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The Failure of the American Dream in August Wilson's *Fences*

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ABSTRACT

This paper traces the impossibility of the fulfillment of the American dream for African-Americans in August Wilson's *Fences*. It examines why Troy Maxon, as the protagonist of the play, is not able to fulfill his dreams of freedom, and economic achievements in an environment of oppression where he finds himself surrounded by hostile whites who hinder his development. It indicates that the racial discrimination, manifested in various forms including racial segregation prevalent in the white-dominated American society, impedes Troy's progress. A large number of African-Americans migrated from southern states to the north in 1920s and 1930s in order to find jobs in industrial northern states. They had been told that the United States was the promised land of equal chances wherein everyone regardless of race and gender was able to progress from rags to riches. They left the South, in which racism was still pervasive despite the abolition of slavery, and moved to the North for the fulfillment of the dreams they had been promised. The advocates of the American Dream claimed that hard diligence and intelligence could lead a man to material prosperity. Nevertheless, this paper demonstrates that since African-Americans are considered to be "others" in the white dominated society, financial progress and other aspects of the American Dream remain impossible dreams for them.

Keywords: *The American Dream, Baseball, Negro, Racism, Slave, Fences*

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1. Introduction

August Wilson (1945-2005) was a prominent African-American playwright who wrote 15 plays for which he won many awards. To name only a few of the prizes Wilson won, one can refer to a Pulitzer Prize and a Tony Award for his play *Fences*, and a second Pulitzer Prize for *The Piano Lesson*. Wilson is generally referred to as a dramatist who concentrated on the sufferings of African-Americans in his plays. He intended to depict the wretched life of a neglected race in the United States in order to draw the attention of social reformers throughout the world to these miserable people. *Fences* is the best play in which he portrays this suffering. As Wilson's masterpiece, *Fences* is a play in which the author foregrounds the troubles of an African-American family who fails to fulfill their dream of success and happiness despite the diligence and constant efforts of Troy Maxon, the head of the household.

The first group of African slaves were brought to the New World, later to be the

United States, by European traders in the 1620s. Since African slaves were well-built and strong individuals for whose labor no wage was required, the idea of slavery was of great financial benefits for slaveholders. Though it is impossible to think of the exact number, roughly six to seven million slaves were imported to the New World during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. African slaves worked mainly on cotton, tobacco and rice lands. Every slaveholder possessed on average fifty slaves who worked in extremely wretched conditions. They were hindered from education and other preliminary social rights. Moreover, most of black women were subject to sexual harassment by their white masters who took sexual liberty with them. No slave family could feel secure, because slaveholders did not hesitate to disintegrate these families in order to sell them to other masters.

American slaveholders did not face serious challenges until the accomplishment of American Revolution



in 1183. Many of the northern leaders associated with this revolution opposed slavery on the basis that it was incongruous to the constitution of the United States that acknowledged freedom and equality. They asserted that slavery was immoral and unethical. After all, northern states were mostly industrial ones and unlike southern states did not depend on agriculture and farm crops. As a matter of fact, slavery was never widespread in the North. Consequently, no significant objection against newly formed abolitionist movement rose up in the North. Abolition of slavery would evoke an economic crisis in the southern states that depended entirely on the labor of African slaves. Therefore, they intensely resisted the freedom of black slaves.

The Congress of the United States banned slavery in 1808, but no southern state obeyed this law. This law gave rise to more and more abolitionist movements. Many authors served as social reformers and attempted to enlighten their audiences through the portrayal of sympathetic black characters. The most prominent author who reacted against slavery was Harriet Beecher Stowe (1811-1896) whose monumental novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) was a fatal blow to white slaveholders. A lot of fugitive slaves were assisted to escape northern states by the strategy of "underground railway". It was conducted neither under the ground nor through the railway system. However, since railway terms were used in this system it got the so-called name. For instance, those who helped the slaves flee to the North; and the secret houses used in this system as shelters were called "conductor" and "station" respectively. More than 1000 slaves escaped by the aid of both white individuals and freed slaves.

The election of Abraham Lincoln (1809-1865) in 1861 reinforced the gap between the North and the south, because he was absolutely against slave trade and uncompromisingly argued against it. Furthermore, the economic, social and political discrepancies between the North and the south contributed to the intensification of this gap. One of the major debates between the two hostile sides was the political autonomy demanded by southern states. The North advocated a federal government but the south urged for more freedom for states. A war was inevitable in such circumstances. The American Civil War (1861-1865) was

one of the bloodiest wars in the history of the United States. The casualties exceeded 600,000 warriors. The war was extremely destructive but black people were satisfied with the result, because the North won the battle. That is to say, those who defended slavery were severely defeated. Consequently, slavery was formally abolished as the 13th Amendment to the U.S. constitution was enacted in 1865.

Freed slaves had been supposedly released from wretchedness of life by the end of slavery, but there was yet a long distance to be taken before gaining full citizenship in a country in which many white people were still hostile towards blacks. African-Americans like Troy Maxson's father expected a world full of options; nevertheless, their hopes were frustrated. They received the right to attend schools and the right to vote but white oppression was too strong to wane in a few decades even. Racist groups such as the Ku Klux Klan never stopped the murder of blacks. The former black slaves who found themselves among millions of antagonistic whites in southern states began to migrate to the North where they were supposed to find jobs and better conditions of life in industrial states. Nearly eight million African-American moved to the North during the Great Migration. They had fled from the aggression and brutality imposed on them by white masters. However, these miserable people realized that they had not escaped inequality and racial discrimination.

2. Review of Literature

Wilson's *Fences* has been subject to a variety of critical articles that sought to examine the play based on distinct theories. Kiffer (2017) argues that Troy Maxson's predicament results from the fact that he is a black individual. He holds that blackness is a burden that worsened the misery of the poor in the United States in 1930s and 1940s. Kiffer adds that African-American characters in *Fences* are in search of their identity despite the fact that the country in which they reside has robbed them of their cultural heritage.

Abdelsamie and Abdallah (2015) state that Wilson is concerned, in *Fences*, with exhibiting black experience in order to arouse the community's awareness with regard to the plight of African-Americans. They also maintain that black characters in *Fences* are in quest of rediscovering their lost identity. Likewise, self-realization and "self-authentication" are significant

purposes pursued by black characters in the play. According to Abdelsamie and Abdallah, African-Americans in *Fences* endeavor to overcome their limitations in the racist American society by recovering their Africanness, and also through recognizing their cultural roots.

Sayni (2017). holds that Wilson indicates the silenced voices of African-Americans in *Fences*. He refers to Wilson as a competent and gifted playwright who adequately delineates the suffering and marginalization of black characters in *Fences*. According to Sayni, Wilson also leaves room for a promising future awaiting African-Americans provided that they maintain their integrity and continue to resist the limitations imposed on them by the white society.

3. Discussion

This paper seeks to examine the representation of African-Americans characters' suffering in Wilson's *Fences*. Wilson tries to contextualize black characters in the white dominated society in order to show that the fulfillment of the American Dream remains only a dream for black people in a society in which racism is a great obstacle limiting their achievements. The questions that ought to be answered concern the possibility of success for colored characters in *Fences*. Do they have any chance to promote their status through attempting the requirements of the American Dream? Do they have their own voice in the society? Can they compete with their white counterpart? What are the factors that marginalize Troy Maxon?

August Wilson dramatizes the suffering of African-Americans in their struggle to improve the wretched circumstances of their lives. He depicts Troy Maxson's life in *Fences* (1985) as an aspirant and wishful African-American who fails due to the racial prejudice imposed on black people by the society. Troy's father is a sharecropper in southern United States. He works for a white landlord to receive a meagre share of the crop. Having ten children, he cannot make the both ends meet in such an unfair situation. He is not able to afford even food for his children. Harshness of life among hostile whites, and absolute destitution turn him to a "devil" whose brutal behavior leads to the disintegration of his family. Troy's mother flees to rid herself from the savagery of a wicked husband. Another escape occurs six years

later when Troy is fourteen years old. Troy forsakes the family out of misery. He intends to migrate to northern states in order to find more options in the industrial North.

Troy expects to be granted full citizenship in the North, where black people were supposed to have satisfactory jobs. He is not a criminal upon his arrival to the North. Troy goes to northern states with good intentions. He is going to escape destitution, find a good job and recover from all the racial inequalities imposed on him in the South. Nevertheless, all his hopes are frustrated upon her arrival to the new settlement. Troy realizes that regardless of being in the North or the South, he is doomed to fail in that he is a "Negro". The burden of blackness exacerbates his poverty even in the industrial areas of the United States where a lot of factories exist that might provide jobs for freed blacks. Complaining about his misery even after his migration to the North, Troy Maxon refers to the hardship of life after migration:

I walked on down to Mobile and hitched up with some of them fellows that was heading this way. Got up here and found out ... not only couldn't you get a job; you couldn't find no place to live. I thought I was in freedom. Shhh. Colored folks living down there on the riverbanks in whatever kind of shelter they could find for themselves. Right down there under the Brady Street Bridge. Living in shacks made of sticks and tarpaper. Messed around there and went from bad to worse. Started stealing. First it was food. Then I figured, hell, if I steal money I can buy me some food. Buy me some shoes too! One thing led to another. (Wilson, 1986, p. 27)

The so-called burden of blackness brings about all sorts of restrictions for Troy. He encounters different kinds of restrictions that affect his ability to earn income. The rate of unemployment among Negroes was highly noticeable. Even those who were employed could find no better jobs than serving as porters, servants or laundresses. Apart from unemployment, substandard residence was a major problem for African-Americans. They had to live in ghettos, slum areas where colored individuals lived segregated from white people. Ghettos, also called "black bottom" neighborhoods were densely populated. Despite the low quality of life in ghettos, poor black tenants had to pay high rents. A lot of black people were



forced to rethink the moral values they had learned from the Bible. The result was higher rates of criminal activities and immorality. Penurious Negroes, like Troy Maxson, who had come to the North with good intentions turned to robbery to escape starvation. Consequently, prisons were filled with Negroes. Meanwhile, Troy kills a white man in one of his attempts to steal money:

Now I got to worry about feeding you and her. Got to steal three times as much. Went out one day looking for somebody to rob ... that's what I was, a robber. I'll tell you the truth. I'm ashamed of it today. But it's the truth. Went to rob this fellow, pulled out my knife and he pulled out a gun. Shot me in the chest. It felt just like somebody had taken a hot branding iron and laid it on me. When he shot me I jumped at him with my knife. They told me I killed him and they put me in the penitentiary and locked me up for fifteen years. (ibid p. 27)

Troy and Bono are imprisoned as the result of the crimes they did not willingly commit. Having no job to handle their lives, they begin to steal. They live in a country that was supposed to be the land of equal opportunities, yet they have to tolerate different forms of racial discrimination. Troy's failure can be associated with the failure of the American Dream. James Truslow Adams (1878-1949) was the first major American author who used the phrase, the American Dream, in his 1931 book *Epic of America* (1931). He stated in his prominent book that the American Dream is "that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement" (p. 214). Moreover, Adams insists that this dream is not limited to the pursuit of material prosperity:

It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position." (ibid p. 215)

Most American people have always considered the American Dream not only as a slogan that says every individual has the right to get wealthy but also as an ideology. This ideology promises equal chances for every person to fulfill his dream. Nevertheless, it functions as a

vehicle to control colored people. That is to say. It persuades them to do what the ruling class and factory owners want. Obviously, despite the claim that America is the land of equal opportunities, not everybody has had an equal chance to rise from rags to riches. The promise of a comfortable life that comes after rigorous perseverance and hard work, is not applicable to Troy Maxon and his sons in that they are considered inferior members of the American society whose cheap labor in factories expedites the production of wealth for white American. Nevertheless, Troy and other black people in August Wilson's *Fences* even do not have the chance to work as low-paid laborers in a society permeated by injustice and racial prejudice.

Troy and his sons, Lyons and Cory, confront everywhere in the seemingly propitious society the promising motto of high incomes and economic security. These slogans seem primarily appealing to an industrious and strong man like Troy, but he is finally disillusioned with the American Dream when racial discrimination turns out to be a stubborn that hampers his progress. No African-American in *Fences* is able to escape the tragic and deleterious consequences of the black color of the skin. The burden of blackness exacerbates the financial problems of already destitute Troy Maxon. August Wilson depicts in the context of his play the inaccessibility of a dream the basic tenets of which rest on false slogans. Referring to the flaws of the American Dream, Jennifer Hochschild (1995) questions its principles as follows:

The first tenet, that everyone can participate equally and can always start over, is troubling to the degree that it is not true. It is, of course, never true in the strongest sense; people cannot shed their existing selves as snakes do their skin. So the myth of the individual mini-state of nature is just that—a fantasy to be sought but never achieved. (p. 26).

Hochschild holds that the American Dream is a matter that pertains merely to white Americans. She believes that this dream is an impossible fantasy for African-Americans in that they have always been considered as second-class citizens. The inferior position of Troy Maxon, who is a garbage collector, proves the failure of the American Dream in the United States. Troy comes to believe that success does not necessarily results from hard work in a

society in which black people are paralyzed by racism. No black character in *Fences* can succeed based on his/her volition and diligence. All of these character have the scars of slavery on their bodies. The misery of wretched People like Troy and his family is best described by Langston Hughes, one of the most prominent African-American poets, in his monumental poem titled "Let America Be America Again (1994)":

I am the Negro bearing slavery's scars.
I am the immigrant clutching the hope I seek
And finding only the same old stupid plan
Of dog eat dog, of mighty crush the weak.

I am the farmer, bondsman to the soil.
I am the worker sold to the machine.
I am the Negro, servant to you all.
I am the people, humble, hungry, mean
Hungry yet today despite the dream.
Beaten yet today--O, Pioneers!
I am the man who never got ahead,
The poorest worker bartered through the
years (p. 189-190)

Langston Hughes depicts the affliction of African-Americans who remained in chain even after the eradication of slavery. As a gifted baseball player with a muscular body, Troy Maxon expects to fulfill his promised dream in baseball but it turns out to be a futile dream. The proponents of the American Dream held that everyone who works diligently and utilizes his/her intelligence will have the chance to realize his dreams. Gender and race were not supposed to prohibit anyone with regard to the fulfillment of this dream. It is on the basis of such a dream that Troy Maxon endeavors to play in Baseball Major League. He finds the accomplishment of his American dream in the pursuit of sport in professional level. Nevertheless, all his hopes are frustrated as he comes to know that unlike what had been promised, this dream is not attainable for everyone.

Troy is the embodiment of a failed African-American who has been disillusioned with the possibility of success in a society in which black people deprived of their social rights. He finds it impossible to break the color barriers, hence, is hindered from any kind of success. Troy goes to the north in order to become an urban citizen able to fulfill his dream through diligence. Nonetheless, he turns out to be a thief who commits murder. He becomes a professional player of baseball during his residence in prison but is excluded from the Major League due to racial discrimination. Instead of playing in the professional baseball league as a super

star, that he definitely deserves, Troy becomes a garbage collector. He dwells in an environment of oppression that imposes segregation. Troy's unfulfilled dream resembles the "deferred dream" elaborated in Langston Hughes's famous poem in which the poet imagines the dreams of African-Americans drying up, stinking or exploding.

Troy's exclusion from baseball league is rooted in the institutionalized racism that is supported by a set of laws entitled Jim Crow Laws. Jim Crow was a black minstrel character in American minstrel shows who was depicted as a decrepitude Negro wearing shabby clothes. Later on Jim Crow became a pejorative name for a set of rules imposing racial segregation on African-Americans. Numerous speeches were made to support these laws. These speeches included harsh critiques of interracial marriages that could lead to "the mongrelization of the white race." These laws reinforced the restrictions imposed on colored people and relegated them to inferior jobs. Jim Crow laws held that white people were superior to Negroes in all aspects including morality. Hence, sexual intercourse between whites and blacks would result in the impurity of the white race. Having seen his dreams turned into nightmare because of such laws, Troy complains bitterly about his exclusion from the professional baseball league:

I done seen a hundred niggers play baseball better than Jackie Robinson. Hell, I know some teams Jackie Robinson couldn't even make! What you talking about Jackie Robinson. Jackie Robinson wasn't nobody. I'm talking about if you could play ball then they ought to have let you play. Don't care what color you were. Come telling me I come along too early. If you could play ... then they ought to have let you play. (Wilson, 1986, P. 7)

Troy denigrates both white and black baseball players in this scene. More than twenty-five years have passed since Troy's failure to play in the white league and now black players are allowed to play in the professional league after the abolition of Jim Crow Laws. Jackie Robinson was the first African-American who managed to play in the Major League. He refers to his own talent which he was not permitted to demonstrate in the professional league. Likewise, he does not allow Cory to play football. Troy contends that no significant change has happened in the society despite some visible signs.



Moreover, owning a magnificent house comprises a major part of the American Dream, but Troy is ashamed of the house in which he lives throughout the play. He owes his shabby house, which is not relevant to the ones described in the American Dream, to his disabled brother, Gabriel who receives a pension from the army after he became disabled in the war. Not only is he not able to play in the professional baseball league, Troy cannot afford a house. Troy is so destitute that he cannot even afford a television. Cory, Troy's teenage son, regrets the lack of a television frequently; but his father reminds him that repairing the damaged roof of their house is prior to buying a TV.

Hence, as mentioned before, as the embodiment of a diligent African-American, Troy Maxson fails to realize his dreams. It might be more accurate, however, to assert that the society fails to provide Troy and other black characters with any opportunity, if not equal opportunities when compared with the whites, with regard to their advancement. As discussed above, the color of skin is a major determinant in Troy's social life. Despite the fact that he endeavors to excel his white peers, the rules and conventions of the racist society ruin his exceptional talent as a basketball player let alone to letting him rise from rags to riches, as a lot of white Americans did.

The findings of this paper confirm Kafir's argument concerning the suffering of black characters in *Fences*, for he contends that the burden of blackness is the most significant barrier that contributes to the marginalization of a character like Troy. Moreover, Abdelsamie and Abdallah's critical arguments with regard to Wilson's perfect depiction of the misery of black people was also corroborated in this paper. That is to say, Wilson successfully manages to raise public awareness throughout the world concerning the wretchedness of black people's lives under severe racism. Nevertheless, rarely an evidence can be found in the play to suggest that black character can adequately rediscover their lost cultural heritage.

4. Conclusion

August Wilson portrays the struggle of African-Americans to survive among white racists. He intends to show that "there is no avenue for the participation" of black people in the society. Ambitious and talented "Negros" like Troy Maxson are

thwarted in their aspirations to fulfill their dreams due to their blackness. Troy and Bono represent all those African-Americans whose lives were full of missed possibilities despite their undeniable capabilities. He relies on the possibility of the American Dream to rise from rags to riches, but the racial inequality prohibited their progress and relegated them to inferior positions. Therefore, *Fences* might be considered a critique of the American Dream.

As a young man, Troy aspires to be a professional athlete in the Major League. He has always heard about the possibility of advancement in a country that is supposedly the land of equal opportunities. Therefore, he strives to realize the American Dream through putting his talent into practice. Nevertheless, the scars of slavery are not healed even after its abolition. The color of his skin keeps him away from the fulfillment of his dream in a society in which the authorities propagate the false ideology of the American Dream. This dream remains out of reach and turns to a nightmare for black people despite all their attempts.

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