

**MEMORY AND CULTURAL IDENTITY; AUNT ESTER IN AUGUST WILSON'S
CENTURY CYCLE¹**

***BELLEK VE KÜLTÜREL KİMLİK; AUGUST WILSON'IN YÜZYIL SERİSİ'NDE AUNT
ESTER KARAKTERİ***

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ABSTRACT

Memory is not only a significant part of humanity but also the individual. The individual feels belonging to the society through his identity. As memory is a result of ongoing process, historical and cultural experiences engrave on it. In this respect, memory is closely related with identity. The construction of identity means in a sense to remember past that is implicit in memory. In this paper, the relation between memory and cultural identity has been examined through Wilson's character, 'Aunt Ester'.

August Wilson, as an Afro-American voice of American theater, put a significant emphasis on the past and culture. He wrote ten plays for the each decade of the 20th century, which is called as Century Cycle. Gem of the Ocean is the opening play of that cycle and it reflects the cultural and historical atmosphere of the 1900s. The main character, Aunt Ester plays an important role both in this play and in the Century Cycle as a whole. She is like the living memory of African history and culture. Wilson shows that Afro-Americans can construct and preserve their identity by remembering their past even their painful experiences.

Key Words: Aunt Ester, August Wilson, Cultural Identity, Memory, Past.

ÖZ

Bellek sadece toplumun değil aynı zamanda bireyin de önemli bir parçasını teşkil etmektedir. Birey kimliği sayesinde topluma aidiyet hisseder. Bellek devam eden bir sürecin sonucu olduğu için tarihsel ve kültürel deneyimlerin izini taşır. Bu bağlamda bellek, kimlik olgusu ile yakından ilişkilidir. Kimlik inşası bir bakıma bellekte saklı olan geçmişi hatırlama manası taşımaktadır. Bu bildiride bellek ve kültürel kimlik arasındaki ilişki, Wilson'ın 'Aunt Ester' karakteri aracılığıyla incelenmektedir.

Amerikan tiyatrosunun Afro-Amerikalı sesi olan August Wilson, geçmişin ve kültürün önemle üzerinde durmaktadır. Yazar Yüzyıl Serisi olarak adlandırılan ve 20. yüzyılın her on yılına denk gelen on oyun yazmıştır. Gem of the Ocean, bu serinin açılış oyunudur ve 1900'lü yılların kültürel ve tarihsel atmosferini yansıtmaktadır. Ana karakter, Aunt Ester, hem bu oyunda hem de Yüzyıl Serisinin genelinde önemli bir rol oynamaktadır. Afrika tarihi ve kültürünün yaşayan belleği gibidir. Wilson Afro-Amerikalıların geçmişlerini, acı verici deneyimlerini dahi hatırlayarak kimliklerini inşa edebileceklerini ve koruyabileceklerini göstermektedir.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Aunt Ester, August Wilson, Kültürel Kimlik, Bellek, Geçmiş.

1. INTRODUCTION

Remembering past or forgetting past, the fundamental function of memory, is the conscious selection of human-beings. The individuals of a certain community feel belonging to the society in which they live through their past. In other words, it has been impossible for any society in anywhere at any time to live without its past and past as a sum of culture and history plays crucial role for the construction of identity. In this respect, it is possible to say that memory, the mirror of past, and identity meet on the shared ground and

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have the potential to affect each other. The construction of identity is profoundly affected by the social, cultural and historical process and cultural identity comes to the fore as a result of a shared culture of a society who has the same cultural and historical background and comes together for the same aims. At this point, memory is a crucial component in creating and maintaining individual and cultural identity. In other words, memory plays a significant role to shape and legitimate identity. To show the relation between identity and memory, one of the August Wilson's characters, Aunt Ester, the most important character in the cycle, will be analyzed in this paper. It is possible to point out that Aunt Ester stands for the cultural identity with her strong memory. Aunt Ester has been figured in the cycle not only as the representation of Afro-American culture but also living memory of the history. Elam (2012, p.693) considers Aunt Ester's role in the cycle as a bridge between past and present. For him, Aunt Ester represents the actual site of African-American legacy and most importantly history and memory commix in her body. He points out that Aunt Ester, rather than abstract signifier, who is blood, family and the aunt of her people, is the connection to the African American past, being indeed the 'ancestor'. By communing with Aunt Ester, the others have the potential to rework their relationship to the past and find redemption. Wilson lays an important burden on Aunt Ester while preserving the past in order to understand the present along with constructing the future of Afro-American community. Thereby, cultural identity takes part to ensure and legitimate their fate in the white society. In this respect, it is undoubtedly that the most important power of Aunt Ester is her memory.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND(S)

2.1. Memory from Cultural Perspectives

As memory is a broad and complex concept, it is hard to give a single definition of it. It has been at the heart of the way of various disciplines especially in psychology. Hence, memory has been analyzed for the different purposes for years. It literally means to save and store the knowledge included in the world of an individual. However, it will be an incomplete evaluation for memory to handle it as a basic storage for individual experiences. Scholars from the different disciplines have paid attention to memory and shed light on the relation of memory with other social areas including culture, history, society and philosophy. As results of these studies, memory has been defined from various perspectives. In this paper, I will focus on the social, historical and cultural aspects of memory, which will bring 'cultural memory' to the forefront.

As Erll (2008, p.1) suggests, cultural or social memory is multifarious notion used in an ambiguous and vague way. In this paper, I will use cultural memory as an umbrella term including social, cultural and historical process and relate it with cultural identity. Cultural memory is not fixed rather as an ongoing process; it is shaped according to cultural, social and historical changes. However, Assmann (1995, p.129) focuses on cultural memory's two aspects by remarking on its inflexible and reconstructive structure, two contradictory faces of cultural memory; on the one hand, cultural memory has its fixed point; its horizon does not change with the passing of time. These fixed points are fateful events of the past, whose memory is maintained through cultural formation and institutional communication. On the other hand, cultural memory works by reconstructing, which always relates its knowledge to an actual and contemporary situation. Erll and Rigney (2009, p.2) explains this situation with dynamic terms: "as an ongoing process of remembrance and forgetting in which individuals and groups continue to reconfigure their relationship to the past and hence reposition themselves in relation to established and emergent memory sites." By this way, cultural memory enables us to understand and evaluate the present conditions through past actions. Connerton (1989, p.3) contributes these definitions by saying, "images of the past commonly legitimate a present order and it is an implicit rule that participants in any social order must presuppose a shared memory." It is obvious that the social and cultural experiences are crucial components of cultural memory. When culture is thought to belong to the whole people coming from the same history and comprising a shared society, it seems impossible to isolate the social factors from cultural memory. As it is understood from the definitions, cultural memory is the sum of shared values including history, culture, politics as well as education, art and literature.

Cultural memory is also a decisive factor on identity. Gramsci says "Each individual is the synthesis not only of existing relations but of the history of these relations. He is a precis of the past."(qtd. in Rutherford, 1990, p.19). That past hidden in cultural memory makes both terms closely related. Assmann (2008, p.109) also explains memory through its relation to identity; memory is the faculty which forms an awareness of selfhood (identity), both on the personal and on the collective level. He remarks on the relation between identity and time, which is, for him, effectuated by memory. The close relation of cultural memory with identity opens a new window into this study. When the individuals' relations to the society are determined by the social factors, identity, especially cultural identity stands out. Identity gives, in a sense, personal location

to the individual in the society. The concept of identity is not only affected by the individual factors but also the social ones. Culture is among the most important social factors, which has the shaping role on identity. That significant role of culture paves the way for the construction of cultural identity. History, experiences, values and cultural memory that we share the others lie at the centre of cultural identity.

2.2. Cultural Identity

Hall (1997, p.597) indicates a social process by saying “identity bridges the gap between the inside and the outside”. The inside is restricted to the individual himself whereas the outside embraces all the cultural and social factors related to cultural identity. Hence, it is possible to point out that cultural identity is constructed by a dynamic and flexible process, which helps the individual to internalize the meanings and values of the society.

Like cultural memory, Hall (1990, p.223) mentions two aspects of cultural identity, which seem to conflict with each other. The first one defines cultural identity in terms of a shared culture, which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common. Cultural identity reflects, in that sense, the common historical experiences shared cultural codes with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning whereas the second definition of cultural identity indicates a flexible process. Hall (1990, p.225) defines this process as a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being'. For him, it belongs not only to the future but also to the past and it has a long-standing past fed by history and culture. It is also under constant transformation like every historical thing. Within this reconstructive process, Hall (1990, p.226) stresses on that cultural identity is always constructed through memory, fantasy, narrative and myth.

Both cultural memory and cultural identity indicates not only a stable process but also a dynamic, changing and reconstructive one. That memory is active and dynamic and varies with the condition of social factors over time brings memory and identity together on a common ground, culture. Aunt Ester will embody the relation between memory and identity through a cultural perspective.

2.3. Aunt Ester; A Living Memory

August Wilson is an Afro-American playwright who represents the Afro-American history and culture on stage to show the value of his own culture. His project called as *Century Cycle* reflects the social, historical and especially cultural atmosphere of the 20th century from Afro-American point of view. Wilson wrote one play for the each decade of 20th century and proudly presents it as a four-hundred- year old autobiography. This cycle opens with *Gem of the Ocean* representing the 1900s and ends with *Radio Golf* as the mirror of 1990s. His intention to complete such a valuable art is hidden in his affection for his culture and he emphasizes his culture love on all occasions: “I wanted to place this culture on stage in all its richness and fullness and to demonstrate its ability to sustain us in all areas of human life” (qtd. in Lahr, 2008, p.viii). Wilson, as a culture architect, aims to introduce Afro-American culture first to the white America, then to the whole world and to show how Afro-Americans construct, preserve and legitimate their identities in the white society. Wilson’s *Century Cycle* displays all the difficulties that Afro-Americans encountered during hard times in the American continent, contributing to the development of their cultural identity as it is a socio-historical account of Afro-American legacy. Shannon (1996, p.176) stresses on that the richest resource for this cycle is Wilson’s own memory and this cycle is the product of his own remembered past- “a past that combines his personal experiences of growing up poor and fatherless in Pittsburgh slum area, his quest for his own ties with Africa and his sustained belief that African Americans of the present generation urgently need to ground themselves in Africa’s cultural past.” In sum, Wilson’s personal memories along with his African past involve in the cycle, reflecting whole Afro-American cultural heritage.

Past plays crucial role, for Wilson, in order to understand the present circumstances. This is in fact the main function of memory; memory becomes active when the individuals try to make sense of the present conditions. The playwright gives top billing to Afro-American historical and cultural heritage to survive in the white society, becoming the Afro-American member of that community. He lays emphasis on this issue by saying, “If you don’t connect to the past, then you don’t know who you are in the present. You may prove to be unworthy of the past.” (Lahr, 2008, p.xiv). In respect to this, it is possible to say that Aunt Ester is born as a result of Wilson’s notable sensitivity to his cultural and historical values. Wilson confirms this state, saying “the tributary streams of culture, history and experience have provided me the materials out of which I make my art.” (Bigsby, 2007, p.16).

Aunt Ester is a 349-year-old ex-slave and voice of past with her powerful memories. She is the representation of Afro-American history, culture and essence of Afro-American self. Afro-Americans with

any troubles visit Aunt Ester and she confronts them with their past hidden in her memory including the realities related to whole Afro-Americans. Aunt Ester, in that sense, forms cultural memory as Pereira (1995, p.6) states, “She is a cultural storehouse of memory and experience.”

Aunt Ester takes the advisor role for Afro-Americans and she is like a safe harbor for them in rough waters of the white society. In *Two Trains Running*, *Seven Guitars*, *King Hedley II* and *Radio Golf*, Aunt Ester is mentioned about as an off-stage character but she is the main character in the *Gem of the Ocean* in which the reader takes the chance of learning her life story and role in the cycle.²:

Aunt Ester: [...] I'm on an adventure. I been on one since I was nine years old. That's how old I was when my mama sent me to live Miss Tyler. [...] I got a strong memory. I got a long memory. People say you crazy to remember. But I ain't afraid to remember. I try to remember out loud. I keep my memories alive. I feed them. [...] I got memories go way back. I'm carrying them for a lot of folk. All the old-timey folks. I'm carrying their memories and I'm carrying my own. (*Gem of the Ocean*, 45).

Citizen Barlow, in a depression, as he causes an innocent worker's death, goes to Aunt Ester to find peace. Aunt Ester tries to make him ready before taking him into a spiritual journey. Aunt Ester starts with her slavery time to show how experienced she is. Her strong memory is filled up historical and cultural realities of Afro-Americans and she uses it to help her own people which enable them to find their place in the society. In other words, Aunt Ester contributes to the characters' construction of their cultural identities by strengthening their ties with the society through her strong memory. Clues to the identity of black Americans are strewn along a cultural trail that leads backward through slavery all the way to Africa (Pereira, 1995, p.5). Accordingly, Aunt Ester reminds Citizen his past within the cultural realities of whole Afro-American community in the City of Bones where Citizen's soul will be washed. City of Bones reveals the details of Aunt Ester's memories related to middle passage. Her own memory turns into cultural memory, reflecting the whole Afro-Americans' experiences while they were brought to American continent from Africa as slaves:

Aunt Ester: Take a look at this map, Mr. Citizen. See that right there... that's a city. [...] It's made of bones. Pearly white bones. All the building and everything is made of bones. I seen it. I been there, Mr. Citizen. My mother live there. I got an aunt and three uncles live down there in that city made of bones [...]

Bones here represents the Afro-Americans who died during their journey to the American continent. These people live in Aunt Ester's memory as parts of their shared cultural past and these realities will help Citizen not only to find peace by confessing his guilt but also to strengthen his cultural identity.

In *Two Trains Running*, Aunt Ester is represented as wise and powerful person. Sterling is encouraged to see her to solve his problems because Aunt Ester has the power to cope with any problems. It is possible to say that her power comes from her memory since she remembers everything related to her community. As Snodgrass (2004, p.83) points out, “a living conscience for Wilson's cycle, Ester is the voice of Africa, the culture-keeper of America's black residents.” Aunt Ester is the reminder of past for the characters who want to go through the proper channels to the future. Besides this, that remembered past will help them both to construct and remember their cultural identity as it is nearly impossible to think identity is separated from society. Memphis is one of these characters in *Two Trains Running*, who left his land in the South and felt regret about his decision, visits Aunt Ester to take her advices:

Memphis: She say, “If you drop the ball, you got to go back and pick it up. Ain't no need in keeping running, 'cause if you get to the endzone it ain't gonna be touchdown.” She didn't say it in them words but that's what she meant... (*Two Trains Running*, 98)

Aunt Ester tries to show that the solution for the present problems lie in the past. When the present conditions meet the past, it is possible to go forward. Aunt Ester manages this through her cultural memory that is always active and open to changes since people remember or forget the past according to the needs of the present. This role of Aunt Ester also contributes to the function of cultural identity which takes a position under the changing conditions. Their shared culture, traditions and beliefs coming from Africa live in Aunt Ester's memory in order to bring Afro-Americans together and help them to find their place in the white society through their cultural identity.

² Although *Gem of the Ocean* is the opening play of the cycle, it was written last because Wilson did not write the cycle in a chronological order.

The importance of Aunt Ester's role for the Afro-American society is best understood in *King Hedley II*:

Stool Pigeon: [...] She's gone. She ain't here no more. Aunt Ester knew all the secrets of life but that's all gone now. She took all that with her. I don't know what we gonna do. We in trouble now (*King Hedley II*, 21).

It seems that death of Aunt Ester leaves Afro-Americans hopeless and desperate. Her death is like to sweep away the cultural heritage of Afro-Americans and they verge on being away from their past. Since Aunt Ester keeps African culture and history alive in her memory, Afro-Americans will deeply feel her absence.

After Aunt Ester's death, *Radio Golf* follows the cycle as a last play. However, Wilson makes reference to her through her house. Her house is planned to demolish as part of a reconstruction and development project of which partners are middle-class Afro-Americans. But the company faces a problem during the legal process and the house is not demolished at the cost of the company's serious financial cost. By this way, Afro-American culture and history, memento of Aunt Ester's strong memory, will live on the walls of her house.

3. CONCLUSION

Memories are among the most important components of human life. People are separated from each other through their personal experiences considerably shaped by memory. When the societies are taken into consideration, individual memories give way to collective or cultural memories. In this paper, cultural memory is associated with cultural identity through Aunt Ester. Aunt Ester, as old as the experiences of Afro-Americans in the American continent, embodies the decades of cultural memory, leading Afro-Americans in the white society. She serves Wilson's thought of "the need was for communal strength, an acknowledgement of a shared past and hence a sense of shared identity in the present" (Bigsby, 2007, p.3) by "making you right with yourself" (*Two Trains Running*, p.22). Aunt Ester exemplifies, in fact, all of Afro-Americans' memory including the Wilson's personal memory. Only remembering past help the characters who want to find peace and understand their "selves", which is possible through Aunt Ester's memory that is the representation of culture and history. By this way, Afro-Americans manage to hold on to the white society, constructing their cultural identity.

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