IJCRT.ORG ISSN : 2320-2882

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

Masculinity And Disillusionment In The Select Plays Of Ed Bullins

K. Karuppusamy 1 , Dr. M. Prasath* 2 ,
Ph.D.,Research Scholar1, Assistant Professor 2 ,
P.G. & Research Department of English,
Vivekanandha College of Arts and Sciences for Women (Autonomous),
Tiruchengode, Namakkal District- 637205, Tamil Nadu, India

Abstract: This paper explores the crisis of Black masculinity and the theme of disillusionment in the select plays of Ed Bullins, one of the leading dramatists of the Black Arts Movement in America. Bullins's theatre exposes the contradictions within Black manhood, showing how racial oppression, economic marginalization, and patriarchal expectations fracture the identities of urban Black men. Through plays such as *In the Wine Time* (1968), *The Fabulous Miss Marie* (1971), *The Taking of Miss Janie* (1975), and *Goin' a Buffalo* (1968), Bullins portrays characters who perform masculinity as a survival strategy in a hostile world. Their disillusionment, however, becomes a process of moral and psychological revelation. The paper argues that Bullins redefines masculinity not as an assertion of dominance but as the courage to confront vulnerability and truth. His theatre transforms despair into awareness, thus contributing profoundly to the discourse on African American identity and gender.

Keywords: Ed Bullins, Black Arts Movement, Masculinity, Disillusionment, African American Drama, Urban Realism.

I. INTRODUCTION

Ed Bullins stands as one of the most authentic voices in African American theatre, presenting the lived experiences of Black men with an unflinching sense of realism. Emerging during the politically vibrant period of the 1960s, Bullins rejected the glorified image of the militant hero that dominated the Black Arts Movement. Instead, he turned his attention to the struggles, contradictions, and emotional turbulence of ordinary Black men. His plays do not celebrate triumph but examine the wounds of existence.

The Black Arts Movement sought to celebrate Black identity through revolutionary art. As Larry Neal observes, it was "the aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept" (Neal 29). While Amiri Baraka and others dramatized collective struggle and racial pride, Bullins exposed the quiet despair and emotional disintegration of Black masculinity under oppression. His men, confined by racism and patriarchy, reveal that the pursuit of strength often conceals deep emotional fragility.

As Harry J. Elam notes, Bullins "brings to the stage the marginalized voices of the Black urban poor, revealing both their humanity and their pain" (Elam 24). Through his realistic portrayal of everyday Black life, Bullins redefines theatre as a site of psychological confrontation rather than ideological declaration.

II. MASCULINITY AS PERFORMANCE AND SURVIVAL

In *In the Wine Time* (1968), Bullins portrays Son, a young man whose masculinity depends entirely on public performance. His identity is shaped by how he appears to others rather than by who he truly is. His boasting, drinking, and womanizing serve as fragile proofs of manhood in a world that constantly diminishes him. Son admits, "Man, you got to act like you got it together even when you don't" (36). This statement

epitomizes the performative nature of masculinity in Bullins's world, where the appearance of strength is valued more than inner confidence.

Maggie Sale observes that Bullins's men "rehearse masculine toughness as if it were armor against emotional exposure" (Sale 201). The performance of manhood provides temporary survival but prevents authentic connection. Bullins shows that these men are not heroes but survivors who wear emotional masks to hide their vulnerability in a world that equates weakness with failure.

III. Disillusionment And The Urban Landscape

The urban setting in Bullins's plays reflects the decaying inner world of his characters. The ghetto functions as both a literal and symbolic space of confinement. In *The Fabulous Miss Marie* (1971), Bob, recently released from prison, returns home filled with frustration and despair. He says, "I walked out those gates, but the street's the same, the faces the same, and me, still locked up" (55). His words reveal the illusion of freedom and the continuing emotional imprisonment that defines his life.

As Elam points out, "Bullins's realism transforms the ghetto into an existential space, where the decay of the environment mirrors the decay of the soul" (Elam 51). Bob's home, instead of offering comfort, becomes a site of confrontation with his failures. His disillusionment symbolizes the despair of a generation whose promises of equality have been replaced by the realities of social and emotional decay.

IV. The Crisis Of Black Manhood

Bullins's *The Taking of Miss Janie* (1975) delves into the intellectual and emotional confusion of post–civil rights masculinity. Monty, an educated Black man, struggles to reconcile his political awareness with his personal insecurities. His relationship with Janie, a white woman, exposes his conflicted identity. He confesses, "I took her because I had to take something, something that said I was still a man" (41). Monty's act of taking Janie becomes both a literal and symbolic attempt to assert control in a world that emasculates him.

Elam notes that "Monty's aggression, rather than liberating him, confirms his impotence" (Elam 66). Through Monty, Bullins exposes the tragic irony of men who equate power with possession. The crisis of Black manhood, in Bullins's plays, arises not only from racial oppression but also from internalized patriarchal expectations that bind men to destructive ideals of masculinity.

V. The Failure Of Revolutionary Masculinity

During the height of the Black Arts Movement, the militant Black male was often idealized as the embodiment of resistance. Bullins challenged this notion in *Goin' a Buffalo* (1968), where a group of hustlers talk about escaping the ghetto but remain trapped by their own weakness. One character admits, "We talk about getting free, but we can't even get out this room" (32). This statement reveals the futility of their revolutionary rhetoric, exposing the gap between their dreams of liberation and the inescapable reality of their circumstances.

As Elam observes, "Bullins refuses to romanticize the militant male; he exposes his contradictions and emotional impotence" (Elam 73). The revolutionary pose becomes another mask of masculinity, hiding emotional emptiness behind words of power. Bullins insists that genuine revolution begins with personal honesty and emotional transformation rather than public defiance.

VI. Disillusionment As A Path To Awareness

Disillusionment in Bullins's plays serves as the turning point from ignorance to awareness. His characters often reach moments of painful clarity about their illusions. In *The Taking of Miss Janie*, Monty admits, "All my life I've been acting free. I never knew what being free really meant" (59). His realization reflects Bullins's belief that awareness arises only through confronting one's self-deception.

Maggie Sale writes that "disillusionment in Bullins's theatre is the necessary prelude to moral awareness" (Sale 209). Through failure and reflection, Bullins's men achieve a deeper understanding of themselves. Their recognition of emptiness, though painful, becomes the beginning of healing. Bullins turns their despair into a moment of moral insight, suggesting that personal truth is more liberating than false pride.

VII. Language, Silence, And The Voice Of The Disillusioned Man

Language in Bullins's theatre serves as both expression and disguise. His characters use the rhythm of street talk to assert identity and deflect pain. Yet behind their endless conversations lies a profound silence that speaks more honestly than their words. In *In the Wine Time*, one of the characters observes, "Everybody talking, but

nobody saying nothing worth hearing" (28). The line captures Bullins's view that communication often conceals rather than reveals truth.

Elam remarks that "In Bullins's theatre, silence is not absence but testimony, the sound of men confronting their own emptiness" (Elam 81). The interplay of talk and silence in his plays dramatizes the tension between appearance and reality. Words become a form of survival, while silence becomes a form of revelation. Bullins's mastery of this contrast makes his theatre emotionally resonant and psychologically profound.

VIII. CONCLUSION

Ed Bullins's select plays offer a powerful examination of Black masculinity, identity, and moral struggle. His characters, Son, Bob, and Monty, embody the conflicts of men who seek validation in a world that denies their worth. Their attempts to perform manhood through control, pride, or rebellion lead only to disillusionment.

Bullins redefines masculinity as the courage to acknowledge vulnerability and accept emotional truth. His theatre transforms failure into insight, showing that liberation begins not with dominance but with self-awareness. Through his unflinching realism, Bullins portrays disillusionment as a necessary step toward moral awakening.

In contemporary African American drama and cinema, from August Wilson's Fences to Barry Jenkins's Moonlight, the echoes of Bullins's wounded men still resonate. His plays continue to remind audiences that true manhood lies in understanding rather than asserting, and that the deepest freedom comes from confronting, rather than concealing, one's pain.

Works Cited

Bullins, Ed. *In the Wine Time*. New York: Macmillan, 1968.

---. *The Fabulous Miss Marie and A Son, Come Home*. New York: Macmillan, 1971.

---. *The Taking of Miss Janie*. New York: Random House, 1975.

---. *Goin' a Buffalo*. New York: Macmillan, 1968.

Elam, Harry J. *Taking It to the Streets: The Social Protest Theater of Luis Valdez and Ed Bullins*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997.

Neal, Larry. "The Black Arts Movement." *Drama Review*, vol. 12, no. 4, 1968, pp. 28–39.

Sale, Maggie. "Call and Response as Critical Method: African American Oral Traditions and the Discussion of Ed Bullins's Drama." *African American Review*, vol. 26, no. 2, 1992, pp. 197–212.

Watkins, Mel. *On the Real Side: Laughing, Lying, and Signifying, The Underground Tradition of African-American Humor*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994.