

## Space in August Wilson's *Fences*

Hossein Pirnajmuddin<sup>1,\*</sup>; Shirin Sharar Teymoortash<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>English Department, University of Isfahan, Isfahan, Iran  
Assistant Professor of English Literature.

<sup>2</sup>MA in English Literature.

Email: sh\_sh.teymoortash@yahoo.com

\*Corresponding author.

Email: pirnajmuddin@fgn.ui.ac.ir

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### Abstract

This paper tries to examine the idea or rather the metaphor of space in August Wilson's *Fences*. It is argued that Wilson, mostly through the deft handling of the multivalent metaphor of 'fences', tends to inform his play spatially. In an attempt to refine our understanding of African-American experience the play offers different perspectives and delineates multiple experiential spaces (geographical, historical, socio-economic, racial, political, psychological, linguistic) marked off by all kinds of 'fences' (borders). As such, it is suggested, Wilson's play exhibits a modernist aesthetic impulse.

**Key words:** August Wilson; *Fences*; space; aMetaphor; African-American experience

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Despite the long history of African-American experience, extensive representation of black Americans in mainstream American literature, especially drama, is a relatively recent phenomenon. "It was not until the surge of interest in African American culture, thought, and experience during the 1960s that serious plays by and about African Americans reached mainstream theaters" (Abbotson, 2003, p.9). These dramatic productions, differing in terms of historical period as well as gender and intellectual modality of their dramatists, produce an

almost heterogeneous body of narratives whose main concern can be regarded to contest prevalent forms of ethnic contingencies. Challenging the "knowledge" that assumes "traditional and canonical American literature is free of, uninformed, and unshaped by the four hundred-year-old presence of, first, Africans and then African-Americans in the United State," they attempt to reveal that "the real or fabricated Africanist presence is crucial to the sense of Americanness" (Morrison, 2000, p.924).

Furthermore, giving voice to the "marginal," "silent" and "exotic" in the work of African-American dramatists is remarkably a response to the call of critics interested in the voice of the "Other," especially Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's polemical question: "can a subaltern speak?" "These resisting writers," as Margery Fee (1995) observes, "freeing themselves from the dominant ideology," attempt "to change the current discursive formation" (p. 243-4). "Orphaned from their unique spatial and temporal context," they claim "a space with history" or "a spatial history" for the Black's invisible and illusory experience and history in America (Carter, 1995, p.376).

One of the most distinguished black American dramatists in the latter half of the twentieth century is August Wilson (1945-2005). Wilson's plays, reflecting upon many concerns of global anti-colonial writing from the 1950s onwards, manifestly depict his conscious attempt to achieve recognition within the current mainstream of the white American Drama. Keith Clark (2009), along with other critics celebrating Wilson's genius, compares him with the great white dramatists such as O'Neill, Miller and Williams (p. 45). Wilson has, of course, enriched the American theatre's heritage, but he has also questioned the basic terminology of difference, separation and exclusion. He is fundamentally concerned with the problem of "the ghettoization" of the black dramatists' works and "the colonization of black theatre" (Bellamy, 1997, p.589) which is "the greatest travesty in American theatre today" (ibid., p.587). In

his “widely publicized 1996 speech at the 11th biennial Theatre Communications Group National Conference at Princeton University, called for an autonomous black theatre in which black artists can be free to express themselves” (Heard and Wilson, 2001, p.100). However, being an African-American, he accepts blackness as “a fact of American life that cannot be transcended by even the collective efforts of extraordinary people.” He argues, “It is important to support the development of black art because it is American art” (White, 2004, p.67).

Not long after the success of Wilson’s first Broadway play, *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* (1984), *Fences* (1985), a play set in the 1950s, was produced to great critical acclaim and reaped many awards including the Pulitzer (Andrews, Foster and Harris, 2001, p.441). *Fences* not only brought success for Wilson as a dramatist, but also, as a particular celebrated example among the bulk of African-American dramatic productions of the twentieth century, marked a turning point in the formation of black American drama in the history of American literature.

In *Fences*, Wilson attempts his hand in tapping the consciousness of a people relegated to the margins of history. The play exemplifies a persistent struggle to achieve an authentic black expression in a distinctively black artistic form. It serves as a dramatic medium through which Wilson addresses the polemics of contemporary society or the “problems under debate,” that is, the Negro problem (Fletcher and McFarlane, 1978, p.502).

The Blacks were brought to America as slaves not immigrants through a forced migration. The history of slavery has always been a black spot in the annals of a nation purportedly championing democracy and human rights. Though there have been many social reforms and the lot of the Blacks (African Americans in modern parlance) has certainly improved since the times of slavery, the speed, scale and genuineness of the process of reform cast the shadow of a deep disappointment upon many black activists and thinkers.

Nearly one hundred years after the decree of the Emancipation Proclamation, many great African activists and thinkers saw the real ‘emancipation’ still far away. Martin Luther King saw “the Negro still sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination;” He reminded the Americans of the promises of “the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence” which were supposed to guarantee “the unalienable rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” (Warner, 1970, p.148). In his historical speech, he emphatically stated:

I *still* have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream.

I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: “We hold these truths to be self-evident; that all men are created equal.”

... I have a dream that my little four children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character ... (ibid., p.150). (Italics

added)

Due to the ever-present racial discrimination, fear, anxiety, anger, resentment and identity confusion have always been an integral part of the body of black experience in the white America. As Wilson also asserts,

The battle since the first African set foot on the continent of North America has been a battle for the affirmation of the value and worth of one’s being in the face of this society that says you’re worthless (Bryer and Hartig, 2006, p.196-7).

This spirit of challenge can be found in the works of nearly all African-American writers. Central to their works has been the attempt to represent different aspects and modalities of this angst-ridden experience.

Calling the Blacks in America ‘African-Americans’ does not only mean that they are a people of two geographically different spaces, it also means that these “double heritage” people are of two different cultural spaces. As W. E. B. Du Bois puts it,

... The Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,-a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twines,-an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.

The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife,- this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to manage his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. (1961, p.16-7)

Wilson’s drama, then, is the attempt to dramatize the ‘strivings’ of the ‘American negro’ ‘to manage his double self into a better and truer self.’ This paper tries to shed light on the ‘space’ of this ‘strife.’

Centuries after the arrival of the first Africans to the continent of the North America, these people, beginning to adopt the culture of the new space, are still carrying the memory of the culture of their past, “a psychological baggage,” on their back (Cook, 2009, p.80). Many black thinkers and writers have struggled with this dilemma, challenging the notion of identity, both individual and national, as a coherent and unified entity in their works.

Walter Allen (1969), in *The Urgent West*, addressing “the problem of American identity” (the question “what is an American?”) and many paradoxes involved in it (for instance, the fact that the document of the Declaration of Independence was signed by slave owners) states that “there can scarcely be any nationality, race or religion that cannot be found somewhere in the United States.” “The process of immigration, settlement and assimilation” brought together “a mixture of English, Scotch, Irish, French, Deutsch, Germans, Swedes, Negroes, Italians, Greeks, Russians, Poles, Czechs, slaves of all kinds, Hungarians, Spaniards, Mexicans and ...” to America.

But, as Allen notes this mixture within America has remained as “solid blocks,” that is, many ethnic groups can be found in self-contained districts, having a quite different American experience in America (pp. 6-7).

The Blacks, among these many “solid blocks”, more than any other ethnic groups in America, have gone through the agonized experience of a sensitive identity, which is multilayered and dislocated. Theirs has been undergoing the never-ending experience of exile and alienation, that of never quite fitting anywhere, being condemned to live in-between borders of lands, languages and cultures.

Hence, creating and preserving the sense of identity is basically vital to African-Americans. The articulation of black identity is a complex process, involving an array of different influences. The construction of their identity is, in one respect, the result of their response to the physical situation surrounding them. The role of space in the formation of black identity has been, at least recently, a dominant concern of critics interested in interdisciplinary studies.

The word ‘space’ is indeed a polyvalent one which could be used to refer to a variety of imaginary or real terrains, such as geographical (Africa/America, South/North, urban/rural), ideological/cultural (masculine/feminine, white/black), social (intellectual/blind-minded), economic (rich/poor), political, psychological, domestic, and so on.

*Fences*, mostly inspired by black American experience at the time of segregation, details, under a critical gaze, the relationships between a black American family and many spaces they occupy. It brings the impact of movement through and within these spaces to the fore. As such, it would be indeed a good ground for exploration of the contribution of space to the construction of black identity. It deepens both our understanding of the nature of space and the experience of black Americans. *Fences*, like, for instance, Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*, which precedes it in the date of publication, helps the readers “to understand the challenges that confronted African-American workers in Chicago from the 1920s to the 1950s”, while addressing the “impact of labor and housing discrimination on the American dreams of these black populations” (M'Baye, 2009, p.171). *Fences* portrays two generations of African-Americans in materialistic American society of the 1950s, focusing mainly on the growing maturity of the new generation's identity.

*Fences*' characters are descendants of the people who have travelled through geographically different spaces; they have crossed the boundaries of the nations (in 1619, the Africans set foot in the continent of the North America in Jamestown) and the boundaries within a nation (in the second Great Migration, many African Americans in search of a better life left the South and moved to the North).

As Amiri Baraka points out,

Spanning most of the first half of this century, [Wilson's] plays depict the experience of black Americans who have migrated from the South to the urban centers of the Northern USA. All of them- *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, *Fences*, *Joe Turner's come and Gone* and *The Piano Lesson*- present characters who are forced to confront the consequences of a double historical trauma: the brutalities of the Southern heritage and the injustice and inequalities of the North as they struggle to make a home for themselves, to achieve an identity, and to lead free and dignified lives in their new environment. (qtd. in Crow and Banfield, 1996, p.45)

Black Americans' second Migration to the North, in response to the increasing violence and severe social, political and economic oppressions in the South, only confronted them with many other kinds of racial discrimination. Wilson “went so far as to regret the Great Migration that had seen millions of black American trek north in search of freedom and success” (Biggsby, 2007, p.3).

Chicago, one of the ultimate destinations of the desperate immigrants, is the setting of *Fences*. Wilson, in the ‘prelude’ of *Fences*, memorably pictures the condition of these immigrants in the North, especially in Chicago:

Near the turn of the century, the destitute of Europe sprang on the city with tenacious claws and an honest and solid dream. The city devoured them. [...] For the immigrants of Europe, a dream dared and won true. The descendants of African slaves were offered no such welcome or participation. [...] They came strong, eager, searching. The city rejected them and they fled and settled along the riverbanks and under bridges in shallow, ramshackle houses made of sticks and tarpaper. (Wilson, 2008, p.xvii)

Escaping from poverty and violence of the South, these people came in hope of a better life. However, they did not fare much better there either; “they cleaned houses and washed clothes, they shined shoes, and in quiet desperation and vengeful pride, they stole, and lived in pursuit of their own dream” (ibid.). The struggle of people in Wilson's play, “as Berniece puts it in *The Piano Lesson*, is the struggle of people who are ‘at the bottom of life’” (qtd. in Crow and Banfield, 1996, p.47).

Troy's family in *Fences*, like most of African-American families in Chicago, is not rich; they live in the ghetto slums, suffering many deprivations. Troy, a “fifty-three year old, large man with thick, heavy hands,” a talented baseball player in his youth, is only a “garbage collector.” Though he has a job, his family is still in dire need of money. His role has been reduced to that of a mere provider, or so he thinks. Lyons, his oldest son, is always asking for money. Talking to Bono, his life-long friend, he laments that all everybody wants from him is money; truly “Troy Maxson's relationships with his children and wife are consistently and directly related to money. Money is the element linking him to his filial and romantic relationships” (Wakefield, 2004, p.37). That is, the play raises the immediate question about the way

money carves out the emotional life of the characters – the emotional space - and complicates their plight.

Like Maxsons' 'unfenced' life, their house is also poorly fenced. From the outset up to the end of the play, Troy's desperate dream is to build "a fence around the yard," "a fence around what belongs to [him]" (Act 2, Scene 3). Thus, as the title of the play indicates, the 'fence,' which is kept ever-present in the background of the actions of the play and is referred to by the characters at critical moments, goes beyond the confines of a spatial image. Accordingly, the physical space, captured in the metaphor of the 'fence,' becomes metonymic of economic space which Maxsons inhabit. For the "idea of a fence [itself] is inextricable from the idea of property. To construct a fence is to delimit, to divide up property, to separate the proper from the improper" (Nadel, 1994, p.86). Also, as Alan Nadel points out, Troy's dream of fence-building implies his claims to human rights, that is, having the right or privilege of being human in "not being treated as property" and having the right to "treat property" of his own in a society that "race or skin [is] just such a fence" serving to draw a line between him and "humans" (white Americans), denying him "the properties of humans and giving to humans property rights over" him (ibid., p.87). Thus Wilson, always a step away from sentimentality, keeping the reader at once engaging and distanced, through the realistic representation of the life of a poor African-American family, depicts two socio-economic spaces, one this side of the fence (the poor African-Americans) and one on the other side, that of rampant capitalism. The metaphor of the fence, then, intimates the merging of the socio-economic and racial borders in a materialistic society.

The 'fence' which is textually and symbolically a part of the play and its performance, has significantly other connotations. It signifies not only the socio-economic and racial space, but also the psychological/emotional space which Maxsons occupy. This emotional space is most manifestly imaged in the play through Troy's filial relations (generational gap/'fences') and his relation with his wife (gender 'fences').

Troy, whose refusal to submit to his deprived position gives him dignity, deeply feels the suffering he and his family have to endure personally and as a race. As Amy Sickles (2010) observes, Wilson "tends to focus on African-American male characters, evoking themes that arises from father-son relationships" (p. 84), avoids typical characterization and introduces Troy as a strong individualized character whose frustrations and aspiration make him unique. Wilson characterizes Troy as a "warrior spirit," "a strong, ambitious man who, frustrated with outer injustices, seeks, if possible, to precipitate social change," a man who is undoubtedly destined "to destroy, or at least tear down, many metaphoric fences within his life" (Roudané, 2007, p.138).

In Act two, Scene three, Wilson deftly conflates two

images, that of an unrepaired fence and that of Troy on the verge of a physical and mental breakdown, like an unrepaired fence. There is a lot of pathos in the scene in which he carries a baby in his arms, the fruit of a late affair, and quarrels with Rose trying hopelessly to convince her to see the baby's innocence and take her in. This highlights the significance of the spatial image of the 'fence' in the play and the way the physical space can be metonymic of the psychological state of Maxsons, especially that of Troy himself.

Wilson, through realist lenses, pierces through the soul of a black man. But, the play is not only the story of Troy and his frustration, resentment and desperate struggle in the economic and political climate of the 1950s; it is also the story of his son, Cory, who belongs to the new generation of African-Americans. Unlike his father, Cory is full of aspirations and joie de vivre. In the figures of Troy and Cory, there is presented two divergent perspectives, the clash between which adds to the layers of tension in the play. The climax in Maxsons' filial relationship is the highly significant confrontation between Troy and Cory in Act two, Scene four, "Cory swings the bat at Troy a second time. He misses. Troy continues to advance toward him" saying, "you're have to kill me! You wanna draw that bat back on me. You're gonna have to kill me."

In portraying the relationship between Troy and Cory, Wilson's ultimate concern is to mark the gap between generations and the possibility of bridging it. The relationship between Troy and Cory, despite the gap between their views of life and the realities around them, is based on a father's love for his son. As a caring father, Troy, despite all his shortcomings and undeniable failures, is preparing his son to get out and seek a better life. As Wilson himself puts it, "Troy loves his son-and ultimately the audience detects that love-but that same audience may also detect much resentment, misunderstanding, and ignorance within that love" (qtd. in Roudané, 2007, p.139). That is, the play is also about 'fence-mending' in generational terms (as it is in racial, socio-political and psychological terms).

There is consensus among critics on likening Troy and his relationship with his sons to that of Willie Loman with his sons in Arthur Miller's *The Death of a Salesman*, but in this comparison, the fact that Troy and Willie, though similar in many aspects, are of two different cultural spaces, should not be taken for granted. Of course, in stressing the Africanness, Wilson does not go too far. Like himself, "none of his characters denies their American context" (Bigsby, 2007, p.21). In the identity of his characters two traditions merge, for Wilson's work deals with the problem of being both African and American. That is, it is concerned with the complexity of inhabiting two spaces in terms of identity, with 'psychological fences.'

Though the political space, the site of struggle for

equal rights, is not in the foreground in Wilson's *Fences* and it cannot be regarded as a radical political protest, it is not that it tries to escape the question of politics. Rather, it touches on historical and political questions of race and class. Revealing many underlying strands of racism, ultimately Wilson portrays Troy as he comes to stand for the unifying agent whose function is to bound rather than to break apart and disintegrate. Troy tries to come to terms with the strengths and limitations of being a black man in America of the 1950s. For Wilson, having an eye on many dimensions of Modern African-American life, the need "for communal strength, an acknowledgement of a shared past and having a sense of shared identity in the present" has a special resonance (Bigsby, 2007, p.3). *Fences* ends with reconciliation, various, at times contradictory, voices of the play's characters blur into one, creating a unique voice for expressing the collective perspective of black Americans of the 1950s.

Also, through the heated rhetoric of the play which is deliberately provocative, Wilson tries to portray two different linguistic spaces, the (standard) American English and the black one; the reader can witness the development of the voice of black people through their "black dialect." As Wilson puts it in one of his interviews, "I realized I didn't have to change it [black dialogue]. I began to respect it" (qtd. in Roudané, 2007, p.136). He artistically innovates at formal and stylistic levels; his play does not just incorporate African-American characters and context, but also African-American language. The notion of linguistic 'fences', then, is also imaged in *Fences*.

This paper is an attempt to address the concept or, better to say, the metaphor of space in Wilson's *Fences*. We end our discussion with a note on the overall style of the play. We suggest that through the masterly spatial metaphor of the 'fences,' Wilson's play demonstrates a modernist impulse. Though it is generally agreed that Wilson's work has a more or less realist/ naturalist orientation (Bottoms, 2007, p.146; Krasner, 2007, p.162), a leaning towards modernist aesthetics is obvious in *Fences*. First of all, there is the predominance of a central multivalent metaphor, as we tried to show, in the play which makes it "approach to the conditions of poetry" as with modernist literature (Connor, 2004, p.63). Secondly, in an attempt to refine our understanding of African-American experience like a modernist work, the play offers different perspectives. Thirdly, and most importantly, the play, as we tried to demonstrate, hinges on "spatial form." And, as Steven Connor (2004), quoting Joseph Frank, points out "modern literature was characterized by its striving to achieve a 'spatial form,' which allowed and required the work to be seen all at once in a single cohering perspective" (p. 63). Wilson creates a fictional space which incorporates geographical, historical, socio-economic, political, psychological and even linguistic spaces 'fencing' in and out the lives of African-Americans in America.

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