

A Reflection of Dreams & Racial Discrimination in August Wilson's Play *Fences*: A Retrospective Study

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Abstract

This article explores the portrayal of the disillusionment of dreams and racial discrimination experienced by oppressed and marginalised African Americans in August Wilson's play *Fences*. The objective of this study is to examine the impact of the dysfunctional American Dream and the discrimination faced by Troy Maxon and his family, with the intention of using them as a representative of the African-American community. This study examines the strategies employed by African American immigrants in their pursuit of success and the realisation of their aspirations. African Americans got engaged in a significant migration from the southern states to the northern states in order to enhance their life prospects. In spite of the prevailing conditions of poverty, bigotry, and slavery prevalent in the southern states, it became evident that the circumstances were far direr. The prevalence of racial segregation and the perception of African Americans as marginalised individuals within the White community have hindered their ability to achieve economic advancement and attain the American Dream. The present paper aims to examine the multifaceted interpretation of the American Dream as depicted in the play "*Fences*" by August Wilson. However, this study also presents evidence to support the argument that African-Americans, being perceived as marginalised individuals within a predominantly white society, face significant barriers in achieving financial prosperity and other components of the American Dream.

Keywords: African American, Poverty, The American Dream, Racial Discrimination, Marginalization, Family.

This paper explores the aspirations and expectations of marginalised community of the African American. August Wilson, a highly esteemed African American playwright who lived from 1945 to 2005, exerted significant influence over The American Theatre throughout the period spanning from the 1980s to 2005. Numerous African American writer including Lorraine Hansberry, Ntozake Shange, Jeremy O. Harris, Suzan Lori Parks and Lynn Nottage have similarly depicted the challenges and discrimination faced by their community in their literary works. However, Wilson's portrayal of the hardships endured by black individuals encompasses a broader scope, addressing the marginalisation experienced by this group in a manner that resonates universally. This approach reflects his deep-seated social and cultural

concern regarding this pressing issue. Frederick August Kittle, later known as Wilson, was born in the Hill District of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, United States. He was a biracial. He has written approximately 17 theatrical productions, which brought him immense popularity. He was awarded the Pulitzer Prize and Tony Award for his theatrical work titled "*Fences*," and subsequently received a second Pulitzer Prize for his play entitled "*The Piano Lesson*." Additionally, he authored a collection of plays that encompassed a period from 1900 to 1990. The collection effectively captures the cultural complexities and traumatic history of African American community in the United States.

In this article, the study examines a particular drama '*Fences*' from the collection known as "*Pittsburgh Cycle*." The play *Fences* which is set in the 1960s, serves as a representation of the socio-economic conditions experienced by the black community. It is widely regarded as a highly acclaimed play that effectively portrays the hardships experienced by marginalized black people. In an interview with Bonnie Lyons he said:

Q. How would that same play, *Fences*, affect a black audience?

A. Black see the content of their lives being elevated into art. They don't always know that is possible, and it's important to know that (3).

Fences regarded as Wilson's magnum opus, is a theatrical work that delves into the turbulent journey and disillusionment of an African-American household, whose aspirations for achievement and contentment remain. The text explores the complex topic of "racism" by examining the experiences of an African American family who relocated from the Southern United States to the Northern states in pursuit of improved economic opportunities. The manifestation of racial discrimination is evident in various occurrences within the dramatic work. The American Dream is a widely held notion that individuals, irrespective of their socio-economic status, religious affiliation, or racial background, have the potential to achieve their personal vision of success within society.

The United States of America is widely recognised as a nation that is distinguished by its history of immigration. During the early 20th century (1910-1940), the United States saw a significant event known as the Great Migration. An estimated six million individuals of African descent undertook a significant migration from the southern region of the United States to the northern states during the period spanning from the 1910s to the 1970s. The main driving force behind this significant migration was the aspiration to flee from the oppressive conditions created by Jim Crow laws.

In 1620, the first group of African slaves was brought over to the United States. African Americans exhibited remarkable physical strength and demonstrated a strong work ethic, often labouring without any kind of payment. As a result, the practise of slave trading experienced a notable expansion in the United States. Additionally, it increased the economic advantages for those who owned slaves. The wretched circumstances endured by slaves were defined by their objectification and the denial of their individuality.

During the 17th and 18th centuries, an estimated 12 million individuals of African descent were forcibly transported to the New World. The enslaved individuals were employed as labourers in sugar plantations, coffee farms, and rice fields. Each slave master typically owned around fifty enslaved individuals who laboured under their control in various harsh conditions. They were subject to a prohibition on schooling and certain other social practises. African slaves who attempted to engage in acts of rebellion or women who experienced pregnancy were subjected to various forms of punishment. African slaves were brought to America as indentured labourers. Indentured labour was a form of labour that operated on a contractual basis, wherein individuals would agree to work for a specified period of time in exchange for certain benefits or considerations. In contrast, slavery was a system marked by the

permanent and hereditary ownership of individuals, who were deprived of their personal freedom and subjected to involuntary servitude for the entirety of their lives.

The American slaveholders faced a significant economic shortfall following the end of the American Revolution in 1775. During the course of this revolution, the enslaved individuals were assured that their participation in the conflict would result in the granting of their freedom. Following the victory of the war, people who had been enslaved and actively participated in the conflict were granted freedom. Following the revolution, numerous politicians from the Northern region expressed agony to slavery. They held the perspective that the institution of slavery was morally and ethically wrong. The abolition of it is required. Conversely, in the southern states, the white population exhibited resistance against this social movement. Indeed, it is a truth that the Northern States were predominantly marked by their industrious nature. The level of development in the region was significantly higher compared to that of the southern states. Therefore, the prevalence of slavery in the northern regions was not widespread. This factor emerged as the primary catalyst for migration.

Despite the official prohibition of slavery by the United States government in 1808, the southern states strongly opposed the emancipation of African American slaves. The enactment of this ban statute resulted in the emergence of more abolitionist movements. During this period, numerous authors emerged as social reformers, endeavouring to raise awareness among the public by portraying the distressing circumstances faced by the black community. Harriet Beecher Stowe (1811-1896) emerged as a preeminent writer who effectively depicted the cruelty of slave owners in her renowned novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852): "This is God's curse on slavery!--a bitter, bitter, most accursed thing!--a curse to the master and a curse to the slave! I was a fool to think I could make anything good out of such a deadly evil (59)".

The strategy known as the "underground railway" facilitated the escape of numerous refugee slaves from northern states. Despite its name, this system did not involve underground tracks or the actual railways. Rather, the term associated with railways was employed to describe its operations. The people who helped slaves in their flight to the North were referred to as "conductors," and the secret homes they used as shelters were called "stations." This strategy successfully facilitated the escape of over 1000 slaves.

Abraham Lincoln, the 16th President of the United States, actively opposed the institution of slavery and sought to address economic inequality, ultimately triggering the outbreak of the American Civil War in 1861. The conflict led to a significant loss of life, with losses exceeding 600,000 individuals. Additionally, the abolition of slavery was achieved with the enactment of the 13th Amendment to the United States Constitution in the year 1865. Following the abolition of slavery, freed slaves encountered significant challenges in their quest for attaining citizenship within a nation where there existed a hostile attitude towards blacks. Despite the progress made in granting rights such as access to education and suffrage, it is evident that white oppression remained pervasive and influential. This is exemplified by the continued existence and activities of racist organisations like the Ku Klux Klan, who perpetrated acts of violence and murder against Black people. A significant number of black slaves chose to migrate to the Northern states in search of employment opportunities and improved living conditions in industrialised regions. Consequently, The Great Migration, a movement in which approximately eight million African Americans fled from white masters' aggression and moved to northern state of America. But they confronted the persistent presence of inequality and racial discrimination even in the Northern regions.

The drama *Fences* by August Wilson, which received the prestigious Pulitzer Prize, delves into the African American real-life experiences in the 1950s Pittsburgh. The play delves into the themes of

dreams and discrimination, shedding light on the impact of racial prejudice on the ambitions and interpersonal dynamics of the characters. As Susan Koprince writes: “In *fences* Wilson uses Troy’s experience in the Negro Leagues to demonstrate that the American dream remained out of reach for people of African descent.”

The character of Troy Maxson serves as a symbol of the African American community's enduring struggle for social and economic advancement among the pervasive challenges of racial prejudice. He harboured aspirations of attaining a career as a professional baseball player, although the prevailing racial obstacles of that era impeded the fulfilment of his ambition. The act of discrimination prevented him from demonstrating his abilities and realising his ambitions. As a result, Troy's aspiration remains unrealized, leading to feelings of resentment and dissatisfaction.

This study analyses August Wilson's play "*Fences*," with a specific emphasis on the depiction of African-American characters within a societal context predominantly controlled by white community. This analysis delves into the various obstacles encountered by the characters in their pursuit of the American Dream, as well as their prospects for attaining success. Additionally, the play delves into the various circumstances that contribute to the marginalisation of the character Troy Maxon.

The present article examines the challenges faced by African Americans, with a special focus on the character of Troy Maxson, a sharecropper who endures exploitation within his own family. European immigrants were afforded advantageous opportunities and experienced wealth, whilst African Americans encountered rejection and disdain. The depiction of Troy's life by Wilson underscores the systemic racial discrimination experienced by whole African Americans in society, resulting in their exploitation and subsequent migration to the Northern regions. Nevertheless, he uncovers that a significant number of African descent encounter comparable forms of exploitation, resulting in limited resources and socio-economic hardships. The play emphasises the contrasting experiences of those of European descent and those of African American heritage. Troy anticipates receiving full citizenship in the North, where there is an expectation of satisfactory job opportunities for blacks. Initially, he did not possess any criminal tendencies, but due to the challenging circumstances prevailing in the North, he was compelled to engage in criminal activities. In order to quench his hunger and find shelter, he switched to a life of crime as a robber. Troy travels to northern states with positive intentions. He expresses his determination to overcome destitution, secure employment, and overcome the racial inequalities they have faced in the Southern region. However, his expectations are disappointed when he reaches the new settlement. Troy recognises that his chances of success are limited, regardless of his location in the North or the South, due to the racial discrimination he faces as an African American. The combination of race and socioeconomic status leads to the economic challenges faced by his community, even in regions of the United States with a significant industrial place that could potentially offer employment opportunities for freed black. Troy Maxon expresses dissatisfaction with his situation, pointing out the ongoing challenges he faces following his move to the North:

“Troy: I walked on down to Mobile and hitched up with some of them fellows that was heading this way.... 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 here on the riverbanks in whatever kind of shelter they could find for themselves... 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, 54).”

The North experienced a significant burden associated with black, resulting in the implementation of numerous restrictions and discriminatory practises that had an adverse effect on the economic prospects of African descent. The presence of higher levels of unemployment leads highly dissatisfaction among black people. Black renters who were poor had to pay high rent, which led to more crime and poor conduct. Negroes, who was hungry like Troy Maxson, went to stealing to get food, which filled prisons with Negroes. In order to steal money, Troy even killed a white man:

“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. ...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 prison and locked me up for fifteen years (Wilson, 27)”.

Troy and Bono find themselves in a challenging situation as they are compelled to engage in theft and survive within a society that was originally intended to provide equal opportunities for all. James E. Walton relates Troy’s life to the life of Willy Loman:

Willy Loman and Troy Maxon are both in pursuit of the elusive American dream. Material goods, for many the essence of the American dream, take an importance for both protagonists. For Willy Loman, it is the refrigerator, the car, and the house... Earning a good living and gaining a practical education has great value for Troy Maxon (57).

According to James Truslow Adams, who coined the term “The American Dream”, is characterised as an aspiration for a more prosperous and fulfilling life for all individuals, where opportunities are granted based on one's abilities or accomplishments. The dream encompasses more than just material wealth; it also includes the desire for a well-structured society where individuals can achieve their highest potential and receive acknowledgement for their talents.

The concept of the American Dream is frequently perceived as an ideology that offers equal opportunities to individuals. Troy Maxon and his son, who work as garbage collectors, are part of a group that is often seen as having a lower social status in American society. Their labour, which is undervalued, contributes to the economic prosperity of white Americans. The portrayal of the characters' disadvantaged status in August Wilson's *Fences* highlights the shortcomings of the American Dream within the United States. It points out the notion that blacks are unable to achieve success solely through their diligent efforts in a society that is hindered by established racism. Sandra G. Shannon pointed it out: “Wilson’s characters struggle to survive in a world of sharply truncated possibilities. They have skills. They have ambition. But they are denied even the chance to put these attributes to the test (112).”

Langston Hughes' poem "Let America Be America Again" (1994) effectively portrays the hardships experienced by colored folks such as Troy and his family:

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 (189)

In his literary work, Langston Hughes effectively depicts the challenges faced by African-Americans, similarly the character of Troy Maxon, a talented baseball player who comes to the realisation that his

aspirations are not universally achievable, even in the post-slavery era. Troy's pursuit of his aspirations was impeded by discriminatory practices, resulting in an enduring emotional trauma. Cory, his son, encounters comparable obstacles. This shows how discrimination can affect thoughts across generations. Troy's aspirations are subject to the influence of racial prejudice, whilst Rose's aspirations are indirectly affected by this societal issue. The fact that her husband and son treat her badly makes her dream of having a stable family even harder to reach. In the play '*Fences*,' the characters Cory and Raynell symbolise the younger generation's resilience in the face of discrimination. Cory's aspiration to participate in football serves as a representation of his determination to conquer challenges, in spite of opposition from his father. Cory is a symbol of the next generation's strength and hope.

August Wilson's "*Fences*" is a story about dreams and racism in the 1950s that is set in the United States. It shows the reality of mid 20th century America through the depiction of Maxson family and shows how racism can break dreams and leave mental scars. Also, it shows how young people are strong as they try to reach the American Dream despite racism. This study offers a critical examination of the challenges faced by African-Americans as they navigate a society marked by pervasive white racism. The present paper discusses the challenges experienced by black people like Troy Maxson, who is talented but face obstacles in achieving their goals due to his race. The study examines the impact of racial inequality on African-Americans' ability to attain the American Dream, despite their evident talents and skills. Troy, a young professional athlete, faces challenges in achieving his dream due to the lasting impact of slavery and the flawed ideal of the American Dream.

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