From Margin to Centre: A Study of *Gem of the Ocean*

Nakul and Renu

The centre-margin dynamics is perhaps as old as the history of human civilization and history of ideas are. From Indian Varna system to European Catholicism, Roman slavery to modern trans-Atlantic slavery, ancient and medieval political discourses to the 20th century, Cold War between the Capitalists and the Socialists, European Imperial powers to the colonized natives, everything had been permeated and shaped by the subtle and latent dynamics of centre-margin. But in the 1960s, the dynamics of centre-margin was configured and re-configured from diverse perspectives. The struggles of the African-Americans and other numerous minorities or marginal ethnics found allies in a diverse range of groups that claimed to wage a war against the politics of the centre: "the persistence, expansion and rearticulation of this discourse [of the margin] have been connected with the ongoing performance of a cultural and political critique from feminist, African-American, third-world, gay, lesbian, and other positions self-identified as marginal, or capable of being so regarded" (Crewe 121). And in Derrida's works, centre and margin became available as terms of a radical critique. His deconstructive procedures and proclivity offer the rhetorical strategies for the articulation of subversive discourse – directed against the metaphysical centrism or phallogocentrism of the Euro-American culture. His critique denuded "production in traditional Western discourse and from the putative centre – of a set of valorized oppositions in which the marginal term was always devalued" (Crewe 122). Derrida's methods were the logical culmination of a spate of great thinkers with radical ideas – 'Nietzschean critique of metaphysics', 'the critique of the concepts of Being and truth', 'the Freudian critique of self-presence, that is the critique of consciousness of the subject, of self-identity' and Heideggerean destruction of 'metaphysics, of onto-theology', of the determination of Being as presence. Derrida was later joined by a huge group of subversive thinkers who adopted his methods or developed their own strategies to fell the cultural and intellectual premises of the Euro-American centrism. Lyotard declared this move as the "incredulity towards the metanarratives." These metanarratives had been functioning as the universal yardsticks or parameters of normalcy, validity, truth and knowledge. Michel Foucault offers a commensurate subversive critique of the enlightenment and modernity, claims of reason and truth, strategies and methods of ordering the

apparently sublime, inchoate world in a specific, dominant discourse that, through the procedures of inclusion and exclusion, claim to validate and censor the aspects of human experiences. Lacan and Baudrillard nihilistically profess the groundlessness, play and floating as the only alternatives present in the postmodern world.

All these diverse waves and their proponents share a concern – liberation of the dispossessed people. They endeavor to dismantle the discourse of monologism that invalidates the experiences, interpretations, values, artistic and aesthetic concerns of the margin or other and disseminates the center's perspectives of the world as the truth. The Enlightened, Western, White, Cartesian individuals turned out to be the capitalistic agents who through epistemological violence turned the marginal others into passive hearers, receivers and recipients, inherently incapable of comprehending and plumbing the reality on their own. African-American community is one of these 'others' whose experiences of this centre have been a long saga of horror, violence, dispossession, deprivation and exploitation. And to achieve freedom in the real sense of the term, the dominant discourse has to be countered as much on socio-cultural front as much on literary-aesthetic front.

And among the diversity and polyphony of these voices of the margins, August Wilson has his own significant place. Wilson seems to carry and extend Larry Neal's project coded in these words: "A main tenet of Black Power is the necessity for Black people to define the world in their own terms. . . . We advocate a cultural revolution in art and aesthetics" (272-73). Through his Century Cycle, August Wilson offers an aesthetic statement on the politics and violence of the mainstream culture and sensitizes his audience towards the urgency and requirement of a redefinition that can be mutually inclusive, culturally tolerant, cathartically redemptive, intellectually enlightening and aesthetically pleasant. Wilson possesses a clinical insight into individual and cultural issues, and despite the cultural and aesthetic acrimony between American mainstream and African-American community, he weaves his project into an aesthetic medium that illuminates, enlightens and sensitizes people of all cultures irrespective of their color, class, creed or gender.

His plays are a strong critique of American racism. American Manichean aesthetics conceives African American people as the embodiment of all cultural and behavioural features that the mainstream derides. Consequently, blacks are treated like animals, bereft of any human emotions and feelings, lacking

social and moral virtues and without taste for higher and noble cultural pursuits. This derogatory image can be seen the way blacks are treated in the American society. His plays are full of incidents where blacks are treated like animals. *Gem of the Ocean*, set in 1905, also known as the Jewel of his plays, has a number of incidents where black people are depicted as having a hard time with the newly found Constitutional Emancipation. This play testifies the fact that without cultural reversal of normativity, the Constitutional Emancipation would remain elusive and unrealistic. Slavery was abolished in 1865. But in the post-Abolition era, whites became quite fierce in their desire to retain their slaves. It was likely to demolish their economy and shatter the southern plantation culture and their quasi-aristocratic life style. According to Mary Ellen Snodgrass, "Emancipation did little to free African Americans from ignorance, want, oppression, and fear, thus elongating the miseries of a marginalized non-white people" (185). Gunnar Myrdal also underlines this issue: "After the War and Emancipation, the race dogma was retained in the south as necessary to justify the caste system which succeeded slavery as the social organization of Negro-White relations" (90). Having been long debarred from any exposure to culture, education, public sector services and business, blacks didn't have any infrastructure to predicate their community. Nor could they hope to realize the Constitutional ideals of equality and American Dream in the southern states, as the decision of the abolition was taken by northern leadership, much to the dismay of southern senators and politicians who, mostly, happened to possess big plantations. It triggered a mass move towards the northern cities to seek job or other means of survival. There has to be a change in the way people see black people in America. In the opening scene, it is suggested how blacks had to escape to the north to avoid inhuman treatment in the agrarian south. Solly Two Kings, the suitor to Aunt Ester, receives a letter from his sister, Eliza Jackson, who lives in Alabama. It is worth quoting at large as it states the conditions of the blacks in the deep south:

> Dear, Solomon.
>
> I am writing to let you know the times are terrible here the most anybody remember since bondage. The people are having a hard time with freedom. . . . The White peoples is gone crazy and won't let anybody leave. They beat one fellow on the road so bad his mama say, 'Who is he?' They killed some more and say the colored can't but any tickets on the train to get away. Say they will sink the ferry if any colored on it. I want to leave to come North but it is too bad. (Wilson, *Gem of* 15)

The urgency, anxiety and the desperation of the tone of the letter is reflective of the grave repercussions of this northward movement at the turn of the 20th century. As the blacks reach north, they have to wander in the streets, facing hunger and bad weather without any accommodation. Since they don't have good education and professional training, they are not offered good jobs. They are not even given jobs involving crude physical labour. The mill, the symbol of the northern industrialized progressive civilization, exploits the blacks in multiple ways. It aggravates their emotional frustration and culminates into further disintegration of their very being. Daniel Patrick Moynihan underscores the significance of family in his report which was later published as a book also: "At the heart of the deterioration of the fabric of Negro society is the deterioration of Negro family" (qtd. in "The Negro Family"). Andrew Billingsley also marks the outgrowth of slavery in his study: ". . . the slavery system had a crippling effect on the establishment, maintenance, and growth of normal patterns of family life among Negro people . . . . This crippled the development not only of individual slaves, but of families, and hence of the whole society of Negro people" (qtd. in Willie 2). This black cultural and familial disintegration further mars the black people. With no family to soothe their anxieties and frustrations, they develop different and distinct measures of retaliation as the dominant regime forbids the shared and concerted measures. Citizen Barlow, when denied his wages, steals a bucket of nails. The mill owners, in the absence of any trace who committed this theft, charge another black, Garret Brown, with robbery, thus consolidating the popular image of a black man as a thief. But Brown, an honest man, drowns himself in the river to assert, "I'd rather die in truth than to live a lie" (Wilson, *Gem of* 47).

Wilson sees such circumstances as the dramatic sites on which the central conflict of his drama hinges. In the face of these situations, his characters resort to a variety of survival strategies. For example, Caesar Wilks, who has had his own share of torture, exploitation and systematic denial, decides to surrender his ethnic manhood, his self to the white people becoming a policeman who is used to keep "the niggers in place." He sees in the poor blacks coming from the south an opportunity to make money through his "magic loaf". He is quite vocal in his disgust towards fellow blacks. Schwalbe et. al. call such measures and strategies of the subordinate others as "defensive othering" or "intra-group othering": "Furthermore, intra-group othering allows the oppressed to present themselves as like the oppressors. By demonstrating that they share the same attitudes and disdain towards co-ethnics who fit with the

stereotypes, they attempt to join the dominant group" (qtd. in Pyke 557). This intra-othering, hatred and disgust for his own brethren to mark his distinction and difference sever his ties not only from his community but from his own family. When he kills Solly, his own sister, Black Mary, snaps all her ties from him. People like Caesar tend to forget that despite their behavioural sophistication and appeasing attitude towards whites, they will never be fully assimilated in the mainstream culture. His voluntary distancing from their own community has already closed the doors of true ethnic and humanistic connections for him.

In contrast to these assimilationists, Wilson's ouvre contains characters like Solly also. Wilson challenges the centre but he does it by making his drama a statement. And his statement upholds the African American experiences, values, traditions and rituals. It was something they learnt in America. Blacks had to develop their own networks to ferry the southern blacks to north. Popularly known as the Underground Railroad, it was "a network of secret routes and safe houses used by the 19th century enslaved people of African descent in the United States in efforts to escape to free states and Canada" ("Underground Railroad"). Both Eli and Solly Two Kings had been railroad conductors. Solly too had been a slave in the south. He recounts how he was kept in chains like so many other slaves, thus confirming their animal status who couldn't be trusted and left free. Solly was helped on his way by many people including the white Abolitionists. Dogs and Ku Klux Klan members and other chain gangs posed a great threat to black lives. Those who escaped the elimination had to undergo severe physical hardships and that was a price to be paid to get freedom: "I'd guard the rear. You had to fight a lot of times. I done been bit nine time by dogs" (Wilson, *Gem of* 60). But after facing all kinds of afflictions, when Solly reached Canada in 1857, he realized that individual liberty meant nothing so long as "my mama and all the other people still in bondage" (59). Solly's character represents those African-Americans who, without any training and weapons, developed this railroad and liberated and migrated large number of slaves from under the nose of the white dictators, thus, challenging and cancelling the prevailing slavery notion that blacks lack in intelligence, management and leadership skills,. Further, Wilson highlights the ethics of community, and cultural identity that tend to bind majority of black people. This black ethnicity puts the culture and community above self, thereby subverts the white capitalistic rhetoric that eulogizes the self. Consequently, for people like Solly, individual emancipation meant nothing so long as the fellow blacks remained shackled in the south.

Gem of the Ocean deals with the psychological and spiritual crisis faced

by the newly emancipated slaves moving towards north. Citizen Barlow suffers from guilt of causing the death of fellow black, Garret Brown, and seeks to "wash his soul" with the help of ageless and wise counsellor, Aunt Ester. This intention and act itself tend to be subversive since in those times, black churches were not allowed to hold confessions and offer pardons. The ways, methods, strategies that Aunt Ester adopts are quite bizarre and peculiar. She asks the seeker to either find pennies or throw away dollars in the river. She does this just to restore their faith in the ritual and in themselves. This throwing of property also implicitly denigrates the capitalistic ethics of mechanical accumulation. The rituals she performs seem to have the traces of Africanism, slavery, racism and emancipation all at the same time. She makes a boat of her "Bill of Sale" and uses it to ferry Barlow to "the City of Bones" an underground graveyard at the bottom of the Atlantic. These bones are of the people who couldn't make it to the Americas and drowned in the sea. This city has twelve gatekeepers, and Barlow's entry is ensured when he confesses his crime. At the end of the ritual, Citizen Barlow, "now reborn as man of the people, sits down and begins to cry" (Wilson, *Gem of* 73). Aunt Ester's mediation and elaboration is worth quoting here:

> AUNT ESTER. Them people you see got some powerful gods, Mr. Citizen. . . . They don't know to call him on their own. God don't answer to no one man. God answer to the all. All the people. They need all the people. . . . When we get to the City of Bones I'm gonna show you what happen when all the people call on God with the one voice. God got beautiful splendors. (Wilson, *Gem of* 69)

Here, the spirituality practiced and projected has quite explicit socio-cultural dynamics. Aunt Ester, as she claims to be 285 years old in 1904, thus was born in 1619, the year first ship came to America carrying the African people to Jamestown. As a trope, she is an embodiment of the experiences of African presence in America that facilitates, as a formidable matriarch and counsellor, the reconnection and redemption of the black people. This ritual, in it's cumulative and collective experience, necessitates and, thereby, prescribes the ethics of community. "The City of Bones" as the destination of visit and shrine for redemption corroborates the fact that Wilson's definition of African-Americans goes back to the time when the first slave ship embarked off the West African shore with slaves. Thus, only those figures who underwent through the ordeal of the middle passage and their descendants can subscribe to Wilson's normative African-American pool. Unlike Garvey and many of his followers, he does not

refer to Africa as a continent or site where he seeks to retreat; rather, in his definition, Africa, instead of a spatial location, "is but a ritual, a dance or a nuance" (Shannon 30), a cultural-spiritual-ethnic totality that the slavery as a system tried to extinguish. But the connection and resurrection to the "City of Bones" and consequent redemption requires the personal ethics of faith, honesty, truthfulness and confession. Wilson's dramaturgy thus is a responsive African-American spirituality that negotiates the living presence of the dead in the contemporary times. Aunt Ester remains an absent presence in *Two Trains Running* and *King Hedley II* as well; her presence throughout the Century Cycle underscores the significance she has been imbued to carry and possess for the African-American community to sail through this and many other centuries.

Wilson started writing the Cycle of plays as an attempt to revisit the African-American past, reassess their choices and decisions, re-evaluate their strategies of survival and probe the role of African-American community and culture in helping the black people survive in a capitalist white dominated world that intends to exploit and erase the black culture and presence. African-American men and women have had a bad experience even in the wake of Emancipation. So long as dominant racist ideology was there, African-American people could not find redemption. These figures often need a counsel or spiritual leader. Given their ferocious engagement with the hostile world, they need an embodied Afro-centricity, the personification of black ethnicity and Wilson effects it through Aunt Ester Tyler. She is present in different plays sometimes on and sometimes off stage and she also claims to have been born in 1619, the year when first African-Americans were brought to America. Her unusually long age – three hundred and odd years – substantiates the idea that she stands for the totality of the black experience in America, an embodied past that counsels the characters to act wisely and shape their future. Wilson devolves on it in a 1993 interview: "Beyond that, of course, she represents the entire 349 years that blacks have been in American. She represents our tradition, our philosophy, our folk wisdom, our hobbies, our culture, whatever you care to call it. All of that is alive, and you can tap into it if you know where to go, and what to say" (Wilson, "The Historical Perspective" 160).

Her counsels and messages are rooted in her spiritual connection. She tries to guide the mentally and emotionally deranged figures to root themselves, identify their heritage and past, and all this is done in typical African fashion. Moreover, she embodies or represents a double liminality. On the one hand, she

exists between the material Afro-centric, and the Euro-American cultures, where she helps the black characters, who are mentally, emotionally and spiritually splintered and deranged by the Euro-American capitalist racism, move and identify with their roots and history. On the other hand, she stands between the material African-American world and the black metaphysical spiritual universe, "City of Bones," the centre of the black world. Most of her counsels, advice and ways are antidotes to the endemic epidemic of capitalistic white world. In *Two Trains Running*, she asks characters to throw away twenty dollars in the river. Whereas, Memphis, Sterling and Holloway do it, West finds it futile to throw and waste one's money. Through their capital renunciation ritual, she tries to initiate the characters in the right direction, i.e. acknowledging their roots, and it could be done only after they have registered willingness to dissociate and separate themselves from the American capitalism symbolised by the dollar and property. After meeting her, these characters start seeing themselves as part of the community which erases the typical capitalistic patriarchal narcissism from their personalities. Holloway tells Memphis: "Aunt Ester give you more than money. She makes you right with yourself" (Wilson, *Two Trains* 24). Consequently, Sterling's love towards Risa is purified of all its earlier capitalistic celebration and glorification of masculine virility, sexuality and crudeness and what remains is true and tender love. It helps Sterling recognize significance of Risa whom he comes to perceive in a new light. Memphis learns to "pick the ball" and go back to the south and claim his land and by his rights and fruits of his own labour. Similarly, in *Gem of the Ocean*, Citizen Barlow is taken on a spiritual journey to the "City of Bones", where through a complex of dialogues and rituals, he is made to recognize his guilt, confess it and thereby relieved of it. Her rituals are a mixture of Africanness, experiences of slavery, and Americanness. She makes a boat of her "Bill of sale" and uses it to accomplish a voyage to the "City of Bones." It is symbolic of the recognition of one's past of slavery and recourse to it as a channel of transformation, of redemption and of resurrection without acknowledgement of the significance of slavery as part of their being, black people can never get reunited with their ancestors and past.

Wilson has been criticized by many scholars for producing predominantly male-dominated plays. Harry J. Elam highlights the issue of women's marginality in Wilson's oeuvre: He asserts that Wilson has been accused of ". . . constructing women who, in his male-dominated dramatic vision, not only exist in subordinate position, but also operate solely in reaction to men and are defined and confined

by these relationships" (88). However, these critical views cannot be considered the final verdict. His ouvre contains a number of such dynamic, multidimensional and complex women characters. Further, the act of embodying the past, history and legacy in Aunt Ester is a conscious move on Wilson's part. Time and again, he claims this Century Cycle to be his autobiography. He also declares that Aunt Ester is the mother of all the characters. Wilson himself owned the name and culture of his mother and learned the rituals, oral traditions and black values from her. Similarly, Aunt Ester as an embodiment of African-American culture guides all blacks. This close parallel between the larger structural aesthetics and his personal life underscores the amount of reverence, love and sincerity he accords to his art as well as women characters.

Wilson's redefinition outrightly rejects simplistic solutions. Recognizing the dynamism, complexity, polyphony and richness of life, Wilson creates characters that defy simplistic definitions. They are mix of complex emotions, feelings and inclinations. Further, Wilson does not see life in black and white terms that validates and glorifies all black people and criticizes all whites. His gallery of characters is life-affirming and hence complex. And Wilson's gallery suggests that he sees human identity as dynamic and ever-evolving, hence resistant to the fixities. His characters feel at ease once they recognize and accept their African-American cultural and experiential roots. This acceptance and recognition must be accompanied by the ethics of natural tolerance and respect for the differences. His theatre thus sensitizes the black and the white both about the ramifications of uni-centric and narcissistic culture of Euro-Americanism and necessitates its erosion and replacement.

Wilson's drama systematically undermines the meta-narratives of Euro-American culture that claim to set the norms of truth and knowledge. His theatre can be deemed what Ihab Hasan avers, ". . . an antinomian movement that assumes a vast unmaking of the western mind" (qtd. in Waugh 345). The fact that he had hardly read any canonical or full length western drama underlines his desire to claim and establish that his art and aesthetic are rooted in his experiences as a black man living in the hostile American society. His characters and the narratives emanate from his perspectives of life. In his theatre, the cultural and aesthetic meta-narratives of the western civilization crumble. He challenges the objective and universal claims of knowledge. Nietzsche's words, ". . . there is only a perspectival knowing"(qtd. in Waugh 349) appear more illuminating in the context of Wilson's drama and cultural vision. To the richness, dynamism and polyphony and thereby validity of the African-American, he

creates a world that is prominently peopled by black figures. His characters and narratives mark his distinction from his predecessors like Langston Hughes, Richard Wright and Ed Bullins and many others whose characters and art defined itself in relation to the mainstream white society. But in Wilson's theatre (*Gem of the Ocean*), white figures and culture is kept mostly offstage. Further, his theatre negotiates the problematic of postmodernism. bell hooks, in her epochal papers, "Postmodern Blackness" avers, ". . . when this diversity is ignored, it is easy to see black folks are falling into two categories: nationalist or assimilationists; black-identified or white –identified" (2514). As in *Gem of the Ocean*, Wilson's aesthetic upholds and eulogies the cause of those blacks who seek redemption and realization in terms of their African-American experience. The exclusivist concern with identity – either purely American or purely African – falls outside Wilson's cultural model as bell hooks avers in her essay: "We are empowered to recognise multiple experiences of black identity that are the lived conditions"(2514). The rise of Aunt Ester to the level of motherly figure, her counsels, advice and strategies all evince the recognition of the dynamism, complexity of human identity. Black critics and thinkers mostly abstain from the Postmodern discourse because of its potential threat to black identity and community. But Wilson orchestrates in *Gem of the Ocean* a variant of postmodernism that not only fells the white cultural meta-narratives, but also shows the ways in which it can be truly emancipatory

Works Cited and Consulted

Crewe, Jonathan. "Defining Marginality?" *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, vol. 10, no. 1, 1991, pp. 121-30. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/463775.

Elam, Harry J. *The Past as Present in the Drama of August Wilson*. University of Michigan, 2006.

hooks, bell. "Postmodern Blackness." *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. 2nd ed., edited by Vincent B. Leitch, W. W. Norton and Company, 2010, pp. 2507-16.

Myrdal, Gunnar. "Racial Beliefs in America." *Theories of Race and Racism: A Reader*, edited by Les Back and John Solomos, Routledge, 2000, pp. 87-104.

Neal, Larry. "The Black Arts Movement." *The Black Aesthetic*, edited by Addison Gayle, Jr., Doubleday and Company, 1973, pp. 272-90.

Pyke, Karen D. "What is Internalized Racial Oppression and Why Don't We Study It?: Acknowledging Racism's Hidden Injuries." *Sociological Perspectives*, vol.

53, no. 4, 2010, pp. 551-72. journals.ucpress.edu. University of California P, n. d., www.irows.ucr.edu/cd/courses/232/pyke/intracopp.pdf.

Shannon, Sandra G. "Framing African American Cultural Identity: The Bookends Plays in August Wilson's 10-Play Cycle." *College Literature* vol. 36, no. 2, 2009, pp. 117-29. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/20642020.pdf.

Snodgrass, Mary Ellen. *August Wilson: A Literary Companion*. McForland & Company Pub., 2004.

"The Negro Family: The Case For National Action." *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*,29June.2017,en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Negro_Family:_The_Case_For_National_Action.

Waugh, Patricia. "Postmodernism and Feminism." *Modern Literary Theory*. 4th ed., edited by Philip Rice and Patricia Waugh. Heritage Publishers, 2001, pp. 344-59.

Willie, Charles Vert. *A Look at the Black* Families. General Hall Pub, 1976.

Wilson, August. *Gem of the Ocean*. Theatre Communications Group, 2007.

—."The Historical Perspective: An Interview with August Wilson." *Conversations with August Wilson*, edited by Jackson Bryer and Mary C Hartig, UP of Mississippi, 2006, pp. 155-71.

—. *Two Trains Running*. Theatre Communications Group, 2007.

"Underground Railroad." *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, 28 July 2013, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Underground_Railroad.

—— * ——