

## SPIRITUALITY AND RELIGION IN AUGUST WILSON'S THE PIANO LESSON

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### ABSTRACT

African American Literature is written by the people of African descent dominantly about the autobiographical and spiritual narrative experiences of African Americans. The major themes and issues explored in this literature are the role of African Americans within the larger American society, African-American culture, racism, slavery, equality, religion and spirituality. African-American writing has inclined to include oral forms, such as spirituals, sermons, gospel music, blues. Religion plays a key role in African American Literature and is carried on through centuries of writing. The church has always been a significant part of African American way of life and been a major contributor to the community of Negroes, bringing them together for support in their spiritual lives as well as aiding them in surviving horrible living conditions.

This research paper tries to focus religion and spirituality from the different perspectives while reading dramas of August Wilson especially *The Piano Lesson*. The writer tries to assert how two different spiritual and religious preaching and practicing like Christianity and African Traditional Religion leading to the conflict for freedom and search for the roots of African culture for healing, revelation and identity.

**Key Words:** African American, Religion, Spirituality, Racism, Shamanism etc.

Art has found its expression as a fundamental need in every human society struggling to find existence and meaning out of chaos. Even in the globalized world discrimination exists on the basis of race, caste, colour, region, religion, gender particularly marginalized classes like Dalits, blacks and women all over the world. August Wilson too echoes the expressions and experiences of African Americans through his *Pittsburgh Cycle*.

African American Literature is written by the people of African descent dominantly about the autobiographical and spiritual narrative experiences of African Americans. African-American literature writers have been recognized by the highest awards, including the Nobel Prize to Toni Morrison and Pulitzer Prize to August Wilson twice for his plays and several awards for his *Pittsburgh Cycle*. Among the themes and issues explored in this, literature is the role of African Americans within the larger American society, Freedom, Religion, Spirituality, Black Nationalism, Double Consciousness, African-American culture, racism, slavery and equality. African-American writing has inclined to include oral forms, such as spirituals, sermons, gospel music, blues or rap.

While African Americans practice a number of religions like Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism and a small number of African Americans who participate in African traditional religions, such as Vodou and Santeria or Ifa and diasporic traditions like Rastafarianism. The researcher tries to explore the relations of African Americans about religion, and spirituality reflected the dramas by August Wilson in general with special analysis of play *The Piano Lesson*. Wilson creates displaced and disconnected black characters removed from their history and from their individual identity, in search

of spiritual resurrection and cultural reconnection.

August Wilson's play *The Piano Lesson* inspired by the Romare Bearden's painting depicting a story of family's struggle to reclaim their own identity and history. It efficiently personifies supernatural and spiritual elements like spirits and ghosts. It suggests the importance for individual's personal struggles than in its precise content. It portrays historical complications of three generations of slavery. The major conflict in the play focuses on 'the piano' which carries incidents of the past and present. The piano appears to have a secret ability that keeps alive the spirits of the dead, fostering a unity between the past and present. The piano also has the possibility to contemplate the identity of those who come into contact with it. Each person of the family responds to it in a different manner, according to his or her past actions, hopes, fears, and desires. The piano in August Wilson's *The Piano Lesson* is rooted in the heritage of slavery.

In *The Piano Lesson* it's a story of Bernice who lives with her uncle Doaker and daughter Maretha. Her brother, Boy Willie comes from South to sell the piano to get enough money to purchase a land in South, a land once labored by his grandfather and owned by a former slave owner Sutter. Bernice could not forget the trauma of her father's and husband's death and family's tragic past. She keeps the piano clear and dusted but scared to touch ivory keys. She considers the piano as a symbol of sweat of her slave grandfather, wooden surface as the tears of her mother, etc. The piano is a treasure of family's history and selling it like a selling soul of the Charles family and surrendering again to white masters as slave. The conflict about the ownership of Piano between the siblings leading to the beliefs of Christianity and African traditional beliefs. The play deals with families separated from communities connected through music, culture, arts and histories of blacks. It deals with the experiences and attitudes of Charles and Sutter's family subtly quoted by Sandy Alexandre:

“Wilson creates a metaphor of art rooted in both the preservation and the creative manipulation of history. Because the piano is simultaneously an heirloom and a musical instrument, it becomes involved in vexing conversation about everything from its aesthetic to its historic, spiritual, pedagogical and economic value” (Sandy 78)

In *The Piano Lesson* Wilson displays his concern for the sense of Africanness, his past by dramatizing the conflict between brother and sister i.e., Boy Willie and Bernice over the piano. For him the piano is history of Charles family, representative of the past, slavery, the heritage carvings by Grandfather Willie Boy. After emancipation they want the piano back from white master Sutter because they believe “as long as Sutter had it... he had us... we were still in slavery” (45/*The Piano Lesson*)

The piano in the play represents the soul of Charles family in particular and all Africans in general. While assessing about the Christianity in the play, it's evident to introduce Christian religious preacher like Avery. Wilson explores the role of Christianity through Avery, a preacher and suitor to Bernice. He's representing biblical faith and spokesperson for black evangelical Christian. He dreams of becoming preacher and wishes to start a church like the Good Shepherd.

To remove Sutter's ghost from her house Bernice with Avery arranges exorcism brings Christian rituals in the play. This interference of Christianity forced in the black world. It represents the Christian Gods of white:

“Thirty-eight years old, honest and ambitious, he has taken to the city like a fish to water, finding in it opportunities for growth and advancement that did not exist for him in rural South. He is dressed in a suit and tie with a gold cross around his neck. He carries a small Bible”

(The Piano Lesson, Act-I Scene-I Pg.22)

Avery reads Bible and begins the ceremony, an act of exorcism, but it's in vain as Christian words fail to drive away the demons of the past. Boy Willie does not believe in Christian words, as a believer of African tradition. He takes on the ghosts physically. Bernice believes that help of ancestors' power within the piano will be fruitful in defeating the ghosts. She begins her own exorcism by playing the piano to invoke ancestors to help Willie in the fight.

BERNICE: I want you to help me.....

Ma Bernice.....

I want you to help me

Mama Esther

(The Piano Lesson Act-II Scene-V Pg.107)

Thus, calling all the ancestors to fight against Sutter's ghost to help her and Boy Willie to win and drive away Sutter's ghost from home. This incident refers Wilson's strong belief in African Oral tradition and fighting spirits to validate strength of its roots and questions African Americans' faith in Christianity. He also tries to emphasize his doubt and argues against western cultural superiority. Western culture has based upon the Holy Bible, miracles, exorcism and denied African oral tradition, worshipping spiritual being as 'unreasonable'.

In the play Bernice's actions of invoking all the ancestors by playing a piano makes her stronger in believing familial values and revives her own 'the African' in American experience. Boy Willie is proud of his past and understands its values, teaching to learn and utilize for better future understanding. He realizes that preservation of the past and is more essential than monetary gain and to be cherished for continuous struggle for self by embracing the history of racial slavery.

As Wole Soyinka in his plays, explores myth, Yoruba rituals, world view of African Americans to build modern African drama. In his plays the world view of the invisible world of gods, spirits, the ancestors and the dead regulate human lives. In Wilson's plays he gives these elements to his characters and audience their own identity and history. It refers to the strong belief of August Wilson in traditional African American rituals of worship and spirituality. Spirituality and religion are deeply ingrained in the African American experience while answering to Hannah Grillo, Riley Keene Temple describes tensions in Christianity and the God of Enslaver and enslaved. He too talks about Wilson's comments "He talks about Jews celebrating the Passover and that black Americans should celebrate the day of the Emancipation Proclamation the same way the Jews celebrate the Passover. While talking about Christianity and Blacks Wilson states:

"The Christianity that black have embraced, they have transformed with aspects of African religion, African style, and certainly African celebration. The church is the only stable organization in the black community, and the community is organized around the church" (Rudolph 562)

Wilson advocates the African American traditions defined by beliefs in ancestors, spirits, practice of magic, Vodou rituals in contrast to Christianity. Wilson believes that one religion must be accepted to resolve the conflict in the play. His plays actually reflect the struggles going on in America between African religious beliefs and Christianity in his plays. His characters like Avery and Boy Willies illustrated two diverged religions through Christianity and African Traditional Religion. In 'The Piano

Lesson' the ghost of Sutter represents ATR, whereas Avery represents Christianity. In each of these plays, the characters are forced to choose between ATR and Christianity, and Wilson subtly guides his characters to choose African Traditional Rituals and overcome. Wilson's plays are a contemporary commentary on the role of religion in the lives of American Blacks. Thus, it may be argued that the Piano lesson deals with several voyages i.e. from Christianity to African rituals, slavery to emancipation, the past to present, African American to African experiences and transition where 'inheritance and legacy to form distinct identity.

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