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The Postcolonial Afro-American Identity in August Wilson's "Fences"

By

Muhammad Alsayed Alsawey

Stardom University

Faculty of Arts and Languages

Abstract

This study offers a postcolonial and cultural studies reading of identity formation in ***Fences*** by August Wilson. Situating the play within the sociohistorical context of mid-twentieth-century African American life, the study examines how race, gender, labor, memory, and generational transition shape the construction of identity under systemic oppression. Drawing upon postcolonial theory—particularly concepts of internal colonization, cultural hybridity, subaltern subjectivity, and trauma—as well as cultural studies frameworks of representation, performance, and spatial politics, this research analyzes the Maxson family as a microcosm of broader African American experience.

The study argues that identity in ***Fences*** is not an essential or fixed category but a historically conditioned and socially negotiated process. Troy Maxson embodies a generation shaped by segregation and racial exclusion, whose wounded masculinity reflects both structural injustice and internalized limitation. Rose Maxson emerges as the ethical and emotional center of the play, negotiating race and gender expectations while sustaining communal continuity. The generational tensions between Troy, Cory, and Lyons illustrate the transmission of cultural trauma alongside shifting possibilities in the post–World War II era.

Symbolically, the fence, baseball, and domestic space function as cultural signifiers through which belonging, exclusion, protection, aspiration, and division are articulated. These material and metaphorical structures reveal how identity is constructed within—and against—historical boundaries imposed by racism and economic marginalization.

By integrating postcolonial theory with African American literary analysis, this dissertation contributes to expanding postcolonial discourse beyond traditional imperial geographies to include racialized minorities within the United States. Ultimately, the study demonstrates that ***Fences*** dramatizes African American identity as dynamic, contested, and continuously renegotiated through memory, resistance, and community formation.

Keywords

Postcolonial theory, Afro- American identity, Masculinity, Cultural trauma, Segregation, Representation and Intergenerational conflict.

ملخص الدراسة

تقدم هذه الدراسة قراءةً ما بعد الاستعمارية ودراسات ثقافية لتكوين الهوية في مسرحية "أسوار" لأوغست ويلسون. وبوضع المسرحية ضمن السياق الاجتماعي والتاريخي لحياة الأمريكيين من أصول أفريقية في منتصف القرن العشرين، تتناول الدراسة كيف يُشكّل العرق والجنس والعمل والذاكرة والانتقال بين الأجيال بناء الهوية في ظل القمع الممنهج. وبالاستناد إلى نظرية ما بعد الاستعمار – ولا سيما مفاهيم الاستعمار الداخلي، والتهجين الثقافي، والذاتية المهمشة، والصدمة – بالإضافة إلى أطر الدراسات الثقافية المتعلقة بالتمثيل والأداء والسياسة المكانية، يحلل هذا البحث عائلة ماكسون كنموذج مصغر للتجربة الأمريكية الأفريقية الأوسع.

وتجادل الدراسة بأن الهوية في "أسوار" ليست فئة جوهرية أو ثابتة، بل هي عملية مشروطة تاريخيًا ومتفاوض عليها اجتماعيًا. يجسد تروي ماكسون جيلًا تشكّل بفعل الفصل العنصري والإقصاء العرقي، وتعكس رجولته المجروحة كلاً من الظلم البنيوي والقيود الداخلية. تبرز روز ماكسون كمركز أخلاقي وعاطفي للمسرحية، حيث تتفاوض بشأن التوقعات العرقية والجنسية مع الحفاظ على استمرارية المجتمع. وتُجسد التوترات بين الأجيال، وتحديدًا بين تروي وكوري وليونز، انتقال الصدمة الثقافية جنبًا إلى جنب مع الاحتمالات المتغيرة في حقبة ما بعد الحرب العالمية الثانية.

ورمزيًا، يعمل السياج وملعب البيسبول والفضاء المنزلي كدلالات ثقافية تُعبّر من خلالها مفاهيم الانتماء والإقصاء والحماية والطموح والانقسام. وتكشف هذه البنى المادية والمجازية كيف تُبنى الهوية داخل الحدود التاريخية التي فرضها العنصرية والتهميش الاقتصادي، وضدها.

من خلال دمج نظرية ما بعد الاستعمار مع التحليل الأدبي للأمريكيين من أصل أفريقي، تُسهم هذه الأطروحة في توسيع نطاق خطاب ما بعد الاستعمار ليتجاوز الجغرافيا الإمبريالية التقليدية، ليشمل الأقليات العرقية داخل الولايات المتحدة. وفي نهاية المطاف، تُبين الدراسة أن مسرحية "أسوار" تُجسد الهوية الأمريكية الأفريقية كهوية ديناميكية، ومتنازع عليها، ويُعاد التفاوض عليها باستمرار من خلال الذاكرة والمقاومة وتكوين المجتمع.

الكلمات المفتاحية: نظرية ما بعد الاستعمار، الهوية الأمريكية الأفريقية، الرجولة، الصدمة الثقافية، الفصل العنصري، التمثيل والصراع بين الأجيال

Part I

1. Introduction

The construction of African American identity has long been a central concern in literary and cultural studies. In the United States, the legacy of slavery, segregation, and systemic racism has profoundly shaped African American cultural consciousness, creating a complex interplay between personal, collective, and historical dimensions of identity. August Wilson's *Fences* (1986) is widely regarded as a seminal work that captures the African American experience of the twentieth century, portraying the nuanced struggles of African Americans to assert their identities in a society structured by racial oppression.

Although postcolonial theory traditionally addresses European colonial domination overseas, many scholars have productively applied its insights to the internal colonization and racial subjugation experienced by African Americans. Thinkers such as Frantz Fanon and Homi K. Bhabha provide conceptual tools for understanding fractured identity, mimicry, hybridity, and the psychological effects of systemic racial oppression.

In ***Black Skin, White Masks***, Fanon argues that colonized subjects internalize racial hierarchies, producing alienation and self-division. This concept resonates strongly with African American identity formation in the Jim Crow and post–World War II eras. Similarly, Bhabha's notion of hybridity complicates fixed racial identities and suggests that identity is negotiated in liminal cultural spaces rather than inherited as an essence.

Additionally, W. E. B. Du Bois's concept of "double consciousness," articulated in ***The Souls of Black Folk*****,** provides a foundational framework for understanding African American identity as a dual awareness: seeing oneself both through one's own cultural lens and through the gaze of a racially dominant society. Applying postcolonial theory to ***Fences*** enables us to examine how systemic racism constructs psychological and social boundaries that shape Troy Maxson's self-perception, aspirations, and relationships.

This research proposes to analyze ***Fences*** through the dual lenses of postcolonial theory and cultural studies. Postcolonial theory, though traditionally associated with former colonies, provides a valuable framework for understanding the cultural and psychological impact of historical subjugation on marginalized communities, including African Americans. Cultural studies, with its focus on the interplay

between power, race, class, and cultural representation, offers tools to examine how identity is performed, negotiated, and contested within everyday life and artistic texts.

By integrating these perspectives, this study seeks to explore how Wilson represents identity formation as a dynamic process influenced by historical, social, and cultural forces. The play's focus on the Maxson family, particularly Troy Maxson, illuminates the tensions between individual aspirations, family responsibilities, and communal expectations, reflecting broader struggles within African American communities.

1.1. Background and Rationale

A cultural study, influenced by scholars such as Stuart Hall, emphasizes representation, ideology, and power. Hall's theory of representation argues that meaning is constructed through discourse and cultural production. Literature, therefore, becomes a site where marginalized communities articulate identity and resist hegemonic narratives.

In the case of ***Fences***, Wilson re-centers African American working-class life, challenging dominant American myths of meritocracy and equal opportunity. The play foregrounds lived experience—labor, family, religion, music, and sport—as cultural texts through which identity is negotiated.

Cultural studies also underscore the importance of historical material conditions. The racialized labor system and exclusion from mainstream institutions (such as professional sports and labor unions) shape not only socioeconomic realities but also masculine identity, generational conflict, and self-worth

August Wilson's ***Fences*** is part of his ten-play Pittsburgh Cycle, which chronicles African American life across the twentieth century. "***Fences***" is set in the 1950s, a period of significant social transformation in the United States. The play examines themes such as racial discrimination, intergenerational conflict, gender roles, and the pursuit of the American Dream, all of which impact the characters' sense of self and collective identity.

The historical context is crucial for understanding the formation of African American identity. The legacy of slavery, the Great Migration, and systemic segregation shaped the social and economic realities of African Americans, creating structural barriers to self-actualization. Troy Maxson, the play's protagonist, embodies these tensions. His experiences as a former Negro League baseball player barred from Major League opportunities, and as a father and husband navigating social limitations, reflect the psychological and cultural consequences of oppression.

From a postcolonial perspective, Troy's struggle can be understood as a negotiation of identity in a society still marked by colonial structures of racial hierarchy. The concept of "hybridity" (Bhabha, 1994) is useful here, illustrating how African Americans negotiate between imposed cultural narratives and their own lived experiences. Cultural studies further situates these struggles within broader social and cultural contexts, analyzing the ways in which everyday practices, family dynamics, and community interactions reproduce or resist dominant cultural discourses.

1.2. Research Problem

Despite extensive scholarship on ***Fences***, few studies have explicitly combined postcolonial and cultural studies frameworks to examine African American identity formation. Most existing analyses focus either on sociological readings of the text, emphasizing race and class, or on purely literary interpretations, such as characterization, symbolism, and narrative structure. There is a gap in scholarship that simultaneously addresses the cultural, historical, and postcolonial dimensions of identity formation in Wilson's work.

This research aims to fill this gap by exploring how Wilson negotiates African American identity within the intersections of history, culture, and power, and how *Fences* functions as a cultural text that both reflects and critiques the African American experience.

1.3. Significance of the Study

a. Fills a critical gap by linking postcolonial studies and cultural studies to African American drama.
b. Provides insights into the mechanisms of identity formation within African American communities.
c. Enhances understanding of the role of theater as a medium for cultural representation and critique.

1.4. Objectives of the Study : this study aims

1. To analyze how Wilson portrays the African American experience through a postcolonial lens.
2. To investigate the role of theater in shaping and representing cultural identity.
3. To examine the psychological and social conflicts faced by African American characters within a racially stratified society.

1.5. Research Questions

1- How does ***Fences*** depict the formation of African American identity in the mid-twentieth century?
2- What historical, social, and cultural factors influence identity construction in the play?
3- How can postcolonial and cultural studies frameworks illuminate the tensions between individual and collective identity in Wilson's work?
4- How do the characters' personal experiences intersect with broader community and cultural dynamics?

1.6. Hypotheses

1. African American identity in the play is shaped by characters' struggles against racial discrimination and social pressures.
2. Wilson employs theater as a critical space to reproduce African American cultural experiences and challenge colonial narratives.
3. Reading the text through postcolonial and cultural studies perspectives uncovers layers of conflict between individual agencies and collectividentitiesty, as well as the impact of historical oppression.

1.7. Theoretical Framework

8.1. Postcolonial Studies:

- Examines the relationship between colonial history and cultural identity formation.
- Key concepts: identity, hybridity, cultural resistance.

8.2. Cultural Studies:

- Analyzes the representation of marginalized groups in literature and art.
- Focuses on power dynamics, race, class, and social conflict.

1.8. Methodology

1.8.1.. Research Approach

The study adopts a qualitative, literary-critical approach, combining textual analysis with theoretical interpretation. The research integrates postcolonial and cultural studies perspectives to examine the complex dynamics of identity formation.

1.8.2. Data Collection

- **Primary Source:** August Wilson's *Fences* (1986).
- **Secondary Sources:** Scholarly books, journal articles, and critical essays on Wilson, African American literature, postcolonial theory, and cultural studies.

1.9. Research Plan

1. **Part I: (Introductory Chapter)**
2. **Part II:**
   1. **Literature Review**
   2. **Study Discussion (Study Chapters)**
      1. **Chapter One: Theoretical Framework**
         - Postcolonial theory and African American identity
         - Cultural studies and representation of marginalized communities
      2. **Chapter Two: August Wilson and the Historical Context**
         - The Pittsburgh Cycle and ***Fences***
         - Sociohistorical background: Segregation, the Great Migration, and racialized labor

3. Chapter Three: Character Analysis

- Troy Maxson as a figure negotiating identity under systemic oppression
- Rose Maxson and the negotiation of family, gender, and community roles
- Cory, Lyons, and intergenerational perspectives on identity

4. Chapter Four: Cultural Symbols and Identity

- The fence as metaphor: protection, division, and connection
- Baseball and the denial of opportunity
- Household and community spaces as sites of cultural negotiation

3. Part III: (Concluding Chapter)

1. Implications & Contributions

2. Findings, Suggestions and Recommendations

3. Conclusion

4. References

Part II

1. Literature Review

1.1. August Wilson and African American Drama

August Wilson occupies a central position in African American dramatic tradition. His Pittsburgh Cycle, consisting of ten plays that chronicle African American life across the twentieth century, has attracted extensive scholarly attention. Critics widely agree that Wilson's drama functions not merely as artistic representation but as a cultural archive that preserves African American history, memory, and identity (Shannon, 1995; Elam, 2004).

Scholars such as Harry J. Elam Jr. (2004) argue that Wilson's plays reclaim African American historical narratives that have been systematically marginalized by dominant Euro-American historiography. Elam emphasizes that Wilson's theatrical project is deeply rooted in African American vernacular culture, oral traditions, and communal memory. Similarly, Sandra G. Shannon (1995) highlights Wilson's use of folklore, blues aesthetics, and storytelling as essential tools for articulating Black identity and resistance.

Within this body of scholarship, ***Fences*** has received sustained critical attention due to its focus on family, masculinity, generational conflict, and unfulfilled aspirations. However, much of the early criticism approached the play from sociological or psychological perspectives, emphasizing Troy Maxson's personal failures or moral rigidity rather than situating these traits within broader cultural and historical frameworks.

1.2. Critical Approaches to Fences

Critical readings of ***Fences*** often center on Troy Maxson as a tragic figure whose personal limitations mirror structural racial oppression. Bigsby (2007) interprets Troy as a man psychologically scarred by racism, whose internalized oppression manifests in authoritarian behavior and emotional repression. From this perspective, Troy's identity crisis is deeply entangled with historical exclusion from economic and social mobility.

Other scholars focus on generational conflict as a central theme. Cory's struggle against his father's authority has been interpreted as symbolic of a shifting African American identity in the post-war era (Nadel, 1994). Cory represents a generation with access to opportunities previously denied to their parents, yet still constrained by inherited trauma and racialized expectations.

Feminist and gender-based readings have also contributed to the scholarship. Rose Maxson is often analyzed as a stabilizing moral force who negotiates identity through sacrifice, resilience, and community values (Pereira, 2005). These studies illuminate the gendered dimensions of identity formation but often remain confined to domestic or interpersonal analysis without extending into broader cultural theory.

While these approaches offer valuable insights, they tend to isolate ***Fences*** within realist or psychological paradigms, underexploring its potential as a postcolonial and cultural text that interrogates systemic power relations and historical domination.

1.3. Postcolonial Theory and African American Literature

Postcolonial theory has traditionally been applied to literatures emerging from formerly colonized nations. However, scholars increasingly argue that African American literature can be productively examined through a postcolonial lens due to the shared histories of displacement, cultural erasure, and systemic domination (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 2002).

Homi K. Bhabha's (1994) concepts of hybridity and ambivalence are particularly relevant to African American identity. African Americans exist within a cultural "in-between" space, negotiating imposed white American norms while preserving distinct cultural traditions. This negotiation is evident in *Fences*, where characters simultaneously desire inclusion in the American Dream and resist its exclusionary structures.

Gayatri Spivak's (1988) notion of the "subaltern" further illuminates the silencing of marginalized voices. Troy's repeated storytelling can be read as an act of reclaiming voice and agency within a society that has historically denied African American subjectivity. However, Troy's voice is also constrained, reflecting the paradox of speaking within oppressive structures.

Despite these theoretical affinities, relatively few studies have applied postcolonial frameworks directly to Wilson's drama. Most postcolonial analyses of African American literature focus on novels rather than theater, leaving Wilson's plays underexplored within this critical paradigm.

1.4. Cultural Studies and Identity Formation

Cultural studies, particularly as articulated by Stuart Hall, conceptualizes identity as fluid, constructed, and continually negotiated rather than fixed or essential (Hall, 1990). Identity emerges through representation, discourse, and social practice. This framework is especially useful for analyzing *Fences*, which dramatizes identity formation through everyday interactions, family rituals, work, and storytelling.

Hall's concept of cultural identity as both "being" and "becoming" allows for a nuanced understanding of the characters in ***Fences***. Troy's identity is anchored in past experiences of racial exclusion, while Cory's identity is oriented toward future possibilities. This temporal tension reflects broader cultural struggles within African American communities navigating tradition and change.

Cultural studies scholars also emphasize the relationship between power and representation. ***Fences*** can be read as a counter-hegemonic text that challenges dominant narratives of American success, masculinity, and individualism. Baseball, for example, operates as a cultural symbol that exposes the myth of meritocracy within American ideology.

Although cultural studies have been applied to African American literature, many analyses focus on popular culture or media rather than dramatic texts.

Consequently, Wilson's work remains insufficiently examined as a cultural site where identity is performed and contested.

1.5. Identity, Trauma, and Historical Memory

Another significant strand of scholarship addresses trauma and memory in African American literature. Scholars argue that historical trauma—slavery, segregation, and racial violence—continues to shape African American identity across generations (Eyerman, 2001).

In ***Fences***, Troy's traumatic past functions as a psychological inheritance that shapes his relationships with his family. His inability to envision new possibilities for Cory reflects what scholars describe as "post-memory," where the trauma of one generation constrains the aspirations of the next (Hirsch, 2008).

However, trauma-centered readings often emphasize psychological damage without sufficiently engaging with cultural resistance and identity reconstruction. A postcolonial-cultural approach allows trauma to be understood not only as a source of limitation but also as a catalyst for cultural consciousness and resistance.

1.6. Gaps in Existing Scholarship

Despite the richness of existing criticism, several gaps remain evident:

1. **Limited Postcolonial Engagement:**
Few studies explicitly frame *Fences* within postcolonial theory, despite its clear engagement with colonial legacies of racial hierarchy and exclusion.

2. **Fragmented Theoretical Approaches:**
Existing scholarship often isolates psychological, sociological, or gender-based readings without integrating them into a comprehensive cultural and historical framework.
3. **Underutilization of Cultural Studies:**
While identity is frequently discussed, it is rarely analyzed as a culturally produced and contested process grounded in power relations and representation.

This study addresses these gaps by offering integrated postcolonial and cultural studies reading of ***Fences***, positioning the play as a critical site for examining

African American identity formation within a historically oppressive social structure.

1.7. Contribution of the Present Study

By synthesizing postcolonial theory and cultural studies, this research contributes to August Wilson scholarship in three key ways:

- It reframes ***Fences*** as a postcolonial cultural text rather than solely a realist family drama.
- It offers a multidimensional analysis of identity formation that encompasses history, culture, power, and resistance.
- It expands the application of postcolonial theory to African American drama, enriching both fields.

2. Study Discussion (Study Chapters)

- **Chapter One: Theoretical Framework**

1. Internal Colonization and Racial Subjugation

This chapter establishes the theoretical foundations for a postcolonial and cultural studies reading of ***Fences*** by August Wilson. The central premise of this study is that identity formation in ***Fences*** is neither innate nor purely individual; rather, it is historically conditioned, culturally mediated, and psychologically negotiated within structures of racial power.

Although postcolonial theory emerged primarily in response to European imperial expansion in Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean, its conceptual vocabulary has been fruitfully applied to African American studies. Robert Blauner's (1972) theory of "internal colonialism" argues that racial minorities within the United States experience structural conditions analogous to colonized populations: economic exploitation, spatial segregation, cultural marginalization, and political disenfranchisement.

Within this framework, African Americans are positioned not merely as an ethnic minority but as a colonized population whose labor, mobility, and representation are regulated by dominant power structures. This theoretical move allows us to

read *Fences* not simply as domestic realism but as a dramatization of colonized subjectivity within a national context.

Troy Maxson's life trajectory reflects these colonial dynamics. His labor is circumscribed; his athletic aspirations were historically denied; and his upward mobility remains structurally limited. His personal bitterness is inseparable from institutional exclusion.

To illuminate this process, the chapter synthesizes three major theoretical strands:

1. Postcolonial theory (Fanon, Bhabha, internal colonization theory)
2. African American identity theory (Du Bois's double consciousness)
3. Cultural studies (Hall's theory of representation, cultural memory, and performance)

Together, these frameworks enable a multidimensional interpretation of identity in Wilson's drama—situating it at the intersection of history, discourse, trauma, and cultural resilience.

1.1. Postcolonial Theory and African American Identity

Postcolonial theory provides a critical framework for examining the construction of identity within systems of domination, displacement, and racial hierarchy. Although initially developed to analyze European imperial expansion in Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean, its conceptual tools have proven deeply relevant to African American studies. The experience of enslavement, segregation, economic exploitation, and institutional exclusion in the United States has been described by some scholars as a form of "internal colonization" (Blauner, 1972), wherein African Americans occupy a structurally subordinate position within the nation-state.

In the context of ***Fences*** by August Wilson, postcolonial theory enables an exploration of how racial oppression shapes consciousness, masculinity, and familial authority. The protagonist, Troy Maxson, embodies a subject formed within a racially stratified society where institutional barriers systematically restrict mobility and recognition.

a. Fanon and the Psychology of Colonization

The psychological dimension of colonial subjugation is most powerfully articulated by Frantz Fanon (1967). In ***Black Skin, White Masks***, Fanon argues that colonial domination produces what he terms an "inferiority complex" embedded within racialized consciousness. The colonized subject internalizes the colonizer's gaze, leading to fractured identity and self-alienation.

This framework illuminates Troy's complex masculinity. His distrust of white institutions, particularly professional baseball, reflects historical exclusion. However, his refusal to allow Cory to pursue football reveals something deeper: trauma reproduced as protective authoritarianism. Fanon suggests that colonized subjects often replicate oppressive structures within their immediate sphere of control. Troy's rigid paternal authority thus becomes a displaced response to systemic emasculation.

Fanon also identifies anger as a byproduct of colonial repression. Troy's confrontational storytelling, mythic self-fashioning, and obsession with death can be read as attempts to reclaim agency in a world structured to deny it. Identity formation here is reactive, defensive, and historically wounded.

The colonized subject often negotiates between imposed stereotypes and suppressed selfhood. Applied to African American identity, this framework illuminates the ways systemic racism infiltrates self-perception. Troy's bitterness toward Major League Baseball, for example, is not merely personal resentment but the residue of structural exclusion. His disillusionment reflects what Fanon terms the "epidermalization" of inferiority—the inscription of racial hierarchy onto consciousness itself.

b. Du Bois and Double Consciousness

The African American intellectual tradition provides an indispensable complement to postcolonial theory. W. E. B. Du Bois (1903) introduces the concept of "double consciousness" to describe the internal division experienced by African Americans:

"One ever feels his twoness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts..." (Du Bois, 1903)

Double consciousness encapsulates the tension between self-perception and imposed racial identity. In *Fences*, Troy embodies this dual awareness. He believes in responsibility, labor, and patriarchal provision—values aligned with dominant

American ideology—yet he simultaneously perceives the racial hypocrisy underlying these ideals.

This contradiction shapes his worldview. He rejects Cory's optimism because he cannot reconcile American promise with historical reality. His consciousness is therefore divided between aspiration and suspicion, hope and historical memory.

Cory, by contrast, represents a shifting form of double consciousness. Growing up in the 1950s, during the early cracks in segregation, he inhabits a transitional identity—less bound by Troy's historical defeat but still shaped by inherited trauma. Thus, double consciousness evolves generationally.

Closely aligned with Fanon's analysis is the concept of "double consciousness" developed by W. E. B. Du Bois (1903). Du Bois describes African American identity as a "twoness," an internal conflict between self-definition and the gaze of a dominant white society. This duality is evident in Troy's oscillation between pride in his labor and suspicion of institutional advancement. While he values hard work and responsibility—hallmarks of American individualism—he simultaneously distrusts the very structures that proclaim equality. Double consciousness thus manifests as both awareness and constraint.

Furthermore, Homi K. Bhabha (1994) expands postcolonial discourse by emphasizing hybridity and liminality. Identity, in Bhabha's formulation, is never pure or fixed; it emerges within "third spaces" where cultural negotiation occurs. In *Fences*, such liminality appears in generational tensions. Cory, unlike Troy, grows up during the early stages of desegregation and therefore inhabits a different historical horizon. His aspirations in football suggest a hybrid identity shaped by both inherited trauma and emerging opportunity.

Postcolonial theory also foregrounds resistance. While domination structures identity formation, it does not entirely determine it. African American cultural practices—storytelling, music, religious faith—function as forms of counter-discourse that resist erasure. Wilson's dramaturgy itself becomes a postcolonial act: it reclaims narrative authority for a community historically marginalized in mainstream American historiography.

In this sense, *Fences* can be read as dramatizing the tension between structural oppression and self-fashioning. Identity formation emerges not as static essence but as process—historically conditioned, psychologically negotiated, and socially performed.

c. Bhabha and Hybridity

Homi K. Bhabha (1994) advances postcolonial discourse through the concept of hybridity. Identity, he argues, is produced in "third spaces" where cultural meanings are negotiated rather than fixed.

In ***Fences***, hybridity appears in the negotiation between Southern Black heritage and Northern urban industrial life. The Great Migration relocated millions of African Americans into cities like Pittsburgh, transforming cultural identity (Wilkerson, 2010). The Maxson household becomes a liminal site where Southern memory intersects with Northern labor realities.

Hybridity also manifests generationally. Cory's aspirations symbolize emerging integration, while Troy's worldview remains shaped by Jim Crow exclusion. The play stages identity not as stable inheritance but as contested negotiation within shifting historical conditions.

1.2. Cultural Studies and the Representation of Marginalized Communities

a. Representation as Meaning Production

Cultural studies shifts focus from structural domination to cultural meaning-making. Stuart Hall (1997) contends that representation constructs social reality through discourse. Literature does not merely depict marginalized communities; it participates in shaping how they are understood.

Wilson's dramaturgy therefore functions as counter-representation. By centering working-class African American life, he challenges hegemonic narratives that marginalize or stereotype Black masculinity. Troy is neither caricature nor victim stereotype; he is complex, contradictory, and historically situated.

Hall's encoding/decoding model further suggests that audiences interpret texts through ideological frameworks. "***Fences"*** encodes racial critique within domestic realism, inviting audiences to reconsider assumptions about responsibility, masculinity, and opportunity.

If postcolonial theory provides the macro-structure of power relations, cultural studies will offer analytical tools for understanding representation and everyday life. Emerging from the Birmingham School in the mid-twentieth century, cultural studies interrogate how meaning is produced within systems of ideology and discourse.

Stuart Hall (1997) argues that representation is constitutive rather than reflective; cultural texts do not merely depict reality—they construct it. From this perspective, *Fences* is not simply a portrayal of 1950s African American life but an intervention in how that life is culturally understood. By centering working-class Black experience, Wilson disrupts dominant narratives that marginalize or stereotype African American communities.

Cultural studies also insist on situating texts within material history. The socioeconomic conditions shaping Troy's life—racialized labor markets, housing segregation, and limited institutional access—are not incidental but structurally embedded. Scholars such as Marable (2007) and Alexander (2010) demonstrate how racial inequality persisted beyond formal emancipation, reconfiguring itself through employment discrimination and legal marginalization. Within this framework, Troy's occupational struggle is symptomatic of broader systemic patterns.

Representation further intersects with gender. Cultural studies highlight how masculinity and femininity are socially constructed performances. Troy's insistence on patriarchal authority reflects both personal temperament and historically constrained Black masculinity. Sociologists Majors and Billson (1992) describe "cool pose" as a performative strategy adopted by African American men to assert dignity in contexts of limited power. Troy's bravado, storytelling, and insistence on control can be interpreted as compensatory mechanisms within a society that denies him institutional authority.

b. Cultural Memory and Identity

Conversely, Rose Maxson's identity formation illustrates alternative modes of representation. She embodies what might be termed relational strength—rooted in family cohesion, moral clarity, and communal continuity. Cultural studies allows us to interpret her character not as passive but as a site of ethical resistance within patriarchal and racial constraints.

Memory also functions centrally within cultural studies analysis. Following Connerton (1989) and Nora (1989), memory is understood as embodied practice. The Maxson backyard becomes a lived archive where stories of the past are rehearsed and transmitted. Through oral narration, historical trauma is both preserved and contested. Identity formation, therefore, is inseparable from cultural memory.

Importantly, Wilson's dramatic language itself constitutes a political act of representation. The vernacular speech patterns, rhythms, and idioms of his characters affirm African American linguistic identity. Rather than assimilating into standardized theatrical language, Wilson foregrounds cultural specificity, thereby challenging hegemonic norms of literary value.

Memory studies, as articulated by Connerton (1989) and Nora (1989), emphasize the performative dimension of collective remembrance. Memory is embodied in rituals, speech, and spatial practices.

The Maxson backyard operates as a site of memory. Troy's storytelling reconstructs personal and communal pasts. Even exaggerated narratives serve cultural function: they preserve dignity in the face of structural marginalization.

Marianne Hirsch's (2008) concept of post-memory is particularly relevant to Cory's identity formation. Trauma experienced by one generation is transmitted to the next through narrative and affect. Cory inherits not segregation directly, but the emotional residues of Troy's historical exclusion.

c. Masculinity as Cultural Performance

The concept of masculinity as cultural performance is central to understanding identity formation in ***Fences*** by August Wilson. Rather than treating masculinity as a biological or fixed attribute, cultural studies approaches view it as a socially constructed identity that is performed, negotiated, and regulated within specific historical contexts. In the case of African American men in mid-twentieth-century America, masculinity was shaped under conditions of racial exclusion, economic marginalization, and social surveillance.

- **Masculinity as Social Construction**

Cultural theorists argue that gender identities are constructed through discourse, social expectations, and repeated acts of performance. Masculinity, therefore, is not an essence but a role enacted within systems of power. Within racially stratified societies, masculinity is further racialized; Black masculinity becomes defined not only by gender norms but also by dominant racial ideologies.

For African American men in the 1950s, systemic exclusion from economic and political power created a crisis of masculine recognition. Employment discrimination, segregation, and limited institutional access undermined traditional markers of masculine success—career advancement, public authority,

and social mobility. As a result, masculinity often became concentrated within the domestic sphere, where authority could still be asserted.

- **"Cool Pose" and Compensatory Performance**

Majors and Billson (1992) describe "cool pose" as a stylized performance of toughness, control, and emotional restraint adopted by many African American men navigating racial oppression. This performative masculinity operates as a protective strategy. It projects dignity and strength in environments that systematically deny institutional power.

Troy Maxson exemplifies aspects of this performance. His rhetorical bravado, storytelling, physical presence, and insistence on patriarchal authority reflect a masculinity shaped by exclusion. Because broader society restricts his upward mobility, Troy intensifies control within the household. Authority over Cory becomes symbolic compensation for authority denied in public institutions.

Importantly, this performance is not mere aggression; it is historically conditioned. Troy's exclusion from professional baseball represents not only lost opportunity but emasculation within a culture that equates athletic success with masculine achievement. His rigid worldview is thus inseparable from historical trauma.

- **Fanon and the Psychology of Masculine Defense**

The psychological dimensions of racialized masculinity are illuminated by Frantz Fanon (1967), who argues that colonized men experience a destabilization of masculine identity under racial domination. When systemic power denies recognition, the colonized subject may seek to reclaim authority in intimate or communal spaces.

Troy's authoritarian parenting can be read through this lens. His refusal to allow Cory to pursue football reflects not simply pessimism but a defensive attempt to shield his son from humiliation. However, this protective instinct simultaneously reproduces restriction. Fanon suggests that internalized oppression often circulates within family structures, transforming structural violence into interpersonal conflict.

Thus, masculinity becomes both shield and prison—constructed to survive oppression yet capable of perpetuating it.

- **Double Consciousness and Masculine Fragmentation**

W. E. B. Du Bois's (1903) concept of double consciousness further clarifies the fragmentation of Black masculine identity. The African American man must measure himself through the eyes of a society that devalues him. This produces a tension between internal dignity and external misrecognition.

Troy's insistence on self-definition—his mythic battles with death, his exaggerated narratives of athletic prowess—can be interpreted as attempts to reclaim narrative authority. Storytelling becomes a masculine act of self-construction. Through language, he resists invisibility. Yet his performances also reveal insecurity, suggesting that masculinity must be continually reaffirmed.

- **Generational Shifts in Masculinity**

Masculinity in *Fences* is not monolithic. Cory represents an emerging form shaped by desegregation and expanding opportunity. Unlike Troy, he expresses vulnerability and ambition oriented toward institutional inclusion. Their conflict dramatizes a historical shift in the meaning of Black masculinity—from defensive survivalism to aspirational integration.

Lyons offers yet another variation. His artistic pursuit of music challenges Troy's labor-centered definition of manhood. Whereas Troy equates masculinity with economic provision, Lyons aligns it with creative expression. Wilson thus presents multiple masculinities, destabilizing any singular definition.

- **Masculinity, Space, and Performance**

The Maxson backyard functions as a theatrical stage for masculine performance. Conversations between Troy and Bono become ritual affirmations of shared identity. Labor—building the fence—serves as embodied masculinity. The fence itself symbolizes both protection and emotional enclosure, reinforcing Troy's guarded selfhood.

Cultural studies remind us that performance requires audience. Troy's masculinity is enacted before Rose, Cory, Bono, and Lyons. It depends on recognition. When recognition falters—particularly from Cory—Troy responds with heightened authority, revealing the fragility beneath the performance.

- **Rose and the Reframing of Masculinity**

Although the focus rests on male identity, Rose's presence reframes masculinity. Her moral clarity exposes the limits of Troy's patriarchal performance. When she asserts emotional autonomy after his infidelity, she disrupts his authority. This moment destabilizes his masculine script and reveals its dependence on relational validation.

Through Rose, Wilson suggests that masculinity is not only socially constructed but relationally sustained.

- **Conclusion**

Viewing masculinity as cultural performance reveals Troy Maxson's identity as historically conditioned rather than inherently flawed. His authoritarianism, emotional restraint, and pride emerge as adaptive responses to systemic racial exclusion. However, these performances also generate generational conflict and emotional fragmentation.

In ***Fences***, masculinity is:

- Racialized by structural inequality
- Performed as compensation for institutional exclusion
- Fragmented by double consciousness
- Transmitted and contested across generations
- Dependent upon recognition within domestic space

Wilson ultimately portrays Black masculinity not as stereotype but as complex negotiation within oppressive structures—simultaneously resistant, vulnerable, and evolving.

1.3. Concluding Remarks on the Theoretical Framework

Taken together, postcolonial theory and cultural studies provide a multidimensional lens through which to analyze identity formation in ***Fences***. Postcolonial theory illuminates the psychological and structural dimensions of racial subjugation—internalized oppression, double consciousness, hybridity—while cultural studies foregrounds representation, performance, and everyday practices of resistance. Within this combined framework, identity emerges as:

- Historically conditioned by segregation and racial capitalism
- Psychologically shaped by internalized hierarchies
- Culturally sustained through memory and representation
- Socially negotiated within family and community spaces

This theoretical foundation prepares the ground for subsequent chapters, where character analysis and symbolic structures will demonstrate how Wilson dramatizes identity not as fixed category but as evolving negotiation within systems of power.

a. Theoretical Synthesis

The integration of postcolonial theory and cultural studies reveals identity in ***Fences*** as:

- Structurally constrained (internal colonization)
- Psychologically fractured (Fanon; Du Bois)
- Culturally negotiated (Hall; Bhabha)
- Inter-generationally transmitted (Hirsch)
- Performed within domestic and communal spaces

Identity is not essence but process—emerging through conflict, memory, and resistance.

b. Conceptual Model of Analysis

This study conceptualizes identity formation in ***Fences*** through four interacting domains:

1. Historical Structures (segregation, racialized labor)
2. Psychological Internalization (trauma, double consciousness)
3. Cultural Representation (language, memory, performance)
4. Generational Negotiation (inheritance and transformation)

These domains overlap dynamically, shaping character behavior and symbolic meaning throughout the play to establish the foundation for analyzing identity formation in ***Fences***. By synthesizing postcolonial and cultural studies approaches, the chapter demonstrates that Wilson's drama stages identity as historically embedded yet culturally resilient. The aspects which will be critically manipulated in the following chapters.

- **Chapter Two: August Wilson and the Historical Context**

2.1. August Wilson and the Historical Context

a. The Pittsburgh Cycle and Fences

Understanding Fences requires situating it within the broader dramatic vision of August Wilson and his monumental theatrical project known as the Pittsburgh Cycle (also called the American Century Cycle). This ten-play sequence, each set in a different decade of the twentieth century, reconstructs African American life from 1900 to 1990 through the lens of working-class Black communities in Pittsburgh's Hill District.

Rather than presenting a singular narrative of progress, Wilson's cycle offers a counter-historical archive—one that re-centers African American experience within the American national story. Through drama, he challenges dominant historiography that marginalizes Black labor, culture, and memory.

b. The Conception of the Pittsburgh Cycle

Wilson conceived the cycle as a cultural reclamation project. Influenced by the Black Arts Movement and writers such as Amiri Baraka, he sought to create a dramatic canon rooted in African American oral tradition, blues aesthetics, and communal storytelling. The cycle includes plays such as ***Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*** (set in the 1920s), ***Joe Turner's Come and Gone*** (1910s), ***The Piano Lesson*** (1930s), and ***Fences*** (1950s), among others.

Each play dramatizes a specific historical moment while contributing to a larger intergenerational narrative. Recurring motifs—migration, labor, music, spirituality, property ownership, and memory—bind the cycle together. Although the plays can stand independently, they collectively form what Wilson described as a "history of Black America told through the lens of Black people."

The Hill District becomes both geographical and symbolic space. Historically a vibrant African American neighborhood shaped by the Great Migration, it functioned as a cultural hub yet was also marked by poverty, urban neglect, and racial segregation. Wilson's representation transforms this locale into a theatrical memory site, preserving communal histories that mainstream narratives often overlook.

c. Fences within the American Century Cycle

Set in the 1950s, ***Fences*** occupies a pivotal position within the cycle. The decade represents a transitional era—situated between the rigid segregation of the early twentieth century and the emerging Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. This liminal moment shapes the identity conflicts at the center of the play.

The protagonist, Troy Maxson, belongs to a generation whose formative years were shaped by Jim Crow laws and institutional exclusion. His son Cory, however, grows up during early desegregation, when cracks in racial barriers begin to appear. Thus, the 1950s function not merely as backdrop but as historical pressure point.

Wilson's depiction of baseball exemplifies this tension. Troy's career in the Negro Leagues precedes the integration of Major League Baseball in 1947. Although integration begins before the play's setting, systemic discrimination persists. Troy's bitterness reflects the delayed recognition afforded to Black athletes—a historical reality that parallels broader patterns of racialized labor and exclusion.

d. Sociohistorical Context: Segregation and Labor

The 1950s urban North is often mythologized as a space of opportunity compared to the segregated South. However, historians such as Isabel Wilkerson (2010) demonstrate that the Great Migration, while offering relative relief from Southern racial terror, did not eliminate structural inequality. Northern cities maintained de facto segregation through housing discrimination, limited employment mobility, and restricted access to unions.

Troy's occupation as a sanitation worker reflects racialized labor stratification. His struggle to become a truck driver rather than a garbage collector highlights incremental progress within systemic constraint. Advancement is possible but limited—an emblem of the era's contradictions.

Furthermore, the postwar period emphasized masculine breadwinner ideology. Economic provision became central to male identity. For African American men, however, structural barriers complicated this expectation. Troy's insistence on defining manhood through financial responsibility must therefore be understood within this broader sociohistorical context.

e. Cultural Memory and the 1950s

Within the Pittsburgh Cycle, each decade interrogates how African American communities remember and reinterpret their past. In *Fences*, memory operates through Troy's storytelling. His narratives of athletic prowess, encounters with death, and paternal conflict with his own father construct a personal mythology that both preserves and reshapes historical truth.

The 1950s setting intensifies this dynamic. It is a moment when the promise of integration coexists with the persistence of discrimination. Wilson captures this historical ambiguity—hope shadowed by skepticism.

The fence itself becomes emblematic of the era: symbolizing both protection and division, aspiration and limitation. It reflects not only domestic concerns but the broader national landscape of racial boundaries.

f. The Pittsburgh Cycle as Counter-History

Wilson's larger project challenges linear narratives of American progress. Rather than portraying steady advancement toward equality, the cycle emphasizes struggle, resilience, and cultural continuity. Each play confronts a distinct historical wound—slavery's legacy, migration, property ownership, artistic expression, incarceration—revealing how identity evolves across decades.

Within this framework, *Fences* dramatizes the psychological consequences of mid-century racial transition. It interrogates how historical exclusion shapes generational expectations and familial authority.

By embedding personal conflict within collective history, Wilson transforms domestic drama into cultural historiography. The Pittsburgh Cycle thus functions as an alternative archive—recovering voices often silenced in official records.

2.2. Fences – Critical Summary

August Wilson's ***Fences*** (1985) is a seminal work in American drama and part of his Pittsburgh Cycle, which chronicles African American life across the twentieth century. The play - Set in 1950s Pittsburgh- centers on Troy Maxson, a former Negro League baseball player turned sanitation worker, and explores themes of race, masculinity, generational conflict, memory, and the contested meaning of the American Dream.

a. Plot Overview

The play unfolds primarily in the backyard of the Maxson home. Troy Maxson, once a talented baseball player barred from Major League Baseball due to racial segregation, now works as a garbage collector. He lives with his wife Rose and their son Cory.

Troy's bitterness over missed athletic opportunity shapes his worldview. When Cory receives a football scholarship offer, Troy refuses to support it, insisting that racial discrimination will block his son's success just as it blocked his own. This conflict escalates into a physical and emotional rupture between father and son.

Simultaneously, Troy's extramarital affair results in a child, Raynell. Rose agrees to raise the baby but emotionally distances herself from Troy. The play concludes years later with Troy's death, as Cory returns home for the funeral, ultimately reconciling his father's flaws with his humanity.

b. Major Themes

A. Race and the American Dream

At the heart of ***Fences*** is a critique of the myth of meritocracy. Troy's exclusion from professional baseball symbolizes systemic racism. Although integration in sports begins before the play's setting, structural inequality persists.

Wilson exposes how African American ambition is often constrained by institutional barriers. Troy's bitterness reflects historical truth, but his inability to recognize shifting social conditions traps him in psychological stagnation.

B. Masculinity and Authority

Troy defines manhood through economic provision and patriarchal control. His belief that "a man got to take care of his family" reflects 1950s breadwinner ideology. However, this narrow definition of masculinity generates emotional repression and authoritarian parenting.

Critically, Troy's masculinity can be read as compensatory. Denied full institutional recognition, he asserts authority within the domestic sphere. Yet this performance fractures familial bonds, particularly with Cory.

C. Generational Conflict

The tension between Troy and Cory dramatizes historical transition. Troy represents a generation shaped by Jim Crow segregation; Cory embodies emerging postwar opportunity.

Their conflict reflects broader African American debates about assimilation, optimism, and structural skepticism. The play suggests that trauma can be inherited—transmitted not biologically but emotionally and ideologically.

D. The Fence as Symbol

The central metaphor of the fence carries layered meaning:

- For Rose, it symbolizes protection and unity.
- For Troy, it represents emotional boundaries and defensive isolation.
- Socially, it evokes racial segregation and imposed limitation.

The fence thus becomes a visual representation of the psychological and social barriers shaping identity.

E. Death and Storytelling

Troy frequently personifies death in his stories, framing it as an adversary. These mythic narratives function as self-assertion; through storytelling, he constructs heroic identity in a world that denied him public glory.

Wilson's use of vernacular speech and blues-inflected rhythm situates the play within African American oral tradition. Storytelling becomes both cultural preservation and masculine performance.

c. Characters' Evaluation

Troy Maxson is one of modern drama's most complex tragic figures. He is neither villain nor victim but a flawed man shaped by historical injustice. His strength—resilience, responsibility, charisma—coexists with pride, infidelity, and rigidity.

Rose Maxson provides moral counterbalance. Her endurance and emotional clarity anchor the family. Her acceptance of Raynell reflects ethical strength rather than submission.

Cory Maxson represents generational change. His ambition and vulnerability contrast with Troy's hardened worldview.

Bono functions as confidant and witness, reinforcing communal perspective.

2.3. Critical Reception and Significance

Fences received widespread acclaim and won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1987. Critics praised its rich characterization, poetic realism, and sociopolitical depth. Scholars frequently interpret the play through lenses of:

- Postcolonial theory (internal colonization and racial hierarchy)
- Double consciousness (Du Bois)
- Masculinity studies
- Cultural memory and oral tradition

The play remains central to discussions of African American identity formation, generational trauma and the limits of the American Dream.

a. Tragic Structure

Troy can be viewed as a modern tragic hero. His hamartia lies in pride and rigidity. While structural racism shapes his circumstances, his personal choices—particularly his treatment of Cory and his infidelity—contribute to his downfall.

Unlike classical tragedy, however, *Fences* does not end in total despair. Cory's decision to attend the funeral signals reconciliation and historical continuity rather than pure rupture.

b. Overall Critical Assessment

"Fences" is ultimately a play about boundaries—racial, emotional, generational, and symbolic. Wilson demonstrates that identity is forged within constraint but not wholly defined by it.

The play's enduring power lies in its refusal to simplify. Troy is both shaped by injustice and responsible for his actions. The fence both protects and isolates. The American Dream both inspires and excludes.

Through intimate domestic drama, Wilson constructs a national critique—revealing how private lives bear the weight of public history.

c. Conclusion

Situating ***Fences*** within the Pittsburgh Cycle and the sociohistorical context of the 1950s reveals the play as both intimate family drama and national critique. The Hill District becomes a microcosm of African American experience, while Troy's struggles embody broader patterns of racialized labor, segregation, and generational transition.

Understanding this context is essential for interpreting identity formation in the play. Masculinity, authority, aspiration, and memory are not isolated psychological traits; they are historically embedded responses to systemic structures.

In the next section, the analysis will move from historical framework to detailed character examination, applying the theoretical lens established in Chapter One to the lived experiences of the Maxson family.

2.4. Sociohistorical Background:

a. Segregation, the Great Migration, and Racialized Labor

A comprehensive understanding of ***Fences*** by August Wilson requires situating the drama within the sociohistorical realities of mid-twentieth-century African American life. Although set in 1950s Pittsburgh, the play is deeply shaped by earlier historical forces—particularly segregation, the **Great Migration**, and racialized labor systems. These forces do not merely provide background; they structure the psychological and material conditions through which identity is formed and contested.

This historical context is crucial for understanding Troy Maxson's worldview. His formative years were shaped by an era in which opportunities for African American advancement were systematically curtailed. His exclusion from Major League Baseball reflects a broader pattern of institutional gatekeeping. Although baseball integration began in 1947, structural prejudice did not disappear overnight. For Troy, the damage had already been done; his prime years were lost to racial exclusion.

Segregation, therefore, operates not only as legal system but as psychological condition. It produces skepticism toward institutions and limits the horizon of possibility. Troy's refusal to believe in Cory's athletic future stems from lived historical memory rather than mere pessimism.

b. Great Migration and Urban Transformation

Between 1916 and 1970, over six million African Americans migrated from the rural South to Northern and Midwestern cities in what historians call the Great Migration. As documented by Isabel Wilkerson (2010), migrants sought economic opportunity and escape from racial terror. Cities such as Pittsburgh became centers of industrial employment, offering jobs in steel mills, factories, and municipal services.

However, migration did not erase inequality. Instead, it reshaped it. African Americans were often confined to segregated neighborhoods, including Pittsburgh's Hill District—the primary setting of Wilson's Pittsburgh Cycle. These communities developed vibrant cultural networks—churches, music, storytelling traditions—while simultaneously confronting overcrowding, economic instability, and limited public investment.

The Great Migration thus produced a dual reality: expanded opportunity alongside continued marginalization. This contradiction informs the generational conflict in *Fences*. Troy belongs to the first generation to come of age in Northern industrial cities. His identity was forged in manual labor and limited upward mobility. Cory, by contrast, represents a generation born into urban life during the early civil rights era, with slightly widened horizons.

Migration also influenced masculine identity. Southern agrarian labor gave way to industrial wage labor. For many African American men, stable employment became central to dignity and self-definition. Troy's pride in providing for his family reflects this historical shift.

c. Racialized Labor and Economic Stratification

One of the most persistent structures shaping African American identity in the twentieth century was racialized labor stratification. Even after migration to Northern cities, African Americans were disproportionately assigned to low-status, physically demanding jobs with limited prospects for advancement.

In ***Fences***, Troy works as a sanitation laborer—a position emblematic of racialized employment patterns. His legal challenge to become a truck driver marks a small but symbolically significant victory. Yet this advancement does not fundamentally alter structural inequality; it merely shifts his position within a constrained hierarchy.

Scholars such as Marable (2007) and Alexander (2010) argue that post-slavery racial control evolved through economic systems that restricted mobility. Labor unions often excluded Black workers, and hiring discrimination maintained occupational segregation. Thus, African American masculinity was shaped within a paradox: men were expected to fulfill breadwinner roles while being denied equitable access to economic advancement.

This tension is central to Troy's identity. He equates manhood with financial responsibility—"taking care of your family." However, the structural conditions of

racialized labor complicate this expectation. His authority within the household becomes intertwined with his status as provider, intensifying his resistance to challenges from Cory.

d. Baseball as Symbol of Labor and Exclusion

Baseball in Fences operates as both national pastime and labor metaphor. Professional sports represent upward mobility and public recognition—forms of success largely denied to African Americans during Troy's youth. His experience in the Negro Leagues symbolizes parallel institutions created in response to segregation.

Although integration of **Major League Baseball** begins before the 1950s, Troy's bitterness reflects generational displacement. By the time racial barriers begin to fall, he has aged out of opportunity. The injustice is temporal as well as structural. His resentment therefore reflects not only lost career prospects but historical timing shaped by racism.

Baseball becomes emblematic of the American Dream: merit rewarded through talent and effort. Troy's exclusion reveals the mythic dimension of that dream when filtered through racial inequality. Wilson's dramatization demonstrates that identity formation cannot be separated from sociohistorical conditions. The domestic conflicts in ***Fences*** are inseparable from broader systems of power. Generational misunderstanding arises not simply from personality differences but from divergent historical experiences.

Conclusion

Segregation established structural barriers; the Great Migration reshaped geographic and cultural landscapes; racialized labor defined economic possibilities. Together, these forces created the sociohistorical environment that informs ***Fences***.

Wilson situates private family struggle within public history, revealing how systemic inequality permeates intimate relationships. The play thus becomes both domestic tragedy and historical testimony—demonstrating that identity is forged at the intersection of personal aspiration and structural limitation.

3. Chapter Three: Character Analysis

1. Troy Maxson as a Figure Negotiating Identity under Systemic Oppression

In ***Fences*** by August Wilson, Troy Maxson stands as the central embodiment of African American male identity shaped, constrained, and fractured by systemic racial oppression. His subjectivity is forged in the crucible of segregation, economic exclusion, and deferred dreams—conditions that align closely with postcolonial concepts of internal colonization and cultural marginalization.

a. The Trauma of Exclusion

Troy's early life as a gifted baseball player in the Negro Leagues situates him historically within the period preceding the integration of Major League Baseball by Jackie Robinson. Though integration begins in 1947, Troy's narrative insists that his prime years were lost to racial segregation. This historical displacement generates what postcolonial theorists might call a "wounded masculinity"—a selfhood constructed around loss and bitterness.

For Troy, racism becomes both a real structural barrier and a psychological framework through which he interprets all experience. His inability to imagine change—despite shifting social realities—reveals how systemic oppression can become internalized. In postcolonial terms, Troy inhabits a consciousness shaped by historical subjugation, where the colonized subject internalizes limits imposed by dominant power structures.

b. Masculinity as Authority and Control

Troy negotiates his identity primarily through patriarchal authority. Denied recognition in the public sphere, he asserts control in the domestic sphere. The home becomes a compensatory site where he can enact dominance. His language frequently equates manhood with provision and discipline:

"I'm the boss around here."

This statement reflects not merely ego but a survival logic rooted in a racially stratified labor economy. Masculinity, for Troy, is defined through endurance, stoicism, and economic responsibility. Cultural studies frameworks—especially those influenced by Stuart Hall—would read this as identity produced within specific historical discourses of Black working-class masculinity.

Yet Troy's performance of masculinity is unstable. His affair with Alberta represents both escapism and an attempt to reclaim vitality. The tragic irony is that his assertion of freedom mirrors the very patriarchal structures that confine him.

Thus, Troy simultaneously resists racial domination while perpetuating gendered domination within his household.

c. Death as Metaphor

Troy's recurring personification of Death functions symbolically. Death becomes his imagined adversary—a figure he claims to have "wrestled with." This metaphor reflects existential resistance against systemic erasure. In a society that denies Black visibility and opportunity, Troy constructs a mythic narrative of defiance.

However, his "victory" over death is illusory. His eventual isolation before his physical death signals cultural and emotional fragmentation. Postcolonially, Troy represents the generation caught between Jim Crow oppression and the emerging Civil Rights era—unable to transcend trauma yet unable to fully adapt to change.

2. Rose Maxson and the Negotiation of Family, Gender, and Community Roles

Rose Maxson occupies a complex intersection of race, gender, and community. If Troy represents wounded patriarchal masculinity, Rose represents emotional resilience and cultural continuity.

a. Gendered Sacrifice and Silent Strength

Rose's famous declaration— "I been standing with you!" articulates the unacknowledged labor of Black women in sustaining family structures under systemic pressure. Cultural studies scholarship highlights how marginalized communities often rely on women's emotional and moral labor for survival. Rose embodies this stabilizing force.

Her identity is relational but not passive. When Troy confesses his affair, Rose redefines her boundaries. She agrees to raise Raynell yet symbolically withdraws from Troy as husband. This act is neither submissive nor revolutionary; it is strategic negotiation. She maintains family integrity while asserting moral autonomy.

From a postcolonial feminist lens, Rose's character reveals how Black women endure double marginalization—both racial and patriarchal. Yet Wilson resists reducing her to victimhood. Instead, she emerges as the ethical center of the play.

b. The Fence as Emotional Architecture

Rose's desire to build the fence contrasts with Troy's reluctance. For Rose, the fence symbolizes protection and cohesion. For Troy, it suggests confinement. This divergence reflects gendered interpretations of space and belonging.

In cultural studies terms, the domestic space becomes a contested site of meaning-making. Rose views the fence as a boundary that preserves community. Troy interprets boundaries as restrictions. Thus, the same symbol produces competing identity narratives.

c. Moral Authority

By the play's conclusion, Rose assumes moral leadership within the family. Cory's eventual reconciliation with Troy's memory occurs largely through Rose's mediation. She sustains intergenerational continuity, embodying cultural survival beyond masculine conflict.

1. Cory, Lyons, and Intergenerational Perspectives on Identity

The generational divide in Fences reveals shifting paradigms of African American identity formation.

a. Cory: Emerging Possibility

Cory represents the post–World War II generation encountering new, though fragile, opportunities. Unlike Troy, he has access to integrated college football recruitment. His optimism signals historical transition.

Troy's refusal to support Cory reflects more than personal stubbornness—it represents intergenerational trauma. Troy projects his own racial disillusionment onto his son, unable to believe in structural change. This conflict dramatizes what postcolonial theory calls the transmission of colonial trauma across generations.

Cory's eventual decision to join the Marines indicates a search for structured identity outside paternal control. His return at the funeral marks partial reconciliation—not full forgiveness but critical distance. He neither replicates nor fully rejects his father's legacy.

b. Lyons: Artistic Identity and Economic Instability

Lyons, Troy's elder son, embodies a different mode of resistance: artistic self-definition. As a jazz musician, he rejects stable labor in favor of creative expression. His struggle reflects broader tensions between economic survival and cultural production within marginalized communities.

Lyons' sporadic presence underscores alternative Black masculinities that diverge from Troy's rigid model. While Troy equates manhood with wage labor, Lyons embraces cultural artistry—even at the cost of financial instability.

c. Generational Shift as Cultural Transition

Together, Troy, Cory, and Lyons form a triptych of African American male identity:

- Troy: shaped by segregation and exclusion
- Lyons: shaped by artistic aspiration amid instability
- Cory: shaped by emerging integration and cautious hope

This progression aligns with Wilson's broader dramatic project across the Pittsburgh Cycle, where each decade reconfigures Black identity under shifting historical pressures.

Concluding Analytical Insight

The characters in Fences collectively illustrate identity not as fixed essence but as negotiation—between oppression and agency, trauma and hope, memory and transformation. Through Troy's wounded masculinity, Rose's moral resilience, and the sons' divergent aspirations, August Wilson dramatizes African American identity formation as a dynamic cultural process shaped by:

- Structural racism
- Gender expectations
- Intergenerational memory
- Economic limitation
- Emerging historical change

From a postcolonial and cultural studies perspective, the play demonstrates that identity is produced within power structures yet never entirely determined by them. The fence, both literal and symbolic, stands not only as a boundary—but as a site where identity is contested, protected, resisted, and reimagined.

- **Chapter Four: Cultural Symbols and Identity**

In ***Fences***, August Wilson constructs a dense symbolic landscape through which African American identity is articulated, contested, and reimagined. The play's cultural symbols—particularly the fence, baseball, and domestic/community spaces—operate not merely as decorative motifs but as semiotic structures

encoding historical memory, racial struggle, gender negotiation, and generational transformation.

a. The Fence as Metaphor: Protection, Division, and Connection

The fence is the central metaphor of the play and functions polysemically across emotional, social, and ideological registers. It refers to:

1. Protection and Belonging

For Rose, the fence signifies emotional protection and familial cohesion. Her desire to enclose the yard reflects a longing for stability in a world marked by racial vulnerability. Within cultural studies frameworks, marginalized communities often construct protective boundaries as survival mechanisms. The fence, then, symbolizes not exclusion but care—an attempt to secure intimacy and preserve relational continuity.

Rose's theology of love aligns with enclosure: to fence in is to hold close. Thus, the fence becomes a metaphor for Black communal resilience amid systemic precarity.

2. Division and Alienation

For Troy, however, the fence suggests confinement. His resistance to building it reflects a psychological aversion to limitation. Having experienced racial segregation and economic constraint, Troy associates boundaries with exclusion. Ironically, he becomes the architect of emotional fences within his family—particularly between himself and Cory.

Postcolonially, this ambivalence toward borders mirrors the experience of colonized subjects whose identities are shaped by imposed racial boundaries. The fence embodies the paradox of containment: it can shelter, but it can also isolate.

3. Connection and Memory

By the play's conclusion, the fence stands completed—coinciding with Troy's death. Structurally, the finished fence marks closure, but symbolically, it represents continuity. The family gathers within its boundary, negotiating reconciliation and memory.

Thus, the fence functions dialectically:

- As protection (Rose's perspective)
- As restriction (Troy's perception)
- As connection (the family's collective future)

Identity formation occurs within this tension between enclosure and openness.

b. Baseball and the Denial of Opportunity

Baseball operates as a powerful cultural symbol tied directly to racialized exclusion in American history. This symbolizes to:

1. Segregation and Deferred Dreams

Troy's baseball career unfolded in the Negro Leagues before the integration of Major League Baseball by Jackie Robinson with the Brooklyn Dodgers. His narrative of missed opportunity reflects structural racism rather than personal inadequacy.

Baseball thus symbolizes:

- Denied citizenship
- Deferred aspiration
- Historical timing as injustice

In postcolonial terms, Troy's exclusion parallels the colonial subject barred from full participation in the dominant nation's institutions. Sport—often mythologized as meritocratic—reveals itself as racially stratified.

2. Language of Baseball as Identity Framework

Troy repeatedly uses baseball metaphors to interpret life:

- "*You swung and you missed.*"
- *"Three strikes and you out."*
- *"I'm gonna build me a fence around what belongs to me*."

These metaphors reveal how deeply baseball structures his worldview. The sport becomes a grammar of masculinity and survival. Yet the irony remains: the very system that excluded him provides the language through which he constructs meaning.

3. Generational Conflict and Shifting Opportunity

Cory's football scholarship opportunity represents a post–World War II shift in racial integration. Troy's refusal to acknowledge change illustrates trauma's persistence. He cannot disentangle present possibility from past injustice.

Baseball, therefore, becomes a temporal marker:

- Troy's generation = exclusion
- Cory's generation = conditional inclusion

The symbolic weight of baseball lies not only in lost opportunity but in contested belief about America's capacity for change.

c. Household and Community Spaces as Sites of Cultural Negotiation

Wilson situates nearly all action within the Maxson yard, transforming domestic space into a microcosm of African American cultural negotiation. It is clear in the following:

1. The Yard as Liminal Space

The yard is neither fully private nor fully public. Friends like Bono enter freely; conversations about work, race, and politics unfold there. It becomes a liminal site where personal identity intersects with communal discourse.

From a cultural studies perspective, space is socially produced. The Maxson yard represents working-class Black Pittsburgh in the 1950s—a community shaped by migration, labor, and segregation. Identity is negotiated collectively, not individually.

2. The House as Gendered Territory

The house functions symbolically as Rose's domain of emotional labor. It is the site of nurturing, sacrifice, and moral authority. Troy's authority operates loudly in the yard, but Rose's authority governs the interior.

This spatial division mirrors gendered cultural roles:

- Yard = masculine performance, storytelling, public persona
- House = feminine resilience, ethical grounding, intergenerational care

Yet these boundaries are permeable. When Troy's affair enters the household narrative, domestic space becomes a battlefield of moral reckoning.

3. Community as Witness

Characters such as Bono serve as communal witnesses to Troy's life. The presence of neighbors suggests that identity is never isolated; it is socially validated or contested.

The yard becomes a performative stage where masculinity, loyalty, frustration, and humor are enacted before an audience. In this sense, Wilson's dramatic structure itself mirrors cultural performance: identity is staged, observed, and interpreted.

Synthesis: Symbol, Space, and Identity Formation

In ***Fences***, cultural symbols are not decorative—they are constitutive of identity. The fence, baseball, and domestic spaces function as:

- Metaphors of historical exclusion
- Arenas of gender negotiation
- Markers of generational transition
- Structures of communal memory

Through symbolic architecture, August Wilson demonstrates that African American identity formation occurs within material realities—labor, sport, housing—but is simultaneously shaped by metaphor, narrative, and cultural memory.

> *The fence encloses more than a yard.*
> *Baseball represents more than a game.*
> *The house shelters more than a family.*

Together, they form a symbolic cartography of Black American existence in mid-twentieth-century America—revealing identity as both constrained by history and continually renegotiated within it.

Part III: Concluding Part

This study has offered a postcolonial and cultural studies reading of ***Fences*** by August Wilson, examining how identity formation unfolds through historical memory, gender performance, symbolic structures, and intergenerational negotiation. The play emerges not merely as a domestic tragedy but as a cultural

text that dramatizes the psychological and structural consequences of racialized modernity in the United States.

1. Findings

Across the preceding chapters, several interrelated findings have emerged.

a. Identity as Historically Conditioned

Troy Maxson's character demonstrates that African American identity in mid-twentieth-century America is inseparable from systemic exclusion. His failed baseball career—shaped by segregation prior to the integration of Major League Baseball by Jackie Robinson—becomes emblematic of deferred dreams and structural injustice.

Troy's bitterness is not reducible to personality flaw; it is historically produced. His masculinity is forged within:

- Racial segregation
- Economic marginalization
- Limited institutional access

Thus, identity appears as a negotiation between personal agency and structural constraint.

b. Masculinity as Cultural Performance

The study demonstrated that Troy's masculinity operates as performance—a culturally coded assertion of authority, control, and endurance. Drawing from cultural studies frameworks, masculinity in the play is shown to be socially constructed rather than biologically inherent.

Troy performs dominance within the domestic sphere as compensation for racial disempowerment in the public sphere. Yet this performance fractures familial bonds, particularly with Cory. The play reveals masculinity as both survival strategy and source of emotional violence.

c. Gendered Resilience and Moral Authority

Rose Maxson complicates patriarchal narratives. While operating within traditional gender roles, she exercises moral agency and emotional sovereignty. Her negotiation of Troy's betrayal and her acceptance of Raynell position her as the ethical center of the play.

Rose's character highlights the intersectional burden borne by Black women—racial oppression combined with patriarchal expectations—while simultaneously demonstrating cultural continuity and resilience.

d. Intergenerational Transition

The generational contrast between Troy, Lyons, and Cory reveals identity as historically dynamic. Troy represents the segregated past; Cory represents tentative integration; Lyons represents artistic alternative.

Identity formation is thus neither static nor uniform but historically contingent. The play dramatizes the transmission of trauma alongside the possibility of transformation.

e. Symbolic Architecture of Identity

The fence, baseball, and domestic space function as symbolic frameworks through which identity is constructed and contested. These symbols encode protection, division, exclusion, aspiration, memory, and belonging.

In this sense, Wilson constructs a cultural cartography of African American life—mapping how space, labor, sport, and family become sites of ideological struggle.

2. Contribution to Postcolonial and Cultural Studies

This study contributes to postcolonial and cultural studies scholarship in several significant ways.

a. Expanding Postcolonial Frameworks to African American Contexts

While postcolonial theory traditionally examines European imperial domination abroad, this reading applies its analytical tools—internal colonization, subaltern identity, and cultural hybridity—to African American experience.

Troy's exclusion from national institutions parallels colonial marginalization. His internalization of racial boundaries reflects what postcolonial theorists describe as psychic colonization. By situating ***Fences*** within this framework, the study demonstrates that postcolonial analysis remains productive for understanding racialized minorities within Western nation-states.

b. Cultural Studies and Representation

The play affirms Stuart Hall's proposition that identity is constructed through representation. Wilson does not present fixed racial essence; instead, he dramatizes identity as narrative negotiation. Through dialogue, performance, and symbolism, Black working-class life is rendered complex and historically grounded.

Wilson's dramatic method resists stereotypical representation. Troy is neither villain nor hero; he is historically burdened and psychologically intricate. This

nuanced portrayal contributes to cultural studies' project of destabilizing reductive images of marginalized communities.

c. Space as Cultural Text

By reading the Maxson yard as a socially produced space, the study reinforces cultural studies' emphasis on spatial politics. Domestic and communal spaces become arenas of ideological conflict, demonstrating how power operates not only institutionally but spatially.

In ***Fences***, August Wilson crafts a drama where personal conflict reflects national contradiction. The fence encloses more than a yard; it encloses a history of segregation and aspiration. Baseball represents more than sport; it symbolizes denied citizenship. The household shelters are more than a family; it stages negotiations of race, gender, and authority.

From a postcolonial and cultural studies perspective, the play ultimately asserts that African American identity is neither passively imposed nor entirely autonomous. It is forged within struggles constructed through memory, contested through performance, and sustained through community.

Thus, "***Fences"*** stands not only as a tragedy of one family but as a cultural meditation on how a people define themselves within—and against—the boundaries history erect.

3. Suggestions

Based on the findings of this study, several academic and theoretical suggestions may be proposed.

First, future scholarships on August Wilson should move beyond purely realist or psychological readings and engage more deeply with interdisciplinary theoretical frameworks. Integrating postcolonial theory and cultural studies allows for a more comprehensive understanding of Wilson's dramatic project as a critique of historical power structures rather than solely a representation of personal failure or family conflict.

Second, scholars are encouraged to examine Wilson's Pittsburgh Cycle comparatively, applying similar frameworks across multiple plays to trace the evolution of African American identity across decades. Such comparative studies could reveal how identity formation shifts in response to changing historical conditions while remaining anchored in collective memory.

Third, there is a need to expand postcolonial theory to include internal colonialism and racialized power within Western nations. *Fences* demonstrates that colonial dynamics are not limited to overseas territories but operate within the social and cultural structures of the United States. This expansion would enrich postcolonial studies and increase its relevance to African American literature and drama.

Fourth, cultural studies approaches should further explore African American theater as a vital cultural practice. Drama, unlike the novel, foregrounds performance, voice, and communal experience, making it a particularly powerful medium for examining identity construction and cultural resistance.

4. Recommendations

In light of the study's conclusions, the following recommendations are offered for researchers, educators, and curriculum designers.

a. **For Future Research:**
Researchers should apply postcolonial and cultural studies frameworks to other African American dramatic works, including Wilson's later plays, to develop a more cohesive theoretical model of Black identity formation in American theater.

b. **For Academic Teaching:**
Fences should be taught not only as a family drama or realist text but also as a cultural and postcolonial critique of American history and ideology. Integrating theoretical readings by Stuart Hall, Homi Bhabha, and other cultural theorists can deepen students' critical engagement with the play.

c. **For Curriculum Development:**
Literature curricula should incorporate interdisciplinary approaches that connect literary texts to history, culture, and power structures. Wilson's work offers an ideal platform for such integration, fostering critical awareness of race, identity, and social justice.

d. **For Theoretical Advancement:**
Scholars are encouraged to continue bridging the gap between African American studies and postcolonial theory, recognizing shared concerns such as displacement, marginalization, resistance, and cultural survival.

5. Conclusion

This study concludes that August Wilson's ***Fences*** is a powerful cultural and postcolonial text that captures the complexity of African American identity formation. Through its nuanced portrayal of personal struggle, cultural memory, and historical oppression, the play transcends its domestic setting to articulate a collective experience of negotiation, resistance, and becoming. By situating

Fences within postcolonial and cultural studies frameworks, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of both Wilson's dramatic legacy and the broader discourse on identity in marginalized communities.

This study has examined August Wilson's ***Fences*** through an integrated postcolonial and cultural studies framework in order to explore the complex processes of African American identity formation. By situating the play within its historical, cultural, and ideological contexts, the research demonstrates that *Fences* transcends its surface portrayal as a domestic family drama to function as a powerful cultural text that interrogates systemic racial oppression and its enduring effects on individual and collective identity.

The study also highlights the significance of cultural symbols in articulating identity. The fence, central to the play's imagery, encapsulates the contradictions inherent in African American identity formation—protection and exclusion, belonging and isolation. Baseball, as a symbol of the American Dream, exposes the myth of equal opportunity and reveals how racialized systems undermine meritocratic ideals. Through these symbols, Wilson critiques dominant cultural narratives and offers a counter-discourse rooted in African American experience.

By applying postcolonial theory to an African American dramatic text, this research contributes to the expansion of postcolonial studies beyond traditional colonial geographies. It demonstrates that colonial dynamics persist within the cultural and social structures of the United States, particularly in the lives of marginalized communities. The integration of cultural studies further emphasizes identity as a fluid, negotiated process shaped by power relations, representation, and historical context.

In conclusion, ***Fences*** emerges as a vital work that captures the complexity of African American identity formation in the mid-twentieth century. August Wilson's dramatic vision affirms the necessity of confronting historical trauma while simultaneously imagining possibilities for cultural renewal and self-definition. This study not only enriches Wilson scholarship but also underscores the value of interdisciplinary approaches in understanding identity, culture, and resistance within marginalized communities. Ultimately, *Fences* stands as a testament to the enduring struggle for dignity, recognition, and belonging in the face of systemic inequality.

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