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## The Powerhouse Women in August Wilson's Plays

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### Abstract:

August Wilson has described the life of the African-Americans during the twentieth century in the newly industrialized North of America in his magnum opus *The Twentieth Century Cycle*. The cycle of plays is a decade-by-decade saga about the struggle of the black people for their existence in an all white world. It is said to be primarily focused on the black men's problem and their survival strategies amidst multiple challenges. However, it cannot be overlooked that besides creating some unconventional tragic heroes, Wilson also created a plethora of extraordinary women who act as the life-force for the people around them and the whole African community as a whole. They collectively represent the matrix from which the black community gets its nourishment for participating as the work force in the industrialized American North which has been the centre of capitalism to date. In this cycle of plays, we can find women who can be so inspiring that they generate awe and veneration equally. There are some other women portrayed in the plays who are beautiful with all their vulnerabilities, and they demand our compassion and sensitivity as readers to understand them.

**Keywords:** August Wilson, plays, black women, life-force, matrix, inspiring, vulnerable.

August Wilson has created some unforgettable male protagonists like Troy Maxson, Mel Sturdyvant and Levee in his "Twentieth Century Cycle of Plays". Though he confessed quite a few times that he could not portrayed their female counter parts with same credibility due to his lack of awareness of women's issues, he has also created diverse female characters with the same skillfulness. The women in his plays represent the subalterns who are doubly discriminated and marginalized for their racial and sexual identities. Wilson has pointed to the status quo of black women in an "all white world" of the American North during the twentieth century. The female

characters in Wilson's works deserve reader's admiration as they show the highest degree of resilience at the lowest point of life and act as cultural agents of the black community who carry the baton of African traditions and rituals. They are the actual representatives of African culture and traditions in America for their adequate resourcefulness. While writing about African diaspora women in America, Bernice Johnson Regan affirms: "Women were the heads of their communities, the keepers of the tradition. Lives of these women were defined by their culture, the needs of their communities and the people they served .... The women, however, became central to the evolving structure for resolving areas of conflict and maintaining, something creating....Mothering/nurturing is a vital force and process establishing relationships throughout the universe....The earth is a woman. Africa is a woman". (Reagon 88)

Most of the women in Wilson's plays are so inspiring that they generate awe and veneration of the readers. The most significant influence behind the creation of these incredible women was Wilson's mother, Daisy Wilson. Wilson never forgot how his mother had raised her seven children as a single parent on public assistance in a Pittsburgh slum. Though Daisy Wilson survived by welfare and on the wages of a janitorial job, she kept her children well-fed, educated and healthy and helped them to develop a positive racial identity. Wilson grew up in his mother's house under his mother's care, guidance and supervision. He learned the language of his mother, imbibed her culture, accepted her religious beliefs, attitude towards sex, concept of beauty and justice and inherited her sensitivity. These inheritance from mother helped Wilson to grow as an artist. The mothers had been the matriarchs in Wilson's family. Wilson used to fondly remember the "Never say die" attitude of her mother and recalled her as a woman of strong principles. He observed the contents of his mother's life, her myths, her superstitions, her prayers, the ingredients in her pantry, the smell of her kitchen, the songs from her parched lips, her thoughtful repose, her pregnant laughter and he valued those elements as worthy of art. Wilson imitated his mother's temperament and habits while creating the female protagonists of his plays, so, most of the women characters in Wilson's dramas are remarkably strong-willed and unprecedentedly self-determined like his mother.

In spite of being unconventional and revolutionary sometimes, Wilson's women rarely fail to perform their typical duties and maintain traditional gender roles as mothers or wives with expertise and zeal. They support and serve the men of the house, take care of their children, do

all the household chores without expecting any support from their male counterparts. They are among the simplest and commonest folk who are visible be at humble homes and in the public places like shops, beauty salons and churches and their presence has made these ordinary places the alternative centres of African culture which are quite socially significant. These places act as cultural crossroads where people meet in groups, indulge with their community and enjoy the collectivity and plurality. Women are often seen serving foods in Wilson's plays and the food symbolises the matrix from which the whole African- American community gets nourishment to sustain.

Wilson has created amazing mothers and kind hearted motherly women who bear strong resemblances with his mother. They have some striking similarities in their characters that they share a kind of sisterhood. Rose (in *Fences*), Tonya (in *King Hedley II*), Bartha (in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*), Berniece (in *Piano Lesson*), Louise, Rena --- all of them are sources of strength and driving force for their families, especially for their children.

Wilson portrayed Rena in *Jitney* (1979) in keeping with the tradition. She is mature and intelligent. She is a counter foil to her hot-headed, immature boyfriend Darnell. She is like most of the African-American women who try relentlessly to balance things and to maintain the stability in relationships. Then, there is a revolutionary "Big Mama" Ma in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (1982). She is the legendary blues singer, "The Mother of the Blues", Ma Rainey. She was the first among the blues singers to record the songs. She made her way to the top of music industry. It had been largely dominated by the whites during her time so it was not at all easy for her to rule over that industry like a queen. In the play, she is least bothered of husband or family or home. The conflict in the play is quite different from the conflict aroused out of the domestic battles of *Fences*. Ma Rainey struggles to maintain her dignity while defying the white promoter's attempts to take control of her life while exploiting her musical talent. Ma's commitment and dedication to music, singing the African blues are her ways to endure and fight against racism and sexism. Spreading the beats of blues in America is her strategy to survive. She enjoys her status of being called "Madame" Ma Rainey, the celebrated queen of the downtrodden, carefully holds her gaudy, sassy, abrasive image to grapple with the odds of life in the racist white American society, lives her life freely and according to her own choices and she is not ashamed to live a daring and wild life rejecting the conventional societal norms.

On the contrary, Rose in *Fences* (1984) is an eternal mother. She is a symbol of strength and sacrifice. She puts her own needs aside for the well-being of her children and husband, Troy. She exemplifies compassion and gentleness in her relationships. She is the source of love and understanding in the Maxson family. She is so empathetic by nature that when Troy asks her to mother the baby girl borne out of an extramarital relationship between him and his girlfriend Alberta (who died during child delivery), Rose agrees. She agrees to raise the motherless child as her own child but severs her ties with Troy as a wife. She tells her husband, “ From right now... this child got a mother. But you a womanless man” (*Fences*, act II, scene II). It has been arguably one of the most provocative depictions of an African- American woman to date. Apparently, Rose may seem to be a very docile homemaker, commonly found among black women of the 1950s, but she shows the other side of her personality when the situation demands her to be vocal in protest. She accepts the baby because the baby is innocent but she does not hesitate for a moment to punish her husband for his betrayal. She rises as a woman who cannot lose her individuality at the cost of being a doting wife. Eventually, she takes her stand and chooses to focus on the helpless child who has just lost her mother instead of focusing on the intense pain and humiliation that Troy has inflicted on her by violating the primary condition of a marriage. She expressed vehemently her disapproval of being taken for granted: “I been standing with you! I been right here with you, Troy, I got a life too. I gave eighteen years of my life to stand in the same spot with you. Don't you think I ever wanted other things? Don't you think I had dreams and hope? What about my life? You not the only one who's got wants and needs. But I held on to you.” (Act II, Scene 1)

Bertha Holly, the wife of Seth Holly, plays the maternal role to her tenants in *Joe Turner Come and Gone* (1984). She is like the benign mother earth who offers solace and the much needed order to the broken hearted people of her community by providing them shelter. She shows her motherly concern for these people and acts like an anchor who binds these people in her shelter home who otherwise behave like nomads. She manages to promote a sense of cohesiveness among them as she interacts with them very cordially. She tries to understand their inner turmoil and offers them her compassionate advice wisely and lovingly. Her compassionate interaction helps in healing their disrupted and wounded psyche. She performs African rituals and partakes in Bynum's folk magic, though Seth does not believe in these things. Bertha is a

mediator between Seth and Bynum, the two conflicting forces in the play. She consoles Mattie in her difficult time and understands her desperation as a woman.

Another character of this play, Martha had once been a very docile wife like Rose and she also shows strength and courage like Rose when it becomes necessary for her to make choices in life. She tells her husband Harold Loomis: “I stayed and waited there for five years before I woke up one morning and decided that you was dead to me. Even if you weren’t, you was dead to me. I wasn’t gonna carry you with me no more. So I killed you in my heart. I picked up what was left and went on to make life without you. I was a young woman with life at my beckon. I could not drag you behind me like a sack of cotton. (*Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*, Act II, Scene 5) She left her daughter Zonia with her mother in the South and travelled to the North. Later, when she reunites with her daughter and husband, she takes the daughter with her but leaves her husband (Loomis) as the courses of their lives have changed over the years. She, too like Rose accepts her responsibility as a mother but denies to drag a dead relation further. Besides Bertha and Martha, Mattie Campbell is another female character in *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*. She is a pathetic character in contrary with the other female protagonists. She is no longer confident of her ability to keep a man. Earlier she depended on her husband completely. But her husband has abandoned her and now she frantically looks for love and demands validation as a woman from any random man. She desperately wants to get married and have children: “All my life I been looking for somebody to stop and stay with me. I done already got too many things to forget about. I take Jack Carper’s hand and it feels so rough and strong. Seem like he’s the strongest man in the world the way he hold me. Like he’s bigger than the whole world and can’t nothing bad get to me. Even when he act mean sometimes he still make everything seem okay with the world. Like there is a part of it that belongs to just you. Now you telling me to forget about him?” (*Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*, Act I, Scene I). Mattie’s loneliness and her feeling of incompleteness without a man make her easy prey for men. They like to spend some time with Mattie without any serious intentions. Unlike Rose and Martha she does not choose wisely, her choices are made out of desperation. Ironically she describes the destructive pattern into which she is entrapped: “I just can’t go through life piecing myself out to different men, I need a man who wants to stay with me.” (*Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*, Act I, Scene I)

Another character in the play, Molly Cunningham neither prefers no such bonds with any man, nor she wants to have children. She says: "Molly can make it nice by herself too. Molly don't need nobody leave her cold in hand. The world is rough enough as it is." (Act II, Scene I) She thinks domestic duties make women servile and motherhood makes them more vulnerable: "I make sure I don't get no babies....Molly Cunningham aint gonna be tied down with no babies" (Act II, Scene I). She declares, "I don't trust these men, Jack or nobody else. These men liable to do anything. They wait just until they get one woman tied and locked up with them... then they look around to see if they can get another one. Molly don't pay them no mind. One's just as good as the other if you ask me. I ain't never met no man that meant nobody no good" (Act II, Scene I). She further adds: "I don't trust nobody but the good Lord above and I don't love nobody but my mama" (Act II, Scene I). She remains very alert and self-centered throughout the play. Molly's choices are the reflections of her strong determination. Psychological disruption of the women characters in this play represents the cultural fragmentation among the whole African-American community. The Afro-Americans earlier lived in the rural South, but now they are dispersed to all parts of the United States by the malefic design of the slave owners. The absence of women, especially of the mother at home indicates dysfunctional families among the blacks. Loomis' search for his wife is actually metaphorical. It implies his search for the lost and missing part of his existence which he has left in the South and this loss is the root cause of all sorts of instabilities in his life.

Berniece in *Piano Lesson* (1986) is the matriarch of the Charles family who had been slaves for generations. She fiercely protects the family heirloom but perceives herself as only "the other half" and the widow of her deceased husband, Crawly. Berniece obsessively clings to her husband's memory. She is not ready to give her life a second chance. She rejects Avery's marriage proposal and declares that she wants to focus only on the upbringing of her daughter, Maretha. Berniece is a mother who lives for her child as she is the only love of her life but she is equally passionate about the piano, which serves as a medium to connect with the ancestors who had been slaves of the Sutter family. The piano is a symbol of her forefather's struggle, pain and suffering. Berniece's grandfather engraved the piano with the illustrations of his wife, who had been sold somewhere else as a slave. Berniece considers the piano as a part of their family's past and refuses to sell it and hopes that one day she would give her daughter piano lessons learnt by her from her mother. Her character is full of paradoxes. At times she appears to be very

vulnerable as she prefers to confine herself and Maretha within the web of memories of her deceased husband. But there are some other moments when she appears to be intimidating as she acts like the boss of her family who manages everything by herself while surviving during the critical time of Great Depression in the 1930s.

The character of Risa in *Two Trains Running* (1990) is another fascinating creation of Wilson. She has scarred her own legs intentionally because she does not want to live her life as the men's object of desire and fantasy. She demands for the respect she deserves as a human being and wishes to be treated as an independent individual, regardless of race and gender in a world where black people are not well-accepted and a black woman is perceived as someone less than human.

In *King Hedley II* (1991), Wilson has portrayed two women, Ruby and Tonya who are very different from each other by nature and live two entirely different lives. Ruby was a jazz singer in her youth and kept moving from one place to another with other band members. Now she has come to live with her son King as she has become old. Wilson has narrated the crisis generated by the tension between mother and son in this play. The conflict and tension depicted in this drama might be a partial reflection of the conflict between Wilson and his mother regarding his career choice. Wilson's mother wants her son Freddie (nickname of August Wilson) to be a lawyer as he was very bright as a student but Wilson left the high school and decided to be a poet. In the play, Ruby ponders over her complex relationship with her son. In a monologue she says, "I done tried everything I know. King don't believe I love him. It's a mother's love. It don't never go away. I love me but I love King more. Sometimes I might not love me but there don't never come a time I don't love him. He don't understand that." (Act I, Scene 2)

Tonya is King's wife in the play. She became a mother when she was only a teenager. Due to the motherhood in such a tender age, she has lost the prime time of her youth making home and taking care of children, especially during the seven years when King was in jail. Tonya feels more frustrated and angry when she cannot get an abortion. She does not want to be saddled with more babies as she knows that there are very few prospects for a black child in America who belongs to a poor African family. Tonya says, "Don't seem like there is nothing left. I'm through the babies. I ain't raising no more. I ain't raising kid to have somebody shoot him. To have friends shoot him. To have police shoot him. Why I want to bring another life into this



world that don't respect life" (Act I, Scene 2). All that she wants is a decent and respectful living for her child. She is constrained to see her daughter repeating the same teen mother role and struggling to make the child alive.

In *Seven Guitars* (1995), Lousie is an elderly and wise mother figure. She loves Hedley like her own son. Lousie also assumes the maternal role to Canewell. But when Hedley tells her that she might need Hedley's protection, she replies, "I got me a thirty –two caliber pistol up there. That be all the man I need. You need to see the doctor." (Act I, Scene III)

Aunt Ester is the ultimate, revered matriarch and the most important character in Wilson's Ten Play Cycle. "Aunt Ester" actually symbolizes "ancestors". She is the embodiment of African tradition, wisdom and spirituality. She is believed to be centuries old. She arrived in America in 1619 when the African people set foot on America for the first time. She manages to survive for 366 years in a brutally racist society. She is a former slave and urges the Africans to reconnect with their past and to remember it always. She foresees things as a mother does. She helps people to find relief in their turbulent life and gives advice on how to cope with life rather than to change the circumstances aggressively. She guides Citizen Burlew to peace and courage by sending him on a metaphorical journey across the Atlantic through the Middle Passage to the City of Bones at the bottom of the ocean's floor. Hollway says, "She makes you right with yourself" (*Two Trains Running*, act I, scene I). Her house becomes a site of cleansing. There she serves people as she helps them to get reconnected with their cultural past. Stool Pigeon says, "Aunt Ester knew all the secrets of life" (*King Hedley II*, Prologue). Until her death she had been the rock centre for the African people in a universe of flux.

Wilson could portray a wide range of women characters with so much depth and detail because he tried to perceive things from their point of view instead of his own view point as a dramatist. Wilson's observation of women around him with an insight saved the characters from being stereotyped. The readers of Wilson can understand the motivations, desires, fears and whims of each character clearly due to Wilson's authentic presentation of each character's journey and personal history. Wilson has revealed the female psychology and framed some compelling narratives through some powerful monologues spoken by the female protagonists. Through the words of Bynum, Wilson expressed his sensitivity towards the women, his respect for their depth and diversity. Bynum tells Jeremy Furlow: "When you grab hold of that woman,

you get something there. You got a whole world there. A woman can take and make you feel like something...A woman is enough to show you what she can do. Your mother was a woman. She made something out of you. Taught you to converse, and all about how to take care of yourself, what to do with yourself when you get lonesome. That's a mighty thing she did. But you just can't look at a woman to jump off into bed with her. That's foolish thing to ignore a woman like that"(Joe Turner's Come and Gone, Act I, Scene III). Wilson has understood very well that a woman's presence in a man's life should be formidable. As a dramatist Wilson has created some memorable female characters who may share some similar traits but are different as individuals and almost every character leaves lasting impression on the audience for their uniqueness.

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