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Deconstructing gender narratives of abuse in Shange's for colored girls who have considered suicide/ when the rainbow is enuf

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ABSTRACT

In for colored girls who have considered suicide/ when the rainbow is enuf, Ntozake Shange deconstructs patriarchal ideology through language by sharing the experiences of empowerment and disempowerment of seven women that belong to the black community in the 1970s. She employs an innovative genre, the "choreopoem" which combines poetry, prose and stage performance. This paper is highly vested in gender politics as the stories of these seven women revolve around feminism. The play brings to the forefront the racial tensions that black women faced outside the black community but most importantly, it unravels the forces of subjugation that they experienced from within the very

black community they are part of, through the violent behavior of black men towards their body. Issues such as rape, abortion, assuming non-normative roles are explored. Attentive to the multiplicity of voices, Shange yearns for the decolonization of black women from the double oppression they experience outside and within the black community by attaining agency through language and through projecting their voice..

PAROLE CHIAVE: *body politics, agency, African-American, queer, subjectivity*

AUTORE

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In her work for colored girls, Ntozake Shange highlights the positive worth of Black women in society. *For Colored Girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enouf* consists of twenty-four poems she wrote over the course of years. Shange is “the second Afro-American woman to reach the mainstream stage in the United States and to become the award winner of many prizes, including the Obie Award” (Tellin 2005: 155). The play unravels issues concerning the lives of black women in the United States and tackles tensions within the black community itself. Through employing the innovative form of the choreopoem, she portrays black womanhood in a positive light. In this article, I would like to focus on the importance of Black women’s value through the narrative form of the choreopoem. She reveals the women’s continuous striving towards healthy self-awareness which ultimately leads to their self-actualization. Shange focuses on what it means to be a Black woman in society through employing the choreopoem. The choreopoem can be defined as “a theatrical expression that combines poetry, prose, song, dance, and music—those elements that outline the distinctly African American heritage— to arouse an emotional response in an audience” (Lester 1995:319). She employs her very own linguistic style while formulating her words to flow in a rhythmic pattern unique to her expression.

The black feminist production of *For colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enouf* began around 1973 because Shange felt the need to break off a poetics dominated by the axes of maleness and whiteness. Shange’s black feminist voice arose due to the significant cultural and political shifts that her community was going through due to “the black power movement and the second wave feminism movement in the 1970s” (Savage 2007: 188). Shange brings to light in an explicit way the sexual politics in the black communities. Her play was significant for the African American theater as it was a catalyst in the depiction of gender relationships. Shange employs “vignettes, poetry, song, dance, music, prose and mime” in a nonlinear way in order to narrate the stories as well as the experiences and pressures that seven actors deal with by being both female and black (Mahurin 2013: 198). The narratives of gender and race are reciprocally intensifying as the body is rendered as a medium for revealing the dialogue between these two discourses.

Shange uses an all- female cast in order to isolate and illuminate the experiences of the black female community. The main characters of her play are identified according to “the materials on their bodies”, the color of their clothes and not according to the “material of their bodies”, which is being black and female (Louis 2013:329). The colors they wear function as the form of their differentiation. In a sense this practice entails essentialism as there is a certain degree of universality involved in this human interchangeability. The experiences of one lady could turn in

a universal symbol, as they could be easily exchanged with the experiences of another lady by simply switching costumes. According to Jill Dolan the “character can no longer act as a stable referent, and that narrative can no longer be assumed to be a coherent, linear system that delivers a single, authoritative meaning” (Dolan 42). Shange creates “a theater of the physical” as the experiences of abuse of these black women are understood through their bodies not only by their actions (Louis 2013:330). There is no fixity in their identities, as their actions are in flux.

Shange represents Black women from different American cities. Each lady is wearing an outfit with a different color and reveals her geographical location.

lady in brown
i'm outside chicago
lady in yellow
i'm outside detroit
lady in purple
im outside houston
lady in red
im outside baltimore
lady in green
im outside san francisco
lady in blu
im outside manhattan
lady in orange
im outside st.louis (Shange 1982:19).

Shange connects these women who occupy different geographical spaces through their experiences. The specific location of each woman is not really significant as the marginalization that these women experience is expressed “from a collective standpoint that transcends both space and time” (Savage 2007: 188). All the women of that monologue experience displacement as they are outside of these big cities, living in the margins. They also experience a “literal disembodiment” as they are rendered as liminal subjects that occupy an “unoccupied space”, a space outside the sphere of habitation (Louis 2013:332). This stanza reflects the metaphorical positioning of black women outside these large cities, outside the social spaces in which they belong. These women might be systematically living in these cities however, their everyday experiences are being trivialized as the dominant social systems have rendered them invisible. Their experiences of abuse are being silenced and not much of attention is paid to their discourse. Shange illustrates how black women fell into the margins of society and are rendered as “outsiders within”, as noted by Patricia Hill Collins, who uses this characterization to depict “social locations or border spaces occupied by groups of unequal power” (Mahurin 2013:199).

Black women are not rendered as equal in the power dynamics spectrum as they have more possibilities to get abused than other social groups. It is significant to note that these women are outside of their own cities and also exist in the margins of their ethnic group, their culture, their history. Diana Martha-Louis highlights the psychological effects of living in a society in which these ladies are outsiders:

All the characters are imagined living their lives literally within cities, but this stanza presents them as metaphorically existing outside them. The imagery of Black women as outsiders within reflects the ways in which they relate to and exist within their worlds and social spaces reminiscent of the life of Lutie Johnson in Ann Petry's (1946) *The Street*, the women walk down city streets, work all city jobs, and attempt to live in city neighborhoods, but are rendered invisible by social systems that trivialize their existence (2013:200).

Louis, as Shange, places emphasis on the psychological toll that living as outsiders within has on these women. Survival for black women is contingent on their ability to find a place to describe their experiences. Understanding why the experiences of African American women are different from those of other women is steeped in the ideology of black people in the United States.

In the next scene, Shange exposes the unifying message that touches upon the lives of all the ladies of her choreopoem:

lady in brown
& this is for colored girls who have considered suicide
but moved to the ends of their own rainbows (Shange 1982:6).

Shange exposes the Black women's emotional trauma and voices the crisis they face in regards to their mental health, as she addresses the issue of suicide. In spite of the hardships they have faced in their lives, they manage to gain self awareness once they move at the end of their own personal rainbows. In this particular scene, womanhood is intricately connected to the notions of sanity and self-reclamation. Moving towards the end of one's rainbow could be read as indicative of these women's personal journey towards self-reclamation. These women make a conscious choice to live in spite of being marginalized in the patriarchal society in which they belong. Even though Shange describes in great detail the reasons that led these women to consider committing suicide, she places more emphasis on the strategies they devise in order to oppose self-harming. In order to counter suicidal thoughts, voicing one's trauma and wholly communicating with others is necessary.

Shange begins by highlighting a major problem, date rape. In the scene "latent rapists" she depicts the sexual assaults that black women have been subjected to and how these assaults pose a threat towards their sanity. In this scene, Shange gives

voice to the psychological distress of black women in the framework of their intimate relationships. This section depicts the "isolation and pain of betrayal and violence" that women go through as a consequence of being raped (Anderson 2008:10). The lady in red, purple and blue show the common ground of being raped by a friend or a stranger. The horrible occurrence of getting assaulted is exposed, showing some victims pressing charges, while others create excuses for their assaulters. By dealing with the issue of "date rape", Shange exposes the reality of the "mid-1970s", rape most likely initiated by an acquaintance rather by a stranger (Anderson 2008:10). By talking about date rape Shange manages to break the silence surrounding this narrative. She describes how sympathy and compassion are withheld from women who get abused by someone familiar to them. The lady in blue starts the poem by mentioning that "a friend is hard to press charges against" (Shange 1982:31). She uses this statement to show that rape is not always initiated by strangers but can also occur from a friendly figure. So, the assertion of the lady in blue shows that most of the times rapists do not fall into the socially prescribed depiction of a stranger but are rather individuals familiar to the victim. The assaulter does not always fit the profile of someone who would initiate rape.

In contrast, women who get abused by a stranger receive more sympathy. The lady in red mentions that "a rapist is always to be a stranger/to be legitimate/someone you never saw/a man wit obvious problems" (Shange 1982: 31). This statement further intricates assumptions about who can be a rapist. The contradiction of these two stanzas shows that ultimately anyone could be a rapist. Shange pronounces the potential behavior of any male subject. The attacker can have any set of features. Thus, the intricate reality that any man could eventually be a potential rapist is emphasized. This consists a reality for any woman's existence as "women relinquish all personal rights/ / in the presence of a man/ / who apparently cd be considered a rapist/". (Shange 1982: 34). She exposes the passive stance that they would adopt if they got involved in a situation that could potentially evolve to rape.

So, this scene highlights the disbelief towards women that get sexually assaulted. Most of the times the faulty assumption "if you know him you must have wanted it" insinuates that women bring this abuse upon themselves (Mahurin 2013: 200). Shange precedes to a revision of the patriarchal assumptions that women bring rape upon themselves. This section is an epitomy of "the feminist discourse that broke the silence around sexual violence against women" (Clarke 2005: 105). Shange voices the violence that raped women have endured. Unfortunately, their accounts are not taken seriously as the validity of their opinion is second-guessed. The statement of the woman in purple shows that onlookers believe that assault was just "a misunderstanding" shows how language can be carefully used in order to frame the one accused of being culprit as innocent. (Shange 1982: 31). Furthermore,

it illustrated the way that “gendered social codes” blame victims rather than perpetrators (Mahurin 2013: 200). People tend to accuse the victim. Especially in the case of other women they seek evidence in order to show that “the victim brought the rape upon herself “usually by breaking social rules that are generally held applicable only to women. And when the rules classify women as dumb, loose, or weak on the one hand, and smart, discriminating, and strong on the other, it is not surprising that women who cannot step outside the rules to critique them would attempt to validate themselves within them” (Crenshaw 1991: 1241). So, when a woman goes against the rules that are socially prescribed, other women tend to assume that she has brought her rape upon herself as they are trying to find signification within the structure that perpetuates the idea that the preconception that black women bring rape upon themselves by being overly seductive and inviting. However, Shange challenges this notion of black women being overly sexually available.

Through this section she dissolves the binaries among a friend and a rapist. She deconstructs the theorization of the notion of date rape as anyone can be a rapist, he is of all races and classes, they are not the “respecters of race or class privilege” (Clarke 2005:105). Shange avoids particularity. The same applies for the survivors of rape, anyone can be assaulted. Most of the times, rapists are stereotypical males whose self-image is determined by their sexual prowess. They get validated by forming as many sexual relationships as possible with female counterparts. The contradictions and insecurities that are rooted within the black men’s confused sense of self, lead them to seek sexual satisfaction by abusing women in order to validate themselves. They can be “extremely cruel to black women, possibly because they feel black women are the only people they are superior to” (Lester 1992 130). One of black men’s only resource was phallic power a means that they try to use on as many women as they can. As Staples argues “some black men have nothing but their penis, an object which they use on as many women as possible [and] in their middle years they are deprived of even that mastery of the symbols of manhood ...” (Lester 1992:130). He emphasizes the pathology of the perpetrators of abuse.

One of the most destructive experiences of abuse is the experience of Crystal with Beau Willie Brown described in the poem “A nite with Beau Willie Brown”. The monologues that Shange employs in her play account abuse “of the most egregious and casual kinds” (Dolan 2013). Beau Willie Brown is the male figure who has dropped his two children from the window on the fifth floor, while helpless Crystal who “cl only whisper” was watching him do that (Shange 84). In an effort to convince Crystal to marry him, “awright bitch/awright bitch/you gonna marry me” he forces his way into her apartment and drops the children out of the window (Shange 1982: 84). A previous violent outbreak foreshadowing this ultimate violent outburst was when he beat Crystal with a high chair while Kwame, their baby was still sitting on it, “beau wazbeatin crystal with the high chair & her son” (Shange 1982: 82). Beau

Willie is an embodiment of all the derogatory features with which males are presented throughout the play. He is a reflection of the "scheming, lying, childish, and brutal baby-killers" (Lester 1992: 130). He is extremely violent, brutal, ruthless, blatant and abusive, while at the same time he is incapable of assuming responsibility for his actions and leads his way through deception. He does not offer anything substantial to Crystal but only utterly destroys her life. Through his sheer, brute force he eradicates any possibility she has to rebuild her life. Beau Willie destroys himself as well as the children because he was not capable of communicating his problems with Crystal (Lester 1992: 130). He is unable to verbalize his personal trauma suppressing it and thus generating violence.

Beau Willie is an egoistic figure as he mostly cares about saving himself. He tries to assert his masculinity by lashing out at his very own family, Crystal and his two children, the only available resource to him. He uses them as the medium to release all the unreleased tension he experiences. In bringing up their utter destruction, he destroys himself as well. He might have been the one who actually drops the children of the window but Crystal shares part of the responsibility of what happened because she placed the children in the middle of their argument. There was the rumor that "that beau wazspendin/ / alla his money on the bartendin bitch down at the/ / merry-go-round cafe" (Lester 130). There was the insinuation that he cheated on her. Crystal decided to get a court order "saying beau willie brown had no access to his children" in order to protect her children (Lester 1992,130). She took responsibility for them. However, she did not take action soon enough as the situation escalated quickly. She decided to leave Beau Willie because of his continued physical abuse to her. He desperately wanted to go back to his family. Crystal made the decision to remain in this abusive relationship as long as she did because she was oppressed by the strictures of patriarchy.

An exploration of the material, social and psychological profile of Beau Willie will further enlighten this narrative of abuse and will lead to a better understanding of his motives. Through him the complex social, physical and psychological realms of abusive black male subjects are being exposed. Beau Willie Brown was a veteran who came back from Vietnam. He was extremely poor addicted to drinking and doing drugs. As it is described in the play "he came home crazy as hell/ he tried to get veterans/ / benefits to go to school & they kept right on puttin/ / him in remedial classes/ he cant read wortha damn/ so beau cused the teachers of holdin him back & got/ / himself a gypsy cab to drive/ but his cab kept breakin down/ & the cops was always messinwithim/ plus not gettin much bread/" (Lester, 1992: 130). He did not have an actual home to return to, but rather stayed at a hotel an occurrence which highlights his displacement. So, without actually having a home or former ed-

ucation he tries to carry on with his life. He tries to get educated because he is illiterate but fails to get educated. He gets a job as a taxi driver but he is unsuccessful. He felt as if "there waz no air". (Lester 1992: 130). He felt that he was lacking the conditions that would allow him to develop as an individual. He fails to embody what is expected of him, finding a job, an imperative imposed by the capitalist society. Thus, he does not fit into the traditional regime of patriarchy, as he does not have the power and more specifically the resources in order to support his family. He is suffocated by the strictures of patriarchy reiterated by capitalism. He is victimized in this context. His ability to exercise agency has been silenced by the rigid capitalistic regime within the patriarchal context.

If one looks at the full spectrum of the relationships of black men with black women, there is the possibility to dismiss up to a point the abusive nature of their relationship. There is an uneasiness with the silencing of the black male experiences whose manhood has been challenged and their self-respect is irrevocably affected. Probably these men are acting out because they do not have a way to establish a sustainable identity as they do not have "any sense of self-actualization, or somebodiness" (Lester 1992: 130). These men feel as lesser beings. Black men "have not been allowed to fulfill the roles (i.e. breadwinner, protector) society ascribes to them", thus they become filled with rage. (Lester, 1992: 130). They fall short on the expectations assigned on them. They are victimized by "a system of racial, social, economic, and political inequality" (Lester, 1992:130). This abusive behavior of theirs towards black women is deeply rooted in their confused sense of self. However, this cannot function as an excuse for their behavior in any way.

Beau Willie is a man trapped as he feels that he needs to prove himself and measure up to the standards of white manhood. He constantly needs to prove his legitimacy to white patriarchy. Beau Willie and Crystal struggle as they are incapable of fighting "the institutionalized racism and sexism that plague their lives" (Anderson 2008:10). He is being discriminated due to his educational and occupational status. Crystal has been his "girl since she was fourteen/ when he caught her on the stairs" (Anderson 2008:10). She did not have the opportunity to develop her subjecthood and find out who she really is and she really wants in life. What is interesting to note is that up to 1970, there was a pervasive silence "around issues of gender and sexism" (Birnbaum 2000). These issues have been silenced, nobody tackled them. Shange was a playwright that created the space to expose how "misogyny functioned in black communities" (Springer 2005: 5). She showed how black women's needs and aspirations were not taken seriously, as they were not rendered with respect.

In the end of the play, the black women of the narrative pave towards a more realized selfhood. They all gather together and exclaim:

i found god in myself

& i loved her/i loved her fiercely” (Shange 1982:87).

This passage constitutes a statement of the true discovery of self. The women of the narrative pave towards a more realized selfhood. After considering to commit suicide, they experience a “spiritual awakening” from the almost “spiritual quest” they had gone through (Hogan 2016:153). There is this almost metaphysical awakening that extends beyond their being. They find “god in themselves, they discover an inner strength, a greater sense of self, and an independence” that will help them “deal better with emotionally and psychologically unsatisfying relationships in the future” (Lester 1992:130). Becoming confident women, relying on their own resources allows them to move away from abusive relationships in the future. Every woman arrives at the realization that she needs to love herself first, in order to be capable of fully loving and accepting someone else’s love. The ladies “sing first to each other, then gradually to the audience. After the song peaks the ladies enter into a closed tight circle” (Shange 1982:63-64). After this realization that god is within themselves, these women are personified as one lady, encompassing the experiences of Black women. They come together “to their surviving meaning: the rainbow”. This is stated in the last line of the choreopoem:

& this is for colored girls who have considered
suicide/but are movin to the ends of their own
rainbows (Shange 1982: 88).

Shange ends her choreopoem by personifying the reason why these ladies decide not to commit suicide but instead fight for their lives. The process of ‘movin to the ends of their own rainbows’ signifies their movement towards self-actualization. They understand that it is acceptable to be vulnerable yet they realize that they need to work towards attaining positive self-worth. As part of the diaspora, they realize that they cannot give up and merely endure systemic oppression but rather they need to act. These women’s journey to self-actualization heavily resembles Shange’s own personal experiences, as in her mid-20s she contemplated committing suicide four times. As she mentions in her 2009 interview in CNN:

I was driving the No.1 highway in Northern Carolina and I was overcome by the appearance of two parallel rainbows. I had a feeling of near death or near catastrophe. Then I drove through the rainbow and I went away. 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 only see her overall beauty if she can see all the colors of herself. To do that, she has to look deep inside her. And when she looks inside herself, she will find... love and beauty (Cox 2009).

The way that Shange come up to the idea of the rainbow is interesting. By looking at the rainbow she realized that it is important to strive to find meaning by exercising introspection. In order for these women overcome their physical and psychological trauma, they need to find a reason to live. By realizing the strength they carry within them, they can endure the hardships they face due to their systemic oppression. These ladies consciously chose not to commit suicide but instead celebrate their life by remaining alive.

In conclusion, in *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf* Black women grasp onto their own concept of God, a God who helps them overcome the abuse that they have been through. Moving towards the “end of one’s rainbow is not the end of, but rather the continuation of the process” of self-actualization (Stearns 2020: 72). Shange challenges the prevailing social discourse about the perpetrators of violence and processes of attribution of blame, disrupting the perils with which traditional gender roles are entrenched along patriarchy. Despite the dominant narratives of patriarchy and sexism, there is the possibility of cultivating critical consciousness to black men. The potential of transformation is present and should be at the core of the black feminist struggle in order to transform the intimate encounters between black men and black women, in order for them not to become the locus of male oppression and domination.

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