

## **The Manifestations of Nationalism in August Wilson's *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom***

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**Abstract:** August Wilson is without question one of the major source of vitality of Black African American culture in literature. As a member of the Black aesthetic movement of the 1960s and a founder of Black Horizons Theater, his works contribute mainly to Black nationalism through his depiction of the Black characters. He highlights the superior/inferior relation between the blacks and the whites in American society. With a focus on resistance and power relation, this study attempts to investigate the theme of nationalism in the Black characters. The study will utilize the Marxist and Foucauldian viewpoints on the relation between whites and blacks to display examples of August Wilson's and his characters' senses of nationalism. He reveals this nationalistic tendency through his analytical concentration on the blues music as a representative of Black nationalism and its resistance to white domination in the power relation. By choosing the name of his first character, Ma Rainey, delaying her entrance into the play, questioning the Christian God, and drawing attentions to African beliefs and rituals, the author shows that blacks can also project power in their dealings with white people. August Wilson undertakes a burden to breathe life into African American national elements through describing the characters and the sense of power that they exude.

**Keywords** Black nationalism, Foucauldian viewpoints, power relation, resistance

## INTRODUCTION

Born as Frederick August Kittel on April 27, 1945, August Wilson won two Pulitzer Prizes and numerous other prestigious awards that imply his influence on African American literature and American theater as a whole. His plays attempt to address the “exclusion of African Americans from history by displaying moments that they were able to choose their own fates” (Shannon, 1995, p. 16). Undergoing major revisions, Wilson’s *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* was submitted in 1981 and went on to play at Yale Repertory Theatre in 1984. It received the Drama Critics Circle Award, and lifted Wilson “into the category of major playwright seemingly overnight.” (Shafer, 1998, p. 11)

If one contemplates on society, different theories and ideas come into his mind. Marx and Engels (1964) believe that “[t]he history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggle” (p. 57). They divide the society into the *bourgeoisie*, who possess and control, and the proletariat, who work for wages. They argue that the relation between people is a relation of exploitation. This exploitation causes social conflicts in societies. The sociologist Max Weber (1964) studied inequalities in modern life. Weber agrees with Marx that the economic difference causes conflicts in societies, but he adds other elements that are also considered sources of inequality. He points out a relation between religion and capitalism. Weber concludes that, “Capitalism is not just economic but a distinctive pattern of a whole society” (pp. 78-89).

These theories are valuable but they cannot be useful in explaining power relation and nationalism in the society portrayed by Wilson. Therefore, the study of his plays with the focus on power, resistance, and nationalistic idealisms of Black characters is essential. Constantino (1979) defines nationalism as “a collective strategy of escape from the clutches of imperialism” (p. 488). This definition goes with those nations that have experienced long-term colonization; hence, nationalism seems meaningful when colonized people want to challenge the power of the colonizer. Philosopher