

WOMANISM AS A MODEL FOR BLACKS' SOCIAL CHANGES IN AUGUST WILSON'S PLAYS

FOFANA Djeneba Epse COULIBALY

Université Alassane Ouattara, Bouaké

f.djeneba@gmail.com

Abstract: This study of four plays of August Wilson is based on Alice Walker's concept of Womanish. These plays are *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, *Gem of the Ocean* and *The Piano Lesson*. Black Women characters use different tools to help their community in their fight for the recognition of their real identity and place in America. Characters such as Ma Rainey, Aunt Esther, Berniece and Martha Loomis struggle for their community's economic independence and the respect of their own sexual life by breaking established rules. They also use the concept of mothering to integrate their Black fellow in the American society. These same characters exploit religion and spirituality to save their community and wash their souls.

Keywords: Womanism, Black, fight, American Society.

LE GENRE ET LA LUTTE IDENTITAIRE DES NOIRS DANS LES PIÈCES THÉÂTRALES D'AUGUST WILSON.

Résumé : Cette étude de quatre œuvres d'August Wilson est basée sur le concept de "féminité" de l'auteur Alice Walker. Ces œuvres sont : *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, *Gem of the Ocean* and *The Piano Lesson*. Les personnages noirs féminins de ces pièces théâtrales utilisent différents mécanismes pour aider leur communauté dans leur lutte pour la reconnaissance de leur vraie identité en Amérique. Les personnages tels que, Ma Rainey, Aunt Esther, Berniece et Martha Loomis luttent pour l'indépendance économique de leur communauté et le respect de leurs propres choix de vie en brisant les règles préétablies par la société. Elles utilisent également le concept de maternage pour intégrer la nouvelle génération de noirs dans le système Américain. Ces mêmes personnages font usage de la religion et de la spiritualité pour sauver les Américains noirs et purifier leurs âmes.

Mots-clés: Féminité, Noir, Lutte, Société Américaine.

Introduction

Black women are dedicated a particular and important place in August Wilson's plays. They endow the role of fighter for Blacks' identity recognition in America. This article studies four plays of the author, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, *Gem of the Ocean* and *The Piano Lesson*. We focus on Black Women's role in this analyse under the yoke of Alice Walker's concept of Womanish. These characters have got different tools to achieve their goal. It is these tools that will be highlighted in this study.

1. Audacity and courage

1.1 Courage

The concept of womanish as described by Alice Walker for life-change is portrayed by some Black Women in the plays. Defending her concept of womanish, Alice Walker writes:

FROM *WOMANISH*. 'Opp. of 'girlish,' i.e., frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.) A black feminist or feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, 'You acting womanish,' i.e., like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered 'good' for one. Interested in grown-up doings. Acting grown up. Being grown up. Interchangeable with another black folk expression: 'You trying to be grown.' Responsible. In charge. Serious.

Walker (1984: xi)

This Alice Walker's position toward womanism is perceived in the plays through characters such as Ma Rainey. Indeed, In *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, Ma Rainey acts womanish in order to change Sylvester and Dussie Mae's life. Not only does she impose herself to both Irvin and Sylvester who are respectively her manager and producer but also, she defends the concerns of the African Americans. Ma Rainey's audacious actions can be perceived in the following passage:

MA RAINEY. I don't care if he do. I promised the boy he could do the part ... and he's gonna do it! That's all there is to it. He don't stutter all the time. Get a microphone down here for him.

IRVIN. Ma, we don't have time. We can't ...

MA RAINEY. If you wanna make a record, you gonna find time. I ain't playing with you, Irvin. I can walk out of here and go back to my tour. I got plenty fans. I don't need to go through all this. Just go and get the boy a microphone. (IRVIN and STURDYVANT consult in the boot, Irvin exists.)

STURDYVANT. All right, Ma ... we'll get him a microphone. (*MRBB*, 74)

Ma Rainey acts womanish faced with Irvin and Sturdyvant. She acts as an outrageous and a courageous woman before Irvin and Sturdyvant who are white Americans. She plainly speaks about what she needs for Sylvester, her nephew. The outrageous action of Ma Rainey plays a womanish role in favour of her sister who is Sylvester's mother. Her good deeds and actions on Sylvester play in favour of her sister's relief from economic charge. Due to Ma Rainey's womanish action, the mother of Sylvester is no longer going to expend money on Sylvester. Ma Rainey does not only recognize oppression but also fights against oppression. She detects the authority of Irvin and Sturdyvant upon Sylvester as an oppression against African American. She then challenges against this racist oppression. Phillips Layli give credence to such the recognition of oppression by a womanist as follows:

A womanist knows oppression when she (or he) see it, and she (or he) is against it. She lives her life in such a way as to fight and dismantle oppression in whatever ways she can, individually or organized formation with others. (Layli, 2006: xxiv)

Ma Rainey lives her life in such a way as to fight and dismantle oppression that Irvin and Sturdyvant inflict to the African Americans in her blues band in whatever way she can. Her struggle brings her to gain the full sense of humanity. Through Ma Rainey's womanish action, she not only changes the life of Sylvester but also the life of the blood mother of Sylvester. Sylvester is given consideration by not only the members of the blues band but also the white manager and producer. Through Ma Rainey, August Wilson praises the courage and responsibility of the African American to take the destiny of the community in the American society. The African Americans do not way for white Americans to defend their black concerns. The African American women take the responsibility to fight for the integration of the different African Americans in the American society.

1.2 Audacity

In addition to changing the life of her sister and nephew, Ma Rainey's womanish action brings change to Dussie Ma's life. Ma Rainey gets Dussie Mae as her sexual partner as her following conversation with Cutler indicates:

MA RAINEY. (Calling CUTLER over.) Levee's got his eyes in the wrong place. You better school him, Cutler

CUTLER. Well, that being Ma's gal, and that being that boy's gal, is one and two different things. The boy is liable to kill you ... but you' ass gonna be out there scraping the concrete looking for a job if you messing with Ma's gal All I can do is warn you. (MRBB, 72, 89)

At first, Ma Rainey's decision to get a woman as her sexual partner is a courageous and wilful behaviour. She transcends the heterosexual politics set by patriarchal politics to subordinate women to men. Next to gender as men and women that exist in the blues band, Ma Rainey brings to light lesbianism as another type of gender in the blues band. Ma Rainey is displayed by August Wilson as a woman wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered good for one. On the top of Ma Rainey, it is the African American women that August Wilson described as a community which transcends the heterosexual hegemony preconceived in the American society. The transgression of the African American women is a mark of their liberty in the American society. This gender liberty symbolizes the integration of the African Americans through the womanish action of the African Americans. As Ma chooses Dussie Mae as her sexual partner, she does not miss to act as audacious and responsible woman. During a rehearsal, when Levee shows that he is interest in Dussie Mae, Ma Rainey reacts against him. She warns Levee:

MA RAINEY. (Calling CUTLER over.) Levee's got his eyes in the wrong place. You better school him, Cutler

CUTLER. Well, that being Ma's gal, and that being that boy's gal, is one and two different things. The boy is liable to kill you ... but you' ass gonna be out there scraping the concrete looking for a job if you messing with Ma's gal All I can do is warn you. (MRBB, 72, 89)

Ma Rainey is not intimidated by Levee's gender. She goes straight to warn him about the danger she can inflict to him if he plays with her sexual partner. If in the African society where the African Americans originate from women are silenced, Ma Rainey is not silenced in the America. She rather silences men. She is capable of dismissing Levee from the blues band. Beyond African American men, Ma Rainey has the audacity to silence white Americans. In the occasion where Irvin and Sturdyvant show their disagreement about Sylvester's integration in the blues band, Ma Rainey imposes her decision which is to integrate Sylvester in the blues band. Next to that, in the occasion where Irvin and Sturdyvant show their refusal to pay Sylvester's money of the blues performance, Ma Rainey orders them to pay Sylvester's money. Ma Rainey is thus outrageous and audacious African American woman who brings change to African American community. As Ma Rainey chooses Dussie Mae as her sexual partner she acts mature and responsible toward her. She dresses and takes care of her as follows:

I'm gonna take you tomorrow and get you some more things before I take you down to Memphis. They got clothes up here you can't get in Memphis. I want you to look nice for me. If you gonna travel with the show you got to look nice. (MRBB, 60)

The blues' singer gives to Dussie Mae social and financial security. She provides her money and dresses. Ma Rainey is an African American woman with a willful behavior. The politics of August Wilson behind the Ma Rainey is to point at African Americans as women endowed with willful behavior. The author presents African American women as a black community which make African American cultural practice integrate in the American society. This womanish action of the African Americans goes on in August Wilson's *Gem of the Ocean*.

2. Mothering and school education

2.1 Schooling

These women's actions are known under the concept of mothering. In the play, *The Piano Lesson* Black American women characters performing mothering carry out social integration. Berniece portrays this description as well. Being the bloodmother of Maretha, Berniece educates Maretha in the American educational institution. She "got her an extra school down at Iren Kaufman Settlement House. Say she good enough she can teach on the piano" (TPL, 10). When educating her daughter in American school, Berniece integrates her in the American cultural world. Through her American school education, Maretha

appropriates the mainstream culture in order to be well equipped to integrate the American society. In this way of thinking, to be socially integrated consists for Maretha to get good job, salary, get married and build her family peacefully in the America. School education in the vein of Maretha's education is promoted here as a medium through which Black Americans can integrate the American society. This stance depicted by August Wilson differs from that of Roy Osamu Kamada who argues that "school and Christianity had combined...to destroy the traditional social structure" (Kamada, 2010: 119). School education as projected by August Wilson is profitable to African Americans' integration in the American society. The American educational institution contributes to break the separation between white and black Americans. School institutions bring Blacks long considered as slaves to share the same educational institution with white Americans. Both white and black Americans have school institutions in common. These institutions teach the same cultural values to both white and African Americans. For example, Maretha's school education delivers her the American cultural value that a white American who is schooled in the same institution can receive. In addition to having the possibility to share the same classroom with white Americans, Maretha gets the possibility to share the same educational value with any white American educated in the same school. Berniece plays an important role when she does not prevent her daughter from joining American school education. It is her act of being a mother who schools her daughter in American school that brings the school to be seen as an integrationist educational institution. The fact of integrated Maretha in American school brings Berniece to fulfil her role of mothering her daughter. Mothering in this condition leaves the traditional connotation of educating girls in the kitchen and marriage life to take the context of schooling girls in educational institutions.

The absence of school discrimination against Maretha, the Black American girl, in the American school is to convey that African Americans are not denied literary capacity in the post-slavery society of America. The Black individual who gets financial means is free to afford the American educational institution for him/herself or for his/her family. The revolutionary consciousness of Berniece compels her to be aware about the new mode of life waiting for African Americans in the post-slavery society. Berniece brings into play her intelligence to work for financial security. Though being a woman, she practices a capitalistic work. She works in "Squirrell Hill cleaning house for some bigshot down there at the steel mill" (*TPL*, 58). With the money that she gains, she schools her daughter in American school. Maretha's school education is an act of appropriation. She mimics the American culture for the purpose of appropriating its values. To use Robert J. C. Young's terms, Maretha translates "herself into the dominant culture by means of a mimicry that undoes the original" (Young, 2003: 142). American culture is no longer embodied by white Americans. It is also incorporated by African people important in America for slavery. Translation as brought to the fore by August Wilson is different from cultural translation as criticized by Robert J. C. Young. For Robert J.C. Young, "The close links between colonization and translation begin not with acts of exchange, but of violence and appropriation". (Young, 2003: 142). Maretha's transformation through her school education is not by violence. Maretha's education is somewhat integrational. Being born from African American parents, Maretha already bears

African cultural treats. She bears the black race. As well, she is by birth a black girl therefore classified as originating from Africa and in African culture. Being now in American school institution, Maretha carries all this pre-existent African cultural and racial values in this educational institution. Her presence in American school is also the integration of African American values in the American mainstream culture. One possible implication of this is the nonrepression of the African Americans in the post-slavery period.

Berniece plays the role of two genders in the American society. If in the African tradition where Blacks originate from the woman's function is limited to kitchen and marriage activities, Berniece's function in America is above that. Not only does she perform activities reserved to the female gender but also to male gender. Berniece is in charge of the domestic chores in her house but also performs activities reserved to male gender. In the African context, it is man who is developed outside to house in order to provide food and financial security for the woman and the family. But in America, Berniece is the performer of the activities reserved to both female and male genders. Berniece thus performs double function. She plays the role of woman and man in educating her Maretha. If in *The Piano Lesson*, Berniece's act of schooling Maretha is a mothering of a bloodmother which brings about social integration; in *Gem of the Ocean*, Aunt Ester's role of healing Citizen Barlow's soul is a mothering which brings about social integration too.

2.2 Mothering

While Berniece is a bloodmother to Maretha, this is not the case between Aunt Ester and Citizen Barlow. Aunt Ester is not the blood mother of Citizen Barlow, therefore her solidarity toward him is not a bloodmothering. It is rather other-mothering or non-parental mothering. According to Tamara Beauboeuf-Lafontant, other-mothering consists for "women who, through feelings of shared responsibility, commit themselves to the social and emotional development of all children in a community ... "Othermothering" has also been described as a 'universalized ethic of care' or a 'collective social conscience' (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2006: 280). Aunt Ester plays this role of non-parental mothering toward Citizen Barlow. Her action of washing Citizen Barlow's soul is a non-parental mothering in his favour. Faced with Citizen Barlow's grievance about the drowning of Garret Brown, Aunt Ester sings for him:

Go to sleep, my child
You don't know the world yet
Go to sleep, my child
The world is not easy
Go to sleep, my child
I am here watching over you
The world is not easy. (*GO*, 23)

Aunt Ester's attitude toward Citizen Barlow is in parallel with Tamara Beauboeuf-Lafontant's above-mentioned stance. Aunt Esther shares the pain of Citizen Barlow. As Citizen Barlow feels guilty about the drowning of Garret Brown, Aunt Ester takes the responsibility to watch over him. As well, Aunt Ester awares Citizen Barlow about the cruelty of the world. Through feelings of shared responsibility, Aunt Ester commits herself to the

social and emotional healing of Citizen Barlow. The striking point is that the emotional healing of Citizen Barlow leads to his social healing. As the British psychoanalyst Bertrand Russell clearly articulates, “the original mechanism of social cohesion, as it is still to be found among the most primitive races, was one which operated through individual psychology” (Russell, 2005: 23). The non-parental mothering that Aunt Ester grants to Citizen Barlow occasions his psychic cohesion. As it can be noticed at the end of *Gem of the Ocean*, the care that Aunt Ester gives to Citizen Barlow liberates his soul from any guilt. As his soul is freed from burden, Citizen Barlow stops being busy reliving the past atrocities concerning the drowning of Garret Brown and comes to the normal life. Aunt Ester’s non-parental mothering is not limited to Citizen Barlow. Her other-mothering reaches Black Mary. Aunt Ester addresses Black Mary as follows:

If you ever make up your mind I’m gonna pass it on you. People say it’s too much to carry. But I told myself somebody got to carry it. Miss Ester carried it. Carried it right up till the day she died. I didn’t run from it. I picked it up and walked with it. I got a strong memory. I got a long memory. People say you crazy to remember out loud. I keep my memories alive. I feed them. I got to feed them otherwise they’d eat me up. I got memories go way back. I’m carrying them for a lot of folk. All the old-timey folks. I’m carrying their memories and I’m carrying my own. If you don’t want it I got to find somebody else. I’m getting old. Going on three hundred years now. That’s what Miss Tyler told me. Two hundred eighty-five by my count.
BLACK MARY. I ain’t say I didn’t want it. (*GO*, 43)

Aunt Ester teaches Black Mary what carrying African American cultural memory is. Though African tradition is a collective memory, Aunt Ester carries it in addition to her personal memory. When educating Black Mary to carry the African tradition, Aunt Ester commits herself to the social development of the latter. Her act of raising Black Mary about African American tradition can be placed in the context of universalized ethic of care. In addition to that, when educating Black Mary to carry on with such a tradition, Aunt Ester emancipates her to care about her community collective social consciousness. Aunt Ester’s other-mothering integrates Black Mary in African Americans’ collective consciousness. Black Mary’s full integration is confirmed by her act of helping Citizen Barlow at the end of the play to completely get rid of his self-destruction. Mothering as perceived in *Gem of the Ocean* is developed in *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*. In *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*, Ma Rainey’s action toward Sylvester is an act of other mothering which generates social integration. Her solidarity is a womanish action; it can also be read as a non-parental mothering toward Sylvester. She integrates Sylvester in her blues band and fight for the respect of his right to benefit of the fruit of his labour. Ma Rainey imposes herself to both Irvin and Sylvester who are respectively her manager and producer. She defends these different causes of Sylvester against Irvin and Sturdyvant as follows: “I don’t care if he do. I promised the boy he could the part ... and he’s gonna do it! That’s all there is to it. He don’t stutter all the time. Get a microphone down here for him” (*MRBB*, 74). From Sylvester’s integration, Ma Rainey goes on to challenge Irvin and Sturdyvant for Sylvester’s money. She attacks the two white folks

in favor of her nephew: "He supposed to get his own money. He supposed to get paid like everybody else" (*MRBB*, 103). Such a role of women in bonding with the concerns of other to share their difficulties leads Tamara Beauboeuf-Lafontant to argue:

'By seeing the larger community as responsible for children and by giving othermothers and other nonparents 'rights' in child rearing, African-Americans challenge prevailing property relations. It is in this sense that traditional bloodmother/other-mother relationships in women-centered networks are 'revolutionary.'" This concept of othermothering is germane to education because teaching in the African-American community, as in other ethnic groups, has been dominated by women since the turn of the 20th century. However, the profound relational capacities of womanist teachers are vitally connected to another dimension – their identity as political beings who make constant parallels between schooling and society, school practices and social reality. Thus, as the traditions of caring in which black women have been involved have had an explicit focus on helping other women and their children survive the degradations of physical, economic, and political enslavement, so has womanism provided an interpersonal base for social action in education. (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2006: 285)

By taking Ma Rainey as responsible for Sylvester's social and economic achievement, Sylvester's mother presents African Americans' politics of living in community. By assuming her responsibility given to her by Sylvester's mother, Ma Rainey helps him survive the domination of American mainstream culture. Ma Rainey's role of carrying about her nephew is a non-parental mothering which engenders his survival from the degradation of economic and social marginalization in the American society.

3. Religion and spirituality

3.1 Religion

In *Gem of the Ocean*, Aunt Esther acts womanish faced with Citizen Barlow's feeling guilty for the drowning of Garret Brown. Aunt Ester reveals herself so mature to save Citizen Barlow in this way: "That iron would have made you strong. That's what Samson had. His strength wasn't in his hair. He had a piece of iron that made him strong of heart and God found favor with him" (*GO*, 62). Aunt Ester exposes herself as knowledgeable woman. She unveils to Citizen Barlow that she possesses the power and necessary means to save him from his trouble. Aunt Ester also discloses herself as a knowledgeable woman about Christianity though she is rooted in the traditional religion. Aunt Ester unveils to Citizen Barlow that Western theologians have distorted the history of Samson in the Bible. She gives to him what she thinks is the right version. She tells him that Samson gets his strength from a piece of iron. African Americans in the viewpoint of Aunt Ester are the location of both black and white cultures. They are tropes for the location of culture in the context of the relocation of African American culture from the margin to the center and white American culture from the dominant position to the center as Homi K. Bhabah writes *The Location of culture* to advocate. This cultural relocation of Homi K. Bhabha is perceived in *The Location of Culture* through his concept of third space. As Nicole M. Gyulay clarifies in Michael Ryan's Encyclopaedia, "Homi K. Bhabha ... conceives of hybridity as a 'third space' in which

cultural identity is negotiated in a way that subverts the power relations between colonizer and colonized” (Gyulay, 2011: 636). The African Americans’ knowledge in the light of Aunt Ester brings them to be perceived as third space. They bear both black and white cultures in a way that reverses the dominant position of white culture. Their knowledge of Christianity helps them rectify the distortion of history by white theologians. The perfect example is Aunt Ester’s rectification of Samson’s strength that he gets from iron not from his hair as white theologians write in the Bible. Acting as knowledgeable woman of the African Americans also prevails in August Wilson’s *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*.

In *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* it is Martha Loomis who can be considered as womanish. This African American woman’s actions perfectly comply with Alice Walker’s perception of womanist actions. As Joe Turner gets Herald Loomis in peonage slavery, and Herald Loomis does not fight to free himself in order to remain with his family, his wife Martha Loomis takes a clear decision. She turns to take her destiny in her hands. She goes ahead to Pentecost religion. She believes in spiritual forces instead of waiting for Herald Loomis or any man to be in charge of her. It is there that she becomes Martha Pentecost. She acts as a grown-up woman who leave her trust and confidence in man to put it in God. Through Martha Pentecost’s conversion, the plays unveil African Americans use of religion to combat whites’ hegemony in the American society. If African Americans act womanish for life-change, these Black women act also as mothers to bring social integration.

3.2 Spirituality

Next to mothering, women’s spirituality can be represented in the plays as Source of Blacks’ liberation. Indeed, all the plays studied are replete with spirituality that liberates both women and men from the hegemony of the American society. From the onset, *Gem of the Ocean* is a play full of women’s spirituality. The African American woman in the play who cannot be put aside in term of woman’s spirituality is Aunt Ester. Aunt Ester’s role in the play is to wash black Americans’ souls. The first African American to be liberated through spirituality is Aunt Ester herself. In the ocean, as the slaves from Africa drown, it is spirituality that liberates Aunt Ester. This happens during the tribulation of the slaves in the ocean as follows: “I just started singing. Just singing quietly to myself some song my mother had taught me. After that I was all right for a little while” (*GO*, 53). Song as performs by Aunt Ester is a blues that reveals spiritual forces. It is a music which heals the soul. As Aunt Ester performs such a blues song, she finds back her strength to continue her life. Aunt Ester’s spirituality does not benefit to her alone. She extends it to other African American women. Aunt Ester educates Black Mary in spirituality. She can even be said to be the spiritual mother of young lady. She educates her to use spiritual songs to heal lost souls. Referring to African Americans’ cultural practice which consists of using spiritual songs to heal, Aunt Ester tells Black Mary, “If you ever make up your mind I’m gonna pass it on you” (*GO*, 43). Being constantly with Aunt Ester, Black Mary ends in knowing the value of the spiritual songs. She thus accepts that Aunt Ester passes on her the spiritual song. She receives this cultural practice from Aunt Ester as follows:

If you don't want it I got to find somebody else. I'm getting old. Going on three hundred years now. That's what Miss Tyler told me. Two hundred eighty-five by my count.
BLACK MARY. I ain't say I didn't want it. (GO, 43)

Aunt Ester does not impose the cultural transfer onto Black Mary. She transfers the spirituality to her by consent. She gives her the option to accept or to refuse. When answering that she is not saying that she does not want to practice the spirituality, Black Mary implicitly accepts to take the heritage of healing African American souls. Aunt Ester's daily contact with Black Mary is a kind of initiation for the young woman. She is initiated to practice spirituality to heal African Americans who lost their soul. This is what helps her to be able to use blues of spirituality to heal Citizen Barlow at the end of the play. Though it is Aunt Ester who begins the healing of Citizen Barlow as follows "God got room for everybody ... God wear all different clothes. He got all kinds of faces and he got a sword" (GO, 54), it is Black Mary who ends such a healing. Undoubtedly, Aunt Ester's references to God is the starting point of healing Citizen Barlow. But this healing is completely achieved by Black Mary. She sings for the soul liberation of Citizen Barlow as follows:

Black Mary begins to sing 'Twelve Gates to the City.' Hearing the song, Citizen slowly unfolds from his fetal position. All is calm and peaceful. He stands up and looks to see the most beautiful sight he has ever seen. He has arrived at the City of Bones. He is awed by its beauty. (GO, 68)

Black Mary uses of the song of spirituality liberates Citizen Barlow from spiritual torture. Citizen Barlow is no longer entrapped in soul loss. This is meant by his unfolding from his foetal position. Black Mary's success in healing Citizen Barlow is first and foremost a trope for her own liberation. Black Mary is liberated from cultural loss. By the time Black Mary could not perform spiritual song to heal soul, she was lost. This period is before her encounter with Aunt Ester. In this period before her encounter with Aunt Ester, Black Mary can be considered as an African American woman who is lost and had no purpose in life. But it is Ayi Kwei Armah in *Two Thousand Seasons*, who writes: "People losing sight of origin are dead. A people deaf to purpose are lost" (Armah, 1973: xiii). Since before meeting Aunt Ester, Black Mary loses sight of her original culture, she is thus entrapped in cultural loss. Aunt Ester notices Black Mary as a beginner in the cultural spirituality when she tells her:

You think you supposed to know everything. Life is a mystery. Don't you know life is a mystery? I see you still trying to figure it out. It ain't all for you to know. It's all an adventure. That's all life is. But you got to trust that adventure. (GO, 42–43)

Black Mary is perceived as not rooted in the traditional spirituality. She is still trying to find her path in this tradition. Due to her encounter with Aunt Ester, Black Mary finally is anchored in spirituality. Such an anchor in spirituality is Black Mary's liberation from her cultural loss. Women's spirituality is not limited to *Gem of the Ocean*, it reaches *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*. In *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, spirituality that liberates women is

portrayed by Martha Loomis. Though culturally recognizes as Martha Loomis, this mother of Zonia Loomis is converted to Martha Pentecost. Her transfer to spirituality helps her to overcome the absence of Herald Loomis. Even when at the end of the play Herald Loomis's soul is suffering from entrapment, Martha Pentecost does not suffer from such loss. She is rather well rooted in words of Good that she uses to try to save Herald Loomis. Martha Pentecost tells Herald Loomis:

Look at yourself! Standing there with a knife in your hand. You done gone over to the devil. Come ... put down the knife. You got to look to Jesus. Even if you done fell away from the church you can be saved again. The Bible say, 'The Lord is my shepherd I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside the still water. He restoreth my soul. He leads me in the path of righteousness for His name's sake. Even though I walk through the shadow of death – (JTCC, 91–92)

The use of the words from the Bible shows that Martha is rooted in spirituality, however, this one is different from the African one overcome by other Black women. Martha, despite her black skin color has found soul's healing through Christianity which is an American religion. Her husband and other main characters from the other plays have also found soul's healing through another path which is their African spiritual heritage. These two facts lead us to the conclusion that a mixture of both spiritualities, African and American one can be a way for Black American to make their voice heard in the American society and affirm their identity. Above all this analysis shows that Black Americans have to be well rooted in their African spirituality to get soul's liberation and not be at the margin anymore in America.

Conclusion

The analysis of these four plays of August Wilson under the concept of Womanism has shown that Black Women have an important role to play in Black Americans' fight in America. The study has unveiled the techniques used by these female characters. Firstly, they fight for an economical and sexual independence by breaking the established rules. Secondly, they use religion to save their community and gain their own independence. Then, African American women develop the concept of mothering under two paradigms to allow their community's integration in the American society. Finally, these women, deeply involved in spirituality use this capacity to liberate the members of their community from their invisible chains.

References

- Wilson, A. (1985). *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*. New York: Plume
 Wilson, August. *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*. New York: Plume, 1988.
 Wilson, August. *The Piano Lesson*. New York: Plume, 1990.
 Wilson, August. *Gem of the Ocean*. New York: Theatre Communications Group,

- Beauboeuf-Lafontant, Tamara. "A Womanist Experience of Caring: Understanding the Pedagogy of Exemplary Black Women Teachers." *The Womanist Reader*, Ed. Phillips Layli, New York: Routledge, (2006): 280–295.
- Bell, Hooks. *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*. Boston: South End Press, 1984.
- Davis, Angela Yvonne. *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Culture 'Ma'Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday*. New York: Vintage Books, 1998.
- Helen, Charles. "The Language of Womanism: Rethinking Difference (1997)," *The Womanist Reader*, Ed. Phillips Layli, New York: Routledge, 2006. 361–378.
- Kammampool, Bawa. "Womanist Discourse from Margin to Center: A Critical Analysis of Amma Darko's *Beyond the Horizon*." *The Archivists Journal* Vol. 3. N4 (2017): 1 - 20.
- Layli, Phillips. "Womanism: On its Own," *The Womanist Reader*, Ed. Phillips Layli, New York: Routledge, (2006) xix–lv.
- Ogunyemi, Chikwenye Okonjo. "Womanism: The Dynamics of the Contemporary Black Female Novel in English." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* vol. 11, n°1 (Autumn, 1985): 63-80.
- Opara, Chioma. "From Stereotype to Individuality: Womanhood in Chinua Achebe's Novels." *Challenging Hierarchies: Issues and Themes in Colonial and Postcolonial African Literature*. Ed. Leonard A. Podis & Yakubu Saaka. New York: Peter Lang, 1998. 113–123.
- Peter, Barry "Beginning Theory: Feminist Criticism." ([http:// englishcgtc.weebly.com](http://englishcgtc.weebly.com)) 2002. 85