities' cunningness and prejudice when he was cheated by the whites from winning guitar playing competitions. Now he is scared of even going out for they might grab him again.

There are all these things that are forcing their way in on them. So I don't need the white characters, and that's why they are all off-stage characters. (Powers 52)

Because of these and other similar incidents, Wilson began identifying himself as a "race man". "As a child Wilson suffered the effects of racism in America: when his family tried to move into a mostly white neighborhood, bricks were thrown through the windows and when he went to a largely white high school, white students left ugly, racist notes on his desk" (Shafer, 268).

Such labeling of whiteness positions the black against the white and hypothesizes that the (black) Self is what the (white) other is not. One is the victim; the other the aggressor. One is vulnerable; the other is in charge. One is good; the other is evil. One racial group is thus defined and understood through its radical difference from another racial group. Of course, these stereotypes inevitably raise questions about their reliability. Despite evidence to the contrary, Wilson assured during an interview that "I don't write from a wellspring of bitterness. I write from a very positive viewpoint of black life and black experience" (Livingston 31).

Seth's boarding-house, "a respectable house as he considers it is a rendezvous of seekers-a Confluence of various laws streams in search of either themselves or their origin or their lost ones. In other words all of them are a bunch of perpetual losers living on some pipe dreams of faint hope. Bynum, the finder and binder, is in search of his shiny wan shining like new money with that light. He has been searching and looking here and there for an indefinite period without being aware of what he has been searching for. He confesses it to Loomis:

"I didn't know what I was searching for. The only thing I knew was something was keeping me dissatisfied something wasn't making my heart smooth and easy." (Wilson 10)

His search has brought him to Seth's house where he is putting up to conjure up his song through sacrificial ritual his ritualistic dancing around a little hole dug to bury the squeezed pigeon, and then to pour its blood on the top of this encircled alter, which has already swallowed many pigeons of Eugene who had sold some of them and after his death, his friend Reuben whom Eugene had asked to free these pigeons, has been supplying Eugene's pigeons to Bynum.

Mattie Campbell, a young lady of unsatisfied life is on an honest search for love and companionship. Though she has suffered many defeats, her faith in the possibility of love has kept her from succumbing to these defeats. She has come to the boarding house in search of Bynum "The man Folk say can fix things" with a song. Her husband deserted her about three years ago because he thought someone crushed her not to have babies and their two babies died before crossing the age of two months.

Selig is on search with a difference he is a first-class people finder. He closed the door behind him, walked out, and bought a horse to be never without one since because he had seen a look on his wife's face wishing he was dead. He found himself shrinking by and by in his wife's company. So he had to run away from her. He is in search of no one, for he has lost none. He has lost himself deliberately to find people for others for money along with selling cans.

Molly Cunningham seems to have no Apparent Quest. She has abandoned her quest. Now she trusts no one except for the lord above. Her skepticism is an outcome of some soul-sapping experience with a man she was in love with. On a certain day she saw him packing his trunk indifferently because, as he told her, the time comes when the best of friends must part. With her newly acquired pragmatism and knowledge of human psychology, she has concluded that men are unpredictable, untrustworthy, and highly unstable in their Minds and behavior. She observes:

I don't trust none of these men...They just wait until they get one woman tied and locked up with them...they then just look around to see if they can get any other one. These men make all these babies, then run off and leave you to take care of them. I make sure I don't get no babies. My mama taught me how to do that. Now she trusts only God because he was never a man and loves only her mother because she taught her how to have no babies. (Wilson 12)

The world of the boarding-house, sheltering these black inhabitants, soothed and solaced by usual delicate touches of Bertha, Seth's wife, is a microcosm of niggers' world in the early years of the present century as the playwright perceived them quivering on the edges of society as loathed loves, thwarted dreams, exploited and enslaved ones whom

the world callously passed by and stereotyped them as slaves, guitar players, watermelon eaters, and idlers. Wilson paints his protagonist with very sympathetic strokes in natural colors. He breaks away from largely restrictive stereotypes of black identity. Through Loomis, the dramatist has portrayed the quest of a black American for his roots and independence, for what appears to pain Wilson the most is the fact that the present black generation knows very little about its past. This ache finds its expressions in Loomis' quest for self-knowledge and freedom. Outwardly it appears to be only a search for his wife but a deeper probe reveals that it is the quest of the entire black race transcending ethnic implications. In Act one, Scene four Loomis' faces first of his two apocalyptic visions. He describes it to Bynum:

I come to this place...to this water that was bigger than the whole world. And I looked out. And I had seen these bones rise out the water. Rise and begin to walk on top of it, walking without sinking down, walking on top of the water. When they sink they made a big splash and thus here wave comes up. (Wilson 13)

The vision of marching bones suggests a mythic image of the indignities and torturous sufferings which the ancestors of blacks underwent in the past. The vision brings about the confrontation between Loomis' and the ghosts of his ancestors who are still haunted by the marauding memory of their painful past. The bygone days of slavery and subsequent ones of his futile search have been assimilated in his psyche and they are crystallized in the vision which along with his ritualistic dance around the kitchen serves a cathartic purpose leaving a therapeutic impact on Loomis'. Further, it suggests one of his steps on a voyage of self-discovery.

Martha has been Loomis' yardstick to measure life away to forget harsh humiliation of thralldom. That is why he never parted with his faith in his wife's life though many friends advised him against continuing his search. The playwright brings it to the surface through the conversation between Zonia, his daughter, and Reuben. Zonia speaks of his father's belief in Martha's life and his love for her, "my daddy says if you miss somebody too much it can kill you. Say he missed me till it liked to kill him, she isn't dead. My daddy says he can smell her" (Wilson 14).

Loomis sought to see her face to know that the world was still there-to make sure that the world was still in its place so he could reconnect himself together and say goodbye after having a look at her face because the world seen by him is a jungle of jails where everyone wanted to imprison him. He tells Martha "Everywhere I go people wanna bind me up Joe Turner wanna blind me up! Reverend Toliver wanna bind me up. You wanna bind me up everybody wanna bind me up. Well, Joe Turner's come and gone and Herald Loomis' ain't for no binding. I ain't gonna let nobody bind me up! (Wilson 15).

With this self-knowledge, he has risen above the petty

shackles of binders who tried to confiscate his body and soul. He has been able to preserve the flesh and marrow and spirit of his race in spite his enthralled existence for many years. His quest for freedom and independence symbolizes the spiritual strength of black people who managed to survive and stand up despite heavy odds against them. His encounter with Martha towards the end of the play presents the quintessence of the play and clarifies this point Loomis' is a search of black Americans for a rightful place in a new society and it would require more than mere ingenuity of Selig or Bynum to locate it. The scene reveals that Loomis has been looking for Martha only to see her and then part forever after handing over Zonia, a motherless daughter, to her mother. It means that Martha has never been an integral part of his search which is the impression created earlier. Precisely speaking, he wants to keep searching and never find it.

He wants to go away from this world of the Turners. He has liberated himself from all sorts of bondage beleaguering his spirit. He had tried them in the trying times of slavery and none of them came to his rescue. The god he has perceived is just an antithesis of Martha's savior. He saw him in a different guise, as he states:

And all I seen was a bunch of niggers dazed out of their woolly heads. And Jesus Christ standing there in the middle of them, grinning...Great big old white man. Your Jesus Christ. Standing there with a whip in one hand and tote board in another and them swimming in a sea of cotton, and he counting. He tallying up the cotton ... What a nice man Mr, Jesus Christ is' cause he gives him salvation after he die. (Wilson 16)

Thus, Loomis has seemingly rejected Christianity because Jesus Christ was one of those exploiting whites. His baptism with the blood of the lamb and the fire of the Holy Ghost could offer him nothing. So he would baptize himself with his blood. His final act of slashing himself across his chest and rubbing the blood all over his face heralds his independence and self-wrought salvation because he has come to realize that he is responsible for his presence and his salvation in this world which he can bring about when he would be his Christ and his Baptist. He needs no Christ for his salvation. His words, "I don't need anyone to bleed for me. I can bleed for myself" (Wilson 17) sum up his newfound creed not only for himself but for the whole race. Having found 'the song of self-sufficiency' he is now" free to soar above the environs that weighed and pushed his spirit into terrifying contractions. At last he has purged himself through symbolic ritual and has earned strength to stand on his legs. He explains, "I'm standing! I'm standing! My legs stood up! I'm standing now! It is in direct contrast with his experience at the end of the preceding vision when he had found his legs incapable of supporting him. At the end of his first apocalyptic vision, Loomis' acknowledged his lack of strength to stand up and remarked, My legs. My legs won't stand up!" (Wilson 18).

Thus, the second vision is a sequel to the first, cleansing Loomis of ruinous hangover of slavery, and the period bracketed within these two apocalyptic visions has served as the crucible of experience providing him insight and fortitude to peep into his problems, sustain his spirit and finally realizing his ultimate destination in a new era beckoning to him. "Black and white Americans have been so long and so intimately a part of another's experience that, will it or not, they cannot be understood independently. Each has needed the other to help define himself" (Huggins 11). So in this study, I examine how a black writer might understand and portray whiteness.

Thus, the play possessing haunting properties of an eerie ghost story is a brilliant delineation of black American experience flecked with hatred, exploitation, terrible catastrophes, and occasional flickering of languishing love and resurrecting laughter. August Wilson's safety net could easily come from this dramatic device: when confronted, he or his black characters might defend themselves by claiming, "I wasn't talking to you" even when they were. Of course, this strategy serves equally well the needs of Wilson's white audience, some of whom might prefer to ignore the unpleasant remarks about themselves. Unlike other black playwrights who still haven't made it, August Wilson's success on Broadway and in dramatic circles may be due in part to this non-confrontational writing style. Another component of white audiences' blissful reading of Wilson

may be the humor Wilson so amply employs in his plays. The humor, which may not come across as strongly on the page as it does on stage, also helps explain why audiences may be willing to ignore the bitterness hiding behind the mask of comedy Wilson's black characters adapt to better deal with their difficult lives.

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