

Separation of Soul and Gender: A study of *for Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide / When The Rainbow is Enuf*

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Black women have long occupied marginal positions and Black female writers have made use of their marginality - their “outsider within” status - to produce Black womanist thought that reflects a special standpoint on women, family and society. Ntozake Shange has embraced her outsider within status and used it wisely. In doing so, she has moved herself and her writings closer to the humanist vision- namely, the freedom both to be different and part of the solidarity of humanity. Ntozake Shange can be identified and interpreted as a pivotal influence in the development of Womanist Dramatic Theoretical Tradition within African American Theatre.

Ntozake Shange (born October 18, 1948) is an African-American poet, essayist, novelist and playwright, best known for her 1975 award-winning choreopoem/play *for colored girls who have considered suicide/ when the rainbow is enuf* (1975). Her original name was Paulette Linda Williams. She baptized herself Ntozake (she who comes with her own things) Shange (who walks with lions) in 1971. She states, “I had a violent, violent resentment of carrying a slave name; poems and music come from the pit of myself and the pit of myself was not a slave” (Brown 115).

Shange’s life struggles provided much inspiration for her work. There is no doubt the content of *for colored girls who have considered suicide/ when the rainbow is enuf* came from the writer's experiences. Shange explained that no writer can separate himself or herself

emotionally from the work. Shange clarified that she is, “committed to the idea that one of the few things human beings have to offer is the richness of unconscious and conscious emotional responses to being alive” (Mahone 151). Therefore, many of the characters are mixtures of Shange's emotions and people she has met throughout her life.

for colored girls who have considered suicide/ when the rainbow is enuf is a celebration of both cultural and gender identity. It is intended by Shange as a handbook for Black girls in order to understand their own lives. Shange explains her intentions:

It's the silence of the mothers that is so shattering. The others know that it's a dreadful proposition to give up one's life for one's family and one's mate and, therefore, lose one's self in the process of caring and tending for others. To send one's daughter off to that kind of self-sacrifice in silence with no preparation is a mortal sin for me. To do this without telling her that this is a sacrifice is so unnecessary. To break this silence is my responsibility, and I'm absolutely committed to it. When I die, I will not be guilty of having left a generation of girls behind thinking that anyone can tend to their emotional health other than themselves (Lester 28).

Shange termed her work *for colored girls who have considered suicide/ when the rainbow is enuf* a choreopoem that, by definition, incorporated music, dance and poetry. Each of these elements flow together creating a performance that is organic in nature. African storytelling, religion, dance, and music inspired the choreopoem. On first reading Shange's play, the reader is stunned by her fearless and honest writing about women pushed aside by society. Both the content and writing are bold, taking from many established art forms in order to create a piece that creates a specific culture. The characters speak honestly about their experience, which are both emotional and believable. Shange's work is provocative, often creating very personal emotional responses in the reader.

for colored girls..., began in 1974 as a poem and later a set of poems that were read in women's bars. Soon several poems were developed and placed into a performance piece that included both dance and music. This style of performance was termed the choreopoem, denoting a performance where dance is performed to poetry. The poems enjoyed a successful run on

Broadway and provided an alternative to traditional American theatre. *for colored girls...* is a study in cultural and gender identity. The play is a survival manual for the American Black girl as she matures and a reference for people seeking a better understanding of the culture and life experiences of Black women. *for colored girls...* is a significant theatre piece, and of value in cultural studies and women's studies.

First and foremost, the play reveals the truth about the experiences in a Black girl's life, touching upon all groups that oppressed her. Also, Shange wanted this presented in a manner she felt followed the African American tradition. She did this through dance and storytelling, abandoning traditional theatre and creating an organic and living experience. By doing this, Shange not only challenged her culture and its environment, but also the traditions in theatre and performance. Despite much artistic alienation, Shange succeeded. The production of *for colored girls...*, was like nothing America had previously experienced; proclaiming a woman's experience a fit subject for dramatic representation. For many women and men, the performance became akin to a consciousness-raising event. The purpose of the play *for colored girls...* is to give birth to a new understanding of the past, to children of the future who know their history unveiled.

The first half of the title, "for colored girls, who have considered suicide," is for women who learned to conform to society's expectations and subsequently lost a sense of their own beauty. The second half of the title, "when the rainbow is enuf," is a suggestion for these girls to learn to love themselves.

And, though colored girls have considered suicide because White society and Black men have abused them, this need no longer be the case. "The rainbow" is now understood as an image of their own beauty and it "is enuf" (Lester 27).

Shange goes on to explain the significance of "colored" and "rainbow", in her own words:

The rainbow is a fabulous symbol for me. 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 of herself.

To do that, she has to look deep inside herself. And when she looks inside herself; she will find.... love and beauty (Lester 26).

Throughout the play, Shange uses traditional songs and rhythm of Black culture as a “safe place” for women to be. Also, she uses music that is exclusive to the “colored” community. This, again, reinforces the exclusiveness of the play. The music within the play also touches on the transition between youth and adulthood. “Momma's little baby like shortnin' shortnin,” plays upon the innocence of a child while the seductive sax music used for the poem “graduation nite,” represents the transition from childhood to womanhood. In the poem, “now i love somebody more than,” the subject is womanhood and losing inhibitions through music. Shange also uses music as a collective voice among Black women. This is seen in a group of girls singing to the music of “little sally walker” or with a woman swaying seductively to the rhythm of Ray Cohen.

Another example of Shange's ethnic style of writing is denoted in the language. Shange writes in a Black dialect. Words such as, “wid” “alla” “yrsel” and “enuf,” are examples of Shange not only writing to a specific audience, but also shunning White American dialect. Shange explains, “I don't write because words come out of my brain. I write this way because I hear the words” (Lester 30). However, this is not the only reason the words appear as they do. Shange states, “It bothers me, on occasion, to look at poems where all the letters are capitalized. It is very boring to me” (Lester 31). In other words, Shange is not only using the language of a specific culture; she is also creating something dynamic and representative of the culture.

Another reason for the language and appearance of the words are for ‘visual stimulation.’ Shange not only counted on an audience in the theatre, but also on the readers and actors.

Also, I like the idea that letters dance, not just the words dance; of course, the words also dance. I need some visual stimulation so that reading becomes not just a passive and more intellectual activity, but demands rigorous participation (Lester 30).

Shange's particular language, wording, and usage of song are a manipulation expressing intention. More importantly, she uses every experience and medium to conjure up emotion in the audience and the reader.

The play is written with a unity of meaning and language so that the intended audience can understand. Each poem comes from Shange's own experiences, but she placed enough fiction within the text for the piece to communicate to many individuals. Shange is aware of the

importance of an individual living in a culture. She is not only writing about individuals, but she is also making a statement about the Black culture or the people who fall into the category of “colored.”

for colored girls... is a collection of poems performed by seven women of color who articulate their individual and collective experience as Black women in America. Although the women move between varying emotional states they find solace in song and dance as they celebrate and grieve simultaneously. The play begins with distress as each woman silently freezes into a pose and it ends with victory as each woman chants and dances. None of the women have names outside of their colour. This is also symptomatic of colorisms as Black women tend to be judged by their complexions. The seven female characters differentiated by the colours they wear (brown, yellow, red, green, purple, blue and orange), represent the urban rainbow of young colored women who have experienced violence in relationships, who are angry, because their racial status in American Society has held back their development.

The performance starts with a poem entitled, “dark phrases” and it is done in a collective voice. Each actor, dressed in one of the colors of the rainbow is present without depicting a specific character or event. They represent the state of the Black woman as a whole. This first poem starts in the shadows or dark places of their lives. While this seems to express a need for pity, it is not Shange’s intention. She expects the audience to relate to the strength of the characters and in return find strength within themselves. “dark phrases” is not about what is lost, but rather it is about the strength earned from being outside of society’s expectations.

Each of the women portray one of the characters represented in the collection of twenty poems, revealing different issues that impact women in general and women of color in particular. The two arenas of political and interpersonal violence are interwoven. Rape and abortion hover at the corners of their consciousness. Prostitution within the black community and constrains placed on a young girls’ education across the country define the madness of being a “colored me”, as the lady in brown reveals in the opening monologue:

somebody / anybody,
sing a black girls’ song
bring her out
to know herself

she's been dead so long
closed in silence so long
she doesn't know the sound
of her own voice
she's half notes scattered
without rhythm / no tune
sing her sighs
sing her song of her possibilities
sing a righteous gospel
the making of a melody

let her be born
let her be born
and handled warmly (*for colored girls... 4-5*).

Shange chose not to ignore the oppression occurring within the Black Community. Her writing assumed the struggles of women within the Black culture. Often the play pointed to Black men as one of the leading oppressors in Black women's lives. Poems such as "latent rapists" and "a nite with beau willie brown," showed Black men not only as lovers and husbands, but as rapists and abusers as well.

we cd even have em over for dinner
& get raped in our own houses
by invitation
a friend (*for colored girls... 21*).

The emotional agony of losing one's self or the pain inflicted by rape, abortion, or a debasing situation, is expressed clearly through Shange's writing. Above all, Shange makes a clear distinction between the control a woman has of herself and the rules put in front of her to take that control away. Shange boldly introduced many issues that had been considered unworthy of discussion because they dealt with women's feelings and emotions. Demystifying women's issues continues throughout the play. Not only does she deal with a woman's sexuality and body

images, but she also deals with a Black woman's need to defy the outside world through nurturing and supporting herself.

The "colored girls" are alienated from their inner selves in addition to their communities, and must remedy their internal wounds before they can reconnect with the society as a whole. As the play progresses, the women also recognize that the intersection of their femaleness and their blackness pose problems that transcend the surface of skin: "... bein alive & bein a woman & bein colored is a metaphysical dilemma/I haven't conquered yet/do you see the point my spirit is too ancient to understand the separation of soul & gender" (*for colored girls...* 45).

Later in the play, the lady in green delivers a line that becomes the signature verse of these women's despair:

somebody almost walked off wid alla my stuff
 not my poems or a dance i gave up in the street
 but somebody almost walked off wid alla my stuff
 like a kleptomaniac working hard and forgetting while stealin
 this is mine / this aint yr stuff (*for colored girls...* 49).

for colored girls... does not have a clear beginning or end to the performance. Each poem reaches its own climax. The play is cyclical in nature, beginning and ending in a collective voice. It is an epiphany of sorts, but not an ending, for each of these women's tales goes on into greater pain and joy. In between two poems, Shange tells stories that build onto each other. The poems recreate and universalize a Black woman's experiences both spiritually and physically. These poems are about individuals, but represent the common experience of a Black woman whether it is pain or joy. The women come together in the first and last poems creating a unity to the entire piece.

The entire play demands that the audience not overlook the pain of women, but rather face it and relate it to their own lives. "a nite with beau willie brown" is the climax of the play. This poem contains the most anger and tragedy in the piece. Crystal has lost her pride, her strength, her relationship, and her children. This character has hit bottom with no place left to go, leaving the audience hopeless, but in the end Shange replenishes hope. Following this, the final poem, "a laying on of hands" calls the women to act or be reborn. It calls for women to transcend

the pain created by their harsh experiences and to respect and take pride in themselves. As “dark phrases” describes being born outside of society, “a laying of hands” depicts being reborn.

Shange uses the analogy of a “layin on of hands,” to suggest healing through the support of other women. It is clear within the poem as Shange writes, “not a man,” and “not my mama,” (*for colored girls...* 62) that she is asking women to pull themselves up from the ground. The power to continue and find one’s self must come from inside a Black woman, and not from society. Society does not offer a woman control, but rather a feeling of powerlessness. In the end “colored girls” become a community of mourners and their lament becomes a chant, a way for spiritual empowerment as they repeat over and over,

i found god in myself
& i loved her
i loved her fiercely (*for colored girls...* 63).

Ntozake Shange’s *for colored girls...* exposes the impact of racial ills upon the Black community and attempts to teach Black men as well as Western society the ramifications of hatred and denial Black women experience in being the cornerstone of the community. It is a work bathed in blood speaking directly about the violence inflicted upon the black female body under the guise of love via rape, abortion, and ever-present threat of pending violence. In this work she created a manifesto that denounced this violence and offered an internal remedy in the women’s chant in the end “i found god in myself and i loved her fiercely/i loved her fiercely.” This inspires a powerful sense of worth and dignity among black women and within the black community. She promotes the realization that we do not have to look outside of ourselves to find peace and progress; that we must, in fact, look within and first find love of self and amongst each other by returning to the Spirit. Such an approach is the heart of Womanist dramatic tradition.

The spirit of Walker’s adopted term, “womanish,” seeps through Shange’s poetic narrative, as the “colored girls” yearn to be “women” in ways that celebrate all possibilities of their femininity. The very last line of the play restates Shange’s intentions, “& this is for colored girls who have considered suicide/ but are movin to the ends of their own rainbows” (*for colored girls...* 64).

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