

Black Feminist Discourse of Power in *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide*

Lamia Khalil Hammad
Yarmouk University, Jordan

Abstract

This paper discusses black feminist discourse of power in Ntozake Shange's choreopoem *For Colored Girls Who have considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf*. The work depicts the struggle of black women through a rainbow of experiences. At the end, the girls arrive at 'selfhood' by finding God in themselves. This paper focuses on how the patriarchal discourse lead to their suffering and how they were able to claim back their identities as black females who only need to be loved and appreciated.

[**Keywords:** Ntozake Shange, African American culture, women's literature, discourse, power.]

1. Introduction:

For colored girls who have considered suicide/ when the rainbow is enuf is Shange's first, and most acclaimed, theater piece. It is not really a play in that it has no continuous plot or conventional development; it consists, rather, of a series of poetic monologues to be accompanied by dance movements and music—a form Shange calls the "choreopoem." According to Auslander, Shange originally wrote the monologues as separate poems in 1974, then began performing them in California with choreography and musical accompaniment under their collective title. After moving to New York City, she continued work on the piece, which opened on Broadway to an enthusiastic reception in 1976. Shange's *for colored girls* was the second play, as Patricia Young claims, by a black woman to reach Broadway, preceded by Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* in 1959.

For Colored Girls has developed into a 2010 drama film adapted from Ntozake Shange's 1975 stage choreopoem play (Los Angeles Times, 2010). Written, directed and produced by Tyler Perry, the film features an ensemble cast which includes nine women playing different roles. David Noh indicates that like Shange's play — which is considered to be a landmark piece in African American literature and black feminism — the film depicts the interconnected lives of nine women, exploring their lives and struggles as women of color, all of which end with these women's self-realization and self-appreciation of who they are. *For Colored Girls* brought to the stage a perspective on what it is to be female and black in the modern United States that many in the Civil Rights Movement era found groundbreaking, especially in the fact that it was, and has continued to be, done in mainstream American stage and media venues. According to Hilton Als in *The New Yorker's Critic's Notebook* (March 5, 2007) that all sorts of people who might never have set foot in a Broadway house -- black nationalists, feminist separatists -- came to experience Shange's firebomb of a poem (http://www.bookrags.com/wiki/For_Colored_Girls_Who_Have_Considered_Suicide_When_the_Rainbow_Is_Enuf).

Structurally, *For Colored Girls* is a series of twenty poems, collectively called a "choreopoem." Shange's poetry expresses the many struggles and obstacles that African-American women face throughout their lives. It is performed by a cast of seven women

characters, each of whom is known only by a color: "Lady in Yellow," "Lady in Purple," and so on. The poems deal with love, abandonment, domestic violence, rape, and abortion, embodied by each woman's story. The end of the play brings together all of the women for "a laying on of hands," in which Shange evokes the power of womanhood. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/For_Colored_Girls_Who_Have_Considered_Suicide_When_the_Rainbow_Is_Enuf).

2. Setting a Feminist Discourse of Power

Discourse determines who represents authority and when this authority can be used. Michel Foucault's discourse is always related to power, because discourse is the governing and ordering medium of every institution. His theory of discursive formation allows for the possibility of resistance and subversion of dominant discourses. Foucault regards discourse as a central human activity, because the dimension of discursive change will keep on existing as long as there are competing institutions. The discursive formation works by exclusion, that is the excluding and marginalizing certain categories such as women; this remark makes discourse of interest since all discourses are power related. Said follows the logic of Foucault's theories: no discourse is fixed for all time; it is both a cause and an effect. Discourse not only wields power but also stimulates opposition.

Discourse has received a great deal of attention by feminists. A male-dominated language fundamentally oppresses women. Foucault's argument is that what is "true" depends on who controls discourse; it is reasonable to believe that men's domination of discourses has trapped women inside a male "truth." From this point of view, it makes sense for women writers to contest men's control rather than retreat in the feminine discourse. Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* (1977) discusses women's discourse as being subordinate and made inferior by the patriarchal institution, which exerts power over women in every domain. Selden says that Millet extends her argument to the sex-role stereotyping; she says that sex is biological, while gender is cultural (138). Sex roles as perpetuated in society are repressive; further, they show the unequal relation of domination and subordination. The patriarchal oppression attempts to sustain the oppression through an ideology created by and for the oppressors. The oppressed tend to defend themselves as an institution against misrepresentation and stereotyping. Both parties conduct a struggle for power.

Men exclude the female because she lacks the power to shape literary values. Their values express a patriarchal culture where women are subject to degradation, domination and subordination. So, women find themselves obliged by their gender to alleviate oppression by speaking out/up. French feminists have emphasized that Freud's "penis" or "phallus" is a symbolic concept of power; Selden believes that the "woman represents a subject position banished to outer darkness (the Dark Continent) by the castrating power of phallogocentrism, and indeed, because such domination works its way through discourse, by 'phallogocentrism' (domination by the phallus logic)"(147). In *The Laugh of the Medusa*, Helene Cixous calls for women to put their bodies into writing: "Write yourself. Your body must be heard" (309). According to her, feminist writing can surpass the powerful discourse, assumingly the patriarchal system. She asks women to transgress the laws of the phallogocentric discourse as the woman writer's special task. A woman needs to "invent for herself a language to get inside" since she already found herself using a male-dominated discourse. As Selden states, "Irigaray thinks that women's writing is connected with fluidity" (150); this, then, endows women with flexibility, volatility, and variability. Feminists seek to control discourse, and struggle for power; through writing women can find themselves exerting power in their own way.

Feminist criticism stems from one fundamental aspect, the discourse of power relations. The culture of feminist studies engages itself with a discourse where “truth” is related to the hierarchy of power. Foucault defines what is “true” as that which is most powerful and agreed upon by a consensus that it is the one that rules and has most authority. This brings into mind the idea that if there is the “most powerful”, then there is also the “least powerful.” Thus, we are dealing with a hierarchy of powers interpolating, in a hegemonic discourse. And from here comes the idea that the less powerful is oppressed and marginalized. Feminism comes to share the grounds with cultural criticism. Feminists claim that their gender/sex is oppressed by the most powerful – that is the patriarchal domination. Feminists suppose that women are not only being oppressed but also marginalized, that they are not being given their own space. This paper discusses *for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf* by Ntozake Shange, an African American female playwright. Shange writes about sexual oppression in a hegemonic discourse where women are always victimized and marginalized by the powerful patriarchal system from which women cannot escape.

Many feminists see that the female body is being colonized by the male dominance, referring to the phallogocentrism. Male dominance has taken place, for the man’s possession of a “phallus” with which he dominates the female body, thus repressing the female to take the back-seat status. In her essay, Gilbert discusses the literary paternity where man /male uses his “pen-is” to write about his hegemonic discourse. He suppresses and represses the female/feminine body and determines that what should prevail is male-related. Gilbert, metaphorically, asserts that the male author “fathers” his texts, so the feminine is ruled and systematized through the legitimization of the paternal structure. Thus, the male text is “sword like” because it deals with the female discourse harshly in a way that confines them to what is legitimate from a paternal point of view, in this hegemonic discourse where the paternal cannot tolerate the feminine. By emphasizing the heterogeneity of women’s emotional and physical needs and experience, the women writers make a profoundly political statement. However, this does not come about because the aim of her work is primarily political. Indeed, Shange explains that this kind of ‘point’ can stifle creativity as she explained in an interview in *Black Women Writers*:

The commercial people tell me that one of the reasons the rest of my work hasn’t been as commercially successful as *for colored girls* is that it has no point that they could sell. That’s because there’s going to be no more point. I am not writing about a point. *for colored girls* doesn’t have a point either, but they made a point out of it. Those girls were people whom I cared about, people whom I offered to you for you to see and to know. Black and Latin writers have to start demanding that the fact that we’re alive is point enough! (162)

In a feminist discourse, women are less powerful for being marginalized. Black women are doubly removed and marginalized from the dominant discourse. White feminists face the problem of being females - a matter of gender and what this embodies. Black feminists are not only concerned with the gender issue, but they are also oppressed and marginalized by their race and color. Audre Lorde in *Sister Outsider*, for example, explores how it is like when you are not oppressed by the male gender domination, but also by her same gender/sex. Black and female, she suffers from the white discourse including both male and female, and suffers from the male from a gender aspect, and from the females because she is a lesbian. My point is that feminists, whether white or black, lesbian or heterogeneous, or however they may be, are always left in the margin. A woman is always a subordinate, the other, the less powerful, the inferior, and the less beneficent. From here we can say that women are marginalized and powerless because they are weapon-less or phallic-less.

Because of the analogy between the male as power on one hand and female as powerless on the other hand, Cixous asks women to write their body. A woman should not feel that her body is a limitation, as was designated by the male dominance, but a woman should “write her body” to be heard. The body is the entity, which suffers from male dominance and therefore it (the body) must write out its own experience. As the body is the “Dark Continent” and must be discovered by the males, so should the females themselves discover it, for themselves in order to be able to fight back and illuminate that “penis-envy” or that “castration complex.”

3. A Black Feminist Discourse of Choreography

for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf establishes an identity for Shange as a writer through her radical language, and expresses in depth the need of self-affirmation for black women. Shange changed her name from Paulette Williams as an act of protest against her Western roots. The Zulu names she embraced, Ntozake (‘she who comes with her own things’) and Shange (‘she who walks like a lion’) emphasize both black young women for whom she speaks (Tate 149) and self naming is one method of self determination, expressing the power to be what one desires to be. There is a correlation between this stance and Shange’s desire to enable young black women to understand their own situation.

Ntozake Shange in her *for colored girls who have considered suicide*, writes the body of the female/feminine. In her choreopoem, Shange refers to physical harm and violence done to the female body such as rape. The body must speak and write about rape to express the issue of violence and oppression, otherwise it will not be heard. Again Shange talks about abortion, to show how women, black women are oppressed; they are not only raped, but they need abortion to get out of the hegemonic male discourse. The body is an entity, which shows and tells many forms of oppression. Though the woman does not have a phallic power to fight back with, but she has her body from which she could write as her source of reaching power.

In a hegemonic discourse, *for colored girls* is concerned with the victimization of women and with finding the young black woman’s voice and self. Shange writes as a woman for women trying to find a woman’s voice, and “writes the body.” Her use of language deconstructs literary and theatrical conventions as a means of foregrounding “the body.” Shange even uses the lower case consistently trying to eliminate differences that bespeak a hierarchy/ power structure, and thus fighting for a democratizing drive that underlies *for colored girls*.

Shange’s general presentation of males throughout the play leaves audience members seeing *for colored girls* as another black feminist attack on all men, mainly black. The men, most of the women in the choreopoem become involved with, are shallow, inconsiderate, and either incapable of communicating or unwilling to communicate except through sex, violence, or verbal abuse. And, finally, the accusation of blatant male-bashing might stem from Shange’s efforts to drive home in the “latent rapist” section the complex reality of any woman’s existence: that every man is a potential rapist, that “women relinquish all personal rights / in the presence of a man / who apparently cd be considered a rapist” (20).

Shange’s men seem brutal baby –killers and beasts. Rather than consider Shange’s whole picture of male-female relationships, one can either try to deny or justify the males’ abusive behaviors in the choreopoem. While rightfully acknowledging the black male’s victimization by a system of racial, social, economic, and political inequality, one cannot fail to

make the men responsible for their own abusive behavior. Shange's message is that some black men have nothing but their phallic object/power, an object they use on as many women as possible. The effect of this line of reasoning is to make light of the nature and extent of suffering at the hands of some black men.

At no point does Shange minimize Beau Willie's victimization. Moreover, Shange suggests that women like Crystal are partly responsible for their oppression at the hands of patriarchy. After all, Crystal--for whatever reasons-- stays in an abusive and destructive relationship. Those who maintain that Shange is not anti-black male should take notice of the choreopoem's opening narrative of "graduation nite," wherein the lady in yellow is flattered and unthreatened by a male's physical attraction to her:

bobby started lookin at me
 yeah
 he started lookin at me real strange
 like I waz woman or something
 started talkin real soft
 in the backseat of that ol buick
 WOW
 by daybreak
 I just cdnt stop grinnin (10).

Perhaps some radical feminists might attack Shange's openness in having this woman's "femaleness" defined by a male. Nevertheless, this encounter demonstrates that Shange does not believe every encounter with a male to be a threatening one, even in matters of sexuality. What Bobby says in that soft voice is unimportant; what matters is that this woman has a significant part of her identity, her sexual identity, defined positively for her. In Tate's article (160-161), she qualifies this, however, when she points that there are male exceptions to this rule, and she has worked with them:

In works by men there's usually an idea as opposed to a reality...Men also generally approach the conflicts involved in the sexual or political identity of a male character in a way that allows them to skim over whatever the real crisis is ... women are more in touch with their feelings; therefore, they're able to identify what it is they're doing and feeling. I also think that women use their feelings to a greater degree and in more varied ways than men do. (160-1).

Even the poem about abortion, "abortion cycle # 1," is not a comment on some male doing a female wrong. The indictment is not of a male who abandons a pregnant woman (the father is not even informed of the pregnancy). Instead, it is an indictment of a society of men and women that ostracizes women who celebrate their sexuality freely, a society that makes a woman's biology her destiny of shame. While women's suffering in the choreopoem stems from their own vulnerabilities, their failed attempts to find the love they want to give the black male and to receive from him are not cause for them to swear off men altogether. Shange insistently characterizes Black women as being easily duped, and as emotionally frivolous. To an extent, the women's emotional and spiritual needs make them vulnerable. But they do not seek out abusive men. When the women arrive triumphant at the play's end, finding god in themselves, they discover an inner strength, a greater sense of self, and an independence that will allow them to deal better with emotionally and psychologically unsatisfying relationships in the future. They realize that they must love themselves before they can love fully or accept love. Shange explains that her "target" in *for colored girls* is not black men per se, but patriarchy in general, which is universal in its oppression of women. That some men feel under attack throughout the play comes as no surprise because *for colored girls* is a feminist piece.

From Shange, we can see feminist issues raised in different aspects. Shange is more concerned with the feminist issue as of female sexuality and its suffering at the hands of men. Discourse serves only those who are in power, ignoring that disadvantaged category of women who fight restlessly to gain power. Though women cannot change the discourse of male/female relationship, yet they can voice it in their writings creating their own discourse from their own point of weakness. Their bodies bespeak their weaknesses and, at the same time, their strengths.

4. Writing the Body

Much of the 'emotional' theme in *for colored girls* centers on 'interpersonal' relations (159) expressed in the choreopoem through representations for heterosexual relationships, from the post-finishing-high-school defloration in the back of a buick, to the end of an affair that: "waz an experiment/ to see how selfish I cd be/ if I wd really carry on to snare a possible lover/ if I waz capable of debasing my self for the love of another" (14). But, depressing though several of these poems are, especially "a nite with beau Willie brown" *for colored girls* is not predominantly concerned with the victimization of black women but with finding the young black women's voice and self.

Shange writes as a woman for women trying to find a woman's voice, and "writes the body" in the manner in which Julia Kristeva talks of it. Her use of language de-struct(ure)s literary and theatrical conventions as a means of foregrounding "the body", emotions and the workings of the unconscious. These may function as if the body and the speech are interconnected: Shange's system of spelling as detailed here is thus dictated by the body.

There are elements of deviation from the written norm, however, which cannot simply be ascribed to the body. The most obvious of such deviations is the constant use of small letters. In *Black Women Writers at Work*, Shange attributes this to the influence of writers like LeRoi Jones and Ishmael Reed: "It bothers me, on occasion, to look at poems where all the first letters are capitalized. It's very boring to me. That's why I use the lower-case alphabet" (163). One might argue that the exclusive use of that lower case alphabet is equally boring, but if one looks for other explanations, the lower case might reflect an inferior sense of status(hierarchy/power structures), on the part of young black women who are at the center of the play representing mostly "every woman' character of *for colored girls*. Another woman representation shows at the end when the young black woman self-affirmingly says: "I found god in myself/ & I loved her/ I lived her fiercely" (63).

5. Semiosis As Form and Content

As a choreopoem, *for colored girls* combines music, song, dance and poetry. What these four elements have in common is that their systems of signification foreground the characteristics of Kristeva's semiotic disposition, being rhythmic, repetitive, non-linear and complex in their form as well as indeterminate in their meaning, resonating the fluidity of women's writing of the body. As such, they stand in direct relation to the semiotic 'chora' which denotes "an essentially mobile and extremely provisional articulation constituted by movements and their ephemeral stases" (25). They signal the expression of "discrete quantities of energy" which "move through the body" in an as yet non-signifying manner. The body, through its drives

and movements, and the body creates “the ordering principle of the semiotic chora” (27). The disposition of the semiotic outlook as an utterance expresses the self as body, or body as self. The semiotic characteristic is disruptive of all structures created by self because the self is recreated through the changing reflexes of the semiotic body movements. It refuses their norms and setting up the self as a counter-authority. The choreography is thus self-affirming rather than self-denying. It signals the body that will not be denied.

Shange, through the four-fold foregrounding of the semiotic by combining poetry, dance, song, and music, ‘writes the body’ all-pervasively. It is thus inevitable that at the end of *for colored girls* the young black woman should “find god in herself and love her fiercely”; this is what the choreopoem drives towards- literally and metaphorically. Shange’s black woman’s self gradually emerges as a separate, discrete entity, a new formation signaling independence and love of self.

Another aspect is naming which belongs to the symbolic order, and optimizes social mobility. Not naming is therefore one way of refusing the symbolic order and thus the categorizations that dominate society. It is important in this context that ‘choreo’ refers not only to dance but also to the group, which in *for colored girls* is an anonymous group of seven ladies, differentiated by color of dress rather than name. Without a name which gives a specific identity they can move literally, for the individual poems in *for colored girls* are separated from each other by the re-grouping of the performers- into and out of identities which they inhabit for the space of a particular poem or section. This ability to change roles indicates the possibility of change per se; the young black woman is not fixed in a role in the same way that the performers are not. She can move on, change through the body; it is for this reason that *for colored girls* offers movement, instability, the subject is in process/ on trial, or in the making, that is the “the semiotic” as form and content.

6. Debating Images of Black Males in Feminist Discourse

Cynthia Bily points that many have criticized the play for being too negative toward black men, but Shange has always attempted to direct the focus of the discussion back on the women. The play is about the experiences of black women, and how they come a long way to ‘be’ at the end. To insist on a “balanced” view of the men in their lives is to deny these women’s experiences. The play, Shange insists, does not accuse all black men of being abusive. These black women do not reject men or seeking a life without men. The women desire men and love them, and crave for that love to be returned.

To reach out for the text, some have seen beau willie brown dropping his children from a fifth-story window, as helpless crystal looks on, as Ntozake Shange’s signature characterization of the black male in *for colored girls*. An embodiment of traits of most of the men in the choreopoem up to that point, beau willie is violent, abusive, deceptive, and irresponsible. He seems to lack ambition and to offer nothing but destruction of Crystal’s life. Indeed this particular example of male brutality and Shange’s general presentation of males throughout the play leave audience members seeing *for colored girls* as little more than another black feminist’s ruthless and unjustified attack on all men. The men, most of the women in the choreopoem become involved with, are shallow, inconsiderate, and either incapable of communicating or unwilling to communicate except through sex, violence, or other abuse. And, finally, the accusation that every man is a potential rapist, that “women relinquish all personal rights / in the presence of a man / who apparently cd be considered a rapist” (20).

These images and portrayals have led critics like Robert Staples to assert that in “watching a performance of *for colored girls*, one sees a collective appetite for black male blood” (26). Jacqueline Trescott insists that Shange’s men “are scheming, lying, childish, and brutal baby-killers..., beasts humiliated for the message of sisterly love” (5). Rather than consider Shange’s whole picture of male-female relationships, these critics try to deny or justify the males’ abusive behaviors in the choreopoem. Staples adds, “[t]here is a curious rage festering inside black men because, like it or not, they have not been allowed to fulfill the roles (i.e. breadwinner, protector) society ascribes to them” (26). While rightfully acknowledging the black male’s victimization by a system of racial, social, economic, and political inequality, Staples fails to make the black male responsible for his own abusive behavior. Staples’ comments are typical of the patriarchy’s reversing the roles of victim and perpetrator. And while Staples does not subscribe to a racist ethos, as do many black males, Staples writes that “some black men have nothing but their penis, an object they use on as many women as possible, and in their middle years they are deprived of even that mastery of the symbols of manhood...” (26). Such line of reasoning makes light of the nature and extent of suffering at the hands of some black men.

Sandra H. Flowers, in “Colored Girls: Text-book for the Eighties”, defends Shange’s presentation of black men by offering insight into the complexity of beau willie brown’s character:

...Beau Willie Brown is the quintessential black man of his generation [i.e., the Vietnam era]. By this, I do not mean, nor does Shange intend to imply, that Beau Willie Brown is all there is to black manhood. Conversely, I am not suggesting that the political realities embodied in Beau Willie justify his treatment of or his attitude toward Crystal. Instead, I believe that Shange’s compassion for black men surfaces most noticeably in this poem and that her characterization of Beau Willie recognizes some of the external factors which influence relationships between black men and women. (52)

While women’s suffering in the choreopoem stem from their own vulnerabilities, their failed attempts to find the love they want to give the black male and to receive from him are not cause for them to swear off men altogether. Curtis Rodgers writes that “in her unrelenting stereotyping of Black men as always ‘shucking’ and ‘jiving’... [Shange], without realizing it,...insistently caricatures Black women as being easily duped, and as emotionally frivolous. This is so because Shange’s *for colored girls* invariably take up with ‘those’ Black men whom she damns as mean and trifling” (11). Rodgers’ inherent use of ‘those’ contradicts and all-male stereotype. Still, Rodgers implies that men’s behavior is always predictable. Perhaps he might deny the legitimacy of acquaintance rape. To an extent, Rodgers is correct: the women’s emotional and spiritual needs make them vulnerable. The Lady in Red’s feeling of “want[ing] to jump up outta my bones /... & be done wit myself” (65) is hardly a frivolous emotion. Perhaps Rodgers might argue the frivolity of anyone’s desire to love and be loved. Shange clarifies: “... just because [some black men are] unloving, doesn’t mean we, women, don’t need to be loved” (qtd in Ribowsky 45).

When the women arrive triumphantly at the play’s end, finding god in themselves, they discover an inner strength, a greater sense of self, and an independence that will allow them to deal better with emotionally and psychologically unsatisfying relationships in the future. They realize that they must love themselves before they can love fully or accept love. Patricia Young indicates that the concluding gesture in the play is powerful; the seven women experience a laying on of hands as they lock their hands together to represent an impenetrable circle that stands as a shield from pain and to empower themselves with each others’ courage. Shange emphasizes that women must nurture and protect one another. Shange explains that her

'target' in *for colored girls* "is not black men per se, but the patriarchy in general, which [she] view[s] as universal in its oppression of women" (Smith 12). That some men feel under attack throughout the play comes as no surprise to Shange, who admits that *for colored girls* is "a heavy feminist piece" (qtd in Ribowsky 43). But the fact that a woman is a feminist does not mean she hates men. There is little question, however, that Shange seeks to challenge the patriarchal worldview that has prevented the black woman from telling their own stories which articulate the needs and expectations of black women. Kwame Dawes explains that the ultimate vision of triumph and possibility at the end of the work illustrates Shange's commitment to an Afrocentric vision in her articulation of her feminist perspective through the use of black music, Afrocentric dance, and the distinctly Afrocentric narrative style.

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Lamia Khalil Hammad is an Assistant Professor of American Literature and Women's Studies at Yarmouk University, Jordan. She had been a Fulbright Scholar (1997-1999) and did Ph.D. in American Literature from Indiana University of Pennsylvania. Her research interests include Post-Colonial Theory/Studies, Women's literature, Cultural Studies. She has written the book *Contemporary U.S. Women of Color Theorize Subversion Through Cross-Genre Writing: Race, Gender and Culture*. VDM: Germany, 2009.
