

American Culture vs Self Construction in August Wilson's *King Hedley II*

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Abstract— Culture in the United States during the 1980s has had a great influence on African American personalities, class, and gender. The play *King Hedley II* by August Wilson explores culture's influences through characters such as King, Mister, and Tonya. This paper will analyze how culture shapes the personality of people, individuals, class, and gender by closely examining how the environment has structured their traits and personalities. The paper also will cover elements such as violent environments contribution in affecting the African Americans lived during the 1980s. Furthermore, poverty level among the blacks, and racism which is attributed to the circumstances characters go through in their lives. Other aspects that would be examined necessitates the availability of opportunities for the African Americans and the possibility of hope to get out of the condition that African Americans found themselves in during the 1980s, as per the August play. The paper conducts a textual analysis through reading the play and investigating the cultural aspects that affected in shaping personalities of the characters. Finally the paper reaches at the point, among some, that the cultural environment directly influences both society and Individual's self-construction.

Keywords— African Americans Literature, Drama, Culture, Literary Criticism, *King Hadley II*.

I. INTRODUCTION

The personality of people is highly shaped by both genetic and environmental factors, where the culture in which one lives forms part of their character. In this context, culture entails traditions, customs, and beliefs of the African American from whom August Wilson's *King Hedley II* is structured. It is believed that culture is transferred from one generation to another through language and modeling of non-acceptable and culturally acceptable behaviors by either use of reward or punishment to condition-specific desired behaviors. With that in mind, it has become an interesting and attractive area where people would like to understand the role of a culture and social anxiety effects on shaping an individual, personality of people, gender, and class. Character traits are said to be the same across cultures, and if they happen to be different, both cultural and

universal aspects account for the differences in personalities of different people. There seem to be regional personality differences among people living in the United States, which is attributed to have been influenced by culture. This paper looks forward to analyzing how culture influences the personality of the people, individual, class, and gender Among African Americans, as evidenced in August's play *King Hedley II*.

The author August Wilson in the play *King Hedley II*, looked with deep concern on the 1980s in America and explores African American life in each decade of the twentieth century. The black community around which the play is formed live in Pittsburg, and it is characterized by violence, crimes, and, worst by far, indifference the cultural history that defines them. The culture itself in the 1980s jeopardies annihilation. The play is a gloomy challenge that needs to be treated with care and confidence by Dirden and his casts (Basourakos, 2016, p. 181). The characters don't necessarily in the same way despite Wilson having considered it to be miserable decade. (This sentence is ambihuous???) The characters believe there is a chance to get ahead just around the corner, and provide few pieces falling into place. It can be observed that the violence and endangerment that constantly exists behind the character have the role of a sense of real threat, which extends the community at large. that's to say, the play captures the present volatility that underpins Wilson's blackness in Pittsburg.

The Influence of Culture on Self construction in King Hadley II

Individualist and collectivists cultures place emphasis on various basic values were people who incline to live eccentric cultures tend to believe on independence, personal achievement, and competition are essential. However, characters who feel the power much more as they resist eventually accept that power is everywhere (Bagirlar, 2019, p. 306) in the play, the African American cultures are more individualist. Most of the characters tend to reveal features such as personal achievement. This can be evidenced with King's Character (Bell, 2020, p. 34). In the play, King is a man who is articulated by his demand for dignity and respect. He has stayed

in jail for seven years after he murdered a man who had refused to show him the respect he demanded, as it has always been a trait. After being released, King wishes he had not wasted a lot of time in the prison, where he becomes unrepentant of his crime besides not being sorry for something he did. This shows his violent and destructive character in the play, which is a representation of the African American youths of the 1980s.

The influence of culture on the personality of an individual is revealed through King, who is son to Ruby, a vivacious young newcomer to Pittsburg in *Seven Guitars*. Ruby has grown by a woman who is overcome with worry and regret despite having abiding determination for happiness (Sultan, 2019, p. 58). In such a case, it emerges that King, a main character in the play, is more concerned with his own achievement in life than he is concerned with other people's achievement. This explains the reason why he is ever looking forward to improve his life. Even his criminal behavior is attributed to the construction of his own success. This can be evidenced in the case where he, in combination with his friend, decides to steal in order to open their own movie store. The play closely follows the King and Mister, son of Red carter and a friend of King, who are trying their best to find a way to get ahead in life (Basourakos, 2018, p. 54). Furthermore, it can be observed that Wilson creates an ironic portrait of loyalty and kingdom steeped in a depressed condition of the urban milieu of the 1980s in the kingdom in which despair, poverty, and cultural devastation are evidenced to be the norm of its citizens. Likewise, the character King is a representation of the black generation that is not in a position to thrive in the self-destructive 1980s (Wilson, 2004, p. 9). The African Americans during this period were alienated from their self-reliance, where it was their socioeconomic and cultural condition in the African racist community. This is an indication that any personality displayed by the African American youths represented by King was the result of the cultural aspects surrounding the minorities during this period.

The culture of the African Americans displayed in the play is dominated by violent and criminal acts. As the children grow up, the culture models them to fit in the society characterized by the insecurity of the black people. Robbery and violence overwhelm the society. (Nadel, 2019, p. 45) The conditions are connected to the self-doubt and instability among the blacks due to unemployment and alienation in comparison to other races living in the same country. Such aspects are mapped in the play through the main character, the King, whom the author explains that always keeps a gun with him for security against violence, and robbery acts in the society. The character is helped by his close friend Mister who forms another criminal figure in the play. He plays the role of assisting King to sell refrigerators that are stolen to strengthen their financial stability. The two characters, due to the surroundings have been brought out to adopted criminal, violence, and robbery to be part of their daily life. As a result, they have developed personalities that depict them as deviants. However, the perception one would have towards this kind of personality would be different if the same characters grew in a different contiguous free from outbreaks of violence and oppression. This can be evidenced in their thoughts where King, Despite to

be the most violent character, is always concerned with his future as an individual. Even in the midst of the poverty that environs the African Americans, King thinks about how he can improve his life.

The life circumstances of the King and Mister do not offer them an altered opportunity that they could be utilize to strengthen their financial condition. In such a case, the two decide to steal a jewelry shop. Therefore, it can be perceived that besides the two being gangsters, they think positively, and if they had any chance to secure an employment opportunity, they would behave dissimilar to what they do currently. Such aspects can be evidenced by their plan to steal to start their own job, the culture of poverty that surrounds the community has transformed the personality of the people such as King to do what is unacceptable for them to keep moving. Their stealing habit has no negative attitudes but seems to be a justification to fund their business, which they believe was the right thing to do for them to become financially stable. This indicates that the culture of treating different races has resulted in influencing black people to engage in defiant and criminal acts simply because it's the only way they could maintain their lives. The employment opportunities in the country were preserved for the non-African Americans, the whites. As the king imagined illustration in the play reveals the belief of the playwright that the lack of employment opportunities contributes to the discontent and crimes verified among the African Americans. Besides, the culture of inequality dominates the country, and Wilson, in the play, examines the tactics utilized by the whites to ensure job opportunities for themselves not the blacks in 1980s (Weeks 2007, p. 51). The two characters, King and the Mister are protracted as the victims of the racist practices in the country that have dominated in industrial, academia, professional, and other sectors.

The majority of the characters in the play are shown as criminals. For instance, the other criminal character in the play is Elmore a lover to Ruby King's mother. It is revealed that the character has already killed Leroy's father and imprisoned for a long time. He was part with King and Mister in selling stolen refrigerators. As the play comes to an end, he tries to persuade King to kill him, but unfortunately, he was killed by his own mother, who was trying to save him from Elmore's pistol. In this case, the play becomes tragic for the King's dream. Despite the King being a criminal, it is substantiated that he has always hoped to come out of his predicament to lead a prosperous and happy life. At this point, Wilson utilizes the plantation of the seeds to symbolize hope and an optimistic view of King towards his life. The author's use of essential, meaningful conversation between King and his mother refers to the criminal acts of King in which the infertile plantation extended to mean his pessimistic and hopeless background, in contrary of his attempt to grow seed which shows his struggle to find hope (Young, 2020, p. 13). During that period, the law has already abolished racism in the country, but various forms of racism still exist in the country.

The play presents the practice of racism, that is profound among African America, by different white individual established institutions. Racism is spread across different

sectors starting from industry, academic, music, sports, and corporate professions. Meanwhile, racism creates a culture against African Americans and favors white Americans. For instance, King, he worked with a ship contractor, got financial harassment by his boss. While on the other hand, Ruby would like to extend her career, but she does not have the opportunity to advance simply because she is an African American. Elmore and Mister are not different as they suffer from being victims of unemployment due to discrimination they receive from the whites. Alongside, the cultural and socioeconomic agitation of the 1980s among the African Americans in which shape their class status which remain them in the lower class due to the high poverty level and denial of opportunities as a result of discrimination.

In *King Hedley II*, Wilson explores and exposes the harsh reality of the African Americans' exploitation, an aspect that he achieves through his dramatic art in the play. He follows anti-racist ideology to strengthen the confidence of the African American society. In this case, the oppressed voice of African American women become Wilson's dramaturgy's critical features. For instance, Tonya's will to establish her own identity in contradiction of patriarchal social order is not regarded due to her urge to abort her child against her husband's will, who would like to have children. This presents contradictory wishes between the two individuals. While King wishes to have more children due to his patriarchal mentality, his wife Tonya is against that because she feels that it's an oppression, and she would like to exercise full control of her body (Ross, 2020, p. 87). Hence, Wilson presents the protest expressed by women against their oppression which is seen as being more radical than earlier decades. It can be said that the radical culture being experienced by women such as Tonya has an impact on their gender rather than they have shaped to what it used to be decades ago. Therefore, the women no longer have to tolerate but rather can express themselves and decide what they should do with their lives.

The radical culture which dominated the United States during the 1980s also has an influence on women. Apart from shaping the gender, it seems to be forming women as individuals keeping them in their stand without fearing their husbands. This is extended to the conflict between a son and his mother, which is a new phenomenon. Wilson reveals that King does not think similar to his mother despite being his biological mother. Immediately after King was born, his mother left him and went away, hence, King has never accepted her as his mother again despite she was showing love to him. Therefore, the different issues that existed between the two, was resulting in the creation of crisis and tensions that occupy the mother-son relationship. Wilson explores the relationship between Elmore and Ruby and depicts it as a disturbed man-woman relationship. Their relationship is dominated by a crisis, which earlier, Elmore had murdered Ruby's former lover in exchange for fifty dollars. The immature relationship shows how the culture has modeled the African American men and women relationships during the 1980s.

Additionally, Wilson, in the play, explores the financial dilemma and poverty of African Americans during the 1980s. Through his exploration, it emerges that the economic policy enforced by president Regan has a marginal effect on the black people's society. Therefore, the policy only had a positive impact on the economy of the wealthy white people who have been having more opportunities than their counterparts' blacks. The harsh reality of the financial dilemma and poverty in the play pictures the effect of economy on the black society as a whole such as Wilson's presentation of Tonya, who is not ready to grow her child in a financially deprived, violent and despaired society. The African American women represented by Tonya are brought in the play as being concerned about their children's future, contrary to decades ago. It has been known that it was the responsibility of the man to understand how the children would grow in terms of providing the required support, both financially and emotionally (Kelsall, 2019, pg44). However, the culture surrounding the African American shows that it has molded the female gender to be concerned with bringing up their children according to their environment. Despite the discrimination of the blacks they still don't surrender completely in the country, Tonya would willing to give birth if there was a financial support for her child in a society that provides equality and without discrimination.

The depression evidenced in the play is propagated by music, utilized as a strong tool. the implication of African American music for dramatic purpose is Wilson's innovative utilization. The characters in the play use Jazz music as a way to express their dilemma. Wilson's specific technique makes his dramaturgy more penetrative and effective, which mostly portrayed as a personal memory. The symbolic implication throughout the whole play serves the purpose of strengthening his dramatic art effectiveness. In addition, the play contains symbols created to communicate rituals and the cultural code which help to understand how the culture has changed the way of life. Among such symbols King's implanting saw in infertile land, which symbolizes his unsatisfied life, while the act of planting the seeds symbolizes hope for a better life. Accordingly the symbolism device used by Wilson allows the reader to view the cultural extent of African Americans that has shaped individuals' behaviors and personalities.

Conclusion

The play *King Hedley II*'s is regarded as one of the greatest achievements in black people's theatrical tradition. It explores the panoramic picture of African American life in the United States cultural environment during the 1980s. As observed in the discussion, cultural and social anxiety affects the personality forming of people, individuals, class, and gender in a negative manner contrary to the expectation of many people. Firstly, the culture in which the characters in the play find themselves is in favor of the white people at the expense of the black people. The African Americans experience discrimination out of the culture that generalize racism and dominates the country. likewise, the Black people's access to opportunities are limited when it comes to turn it for their

benefits. All the opportunities are preserved for the white people. Such an aspect is highly pronounced when it comes to employment. The majority of the African Americans were depicted in the play to be unemployed. Those who manage to secure employment in the play end up suffering from financial aggravation by the boss who treats the blacks as if they do not deserve the opportunity. The high unemployment rate, poverty level and the violent environment in which African Americans grow have greatly impacted their lives. Characters such as King, who represent the African American youths, reveal that the African Americans' culture during the 1980s transformed some of these minorities into criminals, a condition which might be avoided if there were enough employment opportunities. In such a culture, African Americans retain their low social, economic status through standing the oppression placed by racism. Besides, the female characters are contrary to the female of their decade have risen to express themselves through taking firm stands out of the stations they undergo in the United States. The play also extends to cover cultural influence on the man-woman relationship.

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