

Repression and Resistance: A Study of August Wilson's *Gem of the Ocean*

Rupalee Jasrotia

PhD Scholar, Department of English, University of Jammu, J&K

Received: June 09, 2018

Accepted: July 23, 2018

ABSTRACT

In spite of giving the equal status of American citizen to blacks, whites are giving them the status of thieves, gamblers and murderers. The economic inequality has been prevalent since the times of slavery. The conditions are very crucial in the south, where sharecropping or tenant farming has replaced the plantation farming and blacks are still exploited. Moreover, the socio-political system of the south is also a culprit in supporting the inhuman system of exploitation. The blacks were oppressed by the whites in the Deep South through slavery. Therefore, they migrated to the northern cities. But after coming to the North, the situation was no better. Here, the whites use every means to sabotage and exploit the blacks.

Keywords:

In the play *Gem of the Ocean*, August Wilson has criticised the American dream, which proclaims the equality and freedom of every individual. Racial discrimination, racial violence and racial exploitation of African-Americans in America expose the stark reality of the American democracy. Equal opportunity and equal rights are denied to the African-Americans. The white men enjoy all the privileges in America. They have victimised the blacks in the plantations as well as in the industries. They are enjoying the fruits of the labour of blacks in America. The whites have taken for granted the labour of the blacks. One can only see the hypocrisy of whites. By using various hypocritical ways, they exploit blacks. The blacks are not treated equally. This has resulted in the increasing rage and anger inside the blacks' heart. The play reveals the day to day racial discrimination and exploitation of the African-Americans. It is the black man who has given his sweat and blood for building America. African-Americans are treated by whites as second class citizens even after his many decades of contribution for building America.

Keywords: Racism, oppression, discrimination, American Dream.

The play *Gem of the Ocean* explores the injustices and tyrannical humiliations by the coloniser on the colonized. The coloniser takes the pleasure of all the benefits and privileges in the colonial world. But the colonized has to live in the deplorable conditions. They exist only as objects for the coloniser and are not seen as individuals. The play exposes the economic disparity between the blacks and the whites as well as the racial relations between the poor blacks and the rich whites.

The rural compartments which blacks left during their migration from the south to the northern cities are described by W.E.B. Du Bois in *The Souls of the Black Folks* (1903) as "dirty and dilapidated, smelling of eating and sleeping, poor ventilated, and anything but homes" (40). Then, after coming to the north, people are unable to find a place for living. The blacks who have come to Pittsburgh have to live under the bridges and on the streets. They can't afford the boarding facilities in Pittsburgh because of the high rents. They are thrown out of the boarding houses after some days.

The blacks have been affected by the legacy of racism and its harmful effect. August Wilson has depicted the racism and its harmful effects on the lives of the colored people. Racial discrimination, as a result, brings into focus the physical ill-treatment, unjust domination, economic inequality and segregated ways of life. Garret Brown is a black man who has been falsely accused of stealing a bucket of nails. In order to save himself from the police, he jumped in the river. He chooses to kill himself by drowning in the river of Pittsburgh rather than to be killed by the police. This act reminds one of those rebellious Africans who jumped in the Atlantic Ocean during Mid-Atlantic Slave Trade. Instead of spending their lives as slaves, they decided to die. The people working with Garret Brown in the mill started hailing him as a hero. The death of Garret Brown has incited them to show an open resistance to white's colonial rule. They all stand in the defence of his sacrifice and have refused to work. On the day of his funeral, every black stood outside the church of the Reverend Tolliver to honour him for his sacrifice. Everyone is full of anger due to the death of Garret Brown. The black man is not given any chance of proving his innocence in the corrupt judicial system

of whites. Garret Brown has to kill himself to prove his innocence as there seemed to be no way for a black man to prove himself in a white man's world.

The colonised people started protesting against the onslaught of the white's domination. In order to suppress the resistance of the colonised people, the coloniser uses various repressive forces. The whites use various repressive forces like police and army for their own benefit. Through the use of repressive forces, they try to exploit and suppress the black people. The mill owners employ the police to suppress the revolt of the people for the smooth working of their exploitative economic system. The Police use various means to intimidate the colonised people. Therefore, by arresting and killing the people, the police try to suppress the revolt of the masses. The whites use economic system, police, judiciary, law, etc to dominate and control the poor blacks. W.E.B. Du Bois has observed in *The Souls of the Black Folks* (1903) that:

To-day the black man...has almost nothing to say as to how much he shall be taxed, or how those taxes shall be expended; as to who shall execute the laws, and how they shall do it; as to who shall make the laws, and how they shall be made...the laws are made by men who have little interest in him; they are executed by men who have absolutely no motive for treating the black people with courtesy or consideration. (176-177)

The coloniser appropriates laws according to his own benefits. Law is created by the white men and is, in fact, for the white men. Law acts as a tool in the hands of the white men. They make the laws in their favour. Solly is able to understand the double standards of the white men. The condition of the colored people is horrible in the Deep South. Citizen Barlow has come from Alabama. He is a young man who has left Alabama four weeks earlier to come to Pittsburgh. The whites have closed every road so that the colored people cannot leave the south. The blacks are the only source of free and cheap labour in south for the plantations. The migration of blacks from the south is affecting the economy of the south. The blacks form the only labour force behind the economy of the south. The whites have become used to the cheap labour of the blacks and, therefore, they try to stop blacks from migrating because it will affect their plantation business.

In the Deep South, the colored people are showing resistance by running away. The whites want the colored people to work in their plantations. They are forcing them to work as slaves without giving them any salary. They are warning the colored people to live here and work for them. The whites are incurring heavy losses in their business because the colored people are running away to the northern cities. They try to use every means to put a stop on the migration of blacks. Eliza, sister of Solly Two Kings doesn't want to stay in south because of the exploitative practices of white people. The whites are employing various violent ways to stop people from migrating. In a letter written by Eliza from south to Solly Two Kings, asking for help from him, she describes the terrible situation in the south.

Most of the black men working in the mill with the Garret Brown have come from the country side. Instead of earning money, they are under debt. They are trapped by the white men's diabolical ways. These people, working in the mills and factories have started fighting for their rights. The police have started arresting these mill workers and locked them up in the jails. Many are easily killed by the police as the policemen are equipped with guns and cannons.

The whites are rich and are more powerful than the colored masses. The blacks are the poor rural masses who have migrated to the north to escape the harsh colonial regime. But, in the north they still find themselves exploited by the same supremacist white colonial regime. These black masses get themselves equipped with stones, sticks and knives. These are the only weapons available for the poor black masses. Both, Solly Two Kings and Citizen Barlow also carry either stick, knives or stones with them for their defence.

Earlier, Solly used to carry stones with him but they were too heavy to carry. Solly avoids killing and therefore, carries a stick which will only injure a person. He advises other people to carry bone breaker i.e. sticks and stones that are less fatal than the knives. He doesn't want to kill anybody because he loves life and thinks that everybody has a right to live. This act depicts the humanity of the black people which is lacking in the white men. The whites only spread the message of killing through whipping, lynching and shooting the the black people. However, the whites have become savages. They are without any speck of humanity. They claim that the black people are savages and primitive and, therefore, need to be civilized. But the whites have actually become brutes who need to learn the lesson of justice, equality, love, life and humanity from the black masses.

The whites work with the help of hypocrisy. The black people, who have migrated from the country-side, get allured to the cheap jobs in the mill and factories. They are in need of any kind of job. The mill owners try to fool them with cheap boarding facilities. The quality and the quantity of the food is not worth the price the blacks have to pay. Moreover, the rooms available for sharing were not in good conditions. One

has to put up with more than one person in the same room with only a single bed. Others have to sleep on the floor. The charges of the boarding are more than the wage one gets. The mill owners use tactics to lure people by telling them that they will pay two dollars a day. But the people get only a “dollar fifty” (22). Also the charge of the food and the lodging is two dollars. The people end up owing money to the mill. In fact they end up again in another kind of slavery. People have to work for the mill in order to pay for the money they owe to the mill. Neither they can leave the job nor search for some other job. The mill owners make use of these hypocritical means to trap the colored people. Citizen Barlow is also one of the mill workers, who fall into the shenanigans of the mill owners. The people migrating to the northern cities are facing many difficulties.

Jean-Paul Sartre in the Preface of *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963), talks about the form of resistance shown by the colonised. He says, “They’re sly and thieving; just imagine! But their petty thefts mark the beginning of resistance which is still unorganised” (15). The mill accused Garret Brown of stealing the bucket of nails. He ran because he knew that he would be hanged even if the police don’t have any valid proof against him. The whites have devised very harsh punishment for the colored people even for the petty crimes. They will silence every voice which questions and stands against their authority. They give harsh punishments to the colored people to instill fear in them to think before interfering in their working. The police will falsely prove the stealing of Garret Brown and would have hanged him afterwards.

The colonised is demonised and dehumanised under colonisation. The mill workers are referred to as beasts in the play. The colonial resistance shown by the colonized is equated with the “running around like pack of animals” (30). They are only seen as objects by the mill owners. They don’t treat them as humans. The mill workers are equated with wickedness. The whites’ arrest black for loitering. They see blacks as thieves and equate them with sin and viciousness.

Franz Fanon notes that, “colonialism is not a machine capable of thinking, a body endowed with reason. It is naked violence and only gives in when confronted with greater violence” (7). The violence of the mill workers is justified, but only if it is used to conquer a brutal and corrupted violent system. The mill workers have realised that the violence is the best way to overthrow the oppressive system of whites. For mill workers, there is no one to hear their pleas from the white world to end the modern form of slavery in the mills. Fanon rejected non-violence as, “an attempt to settle the colonial problem around the negotiating table” (10). It is only through the violent struggle that the mill workers can liberate themselves from the despotism of corrupted blacks and whites.

The violent revolt of the black is necessary for overthrowing the violent and exploitative system of whites. It has elevated black man from the inferior position of a dehumanised slave, who started fighting for the human rights which are denied to him. Franz Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963), also states that:

At the individual level, violence is a cleansing force. It rids the colonized from their inferiority complex, of their passive and despairing attitude. It emboldens them, and restores their self-confidence.

The violent revolt of blacks acts as a cleansing force. It is also the way by which African-Americans free themselves psychologically from the inferior status of a slave, who is weak, uncivilized and submissive. The violence of the blacks, who belong to the periphery of the colonial world, is a response to the varieties of violence practiced by the white master—physical, emotional and cultural. The violence of the blacks acts as a mirror for the whites, to remind them about the atrocities of colonialism. In *Culture and Imperialism* Edward W. Said mentions that both Lukács and Fanon views violence as a voluntary and rational act that targets to defeat reification. The violence acts as “a cleansing force” (326-30).

Unlike Marx, who thinks that it only through empowerment of the proletariat class by which it can be freed from the labour, Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963), focuses on the liberation of the proletariat through violence and revolution. The colonized mill workers can only “empower” themselves by resorting to violence. Fanon observes that “For the colonized, this violence represents the absolute praxis” (44). The mill workers see violence as the only means by which they could liberate themselves from the master-slave relations. The violence of colonized should explode spontaneously at first. And then it should be channelized by leaders like Solly Two Kings and Aunt Ester, to construct a consciousness in the fight for a national identity. The blacks Americans are excluded from sharing the wealth of a society and its political processes. The colonial city gave rise to Fanon’s “Manichean world,” in which racial and economic inequalities are hierarchised. This colonial city leads to the alienation and to the creation of revolutionary subjects. The disturbing relations between the mill owners and the mill workers lead to violent revolts and will forge a consciousness. It will also help in the development of a new self-consciousness among the African-Americans. The violent revolt of the African-Americans will help them not only in overthrowing the

system of exploitation but will also act as a boon for them to erase the objectified image constructed by the white men

Conclusion:

Though white man is culprit in practising racism, but the greatest offence of white man is instilling in blacks the inferiority, self-hate and self-distrust. Racial hierarchy has been validated and affirmed by the white's culture. Racism is embedded in the social, political and cultural institutions and the blacks are still considered as inferior to the whites. The blacks are still repressed and made to feel inferior through socio-economic and political institutions. August Wilson has exposed the pitfalls of American Dream. America has failed to accept blacks as citizens. The blacks are the living proof of unjust domination and exploitation of the white men. The African-Americans are still slave to white American's system of hypocrisy. Even in the 21st century, there are many instances of racial violence and exploitation of the blacks. The war between the African-Americans and the white men will not be based on the race, but it will be based on oppression. It will be a war between the oppressed and the oppressor, where the former wants liberty, equality and justice and the latter wants to carry on the cruel system of exploitation.

Works Cited

1. Du Bois, W. E. B. *The Souls of Black Folk*. The Modern Library, 1903.
2. Fanon, Franz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Trans. Charles Lam Markmann. Pluto Press, 1986.
3. Fanon, Franz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Trans. Constance Farrington. Grove Press, 1963.
4. Said, Edward. *Culture and Imperialism*. Vintage Books (Random House), 1993.
5. Wilson, August. *Gem of the Ocean*. Theatre Communications Group, 2006.