

ISSN 2347 - 503X

Research Chronicler

International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

Vol III Issue I : January - 2015

Editor-In-Chief
Prof. K.N. Shelke

www.research-chronicler.com

A detailed still-life composition featuring a quill pen as the central element. The quill is positioned diagonally, with its tip resting on a scroll of aged parchment. The scroll is secured with a red wax seal and a red ribbon. In the background, a lit candle in a brass holder provides a warm, ambient light. In the foreground, a glass inkwell with a quill inside sits on a wooden surface, alongside a red wax seal and a small wooden object. The overall scene evokes a sense of traditional scholarship and historical research.

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A Peer-Reviewed Refereed and Indexed International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

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Re-Reading of Shange's *for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf*

Dr. Anuradha Nongmaithem

Assistant Professor in English, Humanities and Social Sciences Department, National Institute of Technology, Agartala Jirania, (West Tripira) India

Abstract

The paper attempts to re-study Ntozake Shange's *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When The Rainbow Is Enuf*. For the convenience of the paper the title of the choreopoem will be used as *For Colored Girls*. Shange coined a new term "choreopoem" to present and display her imaginative quality by ignoring the limitation of a traditional play which is interdisciplinary. Many scholars have written many articles on this piece of work, but every time we read *For Colored Girls* it gives a new perspective and new idea. The paper attempts to trace the journey of the girls' identities in a triply oppressed society like America and the journey within self. Many African American Women Writers took it up as their duty to discover self-identity, which entrapped them in the white society. The urge to discover self-identity moved them ahead and became an important factor in the Black women writers. Shange's choreopoem is a unique and significant contribution to the World Literature at large. In 1971 she adopted a Zulu name, Ntozake Shange. Ntozake means "she who comes with her own things" and Shange means "she who walks like a lion". With her new name, she makes her presence felt in the history of African American literature. Her works have been influenced by African folklore that deals with the burden of history, social concern of race, gender, class, love, and individual responsibility for one's fate.

Key Words: Ntozake Shange, Choreopoem, Self-identity, Triply oppressed society and Subjugation

For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When The Rainbow Is Enuf is Shange's first, and most acclaimed, theater piece. It is not a conventional play, it consists of a series of poetic monologues accompanied by dance movements and music—a form Shange calls the "choreopoem." After moving to New York City, she continued work on the piece, which opened on Broadway to a passionate reception in 1976. It was the second play by

a black woman to reach Broadway, first being Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* in 1959.

The choreopoem *For Colored Girls* deal with a range of human experiences especially that of a black female and an artist. The seven rainbow colors represent seven different women and each of them shares their stories through their songs. Song is unique art and it is a powerful medium of expression, to explore the thirst of identity in

a triply oppressed society like America. The girls are not only oppressed by the whites but also by the Black male in their own society. Each of them has a story to tell to the world.

Shange vents out her emotions vibrantly in the choreopoem *For Colored Girls* which is full of rage and anger. The black women in the play try to find their inner strength from within themselves and come to terms with the problems they face and move ahead in life. The play has various themes like self-identity, paradox of the modern American city, love, betrayal, hatred, alienation, relationship and women sexuality. Shange's first production deserves the attention it has received till date. In spite of having a secured childhood, Shange was not spared from the scrutiny of racism and sexism in America. Her unsuccessful first marriage had a great impact on her personal as well as her professional life. This has helped her to have more personal experiences and to create complex relationships in her works.

For Colored Girls is about the sufferings of seven different women belonging to various sections of life. The tales of these seven women are told through dance, abandoning traditional theatre and creating an organic living experience of black women. By doing this, Shange has not only challenged her culture and its environment, but the traditions in theatre and performance. Lester a critic on Ntozake Shange's work have elaborately points out the implications behind the title, he points out that the term "for" in the title, gives a sense of feeling that Shange is presenting the play as a gift to the younger women in society who are vulnerable about their sexuality. The word

"colored girls" specifies her target audience and "suicide" not only signifies physical death but also the spiritual death in society where black women have to explain themselves. The later part of the title comes as a solace to those who have had an ugly past to come out of it and it motivates them to hear their inner voice which is not defined by the society but by the willingness of an individual. Thus, the title reveals the positive aspect of life, coming to terms with the ugly truth and loving oneself, "when the rainbow is enuf". The rainbow here has lot more meaning that the mere fact that it has seven beautiful colors. The colors of the world exist from the combination of the colors from the rainbow. Thus the rainbow becomes the base of our existence. We are surrounded with various colors and we choose what color we want for ourselves, the best or the worse. Shange in one of her interviews explains the significance of using the word "rainbow":

The rainbow is a fabulous symbol for me. If you see only one color, it's not beautiful. If you see them all, it is. A colored girl, by my definition, is a girl of many colors. But she can see her overall beauty if she can see all the colors for herself. To do that, she has to look deep inside her. And when she looks inside herself, she will find...love and beauty. (Lester 26)

She portrays an optimistic representation of black girls who find a connection with her fiction. The protagonists are young women, trying to find their rainbow in life. The rainbow symbolizes physical beauty as well as the spirituality of a woman. Being a mother of a girl Shange wanted *For Colored Girls* to function as a guide to adolescent

black's girls and help them to grow up with the complex issues that surrounded them. *For Colored Girls* is not only for adolescent girls but also for those young women who have been betrayed and exploited by men and those with a troubled past. Exploitation is not only in America, its everywhere. Women from generation have tried combating this issue but not quite success in the endeavor. Thus, the choreopoem opens up avenues for various interpretations. The colors of the women in the choreopoem are Blue, Red, Orange, Purple, Yellow Brown and Green. The colors of the rainbow do not have brown but Shange has purposely used this color instead of violet in order to connect it with the skin color of the black people. By doing so she tries to celebrate brown as one of the most beautiful colors in the rainbow.

The women in the choreopoem encompasses from different part of America and from various section of the society proving that women are exploited from section of the society. The women in the play live in various parts of North America:

lady in brown
 i'm outside Chicago
 lady in yellow
 i'm outside detroit
 lady in purple
 i'm houston
 lady in red
 i'm outside baltimore
 lady in green
 i'm outside san francisco
 lady in blue
 i'm outside manhattan
 lady in orange
 i'm outside st. louis (5)

They represent various geographical and different metropolitan cities in North America, different backgrounds, experiences, different sufferings, but have one common problem i.e., oppression and subjugation as black women. Shange tries to show that the problems and oppression of women is not geographically bound. The word "outsides" gives an idea of isolation of not being able to belong to the White-defined society. Since the characters are both physically and spiritually "outside" they fail to realize their inner worth. They are not able to find their worth and not able to assimilate with the White society. There has been a tremendous change from the time Shange wrote the choreopoem and today African American in America, yet the sense of discrimination and alienation can be still heard from other African American Women Writers. The choreopoem opens with "dark phrases" by the lady in brown in which she talks about "never having been a girl" (*For Colored Girls* 3), child abuse is a severe crime against humanity and we are still not able to fight this evil crime. The lady in brown in this series of poem expresses her desire to be born again and to have a new life and have her childhood back. She wants to be normal like any other child and wants to feel secure in her own family. She wants to :

sing the song of her possibilities
 sing a righteous gospel
 let her be born
 let her be born
 & handled warmly. (*For Colored Girls* 5)

The opening poem is very poignant and sympathetic. Shange brings out the reality of

black girls and how they are exploited both mentally and physically. "graduation nite" the second poem delivered by the lady in yellow deals with black female sexuality.

& i waz the only virgin
 so I hadda make like my hips waz into
 some business
 that way everybody thot whoever was
 getting it
 was a older man cdnt run the streets
 wit youngsters
 martin slipped his leg round my thigh
 the dells bumped "stay"
 up & down-up & down the new carver
 homes
 WE WAZ GROWN
 WE WAZ FINALLY GROWN
 (*For Colored Girls 9*)

Shange describes the satisfaction of the lady in yellow's first sexual encounter as sex is a mysterious issue for a girl coming of age. Talking of women sexuality is taboo in most of the communities and many young girls are often misled by certain myths and fantasies about motherhood and pregnancy. The generation gap between mother and daughter leads to a vulnerable situation for many teenagers veering them towards unprotected sex which results in early pregnancy among many young girls. The situation is same even in the community I belong, many young girls in the name of liberty, freedom and modernization the concept of sex has taken a different turn of defining their sexuality. The olden time value of making love with a man has deeper commitment and responsibility, but today generation X young women have totally different views. Thus the result is increasing number of abortion and diseases relating to it. "toussaint" shares more in common thematically with "graduation nite," because

it describes a young woman's dreams and ends on a hopeful, sweet note. The lady in brown has a moment of enlightenment when she discovers a book about Toussaint L'Ouverture, the slave who incited a slave rebellion in the colony of Saint Domingo on the island of Hispaniola (now Haiti) in 1791. She marvels at how strong Toussaint L'Ouverture was and admires the fact that refused to accept subjugation from white people (in his case, the French colonists). The lady in brown was no exception, and she reveals her desire to escape her "integrated" life and escape to Haiti, where Toussaint L'Ouverture was able to lead a successful rebellion against his white oppressors.

The section, "now i love somebody more than" accounts for the lady in blue's longing to hear Willie Colon's songs. This line reveals how music for the blacks is a means of comfort and how they relate their problems through the songs:

& i love you more than poem
 more than Aurelian buendia loved
 maconda
 more than hector lovoe loved himself
 more than the lady loved gardenias
 more than celia loves cuba or graciela
 loves el son
 more than the flamingoes shoo-do-n-
 doo-wah love bein pretty. (*For Colored
 Girls 13*)

The lady in blue feels that her love for Willie Colon's song gives a sense of belonging in an alienated America. Songs for the Blacks is part and parcel of the identity and the only source of solace during the Slavery time. Songs functions at various levels for the Blacks it helps her to connect with her native land and soothes her inner

most soul. Oppressor can exploit the physical body but not the soul. The lines depict the blacks' love for their music which helps them to comfort and relate their problems with the black music.

The poem "no assistance" by lady in red documents how women give so much both physically and spiritually to the men they love and how men take advantage of their love by not being there when the women need them the most. In the next poem "latent rapists", all the ladies join together to define what a rapist is in a modern society. The myth of a rapist is that he has to be a stranger with an obvious problem but in reality a rapist can be anybody, a person with whom one is aquatinted with; he can also be a friend, "bein betrayed by men who know us" (*For Colored Girls* 19). Shange through the portrayal of these women tries to define a new nature of a rapist, "cuz it turns out the nature of rape has change" (*For Colored Girls* 20), and it could be anyone "we see them at the coffee house" (*For Colored Girls* 21). This section tells about the possibilities of who can be a rapist.

"abortion cycle#1" lady in blue gives a horrifying image of illegal abortion and invokes a woman's experience during an abortion - she is scared, embarrassed, hurting, and ashamed. Shange through her apt selection of words is able to bring out the pathetic condition of young black women, who have no money to go to a proper clinic or a hospital and she is completely alone:

or a fast scream
to get
those eyes offa me

get them still rods outta me
this hurts
this hurt me
& nobody knew
once I waz pregnant & shamed of
myself. (22-23)

The agony a woman going through abortion is the same whether the abortion results from a proper marriage or a rape. It leaves a deep scar in the mind of a woman and the feeling is torturous. The issue of rape is an age old vengeance against the female community across the globe. There are still many burning issues dealing with the rape case without any definite solution. In a sexual act of intimacy both the partners participate equally but only a woman goes through the physical pain of abortion. This is a biological condition which a woman cannot fight against since it is the law of nature. Should women think that the biology condition of child birth is a draw back in their life takes it up as a boon? Thus, Shange tries to warn the unalarmed young girls about abortion and its complication that it might lead to later in their life.

Another powerful poem is "a nite with beau willie brown" which can be taken as the peak of atrocity a woman can go through in the choreopoem. The problems reach their saturating point with the story of Willie and Crystal. Many critics have accused Shange of being mean in portraying a black man. All the atrocities that the women go through like rejection, rape, and abortion is what Crystal, a mother of two children, feels when her two children are dropped from a fifth-storey apartment window by the father Willie:

he kicked the screen outta the
window/&held the kids
offa the sill//you gonna marry
me/yeh,I'll marry ya/
anything/ but bring the children back
in the house/
he looked from where the kids were
hagin from the
fifth story/at alla the people screamin
at him/&
he strated sweating again/ say to alla
the neighbors/
you gonna marry me/ (59-60)

The lines are highly charged with emotion capturing the misfortune of a black mother, not able to safeguard her own children. Willie fails to provide a secure family. He cannot provide support, love and understanding to Crystal and the children. Willie is addicted to drugs and alcohol. He fails to get help from the government and does not have a secure job and is dependent on Crystal. This frustrating situation breaks down and Willie pleads with Crystal for another chance to start a new life by marrying him. He demands Crystal to agree marrying him in front of the neighbors and threatens her that he will drop the children if she does not agree. In spite of Crystal begging him to leave the children alone, he literally drops the children from the fifth floor of the building. The loss of Crystal is beyond consolation, she is spiritually and emotionally dead from within due to the death of her two children. Crystal needed to come out of the situation caused by Willie. She needed a new beginning, not to be defined as a lover, a wife, or a mother but a human being, an organic whole of one

being. The final consolation of the choreopoem is "a laying on of hand":

i waz cold/ I waz burnin up/ a child
& endlessly weaving garments for the
moon wit my tears
i found god in myself
& i loved her / i loved her fiercely "(63)

The above lines became a means to energize all the women. They renew their being trying to find the solution to the problem within, a force which asserts a new identity, inner beauty and self-worth rejecting the narrowly defined framework of rules. The choreopoem is multilayered with various issues of urban lives, exploitation, relationships, female sexuality, betrayal, death, love and hatred. The song does not belong to one country alone, it is universal. Thus, Shange's choreopoem, a collage of the black women sufferings, becomes an offering to the world as a song sung by these women.

Interestingly, Barbara Frey Waxman in her essay, "Dancing Out of Form, Dancing into Self: Genre and Metaphor in Marshall, Shange, and Walker," explores the dance forms and metaphors in representing the African American women. She discusses Shange's *For Colored Girls* protagonists' dance in quest of identity and self-expression which re-energizes them and redefines them with a new identity. All the women come together in a circle and dance to share their problems and celebrate their kinship and support for each other. The women express their problems through dance and verse. Dance in the Western context is an empowering activity for individual self-expression. In literature,

dance is used as a celebratory ending which concludes with a wedding dance in the Shakespearean comedies. For generations, dance has been associated with individual self-expression, affirming one's identity, eroticism, spiritual revival, and communal bonding and as a healing process. It also provides an opportunity to free one's body to experience sensuality and desire. It dissolves the barrier of the body and the spirit. Many African American writers turn to dance as a thematic or metaphoric motif for asserting self-identity. Accordingly, Shange has used dance as a tool to liberate her protagonists and in liberation from all

the bondage leads to a better understanding of oneself, and enhance one identity. To survive in this world and to strive for better perspective in life acceptance of what one is the key factor. Thus, like the seven vulnerable women exposed to situation that was beyond their control, they are able to face it courageously and leading ahead in life as a better person. They are not ready to be victim anymore; their body will not become the means of weakness. For at the end of the journey they found god and strength from within self.

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