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PROBLEMS OF THE MARGINALIZED IN NTOZAKE SHANGE'S "FOR COLORED GIRLS"

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ABSTRACT: -

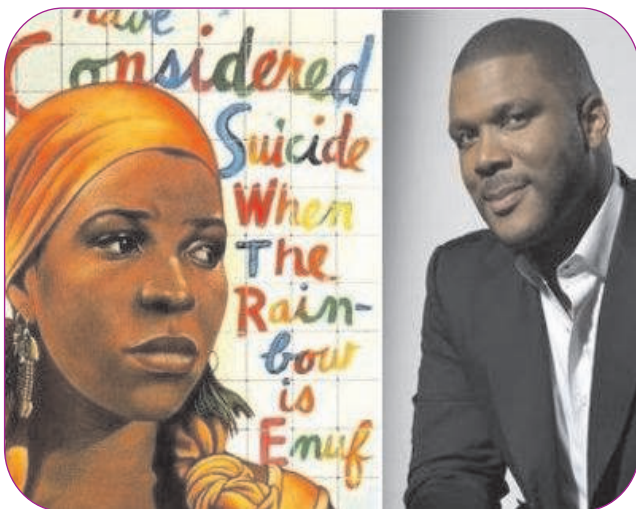
Ntozake Shange is known best for her "Chore poem", for colored girls who have considered suicide when the Rainbow is Enuf. It is a moving work full of choral poetry and portraying feminine black experience. Definitively Shange's theatre emerges from her own experience as a poet and dancer, and she empowers her actors to experience and to communicate her dramas personally and individually. Choreographer Dianne McIntyre, with whom Shange has both danced and collaborated on a number theatre pieces, highlights the improvisational dimension of chore poem: "Chore poem is an ancient form of words and movement happening simultaneously. It's natural. Zaki made a name for it. The uniqueness of the form as I know it and have worked with it is that the words are not separate over there and danced to. The words and dance become one intertwined so you could not imagine one without the other. It feels very natural to me but it is somewhat daring. Her words have the music and the dance in it and the words also have space that is open for the dance whereas some other poetry may be so explicit that movement with it is redundant".

KEYWORDS: choral poetry, racial, political and feminist issues.

INTRODUCTION :

Shange draws upon her personal experiences as a black woman to passionately express her concerns with racial, political and feminist issues. The seven women representing the colors of the rainbow speak of the double oppression of being black and being a woman. Shange's voice is always lyrical, whether is recounting an episode of bleak exploitation or evoking a mood of resignation and quiet strength. She has a keen ear for black American idioms recreated in the rhythms and nuances of the language of her characters. Her chore poem consists of chants, poetry, dance and ritual, and recalls the salient features of American theatre.

Shange describes the chore poem as a cycle of poems combined with music and dance. In this chore poem, she explores the sufferings and joys of seven black American women and rejoices in their ability to share and overcome their sorrows. Critics have found fault with Shange for her unsympathetic treatment of black men who are depicted as obstacles to the social and spiritual freedom of black women. However, the play can be viewed as an affirmation of the people's will to survive. Thematically the chore poem moves from innocence to experience from youth to adulthood, from ignorance to knowledge, from ignorance of self to self-knowledge, from darkness to light, from particular women's experiences to a collective black female experience and identity.



The chore poem can be regarded as literary coming-of-age of black womanhood in the form a series of testimonies which in Shange's words, "explore the realities of seven different kinds of women". Indeed the chore poem is so rich that it lends itself to multiple interpretations which vary according to one's perspective and experiences.

The chore poem for colored girls offers a quest for new being stemming from an experience of nothingness. In Shange's poems the experience of nothingness is born of the double burden of being black and being a woman. But the stories she tells bring a shock of recognition to every woman who has given too much of herself to a man. The heart of the experience of nothingness in the chore poem is a woman's experience of loss and debasement of self on account of love of a man. But what makes Shange's poems more than just another version of Lady Shing's Blues a theme of sorrow and survival too familiar to Black women is Shange's refusal to accept the black woman's sorrow as a simple and ultimate fact of life. She probes for a new image of the Black woman that will make the old images of the colored girls obsolete. Shange envisions Black woman, "born again" on the far side of nothingness with a new image of Black womanhood that will enable them to acknowledge their history while moving beyond it to "the ends of their own rainbows". The rainbow works as metaphor for collective voice of women of colour; it also describes the visual impact of these women moving about the stage in an array of different mono-chromatic costumes. Visually and aesthetically these women are a rainbow and only collectively are they able to dramatize the fullness of black female identity. The rainbow also symbolizes physical beauty in the ethnicity of the black female as well as a spiritual beauty she understands when she becomes aware of her own inner rhythms.

Shange is a gifted poet who orchestrates symbols in her chore poem for Colored Girls, these indices to tonal form advance meaning in Shange's chore poems. One symbol in For colored girls that legitimizes women's vision is the array of colors worn by the seven women, including brown, yellow, red, green, purple, blue and orange. These colors of the rainbow suggest the diversity of women and limitless possibilities. Shange uses the rainbow myth presuming that a pot of gold can be found at the end of a rainbow to illustrate that these colored women are moving toward something good, liberating, and dynamic. Shange also uses the elusiveness and ephemeral nature of the rainbow to demonstrate the mystery of life, particularly of the lives of her women who have been marred by strangers and acquaintances alike. There is a certain amount of illusory hop expressed by these women who do not always understand why they have been victimized. With names lower-cased. Suggesting self-effacement, invisibility and a lack of self-confidence, these women battle the storm before they can enjoy the quiet of the rainbow. The unconventionality of for colored girls is evidenced in Shange's inclusion of brown and purple as colors of her rainbow. While purple may represent indigo and violet, brown is clearly a non-rainbow colour. Adding brown works effectively on a number of levels. First brown characterizes the skin colour of black people. Secondly, brown connects these colored girls with fundamental elements of Earth, evidenced not only in the flower imagery throughout but particularly in the concluding moments of the chore poem. And finally brown sets the prevailing mood of the piece, until the closing moment as one of gloom and despair. The dullness that is associated with brown colour is transformed into a final moment of natural colour of sisterly communion, communion with nature, and communion of the body and spirit.

In the stage of production six actresses dressed in the colors of the rainbow yellow, red, green, purple, blue, orange and dressed in the brown of the Earth and warm-toned skin alternately speak the twenty odd-poems, each a story. While one speaks, the others listen to attentively or mime the story creating a sense of sisterhood and sharing when a story is told by one woman it often evokes sympathetic "Yeahs" or the telling of a related story or even dancing from the other women. The sense of dialogue in Shange's chore poem which raises the consciousness of woman is an invitation to the women in the audience to tell their stories. A tapestry of experiences emerges interwoven with a sense of plurality and commonality.

The title of the poem provoked questions of why Shange had to use outdated term "colored" which Black people abandoned as oppressive in the sixties. As an answer to these questions Shange explained in a television interview why she used "colored girls" in the title of her poem. She spoke of the importance of Black self-definition and of taking pride in dark skin and American heritage. Her own name "Ntozake" is an African name which she chose as a way of affirming her African roots. But she said that it was also important to affirm her

American ancestry. Recalling her grandmother's last words to her that she was a precious "little colored girl", Shange realized that "colored" was not only a term used by Whites to define Blacks, but also a term of endearment in the Black community. The juxtaposition of "colored girls" with "rainbow" enables Black women to see the varied tones of their skin as a reflection of the glorious hues of the rainbow, not as a colour to be borne in shame. And, though colored girls have considered suicide because they have been abused by white society and Black men, this need no longer be the case. "The rainbow" is now understood as an image of their own beauty, and it "is enuf"

The women in Shange's play have journeyed through one emotional mine field after another, bouncing back from the blows which have been leveled at them by males. These women console each other as they speak of how they fought for integrity and self-respect. Though the evolving black women speak of the brutal treatment accorded to them by their men, Shange emphasized their struggle to rise above this form of bondage and their success at coping with a world where "Being alive, being a woman, and being colored is a metaphysical dilemma". These women have been knocked down, but they pick themselves up and search for a way to hold on to their sanity and to improve their life-styles.

Shange's works dignify women's suffering and inform females that they have a responsibility to love themselves and each other enough to resist oppression. Her female characters battle with the incomprehensible dilemma of living in a world where being female and black makes them twice oppressed. For colored Girls is unified by a series of similar experiences shared by characters whose names are lower-cased to represent the poor, abused self-effacing women of colour. On one hand, the chore poem speaks of the physical and emotional abuse enacted against black women. On the other, this work is about women's possibilities their ability to survive in the face of loneliness, rejection, pain, rape and invalidation. The substance of the chore poem is embedded in its title, says Shange, who feels that a rainbow, which comes after a storm connotes the possibility "to start all over again with the power and beauty of ourselves". According to Shange, this theatre piece is an "exploration of people's lives and provides hope for women who have known the bitterness of the storm.

"Women must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies. Woman must put herself into the text as into the world and into history by her own movement". Helence Cixous speaks about *écriture féminine*. In a bid to find a language like hers, women have not only adopted post-structuralism Theory Chris Weedon makes a case for appropriation of recent French theories of language and culture. These theories enable women to analyze the injustices of patriarchy and women's resistance to them. Women writers and critics have keenly felt that the female experience and the creation of women characters have been falsified or distorted. In the light of these theories espousing women's cause, a plethora of texts have appeared, produced by women writers written with a strong political consciousness and awareness of recreating "real" images of women. It is in this context Shange's work presenting sexual and social pressures acquires a special accent.

Shange, in order to sing a colored girl's song must recreate the language of her experiences, a language which in its concrete particularity has almost never been spoken. The voices of the Black Women have been negated by the Standard English grammar that has forced Black people to fit their experiences into alien language pattern. Black women's experiences have also been negated by a literary tradition that celebrates the experiences of the white men. Shange ignores standard grammar in her effort to capture the nuances of Black women's speech patterns and experience. The idiom of this Black girl's life is reflected in her speech patterns, choice of words, details of description, spelling and punctuation. The lack of punctuation and capitalization may reflect Shange's perception of the particularities of Black women's speech and experience. The lady in yellow speaks positively and unashamedly about her first sexual encounters and it venders a daring and important social break in traditional female behavior for Shange's colored girls. Further, it boldly announces Shange's commitment to acknowledging sexuality as a natural dimension of female identity. It renounces a traditionally reversed notion of female virginity in patriarchal societies.

Virginia Woolf once remarked that the translation of women's speech into writing would require the introduction of a new sentence. She said that women's experience does not fit neatly into the rhythms of

dominant and subordinate clauses that patterned after the ordered and hierarchical world of upper class men. In her own Woolf explored a stream-of-consciousness style, which, she felt, expressed women's experience more fully. Like Shange's poetic lines, Woolf's sentences lack precise beginning and ending and patterns of subordination. In both Woolf's and Shange's writing, experience is perceived as a flow with pauses, but without the clear ordering required by the standard sentence and paragraph. Shange and Woolf would probably argue that their writing styles reflect more directly lived experience and that the order expressed by the standard sentence is an imposition, an attempt to control reality. Shange's poems also reflect her notion that Black speech is close to music, an understanding expressed in the mixed genre chore poem in which music, dance, and spoken word are woven together.

Shange's determination to make her poems reflect female experience and bodies is evident in all the poems in *For Colored Girls*, especially in those poems that consider abortion, rape and relationships between Black women. For Shange, it is important to affirm her Black woman's body and this is reflected in many of the poems. As Shange says, "with dance I discovered my body more intimately than I had imagined possible. With the acceptance of the ethnicity of my things and backside, came a clearer understanding of my voice as a woman and as a poet. Through the particularities of Black woman's story, Shange touches a core of pain and self-negation shared by most women. The first poems of *For Colored Girls* create a mood of youthful optimism, playfulness and joy in being alive. The serious note of the opening poem is interrupted by the singing of the childhood song, "mama's little baby", the reciting of a playful rhyme and a game of tag. This lighter note, which carries over into the next two poems, expresses Shange's perception that the Black girl's childhood does not always prepare her for the struggles and hard times of her adult experience. As Shange says, "For Colored Girls is a record of me once I left my mother's house. I was raised as if everything was all right, and in fact, once I got of my house, everything was not all right.

Generally we see the black women only peripherally as the protagonist's lover, wife, mother, or in some other supporting role. Certainly Black women can identify with the predicament of black men. Black women can identify, for example, with the problem articulated in Ellison's *Invisible Man* because they share the same predicaments. But for black women the predicament of the black male protagonist is compounded by concerns which affect them on yet another level. This then, is what makes *Colored Girls* an important work which ranks with Ellison's *Invisible Man*, Wright's *Native Son* and a handful of other black classics. It is an artistically successful female perspective on a longstanding issue among black people.

While her chore poems celebrate black Female identity Shange at no point encourages women to eschew all social or intimate contact with men as the solution to make exploitation. She works toward a level of communication in male-female relationship that is built upon mutual respect, trust and individual self-worth.

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