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African American Dilemmas in the Age of Empowerment : A Study of Two
Generations in August Wilson's *'Fences'*

Abstract

In my article call “African American Dilemmas in the Age of Empowerment : A Study of Two Generations in August Wilson’s ‘Fences’”, I have tried to give an account of two different generations of a middle class African American family. I have tried to diagnose the problems of the health of this community in this play of August Wilson. I have tried to check up this with the help of such expert like W. E. B. DuBois. I have found in this play that the African American community struggles to consolidate their base as the present generation stands in front of the earlier generation to oppose each other. Here the face of the present generation is Cory Maxon and the face of earlier generation is Troy Maxon who is the protagonist of the play and the father of Cory. The health of the society of any community is based upon the heritage and its lineage from one generation to another one onwards. I have tried to analyze this particular lineage and its conditions in the middle of the achievements which this African American community has been contributing for the greater interest of the national power and prestige of the United States of America.

Besides I have tried to examine the fundamental rights of the African Americans as the citizens of America and of the United States of America as a state of the African Americans. I have tried to scrutinize the effort of the playwright August Wilson in his mission which he tries to execute in this play 'Fences'.

Keywords: Self-Consciousness, Schizophrenia, Discrimination, Dualism, Culture, Generations

The decade of 1950s was very important period in the social history of the United States of America in this decade. American society fast approached a period of unprecedented prosperity. The African Americans were too also aspiring for wealth, status and recognition after undergoing the experience of some major events like the Great Depression, the Second World War and various struggles in the ongoing Civil Rights Struggle in the southern states. August Wilson in his Pulitzer Prize winning play 'Fences' which was published in the year 1983 and premiered on Broadway in 1987 has sketched the condition of an emergent African American middle class family which is yet to recover psychologically from such past injuries like slavery and racial discrimination in the American society.

The play of August Wilson 'Fences' was first of all developed in the year 1983 at National Playwrights Conference which was organized by Eugene O'Neill Theater Center. It received its first premier in the year 1985 at the Yale Repertory Theater. This play got its first Broadway production at 46th Street Theater on 26th March, 1987. It was directed by Lloyd Richards and closed on 26th March 1988 after 525 performances and eleven reviews. This production received Tony Awards in the consecutive categories of the Best Play, Best Performance by a Leading Actor in a

Play, Best Performance by a Featured Actress in a Play and the director himself won the Best Direction of the Play. Besides it received the Drama Desk Award for Outstanding New Play, Outstanding Actor in a Play and Outstanding Featured Actress in a Play. The play 'Fences' got its first Broadway Revival at Cort Theater on 26th April 2010 with thirteen week show and it was directed by Kenny Leon. This revival received the nomination for the ten Tony Awards and it won the Best Revival of a Play and Best Actor and Best Actress in a Play. In the year 2013, this play was once again revived in the United Kingdom by Theatre Royal Bath. These generations of productions have successfully executed in demonstrating a couple of endangered African American generations. The directors and the artists of these productions have drawn the attentions of the critics and the academicians. So their reverences for this cultural consciousness may be observed in their frequent selections for various awards.

The analytical perspective which will help me to dissect the psychological make-up of the African Americans in that decade is that of one of the leading African American intellectuals of the century namely W. E. B. DuBois. He has used the metaphor of the 'veil' in his book "The Souls of Black Folk" to describe the condition of the African American people as he explores it as both blessing and curse for them. It is a blessing because it creates for them a second sight of the American world. On the other hand, it teaches African Americans to look at himself through the eyes of other world which itself looks at him with utter ignorance. DuBois says "After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and the Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world, - a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world". The thoughts of black person in America are restricted to the ideas about

himself which he derives from the views and attitudes of the white population of America. Troy Maxon suffers from a sort of inferiority complex which he seems to have received from this restricted self-consciousness. That is what has completely subdued his true self-consciousness which would have allowed him to let his beloved son Cory join the football team and dream about a glorious career of his son as a football player. The figure of Troy Maxon is certainly a wonderful exhibition of the playwright August Wilson about the status of mental exile of a middle class Black person in America. His tragic conversation with his wife Rose about the reason for his objection for the decision of Cory to join the football team highlights this particular condition of self-alienation. Troy says to Rose “I don’t want him to be like me! I want him to move as far away from my life as he can get. You the only decent thing that ever happened to me. I wish him that. But I don’t wish him a thing else from my life. I decided seventeen years ago that boy wasn’t involved in no sports. Not after what they did to me in the sports.” He is not able to think about himself beyond the perception of the white people whose treatment of him has influenced his views so much that he cannot realize the gradual transforming nature of the forth-coming generations of the African American society through the faces of his two sons who are approaching fast towards financial stability.

The protagonist Troy Maxon is confused in his location of a paradoxical consciousness and he seems to be strangled by this dualism of being black and being American as he tries to look at himself through the eyes of his white boss Mr. Rand. His question to Mr. Rand why a black person cannot drive a garbage truck and only becomes the barrel lifter has successfully pointed out this utter confusion. The contradictions between his identities as a black and as an American suffocate him and make him undergo a tremendous mental crisis during his entire life. He was not

allowed to enjoy a pension as a former national baseball player and he had to become an employee of Mr. Rand. He has experienced his own stereotype as an African American by looking at himself through the eyes of the white American society. His objection to Cory's desire to join the football team and his desire for Cory to join the business in order to make money has successfully made him a black folk of DuBois who says that the characteristic of a black person of being lazy and simple minded is the result of the treatment of white people in America. DuBois says "The Negro dimly personifies in the white man all his ills and misfortunes ; if he is poor , it is because the white man seizes the fruit of his toil ; if he is ignorant , it is because the white man gives him neither time nor facilities to learn ; and indeed if any misfortune happens to him , it is because some hidden machinations of "white folk" ." Besides DuBois blames the precedence of slavery system and the procedure of enormous toil for the condition of the black labours. The life of Troy Maxon as a garbage barrel lifter at the beginning successfully depicts that condition of a black person in America. The failure of Troy Maxon to understand the future of his son as a glorious reputation of being a national football player indicates the nature of black folk. The socio-cultural schizophrenia of Troy Maxon may be diagnosed as he does not realize the change of African American society and its condition on the contrary he wins a case in the court and becomes a garbage truck driver. The law and order started to recognize the African Americans because of that supreme court verdict for the desegregation in the public school in that period. The triumph of Troy Maxon in the court to become a truck driver is a successful response towards that socio-historical moment of that period. Troy Maxon fails to recognize a gradual change in the new generation of African American society within the framework of the social history of America. This failure may draw a conclusion about a diagnosis

in which the patient would like to avoid the reality and thus exhibit his abnormal social behaviour for which he is alienated from the society, his beloved and even from his common human nature like emotional expression. His rudeness towards Cory and his obstinacy about the decision of the fate of Cory strongly advocate all these symptoms. Besides he is confused between the two cultural identities during his entire life, black culture and American culture. This confusion and its sufferings have led his utter failure to recognize the change and made him once again the victim of what he suffers in his entire life within his own cultural discourses as he fails to distinguish the circumstances of two different African American generations, one is of his own and another is of his sons. So this particular veil has created a strong fence between father and his son. Troy is yet to recognize himself as an American as he looks at his own image only as a black person through the eyes of white American society. His conflict with Mr. Rand advocates about that desire of recognition as an American in the eyes of white American.

The character of Troy Maxon here encodes the racial discrimination and social segregation of the African Americans which encompasses the hierarchic or we should rather say a prolonged registry of social dominations of the blacks by the whites in America. It is certainly an excellent craftsmanship of the playwright August Wilson who has defined this history and its effect upon the contemporary middle class African American family and specially such black folk of America like Troy Maxon. The conversations between Troy Maxon and his wife Rose Maxon particularly focus upon that influence of the past on their previous life which is deeply rooted in African American experiences of American society and its lineage. Prof. Sandra G. Shannon observes “The common bond that holds together this continuum of African American dramatists is that knowledge that history provides – for both writers and the

characters – what August Wilson’s characters who suffer from historical amnesia call a ‘starting place’.” Troy Maxon is subjected to lead a restricted life which he has admitted in course of his life. The playwright August Wilson exhibits a wonderful art in sketching this character of Troy Maxon into the canvass of that African American history which makes this community experience a tough and the very limited edition of life and its journey. The conversation between Troy and his wife Rose deliberately highlights this particular issue of social and racial segregation in the society America. Troy talks about an incident in restaurant “A Negro go in there can’t get no service. I seen a white fellow come in there and order a bowl of stew. Pope picked all the meat out of the pot for him. Man ain’t had nothing but a bowl of meat! Negro come behind him ain’t got nothing but the potatoes and carrots.”.

His utmost anxiety about the change in American society in which African Americans start to register themselves as players in the various fields of sports like baseball of his own advocates that particular pain for the death of his dream of becoming a reputed national baseball player from his life. The African Americans really started to excel in sports during that period as for example the basketball player Bill Russell who led his team to NCAA championship in 1955 and 1956. He won a gold medal in the 1956 Summer Olympics. He remained a champion in the domestic level after joining NBA and became the first African- American coach for his team from 1966 to 1967. The anxiety of Troy Maxon seems to be the result of his complete rejection of the truth in current social history and bitterness which the circumstances might have injected into his veins. His reaction against a new and young black baseball player called Jackie Robinson reflects that tragedy of his life as he compares himself with Jackie. This incident may be recognized as another evidence of cultural schizophrenia which makes him reject the ongoing change of the

status of African American society within the entire American society. That is what has also been pointed out in the play in which the Jazz music of Lyons irritates him as he declares it as a Chinese music not any African- American one. Troy says “I don’t like that Chinese music. All that noise.” This may be measured as a complete alienation from his own cultural heritage in front of his thirst for money and its sense of insecurity due to the historical incidents like Great Depression and the effect of its flame in next decades. A gradual degeneration is born in the womb of his harsh experience in life which seems to have taught him nothing but the perception of the white man for a black person in America. It is a successful portrait of a middle class African American during the period of Civil Rights Struggle by the playwright August Wilson. His psychological interaction with death seems to witness his utter and utmost frustration in his own life besides his deliberate expression about the status of the black persons in America may have exposed his mental hollowness or we may say a sort of corpse of conscience or his poor black soul. Troy Maxon says to his wife “Woman...I do the best I can do. I come here every Friday. I carry a sack of potatoes and a bucket of lard. You all line up at the door with your hands out. I give you the lint from my pockets. I give you my sweat and my blood. I ain’t got no tears. I done spent them.” Then he continues “That’s all I got Rose. That’s all I got to give. I can’t give nothing else.” A sort of utter despair may be realized here due to the treatment which he has got from the society in the character of Troy Maxon.

The playwright August Wilson here maintains an exquisite balance between the historical events according to his unique artistry of dramatic technique. It exhibits a wonderful series of African American history through its consecutive and epoch-making events. The mould that technique has been prepared in such a way by which

these events are successfully reflected in the plot even along with its inexorable results of those incidents such as the Great Depression like economical boom or prosperity and its effect on the African American society, followed by the response of this community to that advantage. The Great Depression strongly influenced the both society and the economy of America and its worst effect was upon the African-Americans who lost four times more than the other communities in American society. This worst blow from the economy was supported by the occurrence of the Second World War. So when the age of boom arrived, it was inevitable that the African Americans would be seriously running after the money and wealth even more than the other communities. So Troy Maxon has been successfully sketched as the embodiment of contemporary, schizophrenia driven middle class African Americans during the period of 1950s. Troy Maxon is certainly not like that of Walter Lee Younger who gambles in life to make money but he wants his two sons to be like that of the protagonist of Lorraine Hansberry for her 'A Rising in the Sun'. His obstinate desire for Cory to make money by leaving his craze of becoming a football player and his hesitation to give money to Lyons strongly advocate that condition which Troy receives from the social history of his community. There are some noticeable traits of conduct of Troy Maxon such as his conflict with Cory for television and his desire for the money of Gabriel, his war veteran brother. W. E. B. DuBois says that the reason of the misfortune of African Americans is the hidden machination of the white folks in America. Troy Maxon may be recognized as an instrument of that machination as he is a distortion of African American subjectivity. This machination fragmented the black race and caused a rift to come about the different generations of the African Americans.

The playwright August Wilson seems to have successfully redefined the idea of machination projected by DuBois in this section of his play. The problem of the new generation of African Americans especially from 1950s onwards was that they had to start a new to form a society because their predecessors led almost nothing but a life of oppression and deprivation. It is obvious that the prosperity of any society is based upon the foundation provided by the old generation of any community on which the new generation would like to carry on according to the demands of time. But what Cory and Lyons have got is nothing but a false prophet of their community in disguise of their father Troy Maxon. Cory Maxon has become the ultimate victim of this machination because of his shift in goal as he becomes at last a soldier in United States Marines in course of the play. The dreams of becoming sportsmen of both Troy and Cory from their different generations have been victimized by this machination. It diverts these two generations from each other for which new generation suffers. On the other hand Lyons does not suffer much as he goes on with his music because Troy Maxon does not want his sons to become sportsmen. So the misfortune of that new generation of African Americans may be located exactly in this machination. Critic John M. Hannah observes “ Although escaping the peonage of sharecropping and thereby opening different opportunities for his children ,Troy can only envision his son in terms of the forces that shaped his own life .” Those particular forces seem to destroy the base of African American cultural growth within the community .

Cory Maxon represents specially those young generation of African Americans who started that particular trend of sports culture within the community concerned. He is an emblem of those young African American sports personalities who have constructed a new identity of African American culture. The African Americans

started this venture from the decade of 1950s. The tennis player Arthur Ashe for example became the first African American tennis star in men's section. He ruled the entire decade of 1960s and before him Althea Gibson was the first African American woman to achieve the fame of winning Grand Slam title in 1956. She won the Wimbledon title in the consecutive years in 1957 and 1958. Arthur Ashe remained as a defending champion of U.S. Open during the decade of 1960s. The decade of 1970s brought for him the international fame as he started to grab the Grand Slam title in the year of 1968 for the first time and then in 1970 for the second time. He joined the U.S. Army and continued to play in the Davis Cup tournament. So the character of successfully reflects in this sportsman whose professional life was quite similar to Cory because of his identity as an army personnel as well as a sportsman. The success of the African Americans in this arena of tennis is still going on with its successors, the Williams sisters. On the other hand this decade was also highlighted for the African American success in Summer Olympics. Tommie Smith and John Carlos and the athletes Lee Evans, Larry James and Ronnie Freeman earned gold medal for the nation. The reversal of the fortune of Cory strongly highlights the fate of common African American youth of that period. In boxing Muhammad Ali successfully carried on the lineage of Joe Louis.

On the other hand the character of Lyons Maxon also successfully represents those African American youth who were interested in music. The African Americans strongly mesmerized not only the entire America but also the entire world through this genre of popular culture through Michael Jackson who carried on the lineage of Louis Armstrong. He reigned almost the last half of this century with his series of music albums with the beginning of such as Thriller, Purple Rain, Smooth Criminal and of course Black and White in which he deals with the racial issues and protests

against war. This play seems to have successfully revitalized the event of the birth of Hip-Hop. It occurred during the heavy financial crisis in America just after the Civil Rights Struggle and Vietnam War. The financial crisis of Lyons as musician strongly witnesses this episode of history. August Wilson deals with the two historical periods of Troy and Cory very consciously according to his art by which he carefully negotiates and makes the audience negotiate with both the situations of Troy and Cory. It is reflected in the play when Troy Maxon tells Cory's coach that Cory cannot play in future then Cory emotionally states with utter frustration "Why you wanna do that to me? That was the one chance I had." That is the moment when the history of Cory tries to exfoliate itself from the history of Troy in order to set up itself as its new glorious form. It is certainly a successful exhibition of two different ages and a tension due to the reversal of two different times. In the meantime, the play focuses upon the contemporary history of Civil Rights Struggle because the expression of Cory's utter frustration for the decision of his father seems to have strongly focused the root and object of Civil Rights Struggle.

The character of Gabriel seems to strengthen this claim as he is an embodiment of the contemporary history of his community. He is a war veteran from the Second World War. It is certainly a wonderful sketch of African American soldiers who returned to America after the war. The play exhibits the reception of such African Americans like Gabriel in contemporary American society. He encodes the history of racial discrimination into the American army after their return from the war because of the treatment he receives from the government. The play deals with two generations of African American soldiers because Cory is found at last to be a soldier of U. S. Marines. Martin Luther King Jr. was concerned about the future of those African American soldiers who returned from war. It was one of his agendas in

his Civil Rights Movement because of the treatment they were receiving from society. He introduced the concept of American Dream for the Afro-Americans. The condition of Gabriel defines the meaning of this American dream of his agenda for this movement because of the kind of life he leads in the society and his presence in Maxon family. It is focused particularly in the habitation and the life of Gabriel who expresses his condition “ Say , Rose...you know I was chasing hell-hounds and them bad mens come and get me and take me away. Troy helped me. He come down there and told them they better let me go before he beat them up. Yeah , he did!”. He receives nothing but a government check. August Wilson was well aware of these voices raised under the leadership of Martin Luther King Jr. for his concerns about the future of African American war veterans. Gabriel is such citizen who deserves more than a check. When Cory is introduced as a Corporal of U. S. Marines it is the year of American active involvement in Vietnam in 1965. The play successfully exhibits the African American interest in the army of American administration of that period. The appearance of Cory as a corporal is a general picture of those African Americans but August Wilson might have been more specific about this African American tradition because they started to be commissioned in the higher officer rank in this field as for example General Collin Powell was a captain in the army during Vietnam War. General Daniel James Jr. was the first African American commander in American Air Force during that period . The career of Cory as a non-commissioned officer may be recognized as an ordinary response towards that history by the playwright. He deals with only one section of African American history and that is only struggle of the community. He could have dealt with the success to maintain a balance between these two sections. The character of Cory as higher than corporal might have been sufficient in this last section of the play. He has carefully avoided

the political history of the African Americans in this field. Their anti-war sentiments in that period through the rise of Martin Luther King Jr. is unusually neglected but his concern about the war veteran African Americans is dealt with by the art of playwright.

Rose Maxon seems to have played the role of a bridge between the two different generations of African Americans as she tries to maintain the relationship between Troy and Cory. She tries to convince both Troy about the dream of Cory and Cory to understand his father after his death. She says “Your daddy wanted you to be everything he wasn’t...and at the same time he tried to make you into everything he was.” The character of Rose Maxon is here used as a medium to amend the fraction between two generations in African American culture because the history of their past starts to break the base of culture as Cory refuses to attend the funeral gathering of his father. His treatment to his son creates hatred of his son for him and it is a threat to the cultural base of the community. Cory says “I can’t drag Papa with me everywhere I go. I’ve got to say no to him. One time in my life I’ve got to say no.” It obviously leads astray to another wrecked structure of socio-cultural order within the community. It may be claimed that the pavilion for constructing a new base for culture has been created by Rose. That is what Troy has not been able to do because of his condition. The rejuvenation of new African American culture is indebted to such predecessor like Rose. As she redefines her husband she restricts the history of past by exonerating Troy for the purpose of better construction of new African American society through her children whom she gives appropriate guidance to launch a new version of prosperous African American culture. So it is a grand success of August Wilson who deals with the history of that

community and its role of building the structure of society and its culture with the help of his exquisite dramatic art.

The character of Rose Maxon is significant in the perspective of the entire plays of Pittsburgh cycle, created by the playwright August Wilson. This character is specially for those plays which focus on the two generations. These plays are such as 'Piano Lesson', 'Jitney', 'Ma Rainey's Black Bottom', 'Joe Turner's Come and Gone', 'Seven Guitars', 'Two Trains Running' and 'Radio Golf'. The characters of two different generations are engaged in the relationship with each other. They are seen to be alienated from each other in each of these plays. In the meantime, the character of Rose Maxon of this play 'Fences' works as a mediator of the two different generations and that is what is unique in the entire plays of Pittsburgh cycle of August Wilson. Rose Maxon proves herself to be a source of solace in this African American affairs. The playwright has successfully made this role of Rose Maxon an African American feminist issue which includes the responsibility of bringing two generations of this community close to each other in order to strengthen the structure of this African American society and its base.

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