



**RACIAL INCARCERATION IN AMERICA: EXPOSING THE COLOUR OF JUSTICE
IN AUGUST WILSON'S
THE PIANO LESSON AND JOE TURNER'S COME AND GONE**

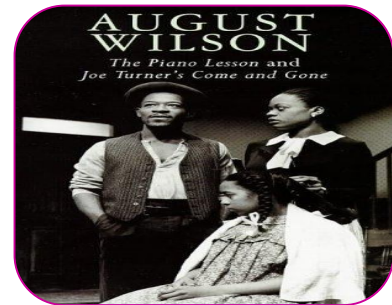
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ABSTRACT

The 21st century is a post-racial period in America. Racism has been practised overtly before the civil rights reforms of 1960s. In the present times, racism is difficult to spot because it works indirectly. The institutional structures are engrained with racial ideologies and therefore some people enjoy more privileges, facilities and advantages than other people. There is still great discrepancy between various facilities given to the white Americans and the black Americans. Structural racism has been a hurdle for African-Americans for enjoying equal access to education, employment, medical and accommodation facilities.

August Wilson in his plays *The Piano Lesson* and *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* is criticising the racism and the prevailing political conditions in the United States of America. Both the plays *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* and *Piano Lesson* have explored the incarceration of the blacks in the northern America and the southern America respectively. The white man exercises control over law. The blacks are unlawfully punished and fined by the white police and sheriffs. The agent of corrupt legal system oppresses black Americans and, therefore, the confidence of the African-Americans in the legal system of the country is fading away. The power structure is owned by the whites and it fails to do justice to African-Americans. The unjust way of exercising the law diminishes the trust of African-Americans in the system. Racial profiling and the incarceration in America are the root cause for preventing the blacks from climbing up the social ladder. The blacks are labelled either as criminals or as vagrants and are used for free labour. America has the largest prison population in the world. The prison population of African-Americans is increasing day by day not because of the increasing crime rate but only due to their race.



KEYWORDS: Racism, law, blacks, oppression, racial profiling, incarceration.

INTRODUCTION

Racial profiling has become new form of racial oppression and discrimination. The African-Americans are often questioned, arrested, and seen with suspicion by police because of their race. The whole race of African-Americans is stereotyped as criminals because of the crime of one person. But this is not applicable for the white counterparts. They have not been subjected to racial profiling like African-Americans. Police often arrests black people because they are stereotyped as criminals and evildoers. Henry Louis Gates Jr., an American literary critic, historian and filmmaker was arrested by police in 2005 without any valid charge on him. West is a renowned and famous scholar, but he has also been a victim of racism. West in *Race Matters* (1993) also writes about one of his experiences:

Years ago, while driving from New York to teach at Williams College, I was stopped on fake charges of trafficking cocaine. When I told the police officer I was a professor of religion, he replied, "Yeh, and I'm

the Flying Nun. Let's go, nigger!" I was stopped three times in my first ten days in Princeton for driving too slowly on a residential street with a speed limit of twenty-five miles per hour. (xi)

Aime Cesaire in *Discourse on Colonialism* (1972) writes in his book that:

Between colonizer and the colonized there is room only for forced labor, intimidation, pressure, the police, taxation, theft, rape, compulsory crops, contempt, mistrust, arrogance, self-complacency, swinishness, brainless elites, degraded masses. (21)

In the play *The Piano Lesson*, Winning Boy's songs tell us about his past which is full of pain and sufferings. Winning Boy is a proficient piano player and singer. The song which had won him success was full of painful memories Here are few lines from the song:

I started out one morning
To meet that early train
He said, "you would work for me
I have some land to drain.
I'll give you fifty cents a day,
Your washing, board and all
And you shall be a different man
In the state of Arkansas."

I worked six months for the rascal
Joe Herrin was his name
He fed me old corn dodgers
They was hard as any rock
My tooth is all got loosened
And my knees begin to knock
That was the kind of hash I got
In the state of Arkansas. (47)

The song worked as an outlet to express his painful feelings and emotions. With the help of his song, he had expressed the cruel times of slavery. He was exploited for his labour by a white man in the state of Arkansas. Through the song, he also expressed the hardships and terrible times he had been through. He had realised that the whites try to exploit and suppress the blacks through the same tactics everywhere and that there seemed no difference between the whites of the south and the whites of the north. The blacks cannot become equal with the whites because the whites had the power over laws. Wining Boy has realised the racial situation of blacks in America and says that the white man "go and fix it with the law. . . . that's the difference between the colored man and the white man. . . . colored man can't fix nothing with the law" (38).

The blacks have to suffer the anti-racists propagandas of the whites. The prisons are full of the black prisoners. After freeing themselves from one kind of slavery, they are forced into yet another kind of slavery. In the play *The Piano Lesson*, Lymon, Boy Willie, Doaker, Winning Boy, and Avery have worked as prisoners in the jail. They have all been to the prisons. The Parchman Farm is the name of the prison. The police arrests Lymon and puts him in the jail for not working. The police fined him hundred dollars. A white man named Mr. Stovall came to the jail and paid his fine. But Lymon has to work for Mr. Stovall to pay back hundred dollars to him. He preferred to spend his days in the jail than to work his whole life to pay the fine. He realised this quickly and "As soon as Stovall turned his back, Lymon was gone" (37). From that day, he has been living in a truck fooling everybody. Both Mr. Stovall and sheriff have been looking for him. Now, he has come to the north with Boy Willie. He has decided never to go back to the south. He doesn't want to be a victim of the peonage system. He never wanted to go to the south and end up his life in the Parchman Farm because they "work you too hard down there. All that weeding and hoeing and chopping down trees" (39).

Boy Willie, Lymon, Wining Boy and Doaker sing a song which depicts their history as prisoners and victims of the forced labour in the Parchman Farm Prison in the south. All the men “stamp and clap to keep time. . . . sing in harmony with great fervor and style” (39):

O Lord Berta Berta O Lord gal oh-ah
 Might not want you when I go free oh-ah
 Raise them up higher, let them drop on down oh-ah
 Don't know the difference when the sun go down oh-ah
 Berta in Meridian and she living at ease oh-ah
 I'm on old Parchman, got to work or leave oh-ah. (39-40)

This song sheds light on the life during the imprisonment in the Parchman Farm Prison. The tough life on the Parchman is contrasted with the trouble-free life of Berta in Meridian. And that in the Parchman Farm, the prisoners “Don't know the difference when the sun go down”. They wake up early in the morning before the sunrise and then have to work the whole day.

Joe Turner's Come and Gone represents a new stage of slavery of blacks through tenant farming, forced labour, racial discrimination, chain gangs in south, economic victimization in industries, police's unjust cruelty, and unjust imprisonment. Through the text Wilson, asserts the necessity to peel off the layers of hegemonic Western values which are subversive and which hides the values of a civilization that are hidden below.

The blacks have to suffer the anti-racists propagandas of the whites. The prisons are full of the black prisoners. After freeing themselves from one kind of slavery, they are forced into yet another kind of slavery. A letter was printed in the newsletter *The Crisis* of W.E.B Du Bois which criticised the peonage system in the southern states:

I am not an educated man, I will give you the peonage system and it is practised here in the name of the law

I am brought in a prisoner, go through the farce of being tried. The whole of my fine may amount to fifty dollars. A kindly appearing man will come up and pay my fine and take me to his farm to allow me to work it out. At the end of a month I find that I owe him more than I did when I went there. The debt is increased in year in and year out. You would ask, “How is that?” It is simply that he is charging you more for your board, lodging, and washing than they allow you for your work, and you can't help yourself either, nor can anyone else help you, because you are still a prisoner and never get your fine worked out. If you do as they say and be a good Negro, you are allowed to marry, provided you can get someone to have you, and of course the debt still increases. This is in the United States, where it is supposed that every man has equal rights before the law, and we are held in bondage by the same outfit. (123)

In *Prisons, Race, and Masculinity in Twentieth-Century U.S. Literature and Film*, Peter Caster explains the role of incarceration in the history of United States for the control of the black race. In 1888, a state official of the South Carolina has said that, “After the emancipation of the colored people . . . we had to establish means for their control. Hence came the penitentiary”. In *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, Jeremy has come from Alabama of the deep south to the northern city of Pittsburgh for a better living and better employment. He is also one of the tenants of the boarding house. After coming to the Pittsburgh, he starts working as a labourer on the road construction project. Just after two weeks, he gets arrested. The police also fined him “two dollars for nothing” (13) on his payday for no valid reasons. Bertha is also aware of all these things: “You know the police do that. Figure there's too many people out on the street they take some of them off” (13). The police often charges many colored people with crime even if they haven't done any. The police also arrests and locks them in jail under terrible conditions without providing any food and water. It is rightly said in *The Wretched of the Earth*:

The colonial world is a world cut in two. The dividing line, the frontiers are shown by barracks and police stations. In colonies it is the policeman and the soldier who are the official, instituted go-betweens,

the spokesman of the settler and his rule of oppression. . . . The intermediary doesn't lighten the oppression, nor seek to hide the domination; he shows them up and puts them into practice with clear conscience of an upholder of peace; yet he is the bringer of violence into the home . . . (29)

Jeremy after spending a night in the jail returns hungry to the boarding house. The blacks who are living in the Deep South find the northern cities very appealing and alluring. They leave Deep South for the northern cities. In the north, the white men have other means of exploiting the blacks. Despite of this, the blacks started migrating in large numbers to the northern cities. This will lead to the Great Migration in which millions of African-Americans migrated between 1910s and 1970s. The blacks have to go through the economic exploitation at the hands of the whites. The whites try to illegally snatch away the money of Jeremy many times. Jeremy has become victim of racism in the North many times. Firstly, he gets jailed for no genuine reason. He has to pay fine for his release. Secondly, he is made to quit his job because he refused to pay money to the white men. These white men forcefully fetch money from the colored masses. If any of the colored man denies, then he is fired from the job. He tells Seth about the meanness of the white men:

JEREMY: . . . White fellow come by told me to give him fifty cents if I wanted to keep working. Going around to all the colored making them give him fifty cents to keep hold to their jobs. Them other fellows, they was giving to him. I kept hold to mine and they fired me. (64)

Hongmei Zhang in "August Wilson's Otherness in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*" points out that, "He shouts out his indignation when he witnesses the blackmail by the off-stage white guy in his workplace. . . . Jeremy dare not to comply and stands up at the risk of losing his job" (172). Jeremy's encounter with the white man discloses that African-Americans are unsafe and insecure in the corrupt world of white man. Jeremy earns only eight dollars a week. The white man "go around to all the colored and he got ten dollars extra" (64) which is more than what Jeremy earns in a week. Jeremy revolted against the white man and therefore has to leave the job.

Even after four decades, when Abraham Lincoln gave freedom to slaves, slavery still exists in many parts of the South. Black people are still captured and forced to slavery by the white men. The white men forcefully capture black people and keep them for many years illegally. They make fun of the Emancipation Proclamation. They exploit the labour of blacks by capturing them illegally and throwing them either in plantations or in prisons. In the south, whites seize any black man walking in their way and unjustly accuses them of some crime and make them work for many years. Barbara Esposito and Lee Wood in their book *Prison Slavery* have criticised the prison slavery:

Meanwhile, vagrancy laws not only kept government cages filled but also helped provide free labourers through peonage, a form of debt slavery which had been outlawed by an 1867 federal law. In spite of the Supreme Court upholding the unconstitutionality of that law in 1911, peonage continued for another 30 years. (123)

Racial violence and discrimination have affected the lives of every black in America. Everyone in the play has been a victim of racism. In *The Piano Lesson*, the family of Boy Willie and Berniece has been through racial violence and exploitation. In the past, their grandparents get separated because of human trafficking of the blacks by the white men. Then, they have to go through forced labour and exploitation. The 137 year old piano is the symbol of incarceration of blacks by the whites. Boy Willie's father gets killed by the white men. The white men killed Boy Charles to avenge the act of stealing the piano. They burned Boy Charles along with three hobo's, sitting in the Yellow Dog. They have also burned the house of the boy Charles. The whites cannot stand the revolt or resistance of the colored masses. All they want is to suppress and exploit the colored folks. They have never taken any initiative of spreading the message of peace but instead have perpetuated more violence. If any member of the black community shows any kind of resistance to the white's rule or does anything against the wishes of the white man, then he is liable to be killed or murdered by the white community. The white have devised various horrible means of killing the colored masses in the south. They kill the black people by lynching, burning, or mutilating the body parts. Lymon's father has also become the victim of the white man's wrath. The white man "walked in and shot him thinking he was somebody else" (64). Lymon's father has to work for three years in Parchman Farm because "he got in tussle

with one of them white fellows and the sheriff lit on him like white on rice” (63). Lymon’s mother once has to pay fifty dollars to sheriff to release her husband from the jail. Both Boy Willie and Lymon are ex-felons. They have been arrested by the police for petty reasons and made to work in the Parchman Farm Prison for three years. Through the play *The Piano Lesson*, August Wilson has depicted the pain and sufferings that blacks have to endure due to racial violence and racial oppression. He has presented the crude reality of the Peonage system in the south. From times eon, the violence between men has affected the lives of women.

The title of the play *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* is very important. “Joe Turner” in the title of the play is a white man and is also a plantation owner. The title of the play are the lines of blues song about a real Joe Turner, who used to capture blacks and forced them to work on his plantations. He is a notorious white man. Joe Turner doesn’t fret about being penalised because he is the brother of the Governor of Tennessee. He captures black men and keeps them as slaves for seven years and then frees them on his birthday. The economic power resides in the hands of white and which furthers the economic exploitation of the black Americans. The whites try to exploit the free labour of the blacks even after the abolition of slavery. The blacks have to struggle for their economic and social equality in America. In *Post-colonial Studies: The Key Concepts*, Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin infer that:

In the newly independent United States, where slavery was a crucial element in the economy, especially of the South, although abolitionism began in the 1830s the banning of slavery did not occur until after the outbreak of the American Civil War. The North proclaimed slaves free in 1861, but only ratified this formally by the 13th amendment to the Constitution in 1865. When slavery was finally outlawed . . . it was replaced by an extension of a system of employment called indentured labour. Although, as the term implies, indenture contracts were apparently voluntarily entered into, in practice this operated as a system of forced labour. . . Consequently, even after the formal abolition of slavery, various forms of forced or contracted labour, such as indenture. . . debt peonage. . . meant that oppressive labour habits died hard in these regions, where the forms of agriculture developed under the slave system required a continued supply of cheap and controlled labour. (239-40)

Joe Turner represents the disturbing past of blacks, which hangs over Loomis’ present life. Though Loomis comes to the boarding house with the purpose of finding his wife but he is actually finding and searching for his identity. The trauma faced by the slaves has completely broken them because they have no rights even after the abolition of slavery. They have lost every hope and the life for them has become futile. During the pre-Emancipation period, slaves have no rights and identity. After Emancipation, black people started their lives with a new hope and by forgetting their painful past. But the hopes of black men to live their lives as the citizen of America are shattered by the white men. The whites make fun of the law and treat the colored masses according to their wishes.

Race is established historically and is preserved and conserved culturally. It is not inherent or biological. After the historical construction of the race, it is culturally circulated. The racial ideologies of the whites are instilled in the blacks by replacing latter’s culture, values and beliefs. The whites also legitimatise their domination by using racial ideologies. They try to repress blacks by using religious institutions, which associates blackness with wickedness and sin. The blacks succumb to these racial ideologies. And therefore further the process of alienation. The whites enjoy many social privileges in America due to their colour. On the contrary, a black man is oppressed by the American system due to his colour.

The play *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* has attacked the American status quo during the Reconstruction period in particular and the slavery and its consequences in general. Slaves got freedom from slavery but it was only nominal. They are still under the tentacles of white man. The institutionalised racism has made every black person its victim, whether he is an ex-slave or a slave. African-Americans were not only denied social, economic, political rights and equalities but were also denied even basic human rights. As Michelle Alexander puts it in *The New Jim Crow*:

Constitutional amendments guaranteeing African Americans “equal protection of the laws” and right to vote proved impotent as the Emancipation Proclamation once a white backlash against Reconstruction gained steam. Black people found themselves yet again powerless and relegated to convict leasing camps

that were, in many ways, worse than slavery. Sunshine gave way to darkness, and the Jim Crow system of segregation emerged – a system that put black people nearly back where they began, in a subordinate racial caste. (20)

Conclusion: No doubt, the violence and exploitation on African-Americans in the twentieth century had declined but it had emerged in new faces. For example, in *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (2010), Michelle Trent Alexander states that imprisonment of African-Americans is a disguised system of racial control, which in the present times is new face of Jim Crow laws of the nineteenth century. People think that racial discrimination against African-Americans has stopped after the Civil Rights Movement of 1960s. But the new forms of racial discrimination and repression have started. The election of a black President in 21st century does not mean that racism has disappeared. Racism has only changed its face. Bonilla-Silva asserts in *Racism without Racists* (2003) that the older form of racism in the post-racial society has been replaced by the “colorblind racism,” which means “contemporary racial inequality as the outcome of nonracial dynamics” (2)

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