

The Manifestations of Nationalism in August Wilson's *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*

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Abstract: August Wilson is without question one of the major source of vitality of Black African American culture in literature. As a member of the Black aesthetic movement of the 1960s and a founder of Black Horizons Theater, his works contribute mainly to Black nationalism through his depiction of the Black characters. He highlights the superior/inferior relation between the blacks and the whites in American society. With a focus on resistance and power relation, this study attempts to investigate the theme of nationalism in the Black characters. The study will utilize the Marxist and Foucauldian viewpoints on the relation between whites and blacks to display examples of August Wilson's and his characters' senses of nationalism. He reveals this nationalistic tendency through his analytical concentration on the blues music as a representative of Black nationalism and its resistance to white domination in the power relation. By choosing the name of his first character, Ma Rainey, delaying her entrance into the play, questioning the Christian God, and drawing attentions to African beliefs and rituals, the author shows that blacks can also project power in their dealings with white people. August Wilson undertakes a burden to breathe life into African American national elements through describing the characters and the sense of power that they exude.

Keywords: Black nationalism, Foucauldian viewpoints, Power Relation, Resistance,

INTRODUCTION

Born as Frederick August Kittel on April 27, 1945, August Wilson won two Pulitzer Prizes and numerous other prestigious awards that imply his influence on African American literature and American theater as a whole. His plays attempt to address the "exclusion of African Americans from history by displaying moments that they were able to choose their own fates" (Shannon, 1995, p. 16). Undergoing major revisions, Wilson's *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* was submitted in 1981 and went on to play at Yale Repertory Theatre in 1984. It received the Drama Critics Circle Award, and lifted Wilson "into the category of major playwright seemingly overnight." (Shafer, 1998, p. 11)

If one contemplates on society, different theories and ideas come into his mind. Marx and Engels (1964) believe that "[t]he history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggle" (p. 57). They divide the society into the *bourgeoisie*, who possess and control, and the proletariat, who work for wages. They argue that the relation between people is a relation of exploitation. This exploitation causes social conflicts in societies. The sociologist Max Weber (1964) studied inequalities in modern life. Weber agrees with Marx that the economic difference causes conflicts in societies, but he adds other elements that are also considered sources of inequality. He points out a relation between religion and capitalism. Weber concludes that, "Capitalism is not just economic but a distinctive pattern of a whole society" (pp. 78-89).

These theories are valuable but they cannot be useful in explaining power relation and nationalism in the society portrayed by Wilson. Therefore, the study of his plays with the focus on power, resistance, and nationalistic idealisms of Black characters is essential. Constantino (1979) defines nationalism as “a collective strategy of escape from the clutches of imperialism” (p. 488). This definition goes with those nations that have experienced long-term colonization; hence, nationalism seems meaningful when colonized people want to challenge the power of the colonizer. Philosopher Cornel West (1999) explains Black nationalism as stressing “unity, solidarity, togetherness in a quest for a Black nation—a place of Black safety and self-determination” (p. 524). In addition, Moses (1978) believes that Black nationalism in both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were based first on a “subject” people under political, social and cultural domination through outside military occupation, and their desire to break away from foreign rule. In other cases, it represented the desire to unite traditionally disunited people; it attempts to unify politically all of these peoples whether they are residents of African territories or descendants of those Africans who were disposed by the slave trade (Moses, 1978).

With a focus on resistance and power relation, this study attempts to investigate themes of nationalism in the Black characters. *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* is “about the role of Black music in a white-dominated industry, the problem of artistic control, and the conflict between communal production and commercial” and “concerns not only how the products of the Black community have been altered by their conversion into white commerce, but also how the community itself has been damaged in the process” (Nadel, 2010, p.1). The study will utilize the Marxist and Foucauldian viewpoints on the relation between whites and blacks to display examples of August Wilson’s nationalistic idealisms vis-à-vis whites domination.

RESISTANCE AND POWER RELATIONS: AFRICANS’ NATIONALISM IN AMERICA

In his masterpiece *Capital* (1977a), Karl Marx expressed:

The discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement, and entombment in mines of the indigenous population of the continent, the beginnings of the conquest and plunder of India and the conversion of Africa into a preserve for the commercial hunting of Black skins are all things that characterize the dawn of the era of capitalist production. (p. 915)

Marx associated the role and origin of blacks to the rise of capitalism in power relation that produced racism against Africans. Beyond Capitalism, for the most part, Colonization was an unconstructive, exploitative, and oppressive experience. European and American immigrants forced Africans to provide cheap labor, which resulted in severe consequences for African communities. Black Africans were humiliated, their nationalities were degraded and their lands confiscated. Twelve years before the American Civil War in *Wage Labor and Capital*, Marx affirms:

What is a Negro slave? A man of the black race. The one explanation is as good as the other. A Negro is a Negro. He only becomes a slave in certain

relations. A cotton spinning jenny is a machine for spinning cotton. It only becomes capital in certain relations. Torn away from these conditions, it is as little capital as gold by itself is money, or as sugar is the price of sugar. (1997b, p. 28)

Free of any prejudice, in this text Marx mocks the equation of “Black” and “slave” in power relations. He, incidentally, depicts how power relation of a capitalist discourse thrust blacks into slavery, “he only becomes a slave in certain relations”, which constructs the dominant ideology that equates being African with being a slave and therefore an inferior citizen.

Although Marx’s idea about whites’ power over blacks seems reasonable, Michel Foucault’s contribution is more beneficial. Foucault (1978) did not see power as a form of repression or oppression that simply forces individuals to obey because “if power was never anything but repressive, if it never did anything but say no, do you really believe that we should manage to obey it?” (p. 36) Understanding power as different from repression, a strategy and not a possession means to think of it as something that has to be exerted and not something that can simply be acquired. Here, power is not localized exclusively in certain group or ethnic, but it is rather a set of relations dispersed throughout society. Its manifestation can be observed in every relation; every single unit involved in power relation. Power is present in all relations among individuals, organizations, and nations; therefore, it operates in circles through a net-like organization and different nations do not have power implicitly, they actively engage in power relations. In any case, one should bear in mind Foucault’s words, “I am not referring to Power with a capital P, dominating and imposing its rationality upon the totality of the social body. In fact, there are power relations. They are multiple; they have different forms, they can be in play in family relations, or within an institution, or an administration” (Foucault, 1988, p. 38). Resistance is an important equation in relation to power, Foucault (1978) argues:

Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power. [There is] a multiplicity of points of resistance: these play the role of adversary, target, support, or handle in power relations. These points of resistance are present everywhere in the power network. Hence there is no single locus of great Refusal, no soul of revolt, source of all rebellions, or pure law of the revolutionary. Instead there is a plurality of resistances, each of them a special case. (p. 95)

For him resistance is an intricate and heterogeneous phenomenon that confronts modern integration and interpretation, which is based on abstract and rigid principles of subversion. Therefore, power is “coextensive with resistance; productive, producing positive effects; ubiquitous, being found in every kind of relationship, as a condition of the possibility of any kind of relationship” (Kelly, 2009, p. 38). As a result, the circulatory chain of power results in a great challenge. Power and resistance are considered like cause and effect relation, without one, the other would be impossible. Sometimes, people carry on power as a mean to resist another form of power, or resistance.

Returning to the blacks and the whites' relations, one of the manifestations of resistance in power relation is Black nationalism. E. U. Essien-Udom (1964) states:

The concept of nationalism ... may be thought of as the belief of a group that it possesses, or ought to possess, a country; that it shares, or ought to share, a common heritage of language, culture and religion; and that its heritage, way of life, and ethnic identity are distinct from those of other groups. Nationalists believe that they ought to rule themselves and shape their own destinies, and that they should therefore be in control of their social, economic, and political institutions. (p. 20)

According to Malpas (2012), the term nationalism describes two phenomena: (1) the attitude that the members of a nation have when they care about their national identity, and (2) the actions that the members of a nation take when seeking to achieve (or sustain) self-determination. In the first case, the focus is on nation as a concept that is defined in terms of common origin, ethnicity, or cultural ties, and while an individual's membership in a nation is often regarded as involuntary, it is sometimes regarded as voluntary. The second phenomenon concentrates on whether self-determination must be understood as involving having full statehood with complete authority over domestic and international affairs, or whether something less is required. In any case, Black nationalism is mostly used to illustrate a bulk of cultural, social, and political thoughts and behaviors ranging from ethnocentrism to pan-Africanism and involving variable and complex forms but their common points are resistance.

NATIONAL RESISTANCE IN *MA RAINEY'S BLACK BOTTOM*

In the article *August Wilson's Women* (1994), Harry Elam calls attention to women's pains during slavery and suggests, "since the horrors and inequities endured by slave women on plantation, the American patriarchal system has denied or misrepresented Black women's sexuality. Historically the mainstream American culture limited Black female sexuality to two stereotypical images- the wanton Black whore and asexual back mummy" (p. 169). He continues that this discussion is not an inclusive feature of slavery; it affects the minds of all dark-skinned people in our own age. It goes further as Wilson argues:

Toledo: Now, what I was saying is what Slow Drag was doing is African. That's what you call an African conceptualization. That's when you call on the gods or call on the ancestors to achieve whatever your desires are [. . .] [Naming all those things you and Cutler done together is like [. . .] a bond of kinship. That's African. An ancestral retention. Only you forgot the name of the gods.

Slow Drag: Don't come talking that African nonsense to me.

Toledo: There's so much that goes on around you and you can't even see it.

(Wilson, 1985, p. 23)

Being unable to see reality, black musicians accept the dominant ideology and know that they are never considered as real musician. Therefore, they play their instruments, receive their money, hasten to get the music rehearsed, and exit band room without paying attention to the value and power of their arts. While rehearsal is done in a band room downstairs, an old warehouse, the control booth is upstairs, aggressive studio. As a result, “their presence and location is a symbol of white society’s control over black music” (Rollyson, 2005, p. 1034). Therefore, blacks will not be considered “better than stepping in a mule shit” (Wilson, 1985, p. 93) because of their tendency towards being exploited. It summons up Marx idea that power relation of a capitalist discourse push blacks into slavery, “he only becomes a slave in certain relations”, which construct the dominant ideology that equates being African with being a slave and therefore an inferior citizen (1997, p. 28).

Elam (2003) argues that such a superior/ inferior relation between blacks and whites has affected blacks’ mentality. Wilson depicts this mentality in Levee who suffers his bitter experiences in childhood. Witnessing his father’s murder and his mother’s mob raped, Levee is the example of “the disillusionment and ultimate frustration that many blacks experience under white oppression” (Elam, 2003, p. 172). Levee’s attempt is “to wrestle with the process of life the same as all of us. His question is ‘How can I live this life in a society that refuses to allow me to contribute to its welfare?’ How can I live this life and remain a whole person?” the most important questions about the identity of blacks (p.53). These questions are solvable in the view of Fredric Jameson. In his contemplation on culture and ethnicity, Jameson sheds the lights on a postmodern Marxist view:

What all third-world cultural productions have in common, and what distinguishes them radically from analogous cultural forms in the first world. All third-world texts are necessarily... allegorical, and in a very specific way: they are to be read as what I will call national allegories, even when, or I should say particularly when, their forms develop out of predominantly western machineries of representation, such as novel (1986, p. 545).

Jameson has never asserted that a Black can produce such a discourse, but it can be inferred that any African American can understand the process of ethnic domination and therefore can challenge this process. In *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*, August Wilson challenges this process through intensifying nationalism. One of the most distinctive involvements of African nationalism in power relation is blues music. Rooted in call and response, religious songs, field hollers, ballads, and work songs, the blue is a melancholy song that argues mainly the singer’s existence or the pains and conflicts that he bore. In *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* (1985), August Wilson makes use of the blues as a form of African American national music and goes over blacks’ nationalism by extemporizing verbal calls and responses between characters. Referring to the importance of blues and its special meaning for Black characters in power relation, Wilson writes, in introduction of the play, “It is this music that breathes and touches. That connects. That is in itself a way of being separate and distinct from any other” (Wilson, 1985, p. xvi). He argues the origin of blues as:

Whether this music came from Alabama or Mississippi or other parts of the South doesn’t matter anymore. The men and women who make this music have learned it from the narrow crooked streets of East St. Louis, or the streets of the city’s Southside, and the Alabama or Mississippi roots have been strangled. (1985, p. xvi)

Accordingly, the blues is an entity born in the racist culture that dominates America. It “relates directly to the Negro, and his personal involvement in America...[Blues] is the one music the Negro made that could not be transferred into a more general significance than the one the Negro gave it initially.” (Jones, 1999, p. 94)

As Wilson metaphorically signifies, “The wind coming off the lake does not carry the promise of spring” (1985, p. xv). The play recalls a time when the identification of blacks’ nation and music came about through the Harlem Renaissance period. After the First World War, many blacks moved north in order to escape discrimination. Celebrating their ethnic culture, they gathered in Manhattan, which was later called Harlem, and sought more equality in northern cities. The blues for them was a “sorrow songs” in a situation “that sometime, somewhere, men will judge men by their soul and not by their skin” (Du Bois, 2007, p. 175). Harry Elam (2006) believes that the blues for Wilson “continues to offer a methodology for negotiating the difficult spaces of African American existence and achieving African American survival” in power relation. (p. 321)

White Americans did not care about the blues and its black singers and they viewed black culture and music merely on commercial terms. In his investigations for something to benefit from, Sturdyvant heard about Harlem in New York and requests a jazzed up, fast-paced, rhythmic form of music. Calling Ma’s songs “garbage”, he wanted to sell more. In such a capitalist power relation, recording studio owners considered blues singers as commodities not artists and utilized them in different ways by taking their voice down on recording machines. Ma Rainey was fully aware of the utilization that takes place in recording studios when she said to Culter:

They don't care nothing about me. All they want is my voice. Well, I done learned that, and they gonna treat me like I want to be treated no matter how much it hurt them. They back there now calling me all kinds of names [...] calling me everything but a child of god. But they can't do nothing else. They ain't got what they wanted yet. As soon as they get my voice down on them recording machines, then it's just like if I'd be some whore and they roll over and put their pants on. Ain't got no use for me then. (Wilson, 1985, p. 79)

In addition, Irvin and Sturdyvant intended to change some parts of Ma’s songs in order to make more money out of it. In that period, people wanted something they “can dance to” (Wilson, 1985, p. 62). Ma does not want to confront such fact when they offer her to sing Bessie Smith’s songs, *Moonshine Blue*; she puts her protest in plain words, “Bessie what? Ain’t nobody thinking about Bessie. I taught Bessie. She ain’t doing nothing but imitating me. What I care about Bessie? Ma was first and don’t you forget it” (Wilson, 1985, p. 78). In this manner, for her “Music is especially important in breaking the inertia which arises in the unhappy polar opposition between a squeamish, nationalist essentialism and a skeptical, saturnalian pluralism which makes the impure world of politics literally unthinkable” (Gilroy, 1993, p. 102). She counted on music as the only way to resist the dominant power and simultaneously constructed a cohesive and spirit-driven black nation. Blues was the medium for the “uncorking of the censored histories” (Woods, 1998, p. 36) that helps African Americans to communicate with each other and speak out the truths of their nationality. Therefore, there is no surprise that Wilson uses blues to provide a link between past, present and future of a nation. It records African American experience during

slavery, serves as a national identity, and functions as an important element for being more powerful in relations.

Another sign of resistance, with focus on national values, is the name of Ma Rainey. Her name recalls the famous blues singer Gertrude Ma Rainey Pridgett (1886-1939). Sandra Adell (1994) claims: "She also had a strong voice that could project her raunchy lyrics, without the aid of a megaphone, over the music and the noise of the crowds who regularly attended her blues performances" (p. 53). Sandra Lieb (1981) believes:

Ma Rainey's life symbolizes the confrontation between the black rural South and the changes wrought by industrialization, urban migration, and the development of modern mass communications. She represents a collision between the unchanging aphorisms of folk poetry and the nervous rhythms of modern life; she is both timeless and in time, both mythic and historical...[S]he serves as the prime link between country blues and black show business, at once folk artist and star performer, both "Ma" and Madame Rainey. (p. 164)

Gertrude Ma Rainey Pridgett is one of the first manifestations of black women's nationalism and resistance in a white culture that have attacked and humiliated African women during its long history. This black character, like Ma in the story, is the leader of blacks who challenges, "our collective shame at being rape victims, treated like a dog, or worse, the meat dogs eat, by emphasizing the value of our allure. In so doing, she humanized sexuality for black women." (Russell, 1981, p. 133)

In the play Wilson intentionally insists on the leitmotif of waiting as Adell says, Ma Rainey's *Black Bottom* is structured around the act of waiting and its consequences for her four black musicians, for whom waiting seems to be a condition of their being: waiting to play a halfway decent gig; waiting to get paid, in cash, when they do play a gig; waiting to have just one mo' good time; waiting for a good women to help ease their trouble-in-mind; waiting for Ma Rainey to sing her "Black Bottom Blues." (1994, p. 57)

Wilson "strategically places the audience on hold as well. Subconsciously they experience, in some measure, the frustration of waiting and its accompanying effects upon the cast (Shannon, 1991, p. 139). In the play Culter asserts, "[...] white folk don't care nothing about who she is ...what kind of music she make" and Slow Drag adds, "that's the truth about that. You let her go down to one of them white folk hotel and see how big she is" (Wilson, 1985, p. 95). It shows that the band is aware of the Ma's power in recording studio, thus members constantly remember Levee of her delay. Waiting for her entrance, Ma Rainey is introduced to the reader intentionally to praise the power and resistance of a black character. Although it is Wilson who indeed does "manage to upstage her entrance, his strategy does not close off the possibility of rendering Ma Rainey powerfully present even in her absence. In fact, her *presence* causes everyone, and especially Sturdyvant, a great deal of anxiety long before she arrives on the scene." Ma, as a black character, is aware of the value of her voice; therefore, she uses it to manipulate power relation in favor of her own nation. By delaying the record of song and hindering to sign the release forms, she reverses the process of power relation in a white dominant discourse. In other words, she "exchanges the rights to her voice for a right that is denied most other blacks, including her musicians: the

right to be treated as she wants to be treated....her *contract* is not with Irvin and Sturdyvant; it is with the people, the down-home folk who identify most closely with her brand of the blues” (pp. 55-6). Through creating this powerful and attractive character, Wilson strives to portray black nationalism and resistance in spite of notable exploitation into which they are positioned.

August Wilson’s nationalism and resistance is obvious in his description of black characters relation to the Christian God. One of the main reasons of black’s tendency to blues is the inadequacy of the Christian God to satisfy the needs of their souls. In *August Wilson and the African American Odyssey* (1995), Kim Pereira argues, “by forcing its God on blacks, the white church could control their spirits. This process attempted, in part, to change the African into an imitation of white man, a carbon copy of the European model. It was a process that robbed him of his individuality, dehumanized him, and turned him into chattel” (p. 31). In other words, white Americans took the advantages of Christianity, stripped blacks of their African belief, and made them obedient slaves. Engendering “in black slaves a passive resignation toward their fate” and being insensitive to blacks (Pereira, p. 79), Christian God causes the resort of Culter and Levee’s run off. Levee believes that Christian God will not help him because when he was a child, He had not helped his mother. Levee had seen his mother’s rape by “a gang of white men” (Wilson 1985, p. 69). He heard when his ma called God, “Lord, have mercy! Jesus, help me! Please, God, have mercy on me, Lord Jesus, help me!” (MR: 99). It is no surprise that Wilson, as a black, agrees with his characters that Christian God will not help black people because He is “busy” (Wilson, 1985, p. 177). In this regard, Wilson and his characters mistrust the generosity of God in their crucial moments and God “have outlived its usefulness” (Mays, 1968, p. 218). As a result, they will not resort to seeking the help of the Christian God in their confrontation with powerful characters; rather they resort to the blues as a national element of their life.

It is not the whole endeavor of August Wilson in his play. He puts African beliefs and rituals side by side of Christianity with African beliefs and rituals. All over *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*, Wilson creates some simple allegorical stories to show his resistance and nationalism. These folk tales, told by each band member, are the representatives of power relation and the subtle subjugation of blacks. The tales inspire and educate blacks to find the best solution for their problems and to uphold their national identity. For instance, the blacks discuss evil and soul as two important elements in African culture:

Toledo: Levee, you ain't nothing but the devil.

Levee: There you go! That's who I am. I'm the devil. I ain't nothing but the devil.

Cutler: I can see that. That's something you know about. You know all about the devil.

Levee (crosses toward Cutler): I ain't saying what I know. I know plenty. What you know about the devil? Telling me what I know. What you know?

Slow Drag: I know a man sold his soul to the devil.

Levee (mosses to bench and sits, facing Slow Drag): There you go! That's the only thing I ask about the devil... to see him coming so I can sell him this one I got. 'Cause if there's a God up there . . . , he done went to sleep. {Takes his cornet and a rag from the case and polishes the cornet.}

Slow Drag: Sold his soul to the devil himself. Name of Eliza Cotter. Lived in Tuscaloosa County; Alabama. The devil came by and he done upped and sold him his soul.

In addition, Wilson subtly claims that the white men forced blacks to work in farms, to become subject of abuse, to be lynched, and to adopt a new language and religious rituals. In other words, each white man cash in on blacks and “now he is full and tired and wants blacks to get out the way and let him be by himself” (p. 58). Along these lines, Wilson “resists the egalitarian myth of America as a land of endless opportunity for everyone, focusing instead on the social and economic displacement of African Americans.” He hints at the fact that “America more accurately is a cultural stew in which African Americans are the leftovers” (Plum, 1993, p. 563). Wilson’s solution to this fact of power relation is revising history from a black nationalistic view; he argues in his interview with Kim Powers:

The importance of history to me is simply to find out who you are and where you’ve been. It becomes doubly important if someone else has been writing your history. I think blacks in America need to re-examine their time spent here to see the choices that were made as a people. (Bryer & Hartig, 2006, p. 5)

In this regard, Wilson, as a thinker, lectures and awakens his fellow musicians of the real state of power relation and the necessity of nationalism.

CONCLUSION

In *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*, August Wilson undertakes a burden to breathe life into African American national elements through black characters. He inspires African American to bring up national solidarity, to avoid assimilation. The evidences of this article support the idea that he reveals this custom through concentration on the blues music as a representative of nationalism and resistance in power relation. In the play, August Wilson observes the blues as a song rooted in call and response, religious songs, field hollers, ballads, and work songs, and considered a melancholy song that argues mainly the singer’s existence or the pains and conflicts that he bore. By choosing the name of his first character, Ma Rainey, delaying her entrance in the play, questioning Christian God, and drawing attentions to African beliefs and rituals, the author shows that blacks can be powerful in power relation. In this regard, he insists on what he later says, “We cannot share a single value system if that value system consists of the values of white Americans based on their European ancestors. We reject that as Cultural Imperialism. We need a value system that includes our contributions as Africans in America.” (Wilson, 1996, p. 7) Accordingly, Wilson invites blacks to bring their nationality on the stage of the new cultural society to “free the black community from the false consciousness produced by participation in mainstream American culture” (Payne 1996, p. 66).

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