EMBRACING RESILIENCE: THE VOICES OF SELF-DETERMINATION, HEALING, AND REDISCOVERY OF SELF-WORTH AND HOPE IN *FOR COLARED GIRLS WHO HAVE CONSIDERED SUICIDE/WHEN THE RAINBOW IS ENUF*

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Abstract： *This article aims to investigate the motif of self-determination of hope and healing from the humiliated and oppressed women in For Colored Girls/ Who Have Considered Suicide/ When the Rainbow Is Enuf. Ntozake Shange is an African American writer in the US who has contributed to the persistent prejudices about black women and their bodies. For ages, black woman's bodies have been subjected to historical representations of their entanglement with slavery. The black women's voices are simultaneously treated as subjects of exploitation, supposition, and sub-humanization. Black bodies were forced into a process of oppressive system, which in turn promoted several stereotyped and disparaging images. Most unheard of, they were the only group described as "masculine," the only group and class of women seen as sex symbols. Black women were viewed as laborers, breeders, and objects of desire for white males. Black women's key concerns are poverty, marginalization, discrimination in the workplace, and powerlessness. Women of color have broken their long-standing silence by sharing their tales of how they went from being invisible to visible and insecure to alert. They are winners despite having been wronged. Her play challenges conventional discourse by bringing the impossible to life and calling upon the obscure.*

Introduction

Ntozake Shange makes an effort to rewrite the stereotype of the black woman and reconstruct the history of oppression. Her female protagonists highlight the importance of "self-determination." These women work hard to overcome the horrific event and repair their souls. In this drama, women express their fury and passion rather than holding them inside. Negative stereotypes and clichés have unfairly painted black women in bad images. They are stereotyped as being violent, erratic, promiscuous and submissive particularly in the United States. The Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (Adichie, 2014) conveys this theme of anger, empowerment, and the cathartic or liberating role of expression, as she underlines, "We teach girls to shrink themselves, to make themselves smaller. However, the truth is that anger is a form of resistance to this system that expects us to be less." Chimamanda tries to highlight the importance of acknowledging and expressing complex emotions like anger as a critical part of reclaiming one's autonomy, voice, and sense of self and pointing the importance of recognizing and confronting the limitations placed on women, and the power of anger as a tool for social change.

Patricia Hill Collins, a critic, has devoted a great deal of effort to the analysis and classification of such homogeneity and stereotypes of black women. She examines that these stereotypes serve as justification for the mistreatment of disadvantaged people rather than serving as simple illustrations of how various groups of people differ from one another or for generalizations. Racism, sexism, and poverty are examples of societal injustices that are normalized and made to seem natural by these oppressive images. Her

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overall message goes beyond the realities of black women in isolation; she asks a broader audience to relate to and comprehend her portrayal of what it is like to be a black woman facing hardship. She creates a resilient tapestry in the face of cruel streets, dishonest men, and severe loss, illustrating the fact that black women do not look for sympathy or contempt. Instead, she begs people to recognize the courage it takes to get through such turbulent times.

I. An Insight into African American Women Portrayed in Theatre

In the context of the United States, Black feminist scholar Patricia Hill Collins argues that the subjugation of Black women has long been foundational to the creation of societal concepts of "otherness" (Collins, 1990, 63). This process of domination frequently involves efforts to reduce subordinate groups to mere objects. As Bell Hooks emphasizes, "To be objectified is to have one's reality determined by the perceptions and desires of others; one's identity and history are constructed in a way that reflects one's role in relation to those in power" (Hooks, 2000, 56). Compared to white women, Black women are often portrayed in ways that emphasize their objectification, with many depictions reducing them to dehumanized, animalistic figures. It can be seen in various forms of media, such as music videos, where women are often depicted as objects for male pleasure, perpetuating a narrative that positions them as always available for sexual consumption (Davis, 1981, 112).

Black women characters in literature have often been subjected to negative portrayals by both white and black male authors. They have frequently been depicted in a limited, one-dimensional way, such as the "superwoman," the long-suffering caregiver, the domineering matriarch, the devout religious figure, or as sexually promiscuous. James H. Cone, in his book *Black Theology and Black Power,* reported:

> The portrayal of Black people as buffoons or lazy, shiftless individuals in these plays helped rationalize a system of oppression that affected real-life Black people. These representations on stage have historically allowed White audiences to project their own experiences, using the portrayal of Blackness both as a metaphor for more general human struggles and as a mask through which they could express their personal philosophies and worldview. (Cone, 1969, 84*)*

In American theater, white-created entertainment, such as the 19th-century minstrel shows, often depicted Black people through exaggerated stereotypes, featuring comic and sentimental songs, skits, and dances. Zora Neale Hurston stated, "I have been made to feel that the image of the black woman in literature is often simplified into the caricature of the 'mammy' or the 'jezebel.' These limiting stereotypes have denied us our humanity and depth" (Hurston, 1935, 150). Caricatured images of Black people displayed to white society that this group consisted of socially inept buffoons with an innate tendency for violence and hyper-sexuality. The stereotype of Black women as inherently promiscuous and sexually available is a long-standing and damaging one. This image has been perpetuated by descriptors such as seductive, tempting, provocative, lustful, and immoral, all of which focus on their supposed sexual allure. In contrast, white women were often idealized as paragons of modesty, dignity, and sexual purity, while Black women were frequently depicted as naturally promiscuous, sometimes even predatory. This portrayal of Black women is often associated with the "Jezebel" figure.

Sociologist K. Sue Jewell further explored this stereotype, describing the Jezebel archetype as a "tragic mulatto" — a woman with features such as narrow lips, straight hair, a slender nose, and fair skin, all of which are often seen as markers of European beauty standards" (Jewell, 193, 46). However, black male writers aim to refigure their

distorted image and find their lost voice by establishing their literary expression within the American canon and by facing the internal and external forces that suppress and destroy their ability to express and articulate. James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* delve deeply into the complexities of racial identity in America, especially the internal conflict and societal rejection that Black individuals face. In their literary works, many black male authors try to highlight the conflict between the oppression and dominance of society and that of the defenseless and powerless individual; thus: "The hero, like the mythic figure, must suffer because of his efforts to transcend or rebel against the confines of his situation" (Baldwin, 1957, 45).

Arthur A. Schomburg asserts in his 1925 essay, "The Negro Digs up His Past," published in Survey Graphic, that "history must restore what slavery took away, for it is the social damage of slavery that the present generations must repair and offset" (Schomburg, 1925, 34(7), 227–230). In the aftermath of Emancipation, Black historians were largely excluded from mainstream academic institutions and archives. As a result, the first Black historians were often self-taught individuals and ordinary people, such as Francis E.W. Harper and Henry Highland Garnet, whose work helped lay the foundation for future Black historical scholarship. This early group was soon followed by a more formally educated generation of Black historians, including prominent figures like John Hope. These scholars advanced historical scholarship and challenged and expanded the discipline, mainly through their pioneering studies on racism in the United States and globally.

Since the 1950s, there has been a significant transformation in the portrayal of Black characters in African American drama, reflecting a broader cultural shift from Black shame to Black pride. Black playwrights, liberated from the constraints of appealing to white audiences, began to write plays that spoke directly to the Black community, expressing their own experiences, struggles, and aspirations. This creative freedom allowed for the emergence of more authentic, complex, and diverse representations of Black life, moving away from the reductive stereotypes that had dominated earlier works by white dramatists. As a result, Black playwrights were able to craft radical and individualized images of Black identity, reclaiming the narrative and presenting a more nuanced and empowered vision of Black people in America.

August Wilson articulates the ongoing challenge faced by African American playwrights in reshaping Black theatre, emphasizing their efforts to "present the Black experience in its full, unmediated reality, while turning the traditional white narrative into a symbolic or metaphorical construct" (Wilson, 1990, 24). The plays focused more on how racial discrimination affects the lives of both Black and White people. These playwrights concluded that Black people's resilience and endurance give them hope. The notion that Black people "will survive" is prevalent in these pieces. Furthermore, the characters in their plays are frequently shown to have strong wills and to speak openly and forcibly. The 1950s marked the definitive emergence of Black playwrights who gained professional recognition, crafting full-length plays with complex characters and intricate narratives that reflected the realities of Black life in America (Elam, 2001; Harrison, 2002).

Because of the excessive degree of selflessness ascribed to these "black mammies," the portrayal of black women prior to the 1950s lacked credibility. In their literary works, white authors portray black women as altruistic "black mammies" who prioritize looking after, cooking, and cleaning white people over their own families. Similar to black men, black women experienced mistreatment and poor presentation. The most common position for a black woman in white-authored fiction was that of a devoted servant who toe-tapped and sang spiritual songs. The presentation of these one-dimensional black female characters demonstrates a lack of understanding of black existence. In her essay "Stereotypes of African American Women in Television," Patricia Hill Collins (2000)

critiques the limited and reductive portrayals of Black women on screen, stating that "the recurring images of the 'Jezebel,' the 'Mammy,' and the 'Angry Black Woman' reduce the complex realities of Black women's lives to simplistic, one-dimensional caricatures, leaving little room for representations of their true diversity and individuality" (as cited in Harris-Perry, 2011). While African American women experience shared oppression and discrimination alongside men, their literary responses have often centered on uncovering internal resilience and latent power as strategies to confront external adversities. Since the 1950s, Black female playwrights have broadened their portrayals beyond the limited roles of being either a seductress or a revered figure.

In the works of African American women playwrights such as Ntozake Shange, Alice Walker, and Suzanne Douglas, the portrayal of Black women is given thoughtful and nuanced treatment, with their representations often being positive and constructive. Their plays' central theme is empowering African American women's spirit by embracing self-awareness, advocating for one's identity, and celebrating cultural heritage. In her essay "The Representation of African American Women in Modern Drama," Margaret Wilkerson asserts the significance of positive portrayals, stating:

> In contemporary Black dramas that explore urban struggles, African American women display remarkable resilience, striving to survive the harsh realities of their environment while often working toward a vision of a brighter future" (as cited in Perkins, 1998, 175).

At the beginning of the 20th century, Black women found themselves in a challenging position, caught between two significant movements: the Civil Rights Movement and the Women's Liberation Movement. They were often expected to prioritize their activism toward either combating racial discrimination or fighting for gender equality, but not both simultaneously. Faced with this dilemma, many Black women chose to focus their efforts on addressing racial injustice, perceiving racism as the more dominant and urgent issue impacting their communities. In the 1960s and 1970s, Black theater became a space where the conflicts between Black men and women were prominently explored. Influenced by the patriarchal views of the Black Power Movement, many Black male playwrights depicted Black women in a negative light, often portraying them as secondary figures with limited roles in their works. In response to the growing tension and criticism directed at Black womanhood during a time of intense ideological and social upheaval, several Black women playwrights, such as Lorraine Hansberry, Zora Neale Hurston, Gloria Naylor, Michelle Wallace, and Toni Morrison, Ntoake Shange among others fiercely countered the negative portrayals of black women by black male playwrights.

These women used their works to confront the dynamics between black men and women, challenging the harmful stereotypes and perspectives that had emerged. Their plays focused on shedding light on black women's struggles, resilience, and dignity, offering a narrative that critiques the systematic oppression they faced and redefined their roles and agency within the community. Through their writing, they sought to restore the image of black womanhood and highlight the complexities of black women's experiences from a deeply personal and empowering standpoint. The black female writers of the 20th century focused on celebrating women's strength and transformative power, emphasizing their capacity for change. These writers also delved into the "sexual politics" inherent in the relationships between men and women, arguing that addressing gender relations was just as crucial as combating racial injustice. During the 1970s, when many Black women's plays were written and staged, society was undergoing significant change, influenced by various factors that fostered the rise of African American women writers. Key among these factors were the Women's Liberation Movement, which advocated for women's economic, social, and political equality, and the Black Power Movement, which, despite

its focus on racial equality, often perpetuated sexist ideologies. In his work *Black Women, Black Feminism*, critic James Baldwin suggests:

> It was the convergence of various cultural, political, and economic shifts by the late 1960s that contributed to the growing visibility of African American women writers. These shifts included the critique of Black nationalist ideologies for their exclusion of women, the dire social and economic conditions that worsened urban life in America, the awakening of feminist consciousness among Black women, and the mounting strain in male-female relations within the Black community (Baldwin, 1979, 112).

This culmination of societal forces helped to propel the creative voices of Black women playwrights, who responded by exploring the intersections of race, gender, and identity in their works. Amidst the backdrop of competing ideologies, a surge of literary works by Black women emerged. Novels such as Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969), Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), Paule Marshall's *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (1959), and Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959), explored the physical, emotional, and psychological trauma Black women faced, often at the hands of Black men. These works highlighted the complex intersection of gender, race, and power, providing a raw and honest portrayal of the struggles that shaped Black women's experiences during this tumultuous period.

II. Seven Black Women Narrating Their Stories

Ntozake Shange established herself as a significant female voice in African–American writing and has received appreciation across the color line. She has voiced the need for black women's expression of centuries-old pain and suffering from a female perspective. Shange offered a variety of insightful perspectives on the experiences of black women. According to her, being black, a woman, and an academic is a metaphysical dilemma described as the reality beyond what is perceptible to the senses. Ntozake Shange's real name was Paulette Linda Williams. She was an American dramatist, poet, activist, and feminist. Her writing dealt with racial, feminist, and black power concerns. Her family moved to St. Louis, a heavily racially segregated city. After being bused to a white school, she experienced bigotry and hatred. These events greatly influenced her writings. Upon turning twenty-three, Shange adopted the Zulu moniker Ntozake, signifying "she who comes with her own things, and Shange, signifying who walks like a lion." She believed that her Anglo Saxon name was connected to enslavement. 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" (Shange, 1996, 115). Her first and most popular play is "*For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/ When the Rainbow Is Enuf*," which won several awards, including an Obie Award and a Tony Nomination for Best Play.

In writing about women and children, Shange's works are "woman-centered." Fundamentally a feminist, she views child molestation and rape as political crimes and views them as horrible as lynching. Her plays express her fury and forceful protest against the crimes against women and children that she witnesses. Shange's themes center on wounded women because she was determined to write about women and their disappointment, disillusionment, grief, misery, and wrath. These women express the pain they have endured on a physical, emotional, and psychological level. They also demonstrate their resilience in the face of these traumatic encounters. Experiences from one person become shared experiences, and when there is mutual respect and dedication, they join together with an unbreakable unity. Shange's dramas depict the agonizing process of self-discovery, emergence, and becoming oneself.

Shange used the phrase "choreopoem" to describe the theatrical form. In an interview, she said that one night, after teaching an evening session, she had an epiphany about the play's title while driving home. At the time, she was experiencing extreme depression. She saw a huge rainbow over the city of Oakland, California, and realized that women had a right to survive because they "have as much right and as much purpose for being here as air and mountains do" (Rushing, 1988, 542). She used that combined poetry, dance, music, and song that circulates being a "colored girl" as a "metaphysical dilemma" and relates stories of romantic and sexual abuse. She is renowned for delving deeply into the experiences and viewpoints of a wide range of women for herself and her readers. Ntozake Shange delves into the experiences of seven women who have experienced tyranny in a racist and sexist culture and who navigate the deep chasm of trauma and turmoil, embarking on a transformative journey towards healing. This journey highlights their resilience and the rediscovery of self-worth and hope. It offers a critique of her own African American community, acknowledging its role in contributing to the struggles faced by these women. The narratives in her work reveal the harsh realities of their relationships with men who are often depicted as violent and uncaring, reflecting a societal context that extinguishes their youthful innocence and forces them into premature confrontation with pain. Despite this, the women do not resort to bitterness, revenge, or divine retribution but find solace and strength in themselves. Bell Hooks reflects on the pain and resilience of black women. There is no space for hatred, no desire for retribution, only the profound need for healing and self-empowerment (Hooks, 1981, 45). It highlights the shared theme of seeking empowerment and healing rather than harboring resentment.

Rather than dwelling in victimhood, the women in For *Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/ When the Rainbow is Enuf* channel their energy towards discovering their inner strength and spiritual resilience as they navigate the journey from innocence to experience, from suffering to joy, and from naivety to self-awareness, they begin to heal the emotional wounds within themselves. Through this transformative process, they uncover their inner beauty, which mirrors nature's splendor and the Creator's divine essence. This journey of self-determination and hope allows them to reclaim their sense of identity and empowerment. In *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/ When the Rainbow is Enuf,* the women raise their voices in a collective call for freedom and respect, seeking to honor men as individuals rather than reducing them to racial or cultural stereotypes. In her analysis, MC Dowell explores the themes of healing and resilience in Shanges work: "Shange's chorepoem functions as both a personal and collective healing ritual, providing a space for Black women to reclaim their stories and affirm their identities in the face of pain and societal marginalization" (Dowell, 1995, 84).This perspective highlights how the characters' journeys in the play mirror Shange's methods for overcoming her emotional struggles, emphasizing the shared experience of finding strength through community and storytelling.

In *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/ When the Rainbow is Enuf,* the women embody their stories through a distinctive and nontraditional poetic language. Shange intentionally breaks away from conventional English grammar and pronunciation, allowing the characters to express their experiences authentically and viscerally. This stylistic choice aligns with feminist literary theories like Audre Lorde's, who argued that women must reclaim their voices and write from their experiences. She emphasizes the importance of women's self-expression: "For women, poetry is not luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change" (Lorde, 1984, 37). This sentiment resonates with Shange's portrayal of the women in her play as they do not simply tell her but embody them entirely, using their voices and movements to draw their narratives into the public space. Through this raw and unfiltered form of expression, Shange's characters

transform their pain into a powerful artistic performance, making their personal experiences part of a more extensive collective history.

When the play starts, the stage is diffused with blue lights, hard music plays in the darkness, and seven women rush onto the stage before freezing in distressed positions. Every woman claims to be from an area outside of a big metropolis. Each actor, dressed in one of the rainbow colors, is present without depicting a specific character or event. The first poem begins amid the gloomy or shadowy areas of their existence. Although this looks to be a cry for sympathy, Shange does not mean for this to come across. She anticipates that the audience will be able to identify with the characters' strengths and, in turn, their strength. As the woman in brown comes to life, the choreopoem opens with "dark phrases," which function as the play's prologue or introduction. "Dark Phases" is about the power from defying social standards, not about what is lost. "Dark Phrases" provides a window into the difficulties faced by a black girl in America. She sets the mood for the series of narrations that follow." Are we ghouls? // Children of horror?....// somebody / anybody //sing a black girl's song // bring her out // to know herself // (4).The girl in the poem is a representation of all black girls in this nation who have grown up too quickly as a result of sad events that rob them of their early years. All of the girl's abilities, goals, and desires have been taken away from her, and this has led her to close up and build a barrier. The unapologetic portrayal of the yellow woman's sexual experiences, marked by the absence of punctuation, capitalization, and intentional misspellings, serves as a reflection of the "particular experiences of Black women, acknowledging their sexuality as a fundamental and integral part of their identity" (Hooks, 2000, 93). Rather than focusing on the power dynamics between men and women, Shange's work emphasizes how the body, especially its sexual expression, can empower women. Through these bold depictions, Shange addresses painful and often taboo topics such as abortion, rape, violence, and gendered relationships, while refusing to separate the body from the mind. Her poetry demonstrates the significant interplay between the two, emphasizing their mutual influence in shaping their mutual influence in shaping one's sense of self and experience in the world.

Sharing the painful experience of abortion is an essential part of the healing process, a way to break free from the confines of the mind. Judith Herman argues that narrating trauma is vital for recovery, explaining that "the act of giving a detailed account of the trauma, reconstructing it, and re-externalizing it into a narrative, is an essential step in healing" (Herman, 1992, 175). In *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/ When the Rainbow is Enuf,* particularly in "Abortion Cycle # 1," Shange powerfully depicts the invasion of the woman's body through rape and the subsequent illegal abortion. Shange's portrayal captures the profound trauma, fear, and pain that causes a deep emotional toll on the woman.

The lady in red speaks of her enormous demonstrations of love. She drives 27 long hours to reach his home when he calls at 3 AM. She sends multitudinous gifts, love letters, and verses. Eventually, the unstable affair results in abandoning their love. Giving up a bad relationship is noble, but these phrases highlight the humiliation of lowering oneself to win someone over. "I thot I was but I was stupid I was able to be hurt/& that's' not real anymore/ I should be immune/if im still/& that's what I waz discussing/how I am still /alive & my dependency on other living veins for love/I survive on intimacy & tomorrow/that's all I've got going" (Shange, 1977, 8). Shange offers the audience the opportunity to learn about society's constraints and peculiarities through listening to a song by a black girl that, though audible in its entirety, only reaches society in a fragmented, eerie, and hysterical manner. The intensity of the initial poems is momentarily softened by a childhood nursery rhyme, "Mama little baby," which may reflect Shange's recognition of her community's failure to prepare girls for the complexities of adulthood

properly. In this context, Toni Morrison highlights the gap between childhood innocence and the harsh realities girls face when thrust into adult life without adequate guidance. In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison touches on a similar theme of early disruption, explaining, "Children, as we know them, do not exist in isolation; they are part of a community that shapes and often distorts their development" (Morrison, 1970, 92). Shange offers a poignant reflection on this theme: "For Colored Girls ….is a record of my life after I left home, I realized that everything was not fine" (Shange, 1986, 56). The dances and songs serve both technical and thematic purposes, challenging Western conventions of dramatic form and patriarchal norms. They function as tools for empowerment, solidarity, and self-expression while also evoking a sense of nostalgia and childhood memories for the audience. Margo Jefferson explores how Shange's use of movement and music in the play creates a powerful emotional language that transcends words, emphasizing that "the body becomes primary vehicle for conveying personal histories and communal" (Jefferson, 1995, 122). For the women in the play, the dance is not merely for performance; it is an intimate and expressive act that fosters a deeper connection to their identities as women and as members of a shared cultural heritage. The rainbow acts as a symbol of the profound bond between women and nature, underscoring the fundamental worth of women.

Conclusion

In exploring male dominance and self-determination of identity, Shange encourages women not to sever all ties with men; instead, she calls for a more mature and balanced form of communication between women and men, grounded in mutual understanding and respect. Shange's primary aim is to transform the lives of black women into models for future generations of young women of color. *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/ When the Rainbow Is Enuf* acts as a space where women can openly voice their struggles, finding solidarity and collective strength to face their most significant challenges. As Kimberle Crenshaw explains, "The interconnectedness of race, class, and gender oppression fosters solidarity among women, reinforcing their strength in the face on common struggles" (Crenshaw, 1991, 126). The play underscores the idea that shared experiences within a community can ease personal pain.

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