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## Reality of Great Migration in the Writings of Prominent Black Playwrights

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### **Abstract:**

After the Civil War in America the segregationist policies and Black codes were imposed across the American South. These discriminatory laws were known as “Jim Crow Laws”. Under these circumstances, between 1916 and 1970, millions of Afro-Americans moved from the Southern United States to the urban North. The primary reason behind this migration (which is historically known as the Great Migration) was the poor economic condition of the blacks and the prevalent racial segregation. The Great Migration is one of the largest voluntary mass movement (internal) recorded in the history of migration. It marked a new beginning for the Afro-Americans in terms of political activism in USA and its impact are captured through literary records and imagination of the black writers. The African-American writers, like, Richard Wright, Zora Neale Hurston, Ralph Ellison, Tony Morrison, August Wilson skillfully portrayed the black life in North shifted from the South. They narrated the desire of their people to change the course of their lives and those of their children and how their hopes and dreams were shattered. Their condition was worsened in the North and they remained socially unrecognized there for a long time. These writers depicted the frustration and failures of the migrants while encountering and confronting the urbanized North and consequent alienation, entrapment and exploitation experienced by them in their dreamland. They criticized the predicament of the black ghettos and attempted to raise the deeper moral issues through developing a social awareness among their readers. Among them, August Wilson directly denounced this historical movement and its socio-economic impacts in the life of the black people through his dramas. He emphasized on the loss of collective as well as individual identity and solidarity among the blacks caused by the Great Migration.

**Keywords: Great Migration, the Afro-American people the Afro-American writers, the black life, loss of identity, socio-economic condition, the South, urban North, August Wilson.**

After the civil war in America the segregationist policies and Black codes were imposed across the American South. These discriminatory laws were known as “Jim Crow Laws”. Under these circumstances, between 1916 and 1970, millions of Afro-American moved from the Southern United States to urban North. The Great Migration is one of the largest voluntary mass movement (internal) recorded in the history of migrations. It outnumbers the migration of any other ethnic group --- Jews or Irish. During this period of 1916 to 1970, millions of African – American people left the American South, their home land, their economic and social base in America and moved to the urban North. The primary reason behind this migration was poor economic condition of the blacks and the prevalent racial segregation and discrimination against them in the southern states where Jim Crow laws were upheld. Most of the African American people hoped that this migration would change their life for something better, it would help them to attain freedom and achieve the “American Dream” (the term coined by historian James Truslow Adams). The north was the promised-land for them where all men would be treated as equals and they would get their right to life, liberty and pursuit of happiness as it was promised in the Emancipation Proclamation.

Almost 175,000 black Americans moved to Harlem in the North, during the Great Migration. Harlem was seen as the centre of Afro-American life in Northern America. In Harlem, a New Negro movement emerged in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Pan-African sensibilities developed by racial pride among the blacks triggered a blossoming of African-American art and culture including literature. In the field of creative arts this new development came to be known as Harlem Renaissance. It was a breakthrough resisting the white hegemony and their stereotypes about the blacks. It laid the groundwork for all upcoming African-American literature and had an enormous impact not only on subsequent black literatures but also on the black consciousness worldwide.

The black writers through their fictional representation of literary histories have tried to capture the impact and complexities of the Great Migration. From these literary histories the readers come to know about the other side of the story, the story often ignored and untold by the mainstream historians and academicians. The white American society ignored the history of

African-Americans as they categorized the black people as subhuman. So their history was vanished from the mainstream and the voices of their forefathers were forgotten.

The Great Migration marked a new beginning for the Afro-Americans in terms of political activism in USA. After the Great Migration when the blacks settled in the North, they got the voting right and the economical securities to some extent but they had to face a lot of hardship and challenges to achieve those things. They were newly freed from slavery and hoped to make a new identity for themselves in the great cities of the north where they would be treated as human beings but in industrial, urbanized north they remained mostly unrecognized and isolated for many years and were treated like outsiders. One of the most significant American voices of the modern theatre, August Wilson says,

“We were land-based agrarian people from Africa. We were uprooted from Africa and we spent 200 hundred years developing our culture as black Americans. And then we left the South. We uprooted ourselves and attempted to transplant this culture to the pavements of the industrialized North. And it was a transplant that did not take. I think if we had stayed in the South, we would have been a stronger people. And because the connection between the South of the 20s, 30s, and 40s has been broken, it’s very difficult to understand who we are.” (Shannon 659)

Wilson was born in a black ghetto of the Hill district of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania in the year 1945. During that time Pittsburgh was mostly inhabited by immigrants. The demand of labour enticed the southerners in Pittsburgh and they settled there at outside the main city. They restricted themselves along the riverbank, in shallow, ramshackle houses. They were largely the agrarian black people who had come to urbanized industrial areas in North during the great Migration. Wilson’s maternal grandparents were the blacks from the South whose forefathers were brought from Africa as slaves for the plantation. Joining the Great Migration Wilson’s grandmother left North Carolina and journeyed on foot to Pittsburgh. Wilson had very bitter experience of racial discrimination as a child of a black mother. The white children used to throw stones at their house for entertainment. Wilson had to leave school because he had written an essay on Napoleon and the teacher could not believe that a black boy could write so well, so he accused him of cheating. So Wilson openly regretted his peoples’ decision of leaving the South which was there second home after Africa.

“We came to the North, and we’re still victims of discrimination and oppression in the North. The real reason that people left was a search for jobs, because the agriculture, cotton agriculture in particular, could no longer support us. But the move to the cities has not been a good move. Today ...we still don’t have jobs. The last time blacks in America were working during the Second World War, when there was a need for labor, and it did not matter what color you were.” (Shannon 659)

As a dramatist Wilson recuperated the past through his plays and he wanted to make his people learn from their past and history and realize their mistake of leaving behind their roots in the South. He wished that the black people in the North would go back to the South or at least visit it once to understand their culture and reconnect with it. So his protagonist in *Two Trains Running*, Memphis decides to return to the South from the North one day and to catch the one of two trains actually running daily there. He goes to Aunt Ester for her guidance .She tells him that he must “go back and pick up the ball” (*The Two Trains Running*, Act II, Scene V). He interprets it as mandate to return to the South, face things there and reclaim the farm that is rightfully his. According to Wilson Memphis can be free to go forward when he learns to deal with his past only. As the play closes, he is triumphant and full of plans for the future.

According to prolific black writer Zora Neale Hurston , though Afro-Americans got some opportunities in the North due to the Great Migration , their overall experience there has been mostly violent, terrifying, devastating and inhumane. She emphasized on the fact that the black people lost their rural folk culture due to assimilation into an urban mass culture. Her play *Color Struck* (1925) exposes the tragic and devastating implications of the Great Migration. It narrates how the black peoples’ identity was fragmented by the displacement of their culture, their history got missing after the migration and their collective social recognition was lost. Hurston pointed out that the black southerners were the others in the North and condemned the commodification of the cultural artifacts of the black people for the amusement of the whites in North.

All major African American writers of post Great Migration era have explored how poverty, unemployment, racial violence, political corruption, legal injustice restricted the southerners from building up satisfactory lives in the North. They presented the reality of the black people with the emphasis on their resistance to survive and overcoming the adversities. They depicted how the blacks made their way through the oppression and racism that structured their

environment. Great Migration failed to generate the expected social and political transformation for the African Americans. Richard Wright writes in his autobiography *Black Boy*, “My first glimpse of the flat black stretches of Chicago depressed and dismayed me. It mocked all my fantasies. Chicago seemed an unreal city.... I caught an abiding sense of insecurity in people around me.” (*Black Boy* 261-263)

Lorraine Hansberry in *Raising in the Sun* portrays the struggle of the blacks to achieve American Dream in the North and in *Invisible Man* Ralph Ellison depicts their striving to establish a sense of identity and how the political forces in the North conspire to keep the black people cornered denying them the right to life, liberty and pursuit of happiness which were guaranteed to all Americans in Emancipation Proclamation. Authors like Langston Hughes realize that the black southerners have attempted to shape their identity through the recognition and acceptance from the white northerners. Playwright Amiri Baraka captures the reality of the African Americans as the oppressed minority and strangers in the strange land of the north who were chasing after the false “American Dream” in his plays.

The literary texts about the post Reconstruction era narrate the struggle of the blacks in the North. The blacks there struggled to feed their family and to live a clean life with dignity. They struggled hard to achieve economic independence and equality. North did not welcome them with open arms, inviting to fulfill their American Dream. Racial difference was everywhere in the North. African Americans’ household, locality, educational opportunities, economic activity were affected and restricted severely due to racism and capital-labour relationship between the blacks and the whites. After the Great Migration, personal life of the black southerners got more complicated due to the drastic changes in family structure as the migrant men left their families to find employment and estranged black women abandoned by their fathers or husbands or sons began to participate in labour force. There was more conflict within the home where black men could not find employment in the North after shifting from the South.

Richard Wright describes the plight poignantly in *Black Boy*,

“I found Aunt Cleo aged beyond her years. Her husband, a product of a southern plantation, had, like my father, gone off and left her. Why had he left? My aunt could not answer. She was beaten by the life of the city, just as my mother had been beaten. Where ever my eyes

turned they saw stricken, frightened black faces trying vainly to cope with a civilization they did not understand. I felt lonely, I had fled one insecurity and had embraced another.”  
(250)

In *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, Wilson portrays how great family structure of the black people crumbled and the families got dysfunctional due to Great Migration. Migration could not always guarantee them for desired freedom, safety, security and stability. Some of them continuously moved from town to town searching desperately for a job and a place to live in. It brought more restlessness in their life as the loved one often abandoned his/her partner in search for a better life somewhere else. Joe Turner comes to the North looking for his wife who has disappeared leaving him and his daughter in the south. The people in the play, like, Herald Loomis, Jeremy, Mattie Campbell, Molly Cunningham all are abandoned by their partners. Instead of steadiness migration invited escapism their life. Jeremy says, “I woke up and got out of there. Found my shoes and took off. That’s the only thing I could think of to do.” (Act I, Scene I)

Wilson shows that to avoid disappointment, frustration, heartbreak and struggle people often decide to run away or chose the wrong way. As a result, their family structures collapse. Children of these families suffer because of absentee parents and as they drift from one place to another. Wilson demonstrates how these young people develop sense of rootlessness, lovelessness and irresponsibility from a very early phase of their life. Wilson also illustrates that people like Bynum also keep moving not out of tendency to avoid adversities but to find out the deeper meaning of life and it was Wilsons conviction that it can only be found out by spiritualism handed down by their African ancestors. So externally, Africans Americans were in search of job, money and love but internally they were searching for a spiritual experience which was next to impossible to find out in the hardcore materialistic world of industrial north.

August Wilson shows how the Great Migration destroyed the blacks’ social and personal lives. In *Fences*, he has written about the complication and predicament of the protagonist Troy’s life in the North. He struggles to make a stable economic and social life here. He worked in the sharecropping farm in the south but had to leave it. He arrived in Pittsburgh and was unable to maintain his family being jobless. So his last resort was to steal and rob. Eventually, he was arrested for murdering a man while robbing and landed in jail. Originally he was a passionate baseball player but after spending fifteen years in jail his dream of becoming a sportsman was

completely shattered and he ended being a sanitation worker. Troy views himself as a victim of segregation that was still prevalent in north. So he does not want his son Cory being allured by the dream of joining college football team with the whites. He is sure that in this white world his dream would lead him to nowhere. Thus *Fences* is a critique on Great Migration and Troy epitomizes the socio-economic paraphernalia of the blacks during the great migration. Wilson always believed that though there were racism and slavery in the South, there had been some good old things about the deep South. Though the south was a place of complex experiences for the Africans, it had been the second home for them after their arrival in America from Africa.

Afro-Americans left the South with the hope that the North would be free of racial tensions but faced a different, less welcoming reality there after their arrival. They attained lower occupational status than the native northerners. Most black men worked in low-paying and low-status jobs. As farm workers children could also contribute financially in their families but in north they became only consumers and the financial condition of the black families worsened and they felt more burdened. Afro-Americans who fled from the South soon found that they had not escaped segregation and discrimination. The southern migrants were received with suspicion and hostility by the northerners. The northerners grew increasingly uncomfortable with shifting racial balance. The migrants from the south were often perceived as signs of laziness, ignorance and danger. They were blamed for a variety of social problems including alcoholism, crime, several venereal diseases. Northerners also considered the migrants as aberrant, less stable, dysfunctional and as people with limited potential. Southerners tried to find a proper place in North which would provide them with safety and security which they could not enjoy in the South. But they were confined to a particular area in the suburbs of the main city which was overcrowded and filled with dilapidated housing and there was hardly any facility. Complicated relation between the southerners and northerners led to frequent incidents of police brutality. Their conflicts caused infamous Chicago Race Riot in 1919 and ultimately the Black Power Movement took place in 1960 as a reaction against the white American supremacy.

Sociologist Edward Franklin Frazier elucidated that the physical and intellectual segregation had been there in North and initially it was in an unchallenged form because the Negro was stereotyped as an inferior race due to their biological and social inheritance. Because of their different physical characteristics, they were also considered as cognitively impaired. “The Negro

problem” which was the root cause of slavery in the South was also persistent in the North. Systematic racism in North was equivalent to Jim Crow Law in the South. It was enacted by the elite universities in North. Black scholars were denied employment in colleges and universities. They could not claim even a fraction of the research, teaching and travel resources available in the elite institutions. Their access to these opportunities was severely restricted and controlled by the whites. The white hegemony deprived them of their rightful opportunities. The system of exclusion was clearly defined in North too.

Still ‘De facto’ segregation continues in the forms of residential segregation and school segregation. Though black and white segregation is consistently declining in most of the metropolitan cities and areas of America, still the blacks and the whites often reside in different neighbourhoods. At present, Afro-American students are technically permitted to attend the educational institutions with the whites but in reality, they cannot attend the educational institutions maintaining the segregation policies internally. So, recent studies on racism show that there is a tendency of self-segregation among the black students.

Interestingly, a reverse flow of former migrants took place after 1970. At least half of them returned to the South and settled mostly in the metropolitan cities. The reverse movement was mainly opted by the students, younger, college educated African-Americans because their experience in North had been becoming increasingly frustrating due to the unfriendly surroundings, conflicts in educational institutions and deteriorating employment opportunities. They could not sustain with their frugal income, pressure of living on the margin and day to day confrontations in the urban North.

Wilson emphasized on the fact that the blacks had lost their African consciousness as well as their legacy in the South and the crisis of the black consciousness can only be overcome by practicing spirituality in the African way. He has illustrated the reality of assimilation. In the North, the external prosperity of the blacks has been evidently visible with the passing of the time but meanwhile the blacks have begun to forget their poetry and songs, the ancestral voices from their past. They have been stripped of their spirituality as they have been wrongly absorbed in the white American commercialism and materialism. Financial success (achieved by a small number of the black population) has cut them off from their soul’s song. Wilson saw red flags in this gradual

gentrification of the blacks. His artistic sensibility could not ignore the danger that lies there in being subsumed into the dominant western/ American culture.

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