Chapter 1

**INTRODUCTION**

*Mama, you have a world in your eye*

*Walker*

The Black woman caught at the interstices of race, sex and class, is a virtual absence in the theatre. She is ‘Other’s other’, a denominator thrice removed to the periphery of the mute and invisible. To will herself into ‘being’, she has had to journey physically, emotionally and spiritually from slavery to self-hood. The Black woman playwright, engaged in the challenge of constructing an identity for the Black woman, has had to revision the way she has been defined and described. The greatest challenge therefore, for the Black woman playwright has been to re-define the sites of representation, subvert the gaze that perpetuates the myth that identity is destiny. This act of subversion points to an innate feminist potential that strives to locate the Black female presence in the theatre.

The aim of this project is to investigate and determine the strategies used by Black women playwrights to subvert the gaze and deconstruct the frames of representation in the theatre that perpetuate the mythology of a patriarchal hegemony. It also analyses the feminist gestures they make in the theatre, creating a dramaturgy that is inherently Black and female, and one that presents the Black woman’s world view.
The objective of this research is to prove that the five Black women playwrights chosen for the study - Bonner, Childress, Hansberry, Kennedy and Shange, have contributed significantly in creating a distinct Black woman’s dramaturgy. In subverting the gaze, they have evolved new expressive gestures that resist the dictates of Western dramaturgy. Despite their different personal and political experiences, beliefs and expressions and the variables of time, place and material conditions, they have manifested common approaches to the simultaneity of their oppression.

Writing in the gaps of history and experience, these Black women playwrights redefine through transformation the reality of being Black and female. Thus Black women’s dramaturgy exhibits “a generational continuity”, which preserves both cultural traditions and personal history (Willentz xiii). This study will clearly point out that these authentic aesthetic expressions organize into a collective expression of the Black female identity. The evolution of this shared tradition reveals a Black female aesthetic that defines and legitimates the experience of Black women in America.

The curious positioning of the Black woman in America has led to a political intent on recovering a lost identity and visibility. This results in the inevitable rupture of structures that have negated and silenced the Black woman. Moraga and Anzaldua claim that “Black women see Black feminism as a politic born out of necessity” (v). If a feminist is defined as one who is involved in transforming and re-interpreting
familiar realities, then Black women’s writing exhibits and constructs a Black women’s literary tradition that is inherently feminist. Barbara Smith concludes that the ability of Black women to survive in the face of white America points to an “innate feminist potential” (Home Girls xxiv). Washington in Any Woman’s Blues states:

[...] even though they can claim a rightful place in the African-American tradition and in the feminist tradition of women writers, it is also clear that for purposes of liberation, Black women writers will first insist on their own space (xvi).

Black women’s history, literature and literary criticism reveal how the specific and externally defined controlling images that have objectified Black women, have resulted in a Black feminist tradition and a ‘literature of their own’. Black women writers and critics have remained outsiders within academic, feminist and Black social and political thought. This position endows them with a distinct angle of vision, which results in unique expressions that validate Black feminism. The double jeopardy of being ‘Black’ and ‘female’ separates them from European and American feminisms. Henderson in her essay argues:

The reduction of multiplicity to undifferentiated sameness has empowered white feminists to speak for all women, black men to speak for all blacks and white males to speak for everyone (qtd. in Baker and Redmonds 162- 163).

The thrust of Black feminist thought therefore is to understand the political reality of the simultaneity of oppression and to seek a politic that redefines the Black woman on her terms.
The objectification of the Black woman had its antecedents in slavery and its concomitant racism. Controlling the sexuality and frailty of white women to ensure the purity of race, in turn led to the denigration and subordination of Black women. In America specifically, the definition of the enslaved African woman became the basis of this society’s definition of ‘other’. The stereotyping of Black women began with slavery. The master’s gaze created the myth of the asexual, virginal White woman while relegating the Black woman to the stereotype of the oversexed animal, prolific breeder and willing labourer.

This dominant gaze split the image of ‘female’ from ‘feminine’. There was no opposition however between the two for Black women. This polemic, created by the male gaze acted reductively, resulting in a complex web of political and economic relationships whereby sexuality is conceptualized along the intersecting axes of race and class. The resulting stereotypes perpetuated by racism are exclusive to Black women. The tragic mulatta, the faithful mammy, the emasculating matriarch, Jezebel, Sapphire and Aunt Jemima evolved out of this complex web. They were to all intents and purposes as Zora Neale Hurston concludes, “de mules uh de world” (16). These controlling images reveal the extent of oppression. By Jefferson’s time, the sign ‘woman’ signified white, free and upper class. This idealization was possible by the nexus of the Black woman who was Black, enslaved, and poor.
Sojourner Truth's pertinent speech "Ain't I a Woman" (1831) testifies to the curious positioning of Black women. The Black woman, from the beginning had to repress her femaleness in order to ensure the survival of her race. 'Herstorically', Black women have played significant roles in the Abolitionist, Emancipation and Civil Rights Movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

"Twice in the history of the United States the struggle for racial equality the Black woman has been midwife to a feminist movement [...] in the Abolition Movement of the 1830's and again in the Civil Rights movement of the 1960's" (S. Evans, 24). However in both these movements, the Black woman was denied equal status with White women in the Feminist movements or Black men in the Emancipation movement. Christian describes this unique position; she quotes:

If denied as black, her woman nature was often denied; if defined as woman, her blackness was often ignored, if defined as working class, her gender and race are muted. It is primarily in the expression of herself that she could be her totality (Black Feminist Criticism 61).

Black feminism thus is a politic that defines and describes her totality. This totality, Ogunyemi describes as "a womanist" position - "That is she will recognize that, along with her consciousness of sexual issues, she must incorporate racial, cultural, national, economic and political considerations into her philosophy" (64). Black feminism therefore is a self-conscious struggle to actualize a humanist vision of community.
Black feminist criticism is a natural extension of this process that re-figures, re-discovers, re-invents and re-visions the presence of Black women in history and literature. This effort has led to a corpus of critical texts that engage in analysis and assessment, description and classification which have provided varied and significant insights into the tradition that has until recently been largely ignored or neglected.

Black feminist criticism broadly engages in a) the rediscovery of neglected or buried authors, (b) the study of themes, images and language in the works of women writers and (c) the possibility of an alternative woman’s tradition or new literary history. The rediscovery and recovery of works by Black women writers is a significant act of rewriting the canon. As Gerder Lerner quotes:

History must record an account of female experience over time and should include the development of feminist consciousness as an essential aspect of women’s past. This is the primary task of women’s history (qtd. in Showalter New Feminist Criticism 260)

1916 is a significant year in Black theatre history. In that year, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) staged the first play in a Black theatre in Harlem. The play Rachel, written by a Black feminist, Angelina Weld Grimke, deals with the subject of lynching and its effects on the Black heroine. The Harlem Renaissance saw the prolific outburst of creative talent by Black women whose plays were published in Black literary journals, but rarely staged. Notable playwrights of this era were Marita Bonner, Alice Dunbar Nelson, George Douglas Johnson, May Miller, Mary Burril and Eulalie Spence. These plays staged a Black female subject’s personal response to her political context. This early period shows that Black female playwrights had much to offer American theatre in their adaptation
of theme “in the way of content, form, characterization, dialogue and heart” (Brown – Guillory *Their Place on Stage 3*).

Marita Bonner stands out from this talented group for her innovation with theme and experimentation with *avant-garde* techniques. *The Purple Flower* (1926) is considered a daring attempt to confront racism.

The establishment of the American Negro Theatre in 1940, the cut-off date for the Harlem Renaissance, brought into the spotlight a vital Black actress and playwright – Alice Childress. Her first play *Florence* (1950) initiated a new phase in Black drama with the realistic treatment of issues that affected Black people. In this play, she put to rest the stereotype of the Mammy, as a complacent, submissive, big-hearted woman. Whilst most plays, black or white, portrayed the exit of the Black hero in defeat or death, Childress’ radical departure from the norm, ushered in realistic portrayals of ordinary Black men and women who resisted and survived racism.

Childress in turn impacted a young reviewer who would go on to become the first Black playwright to stage a play on Broadway with a predominant Black cast. Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun* (1960) explores issues of universalism from the specifics of race, sex and class. It would go on to become an American classic. The same period saw another radical playwright who isolated herself from ‘realistic’ portrayals of race issues. Adrienne Kennedy broke away from the
chauvinistic diatribe and revolutionary rhetoric of the sixties to embark on an
individualistic journey of self-discovery through surrealism and expressionism. Kennedy stages the moral effects of race and sex and the ontological ramifications on the psyche of a Black woman. Her play *Funnyhouse of Negro* (1959) stands out in the militant sixties as an original play, proving that drama could reflect race and art simultaneously.

The eclecticism of the seventies resulted in musicals, revues and re-runs of popular plays. A return to the past, characterized most theatrical expressions. In this milieu Ntozake Shange, made a dramatic impact with her choreopoem *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide / When the Rainbow is Enuf*, ³ (1976) which was the first Black play on Broadway with an all-Black female cast and a Black director.

This singular influence of Black women in the theatre continues in the present, even as playwrights Suzanne Lori – Parks, Aishah Rehman and P. J. Gibson create new directions with their original and innovative expressions. The history of Black American theatre reveals that while these Black women have claimed a stage of their own, yet there still is a large section of Black women playwrights who remain unpublished, unproduced, ignored or forgotten. However with the discovery that a Black female tradition exists in the theatre, it is hoped that more of these playwrights will find a place on the stage.
This investigation incidentally also covers the history of Black women’s theatre from Bonner in the twenties to Shange, in the eighties. Though this study is not a chronological study of the development of Black women’s theatre, the corpus of selection covers the vital period of innovation and contribution to the development of American, Black American and Black American Women’s Theatre. Therefore, these five Black American women playwrights are worthy of serious critical attention.

Brown-Guillory quotes: “[...] they present a slice of United States history from the unique perspective of women who have been both midwives and pall bearers of African-American dreamers (Their Place on the Stage 20).

Marita Bonner (1899-1971) wrote prolifically between 1922 and 1942 in the Crisis and Opportunity journals publishing essays, plays, reviews, and short stories. A graduate from Radcliffe College in English and Comparative Literature, she taught English in Bluefield, West Virginia and in Washington D.C. Though the bulk of her literary career was devoted to fiction, she wrote three plays: The Pot Maker published in Opportunity, 1927; The Purple Flower in Crisis, 1928 and Exit, an Illusion, published in Crisis, 1929. Though her plays were never produced, she earned her distinction with contemporary playwrights like George Douglas Johnson and Langston Hughes. Brown-Guillory suggests that “her writings may have had an influence on Richard Wright and other Chicago Renaissance writers of the 1940’s and 1950’s” (Wines 1)
Alice Childress (1920 - ) was born in Charleston, South Carolina but grew up in Harlem under the care of her grandmother Eliza Campbell. Influenced and encouraged by her, Childress saw life from many angles and heard stories from people “for whom the act of living is sheer heroism” (Brown – Guillory, 1990,p.97). These are the vignettes that she presents in her plays. She is the only Black woman playwright in America whose plays have been written, produced and published over a period of four decades. Childress has contributed significantly to the growth of Black American theatre. She helped found the American Negro theatre that helped many Black actors and actresses, to claim a place in the theatre. As a member of the Author’s League of Dramatists Guild, she helped unionized actors in New York city.

Her first two plays Just A Little Simple (1950) and Gold Through the Trees (1952) were the first plays by a Black woman to be performed by unionized actors. She was also the first Black woman to win an Obie Award for the best original off-Broadway play, Trouble in Mind (1955). Wine in the Wilderness was presented in 1969 on National Educational Television. Childress’ contribution to American theatre has received recognition through many awards and honors including writer - in-residence at the MacDowell Colony, a Rockefeller grant, a John Golden Fund and a Harvard appointment to the Radcliffe Institute for Independent Study.

Lorraine Hansberry (1930-1965) grew up in Chicago in better circumstances than Childress. Educated in public schools, she decided to become a painter, studying Art at the Chicago Art Institute, the University of Wisconsin, and the University of
Guadalajara in Mexico. Hansberry later joined a left-wing Harlem journal, Freedom in 1951. Her first play A Raisin in the Sun (1959) won the Critics Circle Award for that year, making her the youngest and the first Black playwright to win it. Her next play, The Drinking Gourd (1960), a television drama, commissioned by the National Broad Casting Company to celebrate the centennial of the Civil War, was shelved for being too controversial to produce. Hansberry left an indelible mark on American and Black theatre in America, with a legacy of courage and optimism. Dying at the age of thirty-four of cancer, Hansberry's uncompromising vision and creative zeal made her a role model for "the young, gifted and black."

Adrienne Kennedy (1931- ) began to write and have her plays produced in the 1960's and is hailed as one of the most original and innovative of contemporary playwrights, Black or white. Born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, she spent most of her early life in Cleveland, Ohio. Graduating in Education, she traveled widely, absorbing sights and sounds that emerged as images in her plays. Her first play Funnyhouse of a Negro (1964) won an Obie and was translated into several languages. A Rats Mass was performed in 1966, and was named one of the best plays of the Boston season. Kennedy's other plays include The Owl Answers (1964) and A Beasts Story (1965) which were produced jointly under the title Cities in Bezique (1969), A Lesson in Dead Language (1965), The Lennon Play: in His Own Write (1968), Sun: A Poem for Malcolm X Inspired by his Murder (1969); An Evening with Dead Essex (1973); A Movie Star Has to Star in Black and White (1976) and The Ohio State Murders (1990). Kennedy continues to write new plays, intriguing
producers, directors and spectators challenging constantly the structure of society and art.

Ntozake Shange (1948-) became the second Black woman to impact Broadway with her smash hit *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide / When the Rainbow is Enuf* in 1976. It won among other awards the Golden Apple, the Outer Critics Circle the Mademoiselle, an Obie and an Audelco, besides nominations for the Tony, Grammy and Emmy. Shange created a space for the Black woman’s creative expressiveness through music, dance, poetry and rituals. Other plays that have been produced professionally were published in 1979 in *Three Pieces. Spell # 7*, the second in the trilogy which includes *A Photograph: A Still Life With Shadows / A Photograph: A Study of Cruelty* and *Boogie Woogie Landscapes*, is a scathing expose of racism and sexism in the theatre.

Shange was born Paulette Williams, in Frenton, New Jersey, to middle class parents who gave her the best education they could afford. Growing up in St. Louis, Missouri, she was exposed to music, dance, literature and art. She was surrounded by musicians and singers such as Dizzy Gillespie, Chuck Berry, Charlie Parker, Miles Davis, Josephine Baker and writer and intellectual, W.E.B. Dubois who significantly influenced her writings. Shange faced racism and sexism directly, which caused her to adopt strategies of resistance and revolution. Her personal life was filled with a sense of hopelessness and alienation causing her to attempt suicide several times. Her honesty and deep sensitivity evolved from these traumatic experiences which were
translated into poetic self-expression. Hence the themes and titles of her plays are of significance.

Earning Bachelors and Masters degrees in American Studies, Shange taught Humanities, Women's and African-American studies, Drama, and Creative Writing at Sonoma State College, Mills College and the University of California Extension. In 1971 she changed her name to Ntozake (she who comes with her own things) Shange (she who walks like a lion). This act which signifies a new direction in her life, and spells resilience, courage, optimism and self-affirmation, is reflected in the temper of her plays.

Bonner, Childress, Hansberry, Kennedy and Shange have played a seminal role in shaping a Black woman’s dramaturgy. The plays selected display the range of the artist’s repertoire in terms of form, structure, theme and technique. Two plays each from each playwright’s repertoire have been selected: one that has been acclaimed and the other, which is lesser known. This facilitates an approach that allows for a range of expectations; variables that illustrate a constant search for authentic self-expression that encompasses the Black woman’s experience of race, sex and class. This selection also celebrates the rich traditions that have evolved because of their efforts. Bonner, Childress, Hansberry, Kennedy and Shange truly deserve their place on stage.
The initial study of critical texts revealed the dearth of material and sufficient scholarly treatises of the Black feminist tradition. Texts either investigate the implication of 'blackness' or race, or 'femaleness' or sex from either / or positions. This investigation seeks to examine how the gaze situates Black women in its repressive and alienating frames and how that very position has resulted in Black feminist gestures. A cursory exploration from either Black literary or feminist positions cannot encompass the simultaneity and complexity of the Black woman’s position. This study therefore involves an inter-disciplinary eclectic approach that coalesces film, feminist and black literary theories to understand the 'gaze', its effects in the theatre and how the feminist gestures of returning and subverting the gaze have resulted in a Black woman’s dramaturgy that is distinct.

Every society has a mythology that verifies consolidates and perpetuates its beliefs and rituals. Though these beliefs have a historical grounding yet they need not necessarily be historically accurate. Theatre articulates a society’s beliefs, thus becoming a seminal medium of constructing its myths. Schorer in "The Necessity of Myth", considers the function of myth as a vital factor in the validation of a society’s cultural history. He states that "Belief organizes experiences not because it is rational but because all belief depends on a controlling imagery and rational belief is the intellectual formalization of that belief" (qtd. in Murray 356).
Laura Mulvey’s seminal essay, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1975), offers a psychoanalytical perspective of the process of myth making. Analyzing the specific functions that operate in constructing controlling images, Mulvey focuses on the spectator who views from the dominant gaze. The spectator asserts societal pressure and expectations that are internalized and reproduced on stage. Mulvey’s work is significant in that it analyses the creation of images through the visual media. Till recently sociologists and historians had tried to connect images with social development and cultural history. Mulvey using psychoanalysis delves into the process by which images are reproduced consistently under the influence of the dominant gaze. Mulvey extended her theory to expose the ways in which pleasure is derived from genres based on ‘looking’ and which in turn develop identifications and impositions of male antagonism towards women. She noted that men are the major protagonists in mainstream films and it is through the man’s motivations, actions and thoughts that sense is made of the narrative.

Theatre incorporates many of the scopic and narrative pleasures of cinema and so these formulations help in analyzing the specific ways in which the male gaze results in the objectification of woman as ‘Other’, and the stereotyping of women into easily definable and manageable commodities. Theatre responding to the dominant system of representation operates to inhibit systems that will threaten its role as a servant of the ideology that supports and informs its traditions. The gaze in the theatre, is “the looking at” of reality from a phallocratic position.
Mulvey states:

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female [...]. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at ness’ (33).

However Mulvey did not raise the issue of female spectatorship. In her own reconsideration on narrative pleasure in “After thoughts on Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” Inspired by “Duel in the Sun” (1981) she states that women could assume a degree of control through transsexual identification. Mulvey’s revision is important as it displaces the notions of the fixity of spectator positions and focuses on the gaps and contradictions within patriarchal signification. Jane Gaines issues a challenge in her essay “White Privilege and Looking Relations: Race and Gender in Feminist Film Theory” (1996). She discusses the apathy and neglect of the issues of race and class in film theories. She states “[...] the very concept of ‘different perspectives’, while validating distinctness and maintaining a common denominator (woman), still places the categories of race and sexual preference in theoretical limbo” (201).
The attempt to assert "blackness" as a critical category has given rise to several perspectives on the position a Black critic should adopt. The deliberations to define a Black Aesthetic have resulted in narrow, chauvinistic views as it does not account for the hybridization of African–American expression. Showalter asserts that "Blackness itself became an ontological and critical category of assessing Afro-American literature" (*A Criticism* 10). Gates' *Black Literature and Literary Theory* (1990) attempts to reconstruct Black poetics without isolating it from academia. He recommends the reading of a text as a rhetorical structure, and the use of pedagogical tools of post structuralism to deconstruct the text from within cultural ideology.

Spurlin in his essay "Theorizing Signifyin (g) and the Role of the Reader: Possible Directions for African–American Literary Criticism" (1990) states that African-American criticism has critiqued notions of literary phenomena by challenging the terms 'universal' and 'canonical' and problematizing them. He concludes that African-American criticism in the present is concerned with "self-authentication of a different kind" (732). Gates also claims that Black studies have functioned as a strategic site for auto critique within American studies itself. Concepts of 'Black' and 'white' being socially produced, critiques of exclusiveness fail to explain the "complex social dynamism of marginalized cultures" (*Tell Me Sir* 21).
Gates statement ironically points to the exclusion of Black women's culture from Black literary theory. Emerging Black feminist critics, such as Barbara Smith, Barbara Christian, Deborah McDowell, Patricia Collins, Hortense Spillers and Glenda Dickerson have challenged this position of Black critics. They challenge the notion of a black experience that focuses on a black self that is essentially male. Not only does Black literary criticism marginalize Black women but feminist criticism also reduces Black women to a common denominator, thereby ignoring the specifics of race and class. McDowell in her essay "New Directions for Black Feminist Criticisms" (1985) cites examples of marginalization by White feminist critics like Spacks and Moers. Smith's seminal work "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism" (1977) calls for a Black literary criticism that would analyze the ramifications of race, sex and class on Black women's expressions. She asserts that Black women writers share a common experience and a Black female language, which in turn constitutes an identifiable literary tradition.

These works have given direction in shaping an approach to the selected Black women playwrights and their work. These include an understanding of the Black woman's reality, an analysis of the deconstruction of those of images that have been imposed on Black women and the construction of a Black woman's identity, and the creation of an authentic legitimate space for aesthetic expression through a Black female language. It also pointed out the pre-occupations that have resulted in a shared tradition that transcends time and space to form a continuum.
While these directions provided the pedagogical tools for study, yet the study also revealed a discernible lack of investigations in the area of Black women's theatre. It was pertinent to analyze theoretical positions in feminist theatre and theory, and Black Theatre criticism and apply them to Black women's theatre under the directives of Black feminist critics. Attempts to locate Black women's theatre within Black or feminist theatres have failed to describe the unique position of Black women playwrights.

Critics like Keyssar in *Feminist Theatre and Theory* (1996) and Brown in *Feminist Theatre: Definition and Critical Analysis* (1979) maintain the inseparability of feminist theatre and theory. Keyssar's wide selection of essays offers strategies that encompass a range of approaches — historical, psycho-analytical and sociological. She maintains that these categories provide different readings in order to identify with the terms race, sex and class. Keyssar makes a significant point that was useful in analyzing the plays selected for this study. She reviews her earlier stance of concluding that instances of realism in feminist plays make them "less powerful, less provocative than dramas that were non-realistic" (*FT & T* 4). She points out that, "Realism can refer to various aspects of a representation, including those not readily seen or felt or heard; that it can be an expression of 'deep structure' and that the "new realism" presented by feminist playwrights challenges the idea of 'classic realism'" (4). This view provided an insight into reading the realistic drama of Childress and Hansberry.
Belsey’s definition and critique of ‘classic realism’ in “Constructing the Subject: Deconstructing the Text” (1985), provided the basis for the construction of a framework of analysis. Belsey claims that “classic realism” supports the dominant ideology and is characterized by ‘illusionism’. She states that the objective of classic realism is to disrupt order and then provided a closure “which is also disclosure” which reinstates the dominant order (664). She points to how dominant ideology “interpellates concrete individuals as subjects” and “emphasizes the fixed identity of the individual” (661) and that “certain ranges of meaning... are ‘obvious’ within the currently dominant ideology, and certain subject – positions are equally ‘obviously’ the positions from which these meanings are apparent” (664). Belsey therefore advocates that the reader or critic of a text accommodates the “new process of production of meaning” that can “provide a knowledge of the limits of ideological representation” (668). The act of deconstructing a text and claiming subjectivity is a central issue in feminism. For Black women playwrights, the task of constructing a Black female subject is dependent on their ability to deconstruct frames of representation that emphasize their otherness. Though Belsey does not address the specifics of race, she includes sex and class in her work.

Felski’s work “Beyond Feminist Aesthetics: Feminist Literature & Social Change (1989) elucidates the structures that feminist fictions use, namely the confessional and emancipation narratives. Felski however does not account for race
and class in her feminist approach. This investigation improvises on Felski’s classification of structure to analyze the ideological processes, shaping the effects of literary production in the theatre, in specific historical contexts.

Brown–Guillory’s work *Their Place on the Stage: Black Women Playwrights in America* (1988) is a significant work, which analyses the tradition thematically and structurally, which she calls tonal and structural forms. Brown-Guillory relies on African ‘initiation’ and ‘survival’ rituals, which stage a personal journey or political odyssey to wholeness. She constructs a structure to describe this journey through six stages – koinonia, logus, metanoia, kerygma, didache and eucharista, which also have their equivalent in Freytag’s pyramid (88). Brown–Guillory attempts a description of Black women’s drama; which however does not analyze the ideological processes that shape form and structure.

This investigation analyses the causes and effects of the gaze in the theatre which determines the form and structure of Black women’s theatre resulting in a distinct tradition that is identifiable as Black and female. It was necessary therefore to examine how Western dramaturgy shaped by Aristotelian mimetic theories, perpetuates the notion of the gaze and its role in reifying the dominant order in the theatre.

In the theatre the aesthetic of mimesis has maintained the hegemony of realism. Aristotelian mimetic theories have long governed Western dramaturgy and
be described as prescriptive and phallocratic in form and practice. Sexual identity requires a fiction, which is essentially linguistic, ideological and fetishistic. Theatre being an Oedipal affair, woman is represented as a site of difference, framed by the tyranny of roles she is destined to play. This is simply a function of the gaze – of being and so being seen in society. The two great periods of dramatic evolution that have formulated traditions that still govern the generic basis for drama, were those in which women were negated from the stage. ‘Woman’ was a representation on stage; she was enacted on. Thus ‘woman’ was framed in “the oppressive discourse of engendered representation” (de Lauretis 5).

Case in “Classic Drag: The Greek Creation of Female Parts” suggests that “classical plays and theatrical conventions [...] be regarded as allies in the project of suppressing actual women and replacing them with the masks of patriarchal production” (318). Case maintains that in the theatre, the female subject suffers “double alienation – male identified and female” (From Split Subject 130-1).

Classic theatre, rooted in Aristotelian mimetic principles seeks to place the spectator within the frames of its ideology with its apparent unity, coherence and seamlessness. It therefore generates identity and difference through ‘agon’ or conflict. Woman being the ‘other’ is framed within this mimetic frame, as the site of conflict, the perpetrator of chaos and the object of the gaze. The linear structure that develops the action is embedded in conflicts, climaxes, recognition and resolutions. Classic
Theatre also incorporates narrative, and in which, according to Case, "the quest, the desire and the action are male determined and male centered and are privileged at the expense of the female" (Split Subject 130-1).

In the theatre "popular culture has often been allied with the well-made play" (Case Performing Feminisms 10). The hegemony of realism is preserved in the Aristotelian taxonomies of hierarchical difference, which consequently has become the measure of evaluation for the well-made play. These six elements are mythos (plot), ethos (character), dianoia (thought), lexis (narrative), and melos (melody) and opsis (spectacle) (15). These elements become the frames by which and in which women, particularly Black women are framed. Black women playwrights refuse to be enslaved in these sites and therefore deconstruct and re-define them.

Freedman points that "Theatre doesn't hold up the mirror nature, but is the quintessential simulation of simulations, a hyper reality"(100). Since it is a place that stages transformations, it also includes the space for the returning of the gaze. The gaze however coercive is never a locus of complete control – it consistently opens a space for resisting the gaze. Within the theatre, if the woman looks, the spectacle provokes. De Lauretis observes "Medusa's power to cast the spell [...] is directly represented in her horrible 'staring eyes' which are a constant feature of her figurative and literary representations [...]." (Heath 110). The sight that makes the Medusa
threatening to the male spectator may be understood as the sight of someone else’s look—the knowledge that the ‘other’ sees and therefore resists being reduced to an appropriate object. Medusa defies the male gaze as Western culture has constructed it as the privilege of a male subject and as a means of relegating woman to the status of object.

Such defiance unsettles looking relations. To ‘look back’ is to break up performance space, deconstruct the gaze, subvert the classical organization of showing and seeing, revision spectatorship and restructure traditional canons, genres and personal/political identities. Black women playwrights, Bonner, Childress, Hansberry, Kennedy and Shange re-inscribe the Black woman as subject, by placing her in her context, by situating her within her culture and using indigenous forms, spectacle and music to create a dramaturgy of their own. This insistence on an alternate articulation of subjectivity includes multiple viewpoints relating to issues of race, sex and class.

This project examines how Bonner, Childress, Hansberry, Kennedy and Shange set up a Black female gaze by re-defining the elements of drama to subvert the gaze. The four chapters analyze the strategies employed by these five Black women playwrights to locate a Black female presence in the theatre. These chapters are arranged in the order of significance from a Black female perspective, which subverts the hierarchy of elements and also the gaze. Thus ‘thought’ which determines and structures Black women’s theatre comes first, followed by ‘Narrative’, which inscribes a Black woman’s subjectivity and language. Chapter three combines
Plot and Character as they are inter-related and together construct a Black female identity that evolves from an absence to a presence, from slavery to autonomy and self-hood. Music and Spectacle are the textural details that present authentic and original Black women’s expression in the theatre, making its dramaturgy unique and distinct. Chapter Five presents these textural details. Each chapter presents the premises and the effects of the gaze that result in subversive gestures illustrated by the plays chosen for this investigation.

Chapter Two, Thought, presents the interrogation of Aristotle’s emphasis on “the universal proposition” by these playwrights (14). The term ‘universal’ has always negated or denigrated the Black female presence in systems of thought and especially in the theatre. These playwrights individually and collectively as a group, reject the notion that drama is supplemental to, or dependent on prior givens – that it is mimetic. They explore ‘other’ realities that present the simultaneity of race, sex and class in determining their identities and experiences as Black women.

‘Thought’ is described by Aristotle as “the power of saying whatever can be said” (14). Using Butcher’s interpretation of “the intellectual element” (340) and Frye’s suggestion that dianoia corresponds with theme, this chapter examines the recapturing of Black feminist consciousness by these playwrights. It also analyses how thought determines theme, structures the plot, delineates and defines narrative, music and spectacle.
Though Diction or *lexis* is enumerated as fourth in order of importance, it becomes a significant element in re-inscribing the Black woman as subject. Diction makes the internal and external action apparent on the stage. It is variously described as "the expression of the meaning of words," "the mere metrical arrangement of words" and "the manner of imitation" (Butcher 25–29). This covers a range of functions, which include the manner, the structure and the embellishments of rhythms, metaphors and style. These narratives also appropriate realistic, *avant-garde* or experimental forms which reveal the underlying affinities between structures and themes, implying ideological positions.

In the plays chosen for analysis, there is the emergence of a narrative structure that traces a process of separation, from the ideological and social constraints, to a degree of self-discovery and determination. Felski's classification of feminist narratives into the confessional or autobiographical text and the emancipation or biographical narration forms the basis for the analysis of narrative structures. However, these two genres are not mutually exclusive but often find a continuum in these plays.

Chapter Three, Narrative, studies the distinct ways in which Bonner, Childress, Hansberry, Kennedy and Shange authenticate the Black female identity by deliberately manipulating the narrative medium of language or rhetoric. Signifyin'
becomes a pertinent device to subvert, extend and amplify meaning. Vocabulary, dialect, images and motifs relating directly to their experiences express a Black female reality. Using rhythms that are structured on Black indigenous musical forms, they create contrapuntal ‘phrases’ that de-centre meanings and authenticate the creative spontaneity of improvisation. These Black women playwrights manifest through their narrative, a Black woman’s world. Though they speak in the language of their domination, they use it to control the way, they are defined and described. They re-invent within its frames, codes for determining their own subjecthood and build bridges of colour through self—definition within narrative.

These five Black women playwrights also re-figure the ways plots are constructed. Chapter Four, Plot and Character, analyses the plots that reveal the will of the Black woman in defying the pre-determined destiny that the dominant order has created for her. To reclaim their identity, they re-situate both the spectator and the narrator by effecting changes in the way plot and character are constructed. ‘Order’, ‘the logical arrangement of parts’ and ‘magnitude’ are key features that characterize a ‘well made play’. Black women playwrights employ disruptive strategies to re-order the anarchy that has ‘caused’ their positions and destiny. These plays have simple and brief plots, which in turn reveal the complexity of their lives. This complexity is revealed in plots that do not adhere to a single issue or plot but reflect the simultaneity of issues of race, sex and class. In their treatment of causality, linearity, seamlessness, closures and the heroic subject, they subvert the male gaze.
Characterization is based on redeeming an identity through claiming subjecthood. The complexity of the everyday lives of Black women is revealed through characterization. The women in these plays attest the myriad ways in which Black women are oppressed and defined. Choosing to ignore "greatness", these playwrights by and large present the everyday realities of their lives. 'Heroism' is recognized as the will to survive racism and sexism. The incidence of short plays reveals their anxieties about being published or produced but also ironically points to the attempt to subvert the prerogative of "magnitude" in determining heroism.

Breaking these myths, the Black female hero journeys from myth to reality, from victim to hero, from ignorance to self-consciousness. Though she rarely transcends her context, she grapples with and attempts to re-order the ordinary activities of everyday life. Issues that affect her ordinary existence such as the nature of roles she is enjoined to play, the kinds of relationships that encompass her, the threats to her wholeness, the anxieties of security, the future and surviving every day as a Black woman are woven into the characterization and plot.

'Character' and 'plot' are not mutually exclusive but dependent. Plots are structured to manifest the will of the Black woman in her reality. The limits of 'probability' and 'necessity' are defined as they open up spaces for negotiations and new possibilities. They construct new mythic structures through character and plot that affirm that Blackness and femaleness are a real part of the universal. In doing so,
they deconstruct the uni-dimensional stereotypes that have limited their complexity and determined their destinies. One of the primary tasks of the playwrights has been to dismantle these images and create an identity validated by their reality. These plays also interrogate the principles of catharsis, pity or fear. The role of an irrevocable destiny is ruptured and resignation is refused. Instead of recognition there is transformation. While catharsis purges rebellion in classic plays, here catharsis is a spiritual ritual of empowerment and fosters resistance against the order that reduces them to objects. While classic texts punish such rebels, Black women playwrights celebrate the individual’s achievement of autonomy against the society that alienates them on the basis of race, sex and class.

Chapter Five, Music and Spectacle, is a celebration of the compass of Black women’s lives, which is presented through music and spectacle. Through these two elements, Black women playwrights validate their cultural reality. Though the Poetics consider these elements as optional embellishments that enhance meanings, they are of vital importance to Black women, as these visual and aural media display the immediate location of a Black female presence in political and cultural spaces.

Soyinka quotes “Music, whose nature lends itself to largely idealist striving, is not static, on the contrary, the inferiority of its language revokes a constant dialectic with the world of reality—which is action, development, motion” (qtd. in Gates Black Literature 49). A significant feature of Black women’s dramaturgy is the incorporation of vital cultural signifiers—music, dance, symbolic gesture, spectacle.
and rituals. Through these collective acts of self-definition, they assert and affirm their positions not only in the theatre but also in the community. The theatricality of these elements re-visions the representation of character, situation, action and explores forms of Black female expression that enrich and transform the dramatic medium.

Black music and dance offer these playwrights the best example of cultural independence and artistic autonomy. Borrowing from a rich tradition, they stir the collective memory and principal historic moments, thereby forming a historical and cultural continuum. The theatrical appeal of dance, the concrete manifestation of rhythms and its symbolic force make it a powerful means to locate the body as a site of representation within the theatre.

Black women playwrights use spectacle to create a multiplicity of meanings through setting, dramatic gestures and rituals. Setting creates a legitimate space to articulate their realities. The simultaneity of race, sex and class and its effects are most evident in the relationship of theme and character to setting. These playwrights also use rituals as acts of affirmation, celebration and empowerment of the Black female character. Through the use of community and sacred rituals, they create specific meanings that evolve from mythic models. Fabre states that these playwrights use “ritual to integrate the fragmented consciousness of black people, and, above all, to free the theatre from decadent dramatic forms” (102). Rituals therefore become
acts that restore wholeness and healing to the individual and the community.

Bonner, Childress, Hansberry, Kennedy and Shange liberate Black women through their acts of resistance in the theatre. Dismantling the structures that negated or denigrated them, they alter looking relations and locate the Black woman’s presence in the theatre. In subverting the gaze, they re-vision and redefine the Black woman through Thought, Narrative, Plot and Character, Music and Spectacle. These five playwrights also validate Black women’s bodies, feelings and thoughts. With their individual efforts to construct a Black woman’s worldview, they have also created a collective vision that points to a definite tradition within the theatre. They legitimize through this vital and distinct dramatic tradition, the unique vision of Black women.
Notes

1 Alice Walker. In Search of our Mother's Gardens: Womanist Prose. (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983) 393

2 The capitalization of the term Black is politically significant as it draws attention to the signifying difference of race. Whiteness is assumed as the universal given. The African in America has been called several ‘names’ through their history. Evolving from Negro to the hyphenated African—American, the Black people of America have been subjected to racism through every stage. The term is used and re-defined by these Black women. Also, in the period covered by this project the term Black was a term of race pride.

3 Henceforth called For Colored Girls...