

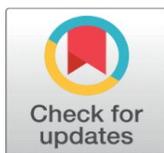
FRAGMENTATION AND RECONNECTION IN THE PLAYS OF ADRIENNE KENNEDY AND AUGUST WILSON

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ABSTRACT

The Fragmentation of existence and attempt at reconnection are two fundamental aspects of black American life history. Under the disorienting effect of brutal system of slavery and racial discrimination over the ages, the socio-cultural life of black American life underwent fragmentation. The families, cultures and communities broke apart and remained separated over the ages through the many generations across the continent. This severe physical dislocation at multiple levels led to psychic disintegration and mental imbalance. In the face of disintegration there have been consistent attempts on their parts and reconnection both at social and psychological levels during and after slavery. There have been attempts at searching out lost and separated members of community, reconnecting the cultural roots they have been alienated from and uniting fragmented parts of culture and maintain psychological balance and stability. Adrienne Kennedy, a prominent female playwright and August Wilson, a male playwright have delineated the themes in their plays. The paper is an attempt on the presentations of the thematic understanding.

Keywords: Fragmentation, Separated, Dislocation, Disintegration

1. INTRODUCTION

The plays of Adrienne are an expression of self. She views writing as an outlet for inner psychological confusions. She figures out 'why' of things in a creative manner. Her experience as black American, her profound knowledge of classics and her extensive travel of Europe and Africa were the materials lodged in her memory. She explains nicely the individual's struggle with the self. She uses her family and personal experiences as metaphors rather than literal examples. The name of family member may be assigned to a character. It is, in fact, a composite of historical, mythical and living figures.

Kennedy's images emanate from her sub-consciousness. Her plays are intense in thought. She creates a character like Sarah in *Funny house of a Negro* who becomes a raping father and husband. Her characters reveal the terrifying world of sub consciousness. The multiple levels of consciousness make her plays both politically and personally significant. She is a poet of theatre. Her language is condensed, imagistic and rhythmic. The repetition and seemingly irrationality of the

dream world is the features of her dialogue. They are the theatrical counterparts of the short story. Plot, event and character in the traditional realistic sense are absent from her plays. Metaphor, image and symbol are the major elements in her work. A character represents the several selves of the central figure or may be multiple, having several names to designate the various parts of his or her personality.

Adrienne Kennedy portrays the fragmented mental states of her characters. She dramatizes the many facets of her characters by changing costumes. It is symbolic representation of changing personalities. Her characters are obsessed with the contrast between the imagined elegance and manners of white European royalty and nobility, the filthiness and vulgarity of contemporary Black American life in the ghettos of northern cities and rural south. They are mentally and emotionally torn between their real external black selves. Her characters not only have ancestral white blood but also docile products of white educational and cultural heritage. In an interview with Bryant Jackson and Lois More Overbeck, Kennedy explains the transformation of character and metamorphosis:

It is back to my childhood-people turning into different people; different characters feeling that you have a lot of characters inside of you that's just so much a part of me. I've always been like that I always just could very easily become a character in the movies or in a book.

(*Intersecting Boundaries* 154)

Funny house of a Negro is unique for its innovative depiction of characters that presents a picture of fragmentation. The play focuses on a young girl named Sarah whose confused identities are linked to her ambiguous feelings towards her White mother and Black father. When the play opens, Sarah's personality is split into four characters which represent various sides of her: Queen Victoria, the Duchess of Hapsburg, Jesus and Patrice Lumumba. Sarah has chosen powerful roles, which reflect political as well as spiritual dimensions. Sarah's strenuous efforts to achieve wholeness and identity and to reconnect the fragmented parts of her concurrent contest with paranoia, self-hatred, and will to self-destruction ultimately results in a disintegration of her personality. Kennedy demonstrated that Sarah's struggle is the struggle of all women in a world, which mocks and rejects blackness, femaleness and education, which together create an insurmountable barrier to achieve wholeness and psychic balance.

Adrienne Kennedy's one act play *The Owl Answers* was first presented at New York Shakespeare Festival Public Theatre in January 1969 and produced by Joseph Papp. The fragmentation of character is at issue in this play:

The Character change slowly back and forth into and end of themselves, leaving some garment from their previous selves upon them always to remind us of the nature of She Who is Clara Pass more who is Virgin Mary who is bastard who is owl's world.

(Linda Kintz, *Theatrical Subjects: The Subject's Tragedy* 165)

The play returns to the family space, but this time the mother is black. She is the bastard Black Mother who is Reverend's Wife who is Ann Boleyn. The father is White. He is Goddess Father who is Richest White Man in the town who is Dead White Father. These White fathers fade into the Reverend Pass more, who is black. The other characters are a White Bird who is Reverend Pass mores' canary who is God's Dove and there are the Negro man, Shakespeare, Chaucer and William, the conquered.

August Wilson is a creative playwright. He has an agenda and specific aim in his plays. He eschews the melting pot metaphors of liberal white America and rejects the assimilations rhetoric. Though he presents the general suffering of mankind, his focus is far more specific. He feels compelled to make concrete the oral traditions of Africa, which is expressed and experienced by the African American community. His resonance may be vast, but the scope of his vision is specific. He is clear and unambiguous about the political intentions of his work.

Wilson's Broadway debut is *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*. Set in 1920s, the play manifests the separation and migration through stories and reminiscences. Wilson's musical artists have their origins in the country. They are classical blues performers. Their musical extravaganza is the equipment for living in White America. A group of black musicians learns the cost of preserving the integrity of musical tradition. As the events of the play in fold, it centers on music. Music is the integral part of the lives and racial identity of these characters. The musicians like Cutler, Toledo and Slow Drag favor the plaintive and emotional sounds of blues and Levee craves for the flashier rhythms of swing. Wilson acknowledges blues as the wellspring of his art. In an interview with Bill Moyers, Wilson suggests:

The blues are important primarily because they contain the cultural responses of blacks in America to the situation that they find themselves in. Contained in the blues is a philosophical system at work. You get the ideas and attitudes of people as the part of the oral tradition.

(Contemporary Literary Criticism, Vol.118, p-332)

The blues developed from work songs and sorrow songs. It reflects the emotional lives of Blacks. The Blacks struggle to rise above the depressed lifestyles through blues. The blues lessen the tensions and anxieties of the daily trials of blacks. It develops the spirit of friendship and love. Wilson projects the life of a legendary Black singer called "Ma Rainey". She is the mother of blues. Her songs contain the ethos and feelings of Blacks, and the quintessence of the oppression of white overseers and anguish of blacks. It expresses the perpetual struggle of slavery and sharecropping of Blacks.

The theme of separation and migration is also explored in Wilson's second play *Fences*. Wilson projects the theme of separation as characters leave their families, homes and lovers. The Blacks struggle for a drink of water and morsel of food under the despotic hand of landlords. They are on the brink of disaster and destruction. Their dignity is potentially displayed. Their mouths are sealed, as they cannot lodge complaints against white masters. The oppression of landlords grows intolerable. The Black folks left their native land and migrated. The characters crave for new pastures. Bono's father leaves home. He expresses the inherent features of black families disrupted during the early part of the twentieth century:

A lot of them did. Back in those days what you talking about.....They walk out their front door and just take a down one or mother and keep on walking till you come to something else. Isn't you never heard of nobody having the walking blues.(52)

Wilson delineates social fragmentation. His emerging themes are separation and re-connection. He elevates this theme to a new, mystical dimension. The dreams, quests and fears of all the characters are entangled. The characters are interwoven in the web of the black fatality. Wilson is a generous artist. He provides compelling characters, an irritable story and a power of language that lends a vivid music to a myriad of emotions.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

None.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

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