

**WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE AND AUGUST WILSON:  
A COMPARATIVE STUDY**

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**Abstract**

*August Wilson emerged in the 1980s as a major figure in American theatre. His plays have received Tony Award, New York Drama Critics Circle Award and Pulitzer prizes. The plays are praised for their vivid characterization and richly poetic dialogues. The plays deal with the history of black suffering and centres upon the struggle for stability and order against the forces of disintegration unleashed by slavery and racism. The plays of August Wilson has humour, revenge, philosophies, visions, sorrows and sufferings compared to the plays of William Shakespeare. The plays of the playwrights are evaluated with a common, distinct visions and dimensions of human life. The themes of separation, migration and reunion of black selves are the central focus of August Wilson. The themes are developed in a realistic manner. The migrant selves yearn for self- authentication like the protagonists in the plays of William Shakespeare. Wilson expresses his capacity and quality of his skills and brilliancy as a playwright "I am sitting in the same chair as William Shakespeare, confronting the same problem as Arthur Miller and Eugene O'Neil". The present paper highlights Shakespeare's 'Hamlet' and Wilson's "Maa Reiney's Black Bottom" in a similar plane of thought and vision.*

**Keywords:** American theatre, William Shakespeare, racism

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Hamlet, the protagonist of the play *Hamlet*, is revengeful for the sad and painful death of his father. He is determined to wipe out the scholarly thoughts and trivial records from his mind. He is disillusioned and depressed for the sudden demise of his beloved father. As a scholar of the Wittenberg university, he expresses in a tone of utter despondency and disappointment:

*I will wipe away all trivial fond records,  
All saws of books , all forms, all pressures past,  
That youth and observation copied there  
And thy commandment all alone shall live  
Within the book and volume of my brain  
Unmixed with baser matters.*

(*Hamlet*, p-51)

Levee is a revengeful character in August Wilson's *Maa Reiney's Black Bottom*. He is revengeful against the blacks. He does not like to be treated like a slave. He has his own identity in the black community. He ventilates his intense anger and pathos against the treatment of whites against the blacks. He expresses his attitude towards white folks for long thirty two years :

*I can say 'yessir' to whoever I please. What to got to do with it. What you got to do with it. I been handling them for thirty -two years, and now you gonna tell me how to do it. Just cause I say "yessir" don't you mean I'm spooked up with him. I know what I'm doing. Let me handle him my way.* (Maa Reiney's *Black Bottom*, p-56)

The death of Hamlet's father is a sorrowful event of the play. The ghost reveals the truth. Hamlet's father is painfully murdered by his uncle. He expresses in a sadful tone to his son :

I am thy father's spirit  
Doomed for a certain term to walk the night  
And for the day confined to fast in fires  
Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature  
Are burnt and purged away. (Hamlet p-54)

Levee narrates his painful death of his father by the white man. He has become avengful for the precarious condition of his father's death. His mother's condition is heart rendering at moment his father murdered by the white :

*Levee got to be Levee! And he don't need nobody messing with him about the Whiteman-cause you don't know nothing about me. You don't know Levee. You don't know nothing about what kind of blood I got! What kind of Heart I got beating here! (He pounds his chest) I was eight years old when I watched a gang of white mens come into my daddy's house and have to do with my mama any way they wanted.* (Maa Reiney's *Black Bottom*, p-57)

Both the plays are humourous. It arouses fun and frolic to entertain the audience. Maa Reiney's *Black Bottom* opens with when the lights in the studio. Irvin and Sturdyvant are the producers of blues and quite insensitive to the black performers. Sturdyvant is visible on the control booth and Irvin arrives on the stage carrying a microphone. Irvin is a tall and fleshy man who prides himself on his knowledge of blacks and his ability to deal with them. He hooks up microphone, blows into it and taps it. The characters Cutler, Toledo, Slow Drag and Levee discuss the spellings of 'Music'. There is a betting for the correct spelling of the word :

*Leeve:It's bet then.Talking about I can't spell music.*

*Toledo:Go ahead, then.Spell it. Music.Spell it.*

*Leeve :I can spell it nigger, !M-U-S-I-K.There.*

*(He reaches for the money)*

*Toledo:Naw!Naw!Leave that money alone!You ain't spelled it.*

*Leeve:What you mean I ain't spelled it?I said M-U-S-I-K*

*Toledo:That ain't how you spelled it?That ain't how you spelled*

*It.It's M-U-S-I-C, C nigger, Not K !C !M-U-S-I-C*

*Leeve :W hat do you mean , C ?Who says it's C*

*Toledo:Cutler .Slow Drag . Tell this fool.*

( Maa Reiney's Black Bottom ,p-21)

There is a discussion between Ophelia, and Polonius on love in 'Hamlet'. The father's guidance for the perfect match for his daughter is the source of pleasure and amusement for the readers. Hamlet is wrongly interpreted by his beloved's father in a comical and entertaining manner. He does not understand the true love of Hamlet for his daughter. He is anxious to take this matter to King's court to punish Hamlet by the king:

Ophelia: My Lord, as I was sewing in my chamber,

Lord Hamlet with his doublet all unbrac'd

No hat upon his , his stockings foul'd

Ungarter'd , and down-gyved to his ankle,

And with a look so piteous in purport,

As if he had been loosed out of hell,

To speak of horrors: he comes before me.

Polonius:Mad for thy love!

( Hamlet ,p-38)

Apart from humour , the plays have philosophical characters. The playwrights have presented 'Hamlet' and 'Maa Reiney' as philosophical characters.Maa Reiney is the mother of blues. She is a protective mantle for all the black singers. The singers are very generous towards her. She was among the first black singers to get a recording contract. The black singers appear to have settled in her melodically extravaganza. They feel proud to be sidemen of one of the greatest blues singers of their time.She appears to be very cool and calm in her statements towards whites. Her main attention is to produce the best blues for the market. The whites have ill-treatments towards her. She does not take the matter very seriously. She tries her best to eliminate all kinds of confrontation and controversies between whites and blacks.

The philosophies, the reasonings, the judgements, the scholarships and varied conceptions of human life are apex in the character of Hamlet. He understands life and the complexities of life very closely. Life does not seem to be attractive when he loses his beloved father. He is disillusioned and distressed :

*How weary, stale, flat and unprofitable*

*Seems to me all the uses of the world !*

*Fie on it! oh fie, fie, it's an unweeded garden*

*That grows to seed: things rank and gross in nature*

*Possess it merely. ( Hamlet, p-34)*

The prominent dialogue of Hamlet 'To be, or not to be, that is the question' is based on the intricate issues of human life. Man faces the puzzling situations of life. He loses the serenity of his mind in solving the complex matters of life. Hamlet, a philosopher, does not take the decision instantly. He is not revengeful very quickly. He does not oppose the adverse situations of life suddenly. The various questions in connections to human life arise in his mind. He searches for its correct and reasonable solutions.

Hamlet explains the standard of a nobler mind to face the challenges of life. What is a mind nobler in stature and dignity? Does it patiently endure the cruel blow of fortune or boldly face the immensity of trouble? Hamlet defines :

*To be or not to be, that is the question :*

*Whether it's nobler in the mind to suffer*

*The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,*

*Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,*

*And by opposing end them. ( Hamlet, p-81)*

The playwrights, William Shakespeare and August Wilson, are skilful in articulating the voices of their characters. They are major poets in theatre. The settings, dialogues and dramaturgy of the playwrights appeal the theatre loving persons of English and American society.

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