

Busting the White Myth of the American Dream: A Study of the Metaphor of Baseball in August Wilson's *Fences*

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Abstract:

August Wilson's play *Fences* deal with the sufferings of Troy Maxon, who could not realize his dream of becoming a basketball star, despite having competence, because of his African American ethnic identity. The sufferings of Maxon are evident throughout the play. The research paper "Busting the White Myth of the American Dream: A Study of the Metaphor of Baseball in August Wilson's *Fences*" deals with the way in which systemic inequality and discrimination have been a part of the American consciousness and how the "collective psychosis" of the African Americans manifests itself in the busting of the myth of the American Dream. The paper explores how African Americans are forced to trade with their dreams as white racial supremacy does not allow them to realize the potential with which the American nation was envisaged – the American dream – where each individual could achieve things as per her/his caliber.

Keywords:

African American, American Dream, August Wilson, Baseball, Collective Psychosis, Troy Maxon

August Wilson (1945 – 2005) endured poverty and racism. He was very much influenced by the Black Arts Movement of the late 1960s, which led him to co-found Pittsburgh's Black Horizons Theater and concentrate on writing plays where he explored African American experiences and sensibilities to fight the white racist ideology and supremacy. His acclaimed play *Fences* (1985), set in the 1950s, dramatizes the conflict between a father and a son, Troy Maxon, and Cory, touching on the all-American themes

of baseball and the American dream of success which for a Negro is hard, almost impossible, to achieve in the US because of the racial prejudices against the blacks.

The American Dream – the dream to achieve greater heights of success and prosperity and equality in opportunity for all, irrespective of racial, ethnic, or gender discrimination is the supposed national ethos of the US. Even though this is the hypothetical norm of the land, in reality, the American Dream falls short in many accounts, as many citizens of the US find it hard even to believe that they have equal access to resources and opportunities to realize their dreams.

The African Americans found and still find it difficult to realize their dreams. The Blacks were brought to the US as slaves. Through a continuous struggle with the Civil War (1861 – 65), other bloody battles, and the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s, the African American people ensured that they were given equal opportunity in every sphere of American life. However, many African Americans live in ghettos and food deserts and are yet to find ways to meet their ends meet. In such a situation, they cannot realize their dreams even though they can do so. Walt Whitman wrote a poem, “I Hear America Singing,” where he celebrated America. In the poem “I, too,” Langston Hughes adds to Whitman's poem. Whitman made laborers, men and women, and industrial workers sing a choric ode in praise to America, and Langston Hughes added the Blacks to that list as they felt for their nation as they are “America.” Thus, Langston Hughes is “reaffirming his faith in the American dream” (Kramer 246) and ascertaining how the American dream needs to incorporate the concerns of all the US citizens, even though the dream is yet to be achieved in its entirety.

Women again sought equal access to resources. Through a long series of feminist movements, they are trying to ensure that they also get the opportunity to realize their dreams in every sphere of life. However, the glass ceiling exists. Women constitute half of humankind. When their resources are wasted by not giving them opportunities, it leads to a loss for the nation and a significant loss to humanity. Hispanic/Latino people find it difficult to realize their aspirations in the US and often find discrimination of different sorts even though they are US citizens. The recent El Paso episode (Gaviria et al.) shows the bias of White America against Latino people. Latino people’s lack of competency in English has been a significant disadvantage to realizing their dreams in the US.

The requirement is a kind of diversity awareness and consciousness. People from all racial communities, ethnic groups, women, and other disadvantaged people are given equal opportunities (Cletus). Only then will the American Dream find justification and not merely be an ideological hypothesis dominated by White supremacy. However, for the

African Americans, it remained a distant dream till the mid-twentieth century as the discrimination that the Negroes faced led them to believe that they would never be able to live a life of dignity however hard they tried and however much potential they possessed. This makes Troy Maxon, the protagonist of August Wilson's *Fences*, make a bold assertion in the play against the American dream and his passion for baseball. The present paper seeks to explore how August Wilson, in his play *Fences*, portrays the shattering of the American Dream through baseball, the national pastime of the US. People like Troy Maxon are victims of racial prejudices leading to their psychological aberrations and consequent suffering, even though he emerges as a warrior shattering the idea of 'Eden' that America projects itself to be amidst his victimization and suffering, championing individualism. The essay's thrust is to review the myth of the American dream in *Fences* to justifiably explore the exploitation of African-Americans in mid-twentieth-century America through the metaphor of baseball.

American Dream – a phrase that permeates a whole gamut of American writing, beliefs, and actions of white America – makes one often ponder on the complexities of the term as it is seen to be “an expression of hope, democratic values, and the drive for individual success” (Koprince 349). The question that African-American dramatist of the second half of the twentieth century, August Wilson, frames in his play *Fences* is whether African Americans were also as much a part of this American dream as the whites and whether the blacks in America also got similar opportunities to realize their potential as America, the land of dreams, promised to individuals.

In Koprince's (2006) paper, an attempt has been made to explore how August Wilson busts the myth of the American Dream. As defined by the psychologist Carl Jung, Myth refers to a community's “collective unconsciousness,” which makes them believe collectively in something. All Americans seem to collectively believe in the “Dream,” which supposedly ensures democratic participation of the people in every aspect of life, equality of spirit, as well as a chance to get equal access to prove one's worth and get critical success, both in terms of material gains and fame. Based on these parameters, when the protagonist of *Fences*, Troy Maxon, goes from the south to the north of the US, thinking that he will have better prospects there, he finds himself disheartened; and, because of his act of theft, lands up in prison where he learns to play baseball.

Baharvand (2012), in his research paper, gives a short history of the black presence in the US and shows how in the making of the US, blacks have a significant role to perform. The blacks arrived in the US as enslaved people and gave their blood, sweat, and tears to build America. When it was time for them to reap the benefits of their hard work,

they were constantly being victimized by the Whites and pushed to the background to suffer in silence and die without recognition. As early as 1808, slavery was made illegal by the Congress of the US (Baharvand 70). However, most of the Southern states did not obey this legality and continued with slavery. Slavery was finally discontinued in the US by the 13th Amendment of the Constitution (70) in 1865 after the American Civil War (1861 – 65) (Baharvand 70).

Though slavery officially ended, racial discrimination occurred in almost every sphere of American life and consciousness as social and psychological prejudices against blacks had colonized the mind of whites, leading them to create disparities against Blacks in every sphere of American life, including baseball. Because of this, August Wilson uses baseball as a metaphor to explore the idea of the American dream in his play *Fences*.

Jabboury (2012) studies how *Fences* deals with the extended metaphor of baseball to deal with how Troy Maxon constructs his personal history and relationships with the world. Though after being released from prison for theft, the game of baseball gives new meaning to his life, the same game becomes the reason for his frustrations and bitterness (Jabboury 5) as he is not able to gain the top opportunity to play for the national league just because his skin color is not on the right side of the binary opposition of White vs. Black. These kinds of binaries that the world makes, which perpetuates discrimination, need to be uprooted from the core and the heart and minds of the populace so that people like Maxon can get what they deserve.

Jabboury further shows how Maxon's identity is based on the traditional notions of American individualism. However, he cannot attain the so-called peak in his career to realize his potential, as being black does not allow him to attain his worth (Jabboury 8), making him a garbage collector. American individualism theoretically allows an individual to pursue his dream and shape it in reality according to his caliber and efforts. It supposedly ensures that anyone with potential rises from their state of penury and achieves greatness and success. Though apparently, this seems to be theoretically as well as ideologically potent; in practice, when the Blacks, such as Maxon, tried to achieve the same with their efforts, they were made to bite the dust and digest the humiliation and frustration which led them to experience extreme hardships in their lives as well as psychological suffering. This suffering and frustrations led people like Maxon to be bitter in whatever they did, which affected their relationships and personal life; typified in the play *Fences* by the relationship between Maxon and his son, Cory, who wanted to be a football player and get a scholarship but is marred by his father's efforts.

Baseball, a national pastime of the US, apparently is used as a myth and metaphor again by August Wilson to show how the Whites hegemonized it till the mid-twentieth century when the blacks were not allowed to play the significant leagues/ clubs even though they had the potential similar to, or greater than, the white players. As Maxon returns from prison, he tries to find his mettle as a baseball player and gets a chance to be a slugger of the Negro Leagues. Troy Maxon tries his best to prove that his worth as a baseball player is not only limited to the Negro Leagues and that he should get a chance to play with the Whites, but dishearteningly figures out that no White baseball league has ever given a chance to any Negro baseball player however much competent he is.

Koprince, in her research paper, thus explores how August Wilson puts his protagonist Maxon in the historical context of the Negro Leagues to “echo the feelings of actual black ballplayers” (Koprince 349) who never got a chance proper to showcase their potential and always remained engulfed in the darkness of being a Negro player. Thus through Maxon and his sensibilities, August Wilson seems to explore the history of the black baseball league and the discomforts and disorientations of all the black players since the end of the Civil War when the Black Baseball leagues came into existence.

It is a very intimidating aspect of the American game, which tried to practice apartheid without ever having a single document (Koprince) that suggested that black players are not allowed in the national leagues; and yet there was a tacit understanding of these clubs owners which led the black players being neglected from their clubs. In the land of freedom, the US, the black players were just being discriminated against. They were allowed to play in different clubs but treated like second-class citizens in their own country (Koprince 350). In such a setting, Maxon is pitched against the white domination of the realm of baseball by the playwright to suggest the frustration that has engulfed the person who, despite having potential, could never find a chance to showcase himself simply because he was an African in the US.

Koprince goes into the history of black baseball in detail and maps a chronological and ideological background against which she pits Wilson’s Maxon to suggest how the African American was a hybrid existence where there were two souls, two thoughts within a dark body which the white society never allowed to come to any reconciliation by its discriminatory practices. African in “African Americans” was thought to be the dominant strain. Thus their Americanness was questioned by the whites leading to them being underrated and treated like second-class citizens in their own country.

Koprince thus suggests that for Troy Maxon, the American Dream is nothing but a “nightmare” (Koprince, 353). So, at the age of 53, when the play was set in 1957, the field

of action for Maxon is no anymore the baseball field. However, the garbage and rags he collects somehow keep running his household. Maxon's injustices made him oppose his son Cory's decision to get a football scholarship. He believes that Blacks will never get their due in a nation that sees Blacks as second class.

Maxon seems to be suffering from a "collective psychosis" (Koprince 354) – a kind of "racial madness" which is a result of years of victimization for being black. When one is a victim of certain injustices for a long time and is not able to react to those injustices, one suffers not only physically, but psychologically which leads to the person who has a psychosis that affects their personality and makes him feel claustrophobia in his thoughts, leading to actions which are not often rationally justifiable – such as Maxon's inability to understand his son Cory's passion for football which makes him outdo all efforts of Cory to get his football scholarship.

Troy, the power hitter, and Troy, the garbage collector – these two selves are not able to coordinate with each other as the romance of being a power hitter is shattered altogether by the garbage that Troy collects, leading him to have a certain madness – a kind of psychological victimization – which leads him to believe that Cory should never try sports but should learn carpentry or auto-mechanism to survive and not foolishly pursue the "dream" which cannot ever realize for an African American. Thus, Koprince concludes that August Wilson, through Maxon, showcases how racist biases stain the national pastime of the US and how the nation of America, which promises to be "Edenic," is but "illusory," leading to people like Maxon be the "defiant African American warrior" (Koprince 357).

Baharvand tries to show that Blacks in America cannot fulfill their American Dream. Baharvand uses illustrations and elaborations from Wilson's *Fences* to show that the American dream remains an unfulfilled dream for African Americans, especially in the kind of society where racism takes a toll on black lives by restricting them from realizing their potential and showing their competence in the public forum, resulting in the blacks living a wretched life as does Maxon in *Fences*.

Maxon continues suffering in silence and only shows his outbursts within the realm of his family and Cory. The father-son relationship is marked by tensions and verbal duels as Cory's passion for football reminds the father of his defeated self, which does not want his son to suffer as he did. The Negro history of baseball thus affects Cory's life. It makes him similarly a victim of circumstances which does not allow a Black to pursue his passion and make it a path to realize his dreams. Whether Maxon or Cory – we, the readers, are

made to see that whether baseball or football – in no field can get a Black shine though he has the power to outshine others.

Some may suggest that Maxon's prejudices against his victimization result in his thoughts against the American dream of chasing one's potential, as there are examples of Blacks included in baseball, such as Jackie Robison. However, suppose such biases exist in Maxon's mind. In that case, it was formed by his baseball experience, which is presented in the play as a white cultural institution. It is against these white institutions of the US; Maxon is set in the play in the times of the Civil Rights Movement to question white supremacy in baseball and the American dream in general.

Like many of his generation, August Wilson felt the pains and anguishes of the African Americans and felt that only when their perspective is presented in the American nation's narratives will they find a voice which many black writers were trying to do in their ways. People like Maxon were silenced into oblivion by the white supremacy in baseball, which discriminated against them and did not let them live life and get their due according to their potential. However, through *Fences*, Wilson makes Maxon's voice heard so that his warrior spirit finds manifestation in the heart of human kindness and justice. No more, Maxon suffers from the madness of racial prejudices. They can also turn their nightmares into dreams and realize them. Maxon had become a garbage collector, and the garbage that he needs to clean is from the minds of the white civilization, which needs to realize that black lives matter and that they are very much a part of the American Dream as anyone else – that Troy Maxon is as better a slugger as any white lad and that he too needs to be recognized as a hero.

Fences divide – they are physical demarcation of what belongs to whom and assert the rights of the people over their property. Fences are lines that make us feel what is ours against what is not. Fences are the realization for others that they are trespassing on someone else's territory. However, when the mind has fences, it creates discrimination – it mars humanity. It creates the basis for differences that do not have any ethical sanction. Such fences that make people suffer need to be uprooted to give the mind's horizon an unlimited scope to realize its potential, and that is what the American Dream is about. Fences cannot define the American dream and only shatter it, as does August Wilson's *Fences* so that no more Maxons suffer in ignominy and humiliation and feel that their lives have been an utter waste.

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