



COURSE CODE: MAEGD 304

COURSE NAME: AMERICAN  
LITERATURE

**CENTRE FOR DISTANCE AND  
ONLINE EDUCATION  
TEZPUR UNIVERSITY**

**MASTER OF ARTS**

**ENGLISH  
BLOCK V**



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## MAEGD 304: American Literature I

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# BLOCK V

## MODULE IV: CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN DRAMA

AUGUST WILSON: *FENCES*

UNIT 11: DIFFERENT KINDS OF FENCES; RACISM AND  
BLACK MANHOOD; BLACKS AND THE AMERICAN DREAM

SUZAN LORI-PARKS: *TOPDOG/UNDERDOG*

UNIT 12: VIOLENCE IN AFRICAN-AMERICAN LIVES;  
CRITIQUE OF EVERYDAY LIFE; PERSONAL AND FAMILY  
HISTORY, BLACK MASCULINITY AGAINST THE  
BACKGROUND OF AMERICAN CAPITALISM AND  
PATRIARCHY

## MODULEV: AMERICAN DIASPORIC/MIGRANT FICTION

SANDRA CISNEROS: *THE HOUSE ON MANGO STREET*

UNIT 13: THEME OF ALIENATION, ASSIMILATION AND  
OTHERNESS IN AMERICAN DIASPORIC/MIGRANT  
FICTION; WITH REFERENCE TO THE HOUSE ON MANGO  
STREET

AMY TAN: *THE KITCHEN GOD'S WIFE*

UNIT 14: PROBLEMS OF IDENTITY AND ASSIMILATION  
AND FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS IN THE KITCHEN GOD'S  
WIFE

## **TABLE OF CONTENT**

### **INTRODUCTION: BLOCK III**

**1-2**

## **MODULE IV: CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN DRAMA**

### **AUGUST WILSON: *FENCES***

#### **UNIT 11: DIFFERENT KINDS OF FENCES; RACISM AND BLACK MANHOOD; BLACKS AND THE AMERICAN DREAM**

**4-40**

##### 11.0 Introduction

##### 11.1 Learning Objectives

##### 11.2 August Wilson: Life and Works

##### 11.3 Reading the play *Fences*

##### 11.4 Major Characters

##### 11.5 Major Themes

##### 11.5.1 Racism and Black manhood

##### 11.5.2 Blacks and the American Dream

##### 11.5.3 Father-Son conflict

##### 11.6 Symbols and Motifs used in the Play

##### 11.6.1 Motif of 'Fences' or wall

##### 11.6.2 Other important motifs

##### 11.7 Summing Up

##### 11.8 Assessment Questions

##### 11.9 References and Recommended Readings

### **SUZAN LORI-PARKS: *TOPDOG/UNDERDOG***

#### **UNIT 12: VIOLENCE IN AFRICAN-AMERICAN LIVES; CRITIQUE OF EVERYDAY LIFE; PERSONAL AND FAMILY HISTORY, BLACK MASCULINITY AGAINST THE BACKGROUND OF AMERICAN CAPITALISM AND PATRIARCHY**

**41-84**

##### 12.0 Introduction

##### 12.1 Learning Objectives

##### 12.2 Suzan-Lori Parks: Life and Works

- 12.3 Reading the play *Topdog/Underdog*
- 12.4 Major Themes in the play
  - 12.4.1 Violence in African-American lives
  - 12.4.2 Critique of everyday life
  - 12.4.3 Personal and family history
  - 12.4.4 Black masculinity against the background of American Capitalism and Patriarchy
- 12.5 The Title of the play
- 12.6 African American struggle for identity
- 12.7 Dramatic devices in *Topdog/Underdog*
- 12.8 Summing Up
- 12.9 Assessment Questions
- 12.10 References and Recommended Readings

## **MODULE V: AMERICAN DIASPORIC/MIGRANT FICTION**

### **SANDRA CISNEROS: *THE HOUSE ON MANGO STREET***

#### **UNIT 13: THEME OF ALIENATION, ASSIMILATION AND OTHERNESS IN AMERICAN DIASPORIC/MIGRANT FICTION; WITH REFERENCE TO THE HOUSE ON MANGO STREET**

**86-101**

- 13.0 Introduction
- 13.1 Learning Objectives
- 13.2 Historical Background
- 13.3 Sandra Cisneros: Life and Works
- 13.4 Reading *The House on Mango Street*
- 13.5 Major Themes
- 13.6 Major Characters
- 13.7 Writing Style/Tone
- 13.8 Summing Up
- 13.9 Assessment Questions

### 13.10 References and Recommended Readings

#### **AMY TAN: *THE KITCHEN GOD'S WIFE***

### **UNIT 14: PROBLEMS OF IDENTITY AND ASSIMILATION AND FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS IN THE KITCHEN GOD'S WIFE**

**102-114**

#### 14.0 Introduction

#### 14.1 Learning Objectives

#### 14.2 Historical Background

#### 14.3 Chinese American Literature

#### 14.4 Amy Tan: Life and Works

#### 14.5 Reading *The Kitchen God's Wife*

#### 14.6 Thematic Concerns

#### 14.7 Major Characters

#### 14.8 Writing Style/Tone

#### 14.9 Summing Up

#### 14.10 Assessment Questions

#### 14.11 References and Recommended Readings

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## INTRODUCTION: BLOCK V

**Block V of MEG-304: American Literature I** will introduce you to two of the important African American dramatists, August Wilson and Suzan Lori-Parks. You will also be enabled to learn about diasporic and migrant fictions with the reading of Sandra Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street* and Amy Tan's *The Kitchen God's Wife*

**MODULE IV: Contemporary American Drama** will introduce you to August Wilson and Suzan Lori-Parks. *Unit 11: August Wilson: Fences: Different kinds of fences; Racism and Black manhood; Blacks and the American Dream* will enable you to learn about August Wilson, one of the seven American dramatists to win two Pulitzer Prizes, one for *Fences* and the other for *A Piano Lesson*. This unit will specifically see the predicament of African American men in the context of a racially built society. *Unit 12: Suzan Lori-Parks: Topdog/Underdog: Violence in African-American lives; Critique of everyday life; Personal and family history, black masculinity against the background of American Capitalism and Patriarchy* will take you through one of the most important works of Suzan-Lori Parks. Here we will make an assessment of her play *Topdog/Underdog* and find out why this play is important in terms of portraying the issues of race in contemporary America. The focus will also be on the fraternal conflict, metatheatrical traits and dramatic devices of the play.

**MODULE V: American Diasporic/Migrant Fiction** will elaborate on Diasporic fiction, which is a body of literature written by authors outside their native country. It is characterised by a sense of longing for a place/world left behind in the quest for a new life in a new land. On the other hand, American migrant fiction is replete with rich and varied expressions of immigrant lives. The presence of many ethnic communities, plurality of languages and culture, multiple nationalities ensure that American migrant fiction is as colourful as it is diverse. Migration literature in America covers the varied experiences of African Americans/Blacks, Asian

Americans as well as Chicanos and other ethnic communities. We have selected two important fiction writers in this module.

***Unit 13: Sandra Cisneros: The House on Mango Street: Theme of Alienation, Assimilation and Otherness in American Diasporic/Migrant Fiction; with reference to The House on Mango Street*** is designed to familiarise you with a text which deal with immigrant experiences in America. Sandra Cisneros' experience of being a Chicana, a term for female Mexican-American, has marked her life, colouring all her works. *The House on Mango Street* draws quite a lot upon the real life experiences of its author. ***Unit 14: Amy Tan: The Kitchen God's Wife: Problems of identity and assimilation*** is meant to familiarise you with the novel *The Kitchen God's Wife*. While studying the text, we will try to place it in the context of Chinese American literature, a subgroup within American migration literature. This unit will also enable you to understand the immigrant condition in the United States

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## **MODULE IV: CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN DRAMA**

## ***UNIT 11: AUGUST WILSON'S FENCES***

### **UNIT STRUCTURE**

- 11.0 Introduction
- 11.1 Learning Objectives
- 11.2 August Wilson: Life and Works
- 11.3 Reading the play *Fences*
- 11.4 Major Characters
- 11.5 Major Themes
  - 11.5.1 Racism and Black manhood
  - 11.5.2 Blacks and the American Dream
  - 11.5.3 Father-Son conflict
- 11.6 Symbols and Motifs used in the Play
  - 11.6.1 Motif of 'Fences' or wall
  - 11.6.2 Other important motifs
- 11.7 Summing Up
- 11.8 Assessment Questions
- 11.9 References and Recommended Readings

### ***11.0 INTRODUCTION***

This unit will introduce you to one of the important African American dramatists, August Wilson and his most famous play *Fences*. The play is considered as a prominent contribution to African American literature in terms of the depiction of the racist ideologies operating in contemporary America. In this unit we shall have an exclusive reading of this play and its characters and themes.

### ***11.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES***

After reading a play like *Fences* you will be able to learn about

- August Wilson as a major African American dramatist

- the major themes and characters in the play *Fences*
- the black predicament in racially constructed America
- major thematic concerns like racism, African American existence in America amidst lack of opportunities and failure of expectations
- symbols and motifs used by the playwright to enhance various themes

## 11.2 AUGUST WILSON: LIFE AND WORKS

August Wilson (1945-2005) is one of the seven American dramatists to win two Pulitzer Prizes, one for *Fences* and the other for *A Piano Lesson*. He is also the first African American to have two plays, *Fences* and *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* running simultaneously on Broadway. August Wilson was born in the Hill District of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania to a white father, German American Frederick August Kittel who never lived with his family and African American Daisy Wilson. He was the fourth of six children and the eldest son. He was raised by his African American stepfather, David Belford. He grew up in a poor, racially mixed section of Pittsburgh called "the Hill." In the late 1950s, when his family shifted to a predominantly white suburb, he experienced racial prejudice for the first time. The whites threw bricks at his house. In Central Catholic High School, where he studied, he was the only black student. His classmates would not sit with him and would shout at him, "Nigger go home." When he was fifteen, after his history teacher falsely accused him of plagiarizing a twenty-page essay on Napoleon, he quit school and spent time in the Carnegie library educating himself. In the library, he read the works of all the black writers including Ralph Ellison, Langston Hughes and Richard Wright.

In the late 1960s, Wilson became involved in the Black Power movement and began writing poetry and short stories. In 1969, he married Brenda Burton, a Muslim, with whom he had a daughter, Sakin Ansair. The marriage ended in 1972. In 1981, he married Judy Oliver who is a social worker. The marriage ended in 1990. His third wife is Constanza Romero, with whom he has a daughter, Azula Carmel Wilson. In 1973, Wilson wrote his first play *Recycle*

and in 1976, his play *The Homecoming* was directed by Vernell Little for the Kuntu Repertory Theatre. In 1978, he moved to St. Paul, Minnesota, where he wrote his play, *Jitney* and *Fullerton Street*.

August Wilson became a playwright to “tell a history that has never been told. His major works are all part of a cycle of ten plays, each of which explores a central issue facing African Americans in a different decade of the twentieth century. In the 1991 preface to *Three Plays*, Wilson reports that his exploration of African American historical experience began in 1965 with “a typewritten yellow-labeled record titled ‘Nobody in Town Can Bake a Sweet Jellyroll Like Mine’ by someone named Bessie Smith...It was the beginning of my consciousness that I was a representative of a culture and the carrier of some very valuable antecedents.” (Introduction to August Wilson in *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*) Apart from the blues of blues singer Bessie Smith, Wilson was influenced by the nationalistic perspectives of African American playwright Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) and the South African dramatist Athol Fugard and the works of the visual artist Romare Bearden.

August Wilson’s series of ten plays is known as “The Pittsburgh Cycle.” The first is *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*, set in the 1920s. It opened on Broadway in 1984 and was a commercial and critical success. It ran for 275 performances and won the New York Drama Critics Circle Award and several Tony nominations.

Wilson’s next in the series is *Fences*, which is set in the Pittsburgh Hill District. The time period of the play is 1957-1965. It was first produced in 1985 at the Yale Repertory Theatre, directed by Lloyd Richards. It opened on the 46<sup>th</sup> Street Theater, Broadway on 26 March, 1987. The play was a tremendous critical success. It won the New York Drama Critics Circle Award, four Tony awards (including Best Play), and the Pulitzer Prize for drama. It contributed to August Wilson being seen by some as ‘America’s greatest playwright’ and the ‘American Shakespeare’. Wilson’s next play, *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* is set in a boarding house in Pittsburgh in 1911. It has been described by New York Times’s critic Frank Rich as “a spiritual allegory” that “will give a lasting voice

to a generation of uprooted black Americans”. It explores the lives of characters in danger of being cut off from their African and southern roots by their migration to the North. Wilson’s next play *The Piano Lesson* which opened on Broadway in 1990 and won the Pulitzer Prize, is set in 1937 in Pittsburgh. It revolves around the conflict between a brother and a sister and their relationship to a piano, which comes to symbolize the choice between revering symbols of African ancestry and converting them to functional use. Wilson’s next play, *Two Trains Running* opened at the Walter Kerr Theater on Broadway in 1992. The play is set in a Pittsburgh luncheonette in the late 1960s. One critic noted that the play “embodies the entire black political dialectic from that time to this— isolation vs. assimilation, hostility toward vs. cooperation with whites, clinging to bitter memory vs. moving on into a better world.” Among the other plays in the ten-play cycle is *Gem of the Ocean*, which premiered in 2003 and is set in the 1900s. The play *Jitney* is set in the 1970s. Wilson’s play *Seven Guitars* opened on Broadway in 1995 and is set during the 1940s. Wilson’s play *King Hedley II* is set in the 1980s. Wilson’s last play in the ten-play cycle is *Radio Golf*, which premiered in 2005 and is set in the 1990s.

### LET US STOP AND THINK



- August Wilson is a playwright with a purpose
- He has a history to ‘tell’
- *Fences* deals with the limited expectations of common African Americans
- Wilson looks at their lives of hardship and struggle.

### 11.3 READING THE PLAY *FENCES*

In *Fences*, the time is 1957 and the place is Pittsburgh, one of the centers of the American steel industry during that period. In the backdrop there is also the echo of the great 1919 steel strike that took place around the time when Troy Maxson, the protagonist of the play, arrived in the city. Tens of thousands of African-Americans, desperate for work, were recruited from the South to come

to violence ridden Pittsburgh and other steel centers as scabs, a factor that helped to drive a wedge between black and white workers, both native-born and immigrant.

Born in 1904, Troy Maxson has known exploitation and racial discrimination throughout his life. In the period before the mass civil rights struggles of the 1950s and 60s, racism and discrimination were still part of everyday life, and not only in the Jim Crow South. We learn that Maxson came to Pittsburgh as a teenager, as part of the Great Migration of African-Americans from the rural South to the urban North and West that began around 1915 (Mazelis, 2017). Thus, in *Fences* August Wilson tells about the difference in the way the United States of America had welcomed the European immigrants on the one hand, and the descendants of African slaves on the other. It is the story of a family whose problems and trials are for the most part universal in character. The issue of class oppression, and how that shapes the difficulties between fathers and sons and husbands and wives, are the focal point of discussion in the play.

## THE SUMMARY OF *FENCES*

### **The Epigraph of the play-**

When the sins of our fathers visit us  
We do not have to play host.  
We can banish them with forgiveness  
As God, in His Largeness and Laws.

--August Wilson

The epigraph gives the message that people can forgive the sins committed by their fathers, in the same way as the generous and kind-hearted God forgives the sins of people. The father may commit sins due to diverse circumstances in life, but he is always the well-wisher of his children. The play will explore the character of Troy Maxson, the father, in the light of the statement as given in the epigraph.

### **The Setting**

The play is set in the front yard of Troy Maxson's house. The house is an old two-story brick house set in a small alley in a big neighborhood. The entrance to the house has two or three steps leading to the wooden porch which is a new addition to the house and requires paint. There are one or two cheap chairs at one end and an old-fashioned icebox on the other.

The yard is a small dirty yard and is partially fenced except in the last scene which shows the completed fence. The fence carries a symbolic meaning in the play. There is a wooden sawhorse, a pile of lumber and other fence-building materials kept at the side. There is a tree from whose branches hangs a ball made of rags and a baseball bat is leaning against the tree. As the game of baseball is a significant dramatic device in the play, the ball made of rags and the baseball bat constitute another symbol as will be discussed later. There are two oil drums which serve as garbage receptacles.

*Fences* is a two act play unfolding into nine scenes at different points of time. Let us have a look at the detail happenings of Act I Scene I.

## **ACT 1**

### **SCENE 1**

Scene I presents a Friday night in 1957. Troy and Bono, two friends and co-workers are engaged in their weekend activities of drink and talk. Their conversation has various topics like their co-worker Brownie's foolish attempt to hide a watermelon from their boss Mr Rand. Troy also informs Bono about his complaint to the management and the union about blacks not being allowed to drive the garbage trucks. Contrary to that Bono is accusing Troy of cheating his wife for a girl called Alberta which he refutes by making a vulgar comment. In the mean time Rose joins the conversation and also shares the news of their son Cory's selection in the college football team. Troy does not seem happy as this reminds him of his own failure to play in the Major Leagues Baseball as they did not include blacks in the team during those days. Troy goes into a long epic story about his struggle in July of 1943 with drinking and death. For all these, he wants his son to do something else for living to be successful. But both Bono

and Rose agree that time has changed a lot since then and nothing is same now. This scene also introduces Lyons, Troy's son from his previous marriage, who comes to ask for the money Troy promised him to give. In this scene we come to know that Troy does not like his son due to his lifestyle that leads to an argument between them. Finally, Lyons leaves after getting the money.

This scene reveals two things primarily, one is the bonding within the family and friends and their concern for each other. Troy's affair with Alberta will reveal many things in due course, though he believes that it is not serious in this relationship. Contrary to that, Rose is always supportive of her husband and son. Present mistakes and future conflict arising out of them seem to be a clear indication in this scene. This scene also gives us the idea of a black man's pain in white America. We can see in due course to what extent the age old problem of exploitation of the blacks in America will be resolved in the play's context.

## **SCENE II**

Scene II begins with yet another day and its regular activities. Rose, while hanging clothes, thinks about the repairing of the fence around the boundary. Troy seems angry again with his son for going to football practice instead of working on the fence. We are also introduced to Gabriel, Troy's brother, an ex-serviceman who had lost his mental balance due to a shrapnel injury to his head while fighting for America. Both Troy and Rose express concern for his condition and Troy feels guilty for utilizing Gabriel's money which he had received as compensation. In this scene he talks about seeing St Peter's Book for Judgement Day with both Troy and Rose's names written, but in different ways. He imagines himself as angel Gabriel and sees hellhounds grabbing Troy by his leg.

This scene is significant in many ways. We notice Troy and Rose's sense of insecurity in two different ways, one by raising a protective fence, another by constantly meditating on his son's future. Gabriel tries to warn Troy through his vision of Troy and Rose in the Book of Judgement. Another important irony seen in this scene is the antithetical status of the blacks in America. While one brother

is deprived of fortune and opportunities in the country in the name of race and colour, the other one is used to fight for the country but rejected again.

### **SCENE III**

The scene begins with usual household activities; flirting, conversation, argument etc. Troy seems to be upset with his son for asking if they could buy a TV when they did not have enough money to get their roof repaired. He is also unhappy with Cory for leaving his job at the local grocery store, the A&P, during the football season. Troy challenges him to earn one hundred dollars and get the job immediately back to compensate his mistake. Cory begs Troy to let him play because a coach from North Carolina is coming all the way to Pittsburgh to see Cory play. But Troy refuses to sign the permission letter.

Troy's sternness makes Cory believe that he is not loved by his father. Contrary to his feelings Troy makes his stand clear by telling both Rose and Cory that he is simply performing the responsibility of a father and by not allowing his son to go for a futureless profession and spoil his career like him, he is doing his job. But Rose, like before, believes that things have changed a lot from Troy's time.

The focus of this scene is primarily on the father-son relationship. While we see Troy emerging as a responsible father thinking about his son's career, we also see that Troy's present is constructed by his past experiences which he tries to carry forward to the next generation, that is Cory. This scene is pragmatic as we witness the basic needs of lower class people such as a job, a secured living place, a humble earning, rather than big dreams that Cory tries to see. Cory, being the new generation, is hopeful about the changes. The generation gap is also visible in this relationship. Troy and Cory share a disturbed relationship where Rose is always a mediator, a mother whose primary role is to hold the family together.

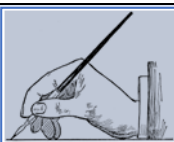
### **SCENE IV**

This scene takes place on Friday and mirrors scene one. Troy has won his case and has been promoted as the first coloured garbage truck driver in the

company. Bono and Troy remember their fathers and their childhood experiences of leaving home in the south and moving north. How Troy was wandering here and there when he was only fourteen years old, how he had to steal because of starvation and went to jail are coming to his memory while talking to Bono. We also come to know about Lyons' birth and Troy's imprisonment for fifteen years, his meeting Bono in the jail and marriage with Rose after coming out of prison.

By the end of this scene we see how angry Cory comes home accuses Troy of being jealous at him. We are informed how Troy told the football coach about Cory not playing anymore in the team. Troy warns Cory that his insubordination is "strike one," against him.

Scene four is suggestive of the monotony and repetition of life for people like Troy, Rose, Bono etc. Occasional happy news startles their very ordinary lives with positivity. Troy winning a legal battle is very important as it is suggestive of a changing time both Rose and Cory talk about. Ironically, while Troy is critical about his deprivation as a black in America, we are also informed that when he becomes the first Black garbage truck driver, he neither knows how to drive nor has a driving licence. A play of opportunity vs competence can be an important issue in this play. Troy and Bono's childhood experience is another important focal point of this play that constitutes Troy's present. The struggle, hardship and deprivation made Troy a matter of fact person who fails to see Cory's dream. Gabriel's appearance with same utterances of Judgement day, heighten Troy's confession to Bono in Act II about his extramarital relationship with Alberta which he had denied till then.



### CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. How will you relate Scene I and Scene IV? What development do you see in scene IV?

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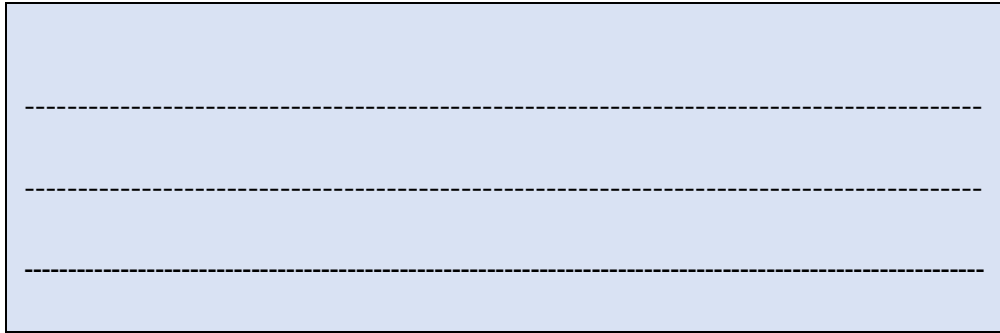
2. What is the major area of conflict between Troy and Cory? Why do you think both of them are correct in their own positions?

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3. Is it possible to read Troy's present on the basis of his past? Examine his experiences from childhood to maturity.

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4. Examine Gabriel's plight. What does it say about America's treatment of war veterans.



## **ACT II**

### **SCENE I**

Bono and Troy work on the fence Rose wants around the boundary. Troy asks Cory to saw the logs and help them. Troy is little bit disillusioned at Rose's decision of erecting a fence but Bono explains to Troy and Cory that Rose wants the fence because she loves her family and wants to keep close to her love by protecting them. She wants to see them together.

Troy bails his brother Gabriel out of jail who was arrested for disturbing peace in the area. In the mean time Bono raises the issue of Alberta and Troy admits to Bono that he is having an affair with her. But Bono, being a well wisher of the family, warns Troy not to be disloyal to his wife and never to hurt her. He also bets Troy that if he finishes building the fence for Rose, Bono will buy his wife, Lucille the refrigerator he has promised her for a long time.

When Troy and Rose were discussing a hearing in three weeks to determine whether or not Gabriel should be recommitted to an asylum for further supervision, Troy tells Rose about his affair. Rose is taken aback by his sudden disclosure. She could not believe that after eighteen years of married life he had betrayed her like this. But their argument is interrupted by Gabriel. Troy takes an escapist stand and tells her that because of problems and pressures he had sought relief in another relationship. Rose accuses Troy of taking and not giving. At this Troy grabs Rose's arm. But Cory enters into the scene, punches him and knocks him down. Troy yells at Cory asking him to stay away from him.

In this scene we witness the growing differences between father and the son. Troy's escapist stand puts him in a self-contradictory position not only before Rose and Bono, but more importantly before Cory to whom Troy often talks about responsibility and duty. Contrary to that, Cory comes out as a more impressive character as he protects his mother against violence and injustice of a husband. Gradually, Gabriel's prophetic utterances start taking shape in the form of turmoil in the family due to Troy's mistake. Readers are also impressed with Bono's concern for his friend and his family.

## **SCENE II**

We see that the split within the family is quite visible as for last six months Rose has not been talking to Troy. But at her enquiry six months later Troy says that he is going over to the hospital to see Alberta who is going to deliver his child. Rose tells Troy that due to his inability to read he has made a grave mistake and signed for Gabriel to be taken away to the asylum.

Alberta gave birth to a baby girl but died during childbirth. With that news Troy goes out of his mind and challenges Death to come and get him after he builds a fence.

## **SCENE III**

This scene takes place three days after the previous one. Troy brings home his baby, Raynell. Rose behaves like a mature, responsible woman and agrees to look after the baby who is the innocent product of a sordid affair. But she clearly refuses to be Troy's wife.

## **SCENE IV**

Scene four displays a congenial relation between the half-brothers, Lyons and Cory. Lyons feels bad that he could not attend Cory's graduation ceremony and advises him to find a job and get settled.

We see how the family is no more the same. Both Cory and Rose are no more emotionally and mentally attached to Troy. Cory and Troy now cannot see both eye to eye. All of them are absorbed in their own individual lives and

responsibilities. After a long time, Bono comes to his friend's place. We come to know that Troy finishes the fence for Rose and Bono brings a refrigerator for his wife as promised.

The long silent anger suddenly takes a violent form when Cory comes home and tries to enter crossing over Troy who was sitting in the middle of the steps. At this both engage in a game of accusation. Troy insists that Cory leave the house and provide for himself. Cory brings up Troy's recent failings with Rose. Cory points out that the house and property, from which Troy is throwing Cory out, should actually be owned by Gabriel whose government checks paid for most of the mortgage payments. The scene ends with Troy physically attacking Cory and Cory leaving the house. Troy swings the baseball bat in the air, taunting Death.

## **SCENE V**

This scene take place seven years later, on the day of Troy's funeral. Troy died from a heart attack while swinging his baseball bat. Rose asks seven year-old Raynell who plays in her newly planted garden to get dressed for funeral. Lyons and Bono join Rose too. Cory returns home from the Marines but refuses to attend Troy's funeral. But Rose teaches Cory that not attending Troy's funeral does not make Cory a man. She tells about her own life of suffering and pain where she ends up taking care of the child of another woman fathered by her husband. But she admits that Troy wanted him to settle down with a job because of his own experience of exploitation and deprivation as a black man. Both Raynell and Cory recollect the memory of their father and sing one of Troy's blues about the old dog named Blue. Gabriel turns up for the funeral from the mental hospital. Gabe blows his trumpet, but no sound comes out. He tries again but the trumpet will not play. Disappointed and hurt, Gabriel engages himself in an eerie dance. He makes a cry and the Heavens open wide. He says, "That's the way that goes," and the play ends. The play ends with a positive note. Characters seem to forgive Troy as they also realize life as understood by him and the good lessons he left for his children.

## 11.5 MAJOR CHARACTERS

### Troy Maxson

Troy Maxson is the character around whom the story revolves in *Fences*. It is Troy through whom we see the happenings in the play. Different characters and their relationship with Troy help us to form our own idea of the events or the tragic turn that takes place in the play. Thus, *Fences* is largely Troy's story. What all of the play's characters have in common is a complicated relationship with Troy.

As we see, the conflicting situations arise as a result of Troy's belief in self-created illusions and his inability to accept others' choices in life when they differ from Troy's philosophy. But his own philosophy is frequently self-contradictory. Rose often contradicts his stories about himself and versions of what happened in the past. Contrary to his self-righteous stand, he expects others to follow his directives. We also witness how Troy aggressively disagrees with Lyons' decision to be a musician and Cory's decision to play football in college, as well as Rose's habit of playing the numbers. However, going against all social, familial norms, he engages in a relationship with another woman which finally challenges the whole family dynamics in the Maxton household.

But certain aspects of Troy's character make us believe that he was not a haughty person from the beginning. In the course of the play Troy tells us about the struggle and difficulties he had faced since teenage. Starvation, theft, imprisonment and accidental death of a person in his hand were enough for a young boy to see the reality of this world. This is why he pays more attention to a secure job than sons looking for careers through music or football. Despite his adamant approach to things Troy is genuine in his concern for his sons' futures. Though we agree with the views of Rose, Lyons and Cory about the change of time, we cannot deny what Troy experiences in his life. But he is a fighter. He fights for life since his early days. We are told how he fought against injustice and even won his battle to be the first coloured garbage truck driver. His fight was not for himself alone but for the whole community.

But duality in ideology made Troy a less respectable person in his own family and circle of friends. While he demanded a practical, responsible approach from his sons and wife, he himself broke the norm. Not only that, he left his child for Rose to look after when Alberta died in childbirth. Troy refuses to see life in any way other than his own.

### **Rose Maxson**

Rose Maxson represents love, kindness, nurturing and care. She reveals these traits of compassion in all her relationships, as a wife, mother and sister. We see how she always wanted to keep a balance in her family, including Lyons and Gabriel. Like a compassionate mother her only desire is to protect her family which is symbolised by her repeated request to her son and husband to finish the fence as early as possible.

Unlike Troy, Rose is a fair judge of their predicament. While Troy never comes out of his past making his present equally hopeless, Rose lives with the belief that time will change, and things will be changing equally. That is why she wants her son to go on with his dream of a career in sport. She is always good with Lyons, Troy's son from the first marriage. Troy, despite living in Gabriel's property, is never so empathetic towards him as Rose is. At last she even embraces Alberta's child with this belief that a baby is innocent, and she should not be punished due to her parents' fault. Her all forgiving nature makes her a unique and complete character. Her final plea to Cory to forgive his father keeps Rose apart from other characters of the play.

### **Cory Maxson**

Cory represents the new generation in the play with his hope for a future. In his antagonism towards his father Troy, the clash of the old and the new generations of African Americans can be seen. Cory wants to live with his dream, wants to avail the opportunities changes have brought, but Troy comes as an obstacle every time. Cory proves himself as a man and as a member of the family by forgiving his father at his mother's request.

### **Gabriel Maxson**

Gabriel, Troy's brother, had lost half his brains fighting in World War II. He has a metal plate implanted in his head, and spends most of his time in a mental asylum. Whenever he comes out, he is harassed by the white policemen, who claim he is disturbing the peace in the neighborhood. Gabriel is one of Wilson's most fascinating characters. However, as the play progresses, Gabriel is shown as a person with profound insight and foresight. Despite his physical and mental disability, he has the courage to live an independent life of his own. He has himself chosen to rent two basement rooms in Miss Pearl's house and proudly displays his door-key to Rose and Troy. On the other hand, it is Troy who has built his house with the help of the money which the government gave Gabriel as compensation.

Wilson draws attention to the plight of the war wounded though Gabriel. Often non-White men are enlisted during war time and released from the army after the war is over without much care about their future. This is an issue which has been addressed by a number of writers.

### **Jim Bono**

Jim Bono plays the role of a devoted and trustworthy friend who has faithfully maintained steady friendship with Troy for the last thirty years. Bono is proud of his and Troy's eighteen years of constant and enduring relationship with Lucille and Rose respectively. It is Bono who gives several warnings to Troy to remain faithful to Rose and not commit adultery with Alberta. It is only Bono who understands why Rose wants to build the fence around her yard. It is because she loves her family immensely and does not want the outside world to disrupt her family.

### **Raynell**

Raynell is seven years old in the last scene of the play. The critic Harry Elam Jr. in the book *The Past as Present in the Drama of August Wilson*, describes Raynell in these words, "The seven-year old Raynell, the product of Troy's illicit relationship, enters in the final scene of *Fences* and produces powerful reverberations of change; she is the living manifestation of Troy's past

infidelities and also the signifier of his eventual redemption.... Wilson uses her appearance to convey the importance of legacy but also the potential for growth and progress” (75). She is the embodiment of hope in the future.

## **11.5 MAJOR THEMES**

The story of *Fences* throws light on some important and burning aspects of modern America. The play looks at the predicament of the blacks in a racially constructed America and its far-fetched impact on generations. So, let us see few major issues or themes that the playwright brings into discussion.

### **11.5.1 RACISM AND BLACK MANHOOD**

The African American people constitute the descendants of African slaves. Although the institution of slavery existed since time immemorial, the transatlantic slave trade and the period of slavery in the American continent was from about 1619 to 1865. The African slaves were transported in slave ships and made to work in Southern plantations under the most horrifying forms of human exploitation. Slavery was legally abolished in America by President Abraham Lincoln after the Civil War in 1865. The Reconstruction Era began after the Civil War from about 1863 (after Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation) to 1877, which attempted to normalize life in the Southern states. The African American people actively fought for basic human rights, the right to equality and the right to vote. A legacy of activism began in the twentieth century with black leaders like W.E.B. Du Bois, Booker T. Washington, James Weldon Johnson, Ida B. Wells, Mary McLeod Bethune who fought for the rights for black people in America.

In the history of the world, the whites have been considered as the superior race and the blacks as the inferior race. The blacks have been exploited since they were considered as less than human beings. However, the play *Fences* is set in the time period of 1957-1965. It is a time when America was gaining the status of global superpower after having won two World Wars. It is a time of promise and change. The President Dwight D. Eisenhower had declared that there should be no second class citizens in the country. The play begins with

Troy Maxson questioning his white boss Mr. Rand, “Why? Why you got the white mens driving and the colored lifting? What’s the matter, don’t I count?” (Act I Sc. i). There was a time during slavery when blacks were treated as property, as chattel, to be sold and abused at the whims and fancies of the white masters. In the year 1957, at least, Troy, who did not fear of getting fired, could not only voice his demand but he also achieved the rare distinction of becoming the first black garbage truck driver. At the end of the play, in the year 1965, eight years after the play begins, Cory’s homecoming in the uniform of a Marine Corporal suggests that blacks were rising in life and were allowed to hold important positions, despite the fact that racial discrimination prevailed in some form or the other.

The character of Troy Maxson seems to be a representation of historical time. The surname Maxson is the combination of the Mason-Dixon Line. It is the name of an imaginary line which separated the Southern slave states from the Northern free states. So, Troy has migrated from the Southern states to the Northern states. The Great Migration refers to the mass movement of African Americans from the rural, agrarian South to the urban, industrial North. The First Great Migration happened around 1910 to 1930. After a lull during the Great Depression from 1929 onwards, the second Great Migration occurred between 1940 to 1970.

As seen from Troy’s conversation with Bono and Lyons in Act One Scene Four, Troy had migrated in the year 1918, at the age of fourteen. In the beginning of the play, Wilson gives a contrasting picture about how the white European immigrants had been accepted into the bosom of America with dignified settlement whereas the African Americans are being segregated, discriminated against and forced to live the lives of slum dwellers, thieves and prisoners. Despite Troy’s being a good baseball player in the Negro Leagues, the greatest disappointment in his life is not getting selected to the Major Leagues for the sole reason of being black. Troy’s disappointment has repercussions on most of his future actions since he adamantly does not give permission to his talented

son, Cory to play football, having decided at Cory's birth that his son should not suffer the same fate as him.

The play also tries to debunk certain conventional stereotypes of the blacks. The play begins with Troy and Bono sharing their disagreement over fellow-worker Brownie who was concealing and stealing a watermelon. Brownie's act reminds of the typical minstrel shows which was popular in America during the early and mid-nineteenth century. In these shows, white actors in blackface portrayed blacks as lazing around and who stole and ate watermelons. This play, by showing two hard-working black men rebuking their own fellow man's foolishness in concealing the watermelon when it was clearly visible to all, demonstrates the debunking of stereotypes of black men.

Gabriel, Troy's brother had lost half his brains fighting in the second World War. This character also heightens the antithetical view of white America, which, on one hand creates a history of repression and suppression for the blacks, and on the other hand, takes services for the land in war. Again, once the war is over, Gabriel's war injuries become the cause of disturbance for the white neighbourhood.

But his character deflates the conventional belief that the blacks do not possess intelligence, are barbaric, uncivilized and connected with black magic like voodoo. By name an archangel, Gabriel plays the role of a prophet who clearly sees the fate of various characters, foresights to the disastrous circumstances that will befall Troy's family such as Troy's split with Bono, Rose, Cory and himself. After repeatedly failing to make sound with the trumpet, his atavistic and ritualistic dance leading to the symbolic opening of the gates of heaven, can be interpreted as the play's attempt to defy another conviction of the whites who connote African dance as related to black magic, voodoo and pact with the devil.

## LET US STOP AND THINK



### **Spectacle Character**

A spectacle character in Wilson's drama is one who appears to be on the periphery of sanity but who along with the protagonist, motivate the plot's action and offer insightful and compelling points. Initially, he is shown as an insane person, singing about selling plums. He does not have any plums in his basket. Gabriel Maxton is such a spectacle character in this play.

### **11.5.2 BLACKS AND THE AMERICAN DREAM**

The land of America is entwined with the myth of the American Dream. There is a myth that any person irrespective of the background who has talent, guile or cunning and has the willingness and capacity for hard work can be rich and successful in America. Wilson tells that the myth excludes the African Americans even years after the Civil War (1861-1865) when slavery was formally abolished as a part of constitutional amendment.

The northern part of America was industrial whereas the southern part was mainly agrarian at that time. When the destitute people of Europe came to the United States of America with dreams in their eyes, America had accepted them as any professionals they aspired to be. The white Europeans could live a dignified life even if many of them had chosen professions such as tailors, butchers, bakers, churchmen, doctors, nurses, money-lenders and people of funeral parlors. On the other hand, the African Americans also migrated, nearly eight million in number, from the agricultural American South to the industrial American North during the Great Migration with dreams in their eyes. African-Americans like Troy Maxson's father expected a world full of options; nevertheless, their hopes were frustrated.

In 1920s and 1930s these people came from places like the southern states of Carolina, Virginia, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi and Tennessee. They had fled from the discrimination and brutality they had to experience at the hands

of white masters. However, these miserable people realized that they had not escaped inequality and racial discrimination. America had rejected them. They had to take shelter in river banks and under bridges in broken, dilapidated houses made of sticks and tar paper, as in city slums. In other words, different kinds of discrimination continued in these places. Their hard work earned them small jobs like servants, rag-pickers, collectors of wood, washer-men and cobblers. Some of them became robbers and thieves in their desperation to take revenge. The Harlem Renaissance, a dream of a new life for the Blacks in America turned to be nightmare for most of the African Americans. It brought them cultural recognition but no civil rights. *Fences* constantly focuses on this issue of racial discrimination and the death of the dream of success in America for the Blacks.

Wilson tries to contextualize black characters in the white dominated society in order to show that the fulfillment of the American Dream remains only a dream for black people in a society in which racism is a great obstacle limiting their achievements. “The questions that ought to be answered concern the possibility of success for colored characters in *Fences*. Do they have any chance to promote their status through attempting the requirements of the American Dream? Do they have their own voice in the society? Can they compete with their white counterpart? What are the factors that marginalize Troy Maxon?” (Baharvand, 71)

It is equally interesting that Troy has to file a case to be a driver of a garbage truck and becomes the first African American to drive the garbage trucks in his town. Ironically, in this ‘land of opportunity’ the black employees were allowed only to lift the garbage, not even to drive the garbage trucks. While winning a case seems like an achievement, this mirrors the reality of the changing time the blacks dreamt of and the predicament of the blacks in the American Dream. Behind Troy securing the first opportunity, the strategies used by the oppressive regime to silence the voice of the black movement can also be viewed, rather than viewing it as the wish fulfillment of a black American.

### **11.5.3 FATHER-SON CONFLICT**

The father-son conflict constitutes a fundamental aspect of the play. The father-son conflict is inter-generational between Troy's father and Troy on the one hand and between Troy and Lyons and Cory on the other. The question is what are the causes behind such a conflict which leads the son to abandon the father? The probable causes are fight over individual manhood, troubled psyche due to racial victimization and generation gap.

The African American men have been the worst sufferers as slaves in history. They could never call anything as their own be it their own body, father, mother, family, home. Troy's father only bothered whether his eleven children had sent the cotton to his white master Mr. Lubin. Although he did not care much whether his children ate or not, he was not irresponsible like Bono's father. The incident which led to a violent conflict is when his father discovered Troy enjoying with Joe Canewell's daughter and thrashed him with the reins. Troy had thought that his father had beaten him for not performing his duty but when he understood that his father wanted the girl for himself, he took over the reins and thrashed his father instead. In Act One Scene Four, Troy says, "When I see what the matter of it was, I lost all fear of my daddy. Right there is where I become a man...at fourteen years of age." The conflict between Troy and his father was over the possession of a girl, over the ascertaining of their individual manhood.

The conflict between Troy and Cory can be interpreted over their competition in which they unconsciously desire to outwit each other. In Act Two Scene One, when Cory accuses his father in these words, "Just cause you didn't have a chance! You just scared I'm gonna be better than you, that's all." It is the first instance of Cory's challenge to Troy and Troy accepts it as strike number one. For the black people, proving their excellence in sports was also a way to demonstrate manly prowess and power. In Act Two Scene Two, Cory violently strikes his father in the chest after he sees him hurting his mother. In this scene, Rose was hurt not only physically but psychologically as Troy's confessed about

his illicit affair with Alberta. Troy, once again, accepts the challenge as strike number two.

The ultimate conflict happens in Act Two Scene Four when a simple act of getting down the steps leads to a serious brawl between them. After Cory refuses to say ‘excuse me’ as expected by Troy who was sitting in his way, Troy’s anger overtakes him. Troy’s words again suggest that Cory is a threat to his manliness, “You done got so grown to where you gonna take over. You gonna take over my house. Is that right? You gonna wear my pants. You gonna go in there and stretch out on my bed. You ain’t got to say excuse me cause I don’t count around here no more. Is that right?” (Act Two Scene Four) The combat grows further with Cory saying that Troy does not count anymore in his house, he is a crazy old man and he has built his house with Uncle Gabriel’s money. As they threaten and move towards the tree, the violent struggle occurs over the possession of the bat. The bat may be seen as a phallic symbol, a symbol of manhood. Troy emerges victorious whereas Cory is stung by the defeat and decides to leave the house at the age of seventeen to become a man on his own.

The second reason for the father-son conflict is racial prejudice due to which the father stands as a hindrance in his son’s path. Troy’s refusal to sign the permission papers for Cory to play football and his insistence that he work in the local store A & P are actually sensible from the historical perspective. According to Harry J. Elam Jr. in his book *The Past as Present in the Drama of August Wilson*, Troy’s resistance is a form of “racial madness”—a term that suggests that social and political forces can impact the black psyche and that decades of oppression can induce a collective psychosis. Troy has experienced racism at its worst, being deprived from playing professionally and is now toiling away in the undignified job of a garbage collector. So, he wanted Cory to learn a trade such as car repairing so that he can feed himself.

When Lyons repeatedly requests Troy to come and see him playing jazz, Troy tells he finds Chinese music noisy to his ears. Troy thinks jazz is foreign music, he is ignorant of the fact that it is his culture’s ingenious invention like the blues. In a similar manner, Cory’s demand for a television set in order to

watch the World Series is met with Troy's demanding task of repairing the roof of his house. Moreover, Troy remains stubborn with his belief that black players do not get their due, even as Cory gives the examples of several players such as Hank Aaron, Wes Covington and others. Troy's own bitter experience has made him blind to the fact that in Cory's generation, black players were being recruited and played successful matches.

#### **11.5.4 IMPORTANCE OF FAMILY IN BLACK LIFE**

It is very important to remember the context of the 'family' in the situation of the African Americans. Throughout the historical period of slavery, the blacks could never possess a closely-bonded family which they could claim as their own family. Their family members were auctioned and sold at the whims and fancies of their white masters. They mostly lived with step-parents and step-siblings. In this play, Bono and Rose are exceptionally instrumental in preserving their family as a close unit. Bono had known his father as having 'the walking blues,' who kept wandering from place to place and from woman to woman in search of the New Land. Bono's father had never cared for his children as far as he can remember. So, Bono had decided to be faithful to his wife Lucille all through his life and does not have children because he did not want to commit the sins which his father had committed. Bono abandons Troy's friendship only because Troy is cheating on Rose. Bono, nevertheless, leaves with the condition that if Troy completes building the fence and thus keep his family intact, he will give Lucille her long-awaited demand of a refrigerator.

Lyons grew up without the shadow of his father Troy, since Troy was in jail for most of his growing years. In the 1950s, at the mature age of thirty four, Lyons has the unconventional dream of becoming a jazz musician. Unlike his father, he is not bothered about simply surviving by fulfilling his basic needs of life. Lyons says with confidence, "You and me is two different people, Pop." and "I know I got to eat. But I got to live too. I need something that gonna help me to get out of the bed in the morning. Make me feel like I belong in the world. Otherwise there ain't no telling what I might do". (Act One Scene One) In 1965,

although he has been put to work in the workhouse as he was caught to illegally cash people's check, he still satisfies his passion by playing music. Lyons's ability to dream and fulfill his dream despite obstacles and criticism makes him one of a kind. Like an ideal son he dutifully returns his father's loan.

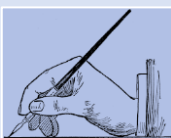
Cory also harbors unique dreams of becoming a football player and attend college. Although, he fails to attain sportsmanship due his own father's disappointing life, Cory's verbal and physical fight with his father is catastrophic on the one hand and rewarding on the other. Troy had experienced a similar kind of physical altercation with his father at the age of fourteen which led him to become a self-made man. In an identical way, Cory who lived a sheltered life was thrown out of the house at the age of seventeen to find a livelihood on his own. It can be interpreted that Troy may have known that he is consciously or unconsciously standing as a barrier in the way of his talented son's progress into manhood and accordingly leaves him alone to undergo the rites of passage from adolescence to adulthood.

Rose Maxson is the embodiment of the struggle of black womanhood. She is initially highly committed to her husband for protection because she knows the plight of black women who are triple marginalized by discrimination against gender, race and abuse from black men as well. She loved Troy more than herself and ignored most of his faults and shortcomings. Since she has come from a broken family, her first priority is to hold her family together. She plays the role of a reconciliator between all the family members and asked Troy to build the fence to protect her family from outward disturbances.

Rose's life turned upside down when Troy confessed his infidelity after eighteen years of steady marital life. As Troy repeatedly defends his illicit affair by proclaiming that he can momentarily forget his daily woes and struggles and laugh out loud with Alberta, Rose takes her stance as the superior being in the family. She continues living in the house but does not talk to Troy for months. Rose's final verdict comes in Act Two Scene Three when she accepts motherhood selflessly by accepting to nurture Raynell but firmly refuses to be

Troy's wife anymore. However, she is strong enough to not only forgive Troy but also tells others to forgive Troy on the day of Troy's funeral.

Raynell is seven year old in the last scene of the play. The critic Harry Elam Jr. in the book *The Past as Present in the Drama of August Wilson*, describes Raynell in these words, "The seven-year old Raynell, the product of Troy's illicit relationship, enters in the final scene of *Fences* and produces powerful reverberations of change; she is the living manifestation of Troy's past infidelities and also the signifier of his eventual redemption. The intrusion of this new character during the play's denouement is a deliberate breach of the accepted conventions of realistic play construction. Wilson uses her appearance to convey the importance of legacy but also the potential for growth and progress. Significantly, Raynell's entrance not only occurs on the day of her father's funeral, but in the year 1965, in the midst of the Civil Rights era, a period of intense struggle and new opportunity for African Americans. Raynell's emergence at this precise moment brings a 'ray' of sunshine that hearkens a brighter tomorrow for the Maxson family and for black America." (75) She is the embodiment of hope since she will grow up with the love and affection of Rose and not face the bitter temper of Troy Maxson. She is transforming Troy's yard into a beautiful flower garden. Raynell and Cory's duel singing of Troy's blues about Old Blue captures the precise hope of continuity of the legacy of Troy Maxson.



### CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. Compare and contrast the characters of Troy and Bono.

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2. Critically analyse the role played by Rose Maxson in *Fences*.

3. How do you place Rose Maxton in relation to the other characters of the play?

### **11.6 MOTIFS AND SYMBOLS USED IN THE PLAY**

August Wilson's play *Fences* contains a host of motifs and symbols. A motif is a dominant or recurring idea in an artistic work. A symbol can be defined

as a thing that represents or stands for something else, especially a material object representing something abstract.

#### **1 1.6.1 MOTIF OF 'FENCES' OR WALL**

The title of the play is a prominent symbol. The meaning of fences can be understood on various levels. On a physical level, it is the fence which Rose has asked Troy to construct as a boundary to their yard. Rose wants to protect her family from destruction. She does not want any outside element to destroy her family which she has lovingly preserved against all odds for eighteen years. According to Bono, "Some people build fences to keep people out...and other people build fences to keep people in. Rose wants to hold on to you all. She loves you." (Act Two Scene One) Rose may have also foreseen the disagreement between Troy and Cory and wanted them to reconcile during constructing the fence together. Thus, the fence is a symbol of protection. On another level, the fence demarcates the inside and outside world on an abstract plane. Troy repeatedly taunts Death telling him to remain waiting outside the fence, as if, the fence is a boundary between the worldly and the other world.

#### **1 1.6.2 OTHER IMPORTANT MOTIFS**

##### **Baseball**

Baseball is the national sport of the United States of America and forms an integral component in the play. The play is set in the historical time when organized baseball was being integrated. In 1947, Jackie Robinson had become the first black baseball player to cross the color line. Troy is of the opinion that, "I done seen a hundred niggers play baseball better than Jackie Robinson. Hell, I know some teams Jackie Robinson couldn't even make! What you talking about Jackie Robinson. Jackie Robinson wasn't nobody. I'm talking about if you could play ball then they ought to have let you play. Don't care what color you were. Come telling me I come along too early. If you could play...then they ought to have let you play." (Act One Scene One) The play mentions the names of several real-life baseball players who were later inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame. Troy claims that he played baseball as good as any of them but

did not get recruited for the racist reason of being black. Even though Rose gives the reason that he was too old at the time of selection, Troy considered the racist ideology as the sole reason of his setback. Troy does not permit Cory to pursue his dream in football, so that he does not suffer like his father. Troy's dream of becoming a national icon has been shattered and he somehow survives with the pay of his job of a garbage lifter and then garbage truck driver.

Susan Koprince in the essay, "Baseball as History and Myth in August Wilson's *Fences*," says that "The game of baseball has long been regarded as a metaphor for the American Dream—an expression of hope, democratic values, and the drive for individual success." However, the play "uses both the history and mythology of baseball to challenge the authenticity of the American dream." Troy's bitter struggle in life echoes the sentiment of many black baseball players of his time. One example is that of Josh Gibson who died early because despite being a great athlete, he did not get recruited in the Major Leagues. In the play, Troy refers to the poverty of Josh Gibson's daughter.

### **Blues**

The songs called Blues is an African American invention. It originated in the beginning of the twentieth century. *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature* says, "to term a poem or work of fiction a "blues piece" or to note blues influence within it is to associate it with modern black American vernacular expression at its finest." (49) Ralph Ellison has also given a compelling definition of the form:

"The blues is an impulse to keep the painful detail and episodes of a brutal existence alive in one's aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism. As a form, the blues is an autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophe expressed lyrically." (Gates and McKay 49)

The play is suffused with lyrical melodies in several acts such as Rose singing to Jesus to protect her with a fence. The most significant is the blues song sung by Troy in memory of his dog named Blue. It is an inter-generational song

transmitted from Troy's father, a freed slave to Troy, to Cory and then to Raynell. The unified singing of the blues song by Cory and Raynell on Troy's funeral conveys the continuing existence of oral vernacular tradition which is the base of the African American tradition.

The other blues song is sung by Troy when he brings the infant Raynell to his home. As a destitute in his own porch, he sings a song with the trope of trains. A literary trope is the use of figurative language through a word, phrase or even an image for artistic effect.

“Please, Mr Engineer let a man ride the line

Please, Mr Engineer let a man ride the line

I ain't got no ticket please let me ride the blinds. (Act II Scene III)

In the African American tradition, the trains were symbols of change in a person's life. Here, Troy's life has changed from a patriarchal figure to a destitute after he betrayed Rose. Just as in the song, the singer is pleading the engineer to allow him a free ride in hiding, similarly, Troy is earnestly pleading Rose to allow him and Raynell inside the house.

### **Death**

Death is a recurrent motif in the play. Troy is fearless not only against real-life situations like getting fired from his job but also against destructive forces like Death. Troy's stories about wrestling with the personified Death has got historical connotations. Death appeared to him as an army man marching forward with his soldiers on parade, as a person carrying a sickle in his hand and finally, as a person wearing a white robe with a hood. The first image refers to the inherent fear in the minds of people of the recently fought World Wars. Troy is related to the World War as his brother Gabriel is one of the victims of the brutalities of war. The second image refers to the slaves who worked in plantations with various tools such as the sickle. The racial and historical memory of slavery will always be etched in the minds of the African American people. Troy's father was a slave in the white Mr. Lubin's cotton plantation. The third image is the fear of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) who wore white robes with a

hood. The Ku Klux Klan desired the purification of race and were exterminating the African Americans during the Reconstruction era and later. Troy emerging as a winner against all the three implies the victory of the African American community. Therefore, although Rose trifles Troy's story about Death as an improvised one which he began while suffering from pneumonia in 1941, Troy's story about Death signifies a note of victory not only for him but his entire community.

### **Devil**

The Devil is a symbol which is personified by Troy in his story. Unlike conventional references of the Devil throughout eternity, Troy's devil is a personification of goodness and kindness. At a time when Troy did not have cash to buy furniture for his house, the Devil had stood at his door in a larger-than-life figure and delivered Troy the furniture on installment basis. On the devil's advice, Troy regularly sends ten dollars to the given address the first of every month. In this case also, Rose claims Troy is lying but the image of the devil can be interpreted in a different manner. In the discourse of race, the blacks are said to have the skin color of night and consequently manifestations of both evil and the devil. Troy's picture of the kind-hearted devil can be thus interpreted as a symbol made by Troy's Uncle Remus-like nature against racist ideology. However, the devil can have a contradictory interpretation also. If the devil was white, as mentioned by Troy, it can be interpreted as a white salesman's financial exploitation of poor blacks. So, Troy's devil presents an ambiguous symbol.

### **Ball made of rags and the bat**

In the setting of the play, there is a ball made of rags tied to a tree and a bat. The ball of rags symbolizes the poverty of Troy's household. It also symbolizes Troy's broken dreams of becoming a national baseball icon. The ball is also symbolic of Death as Troy personifies Death in these words also, "Death ain't nothing but a fastball on the outside corner." (Act One Scene One) The ball as a symbol for Death reveals Troy as a fearless man who is undaunted by Death and considers it as something to play with. The bat is a phallic symbol, the symbol of manhood. In the penultimate scene of the play, Troy and Cory fight

over the possession of the bat, which stands for the fight for manhood and power. Troy is the stronger and emerges the winner. Cory is shocked by the loss and decides to abandon his father's house. In the last act, Rose mentions that Troy suffered from a heart attack while he was striking the ball with the bat. It can be interpreted as Troy's loss of physical prowess and manhood in the face of Death.

### **The yard of Troy Maxson's house**

The yard is the place which forms the setting of all the scenes of the play. In Susan Koprince's essay, "Baseball as History and Myth in August Wilson's *Fences*," Koprince refers to the mythical belief that in the United States of America, the baseball field is considered as an archetypal garden, an American Eden. The baseball field is a ground for the manifestation of the American Dream. In Troy Maxson's case his dreams have been transformed into a nightmare and the baseball ground of his youth days has been symbolically relegated into "the small dirt yard." Sandra Shannon in the book *August Wilson's Fences: A Reference Guide* has referred to the baseball bat and the ball of rags hanging from the tree as "the most visible symbol of [Troy's] deferred dreams." (page 46) It is only after Troy's death that Raynell aspires to transform the yard into a garden. On a second level, Troy's yard is also his battleground where he claims to have fought with Death. The furious fight between Troy and Cory also takes place in the yard. Troy is the fearless warrior who teaches his son not to have an easy life but to fight against all odds in the bigger world outside the fence. On a third level, the yard also becomes a graveyard after Troy's death. It is in the yard that Cory forgives his father and Gabriel symbolically opens the gates of heaven for Troy Maxson.



### **CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

1. Write few examples of 'fence' as an important symbol in the play.

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2. How will you link symbols like yard and fence in the play?

### 11.7 SUMMING UP

In this unit you are acquainted with August Wilson's *Fences* (1985). We have discussed all major issues related to this play. Till now perhaps you have noticed that *Fences* has a striking resemblance with Arthur Miller's play *Death of a Salesman* (1949) that you had studied in MEG-303 paper. While August Wilson is a black African American playwright, Arthur Miller is a white mainstream American playwright. It cannot be known for sure whether the similarity is intentional, in all probable reasons it is not. However, it can be said that there is intertextuality between these two plays. In simple terms,

intertextuality means when a text refers to a second text by title, plot, characters, structure and themes.

Both the plays have a fixation with the myth of the ‘American dream’. You are also familiar with this myth according to which America is a land of opportunity where anybody, irrespective of class or background, can become rich and successful with merit and hard work. In both the plays, the father and sons fail to realize the myth. While the Lomans are unsuccessful because of their ego and pride, the Maxsons suffer as victims of being blacks in a nation of whites. Willie Loman always measured success by the amount of popularity one gains in life. He brings up his sons with the motto of being “well-liked” by others.

It is interesting to see that both the plays demonstrate the failure of the myth of success. Both white and colored characters could not work out success in the land. But if we deeply analyse we can see few important aspects in the characters of the protagonists that make them responsible for the tragedy in their lives. We suggest the learners to see those traits so that they may understand the predicament of modern tragic heroes.



### **11.8 ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS**

1. How is the myth of the American Dream used in the context of the play?
2. Discuss Troy’s relationship with his sons Lyons and Cory in the context of his acceptance or refusal of their individual dreams? How do the dreams of the generation of Troy and Bono differ from that of the younger generation of Lyons and Cory?
3. How does the play situate Troy’s relationship with Rose and Troy’s relationship with Alberta in the context of his rise and fall as the patriarch of the family?
4. How is racism portrayed in the play? Are all the characters of the play victims of racism or are they able to overcome it?
5. Discuss the trope of baseball and football in the context of the play?

6. Attempt a comparative study of August Wilson's *Fences* with that of Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*?
7. Write critically on Wilson's art of characterization.



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## **UNIT 12: SUZAN LORI-PARKS: TOPDOG/UNDERDOG**

### **UNIT STRUCTURE**

12.0 Introduction

12.1 Learning Objectives

12.2 Suzan-Lori Parks: Life and Works

12.3 Reading the play *Topdog/Underdog*

12.4 Major Themes in the play

12.4.1 Violence in African-American lives

12.4.2 Critique of everyday life

12.4.3 Personal and family history

12.4.4 Black masculinity against the background of American Capitalism and Patriarchy

12.5 The Title of the play

12.6 African American struggle for identity

12.7 Dramatic devices in *Topdog/Underdog*

12.8 Summing Up

12.9 Assessment Questions

12.10 References and Recommended Readings

### **12.0 INTRODUCTION**

This unit will take you through one of the most important works of Suzan-Lori Parks. Here we will make an assessment of her play *Topdog/Underdog* and find out why this play is important in terms of portraying the issues of race in contemporary America. The focus will also be on the fraternal conflict, metatheatrical traits and dramatic devices of the play.

### **12.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES**

After reading this unit you will be able to learn

- contributions of Suzan-Lori Parks as a playwright
- detail summary of the play *Topdog/Underdog*

- critical study of the title of the play
- the struggle of African Americans for personal and historical identity in a racist white society
- importance of African American history in the formation of personal and family identity
- major dramatic devices used to enhance the grave situation of the play

## 12.2 SUZAN-LORI PARKS: LIFE AND WORKS

The first thing to remember about Suzan-Lori Parks is that she was the first black woman to win the Pulitzer Prize for drama for the play *Topdog/Underdog* in 2002. Suzan-Lori Parks (originally spelled Susan-Lori Parks) was born in Fort Knox, Kentucky on 10 May, 1963. Her parents are Francis and Donald Parks. She has an elder sister Stephanie Parks and a younger brother Donald 'Buddy' Parks. Since she belonged to a military family, she spent her childhood moving around six states before attending high school in Germany. She was a precocious writer and started writing stories at the age of five. In 1982, she met James Baldwin (an African American author) who encouraged her to write plays and she wrote her first play *The Sinner's Place* sitting in Baldwin's classroom. James Baldwin described her as 'an utterly astounding and beautiful creature who may become one of the most valuable artists of our time.' In 1985, she graduated from Mount Holyoke College, in South Hadley, Massachusetts with a double major in English and German. Then, she studied acting at London Drama Studio for a year. In 1986, she returned to the USA and moved to New York City. She married blues singer and musician Paul Oscher on 24 July 2001.

Suzan-Lori Parks has won numerous awards, fellowships and grants during her long and distinguished career as a playwright. She won Obie Awards for her plays *Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom* (1989) and *Venus* (1996). Her other notable plays are *The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World* (1990), *The America Play* (1994), *In the Blood* (1999), *Fucking A*

(2000). She has written radio plays such as *Pickling* (1990) and *Locomotive and The Third Kingdom* (1992). Her novel *Getting Mother's Body* was published in 2003. She has written the screenplay for *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, based on the novel by Zora Neale Hurston, for Oprah Winfrey's Harpo Films in 2004. From 13 November 2006 to 12 November 2007, the individual plays of *365 Days/365 Plays*, which she had written one play per day over the course of a year in 2002-2003, had a 'simultaneous and shared world premiere' being performed at hundreds of theaters around the USA.

Suzan-Lori Parks's play titled *The America Play* (1994) is about an African American man who calls himself the Foundling Father. He leaves his family and finds the job of pretending to be Abraham Lincoln in a game. He has to wear the costume and pretend to be Abraham Lincoln and customers come and shoot him for a penny. The play *Venus* (1996) is the fictional account of Saartjie Baartman, a South African Khoi-San woman, who was brought to England in 1810 as a sideshow attraction and named "Venus Hottentot" because of her enormous posterior. The play shows the reaction of the sideshow in London where slavery was illegal. Baartman escapes to Paris where Baron Docteur falls in love with her but ultimately betrays her as he had plans of dissecting her after her death. Through the female protagonist, the play explores the African American history. The play *In the Blood* (1999) revolves around the story of a homeless single mother Hester La Negrita and her five children. The character of Hester is drawn from two literary mother figures, German dramatist Bertolt Brecht's play *Mother Courage and her children* and American novelist Nathaniel Hawthorne's novel *The Scarlet Letter*. The play explores Hester's fierce struggle against all the people who cheat and exploit her. In the last act, she is driven to kill one of her own children which lead her to lose her conscience.

The play *Fucking A* (2000) is like a Jacobean revenge tragedy as described by Suzan-Lori Parks. The play has a female protagonist Hester Smith, whose name again draws from Nathaniel Hawthorne's character Hester Prynne. However, the scarlet A in the play represents an abortionist and not an adulteress.

It is a dystopian play in which Hester Smith tries to win freedom for her son, Monster, who is imprisoned since he was five for stealing food from a rich family.

### ***12.3 READING THE PLAY TOPDOG/UNDERDOG***

The play has two characters.

1. Lincoln, the topdog
2. Booth (aka 3-card), the underdog

Lincoln is the elder brother and he is the topdog. Booth is the younger brother and he is the underdog. Booth also has another name, 3-card. The place is “Here” which means the present place. The time is “Now” which means the present time.

#### **SCENE I**

It is Thursday evening. There is a room which is very seedily furnished, which means it is shabby and squalid. The room is dirty and unpleasant because of poverty. In the room, there is a bed, a reclining chair, a small wooden chair and a handful of other stuff. The room clearly shows that it has space and furniture for one person only. It is the younger brother Booth’s room.

Booth, the younger brother is present in the room. He is a black man in his early thirties. He is practising the game of 3-card monte. At this stage, you should know what is this game all about, since the play uses this game as a significant dramatic device. 3-card monte is a type of gambling and this game had its origins in Spain in about the fifteenth century. It is a type of confidence game which means a person or group of persons is cheated after winning their confidence or trust. In the game, a person is tricked into betting a sum of money with the assumption that the money card is found among three face-down playing cards. The three playing cards are usually kept on top of a cardboard box. Booth is also playing in a similar set-up. His three playing cards are on top of a cardboard which is placed on top of two mismatched milk crates or milk boxes. His body movement and repeated light sound made by him, is studied and awkward which

means Booth is self-conscious that he is playing all alone without any other players. Booth is an aspiring 3-card monte player.

Booth is seen continuously repeating the speech which the players speak while playing. In his case, he is all alone but he imagines and speaks what the other players would have spoken. He imagines another player betting 500 dollars which he then wins. He also imagines cursing the loser and running away to another corner because the policemen are looking in his direction. After winning the “imaginary loot” and avoiding the “imaginary cops,” he again resumes playing the next game.

Lincoln, the elder brother comes into the room. He is a black man in his late thirties. He is wearing “an antique frock coat” and “a top hat and fake beard”. He is dressed like his namesake, Abraham Lincoln (1809-1865), who was the sixteenth President of the USA and most famous for abolishing slavery after the Civil War in 1865. Lincoln enters and stands behind Booth in a secretive manner. Booth, who is engrossed in his game does not notice him and after sometime when he senses that someone is standing behind him, whirls around and pulls out his gun from his pants. It should be known that in history, Abraham Lincoln was assassinated on 15 April, 1865 by the white, southern American, stage actor John Wilkes Booth (1838-1865). The two brothers in the play are the namesake of the assassin and victim and the moment Booth pulls out the gun, the audience is reminded of the real historical scene but also remind them that they are now watching two brothers in action.

Booth is not surprised by the presence of his brother but by the Lincoln costume. He tells Lincoln not to come like a ghost of the historical Lincoln to which Lincoln replies that he could not change because he had to catch the bus and the hat kept his head warm. It is seen that Booth is irritated by the Lincoln costume. He puts his gun away only when Lincoln takes off his “stovepipe hat”. Booth does not want Lincoln to come home, which he calls his “humble abode” in the disguise or artificial get-up which he wears all day. Booth is clearly the owner of the room. He is also irritated because he imagines his woman Grace might abandon him again if she sees his elder brother coming home like a

“spook” or ghost. Booth boasts to Lincoln that he has reconciled his broken relationship with Grace and has got a date with Grace tomorrow. He further claims that he has gifted Grace a diamond ring, and then clarifies that it is “diamond-esque” but looks like real diamond. He asked her the ring size and she said its 7. He brought her a ring with size 6 and a half, so that it fits tightly on her finger and she cannot take it off on a whim like she did last time. Booth repeatedly peeks out of the window to make sure Grace is not walking down their street or she might have seen Lincoln. In the meantime, Lincoln takes off his costume and applies cold cream after removing the whiteface. The whiteface is the artificial makeup which the black Lincoln has to put on his face since he pretends to be a white President.

Now, what is Lincoln’s profession? He is an Abraham Lincoln impersonator and provides entertainment to people. An impersonator is someone who pretends to be another person. He wears the usual Abraham Lincoln costume and puts the mask of whiteface because he is a black man. People come and shoot at him using a playgun. In Suzan-Lori Parks’ another play *The America Play* (1994) also, there is a black man who calls himself the Foundling Father and who is obsessed with Abraham Lincoln. He builds a career for himself, he sits in an arcade impersonating Abraham Lincoln and let people come and play at shooting him dead—like John Wilkes Booth shot Abraham Lincoln at Ford’s Theatre. Suzan-Lori Parks in the introduction to *Topdog/Underdog* says that this black Lincoln impersonator is unrelated to the first guy in the other play. Even then there is intertextuality (similarity) between the two plays as can be seen in the profession of Lincoln and the Foundling Father.

Lincoln tells Booth that he did not have time to change into his street clothes because he had to catch the bus. Inside the bus, a kid who had just read about Abraham Lincoln in history class asked for his autograph. The kid might have mistaken him for the real Abraham Lincoln. Lincoln did not want to give the autograph but on finding that he was a rich kid, offered to sign in return for 10 bucks. He should have asked for 5 bucks since he was pretending to be Honest

Abe (Abraham Lincoln was famous for his honesty) but Lincoln, who was a former 3-card monte hustler knew how to take advantage of the rich kid. A hustler is someone who is an expert in illicit deals or games like 3-card monte game. When the kid paid him 20 bucks because he did not have 10 bucks, Lincoln told him to meet on the bus tomorrow to take his change. Lincoln then went to Luckys and spent the 20 bucks enjoying and buying drinks for everybody. When Booth complains that he should have called him to Luckys, Lincoln says “Next time, bro” and asks Booth whether he was making bookshelves using the cardboard and milk crates. Booth who was actually practicing 3-card monte on the set up, lies to his brother that since they do not possess bookshelves and dining room table, he was trying to make one. Booth brings the raggedy family photo album and puts it in the milk crate. The worn-out photo album is the first hint that these two brothers once had a family.

Booth then reveals to Lincoln that he is planning to change his name. Lincoln advises him not to decide on African names because that will hinder his employment opportunities. In USA, it is already difficult for African Americans to get jobs because of the politics of color and race. In addition to that if the African names are difficult to spell and pronounce, it becomes difficult to get hired. Lincoln suggests in case Booth has not decided, “Shango”, the name of the thunder god can be a good choice.

Booth asks for dinner and Lincoln says he brought Chinese food. The food is far away near the door. At this stage, it is seen that although, the brothers may have a cordial relationship on the surface, there is a fight for dominance among them. Lincoln reminds there is a deal that while he will bring home food, Booth will set up the table. Booth does not move and asks Lincoln to set up the food on the table. It is seen that although Booth is the owner of the room, it is Lincoln who pays the rent and brings home food. Booth accuses Lincoln of not having his own place and woman. Cookie, Lincoln’s former wife threw him out. On the other hand, Lincoln complains that his room is like living in the “Third World” since there is no provision for running water, toilets and sink. Moreover, Lincoln feels he is too old to sleep sitting in the chair. Nevertheless, Lincoln

gives in and brings the food. He agrees to Booth's demand for the shrimps, even though he had brought it for himself. Booth had earlier told he wanted meat but now abruptly demands Lincoln's share of shrimps. While Lincoln eats "slowly and carefully", Booth eats "ravenously". Lincoln, on seeing a stray card lying on the floor, asks Booth whether he was playing solitaire and Booth replies that he is getting pretty good at the game. When Booth asks Lincoln whether they both will play together, Lincoln refuses because he had abandoned playing 3-card monte and will not touch the cards. When Booth insists, they play for money, Lincoln reminds him that he is the breadwinner among the two brothers and Booth does not have any money. Booth tells about his mother's inheritance, which he had kept intact while Lincoln had wasted his father's inheritance years ago. While Booth's motto for fortune is "Waste not want not", Lincoln's is "Your luck will change!" It means Booth does not want to take risks in life, whereas Lincoln plays with luck and chance. It may be the reason why Lincoln was a successful 3-card monte hustler (hustler means somebody adept at illicit dealing of people's money) in his past, while Booth is still struggling to find a career as a 3-card monte hustler because this game requires the skill of risk and chance.

When Booth again practices the game, Lincoln tells him the trick of practicing in smaller bits but does not show how to do it. Booth reveals that his new name would be '3-Card' and insists vigorously that he and Lincoln play as a team. Booth schemes and dreams that they will be "golden" with "pockets bulging, plenty of cash!" and win Grace and another woman for Lincoln. Lincoln repeats he will never touch the cards again and then Booth for the first time mentions about their parents, who had abandoned them. The day when their Mom left them after stuffing her things in bags, Lincoln was his usual self, going to school and did not care if anything was wrong in the house. It was the younger brother Booth who came back from school and listened to his Mom's last advice that he should look out after the elder brother. Booth accuses Lincoln in these words, "Here I am interested in an economic opportunity, willing to work hard, willing to take risks and all you can say you shiteating motherfucking pathetic

limp dick uncle tom, all you can tell me is how you don't do no more what I be wanting to do. Here I am trying to earn a living and you standing in my way. YOU STANDING IN MY WAY, LINK!" After Booth's vehement accusation, Lincoln is sorry but he will not go the hustling way again. He plays the Honest Abe now which is a respectable job. Booth tells Lincoln to leave his room since his stay was a temporary arrangement. Lincoln agrees to move out the next day and says that their Dad had told him the reason behind naming them Lincoln and Booth. When Booth asks the reason, Lincoln says it was his idea of a joke. The Scene somewhat ends with Lincoln's improvised song which laments his present state of living.

My dear mother left me, my fathers gone away  
My dear mother left me and my fathers gone away  
Aint got no money, I aint got no place to stay.  
My best girl, she threw me out into the street  
My favorite horse, they ground him into meat  
Im feeling cold from my head down to my feet.  
My luck was bad but now it turned to worse  
My luck was bad but now it turned to worse  
Dont call me up no doctor, just call me up a hearse.

## **SCENE II**

It is Friday evening, the very next day. Booth comes home after a busy day of shoplifting (shoplifting means stealing goods from a shop while pretending to be a customer). He takes off his clothes and underneath it is revealed new suits, shirts, neckties, shoes, socks, belts, magazine, whiskey which he brought for both Lincoln and himself. He also brought a folding screen which he puts up between his bed and the recliner, creating two separate spaces for the two brothers.

Lincoln comes home in his street clothes unlike yesterday. Since Friday is payday for Lincoln, both the brothers are immensely excited and happy. In their enthusiasm, Booth addresses Lincoln as "Pa" whereas Lincoln addresses Booth as "Ma". It implies that since Lincoln is the earning member today, he

enjoys a patriarchal status and Booth is easily relegated to the matriarchal status. Both the brothers then try on the new suits which Booth had shoplifted so casually from a big department store. Lincoln resents the worn-out, fake Lincoln costume which he has to wear all day. The man who did the job before him just left the dress, walked out and never came back. Then Lincoln got the job but he is being offered less pay than a white guy because of ongoing racial discrimination in USA. The two brothers also remember about the wonderful clothes their Dad possessed in his closet until Lincoln took them all out and burned them.

Booth praises Lincoln that he is looking really nice in his new suit and will meet somebody nice. Booth has his eyes on Grace and hopes she will marry him by seeing him in his new suit. Lincoln and Booth exchange neckties, agreeing that Grace will like bright colour on Booth. After exchanging neckties, Booth is pleased but Lincoln is more pleased. Then they sit down to sort out the budget, out of 314 dollars Booth plans to keep aside 100 dollars for house rent, 30 for electricity bills and 50 for phone bills. When Lincoln says they do not need a phone, Booth lays importance on having a phone for the sake of pleasing women. He explains his elder brother that when a man gives the telephone number of his home, it implies three things for the women, who secretly desires to assess the man's property. It means that the man possesses a home, that he has a working telephone and he has cash to pay the bills, and that it is cool to call him because he does not have a wife or approximation of a wife on the premises. Booth then keeps 50 for medicine (medicine refers to drinks), 40 for meals, 14 for Lincoln and 30 for himself. He takes the greater share because he has to impress Grace tonight. When Lincoln reminds him that he did not keep money for phone last week, Booth says he was depressed last week and this week, things have brightened up for both of them. Then Lincoln mentions that his employers are talking about cutback in his job but he has been working there for the last eight months. Lincoln says he does not want to lose his job since he is making a living out of it. He describes the positive things about his job. Amidst all the disturbances in the arcade, he can just sit back and let his mind travel, improvise

songs, make plans and forget. Booth asks whether his Best Customer came that day. Lincoln says he came and asked him “Does thuh show stop when no ones watching or does thuh show go on?” Another time he said Lincoln, “Yr only yrself –when no ones watching.” The statements refer to the illusory nature of Lincoln’s job. Lincoln still loves his job of pretending to be Honest Abe. He had quit 3-card monte, because when he was at the pinnacle of success, his companion Lonny was killed and the next person to be killed was probably him. When Booth says Lincoln was lucky with the cards, Lincoln clarifies that cards aint luck, cards is work, cards is skill. Booth advises him that if he has to keep his job intact, he has to practise jazzing up his act and not remain stiff when people shoot him. While Booth goes for a rendezvous with Grace by taking an additional 5 bucks from Lincoln, Lincoln wears his costume and pretends to get shot, flings himself on the floor and thrashes around. After practicing once, Lincoln pours himself a glass of whiskey and sits drinking.

### **SCENE III**

It is much later that same Friday evening. Lincoln, still wearing his costume is fast asleep in the recliner which is stretched to the maximum length. It seems he is having a troubled sleep. Booth comes in a swaggering manner and deliberately makes noise to wake up Lincoln. Booth says he had “an evening to remember.” He says Grace passionately wants him back in her life. She has wiped her hand over everything that happened in the past. They had a wonderful evening in her place with music, candlelight and the best food brought by Booth. Lincoln is curious to know the minute details of their intimacy and Booth describes in detail, how she allowed him to have sexual intercourse without using rubber, dogstyle, in front of the mirror. Both the brothers are in awe of Grace, Lincoln calling her “Amazing Grace” and Booth describing how she is different from other girls, studying cosmetology in school. Booth then asks Lincoln what kind of rubber or condoms he used with his wife Cookie or with other women, to which Lincoln replies Magnums which are for “the larger man”. Booth then says that he has purchased Magnums for his next rendezvous with Grace. According to Booth, they were in a relationship for two years then they had split

up because Booth had little employment difficulty and Grace needed time to think. Now she has thought over and everything is fine between them.

Lincoln earnestly requests Booth to practice with him in order to improve his tactics because his employers are talking about replacing him with a wax dummy but Booth says he is tired and will practice the next day. Lincoln discloses that while looking for something the other week, he had discovered about 100 fuck books under the bed of Booth in whose pages Booth had masturbated and forgotten to wipe them off. Booth strikes back at Lincoln saying he is hot and needs constant sexual release. If he does not help himself through masturbation, he will have to visit prostitutes which would cost money or he will be shooting people out of a need for unresolved sexual release. Booth says he is not apologizing for it. Booth says unlike him, Lincoln might have become impotent. He is deliberately suggesting that Lincoln might have lost his manhood. He is making a deliberate attempt to compare Lincoln's passively-sitting profession to that of his male organ, when he says "little whiteface shriveled-up blank-shooting grub worm." Booth says Lincoln is "a limp dick jealous whiteface motherfucker whose wife dumped him." According to Booth, Lincoln's former wife Cookie left him because of his impotency and she had told him so. She had come to him because she needed a man.

Lincoln as the elder brother knows how to ignore his brother's rude sexual insults and take advantage of him. Since Booth was showing interest in 3-card monte, Lincoln says that although he will not touch the cards anymore, he can still contact his former crew members who used to make a lot of money through hustling. Lincoln says he will introduce Booth as his brother who was engaged in jobs such as taking tourists in the west coast or Mexican border and that he possesses marketable skills in hustling. Lincoln says he will instruct Booth the skills and since Booth will be partners with upper echelon or topmost hustlers, he needs to have real pistols, not just a pop gun. Booth reminds him that since Lincoln had left hustling six or seven years back, he will not know about the heat of violence happening today. Lincoln says he sees guns every day in the arcade, by which people fire caps and shoot blanks at him or Honest Abe. Booth

attempts to instill fear in Lincoln's mind by saying he will go to the arcade and rework the guns to make it shoot for real or what if somebody comes with a real gun with real slugs and shoots him dead. Lincoln says he has no enemies. Booth says may be Cookie or his Best Customer or some miscellaneous stranger will kill him. Lincoln says Cookie does not hate him and he is not interested in the doings of miscellaneous strangers. The entire day, he keeps staring straight as if watching a play, just as Honest Abe was doing at Ford's Theatre before he was assassinated.

Lincoln says although he keeps staring straight in the darkness (it is dark in the arcade to keep the illusion of the theatre as in the actual Ford's theatre), there is a little electrical box like a fuse box made of silver metal on the wall opposite him. It has got a big dent, so whatever is reflected is reflected upside down as in a spoon. It is in this dent that he can see the assassins (in this case, children, businessmen, tourists, housewives). He listens to the sound of their shoes on the carpet, feels the cold gun and every moment he is shot he feels it is real, he slumps down and closes his eyes. Lincoln is sad that after giving such a good performance day after day, now his employers are about to replace him with a wax dummy.

Booth acts like a good brother again and explains Lincoln how he can protect his job by showing his boss that he can do things which a wax dummy cannot. Booth acts shooting him without the gun asking Lincoln to scream (Lincoln says a wax dummy with a voicebox in it can also scream), curse, roll and wiggle on the floor and scream loudly and hold his head where he is being shot. While Booth wanted the shooting act to look more and more realistic, Lincoln says if it looks real, it will scare the customers and he will surely be fired. Lincoln says it is a historical event and people like it to unfold neatly like a book, not raggedy and bloody and screaming. Lincoln says it is a tough job to leave his own self and to become another dead self every day of his life. After swearing that he will never play cards, he drank and was unemployed. When Cookie threw him out, he was helpless. Then he saw the "Help Wanted" sign, went in and his employers hired him because he looked good in the getup, agreed

to the whiteface and most important, that he and Honest Abe got the same name. Lincoln is very worried about losing his job. He says that it is a sit down job with benefits and the employers will not give a reference if he gets fired.

Booth says if he is fired, they can still support themselves by hustling together. Booth again asks Lincoln to teach him the skills of the Dealer in 3-card monte but Lincoln says a big NO! Lincoln goes to sleep in the recliner, Booth waits for some time to see if Lincoln changes his mind. When he sees that Lincoln is fast asleep, he covers him with a blanket, goes to his own bed and reads a girlie magazine with great interest.

#### **SCENE IV**

The entire Scene Four consists of a long monologue by Lincoln. It is Saturday, just before dawn. Lincoln gets up while Booth is still sleeping. Lincoln curses that there is no running water. He pees in a plastic cup and finds an out of the way place to store the cup. He undresses his Lincoln getup and claws and rips it in the process. He strips down to his t-shirt and shorts. Lincoln is talking to himself in the entire scene. He speaks that he hates falling asleep in this getup. Although his boss has got a lot of boys working under him, he is always particular to check whether Lincoln is presentable. Since his fake beard was torn, his employers had told him that they will get him a new beard but it has to come from Lincoln's own payment. Lincoln is angry. He wants to tear off his beard, quit his job and strangle his boss.

Then Lincoln remembers his past achievements, as a hustler. He was a great player, the "be all end all." Everybody praised that he was the best player from this coast to that coast. He never lost even once in his whole life. Then one day, suddenly, he did not have the taste. Something in him told that he should quit. Still he went to play and that was the time his strong partner Lonny died. Nevertheless, he got a good and respectable job in the arcade and in case, his employers fire him he will get a better job. There is more to life than cheap hustling which is cheating somebody of his paycheck or life savings. Once Lincoln had got a joker and his wife to play. They had come to see the big city and Lonny, his Stickman was able to get them as customers. Lonny, with his

looks could attract difficult customers very easily. Then one day somebody shot Lonny and nobody cared to find out who shot him. Lincoln remembers that he and his fellow hustlers had once robbed a father and a mother of everything they possessed. They had robbed the father of the money which he was planning to spend to buy new bike for his children and while he was crying in the street, they had vanished. They had robbed the mother of her welfare check and while she aimlessly threw a knife at them, they ran away. Then something inside him told him to swear off the cards, to never touch the cards again. Lincoln had thus transferred from an illicit job to a legitimate job.

Lincoln now sees a pack of cards. He studies them just as an alcoholic would study a drink. He just pretends to play. He says he will not hurt anyone because he is playing with himself. He moves the cards slowly at first but the game draws him deeper into it. Then he gets pulled to the game as if the cards are playing him.

Even though Lincoln speaks softly, Booth wakes and unknown to him listens intently, and gets to learn some of the secret skills and tactics of the great hustler. Lincoln plays the game, imagines winning 500 dollars, then knowing he has gone deep into the play, moves aside from the monte setup but he cannot get his eyes off the cards. He says “God help me” because he has the foresight that the next time he plays for money he might be killed like Lonny.

## **SCENE V**

After several days, it is now Wednesday night. Booth’s apartment room is ready for a romantic dinner for him and Grace. Booth is wearing his brand new suit. The monte setup is nowhere in sight and in its place is a table with two nice chairs. There is a nice table cloth, nice plates, silverware, champagne glasses, candles, new curtains on the windows, a doily-like object on the recliner.

Booth makes sure the room is perfectly clean. He notices that some of his girlie magazines are visible and tries his best to hide them underneath his bedspread. There are two expensive gowns marked “His” and “Hers” lying on the bed. When he notices the magazines are still visible, he struggles hard to hide them

under his bed. He remembers that his new suit will be spoilt, removes his jacket and pants and crawls underneath to give the magazines a final push.

Lincoln enters wearing his frock coat and the rest of his getup is inside his plastic bag. Booth thinks it is Grace but when he sees Lincoln, he does his best to keep Lincoln from entering the apartment. When Lincoln sees Booth stripped to his underwear, he thinks may be he and Grace are in the middle of an intimate act. Lincoln says he will either go or remain real quiet and sing a song in his head in the same manner when his Mom and Pops used to do it in the middle of the night.

Booth tries his best to make him go and stay with his friends for the night but Lincoln stands his ground and gives the news that he has lost his job. His employers have told him about further reducing his salary and at last showed him the wax dummy which they are going to buy right from a catalogue. Even though Lincoln plans to go back the next day to accept further cutback, Booth advises him not to crawl back and use his new-found freedom in indulging in better things, such as hustling.

Grace was about to come at 8 and now it is after 2 a.m. Lincoln had thought that may be Booth had spent his inheritance to buy all the new expensive things. Booth says he has boosted or stolen everything. Booth questions why is it that he is an expert in boosting but not an expert in hustling. While Booth sits staring out of the window for Grace, Lincoln drinks and takes the raggedy photo album.

The raggedy photo album is the only thing the brothers have preserved from their past apart from their memories. Lincoln talks about their big house in which they went to live when Booth was about 4 and he was 9 years old. It seems among the brothers, the younger brother remembers more the bitter aspect of their life. Booth remembers the cement backyard and a frontyard full of trash. When Lincoln says they spent a good time selling lemonade in the corner, spending the summers lying in the grass and watching the stars at the treehouse at the back, Booth says they did not do anything like that. Lincoln again reminds the good time when he had told Booth to line up a row of nails behind Dad's car but Booth reminds the worst part of the event because their Dad had come back

that night, his face red because of 4 flat tires of his car. His Dad misunderstood that some white man had sabotaged his car and did not realize that his sons had done it. While they were having a fine dinner of pork chops, mashed potatoes and peas, Booth was anxious that his Dad will find out and whip them. While Booth was glancing at Lincoln out of the corner of his eye, he saw that Lincoln was cool and was not afraid at all.

Booth accuses that Lincoln's presence may have jinxed the room because Grace is not showing up. Then he says he will wait because patience is a virtue and he is cool. Booth asks Lincoln whether he was given severance pay. Severance pay is the amount given to an employee if the job contract is terminated earlier than time. Lincoln replies he got a week's pay and spent it all, like he used to spend when he was an independent hustler.

Lincoln suddenly turns grim and ponders on the reason why their Mom and Pops abandoned them. Lincoln says may be they did not like them but then thinks of a larger reason. He feels both of them were struggling against something. They had left the nasty apartment and purchased their own whole house to live as a family. They had thought that may be the thing against which they were struggling would be impressed by the fact that they possessed a house, that Dad had a job and he polished his shoes every night; that the Mom set food on the table every night, could read to her children, had clean clothes and buttons sewed in all places. May be Lincoln is implicitly referring to the implications of racism against which his parents were struggling because in America the black people faced great difficulty in living as regular people in their own house.

Lincoln was 16 and Booth was 11 when their parents had abandoned them. Booth says Lincoln was almost grown and Booth felt all right because his elder brother was with him. Booth does not blame his parents because they did not leave together as if to enjoy the sun on a tropical island. At first, his Mom left and after two years his Dad left as if they could not handle the whole family's mortgage bills anymore. Booth says he will follow the example of his parents. He will not stick to a steady job, not be a one-woman man and when he will have kids, he will give them 500 bucks and will cut out. Booth says their parents might

have schemed an agreement between them. Before leaving, his Mom gave Booth an inheritance of 500 bucks tied in one of her nylon stockings and told him to keep it safely without telling Lincoln. On the other hand, before leaving, his Dad handed Lincoln 500 bucks in a handkerchief and told Lincoln not to disclose it to Booth. Both the brothers now feel that their parents may have got together, exchanged wedding vows, had another family of two boys, who might be better than them.

Booth did not mind his parents' abandonment because he had his elder brother to look after him. When their parents left, Lincoln had finished school and Booth had stopped going to school. Both of them did all kinds of odd jobs together to keep the lights on, the heat going and prevent the child protection bitch in catching them. Both the brothers had fought against the world and Booth desperately wants that they fight against the world together again.

Lincoln says hustling is not an easy job. When Booth was with Lincoln's crew earlier, he was just on the sidelines like that of a customer. Finally, after Booth satisfactorily answers some technical questions asked by Lincoln, Lincoln agrees to touch the cards and play with Booth. In a flash, Booth tosses aside the romantic dinner table and sets the table for the game. They start playing. Lincoln explains that in the game, there is a Dealer, a Stickman, the Sides, the Lookout and the Mark. Lincoln chooses to be the Dealer. Booth chooses to be the Lookout (look out for the cops) because he is carrying a real gun in his pants. Lincoln asks for the gun and places it in the wooden chair, saying that will be the lookout since there are no real cops. Booth says he will be the Stickman but Lincoln makes him the Sideman. Then Lincoln looks at him because a Dealer always sizes up the crowd. Then Lincoln says he does not want to play which actually shows the Dealer's attitude. The Dealer acts like he does not want to play and sees the crowd's eagerness to goad him and push him to throw his cards. Lincoln says there are two parts to throw the cards, such as "the moves and the grooves, the talk and the walk, the patter and the pitter, the rap and the flap, what is said by the mouth and what is done with the hands." It shows that hustling is much more complicated than Booth had thought.

When Lincoln throws the cards, he asks Booth to focus and concentrate on his eyes and not on his hands. Lincoln's eyes become red and seems like crying because of his immense focus and concentration. Lincoln teaches Booth how to point the deuce of spades and Booth erupts in joy when he correctly points at the deuce of spades. Lincoln moves the cards and speaks in a low hypnotic voice the usual patter of the game and when the time comes Booth is again successful in selecting the deuce of spades. Booth erupts in joy and in a boastful attitude says what has gone wrong with "Links Lightning Fast Express", Lincoln has become like a local train to him. Lincoln rebukes him to leave aside his boasting and concentrate on throwing the cards lightly like a whisper or like touching Grace's skin. Booth moves the card in an awkward imitation of his brother with loud speech and jerky movements. He is doing worse than what he did at the beginning of the play.

Lincoln bursts out laughing at the way Booth is playing. Booth pockets his gun. Lincoln says he is just wild with the game. It reminded him of a time when Booth used to hang out with his crew. At one time, Booth had forcefully become the Stickman and played the wrong game.

Lincoln reminds Booth of the time. Booth curses because Grace has not arrived yet. Lincoln asks Booth to call up Grace, he says she may will come at 8 a.m. the next day or may be something has happened to her. Booth says it is all right if something has happened to her, but he will not be deceived by her, he will not be anybody's chump. Lincoln says he will go to the payphone in the corner, may be to call Grace. Booth says even if the world steps on Lincoln's face, Lincoln will not move, and Booth is his own man. While Booth slams the door and goes out, Lincoln takes the cards and moves them around fast, faster, faster.

## **SCENE VII**

It is Thursday night. The room is empty. Lincoln comes drunk and highly excited because he has brought an enormous wad of money. On finding that Booth is not there, he brings out the money from his pocket and counts with great

love and care. Then he counts it again with the touch of an expert hustler. Lincoln has become a hustler again.

Lincoln thinks he is alone and begins a long monologue. He says he did not go back but got back in business. When he went to Lucky's that day, all the people were staring at him, Lucky poured him a drink himself. He brought drinks for everybody. The women were hanging on him and fighting to get him. He made lots of contacts, got more phone numbers than he got in his life. He says, "Who thuh man? Link. Thats right." All this time, Booth was hiding in the room. He was standing behind the screen, unseen all the time. He goes to the door, soundlessly and stands there, so that Lincoln misunderstand that Booth has arrived just now. After listening to Lincoln's monologue, he closes the door.

On seeing Booth, Lincoln asks if he had gone on a date with Grace and had "another evening to remember." He adds that he also had a memorable evening. Booth says Grace got down on her knees and asked him to marry her. Booth says Grace did not come to his romantic dinner because he had invited her on Thursday. He was thinking he called her on Wednesday and there she was in her house watching television. Grace wants to marry him right now and have a baby and Booth says they will have a boy and name him after Lincoln. The bad news is that since Grace likes the place and wants to live together, Lincoln will have to move out. Lincoln repeats his elder brotherly gesture, "No sweat" and gets ready to pack his things and move out. Booth says since he just lost his job yesterday, how can he move out so easily without any cash in hand. Lincoln lies that he has got the new job of a security guard. It is very clear in this scene that Booth is lying about Grace because he was inside his room all the time. Lincoln advises Booth to take up some kind of job because Grace may support him for the time being but in the long run, she may not like the fact that he does not possess any skills. Booth says he has plans and Grace is very cool with what he is at present.

Booth says when their Dad left, he did not take any clothes with him. Booth wants to suggest that Lincoln should also not take his clothes and leave them for Booth to wear. Lincoln replies that the reason why their Dad did not

take any clothes or even abandoned them can be dismissed as one of the great unsolved mysteries of existence. When Booth says their Mom had another man in her life, Lincoln says their Dad had many pretty women too. His Dad took Lincoln and let him witness his affairs when he went to meet them. Sometimes when his Dad slept, he would sneak in with one of the ladies too.

As Lincoln is wondering what to do with the Abraham Lincoln costume, Booth says he will miss Lincoln coming home in that costume. Booth decides to take a last photo. Booth searches the camera and Lincoln wears the getup. Booth says smile but Lincoln acts like the original Lincoln who never smiled. Lincoln demands a group photo with Booth but Booth does not take and saves the film for the wedding.

Lincoln says he can tell his employers to hire Booth as the Abraham Lincoln impersonator but Booth says he will never do a job in which he has to pretend to be somebody else all day. Lincoln says he just sat there and sometimes made up songs in his head or thought of Cookie. Booth takes the chance to degrade Lincoln's manhood again. He says Cookie came to him one day while Lincoln was drinking at Luckys, and the bad part of Booth had his brother's wife in bed. Lincoln says he used to think of Cookie all the time but does not think of her anymore. Booth says "No matter what you do you cant get back to being who you was. Best you can do is just pretend to be yr old self." Lincoln says at least he works and Booth cautiously challenges that he can play the game better than him. Lincoln is about to leave but gauging the seriousness of the challenge, accepts it.

Booth hurriedly sets up the milk crates and cardboard top. Lincoln throws the cards. Booth successfully selects the deuce of spades. Booth asks "Who thuh man, Link?" and Lincoln replies it is Booth. Lincoln praises him that he is doing good but Booth says it is not feeling like a real game. Lincoln says it is not feeling real because the essential elements like the crowd, the street, the traffic sounds are not there but Booth cites the reason that it is the absence of cash. When Lincoln looks glum, Booth says he knows that Lincoln had thrown cards and has a whole pocketful of money and asks him to put the 500 bucks on the table. In

order to make it even more real, Booth is ready to put his money too. Lincoln says Booth does not have any money because he has not worked for years or maybe he has been stealing from Lincoln's paycheck. Booth goes to his hiding place and brings his inheritance, the 500 bucks, his Mom had given him before leaving, tied in the toe of her nylon stocking.

Booth recollects that when he had cut school on a Thursday, he had caught his Mom red-handed with the man who came regularly on Thursdays. After two months, when she had some problem and demanded the man some money, the man had replied "I aint made of money." Booth, the eleven-year old young boy did not understand what problem his Mom was having but he understood that when she left with the man, giving Booth his inheritance, she meant that he should not disclose it to anyone, whatever he knew.

Booth places the stuffed nylon stocking on the table to make it more real. Lincoln refuses to play because he somehow portends that involving money may cause a disaster. Booth pressurizes him to throw the cards. Lincoln throws and Booth selects the right deuce of spades. Lincoln can foresee that Booth is really hustling for the money. Lincoln asks twice, whether they are brothers, or blood brothers and Booth replies, "I think we're brothers." Lincoln asks him to point the deuce of spades again. Booth chooses the wrong card this time which makes Lincoln the winner. Lincoln takes the inheritance and chuckles that he still has got the moves and there is much more to the game than Booth knows about. Lincoln consoles Booth that at least he has Grace with him. Lincoln takes the nylon stocking which Booth has never opened to check. Lincoln finds the knot tight and asks Booth that their Mom may have jived him and not given him any real money. Even though, Booth tells him again and again not to open the knot which he had preserved for so long, Lincoln's curiosity leads him to take out a knife from his boot and try to cut open the knot.

Booth tricks Lincoln by changing the issue and talking about how he had popped Grace. Grace was complaining that the ring was too tight, that she is into bigger things and Booth has popped her. Booth is confused whether she is dead or alive, and finally says, she is dead. Lincoln knows that Booth is upset and

returns the nylon stockings. Booth says since he won it, he ought to open it. While Lincoln brings the knife down to cut it, Booth grabs Lincoln from behind, pulls the gun and thrust it into the left side of Lincoln's neck. Lincoln says "Dont" but Booth shoots and kills Lincoln.

Booth paces back and forth, like a panther in a cage. He is immensely angry that Lincoln attempted to steal his inheritance which he had preserved through thick and thin. Booth says since he is dead, he will take Lincoln's roll of money and become a great hustler. Everybody will know of him as 3-card like they used to know Lincoln. He bends to pick up the nylon stocking. Then he crumples. He sits beside Lincoln's body, the nylon stocking falls away. Booth holds Lincoln's body, hugging him close and he sobs and lets out a piercing scream.

## **12.4 MAJOR THEMES**

*Fences* depicts the life and its hurdles that come to the ways of two African American brothers Lincoln and Booth. In that sense personal happenings find more space in the play than any other issues. But in the depth of this personal drama, the play's plot is loaded with social and political history of the African Americans in America which has gradually intertwined with the personal history of the characters. Thus, the play has multi-layered meanings that constitute many themes within one story. Let us now critically discuss few of them.

### **12.4.1 VIOLENCE IN AFRICAN AMERICAN LIVES**

An indepth reading of the play clearly indicates the predicament of blacks in a white society that has long history of slavery and far flung implications of it on generations. One of the important issues depicted in the play is the power structure or the power role male characters are engaged in. The title of the play itself is suggestive of this hierarchical role the playwright intends to shoulder on his characters. If we go to the final scene of the play where Booth kills his brother Lincoln, we can understand the deep rooted reality in the minds of the black people.

The play makes it clear that there is a complex pattern of violence in black lives in America. This is mostly rooted in the slavery. Because of the long history of chattel slavery, blacks, especially the men, are always deprived of the economic independence, power positions, family responsibility, paternal duties etc. These feelings have been heightened even in postbellum America creating a unique psychological violence that operates in all levels of black life. Significantly, while the boys' parents led comfortable life in the play's context, we are told how they have left their kids for a better living. Though the reason is not very clearly stated in the play, considering the socio-political context of *Fences* one can assume the situation to be responsible for such an action. Very possible that Link and Booth's parents were also the victim of same psychological violence.

What creates this psychological violence is America's self contradictory ideology. While in Declaration of Independence America set the foundation for the idea of the country by saying "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness" for all, allowing one to follow one's dreams for economic gains, social mobility, and family stability and the opportunity to attain all of these goals. Thus, America creates its great 'American Dream'. The term "American Dream" is further defined in historian James Truslow Adams's *The Epic of America* (1931): "The American Dream is that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement" (Adams, 415). You have already ample examples of the violence done by this dream to the vulnerable whites and more vulnerable blacks after reading works like *Death of a Salesman*, *Fences* and *Topdog/Underdog*. All these plays one way or another show the characters' falling for the sparkle of this dream and ultimate realisation of their inability to attain this. Specially, later plays are unique as poor blacks are doubly vulnerable for being black and poor.

Another psychological violence with which the blacks grow is the process of naming. Whites, in a process of defacing the blacks, always gave humiliating names, names that were joke black entity. We are told how it was the father's idea of a 'joke' to name his sons as Lincoln and Booth, representing Abraham

Lincoln and his assassin, confederate sympathizer and well known stage actor, John Wilkes Booth. This very joke silently takes shape in the minds of the boys when they grew up with the reality, especially Booth when the question of rivalry and masculine assertion began to seed in his mind.

The play does not display much physical violence except the final scene of murder. But each moment we are made to anticipate the ‘explosion’ Langston Hughes talks about in his famous poem “Harlem” (1951). He asks a rhetorical question “What happens to a dream deferred?” and almost gives an answer “does it explode?” There were many catalysts in the form of psychological violence in the play that culminated in the final catastrophe.

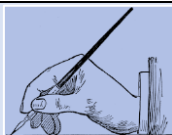
### LET US STOP AND THINK



#### “Harlem” (1951)

—Langston Hughes

What happens to a dream deferred?  
Does it dry up  
like a raisin in the sun? Or fester like a sore—  
And then run?  
Does it stink like rotten meat?  
Or crust and sugar over—  
like a syrupy sweet?  
Maybe it just sags  
like a heavy load  
*Or does it explode?*



#### CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. What connection of slavery do you find in the violent trajectories of the characters in *Fences*?

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#### 12.4.2 CRITIQUE OF EVERYDAY LIFE

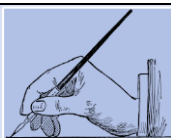
A careful reading of the play clearly reveals the two major characters' struggle to live in a society that shows many dreams but does not allow certain people to live with them. In her article "Trayvon Martin, Topdog/Underdog, and the Tragedy Trap", Patricia Stuelke discusses the fantasy of 'good life' that is created by white America that Lincoln and Booth fail to be part of (Patricia, 761). Not only the major characters, but also characters that do not appear in the stage but make their presence felt by their absence symbolically state the predicament of everyday life of the African Americans in a racist and capitalist social set up.

It is significant that the play's set up is primarily in a one-bed room apartment indicating Lincoln and Booth's struggle to make a living. It is also an embodiment of everyday life challenges that black Americans face in capitalist modern America. From the very childhood Lincoln and Booth live by themselves facing poverty because their parents abandon the kids in order to start a new life to get rid of the everyday hassles. Significantly, they belong to rich parents. The parents' leaving despite a comfortable life, is more under critical scrutiny. It can be assumed that they wanted to get rid of injustice and the bias

blacks have to face in their day to day life. The incomplete family life the boys experience or many blacks do in America is another reality the play depicts.

The play gives ample evidence of the protagonists' struggle to make their days 'look good' or create the 'good life' Patricia Stuelke talks about, as economic lack is one of the most important reasons not to be socially acceptable, specially, by the womenfolk in the play's context. The scene where Booth is expecting Grace, his girlfriend, to come for a visit to their home is not only ironical, but also pathetic. We see how Booth takes great care in setting up the dinner table. "You'd sit there, I'd sit on the edge of the bed. Gathered around the dinner table. Like old times" (13). In scene one, Booth creates a versatile piece of furniture made of milk crates. His idea is: "I'm making a sorta modular unit you put the books in the bottom and the tabletop on top. We can eat and store our books. We could put the photo album in there" (13). He wants to re-live the "nice family dinner" experience and the reading of the books by their mother, when in fact they do not even have books. Setting up the dinner table is a reoccurring theme in which Booth unconsciously demonstrates his dream of a comfortable, happy life. "the whole apartment in fact takes its cue from the table. It's been cleaned up considerably. New curtains on the windows, a dolly like object on the recliner. Booth sits at the table darting his eyes around, making sure everything is looking good" (59).

Thus, a stark difference between appearance and reality is what characterises lives of the characters in the play. Repetition and monotony of familiar scenes symbolically enhance the cyclic manner of their struggle with everyday life.



### CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. Find out few more instances of everyday reality depicted in the play.

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#### 12.4.3 PERSONAL AND FAMILY HISTORY

Personal and familial history inform the development of the protagonists, while national history influences the plot and foreshadows the final climax and thus makes an important link with the personal history of the characters. As the drama progresses, we are slowly exposed to more of Link and Booth's family story, which highlights the brothers' own dysfunctions. Booth grows with the memory of seeing their mother in the process of leaving, which then problematizes his future relationships with women. This is seen most specifically in his on-again, off-again relationship with Grace and his efforts to keep her from leaving him, very significantly evidenced by his decision to steal an engagement ring half a size smaller than her actual size so that she can never take it off.

Personal and family history in blacks' lives are often intertwined with American chattel history. Black men have to bear the burden of not being associated with their families, not being able to be the bread earner for their wives and children. This age old psychological notion is a reason why the play's

male characters are busy in establishing themselves before their own people, in competition with each other for social acceptability. This personal struggle is highlighted by Link and Booth's family history that repeats the black history of abandon and forsake. It can be said that what the parents did with their kids was not most essential for them to do as they had sufficient wealth to look after their children. But lack of responsibility and attachment is the reason of their leaving which affected the boys, specially, Booth who inherited a reckless life, with no sense of respect and belongingness for the people in his life. We are told how he slept with his brother's wife, killed his girlfriend Grace and finally, his own loving and caring brother over a trivial issue. The anger Booth nourishes within himself is an outcome of the historical repression and exploitation blacks have to face in a racial social structure. In the previous unit you came to know how the August Wilson, the author of *Fences* was a victim of this discriminations. The whites threw bricks at his house. In Central Catholic High School, where he studied, he was the only black student. His classmates would not sit with him and would shout at him, "Nigger go home." Booth's experience was nothing better.

A careful reading of the play reveals how the root of the final catastrophe goes back to a history of loss and incoherent family life. Booth always felt the absence of his mother and her love and care, while Link tried to replace his father's absence by being the bread earner. This can be seen in Booth's possessiveness for the small money his mother left for him inside a sock and Lincoln often wearing his father's clothes. We see how the boys, especially Booth, always dreamt of a 'nice family dinner' they have been deprived of since an early age. It is this nostalgia of a unified family which they never got finally led Booth to kill his brother as Link tried to open and possess Booth's only memory, only inheritance from his mother, the sock, a symbol of love and empathy, care and bonding.

The historical significance of their namesakes plays pivotal role in the formation of personal history as we see in the play. We are told how it was their father's idea of a 'joke' to name them after two prominent persons of history

standing in antagonism with each other. In the annals of history, John Wilkes Booth, a white, southern actor had assassinated the sixteenth President of America, Abraham Lincoln. In the play, both Lincoln and Booth are aware of their historical namesakes. This consciousness has been ingrained into the mindset, particularly that of Booth, who always carries a real gun even when he is alone with his brother in the room. But it cannot be denied that Booth might be psychologically inclined to behave like the actual Booth with a violent temperament to murder Lincoln standing at the threshold of a situation of hatred and vengeance.

One of the underlying issues in *Topdog/Underdog* is the unique pressure of masculinity for African American males. The title of the play, *Topdog/Underdog* highlights this problem.

### LET US STOP AND THINK



#### **Topdog/Underdog**

The dictionary meaning of ‘topdog’ is a person who is successful or dominant in their field. The dictionary meaning of ‘underdog’ is a competitor thought to have little chance of winning a fight or contest.

## **12.5 THE TITLE OF THE PLAY**

The play’s title carries a serious hierarchical connotation as why Lincoln is considered as the topdog and Booth as the underdog. The title has clear implications of the meaning that is characterized by the two brothers. But at the same time we shall also explore the possibility of changing positions that the title may offer as structuralists say hierarchical positions are not static.

Lincoln is a former, successful 3-card monte hustler in his field. He was the leader of his crew and he always defeated his opponents. He lives and enjoys life to its fullest buying drinks for everybody in Luckys which is a sign for rich and successful people. He had also joyfully spent his inheritance of

500 dollars which his father had handed him before abandoning both his children. He is somebody who loves taking risks in life. His motto in life is “Your luck will change!” After the death of his crew man Lonny, he had the foresight that if he threw cards again, he will be the next victim. He followed his insight and decided not to touch the cards again. He got the job at the arcade to pretend like Abraham Lincoln and thus became the breadwinner among the brothers. It is Lincoln who maintained a steady job and brought home food and money. Despite the fact that Lincoln’s present job is dejectedly criticized by Booth, nevertheless he tries to love his job because it is honest. Lincoln was also married to Cookie. It is after Cookie left him that Lincoln shares Booth’s room. Even after losing his job at the arcade for a wax dummy, he immediately assumes power again as a successful 3-card monte hustler. Lincoln is also pragmatic, clear-headed and cool among the two brothers. Whenever Booth makes unnecessary demands, he coolly replies, “No sweat” and gives it to his brother. Thus, Lincoln is undoubtedly the ‘topdog’ among the two brothers.

Booth is the aspiring 3-card monte hustler. He practices 3-card monte on his own with studied and awkward movements. He earnestly aspires to become like his elder brother in the field of gambling. He seriously requests his brother to teach him the nuances and tricks of the game so that they can together explore the “economic opportunity” through the method of hustling. It can be interpreted that Booth does not have the ability to explore the world of hustling on his own. Booth is not the breadwinner of the family, he is typically unemployed who has no interest in the kind of job that Lincoln is engaged in. He is only a shoplifter and finds solace in preserving the things he steals from the shops. After he had stolen the expensive suits in Scene Two, he tells Lincoln, “Just cause I ain’t good as you at cards don’t mean I cant do nothing.” (p.32) He looks forward for a word of applause from his elder brother. Booth has carefully preserved his inheritance of 500 dollars which his mother had given him tied in a nylon stocking before leaving her children. He is not even pragmatic enough to open the nylon stocking and check if it contains real money. His motto in life is “Waste not want not!” He is dependent on Lincoln for food and money even at this

mature age of early thirties. Although he boasts about having a relationship with Grace and the possibility of marriage, there is clear indication in the play that Grace may not exist in reality. She may just be a fragment of Booth's imagination. Booth may have made up stories to demonstrate his so-called superior masculinity in a competition against his elder brother because in reality he releases his lust and libido by reading girly magazines and masturbating in about a hundred fuck books which he keeps hidden under his bed. Even after Lincoln teaches him the tricks of the game it is vividly seen that Booth becomes over-confident with the slightest show of victory. Booth is impractical, hot-headed and aspires to be cool like his elder brother. Thus, Booth can be seen as the 'underdog' among the two brothers.

It is very necessary to take note of the slash sign in the title, *Topdog/Underdog*. It means there is a possibility of interchange in the status quo in the fraternal relationship. The binary Topdog/Underdog does not contain a fixed or essentialized meaning. In critical terminology, binaries are structuralist terms in which the left-hand side thing has superior connotation, whereas the right-hand side thing has inferior connotation. Some examples of binaries are day/night, boy/girl. It is the pursuit of poststructuralism to show that the binaries do not have a fixed hierarchical meaning.

It is from Scene One itself, that Booth tries to take charge of the situation. The first dialogue that he delivers on seeing his elder brother is replete with violent connotation. When Lincoln arrives in the Lincoln costume, Booth displays his gun and threatens to shoot him, "And woah, man don't ever be doing that shit! Who thuh fuck you think you is coming in my shit all spooked out and shit. You pull that one more time I'll shoot you!" (p.13) Booth is filled with remorse as well as envy, when Lincoln narrates how he cheated a rich kid of 20 bucks and enjoyed drinking with everybody in Luckys.

The scene when the conflict emerges on the surface is when they eat food in the room. Although Lincoln brought Chinese food, Booth tries to establish his dominance by the fact the he is the owner of the room, even though it is a "Third World" room without any sink or toilet or running water as complained by

Lincoln. Booth intimidates that Lincoln will have to become homeless if he does not follow his orders. Booth says, “Every Friday you come home with yr paycheck. Today is Thursday and I tell you brother, its a long way from Friday to Friday. All kinds of things can happen. All kinds of bad feelings can surface and erupt while yr little brother waits for you to bring in yr share. (Rest) I got my Thursday head on, Link. Go get the food.” (p.19) Booth orders Lincoln to bring the food from the door, abruptly demands the skrimps which Lincoln brought for himself, eats ravenously and allows Lincoln to clean up the table. When Lincoln refuses to deliver lessons in hustling, Booth threatens Lincoln to leave his room since it was a temporary arrangement but takes back the idea on listening Lincoln’s improvised song about his family.

In Scene Two, the status quo again changes. Since Friday is the payday, it is a common fact that the people are in a jovial mood. While Booth had boosted expensive clothing for both of them, Lincoln comes home with his pay. There is immediate change in mutual disposition as Lincoln becomes the masculine figure as “Pa” and Booth becomes the feminine figure as “Ma.” Despite the fact that Lincoln brings the money, Lincoln tells Booth to sort out the budget in the same manner as a husband will tell his wife. Booth enthusiastically takes the feminine role to take advantage of the situation and take a bigger share from Lincoln’s pay.

Booth’s bitter allegation of impotence is directed not only at Lincoln’s manliness but also at Lincoln’s profession. When Lincoln wears his costume with whiteface, his face looks like a whiteface that is shriveled up when customers shoot at him with black pop guns. Booth also claims that Lincoln’s wife Cookie had thrown him out because of his impotence and came to Booth to find her sexual fulfillment.

Booth helps his brother in practicing his moves by telling him to scream, shout but Lincoln explains that the customers will not like the murder scene to look like it is real. Booth is inquisitive to make it look real and questions him if somebody comes and shoots him with a real gun. Thus, Booth gives implicit hints about his motives of causing a catastrophe.

In Scene Four, Booth secretly listens to Lincoln's sound patter while Lincoln throws cards all alone in the middle of the night. In Scene Five, Booth is again set to display his grand date with Grace but Grace does not turn up at his room. Booth wants Lincoln out of the room so that his presence does not jinx the place. After both of them are demoralized because Lincoln has lost his job, their nostalgic recollection of their parents and childhood memories help create a cordial bonding so that Lincoln finally instructs Booth the art of becoming a 3-card monte hustler.

The last scene, Scene Six brings about a total reversion of circumstances. Lincoln is again his former self as a rich, successful 3-card monte hustler, enjoying the demand of all men and women at Luckys. Booth, who was secretly hiding in the room overhears Lincoln's proud monologue and is filled with envy. Initially, he tells Lincoln to leave his room because he will be marrying Grace very soon. The scene reveals that Booth is psychologically motivated to take a drastic act. He closes the door in advance, clicks Lincoln's solo photo for the raggedy family album, informs Lincoln that he will name his future son after him and finally challenges him into a realistic game of 3-card monte with real cash. In the game, Lincoln as the responsible elder brother repeatedly tries to prevent any disaster by not desiring to play with real cash with his blood brother. Lincoln even attempts to return Booth's inheritance money before his last attempt to tear open the nylon stocking. The final calamity occurs at the point when Booth's inheritance of a lifetime is about to be destroyed by Lincoln. Thus, the historical scene is repeated again, this time between two brothers. However, Booth's sobbing and piercing shrieks holding the dead Lincoln implies that Booth will surely regret this dastardly act for a lifetime.

## ***12.6 AFRICAN AMERICAN STRUGGLE FOR IDENTITY***

The African American people have lived a thoroughly victimized life in USA right from the days of slavery. Slavery was legally abolished in 1865 by President Abraham Lincoln. Even after that the black people have been victims of racial prejudice and discrimination, disenfranchisement, abuse, inequality and

inferiority complex. The black people have always had to view themselves by what the African American author and activist, W. E. B. Du Bois's concept of "double-consciousness." In his book, *The Souls of Black Folk*, he says about "a peculiar sensation" experienced by blacks in America. It is "a 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." (p.3) The black people mostly saw themselves as victims of contempt through the gaze of the white people. Another fact is that in the history of slavery, the black people could neither own a family nor a home of their own. The family members of the slaves were auctioned and sold at the whims and fancies of the white masters. So, the family constitutes a rather significant aspect in the struggle for African American identity.

If the question is asked, does racism exist in the twenty-first century in USA; what will be the answer. The answer is yes. Although America has legally dismantled racism, racism still makes its presence in subtle ways in life. The critic Andrea J. Goto in the essay "Digging Out of the Pigeonhole: African-American representation in the plays of Suzan-Lori Parks," says, "Does that mean racism no longer exists? Absolutely not. It only means that now we must look harder and longer into our language, history, and movements to extract that mold of racism harming our democratic potential. The extraction requires new tools—new ways of seeing, acting, and speaking that may seem unconventional, if not outright strange. Parks rises to the challenge. Her plays, despite all of their ambiguity and strangeness, provide a means to dislodge this mold from the nooks and crannies of our national character." (p.107) The very fact that the supreme motif of the play *Topdog/Underdog* is the repeated demise of President Abraham Lincoln, who is a savior of the black people, demonstrates the fact that racism has not ceased to exist in America.

Lincoln and Booth are two black brothers who share a squalid room with space and furniture for one person only, suggesting their struggle to own a proper home of their own in a hostile world which treats them as second-class citizens. According to Lincoln they live in the "Third World" with no running water, sink

and toilets. America is considered as the First World for people across the globe but it is a “Third World” in terms of giving facilities and equal amenities to the black people.

Lincoln and Booth had been named by their father after a famous President and an infamous actor because it was his idea of a joke. Both of them had Americanized names. One of the reasons for Lincoln to be recruited by a white boss for his present job is because he shares the same name as the person he needs to act the entire day. So, Lincoln’s name has helped him to achieve an honest job and livelihood. When the younger brother wants to change his name, Lincoln gives a most apt advice, keeping in mind the double-conscious nature of their lives, that keeping an african name can hinder one’s employment possibilities in America,

**“Lincoln-** You gonna call yrself something african? That be cool. Only pick something thats easy to spell and pronounce, man, cause you know, some of them african names, I mean, ok, Im down with the power to the people thing, but, no ones gonna hire you if they cant say yr name. And some of them fellas who got they african names, no one can say they names and they cant say they names neither. I mean, you don’t want yr new handle to obstruct yr employment possibilities.” (p.18)

Lincoln’s recruitment is based on racial discrimination because he is paid less than what a white guy would have got for the same job. As Booth says, “Go on, say it. “White.” Theyd pay you less than theyd pay a white guy.” (p.34) Despite this fact, Lincoln has to look more presentable than the other workers. When Lincoln’s artificial beard gets ripped, his boss tells that they will buy him a new beard but the price will be deducted from his pay. Lincoln vents his anger at his white boss in this way in scene four,

**“Lincoln-** Hate falling asleep in this damn shit. Shit. Ripped the beard. I can just hear em tomorrow. Busiest day of the week. They looking me

over to make sure Im presentable. They got a slew of guys working but Im the only one they look over every day. “Yr beards ripped, pal. Sure, we’ll getcha new one but its gonna be coming outa yr pay.” Shit. I should quit right then and there. I’d yank off the beard, throw it on the ground and stomp it, then go strangle the fucking boss. Thatd be good. My hands around his neck and his bug eyes bugging out. You been ripping me off since I took this job and now Im gonna have to take it outa yr pay, motherfucker. Shit.

(Rest)

Sit down job. With benefits.” (59)

It shows that the African American people are bound to stick to a job despite being racially victimized. Lincoln is nevertheless fired to be replaced by a wax dummy and he could retain his job with a greater cutback or reduced pay. Lincoln left his dishonest pastime of hustling to become “Honest Abe” but the ongoing racial manifestation in America turned him into a hustler once again.

Suzan-Lori Parks has mentioned in the Introduction to the play that “this is a play about family wounds and healing.”(p.4) Lincoln and Booth are traumatized victims who have been abandoned by their parents when they were sixteen and eleven respectively. They are not aware of any specific reason as why their parents had abandoned them. The probable reasons as thought by them are their parents extramarital affairs, struggle against racial bias or simply the fact that their parents considered them as burden. They are just left with the memories attached to the raggedy photo album. According to Dr Dori Laub and Shoshana Felman, “Trauma survivors live not with memories of the past, but with an event that...has no ending, attained no closure, and therefore, as far as the survivors are concerned, continues into the present and is current in every respect.” (p.69) Both the brothers were very attached to their parents. Lincoln was particularly attached to his father due to which he received his inheritance from his father. Lincoln also accompanied his father when he went to meet with other women. Booth was particularly attached to his mother and received his

inheritance from her. Booth also knew about his mother's affair with her "Thursday man." Both the brothers are grieved with the probability that although their parents got separated with a gap of two years, they might have planned to reunite and begin another family as they might not have liked Lincoln and Booth.

Lincoln and Booth's parents were rich, successful, owned a decent home and a car. Their father had a decent job for which he had to polish his shoes every night. Their mother made good food, read books to her children and checked that they wore good clothes with all the buttons stitched. They were a contented family but these circumstances are out of the ordinary for an African American family. Lincoln felt that their Mom and Dad struggled against something invisible which did not let them live in peace. The invisible thing which was beyond the grasp of Lincoln and Booth in their childhood was probably the bitter implication of racism which could not tolerate the standard of living and happiness of their family.

Lincoln and Booth are two different individuals when it comes to their attitude towards preservation of their familial memories. Whereas Booth preserved memories, Lincoln destroyed them. When their father had abandoned them, Lincoln had burnt all his clothes which Booth was planning to wear when he grows up. As Booth says,

**"Booth-** He had some nice stuff. What he didnt spend on booze he spent on women. What he didnt on them two he spent on clothes. He had some nice stuff. I would look at his stuff and calculate thuh how long it would take till I was big enough to fit it. Then you went and burned it all up."  
(p.33)

Booth is the younger brother who is more vulnerable because he needs somebody to help him grow up. Booth is the more traumatized, more psychologically bruised among the two brothers. In a psychological manner, he considered Lincoln as a father figure, as a mentor and guide for survival. As he says,

**“Booth-** I didnt mind them leaving cause you was there. That’s why Im hooked on us working together. If we could work together it would be like old times. They split and we got that room downtown. You was done with school and I stopped going. And we had to run around doing odd jobs just to keep the lights on and the heat going and thuh child protection bitch off our backs. It was you and me against thuh world, Link. It could be like that again.” (p.74)

The ending of the play can also be interpreted from a psychoanalytical point of view. As Booth thought of Lincoln as a paternal figure, there is a probability of an oedipal conflict. Oedipus Complex is a psychoanalytical term in which a male child has a special liking for his mother and disliking for his father. Booth was specially attached to his mother and preserved her inheritance against all odds. The final tragedy happened when Lincoln suspected the mother’s trust, as when he questioned whether the nylon stocking contained any real money. Lincoln’s attempt at destroying the memorial of the mother led Booth to kill Lincoln. So, apart from other reasons, the family psychoanalytical angle also has a role in the psychologically-motivated tragedy.

### ***12.7 DRAMATIC DEVICES IN TOPDOG/UNDERDOG***

The first line written by Kevin J. Wetmore Jr. in the Introductory chapter of his casebook on Suzan-Lori Parks is “Many challenges await those who attempt to compile a casebook on Suzan-Lori Parks. More than one scholar has abandoned a critical analysis of her work because her most recent play does not fit into a preconceived notion or theory of what a ‘Suzan-Lori Parks play’ is.” (p.xvii) It is true that her plays use certain dramatic devices which do not give a clear understanding. For example, any member of the audience for *Topdog/Underdog* will think that Grace is a real character. However, it is only in the last scene when Booth says that he has popped her and Grace is dead, clarifies that Grace is just an imaginary device.

Suzan-Lori Parks has a formula which she uses in several of her plays. It is 'rep and rev' which means repetition and revision. In her plays, many things are repeated but revised. According to Henry Louis Gates Jr. repetition and revision is a form of signifyin(g). In the book, *The Signifying Monkey* (1988), Gates has coined the term, 'repetition and revision, or repetition with a signal difference. *Topdog/Underdog* is a form of 'rep and rev' of Parks's play, *The America Play*. It has the same plot device of a black man pretending to be Abraham Lincoln for providing entertainment to customers. However, Parks has revised the play because Lincoln is unrelated to the Foundling Father. *Topdog/Underdog* is a play about the brothers and the memories of their family.

The game of 3-card monte hustling is the most important device used in the play. The repeated sound patten echoes throughout the play but a careful audience listener can see that Booth and Lincoln's sound patten are slightly different. It is an example of Parks's use of repetition and revision. The play continuously echoes the patten which begins this way,

**Booth-** Watch me close watch me close now: who-see-thuh-red-card-who-see-thuh-red-card? I-see-thuh-red-card. Thuh-red-card-is-the-winner. Pick-thuh-red-card-you-pick-uh winner. Pick-uh-black-card-you-pick-uh-loser. Theres-thuh-loser, yeah, theres-the-black-card, theres-thuh-other-loser-and-theres-thuh-red-card, thuh-winner. (p.11)

Lincoln begins his patten in this manner,

**Lincoln-** (((Lean in close and watch me now: who see thuh black card who see thuh black card I see thuh black card black cards thuh winner pick thuh black card thats thuh winner pick thuh red card thats thuh loser pick thuh other red card thats the other loser pick thuh black card you pick thuh winner. Watch me as I throw thuh cards. Here we go.))) (p.61)

So, the play uses repetition and revision to augment the situational crisis of the conflict between the brothers to dominate the field of hustling. Hustling is also an embodiment of the trickster myth. The image of a hustler is an iconic African American image, which is a means for oppressed people to become rich

in an otherwise dominant capitalist American system. (There is a relation between the trickster myth and Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s concept of signifyin(g). Gates have used the conversation found in African American narrative poetry between the trickster, The Signifying Monkey and the oppressor, The Lion. It is seen that the Monkey is able to outwit his strong oppressor, the Lion using the same language of the Lion but in a different manner. The Monkey uses figurative language which is not understood by the Lion.)

The setting of the play in all the scenes is the single “seedily furnished rooming house room” (p.11) which revealed from the beginning that only one brother can dominate over it at a time. The critic Una Chaudhuri has described about the claustrophobic room in these words, “instead of openness and diffused spatiality that so powerfully conveyed the searching nature of her [Suzan-Lori Parks] earlier dramaturgy, this stage is not just a room, but an archetypal room, a room with a vengeance...A very emblem of limits and boundaries.” (p.289) The room is used as a device to not only show the squalid poverty of African American people but also the conflict of urban black males who do not have the means for social mobility and consequently take revenge on each other to usurp the limited space available to them.

Grace is a device used by the two brothers specially Booth to boast about his superior masculinity. Grace is the imaginary person who has been thoroughly objectified by the two brothers as a sex object, “a sexmachine” in the words of Lincoln. The fact that Booth tells in the last scene that he has killed Grace at a time when he was inside his room all along clarifies that he has been improvising the story about their relationship all through the play.

## **12.8 SUMMING UP**

In this unit, we have learnt about one of the important playwrights Suzan-Lori Parks. After reading *Topdog/Underdog* with all its major themes and issues, we hope that you would be able to compare the two plays we had discussed in these units. You may compare *Fences* and *Topdog/Underdog* as

plays depicting black predicament in a racist society and the price one has to pay to fulfill his/her dream.



### 12.9 ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS

1. Discuss the fraternal relationship between Lincoln and Booth?
2. Do you think the final murder of Lincoln by Booth is an impulsive act or a psychologically-motivated act? Is the murder justified in the play?
3. How is the African American family presented in the play? How do you situate Lincoln and Booth's family in the greater context of African American history?
4. Discuss the African American brothers' struggle for identity in a society dominated by the white race?
5. Can the play *Topdog/Underdog* be justified as a metatheatrical play or a postmodern play?
6. Can Lincoln and Booth's clash for power be demonstrated as clash for a dominant masculine identity?
7. Discuss the dramatic devices used in the play.



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## **MODULE V: AMERICAN DIASPORIC/MIGRANT FICTION**

## **UNIT V: SANDRA CISNEROS' *THE HOUSE ON MANGO STREET***

### **UNIT STRUCTURE**

- 13.0 Introduction
- 13.1 Learning Objectives
- 13.2 Historical Background
- 13.3 Sandra Cisneros: Life and Works
- 13.4 Reading *The House on Mango Street*
- 13.5 Major Themes
- 13.6 Major Characters
- 13.7 Writing Style/Tone
- 13.8 Summing Up
- 13.9 Assessment Questions
- 13.10 References and Recommended Readings

### **13.0 INTRODUCTION**

Diasporic fiction is characterised by a sense of longing for another world – a world left behind in the quest for a new life in a new land. It is a body of literature written by authors outside their native country. American migrant fiction is replete with rich and varied expressions of immigrant lives. The presence of many ethnic communities, plurality of languages and culture, multiple nationalities ensure that American migrant fiction is as colourful as it is diverse. Migration literature in America covers the varied experiences of African Americans/Blacks, Asian Americans as well as Chicanos and other ethnic communities. Within such broad terms, these minority groups are further divided into various subgroups. For instance, although the term Asian American would imply any Asian in the United States, the truth is that the experience of migration would be very different for a Korean American from a Pakistani American. And this is reflected in the literature of the different diasporic groups.

For a long time, the bulk of American migration literature was produced by Black writers. The latter half of the twentieth century saw the emergence of writers from many other communities/ethnic backgrounds. There was a sudden proliferation of writings from other immigrant communities. More and more women began to write which resulted for the first time in the representation of the non white, “ethnic”, immigrant women experience. Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* (1976) remains a seminal book despite its many criticism because of the way it invented a new language for the ethnic women’s fiction. With the publication of Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987), a new standard of immigrant writing was reached. Immigrant narratives could no longer restrict itself to the recording of one’s experience. Instead writing had become a weapon of criticism – a counter of resistance – that threatened to shred to tatters the complacency of its readers as well as the wider society.

But no matter the community or the time or the place represented, such fiction often finds itself concerned with the human subject trying to negotiate the pull between alienation and assimilation in their new home. The immigrant always finds herself the “other” in her interaction with the world. We shall keep this aspect of immigrant fiction in mind while going through Sandra Cisneros’ *The House on Mango Street*.

### **13.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES**

In this unit, we shall discuss Sandra Cisneros’ *The House on Mango Street* (1983). We shall do this by discussing the themes and ideas central to the novel, and by contextualising these ideas within the background history from which these novels emerged. By the end of this unit, you shall be able to:

- acquaint yourself with the life and work of Sandra Cisneros
- learn about Cisneros’ contributions to contemporary American fiction
- identify the distinctive writing style used in her fiction
- write about the themes and issues that are of primary concern in the novels

- understand the immigrant condition in the United State

### **13.2 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

This particular unit is designed to familiarise you with a text which deal with immigrant experiences in America. The history of the United States of America is a history of its immigrants. Immigrants from all over the world have shaped as well as defined the essence of what it means to be an “American”. Yet the process of assimilation has worked negatively time and again to alienate certain sections of people, turning them into a marginalized community. This condition has resulted in the creation of some new voices in American literature, writers who celebrate their uniqueness, their differences from the mainstream American culture. Some of them are more for assimilation and others are more for the celebration of their ethnic identities, but whichever the case, these writers have succeeded in bringing about the issue of immigration into dominant discourse. Sandra Cisneros belongs to such a group of writers. Her experience of being a Chicana (term for female Mexican-American) has marked her for life, colouring all her works. *The House on Mango Street* draws quite a lot upon the real life experiences of its author. Like Esperanza, Cisneros too goes on to find her identity and peace through writing. Writing and recording such experiences become a way of legitimatizing those experiences, proving that there are truths beyond the golden American Dream.

### **13.3 SANDRA CISNEROS: LIFE AND WORKS**

Sandra Cisneros was born in Chicago in 1954, the lone daughter among six brothers in an immigrant Mexican family. For most of her childhood, she was shifting between the two countries. Her education suffered as did her childhood because of this. The constant shifting made lasting friendships impossible and growing up, Cisneros found herself a lonely child. This later influenced her to pursue a career in writing. The fact that her mother was an avid reader also helped. Humboldt Park where the family resided for some time became the chief inspiration behind *Mango Street*. The predominantly Puerto Rican

neighbourhood was to Cisneros a place from which one needed to escape in order to find oneself.

Cisneros' writings were encouraged by her high school teacher. Initially she tried to mould her voice to the likes of her favourite male writers but after completing her masters in Fine Arts from the Iowa Writer's Workshop, she finally realized the uniqueness that her own voice carries situated as she was at the edge of American mainstream culture. She started to celebrate her social position as an outsider, her writings started to be concerned with the uncomfortable premise of the immigrants, legal and illegal, that made up a large part of the American population.

Cisneros' works are primarily concerned with the process of identity formation. Her own identity – as a woman, as a Chicana/Latina, as a non-white – comes to form a pattern throughout her oeuvre. She questions the inherent patriarchal set-up of the Mexican society that continues to exploit women by expecting them to conform to one of the three stereotypes – of La Virgen de Guadalupe, the mother and the maiden figure, La Malinche, the figure of female sexuality that is violated and untrustworthy, and La Llorona, the grieving woman who loses everything while trying to assert herself. Cisneros in her writing, both in prose and poetry, tries to regain control over women's sexuality. Her characters are often shown negotiating to form an identity straddling two cultures, two languages and two nations.

#### **13.4 READING THE HOUSE ON MANGO STREET**

*The House on Mango Street* is a collection of short, poetic vignettes (sketches) that reveals first-hand the lived experience of young Esperanza Cordero. It is a bildungsroman, an experience novel, where readers first meet a twelve year old Esperanza and accompanies her in her journey towards maturity. The novel opens with the Cordero family moving to the house on Mango Street. The family consists of the parents, the sons — Carlos and Kiki, and Esperanza and her sister, Nenny. The house is not at all what Esperanza expected it to be.

She had in mind a proper house in a respectable neighbourhood; it was nevertheless, an improvement from the earlier houses they had lived in. More importantly, the house was their own property.

In the course of the next few chapters, the life and world on Mango Street is revealed little by little through Esperanza's record of her experiences. The sharp line demarcating the genders is revealed innocently through her naïve perplexity at her brothers' refusal to talk to her in public. The loneliness of an adolescent child is brought to the fore by her longing for a best friend. Esperanza's dislike of her own name reveals her awareness of the duality she is living in where her beautiful Spanish name becomes a mouthful when uttered in English. Her longing to change her name reflects her desire to change her circumstances, her social position.

Esperanza's first friend in the neighbourhood is Cathy. Cathy moves away a week after they become friends. This is one defining quality of Mango Street; it is only a place of transit, a place where people stop when they are going someplace else. Cathy offends Esperanza by telling her that their reason for moving away was because the neighbourhood was no longer made of good people. Esperanza goes on to befriend Lucy and Rachel, two Chicana sisters, offending Cathy. The three of them, with contribution from Nenny, buy a bike which they take turns riding around the block.

Esperanza and Nenny do not look alike yet they share a lot of similarities. Together they explore the neighbourhood, going into a junk store and having their first experience of a music box. Meme Ortiz's family moves into Cathy's house with his dog. They rent the basement apartment to a Puerto Rican family. Louie, the son of the family, is a friend of Esperanza's brother. One day, a cousin of Louie arrives in a car and with much fanfare gives a ride to all the neighbourhood kids. He ends up hitting a streetlight while trying to escape the police though and is arrested. Marin is Louie's cousin and stays with the family. She is sassy and young and loves wearing make-up. She befriends the younger girls and tells them about all kinds of stuff related to boys. Her claim of having

a boyfriend back home in Puerto Rico lends a romantic air to her. Her information is rather unreliable as she is quite superstitious and has a strong imagination about meeting a rich man and marrying him. The reader is given the impression that a sad future awaits her as the vignette ends with a future image of Marin waiting on a street still waiting for her love.

Gradually Esperanza grows into her neighbourhood. She does not find it frightening despite its share of a few weird characters. She instead feels uncomfortable when she finds herself in non-Chicana surroundings. Through the prism of the Vargas family is revealed the downfall of an entire household resulting from a single mother being abandoned by her husband. Rosa Vargas is incompetent to run her family and the children become delinquents for lack of proper guidance. Even the community, after repeated attempts, gives up on the family, choosing to ignore the accidental death of the child, Angel Vargas. In contrast, Alicia is a motherless girl trying to escape her situation by going to college. The chief opposition comes from her father who dictates that a woman's job is looking after the house.

Through the children's different views on clouds, the different temperaments of the children are revealed. Darius, an outwardly tough guy, thinks that one particular cloud looks like God. Nenny insists on naming the clouds by familiar names of people like Lisa and Ted. Esperanza is concerned with the actual names of the clouds. Lucy and Rachel relate the clouds to everyday objects.

The girls' first brush with sexuality occurs with the incident of the high-heeled shoes. The girls wear these old, high-heeled shoes and are surprised to find themselves transformed into "women", vulnerable to adult attention. Their fun in dressing up abruptly ends when a drunk tries to kiss Rachel in exchange of a dollar. Thoroughly shaken, the girls rush back to Mango Street and hide the shoes, which are later thrown away by Rachel's mother. When they realize it, instead of being upset over the loss of the shoes, the girls are relieved.

Esperanza has a mortifying incident at school when she tries to have her lunch there instead of having it at home. Only students whose houses are far away are allowed to have packed lunch in the school canteen. The Sister Superior points to some sorry apartments up the street and accuses her of living there. Although Esperanza's own house is much nicer than what is being pointed, she nods her head, realizing that the Sisters consider her as coming from such a background.

At her cousin's baptism, Esperanza refuses to dance despite her beautiful outfit because she is conscious of her mismatched shoes. But when she is finally convinced to dance by Uncle Nacho, she ends up having a lot of fun. She also gradually grows aware of her sexuality as she exults over the fact that one particular boy had his eyes on her. The girls are all growing up gradually with the usual confusion and discomfort about the body and their own bodies in particular. Nenny though is still too young to understand much of the other girls' talk.

Esperanza gets her first summer job at Peter Pan Photo Finishers where she had to match negatives with prints. She had to lie about her age because she is underage. She is not aware of the office etiquettes and goes to the coatroom to have her lunch. There she meets an Oriental man who she thought was quite likeable but who tricks her into kissing him and does not let go.

Esperanza's grandfather dies and for the first time, she sees her father cry. As the oldest, it is her duty to tell the others to be quiet and not play that day. She realizes all of a sudden that she too might lose her father all of a sudden and this makes her hold on to her father fiercely. Esperanza and her friends are convinced that they shall go to hell because they cruelly imitated Aunt Lupe, a bedridden invalid, for fun just before her death. Aunt Lupe was once a strong, beautiful swimmer but she has been sick for so long that for Esperanza and her friends her sickness is a normal thing. They had quite liked her; she had listened to their stories and had encouraged Esperanza to keep writing, telling her that it would keep her free. Esperanza hauntingly records that she might have decided

to die so as to allow space for a new wife to her husband, a free childhood for her children.

Elenita is a “witch woman”, a fortune-teller who predicts the future for five dollars. She does a Tarot reading and tells Esperanza that she has jealousy and sorrow and luxury in her future. She also predicts “a home in the heart”.

Marin meets a handsome young man, Geraldo, at a dance. While leaving, he has an accident and dies. She knows nothing about him except his first name. He is unidentifiable. Marin is much moved by this incident, by the fact that his family and friends shall never know what had befallen this young man, who spoke no English, so far from home.

Edna owns the big building next door to Esperanza. She is a cruel landlord often causing her tenants considerable trouble. Ruthie is her grown-up imbecilic daughter. She is friends with the children but quite at a loss as to how to deal with the grown-up world. She is married and lives under the impression that her husband would come and take her away soon.

Earl is one of Edna’s tenants. He is a jukebox repairman who works by night and sleeps by day. He keeps bringing different women to his house which causes confusion among the neighbours as to who his wife really is.

Esperanza has her first stirrings of feelings when she notices Sire. They carry out a silent flirtation of glances, but he has a girlfriend Lois. Despite her parents warnings about people like Sire and Lois, Esperanza cannot help fantasizing about Sire.

Esperanza then recounts the life of four women in the neighbourhood. Mamacita is the new character in the neighbourhood who cannot speak English. She lives inside with her baby boy in the third floor apartment. She does not come out because her English is limited to a handful of words. She is homesick and sings songs that remind her of her homeland. Her sadness is complete when her son starts speaking his first words in English. In contrast to Mamacita’s self-imposed imprisonment, Rafaela is literally kept locked in by her husband

because he is threatened by her looks and is afraid that she might escape. Her desire to go out and dance remains unfulfilled. Even the women who do get the chance to dance at bars are always at risk of being confined to their homes by their husbands.

Sally is another beautiful girl who wants to enjoy the lighter things in life but is restrained by her father from going out after school. Minerva is only two years older than Esperanza but is married with two children. Her husband leaves and comes to her at his convenience but she accepts all his abuse silently.

Gradually Esperanza becomes aware of her family's futile dreams of owning a beautiful house. She also rejects the traditional roles dictated by the society for women. She wants the power of men as well as to have men in her power. In her pursuit of self-improvement, she is encouraged by her mother who gave out because of embarrassment caused by want.

Sally is often beaten by her father who wishes to control her. She gets into trouble if she is caught talking to boys by her father. Yet she is more into grown-up games with boys. Esperanza does not understand their flirtation and goes to save Sally from what she considers Sally's exploiters, but is dazed to find out that Sally is there by her own volition. In that one moment, Esperanza grows out of her childhood. She is later sexually abused by a group of boys at a carnival where she had gone with Sally. She keeps blaming Sally for the incident because of the fact that she was not there to save her. She is haunted by the incident, more so by the fact that her sexual encounter was nothing like what is being projected in movies or books. Sally marries before turning fourteen. She marries an older man who keeps her caged in his house. She spends her time looking at the stuff in her house, trying to derive pleasure from her ownership of those things.

Esperanza meets three old sisters at the wake held for Lucy and Rachel's baby sister. They ask her to make a wish and promise that it will come true. One sister tells her to come back for the others once she leaves Mango Street, because she will always retain Mango Street inside her. Esperanza is embarrassed at being found out, for that was what her wish was.

The novel ends with Esperanza asserting that she is a writer foremost. She tries to arrange everything that has gone before by saying that she is going to write a story about a girl who did not want to belong. Her writing sets her free. She is certain of leaving Mango Street but she will leave only to come back.

### **13.5 THEMATIC CONCERNS**

#### **Alienation and Assimilation**

“... what I remember most is Mango Street, sad red house, the house I belong but do not belong to.”

The troubles of most of the characters in the book arise from a deeper sense of alienation that they experience. This alienation arises from their inability to connect to the world around them. This is a similar motif across migration literature. Migration literature often deals with the hardships of eking out a living in a new land, the hostility of the receiving population, the confusion arising from negotiating with alien customs, the generation gap between the first generation immigrants and their America born children. Uprooted from the familiar world, immigrants often find themselves at odds with the culture and way of life in the new world. This often results in the characters' withdrawal from active participation in the mainstream world. This alienation from the immediate circumstances is also very much a result of more concrete difficulties like the inability or limited fluency in speaking the native language, finding oneself in a different socio-economic position, discovering that one is part of a community that is not welcome in the new country. Yet living through such terrible conditions, the immigrants long for nothing more than to be accepted and assimilated into the mainstream culture.

The characters in *The House on Mango Street* often keep to their own neighbourhood because that is the one place where they are normal. When any character ventures out into the bigger world outside, bad things happen to them. Yet the outer world is the real America of one's aspirations. For the people in Mango Street, the neighbourhood is only a place of transit, a place to stay till

you can move elsewhere. Esperanza feels uncomfortable when she is out of the neighbourhood. Experiences like the one where the Sister Superior humiliates her, alienates her further. Yet she realizes that she must escape Mango Street. She understands that she would always be someone who shall be dangling in the cusp of belonging and alienation, someone who shall never be at home anywhere, not in Mango Street, not outside Mango Street. This acceptance of her alienated condition is what would eventually lead to Esperanza's integration with the world outside.

### **Negotiating adolescence**

Much of Esperanza's troubles can be connected to her age. The dawn of adolescence brings in its stride issues of adjustment and rebellion. The young find themselves in a rebellious mood without really understanding what it is they seek. The girls living in Mango Street lack proper guidance that can shape their growing sexual awareness. Poverty, patriarchy and lack of education have condemned the people of the neighbourhood to be unconcerned about children. Esperanza and her friends are left on their own at the precise age when they should have had the utmost care. Minerva in her teens is a mother with two children. Sally finds a way of rebelling against her father by kissing strange boys. The teetering high-heels that seem like fun to the young girls soon reveal itself as too adult in its connotation.

### **Home as prison**

Home in Mango Street is not indicative of an anchor but rather it highlights the sense of displacement. The houses seldom become home there because the residents lack the conditions or the spirit to turn these into homes. Home often becomes a prison, trapping its inmates, especially women, inside against their will. Mango Street is only a temporary place to reside when one is going someplace else. No one belongs there; no one wants to belong there. Esperanza is embarrassed of her house and couldn't wait to see the day she would leave Mango Street. Alicia is the only character who seems to understand that despite

its unlikeable characteristics, *Mango Street* is especial and defining in its own way.

### **Struggle for identity**

The novel abounds with characters who are struggling to arrive at a definite sense of identity. The women's lives revolve around their men and their family. Their identity as an individual is subservient to their identity as a woman. Yet others like Esperanza and Alicia are trying to establish themselves as independent career women. Esperanza's strong search for her own identity leads her to hate her own name, her locality, her very life. Then there are characters like Geraldo, unmoored characters without any identity. In a country of immigrants, Geraldo represents the less than ideal life and death that is often the fate of countless anonymous men. Geraldo's death is a reminder of how easy it is to erase all of one's life if it is a life without any identity.

### **Writing as freedom**

Writing becomes a way of setting oneself free. In the world of *Mango Street* if language is power, then writing is the wielding of that power. Aunt Lupe encourages Esperanza to write saying that it would keep her free. Though Esperanza was too young to understand the significance of her aunt's words, she comes to realize it on her own by the end of the novel. Writing and language are interwoven with each other. Ruthie has the soul of a poet but in the absence of language, she is unable to express herself. Mamasita is trapped within the four walls of her apartment because her English is limited to the functional "eight" words and she can express herself only in her songs that have such a "guttural" sound. Esperanza's schooling allows her to dream of escaping *Mango Street*. The writing down of all the traumatic incidents that befell her and her friends makes these incidents tolerable to her because writing is after all one form of letting go.

### 13.6 MAJOR CHARACTERS

*The House on Mango Street* has a large number of characters, each distinctive, yet sharing some similar traits to other characters. Below is given a list of some important characters in the novel:

#### **Esperanza**

Esperanza Cordero is the young narrator of the novel. She is the prism through which Mango Street comes alive to the readers. At the beginning she is a shy, dissatisfied child, unhappy with their new house. In the course of the novel, she gradually transforms from an unhappy child to a naughty adolescent to a mature young girl clear about her goals in life. She emerges from her childish games with her sister and friends into a confusing phase of adolescence when the heart is filled with longing for things unfathomable. Her sexuality that is first awakened by her feelings for Sire becomes a horror when she is sexually assaulted at the carnival. She is very much a product of the patriarchal society that she lives in but towards the end, she is shown taking control of her life, trying to break away from the set of rules that tries to keep everything in its place. She gradually comes to understand and appreciate Mango Street and its inhabitants.

#### **Nenny**

Nenny is Esperanza's younger sister and initially serves as a foil to her. She is often quite childish and does whatever it is she wants. She refuses to adjust to other people's rules, exhibiting a stubbornness that embarrasses her elder sister. She finds no mention towards the later part of the novel which goes on to show Esperanza's gradual distancing from her sister.

#### **Sally**

Sally is crucial in Esperanza's life because she was the one who initially influenced Esperanza's growing sexuality. To Esperanza, she is a flamboyant character who is much abused by her father. Sally derives pleasure and comfort

from her relationships with boys, something that Esperanza is not grown enough to understand. It is not till Esperanza is assaulted at the carnival that she understands the truth about Sally. Sally remains a sorry figure till the end.

### **Rachel and Lucy**

Rachel and Lucy are two sisters with whom Esperanza and Nenny become friends just after moving to Mango Street. They are Esperanza's companions during her childhood and the three are friends in early adolescence but eventually Esperanza leaves them behind to become friends with Sally.

### **Marin**

Marin is a Puerto Rican staying at her relatives' place. She is a romantic and is full of stories about boys. She loves putting on make-up and going to dances. Her childish daydreams come to an end when she witnesses the death of Geraldo, a young man she meets at a dance. This incident sobers her up by its very grimness and finality.

### **Alicia**

Alicia is a neighbourhood girl who is actually the forerunner of Esperanza. Initially introduced as arrogant, Esperanza later comes to realize that Alicia has actually figured out what she wants to do in life. She attends the local university despite her father's vehement opposition, and at the same time runs the entire household as the eldest sibling in a motherless family.

### **The Three Sisters**

The Three Sisters are three old women who foretell Esperanza's future. They seemed to guess the innermost thoughts of Esperanza when they ask her to return to Mango Street after she succeeds in leaving it. Although presented as almost some mysterious characters, the three sisters' predictions are more experience based than prophetic.

Apart from these, *The House on Mango Street* has a wide array of colourful characters. Characters like Aunt Lupe and Mamacita among others are well-defined and unforgettable. Even the minor characters, to whom only a few lines are given, etch themselves on the reader's mind by their detailed presentation.

### 13.7 WRITING STYLE/TONE

*The House on Mango Street* is a collection of vignettes that is non-linear, disconnected to each other, yet progressing towards a coherent end. The apparently loose structure actually frames the disjointedness and the sense of “unbelonging” that the characters experience in Mango Street. The multilingualism of the neighbourhood manifests itself through the frequent use of Spanish phrases in the novel. The accounts being recorded through Esperanza's point of view are always deceptively simple, befitting the language and wisdom of a young child. The innocence with which she describes the brutality of life in Mango Street, recording the experiences without realizing their significance, lends poignancy to the narrative.

### 13.8 SUMMING UP

Thus, we have seen how the immigrant experience has shaped *The House on Mango Street*. We hope that you will read other works by different immigrant groups in America and come to a better and nuanced understanding not only of American fiction but of America as a nation.



### 13.9 ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS

1. How does the structure of the novel relate to the plot?
2. Comment on the ways in which patriarchal control is evident in the lives of the residents of Mango Street.
3. “Mango Street is a microcosm of the different immigrant colonies across the United States.” Comment.

4. What role does “home” play in the world of Mango Street?
5. Do you see Sally as a transgressive figure or a victim figure? Give reasons for your answer.
7. How are the three stereotypical figures of women – the virgin, the whore and the grieving woman – manifest in *The House on Mango Street*?
8. What does “the house” on Mango Street stand for? Justify the title of the novel.



### **13.10 REFERENCES AND RECOMMENDED READINGS**

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## **UNIT VI: AMY TAN'S *THE KITCHEN GOD'S WIFE***

### **UNIT STRUCTURE**

- 14.0 Introduction
- 14.1 Learning Objectives
- 14.2 Historical Background
- 14.3 Chinese American Literature
- 14.4 Amy Tan: Life and Works
- 14.5 Reading *The Kitchen God's Wife*
- 14.6 Thematic Concerns
- 14.7 Major Characters
- 14.8 Writing Style/Tone
- 14.9 Summing Up
- 14.10 Assessment Questions
- 14.11 References and Recommended Readings

### **14.0 INTRODUCTION**

This particular unit is meant to familiarise you with the novel *The Kitchen God's Wife*. While studying the text, we will try to place it in the context of Chinese American literature, a subgroup within American migration literature. At the same time, we will also try to analyse how this particular novel relates to other works by Amy Tan.

### **14.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES**

In this unit, we shall discuss Amy Tan's *The Kitchen God's Wife* (1991). We shall do this by discussing the themes and ideas central to the novels, and by contextualising these ideas within the background history from which these novels emerged. By the end of this unit, you shall be able to:

- acquaint yourself with the life and works of Amy Tan
- comment on Tan's contributions to contemporary American fiction
- identify the distinctive qualities of her writing
- write about the themes and issues that are of primary concerns in the novel
- understand the immigrant condition in the United States

## 14.2 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Let us see how the Chinese immigrant experience has been with respect to America. The Chinese were among the first Asians to arrive at the New World. Lured in by the promise of the California Gold Rush, they contributed vastly to the construction of the Transcontinental Railroad. Yet they were never welcome in the United States and merely tolerated for their service. They provided cheap labour but when work became scarce, attempts were made to restrict Chinese immigration. The restriction that started with the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 succeeded in isolating the Chinese community as well as shaping it in definitive ways. The many Chinatowns spread across the United States bear testimony to the historical persecution of the Chinese that had forced them to adhere to their ethnic identities instead of assimilating into the broader American culture. But the newer generation of Chinese, born and brought up in the States, are more open to negotiation in their ethnic identities than their parent generation. This new generation identifies more with Western culture than with traditional Chinese values. This has brought about a huge generational gap between parents and children, something that manifests itself in contemporary writings by Chinese-American writers. Amy Tan is one of the most prominent writers in contemporary America. *The Kitchen God's Wife*, published in 1991, focuses on the relationship between a first generation immigrant mother and her America born daughter.

## 14.3 CHINESE AMERICAN LITERATURE

Chinese-American literature is the body of work produced by people of ethnic Chinese origin in the United States. Frank Chin, Maxine Hong Kingston,

Amy Tan, Fae Myenne Ng among others are some very prominent names in Chinese-American literature. The most common theme defining Chinese-American literature is the issue of assimilation into and alienation from the mainstream American culture. The patriarchal set-up of Chinese society is often critiqued in the context of the American scenario. The generation gap between the Fresh-of-the-Boat (FOB) Chinese and their American children also come to be of primary importance in the telling of writers like Kingston and Amy Tan. There is significant difference between the writings of Chinese-American male writers and female writers. The women writers are frequently criticized for depicting Chinese culture as sexist and strongly patriarchal.

#### **14.4 AMY TAN: LIFE AND WORKS**

Amy Tan was born in California in 1952 to a family of Chinese immigrants. Her experiences of growing up as an American in a Chinese family contributed significantly to her writing. She lost her father, a Christian minister, and her brother, both to brain tumour at the age of fifteen. Her mother went back to her practice of Chinese beliefs. Thus, Tan was exposed to two very different worldviews while growing up. She also came to know of her mother's traumatic early life in China, a life that she successfully ended by escaping to America, but at the cost of leaving her children behind. This part of her family history became the central premise of her first novel, *The Joy Luck Club*.

Amy Tan's novels, time after time, continue to explore the trajectory of her family as the members move from the interiors of conservative, traditional China to the land of opportunities. Her writings highlight her own tensions with her mother as she, influenced by the greater American tradition of individual freedom, lacks empathy for her mother's desperate attempts at clinging on to her old customs. Death too becomes a recurring motif in her works as we see a single mother struggling to bring up her children. Works like *The Kitchen God's Wife*, *The Bonesetter's Daughter*, *The Joy Luck Club*, etc. all follow a similar kind of pattern where the focus is on mother-daughter relationship.

#### 14.5 READING THE KITCHEN GOD'S WIFE

Now we will try to familiarise you with the text of *The Kitchen God's Wife*. Through an exposition of the text, we shall attempt to discuss the themes and issues central to the novel.

The first part of the novel has Pearl Louie Brandt as its narrative voice. Pearl is the forty-year-old married daughter of Winnie Louie. Pearl is married to a white American, Phil, and they have two daughters. Pearl feels more of an American and is reluctant about going to the large family gatherings. She is suffering from multiple sclerosis, a condition she has kept hidden from her mother. Winnie had lost her husband to stomach cancer and Pearl doesn't want to worry her.

Pearl reluctantly accepts an invitation to attend her cousin, Bao-Bao's engagement party at San Francisco. Just two days before the engagement, Winnie calls to inform Pearl about the death of Aunt Du. Pearl goes to her mother's place with her husband and two daughters.

Once there, Pearl goes to help around the flower shop jointly owned by her mother and Aunt Helen. She is given some paraphernalia connected to the Buddhist funeral of Auntie Du, rituals about which she has no idea. At the wedding, Helen takes Pearl aside and reveals to her that she has malignant brain tumour. She urges Pearl to tell Winnie about her multiple sclerosis saying that she doesn't want to die with such knowledge by herself. Similarly, she urges Winnie to come clean about her past to Pearl, playing the same tumour card.

The narrative voice shifts to Winnie after this as she recounts her life as Weili before coming to America. She was an unwanted child whose mother had disappeared and as such, she was sent away to live with her uncle and aunts' family. She was unhappy there. Her cousin, Peanut, had a secret suitor, Wen Fu. But when Wen Fu came to know about Weili's wealthy background, he sent his

marriage proposal for her instead of Peanut. Her father provided a large dowry. But Wen Fu turned out to be a terrible person – violent, aggressive and cruel. Her dowry too was sold away by her in-laws. She succeeded in stealing and hiding away a few silver chopsticks.

World War II broke out and Weili accompanied Wen Fu to Hangchow where he was in training to become a pilot. There she met Helen, known then as Hulan. She was the wife of Wen Fu's immediate boss. The two became good friends. Hulan was much more experienced compared to Weili and taught her a lot of things. She even sensed Weili's pregnancy before she herself did. Hulan went on to share her past with Weili. She had a sister who became pregnant with Jiaguo's child. But Jiaguo refused to accept or acknowledge her. The sister ended up dying during labour at Jiaguo's place. Overcome by pity and guilt, Jiaguo then married Hulan. It turned out to be a good marriage. Hulan was much freer and in a better state compared to Weili.

Wen Fu raped Weili when she refuses to have sex during her pregnancy. This opened Weili's eyes and she for the first time starts wishing for the death of her husband. The Japanese attacked and the Chinese in their hurry, bombed their own people. Wen Fu, despite being popular among the army, is actually a coward and his boss (Hulan's husband) is quite troubled by him. This results in some friction between Hulan and Weili. The army is moved to Yangchow, a dirty, boring place. Hulan and Weili becomes friends again. A young pilot named Gan quietly fell in love with Weili but he soon died.

The company moved to Nanking. Weili sends for her dowry money from her sister-in-law but the money is sent to Wen Fu who promptly wasted it on a car. She becomes friends with Wan Betty, the telegram operator. She sends for money again but during the chaos of war it is forgotten. Weili, Hulan, their husbands and a few others, escape to Kunming. It is a difficult journey and by the time they reached Kunming, Weili was eight months pregnant. A competitive feeling started to grow in Weili and Hulan's relationship when Weili managed to occupy the better rooms and afford a servant. Weili loses her first child; it was

a stillborn girl. She blames it on the fact that she had dropped a scissor. Wen Fu met with an accident while driving with a girl who died in the accident. Wen Fu himself had lost one eye. Jiaguo wanted to take action but Hulan convinced him not to. Weili had actually hoped that Wen Fu would be put in jail. Wen Fu becomes terrible after his accident, humiliating Weili in public. Weili had another girl child. Wen Fu raped the maid servant and she died while trying to abort Wen Fu's child. When Weili confronted Wen Fu about this, he hit Yiku their child so brutally that she became a problem child. She died but by then Weili was pregnant again. Wen Fu blamed Weili for Yiku's death.

Weili had a son, Danru. She returned from the hospital to find that Wen Fu had installed another woman in the house. She allowed the young woman, Min, to remain so as to be free from her husband at night. Aunti Du came to stay with Hulan. When the story of Min's pregnancy became known, Weili offered to divorce Wen Fu but Wen Fu rejected it and sent Min away.

In the meantime, the outer world was in turmoil. The war had escalated and there were bomb scares every day. Bombs fell on their city as well but they were all unharmed. Weili came to know that Hulan's marriage with Jiaguo was unconsummated. Around Christmas, in 1941, Weili, Hulan and their husbands attend an American dance where Weili meets Jimmy Louie for the first time. He is an American born Chinese man working as a translator for the American Information Service. He gave American names to all the people there. That is how Hulan ended up as Helen and Weili as Winnie. After the party, Wen Fu was furious with Weili and made her sign on divorce papers and then raped her at gunpoint. Weili ran away with Danru the next day but Wen Fu succeeded in finding her as he was helped by Hulan who did not realise the full extent of his viciousness.

In 1945, the war ends and Weili and Hulan parted ways. Weili went back to her father's place but it was in disrepair. During the war, her father had declared for the Japanese under pressure and with the Chinese back in power, he

was in disfavour. He was also disabled by a stroke. Wen Fu immediately assumed control of the house taking over all the finances.

Weili started to look for an opportunity to leave her marriage. She went to visit her uncle and aunts who had raised her. There she came to know about the fact that Peanut had left her husband and was estranged from her family. She was living with the communists which had forced her husband to announce his divorce in newspapers. Once back in Shanghai, Weili went looking for Peanut but she met Jimmy Louie in a serendipitous meeting. They talked and Weili told Jimmy about her life. Jimmy was understanding and in his turn told her of his decision to marry her. When Weili finally met Peanut she came to know about Peanut's wedding to a homosexual. The house where Peanut resided was actually a hiding place for women who escaped from their husbands. The people there promised to help Weili but asked her to get money and jewellery for her escape.

Weili ran away with Danru to Jimmy with the approval of her father. Afraid that Wen Fu might come and take her son away, she sent Danru to Hulan's place where he died of an illness. Wen Fu sued Weili and she was taken to jail. Despite her claims of being divorced from Wen Fu, she was sentenced to two years imprisonment because the divorce papers were not available. Jimmy was sent back to the United States at the behest of Wen Fu. While in prison, Weili got the news of the death of her father.

Auntie Du came to visit Weili in jail with Hulan who was by then married to KuangAn and pregnant with his child. Through the machinations of Auntie Du, Weili was released two months later. Weili made preparations for leaving to America but before leaving, she wanted to have some proof of divorce from Wen Fu. She tricked him into signing the divorce papers but before she leaves, she is raped a last time by Wen Fu. Pearl is the living testimony to that last violence on Weili.

At the end of Winnie's disclosure, Pearl too reveals her news of multiple sclerosis to Winnie. Mother and daughter are finally open and accessible to each

other. The novel ends with Winnie gifting Pearl a statue of the Kitchen God's Wife, whom she names "Lady Sorrowfree", to keep at her altar.

## **14.6 THEMATIC CONCERNS**

### **Women Negotiating Patriarchy**

The Kitchen God's wife is not a goddess; rather she is an abused figure who tries to rise above her hardship only for her efforts to be rejected. The Kitchen God, on the other hand, was a man who neglects his lovely wife and allows her to be thrown out of her house. When he finally realizes his mistake, he throws himself into the fire and gives up his life, at which point he is turned into a god. But the fate of his wife who saw her own husband burning is left untold. This was more or less the plight of the Chinese women in Winnie's world. From Winnie's own mother to Peanut to Hulan's sister, all these women have been victims in a male dominated society. The women lack initiative, even the agency to escape their miserable lives. But nevertheless the women in the novel go on to become their own persons. Once they are in America, Hulan and Weili quickly fit into the shoes of Helen and Winnie. They quickly adapt to the new society, becoming shrewd and capable with some amount of business acumen. They are no longer powerless but have the ability to create even a new goddess for their purpose.

### **Mother-Daughter Relationship**

The mother and daughter in *The Kitchen God's Wife* are not only separated by a generation, they are separated by the philosophy of two different cultures. The mother born in China must reject her past, renew herself in a foreign land and become a new person to survive, to find her voice. The daughter in contrast must acknowledge the "history and myth of their mothers" (Bloom: 105, 2009) in order to find her voice. Language and cultural barriers become such forces that Winnie and Pearl cannot communicate to each other. The daughter feels distanced from her mother because she is not privy to her mother's story. The same was the case with Winnie and her mother. Winnie never finds out what happened to her mother. Since Winnie's story is recounted in hindsight,

the intensity of her feelings regarding the absence of her mother has mellowed down. But when Pearl in the first part of the novel speaks of Winnie, she is much more blunt and vocal about her reluctance in connection with her mother. Yet when they share their stories, all the barriers fall away and the similarity between them becomes apparent.

### **Being Chinese-American**

Hybrid identities are always problematic. Being Chinese-American implies occupying a hyphenated space between what is American and what constitutes Chinese. In the character of Pearl, the struggle for assimilation is seen clearly. She is proud of her identity as an American, choosing to marry someone who is “very” American. She is not interested at all in Chinese traditions or history, nor is she interested in Chinese food. She insists on raising her two daughters as typical Americans. Pearl is all for intermarriage, amalgamation and the mainstream American values. But when it comes to Winnie, she is more interested in holding on to her Chinese cultural values and beliefs. She does not even make an effort to speak English fluently. Nor can she understand what her daughter does for a living. For her it is important to be firmly anchored to her identity as a Chinese woman. Being Chinese-American actually means to live an everyday duality balancing the distinctive characteristics of both identities, a movement which can be traced in the character of Pearl towards the end of the novel.

### **Family Relationships**

Family relationships are of primary importance in the Chinese community. In a strange new country though, the family comes to be even more significant as the only familiar anchor in an otherwise confusing world. In the works of Amy Tan, we see how reconnecting with one’s family becomes the sole means of attaining redemption. Pearl had to mend her relation with Winnie before either of them could begin their journey to recovery. However, Tan does not give us an image of the family as a holy grail that can never be questioned. Instead the idea of family that she presents in her book is one that needs constant attention to function. Families can be a source of strength, but families can also

be a vicious trap that one must escape in order to live one's life to her fullest potential. The life that Winnie led as Weilie with Wen Fu could never have resulted in a sound family. Tan also questions the very definition of family in this book. Helen and Winnie and Du are women unconnected to each other by blood but connected by a greater bond of shared sufferings and experiences. They are closer to each other than any family.

#### **14.7 MAJOR CHARACTERS**

##### **Winnie**

Winnie is the most important character in the novel. The novel traces her life from very childhood to her present life. She is a strong person who had overcome a lot of misfortunes with grit and determination to make a new life for herself in America. Despite being forced to endure a destructive marriage for a long time, she manages to keep her spirit unbroken. Initially she comes across as pushy and manipulative, but as her narrative later explains her transformation from an innocent, village girl, Winnie becomes at once deserving of the reader's sympathy. She remains strong-willed and optimistic towards the very end, and as always, is there for Pearl at the time of her need.

##### **Pearl**

Pearl is the American born daughter of Winnie. She identifies herself as an American first and foremost and initially has no tolerance for the Chinese customs and traditions. Her knowledge of Chinese customs is so hazy that she cannot even give any explanation to the enquiries of her daughters. Grieving for her father, but not being able to vent it out, scars her for life. Her limited access to her mother's background alienates her from her mother. Not knowing how strong her mother is, she feels a need to protect her mother from bad news, therefore hiding the news of her multiple sclerosis. Towards the end, Pearl transforms into a surer person much more at ease with her identity after being fortified by Winnie's story.

## **Helen**

It is Helen's fictitious malignant brain tumour that makes the confessional conversation between Winnie and Pearl possible. Helen and Winnie were best friends once, but now in America, they are sisters, they are family. Despite their occasional fights and misunderstandings, Helen had proved to be a true sister to Winnie time and again. Ever since the War when they came together, Helen had guided Winnie in many practical aspects. She is of cheerful temperament and believes in doing what needs to be done. Though at times jealous of Winnie, Helen had always been her greatest well-wisher.

## **Wen Fu**

Wen Fu was the first husband of Winnie and the father of Pearl. He is a vile character, wicked and capable of all sorts of brutalities and outrageous behaviour. He is the one responsible for all of Winnie's misery. Such an evil person was he that Winnie was never free from terror till news of his death reaches her.

## **Jimmy Louie**

Jimmy Louie was the second husband of Winnie and the one whom Pearl considered her father. He was an American born Chinese and was a good man who consistently supported Winnie. He was the complete opposite of Wen Fu in everything.

Apart from these primary characters, *The Kitchen God's Wife* is full of myriad characters that flesh out the novel. Characters like Auntie Du, the most unassuming character who yet contributes substantially to Winnie's life; Peanut, who underwent a sea-change after her marriage, contribute significantly to the development of the novel.

### 14.8 WRITING STYLE/TONE

The novel presents alternating first person point-of-views. The mother-daughter conflict is captured not just through the obvious statement of differences in their opinions but from their very different style of narration. Chinese myths and legends are interwoven into the narrative of Winnie thereby lending to it a surreal feel. Language too becomes a prominent character in the course of the novel, creating barriers, restricting movement.

### 14.9 SUMMING UP

By now you must have been able to get a general idea about this particular novel as well as Chinese American migration literature. It is a rich body of literature and there are new writers contributing to it everyday. We hope that you will go on to read other works by Amy Tan and other Chinese American writers which would help you to come to a better understanding of the immigrant condition as experienced by this particular group and how it is reflected in their literature.



### 14.10 ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS

1. How does the process of Americanization influence/affect the different characters in the novel?
2. Do you think the representation of patriarchal dominance is especially vehement in *The Kitchen God's Wife*? Give reasons for your answer.
3. Comment on the mother-daughter relationship as depicted in Amy Tan's novels.
4. Comment on the title of the novel –*The Kitchen God's Wife*.
5. Write a note on the character of Wen Fu. How would you justify his actions against Weili?
6. Trace the development of Winnie's character as she grows from Weili to being Winnie.
7. Discuss the prominent themes of Amy Tan's works.

8. Write a brief note on Chinese-American literature. Place Amy Tan in the context of Chinese-American literature.



#### **14.11 REFERENCES AND RECOMMENDED READINGS**

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**JOT DOWN IMPORTANT POINTS**

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