

Healing the Hole in the Soul: *Colored Girls* in Search for Agency and Self-Affirmation

GUERIR LE TROU DANS L'ÂME: LES FILLES COLOREES RECHERCHENT UNE AGENCE ET L'AFFIRMATION DE SOI

Tengku Sepora Mahadi^{1,*}; Maysoon Taher Muhi²

¹Ph.D. School of Languages, Literacies and Translation of Universiti Sains Malaysia

²School of Languages, Literacies and Translation of Universiti Sains Malaysia

*Corresponding author.

Email: maysoontaher@yahoo.com

Received 30 August 2011; accepted 22 November 2011

Abstract

This study investigates the motif of the female agency and self-affirmation of traumatic and marginalized women in *For Colored Girls/ Who Have Considered Suicide/ When the Rainbow is Enuf* (Henceforth, *For Colored Girls*) by the African-American writer, Ntozake Shange. This play addresses Afro-American women's long history of trauma and pain that caused a hole in their souls, hoping to heal and transcend their pain by deregulating and proving their spiritual and solidarity strength. The long-kept silence of the marginalization and abuse of the women of color has been shattered by women's narrating their personal stories and by their transition from invisible to visible and from insecurity to awareness. Women in Shange's play are victims, and they are wronged, yet they are winners; they "attain victory while being oppressed." Shange's untraditional technique of using dance, movement, song, music, and poetry, forming them in one performance, makes her play a unique one as it is able to speak the unspeakable and invoke the invisible in order to subvert dominant discourse.

Key words: For Colored Girls; Female agency; Self-affirmation; Afro-American theatre

Résumé

Cette étude examine le motif de l'agence de sexe féminin et l'affirmation de soi des femmes traumatique et marginalisés dans *For Colored Girls / qui ont considéré le suicide / Quand le Rainbow est Enuf* (Désormais, *For Colored Girls*) par l'écrivain afro-américain, Shange

Ntozake. Cette pièce aborde l'histoire afro-américaine des femmes de longues traumatisme et la douleur qui a causé un trou dans leurs âmes, espérant guérir et transcender leur douleur par la déréglementation et de prouver leur force spirituelle et de solidarité. Le long silence gardé de la marginalisation et l'abus des femmes de couleur a été brisée par les femmes raconter leurs histoires personnelles et par leur transition de l'invisible au visible et de l'insécurité à la sensibilisation. Les femmes dans le jeu sont Shange victimes, et ils sont lésés, et pourtant ils sont gagnants: ils «atteindre la victoire tout en étant opprimés." Technique de untraditional Shange de l'aide de danse, de mouvement, le chant, la musique et la poésie, les former dans une performance, rend son jeu un unique car il est capable de parler de l'innommable et d'invoquer l'invisible dans le but de subvertir le discours dominant.

Mots clés: Pour les filles colorés; Agence de Femme; Affirmation de soi; Afro-américain de théâtre

Tengku Sepora Mahadi, Maysoon Taher Muhi (2011). Healing the Hole in the Soul: *Colored Girls* in Search for Agency and Self-Affirmation. *Canadian Social Science*, 7(6), 156-161. Available from: URL: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/css/article/view/j.css.1923669720110706.139> DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/j.css.1923669720110706.139>.

INTRODUCTION

In *For Colored Girls* Ntozake Shange attempts to reconstruct Black Women's history of oppression and re-shape the stereotypical presented image. Her female characters expose the need of power, the need to be heard and the need of 'self-affirmation'. These women strive to heal their souls and to get over the traumatic experience that caused by their own black society. The playwright, here, does not really condemn the white people; rather she criticizes the black men who are cruel, violent and irresponsible, and who do not appreciate women. Women

in this play express their rage and anger instead of keeping them inside hurting only themselves. The critic, June Jordan (1982) argues that this vent out rage is purification and at the same time a fundamental step in the process of women's achievement of self-determination, as Jordan underlines:

If someone is trying to hurt you, to oppress you, you should be angry, and you should put that anger where it belongs-outside yourself...I had been raped...and I was trying to deal with the experience in a lot of different ways. Once the shock subsided, I wrote "Poem about My Rights".

What Jordan highlights about sexual oppression is highly important issue in studying the history of African American women. The black women's sexual exploitation and oppression might date back to the times of the slavery where women have been regarded as sexual objects for White men, and rape was employed as a threat for her and for her community. What makes things worse is the fact that these women suffer also from misrepresentation and oppression under the hands of their black men.

PERSPECTIVE ON THE AFRO-AMERICAN WOMEN IN BLACK THEATRE

Generally speaking, the black women characters suffered from negative representation by both white and black male writers. The black women have been portrayed in literature as one-dimensional figures: the 'superwoman', the suffering servant, the matriarch, the religious fanatic, and sexually immoral. However, in American theatre, the white-authored entertainment like minstrel show of the nineteenth-century "caricatured Blacks with comic and sentimental songs, skits, jigs, and shuffles dances." (Wilson, 2007, p.360) The portrayal image of the comic buffoon and lazy shiftless Negro people in these plays helped to rationalize a system which oppressed their real life counterparts. Consequently, the black image has traditionally been presented on the stage as a way for Whites to express their own experience within their world, "both as metaphor of more general aspects of the human predicament and as mask for....personal experience and philosophy." (Sanders, 1988, p.1) This ridiculous and the negative presentation of the Negro created artistic expectations which Black playwrights had to overcome when writing for the stage. Audience, even the Black ones, were ill-prepared to accept serious and real portrayals of people presented on stage for a long period of time as object of ridicule and evil. Even the genuine relationship between the black woman and man characters was looked down as something unreal and an attractive for the White audience. James Weldon Johnson (1972, p.171) in his book *Black Manhattan* reported:

One of the well-known taboos was that there should never be any Romantic love in a Negro play. If anything approaching a love duet as introduced in a musical comedy, it had to be broadly burlesqued. The reason behind this taboo lay in the belief that

love scene between two Negroes could not strike a White audience except as ridiculous. The taboo existed in deference to the superiority stereotype that Negroes cannot be supposed to mate romantically, but do so in some sort of minstrel fashion or in some more primeval manner than White people. This taboo has been one of the strictly observed.

However, the black male writers make their main aim is to find their lost voice and refigure their distorted image by establishing their literary expression within the American canon and by confronting the external and the internal forces that repress and destroy their ability to express and articulate. Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* and Wright's *Native Son* focus on the lasting conflict and misconception of the black character by the society that renders him and ignores his right. Many black male writers in their literary works attempt to expose the tension that stems from the confrontation between societal oppression and domination and that of helpless and the impotent individual; therefore:

The contest which results, between the desire to function within a sense and sensible set of standards and the impossibility of achieving it, is the basic contest of the literature. It ends either in the hero's defeat or in stalemate. (Rosenblatt, 1973, p.19)

The black intellectualists and writers had in hand with sociologists and philanthropists paved the way to encourage efforts and attempt to rehabilitate the African history and to reevaluate the African culture as well as to develop an awareness and pride in the black man. Accordingly, the image of blacks that appear in Afro-American drama since 1950's reflects a considerable shift in cultural attitudes from black shame to black pride. The Black playwrights wrote freely with no longer feel obligated to write plays that satisfy or appeal to white audiences; instead, their plays directed primarily for the black community. Because of this shift, black playwrights were able to create radical and individualized images of blacks, replacing the stereotypes which had been mainly presented and fixed in earlier decades by white dramatists. Sandra (1988, p.3) states her belief that the African-American playwrights continued their challenge to create Black theatre definite reality, "to demetaphorize the figure of the black and make that of the white metaphorical."

Scott (1985) asserts that the fifties saw the definite emergence of the black playwright who wrote professionally and produced full-length plays with developed characters and plots. The plays of this area concentrated more on the effect of racial discrimination on the life of both the Blacks and the Whites. These playwrights concluded that the hope of blacks lies in the stamina and strength of black people. The common idea that the blacks "will survival" predominates most of these plays. Moreover, the characters in these plays are often appeared as having strong-willed, speaking firmly and freely. The old images and stereotypes of the submissive black nearly have no-existent in nearly all of these plays. However, literature produced by the African-American

male writers directed basically on the conflict between man's isolated inner world against devastating and ultimately triumphant external and powerful oppressors.

Prior to 1950's, the characterization of the black woman lacks creditability because of the extreme degree of selflessness attributed to these "black mammies." The black woman is portrayed by the white writers in their literary works as selfless "black mammies", whose main concern is cooking, cleaning and nurturing whites without considerable attention to her own family. Black woman like the black man suffered from ill-treatment and bad presentation. The most frequent role played by the black woman in literature written by whites was that of the spiritual-singing, toe-tapping, faithful servant to whites. It is clearly that such one-dimensional female black characters portrayal shows the lack of knowledge about black life. Cynthia Belgrave in "Readers' Forum: Black Woman in Film Symposium" states in commenting on the image of woman on the American stage that "...if you are strong and stoical you're a matriarch, and if you're weak and sensual you're a whore. Of course there are no woman is at the mercy of everybody. When we finish kicking people, let us kick the Black women again." (as cited in Brown-Guillory, 1987).

However, African-American woman shares with man a common oppression and discrimination, yet woman's literary response has focused generally on the exploring the internal strength and hidden power as a means to face the external persecution. Black women playwrights since the 1950's do not restrict themselves to the condition of being slut or deity. Black women in the plays of Black women playwrights like, Hansberry, Childress, and Shange receive serious treatment and almost their images are constructive. The focus in their plays is one the empowering African-American woman spirit by understanding and advocating one's self and praising their origin.

Jeanne-Marie A. Miller in her essay "Images of Black Women in Plays by Black Playwrights," affirms the effectiveness of this positive treatment, saying: "In Black-authored dramas depicting ghetto life-styles, Black women hold on to life, however harsh it may be, and sometimes work for a better future." (as cited in Brown-Guillory, 1996, p.204) Criticizing the negative way that Black men writers present Black women, Miller points out that "in the plays written by Black males, Black women's happiness or "completeness" in life depends upon strong to their works their vision, however, different, of what Black women are or what they should be..."

At the turn of the 20th century Black women found themselves caught in ambivalent situation as they were in the middle of two movements (The Black Movement and Feminism), expected to direct their fighting towards either racial or gender oppression, but not both. Black women made their mind and decided to continue the fight for racism, thinking that racism is largely the head

of the Hydra, especially when they discovered that the Women's Movement is partly racial since it did not take the Black women's suffering and status into consideration. Moreover, the guilt feeling Black women practiced by black males if they demonstrated an interest in the White feminism, as if by following feminism, they would betray their fatal issues of freedom and respecting their heritage. Thus, Black women decided to speak for themselves. (Williams, 1970; Guy-Sheftall, 1985).

Nevertheless, in the 1960s and 1970s, the black theatre turned out to be a site where the tensions between black men and women were dramatized. Affected by the sexist attitude of the Black Power Movement, many black male playwrights portrayed black women negatively in their plays, and claimed that women have a secondary role. Working with the principle that for each action there is a reaction, the Black women playwrights, who were writing during this hectic time of myriad ideologies, theories and perspectives, like Alice Childress, Ntozake Shange, Adrienne Kennedy, Sonia Sanchez and Aisha Rahman, to name some of them, strongly responded to these abusive attacks on black womanhood by creating plays that basically tackled and examined the rising tension between black men and women, depicting such attitudes as Wallace indicates. Their plays often exposed and redefine looked at the situation from the black female perspective and attempted to restore black women's images by focusing on the hardships and oppression they have had to endure.

The black female writers of the 20 century concentrate and trust women's power and their readiness to change. Moreover, they explore "the sexual politics" of the relationship between man and women and they conclude and emphasize the need of new inward campaign towards gender relations not less than campaign towards the racism. The Black women during the 1970's, when the majority of Black women plays were written and produce, much activities were taking place, or had occurred in society due to varied factors that help the emergence of African-American women writers, like women's movement, with its stress on vital factors like the economic, social, and political equality for women- cum- the Black Power Movement with its indirect sexist practices, and its emphasis on racial equality. Cudjoe (1990) concludes that:

It was the culmination of a number of factors at the end of the sixties that led to the outpouring of writings by Afro-American women. First, the inherent shortcomings of the nationalism of the Black Power; second, the increased social and economic pressures that led to the rapid deterioration of the urban centers of America; third, the rise of the feminist movement that made Afro-American women more conscious of their particularity; and fourth, the increasing tensions in the black male-female relations.

Within such an atmosphere of conflicting ideologies, proliferation of literary works by black women had appeared. Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970), Alice

Walker's *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970), Cayle Johnes's *Corregidora* (1975) and Eva's *Man* (1976), Ntozake Shange's chorepoem *For Colored Girls*, among others, focused on the physical, emotional and psychological abuse and oppression that black women endured and suffered at the hand of the black men. Regardless of the way black women were sometimes presented in the works of male writers, when black women writers try to turn the tables and depict male characters negatively, such depiction raised the rage of many men and ignite a critical debate within the black community about the relationship between black men and women and the portrayal of black men by black women writers. Ntozake Shange's chorepoem *For Colored Girls* was one of the literary works that sparked off this debate between male and female in the 1970.

THE BLACK SHARAZADIAN WOMEN TELL THEIR STORIES

For Colored Girls is a moving work full of poetry, music, and dance, expressing women's painful personal experiences. The women's stories together represent Shange's personal life and 'Every Woman'. Shange shows her deep concern with many issues that block the path of the black women to grow healthy maturity and full humanness. In her play, she speaks of the political, racial, sexual, and feminist issues as the direct causes of women's sufferings and dilemma. The seven women representing the colors of the rainbow vividly project, through poetic language, dance and music, the double oppression of being black and being women.

In her chorepoem, Shange explores the ability of seven women to across over the abyss of chaos and destruction, setting a journey of healing; a journey that mitigates their pain and demonstrates the power of self-love, and self-affirmation. Shange in *For Colored Girls* criticizes her own black community as it is a reason behind women's predicament. Her women shed light on their relationships with men who were so violent and cruel, and on their own society that saddened their song of innocence, let them suffer the pre-mature experience. Yet there is "...no venom...No god-like revenge, no god-like forgiving Hell" (Bambara, 1976, p.38). Instead of being self-indulges as victims, the women in *For Colored Girls* direct their efforts to find their own spiritual and inward strength. However, in their journey from innocent to experience, from pain to joy, from naivety to self-knowledge, these women are able to heal the deep hole in their souls, to find the inner beauty which is a reflection to the beauty of nature and of Creator.

These colorful women are chanting for freedom, for respecting Man for his own sake, not for a race or skin color. Shange, in this play, dignifies a different kind of women's suffering which is as different as their colors that

represent the color of rainbow. According to Shange, this play is an "exploration of people's lives and provides hope for women who have known the bitterness of the storm" (Tata, 1983, p.171).

These women follow many strategies which are in reality Shange's strategies and techniques to heal herself from unsuccessful marriage and from societal and political restrictions. These 'rainbow's women' write their body and draw their words using a unique poetic language, where Shange gets rid of the classic rules of English pronunciation and grammar. She embodies Helen Cixous's (1976, p.4) description of how woman's writing should be or look like "Woman must write herself, must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as their bodies." Helene continues her description which comes in term with Shange's portrayal of women: "Listen to a woman speaks at a public gathering.... She doesn't 'speak,' she throws her trembling body forward; she lets go of herself; all of her passes into her voice, and it's with her body that she...draws her story into history."

This strategy of exposing woman's body is a means to establish her entity, finding her own voice. The play starts with the lady of Brown voicing her experience in song and story:

Sing a black girl's song
bring her out
to know you
but sing her rhythms
carin/struggle/ hard times
sing her song of life
she's been dead so long
closed in silence so long
she doesn't know the sound
of her own voice
her infinite beauty

So, excavating for their dead inner self, song and beauty is the first mission that women have to do. One of the tools of this excavating is re-modifying English language to express women's profound needs of own freedom. The poem of lady in Yellow is a case in context:

it was graduation nite & I waz the only
virgin in the crowd
bobby mills martin Jerome & Sammy Yates
eddie jones & randi
all cousins
all the prettiest niggers in this factory
town
carried me out wit em

The boldness of the Yellow woman speech about her sexual intercourse, with the lack of punctuation and capitalization as well as the miss spelling, might reflect "the particularities of Black Women's...experience", acknowledging sexuality as a "natural dimension of female identity" (Sharadha, 1998, p.79). However, the stress on the sexual bodily action is valorized as an especial source of women's empowerment, not as a source

of inequality between men and women. Shange's poems touch a core of pain and self-negation shared by many women in relation to their bodies' experiences. Within a poetic unique detail her poems tackle vital issues like abortion, rape, violence and the relationships between men and women. It seems that Shange rejects the separation between body and mind, giving a perlocutionary emphasis on the reflection power of their correlation.

Narrating their painful experience concerning the abortion, is a necessary step in the healing process and a way to go out of the closed circuit of one's psyche, as it is regarded, Laub (1992) believes, "a therapeutic process--a process of constructing a narrative, of reconstructing a history and essentially, of re-externalizing the event--has to be set in motion." In "abortion cycle #1" Shange visualizes the brutality invasion of the woman's body in the rape action and then in illegal abortion. The woman is under indescribable and unspeakable painful trauma and fear.

tubes tables white washed windows
grim from age wipe over once
legs spread
anxious
eyes crawling up on me
eyes rollin in my thighs
metal horses gnawin my womb...
& i didn't say a thing
not a sign
or a fast cream
to get those eyes offa me
get them steel rods outta me
this hurts (pp. 22-23)

She seeks the abominable abortion because she is not married, "I cdnt have people/ lookin at me/pregnant/this hurts me." (p.22)

The story chanted by woman of Red about BeauWillie Brown who killed Crystal's children by throwing them out of the window for Crystal has rejected him as a man, is reflective as it shows the abusive of some men and the woman's wrong choice to be with such man. Crystal 'mistake' is that she allows herself, in a sense, to be oppressed under the hands of the patriarchy. She prevents Beau Willie from seeing the children part of jealousy as he "alla his money on the bartending bitch down at the//merry-go-round café"(p.60).

The serious of the first poems is interrupted by a childhood song, "mama little baby," which might express Shange's awareness of her community mistake of throwing girls into the ocean of adults without full preparation. Shange in this respect says, "*For Colored Girls*...is a record of me once I left my mother, I was raised as if everything was all right, and in fact, once I got of my home, everything was *not* all right." (as cited in Sharadha, 1998, p.80) However, the dances and songs have technical and thematic functions as they might be used to dissolve the Western ideals of dramatic form and patriarchal system, to reflect the empowerment and

the sisterhoods, as well as to attract audience attention, reminding them of their childhood memories. Waxman (1994, p.99) rightly suggests that Shange's use of dance in this play purports to unify the stories of these women and to help them to vent out their despair and isolation. For these women, this dance becomes an eloquent and effective means of communication between themselves and within their selves, allowing them to celebrate their femaleness and ethnicity.

The grounded painful reality of these women does not prevent women from being romantic, day dreamer and seeker for love. The reverie of these women is what energized them to promote freedom and long for acknowledgement. The poem "Toussainat L 'Ouverture'" describes the passion and the imagination of a little girl who dream of meeting Toussainat. This girl dreams of meeting the hero Toussainat whom she read a lot about him in books. Upon meeting a boy who alleges that he is as hero as Toussainat, she decides immediately to leave the fantasy in live in reality, hence she remains with the boy. He "became my secret lover at the age of 8/ I entertained him in my bedroom/widda flashlight under my coves/way into the night/ we discussed strategies" (p.27). The intimacy the little girl has felt makes her think that the black man is the hero and the savior, yet all her dreams came to be a nightmare when later on the other women narrate the incidents of rape and the emotional agony.

The play begins with birth and ends with birth, yet the difference between the two births is significant as the first birth ends with death, while the second one is full of life, reflecting the internal growth of these women. Utilizing the rainbow is a metaphoric to connote the relationship between women and nature, stressing the worthiness and importance of women, as no one can dispend with nature, so no can dispend with women. The lady in red concludes, "we are the same as the sky, we are here, breathing, living creatures and we have a right to be everything." (p. 28)

However, these colored ladies end not as they started. The play ends with women united in a circle, celebrating their 'cultural and spiritual fullness' as each expresses and affirms her inner peace, beauty and her own power, saying that

i found god in myself
& i loved her/ i loved her fiercely (p.63)

This power that women have discovered in themselves is both acquired power and inherited from nature but it needs to be probed and explored. They reach this power together as one group as "all the gods comin into me/layin me open to myself"(p.61).

CONCLUSION

In her projecting the male chauvinism, and solemnizing the black female identity, Shange, is by no means, attempts to incite women to shun all social and intimate

contact with men. Contrariwise, she seeks a mature level of communication in female-male relationships, built upon understanding and respecting each other. Shange's mean concern is to reconstruct the life of the black women to be a model for the young colored girls in future. *For Colored Girls* is a women's session where they unfold all their worries, finding within this meeting the solidarity strength to face what is unbearable. "The woman's shared betrayal by the same man move them toward renewed sisterhood and renewed personal strength..." (Lester 57). This play shows that the heaviest concerns would be eased if many consciences share in carrying them.

REFERENCES

- Bambara, Toni Cade (1976, Sept.). On the Arts: *For Colored Girls — And White Girls Too*. Ms. 5, pp.36, 38.
- Brown-Guillory, Elizabeth (1987). Black Women Playwrights: Exorcising Myths. *Phylon* 48, 229-239.
- Brown-Guillory, Elizabeth (1996). *Women of Color: Mother-Daughter Relationships in 20th- Century Literature*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.
- Cudjoe, Selwyn Reginald (1990). Maya Angelou and the Autobiographical Statement. In Gate, Henry Louis (Ed.), *Reading Black, Reading Feminist: A Critical Anthology*. New York: Meridian.
- Guy-Sheftall, Beverly (Ed.). (1995). *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African- American Feminist Thought*. New York: The New Press.
- Laub, Dori (1992). Bearing Witness, or the Vicissitudes of Listening. In Felman, Shoshana and Laub, Doff (Eds.), *Testimony: Crisis of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*. New York: Routledge.
- Cixous, Helene (1981). The Laugh of the Medusa. In Marks, Elaine and Cunnivorn, Isabelle dr (Eds.), *New French Feminisms* (p.235). Brighton, UK: Harvester Press.
- Jonson, James Weldon (1972). *Black Manhattan*. New York: Atheneum.
- Lester, Neal A. (1995). *Ntozake Shange: A Critical Study of the Plays*. New York: Garland Publishing.
- Rosenblatt, Roger (1974). *Black Fiction*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP.
- Sanders, Leslie Catherine (1988). *The Development of Black Theater in America: From Shadows to Selves*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press.
- Shange, Ntozake (1977). *For Colored Girls, the Rainbow is Not Enuf*. New York: Macmillan.
- Sharadha, Y. S. (1998). *Black Women's Writing: Quest for Identity in the Plays of Lorraine Hansberry and Ntozake Shange*. New Delhi, India: Prestige Books.
- Tate, Claudia (Ed.). (1983). *Black Women Writers at Work*. New York: Continuum.
- Waxman, Barbara Frey (1994). Dancing out Form, Dancing into Self: Genre and Metaphore in Marshall, Shange, and Walker. *Melus*, 19(3), 91-107.
- Williams, Maxine (1970, July 3). Black Women and the Struggle for Liberation. *The Militant*.
- Wilson, Edwin (2007). *Theatre Experience*. New York: McGraw-Hill.