

African-American Identity: Tracing the blues (music) in***Ma Rainey's Black Bottom and Seven Guitars*****Elham Jalali Karveh**

MA in English Literature from Isfahan University

English Language and Literature Lecturer, Sob-e-Sadegh Institute of Higher Education

Abstract

Music, in particular the blues, has long been affiliated with African-American lives. African-American identity is inevitably connected with this kind of music as they were the first to begin singing and playing the blues when working on plantations in order to ease the pain of slavery. The songs represented the slave's longing for both spiritual and bodily freedom. As Ralph Ellison has stated the blues is a mixture of tragedy and comedy, of poetry and ritual. August Wilson has justly represented the influence of the blues on the lives of his characters in his Pittsburgh cycle. In this study I trace the effect of the blues in two of these plays, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* and *Seven Guitars*. It is highlighted that the characters are closely connected to their musical (ancestral) heritage in a way that they see themselves anonymous without this element. As long as they hold onto this cherished relic, they have a uniqueness that no white man can change and possess.

Key Words: Music, The Blues, Ancestral heritage, Ma Rainey's Black Bottom, Seven Guitars, African-American identity.

"MA RAINEY: The blues help you get out of bed in the morning.

You get up knowing you ain't alone. There's something else in the world.

Something's been added by that song.

This be an empty world without the blues (Ma Rainey 66)."

Introduction

African-American slaves on southern plantations cultivated their own musical styles, which later evolved into gospel, blues, and what is now known as bluegrass and country music (Stepito). They did not have musical instruments and were not allowed to have any but they would make them with anything at their disposal. One of the most widespread of early musical forms among southern blacks was the spiritual (The Negro Spiritual). Neither black versions of white hymns nor transformations of songs from Africa, spirituals were a distinctly African American response to American conditions. They expressed the longing of slaves for spiritual and bodily freedom, for safety from harm and evil, and for relief from the hardships of slavery (Stepito).

Blues music first swept the United States in the early 1910s, remained a driving force in the pop mainstream for some six decades, and continues to be played and heard around the world. Once performed by neighborhood bands, street corner guitarists, and theatrical divas, blues is now routinely heard as background music for car commercials and Westerns, in forms ranging from gentle acoustic guitar melodies to crunching blues-rock. Blues has been whispered, shouted, growled, moaned, and yodeled, and played on everything from harmonicas to synthesizers (Wald 1). Ralph Ellison calls the blues a unique combination of the “tragic and the comic,” of poetry and ritual (256). Wilson’s plays embody this blues formula on a multitude of occasions. In each of the plays, Wilson’s characters engage in a series of vernacular games, the dozens, and signifyin’. All these cultural activities are extensions of the blues or variations on a blues theme (Elam).

August Wilson's Century Cycle consists of ten plays, all of which, in their own unique way, include the influence of music (especially the blues) on the African-American individual. Starting from *Gem of the Ocean* and ending with *Radio Golf*, we observe the power of music keeping the characters going in their lives. According to Harry Elam,

The blues become not only a guiding force in his writing, but also the foundation he discovers for African American expressive culture and for what Wilson believes is a distinctly African American way of “being”. According to Wilson, the cultural, social, political, and spiritual all interact within the blues. Forged in and from the economics of slavery as a method of mediating the pains and dehumanization of that experience, the blues are purposefully duplicitous, containing a matrix of meanings. The blues for Wilson continue to offer a methodology for negotiating the difficult spaces of African American existence and achieving African American survival. (Elam)

Different kinds of implementation regarding the blues is seen in each play. As Kim Pereira notes, "A garbage collector (*Fences*), an innkeeper (*Joe Turner's Come and Gone*), a numbers runner (*Two Trains Running*), or a jitney cab driver (*Jitney* (1982)) all form part of a collage, all constitute aspects of a society in which individual voices sound out like instruments in a band" (Pereira).

In Wilson's plays, music and song act as metaphors for African American identity, spirit, and soul (Elam, August Wilson). In *Ma Rainey* and *Seven Guitars*, there are a lot of references to the "guitar". For example, Floyd, in *Seven Guitars*, constantly talks about his guitar being held in the pawnshop and when he finally gets it back he will go to Chicago and his life will change. As Elijah Wald notes,

The turn of the twentieth century was a particularly rich period of musical innovation, due not only to this mobility but to the dawn of recording and the increased availability of store-bought instruments. Sears Roebuck's mail order business made guitars accessible to musicians who previously had considered them an upper-class instrument, and the shift from banjo to guitar played a significant role in the rise of blues. (Wald)

Wilson's use of the blues instantiates an alternative form of historiography so that a blues rendition can have the same status for African American culture as a history text, as Nadel explains. If we look closely, a kind of comic relief is observed when any link is made to music, either with the use of dancing, someone singing or someone playing a musical instrument. This goes to show that the African-American culture is tied to music no matter what. In order to connect themselves to their past, their roots, he/she seeks refuge in a well-known song or a popular artist (for instance King's reference to Buddy Bolden in *Seven Guitars*). "The thing about the blues", Wilson has said, "is that there's an entire philosophical system at work. And whatever you want to know about the black experience in America is contained in the blues" (qtd. in Nadel). The role of the blues is so conspicuous that the critic Alan Nadel goes so far as to interpret the cycle as a CD album of the blues itself, "If Wilson's drama is fundamentally structured by blues performance, his ten-play cycle can be thought of as a record (or CD) album that orchestrates and arranges the American twentieth century as ten versions of African American blues, played by a combo with one to three singers" (Nadel).

The influence of music can be traced in all the plays. However, this study looks into the two which are conspicuously related. Having said that, in the following sections *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* and *Seven guitars* will be looked into concerning the influence of 'The Blues'.

1. *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*

"On the city's Southside, sleepy-eyed Negroes move lazily toward their small cold-water flats and rented rooms to await the onslaught of night, which will find them crowded in the bars and juke joints both dazed and dazzling in their rapport with life. It is with these Negroes that our concern lies most heavily: their values, their attitudes, and particularly their music". (Ma Rainey xviii).

Ma Rainey's Black Bottom (1984), Wilson's first critically acclaimed play, and arguably the most musical of his plays to date, establishes a foundation for Wilson's blues theology that he examines with his later plays (Krasner).

Ma Rainey is situated in a recording studio. The characters are members of a band. Music is how they make a living. Ma Rainey is the mother of the Blues and the mother of the band. With her music she rejects any kind of White dominance. Levee, the youngest in the band, represents the urge to make one's own music in a white dominant society yet failing to do so at the same time. His failure is manifested in his killing of his fellow friend. As Nadel elaborates, "In a very literal way, the band becomes the embodiment of the blues" (Nadel, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom: Cutting a historical record, dramatizing a blues CD*).

In *Ma Rainey, The Blues* is mainly projected through the character of Ma Rainey, a famous Blues singer. Elijah Wald notes that Ma Rainey and W. C. Handy were called the Mother and Father of the blues back in those days (Wald 16). In this play, the fact that the white man should not penetrate into the origins of the black by exploiting their key ancestral heritage (the blues) is brought to light. The white man only takes advantage, so Ma Rainey tries to procrastinate this act with her attitude throughout the play:

MA RAINEY: If you colored and can make them some money, then you all right with them. Otherwise, you just a dog in the alley. I done made this company more money from my records than all the other recording artists they got put together. And they wanna balk about how much this session is costing them (Wilson, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*).

Ma Rainey bosses the two directors around. She refuses to sing without her Coca Cola. She expects Irvin, her manager, to do as she says. She wants everything done according to her schedule. She believes that no one but the black people can understand the true value of the blues. As Nadel elaborates,

As Ma Rainey points out, 'White folks don't understand the blues. They hear it come out, but they don't know how it got there. They don't understand that's life's way of talking' (82). 'Life's way of talking', of course, is a vernacular name for history, a vernacular name for vernacular history, and Ma Rainey is acutely aware that she does the work of the historiographer: 'This be an empty world without the blues. I take that emptiness and try to fill it up with something' (83). Exactly because she regards the blues as history, Ma Rainey understands that she is necessarily as much their inheritor as their producer. 'They say I started it,' she explains, 'but I didn't. I just helped it out' (83). (Emphasis added, Nadel)

Nadel further explains, "Toledo is the character who constantly referred to the African past and tried to convince the others that their history must not be lost, they should not be leftovers anymore. Toledo's role in the band, in other words, is to supply the notes, not just the melody; he retrieves the historical circumstances that have brought Ma Rainey, her band and her entourage to this time and this place. In this sense *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* not only explicitly articulates the position of the historical subject in general, and of the African American historical subject in particular, but also plays out the fate of the leftovers in direct contrast to those who make and

keep the records. Inverting the hierarchy of power that official history demands, Wilson's play foregrounds those most marginalized by the process, playing out an arrangement in the time measure of those in the margins" (Nadel, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom: Cutting a historical record, dramatizing a blues CD*).

In other words, Wilson tries to omit the hierarchy that has been imposed by the white society on the black. This is what postmodernism renders significant. By questioning the act of Sturdyvant and Irvin, Wilson questions the whole white community.

Levee and Toledo argue from the beginning to the end. Their arguments are a mixture of ancestral issues connected to music:

TOLEDO: All right, I'm gonna show you. Cutler. Slow Drag. You hear this? The nigger betting me a dollar he can spell music. I don't want no shit now! (Lays a dollar down beside Levee's) All right. Go ahead. Spell it.

LEVEE: It's a bet then. Talking about I can't spell music.

TOLEDO: Go ahead, then. Spell it. Music. Spell it.

LEVEE: I can spell it, nigger! M-U-S-I-K. There! (Reaches for the money)

TOLEDO: Naw! Naw! Leave that money alone! You ain't spelled it.

LEVEE: What you mean I ain't spelled it? I said M-U-S-I-K!

TOLEDO: That ain't how you spell it! That ain't how you spell it! It's M-U-S-I-C nigger. Not K! C! M-U-S-I-C!

LEVEE: What you mean C? Who say it's C? (Ma Rainey 18-19)

Not knowing how to spell the word music is a sign of the blues losing its significance in the character Levee. He claims he wants to be a music composer yet he cannot even spell the word music. Nadel further elaborates,

The inevitable collision between Levee and Toledo results from a musical, historical and ontological conflict about the nature of change, but they are also at odds when it comes to language, Toledo favouring metaphor, Levee the immediate, the material. When Toledo remarks to Levee, "Things change. The air and everything. Now you gonna say you was saying it. You gonna fit two propositions on the same track . . . run them into each other, and because they crash, you gonna say it's the same train". Levee replies, "Now the nigger talking about trains! We done went from the air to the skin to the door . . . and now trains (25). (Nadel, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom: Cutting a historical record, dramatizing a blues CD*)

The play ends with Toledo's death which highlights the death of one's roots, one's beliefs, and one's music. One member of the band is dead. What Wilson tries to indicate is that a community is an ever-changing set or series of arrangements and rearrangements of melody and time (Nadel, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom: Cutting a historical record, dramatizing a blues CD*).

Wilson juxtaposes Irvin and Sturdyvant's plan to commercialize Ma Rainey's blues song with Ma's own resolve to protect the integrity of herself and her music. Ma testifies to Wilson's contention that the blues are a uniquely black voice that whites' desire but cannot understand: "White folks don't understand about the blues. They hear it come out, but they don't know how it got there" (Elam, August Wilson)

2. *Seven Guitars*

Starting from the title of the play, *Seven Guitars* is, obviously, closely related to music. This relation is mainly seen in the characters. As Wilson explains himself, "They are the seven guitars. They each have their characters. And if they're the guitars, then I guess I'm the orchestra." (qtd. in Murphy). These seven characters have their own tune and play an important role in Wilson's orchestra. As Murphy elaborates,

In the play as Wilson finally wrote it, there are seven characters, the blues musician Floyd Barton, his two sidemen, or supporting musicians, drummer Red Carter and harmonica player Canewell, Canewell's girlfriend Vera, and three people who live in Vera's house: Louise, a middle-aged single woman whose beautiful young niece Ruby comes to stay with her, and King Hedley, a West Indian who lives in his dreams. (Murphy)

The play starts with Floyd's death after trying so hard to become a famous musician. He is ambitious for starting a musical career in Chicago. He is reminiscent of Levee in *Ma Rainey*. Levee put faith in Sturdyvant's help and now Floyd has put faith in a man called "Mr. T. L. Hall". This man is supposed to make Floyd into someone like Buddy Waters. However, this is just in Floyd's head. As Elam further explains, Floyd's myopic, self-obsessed desire for fame and fortune in Chicago results in his betrayal of the redemptive power of the blues and values of community which the blues inspire. His capitulation to white hegemony is symbolized by his pawning his guitar, the instrument of his cultural potency. His demise is inevitable. (Elam, August Wilson). From scene one we detect the presence of music,

The lights come up in the yard. CANEWELL, VERA, LOUISE, RED CARTER and HEDLEY have gathered in the yard. Dressed in their Sunday best, they have come from

the cemetery where they have buried Floyd Barton. There is lingering evidence of food and drink. LOUISE, in a much-needed affirmation of life, is singing a bawdy song.

LOUISE (*singing*):

“Anybody here wanna try my cabbage

Just step this way

Anybody here like to try my cabbage

Just holler Hey...”(Wilson, Seven Guitars)

Further on when Vera claims no one knows when death comes Canewell starts singing a song,

VERA: The Bible say some things ain’t for you to know. It say you know neither the day nor the hour when death come.

CANEWELL: He come like a thief in the night. And he don’t go away empty. There’s a song what go (*he sings*),

“He’ll come to your house

He won’t stay long

You look in the bed

Find your mother gone...”(Wilson, Seven Guitars)

It is highlighted that not only their history but also their religious beliefs are also closely tied to songs and music. To emphasis the matter, we have music taking us to the next scenes of the play,

CANEWELL: I would have carried two. One on each shoulder. If I didn’t have this bourbon. I looked at that bourbon and forgot all about the beer. (*The sound of Floyd Barton singing “That’s All Right” comes out of the kitchen window and envelopes the yard. There is a moment of silent reverie.*)

RED CARTER: Floyd “Schoolboy” Barton. (*The lights fade. The music carries into the next scene.*)(Wilson, Seven Guitars)

After Floyd’s death the characters still have him linger around through his music. Through the blues, the African-American can claim his/her existence even after death. For instance when Floyd talks about his dead mother’s prayers,

FLOYD: if I could hear my mother pray again, I believe I’d pray with her. I’d be happy just to hear her voice again.

I wouldn't care if she was cussing me out. They say you don't miss your water till your well run dry...She used to sing "Old Shio of Zion". I believe that was her favorite. Though sometime she used to sing "The Lord's Prayer". I can still hear her singing...(*he sings*)

"Our father

Which art in heaven

Hallowed be thy name

Thy kingdom come

Thy will be done

On earth as it is in heave.

Give us this day our daily bread

And forgive us our debts

As we forgive our debtors.

Lead us not into temptation

But deliver us from evil,

For thine is the kingdom

And the power

And the glory

Forever. Amen."(Wilson, Seven Guitars)

As well as Hedley's reference to singing and music on judgement day,

HEDLEY: The Bible say it all will come to straighten out in the end. Every abomination shall be brought low. Everything will fall to a new place...that is the day my father forgive me. I tell you this as God is my witness on that great day when all the people are singing as I go by...(Wilson, Seven Guitars)

Floyd constantly talks about Chicago and begs for Vera's companionship. He sees his only chance of survival in the society by playing music (however, not the black style but the style T. L. Hall is suggesting).

FLOYD: Wait till you see it. There ain't nothing like it. They got more people than you ever seen. You can't imagine that many people. Seem like everybody in the world in Chicago. That's the only place for a black man to be. That's where I seen Muddy Waters. I was walking past this club and I heard this music. People was pushing and crowding in the club; seem like the place was busting at the seams. I asked somebody, I say, "who's that?" they told me "That's Muddy Waters". I took off my hat. I didn't know you could make music sound like that. That told me say, "the sky's the limit". I told myself say, "I'm gonna play like that one day." I stayed there until they put me out. Mr. T. L. Hall asked me what I wanted to do. I told him I wanted to play at the Hurricane Club. He say he'd fix it.(Wilson, *Seven Guitars*)

Conclusion

Floyd's tragic death at the end shows the victory of history over unfulfilling dreams. Hedley, thinking Floyd is Buddy Bolden, stabs him to death. As the main musician in the band of *Seven Guitars*, Hedley presents the power of 'the blues' over white dominancy. Similar to Ma Rainey, who would not capitulate to the white man's dominancy, here Hedley's action represents the same idea. As Murphy notes, "The nature of Floyd's tragedy is related to Wilson's revisiting of the issues he had first raised in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* in 1984. Harry Elam, Jr. has noted that *Seven Guitars* 'repeats and revises both the image of a misguided blues musician from Ma Rainey and the trope of white exploitation of the black song'" (Murphy). Elam further elaborates, "Throughout his historical cycle of plays, Wilson replays this theme, as whites repeatedly attempt to seize or possess black music, the black blues song" (Elam, *August Wilson*).

As witnessed in the other century cycle plays, the characters feel best at ease and peaceful when connected to their ancestral backgrounds, one of them being music. Loomis is free when he discovers his song, the ghost of Stutter goes away with the sound of the piano, the characters in *Two Trains Running* are not peaceful because the jukebox has been broken, Ma Rainey has power because she has 'the blues', etc. In several parts of *Seven Guitars*, like when they listen to Joe Louis' match on the radio, we witness the influence of music manifested in dancing.

Floyd's record is constantly played in the background of the play manifesting the inevitability of music in the black man's life. Floyd dies but his songs live to show his presence. As previously mentioned, 'the blues' is a kind of music which reflects struggle, love, pain, endurance, etc. Moreover, *Seven Guitars*, as Wilson admits, is reminiscent of an Aristotelian tragedy (Murphy). Music strengthens this tragedy.

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