



Trappings that surround the construct of Gender: A Study of Ntozake Shange's Choreopoems

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Abstract:

Gender is a vast and expanding subject which is constantly changing and producing new and often surprising inflections of meaning. It is a term for the social, cultural and historical construction of sexual difference. The nineteenth-century doctrine of separate spheres for men and women was built on constructs of gendered identity rather than any inherent predisposition on the basis of anatomy and capacity for childbearing. The present paper attempts to delineate Ntozake Shange's Choreopoems by studying the gender confined roles the society has made them to perform and the endeavors of the women to break free from the shackles and establish an identity of their own.

Keywords:

African American, Choreopoem, Colored, Gender, Theatre,

Sex is biological but gender is entirely a construct of society, established through the ages. All the trappings that surround the construct of gender such as the roles of a man and a woman in the domestic sphere and elsewhere, their responsibilities, the choices they make, the lives they lead, their career aspirations are all conditioned and determined by the gender conceptions of society. Roger Webster in *Studying Literary Theory: An Introduction* quotes Brooker, "There is a distinction to be made between sex and gender. Sex is a term which can be used to indicate the biological differences between men and women, but gender signifies the socially constructed differences which operate in most societies and which lead to forms of inequality, oppression and exploitation between the sexes." (Brooker 1992:72)

Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* introduced her now well-known theory of the performativity of gender. Butler says that gender is the performance identification, a performance that constructs the identification. Butler believes that it is gender performativity that determines the apprehension of sexed bodies and not cultural gender. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler elaborates upon Ortner's earlier equation:



gender is not to culture as sex is to nature; gender is also the discursive/ cultural means by which ‘sexed nature’ or a ‘natural sex’ is produced and established as ‘prediscursive’, prior to culture, a politically neutral surface on *which* culture acts. This [is the] construction of sex as the radically unconstructed. (11)

Simone de Beauvoir’s ‘One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman’ distinguishes sex from gender suggesting that gender is an identity gradually acquired. Gender is not a cultural construction, but is a process of constructing ourselves. Gender these days is passively determined, constructed by a personified system of patriarchy or phallogocentric language which precedes and determines the subject itself. Even if gender is rightly understood to be constructed by such systems, it remains necessary to ask after the specific mechanism of this construction. Judith Butler in her *Gender Trouble* agrees that gender is a symbolic form of recurring public action which makes woman as desiring and desirable objects. She says:

...gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts*. The effect of gender is produced through the stylization of the body and hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self. (140)

This becomes the basis of understanding which determines the nature of activities of the gendered self.

Women therefore yearn for an identity and request for a space and recognition of self. They have attempted to create a space for themselves from time immemorial. The peculiar history and culture of Afro-American women is drawn from the institution of slavery leading to racism. Slavery shaped certain elements of sexism that still persist in American society wherein slave women were expected to do both men’s work and women’s work. As Barbara Christian observes in *Black Feminist Criticism*, “... female slaves were valued and devalued for their capacity to breed slaves...they were valued and devalued for their supposedly incredible sexuality...for their physical and psychological strength in a society where strength was a masculine word, for their lack of beauty in a society where beauty was equated with women” (161).

The African woman, idealized as mother earth, remained intact in her traditional gendered sphere untouched by the West. She provided a source of cleansing for the men who had ventured out and were tainted by European education, religion, ideas, money. The black men writers stressed the image defending clitoridectomies as necessary in order to preserve the culture. The women were prevented from leaving their backbreaking life in the countryside to preserve the traditional culture but it was not necessary for men to stick to culture

These women needed a platform to express their needs. However, it is a challenge for the black female dramatist to try to treat women right and make them legitimate literary figures. Black women’s appearance in



American literature through Zora Neale Hurston's work is transitional. The major theme dominating Afro-American women's literature is a desire to define and express a discovery of self in relation to the society in which one lives. These desires have been opposed, repressed, and distorted by society but Afro-American women writers' constant and continuous effort has achieved their dreams.

Ntozake Shange resembles Childress and Hansberry in her commitment to telling the truth about spreading and perpetuating the false myth concerning black women. Claudia Tate quotes Shange: "I can't live around a whole bunch of lies...I cannot sustain lies...I refuse to be part of this conspiracy of silence ... I'm tired of living lies" (Tate 158). She argues that lies are being told about racism, sexism, poverty, and imperialism and she feels that much of the sufferings experienced by the women and black people are not respected in America. She aims to evoke an emotional response as she bares the lives of these walking wounded for all to see. And she writes about the roughness and the rawness of human life, shaped by her own personal struggle to survive in America as a black woman. She dignifies women's suffering and informs females that they have a responsibility to love themselves and each other enough to resist oppression. Her female characters fight with the dilemma of living in a world where being female and colored makes them twice oppressed.

Shange frames a theatrical pattern of her own to present a convincing portrait of the dilemma of the blacks and named it the choreopoem. Her characters through poetry, dance, and song, express their trials and triumphs in a world bent on their eradication and silence:

Ever since I realized there was someone calt
a colored girl and evil woman a bitch or a nag is
i been trying not to do that & leave bitterness
in somebody else's cup / ...
So this is a requiem for myself /cus
i have died in a
real way / ... cuz i don't know
any more / how to avoid my own face wet with my
fears / cuz i had convinced myself colored girls
had no
right to sorrow / ...
icdn't stand it
icdn't stand bein sorry and colored at
the same time
its so redundant in the modern world. (*for colored girls* 42-43)

The poem brings out a colored girls predicament in a white world. Her longing for a better life and her desire to survive in the face of challenges in the racist and world is quite evident.



The choreopoem is a theatrical expression which emerges from an African tradition of storytelling, rhythm, physical movement and emotional catharsis. It is an ancient [African] form-words and movement happening simultaneously. The uniqueness of the form is that the words are not separate from dance but are one-intertwined so one couldn't imagine one without the other. As Neal A. Lester observes in *Ntozake Shange: A Critical Study of the Plays*, "Shange uses an unconventional American form to present more accurately what she offers as her own African-American culture by rejecting Standard English in favor of black vernacular and profanity and declares open war on the patriarchy by creating her own rules of spelling, punctuation, capitalizations, word usage, and even syntax" (5).

Shange was brought to the limelight with her Broadway production of the choreopoem *for colored girl*. It was originally intended for the black women. But its commercial success removed the play from its intended audience. It took the play out of reach of the average black female, children, particularly young girls, who are abused every single year. Her deep concern for young girls is visible when she says, "If there is an audience for whom I writ, it's the little girls who are coming of age. I want them to know that they are not alone and that we adult women thought and continue to think about them" (Tate 162). Shange targets the parents or guardians of adolescent black girls, particularly older women, whose task is to nurture that young girl's emotional and psychological identity. Shange defines the role, as a mother, to her own adolescent daughter:

[I]ts the silence of mothers that is so shattering. The mothers know that it's a dreadful proposition to give up one's life for one's family and one's mate and, therefore, lose oneself in the process of caring and tending for others. To send one's daughter off to that kind of self-sacrifice in silence with no preparation is a mortal sin to me. To do this without telling her that this is a sacrifice is so unnecessary. To break this silence is my responsibility, and I'm absolutely committed to it. When I die, I will not be guilty of having left a generation of girls behind thinking that anyone can tend to their emotional health other than themselves. (Tate 162)

Thus Shange is determined to prepare the young girls emotionally before sending them into the world

Shange presents a complex human experience in *for colored girls* through a compilation of twenty vignettes. The black women dressed in loosely draped costumes are known by the color of their dress as Lady in Blue, Lady Red or Lady in Brown. They ventilate pent-up anxieties by music and dance. "Latent Rapists" centers on women who are afraid to talk about rape by friends and men in prominent positions. "Sorry" tells of all the excuses given by men when they hurt women. "A Nite with Beau Willie Brown," deals with a maniacal wife-beater who drops his two children out of the window when his mistress refuses to marry him. "A Laying on of Hands" speaks of self-love and sister sharing addressing the emotional and physical abuse heaped upon women in America. She also attacks the American public who refuse to take responsibility for protecting millions of American women and children who are abused every year.

The choreopoem begins with a celebration of the vitality of their bodies, executing the meringue and the bomba. A sudden lighting plunges them into misogynist material realm with a consciousness-raising event. The seven women, distinguishable by the color of their simple dresses, set forth the image of a black girl,



[whos] been dead so long
closed in silence so long
she doesn't know the sound
of her own voice
her infinite beauty (*for colored girls* 4)

The choreopoem restores her to life and traces a black girl's eager transition from adolescence into adulthood of self-recognition which is divinely natural. The women play multiple characters speaking of the physical and emotional abuse enacted against black women and their ability to survive in the face of loneliness, rejection, pain, rape, and invalidation.

lady in brown
& this is for colored girls who have considered
Suicide/ but are moving to the
Ends of their own rainbows (*for colored girls* 64)

Shange says that just as a rainbow after a storm connotes possibilities to start all over again this theatre piece is an exploration which provides hope for these women, who have known the bitterness of the storm.

The Lady in Red narrates the most tragic incident through "A Nite with Beau Willie Brown" about the gradual collapse of a family unit plagued by poverty, poor education, domestic violence, and post-combat trauma. The performance is usually met with total silence. It seems to relate the suffering of the vulnerable women in the hands of men. Shange reiterates the possibilities of women who realize the fullness of the inner beings. Each black woman survives painful experiences individually and collectively. In the women's final proclamation of "I found god in myself // & I loved her / I loved her fiercely" (*for colored girls* 67) comes a song of joy and hope that will lead them "to the ends of their own / rainbows" (*for colored girls* 67). In the final scene the women, are reborn into a kind of holy selfhood just as the Lady in Brown's opening plea foreshadowed: "let her be born // let her be born // & handled warmly" (*for colored girls* 63). Their tears are tears of joy affording brighter day for these black women both on stage and in the audience: "The ladies sing first to each other then gradually to the audience. After the song peaks, the ladies enter into "a closed tight circle" (*for colored girls* 67).

Shange in *for colored girls* manages to transform personal pains associated with race and gender into a public acceptance of black women's potential for selfhood and self-determination. The focus is on black female realities but it connects with a larger womanist and feminist community. Though Shange belongs to an upper-middle-class background, in no way the choreopoem invalidates the message or the effectiveness of this presentation. *for colored girls* moves from the particular experience of a single black girl to the realm of possible experiences for any female of any race. The choreopoem transcends gender boundaries bringing the



transformation of physical, psychological, and verbal abuse to a final fulfillment of an individual's personhood and self-reliance. Thus Shange's colored girls emerge from double oppression making their final triumph unique and of their own and of the women in general.

for colored girls focuses on the common suffering of women but her next choreopoem *spell # 7* singles out black women as victims at the hands of white men and white women. In Act I of *spell # 7* Shange uses women's situations to highlight race issues and Act II presents a clearer feminist dimension. In fact, Shange's attack on black men is more evident in *spell #7* than in *for colored girls*. The women in *for colored girls* are drawn to men romantically despite the abuse they receive from them, but in *spell # 7*, the actors dramatize males' aggressive insincerities toward women discerning their true motives which may be sexual or economic. Shange typecasts black men to redefine black females as shrewd critics of black males' behavior. This image of black women's strength and intelligence perpetuates the myth that all black men are manipulative and self-centered. Shange continues her attack on male insincerities in *boogie woogie landscapes*, but qualifies these assertions about male behavior toward women in *From Okra to Greens*.

In *spell # 7* Shange tears away at racially biased myths about black women and claims that black women are unloved, unwanted and unattended because of these myths. Lou, the black magician says, "nobody loves the black woman like they love farrah fawcett-majors, the whole world don't turn out for a dead black woman like they did for Marilyn Monroe" (*spell 36*). In Act II of *spell # 7* Shange explores the reality that sexism exists even within this group of oppressed black professionals. Alec represents the black male actor who refuses to audition for roles that have little to do with his "classical training" as an actor. However he seems relatively unmoved by the plight of black female actors. Shange makes clear that black men's sensitivity to racism does not mean that they are aware of and concerned about black women's additional struggles with sexism.

Fantasy is another theme taken up by Shange. She shows how the women characters try to find solace through fantasizing. Sue-Jean in *spell #7* is led to destruction due to entrapment in fantasy. Her experience is far more tragic than the Passion Flower's in *for colored girls* because the Passion Flower is fully aware of her purpose throughout the seduction routine separating fantasy from reality, but Sue-Jean is not able to. For Shange controlling one's own mind is the ultimate power for any oppressed individual. Sue-Jean's story and the Beau Willie Brown-Crystal episode present a woman's desire for power in her life. Both present tragic loss in mother-child relationships. Their end is different. Crystal's loss moves her toward self-discovery and an identity not based on female's role as wife, lover, or mother while Sue-Jean's emotional devastation has a different message. Sue-Jean's act of infanticide and the motivation behind it are perhaps more psychologically paralyzing for an audience. Unlike *for colored girls*, this climactic moment in *spell # 7* is the culmination of a gradual awareness of how to combat stock characterization with an existentialist goal of reconstructing black people's psychological landscapes.



Shange through the character of Maxine in *spell #7* and gives an opinion of male-female relationships. She says: “i noticed this yng man waz so much like the other yng men from here/ who use their bodies as bait & their smiles as passport alternatives” (*spell* 39). Thus the black male is characterized negatively even though they are willing participants in this improvisation of stereotyped acting roles. In fact, these male artists seem to be sensitive to feminist realities, as does Greens to Okra’s complex realities in *From Okra to Greens*. Shange idealizes the black female, to be perceptive, sharp-witted, clever, and intelligent to counter traditional negative creations of black females. She even destroys and challenges the myth of black female’s intellectual inferiority by showing Maxine’s character reading Nietzsche. Ross comments: “i never saw a black woman reading Nietzsche” (*spell* 39). It echoes the Englishman’s surprise at Lily’s knowledge of Portuguese. Male chauvinism transcends racial boundaries, and Shange thus rebukes the male chauvinism of the black men who take black women’s physical and intellectual beauty for granted. Shange argues that this is one of the lies that racist America has fed to black men and she sends out the message that there are millions of black women who are intellectuals, and that black women for too long have been assigned restricting labels. And they are never inferior to the so called white intellectuals - men or women. Thus she attacks the prevailing patriarchal attitudes toward black women.

Ntozake Shange’s *for colored girls and a photograph: lovers in motion* are replete with male chauvinists. Sean David is one of Shange’s characters whose social, physical and psychological responses can be seen through his treatment of three female lovers. He resembles the characteristic male whose self-image is determined by his sexual prowess. Like Beau Willie Brown, Sean is also a male supremacist who proves that Shange’s middle-class chauvinists are no less brutal than the grassroots black men who violate their women. Sean proudly explains to Michael, “there are a number of women in my life / who i plan to keepin my life / &i’ll never let any of them come between us / between what we have in our world” (*a photograph* 61).

In *a photograph* Shange explores the notion that a person’s identity is not defined by things but by a belief in self. Sean David is a struggling photographer involved with three women. Nevada, an attorney, wishes to take Sean out of the ghetto and provide him with material comfort. Claire, a model, is a cocaine addict and a nymphomaniac who wants to possess Sean. Michael, whom Sean chooses in the end, is a dancer who wants to help Sean fulfil his dreams. Earl, another character who is also an attorney, is a homosexual having designs on Sean.

The two men in the play Sean and Earl, offer contrasting images of manhood but their behaviors toward women is the same. However the female characters show varied images on sexuality and gender roles. They are all professionally independent but are, “plagued by unfulfilled dreams and physical, psychological or verbal abuse from the same man” (Lester 1995: 157). Sean defines his male superiority through such phrases as “i dont take no orders from no bitch” (*a photograph* 84), “stupid bitch” (*a photograph* 85), and “you are such a dumb bitch” (*a photograph* 86). He also assaults and exploits his female companions physically. He accepts violence as the means by which males maintain control over females.



Shange attacks such mythical notions of manhood, which defines it as simply power over women. Sean takes pride in able to have smooth relationship with more than one woman. His identity problem is this warped definition of manhood which is engendered by his actions. He uses violent temper, a sharp tongue, and brute force, which give him control in these relationships. According to Shange, manhood means vulnerability, gentleness, and respect for women. She wishes Sean to change his attitude toward women and examine his attitude toward his own gender identity to elicit the audience's sympathies.

a photograph, dramatizes the complexities within the oppressed mind while *boogie* is an in-depth character analysis defining and legitimizing a black female's ever-threatening realities. Shange isolates the themes of gender in *boogie*. She depicts a black girl's dreams, visions, and memories, fears, and fantasies through the character's unconscious psychoanalytic. In *for colored girls*, Shange elevates and glamorizes the social status of black women, but in *boogie*, she explores in detail a black woman's identity problems of growing up in a sexist and racist North America. Layla's responses to and the social manifestations of racism and sexism impacting her identity are as ever-changing as are the emotional, physical, and cultural landscapes which change without warning. Her efforts to re-order permanently natural order are often futile and disillusioning. The play is a stream-of-consciousness presentation set at night in Layla's bedroom, when she is most physically vulnerable and consciously unaware and dreams. Shange introduces the poem thus:

...this is a geography of whimsy, fantasy, memory & the night: a bedroom. the bedroom of layla ("born at night": arabic), an all-american colored girl. there is what furniture a bedroom *might* accommodate, though not too much of it. the most important thing is that a bedroom is suggested...(boogie woogie 113)

Shange defines *boogie* as "one night of dreams and memories of a young woman who has grown up in America" (*boogie woogie* 7). It traces a black female's growth from childhood, perceptions about herself and her world to painful experiences associated with being black, a woman, and a black. As Layla's dreams, visions, and fears are disclosed, personal issues in her life become political ones and she, learns that "bein alive &bein a woman &bein/ colored is a metaphysical dilemma" (*for colored girls* 48). Shange represents Layla as a complex character.

Shange analyses aspects of Layla's psyche along with her audience. Layla's dreams of the night highlights the victimization of female's politically, socially and sexually. Layla's dreams are not just nightmares because there are instances of celebration of life and her identity. She overcomes her dual victimization through dance and recollections of happier times. Layla learns that being black means being oppressed, and discovers that being female also means being denied certain freedoms of existence and feeling like an oven. The oven imagery effectively reiterates her emptiness and the need to be filled with something to justify her existence and worth. The oven imagery also recalls a myth that explained to black children about the reason for their dark skin.

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In *From Okra to Greens/A Different Kind of Love Story A Play/ With Music & Dance*, Shange once again deviates from her feminist perspective and suggests that a man is a woman's savior as in *a photograph*. She legitimizes and celebrates a heterosexual, Negro love story, which is seen very rarely in a white-dominant social order. In the beginning Greens is aware of being removed from the crooked woman's existence who has come into his life, but their encounter makes him think, "he didnt know what a stood // up straight man felt like" (*okra to greens* 9). The spiritual union which accompanies physical love is a new experience for him which allows him to stand upright as a complete man. He finishes the narrative with first-person plural pronouns "we" and "our" evidencing his spiritual connection to Okra which grows out of their physical intimacy. Greens, opens the choreopoem with a definition of a black woman's problems. He makes it clear that he is sensitive, gentle, and open to learning the black woman's emotional and physical needs. He is a sensitive black male and he recognizes the potential power play between male and female even during moments of private intimacy.

Shange succeeds in portraying complicated lives of females in a male-dominated society. Carol P. Christ in *Diving Deep and Surfacing: Women Writers on Spiritual Quest* observes that Shange is acutely aware of the nothingness experienced by women in a society defined by men and of a double burden of pain and negation suffered by black women in a society dominated by white men. The black women are not even granted the ambivalent recognition some white women receive for youth and beauty or for being wives and mothers of white men. Shange's poem also reflects the double strength black women have had to muster to survive in a world where neither being black nor being woman is valued. In *for colored girls* Shange brings out a woman's loss and debasement of self for love of a man. Shange refuses to accept her choreopoem as just another Lady singing the blues and probes for a new image of the black woman trying to make the old images of the colored girl obsolete. John Timpane in *Studies in American Drama, 1945 – Present* expresses the view,

Shange's dramatic work, especially [for colored girls], represents a moment of crucial importance in black and American history ... The process of becoming is Shange's subject, "our struggle to become all that is forbidden by our environment all that is forfeited by our gender, all that we have forgotten."(91)

Shange thus provides pictures of women's predicament and a course of survival in a suffering rid world. However Shange's portrayal of men shows that she does understand the dilemma of the men who have a wrong notion of masculinity and reflects on their aspirations. She concludes that men and women should be able to recognize the need to respect and understand each other's space and live life together. Shange seems to be aware that most solutions to the gender-related problems must come from within. The reason for this awareness stems from the social environment where the gender roles are almost fixed. Shange, however, does not deem the gender roles as an excuse for the problems, but if black men and women are aware of these tradition-bound roles, the solutions might evolve from within.

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