

Chapter IV

Ntozake Shange: Black Women's Blues Singer

In recent times the works by African-American women writers have claimed their rightful place in the canons of black literature. Some writers like Alice Childress, Lorraine Hansberry and Ntozake Shange, to name only a few, have established them as significant female voices in African-American writing and have received appreciation across the color line. Elizabeth Brown-Gillory has stated that these three African-American women playwrights stand out as milestones in the tradition of African-American drama and are "crucial links in the development of playwrighting in America"(1). Under their impact the established canon of African-American writing, particularly drama, has taken a new direction. "With the steadily growing interest in the works of black women playwrights, however, the established canon is quickly broadening to include plays by Alice Childress, Martie Charles, and Ntozake Shange as poignant dramas of self-celebration" (Brown-Gillory 27). These women playwrights have voiced the need for black women's expression of centuries-old pain and suffering from a female perspective. The themes with which these three playwrights are chiefly concerned are echoes of those addressed by the black women playwrights of the earlier decades of the century, but these themes are now examined from new perspectives relevant to contemporary times. Moreover, the techniques these playwrights have employed are highly innovative. Elizabeth Brown-Gillory says,

Lynching, poverty, disenfranchised war heroes, miscegenation, race pride, folk heroes and heroines, family loyalties, church politics, revolution and women's rights are subjects frequently explored in early black plays by women who deserve a place among the best writers of the twentieth century. These same themes are echoed in the works

of three of America's finest contemporary black woman playwrights: Alice Childress, Lorraine Hansberry, and Ntozake Shange. (19)

Each of these playwrights has made significant contribution to the development of theatre in America, particularly black theatre, not only by continuing the traditions set up by earlier playwrights but also by appropriating the conventional forms to suit their needs. Brown-Gillory observes, "An examination of their [Childress, Hansberry and Shange's] plays reveals that their works are both similar and different from plays written by black males between the 1950s and 1980s"(25-26). What is remarkable in these three playwrights is their consistent attempt to demonstrate the distinctive feature of their female identity which both the white playwrights and Black male playwrights have systematically ignored or distorted. Brown-Gillory further comments thus:

Unlike their male counterparts, Childress, Hansberry and Shange have brought to the American stage a multiplicity of images of female heroines and have not confined themselves to such limiting images of black women as immoral, promiscuous, wanton, frigid, overbearing or pathetically helpless.... Peopling their plays with heroines who are challenging, innovative and multidimensional, Childress, Hansberry and Shange are forerunners in the development of black playwrighting and, thus, warrant serious critical study. (28)

Wilkerson corroborates Brown-Gillory in stressing the role played by these women playwrights in the development of Black theatre. In the "Introduction" to her collection *9 Plays by Black Women* (1986) she states:

The work of Hansberry, Childress, Kennedy and Shange strengthened the social consciousness of black plays, integrated the social and the political with the private and the personal self in new ways, and validated the theatrical richness of women's

experience. Their plays pushed beyond the confines of realism to newer theatrical forms more expressive of black reality. As the Civil Rights and the Women's Movements changed the face of the country, these writers opened the theatre to new dramatic realities. (xxii-xxiii)

Besides creating new images of black women and replacing the traditional stereotypes with these images, these playwrights have felt the urgency in establishing *healthy relationships with black males* (my emphasis) in order to help build a black nation in the United States. Like their male counterparts, African-American women playwrights also share the common concerns of all African-American writers in establishing solidarity among the Blacks. While Baraka advocated open violence in theatre, Ed Bullins concentrated on community and race relations, these women playwrights focussed on women as the link between the several contradictory pulls in the ongoing struggle for freedom and equality.

Ntozake Shange is the most prominent of the Black women playwrights in the contemporary American theatre. Although not directly connected with the "Black Arts Movement" in the 1960s, she is considered to be its natural heir. She picks up some of the important aspects of the Black Arts Movement like the value of the family, the need for a Black resurgence, creative use of the traditional aesthetic forms and the need for re-examining the place of religion in one's making, etc. and examines their relevance to the burgeoning cultural nationalism among the Blacks. Her four important plays, *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is emuf* (1976), *Spell # 7* (1979), *A Photograph: Lovers in Motion* (1979), and *boogie woogie landscapes* (1979) have established her reputation as a distinctive female voice in contemporary African-American drama. Her other two plays—*Mother Courage and Her Children* (an adaptation of Bertolt Brecht's play) (1980) and *From Okra to Greens/A Different Kinda Love Story: A Play/with Music and Dance* (1985), two

novels, *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo* (1982), and *Betsy Brown* (1985), and poems voice her preoccupation with issues which are female, but cut across gender lines. Commenting on her dramatic strategies, Brown-Gillory observes:

Shange carved for herself a permanent and classic place in American theatre history when she successfully broadened and redefined American theatre to include the choreopoem as an acceptable legitimate dramatic form. Not only did she popularize the choreopoem but she also brought to the American theatre an art that is undeniably African. Shange's choreopoem is comprised of chants, poetry, dance, and rituals.

With the popular appeal and commercial success of *for colored girls*, American theatre would never be the same. (41)

Like the playwrights of the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s, Shange stressed the need for black people's solidarity through strengthening their cultural ties with one another and invoking the spirit of their common racial heritage. She also stressed the emotional need of the Blacks to return to a natural, spontaneous living away from the institutional demands of any religion. Before examining in detail the works of Shange it is necessary to give the context of the African-American women playwrights.

African-American Women Playwrights before the 1950s:

Although the founders of African-American literature were women—Phillis Wheatley, Lucy Terry and Harriet E. Wilson—the female voice in the history of African-American literature was suppressed by the male dominance. In the field of drama it was difficult for a woman to get any opportunity to participate in the theatre activities. Even a white woman had difficulty in establishing herself in this domain of literature. Theatre in America, compared to its counterpart in Europe, has a brief history and during this period it was difficult for a woman

dramatist, black or white, to come to the forefront. The African-American drama has even a shorter history and in the context of this short span of time for the Black theatre, the work of Ntozake Shange is remarkably significant. During the first half of the twentieth century, Kathya Perkins writes, "black women, who had to bear the double burden of racism and sexism, burst upon the scene" and further adds that, "[p]rior to the 1950s, black women published over sixty discovered plays and pageants, as well as numerous unpublished scripts" ("T" 1). Yet there had been no attempt to look at these dramatic efforts of the African-American women playwrights from a historical perspective until Kathya Perkins' anthology *Black Female Playwrights: An Anthology of Plays Before 1950* appeared in 1989. The anthology gives a comprehensive survey of the history of Black American plays by African-American women written before 1950s. Perkins observes, "Except for the section on plays presented in James Hatch and Ted Shine's *Black Theatre U. S. A.* (1974), there has not been an anthology totally devoted to the works of these pioneer writers" (1). Most of the plays collected in Perkins' anthology "were written when blacks were just learning the art of playwriting" and "represent a historical perspective that reflects the lives of the early black women" ("T" 2). Perkins adds further:

Many of the topics that these women focused on were issues that could only be expressed by a black woman. Neither the white nor the black male playwright could express the intense pain and fear a black woman experienced concerning her children—wondering, for instance, if the child that she carried for nine months would be sold in slavery, or be a son who might one day be lynched. Along with this excruciating pain, black women were also preoccupied with the safety of their husbands. ("T" 2)

One of the earliest black female playwrights to have her work produced was Pauline Elizabeth Hopkins whose *Slaves' Escape: or the Underground Railroad*, a musical drama was produced on July 5, 1880. Her second play *Drama of Early Days* dramatized the biblical story of Daniel in the Lions' Den.

During the early 1920s, what came to be known as "native drama" emerged in Harlem as part of the Little Negro Theatre Movement. These plays, which included drama and comedy, depicted a more realistic and richer spectrum of the black experience than the plays written by whites about blacks. Perkins divides this type of drama into two categories: "race or propaganda plays" and "folk plays" ("T" 3). The former, which dealt with the issue of racial oppression, were written primarily to effect social change. The main goal of the latter, which sought to depict the black experience without focusing on the oppressive issues, was to educate and entertain without offending the audience. "A major catalyst behind the promotion and recognition of plays by early black women writers," records Perkins, "came through the efforts of three Harvard graduates: W. E. B. DuBois, one of the founders of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and Professors Montgomery T. Gregory and Alain Locke of Howard University" ("T" 3). Another historian of the black theatre in America, William Branch, also endorses this contribution. According to Perkins, "native drama" was a response to the works of white dramatists such as Eugene O'Neill, Dorothy and DuBois Heywood, Mare Connelly and Paul Green who attempted to capture the black experience but, when compared to "native drama," merely brought to the stage superficial aspects of black life and their plays lacked the "true spirit and soul" of the Negro.

As the editor of *The Crisis*, DuBois, along with his rival editor, Charles S. Johnson of the National Urban League's *Opportunity* magazine, encouraged black playwrights by launching a literary contest during the years 1925, 1926, and 1927. In the 1925 contest alone

as many as 628 manuscripts were submitted to *The Crisis* while *Opportunity* attracted 732 competitors. "Ironically, although the contests in drama were open to both black men and women, women outnumbered men in submitting plays, and most of the winners were women"(Perkins 3). The plays by women which won prizes in these contests included such names as Ruth Gaines-Shelton's *The Church Flight*, Myrtle Smith Livingston's *For Urban Children*, Eulalie Spence's *Foreign Mail*, *The Starter* and *The Hunch*, Marita Bonner's *The Purple Flower*, Zora Neale Hurston's *Color Struck* and *Spears*, May Miller's *The Bog Guide*, Eloise Bibb Thompson's *Cooled up*, and Georgia Douglas Johnson's *Blue Blood* and *Plumes*. To further encourage the development of drama written by blacks, DuBois organized a theatre group, the Krigwa Players, which existed for only a short time but was successful in encouraging the formation of small theatre groups throughout the country.

While DuBois was promoting "race" or "propaganda" plays, the other two Harvard graduates, Montgomery T. Gregory and Alaine Locke were promoting "folk plays" at Howard University. Gregory brought national attention to the Howard Players of Howard University in 1921 by establishing the Department of Dramatic Arts, which promoted Black theatre. The Department offered three areas of professional training: acting, playwriting, and production. Perkins writes on the contribution of Howard Players:

It was through the Howard Players that many black women received their training in playwriting. This opportunity allowed black women to see their works produced throughout the northeastern portion of the country. According to speculation, the large number of plays written by women could be attributed to the fact that since black women were not in any leadership position as compared to black men, these plays provided a unique opportunity for the voices to be heard. (7)

Like Montgomery Gregory, Alaine Locke, considered as one of the trailblazers of the Harlem Renaissance, was involved in similar projects in promoting the works by blacks in Washington, D. C. Consequently, in Washington, D. C. the first twentieth century full-length Black play, *Rachel*, written by Angelina Weld Grimke was produced by the Drama Committee of the District of Columbia Branch of the NAACP at Myrtilla Miner Normal School on March 3 and 4, 1916.

Rachel addresses the psychological impact of racism on the lives of blacks in America. Set in New York City during the early 1900s, the play deals with a family called the Lovings, who has migrated from the South to escape racial oppression. The main character, Rachel, is a bright young woman whose greatest desire is to become a mother. During the first act, Mrs. Loving reveals to Rachel and her brother, Tom, that a lynch mob had murdered their father and half-brother ten years earlier in the South. The play covers a period of about four years, and it is during this period that Rachel realizes that she and her family are still victims of racial oppression, even in the North. Rachel and Tom, both well educated, cannot find work for which they are qualified. Rachel also witnesses the brutal treatment of young black children by their white classmates and by the end of the play she questions God's justice in this society. Affected by a society that seems to offer no hopes for blacks, Rachel vows never to marry nor conceive. The play was a milestone in the history of African-American playwriting not only for being the first full-length play written, directed and produced by blacks but because it made the blacks realize the extent to which the black women were mentally tortured by the racism prevailing in American society. "In spite of the very romantic style and the extremely long speeches by Rachel," writes Perkins, "both of which were typical of the period, Grimke and her pioneer play hold a special place in American theatre history" ("T" 8).

Shortly after the production of *Rachel*, there followed a series of protest or propaganda plays written by black women. The issue of lynching remained a dominant topic in Black drama until the 1930s. This is understandable, given the political climate of America during this period. According to an estimate given by Walter White in his *Rope and Faggot: A Biography of Judge Lynch*, Perkins notes, "as many as 3,589 blacks, including 76 women, were lynched between 1882 and 1927" (Perkins 10). Another historian, John Hope Franklin, writes, "In the very first year of the new century more than 100 Negroes were lynched, and before the outbreak of World War I, the number for the century had soared to more than 1100" (Quoted by Perkins 10). Georgia Douglas Johnson, one of the most prolific and versatile playwrights of the era, wrote several plays focusing on the theme of lynching. Three of her plays titled as *A Sunday Morning in the South* (1925), *Safe* (193?), and *Blue-Eyed Black Boy* (193?) and, Regina Andrews's *Climbing Jacob's Ladder* (1931) center around the theme of lynching.

Black women also dealt with the situation of the Blacks in the army. Alice Dunbar-Nelson and Mary Burrill, both of whom were contemporaries as well as friends of Angelina Grimke and Georgia Douglas Johnson, wrote plays during World War I that questioned the black man's loyalty in wartime to a country that offered him no compensation for his loyalty. Nelson's *Mine Eyes Have Seen* (1918) presents Chris, a young black man debating whether he should serve his country. He reflects on how his father was murdered by whites, and how as a result of his father's death his mother died. Chris is also faced with the problem of leaving his crippled brother and sister if he joined the army. In Burrill's *Aftermath* (1919), John, a young black hero returns from the war to visit his parents only to find that his father has been lynched. John's solution to the problem for the injustices perpetrated against blacks is to take the law into his own hands in order for justice to prevail. In anger he exclaims: "This ain't no

time fu' preachers or prayers! You mean to tell me I mus' let them w'ite devuls send me miles erway to suffer an' be shot up fo' the freedom of people I ain't nevah seen, while they're burning and killin' my folks here at home! To hell with 'em!" (Perkins 11).

Mary Miller's *Strangers in the Dust* (1930) has the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Washington, D. C. as its setting. "This play is worth noting," writes Perkins, "because Miller, unlike many of her contemporaries, used white characters to illustrate racism in this society" ("T" 11). In *Strangers in the Dust*, Nan, a Negro charwoman, is convinced that the body in the tomb is that of her son killed in action during World War I.

The theme of miscegenation was a prominent theme employed by both male and white playwrights as well as Black women playwrights. Historians have generalized that the plays by these playwrights usually depicted the negative impact that "mixing of the races" had on blacks, particularly on women. Mary Smith Livingston has examined the ultimate crime in America—the relationship of a black man and a white woman in the South—in *For Unborn Children* (1926). This play is unusual because, while most plays of this period examine the pairing of the white Southern man and the black woman, Smith's pairing of the black man and white woman may be attributed to the fact that as a woman she is expressing the sentiment that was shared by many black women regarding interracial coupling. Ottie Graham's *Holiday* (1923) and, Zora Neale Hurston's *Color Struck* (1925) deal with the disastrous fate of the tragic mulattos, and Georgia Douglas Johnson's comedy *Blue Blood* (1926) explores the absurdity and sorrows of the "mixing of races."

Unlike the black women playwrights who wrote "race" or "propaganda plays," a large number of black women like Eulalie Spence, Ruth Gaines-Shelton, Marita Bonner and many others wrote "folk plays" dealing with subjects like black heroes and heroines, religious themes, the ills of slavery and such other issues. Kathya Perkins anthologizes the works by

seven of the numerous black women playwrights who were writing prior to the 1950s which include Georgia Douglas Johnson, Grimke, May Miller, Zora Neale Hurston, Mary P. Burrill, Eulalie Spence, Shirly Graham, and Marita Bonner. The anthology reaffirms the fact that the double subjugation of sexism and racism prevented the black women from expressing their voices but they did express their concerns whenever there was an opportunity.

The history of African-American theatre makes it very clear that it was only after the successful production of Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* on Broadway in 1958 that the female voice became acceptable in the field of African-American drama. Only after this milestone production the anthologies started including plays by African-American women playwrights. The success of *A Raisin in the Sun* inspired African-American writers both male and female, to write not only plays but to try their hand at other genres also.

Mari Evans's collection of essays, *Black Women Writers (1950-1980): A Critical Evaluation* (1984) makes a survey of the contribution made by Black women writers to the literary heritage of the Blacks in America. If it is true to say that African-American women writers did not get enough opportunities to make their way in the literary creative field, it would be equally true to say that no critical attention was given to their contribution until recently. In the Preface to *Black Women Writers*, Mari Evans writes: "Historically, very little serious critical attention has been directed toward [Black women writers who]... have provided the matrix for much of what is classic, what is significant, what is nurturing in the field of African-American letters"(xii). But now the situation has substantially changed. In literary criticism about African-American literature, the contribution of female writers has found significant space. The women writers, particularly the playwrights, have made their mark in the history of the struggle for self-definition and cultural nationalism. In the "Introduction" to Mari Evans' book, Stephen Henderson observes that "Black literature has always been implicated in our



freedom struggle" and that "Black women have played a heroic role in the struggle for freedom and equality both here in the United States and abroad.... "(xxiii).

In more recent times, Elizabeth Brown-Gillory in her *Wine in Wilderness* (1990), and *Their Place on the Stage* (1988) has made a significant effort at evaluating the contribution of black women playwrights. While re-evaluating the works of some of the black women playwrights already discussed by Kathya Perkins, Brown-Gillory continues from where Kathya Perkins has left off. *Wine in Wilderness*, an anthology of dramatic works by nine African-American women playwrights with critical comments by the editor, represents seven decades of black female vision, beginning in the 1920s and closing in the 1980s. The anthology which derives its title from the title of a play by Alice Childress, includes the following plays: *The Pot Maker* (1927) by Marita Bonner (1899-1971); *Blue Blood* (1926), *Safe* (c.1929) and, *Blue Eyed Boy* (1930) by Gloria Douglas Johnson(1880-1966); *Hot Stuff* (1927) and *Episode* (1928) by Eulalie Spence (1894-1981); *Riding the Goat* (1929) by May Miller (1899-); *It's Mornin'* (1940) by Shirley Graham (1896-1977); *Florence* (1950) and, *Wine in the Wilderness* (1969) by Alice Childress (1920-); *Sister Son/ji* (1969) by Sonia Sanchez (1934-); *Get Together* (1970) by Sybil Kein (1939-); and, *Mam Phillis* (1985) by Elizabeth Brown-Gillory (1985-).

All these collections and critical attempts reveal that by the time Ntozake Shange came on the scene in the late 1970s, there had already been a sizable body of dramatic works by African-American women playwrights. It is true that some attempts have been made to study the plays of African-American women playwrights but virtually none has written about how significant the contribution of these playwrights has been to the development of African-American drama and theater. After the Harlem Renaissance while several African-American playwrights tried to write plays only a few have been published. As mentioned earlier, owing

to the encouragement provided by *The Crisis* under the editorship of W. E. B. DuBois in the early decades of the present century, *Rachel* (1916) written by Angelina Weld Grimke was published. Since then a number of African-American women playwrights have written plays on various themes concerning their experience in America. Some of the themes have been identified by literary historians such as Kathya Perkins, Darwin T. Turner, Elizabeth Brown-Gillory and others as "lynching, poverty, disenfranchised war heroes, miscegenation, race pride, folk heroes and heroines, family loyalties, church politics, revolution and women's rights"(Brown-Gillory 1988: 19).

Unlike the other playwrights who wrote generally on the situation of the Blacks in America and made women conscious of their responsibilities in their attempt to forge a sense of Black solidarity at a time when divisions were marked among the Blacks, Ntozake Shange is concerned more specifically with women-related questions within the Black community. She feels that solidarity among the Black women will do a better job in the development of Black Nationalism than attempting an ambitious Black solidarity against the whites. She seems to think that the idea of solidarity needs to be addressed from a specific, gender-based perspective for practical reasons. Although she had written, published, and read poetry in bars across the country, she was virtually unknown until the Broadway production of *For Colored Girls*. In 1976 *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf* exploded upon the stage and established Ntozake Shange as a major force in American theatre. There was a gap of about two decades between *A Raisin in the Sun* (1958) and *for colored girls* (1976) which suggests the extent to which black women were kept out of the trade. According to Brown-Gillory, *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow is Enuf*, the second play by a black woman to reach Broadway, "marked the beginning of a new temper in American theatre"(1988: 45). What is more significant is that this "new temper could

appeal to women everywhere every race”(45). *For Colored Girls* topped *A Raisin in the Sun* with its 747 performances and won a host of awards, including the Golden Apple, the Outer Critics’ Circle Award, the Mademoiselle, an Obie and an Audelco, and was nominated for Tony, Grammy, and Emmy. *For Colored Girls* “established its author as a serious, volatile, pained American dramatist, who echoes the sentiments of women everywhere and of every race, who have been raped emotionally and physically, and who perceive themselves as exploited and unappreciated”(Brown-Gillory 1988: 40). Following its Broadway run, *For Colored Girls* toured London in 1977 under the auspices of Samuel French Company and was produced as a movie to PBS in collaboration with WNET and WPBT-TV in 1982. With such a sweeping success it is not surprising that Shange should have raised the consciousness of not only black women but also women of every race and color. In Shange’s own words, “... the cast is enveloping almost 6000 people a week in the words of a young black girl’s growing up, her triumphs and errors, our struggle to become all that is forbidden by our environment, all that is forfeited by our gender, all that we have forgotten”(Quoted by Brown-Gillory 40).

Since the production of *for colored girls*, Shange has gained distinction as an educator, a performer/director, and a writer whose works draw heavily on the frustrations of being a black female in America. The early years of her life were definitely influenced by the playwrights of the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and her career took shape in the context of the Civil Rights Movement and the turbulent events which saw the assassinations of Dr. Martin Luther King and Malcolm X, and the bombing of the Birmingham Sunday school children and the Newark riots. As a black woman, she felt she was doubly oppressed: by whites and by black males. Like Alice Walker later, she directed her weapon against both

these oppressors. The following words from *for colored girls* must have exercised a great appeal to the black women in the audience:

somebody almost walked off wid alla my stuff

... why dont ya find yr own things & leave

this package of me for my destiny... (FCG 99-100)

In fact the above words spoken by the lady in green, as some critics have observed, should have the same appeal to the women of all races and of all age groups.

It is easy to see a close connection between Shange's own life and her choreopoem. Shange was born Paulette Williams, the oldest child of a professional middle class family in Trenton in 1948. Her father was a surgeon and her mother a psychiatric social worker. Her parents encouraged their children's interest in music, literature and art, and Dizzy Gillespie, Miles Davis, Chuck Berry, and W. E. B. DuBois were among the frequent guests at their home. Shange started attending Barnard College at the age of eighteen. After her separation from her husband she attempted suicide several times before focusing her rage against society and its treatment of Black women. While earning a master's degree in American Studies from the University of Southern California, she took her African name, Ntozake, which means "she who comes with her own things," and Shange, which means "she who walks like a lion." Her decision to change her name displays quite distinctly what Gabrielle Griffin calls her "defiant stance" and Claudia Tate calls it "an act of protest against her Western roots"(34).

Shange spent her formative years in St. Louis, had some clashes with her parents about playing with lower-class black children, graduated from Barnard with honors, read widely, especially Russian novels, French (in the original), and Spanish with the aid of dictionaries. In a *New Yorker* interview she mentions Genet, McCullers, Millay, Melville as influences. In an *Essence* interview she credits Margaret Walker, Ralph Ellison, Richard Wright, James

Baldwin, Ann Petry, Jean Toomer, Claude McKay, LeRoi Jones, Owen Dodson, Ted Jones, Senghor, and Césaire with giving her something valuable for her emotional sustenance. In a *Ms.* self-interview, she recalls visits by her parents' friends from Nigeria, Togo, Cuba, Haiti, India, the Philippines, France, and Mexico, and Sunday afternoon variety shows where her mother read from Dunbar, Shakespeare, Countee Cullen, and T. S. Eliot; her father played congas and did magic tricks, and the four children did soft-shoe and played violin, cello, flute, and saxophone. In all these interviews she mentions the childhood impact of black music, specifically rhythm and blues and Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie. Dizzy Gillespie, Chico Hamilton, Sonny Til, and Chuck Berry visited her family. Later she got interested in the music of Cecil Taylor and Albert Ayler. After Barnard she worked in American Studies at the University of Southern California, worked with the Women's Program at Sonoma State College, studied dance with Raymond Sawyer, Ed Mock and Halifu, performed in Halifu Osumare's "The Spirit of Dance" troupe, did poetry readings at San Francisco State College with the shameless Hussy poets. While in the Bay area, she began a series of seven poems, modeled on Judy Graham's *The Common Women*, which were to explore seven different kinds of nameless women who "assume hegemony as dictated by the fullness of their lives." The twenty-three poems of *For Colored Girls* are the result.

for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf explores the sufferings and joys of seven African-American women through a combination of poetry, prose, music, and dance. It opens with the women running in from separate exits, freezing in postures of distress. When one woman tries to call the others there is no response: they are silent, separate and in pain. Shange's choreopoem *for colored girls* began as a series of separate poems, but as it developed Shange came to view, as Carol P. Christ writes, "these twenty-odd poems as a single statement, a choreopoem...."(97).

The play begins with a poem spoken by the lady in brown about the importance of naming and celebrating experience in song and story—both very strong means of self-realization. The opening poem, “dark phrases of womanhood,” first in a series of twenty-one presents the problem—the double subjugation and lost connections and the resultant exploitation—to be solved by the play. The women are, as yet, “half-notes scattered/without rhythm” (*FCG* 86) under the domination of the patriarchal social structure. This separateness continues as some women reject others, parodying one dancing, or refusing to dance, but gradually as the stories unfold, as difference and similarity are established, they begin to dance together until the end when they can enter into a closed tight circle. Here the concept of carnivalization and that of the *mojos* are well connected with the dance of the seven black women dressed in seven colors of the rainbow—an alternative Shange offers the women who have attained the state of spiritual rapture that make them overcome the worldly woes. In addition, they show the audience that women have such capability—what Sandra Richards terms as the “will to divinity”—to rise above the mundane world of social constrictions to occupy the state of natural order.

What is remarkable in *for colored girls* is its presentation of the traumatic moments in the life of black women, which were ignored by black women themselves. In this regard Andrea Rushing points at four scenes which disturbed her. The first was the lady in brown’s “cute” monologue about Toussaint, which Rushing found contrary to Shange’s feminist stance. The second was the lady in blue’s depiction of Harlem. According to Andrea Rushing, this was a lop-sided and narrow view of the city. Commenting upon this scene she says, “I know too much about ghettos... but while calling Harlem ‘six blocks of cruelty/piled up on itself/a tunnel closin’ may reflect Shange’s experience the year she lived there, it leaves out the vibrancy and vitality of the chocolate city and tells only a fraction of Harlem’s intricate

story”(541). The third incident involves the lady in red’s long monologue about Crystal and Beau Willie Brown (the scene most often cited in reviews), about a crazed Vietnam veteran who drops his son and daughter from a fifth-floor tenement window because their mother will not marry him. The fourth disturbing scene for Rushing is the final resolution Shange comes to after her vigorous exposition of black women’s blues. The words, ‘I found god in myself/& i loved her,’ indicate the ladies’ discovery of the divinity in them but the “last line with its present progressive tense (& this is for colored girls who have considered suicide/but *are movin* to the ends of their own rainbows’ [her italics] suggests that the struggle continues well after the dance”(541). But here Shange is trying to forge a sense of unity among the women as a step toward an emotional renewal through the common experience of suffering.

While it is comfortable to draw a conclusion that Shange displays hope and optimism for the women on the stage—and thereby the entire world of women—some critics have found that the final note with which the play concludes is that of despair, and that if there is any hope it is a very distant one. Mary O’Connor, for example, says: “By the end of the play women have sung the song of their body, dancing, poetry and love of women, but the various stories, including Beau Willie’s story where a mad husband drops his two children from the fifth-story window, leave us with no doubt that the inevitable confrontation with despair will continue”(214). O’Connor finds that in the present world under the male domination there is little scope for love to flourish. “Perhaps this is the new ethos of our age—a carnivalesque one in as much as the fact that this love has been forbidden by the male authority and is seen as a premise for changing the world, for turning it upside down”(O’Connor 215).

Thus O’Connor stresses the difficulty of love in the world. At the same time she agrees with critics like Sandra Richards who find that Shange displays “the persistent call for love between women, a love seen as a healing of the wounds created in our patriarchal world.”

There are some other critics who find the ending optimistic. For Sandra Richards the ending of *for colored girls* is on a “defiantly hopeful note”; according to Andrea Rushing, “like the vivid colors of the women’s dresses,” the ending of the play captures “part of *African-American* spirit”(547). Those who find the ending disturbing or pessimistic miss the message of solidarity as a condition for hope concealed in the stage directions before the last words:

All the ladies repeat to themselves softly the lines 'I found god in myself & I loved her.' It soon becomes a song of joy, started by the lady in blue. The ladies sing first to each other, then gradually to the audience. After the song peaks the ladies enter into a closed tight circle. (FCG 105)

I too endorse the positive impact of the play’s ending on the audience. O’Connor’s contention that the world is full of rapists, treacherous loves is valid could be countered by the confidence in the words of the ladies:

lady in brown

my love is too beautiful to have thrown back on my face

lady in purple

my love is too sanctified to have thrown back on my face

lady in blue

my love is too magic to have thrown back on my face

lady in orange

my love is too Saturday nite to have thrown back on my face. (FCG 99)

In spite of one of the play’s messages about the difficulty of love in a male dominated society, the last lines spoken by the lady in brown indicate that there is a hope:

& this is for colored girls who have

considered

suicide/ but movin to the ends of their

own

rainbows. (*FCG* 105)

The play creates a spell on the audience with these words which acts as a refrain. The critical opinions about the ending of the play suggest that the play is too complex for a straightforward message. But the overall impression that the play makes on its readers is that the issues of Black community need to be understood in the light of gender relationship and the specific role of women in fostering a sense of community among the Blacks.

Shange's portrayal of the black male, according to some critics, is sympathetic, but for the critics like Peter Erskine, John Simon and Elizabeth Brown it is the opposite. Some sympathetic critics suggest that even Beau Willie's dropping of his own children from the window of fifth-floor apartment is to be understood in the context of prevailing racism and should not be treated in isolation.

Yet Shange is faulted for her unsympathetic treatment of African-American men, who are depicted as obstacles to the social and spiritual freedom of black women. Critics like Elizabeth Brown and Jean Carey Bond think that *For Colored Girls* presents only a fragmented view of black life. Brown writes, "Shange's vision of black life seems limited, narrow and, and lacunal in that nearly all of the black males in *for colored girls* are depicted as having serious personality defects; most are light years away from being decent human beings"(243). Similarly, Bond also echoes Brown in remarking about Shange's portrayal of black men: "As the chronicle of implied and explicit abuse of Black women by men crescendoes, giving birth to the statement that negative male behaviors subvert colored girls'

pursuit of happiness, the poems' 'truth'—formerly food for gimme-five amusement —now seems distorted and strikingly incomplete”(190).

Most critics, however, view the play as an affirmation of the human will to survive. Toni Cade Bambara says that Shange “celebrates the capacity to master pain and betrayals with wit, sister-sharing, reckless daring, and flight and forgetfulness if necessary. She celebrates most of all women’s loyalties to women”(36,38). Gabrielle Griffin emphasizes this sisterhood idea in the choreopoem and counters the argument that it is about human exploitation: “... *For Colored Girls* is not predominantly concerned with victimization but with finding the young Black woman’s voice and self. Shange writes as a woman for woman trying to find a woman’s voice—and ‘writes the body’ in the manner in which French Feminists talk of it”(34). In an interview with Brenda Lyons, Shange confesses that she is being satirical of black males at times but does not totally look down upon them. She says: “I think on a couple of things I got very pointedly satirical about people... some things... where I can make fun of sexism, misogynists.... It's like creating a world of women that's women-centered, so aberrant male forms really look aberrant”(Lyons 687).

Carol P. Christ makes a similar statement: “A gusty, down-to-earth poet Ntozake Shange gives voice to the ordinary experiences of Black women in frank, simple vivid language, telling the colored girl’s story in her own speech patterns”(Christ 97). She adds:

Those who hear or read her choreopoem *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf* may feel overwhelmed by so much reality, so much pain, so much resiliency, so much life force.... Shange's poem also reflects the double strength Black women have had to muster to survive in a world where neither being Black nor being a woman is valued. (97)

Even Elizabeth Brown who criticizes Shange's choreopoem for presenting a narrow view of black life also praises it for its powerful and universal appeal. "Even though the work presents a fragmented view of black life," she writes, "its poetry is poignant and it appeals to women who have experienced more pain than joy at the hands of men. Shange consoles these women by showing them that they are not alone in their suffering"(243).

The title of the choreopoem provokes several questions. Why did Shange use the outdated term "colored" which Black people had abandoned in the 1960s as objectionable? How is the rainbow enough? And, what does a rainbow have to do with suicide? The two words in the play's title, "colored" and "suicide" are significant. Shange has said that she used "colored" for the play's title because "it was a word my grandmother would understand." "To reclaim the name 'colored girl,' " writes Carol Christ, "was to reclaim her relationship to her grandmother, a part of her story. The juxtaposition of 'colored girl' 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 color to be borne in shame"(99). In her interviews she has also talked about her suicide attempts briefly. It is common knowledge that the suicide rate among black women, especially poor, is very high but the focus has usually been on black men. That is perhaps the reason why Shange introduces the theme of suicide in the title of the play. Rushing refers to the research done by Ronald W. Maris, sociology professor at the University of South Carolina, on this subject of suicide and quotes his contention that the cause of suicide is the "negative self-image, low self-esteem, and feelings of isolation and rejection"(Quoted in Rushing 543). Professor Maris also says that hopelessness and isolation resulting from failed social relationships often lead to suicide, and that "it is not just being alone that causes one to be suicidal, rather it is process of how one came to be alone"(543). James Comer, a psychiatrist at Yale, stresses the socio-cultural factors and says, "The caring, protective systems

which black people once found in the church and in the extended family are not now so available to us,” and the “decline of the black church” has had a devastating “psychic effect” on black women who once found “a sense of belonging and importance” there. Further he says,

The church had a built-in defense mechanism for black people. When you don’t relate any longer to a protecting system like that, you are thrown out in the larger system, which is a rejecting system. You are thrown into a competitive game whose rules say that you must “make it” to be an adequate person. But in the black church you didn’t have to “make it,” because you had an intrinsic worth and value in that system.

(Quoted by Rushing 544)

Rushing comments that the kind of women Shange wrote about and the play’s splendid isolation from the power poles of black culture, the extended family and the black church, were two things Shange was alienated from. Shange was geographically rootless because as an Army officer, her father moved (and moved his family) often; she felt alienated from other black people because her family disapproved of her lower-class playmates and, therefore, it is difficult to say that hers was an extended family; and, none of her interviews discuss her childhood religious training, but the kind of family she comes from is hard to be found in the kind of black church Comer refers to. This kind of alienation, which Shange deals with, is the result of the breakdown of a stable social order and religious system. In the face of such a breakdown one feels the urge to commit suicide. This urge is most acute among the Black women, who more than men, have to bear the brunt of broken community and loss of religious values.

The play also offers a critique of the black family, which had come under severe criticism during the 1960s. The women in *For Colored Girls* are mostly single. Only Crystal

has children. This fact of being single further alienates them from the community. According to Rushing,

They are as isolated and alienated as the typical, middle-class, single white women in contemporary urban America,... [the play] is full of 'local color' in its use of black urban talk, black popular music like 'Dancing in the Streets' and 'Stay,' renditions of black dances like 'the Pony,' but *the* problem it focuses on (mistreatment by an immature, insensitive man and managing the ensuing distress alone) are 'universal' enough for white audiences. (545)

Another important observation Rushing makes is that the play presents mostly middle-class urban women who have been alienated from the ordinary lower-class masses of rural black women: "*For Colored Girls* has no knowledge of that 'old-time religion' that was good enough for mother... [and] is ignorant of black women on the mourner's bench praying struggling souls 'through' serving on stewardess boards, superintending Sunday schools, frying chicken by the crate to pay off church mortgages. Its ladies... with their exquisitely articulated anguish... are cut off from the tradition of faith which sustained a slave people through fire and brimstone and a half-free people through Reconstruction, lynching, legal segregation, second-class citizenship, and all the other travails of our stay in this Babylon" (Rushing 545).

Rushing's observations need some rethinking. I think Rushing has misinterpreted Shange's intentions in the play. A careful reading of the play will reveal that the problems Shange is concerned with are typical problems which all Black women face and one can even say that in her treatment of the theme of alienation she addresses a universal problem.

But later in her essay Rushing says that Shange's distinction between alienated urban blacks and the average Blacks is not so sharp as in Ed Bullins' plays. Unlike Bullins, Shange does not treat them with satire and irony. "Looking at the play very closely," writes Rushing,

“one finds that Shange’s focus is on black women’s shared pain, so she blurs the economic differences between those women who cry the blues over a beer at a neighbor’s tenement kitchen table and those women who can afford to soak their man-sorrow while sipping rum punch on a vacation beach”(546). Carolyn Mitchell also says that the crucial question in *for colored girls* is “how to find and maintain hope in the face of despair”(230). Further, “Shange uses the physically and morally desolate cityscape as a backdrop before which to reveal her spiritual vision of female strength and survival”(Mitchell 230). Contrary to what Rushing says about the ignorance of ‘the old religion’ in the play, Mitchell says, “The women depicted by Shange become physically and spiritually whole, thus free, through the psychic/psychological healing power that resides in the ancient, fundamentally religious act called “the laying on of hands”(230). Here Mitchell seems to be correct in her assessment of the nature of alienation of the Black women in Shange’s text. Shange’s alienated women represent all classes of society.

Although she has included male characters in plays like *Spell # 7, A Photograph: Lovers in Motion* and *boogie woogie landscapes*, they are portrayed as agents of oppression. Shange suggests that the major cause of the alienation of Black women is the breakdown of the traditional Black community as a result of urbanization. The urban ethos tends to be pro-white and anti-Black. The other possible reason is the disintegration of the Black church, once considered as the powerful agency for the Black communal harmony. Like the earlier exponents of black cultural nationalism of the 1960s, Shange concentrates in her plays upon these two powerful centers of authority, which have over time lost their appeal. However, in the treatment of these two institutions between the Black nationalists of the sixties and Shange there is a difference. I endorse Rushing’s view that Shange in this play “does not attack the black family and the black church frontally “but the solutions Shange offers the ladies of the

rainbow indicate her evaluation of these institutions. While some of African-Americans experimented with communalism, polygamy, Hinduism, the Nation of Islam, and cults modeled on traditional African religion, Shange worked out other solutions”(549) like alternative family structures based on sisterhood and rainbow coalition of like-minded peer groups. Rushing says,

Unlike African kinship systems based on extended family ties... Shange devises an alternative family based on shared coming-of-age rites, sufferings, and peer relationships, which, like a strong age group or family, is impervious to outside attacks. In place of the psychosocial “cement” of the black church or hoo-doo Shange has substituted the rainbow. (549)

The rainbow metaphor here suggests proximity to nature. This “rainbow coalition,” according to Shange, will provide a defense mechanism against external forces of oppression. On seeing a huge rainbow, while returning from a class in California, Shange realized that “women could survive if they decide that they have much right and as much purpose for being here as air and mountains do.... We form the same stuff here that sunlight does, we are the same as the sky, we are here breathing, living creatures and we have a right to everything”(“I” *FCG* 85).

Rushing’s comments on the ending of the play are appropriate here:

The play’s closing words, “I have found God in myself and loved her fiercely,” chanted by the entire cast, affirm women’s solidarity, healthy acceptance of one’s blackness and sense of the ultimate sacredness of one’s soul and its ties to all living things. (549)

Shange has also been accused of ignoring the role of the white people in the persecution of the Blacks. Rushing thinks that the play is shockingly *ahistorical* (my emphasis) “both in ignoring white responsibility for our pain (which is another reason white

critics and audiences can praise it) and ignoring black response to white oppression”(546). She further adds:

Despite Shange’s education in American Studies (or because of it), the play makes no reference to past or present tensions between black and white Americans. It shows no knowledge of the Kerner Commission report about two separate and unequal nations existing in the United States; about working for “Miss Ann”; about white man’s “prerogative” to take black women; about the myth of white women’s purity constructed on the debased valuation of black women; or about difference between what white men and women annually earn and what black men and black women earn and what (if any *possible* thing) that has to do with the tenderness and the rage that compose black love. (546-7)

The other accusation is that Shange in her treatment of Black women does not show any regard to the direction of Afro-American history, which has produced such heroic persons as Sojourner Truth, Fanny Lou Hamer, Harriet Tubman, Mary Bethune, or Rosa Parks. Also, she is accused of completely ignoring the social achievements of the revolution of the 1960s. This is, however, a lop-sided view of the play because it does not take into consideration the play in its entirety. For Shange all black women are strong and possess powers of divination and capacity to establish closeness with the cosmic forces which can thwart the oppressive worldly forces including the white power structure.

It would be far from truth to say that Shange disregards history and the role of whites in black women’s oppression. In *Spell # 7*, for example, she very effectively brings in the disparaging effects of minstrelsy on the lives of blacks. Subtitled as “quik magic trance manual for technologically stressed third world people,” *Spell # 7* was originally produced in 1979 by Joseph Papp’s New York Shakespeare Festival in New York City. It is set in a bar and centers

around nine characters that are friends: Lou, Dahlia, Alec, Eli, Bettina, Lily, Natalie, Ross, and Maxine. The characters express their despair at being oppressed in numerous ways by a racist society. In this play, Shange tackles the iconography of “the nigger.” Underneath a huge blackface minstrel mask, a master of ceremonies promises to perform a different kind of magic designed to reveal aspects of black life authentically. The minstrel performers move through the pain of dance steps and memories associated with Black entertainment of white America on to the release of more private, improvisational party styles. In doing so, they banish the hideous mask along with their stage personae, thereby creating a safe space in which to expose secret hopes, fears, or dreams. According to Sandra Richards, “Shange’s text [*Spell # 7*] functions like an *odu*, or book, on the construction of black identities within an exorcised space, freed of the dominant culture’s stereotypes” (“Trickster” 70). The characters present a series of narratives that best speak to his or her need. Some of them act quite contrary to traditional stereotypes. For example, Fay, a Brooklyn housewife, who contrary to the traditional role assigned to loose women, is not a prostitute but is looking for fun night out of the town. Alec and Lily present their narratives—the former demanding a day of national apology for the wrongs done to blacks and the latter expressing a suppressed desire of being in possession of uncommon riches—making them free from the traditional images.

Moreover, Shange portrays Black women’s anguish at the wrongs done to them. According to Richards, the two confessions—that of Sue-Jean and Maxine—coming at the end of each act “puncture the whimsical or contained quality of the most of the fantasies to reveal an almost overwhelming anguish” (“Impulses” 74). The first involves a young woman who gives birth to a boy named Myself. Sue-Jean is ordinary, a “colored girl with no claims to anything/or any one” (*Spell 28*). Shange shows her double subjugation: as a black person, she is “defined by her poverty and low status” ; and as a woman “by her availability as a sexual

object" (Richards 74). But by choosing pregnancy, Sue-Jean proves her creativity. Although she pursues the traditional female modes of self-expression in planting a garden, canning, baking, knitting and mothering, she craves to prove her independence. When the male *Myself* as the embodiment of Sue-Jean's own self grows up into somebody who defies her expectations, she kills the child and drinks his blood. She then returns to a state of feigned pregnancy and under the joyous feeling of being pregnant she forgets "abt the child bein born/& was heavy & full all her life/with 'myself'"(*Spell* 32).

Through her portrayal of the character of Sue-Jean, Shange depicts Black women as embodiment of the community capable of committing the ultimate acts of self-assertion. In killing her child *Myself*, for example, Sue-Jean "makes actual the suicide which many women symbolically experience in sublimating their own identities to those of their own children" and in committing a murder generally thought to be contrary to all laws of nature, "she courageously asserts her independence"(Richards 75). Although Sue-Jean's cruel act asserts her independence, it leads her nowhere. Through Sue-Jean's character, I think Shange wants to imply that Black women are ready to kill their own kin or to commit suicide if such acts may liberate them; the act should be understood metaphorically only. Sandra Richards rightly observes that the character of Sue-Jean "works primarily on the level of metaphor," and "one senses that it is not so much a reflection of an actual event as a fantastic projection of barely understood, self-destructive urges"(75). What is significant about the play is its capacity to disturb in its portrayal of the characters like Sue-Jean who sit on the edge of perversity and Maxine with her instinctive knowledge of the power lying in the ancestral religious rituals.

Maxine is another Shange character whose actions in the final segment of *Spell* #7 seem like a contrary, pathetically ludicrous response to the socio-metaphysical ills she would cure. As a young girl she lived in a house where "... trees that grew into my room had to be

cut back once a year/this was when the birds sometimes flew thru the halls of the house as if the ceiling were sky & i/simply another winged creature. Yet no one around me noticed...." (*Spell* 49-50). Thus she lived in the proximity of nature and enjoyed freedom. When she becomes a young woman, however, her grandmother closes up the windows, and, with her mother's consent, she sends her out into the world to be among "trouble" but not to get into "trouble." Maxine learns that "contrary to her cherished childhood beliefs, Black people are not immune to diseases and perversions manifested by whites"(Richards 75).

Although in *Spell* # 7 Shange gives vent to the repeated theme of racial oppression of blacks, she also suggests a way out. She points out the Black's immense capacity to offer love and thereby suggests the possibility of establishing healthy relationships. As Elizabeth Brown says, "... *Spell* # 7 deals with the image of the black woman as a neutered workhorse, who is unwanted, unloved and unattended by anyone... [but it also] handles the theme of blacks learning to accept and to love themselves and each other"(247). This could be accomplished by appealing to the black women emotionally, as Richards says that black women could be encouraged to love one another by bringing them under a soothing spell. Through the portrayal of a magician named Lou who casts a spell on the group and makes them realize the beauty and value of their color, Shange attempts to get an emotional response from the women in the audience. Thus the role of the playwright is to cast such a spell on the women in the auditorium and to try to use the cementing techniques of the theatre. Like *For Colored Girls*, this play is also about women-bonding. But unlike the earlier play where bonding takes place through shared suffering and natural instinct for spontaneous living, this play celebrates female union through the commonality of skin color. The magic spell of their union comes out of their pigmentation.

A Photograph: Lovers in Motion, produced in November 1979 at Houston's Equinox Theater, is a revised version of *A Photograph: Still Life With Shadows/A Photograph: A Study of Cruelty* produced at the Public Theater in 1977. In this piece, Shange explores "the notion that a person's identity is not defined by things but by a belief in self" (Brown-Gillory 44). The central character is Sean David, a struggling novice photographer who is involved with a complex triad of women: Nevada, an attorney who wishes to take Sean out of the ghetto and to provide him with material comfort; Claire, a model, a cocaine addict and a nympho-maniac who wants to possess Sean; and Michael whom Sean chooses in the end, a dancer who wants to help Sean fulfill his dreams. There is another character, Earl, also an attorney and a homosexual who has designs on Sean. In *A Photograph: Lovers in Motion* Shange follows more or less the traditional conventions of the theater. At this stage in her career, she is perhaps preparing herself to establish her voice by adopting the conventional mode of Western theater but her irresistible spirit to break away from whatever enslaved the black women is easily seen even in this theater piece. Elizabeth Brown-Gillory observes that *A Photograph: Lovers in Motion* is "a drama that comes closest to play form in that there is a logical progression of action and dialogue..." (97), but it also "reveals a unique brand of theater in which many heritages come together, functioning side by side, to produce theater that is engaging, provocative and diverse"(81).

Thematically, *A Photograph: Lovers in Motion* is a drama about human behavior and the importance of the role of a woman in the life of someone she loves in spite of the latter's maltreatment to her. The play deals with the Black woman's excessive desire to be loved which makes her vulnerable. Through the play Shange wants to caution Black women against such desires which may eventually be self-destructive. The play is innovative in its use of techniques. Here the poet and the playwright, as Brown-Gillory suggests, merge the traditional

dramatic structure with identifiable African American self-expression" (Brown-Gillory 100). According to Sandra Richards, Shange draws upon Bertolt Brecht's epic theater and Antonin Artaud's Theater of Cruelty and the plays of Amiri Baraka to produce a composite theatre. To quote Richards,

Chief among the German dramatist's tenets is the view that theatre must be an analytical forum which exposes bourgeois illusions and stimulates audiences to think objectively about the causes of social and personal ills. By constructing most of her plays as a series of poetic monologues, occasionally interrupted by conventional dialogue, she takes advantage of the telegraphic, elusive quality of poetry to encourage audiences to listen with close, critical attention; the resultant episodic structure diminishes the audiences' empathetic tendencies by denying them the opportunity to gain a more rounded sense of character. (75)

Additionally, Richards argues further that the "women's contrariness can function like Brecht's *Verfremdung* effect as an alienation device which keeps observers at a more objective, thinking distance from the characters"(75). This is a perceptive comment and implies that Shange employs complex perspectives in her treatment of women characters in order to distance them, like Brecht did, from the audience so that they approach the characters objectively and not through subjective identification. Antonin Artaud's "theatre of cruelty" and Baraka's 1964 essay "The Revolutionary Theatre" which draws upon Artaud's *The Theatre and its Double* are other influences on Shange. "In this tradition," Richards observes, "theatre is a locus for emotionally charged, eruptive forces which assault social complacency to expose victims who, nevertheless, contain within themselves seeds of their own regeneration"(76). If Brecht's "alienation device" was meant to clarify the message of the theatre to the audience, Artaud's theatre was designed for arousing the emotional response of the audience for a regenerative

purpose. In this way, Shange combines the two theatre conventions for serving her purpose in arousing the consciousness of the Blacks.

Richards' final contention is that "while Shange's mode of playwriting shares similarities with Artaud's and Baraka's theoretical writings... her style is actually rooted in an even older philosophical tradition, that of the African world view"(76). This world view is derived from the ancient African culture in which, as Richards says,

music and dance, strong in their power to convey layers of sensate information lying beyond or outside linguistic or cerebral dimension of the brain [t]hey function as *mojos*... [or] spirit-forces which have the power to amplify, contradict, or reaffirm the spoken word. As structures, they act as channels for enlightenment, setting the conditions whereby the individual penetrates to essence. In Shange's drawing upon this Black Aesthetic lies the will to divinity, an impulse which her characters experience as an opposition to combat breath. (76)

One of the most outstanding features of Shange's dramaturgy to date is a "dialectic between the felt constrictions of the social order and the perceived limitlessness of the natural order"(Richards 73). In her essay, "Conflicting Impulses in the Plays of Ntozake Shange," Richards tries to analyze one aspect of this dialectic, "combat breath," a term Shange borrows from Frantz Fanon for the African-American fighting spirit which enables the Blacks to fight against the social constrictions. In this conflict between "combat breath" and the "will to divinity" lies the real power of Shange's heroic characters. "The diametric opposite of Shange's combat breath," says Richards, "is the will to divinity whereby individual protagonists seek to transcend corporal existence in order to merge with natural, cosmic forces. These characters completely forsake the troubled realm of social relations to gain entry into the more pleasurable world of private, spiritual communication" (74). While the ladies in for colored

girls convey the message of solidarity to fight the oppressive forces, those in *Spell # 7* emphasizes the strength that lies in “fighting back” with their “contrariness” and assertive power.

Shange’s stage tactics—the use of a huge minstrel mask and the effect of time at a stand-still in the beginning of her play, *Spell # 7*,—a very effectively help her take the audience deep into the past and make them experience what blacks suffered, both physically and emotionally, during the period when the minstrelsy was extremely popular. These tactics not only help her in stunning the audience but also serves as an aid in creating a strong feeling of association among the black people in the audience. Sandra Richards remarks,

To a certain extent, Shange like her fictional magician, performs a sleight of hand which theoretically allows the drama to end on a positive note, provided the communion between actors and audiences, brought into being by the refrain, becomes a sufficiently strong countervailing force against all the negativity represented by the minstrel mask. (“Impulses” 75)

If one takes a close look at the dramatic works of Shange, one will find that her work centers on the difficult moment of discovering the painful realities of black life, not just those of the life of black women only. “The process of becoming,” John Timpane remarks, “is Shange’s subject”(91). Shange is not as much interested in the final consequences as in the process of finding out what it is to be black in the world where blackness has made blacks prey of repression and repulsion. Here she seems to echo the pain suffered by the protagonist of Adrienne Kennedy's *Funnyhouse of a Negro*, a play in which the protagonist, unable to bear the pain of being imprisoned in blackness, finally commits suicide. Shange has come to realize that the only way to brave the racist and male-dominated world is to find strength in the collective expression and share the suffering by mutual love. “Collective expression” may well

be the only outlet for a certain range of feelings, as Shange says in the introduction to *Three Pieces* that

in addition to the obvious stress of racism in poverty/afro-american culture/in attempts to carry on/to move forward/has minimized its 'emotional' vocabulary to the extent that admitting feelings of rage, defeat, frustration is virtually impossible outside collective voice. (xii)

John Timpane also emphasizes this compulsion of movement from the personal to the collective expression in Shange's plays: "again and again Shange's dramas wander through a maze of personal and collective experience"(199). In *Spell # 7, boogie woogie landscapes*, and *colored girls*, further adds Timpane, "there is no one outcome to the process of becoming, no one unifying end—but there is the process itself, in which all are engaged"(199). The same theme is present in her recent one-act play, *Daddy Says* (1989). In this play Shange shows her concerns for the difficulties in the process of adolescent girls becoming "women" in the absence of their mother.

In her essay "Subject, Voice, and Women in Some Contemporary Black American Women's Writing," Mary O'Connor establishes a connection between Mikhail Bakhtin's linguistic theories and Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s concept of "two-toned discourse" in his theory of "Signifyin (g)." O'Connor lays down the theoretical context to examine the works of the Black American women writers—Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place*, and Ntozake Shange's *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf*—on the basis of Bakhtin's theories of dialogic imagination and carnivalization.

Mary O'Connor argues, "The works of many contemporary Black women writers force women readers to turn to the bourgeois illusion that art can be a place of truth, some metaphysical space of vision and retreat" and that "[t]his feeling of solidarity eases the pain, offering some compensatory world of connectedness"(200). The emergence of Women's Liberation Movement in the 1970s could be taken as a consequence of the consciousness that contemporary women's writing raised among the heretofore-silent world of women. The crumbling down of the British Empire after the World War II that allowed the shaping of the new awakening among the people of the colonized countries coincided with the emergence of the Black nationalism during the 1960s and the Women's Lib in the 1970s. Black women writers in America also flourished around the same period and produced works that pulled the black women readers into solidarity by establishing lost connections. Most of the African-American women writers, just like their male counterparts, stressed the cultural identity as a basis for unity. The feminist literary theory explicates the function of these writers who always concentrate on constructing a new identity and subvert the myths of "wholeness" of male in order to achieve freedom from the male domination. O'Connor adds further,

Freedom in this poststructuralist world must come from analyzing and subverting all constructed identities, especially those, which place us in an exploited position. Women must still deconstruct the patriarchal image of ourselves as silent, submissive, and an object of pleasure or possession, but problems arise when we start to construct our own identity. (200)

Shange has always kept herself engaged in producing works which defy easy categorization. Her works primarily address women and aim at raising consciousness about the need to unite to assert them in a world where they have been exploited so far. Her voice is authentically

rooted in her personal experience as a black woman and shares the commonality of the experience of other women. As Deborah R. Geis comments,

Shange has created a poetic voice that is uniquely her own—a voice which is deeply rooted in her experience of being female and black, but also one which, again, refuses and transcends categorization. Her works articulate the connection between the ‘doubly marginalized’ social position of the black woman and the need to invent and appropriate a language with which to articulate a self. (210)

In the early 1980s, Shange began to concentrate on writing novels and poetry. Her collections of poems, like her theatre pieces, are noted for their innovative language, including the use of nonstandard spellings and punctuation. Some reviewers have argued that these innovations in such works as *Nappy Edges*, *A Daughter's Geography*, and *From Okra to Greens: Poems* present unnecessary obstacles to readers. Like most of the Black Arts Movement writers Shange also believes in practicing what she preaches. Her resentment against the linguistic hegemony of the English language is obvious in her use of language and technical innovations. In the introduction to *Three pieces* she writes:

I cant count the number of times I have viscerally wanted to attack deform n mime the language I was taught to hate myself in/the language that perpetuates the notions that cause pain to every blaack child as he/she learns to speak of the world & the self. (xii)

Therefore she breaks away from conventions of Standard English and uses punctuation marks in her own way—slashes in place of periods, no capital letters and the like. She uses the words as she hears them following the music inherent in them.

In her novels too, which are full of lyrical chunks, Shange continues to express the same ideas as those expressed in her plays. She focuses on the images that have been

trivialized because they were associated with women and fills them with tremendous significance that leave behind the hegemony of male images. This inversion of traditionally held binary opposition of man-woman hierarchy enables her and her female readers to view the world afresh in terms of Jacques Derrida's "deconstruction" of traditional structures. This has been exemplified in *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo*. As Jean Strandness observes:

Ntozake Shange, drawing from the personal realm of women's everyday experience and from the ancient or folk traditions of women's spirituality, incorporates a number of these "trivial" images, activities and modes of expression—dolls, flowers, stones, feathers, apples, the moon, trees, the ocean, menstruation, dreams, spells, recipes, rituals for trance journeys, letters, journals, weaving, dancing, psychic healing—to depict the individual and the archetypal personalities of three sisters—Sassafrass, a weaver; Cypress, a dancer; and Indigo, a healer—and to evoke their world. (11)

In *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo*, it is all a women's world that overpowers its male counterparts. Hilda Effania gives her daughters the names of trees, which are used in dying cloth and also have healing powers: Sassafrass, a small American tree used in medicine; Cypress, an evergreen tree with dark leaves; and, Indigo, a plant out of which blue dye is extracted. Besides being a link between the androgynous god Legba in the Yoruba mythology and the Signifying Monkey in the urban ghetto in America these three daughters connect the visible, tangible world with the invisible world. Initially these women, in spite of their profuse love for their lovers, are abused and treated cruelly but finally they realize this and free themselves from their physical and emotional exploitation. Sassafrass, away from her mother, falls in love with a musician, Mitch, who initially encourages her to write poems and to weave but later undervalues her talents. When she discovers that Mitch was a drug-addict she is shocked and when his cruelty crosses limits, her anger explodes. In her fury, she leaves Mitch

and goes to live with her sister, Cypress, where she feels free to read and write. Cypress and Indigo, too, are powerful women, quite contrary to the women of nineteenth and twentieth century literature. While Cypress wielded power over males by allowing them to go near her only at her will, Indigo chose to attain power by working as an apprentice under Aunt Haydee and becoming a midwife learns to give birth and to cure women and children.

In *Betsy Brown* (1985), an explicitly autobiographical account of a young girl, Shange also displays a powerful world of women. Just as what Alice Walker has done in *The Color Purple*, here too Shange presents men only as anonymous shadows. Shange's art of characterization is a bold step towards breaking away from the traditional portrayals of female character—weak, extremely subjugated by horrible husbands, who, as Annis V. Pratt observes, “falls into madness, determines to commit suicide, or lapses into a zombie-like state that precludes further development”(Quoted by Strandness 13). Finally, as Strandness observes, “Shange, by reclaiming the old and developing new metaphors for women's experience, creates female characters who differ significantly from previous female protagonists in nineteenth and twentieth century literature”(11). This is true largely of all of Shange's characters—both in her novels as well as in her plays.

Shange's women are different from the images which men have molded of them traditionally. TDB, the father of two girls in the play *Daddy Says* (1989) says, “That's what gals is s'poses to do/have babies & keep a good house”(DS 244). Shange creates the image of a “new woman” by presenting the two daughters of TDB (Tie-down Brown) who disobey their father and have sex with their boyfriends. Shange harshly lashes at the hypocritical constrictions of patriarchy by portraying the Daddy in the play *Daddy Says* as an unsympathetic and domineering male. Shange makes fun of the father when his daughters just evades his threat.

TDB: But dont'tchu think I need to tear the hides off them gals? /look at what they
done/ disobey/ act a fool/ act a tramp/ disgracin' my name/ oh Jesus/ I gotta mind to go
up there right now & beat the living daylights out them wenches/ (DS 249)

The mothers are created as protective forces for the young daughters. The protective presence of Twanda, the dead wife of TDB is haunting the minds of the two daughters as much as the house. At the close of the play, ANIE-SHASON expresses her firm resolution to emulate her mother.

ANIE-SHARON: I'm gonna be jus' like you/ Mama/ I wanna do it so/be like you/ but
I get scared Mama/... / jus' you wait and see/ I can ride the hell out some horses/& I'm
learning to kiss/ no matter what all Daddy say. (Lights.)

(DS 251)

To sum up, Ntozake Shange, who is reluctant to associate herself with the Black nationalists of the early sixties, is one of the strong exponents of the movement that, after the flurry of the plays by playwrights like Amiri Baraka and Ed Bullins, seemed to have lost initial explosive vigor. Though Shange dissociated herself from the black nationalism of the 60's because of its sexism, she is (like all of us who came of age then) very much its heir. She wears geles, and noserings and,... Shange changed her name from Paulette Williams because she didn't want a feminized masculine first name...." (Rushing 548).

Apparently Shange seems to be a strong feminist writer, but her plays (like her poetry as well as fiction) are expressions of a strong yearning for a survival through solidarity established by mutual love. She joins the Black Arts Movement writers in offering harsh critiques of the forces—like the black church and the black family—that counter social change. She echoes the same concerns as expressed by her predecessors but invigorates her women

with a new energy to fight against the constricting social, political, economic forces. Unlike some of the playwrights of the Black Arts Movement who advocated violence to counter racism, Shange stresses the internal strength which she terms as "combat breath" of her women and advocates that they should exercise this inner strength in their fight against the oppressive forces. Shange also emphasizes her women's power of "divination" which was recognized in the African Yoruba mythology. The "trickster figure" of the Yoruba mythology is extremely and appropriately applicable to the interpretation of Shange's dramatic works as well as to other black texts.

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Chapter V

August Wilson: The Chronicler of Unsung Songs

August Wilson has been described as a chronicler of Black history through his plays. Each of his plays from his proposed cycle of ten plays is intended to record the history of each decade of the present century. What is important for Wilson is to give an authentic version of black history and he promptly assumes the role of a chronicler in his plays. He begins with *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (1984) with a focus on the 1920s by taking into account an imaginary episode in the life of Ma (Gertrude) Rainey, popularly known as the "mother of blues." His second play, *Fences* (1985) is set in the 1950s. In the next play, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* (1986) he goes back to the second decade of this century and continues to recount the black history with a view to arousing a psychic response from the African Americans which may lead to racial solidarity. Frank Rich remarks,

As the characters hang out in the kitchen and parlor of a boardinghouse... they retrace their long hard roads of migration from the sharecropping South to the industrialized North, and those tales again hum with the spellbinding verbal Pretoria of the blues. Whether a lost young woman is remembering how her mother died laboring in the peach orchards or a bitter man named Herald Loomis is recounting his seven years of illegal bondage to the... [Southern] bounty hunter Joe Turner, Mr. Wilson gives haunting voice to the Souls of the American dispossessed. (C15)

The Piano Lesson (1987), his next play is set in 1936 and examines the confrontation of black heritage with the possibilities of the future. *The Piano Lesson* is followed by *Two Trains Running* (1990), a sixties play which re-examines the choices that the Blacks in America have made in the past and the author tries to persuade the African-American community about the

importance of looking at the past for guidance for the future. Wilson's search for the authentic black history is the subject matter in his *Seven Guitars*, the play at which he is presently engaged.

In all the five plays from his twentieth-century cycle produced so far, Wilson's major concern is how to chronicle the past. According to Kim Pereira, three themes, separation, migration and reunion are at the center of his plays. He sees in the history of the Blacks in America "a pattern of migration and separation, beginning with the great involuntary migration from Africa... thrusting them into a totally alien environment"(Pereira 1). After Emancipation the quest for reunion began. But in a vast country like America reunion with the lost families was impossible, Wilson "elevates this theme to a new, mystical dimension by suggesting that black migration is ultimately a quest for self-authentication and empowerment"(Pereira 3). A close look at his plays will reveal that all these themes are aspects of his central concern which is to go to the past for the guidance for future.

Wilson began his career as a poet but switched on to drama in the 1960s, co-founding with Rob Penny the Black Horizon Theatre, a company that featured activist drama. At the outset, he "envisioned theatre as a means to raise the collective consciousness of Black community about black life in twentieth-century America"(Elkins xi). He focuses in his plays on the effects of racism on the Black community in the United States. Although he writes plays with a view to raising the community's consciousness, what he writes is not *agit-prop* stuff. In an interview with David Savaran, he says, "All art is political. It serves a purpose. All of my plays are political but I do not try to make them didactic or polemical. Theatre doesn't have to be agit-prop"(304). His characters are warriors involving themselves in violence but are not looked down upon by the audience. Unlike their traditional stereotypical counterparts, they are multidimensional and avoid the pat answers of agit-prop theatre.

According to Elkins, Wilson effects “a powerful theatrical experience and trusts his audience to reach political conclusions which develop as a logical extension of his plays’ narrative situations”(“T” xi). Unlike many of his predecessors, Wilson elevates the everyday vernacular speech to the level of poetry and achieves high aesthetic norms in his plays. The language of his plays is rich with hidden meanings and is, therefore, different from the rhetoric of the playwrights of the 1960s and 1970s. At times his virtuosity with the vernacular can lull the audience into laughter. For instance, early in *Fences* Troy Maxson’s friend, Bono, needles the former about his extramarital flirtations with a woman named Alberta: “It’s all right to buy her one drink. What that mean? I bought you one, too. But when you wanna be buying two or three... that’s what you call eyeing her”(Fences 107). It is this skilful handling of the Black vernacular that makes Wilson a great artist. In the introduction to his book, *August Wilson*, Elkins points out this aspect in Wilson:

He accomplishes this difficult task partly through his focus on the poetry of everyday language.... [H]is fine ear for vernacular speech and his ability to infuse the language of ordinary people with the stuff of poetry are an essential, distinguishing factor of his plays. (xi)

In 1990, Wilson won second Pulitzer Prize for *The Piano Lesson* (first he had won in 1987 for *Fences*). He also had the distinction of having two plays running simultaneously on Broadway: *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*, and *Fences*. His primary concern as a playwright is to reconstruct the Black history with emphasis on the use of the vernacular, black music, particularly the blues and the gradual development of the Black consciousness as a result of their confrontation with the white community. Like Bullins he is more concerned with the problems within the Black community than with race relations.

Though apparently concerned with the evil effects of racism on the African-American community, Wilson is more interested in the problems within the community than those outside the community. His plays depict generational conflicts and the familial conflicts, which provide a microcosm of the splits that endanger racial solidarity. But it is the conflict between those who value the African cultural roots and those who want to ignore them that occupies the central position in his plays. Wilson advises the Blacks in America that they “simply look in the mirror and recognize that this is who they are. There is an inner strength that comes with recognizing that this is okay, that there’s nothing wrong with being African”(Moyers 174). Hilary DeVries remarks on this concern: “Indeed, the theme that surges through Wilson’s work is the need for Black Americans to forge anew their identity, an identity that is at once African and American”(49). In order to dramatize this need for forging a new identity, Wilson portrays his characters striving for this identity in contemporary American society dominated by white people who are still the same as they were in the past three centuries. Wilson makes his characters speak the Black vernacular in order to create in them a sense of identification with their past. Samuel Freedman comments on this aspect: “Praised for their vivid characterizations, Wilson’s plays often center upon conflicts between blacks who embrace their African past and those who deny it”(36). Every African-American writer is confronted with this challenge and is always preoccupied with the task of overcoming it but rarely succeeds to his or her satisfaction. Wilson adopts a new approach in his attempt to synthesize these two nearly incompatible elements among the African Americans. He advocates that African Americans must go to past for guidance for the solution of this dilemma. Almost all of his plays deal with this attempt to think over the choices that African Americans have made in the past and to decide about the direction they should take in their struggle in the future. By examining their past history they will get a proper perspective on

their struggle and will be able to place themselves in the authentic context of their historical development. In an interview with David Savaran, Wilson said:

... the history of blacks in America has not been written by blacks. And whites, of course, have a different attitude, a different relationship to the history. Writing our own history has been a very valuable tool, because if we're going to be pointed toward a future, we must know our past. This so basic and simple yet it's a thing that Africans in America disregard.... One of the things I'm trying to say in my writing is that we can never really begin to make a contribution to the society except as Africans. (295-6)

In another interview, Wilson reiterated the same response: "We are Americans. But first of all, we are Africans... and we have a culture that's separate and distinct from the mainstream white American culture. We have different philosophical ideas, different ways of responding to the world, different ideas and attitudes, different values, different ideas about style and linguistics, different aesthetics—even the way we bury our dead is different"(Moyers 172).

Although he had co-founded with Rob Penny the Black Horizon on the Hill in his hometown Pittsburgh in the late 1960s, his first professional breakthrough occurred in 1978 when he was invited to write plays for a black theater founded by Claude Purdy in St. Paul, Minnesota. In this new milieu, removed from his native Pittsburgh, Wilson began to recognize poetic qualities in the language of his hometown. While his first two plays, *Black Bart and the Sacred Hills* and *Jitney* generated little notice, his third, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, was accepted by the National Playwrights Conference in 1982 where it drew the attention of Lloyd Richards, the artistic director of the Yale Repertory Theatre. Richards directed *Ma Rainey* at the Yale Repertory and later took the play to Broadway. Since then, with Richards as mentor and director, all of Wilson's plays have had their first staged readings at the Playwrights

Conference followed by runs at the Yale Repertory Theater and regional theaters before opening on Broadway.

Set in the 1920s, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* is an exploration of the effects of racism and shows how black musicians were prevented from entering the mainstream of American recording industry. It is based on an imaginary episode in the life of the legendary black singer Gertrude (Ma) Rainey, regarded by some artists as the mother of the blues. The action takes place in a recording studio and focuses mainly on four musicians who are waiting for Ma's arrival. As the details of the musicians' lives unfold, the audience becomes aware of the racism that these successful black performers have had to face throughout their careers. The attitudes of Irvin, the group's white manager, and Sturdyvant, the owner of the studio reveal continuing exploitation of Ma and her band-mates. One of the musicians, Levee, vents his frustrations on the others, but the play climaxes when, deeply frustrated at the rejection of his songs by Sturdyvant and his dismissal from his job by Ma, he stabs one of his colleagues, Toledo, to death. This is what Wilson too, as his predecessors like Baraka and Bullins in the long tradition of African-American writing have done, does—admonishing the Blacks against the suicidal acts of killing one's own Black brothers. As Hilary DeVries remarks, "In *Ma Rainey*, the struggle is predicated not only upon friction between the white recording executives and the black musicians but also upon subtle conflicts within the black community"(53). This handling of the subtle communal conflicts is one feature that made the play a success. Another remarkable feature of the play is the brilliant use of the Black vernacular in a lively manner, which elevates the play to new poetic heights. Critics have praised Wilson's vitality of *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, as well as for the authentic, lively dialogue. Yet another remarkable quality of this play is the careful treatment of white characters. As Wilson is more concerned about raising the consciousness of the Blacks in

order to make them aware of the dangers of their communal conflicts, he does not focus on white characters as much as he does on the vivid portrayal of the Blacks. Samuel Freedman's comments in this respect are significant: "The white man in Wilson's plays can be finessed, ignored, intimidated; it is the Almighty against whom his characters rail. After a musician in *Ma Rainey* hears of a white mob forcing a black reverend to dance, he shouts to the rafters, Where the hell was God when all of this was going on ?"(36,40).

As a way of establishing the distinctiveness of Black identity, the black characters in Wilson's play make use of the language of blasphemy to show their disparagement of the genteel language of the whites. While Baraka uses blasphemy openly, combining it with extreme obscenity, Wilson uses it very cleverly as a tactic to insinuate the black people against white bigotry. The use of the vernacular and the so-called language of blasphemy make the Blacks closer to their African religion. For example, the most vibrant character in the play, Levee, expresses the inner most hatred for Christianity:

Levee: God ain't never listened to no nigger's prayers. God take a nigger's prayers and throw them in the garbage... God hate niggers! Hate them with all the fury in his heart. Jesus don't love you, nigger! Jesus hate your black ass! Come talking that shit to me. Talking about burning in hell! God can kiss my ass!
(MRBB 98)

Similarly, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, too, as Savaran says, "performs a ritual of purification, setting African religious tradition against American Christianity... In the course of the play the details of everyday life in a Pittsburgh boardinghouse give way to the patterns of African religion and ritual"(289). Loomis, the man who has come from the South in search of his wife challenges the authority of the Holy Ghost:

LOOMIS: Stop it! Stop!... You all singing up here about the Holy Ghost. What's so holy about the Holy Ghost? You singing and singing. You think the Holy Ghost coming? What he gonna do, huh? He gonna come with tongues of fire to burn up your woolly heads?... Why God got to be so big? How much big is there? How much big do you want? (*LOOMIS starts to unzip his pants.*)
(JTCG 250)

Unlike Baraka who advocates Islam as an antidote to Christianity, Wilson, just like Shange who offers the ancient African world view as a spiritual solution to the corrupt practice of religion, stresses the African religious traditions as an alternative form of worshipping. While the former stuns the religious-minded, the latter exposes their hypocrisy without offending them. Wilson shows his disillusionment with The Nation of Islam, which too had the potential to alienate the African-American community like Christianity. Instead, he offers Aunt Ester, the mystic 322 year old woman who offers answers to everyone who goes to her.

Although Wilson cautions the Blacks against using violence against their own people under provocation from the whites, he is not entirely against the use of violence for self-defense. Such strategies, according to him, are heroic and those who use them are called warriors. According to Freedman,

One part of Wilson understood the futility of violence, the self-destruction, and he summons it in his plays as the ultimate, diabolical triumph of white bigotry: turning blacks against themselves. *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, for instance, ends with Levee stabbing not the white man but the band-mate who accidentally steps on his shoe. *Fences* bring Cory to the brink of attacking Troy with a baseball bat, symbol of the father's manhood. Yet another part of Wilson admired the Hill's criminals. (40)

The verisimilitude one finds in Wilson's plays is the result of the resemblance between his portrayal of people and places and his life experiences. But he makes the portrayal of these people more effective by adding those aspects, which he wants to attribute to black heroes. Troy Maxson of *Fences*, for example, "embodies not only the black stepfather Wilson found in his teens, but something rather more metaphysical" (Freedman 36). The settings in his plays like *Two Trains Running* and *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* are closely related to his hometown, Pittsburgh. His own family lived near the bottom of the Hill's social scale, a fact that he never ignored. The average blacks of the town roughly conformed to its topography. Wilson grew up with a bitter hatred for the affluent blacks up in Sugar Top, the doctors and lawyers who would send their children to Saturday movie downtown with the admonition, "Don't show your color." It is significant to note here that all the playwrights who call themselves nationalists see the black bourgeoisie an alienated section within the community and always seek to satirize them with a view to correcting them. In Wilson's plays, the black middle-class exists only as an object of contempt; if he had written *A Raisin in the Sun*, the Younger family would not have moved to the suburbs, it would have either joined the Blackstone Rangers Street gang or the Nation of Islam. Wilson's characters are almost all kinds of street blacks for whom his longtime friend Rob Penny invented the term "stomp-down bloods."

In his next play, *Fences*, which won the 1987 Pulitzer Prize, Wilson again examines the destructive and far-reaching consequences of racial injustice. In this play also he continues the same concern that he expressed in *Ma Rainey*—the self-destructive acts of the Blacks when they commit violence on one another out of exasperation and anguish. Set in the late 1950s on the eve of the civil rights movement, *Fences* shows how black athletes were prevented from participating in major league baseball. It revolves around Troy Maxson, an outstanding high

school athlete who was ignored by major league baseball because of his color. Struggling through middle age as a garbage man, Troy is bitter and his state of mind results in family conflicts. Wilson wants his people to be aware of such a state of mind, which results from disappointments from racial prejudices. Troy antagonizes his son Cory, who also aspires for an athletic career, and Ruth, his wife who is humiliated by his adultery.

Fences is the most accessible of Wilson's plays, more compact and faster-moving than *Ma Rainey* and less mystical than *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*. It is a family drama in which the dreams of the members are thwarted by the brutal reality of racism, which operates in a subtle way. The central focus of the play is on the conflict between the two generations represented by Troy Maxson, and Corey, his son. Several critics have compared this family drama to Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. The play recalls *Death of a Salesman* in many respects, especially in the close resemblance, between their protagonists. But what makes *Fences* different from *Death of a Salesman* is the way Wilson depicts the conflict resulting in Corey's realization of the circumstances that shaped his father's bitterness in life.

Wilson's dramaturgy gets its effectiveness from a combination of a handful of characters and a very clever use of dialogues. The effective use of dialogue is a more challenging job for a playwright than for a novelist. A playwright has to make use of limited dialogues and yet make them vehicles for what he has to say. Wilson keeps the number of his characters small so that there are no deviations from the central concerns. Freedman observes,

With one set and a half-dozen major roles, a Wilson play can seem talky and static, but if wordiness is a weakness at times, it is also a masterly way of deceiving the audience into amused complacency. By the end of his first acts, Wilson characteristically begins to detonate his dramatic bombshells, and at the final explosion—a murder, a

madman's howl, or a self-inflected stabbing—a shudder ripples through the audience.

(36)

Similarly, in order to intensify this effectiveness of his dialogues, Wilson tries to expand the emotional aspects of the expressions. He writes of the particulars of black life, elevating his anger to a more universal plane.

Wilson situates himself in the long tradition of African-American writing and derives his strength from those writers who have articulated the voices in favor of distinctive black identity. As a thinker, if not as a stylist, Wilson belongs less to the Richard Wright tradition of social protest than to the philosophical tradition of Ralph Ellison. Wilson's characters, like Ellison's *Invisible Man*, confronts blackness not as a function of the pigment but as a condition of the soul. Wilson tries to solve the ontological problem of being black by going back to the African roots of his community. But this "going back" is not a straight road for him. During the process of the emotional retrieval of their African past, his characters are faced with some conflicts of conscience. Freedman remarks that most of Wilson's plays are concerned with the "conflict between those who embrace their African past and those who deny it"(36). Wilson does not, however, suggest that African Americans should not move forward and should always cling to their primitive state. But he also implies that a movement towards the future is always conditioned by a creative absorption of the values of the past. Therefore, one can say that Wilson's concern is both progressive and retrospective. As one of his characters says, "You don't see me running around in no jungle with no bone between my nose"(MRBB 32). Wilson thinks that Africa remains a "pervasive force, a kind of psychic balm for the 20th-century blacks through the blues, communal dances and tall tales"(Freedman 36). Africa remains more a symbolic and psychological presence for the American Blacks than the actual place to return to. Here, Wilson the mythologist coexists with Wilson the social realist.

Freedman comments thus on his characters, "There is a broad historical truth to his characters—to Levec, the jazz musician who naively sells off his compositions to a white record-company executive; to Troy Maxson, whose job prospects go no further than becoming the first truck driver in the Pittsburgh sanitation Department"(36). It is this "historical truth" about the characters that makes *Fences* transcend the provincial boundaries of the USA.

In the next play, *Joe Turner's Has Come and Gone* (1986), Wilson continues with greater insight the concern with "the historical truth" about the legacy of American Blacks. *Joe Turner* is regarded as a more mystical play than Wilson's other plays. It centers upon the struggles of migrants in the post-Civil War north and shows how blacks were reduced to poverty and desperation by the chain-gang system. The play takes place in 1911 in a Pittsburgh boardinghouse owned by Seth and Bertha Holly. Following seven years of illegal bondage, Herald Loomis, a black freedman, travels to Pennsylvania in search of wife who had fled north during his enslavement. The critical issue of white oppression is symbolized in Herald's haunted memories of Turner, the infamous Southern bounty hunter who captured him. His sojourn ends at the Holly boardinghouse, where the black residents are also searching for some kind of connection and wholeness in their lives. Besides the Hollys and Herald Loomis, there are several other characters: Bynum Walker, an eccentric boarder with a penchant for clairvoyance and other forms of old-country voodoo; Jeremy; Molly; and, Martha, Loomis's lost wife who returns at the close of the play. There are two child characters also—Reuben and Zonia—who provide a different perspective to the play, different from that of the adults.

At the play's end, the boarders sing and dance a *juba*, an African celebration of the spirit. The shared joy of the characters in this play represents an achievement of unity, having come to terms with the trauma of slavery and the harsh reality of white persecution. This is

perhaps the most appropriate way by which a Black finds a mode of survival by identifying himself with the creative expressions of his African past. Herald, however, does not join the *juba*. The reason for his not joining is not the lack of desire of participation in the celebration but his over-intoxication in the atmosphere, which made him completely numb. In this respect, Wilson's play is similar to Shange's *For Colored Girls*. Both Wilson and Shange celebrate the African past of the American slaves.

Joe Turner "is the most mystical, most remote and dispersed of all Mr. Wilson's plays... about a people dispossessed by history" (Oliver 107). It is a powerful play as it makes the audience aware of the harrowing effects of slavery. But it does not merely re-create and reclaim history misrepresented by the white slave-masters; it adds the metaphysical dimension to it by investing the history with some forms of magic and spirituality. Each relationship in the play suggests another layer of bondage totally beyond easy recognition in the normal worldly sense. Wilson wants his audience/readers to look for a deeper layer of relationship among his characters and, by extension, among all blacks. This spirituality has been lost during traumatic years of slavery and it could be re-established only in a special milieu, which the playwright provides in the settings, which he creates carefully. For example, he transforms the boardinghouse in one of such settings with the presence of certain persons like Loomis and Bynum. While Bynum as the representative of the old African voodoo rituals evokes spirituality, Loomis's abnormal behavior caused by the trauma of his seven years of slavery deepens the metaphysical dimension. According to Frank Rich, "the metaphysical cat-and-mouse game played by Bynum and Loomis is only the spine of *Joe Turner*" (C115). Paul Carter Harrison too notes this aspect in Wilson's plays:

Metaphysical challenges are frequent among the tricksters of Wilson's plays. Herald Loomis, vigilantly stalking the crossroads, is drawn into the boardinghouse by a

frenzied, improvised, contrapuntal ritual of the Holy ghost, which was generated in the remnants of a ring shout retrieved from African memory and now configured as the Juba dance... While stalking the crossroads for signs of his wife, Martha Pentecost, he becomes a witness to a vision of ancestral bones that walk on water until they are swept under a great wave that washes them ashore, their bodies now covered with flesh.

(313)

While the playwrights of the Black Arts Movement in the 1960s focused upon contemporary black reality and addressed the problems mostly politically, Wilson prefers to go to the deeper roots of the problems and to place the condition of contemporary Blacks in the larger context of their lives distorted spiritually during their traumatic progression through slavery.

Another feature of Wilson's plays is his ingenuity in presenting the theme of spiritual nostalgia, a feature which distinguishes him from his predecessors who mingled art with polemics. Although the Black Arts Movement playwrights also exploited the effect of the poetry of the blues, they could not integrate it into the other concerns of their plays as successfully as Wilson does. For them, the blues were more ornamental than spiritual. For Wilson, they were the life force of the Blacks and the condition for their survival through the years of tribulation. The following excerpt from *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* show what tremendous power the language of the blue had:

Ma Rainey: White folks don't understand about the blues. They hear it come out, but they don't know how it got there. They don't understand that's life's way of talking. You don't sing to feel better. You sing cause that's a way of understanding life.... The blues help you get out of bed in the morning. You get up you ain't alone. There's something else in the world. Something has

been added by that song. This be an empty world without the blues. I take that emptiness and try to fill it up with something. (*MRBB* 82)

One can notice the difference between the dialogue between Clay and Lula in Baraka's *Dutchman* and the one given above. Clay's incendiary tirade was full of anger and hatred against the whites; Ma's words show the sacredness of the blues. There is something lyrical about what Ma says which evokes artistic response. Moreover, the blues provide an authentic tool for documenting black history. Here it is appropriate to recall Ralph Ellison who defines the blues as

an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one's aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism. As a form, the blues is an autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophe expressed lyrically. (*Shadow and Act* 90)

Freedman too praises Wilson's extraordinary method of reclaiming the lost days when he says, "If Wilson's mission is memory, his method is more artistic than archival,"(36). The blues poetry serves two purposes simultaneously: it yields high artistic value to his plays; and kindles black fire in the hearts of the African Americans to equip them to fight counter-revolutionary forces. As Freedman observes, "He [Wilson] is one part Dylan Thomas and one part Malcolm X, a lyric poet fired in the kiln of black nationalism"(36). With the self-developed dramatic techniques Wilson secures the blending of the conventional naturalistic elements with the unconventional world of people whose activities escape the logical grasping that provides his play a special character which is remote from the African American and close to the native African forms of oral expression. Paul Carter Harrison's comments on this aspect are worth quoting:

Memory enshrines experience unless otherwise burdened with an uneasy reconciliation with the middle passage that leads to spiritual vitiation in the process of Anglo-American assimilation. Wilson, as a chronicler of the African-American experience, has responded to the durable ethos of the African continuum, which is the cultural mooring of black expression throughout the diaspora. (292)

Wilson does not envisage the complete assimilation of the Blacks in the Anglo-Saxon American milieu. On the contrary he suggests that as long as the Blacks have vestigial memories of their past, they will continue to be different from others and will share among themselves a sense of community and emotional solidarity. "As the occupants of the Pittsburgh boardinghouse are partly in thrall to a collective African unconscious," says Frank Rich, "so Mr. Wilson's play is a mixture of the well-made naturalistic boardinghouse drama and the mystical, non-Western theater of ritual and metaphor"(C 15).

According to Paul Carter Harrison, "the psychic response to the dislocations shared in American history binds the collective consciousness into an ethos that strives for material and spiritual cohesion. The stories and gestures that codify collective experience are framed ideologically by myths, which serve to preserve the essential metaphors of the cultural worldview"(293).

What is an extraordinary characteristic of a Wilson play is an extremely artistic dramatization of the folk narratives. Wilson wants to reclaim the black history with what we discover in his work an "authentic reclamation of the blues voice—dredged up from the oral and musical traditions of black life—as the vehicle for folk narratives"(Harrison 316). Harrison adds further, "These narratives are profoundly rooted in the mythic sediments of reality in a way that eschews 'folksiness' as a convenient index to folk life. The ironic

significations of the blues, like the testimonial strategies of folk language, allow an encounter with good and evil, negotiated as part of a non-contradictory social universe”(316).

While Wilson dramatizes the folk narratives, he is very careful in emphasizing what is left out in the overt verbal expression. The ironic connotations of the Black vernacular in the form of what Willie Susan has called ‘specifying’ and what Gates has defined as ‘signifying’ which are largely hidden in the narratives are the most important aspects of his dramatic representation. For example, as Frank Rich says, “What is more important about *Joe Turner* is the elliptical connotations of the stories told by the characters. They want to remind the black people in the audience what was the correct version of the black history in America. Wilson forces the audiences to realize the fact that in order to get to the essence of the play’s message, it is essential to grasp what the characters *do not say* (my emphasis)—to decipher the history that is dramatized in images and actions beyond the reach of logical narrative”(C15). This aspect of the play’s “signifying” practice in a medium other than the verbal is one of the many innovations made by Wilson in his dramatic art. In *Joe Turner*, “there are moments when otherwise voluble men reach a complete impasse with language, finding themselves stuck dumb by traumatizing thoughts and memories that they simply “ain’t got words to tell” (Rich C15). Wilson knows this aspect of the vernacular very well and makes the most efficient use of the words that have acquired special connotations as tactics of survival. Not only the words, but sometimes the situations also assume enormous proportions of unforeseen implications over and above their plain meanings. Wilson arranges the scenes also in such a way that one situation intensifies the impact of the other. There are no connecting sequences for the audiences who are by convention used to find naturalistic progression of events. At times, however, whenever it is necessary, Wilson takes recourse to straight naturalism, as in *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*. Rich corroborates this aspect:

... there are times when the play's events also leap wildly off the track of identifiable reality. Late in Act I, [for instance], Herald Loomis becomes so possessed by a fantastic vision—of bones walking across an ocean—that he collapses to the ground in a cyclonic paroxysm of spiritual torment and, to the horror of his fellow boarders, scuttles epileptically across the floor on his back, unable to recover his footing and stand up. (C15)

Thus, Wilson's plays are essentially attempts for a search for a cultural identity that African Americans must pursue just as the characters in his plays are constantly in pursuit of. As Rich observes, "Though on its surface a familiar American tale about new arrivals in the big city searching jobs, lost relatives, adventure and love, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* is most of all about a search for identity into a dark and distant past. That search leads the black characters back across the ocean where so many of their ancestors died in passage to slavery—and it sends Mr. Wilson's own writing in search of its cultural roots"(C15). The central concern of Wilson the dramatist is to search for cultural roots of the American blacks in the debris of their history of slavery, which paradoxically, constitutes the most important event that unifies all the Blacks in their pursuit of self-identity.

The next play in the cycle is *The Piano Lesson* (1987). It deals with the conflict between two members in a family involving the shared experience of slavery and expectations for the future. A piano serves as a major element in this play, which is set in the 1936 in Doaker Charles's Pittsburgh home. Decades earlier, the white master of the Charles family traded Doaker's father and grandmother for the piano, and the grief-stricken grandfather carved African totems of his wife and son in the piano's legs. Later, Doaker's older brother was killed in a successful conspiracy to steal the piano, which now sits in Doaker's living room untouched and revered. Conflicts arise when Boy Willie, the son of the man who stole the

piano, wants to sell it in order to buy the land on which his ancestors were slaves. The conflict is between those African Americans like Berniece who value the heritage as something sacred and those like Boy Willie who wants to cash on that legacy. But the playwright is in favor of the former since, according to him, it is the legacy, which strengthens the racial solidarity. According to Frank Rich, "Whatever happens to the piano... the playwright makes it clear that the music in *The Piano Lesson* is not up for sale. That haunting music belongs to the people who have lived it, and it has once again found miraculous voice in a play that August Wilson has given to the American stage"(C13). Thus the piano is a symbolic capital for the Blacks and cannot be bartered for any reasons. The piano represents the rich musical tradition of the Blacks.

It is obvious that for Wilson music and literature are sacred and must continue to remain as carriers of the Black's life force. Even if one uses art as a vehicle for political message, art should not be understood as a mercantile item in the marketplace. Though Wilson regards the Black Arts Movement playwrights like Baraka and Bullins as important links in the tradition, he thinks that art has a higher responsibility than serving as an instrument for a political agenda. As Samuel Freedman says in this regard, "The highly polemical black theater of the 1960s made the play the vehicle for the message, but Wilson encountered literature before ideology, and he still abides by that order. He is a storyteller, and his story is the African diaspora—not because it suits political agenda but because everything in his life conspired to make it so"(36). Unlike the politically conscious black writers of the 1960s, or, the mass-market creators of television's *Julia* and *The Cosby Show*, Wilson has created fallible humans, not simplistic paragons.

His next play *Two Trains Running* (1990) is centered in Pittsburgh, a place "that has continually intrigued me," says Lloyd Richards (Pettengill 203). By setting all his plays in

Pittsburgh, Wilson is sharing his adventures with the characters in the crossroads of life. *Two Trains Running* is a play where characters outweigh the events. Wilson names them according to their inherent characteristics. Wolf is a looper, a survivor and is very intelligent just as wolves are cunning and intelligent. Risa, the only female character in the play, is a woman of principle and acts in terms of those principles. She is living in a man's world and lives at her own pace because she is strong-willed. West knows how to operate in the world of work. He has found his way to live in a white man's world by adopting the practices of the white man into the black world. Sterling learns to employ principles, values and the value of taking action for what one perceives as right. There is Aunt Ester who has somehow become 322 years old and who is always present but never appears physically in the play. According to Wilson, she "represents the entire 349 years that blacks have been in America... [and] our tradition, our philosophy, our folk wisdom, our hobbies, our culture, whatever you care to call it" (Pettengill 212-3). But of all the characters in the play, according to Richards, "Hambone takes a stand: Give me my due, give me what's promised me. He is perceived to be mad because of his commitment to that principled position" (Pettengill 205). In spite of his madness, Hambone is the core character. From the day he painted Lutz's wall and the latter denied him his wages, he has been roaming the area with a demand:

He gonna give me my ham. He gonna give me my ham. He gonna give me my ham.
(*TTR* 47)

With the portrayal of Hambone, the madman asking for his 'ham' repeatedly, Wilson indicates that the Blacks in America must ask for whatever share they are due. Another character, Memphis, is interested in reclaiming the past. He too, like Hambone is a man of principle. When the city authorities were planning to demolish his restaurant, he says,

That's alright. I got a rule of my own. I ain't taking a penny less than ten thousand dollors. I know how to deal with white folks. Ask Holloway. Down from where we come you learn how to deal with white folks quick. It won't be the first time I bucked heads with white folks about my property. I got some land down in Jackson I'm going back and get one of these days. (*TTR* 60)

In *Two Trains Running* the playwright “summons up the people and circumstances of this world from his own memory, reclaiming stories from the obscurity into which so much of the oral storytelling tradition has passed”(Wilde 73). These elements in the play are intensified by the socially and politically charged atmosphere of the 1960s. The tumultuous events like the assassination of John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King and Malcolm X are still fresh in the air in the sixties and affect the lives of the people who are living then. It is curious, however, that Wilson keeps these major events off-stage. In an interview with Richard Pettengill, he says that he was “more concerned with those people [the average blacks of Pittsburgh] and what they were doing and how they were dealing with them” than those events of the sixties (Pettengill 207).

About the title of the play Wilson says that it “came from a blues song called *Two Trains Running*, and actually that phrase is in several blues songs”(Pettengill 207). In the same interview with Pettengill, he says further,

There were two ideas in the play... that have confronted black America since Emancipation, the ideas of cultural assimilation and cultural separatism. These were, in my mind, the two trains. I wanted to write a play about a character for whom neither of these trains was working. He had to build a new road in order to get to where he's going, because the trains are not going his way. That was the idea when I started out exploring. (208)

The two divergent roads of “cultural nationalism” and “cultural separatism” which are obvious possibilities for average Blacks are, however, unacceptable for Wilson. In this play he searches for a third road which is perhaps a middle path. Besides this central concern, Wilson also deals with the specific nature of men and women and their relationships. “It is the question of self-definition: women define themselves in terms other than the terms men define them in” (Pettengill 211).

Wilson has portrayed characters who, contrary to their traditional images, are principled and responsible. Hambone and Memphis who would not accept nothing less than what they deserve. Levee is another who is full to the brim with dreams and hopes for a future. There is a scene in *Fences* in which Troy, a huge man is seen with a tiny child in his arms. Wilson tries to create an image of a responsible Black man. There is Rose who is replete with humane values. Some of these characters in his plays are modeled after the persons he came into contact with during his days in Pittsburgh. His “fictive families” form bulwarks against the hostile world, the signs of which are marked in the scribbling like “Nigger, go home” on his desk at an overwhelmingly white parochial high school and accusations of cheating when a term paper on Napoleon seemed a “bit too good to have been done by a black boy”. At a very young age, Wilson had to leave school because he could not endure the humiliations poured on him by white students and teachers. This incident serves as a crucial link between his real world and its fictive representation.

But this humiliation and his subsequent frustrations led him to explore the ways through which he could counter his state of self-indignity. Unexpectedly, he discovered in the library such sources of strength through the writings of Arna Bontemps, Ralph Ellison, Richard Wright and Langston Hughes. He remembers especially a sociology text that spoke of “the Negro’s power of hard work” because it was the first time anything ever suggested to him that

a Negro could have any power in America. "I was just beginning to discover racism, and I think I was looking for something," Wilson recalls. "Those books were a comfort. Just the idea black people would write books. I wanted my book up there, too. I used to dream about being part of the Harlem Renaissance" (Quoted by Freedman 40). In 1969 when he was 24, his stepfather, David Bedford, died. The two had not been close for almost a decade, since Wilson quit his high school football team against Bedford's wishes, and the late 1960s was a time when young black men like Wilson often disparaged their fathers as a generation of compromisers. Then Wilson heard a story about Bedford that changed his life. Bedford, it turned out, had been a high school football star in the 1930s and had hoped a sports scholarship would lead to a career in medicine. But no Pittsburgh college would give a black player a grant and Bedford was too poor to pay his own way. To get the money, he decided to rob a store, and during the theft he killed a man. For the 23 years before Bedford met Wilson's mother Bedford had been in prison. By the time he was free, a job in the city Sewer Department beckoned. "I found myself trying to figure out the intent of these lives around me," Wilson says. "Trying to uncover the nobility and the dignity that I might not have seen. I was ignorant of their contributions. Part of the reason I wrote *Fences* was to illuminate that generation, which shielded its children from all the indignities they went through"(Quoted by Freedman 40).

It is important to note that Wilson's life like that of many other young black persons during this period of upheaval and turmoil, was shaped by the events that took place in the United States. "Wilson's personal discoveries," writes Freedman, "coincided with the rise of the black nationalist movement, which was based in large part on venerating the Afro-American past"(40). In some ways, however, Wilson didn't quite fit into the ethos of militant

nationalism. His sympathies, however, are with black nationalism in its cultural manifestation. He confesses of still being “a black nationalist and a cultural nationalist”(Savaran 175).

His development as a writer shared less with black American authors than with black Africans like Chinua Achebe, who was under the influence of white writers while studying abroad. Like Achebe, Wilson was not averse to accepting ideas and techniques from white writers if these suited him. Thus Wilson carved out his path through the 1960s, but went beyond its militant ethos.

Wilson's career is molded by several influences. In an essay, “August Wilson and the Four B's,” Mark William Rocha mentions four distinct influences on him: Bearden, Baraka, Borges and the blues. Rocha says that Wilson talks about these four “not merely as discrete influences, but as constituent elements of an African American cosmology”(4). Baraka taught him the politics of confrontation. Rocha compares the two nationalist playwrights: “The overtly political agenda of Black nationalism is every bit as much at the heart of Wilson's plays as Baraka's...”(6). Wilson also “admired the jazzy rhythms and street sensibility of Baraka's poetry and plays”(Freedman 40, 49). Similarly, the blues form one of the integral elements in Wilson's plays. For example, while the title of *Joe Turner* comes from a W. C. Handy song, the central character of *Ma Rainey* is the legendary Ma Gertrude, ‘Mother of the blues.’ *Fences*, *The Piano Lesson*, and *Two Trains Running* each contain numerous epigrams, allusions, and lyrics drawn from specific blues songs. Bearden, the noted black painter, offered Wilson through his paintings, “a new visual language that created a world populated by conjure women, trains, guitars, players, birds, masked figures, and the rituals of baptisms, funerals, dinners, parades”(Rocha 11). Finally, Jorge Luis Borges, the Argentinian story teller “taught Wilson the ethics of listening” and “Wilson's interest in storytelling is the basis of his strongest bond with Borges”(Rocha 13). According to Freedman, Wilson counts among his

strongest early influences Dylan Thomas “for the theatricality of his verse” and John Berryman for the process of convincing language that the poet called “psychic shorthand” (Freedman 40,49). “Wilson’s plays arguably represent the culmination of political, social, and aesthetic objectives presaged by the Harlem Renaissance in the twenties and the Black Arts Movement of the sixties,” observes Harrison (326). He also combines in his writing the classical elements of dramaturgy and the vernacular style of the ethnically rich African-Americans. “You have to be willing to open yourselves up,” Wilson says of his approach to writing. “It’s like walking down the road. It’s the landscape of the self, and you have to be willing to confront whatever you find there”(Quoted by Freedman 70). “In comparison with the raging polemics of Ed Bullins or Amiri Baraka,” observes Brustein,

Wilson’s indictments are relatively mild. His characters usually sit on the edge of the middle-class, wearing good suits, inhabiting clean homes. Securely shuttered behind realism’s fourth wall, they never come on like menacing street people screaming obscenities or bombarding the audience with such phrases as ‘black power’s gonna get your mama’ which may further explain Wilson’s astounding reception. (28)

Wilson, thus, chooses to expose the false images of the blacks and the forces behind the twisting of the American history in general and of the blacks in particular. He tries to correct both these misconceptions by creating positive images of the Black and by using the blues as tools of documenting black history respectively. He uses different techniques but his motive is more or less the same in almost all of his plays—to reclaim the true history of the Blacks. Unlike his predecessors of the 1960s who attacked the white world mercilessly, Wilson assumed the role of a cultural leader for the community, a role which involved an objective assessment of the Black history which cuts across a range of associations in which both blacks and whites participated.

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