Chapter 2

THOUGHT

Thought is shown in all they say when proving a particular point or perhaps expressing a general truth.

— Aristotle

But I who am bound by my mirror / as well as my bed / see causes in color / as well as sex / and sit here wondering / which me will survive all these liberations

— Audre Lorde

The aesthetic of mimesis has maintained the hegemony of realism in the theatre. The Aristotelian aesthetic has long governed the theatre’s idea of reality. The Black woman has thus had to confront the idea of a pre-given reality, which excludes her on the basis of the markers of race, sex and class. Caught at the intersection of the signifiers of race, sex and class she is not only society’s ‘other’ but ‘other’s other’. Framed by the gaze, she is trapped in the bind of “the authority of apparent familiarity” (Keyssar FT & T 5). She is thus objectified and commodified by the male gaze in the theatre.
This privilege of the aesthetic disposition that Western theatre enjoys and which Kintz calls "cultural competence", defines what is "universal as being historically specific and partial" (67). According to Kintz, the most classifying privilege, is the privilege of appearing to be the most natural one. Those who emphasise these markers foreground their own constructedness, in order to comment ironically, on the fictionality of representation.

Diamond's statement that mimesis is "a morphological and epistemological issue" (Mimesis in Syncopated Time 132) and Frye's observation of the existence of a work of art between "the precept and the example" proves that mimesis relies on universal models and truths (84). Theatre rooted in mimesis, not only accepts these rules but perpetuates them, by assuming "a stable subject position and "a reliable linguistic field" (Diamond MST 133). The stable subject position belongs to the dominant culture which is phallocratic, and the linguistic field is the discourse of domination.

Fanon in Black Skins, White Masks (1978) assesses this assumption and declares that "Ontology [...] does not permit an understanding of the being of the Black man" (110) Since 'being' exists outside of language, it must necessarily be defined and inscribed in language. The Black woman, who is triply removed, has for centuries been denied an identity on the basis of these universal givens. She therefore
has had to inscribe her being in the very language that has denied her existence. This primary task forms the defining principle of Black women’s writing.

Western dramaturgies have for centuries perpetuated the dominant frames of representation in the theatre. Belsey, classifies these plays as “classic realist” (Constructing the Subject 664) as it “instills itself in the space between fact and illusion”, presents “a simulated reality” and perpetuates its “power as myth”. This illusionism propagates such conventions as the “detached viewpoint, apparent unity, seamlessness and narrative closure”(672). The colonizing structure of the classic realist form prescribes an order that is hierarchical. Western dramaturgy, influenced by the Poetics, inscribes this order in the aesthetic of the ‘well – made play’. Resisting the frames of enslavement in the dominant code, Black women playwrights dismantle them and challenge this order, by rupturing it.

“Aesthetically and ideologically”, quotes Fabre, the fundamental opposition is between a drama of order, of oppression and a drama of liberation (of disorder) [...] the definition of which is a matter of irreconcilable choices”(105). These ‘irreconcilable political choices’ are responsible for the construction of the dramaturgy of Bonner, Childress, Hansberry, Kennedy and Shange. In making the political personal, they challenge the colonizer’s aesthetic and engage in negotiating and offering new meanings and alternate realities in the theatre.
Dickerson sums up this subversive act in the following lines:

Aunt Jemima perceives how the well-made relationship between the stage and social experience keeps the spectator mired in the glue of that binding ontological / mimetic bond...no feminist wants to sleep (or perform even more stimulating acts) in that well-made bed” (180).

In the last eighty-four years, since Black women playwrights made their presence on the American stage, the gaze in the theatre has been returned, deconstructed and subverted. Refusing to be relegated to a position of invisibility, the Black woman has claimed the power of subject hood, of definition and description. In the process she has constructed new mythologies, negotiating “metalevels of space, place and time in order to figure forth a new expressive world” (Baker Jr. Workings 240).

The primary task in “this effort has been to dismantle the hierarchy of structures and codes in the theatre that have framed the gaze. Aristotelian mimesis, which has through accretion become fundamental to Western dramaturgy, still perpetuates models of codified aesthetics in the theatre. Central to this western dramaturgy is the definition of drama and the description of its elements. The six elements that determine the genres are in order- plot, character, thought, narrative melody and spectacle (Aristotle 12- 15). The world of individual thought and idea has a correspondingly close association with the eye; in the theatre therefore what is made apparent is ‘thought’ or ‘theme’. For these Black women playwrights it is the thought
theme of Blackness and femaleness and the simultaneity of their oppression that becomes the informing, structuring and determining principle of their dramaturgy. The reclamation of Black female consciousness through their plays is what informs the thoughts, themes and forms of the plays of Bonner, Childress, Hansberry, Kennedy and Shange. The other elements become incidental to thought. The first act of subversion then is to upset the hierarchy of elements by placing ‘Thought’ first as the seminal motive that influences and informs a Black woman’s dramaturgy.

Aristotle in chapter three of the Poetics places thought third, after plot and character. He defines thought or dianoia as “the power of saying whatever can be said, or what befits the occasion” (14). He also adds that while “Thought is quite distinct from character”, it “is shown in all that is said by way of proving or disproving some particular point, or of enunciating some universal proposition or expressing some general truth”. (13-14)

Aristotle also emphasizes that character or ethos and thought or dianoia are two distinct qualities of the agent and are the two causes of action and “therefore of their ultimate success or failure” (13-14). Butcher explains dianoia as ‘thought’, the intellectual element, which is implied in all rational conduct, through which alone ethos can find outward expression, and which is separable from ethos only by a process of abstraction” (340). It is pertinent to note that while dianoia is described as the two causes of action, it is deliberately kept independent of it, and is explicitly embodied as manifested in speech, not in action.
Frye describes *dianoia* as "a secondary imitation of thought, a *mimesis logou*, concerned with typical thought, with the images, metaphors, diagrams and verbal ambiguities out of which specific ideas develop" (83). He also adds that nearly "all expressions for thought from the Greek *theoria* down, are connected with visual metaphors" (243). He concluded that "mythos is dianoia in movement; the dianoia is the mythos in stasis" (83). Frye offers "theme" as the closest translation of dianoia (52). *Dianoia* or thought may thus take on two functions, one as an informing and two, as an interpretive principle. Since character and thought are distinctive qualities, which manifest the agent’s will, it determines action. As thought is revealed through speech it becomes a verbal metaphor for the *mythos* or action.

Aristotelian mimesis defines thought as “the power of saying whatever can be said or what befits the occasion”. According to Belsey this power of saying belongs to a subject who is constructed in language, discourse and ideology (CTS 660). She adds also that classic realism interpellates subjects in order that they freely accept their subjectivity and their subjection (663). By this we can infer that certain meanings are possible and “obvious” within the dominant ideology and “certain subject – positions are equally ‘obviously’ the positions from which these meanings are apparent” (664).

However the construction of subjectivity also implies contradictions and incompatibilities, which may be manifested across a range of discourses. Women are inhibited by these discourses, as they are male – identified. Since the individual
subject is not a unity, it is possible to envisage changes that will establish a dialectic between language and the individual.

Black women have been mute and denied the 'power of saying', as they are excluded from the classifiers that influence subject-construction. Being denied a voice, they have been inhibited and subjected to the humiliation of being objects that are defined, described and denigrated. This negation has invalidated the Black woman's identity, her thoughts and experiences. Whiteness and maleness have been the markers of subjected hood or absolute subjectivity and thus it also determines mastery or 'the power of saying'.

In the theatre, where the assumptions are white and male, the Black woman playwright has to constantly confront a white stage reality. She has to, therefore employ even, alienating mediums, to reclaim her subject-position. This interpellation of the Black woman as subject causes a disruption as it reveals contradictions in the dominant ideology. Thus race and sex are charged with a new meanings as Black women playwrights see and stage whiteness and maleness as an image and not the origin.

Childress, prolific playwright expressing the reality of being Black and female in the theatre says, "being a woman adds difficulty to self-expression, but being Black is the larger factor of struggle against odds" (A Candle 115). However she insists that "The Negro woman will attain her rightful place in American literature
when those of us who care about truth, justice and a better life tell her story [...]" (A Candle 278).

Kennedy echoes a similar sentiment while expressing certain powerlessness in the face of white American. She says, "[...] I think that as a Black person in America, you almost have to force yourself on society" (Bryant and Overbeck 7). She also adds that a lot of her energy comes from the feeling of being "oppressed and overdefined by another group of people" (7DC 191).

The theatre is a colonized space where women have virtually been relegated to backgrounds such as balconies, bedrooms and boudoirs. The subjugation and silencing of women, was enacted on stage, to reinforce the social positioning of woman as 'other'. By Aristotle’s injunction, it follows that women should not be attributed manliness or cleverness. In other words, she is denied the power of saying or choosing. Black women playwrights have now re- claimed the power of saying and choosing ‘what befits the occasion’.

Classic realist texts following mimesis maintain that thought is shown in all that is said, to prove or disprove a point and to enunciate a universal proposition or general truth. For centuries Black female thought could not be shown, spoken, proved or disproved, as hegemonic structures silenced her. Her unspoken thoughts have now been voiced through the efforts of these Black women playwrights. The Black woman has since then created a space to speak and be heard. The struggle to retain those
public spaces of articulation where she may be heard still continues. Shange’s lady in brown articulates this anxiety in *For Colored Girls...*:

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somebody / anybody
sing black girls song
bring her out
to know herself
to know you
but sing her rhythms
carin / struggle / hard times
sing her song of life
she’s been dead so long
closed in silence so long
she doesn’t know the sound
of her own voice
her infinite beauty (4)
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The plays of Bonner, Childress, Hansberry, Kennedy and Shange become not just creative spaces but political arenas in which the identity of the Black woman is articulated and established. While thought is revealed in ‘showing and telling’, the objective of *dianoia*, as perceived by Aristotle, was a rhetorical device to debate and thus make a choice. The choices determined the success or failure of the agent. This rhetorical device included “the intellectual reflections of the speaker, the proof of his own statements, the disproof of those of his opponents, his general maxims concerning life and conduct, as elicited by the action and forming part of a train of reasoning” (Butcher 343).

In the theatre, since ideology is inscribed in discourse, what is said and how it is shown, pre- supposes a single conception of history and truth. The subjectivity of the subject in accommodating the dominant ideology maintains order. Thus it follows
that thought, for all its individual character, when professed in public, must necessarily be acceptable or credible from the position of the dominant ideology. The speaking subject becomes the author of the word and its meaning, in the concrete realities in which the individual participates. Therefore, what is said and how it is proved/disproved is one of the most significant ways in which ideologies are perpetuated and concretized.

Shange accepting this reality quotes “I think it is important for us never to forget that language determines how we perceive ourselves and unless women and people of color take charge of language we are nothing” (qtd. in Lester 272). Through the voice of Eli in Spell #7, Shange makes a territorial claim of mental spaces.

Eli: this is

My Kingdom
there shall be no trespassers / no marauders
no tourist in my land
you nurture these gardens or be shot at sight
...................................................
i am mantling an array of strength & beauty
no one shall interfere with this
the construction of myself
my city my theatre
my bar come to my poems
but understand we speak english carefully (76)

Black women have to use the language that they have been taught to hate themselves in and which, according to Shange, “perpetuates the notions that cause pain to every black child as he / she learns to speak of the world & the self”. This culture of oppression minimizes “the emotional vocabulary to the extent that admitting feelings of range, defeat, frustration is virtually impossible outside a
collective voice”. Shange adopts ‘combat breathing’, a strategy advocated by Fanon which is “a living response to the Black and white of what we live ‘n’ where” (Foreword 68).

Black women playwrights struggle to posit themselves in Western languages in which Blackness itself is an absence. Figuration, thus becomes a means of survival in Western discourse. ‘Signifying’ is a mode of figuration, native to African discourses, and is pertinent to Black literacy. This “metaphorical literacy” becomes a strategy to disrupt received meanings and is “a rhetorical strategy” (Gates BL & LT 6). In Spell #7, Shange manipulates meanings with a large minstrel mask, which hangs over the stage. This mask is a symbol of the historical enslavement and appropriation of Black culture from minstrelsy to contemporary theatre. Lou, the magician, who is also the interlocutor, quotes:

all things are possible
but ain’t no colored magician in his right mind
gonna make you white
i mean
this is blk magic (.72)

Natalie’s speech in Spell #7 is a signifyin’ speech in whiteface where she assumes the identity of a white girl and mimics her. Thus the power to describe and define the white female as ‘other’ reinstates her as subject under the conditions that theatre validates (111-113). This illustration reveals how Black women playwrights choose unique strategies to prove/disprove, show and enunciate the reality of being
Black and female within the dominant discourse. Black women playwrights reject the notion that there is one single reality.

The prerogative of whites to reduce conditions to undifferentiated sameness excludes the complexity of Black women’s lives. These playwrights challenge the notion that there is only one reality in the theatre that is framed by the gaze. Western classic realist texts ‘enunciate universal or general truths’ which is the objective of mimesis. The objective of Black women’s dramaturgy is to validate other realities, and to understand the political reality of the simultaneity of oppression and to seek a politic that redefines the Black woman on her terms.

This consciousness of being different, of being Black and female is revealed in the ideological positions they claim and the dramaturgies of these Black women playwrights. Belsey states that the split between the real and the imagined real is a split between the eye and the gaze. This split is “indicative of a crisis in social formation that demands a change” (CTS 664). These Black women playwrights attempt to suture this split and offer subjects that ‘see’ other realities, thus reclaiming displaced space and interrogating ‘universal propositions and general truths’.

A review of their ‘thoughts’ on being Black and female indicates their ideological position. It also testifies that though these women belonged to different times and material conditions yet the consciousness of being Black and female remains unaltered. This in turn is responsible for the collective experiences they are
enjoined and forced to share, which has resulted in a series of dramatic expressions, which manifest common approaches to the specific condition of being Black women. These common approaches have led to the evolution of a dramaturgy that links them over time and space.

Bonner writing in the twenties, during the Harlem Renaissance, was one of Dubois’ ‘Talented Tenth’. Despite her talent, she faced sexism within her own community and racism without. This double jeopardy is lyrically expressed in her essay “On Being Young -A Woman- and Colored” (1925). She articulates her feelings about the gaze and its impelling power to sweep her “into the deep waters of a new sea of human foibles and mannerisms, of a peculiar psychology and prejudices”. She denounces Anglo-Saxon intelligence for being “warped and stunted”. She encourages young, black women to absorb “the essences, the overtones, the tints and shadows” and ignore “the measurement by standards known within a limited group and not those of an unlimited, seeing world [...] like the blind, blind mice” (On Being Young 212-15).

Though Bonner does not publicize her ‘self’, and her works remain aloof from her own educated, upper class reality, yet her fictional voice becomes the medium for the protests of the voiceless and powerless. Her attempts to portray America stems from a deep personal conviction, which is revealed in her documentary and realistic portrayals of the conditions and circumstances she observed and which control her characters. Musser notes, “Marita Bonner re-allocates the goals of the leaders of the
Harlem Renaissance as a way to focus attention on the neglected issues that African-American women in particular, had to face every day" (83).

Hansberry, though forty five years apart from Bonner, presents similar concerns and convictions in her collection of personal essays. Entitled “To be Young, Gifted and Black” (1970), it reveals Hansberry’s convictions not only as an artist but also as a Black, female, writer. Her opening statement “I was born black and female”, synthesises her worldviews. Fundamental to this view, is a probing of the individual within the specifics of culture, race and gender. For Hansberry, universality includes the alternative. In her redefinition of universalism, she states,” One of the most sound ideas in dramatic writing is that in order to create the universal, you must pay very great attention to the particular”. She acknowledges that the truthful acceptance of “what is” will enable people “to become somebody” (To Be Young 128). Hansberry’s commitment to justice and her sensitive treatment of histories and issues have earned her varied reactions. Though she was caught in a paradox of Black and white expectations, she remained true to her artistic vision to write “of not only what is but what is possible […] because that is part of reality too” (THY 234).

Childress, a contemporary of Hansberry, was more vociferous in her indictments against racism and sexism. In her essay “A Woman Playwright Speaks Her Mind” (1966), she talks about her “constant, unrelenting struggle against racism and for human rights” (qtd. in M.Evans 278). She describes her writing as a “labor of love” but more significantly as “an act of defiance” (111). Unlike Hansberry, she
refuses to be drawn into ambivalent situations,” either / or situations”, for she categorically states that they “put shackles on a writers’ pen” as does “Universality and common experience” (113). In Black Scenes (1971) she reiterates that “Black experience means living a segregated and very special existence” (xi) and as a Black writer she is involved in “explaining pain to those who inflict it” (qtd in M. Evans, 113).

Kennedy’s struggle against the oppressiveness of racism has shaped her characteristic technique of portraying the psyche of a Black woman under duress. Blau attests that Kennedy “rehearses the guilt, fantasies and phobias of her secretly divided world” (532). Issues that rankled the Black community in the sixties find symbolic expression in her plays. For Kennedy “Heroism is trying to decipher life through work”. Her characters, who are also writers, are trying to explore “in this work the history of race, which for me is the predominant question of my existence” (176x’ 190).

Shange speaks of a similar preoccupation when she says, “this world will do its best to take from her all she is unless she is willing to struggle” (See No Evil xii). An avowed feminist, she is sometimes visceral in her expressions. In her foreword to Spell # 7 entitled “unrecovered losses /black theatre traditions” she states:

yes / being an afro-american writer is something to be self – conscious abt / & yes / in order to think n communicate the thoughts n feelings i want to think n communicate / i haveta fix my tool to my needs /i haveta take it apart to the
bone/ so that the malignancies fall away/ leaving us space to literally create our own image/" (68).

These statements reveal the concerns and convictions of Bonner, Childress, Hansberry, Kennedy and Shange and validate the unique and distinct characteristics of their dramaturgy. Although disparate conditions have shaped their perceptions and experiences, it is evident that there is a collective envisioning of their ideological positions as Black female playwrights. This dramaturgy involves the dismantling of oppressive structures that are responsible for their invisibility or denigration. They displace these codes with new mythic structures that codify its aesthetics and create new art forms, which no longer find their basic principles in the dictates of Western dramaturgy.

Childress' search for new forms resulted in moving beyond content to theme. He adds, "Knowledge of such forms and much content taught me to break rules and allow my own thought and structure patterns with failure and success" (A Candle 14-15). Hansberry believed that imagination had no bounds in realism and "You can do anything which is permissible in terms of the truth of the characters (TBY 7). Both Hansberry and Childress use realist gestures but are radical in their treatment of their themes. The more innovative experimenters are Kennedy, Shange and Bonner, who in their choice of radical forms and techniques defy classification by Western dramatic codes.
Shange viciously denounces European aesthetics and psychology and the notion of the perfect play. In her foreword to Spell # 7 she argues that Western dramatic traditions are "unsuited to the needs of Afro-Americans (p. 67). She asserts, "I am interested [...] in creating vehicles for people (of color and women) who can't exist in (European artistic) forms [...] I am trying to create a land for us where we can live" (See No Evil 26).

Black female consciousness is re-located in models that affirm the subjectivity of their experiences and organizes discursive meaning around different conceptions of history and truth. These new excursions in forms and themes are distinctly different from male or white authors. These themes and forms are reflective of their need to not only legitimise their experiences but to also create forms that incorporate cultural expressions. These forms which include African rhythms, folklore, narrative patterns, neo-Africanisms and other indigenous forms such as jazz, blues, gospels and spirituals, and dance, create distinct expressions in the theatre.

The primary theme in Black women's drama is a quest for identity. However this quest is possible only if earlier images and stereotypes are deconstructed. The debunking of the historicization of the Black female through stereotyping has led to a series of explorations into the lives of ordinary Black women. In order to authenticate the Black female subject, the protagonist in these plays is almost always a Black woman or a group of Black women who collectively represent the experiences
These plays portray the journey of the Black woman from slavery to autonomy and self-hood. These women discuss issues that affect them as Black women, on account of their blackness, or femaleness or both.

The plays chosen for investigation have shown unanimity in the choice of themes. Significant among them is a quest for identity, survival, motherhood and sisterhood. There is also the theme of affiliation with coloured communities. The black female hero raises other issues pertaining to their everydayness such as their bodies, sexuality, infidelity, rape, abortion, unemployment, children and the men in their lives. These women while rarely transcending their contexts however show remarkable spirit in coping and surviving, resisting or protesting against racism and sexism.

Bonner’s first play The Pot Maker: A Play to be Read (1927) was written during the Harlem Renaissance. The subtitle attests to the realities of discrimination in not only the American but also in Black theatres. None of Bonner’s plays have been produced, though they have all won prizes in Black playwriting competitions. This play reveals the realities of the world of rural, uneducated women who seem out of touch with the ideologies the African-American revival of the twenties. Bonner relocated the goals of the Harlem Renaissance to focus on the neglected issues that Black women face everyday.
Bonner takes a closer look at a rural Black family caught between poverty and spirituality. These characters are not independently strong, individualized or amphant. Lucinda, the central character is torn between an indifferent husband who heard the call of God and a boorish lover who pays her attention. Lucinda makes an emotional choice rather than a conventional moral one.

The play itself is an experiment with the idiom and structure of the black folk play. Though it uses the analogy of the Pot Maker, which is an indigenous black folk tale, yet it becomes a powerful means to subvert the objectives of the morality play. She thus extends the conventional boundaries of the black folk play. Inherent ironies in the play raise questions that are troublesome. Nettie Jackson asks her son, Elias, to rehearse his sermon. He has decided to use story of the Pot-Maker to illustrate God’s love and mercy. When Nettie asks him if the tale was from the Bible, Elias replies “This is one of them tales like Jesus used to tell the Pharisees [...]” (TPM 6). Bonner also uses the rhythms and tones of the Black sermon in the narration of the folk tale.

In The Purple Flower (1928) Bonner’s masterpiece, uses symbol and allegory to transform “political necessity into artistic adventure”, according to Mckay (What Were They Saying 143). Though the setting is surreal, Chick calls it a morality play, which is subversive, as violence is advocated (25).
The purple flower, which represents "the Flower – of life – at – Fullest", is a symbol of ungendered whiteness and the utopian ideal. However Bonner undercuts once again the conventional objective of a morality play and advocates a bloody revolution. Three years before in an essay she advised "[...] When time is ripe, swoop to your feet at full height – at a single gesture" ((On Being Young 213). In 1928, the time was ripe for the issue of racism to be treated differently and Bonner responded 'in a single gesture'.

Toni Cade Bambara states, "The responsibility of an artist representing an oppressed people is to make revolution irresistible" (qtd. in Evans 133). Bonner fulfils that role politically and aesthetically. While Bonner was pre-empting the militancy and aggression of the sixties in her time, her contemporaries were considering integration. The opposite is true of Kennedy who ignored the Black Power movement of the sixties to independently focus on the nature and subjectivity of Blackness and its effect on the psyche of the Black woman.

Kennedy's plays defy the logic of coherence with her multi-layered characters, surreal montages, disturbing images and monologic narratives. Disrupting time and linearity, she foregrounds whiteness and denounces blackness as it reeks of only sterility, rejection and pain. History, religion and politics are re-located in the 'Negro' who symbolizes the political incorrectness of, not so much the term as the treatment meted to Blacks in white America. She persistently portrays the romance of white
history and its influence in shaping the Black psyche. However she also reveals simultaneously its corrosive nature and the bastardization of its ideals.

Sarah, the Black tragic character in *Funnyhouse of a Negro* cries, "I clung ployally to the lie of relationships, again and again seeking to establish a connection between my characters. Jesus is Victoria’s son… A loving relationship exists between myself and Queen Victoria, a love between Jesus and myself. But they are all lies" (7). Sarah finally commits suicide as her character fails in individuation and reveals a crisis in social formation.

In *A Rats Mass* a similar mythopoeic dramaturgy emerges, which is a layering of narratives which sound like antiphonal disturbances. Here Rosemary, the white Catholic girl inspires a Black brother and sister to commit incest. She will not absolve them, so they degenerate into sub-human beings, rats, which are hunted down by the Nazis. Brother and Sister Rat remain trapped but alienated by the Euro-Christian ethos Rosemary symbolizes. Brother Rat cries: “Rosemary atone us take us, take us beyond the Nazis … Atone us. Deliver us to your descendants” (60). The insidious imposition of the dominant ideology on the twoness of Black Americans is evident in Brother Rat’s guilty confession of his love for whiteness: “God, I think of Rosemary all the time. I love her… Yet I told Kay I am her keeper yet I told Rosemary I love her. It is the secret of my battlefield” (63). Kennedy’s play shows how the indices of Western ideology - religion, history and education betray the faith of Black people
and this becomes the means to validate the de-humanization and ghettoization of the Black.

Ntozake Shange's contribution to the theatre is her innovative form the choreopoem— an amalgamation of the cultural heritage of Black Americans. The 'choreopoem' is 'a “theatrical expression that combines poetry, prose, song, dance and music [...] of storytelling, rhythm, physical movement and emotional catharsis” (Lester 3) This novel form which crosses generic boundaries, resists conventional definitions thus rendering it a subversive tool, a weapon, for cultural warfare against racism and sexism.

For Colored Girls... is a choreopoem, a rite of passage for seven Black women to come into self-hood and celebrate their identities The title of the play “for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf” itself points to transition and transformation. Seven nameless Black women, representing the colours of the rainbow, yet distinctive in their individual narrations, merge to form a single collective symbol of Black female consciousness.

Their narrations cover the issues that trouble them. This complexity is enacted through music, dance and mime, through body, mind and soul. The opening scene begins with harsh music and the seven women “Freeze in postures of distress”(3). Each of them comes from “outside” metropolises; they feel alienated in their specific
situations. The lady in orange in a matter-of-fact tone states “so this is a requiem for myself / cuz: i have died in a real way”. She adds “i don’t stand being sorry & colored at the same time / its so redundant in the modern world” (43).

The quest for identity, for affiliation leads to a celebration of sisterhood. The catharsis at the end of the Beau Willie episode culminates in spiritual healing as they gather into a tight circle and sing “i found god in myself & i loved her”. Though the circle seems to be insular, yet the lady in brown addresses coloured girls who have considered suicide, like them, and urges them to move “to the ends of their own rainbows” (64). Shange herself considered suicide twice but moved on, as her preface affirms “i am on the other side of the rainbow / picking up the pieces of days spent waitin for the poem to be heard / while you listen / i have other work to do” (xviii).

The transitions from death to life, from wounds to healing, from alienation to community are expressed through the choreopoem. The quest for identity is captured in an inimical Black female way, as the lady in yellow declares, “my spirit is too ancient to understand the separation of soul and gender / my love too delicate to have thrown back on my face”(45).

In Spell # 7 Shange explores the realities of being Black in modern America and makes powerful indictments against racial and sexual stereotypes. The action arises from the large minstrel mask, which hangs above the stage. This mask specifies
a historical moment and also racist mythologies. The mask itself becomes a signifier of possible transformations and therefore apt for signifying. This metadrama challenges temporal boundaries though the settings are more naturalistic. The actors through performance and narrative trace the history of minstrelsy and also reveal how the theatre stages myths about the ‘other’. Shange shows how minstrelsy, though banned by law, is still alive in a more insidious form in the theatre. This parallels the abolition of slavery in letter, but points to the persistent practice of its concomitant - racism.

Lou, the magician and interlocutor, is an integral part of the trickster tale in African discourse. He uses the minstrel mask as a signifying trope. At the beginning of the play, he asserts the legitimacy of his role:

this is blk magic
you lookin at
& I m fixin’ you up good/ fixin ‘ you & up
good & colored
you gonna be colored all yr life
…colored & love it / love it been colored (72).

When the Black actors sing and move in the minstrel mode, Lou challenges the audience “who fell so easily into his hands & who were so aroused by the way the black - faced figures sang n danced” by his monologue (73). At the end of his speech, he announces: “Why dontchu c’ mon & live my life for me / since the dreams aint emuf/ go on & live my life for me / I didn’t want certain moments at all / i’d give em to anybody …awright” (73).
The play reveals the many ways Black people are denigrated in the theatre. Lily, who is working for a decent part, is sarcastically goaded by Lou, who asks her if she is expecting the role of Lady Macbeth or Mother Courage. Eli, the bartender retorts, “how the hell is she gonna play Lady Macbeth and Macbeth’s a white dude” (76). Though the comment seems a casual repartee, it points to the issue of miscegenation.

Later when Lily is asked if her show is closing down, she responds, “no / show is not closin / but if that director asks me to play it any blacker / I am gonna have to do in a mammy dress” (78). Blackness is codified through certain images, here it is the Black woman as the mammy from the days of slavery who has been made a mythic figure. This shows the stereotypical roles that are written for Black actors.

Shange also berates the audience who force Black actors to take such demeaning roles in order to make a living. Their lust for entertainment, their enjoyment at the expense of the humiliation of Black people, their hunger for the primeval and the exotic is powerfully commented on in Ross and Bettina’s lines.

Ross : These factories  
Bettina: These middle management positions  
Ross : Make Madison garden  
Bettina: The temple of the primal scream (79)
Shange also presents the real people behind the masks. The unmasking of the actors gives the audience a glimpse of the faces behind the mask, of real people underneath their skins. They symbolically step out of black face Lou, in a very poignant speech says:

you have t come with me / to this place where magic is / to hear my song / sometimes i forget & leave my tune in the corner of the closet under all the dirty clothes / in this place / magic asks me where ive been / how we been sing in lately i leave my self in all the wrong hands/ in this place where magic is involved in undoin our masks / i am able to smile answer that (91)

Shange also uses the mutability of the stage to make whites a victim of minstrelsy, by using Blacks in white face to stereotype whites. Maxine and Natalie appropriate the white girl’s image and go through several motions that reduce the white girl to a stereotype. However the pressure of acting in masks leads to a climax when Natalie makes a seamless switch from white girl to black girl, to explore the effects of racism and sexism. Shange explores strategies available within the theatre to subvert the white male gaze. By appropriating images framed by the gaze, she dismantles it and turns it against the originator, thus empowering the characters.

Shange sees the value of communities to nurture and sustain the lives of Black people who are alienated from others. The shared experience of the individual allows them to connect over spaces and leads them to an awareness of not only the self but also a communication of selves. This is manifested in the cumulative response of the actors who interact with the audience to affirm that they “love it been colored”. This is the
magic of the spell that Shange casts through her choreopoem. Spell #7, like For Colored Girls... ends in a ritual of communal healing, of affirmation and celebration.

Childress raised a similar issue of racism in the theatre in the mid-fifties. Trouble in Mind makes use of the play—within—the play structure to reveal the ways Blacks are treated in the theatre, the way they are historicized and stereotyped. The play begins with a stage rehearsal of “Chaos in Belleville”. A range of characters Sheldon, Millie, Judy, John and Wiletta not only disclose the limited choices available to Blacks, but also their illusions about the democratic nature of the American theatre. A Black artiste in a white theatre has to choose between being out of work or typecast.

John Nivens a trained actor has great hopes for a splendid career in the theatre. When he enters, he announces “I think the theatre is the grandest place in the world and I plan to go right to the top” (139) Wiletta, the Black middle-aged heroine has quite a different sentiment to share. Her years of experience on the American stage have taught her that “show business, its just a business. Colored folks ain’t in no theatre” (139). She not only exposes racism but also sexism within the theatre. She says, “I always say it’s the man’s play, the man’s money and the man’s theatre. So what you gonna do” (141).

The phallocratic gaze that frames the Black actor is evident in the attitude of the white director Al Manners towards his cast. When Wiletta expresses her uneasiness in
playing a role, he says, "Darling, don't think. You're great until you start thinking. I don't expect you to" (155).

The play “Chaos in Belleville” is about lynching or at least a white perspective that validates lynching. The script is a moderate white man’s view that expects a Black mother to be law-abiding and surrender her son to the law. Wiletta refuses instinctively, she quotes, “They weren’t sent to be killed by their mama. The writer wants the damn white man to be the hero—and I am the villain (169).

Wiletta, the spirited middle aged actress, who has survived twenty five years of racism and sexism in the theatre is able to get even with Manners when she confronts him “Would you send your son to be murdered?” (169). The angry response that follows very succinctly portrays Childress bold statements about racism. Manners reveals the truth about racism in the theatre:

Do you think I can stick my neck out by telling the truth about you? [...] The American public is not ready to see you the way you want to be seen because, one, they don’t believe it, two, they don’t want to believe it and three, they’re convinced they’re superior...What goes for my son doesn’t necessarily go for yours! .... They’ve got nothing in common ... not a goddam thing (171).

The speech affects the rest of the cast, who see things clearly but still make choices that attest the limitedness of those choices for people to whom survival is a priority. Wiletta is the only one, who seeks affirmation in the truth about herself. The play ends with her taking a private moment centre – stage in front of an empty theatre,
with only Henry for company, to recite a psalm in the Black gospel form. Wiletta’s spirit is invincible. She reflects the spirit of Childress and other Black women in the theatre, in claiming a space on the stage on her terms.

While Trouble in Mind revolves primarily around the confrontation of Black and white, it also exposes the poor self-esteem that Blacks have of themselves. However Childress’ play Wine in the Wilderness explores this theme more fully in an intra-racial context against the race riots of the sixties. This play deconstructs the myth of the Black woman within her own community and is similar to Shange’s For Colored Girls... which also exposes the treatment that Black men, influenced by white patriarchy, mete out to their women. This play too is well crafted to explore the theme of sexism and to expose the illusions that are constructed by the gaze and how false signs are mistaken for true symbols.

Bill, the Black artist, is painting a triptych, which portrays three faces of the Black woman—“an innocent child”, “a messed up chick” and the “black queen” (126). Bill wants “all messed up chicks” like Tommy, to see “what a woman ought to be” (126). In fact when he sees Tommy, he confides to Sonny—Man, “She’s as far from my African Queen as a woman can get and still be female [...] there’s no hope for her” (126). Bill’s feelings are feelings of insecurity at the Black woman’s independent spirit. He would like them to “leave something for a man to do” (139). He adds, “another thing... Our women don’t know a damn thing about being feminine”(139).
Cynthia, Sonny - man's wife, advises Tommy to be more feminine if she wants to win Bill's attention. Tommy, a survivor, finds it hard to assimilate Cynthia's advice about letting "the black man have his manhood again" (134). Childress, through Tommy, makes the Black man restore the Black woman's womanhood again. When Bill recognizes Tommy's resilience and gentleness, her strength and softness, her persistence and dreams, he begins to see the person behind the shabby clothes and embarrassing mannerisms.

When Tommy realizes that she was being laughed at for who she was, she retorts, "I don't have to wait for anybody's by-your leave to be 'Wine in the Wilderness' woman. I can be it if I wanta ... and I am. I am. I am. I'm 'Wine in the Wilderness'". The speech has a remarkable effect on Bill, Sonny - Man and Cynthia. Bill accepts his illusions about the ideal Black woman, the exotic African beauty who now seems to him "nothin' but accessories, dreams I drummed up outta the junk room of my mind"(149). Childress is thus able to theatrically express her convictions about the extra-ordinary heroism of ordinary Black women. Childress comments, "Black writers cannot afford to abuse or neglect the so called ordinary characters who represent a part of ourselves; the self twice denied, first by racism and then by class difference" (qtd. in Brown- Guillory Their Place 53).

A similar theme is dramatically outlined in Hansberry's A Raisin in the Sun. In this play she attempts to redefine the images of a Black family, by bringing the
fourth wall down. She personalizes the political issues of racism and sexism on the lives of the Younger family in same riot-torn sixties. Through this play, Hansberry dismantles the myth of the emasculating Black matriarch. Lena Younger, the Black mother, is in fact the means by which Walter, her son reaches his manhood.

The portrayal of three generations of women conditioned by vastly different circumstances is also Hansberry’s means of historicizing Black female experiences and legitimizing them. Lena Younger, sixty and head of the family, has worked all her life for the fortune she is about to receive. Her dream is to own a house, a place to call her own. Ruth, Walter’s wife, is half Lena’s age, but despair turns her into a “tired, settled woman; she works as a domestic hand and puts up with her husband’s irresponsible behaviour, out of habit. Beneatha is a refreshing, spirited young woman, who is determined to be somebody, more specifically a doctor” (54) She believes fiercely in the freedom and liberation of the African people rather than in Christian salvation. In her quest for love and a career, she meets two men- Asagai, the passionate African activist who inspires her to accept her African roots and natural beauty and George Murchison, rich, decent but with no ideas except those of being an assimilationist.

Walter, feels caged in a room full of women; he makes disparaging remarks about Black women, very like Bill in Wine in the Wilderness. He states “We one group of men tied to race of women with small minds he thinks his dreams are more
legitimate than Beneatha’s because “ain’t many girls who decide to be a doctor” (44). He arrests their dreams with his own pride and arrogance and causes deep pain and suffering to the family, with his selfish irresponsibility. However his selfishness becomes the act that spurs them to discover their own strength and to fight for what they believe in - Mama, the right to her money; Ruth, the right to choose; and Beneatha, the right to a future.

Racism rears its ugly head in the play, when it threatens to end Mama Younger’s dream. She invests in a house in a white neighborhood in a daring act of defiance and self-preservation. When George Lindner threatens to end it, Walter rises to the occasion to protect his family. In the process he gains new sights and recovers his place as head of the family. Hansberry seems to assert that if Black women have become matriarchs it is because of the absence of real men.

There are several conflicts and confrontations in the play. There is the generational shift in perspectives – for Walter, this money spells a respectable life, for Mama, it is freedom, for Beneatha, it is a future. There are also confrontations between black and white, man and woman, what is right and decent, and segregation and affiliation. Though Hansberry called it a play about an American family, the particular circumstances of the Younger family are pertinently Black. The title “A Raisin in the Sun” is borrowed from the poem “A Dream Deferred” by Langston Hughes written in the twenties, the time of the Harlem Renaissance. The title gives it
a political slant as it interrogates the options available to Black people with dreams—should they dry up or explode like a raisin in the sun? The answers are given in the play. The Younger family’s acquisition is not just an act of defiance, it is also an act of affirming the right to be.

While *A Raisin in the Sun* is set in the sixties, Hansberry’s next play goes back to slavery. *The Drinking Gourd* is an un-produced play, for precisely the same reason, that it portrays racism. The play is a powerful indictment of American slavery. It dramatizes the devastating effects of slavery on master and slave set at the beginning of the Civil War. The play relocates history in the narrative of Rissa and Hannibal, the slaves and the Soldier. “The Drinking Gourd”, in slave parlance, was a metaphor for liberation, attributed to the constellation of the Great Dipper. It became the sign that pointed to freedom. It was also a slave song popularized by the Underground Railway that helped thousands of slave escape to the North and freedom.

Hansberry violates the romantic view of the slave woman who had for centuries been carefully preserved in the white imagination as the faithful mammy. This picture has been interrogated by Childress in *Trouble in Mind*. Rissa, the Black slave woman allows her white master Hiram Sweet to die, rather than jeopardize her son Hannibal’s, escape to freedom. Hansberry also examines the brutal effects of slavery, not only on Blacks but also whites. By showing the white also as victim, she
negates the right to domination and questions the whole system of slavery, labour and race. This play too revolves around confrontations of black and white, men and women, between the history of the master and the slave and between the narratives of slave and master.

However, the most significant contribution has been the subversion of the Black mother after two hundred years of mythologizing. Spillers quotes:

The African-American male has been touched, therefore, by the mother, handed by her in ways that the white American male is allowed to temporize by a fatherly reprieve. [...] the African-American woman, the mother, the daughter, becomes historically the powerful and shadowy evocation of a cultural synthesis long evaporated — the Law of the Mother — only and precisely because legal enslavement removed the African-American male not so much from sight as from mimetic view as a partner in the prevailing social fiction of the Father’s name, the Father’s Law (403 - 404).

Hansberry’s plays present the human and historic development that slavery imposed on the social and psychological conditions and the far reaching consequences of misnaming. While motherhood becomes “the founding term of human and social enactment”, it also raises the curious position of the Black mother who is also “mother dispossessed” (Spillers 404). She asserts that the future of the Black race lies in the strength and wisdom of Black motherhood. Hansberry acknowledges this personally in her play A Raisin in the Sun through her dedication to her mother “to mama: in gratitude for the dream” (33).

Black feminist thought has shaped a politic that re-captures the Black female consciousness through the dramaturgy of Bonner, Childress, Hansberry, Kennedy and
Shange. This dramaturgy seeks to recover lost ground and posit Black women in it by de-centering the gaze and claiming the privilege of returning the gaze. They return the gaze by refusing the theatrical codes that enslave them in racist and sexist frames of representation. These plays manifest themes and forms, which are directly related to their own position as Black women playwrights. By legitimizing Black female experience through their themes and in claiming subjecthood through their characters, they deconstruct the structures of Western aesthetic codes that had privileged only whites. This liberation empowers and sustains Black women’s theatre.

Black feminist consciousness and thought informs the dramaturgy of these five playwrights and structures its themes. Therefore thought is the primary determining principle of the practices of these five Black women playwrights. It is the basis of the formal and aesthetic causes of Black women’s drama. Thought maps the grounds by determining the plot and narrative and explains the goal through characters, music and spectacle. Thus thought comes first, as the Black feminist impulse is the foundation on which this dramaturgy rests its case.
NOTES
