

STRUGGLE FOR SURVIVAL IN *TWO TRAINS RUNNING*

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Abstract

August Wilson's play, Two Trains Running is the seventh play of his Century Cycle which chronicles black people's experiences in American society. Since the structure and dynamics of each society are distinctive, the experiences of individuals belonging to that society are naturally shaped by these factors. The complicated relationship between societal norms, values, and power structures play a pivotal role in shaping the individual and collective experiences in society. In that respect, the social practices of black people in American society are notably outstanding as they have been subjected to slavery and segregation through systematic racism. Ideologically, racism has been used as a strategic tool to control the black people, who were pushed out of social boundaries because of their skin color and to sustain the white dominance for economic and politic reasons. Significantly, black authors have tried to be the voice of the oppressed black people on the literary arena and considered the theater as a way of resistance. Based on the societal awareness aroused by black authors, this study analyzes the struggle of black people in Wilson's Two Trains Running. Drawing attention to the significant fact that black people are the members of the white society with their loyalty to their own cultural values and their African-American identity, Wilson is an antiracist playwright. Relatedly, the central focus of this study is the ways of coping with the unequal, unfair and discriminative practices of the white supremacy.

Keywords: *August Wilson, Two Trains Running, racism, inequality, resistance.*

Date Received (Geliş Tarihi): 19.04.2023

Date Accepted (Kabul Tarihi): 31.05.2023

DOI: 10.58306/wollt.1285534

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TWO TRAINS RUNNING OYUNUNDA HAYATTA KALMA MÜCADELESİ

Öz

August Wilson'un Two Trains Running adlı eseri, siyahilerin Amerikan toplumundaki deneyimlerinin tarihsel bir kaydı olan Century Cycle adını verdiği serisinin yedinci oyunudur. Her toplumun yapısı ve dinamikleri farklı olduğu için, o topluma ait olan bireylerin yaşantıları da söz konusu faktörler aracılığıyla şekillenir. Toplumsal normlar, değerler ve güç örüntüleri arasındaki karmaşık ilişki, toplumdaki bireysel ve kolektif deneyimlerin şekillenmesinde önemli bir rol oynar. Bu noktada Amerikan toplumundaki siyahilerin deneyimleri oldukça çarpıcıdır çünkü sistematik ırkçılık aracılığıyla, kölelik ve ayrımcılığa maruz kalmışlardır. Ten renkleri sebebiyle toplumsal sınırların dışına itilen siyah halkı kontrol altında tutmak ve beyaz tahakkümün ekonomik ve siyasi gerekçelerle devamını sağlamak için, ırkçılık ideolojik açıdan stratejik bir araç olarak kullanılmıştır. Siyahi yazarlar edebi sahnede ezilen siyahi halkın sesini duyurmaya çalışmış ve tiyatroyu bir direnme aracı olarak görmüşlerdir. Siyahi yazarların uyandırdığı toplumsal farkındalıktan yola çıkan bu çalışma, Wilson'un Two Trains Running oyununda siyahi halkın mücadelesini irdelemektedir. Wilson, siyahi halkın kendi kültürel değerlerine bağlılıkları ve Afrikalı-Amerikalı kimlikleriyle beyaz toplumun bireyleri olduğuna dikkat çeken ve ayrımcı olmayan bir yazardır. Dolayısıyla bu çalışma, siyah karakterlerin beyaz egemenliğinin eşitsiz, adaletsiz ve ayrımcı uygulamalarıyla baş etme yollarına odaklanmaktadır.

Anahtar Sözcükler: August Wilson, Two Trains Running, ırkçılık, eşitsizlik, direniş.

1. Introduction

There is but one destiny for the black man. And it is white.
Frantz Fanon¹

The societal structure of each society is shaped by peculiar constituents that lead to reconciliation or dissidence in determining its distinctive dynamics. These factors include but are not limited to gender, religion, ethnicity, cultural beliefs and values, economic conditions or political ideology. None of them,

¹ Black Skin, White Masks (1967: 13).

however, has been as crucial and radical as racism. Because racism is a form of legitimation of power and authority, and in this respect, it is nothing but a ‘constructed reality’ or a ‘systematic system’. Rather than being a reflection of innate or natural differences between the groups, racism is a way of controlling and sustaining power. Accordingly, the social fabric is (re)shaped by either differences or similarities at the hands of authority in line with the constructed norms. This dichotomy of variables inherently affects the sense of reality. The biological differences turn into social and ideological constructs resulting in discriminative practices. Hence, the conflicts because of disharmony become inevitable including otherization, loss of belonging, identity crisis and collective reactions.

Toni Morrison deeply discusses ‘race related issues’ in her book, *The Origins of Others* (2017). For her, the depictions of cultural, racial, and physical differences which define “Otherness” without categorizing any worth or rank is nearly impossible: “Many, if not most, textual/literary descriptions of race range from the sly, the nuanced, to the pseudo-scientifically “proven” (2017: 3). Clearly, as an inherent result of creating a hierarchy based on differences, racism shapes our sense of reality. The discriminative practices of the dominant group lead to societal corruptions such as inferiority, injustice and inequality because racism creates artificial barriers between the individuals to justify the unequal distribution of resources, opportunities, and facilities in society. Naturally, such practices impact the minority groups’ sense of self and belonging in society. Because “beyond language, in a racialized system, all manner of things will read as “peculiar to” one kind of person or another. [...] Black things, white things. Things that are peculiar to our people and peculiar to theirs” (Morrison, 1983: 38).

Through the eyes of authors, the readers closely witness such social and historical facts on fictional ground. Similarly, the core of August Wilson’s plays is black experiences both to create cultural awareness and to make his people visible, who are systematically ignored in real life. According to Lahr (2001: 53), Wilson’s plays are not only a witness to the black society, but they also serve as a piece of news to the white society, which creates a racial conundrum. Through his plays, Wilson sheds light on themes ranging from identity crisis and cultural heritage to social injustice and inequality in ways that force audiences, both blacks and whites, to grapple with bitter truths about themselves, their communities, and society in general. However, African culture and heritage are always of top priority for him: “My idea is that somewhere, sometime in the course of the play, the audience will discover these are African people. They’re black Americans, they speak English, but their worldview is African” (Powers, 1984: 53).

Wilson’s sensitivity to the African roots in the white society naturally includes racism since black people’s first experiences are related to slavery in the American society. Although his characters are the victims of oppression in some ways, they try to be a part of the American society with their cultural backgrounds. Hence, they struggle for their economic, collective and individual freedom. In a broader

sense, Wilson deeply represents the dilemmas and richness of black life, including the ways in which black identity has been shaped by the African roots and by racism that black people have faced in the American society. Relatedly, this study focuses on the struggles of Wilson's characters to survive with their African roots under the racist practices of the white supremacy in *Two Trains Running*. His characters in the play try to resist against discrimination either remaining silent or rejecting the unfair practices. Resistance thus becomes a way of preserving their African roots and constructing African-American identity, which essentially forms the main concern of this study.

2. Race-Based Realities

Racism, without a doubt, is a wounding societal construction rooted in history but marked in memory. Not surprisingly, none of societal constructions has had such deep roots or long-lasting effects as racism. For Banton (1980), race is originated in a particular culture and a particular period of history. It represents a complex web of relations that have evolved over time within specific cultures shaped by political power dynamics and economic conditions. In this respect, race is the trigger of a painful struggle for recognition and belonging. Relatedly, Goldberg (1993: 206) links race with societal distances:

Race continues to mold personal and social identity, the bounds of who one is and can be, of where one chooses to be or is placed, what social and private spaces one can and dare not enter or penetrate. Race inscribes and circumscribes the experiences of space and time, of geography and history, just as race itself acquires its specificity in terms of space-time correlates.

Understandably, there are key elements including history, religion or ethnicity that shape the societal structure and they are accepted as the main actors of social fabric, shared past and cultural differences. At its core, racism perpetuates disadvantageous stereotypes and creates barriers to equity and justice. It undermines differences by valuing some over others based on arbitrary characteristics such as skin color or ethnicity. The systemic nature of racism means that it extends beyond individual actions into societal structures that reinforce discrimination.

Playing a pivotal role in determining how individuals perceive themselves and others around them, it is this societal fabric that characterizes the boundaries. Ideologically, the most penetrating confines belong to racism since it is a systematic way of controlling communities to serve the authorities' own interests. It provides economic and political benefits for the dominant group to label minorities as 'others' by leading to a hierarchical system. The construction and preservation of domination is essential for the survival of this artificial system. Inevitably then, racism is the most suitable tool in sustaining

power because “racism is not the whole but the most visible, the most day-to-day and, not to mince matters, the crudest element of a given structure” (Fanon, 1964: 32).

When discussing racism, the issues involved are often multi-layered and require a deep understanding of historical, social, economic and cultural contexts because “if race is a conception, then racism is a condition; or more precisely, where race is a set of conceptions, racisms are sets of conditions” (Goldberg, 1993: 98). Similarly, for Cornell and Hartmann (1998) race is a slippery concept and they emphasize that its slipperiness has a long history. The complexity of defining race lies not only in the scientific understanding but also in the historical, cultural and ideological constructions that perpetually re-shapes individual perceptions and perspectives, which subsequently turn into collective ones. Despite being biologically unfounded, race continues to be used as a way to categorize people into different groups based on physical characteristics. With the transformation of individual differences into social boundaries, racism finds a position in the social order. As emphasized by Robin Diangelo in *White Fragility* (2018: 40), racism is supported by the legal authority and institutional control: “This authority and control transforms individual prejudices into a far-reaching system that no longer depends on the good intentions of individual actors; it becomes the default of the society and is reproduced automatically. Racism is a system”. It, hence, protects its position through the social structures, institutions and policies. Sufficiently broad, race involves biological factors, which do not allow individuals to prefer but racism represents an intricate set of societal conditions that perpetuate discrimination based on race. In that vein, racism refers to various structures within society that maintain systemic inequalities and prejudices against certain races.

For Goldberg (1996), racism consists in those social practices which implicitly or explicitly attribute merits or allocate values to members of racially categorized groups, solely because of their race. Because of this focus, “to lose one’s racial-ized rank is to lose one’s own valued and enshrined difference” (Morrison, 2017: 30). Racism, in this way, is more than simply rejecting differences, which prioritizes to preserve privileges by allowing those in power to maintain a sense of superiority over others. It is a process of otherization with the illusion and re-construction of norms. Being a vital issue of positioning, racism is a matter of normalizing impositions.

Ultimately, racism is a form of legitimization of power, oppression, discrimination, inequality or social injustice. This form of segregation reinforces the dominant group’s politic and economic position while subjugating marginalized ones to the unjustified persecution and oppression. So, being the low-cost labor for the white community, black people are regarded as a means of contribution to the America’s economy through slavery. The mechanism of slavery precisely that ran in favor of the American society draws attention to the primary need of perpetuating this system. The way to legitimize this demand turns to racism based on skin color since the fundamental factor between the dominating

and the dominated is nothing than skin color. The factors that threaten the authority or weaken the influence of authority significantly contributes to the (re)construction racism which “is only one element of a vaster whole: that of the systematized oppression of a people” (Fanon, 1964: 33). It is clear that dominance and oppression are intertwined because the former owes its existence to the latter. The intricately relationship of these two mirrors ‘the constructed realities’ shaped by the power dynamics in society.

The essential elements of discrimination against African American people during colonialism characterize racial oppression. Racial oppression is a vicious and standardized form of discrimination to subjugate certain groups throughout history. It involves “declassing legislation, directed at property-holding members of the oppressed group; deprivation of civil rights; illegalization of literacy; and displacement of family rights and authorities” (Allen, 2012: 107). The essence of racial oppression lies in colonialism, which exploits people who do not have any power and any rights to object and which equalize them in the face of oppression. Racial oppression perpetuates cycles of inequality that persisted long after the end of colonial rule, highlighting the importance not only for historical revenge but also present efforts towards the costs and dismantling structures that continue to reinforce these discriminative legacies. Against the whites’ desire to maintain this utilitarian system, black people extremely struggle to survive. In this respect, they are limited to only two choices: subjection or resistance. Their limited options become inspiration for this study, which focuses on the struggles of Wilson’s characters including Hambone, Memphis, or Sterling, to resist under the political and social climate of the 1960s to preserve their black-selves in *Two Trains Running*.

3. Black Theatre as a Way of Resistance

The distinctive aspect of literary works is their sensitivity to raise awareness of societal issues. Their power lies in their remarkable ability to create empathy, to reflect the different perspectives and experiences, and to deal with the universal issues of humanity. With the creative and effective language of authors which poignantly touches on readers, literary works also become the voice of social change and historical past. In this respect, it would not be wrong to claim that theatre has a more privileged position since the texts meet the performances on the stage. This means that the social or political message to be conveyed becomes more impressive. Accordingly, theatre is a kind of tool for resistance in which the black community can make their voices heard, reflect their own black issues, and harmonize their cultural richness with their past. Through theatre, they become the actors of their stories, which shed light on their undervalued struggles while intensifying narratives often drowned out by the dominant societal forces. Rather than mere entertainment, it is a way of fighting against the white supremacy. Hence, “Defining black theatre has become a political issue. Racism allows no simple

answers” (Hatch, 2005: 297) since “race question is inherently theatrical because the discourse on race, the definitions and meanings of blackness, have been intricately linked to issues of theatre and performance from the arrival of first African slaves on American soil” (Elam, 2001: 4).

The essence of black theater is the history, culture and deep-rooted past of black bodies. Black theater has its roots in the African traditions brought to America by the enslaved Africans. Despite being taken from not only their homeland but also their culture and identity, these resilient individuals remain loyal to their African roots through their dance, music, stories and rituals. The African American playwrights, hence, emphasize that black plays should utterly reflect the unique black experience: “A real Negro theatre must be About us, By us, For us and Near us” (Du Bois, 1926:135) because to portray the African American experience is only possible with the actual actors of this experience. Similarly, unveiling the layers of oppression, black plays illuminate the complex issues such as racial identity, social injustice, resilience, faith and hope with exceptional depth through the captivating performances. In this sense, the representative figures of the African American theater like W. E. B. Du Bois, Amiri Baraka or August Wilson have claimed that “black theater practitioners must not only have authority over the representational apparatus but must use the theater as a means of protest and revolt in order to change black lives and fight oppressive conditions” (Elam, 2001: 6). Understandably, the transformative potential of black theater aims to challenge oppressive conditions, inspire radical changes within black communities, and ultimately trigger essential social revolution by empowering those who have systematically been marginalized.

As a significant representative of black theatre, August Wilson is a literary icon who is called as heavyweight champion because of his language defined as “the rhythm of hurt, the rhythm of pain, the rhythm of ecstasy, the rhythm of family” (Lahr, 2001: 50). Wilson wrote a play for each decade of the twentieth century, which is called as ‘Century Cycle’ to portray the distinctive aspects of the African American society. Relatedly, the African American people are his main characters while the primary setting of his plays is Pittsburgh where he grew up. It is noteworthy that his plays with his poetic and artistic language are rich and vivid portrayals of the cultural and social practices of black community.

Highlighting the significance of African roots, culture and history, Wilson attaches great importance on the African American experiences. He believes in black people’s strength and determination in spite of the existing social order harmonized by the intricate connections between cultural traditions, historical events, political perspectives and ideological realities in the white society. Wilson arrestingly encourages them to own the values of African heritage in an attempt to create a bridge between Africa and America or past and present. In that vein, he is known as *race man* since he strongly believes that race matters, arguing that “it is the largest category of identification because it is the one that most influences your perception of yourself, and it is the one to which others in the world of men

most respond” (Wilson, 1997: 494). Hence, Wilson aligns himself with the African American history of struggle and survival, as well as the black tradition of cultural heritage (Elam, 2001: 7):

I stand myself and my art squarely on the self-defining ground of the slave quarters,
and find the ground to be hallowed and made fertile by the blood and bones of the
men and women who can be described as warriors on the cultural battlefield that
affirmed their self-worth. (Wilson, 1997: 496)

The black theatrical tradition of resistance or protest is clearly rooted in the centuries of systemic oppression and discrimination. Wilson masterfully depicts how black people have resisted against the white supremacy by focusing on both the personal and communal stories of difficulties and struggles of them. His active role in The Black Power Movement during the 1960s considerably shaped his position on the literary arena. In this way, Wilson provides a profound understanding of the multifaceted nature of blacks’ resistance to preserve their dignity and cultural identity.

Setting in 1969, *Two Trains Running* is the seventh play of Wilson’s cycle. Memphis Lee’s restaurant, Funeral Home and Lutz’s butcher shop reflect the historical and political climate of the time: “a turbulent, racing, dangerous, and provocative decade” (Bloom, 2009: 16). The action of the play takes place in the Memphis Lee’s restaurant in Pittsburgh and except for Risa, all the characters are men who are the regular customers of the restaurant- Memphis, Wolf, Holloway, Sterling, Hambone and West. In this small restaurant, the characters are discussing the political and economic atmosphere of the 1969 including Black Power Movement, Civil Rights Movement, death of Malcom X and urban transformation. It is accepted as a controversial time for black people when they both started to stand against the inequalities and injustices of the white authority and witnessed the assassination of Malcom X and Martin Luther King. Similar to the political atmosphere of the time, the characters in the play question their social and economic positions in the white society under the racist conditions. The readers intrinsically feel the historical and political climate of the time through the setting and the daily conversations of the characters. The play ends with the death of Hambone who is the most obvious victim of the white supremacy in the play. Relatedly, the challenges and contradictions that black individuals faced during the Civil Rights era lies at the heart of the play. The economic conditions as well as politic status of blacks are reflected under the hostile environment. As Bloom emphasizes (2009: 17), the play mainly focuses on “how can we know who we are and where we are going, if we do not face our past, struggle towards understanding it, and reconcile ourselves to its present legacy to us?” More precisely, through Wilson’s characters, the readers witness the coping ways of black people with oppression and discrimination. Their painful stories invite readers to explore distinctive struggles of black community under politically constructed barriers that threaten them at the cost of their life.

4. Struggle for Survival in *Two Trains Running*

Racism matters. To be an Other in this country matters- and the disheartening truth is that it will likely continue to matter.

Ta-Nehisi Coates²

Being black in a white society means ‘being others’ who are always under threat and have to watch their backs and make themselves understood. They must face enduring difficulties to be accepted as they are, including their cultural and physical differences. Not surprisingly, Wilson has regarded himself as “a struggling playwright whose struggle was to reveal the richness of black life as being both uniquely African, and at the same time authentically American” (Fishburne, 2017: ix). Relatedly, the readers witness the struggles of black community to get their deserved rights, to protect their cultural roots and to resist against the oppression in *Two Trains Running*.

The discriminative practices of the white supremacy are reflected through the black character’s both individual and collective experiences in *Two Trains Running*. More specifically, Memphis and Holloway epitomize the collective experiences of black people while Hambone is the most insistent character whose individual resistance is purely for getting his deserved right throughout the play. Through his black characters, Wilson shows his belief in the power of community which essentially constructs the African American identity. Their struggles to survive under oppression are the central tenet of their meaning of existence. Wilson thinks that “blacks know the spiritual truth of white America and that we know them better than white America knows us” (Lahr, 2001: 53) as Memphis learns the rules in the play. Memphis told West his story about his past in the South where is the home of slavery. He was in conflict with a white man about his land in which he was the legitimate side but he lost his land and his mule because a black person could not be right under any circumstances against the white authority:

Memphis: [...] They took and cut my mule’s belly out while it standing there. [...] Okay. I know the rules now. If you do that to something that ain’t never done nothing to you... then I know what you would do to me. [...] Once I know the rules, whatever they are, I can play by them. (Wilson 2007: 67)

Memphis learns how to survive in the white society since he has witnessed his mule’s killing because of its black owner and he has watched its murderers without doing anything. It is the legitimized discrimination which leaves Memphis hopeless and forces him to leave his own farm behind. His silence as a part of his personal integrity represents his ways of surviving in a hostile environment because in

² Foreword in *The Origins of Others* by Toni Morrison, (1983: xvi).

Wolf's eyes in the play "you always under attack" (Wilson, 2007: 51). Wolf is talking about black people's daily experiences in the white society. While they are just walking in the street, they may be arrested, beaten or killed for any reasons or without any reasons. As an epitomized incident, Wolf was arrested for obstructing justice while walking in the street and stayed in prison for three months, which showed him that black people are always under the white threat. Similarly, Holloway emphasizes the same issue in line with discrimination:

Holloway: You say the word "gun" in the same sentence with the word "nigger" and you in trouble. The white man panic. Unless you say, "the policeman shot the nigger with his gun"... then that be all right. (Wilson, 2007: 77)

As seen, racism is a social construct to sustain the authority, which naturally evokes victimization of black people. Holloway obviously shows that blacks are inherently dangerous and pose a threat to the safety and stability of the white society. The deeply-rooted reality, racism is central to the Holloway's idea. His belief perpetuates negative stereotypes which unfairly categorize an entire race as 'violent and criminal', while ignoring systemic discriminative factors such as poverty, unemployment or lack of access to education or healthcare. In the play, Wilson touches on these issues to portray the unfair system of the white society. In the restaurant, Holloway, Wolf, Sterling and Risa were talking about playing and hitting numbers to earn money and Sterling mentioned that he wanted to have a job as white people who could earn eight or nine thousand dollars yearly. However, Holloway reminds him the unequal access to the social opportunities: "You ain't got none of them white folks' education... how you gonna get one of their jobs?" (Wilson, 2007: 49). It is clear that racism makes impossible to have equal rights to access both education and employment opportunities for black people.

Poignantly, it is Hambone who is the most remarkable character in the play. As Bottoms (2007:149), highlights, the play "concerns with structural racial injustice are embodied in the character of Hambone, who has been driven over the edge of his sanity by a deep-rooted sense of having been wronged" and he is described as "self-contained and in a world of his own" by Wilson (2007:17) in the play. As a voice of black world dominated by the white rules, he revolts against the injustice by repeating the same sentence throughout the play:

Hambone: He gonna give me my ham. He gonna give me my ham. I want my ham.
He gonna give me my ham. (2007: 17)

He embodies not only a symbol of resistance but also an inspiring beacon of hope for his black community. Hambone's story is closely related to the racist practices of the American society. Hambone and Lutz made a deal about ten years ago and Lutz would give him a ham in exchange for Hambone's painting his fences. After Hambone finished painting the fences, Lutz did not keep his promise and told

him to take a chicken or nothing instead of ham. Since then, Hambone has wanted his ham by waiting in front of the Lutz's fences. Lutz is a white man and is the symbol of discrimination in the play. His determination not to remunerate Hambone along with Hambone's determination not to accept the whites' injustice is the portrayal of how racism works in the social order. Actually, Hambone's ideological stance is similar to a true story of Wilson's mother. Answering a question correctly in a radio program, his mother, Daisy won a new washing machine. Yet her blackness posed an obstacle for the prompters who offered a second-hand machine instead of a new one. Most notably, she did not accept although she extremely needed it: "Something is not always better than nothing" (Lahr, 2001: 55) poignantly said Daisy. That incident turned into Wilson's life philosophy for his struggle in the white society. Through his plays, he draws attention to the crucial need for black people to seek their rights and not to accept what is determined as deserved or undeserved for black people by their white masters. Relatedly, Hambone's rejection of chicken is a kind of resistance to the white supremacy even if Hambone cannot manage to take it. "As Hambone waits at Mr. Lutz's fence, so do black people wait, collectively, for the freedom, justice and equality owed them" according to Fisburne (2017: vii).

As aforesaid, racism is one of the most forceful barriers to the social equality and justice since race is regarded as the provocateur of struggle for survival. In that respect, *Two Trains Running* represents black people's struggles and their own ways to cope with discrimination. For Memphis, there is not justice and it is useless to demand freedom, justice or equality through the Black Power Movement. Because he thinks that justice will not change the fate of the black community, claiming that black people only need a gun:

Memphis: [...] You can't do nothing without a gun. Not in this day and time. That's the only kind of power the white man understand. They think they gonna talk their way up on it. In order to talk your way you got to have something under the table.
(Wilson, 2007: 41)

At any corner of the white society, black people experience the color of rules. More specifically, their blackness becomes the main decisive factor in benefiting social rights including education opportunities, house rents or wages. They cannot use such facilities or they cannot earn equal money as whites even they do the similar works. Inevitably then, they think that violence is a kind of resistance tool against the oppressive forces. Ideologically, the crux of issue lies in power relations and how they are practiced in the societal order. It is again these dynamics that contribute significantly to the perpetuation of racism because authority based on power relations is the triggering force for racism. Since black people are the side on which power is exercised, they try to find their own ways to resist such as Sterling in the play:

Sterling: [...] Like when I robbed the bank. That made me feel strong too. Like I had everything under control. I did until they arrested me. (Wilson, 2007: 45)

Racial differences are used as an excuse to justify the white people's oppression and to preserve their privileges. For this reason, black people try to rationalize their resistance ways which manifest itself in crime, violence or death since it is the only way to have power in the discriminative system. The relationship between these two situations cannot be ignored because one inevitably leads to the other. The significant difference, however, is that the white community support their discriminative practices by the hegemony and unbalanced force while black people only have their individual and collective struggles to cope with discrimination. Ultimately, the most striking representation of their efforts to provide justice by themselves is Sterling's robbery for Hambone's casket. Sterling steals ham from the Lutz's market for Hambone, most remarkable victim of the white supremacy in the play. Hambone whose sole action is to 'want his ham' dies without getting it. However, Sterling opposes the institutionalized injustice through his voluntary crime which is related to "the black response to bias, unemployment, poverty, self-preservation, disenfranchisement, and white urbanism" according to Wilson (Snodgrass, 2004: 65).

Believing in the perseverance and determination of black people, Wilson emphasizes the significance and value of African heritage and culture. His plays are not only the historical witnesses of their experiences but also the sign of the nobility of their coercive struggles. For this reason, a black community warmly welcomes all readers in Wilson's plays, which go beyond what the white man grants them:

Holloway: [...] the white man would give him a couple of pounds of bacon. He'd bring that home and my grandmother would throw it out with the garbage. That's the kind of woman she was. (Wilson, 2007: 71)

Despite the limited opportunities and oppressive manners, black people endeavor to content themselves with what they can get through their own efforts. Their only zeal is to get what they deserve, rather than what white people consider for them. Wilson represents the black people's dignity through Holloway's grandmother who symbolizes their determination and self-respect against the racist system. More clearly, Wilson depicts the African American people as those who refuse to settle for crumbs from the white authority with his rich characterizations and poignant language. He epitomizes race relations based on the white discrimination and black struggle.

Holding on to their African roots plays a vital role while living under the discriminative conditions. Obviously, Wilson dedicates a significant role to the African culture in their struggle against racism. In this regard, Aunt Ester who appeared in the first play of Wilson's *Century Cycle*, is the most

influential character. As an allegorical figure, she is regarded as a notable symbol of Africa and the culture-keeper of black people. Also, she is the representation of grace and restoration to become the eternal mother of Wilson's fictional black characters (Snodgrass, 2004). Most distinctively, she is like a remedy for the African American people:

Holloway: [...] Aunt Ester give you more than money. She make you right with yourself. [...] don't care whatever your problem. She can straighten it out. (Wilson, 2007: 25)

Aunt Ester is the off-stage character in this play as in *Seven Guitars*, *King Hedley II* and *Radio Golf*, but *Gem of the Ocean*, the first play of Wilson's cycle is constructed on this character. Aunt Ester is an ex-slave and serves as a voice of past with her vivid memory. As Baykara (2018) argues, black people visit her when they despair or have any troubles because of racism. And she confronts them with their past hidden in her strong memory in order to remind their African roots. Rather than providing salve for the external wounds of oppression and racism, her spiritual and practical healing is internal and psychological, according to Elam (2007). In that vein, Aunt Ester is an icon of hope, inspiration and most importantly, the African heritage that will always live in America with black people. She is thus 322 years old in *Two Trains Running*. Her image stands as a reminder of the rich history and traditions inherent to Africa, which vitalizes black people in their struggle in the face of imposed injustices. Depicting as a strong, wise, and merciful figure, she embodies the essence of African spirituality and traditions. Her ability to conceive black people's fears, hopelessness, dereliction and otherness makes her a gracefully adored symbol for the African American people. Nadel (2010) claims that in the play, Aunt Ester is like a heroine who fills a vacuum left by the deaths of Prophet Samuel, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King Jr. and "she makes sense out of the absurdity of their situations and shows them how to realize their own agency" (125). Hence, she inspires her community to connect with their African roots and fight for justice and equality as a key factor of their struggle.

5. Conclusion

It is crystal clear that struggle is an essential aspect of the African American identity. Their struggle and resistance pivotally define their status in the American society. Their struggles are not fictional stories about overcoming difficulties; rather, they represent a 'struggle for survival' against institutionalized discrimination. From the horrors of slavery to the hopes of civil rights movement, they have fought for equal rights, justice, and freedom. Their efforts have not only been physical but also psychological as they have faced systemic oppression and discrimination that challenged their humanity and self-confidence. Black people are like the embodiment of a proverb, 'no pain, no gain'. In that vein, drawing attention to black people's respectful struggle, Wilson is the strong and determined voice of his

community. He has chronicled their socio-cultural and historical journey characterized by the ideological and political factors by focusing on the African American people's respectability.

Two Trains Running reflects the black people's struggles during the civil rights era. While the characters witness the significant changes in the social order, they also carry the burden of their past. They resist against the whites' injustice and inequalities through their own ways. During this painful journey, Aunt Ester becomes a part of their struggle. She both reminds black people's cultural and historical values and helps them preserving their roots as the African American individuals. Wilson wants his people to struggle for themselves and to find solutions by focusing on their own values. Accordingly, this study scrutinizes the black struggle of his people, of which Wilson was always proud. The play depicts how the characters resist against the dynamics of the white society and also fight for the societal norms inheriting from history. The struggle to overcome discrimination and to be loyal to their African American identity are the central message of the play since the struggle is always the driver of radical changes.

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