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**Racial Identity and Modern Day Slavery in August Wilson's
Gem of the Ocean, Joe Turner's *Come and Gone*, and Ma
Rainey's *Black Bottom***

Otu, Oyeh Oko

Department of English Studies
University of Port Harcourt, Port Harcourt
Rivers State, Nigeria
E-mail: oyehotu@gmail.com

&

Udumukwu, Onyemaechi, Prof

Department of English Studies
University of Port Harcourt

Abstract

Race has dominated American cultural discourse for almost four hundred years, and yet it has not ceased to be topical. Racism in its crudest and most savage form, slavery, manifested its capacity to dehumanize both the slave and the slaveholder (including the society). Although the trans-Atlantic slave trade and slavery formerly ended in 1808 and 1865 respectively, they left an ugly and monstrous legacy that has continually threatened the peace, stability, unity, security and prosperity of America. African Americans bear the brunt of race-related discrimination. Slavery denied blacks dignity and economic empowerment by not granting them access to the free

market economy (owning properties and businesses), and opportunities for self-improvement through education and socio-cultural and political participation. This study reveals that when slavery was abolished in principle in 1863, the spirit of slavery was kept alive through various means by which the rights, privileges and opportunities that are natural entitlements and inalienable rights of citizens were still withheld from Negroes. The three plays under study namely, Wilson's *Gem of the Ocean*, Joe Turner's *Come and Gone* and Ma Rainey's *Black Bottom* dramatize discrimination and exclusion of African Americans from the mainstream of American socio-economic and political life as a historical continuum of slavery. Using New Historicism as its theoretical framework, this study concludes that racial discrimination, abuse and denial of opportunities are subtle means of reinventing, reconstituting and perpetuating slavery.

Introduction

Following the federal constitution convention of 1787, a slave (i.e. a black person) was counted as "three-fifths of a white person" (Rosenbaum 352). In 1857, Chief Justice Roger B. Tancy declared that Negroes were excluded from "the people" and "citizens" of the United States of America. According to him, blacks were "regarded as beings of an inferior order so inferior that they had no rights which white men were bound to respect" (Rosenbaum 343). Consequently, blacks were abused and dehumanized. In fact,

To be a bondsman was to experience a psychological development very different from the master's. Slavery required the creation of a particular kind of person, one *compatible with a life of involuntary servitude*. The ideal slave had to be absolutely dependent and have a deep consciousness of personal inferiority. His color was made the badge of that degradation. And as a final precaution, he was instilled with a sense of unlimited power of his master. (Grier and Cobbs 20-21)

One cannot help asking: Why are blacks still perceived as a subordinate social caste 148 years after the abolition of slavery? Why is the skin colour of blacks still seen as a badge of slavery and mark of racial inferiority? Why have racist and discriminatory attitudes persisted?

One important reason is that white America which is the dominant racial-ethnic group that instituted slavery, profited by it, and through it entrenched the white supremacist ideology – a system of hegemonic control and domination – simply dropped its title as a slaveholder but held firmly to its racist feelings and attitudes. In other words, when the slave codes that formed the legal framework for the subordination of black people in America, denying them fundamental human rights, citizenship and dignity

of the human person were jettisoned consequent upon the 13th Amendment of the American constitution which came into effect on December 18, 1865, white supremacist ideologists internalized the slave codes and made them the cornerstone of their racial-social philosophy in order to perpetuate black slavery and white power/domination. As Grier and Cobbs aptly put the idea:

when slavery ended and large-scale physical abuse was discontinued, it was supplanted by different but equally damaging abuse. The cruelty continued unabated in thoughts, feelings, intimidation and occasional lynching. Black people were consigned to a place outside the human family and the whip of the plantation was replaced by the boundaries of the ghetto. (20)

Racial ideology is so crucial to American culture and racial relations that it is central to identity construction in it. In the US, “without a racial identity, one is in danger of having no identity” (Omi and Wanant 12). Unfortunately, African American racial identity is inextricably intertwined with the history of slavery and its attendant burden of myths of racial inferiority and the subordinate caste status in the US.

Gem of the Ocean

New Historicism directs literary studies back towards history and politics, and this is what August Wilson does with his decade cycle plays, starting with *Gem of the Ocean*. Set in the first decade of the 20th century, precisely 1904, *Gem of the Ocean* is the first of August Wilson’s ten-play cycle. Though its story is first in time sequence, it is actually the ninth to be written of the ten plays that form the “Decalogue”. It captures the struggles of African Americans to escape from slavery to freedom forty-one years after the Emancipation Proclamation. 1904 is exactly forty-one years after African Americans were granted freedom following two hundred and forty-four years of brutal slavery and black resistance (1619 – 1863), and a bloody civil war (1861 -1865) that claimed 360,000 Union lives and 258,000 Confederate lives, and cost America an incalculable fortune in material resources. Robert A. Rosenbaum posits that although the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 only freed slaves in theory, it fulfilled its promise of total emancipation for all slaves with the adoption of the 13th Amendment to the U. S. Constitution in 1865 (114, and 352).

Contrary to the above official historiography of white America, Wilson dramatizes in *Gem of the Ocean* that the worst struggles of African Americans for freedom started after both the Emancipation Proclamation and the 13th Amendment. The play justifies W. E. B. Du Bois’ assertion in *Black Reconstruction in America* that “the slave went free; stood a brief moment in the sun; then moved back again toward slavery” (qtd in Alexander 20). *Gem of the Ocean* tells the story of African Americans enslaved in freedom forty-one years after they had been declared free.

Due to the terrors unleashed on them by Southern whites in general, especially organized terror groups such as the Ku Klux Klan, who were aggrieved over the defeat they suffered in the American Civil War and its consequence of losing their African American slaves, African Americans flee to the North in droves. It is important to note, as stated earlier, that the South also called Confederate States wanted to secede from the United States of America in order to avert the abolition of slavery. Thus, the federal government engaged them in battle, defeated them, thwarted their attempt at secession and independence, and went ahead to declare African Americans free. *Gem of the Ocean* captures the desperate concerted efforts of Southern whites to keep African Americans in eternal bondage and servitude: after losing the war, they make freedom a nightmare for African Americans. And as African Americans resiliently try to escape from this terror and hopelessness which has made slavery far better than the “freedom” in the South, white slavers who do not recognize their freedom stop them from fleeing to the North. This experience is revealed in the following dialogue between Citizen Barlow and Aunt Ester, the 287-year old African American matriarch:

AUNT ESTER: Where was you born, Mr. Citizen?

CITIZEN: Alabama. I only been up here four weeks. When I left Alabama they had all the roads closed to the colored people. I had to sneak out. Say they didn’t want anybody to leave. Say we had to stay there and work. I told my mama I was going and she say okay. Told me, “There a big world out there.” I kissed her. She told me she loved me and I left. I almost got caught a couple of times. I had to go out the back way and find my own roads. Took me almost two weeks. There was some other people out on the road and we helped each other (22).

This is reminiscent of the ordeals of slaves who tried to escape from their masters in pre-emancipation slavery in the South as recorded in slave narratives such as Olaudah Equiano’s *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* and Fredrick Douglas’ *Narrative of the Life of Fredrick Douglas, an American Slave, Written by Himself* and novels such as Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and Alex Haley’s epic, *Roots*. Citizen escapes to the North despite the risk, but not many are as lucky as he is. Many are trapped in the south and forced to continue plantation slavery. Wilson depicts the same evil world of cruelty which characterized slavery in this play. As is evident in the letter that Solly Two King’s sister wrote to him, in principle blacks have been proclaimed free, but in practice they are in bondage: little or nothing has changed to affect their lives positively:

Dear Solomon,

I am writing to let you know the times are terrible here the most anybody remember since bondage. The people are having a hard time with freedom. I can't hold on here anymore. The white peoples is gone crazy and won't let anybody leave. They beat one fellow on the road so bad his mama say, "Who is he?" They killed some more and say the colored can't buy any tickets on the train to get away. Say they will sink the ferry if any colored on it. I want to leave to come North but it is too bad. It is a hard time for everybody. Write and let me know what to do as I try to hold on but can't.

Your loving sister,

Eliza Jackson (15).

Those who are trapped in the South face daily intimidation, humiliation, beating, rape, lynching and other forms of white-on-black violence which make life a nightmare for blacks. Homeless and jobless, freedom brings African Americans of the period represented in *Gem of the Ocean* destitution and trauma. In essence, *Gem of the Ocean* depicts how white Americans, particularly in the South, schemed African Americans out of the Reconstruction program aimed at healing the nation and integrating its peoples. The legal status of blacks may have changed, but white America simply sees and treats them as slaves and nothing more. Accordingly, they redesign the social system to keep the spirit of slavery alive. As Michelle Alexander puts it in *The New Jim Crow*:

Constitutional amendments guaranteeing African Americans "equal protection of the laws" and right to vote proved impotent as the Emancipation Proclamation once a white backlash against Reconstruction gained steam. Black people found themselves yet again powerless and relegated to convict leasing camps that were, in many ways, worse than slavery. Sunshine gave way to darkness, and the Jim Crow system of segregation emerged – a system that put black people nearly back where they began, in a subordinate racial caste (20).

It is this situation that forces the hero of the play, Citizen Barlow, to flee to the North even at the risk of losing his life, if caught. In this play, Wilson provokes very poignant issues that suggest that the status of blacks as slaves and social caste has not really changed; if anything, their condition has become worse. In the South, African

Americans are still denied freedom of movement. Just as in the days of slavery, they are forced against their will to work for whites; those caught trying to escape to the North in search of employment in industries or in search of a better life generally are tortured and sometimes killed. This is the dramatist's way of illustrating that white America fixes the black man's identity anachronistically such that no matter what the law says, the black man's identity is inextricably tied to his status as a slave and a descendant of slaves, a badge of inferiority through which the white man oppresses him. As Citizen Barlow discovers shortly after his arrival in the North, the black man is a social caste even in the North, an outcast not protected by law and not entitled to civil rights and civil liberties. It is Barlow's realization of this grave injustice and his effort to resist it that lead to the major conflict of the play.

There is close inter-textual relation between *Gem of the Ocean* and the Bible story of the Israelites, who after over four hundred years of cruel slavery in Egypt, were set free through God's divine intervention. When Pharaoh stubbornly refused to grant the people of Israel freedom and let them return to their country, God waged a spiritual war against Pharaoh and his people by afflicting Egypt with deadly plagues that finally forced Pharaoh to release them. But shortly after they left Egypt, celebrating their long-awaited and newly found freedom Pharaoh sent his soldiers after them, to bring them back to bondage in Egypt. African Americans have always compared their condition in America with that of the Israelites in Egypt right from the early days of oral traditions such as the spirituals.

However, subversive in his thematization, Wilson dramatizes that in freedom life has become a battle field for African Americans. Solly, like Citizen's father and many other black people carry sticks wherever they go. Some others carry stones and yet others like Citizen carry knives. Even in the urban centres of the North, life for the black man is still like living in the jungle or plantation. Solly has a knife too and he still carries with him a chain link wherever he goes. In his words:

That's my good luck piece. That piece of chain used to be around my ankle. They tried to chain me down but I beat them on that one. I say, I'm gonna keep this to member by I been lucky ever since. I beat them on a lot of things. I beat them when I got away (57).

Like Du Bois who asserts that the black man is yet to find his promised land in freedom, Solly aptly remarks that freedom is meaningless and empty; it is trouble and battle for survival; it has not delivered to the black man its promise of peace, security, equality and prosperity.

SOLLY: The people think they in freedom. That's all my daddy talked about. He died and never did have it. I say I got it but what is it? I'm still trying to find out. It ain't never been nothing but trouble.

ELI: Freedom is what you make it.

SOLLY: That's what I'm saying. You got to fight to make it mean something. All it mean is you got a long row to hoe and ain't got no plow. Ain't got no seed. Ain't got no mule. What good is freedom if you can't do nothing with it. I seen many a man die for freedom but he didn't know what he was getting. If he had known he might have thought twice about it (28).

Garret Brown was born in slavery, of slave parents. To escape the horrors of racism orchestrated by whites opposed to the abolition of slavery in the South, his mother runs to the North, "to begin a long siege of poverty" (25). Ironically, he loses his life to racial injustice in the North. Aunt Ester says Garret Brown died to prove his innocence. This innocence is important to August Wilson's cultural project of constructing counter-images that challenge and displace the logocentricism of black criminality and worthlessness. But it is important to note that Caesar, the man who pushes Brown to choose death instead of living with a tainted image falsely laid on him, is a black man. This is one of the ways the dramatist challenges and subverts racial categories and totalities such as the binary oppositionality of "white is good whereas black is evil" of dominant discourses, or "black is good whereas white is evil" of minority discourses. Caesar is a product of the hostile, annihilating and capitalist American environment. Driven by an inordinate ambition for freedom, wealth, privilege and power, he exhibits unparalleled cruelty in his execution of the racist agenda of his white overlords.

Wilson's drama disavows any autonomous view of history. Accordingly, he creates contradictions and ruptures. Caesar, a black character in the play, is one of such contradictions which undermine the struggle of African Americans for freedom and equality. Caesar believes blacks are ignorant and foolish; he calls blacks "niggers" with contempt. Like the white supremacists, he feels he is superior to blacks. He tells Citizen, "My name is Caesar. I'm the boss man around here" (31). He represents the white supremacist view that the black man was created to be a slave, to serve the white man. Thus in the following lines, he blames Abraham Lincoln for abolishing slavery.

CAESAR: It's Abraham Lincoln's fault. He ain't had no idea what he was doing. He didn't know like I know. Some of these niggers was better off in slavery (34).

Obviously, Caesar, whose name is symbolic, does everything to keep blacks in perpetual slavery. His name is reminiscent of Julius Caesar and his imperial authority. Wilson could have simply made Caesar a white man, but he does not. This is to undermine the false belief that only the white man is to blame for all the problems

and deprivations of the black man. On the contrary, he implicates the black race in order to provoke self-examination and re-evaluation in the black man's quest for freedom and racial justice.

Whereas slavery confined slaves to plantations (and farms), mainly in the south, freedom made the whole of America a metaphorical plantation where the black man is exploited and abused without any legal protection. What has changed for the black people in *Gem of the Ocean* is that they are now slaves in the cities or factories instead of farm plantations in the rural South. Citizen, Green and others who run to the North soon discover that they are still victims of the stigmatized social status of the black man, and the changing patterns of deprivation. North or South, they are defined anachronistically, classified and treated as a subordinate racial caste.

Significantly, Solly who was an Underground Railroad conductor is forced by the harsh cruel circumstances suffered by black people trapped in the South to go back and rescue them, particularly his sister, through the Underground Railroad just as in the days of plantation slavery. Unfortunately he is killed by Caesar. Then Citizen who represents the future generation takes over from him as an Underground Railroad conductor. This is one of the ways through which Wilson dramatizes the perpetuation of slavery and the implications of its attendant structures on identity politics on freedom, privilege and power for the black race. What is freedom if people are not yet free to move to wherever they please in search of their dreams, or are still deprived dignity and opportunities as is the case in *Gem of the Ocean*? In the dramatist's view, white America has perpetuated slavery even after the abolition of slavery. Therefore, his drama is a counter-narrative which foregrounds the dialectics of American historiography and the particularities of African American oppositional engagement with the historical process.

Joe Turner's Come and Gone

Joe Turner's Come and Gone (1988) is the second, in historical time, of August Wilson's decade cycle. Set in 1911, it depicts with compelling craftsmanship and historical verisimilitude the spirit, tone, struggles and quests of African Americans in the second half of the twentieth century. The dramatist re-enacts what historians now generally call The Great Migration (1910 – 1930) of African Americans from the Jim Crow South, mostly rural areas where they served as farm hands and domestics, to Northern industrial cities in search of jobs and a better life. About 1.6 million blacks left the South within this period of time (In Motion; Great Migration – Wikipedia). At the beginning of the play, Seth Holly, the owner of the boardinghouse where the action of the play takes place in Pittsburgh, observes concerning the migration of blacks to the North, "these niggers keep on coming. Walking ... riding..." (6).

Wilson also pays particular attention to the socio-historical and economic forces that precipitated this Great Migration of African Americans comparable to the biblical exodus of the children of Israel. He portrays African Americans as free men and women fleeing the cruelty, hostility and annihilation of the South in search of freedom, in search of a new life, in search of empowerment and prosperity, in search of sanctuary, in search of their individual as well as collective racial identities. The paradox of “free men” in search of “freedom” is vital to Wilson’s counter-discourse.

Joe Turner’s Come and Gone presents an intense and phenomenal historical moment in the post-Emancipation disillusionment portrayed in *Gem of the Ocean*. The dramatist shows how African Americans doggedly contend with and escape from slavery in post-slavery America: forty-eight years after slavery was formally abolished. In essence, *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* dramatizes a new phase of slavery: the oppression of sharecropping, the chain gang and coerced labour, discrimination and economic exploitation in industries, and police brutality, unjust detention and mass incarceration. Wilson therefore dramatizes the corrosiveness of discourses of domination such as racism and compellingly demonstrates the manner and degree to which they are prejudicial to the humanity, freedom, and dignity of African Americans.

Although Wilson has argued in different interviews that the massive migration of blacks from the South, which he considers their ancestral home in America, was their worst and costliest mistake, one has strong reasons to reject that view as sentimental and unrealistic. With hindsight one may say that blacks may have had majority population in some of the states wherein they and their ancestors were enslaved, and perhaps may have taken political control of such predominantly black states if they had not migrated. But in the face of unrestrained, wanton racial terror, blacks of the post-Emancipation Proclamation era responded to their horrendous situation pragmatically and expediently by fleeing the terror zone (the South) since they had neither the legal instruments nor the weapons to seek and enforce legal redress or stem the tide of violence by confronting their oppressors. Consequently, they did what was in their best interests by running for safety: to avoid extermination or racial genocide.

Besides, the Great Migration had its benefits. The black population which migrated from the rural South to the industrial North experienced profound transformation. Yet another benefit of the black migration to the Northeast and Midwest was that it made the struggles of African Americans for civil rights a national issue rather than a Southern concern (Rosenbaum 70). Fundamentally, black migration as portrayed in Wilson’s decade plays in general is a protest, a denunciation of slavery, a quest for self-discovery and self-recreation. As Wilson puts it in his introduction to the play:

From the deep and the near South the sons and daughters of newly freed African slaves wander into the city. Isolated, cut off from memory, having forgotten the name of the gods and only guessing at their faces, they arrive dazed and stunned, their heart kicking in their chest with a song worth singing. They arrive carrying Bibles and guitars, their pockets lined with dust and fresh hope, marked men and women seeking to scrape from the narrow, crooked cobbles and the fiery blasts of the coke furnace a way of bludgeoning and shaping the malleable parts of themselves into a new identity as free men of definite and sincere worth (n.pag).

In the above excerpt, Wilson insightfully captures the controlling theme of the play. In *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, African American men and women "marked" as slaves reject that identity and its attendant servitude and inferiority in search of opportunities through which they can discover themselves, remake themselves, redefine and reconstruct their identities as men and women of worth.

The title of the play evokes and engages actual, authentic and verifiable history. Joe Turner was a real person, a wicked, greedy white plantation owner and slave holder who in a desperate effort to maintain the gains of slavery coerced African Americans by all means possible to work in his farm under most inhuman conditions long after the Emancipation Proclamation. He represents all southern whites desperate to perpetuate slavery. Wilson uses this historical character to dramatize the historical continuum of slavery. In an interview with Kim Powers, Wilson states:

Joe Turner was a real person. He was the Brother of Peter Turner who was the Governor of Tennessee. Joe Turner would press blacks into peonage. He would send out decoys who would lure blacks into crap games and then he would swoop down and grab them. He had a chain with forty links to it, and he would take blacks off to his plantation and work them. The song "Joe Turner" was a song the women sang down around Memphis "Joe Turner's got my man and gone"(Powers 8-9).

Behind this type of brazenness is the white man's ideological conception that the black man is nothing other than his property, commodity or servant. The concept of the black man as the white man's property and source of easy wealth has its roots in the trans-Atlantic slave trade. "The transatlantic slave trade has created an enduring image of black men and women as transported commodities, and is usually considered the most defining element in the construction of the African Diaspora ..."(In Motion). During (plantation) slavery, black people were first of all turned into human cargo; in the plantations and farms, blacks as properties became the white

man's labour machines; after the abolition of slavery the white man, in order to retain the power and privileges slavery conferred on him, continues to exploit the black man by retaining hegemonic control over the black man's body, labour and economic life. Wilson subverts this constituted reality in all the ten plays under study.

The protagonist of *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, Herald Loomis, is one of the unfortunate victims of Joe Turner. Before his kidnap and enslavement by Joe Turner, he was a sharecropper. This part of his life is important to Wilson's unfolding of the transmutation of slavery because sharecropping was one of the subtle ways white Americans enslaved and exploited blacks after they had been declared free men and women. Loomis was also a devout Christian, a deacon in the Abundant Life Church. Ironically, instead of having the abundant life promised by the Proclamation Emancipation, the American dream and Christianity, he was captured and conscripted into Joe Turner's chain gang while evangelizing black gamblers. Afterwards he was enslaved for seven years within which his world was turned upside down, his life fragmented, and his marriage ruined. By the time he is released seven years later, Loomis is disoriented and disillusioned.

Upon his release, Loomis decides to find his wife, Martha Pentecost, and his eight-year old daughter, Zonia. Unfortunately, his wife has left his daughter with her mother and travelled North. For over two years, Loomis and his little daughter traverse America in search of his wife. The search for his wife turns him into a disoriented nomad by the time he gets to Seth Holly's boardinghouse in Pittsburgh. At the boardinghouse, he isolates himself from the other occupants of the house and behaves so strangely that Holly says he is mad. But Bynum, the spirit man and healer, does not think so. He correctly discerns that Loomis is "one of Joe Turner's niggers"(71) who suffer trauma and identity crisis because they have been physically enslaved, spiritually dislocated and psychologically tortured and, or mutilated to accept that they are inferior and worthless. Bynum tells Loomis that he is a man who has forgotten his song and consequently who he is. "Song" is a term Wilson uses for an individual's purpose in life (perhaps destiny) and identity. Loomis later admits he is one of Joe Turner's niggers. He narrates how Turner hunts and captures African Americans into his chain gang, forty at a time, tells them that they are worthless and then forces them to work without pay in his plantation, under inhuman conditions and immense human suffering such as characterize the horrors of slavery. As Wilson himself has observed in an interview with Powers, "... the seven years Loomis is with Joe Turner, seven years in which his world is turned asunder and his life is turned upside down, can in fact represent the four hundred years of slavery, of being taken out of Africa and brought to America" (Powers 9). There is no doubt therefore that the playwright dramatizes the continuity of slavery. As one of the characters, Seth Holly, aptly remarks, "Niggers coming up here from the

backwoods... coming up here from the country carrying Bibles and guitars looking for freedom. They got a rude awakening” (6). Wilson shows that the Emancipation Proclamation did not bring African Americans freedom; blacks are migrating to the North in search of freedom. Apart from Joe Turner who forcefully enslaves blacks in his farm prison, the playwright shows another level of the historical continuity of slavery through another white character, Rutherford Selig who proudly narrates his family’s involvement in slavery. Three generations of the Selig family have depended on slavery for prosperity. Rutherford Selig’s great-grandfather was involved in the trans-Atlantic slave trade. According to him:

My great-granddaddy used to bring Nigras across the ocean on ships. ... it set him well in pay and he settled in this new land.... Me and my daddy have found plenty Nigras. My daddy, rest his soul, used to find runaway slaves for the plantation bosses. He was the best there was at it. Jonas B. Selig. After Abraham Lincoln give you all Nigras your freedom papers and with you all looking for all over for each other ... we started finding Nigras for Nigras. Of course, it don’t pay as much. But the People Finding business ain’t so bad. (41)

In Bertha’s view Rutherford Selig carries people away too. People hitch a ride on his wagon, he takes them where he is going, then he charges people looking for them money to find them. She therefore concludes, “This old People Finding business is for the birds. He ain’t never found nobody he ain’t took away” (4). Whether Selig is taking Negroes to new locations in the course of their migration in search of freedom or helping their folks find them, he has made business out of the black migration.

Wilson relates the Negro migration to slavery in yet another fundamental way. One of the many costs of slavery for African Americans was the agony of separation. When Loomis expresses disappointment about Martha not being there for him when Joe Turner released him and for leaving their daughter motherless, saying he just wanted to see her face to enable him pick his broken pieces, reorganize himself and reconnect to the world, Martha replies, “I didn’t leave her motherless, Herald. Reverend Tolliver wanted to move the church up North cause of all the trouble the colored folks was having down there” (89). Martha recounts how losing her husband to Joe Turner turned her world upside down. This is reminiscent of the way black families were torn apart when a member or members of their family were sold to different plantations. The white-on-black terror is still separating blacks as slave trade/slavery separated their ancestors. However, at the end of the play, Loomis finds his “song”; he denounces the slave identity of inferiority and worthlessness, discovers himself, his true identity as an American of African descent who is not by any means inferior to any other person because of the color of his skin. Having undergone an African ritual, Loomis experiences an epiphany through which he recovers his will to self-

acceptance, racial affirmation, power and resistance. This self-discovery or re-conception of racial and individual identity challenges anachronistic fixations and white America's mechanisms of control (be they ideological, legal, economic, political or cultural); it is decisively indicative of emerging currents and structures of identity formation and dialectics of race relations in America.

Ma Rainey's Black Bottom

August Wilson's drama evinces racial essentialisms of white hegemonic discourses which he challenges and undermines. For instance, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* which is set in the 1920s raises a lot of historical issues characteristic of the deft manner in which Wilson's drama intersects with actual history as text and inter-text, and provides rich insight to the relics of slavery in contemporary African American history and lived experience. The history of Levee's family is loaded with significant implications about the question of slavery versus freedom. It raises fundamental questions such as: are African Americans actually free from the lethal clutches of slavery? Are they now citizens with rights and privileges? Has the badge of slavery been removed, has it ceased to be the dominant defining element in their racial/collective and individual identities? Wilson does not answer any of these questions in the affirmative. Levee's experiences, character and attitude are shaped by his past as a descendant of slaves. And this is representative of African Americans in general.

Levee narrates to other members of Ma Rainey's band, who accuse him of being afraid of and subservient to the white man, that he was eight years old when about eight or nine white men (crackers) came to his house and gang-raped his mother while his father was away. According to him, he and his parents lived in Jefferson County and his father, Memphis Lee Green, had close to fifty acres of good farmland. He had saved some money while toiling for many years as a sharecropper and then borrowed some money to be able to purchase that land so that he and his family could be independent and free. To Levee's father, that land represented freedom and independence in concrete terms. But that was exactly what the white man did not want him to have, considering him a mere slave and outcast, and his action an affront on white privilege and supremacy. The playwright represents this as a subtle, systematic negation of the identity of African Americans as free citizens of the United States, their right as complete human persons with dignity and equal rights, equal access to power and opportunities.

Consequently, when Levee's father went to Natchez to buy some seeds and fertilizer for a new planting season, some white terrorists determined to dispossess him of his land through intimidation and violence came to his house and gang-raped his wife. A little boy of eight, Levee saw that his mother's efforts to fight back and stop the white

terror gang from defiling her were futile and hopeless, so he took his father's knife and attacked one of them, tried to cut his throat. But the white man grabbed the knife and struck him on the chest so that he fell and bled profusely. To prove the veracity of the story, Levee pauses to pull up his shirt and show his audience a long, ugly scar on his chest. He says it was the fear that he might die that scared the gang and made them leave him and his mother.

After the gang fled, his mother wrapped a sheet around his chest and carried him two miles to a place from where he was driven to Doc Albans who refused to attend to him despite his critical condition, because he was attending to a cow in labour. This underscores the value placed on the black man's life and his status in a society which pronounces him free in principle but denies his humanity and freedom in practice. Levee's life is saved by a sympathetic and kindhearted midwife. Driven by the ideology of race (black inferiority and white superiority), slavery denied the humanity of Africans and African Americans and therefore justified treating them as chattel, property and animals.

To underscore the point that racial politics is politics of power and domination, the playwright shows that the gang behind this dastardly act is made up of members of the community armed with the knowledge that blacks have, in practice, neither rights nor legal protection, that whites are immune to punishment for crimes committed against blacks (including murder), did not even bother to wear masks. From Levee's account, his mother recognized the culprits, but significantly they were not arrested and charged with rape and attempted murder. Thus, Levee's father got their names before announcing that he and his family were leaving the county. Memphis Lee Green employed an ancient survival strategy devised by Negroes of old: fawning, dissembling and the use of wit by small and weak animals to out-smart, overcome and destroy big, strong and oppressive animals as evident in Negro folktales used for socialization and acculturation. He went and smiled in the face of one of the white men who raped his wife, told him he wanted to leave the county and then sold his land to him. This is exactly what the Southern whites wanted in the first place. By designation, a slave is somebody's property, and as such is not supposed to acquire or own property as Green does. Owning property is a mark of true freedom and independence; and since whites tie black identity to slavery, they do everything to deny them access to property and rob them of any they may have acquired. Hence, Levee's father left Jefferson County with his family. Having settled his family with his relations in another town, he sneaked back to Jefferson County and hid in the woods from which he attacked and killed four members of the gang that raped his wife, nearly killed his son, and forced him to sell his land. Whites, most likely panic-stricken, tracked him down in the woods, hanged him and set him on fire.

Levee's family history is important to Wilson's interrogation of the changing phases of slavery. It consistently challenges the paradigmatic philosophy of slavery which holds that African Americans, as slaves and descendants of slaves, are inferior (human) beings and have no rights whatsoever that should be respected by America as a nation or any individual white person. In this sense, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, being a minority narrative, a counter-narrative, exposes in what ways race as a determinant of identity, power and privilege in contemporary American experience is simply a master discourse through which African Americans are defined (as inferior, stupid, lazy, pathologically given to crime, etc), classified as worthless social pariah and therefore discriminated and dispossessed.

Conclusion

The research has argued, therefore, that racial identity is an important factor in the determination of power, class, privilege, opportunity and respectability in America. In *Gem of the Ocean*, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* and *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, August Wilson dramatizes African American experiences which suggest that the status of African Americans as slaves or servants and social caste has not really changed significantly. This is mainly because white America fixes black identity anachronistically. The efforts of white southerners to perpetuate slavery necessitated The Great Migration as blacks in their droves fleeing from white-on-black terror in the south migrated to the north in search of freedom, dignity and self-actualization in Post Emancipation Proclamation America. The playwright demonstrates that white America fixes the black man's identity anachronistically such that no matter what the law says about emancipation and equality, the black man's identity is inextricably tied to his status as a slave and a descendant of slaves, a badge of inferiority through which the white man oppresses him. This negative identity is aimed at ensuring that the black man remains an outcast not protected by law and not entitled to civil rights and civil liberties.

Accordingly, the study shows that in August Wilson's drama, whereas slavery confined slaves to plantations (and domestic servitude), mainly in the south, freedom made the whole of America a metaphorical plantation where the black man is exploited and abused without much legal protection. In other words, Wilson's drama reveals that despite the abolition of slavery, African Americans are still victims of the stigmatized social status of the slave; that what has really changed are patterns of racial discrimination and deprivation. North or South, their racial and individual identities are yet defined anachronistically, and they are classified and treated as a subordinate racial caste. This is one of the ways through which Wilson dramatizes the perpetuation of slavery and the implications of its attendant structures on identity politics on freedom, privilege and power for the black race. In the dramatist's view, white America has perpetuated slavery even after the abolition of slavery.

Therefore, his drama is a counter-narrative which foregrounds the dialectics of American historiography and the particularities of African American oppositional engagement with the historical process. He portrays African Americans as free men and women fleeing the cruelty, hostility and annihilation of the South in search of freedom, in search of a new life, in search of empowerment and prosperity, in search of sanctuary, in search of their individual as well as collective racial identities. The contradiction of “free men” in search of “freedom” is vital to Wilson’s counter-discourse.

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