

Aggression in August Wilson's *King Hedley II***Asma'a Mohannad Saad**sasmaa567@gmail.com**Asst. Prof. Muthanna Mohammad Sultan, (Ph.D)****University of Baghdad/ College of Education (Ibn Rushd)**muthanna.sultan@ircoedu.uobaghdad.edu.iq

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This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).**Abstract**

The need for investigating the stereotypical image of the African American males as aggressive, criminal individuals brings this research to address this sensitive issue. But the stereotypes of the African American have drawn the attention of many black writers and psychiatrists who tried to dismantle these images by revealing the social, psychological, and socioeconomic factors which contribute in this phenomenon. This paper highlights the reasons that drive the black males to adopt aggression through analyzing August Wilson's *King Hedley II* (1999). In this play, Wilson portrays the widely spread aggression and its negative consequences. He also goes a step further and suggests a solution that the paper questions its validity.

Keywords: Aggression, Frantz Fanon, hegemony, King Hedley II.**العداية في مسرحية اوكت ويلسون الملك هيدلي الثاني****أسماء مهند سعد****أ.م. د مثنى محمد سلطان****جامعة بغداد/ كلية التربية (ابن رشد)****الملخص :**

جذبت الصورة النمطية للذكور الأمريكيين الأفارقة كأفراد عدوانيين ومجرمين اهتمام العديد من الأطباء النفسيين السود الذين حاولوا تفكيكها من خلال الكشف عن العوامل النفسية والاجتماعية والاقتصادية التي تسهم في ظهورها. يسلط هذا البحث الضوء على الأسباب التي تدفع الذكور السود إلى تبني التصرفات العدائية من خلال تحليل مسرحية اوكت ويلسون الملك هيدلي الثاني. ففي هذه المسرحية، يصور ويلسون انتشار العدائية ويوضح آثارها السلبية. بالإضافة إلى ذلك، يقترح ويلسون حلاً يناقش البحث مدى صحته.

الكلمات المفتاحية: العداية، فرانتز فانون، الهيمنة، الملك هيدلي الثاني.

1. Aggression

The word aggression is derived from the Latin word “aggression” which means “an attack.” It has been used in the English language for the first time in 1611 to refer to ‘an unprovoked attack.’ Nowadays, aggression is defined as any “spoken or physical behavior that is threatening or involves harm to someone or something” (Aggression, 2019). It has two kinds: Verbal and physical. The verbal aggression means insulting and humiliating others through using bad words. Whereas, physical aggression involves criminal acts such as killing and beating (Belgrave & Allison, 2006). Basically, the aggressive, criminal behaviors are associated with the black males because of the criminologists and researchers such as Cesare Lombroso who leaned towards the physiological approach for crimes explanation. Lombroso proposed certain physical traits through which the criminals could be identified such as pointed ears, thin bridged nose, and thick skin (Wetzell, 2000). These traits are more likely to be found in the black males. Thus, Lombroso contributed in stereotyping the black males as criminal, aggressive individuals.

The theorist and psychiatrist, Frantz Fanon (1991) found that the depiction of the black male as an aggressive individual is correct, but this aggressiveness does not stem from his biological construction. It is induced by the white man’s violent practices which could be physical, psychological, emotional, and financial. Long-term exposure to these practices would fill the black males with a sense of rage and frustration. If these sensations find no release, they will evolve into aggressive acts. Usually, the black male directs his aggressiveness against his fellowmen:

When the [white] settler or the policeman has the right to strike the native, to insult him and make him crawl to them, you will see the native reaching out for his knife at the slightest hostile or aggressive glance cast on him by another native: for the last resort of the native is to defend his personality vis-à-vis his brother. (Fanon, 1991, p 54)

In this case, the victims of aggression are the black themselves. Fanon’s theory, expressed in *The Wretched of the Earth* could be followed in analyzing the aggression of the African American males. As it is known, the African Americans, as a minority, live under the hegemony of the white society. To perpetuate this domination, the whites treat the African Americans brutally. During slavery, the African American males

received all the kinds of physical torture, including beating, lynching, and body mutilation (Staples, 1974). After the end of slavery, the aggressiveness of the white Americans continues in an indirect way which is seen in the socio-economic pressures that are inflicted upon the African Americans. Due to these pressures, the rates of black crimes increased. This increase has drawn the attention of many African American psychologists such as Amos Wilson, who analyzed black-on-black aggression through introducing theories that are similar to Fanon's theory. According to Wilson (1990), the aggressive conducts are the result of a psychopathological social system that wants to oppress the black people. To explain this point, he contends that the sources and motivations of the African American's aggressiveness are socially determined. Ignoring the social context that causes the aggressiveness of the African Americans males would make us blame the victims and see them as innate criminals. This is what the white society would like others to do so that they can hide their criminality.

The American nation has been founded over one of the most drastic crimes in the history of humanity which is the crime of enslaving the Africans and exploiting their labor. To rationalize this crime, the white Americans portray the African American males as aggressive, criminal individuals and thus create a false consciousness. The goal behind the process of criminalizing the black males is maintaining the relative powerlessness and inferiority of the African American community:

Black criminality is not accidental, coincidental, or aberrant, but speaks to an apparent need in the White American community to induce criminality in a significant proportion of the Black American community, as well as its need to perceive African Americans as innately criminal, just as it exhibits the related need to perceive the average African Americans as innately intellectually inferior. (Amos Wilson, 1990, p 34)

However, these projections will not remain mere stereotypes. When the white individuals have the power that they have, these projections will become creative efforts. In another sense, they would bring these stereotypes into life by imposing poverty and unemployment on the African Americans males. Through controlling the socio-economic conditions, the white society frustrates the black males and creates stresses within them. Out of these stresses arises aggression and criminality.

The black male's inability to provide the material needs of his family makes him resort to destructive behaviors like robbery, and homicide, especially 'black on black

crime' that are detrimental to the African American community. Accordingly, the frustration of the African American male is aroused by the cruel treatment that he has received throughout his life and made him aggressive. Thus, the African Americans got caught in a vicious cycle that is difficult to break.

2. Aggression in *King Hedley II*

Aggression has been a recurrent issue in Wilson's plays. He has discussed the aggression of the African American males and unveiled its negative consequences in plays such as *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (1982) and *Fences* (1985). But in *King Hedley II* (1999), Wilson suggests his solution to this life threatening issue. He sets the play in the 1980s; which is a decade characterized by higher rates of black crimes. To project the reasons behind the prevalence of aggression among the black males in that period, Wilson attaches the blacks' crimes with the economic conditions. As it is known, Ronald Reagan has assumed the presidency during the 1980s and launched a set of economic policies known as "Reaganomics" which intend to reinvigorate the economic conditions of the American citizens. Yet, these policies have accelerated the economic deterioration of the black population and increased their frustration (Swinton, 1988). The gnawing need for money has propelled the black males to indulge in illegal activities such as robbing, murdering, and drug dealing which are considered aggressive acts.

To stress the gravity of aggression, August Wilson presents Pittsburgh as a violent milieu where the black citizens live with the fear of losing their lives in any moment. Therefore, they hold their guns in anticipation of any imminent attack. By presenting this condition, Wilson reinforces the idea that the black individuals kill each other for trivial reasons. To denote the diffusion of black-on-black crimes, Stool Pigeon, a sixty years old African American man, gives examples from the newspapers he collects and the incidents he has seen in his life. He states:

STOOL PIGEON (showing newspaper). Look at that! "City Violence Escalates. Teen Killed in Drive-By." You got to know that!

ELMORE. "Teen Killed in Drive-By." I'm tired of hearing that.

KING. I used to be you get killed over something. Now you got killed over nothing.

STOOL PIGEON. I [sic] seen a man get killed over a fish sandwich. Right down there at Cephuss. Had two fish sandwiches . . . one with hot sauce and one without. Somebody got them mixed up and these two fellows got to arguing over them. The next thing you know it was a surprise to God to find out that one of them had six bullet holes in him. (August Wilson, 2005, p 34)

When one kills another over a fish sandwich, this incident demonstrates the moral deterioration of the black males and the senselessness of their crimes which would surely enhance their image as aggressive, criminal individuals.

King Hedley II, the protagonist, is also marked as an aggressive man because he has killed a black man. Before the commencement of the play, he has spent seven long and harsh years in prison. Harry Elam (2004) asserts, the factors that have contributed in shaping King's personality are environment and heredity. In King's case, environment and heredity work in tandem because his father, King Hedley I, has been an aggressive man. His physical aggressiveness manifests when a black man refuses to call him King. King Hedley's opponent could not cope with the idea that a black man is given a royal name such as King. From his perspective, the black population is a marginalized group that lives under the white man's rule. So, how a black man becomes King? Hedley, on the other hand, conceives the black man's behavior as an intended degradation to his identity; therefore, he kills him without hesitation.

When King Hedley II matures, he prides himself for being the son of a man who has killed to preserve his identity and self-worth. In fact, he inherits his father's aggressive conducts and refusal to any insult. To demonstrate this, Wilson makes the motives behind their crimes identical. King's crime has been stimulated by his black neighbor who has kept calling him 'champ.' King reveals, "Pernell called me 'champ.' I told him my name's King. He say, 'Yeah, champ.' I go on. I don't say nothing. I told myself, 'He don't know.' He don't know my daddy killed a man for calling him out of his name" (August Wilson, p 73). Pernell's words strike the strong chord, which is King's identity, mainly because King's name is associated with his identity and self-worth. Thus, when Pernell calls him 'champ,' King considers it an insult. Pernell could not accept King's correction. And in their next encounter, he cuts King's face without uttering a word.

Pernell deforms King's face and leaves him with an ugly scar that runs along the left side of his face. Consequently, King feels that he must avenge his disfiguration. He follows Pernell to a phone booth and kills him. By Killing Pernell, Wilson substantiates that King has inherited his father's aggressiveness. On the contrary of King Hedley I, King Hedley II directs his aggression on both of the whites and blacks. To demonstrate this difference, King's aggression would be divided into two parts: External aggression against the other and internal aggression against the family.

2.1 External Aggression Against the Other

King's aggressiveness against the other (the white man) is the result of grasping the strategies that the hegemonic whites use to maintain the blacks' poverty and inferiority. As Amos Wilson (1990) elucidates, these strategies depend on the economic and educational institutions that eliminate the blacks' job opportunities to control the material aspects of the blacks' life and ensure their poverty. King himself has been the victim of the white hegemonic institutions such as school. King remarks that, the white school teachers, instead of educating him and widening his prospects, eradicate his aspirations by telling him that he only could be a good janitor. The whites enclose the black individuals with these menial, low-paid jobs in order to fortify their poverty.

King refuses this poverty and rebels against the white hegemonic system that limits the economic opportunities of the African American males in spite of their marvelous potentialities. As King explicates, his ability to work and perform exceeds anything. The limitations come from the white society that restricts the young black men into menial jobs even if they are educated. King, for instance, has a high school diploma and can work in any job, but whenever he applies for a new job they ask him, "What can you do" (August Wilson, p 55). King retorts, "I can do anything. [. . .] Ain't nothing I can't do. I could build a railroad if I had the steel and a gang of men to drive the spikes. I ain't limited to nothing" (August Wilson, p 55). According to the former line, African Americans possess great potentialities, and the limitations of their achievements are externally imposed.

In fact, the white society intentionally constrains job opportunities because it does not want the African Americans to gain money and achieve economic independence. King asserts:

Every time I try to do something they [the whites] get in the way. Especially if you try and get some money. They don't want you to have none of that. They keep that away from you. They got fifty-eleven way to get money and don't want you to have none. Hop been tearing down buildings his whole life and all of a sudden he don't know what he doing. He don't know how to tear down buildings. They can't give him the contract. They afraid he gonna make a little bit of money. (August Wilson, p 54)

From King's perspective, it is virtually impossible to accomplish financial success while enclosing within an oppressive society that blocks the black individuals out of the economy. To supplement his argument, King mentions Hop as an example. Hop, a black contractor whom King works with, has offered the lowest bid to obtain the contract of tearing down a hotel in East Liberty. However, the white authorities do not want to follow the rules and give Hop the contract. They even use his low bid as a substantiation for his inefficiency, thinking that he might make some money.

This imposed poverty frustrates King who indicates the conditions of the African Americans and their self-worth are in accelerating decline because of the economic hegemony of the white men who rebuff the idea of maximizing the black males' wages; he states, "I used to be worth twelve hundred dollars during slavery. Now I'm worth \$3.35 an hour. I'm going backwards. Everybody else moving forward" (August Wilson, p 55). This huge drop of the blacks' worth infuriates King and triggers his aggressiveness. King physical aggressiveness against the white men blasts when he goes to the Sears, a photographic studio, and discover that his wife's pictures are lost and there is no record of them. He shows them the receipt, but the white manager tells King that his receipt does not count. When the white man tells King that his receipt has no value, it is an indirect reference to the fact that the white society considers the African Americans valueless. Therefore, King reacts aggressively. He grabs the white man by his throat and shouts, "How in the hell the receipt not gonna count? That's like money" (August Wilson, p 52). The white manager calls the police to frighten King and take his receipt. Yet, King refuses to cede, he tells his friend, Mister, "Without that receipt I'm going to jail. They gonna charge me with fraud, forgery, grand theft, larceny, second degree robbery and anything else they can think of" (August Wilson, p 52-53). King's insistence on his rights obliges the white man to take the number of King's receipt and look for them.

Through putting King in such a situation, Wilson highlights two important points. The first point is that, in a post-Civil Rights era, the white system covertly fuels racial discrimination by creating different norms that sustain the inferiority and poverty of the black race. The second point is that the African Americans live in a country that is originated out of violence and still depends on the violent practices. So, they must protect themselves and defend their rights. King, for instance, would not get his pictures if he has not confronted the white men and claimed his rights.

2.2 Internal Aggression Against the Family

King's aggressiveness against his family members represents the negative side of aggression which, as we have seen, usually leads to the destruction of the aggressor. In *King Hedley II*, Wilson adds a slight twist to change the course of the events and bring the cycle of black-on-black aggression into an end. Before analyzing King's aggressive acts, the motivators of his aggression deserve an in-depth examination. In other words, King's economic conditions should be expounded.

After his release from prison, King has the dream of regaining his life and starting a legal job that grants him financial security. However, King's dream is difficult to achieve due to the economic policies that have been followed in the 1980s. These policies, in Wilson's view, deprive the black males of the chance to amend their financial conditions and consequently instigated their criminality (Bryer and Hartig, 2010). King's need for obtaining financial independence returns him to the road of criminality. Throughout the play, he sells stolen refrigerators and robs a jewelry shop to collect the required money for opening his own video store.

King's criminal acts are opposed by his family members, Ruby and Tonya. Their opposition makes them the targets of King's verbal aggressiveness. King's aggressiveness against his mother, Ruby, starts at the beginning of the first act when she doubts the growth of King's seeds. According to Ruby, the seeds that King has brought will not grow because the soil of his backyard is infertile. In fact, King's seeds symbolize his own dream and desire to overcome the quandaries of life while the infertile soil signifies King's criminal background. Therefore, when Ruby tells King that his "seeds [are not] gonna grow in that dirt" (August Wilson, p 10), she indirectly indicates that it is impossible for his dreams to become true because of his criminality.

Ruby's statement agitates King's anger who confirms that his seeds will grow whether the soil is fertile or infertile.

Thereafter, Ruby advises King not to embroil in illegal acts that will lead him back to prison. Ruby's unsolicited advice unleashes King's verbal aggressiveness. He shouts:

Why don't you leave me go with my business. You ain't got to watch over me. You wasn't watching over me when you took off to East St. Louis and left me here with Mama Louise. You wasn't watching over me then. I don't need you to tell me nothing. Your time to tell me done come and gone. (August Wilson, p 28)

As King illuminates, Ruby does not have the right to interfere in his life because she has preferred her singing profession and abandoned him when he was three years old. For that reason, King does not accept her advice and consider her a mother.

King's wife Tonya experiences King's aggressiveness when she announces her decision to have a miscarriage. Throughout the play, King has expressed his desire to have a child that carries his name and continues his legacy more than once. Yet, Tonya disregards King's opinion and insists on aborting his child. Her insistence springs from the fact that black neighborhoods have become unsuitable places for raising kids. She does not want to have a child and then go through the pains of losing him in an armed struggle. Tonya announces, "I ain't raising no kid to have somebody shoot him. To have his friends shoot him. To have police shoot him. Why I wanna bring another life into this world that don't respect life? I don't want to raise no more babies when you got to fight to keep them alive" (August Wilson, p 39). Tonya's disregard for King's opinion stirs King's aggressiveness. So, he starts to yell, "It ain't even born and you got it in a casket already. [. . .] Talking about you ain't got to explain it to nobody. [. . .] You got to explain to me" (August Wilson, p 40).

In addition to the violent environment of the 1980s, Tonya uses King's aggressive mentality as an excuse for aborting the child (Snodgrass, 2004). From Tonya perspective, an aggressive man who walks with a gun in his hand and ready to involve in criminal acts would not be qualified to raise a son. He would either lose his life or end up in prison and thus leave his son without protection. Accordingly, Tonya demands a remarkable change not only in the society, but also in the males' aggressive mentality.

Tonya's predictions become a reality when Elmore, Ruby's fiancé, discloses the secret of King's real paternity. Elmore detours the course of the events by declaring his role in killing Ruby's first husband, Leroy Slater, who was one of his best friends. Their friendship shreds when Leroy marries Elmore's ex-girlfriend, Ruby. Sadly, this marriage ends because Elmore, as Ruby claims, has killed Leroy out of jealousy. Elmore refutes Ruby's claim by stating that he has murdered Leroy over a gambling debt. Elmore aggravates the intensity of his crime by revealing the kinship between King and Leroy Slater, who is King's biological father, despite of Ruby's objection. Ostensibly, Elmore confesses his offense because he wants King to know the identity of his birth father. But the underlying motivation for this confession is Elmore's desire to find inner peace.

Obviously, Elmore's declaration strips King of the name that defines his identity. In lieu of discovering his real identity, King loses his identity and alienates himself from his friends and family in an attempt to apprehend his pedigree. However, King's silence and disappearance is the calm before the storm because King has inherited Hedley's aggressiveness and will return to seek vengeance. To reestablish his sense of self, King feels impelled to repeat the cycle of black-on-black aggression and kill Elmore. Before taking Elmore's life, King pays Leroy's debt and invites Elmore to a crap game to reduplicate the scenario that has led to his father's death. Thus, King throws himself into a game that is based on chance just to take revenge. To accomplish his retaliation, King disregards his dreams and spends his savings, which are supposed to be used in opening the video store, on gambling with Elmore. Consequently, King's retaliation or aggression costs him the dream of having a prosperous life.

After losing a considerable amount of money, King notices that Elmore has switched the dice to win the game. Elmore's deceit evokes King's physical aggressiveness. He takes the machete that Stool Pigeon has given him and threatens to kill Elmore. Through holding this machete, King resuscitates the memory of his surrogate father, King Hedley I, who has used the machete in slaying a black man. Unable to reenact Hedley's crime, King drops his weapon and repeats the phrase that Leroy has pronounced before deciding to spare Elmore's life: "Now you are a dead man twice" (August Wilson, p 101). Enraged by King's phrase, Elmore pulls his gun in King's face. Incapable of harming King, Elmore lowers his revolver and shoots into the

ground. When Ruby hears the gunshot, she brings her pistol to defend her son. Sadly, her bullet hits King in the pharynx and ends his life.

By choosing forgiveness, King ends the cycle of black-on-black aggression that has haunted the African Americans for more than three centuries (Pease, 2010). The blacks' aggressiveness, as it is earlier discussed, has originated from the white oppressive social structure that has implanted aggression in the mind of the black males and then nourished it to ensure the destruction of the African American community. To save the community from imminent destruction, Wilson calls for a new tradition that has to be based on forgiveness rather than retaliation.

3. Conclusion

King Hedley II situates the black male aggressiveness as it is aroused by the socio-economic pressures. These pressures are created by the government and non-government institutions just to perpetuate the otherness and poverty of the African Americans. The aggression of the black males is only a reaction. Wilson suggests a solution to this aggression through King Hedley's persona, who is an aggressive man. As we have seen, King's aggressiveness lends itself to the public and private domains. The former is caused by his marginalized identity as a member of the American society, his otherness, while the latter is the production of his inability to express himself. King breaks the cycle of aggression by refusing to kill the murderer of his biological father. Through this act, Wilson conveys an important message to the African American males, which is the fact that aggressive acts leads only to the destruction of the community. If they really want to avoid this destruction, they must learn how to dissolve their anger and forgive each other. However, Wilson's solution is far from being realistic. He depends on ethical and religious beliefs, such as oblivion and forgiveness, that cannot be followed by all the African Americans. To end the delinquency of black males and their aggressive behaviors, a tremendous change in the position and conditions of the African Americans should happen first; this means better education, better health care system, and more job opportunities. To bring these changes into a reality, the African Americans, as a subaltern group, need to find their voice and unite their forces in order to claim their legitimate rights as human beings.

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