

Rose's Self-consciousness in Fences

Xiaohui Zhang

Tianjin Foreign Studies University, Tianjin 300204

Abstract: As to Rose in August Wilson's *Fences*, most of critiques view her as an "angel in the house", devoting herself to her family without female self-consciousness. While the paper will prove Rose is a brave, independent woman who has a sense of self to express her ideas, stick to her decision and pursue her felicity she wants.

Keyword: Fences; Rose; Self-consciousness

The black playwright August Wilson, as one of the brightest stars in American drama since the 1980s, has shaped a series of impressive male roles, but his female roles are often considered as subordinate, secondary, and lost compared to his male roles. The feminist Kim Marra believes that Wilson creates weak and subordinate female characters who are merely ornaments or prisoners of men. She criticizes Wilson's writing of black female characters as the stereotype of black women, with little hope of breaking down traditional patriarchy (132-160). In his *Fences*, the heroine is a negative housewife when making her entrance in Scene One, which seems to reinforce this viewpoint. Bogumil states, "Rose loses her sense of self in her commitment to her husband"(49). This paper will examine Rose's self-consciousness in *Fences* and show that she is an image of a strong and positive black female, even before she is emotionally scarred at the hands of disloyal and untrustworthy Troy.

Self-consciousness stemming from philosophy and psychology is a very extensive concept and a large amount of famous scholars endow it with different understandings and definitions. To analyze Rose's self-consciousness in the play, it is necessary to clarify what the self-consciousness refers to in the paper. "Self-consciousness mainly emphasizes that individuals must remain independent and should be able to make judgments based on their own experience, knowledge, personality and interests, rather than based on others, traditions, and customs" (Zhu 37).

Having independent awareness is vital for female self-consciousness, especially living in an unfair and lopsided world, which means one is able to possess her own ideas to choose, decide and judge her around society. Rose has always had the independent awareness to make all kinds of decisions. The best proof is that Rose is initiative to marry Troy who is often criticized as the miniature of patriarchal society. Although there are quarrels with their eighteen years of marriage, the family also gives her the greatest protection and well-being in her life. As she tells to Cory, "It's my choice. It was my life and I didn't have to live it like that. But that's what life offered me in the way of being a woman and I took it. I grabbed hold of it with both hands" (Wilson 108). She is deeply obsessive with Troy shining on the baseball field and impressed by Troy's masculinity and personality that he was talented, having ideals, and daring to fight at that time. Marrying Troy is her own choice as she really adores the man. Even driven by the impassioned emotion, Rose still keeps sober. She warns Troy, "if he wasn't the marrying kind, then move out the way so the marrying kind could find me" (Wilson 9). Later, even if Troy's dreams are broken by reality to become a sanitation worker, she is still proud of the responsible man. She admires her husband's strengths and tolerates his faults. She puts herself aside owing to the passion of love to Troy and the responsibility for the family rather than a lack of self-consciousness.

Although Rose can not change the stubborn thoughts and actions of Troy, it does not mean that Rose has been in a silent position. Rose's love for Troy is not blindly obedient, and she has been expressing her views to challenge Troy's authority. Troy is a man who is frustrated in reality, at the same time he is dishonest, selfish and proud, thus he is accustomed to satisfying his masculinity by speaking exaggerated lies or making excessive jokes. At these moments, Rose does not just listen in silence, but she points out sharply the facts to keep Troy from continuing. She says, "Troy lying" (Wilson 19). When she can not stand Troy's words, she says directly that "I don't like talk about it" (Wilson 14). Rose disagrees about Troy's way how to take care of his brother, Gabriel, who suffered a brain injury in the second world war and she has several quarrels with Troy. She is full of love and sympathy for him, putting herself in his place to treat him and she thinks that "something ought to be done to help him" (Wilson 32). While Troy's care for his brother is not innocent that he uses Gabriel's pension. Rose is not voiceless at home as she has been expressing herself and has her own opinions on things. Although she may eventually compromise with Troy's authority out of her worship to Troy and responsibility to the family, it does not erase her self-consciousness rooted in her nature.

A self-conscious person must first be aware of and pay attention to self, and then to the surrounding environment, people or things. Conversely speaking, if one can perceive changes of the surrounding environment or people, this perception will help them fulfill themselves. When Rose discovers that her husband often goes out on weekends, she has conceived keenly the crisis of the family. Therefore, she does her best to maintain the family that is about to fall apart by persuading Troy to stay at home and repair the fence. What's more, Rose realizes that times have changed and the black people can now become professional athletes. She reminds Troy that time is different when he played baseball, in other words, which makes Rose stronger and wiser than Troy because she is able to feel and accept the changes of environment and willing to transform her ideas to adapt society. She insists that "Times have changed from when you was young, Troy. People change. The world's changing around you and you can't even see it" (Wilson 46). Rose's

sharp sense of the surrounding environment, people and things shows that she is not just an “angel in the house” who has no thoughts and loses herself under patriarchal values.

When Troy has an affair, Rose knows that it’s unworthy of devoting herself to her headstrong, ungrateful and unsympathetic husband and that she has given up too much of herself. Rose’s transformation from a housewife to more independent woman is fascinating and quick. When she discovers she has given most of herself to a husband who took her for granted, she realizes that everything she did for holding the family together is fruitless and she decides to break up with Troy firmly. She announces to her husband, “From right now, this child got a mother, but you a womanless man”, which shows a powerful challenge to Troy’s hegemony in the home (Wilson 88). Dejected and broken, Rose asserts her own independence. The more important is that Rose walks out of the patriarchal family and moves towards society where she can achieve her self-worth. Rose accepts motherhood and she now looks for self-consciousness in the raising of a new baby. She now has the freedom to discover new avenues for her energies, and she becomes heavily involved in her church.

James Lawrence Taylor, JR states that, “She can be seen as the strongest character in *Fences*”(76). On the surface, this family is controlled and owned by Troy, and all family members can only obey his authority, so that Troy is elevated to a supreme hegemonic position. But in fact, Lyons, Cory and Gabriel are more dependent on Rose. Bono as a clear bystander, he evaluates that “Rose’ll keep you straight. You get off the track, she’ll straighten you up” (Wilson 62). When Troy is unwilling to accept the money returned from Lyons, Lyons gives the money to Rose. Because of Rose’s words, Cory attends his father’s funeral and walks out of his father’s shadow. Gabriel has always been afraid that Troy is angry with him, but is very dependent on Rose. If Rose is just a simple image of a black care-taker, without self-consciousness, it is impossible to gain the respect and trust of the whole family.

Rose is not only the potential stereotype, but also a strong black female character with understanding, intelligence and acumen, though one might argue that she passively accepts her life. As Troy’s affair inspires Rose’s freedom, she gains a greater self-consciousness. Her self-consciousness is rooted in her nature rather than awakening after going through Troy’s disloyalty.

References:

- [1] Bogumil, Mary L. *Understanding August Wilson*. Columbia: U of South Carolina P, 1999.
- [2] Baorong, Zhu. *Psychological Philosophy* [M]. Shanghai:Fudan University Press, 2004:37-47.
- [3] Lawrence Taylor, JR, James. “Understanding Wilson’s Blueswomen: A Dramaturgical Exploration of August Wilson’s Female Characters.” Florida: Bell & Howell Information and Learning Company, 2000.
- [4] Marra, Kim. “Ma Rainey and the Boyz: Gender Ideology in August Wilson’s Broadway Canon.” *August Wilson: A Casebook*. E d. Marilyn Elkina. New York: Garland, (1994):123-160.
- [5] Wilson, August. *Fences*. New York: Plume, 1986.

Author Introduction: Xiaohui Zhang(1998-),Female, born in March 12, Linyi, Shandong Province, postgraduate student of Tianjin Foreign Studies University, British and American literature.