

## I. General Introduction

The present research work is a study on August Wilson's Pulitzer Prize winning play *The Piano Lesson* which highlights, through the slave narratives, the conflict between the African cultural legacy and modern liberal cultural and social values. The study explores the lives of the enslaved black family in Pittsburgh, America. At the heart of the play is a family conflict which dramatizes Boy Willie's desire to buy land at the expense of an old piano which having the carved faces of his ancestors reminds him of past slavery and his sister Berniece's insistence on keeping it as their past heirloom. Thus, through the family conflict Wilson's play, *The Piano Lesson* explores the conflict between two classic desires of the typical African-American family in post-slavery era: ownership of land for new identity is a sign of modernity and remembrance of their roots, as in the case of Berniece's denial to sell the old piano shows her desire to continue her ancestors' culture.

August Wilson was born in Pittsburgh in 1945. He was a son of a white father who never lived with his family and black mother who had come from North Carolina to Pittsburgh where she worked to keep her family together. Wilson was author of cycle of plays, each set in a different decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century about black American life. Having won many prestigious national awards and Pulitzer Prize for his dramas, he has achieved the status of theatrical historiographer. He won Pulitzer Prize twice for *Fences* and *The Piano Lesson*. He was largely self-educated; he grew up in poverty and quit school at the age of 15. In the

1960s and 1970s Wilson became involved in the Civil Rights Movement and began to describe himself as a black nationalist. He joined the black aesthetic movement in the late 1960s and became the cofounder and director of Black Horizons Theatre in Pittsburgh. Wilson won New York Drama Critics Circle Award for *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, *Fences*, and *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*.

Wilson's writing is rooted to a large extent in music, especially the blues. As a poet, writing over several years, Wilson found himself interested in the speech patterns and rhythms that were familiar to him from black neighborhoods, but the value of those patterns became clearer to him when he grew older and moved from Pittsburgh to Minneapolis. From a distance, he was able to see more clearly what had attracted him to the language and began to use the language more fully in his work. Wilson believes in what we have wrought what we have learned about life and what we have learned that are always pointed towards moving harbourless parts of our being closer to home. He further believes that to write is to forever circle the maps. So, he chooses Afro-American history as a context in his plays.

He further believes that only people do not realize the value in what they are doing because they have accepted their victimization; they have marked themselves as victims. Once they recognize that they can begin to move through society in a different manner from a stronger position and claim what is theirs.

Wilson is one of the most prolific writers of America, whose plays, like those written by Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams are produced throughout the USA on a regular basis. He has won two Pulitzer Prizes and seven New York Drama Critics Circle Awards for his dramas.

Wilson's project to chronicle the Afro-American experience through each decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that the series, which now includes seven plays -- *Jitney*, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, *Fences*, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, *The Piano Lesson*, *Two Trains Running* and *Seven Guitars*.

Traditionally in Wilson's plays the protagonist's personal past is the lens through which the present situation is seen. His authentic sounding characters have brought a new understanding of the black experience to audiences through a series of plays, each addressing people of color in each decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Although Wilson's 'decade' plays have not been written in chronological order, the consistent, and key theme in Wilson's drama is the sense of disconnection suffered by the blacks uprooted from their original homeland. Each of the eight plays he has produced to date is set in a different decade of the twentieth century; a device that has enabled Wilson to explore, often in very subtle ways, the myriad and mutating forms of the legacy of slavery.

*Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* tapped the playwright's interest in the blues and its importance in American black history. The play deals with how black singers were exploited by the whites.

His next play *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* is about a freed black man who comes to the North to search for his wife, who disappeared

during enslavement. It focuses on the theme of Afro-Americans moving from the agricultural South to a new set of hardships in the industrial cities of the North in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

*Fences* is about a trash collector whose dreams of playing professional baseball was frustrated by white racism. Protagonist Maxson's bitterness leads him to deny his son the athletic success that was not possible for the blacks in the past.

*Seven Guitars* that is set during the post-World War II features the story of a blues guitarist, who is murdered, and his circle of friends. The friends gather at the wake and their stories are told in flashback technique. In his play *Two Trains Running*, which opened in New York City in 1992, Wilson probed the turbulent era of the late 1960s, when racial strife and the Vietnam War convulsed the nation.

His mission in writing ten plays set in the 20<sup>th</sup> century is to re-write that history to tell the stories of the forgotten, misrepresented, silenced black masses. He concentrates on bringing the past in to the present as a healing measure for all Americans today. His cycles of plays are intended to illuminate the shadowy past of Afro-American by focusing on black issues. Wilson through his dramas encourages people not to forget who they are and where they come from. His plays deal with common people and are created with elements of mysticism, ritual, and story telling. All of these elements, which are often found in African culture, are prominent in his play.

Wilson's plays are about history, his order to present this history on the stage, where his characters could come to life and share their revelations with audiences across the country. His plays interpret periods of history through the stories of ordinary people. For each decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Wilson has focused on a representative group of characters whose struggles and dreams reflect the events and attitudes of the large society.

By using historical frame, August Wilson gives us something of the past and something of the present. Wilson also shows us individuals engaged in a struggle to gain control of their own lives and to make connections with others that will sustain them. That struggle, of course, continues today and includes all of us. The past and especially the history of slavery is a crucial factor in his plays. The relationship of the present with the past is very much important for African-Americans. His plays are intense, emotionally draining and painfully real in their depiction of people who feel stuck in their given roles due to the innate racism and classicism of American society. Past shapes the present and in turn the future. According to Wilson, people should not forget their past because it determines who they are and what their condition is.

Wilson's plays are almost classically well-made with strongly individualized characters and realistic settings and actions. His plays depict the experience of black Americans who have migrated from the Southern to the urban centers of the Northern USA. All of his plays present characters who are forced to confront the consequences of a

double historical trauma: the brutalities of the Southern heritage and the injustice and inequalities of the North as they struggle to make a home for themselves, to achieve an identity and to lead free and dignified lives in their own way.

Wilson's plays depict black Americans' struggling sometimes successfully and sometimes not to escape from their psychological or spiritual confinement in white dominated society. His plays evoke both the condition that they struggle against and in moments of intensely theatrical action that embrace the mythic and ritualistic and which are always associated with the power of music and song-the forces by which cultural emancipation and empowerment may be achieved. Thus, his drama suggests, black Americans must rediscover to achieve their full emancipation from racial subordination. Anyway, his drama tells about pain, frustration, anger, anxiety in a white-dominated society. By doing so, Wilson wants to change the society; he wants to break the hierarchy existing between the whites and the blacks in America. Most of his dramas suggest that black people should recreate their identity in a white-dominated society. His plays deal with common people and are created with elements of mysticism, spiritualism and storytelling. All of these elements, which are often found in African culture, are prominent in Wilson's plays. Wilson shows great pride in his culture and believes that African-Americans need not assimilate to the dominant white culture.

Most of August Wilson's dramas are about Afro-American suffering, pain, frustration in a white dominated society. In the same way, his drama entitled *The Piano Lesson* cannot be the exception. In this drama, he takes Afro-American history as a means to make all Afro-American people aware about who they are and where they are from. The play begins with the return of Boy Willie to his uncle's home in Pittsburgh in 1930s where he plans to sell his family's piano in order to purchase a few acres of farmland where most of his ancestors were once enslaved. However, his sister Berniece stands firmly against him, contending that their father died trying to snatch the piano from his slave master.

Many critics and reviewers have studied this play from various perspectives since its publication in 1990. It is important to analyze how the piano stands for the legacy of slavery and identity of Afro-American people in Wilson's *The Piano Lesson*. The piano stands for the slavery of Afro-American people in the sense that two members of the Charles family were sold by their owners for the piano and it further indicates the identity crisis of the Charles family in the past as Doaker says: "Say it was the story of our whole family and as long as Sutter had it [. . .] he had us. Say we was still in slavery. Me and Winning Boy tried to talk him out of it but it wouldn't do any good" (45). The Charles family in this play is the text book example of Afro-American people in the twentieth century. This very piano bears the whole past life of the Charles family in specific and Afro-American people in general at the same time. This piano further opens the way for construction of Afro-American identity when the

protagonist named Boy Willie knows the history of this piano; he wants to sell it in order to create a new life or new identity.

By selling the piano Boy Willie wants to buy a piece of land in the South where most of his ancestors were forced to work as slaves. As a result, he will be able to create a new identity. Boy Willie says, "Boy Willie was here; that's all I'm trying to do with that piano. Trying to put my mark on the road. Like my daddy done. My heart say for me to sell that piano and get me some land so I can make a life for myself to live in my own way" (94). It shows that he wants to buy a land in the South so that he can live on his own. In other words, his thinking of selling the piano is an appropriate means to buy a piece of land and live on his own. Critics Brian Crow and Chris Banfield say about this drama:

Unlike most of Wilson's characters Boy Willie's residence in the North is only temporary, he has no desire to stay and will leave as soon as he acquires the money to buy Shutter's land. For him the sale of the piano and acquisition of the property are the most appropriate and effective ways through which he can get new identity. (54)

Crow and Banfield opine that Boy Willie's residence in the North is temporary because he wants to recreate his new identity by purchasing the same land where most of his ancestors were once enslaved. He knows his family's slave identity and wants to use his family's heirloom, piano, which metaphorically represents slave identity of the Charles family in

this drama. A sale of family's piano for buying Shutter's land in the South is an effective means to create a new identity for Boy Willie.

Thomas Riggs annotates about migration: "Boy Willie is the first Wilson character to claim the South as his home" (930). According to him, Riggs says that Boy Willie does not want to live in the North. Rather he wants to live in the South where most of his ancestors were forced to work as slaves. Claiming the South as his home is a claiming of own identity. Boy Willie is going to recreate a new identity by selling the piano. Similarly, Amandou Bissiri views on this drama, "In the play Boy Willie's return to the South is [. . . ], [an] essential quest, a quest for mother Africa, for identity" (302). Bissiri views that return of Boy Willie to the South is for identity. South is the original place where most of Boy Willie's forefathers were toiled to death. Returning of Boy Willie into the South indicates that he is going to create his own identity.

Boan Devon raises the issue of slavery:

The call in the play consists of the slave narrative that has been carved in to the body of the piano and the response is seen by Boy Willie's improvised effort to translate that myth into the reality of his own economic and social emancipation.  
(264)

According to Devon, the very piano shows slave identity of the Charles family in the sense that two sold slaves' bodies are carved into the piano. In other words, the piano bears the past slave identity of the Charles

family. Boy Willie wants to use family's piano for economic and social emancipation.

Alan Nadel writes about the relation between the past and the present in this play: "Wilson explains that the piano provided a link to the past, Africa to who these people are" (105). He says that the piano is a means to link the present with the past and hopefully changing the future.

Studying the aforementioned reviews and criticisms of these critics on this drama, it shows that through this drama Wilson is trying to give the 'lesson' for all Afro-Americans and he asserts emphatically that blacks will stay to claim the South as their home to recreate a new life or new identity. In the drama, the protagonist's intention of selling the piano indicates that he is trying to create his own identity: "My daddy spent his whole life farming on somebody else's land. I ain't gonna do that. The only thing my daddy had to give me was that piano. And he died on over giving me that" (46).

The conflict centers on the piano that was once traded by the family's white master for two of Boy Willie's ancestors. Brother Boy Willie and sister Berniece inherit the piano and argue on whether to sell it or not. Boy Willie wants to give out lesson by selling the piano or he wants to create a new identity by selling the piano. Boy Willie says:

I give out lessons on it and that help me make my rent or whatever. Now I want to get Shutter's land with that piano. I get Shutter's land and I can go down and cash in the crop

and get my seed. As long as I got the land and the seed then  
I'm all right. (51)

By using the piano Boy Willie wants to create a new identity. Here, the piano is a pivotal piece of the action and climax and it reappears throughout the play as a source of friction and healing. Wilson is able to capture the past life of the Charles family through the piano. So, in this play the piano is used as a metaphor of slavery and identity of the Charles family and Afro-American people at the same time. Thus, the present researcher tries to study how piano metaphorically stands for slavery and identity of Afro-American people.

Moreover, the present researcher will observe the conflict between African cultural legacy and modernity which has led the blacks to search and recreate their new identity separate from their past slave era by doing away with all kinds of exploitations. The research work will study the play from black cultural point of view.

The thesis has been divided into four chapters. The first chapter presents an introductory outline of the work -- a short introduction to August Wilson and a short critical response. Moreover, it gives a bird's eye view of the entire work.

The second chapter tries to explain the theoretical modality briefly that is applied in this research work. It discusses black culture, cultural identity, slavery and impact of white culture upon black culture.

On the basis of the theoretical framework established in the second chapter, the third chapter analyzes the text at a considerable length. It

analyzes how the blacks' past has brought a conflict in the changing modern context. It sorts out some extracts from the text as evidence to prove the hypothesis of the study.

Finally, the fourth or the last chapter will sum up the main points of the present research work and the findings of the research work.

## **II. Afro-American Culture and Modernity**

### **Historical Background**

The history of African-Americans in the United States began in 1619 when a Dutch ship brought the first slaves from Africa to the shores of North America. Of all ethnic groups, African Americans were the only ones to arrive on these shores against their will. Like other people of African descent in the Western hemisphere, the ancestors of the overwhelming majority of African Americans were brought to North America as slaves between 1619 and 1807, when the Trans-Atlantic slave trade was supposed to end.

Black Americans, like their white counterparts, are not a homogeneous population. Just as white Americans descend from Dutch, French, English, German, Irish, Italian, Franco-American, Polish, Irish, Scottish, Swedish, Norwegian, and Russian ancestors, Black Americans are composed of multiple ethnic groups. A reliable number of just how many ethnic groups were part of the Atlantic slave trade may never be known. However, there are approximately 40 major ethnic groups Black Americans descend from that can be found in present day African nations: Ghana, Mali, Senegal, Gambia, Guinea, Sierra Leone and Liberia, Ivory Coast, Benin and Togo, Nigeria, Cameroon, Angola and Congo. These ethnic groups were usually sold to European traders by powerful coastal or interior states in exchange for European goods such as textiles and firearms. Europeans on occasion kidnapped Africans, but this was rare. As coastal and near-coastal nation states in Africa expanded through

military conflicts, the captives of these wars were sold. Slavery had been prevalent on a much smaller scale in African society long before the arrival of the Europeans. Another way of becoming a slave was being convicted of a crime. Since most, if not all of these states did not have a prison system, criminals were usually sold.

Most Africans lived in moderately autonomous villages or densely populated urban centers within tribal kingdoms that checked a king's power via some sort of council. These villages or cities paid tribute to the king and fought for him when called upon.

While most Africans lived within a semi-centralized state or kingdom, others lived in small villages with no state protection. Without such protection, these Africans were at higher risk to be enslaved. Since early Europeans had little success against the African states militarily, the non-urbanized Africans became frequent victims. Stateless areas such as Gambia, Guinea and Southern Angola quickly fell into the hands of Europeans who sold the inhabitants as needed to colonies in the New World. The African states also raided these areas selling the inhabitants to Europeans and each other.

Afro-American culture which emerged from slavery evolved through creolization as it came into close contact with Euro-American culture. There occurred an interaction between African tradition and Euro-American tradition where Afro-Americans tried to maintain and build up their culture through music, song, folklore myth and magic. So, this medley of the elements of African tradition with the Euro-American

culture is known as Afro-American culture. For the blacks in the United States, this cultural creolization has involved two complex and dynamic aspects. First, among Africans themselves, a creolization process developed as Africans captured from different places. It was a process of mutual cultural exchange where synthesis took place. Secondly, almost simultaneously, this dynamic mixture of African culture was interacting and exchanging with Euro-American cultures, which were themselves varied because of the different national identities and cultural patterns of the oppressive slave traders and plantation owners.

For the Afro-Americans, art was an important part of their way of life and was closely associated with everyday activities. They created their art as an instrument by which they contacted the spirit using supernatural forces. They did so to overcome the dangers of their environment and to express their religion. They believed in the universal life force which the almighty pours into the world and gives life to every creation. They even believed that the dead retain their living force through certain rituals performed.

Although Africans were inspired by what they do at the rituals, they also like invisible spirits to be visible. So, they carved sculptures which serve as a medium for the access to the spirit world. The figures of ancestors and spirits, masks and other cult objects are the links between god and man. The inspiring figures are supposed to bring fertility riches and the blessing upon the successors.

Africans often use masks, which they believe enable the souls of the dead, to make their appearance in a visible form. The designs of the masks depend upon its major purpose. They should be unreal as far as possible. In order to know the full meaning of the mask, one must be able to witness the ceremonies of which the mask is used. Not only the mask but also other carved objects and sculptures are used in the rituals.

Human motifs were first priority of all African tribes. They formed an analogy to particular divine forces and myths. The navel and genitals signified the continuance of mankind. The sculptures seen with a large navel can be interpreted as a sign that a very powerful spirit would lift the body or womb. A large head could be an indication of great intelligence and will power of the spirit world.

Afro-Americans blended old styles with new when cooking, smiting, wood-carving, story-telling and gospel singing traditions. They sang folk songs reflecting their secular life, as Blaissingame points out:

The secular songs told of the slave's loves, work, floggings, and expressed his moods and reality of his oppression. On a number of occasions he sang of the proud defiance of the runaway, the courage of the black rebels, the stupidity of the black rebels, and the stupidity of the patrollers, the heartlessness of the slave traders and the kindness and cruelty of masters. (23)

They sang songs that began in the fields of the plantations to pass the themes of salvation and freedom of Christianity with a native style of singing and dancing.

Slave spirituals were among the earliest forms of artistic self-expression available to African Americans; the songs were based on Christian hymn tradition, but often departed radically from the complacent austerity to white hymns. This spiritual tradition provided the birthing ground for what Levine calls "the most highly personalized genre of African-American music: the blues" (221). By the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the blues had emerged as a dynamic and powerful addition to the music of black America. In this regard, Schultz remarks, "In the spirituals, black Americans first started to sing of their feelings of homelessness; in the blues, they continued to sing it" (127). In a 1960 interview, blues musician Sidney Bechet identified the source of the essential connection between music and story telling. He says "Me, I want to explain myself so bad. I want to have myself understood. And the music, it can do that. The music, it's my whole story" (qtd. in Levine 190). Although gospel and blues often differ in focus and style, both genres are musical expressions of the cultural need to the story of people.

Mahalia Jackson once remarked that blue songs "are the songs of despair, but gospel songs are the songs of hope" (qtd. in Levine 174). This comment is not pejorative judgment of blue singers; perhaps the blues developed to fill a need that gospel could not address. A deep despair that fills so many blues songs provides a communal outlet for emotions that

would otherwise choke the singer; the blues may provide a way of recognizing and sharing human pain in order to overcome it. According to John Lee Hooker, the blues are "not only what's happened to you, it's what happened to your fore parents and other people. And that's what makes the blues" (qtd. in Levine 237). This historical and cultural breadth of the blues illustrates the vitality and strength of the close connection between music and folklore. Similarly, Zora Neale Hurston suggests that "[s]omewhere songs for sound-singing branched off from songs for storytelling until we arrive at prose" (qtd. in Hurston 877). She asserts that folklore is nothing less than "the boiled-down juice of human living" (875).

In addition to music, the African-Americans relied on the oral traditions, much as their African ancestors did. Orature and storytelling is a way of bridging gaps between the Black community's folk roots and the Black American tradition. Blaissingame outlines the value of the folk tales which emerged out of slave environment:

The [folk] tales also represented the distillation of folk wisdom and were used as an instructional device to teach young slaves to survive. A projection of the slave's personal experience, dreams, and hopes, the folk tales allowed him to express hostility to his master, to poke fun at himself, and to delineate the workings of the system. At the same time, by viewing himself as an object, verbalizing his dreams and

hostilities, the slave was able to preserve one more area which whites could not control. (36)

So, elements of African culture synthesizing with the slave culture, slave experience and Euro-American culture ultimately became the components of the Afro-American culture.

### **Encroachment of White Culture upon Black Culture**

Slavery and racism in America remains the main cause of encroachment of white over black culture. Though the blacks brought their African traditions and culture with them during the period of slave trade their culture was dominated by different activities of the whites.

After a large number of whites migrated to America and sponsored the colonization of American land, they brought with them to America already captured blacks from the African states. Whites began to subordinate blacks in every sphere of life. From such subordination of black race, racism appeared in the American soil. According to Ellis, the cause of racism in America was the belief of the whites that their race was naturally superior and colored race was inferior. He states:

In the US race prejudice is predicated upon the belief that the colored race is naturally inferior to the white race physically, religiously, socially and morally. As a matter, ultimate fact is actually based upon the advantages temporary and imaginary which the white groups economically, politically and socially dominated. (11)

Racism in America mostly spoiled the relationship between the blacks and whites. Historically, their relationship grew on the basis of slavery, where segregation and oppression of black people was prevalent. The Africans suffered a lot after their arrival in America. White masters placed those poor and uneducated blacks in the rural plantations of the South where cotton, sugar, tobacco and rice were produced. Slaves were valued primarily for their labor.

Undoubtedly, there was cruelty and oppression in the time of slavery. Du Bois found slavery as "the root of all villainies, the cause of all sorrows and the root of all prejudices" (366). The most horrifying experience blacks had undergone was the 'sale and buy' of their flesh. The masters totally commodified slaves, denying their potentiality. In the words of Helen Scott masters perceived slaves as "property rather than as people and placed property rights over individual rights" (173).

Objectifying slave masters began a regular slave trade between Africa and America. In this process, slaves were separated from their land, people, culture and tradition. This left an adverse effect on the blacks, which later made them wish to possess land to achieve the position of the whites.

The degree of oppression rose up when Colonial Laws in white plantations permitted brutal masters to discipline the SLAVES for the purpose of higher production. In the process of disciplining slaves, masters had to be "willing to maim and kill slaves" (Wilson 192). Millions of black people were inhumanly beaten as described in Harriet Jacob's incidents in the *Life of a Slave Girl*:

Master was a cruel man, hardened by a long life of slave holding. He would at times seem to take great pleasure on whipping a slave. I had often been awakened at the day by the most heart rendering shrieks of an own aunt of mine, when he used to tie up to a joist and whip upon her naked back till she was literally covered with blood. No words, no tears, no prayers from his gory victim seemed to move iron heart from its bloody purpose. (915)

Thus, the whites developed an ideology to justify slavery on the grounds of racial superiority of the whites and the innate and permanent inferiority of the Negro race.

In this way, the belief in an inherent inferiority of the blacks was validated. By treating the blacks as inferior, the whites forced them to perform manual labor, which was the work of the slaves. Meanwhile, the slaves found no place of escape, except obeying the white masters. The masters always ruled over the slaves and controlled slaves' lives and destinies. The masters took pleasure over slaves' toil, sweat and blood. The blacks remained colonized, oppressed, and totally broken. Such treatment continued till the late-nineteenth century.

Refusal of the assimilation with the American whites meant that the blacks were either forced to leave America or to live under severe torture. Some racist whites even formed an organization named under Ku Klux Klan, which aimed to maintain white supremacy in the south. This organization severely terrorized black people by dragging them from their

homes, whipping, and shooting, driving them away or destroying their property. Indeed, for the Negroes the new century provided more violence and more blood shed. Franklin and Moss in *From Slavery to Freedom* have stated about the violence against the blacks:

Blacks were dragged out and burned alive. This was the signal for wholesale terrorism against blacks. One Negro was severely whipped for riding a bicycle on the sidewalk while another was lashed on general principles. The Negro mother of three-day-old infant was beaten and kicked and her husband was killed. Houses were wrecked and countless terrified Negroes left the country (283).

In order to escape such violence, blacks migrated to Northern cities. The primary motif was to seek freedom from slavery. But, in the North they felt more alienation, isolation and fragmentation in their task of finding a new shelter and establishing a new community.

Du Bois in the *Souls of Black Folk* expresses the instability of black people, the harsh Afro-American experience, the continuing process of acculturation and alienation, of being so intimately different of and at the same time belonging to America:

It was a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the type of world that looks on an amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two

unrecognized strivings, two warring ideals in one dark body,  
 whose dragged strength alone keeps it from being torn  
 asunder. (364-65)

In the North, the black's faced uncertainty, fear and apartness; they were expelled from job market. They were denied the possession of land. They were expelled from education, shelter and medical facilities. It dragged the blacks towards deplorable condition of illiteracy, hopelessness and poverty. According to Black American activists Charmichael and Hamilton, blacks' degraded condition was a product of institutional racism.

Hence, the history of American society is a history of oppression and migration. American geographical and cultural space has provided unlimited potential to the whites since its settlement, but the blacks have been denied such space. Over the different historical events such as slavery, emancipation, migration and integration the Afro-Americans tried to negotiate their relationship with their cultural traditions. But the white race and its cultural heritage consistently marginalized them.

To counter the racial superiority, to break the ethics of institutional racism and to bring equality, freedom and justice, black's struggle continued in twentieth century. It reached its full expression during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. It certainly protected and expanded the rights of the African-Americans.

### **Modernity and Afro-Americans' Struggle for Identity**

Modernity is a term used to describe the condition of being related to modernism. Since the term 'modern' is used to describe a wide range of

periods, modernity must be understood in its context, the industrial age of the nineteenth century, and its role in sociology, which since its beginning in that era examined “the leap from pre-industrial to industrial society, sometimes considering events of the eighteenth century as well. For the period since the Middle Ages, the term Modern Times is used” (Schwartz 19).

Modern can mean all of post-medieval European history, in the context of dividing history into three large epochs: Ancient History, the Middle Ages, and Modern Times. In the context of contemporary history, politics and other subjects, it is also applied specifically to the period beginning somewhere between 1870 and 1910, through the present, and even more specifically to the early twentieth century, though the early modern times would be marked by the Renaissance.

‘Modernity’ is a different term from modern times; it is derived from Modernism, a movement in art and literature based on the consciousness that through the mechanical age of industrialism, mankind has evolved into something very new -- what that would be, would have to be explored by art and literature and all previous concepts were questioned. Darwin's *Origin of Species* and Lyell's *Principles of Geology* revolutionized the perception of time and race, and that of mankind in particular. Anthony Giddens writes about modernity:

At its simplest, modernity is a shorthand term for modern society or industrial civilization. Portrayed in more detail, it is associated with a certain set of attitudes towards the world,

the idea of the world as an open transformation by human intervention; a complex of economic institutions, especially industrial production and a market economy; and a certain range of political institutions , including the nation-state and mass democracy. (94)

Largely as a result of these characteristics, modernity is vastly more dynamic than any previous type of social order. It is a society -- more technically, a complex of institutions -- which unlike any proceeding cultures is concerned about the future rather than the past.

Modernity is the condition of being new and modern from the existing established order. It is a break from the past and it seeks to subvert earlier practices. In this regard, Marjorie Perloff quotes de Man as writing, "modernity exists in the form of a desire to out whatever came earlier, in the hope of reaching at last a point that could be called a true present, a point of origin that marks a new departure" (162). Perloff further categorically defines the concept of modernity as a:

replacement of representation of the external world by the imaginative construction of the poets inner world via the mysterious symbol; the superiority of art to nature; the autonomy of art and its divorce from objective truths, value and morality; the use of myth as organizing structure, the emphasis on the divided self, an mask versus inner self and the malaise of the individual in the 'lonely crowd' the alienated self in the urban world. [. . . ] (158)

These concepts provide the African-American writers in specific and African-Americans in general with enough insight into their plight. Thus, modernity influences their lives to a greater extent than any other movement.

This concept of modernity opens up a new way for the African-Americans to subvert the past slave tradition. They seek much more freedom from the master which becomes only possible due to modern attitudes. The process of modernization encompasses change and reformation in every social sector, which has paved way for the betterment of the people of marginalized countries. In this regard, Samuel P. Huntington writes, "Modernization involves industrialization, urbanization, increasing levels of literacy, education, wealth, and social mobilization and more complex and diversified occupational structures. It is a revolutionary process comparable only to the shift from primitive to civilized societies" (68).

As the first civilization to modernize the west leads to the acquisition of the culture of modernity, which has influenced other third world countries. Huntington opines:

The increased interaction among modern societies may not generate a common culture but it does facilitate the transfer of techniques, inventions, and practices from one society to another with a speed and to a degree that were impossible in the traditional world. (69)

This transfer of technology has really helped poor countries like Africa become advanced and modern. So, no people of the poor countries can remain unaffected by modernity.

However, Huntington opines that not all countries follow the process of modernization and westernization in the similar way because westernization refers to the emulation of the western culture, whereas modernization refers to only the embracing of modern technology and knowledge. Anyway, the concept of modernity has provided a broader space for the poor people and countries to decide in a free and liberal manner. As a result, the African-Americans feel now much freer as to seek their new identity that has become possible only due to the concept of modernity.

Men such as Emperor Napoleon introduced new codes of law in Europe based on merit and achievement rather than on a class system rooted in Feudalism. The modern political system of liberalism (derived from the word 'liberty' which means 'freedom') empowered members of the disenfranchised third estate. The power of elected bodies supplanted traditional rule by royal decree. A new attachment to one's nation, culture and language produced the powerful forces of nationalism. This, in turn, ultimately contributed to new ideologies such as the ideology of Fascism, Socialism and Communism.

Taken to an extreme, the desire to demolish all vestiges of the past and to create a classless society, resulted in the collapse of Communism following the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia, which executed the Tsar

and his family, created the Soviet Union, transformed serfdom, and forcibly modernized Mother Russia. In Germany, once the Kaiser had abdicated in 1918, chaos ensued, paving the way for the rise of Adolf Hitler and Nazism.

The new republic of the United States of America granted the vote to the whites, male citizens, and placed reins on government based on the new Constitution and created a system of checks and balances between the three different branches of government -- the legislature, judiciary, and executive -- headed by the president who was elected via a national election.

New attitudes towards religion, with the church diminished, and a desire for personal freedoms induced desire for sexual freedom, which was ultimately accepted by large sectors of the Western World. Theories of 'free love' and uninhibited sex were touted by radicals only later in the 1960s.

Afro-Americans' real struggle for freedom is a modern phenomenon though they began to resist white dominant groups from the period of slavery. In the modern times, one of the modes of resistance has been their writing. This is commonly known as 'slave narratives' which were the autobiographies written by black slaves who either escaped the brutality of slavery or had been freed. A large number of slave narratives, including Fredrick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Fredrick Douglass* (1861), were published between 1830 and 1865. Some of such narratives published during this period attacked the institutionalized oppression of the

black people under slavery. The novels, like William Will Brown's *Caries* and Martin Delavey's *Blake, or The Huts of America*, that fuelled the anti-slavery movement and advocated for freedom, have been categorized as abolitionist. It was a kind of resistance against the whites for their liberation.

Even after the abolition of slavery in 1865, the whites adopted the tradition of plantation in order to simplify and defamiliarise the exploitation and oppression of the blacks. Therefore, the black intellectuals, being aware of this fact, began to attack the post-reconstruction of repression, discrimination and segregation. *Appointed* (1894) by Walter Slowers and William. Anderson was the first novel to deal with "peonage, convict labor, lynching, disfranchisement, and segregation" (Bone 32).

Another tendency became apparent in the period between 1890 and 1920, before the Harlem renaissance, when black novels invariably took a revolutionary stance. The novels like Charles Chestnut's *The House behind Cedars* and Suten Groggs's *The Hindered Hand Contain* an element of protest, for which they have been typically categorized as novels of accommodation and assimilation.

In the midst of this great change emerged the New Negro Movement which was named after Alain Locke's "The New Negro," founding document of the Harlem Renaissance -- modern art movement of the Afro-Americans. Locke wanted the elevation of the black artists and intellectuals whose achievements should be seen as equal to that of the

white writers and artists. The New Negro Movement was also a 'spiritual emancipation'. He stresses that the Negro has "American wants, American ideas and should therefore strive for recognition of those wants and ideas by white culture" ("The New Negro" 517). "The New Negro" became the credo of movement of black writers, artists, musicians, actors, intellectuals, and their patrons which emerged during this period. The cultural expression of this 'New Negro' was authentic and widespread. No longer was Black cultural expression isolated and shunned. Artists like Langston Hughes were inspired to expose the life and culture of Black people in a way that had not been done before. Thus, it shows that the Black Renaissance Art of 1920s was self conscious and racially rhetorical. It interpreted the Negro and his cultural values . These artists craved for equality and recognition of the artistic values in white America. This makes their literature what is popularly known as protest writing.

Black people and their artist began to understand that racist discrimination was a product of capitalism and imperialism. They thus became active as leaders and participants in campaigns for radical and revolutionary changes. These themes of revolutionary class struggle pervaded the work of many artists. Richard Wrights summarizes new perspective:

It means that a Negro writer must learn to view the life of a Negro living in New York's Harlem or Chicago's South side with the consciousness that one-sixth of the earth surface belongs to the working class. It means that a Negro woman

hoeing cotton in the South and the man who loll in swivel chairs in Wall Street and take the fruits of her toil. (56)

Of Black writers in a speech at the first American Writers' Congress in 1935, it was said that:

Negro writers can seek to unite blacks and whites in our country, not on the nebulous basis of an interracial meeting, or the shifting sands of religious brotherhood, but on the solid ground of the daily working-class struggle to wipe out, now and forever, all the old inequalities of the past. (9)

The Civil Rights Movement with its underlying cultural goal of assimilation was aborted by the reactionary repression Blacks underwent in the form of assassination, imprisonment and racist ideological attacks. This movement had been the hope of a large and developing number of aspirations to middle-class life. When it failed, many of these young, middle-class youths formed the social base for a new nationalist movement against America. While this had a political aspect, it also had a cultural aspect. 'Black Power' became a relying cry for the newborn nationalist who began to defect from the Civil Rights Movement, particularly after the death of Malcolm X and assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. In this context, the Black Arts Movement was born. This movement desired and had fought for full integration into the 'mainstream.'

The Black Arts Movement defined the problems of Black people more as the result of 'European American cultural insensitivity' and not primarily as the result of the operations of the capitalist system. The

solution proposed by the Black Arts Movement (and Black power) was essentially reformist: "A cultural revolution in arts and ideas. " This Cultural Revolution was to be rooted in a new aesthetic: The Black Aesthetics. The writer Larry Neal articulated its purpose as:

The motive behind the Black aesthetic is the destruction of the white thing, the destruction of white ideas, and white ways of looking at the world. The new aesthetic is mostly predicated on an Ethics which asks the question: whose vision of the world is finally more meaningful, ours or the white oppressors'? What is truth? Or more precisely, whose truth shall we express, that of the oppressed or of the oppressors?  
(27)

After the rise of the Black Aesthetic, black writers no longer plead for their equal status in white-dominated literary mainstream; they are on their way to establish a literary world of their own.

Their long and sustained oppression in white America has provided them with a unique experience out of which they now speak in a different way. Their works have become racially expressive rather than racially rhetorical; they like to speak as Negroes. As Alain Locke says, Negro youth speaks "[. . .] with arresting visions and vibrant prophecies; forecasting in the mirror of art what we must see and recognize in the streets of reality tomorrow, foretelling in new notes and accents the maturing speech of full racial utterance" (Negro Youth Speaks 17). With this unique experience and new way of expression, Negro Youth -- black

artist or writer -- has become a particular representative of his people who share his experience.

Instead of being self-conscious, Negro writer exploits what Locke calls "race-gift" which for him is a "vast spiritual endowment" (18) in the process of literary creation. And he does not speak to others, but to his own people in his artistic creation and expresses what his unique experience has taught him, which, eventually, would liberate his readers (who are, of course, black) from the conscious motive of race and their oppression under its horror. Thus "Speak as Negros," as Locke says, has become to motto of the Black Aesthetic.

After having overcome the atrocities of racism and the tag of racist' the white critics have imposed upon him, Negro writer has achieved "an objective attitude towards life" (Locke, Negro Youth 18). Locke further explains:

The artistic problem of the Young Negro has not been so much that of acquiring the outer mastery of form and technique as that of achieving an inner mastery of mood and spirit. That accomplished, there has come the happy release from self-consciousness, rhetoric, bombast, and the hampering habit of setting artistic values with primary regard for moral effect--all those pathetic over-compensations of a group inferiority complex which our social dilemmas inflicted upon several unhappy generation. (18)

Thus, their focus on the intrinsic values of art would certainly help the Negro writers to throw off the shackles of discrimination put on them by the white racism, and to establish their own aesthetic principle in creation and analysis of their art which, indeed, reflects the subtleties of their lives. They have brought with their art the virtue of finding beauty in them and through their art have offered 'an emancipating vision to the African-Americans.

In this way, the twentieth century brought changes of a rapidity and magnitude unmatched in any preceding century. The major forces that shaped history after 1900 were a fulfillment of trends already apparent before that date. What made the twentieth century unique was that of changes in moral, social, culture and political values. Vicissitudes in the life of nations, strokes and tensions that had a relatively local and limited effect in earlier times produced wider and wider repercussions after 1900 as transport was accelerated and communication became almost instantaneous. The events of the twentieth century demonstrated that it was no longer possible for any people, however remote or isolated, to live to itself.

To a greater extent, the two World Wars are responsible for bringing about the achievements. People began to question everything of the earlier times. In this sense, it is in this century that the root of 'modernism begins to take a route. Many critics agree that it involves a deliberate and radical break with some of the traditional bearers not only of western art, but of western culture in general. In this regard, M. H.

Abrams writes, "Important intellectual precursors of modernism, in this sense, are thinkers who had questioned the certainties that had supported traditional modes of social organization, religion, and morality [ . . . ]" (167). So, especially marginalized people sought for material comfort, personal happiness and liberty by challenging earlier strict social codes and values. And thus there started a conflict between earlier and modern values.

'Conflict' is a situation where individuals of different groups are having different views and needs. It is a situation of opposition or antagonistic interaction based on scarcity of power, resources, political and social position and differing values. Conflict occurs in different situations, between and among members of family between older generation and younger generation, between labor and management and even within a single mind. In Wilson's *The Piano Lesson*, the conflict occurs between African traditional values and modern liberal values represented respectively by sister Berniece and brother Willie of an African American family.

### **III. Conflict between African Cultural Legacy and Modernity in**

#### **August Wilson's *The Piano Lesson***

##### **Berniece's Quest for Cultural Identity**

The present for black America has been invariably shaped by a history of race-related and broken relationships, or what Michael Morales calls "a simultaneously reactive/reconstructive engagement with the representation of blacks and the representation of history by the dominant culture" (105). Traditionally in Wilson's plays, the protagonist's personal past is the lens through which the present situation is seen. In *The Piano Lesson*, however, Wilson traces the play's historical complications back three generations, to an incident in the family's slave legacy that has left them to face the present in terms of a history that, seventy-five years later, is not just personal, but communal and familial.

The action of the play is driven by conflict over how best to engage history as iconographically centered mythology, which would celebrate the events of the past, or as foundation for the present, which would seek to fulfil its promise. The fulcrum of the conflict is the piano. Boy Willie, the great-grandson of the slave whose art graces the piano, has come to the North, i. e. Pittsburgh to claim his half of the piano, which is currently in the possession of his sister, Berniece. He feels that the proceeds from the sale of the piano offer him his best chance to escape the economic and social oppression that has burdened the men in his family since slavery. His dream of escape is blunted, however, by Berniece's unwillingness to sell what is, for her, a sacred icon of the family's sacrificial legacy. It

brings a serious conflict between the brother and sister because Boy Willie wants to create his new identity separate from his past slavery through the possession of land which is a sign of modernity in the post slavery era, whereas Berniece's denial to sell the piano reflects her adherence to her ancestors' culture.

Berniece is very much conscious about her cultural root, which she believes, plays a significant role in African-Americans' life. She is not affected by the influence of modernity. Her dialogues and activities in the play show that she is in constant quest for preserving her African identity. The piano, which Berniece wants to keep as an heirloom, is a means through which she tries to claim her African cultural roots. She believes in the mythical power of the piano and acknowledges it as a point of contact with her ancestral heritage this explains her absolute reluctance to sell it -- it was important enough to die for it (but only within the parameters of the myth). The result is an acknowledgment of the symbiotic relationship between her generation and those who came before -- for mutual gain or mutual destruction -- just as in the African ancestral ritual that was the source of the original myth. It is to these ancestors she turns during the family's confrontation with Sutter's ghost near the end of the play. When Berniece hears the sounds of the ghost of Sutter, she realizes that she must do something:

She crosses to the piano. She begins to play. The song is found piece by piece. It is an old orge to sing that is both a commandment and plea. With each repetition it gains in

strength. It is intended as an exorcism and a dressing for  
battle. A rustle of wind blowing across two continents.

(106)

Then Berniece begins to sing playing the piano:

I want you to help me.

Mama Berniece

I want you to help me.

Mama Esther

I want you to help me.

Papa Boy Charles

I want you to help me.

Mama Ola

I want you to help me. (107)

One of the strengths of such a mythology is its ability to empower the  
believer -- particularly in its power to define the past and to define reality.

It was precisely for this reason that slave narratives and slave songs  
became such an important literary form for black America. Such  
narratives take control of the environment by shaping it sympathetically  
and, in doing so, giving individuals control over themselves and their  
destiny. As a result, then, it is generally insignificant whether the myth  
bears the whole truth or any truth at all. Frequently, slave narratives were

shaped and reshaped by abolitionists who wanted to convey a specific political message.

In *The Piano Lesson*, the truth of the narrative is subsumed by its communal and familial empowerment which is evident in the empowering effect achieved by Wining Boy's retelling of the Yellow Dog myth:

I done been to where the Southern cross the Yellow Dog and called out their names. They talk back to you, too. [. . .] I can't say how they talked to nobody else. But to me it just filled me up in a strange sort of way to be standing there on that spot. I didn't want to leave. It felt like the longer I stood there the bigger I got. (34-35)

It shows how the African myth plays a significant role in the lives of African people.

Doaker's retelling of the piano myth offers the same sense of power. What is not so obvious is that Doaker's narrative bears internal evidence to some degree of inauthenticity. In documenting the family heritage, Doaker relates that Old Berniece and her son (Doaker's and Charles's father) were sold as payment for the piano to a slaveholder "down in Georgia" (42). In his grief over their departure (and in response to the white mistress's grief over losing her favorite slave), the first Boy Willie (Doaker's grandfather) carved their portraits, as well as much of the family history, into the piano.

What seems problematic about this genealogy is that Doaker's and Charles's father would have been in Georgia, some distance away, when

these portraits were being carved, and was unlikely to have known anything about them, or that they even existed. Nevertheless, Doaker relates that Charles (his father) becomes obsessed enough with the piano to raid Sutter's farm and steal it, an act that would lead directly to his death. Now, even Sutter's grandson has become complicit in the myth, appearing like what Anne Fleche calls "the vampire from some expressionistic film" to take his revenge on those, like Boy Willie, who will not believe in the myth, and who will not acknowledge his existence (9).

It is this myth that Berniece wants to trace her cultural root for her African identity. It is clear, however, that the myth has sustained Berniece to the present, and it is the myth that ultimately resolves the conflict over the piano, though she treats the myth throughout the play with a selective reverence. She refuses to play the piano, and has done so ever since her mother's death, as a way of forgetting the past - of keeping the spirits from "walking around [. . .] the house" -- even as she honors its sacredness (70). Likewise, she denies the existence of the 'Ghosts of the Yellow Dog' though she is ultimately forced to acknowledge both -- the past and the spirits -- in reclaiming her faith in the myth, when she plays the piano and furiously calls on her ancestors to help Boy Willie defeat the ghost of Sutter in a final showdown: "I want you to help me. I want you to help me," for both Boy Willie and Berniece, between embracing the past and planning a future. For the family, it is a landmark moment, and a reconciling one, for by embracing the shared mythology, both Berniece

and Boy Willie find what they seek. Berniece rediscovers the usefulness of the piano that Boy Willie was seeking, and Boy Willie is able to defeat the Sutter spirit that has oppressed the family for generations.

Throughout the play, then, the piano becomes a touchstone by which antithetical attitudes about the past may be evaluated. The result is that Wilson has redefined the frustration of carrying the burden of the past, which is at the center of his other plays, into a question of how best to utilize the past as he told an interviewer, "The real issue is the piano, the legacy. How are you going to use it?" (DeVries 25).

This question is brought into focus at the point where Doaker, Berniece's uncle, tells Boy Willie's friend Lymon why Berniece refuses to sell the piano (40). He relates the story of his grandfather's carvings on the piano in a tale so imbued with rich images of bondage, acceptance, and retribution that it seems to have been handed down, father-to-son, detail-by-detail, since the time of its origin. It is, in other words, the family's slave narrative. Doaker narrates:

See, our family was owned by a fellow named Joel Nolander. It was coming up on Stutter's wedding anniversary as he was looking to buy his wife [. . .] Miss Ophelia was her name [. . .] he was looking to buy her an anniversary present. Only thing with him [. . .] he ain't had no money. But he had some niggers. So he asked Mr. Nolander to see if maybe he could trade off some of the niggers for that piano. Mr. Nolander agreed only he say he had to pick them. He didn't

want Sutter to give him just only old nigger. He say he wanted to have the pick of the latter. So Sutter lined up his niggers and Mr. Nolander looked them over and out of them the whole bunch he picked my grandmother [. . . ] her name was Berniece [. . . ] Same like Berniece. (43)

**Boy Willie's Quest for Individual Identity (Influence of Modern Mainstream American Culture/ Modernity)**

Boy Willie is a modern black boy who moves from place to place looking for better opportunities. During his movement, he enjoys much freedom. He does not face discrimination and injustice as his ancestors faced. The only freedom he seeks is economic freedom. He is almost free from other kinds of bondages like slavery.

For Boy Willie, however, the dynamic of enslavement is not just a product of oral tradition; the events of his own life constitute, in his mind, a second, metaphorical, enslavement -- economic, not physical -- from which he attempts a desperate flight to freedom through the acquisition of James Sutter's land, upon which his family had worked as slaves, and which would offer him, for the first time in his life, a substantial degree of achievement and self-realization.

Boy Willie embarks on an archetypal quest for self-realization by attempting to purchase the very land that his family had been forced to work as slaves, and working on it for his own profit. The cost of such self-realization is high; he must surrender the concept of community, the folklore of family, and the respect of his ancestors to acquire the means to

his sense of selfhood. He wants to recreate his identity through the possession of land which is possible modern phenomenon. Otherwise, he would have remained bound to myth (African) only. In the call-and-response to the parallel narratives within the play, Boy Willie refuses to engage the call, seeking instead his own 'song,' which catapults him to conflict with his sister. To him, the decision seems to be a pragmatic one since the piano has "gone untouched" by Berniece since Mama Ola died seven years ago (10). His argument places him squarely in the tradition of later slave narratives, which had come to view even slavery itself from an increasingly pragmatic perspective. Nevertheless, it is more than mere pragmatism that sets Boy Willie's story apart as a classic 'slave narrative.' He was, after all, extremely pragmatic when he was still playing the part of the rogue; skimming wood for himself from the load he was hauling for a white man, as pragmatic as the decision may have seemed, was the catalytic event in Crawley's death. What sets Boy Willie apart, then, is that, like the archetypal hero of the Bildungsroman, he is moving from the somewhat idyllic world of an almost childlike ignorance, symbolized by his having recently come out of the rural South (a traditional metaphor for innocence and simplicity), into a metaphoric wilderness, just as dark and full of surprises as the ones his ancestors would have faced in their escape attempts. Once the commitment is made, turning back becomes impossible.

Furthermore, while he is not a literal runaway slave, his flight to Pittsburgh bears all the earmarks of the journey his ancestors would have

taken a century before. He has come to the North, just across the Ohio River, seeking not only economic and social freedom but to reclaim the heritage built by his ancestors and stolen from him. He wants to create African-American identity in a new modern context as he has become quite familiar with the free and changed context. He has enjoyed equal opportunities wherever he has moved. Now he wants to get the position similar to that of the whites through the possession of land. He wants to use the African myth in a creative and practical way unlike his sister Berniece who just wants to keep the piano as an heirloom which reminds them of slave era. Though she tries to trace her cultural root, her thinking is narrower than that of her brother who even seems to be pursued by a sort of spiritual slave catcher. His chief dissimilarity with the runaway slave would appear to be his inability to persuade anyone of the merits of his method. What he surrenders is nobility, however, he reacquires with singlemindedness: He is determined to take the piano regardless of Berniece's opinion or threats. This quality of being 'driven' is a quality inherent in yet another literary motif -- the running man, the man who is fleeing the culture in which he is the outsider: the immigrant from Europe at the birth of America, the pioneer in the westward expansion, the runaway slave. What distinguishes the runaway slave from the pioneer is the issue of choice -- the slave never has the option of setting up life where he or she is. Boy Willie's flight, even given his economic depravation, is his choice, one, in contrast to the trains which always return, from which he will not turn back.

The only obstacle to completing his journey is the material worth he possesses in the piano, a value that stands in contrast to the inherent transcendent and symbolic value it possesses for Berniece. He says to Berniece: "Now I'm gonna tell you the way I see it. The only thing that make that piano worth something is them carvings Papa Willie Boy put on there. That's what make it worth something" (51). Boy Willie realizes that it is only through material worth that one's identity is secured. This is the influence of modernity on him. For Berniece, however, to liquidate the piano would be to demythologize it, to profane it, to take away the essence of identity which Berniece has bestowed upon it, the same identity that she placed so completely in Crawley, who seemingly foreshadowed this loss by being taken from her, in her mind, by Boy Willie. In this sense, Boy Willie, by selling the piano, would be asserting the preeminence of his own narrative over that of the piano and its carvings -- present over past, utility over tradition, freedom over community. It is an inversion of the call-and-response, an attempt to make the 'song' that is his life truly his own. At that point, he would be retaking control over the text of his own narrative, a text that most slave narratives, even the one represented by the piano, surrendered to the demands of authentication and audience. Certainly control over the text of bondage is no guarantee of freedom. But it would be evidence of that freedom.

Owning Sutter's land would give Boy Willie that sense of place, of time, of identity. It was, after all, he who planned all along to return to the South, that metaphorical wilderness of bondage, while Lyman was

staying in Pittsburgh. "Boy Willie say he going back [to the South], but I'm gonna stay" (3). Meanwhile, Doaker, already in Pittsburgh, would continue to ride the trains in every direction as a "Pullman porter" (18-19). Doaker, literally a man without a place in his career, is also the heir who has given up his own claim on the piano, metaphorically renouncing any claim to his own cultural identity, even one based on an authenticated narrative like the piano. Berniece says:

Doaker don't want no part of that piano. He ain't never wanted no part of it. He blames himself for not staying behind with Papa Boy Charles. He wished his hands of that piano a long time ago. He didn't want me to bring it up here – but I wasn't gonna leave it down there. (69)

It shows other characters such as Doaker who are not conscious of their cultural traditions.

### **Conflict between Berniece and Boy Willie as the Conflict between Cultural Legacy and Influence of Modern White Culture**

In *The Piano Lesson* Boy Willie wants to create a new identity or new life by selling the piano where most of his ancestors were forced to work as slaves. It is only the piano which helps to fulfill his aim. He is very much conscious about his ancestors' past life which helps him to know who he is. Here, Boy Willie is going to build a new life by purchasing a piece of land in the South. He thinks that purchasing a piece of land in the South is recreating identity. For Boy Willie the piano is merely the means to what for him is the most important end -- economic

independence in the form of the ownership of land that he can farm, in this case land on which his family was once enslaved.

With the help of his family's piano Boy Willie wants to fulfill his aim. Boy Willie says, "Sutter's brother selling the land. He say he gonna sell it to me. That's why I come up here. I got one part of it. Sell them watermelons and get me another part. Get Berniece to sell that piano and I'll have the third part" (9). It shows Boy Willie's intention of selling the piano in order to get a piece of Sutter's land so that he can live on his own way not under the domination. The piano helps him to get a piece of land and watermelons help him to get another part in the South where his ancestors were forced to work as slaves. He knows the slave history which represents through the piano. That is why, he insists on selling the piano even though his sister does not allow him to sell it. As Boy Willie says: "Hey Doaker [. . . ] if Berniece don't want to sell that piano [. . . ] I'm gonna cut in half and go on and sell my half" (28). He decides that he is surely going to sell his piano so that he can live in the South in his own way. It shows he is going to recreate his identity.

Unlike most of Wilson's characters, Boy Willie's residence in the North is only temporary; he has no desire to stay and will leave as soon as he acquires the money to buy Sutter's land. For him the sale of the piano and the acquisition of the property are the most appropriate and effective use of their inheritance and he is critical of his sister's attitude towards the piano.

Most of the people had already migrated towards the North for the better life but Boy Willie does not want to live in the North because he wants to show his power over whites by building a house or by creating a new identity in the South where most of his ancestors were forced to work as slaves. Most of the people migrated towards the North but here, Boy Willie's returning to the South indicates that he is going to create a new identity where most of his ancestors were once enslaved. As Boy Willie says:

All that's in the past. If my daddy had seen where he could have traded that piano in for some land of his own, it wouldn't be sitting up here now. He spent his whole life farming on somebody else's land. I ain't gonna do that. The only thing my daddy had to give me was that piano. He died over giving me that I ain't gonna let it sit up there and rot without trying to do something with it. If Berniece can't see that, then I'm gonna go ahead and sell my half. And you and wining Boy know I'm right. (46)

It shows Boy Willie knows his father worked on somebody else's land. Boy Willie knows about his father's slave identity but he is not going to follow his forefathers' way of living in the South. Purchasing a piece of land in the South would give him a sort of freedom where he could live in his own way. But he is not going to do what his father did. He wants to make his own identity so that he can live in his own way by selling the piano. As Boy Willie says, "You stay up here and make your own way if

that's what you want to do. I'm going back and live my life the way I want to live it" (46). Through the dialogue of Boy Willie, it is clear that his ancestors were treated as slaves in the South so that he wants to build a new life by selling the piano in the South where his ancestors were forced to work as slaves in white man's land. But on the other hand, the piano is a taboo object for Berniece as Berniece says:

I done told you, I don't play on that piano, when my mama died I shut the top on that piano and I ain't never open it since. I was only playing it for her when my daddy died seem like all her life went into that piano. When I played it she could hear my daddy talking to her. I used to think them pictures came alive and walked through the house.

Sometime late night I could hear my mama talking to them. I said that wasn't gonna happen, to me. I don't play that piano cause I don't want to wake them spirits. They never be walking around in this house. (70)

Berniece says that she has not been able to touch the piano since her mother has died; she played for mother alone, when she played, her mother could hear her father speaking to her. As a child, Berniece imagines that the figures would come to life and stalk the house. She leaves the piano untouched to keep from waking those spirits. Here, Boy Willie's views on the piano and Berniece's views on the piano are totally different. Berniece wants to keep it in order to keep memory alive but

Boy Willie wants to sell it so that he can buy a piece of land in the South to create a new life or new identity.

Here, in this drama, the male protagonist's intention of returning to the South indicates that Boy Willie is very much aware about his past slave identity. He wants to live in his own way where he could use his freedom. Purchasing a piece of land in the South would give him that sort of freedom. As Boy Willie says, "You stay up here and make your own way if that's what you want to do. I'm going back and live my life the way I want to live it" (46).

Above dialogue of Boy Willie shows that he wants to return to the South where he wants to build a new life. Then only he will be able to stake his future. Despite the interest of his sister Berniece he decides to sell his family's piano, which helps him to buy a piece of land in the South. Returning into the South indicates that, he is very much aware about his culture and his past. In the play, Boy Willie's return to the South, for Wilson, is part of an essential quest, a quest for mother Africa, for identity. Returning of Boy Willie in the South is for creating identity and Boy Willie is very much aware of his past slave identity. In order to fulfill his desire he must use his family's legacy, i. e. piano. But his sister is totally against his desire of selling the piano as Berniece says, "Money cannot buy what that piano cost. You cannot sell your soul for money. It won't go with the buyer" (50). This shows she does not want to sell her family's piano because it represents her family's past. It is the spirit of her family. So, she doesn't want to sell the piano because she does not want to

wake the spirits of her family. But on the other hand her brother wants to use the piano in order to build a new life in the South. He wants to give out lessons on it (piano). This is the result of the influence of modernity on him.

Here, Berniece wants to hide past life but Boy Willie wants to disclose the truth of the piano because he believes that it helps the people to realize who they are. Boy Willie says, "Alright now, if you say to me. Boy Willie, I'm using that piano. I give out lessons on it and that help me make my rent or whatever" (51). It shows that Boy Willie is going to use that piano so that he can buy a piece of Sutter's land in the South. This act consequently helps him to live on his own. He wants to live economically and psychologically free life. He is very much aware about his ancestors' past life but he is not going to follow his ancestors' way of living under white domination. Boy Willie wants to dismantle the hierarchy existing between white and black people in the Southern USA. So, he decides to sell that piano in order to make his future life. Boy Willie further says:

That's all I'm trying to do with that piano. Trying to put my mark on the road. Like my daddy done. My heart say for me to sell that piano and get me some land so I can make a life for myself to live in my own way. Other than that I ain't thinking about nothing Berniece got to say. (94)

With the help of piano, he is trying to build a new life it will be helpful for future generation. He wants to live in his own way. By selling the piano, he wants to put the mark on the road.

Purchasing a piece of land with the help of the family piano is a most effective use of his family's legacy for Willie. He wants to subvert the hierarchy between white people and black people. He does not want to live under white domination as he is very much aware about his forefather's past life. By doing so he wants to make a room for his future generation. So, Boy Willie is going to sell that piano despite the unwillingness of his sister. He knows that the so-called white people ruled his ancestors. So, by purchasing some acres of land in the South where most of his ancestors were once enslaved, he wants to build a new life.

Boy Willie doesn't want to see the fundamental difference between white man and him. This very difference between man and man is a society-made thing. So, Boy Willie does not want to accept it. Boy Willie thinks that we all are equal. Boy Willie says, "I ain't worried about nobody mistreating me. They treat you like you let them treat you. They mistreat me, I mistreat them right back. Ain't no difference in me and the white man" (38). Boy Willie is of the opinion that if we let them mistreat, they mistreat us as much as they can. So, we should not give the chance to mistreat us. Rather we should demand to live in our own way not under domination. We should have courage to live freely without being mistreated by the whites. Boy Willie asserts that there is no difference between him and the white man. According to him, the whites and the blacks, all are humans so

there is no difference between us. So, he asserts himself as equal to white man:

This might be your bottom but it ain't mine. I am living at the top of life. I ain't gonna just take my life and throw it away at the bottom. I'm in the world like everybody else.

The way I see it everybody else got to come up a little taste to be where I am. (92)

Boy Willie claims that he is living at the top of life as a white man. He does not want to see any difference between the white man and him. This very difference between men is a social construct, so we should not follow or accept it. It shows Boy Willie is very much critical about racial discrimination, in order to show his determination for equality; he wants to buy a piece of land in the South by selling the piano, which symbolizes his family's past life. Boy Willie's sister lives in Pittsburgh. She feels inferior to white people. She does not want to recreate an identity she just wants to live under slavery. So she does not want to tell the history of the piano to her daughter but Boy Willie wants to tell her because it helps to behave differently in society.

Here, in this drama, Boy Willie's desire to return to the South undoubtedly symbolizes awareness and an acceptance of his identity who he is. He is very much aware about his past life. He wants to live in the South not like his ancestors but on his own. By doing this he wants to create a new life by selling the piano as Boy Willie says opines: "You ain't got nothing working for you. Now the kind of my daddy was he

would have understood that. I'm sorry you can't see it that way. But that's why I'm gonna take that piano out of here and sell it" (51).

It is clear that it is the piano which helps him to create his new life and identity. The only thing his daddy had to give him was that very piano. But his sister cannot see it, whereas he is going to sell it to build a new life. For him, the piano is the means to assure his future. He wants to change the social order by purchasing a piece of land in the South where most of the blacks worked under white domination.

It shows that Wilson is trying to tell all Afro-Americans to rediscover themselves. They have to find their identity. They have to struggle to create a new life. They have to find out who they are and where they are in a white dominated society. This play suggests that the black Americans must rediscover to achieve their full emancipation from racial subordination. So, here in this drama, Boy Willie is going to create a new life where most of his ancestors were once enslaved. He asserts that he only follows law which is right, he does not follow law forcefully. In this regard, Boy Willie says, "I don't go by what the law say. The law's liable to say anything. I go by if its right or not. It doesn't matter to me what the law say. I take and look at it for myself" (38-39).

While Berniece wishes simply to preserve the piano, to let their ancestors die in peace, Boy Willie wishes to sell the piano, his past so that he might buy a new future. Berniece wants to keep the piano untouched but for Boy Willie the piano symbolizes his past life. So here selling the piano symbolizes selling his past life so that he "will be able to buy a new

future" (102). The piano becomes the history of his family and selling the piano metaphorically represents selling his past life so that he will secure a new future.

In this way, Wilson talks about the Charles family in such a way that it is the representative of the whole Afro-American life of 1930s in America. Through this play, Wilson wants to alter the relationship between blacks and society. Here, in this drama, the protagonist named Boy Willie wants to buy a piece of land in the South where most of his ancestors were once enslaved.

Boy Willie's attitude is that the piano is merely the means to what for him is the most important end --economic independence in the form of the ownership of land that he can farm, in this case land on which his family was once enslaved. Unlike most of Wilson's characters, Boy Willie's residence in the North is only temporary, he has no desire to stay, and will leave as soon as he acquires the money to buy Sutter's land by selling the piano. For him the sale of the piano and as a result the acquisition of the property is the most appropriate and effective use of their inheritance. Here, the piano metaphorically tells the past identity of the Charles family. So here selling the piano metaphorically indicates selling his past identity.

### **Resolution of the Conflict between Boy Willie and Berniece**

At the end of the play, however, the piano will not authenticate Boy Willie's search for freedom. When he goes to move it, to take possession of it, to claim power over it, the piano will not move. Boy Willie says,

"How the piano gonna be stuck? We just moved it. Slide you' end out. "

He and his friend, Lymon "switch sides and try again without success" (83). As a result, he is ultimately forced into a battle with the one thing that may still hold power over his narrative -- Sutter's Ghost. Whether he "killed Sutter," as Berniece believes (105), or Sutter has taken a position as a representative of the whole white world directly in Boy Willie's path, the result is that Boy Willie must ascend the stairs -- "go to the mountaintop" -- and defeat this final obstacle to freedom (106). He had imagined all along that the piano was his final hurdle; now he finds this engagement with Sutter, which he has desired economically throughout the play, to be his "baptism by fire" -- "baptism" suggested by his reference to water, "fire" by his reference to Hell (105). He finds himself engaged at the end with the ghost, his past. It shows that he cannot completely ignore his past heritage for economic prosperity. He feels that he has to give some regard to his cultural tradition. So, Boy Willie says to Berniece, "Hey Berniece [. . . ] if you and Martha don't keep playing on that piano [. . . ] ain't no telling [. . . ] me and Sutter both liable to be back" (108).

This was the point at which the play originally ended; once Boy Willie engaged the ghosts of the past, he had cleared the very hurdle for which he sought to sell the piano. For Wilson, struggle with such ghosts of the past is a real phenomenon for black America, and the ambiguity of the outcome a thought-provoking reflection of reality. With Lloyd Richards's guidance, Wilson rewrote his ending, but the substance remains the same. Once on the mountaintop, Boy Willie finds the identity he has

long sought, so much so that he returns from the conflict ready to grant the validity of the past, tempered by its utility in the present -- If Berniece and Maretha don't keep playing that piano, Boy Willie and Sutter are both liable to be back. He leaves Pittsburgh no richer (with the exception of the proceeds from watermelons he has brought with him), but wiser - no longer completely disdainful of that which his ancestors loved, no longer completely trusting in his own pursuits.

At this point, the parallel narratives of brother and sister come together in a single call to the future; the response awaits. The family's slave narrative yields to the piano's pragmatic use, where its focus becomes the present and future, not the past. On the other hand, Boy Willie, having agreed with the importance of sanctifying the family's past, refocuses on an unchanged, but refined and more powerful, vision of his own future. In his struggle with the ghosts of the past, he has reached a new level of self-actualization and has taken the family's understanding of its shared slave narrative to its final, generic phase; now both he and Berniece may continue the narrative. Neither of them seeks, or needs, any further authentication of its validity as they seem to stick to their stance.

In this way, Wilson uses the piano as a means to link the present with the past and hopefully change the future. Here, Wilson is able to tell the shadowy past of Afro-Americans with the help of the piano. By telling the shadowy past of Afro-Americans, Wilson believes that it helps the people to alter the relationship between the black and the whites. So, the piano helps to open the way for recreating identity of Afro-American

people. Lesson of the past is very much crucial for all Afro-Americans to recreate their identity. So, Wilson uses the piano in order to tell the shadowy past of the Charles family thereby helping to assure the future. This family is the representative of the whole Afro-American life of 1930s in America. Thus, the piano works as a metaphor of slavery and identity of Afro-American people and further opens the way for recreating the identity.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

August Wilson's play *The Piano Lesson* is an exploration of the conflict between African cultural legacy and modernity represented respectively by sister Berniece and brother Boy Willie. Boy Willie, unlike his sister, wants to recreate separate identity from slavery of Afro-American people in the South. The conflict is put into an action by the slave narratives of the brother and sister. Boy Willie wants to build a new life by selling the family piano and purchasing land in the South where most of his ancestors were forced to work as slaves. This has been possible due to the concept of modernity. His forefathers lived under white domination. So, they did not have their own identity. On the other hand, Berniece wants to keep the piano as an heirloom of her ancestors whose carvings the piano bears. Berniece is adamant in her stand as to the sale of the piano. This metaphorically represents that Berniece wants to continue her enslaved past history. She cannot think creatively as she just wants to trace her cultural roots. It causes a serious conflict between the sister and brother and increases hostility between them.

Wilson's *The Piano Lesson* shows the location of Afro-American people in the South. This play explores the life and suffering of Afro-American people in a white dominated society particularly in the Southern USA. Since Afro-American people lived in a white dominated society, they do not have their own identity. When people

are forced to work as slaves, then they are defined by other. This play shows what sort of identity they had and what sort of life style they lived in the South during slavery. With the help of the piano, Wilson is able to give the lesson of the past so that it further opens the way to make the African-Americans realize who they are and where they are from. Wilson believes that when people know about their shadowy past life then automatically they behave differently in society as the male protagonist named Boy Willie wants to buy a piece of land in the South in order to recreate a new life where most of his ancestors toiled to death. Boy Willie's intention of selling the piano metaphorically represents selling his past identity so that he will buy a new future. The piano, in this play, opens the way for recreating identity of Afro-American people. However, his narrative cannot escape the past legacy as he is frequently thwarted by Sutter's ghost. It shows that he cannot completely neglect his history and past. With the lesson of the past, Wilson wants to politicize the community so that it will help to alter the relationship between the blacks and the whites as Boy Willie wants to review this relationship in the changed context in modern time.

*The Piano Lesson* shows how people were frustrated by the racial discrimination. When we live under domination then we realize our identity. We become aware of our belonging and identity as the characters in the book exhibit. Metaphorically in the drama, the piano stands for the slavery and identity of Afro-American people in the sense

that the history of the piano is directly related with the history of the Charles family, which represents the whole Afro-American life of 1930s. The South is the original place where most of the Afro-American people were treated badly by the white people. And through this drama, Wilson wants to give the lesson for all Afro-Americans to claim the South as their own because it was the original place where most of the blacks were toiled to death. Lesson through the past is very much important for the present in order to make the present more meaningful and change the future. He asserts emphatically through this play that black people should recreate their own identity.

Explicitly Wilson talks about the piano in this play but implicitly he wants to talk about the condition of Afro-American people in the South. The history of the piano indicates the painful condition of the Afro-American people in the past. So, Wilson uses the piano or the past life of black people in order to make them conscious about who they are. He is able to link the present with the past and hopefully change the future. Wilson's inclusion of ghosts and spirits shows his diverse cultural influences. He is able to achieve the goal of the black aesthetic movement. The main aim of this movement is that artist should include interracial tension, socio-political awareness and relevance of African culture in their works. Wilson includes all these elements in this play. Thus, through the family conflict over the piano in the play, Wilson is able to talk about all these elements. Finally,

Wilson conveys the message that we should not completely ignore the past while seeking new identity in the changed context. We should take positive things from the history which helps people maintain their cultural identity.

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