AUGUST WILSON'S *FENCES*: THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN WOMEN'S PURSUIT OF DREAMS SEEN FROM THE PERSPECTIVES OF ROSE MAXSON

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ABSTRACT

This paper portrays the struggle of people of color to reach their dreams as reflected in August Wilson's "Fences". In his work, he described vividly how African-American men force themselves to be successful in reaching their dreams. However, he did not give a large portion of discussion about women and their dreams. His female characters' dreams are remain unspoken. Moreover there is only one woman, named Rose Maxson, who stands as his female protagonist, while the other female characters are only exist in term of names that are mentioned by the other characters involved in the play. It seems that he only gives chance to Rose to speak up her mind as one of the African-American women. Therefore, she is a source full character that can be used as the media to learn about the way women see the importance of having and reaching their dreams.

This paper is based on a library research. The primary data used in the analysis were taken from August Wilson's play, entitled "Fences". The secondary data were collected from articles and historical documents such as autobiographies and notes. Through the use of Liberal Feminist approach and the discussion of the character of Rose (along with her characterization) and the connection between the writer and the history of African-American women, this paper wants to reveal Wilson's point of view on how African-American women see the importance of having dreams and what they, mostly, do to reach those dreams. Furthermore, the readers will also be able to know what challenges faced by those women in their struggle to gain equal rights and acceptance in the society.

Based on the analysis, it can be concluded that Wilson uses Rose, who takes the ideas of reaching dreams as her self-fulfillment into a new direction with less focus on financial gain and put more emphasis on what some people

believe as living a simple, fulfilling life, as the agent to open the eyes of (especially) the African American women to think and struggle to reach their dreams, although those dreams are still closely connected to the ideas of fulfilling their roles as the heart of the family.

Keywords: African-American women, dreams, the sociology of literature, self- fulfillment, marriage, motherhood.

A. Introduction

Literary works can play a role as historical documents that record social realities, which are artistically portrayed by the author (Wellek and Warren, 1956: 102). Therefore, literature cannot be separated from society, and the study of literature should be related to society.

In American history of literature, August Wilson is famous as an African-American's play writer who often writes about Black experiences in the United States. The efforts of people of color to reach their dreams, along with its complex social issues as racism, are shown in one of his plays entitled *Fences*. This is a play about an African-American family in the 1950s who try to survive in the middle of American urban industrial city. The writer himself had to spend his childhood in the black slum community of Pittsburgh-Pennsylvania, which then revealed in many of his dramatic writings (*August Wilson 1945-2005*).

Thus, *Fences* is used as the object of the study in this paper. This is a story of an African-American former athlete named Troy Maxson (a garbage man of fifty-six) and his family. In his early age, after facing a lot of problems, finally, he has an opportunity to reach his dream as a professional baseball player, but then he is prevented by his color from playing in the major leagues. As a result, he has a strong sentiment toward the white American, and he even forbids his son to reach his dream by refusing an athletic scholarship.

Throughout the play, the pursuit of dreams has played an important role in the characters' self-fulfillment. However, this play centers its story only on its men characters and their dreams; Wilson does not go deeper into the minds of his female characters. When he discusses the male characters' dreams thoroughly, his female characters' dreams are remain unspoken. Moreover, there is only one woman, named Rose Maxson, who stands as his female protagonist, while the other female characters only exist in term of names that are mentioned by the other characters

involved in the play. It seems that he only gives chance to Rose to speak up her mind as one of the African-American women. Therefore, she is a source full character that can be used as the media to learn about the way women see the importance of having and reaching their dreams. The focus of this paper is only on Rose's dreams as the one and only female protagonist in *Fences*, this paper will not discuss further the other characters' dreams.

Liberal Feminist approach was employed in conducting the research. In order to know about liberal feminism, we need to know about its' origin. Andersen notes that "the historical context of early feminist thought is found in conditions that inspired more general appeals to social reform through the application of human reason" (1997: 322).

According to Maggie Humm, the first detailed-book which argued for women's rights was *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* written by Mary Wollstenecraft in 1792. She wrote about the psychological and economic impacts which make women become dependent and excluded from public sphere. Maggie Humm says, "Liberal feminism aims to achieve equal legal, political and social rights for women" (1990: 181). Moreover, Andersen supports her idea that "Liberal feminism emphasizes social and legal reform through policies designed to create equal opportunities for women" (1997: 319). She also stresses that the cause of gender differences is the gender socialization of the society. Therefore, people have to change the socialization practices and the public education system so that it can create more "liberated and egalitarian gender relations" (1997: 319).

Andersen believes that liberal feminism is "the most mainstream feminist perspective." She defines *liberal* as "open-minded, tolerant, or socially nontraditional" (1997: 320). She continues that Liberal feminism concerns with two important basic concepts. First, it emphasizes on the importance of people's awareness about the individual rights, especially for women to attain equal opportunities. Second, it concerns with the importance of human capability to make social reform (Andersen, 1997: 323).

It is hoped that the discussion on Wilson's female character by employing the liberal feminist approach can reveal Wilson's point of view on how African-American women see the importance of having dreams and what they, mostly, do to reach those dreams. Furthermore, the readers will also be able to know what challenges faced by those women in their struggle to gain equal rights and acceptance in the society.

B. Methodology

This paper is based on a library research. The major concern is to analyze August Wilson's play, entitled *Fences*, that use the issue of the African-Americans' struggle to reach their dreams as the central subjects. There are several steps that the researcher has to follow. First, the researcher must try to interpret the literal meaning of *Fences*. Second, the researcher has to find out the meaning and the importance of reaching dreams for African-American women. Then the researcher applies the Liberal Feminist approach and supports the analysis by using the secondary data which were collected from articles and historical documents such as autobiographies and notes.

According to Guerin, *et al*, "feminist literary critics try to explain how power imbalances due to gender in a given culture are reflected in or challenged by literary texts" (1999: 196). It means that feminist approach examines a literary work by explaining how the author reflects the injustices experienced by people, especially women which are caused by the gender stereotyping of the society through his/her work. In addition, the main purpose of this paper is to describe the struggle of the major female character to gain equal position and opportunities in the society.

C. Author's Biographical Sketch

Frederick August Kittel, who later known as August Wilson, was born in 1945 and he spent his childhood in poverty in Pittsburgh-Pennsylvania. He was named after his drunkard white German father, Frederick August, who worked as a baker. His mother was an African-American woman, named Daisy Wilson, who worked as a cleaning woman and she became a role model for her six children. Wilson inherited his mother's strong sense of pride and zero tolerance for injustice. As an example "She once turned down a washing machine she had won in a contest when the company sponsoring the event tried to fob off a secondhand item on her" (The New York Times, 2005). After his mother got divorced and remarried, the family moved to a largely white suburb. As the only African-American student in his class he had to face racism, and it ended when he gave up on formal education.

In his 20's he became a poet. Inspired by the Black Power movement then he and the other poets founded a theater workshop and an art gallery, and in 1968 he

and Rob Penny founded the Black Horizons on the Hill Theater. Later, he was known as an important contemporary American play writer who tries to portray the life of African-American community (The New York Times, 2005).

D. Discussion

From the very beginning of the play, Rose is described as the character under the patriarchal domination and her relationship with her husband is characterized by her husband's sexist point of views. Similar to the other African-American women, when she got married, she has to give up her free will and she is owned and fully controlled by her husband.

1. Rose's Dreams and her Effort to Pursuit them.

Rose Maxson is Troy's second wife and mother of his second child, Cory. Rose is an African-American housewife who has been married for eighteen years and loves her family very much. As the caretaker of the family and home, she showers her family with love and care, and protects them in the same time. This can be seen when one day Rose requests Troy to build fences in their small backyard: "... Go on, Troy! You supposed to be putting up this fence" (p.1323). It is from Troy's friend, named Bono (p.1331), the reason of making the fences can be revealed.

In Bono's opinion although it is true that she had nothing, Rose sees the fences as something necessary: "Some people build fences to keep people out and other people build fences to keep people in. Rose wants to hold on to you all. She loves you." (p. 1331). The *NTC's American Idioms Dictionary* noted that "fence *someone* in" means "to restrict someone in some way" (200: 114). Thus, Rose sees the fence as the symbol of protection, by building it she wants to restrict her family from leaving their house, or in the other word to keep her loved-ones close, and to keep-out the outsiders from interfering her family's affairs. Her main goal is to maintain her family's relationships from falling apart. In this case we can see that for her, family stands as an important thing and that is why Rose's dreams center around a hope for a stable, loving family, something that she lacked as a child:

> And you know I ain't never wanted no half nothing in my family. My whole family is half. Everybody got different fathers and mothers... my two sisters and my brother. Can't hardly tell who's who. Can't never sit down and talk

> about Papa and Mama. It's your papa and your mama and my papa and my mama... I ain't never wanted that for none of my children... (p.1333).

While Rose is trying her best to protect her family, Troy is messing up by having affairs with several women as his way to gain freedom. This fact shocked Rose: "You should have stayed in my bed, Troy... You should have held me tight. You should have grabbed me and hold on." (p.1333). She is questioning Troy's loyalty as her husband and his willingness to keep their marriage in a right track.

When Rose and Troy having an argument, Rose tells him about her dreams and needs which she often denies:

> ...I gave eighteen years of my life to stand in the same spot with you. Don't you think I ever wanted other things? Don't you think I had dreams and hopes? What about my life? What about me. Don't you think it ever crossed my mind to want to know other men? That I wanted to lay up somewhere and forget about my responsibilities? That I wanted someone to make me laugh so I could feel good? You not the only one who's got wants and needs (p.1333).

Then her decision to sacrifice everything, even her own dreams as a woman, revealed. Troy is her only hope, he is the one who she can rely on and makes her dreams come true, "...I took all my feelings, my wants and needs, my dreams... and I buried them inside you. I planted a seed and watched and prayed over it. I planted myself inside you and waited to bloom." (p.1333). She then convinces him that after they got married, he is the most important thing for her:

> ... You was my husband. I owed you everything I had. Every part of me I could find to give you. And upstairs in that room... with the darkness falling in on me... I gave everything I had to try and erase the doubt that you wasn't the finest man in the world. And wherever you was going... I wanted to be there with you. Cause you was my husband (p.1334).

As shown in the above quotation, as Troy's wife, she sees him as his savior. Thus she is willing to accept him inside out, to be his other half and loyal to him.

Rose desires to have a devoted spouse, too "... I want to know if you're coming straight home after work." (p. 1334), which her husband cannot give. As a matter of fact, Troy always comes late, having mistress and soon will have an illegitimate son from a woman named Alberta. Rose notices that it has been going on for about six months.

Rose chooses to stay and protect her family because she realizes that without her the rest of the family's members will lose their strength in facing problems. She sees that it is her responsibility as a mother and a faithful wife to keep the family together. While Troy in her eyes, tries to escape from his responsibility by having an affair with Alberta, and she accuses him of being selfish and "taking and not giving," (p. 1334), because she gives her whole life to 'serve' him, even when she knew he cannot offer a better life to her.

Rose, as a good mother and faithful wife, often has to defend her son as her way to keep the family relationship from falling apart. First, she tries to 'defend' Cory in front of Troy; she tries to convince him that football cannot do any harm to Cory. Therefore she believes that her husband has to support Cory to reach his dream that can lead him to a better future. Second, although at the first time she cannot believe that she has been loyal to Troy for eighteen years and he has done bad things to her, she then is willing to be the mother of the illegitimate child.

Rose seems to believe that as a couple, Troy and herself are the two halves of one thought; she puts her faith in her husband. Therefore it is quite reasonable to see her first reaction when Troy tries to explain about his affair with another African-American woman, named Alberta. Even though it seems that she is able to accept and treat Raynell (the name of Troy and Alberta's child) as if she is Rose's own daughter. However, she refuses to be Troy's wife, for her Troy is only a "womanless man" (p. 1336). She shows her rebellious fight against him by refuses to talk to him for months and avoids him by going to the church.

Rose has her own reason for accepting Raynell as her 'own daughter', it is because she believes that children are born 'innocent' (This term is used by Troy when he asked Rose to take care of his daughter), thus she will never blame the 'innocent child' for any of the faults of the father, her adulterous husband. She also realizes how much that 'innocent child' will need love from a mother, and then she agrees to raise her with unconditional love that she no longer feels towards Troy.

It is obvious that Rose's decision to show her compassion toward Raynell can be seen as her attempt to get self-fulfillment:

> ..., Rose Lee, here is a man that you can open yourself up to and be filled to bursting. Here is a man that can fill all them empty spaces you been tipping around the edges of. One of them empty spaces was being somebody's mother (p. 1340).

Before marrying Troy, she already sets her dreams; one of them is to be somebody's mother. For her to be somebody's mother can be seen as self-fulfillment because normally woman will be called as a 'complete woman' if she already has her own children. Of course, it is clear that when she had Cory as her son she feels very blissful because at last she now can be somebody's mother. However, when Cory has become a grown up man, it seems that she feels very lonely. She loses the feeling of being somebody's mother and she misses that moment when a child called her as 'mother'. For her Raynell is her second chance to be somebody's mother:

> Like I'd been blessed to relive a part of my life. And if the Lord see fit to keep up my strength... I'm gonna do her just like your daddy did you... I'm gonna give her the best of what's in me (p. 1340).

She is blessed because she can take care of this motherless-child, she is also able to give her best to this little girl and find a cure for her own pain.

She can be seen as a successful mother because she successfully provides 'shelter' to her children from their father's destructive behavior and has raised Cory and Raynell with her love and compassion. She teaches them about loving and forgiving, especially when she is able to convince Cory to come to his father's funeral: "Disrespecting your daddy ain't gonna make you a man, Cory. You got to find a way to come to that on your own. Not going to your daddy's funeral ain't gonna make you a man." (p.1340).

From this point it is clear that Rose, at first, represents the traditional woman that chooses responsibility over her own dreams. She 'denies' herself that actually she has "dreams and hopes" (p. 1333) because as a good mother and a faithful wife, her ultimate dream is to build a solid foundation for her family; and this is the most important thing in her life.

Although as a woman Rose is not successful in pursuing her dream to have a happy marriage and then chooses to be an independent woman by refusing to be a good wife for her husband, however when she devotes her life to her children (Cory and Raynell) and finds Church as her way to escape (p.1336), she is able to find her long lost self-fulfillment. She realizes that a woman can also have another life outside the house because she also believes that marriage cannot always bring happiness for people. She is, finally, able to see that she does not need to build fences around her house to protect her loved one because Church leads her way to

the most powerful 'fence', that is Jesus. It is just like the song she loves to sing: "Jesus, be a fence all around me every day. Jesus, I want you to protect me as I travel on my way. Jesus, be a fence all around me every day." (p.1321).

Related to the discussion of the dreams, some people may say, the pursuit of material prosperity is everybody's dreams, but learning from Rose's accomplishment, she proves it is beyond the grasp of the African-Americans who must work hard to insure their family's survival. She takes the ideas of reaching those dreams into a new direction with less focus on financial gain and put more emphasis on what some people believe as living a simple, fulfilling life.

2. Wilson's Perspectives on Marriage and Motherhood as reflected in Rose Maxson

Maggie Humm defines marriage as "the institution traditionally provides women with a social identity" (1990: 127). She also explains some aspects of marriage. First, it is the site where categories of gender are reproduced. Second, it is the site of sexual division of labour and women's subordination. Third, it is the model for other social institutions of a sexual Norm. She also reveals that sociologists and historians suggest marriage as "a simple social contract" which is closely related with the reproduction of children (Humm, 1990: 128).

Almost all societies expect women to get married and to be good mothers for their children; it means that women have to stay at home while men act as the breadwinners. When couples decide to get married, it means that they have to be a good partner for each other:

> Women and men will have to work together. They will want to be together, to cooperate, and by doing so; they can free each other from the shackles that bound them for so long. By working together in harmony, men and women will coffer the greatest benefits upon each other and upon the whole of humanity (Montaqu, 1953:153).

The cooperation between women and men will create a lot of advantages for both of them. Montagu notices that the most important thing in marriage is being kind and cooperative. It means both husband and wife have to work together to accomplish harmony, health, wealth, welfare, and happiness in their life (1953: 161). They also have to build good relationship thus they can create a good condition for their children's character development (1953: 162). She also adds, "Men and Women must become partners in the greatest of democratic

enterprisesthe making of a democratic world can only be made by persons who are themselves truly democratic" (1953: 164).

Society often sees a marriage woman as a complete person when she has her own child. However, as stated by Andersen there are several problems related to the discussion of motherhood, "women's roles as mothers are idealized in our culture as all-loving, kind, gentle, and selfless; however, the objective conditions of motherhood in this society fill the role with contradictions, conflicts, and pleasures" (1997: 163).

In fact, as stated in *Women's Studies: A Reader*, Marriage and motherhood have been recognized, not only, as the main sites of women's oppression, but also as relationships which give them the meaning of life and from which they derive a sense of self-worth. When women decided to get married, they (mostly) expecting emotional fulfillment and companionship, but then they realized that sometimes they could not have an equal relationship (Jackson., Atkinson and Beddoe, 1993:181-182). And for centuries African-American women were often believed that their way to survive and reach their self-fulfillments were by becoming wives and mothers. As stated by Hilliard Yellerday in Littlefield's *Black Women, Mothering, and Protest in 19th Century American Society*: even in the slavery era "When a girl became a woman, she was required to go to a man and become a mother. There was generally a form of marriage." (2007:57).

When they failed to gain their dreams to have a happy marriage, they still had one thing to hold on that was Motherhood:

> Motherhood for black women was survival. Black women had children, set up households, nursed and cared for their children, and formed communities. As mothers, black women loved their children and cared for them in spite of the multiple tasks they performed. (Littlefield, 2007: 57)

Based on the above quotation, it's clear that the bond between African-American women to their children were strong. They shower their children with love, affection and also protection.

The history also noted that the culture set up new identity to the African-American women. In both the African culture from which they came and the American culture into which they grew up, their identities were bound up in and even defined by their familial roles and their sense of self depended on "fulfilling those roles" (Hine and Thompson, 1998: 16).

The warm atmosphere and close relationship between a mother and children also can be seen in Wilson's own family. As what mentioned before, he was born in a family with a tight relationship, especially to their mother (Daisy Wilson). He and his siblings projected their mother as their role model, while his father was mostly absent during their childhood's period. His mother was the one who taught him the importance of having strong sense of pride and zero tolerance for injustice (The New York Times, 2005).

As an African-American writer, he could not escape the influence of culture where he grew up (included his past experiences dealing with racism) and he created his plays based on those values that he learnt from his life:

> We're like our parents. The things we are taught early in life, how to respond to the world, our sense of moralityeverything, we get from them. Now you can take the legacy and do with it anything you want to do. It's in your hands. (Barnet., eds: 1342).

Further he states that his plays offer a different perspective on how people (Americans in general) see the African-Americans, which will have an effect on how they think and deal to each other (The New York Times, 2005).

In "Fences", Wilson creates the one and only female character, named Rose Maxson. He uses her as his weapon to show how hard the life of an African American woman is. Her failure in gaining her dream to have a happy marriage, and her decision to focus her life more on her motherhood's side resembles the life of Wilson's own mother and even many other African-American mothers. His mother, who was failed to have a happy marriage during her first marriage, as well as her accomplishment in shaping up her children (The New York Times, 2005), is his tools to lead his reader to a better understanding of the history of African-American women.

When Rose finally listens to her heart and uses her liberal thought by choosing to be an independent woman, refusing to be a good wife for her husband, making her own decision to determine what activities she wants to do, and most importantly she thinks right for herself. Her behavior has fulfilled Andersen's definition of liberal which is being "open-minded, tolerant, or socially nontraditional" (1997: 320). She has shown to the people living around her that she wants to make a kind of social reform in her own life. She wants to have a valuable and meaningful life. Therefore, she makes such a final decision by undermining all her feelings towards her own husband.

While in the discussion of motherhood, Rose is described as a mother who has a close relationship to her children better than her husband, who constantly absent in his children's development. Rose, as the only source of protection and media of learning for her children, teaches Cory how to be a fine gentleman by forgiving his father and joining the family to go to Troy's funeral (p.1341). As commonly seen in the African-American parents-children relationship, children (especially young males) are often brought closer to the feelings of their mothers because of their father's absence during their childhood. The absence of the father's figure makes the youth "constantly exposed to the problems and sacrifices of his mother's attempt to raise a family without co-provider, he may become unexpectedly sensitive, protective, and empathetic toward his mother and other women."(Majors and Billson, 1993:95). As seen in *Fences,* Cory loves his mother more than his father and he shares empathy to his mother who has to deal with the injustice action done by his father.

As a mother, Rose believes that becoming a mother of compassionate and loving children will give her true happiness in her life which is her own self-fulfillment. She will create her own social reform in her life through motherhood. Based on Cott's work, Andersen says that "The cult of domesticity did provide the conditions for women's involvement in moral reform movements and, ultimately, feminism, because it encouraged women's nurturance to be turned toward social improvement" (1997: 148).

From the discussion above, it can be inferred that Wilson is aware of the African-American women's conditions around him and he creates his writings based on those phenomena. Thus, he uses Rose Maxson, as the media to open the eyes of the African American women to think about their dreams and even, to struggle to reach those dreams, although those dreams are still closely connected to the ideas of fulfilling their roles as the heart of the family. He is successful in revealing his point of view on how black women should see the importance of having and reaching their own dreams and what they should do to reach those dreams.

E. Conclusion

To summarize, the African-Americans' daily life are much measured by male standards and values. From the discussion, women are put in the injustice

position by men and the patriarchal system, and this situation make them hardly have a chance to think about their dreams, moreover to reach those dreams.

However, the situation gradually changes when women have enabled themselves to be independent, like the one done by Rose Maxson. She starts her new journey as an independent woman when decided to leave her husband, Troy, as a "womanless man" and beginning to set her new goals, which are to be a religious person and a good mother for her children. She shows that she has the freedom to choose the right things for herself and her rebellious spirit seeking for freedom enables her to reach her dreams. She takes the ideas of reaching those dreams into a new direction with less focus on financial gain and put more emphasis on what some people believe as living a simple, fulfilling life.

After analyzing Wilson's female protagonist's perspectives on marriage and motherhood and relate those findings with the society where he lives, it can be inferred that, as an African-American playwright, he is aware of the life of African-American women's around him and he creates his writings based on those phenomena. His female protagonist is his tools to lead his plays' readers to a better understanding of the history of African-American women who often choose to neglect their own dreams as a free individual.

He opens the eyes of the African-American women to think about their dreams and even, to struggle to reach those dreams, although those dreams are still closely connected to the ideas of fulfilling their roles as the heart of the family. He is successful in revealing his point of view on what challenges faced by those women in their struggle to reach their dreams as one form of the equal rights and acceptance in the society.

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