

BLACK FEMALE PLAYWRIGHTS CARVING A PLACE ON THE AMERICAN THEATRE

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Abstract:

It aims at highlighting the changing complexion of the traditional American theatre which propagated negative and tenuous images of African American women. Being ‘black’ and ‘female’, these women had to suffer from various disadvantages in the dominant white patriarchal society. Nevertheless, in the midst of subordination and marginalization, these women attempted to retain their ‘womanhood’ and preserved African cultural heritage in the U.S. prominently, African American women playwrights made sincere efforts to liberate black women from the restraints of subjugation and from socio-political and cultural devaluation.

The writings by black women may be viewed as a prism through which the searing rays of race, class and sex are first focused, and then refracted. Portraying black life from a special angle, the black women play wrights have worked to redefine the American stage that has traditionally been populated with stereotyped images of the blacks. Their plays provide a special window on human condition in general and black women in particular. The black women playwrights probe deep into the American society in all its dimensions.

Through their plays, the black women playwrights have made sincere efforts to emancipate and uplift the black women from the triple jeopardy of slavery, racism and sexism. They not only deal with the problems concerning racial discrimination but also the issues affecting the society in general. However, their plays reflect one common purpose; to install ‘black consciousness among the black society in general and black women in particular.

Key Words: *Complexion, patriarchal, stereotyped, efforts, discrimination, cultural, jeopardy*

Introduction:

An attempt will be made to take up the survey of African American theatre in general and the tradition of African American women playwrights in particular.

Though in recent times the black women playwrights have achieved a prominent place in American theatre and are showered with prestigious awards, they have had to struggle hard at every level. Till the end of the nineteenth century, they did not get an opportunity either in theatre or in any other media of expression. Moreover, their creative ability was ignored not only by the whites but also the black males. Due to promotional difficulties, the plays by black women were not only by the whites but also the black males. Due to promotional difficulties. The plays by black women were not performed in theatres.

The doors of opportunity for the black women writers were opened with the sincere efforts made by the black thinkers like Langston Hughes. W.E.B. DuBois, Ron Karenga and LeRoi Joones, They encouraged the black women to write plays dealing with the black life.

One of the earliest black female playwrights, Pauline Elizabeth Hopkins, who has been called 'literary foremother' of black women writers, produced a play *Slaves' Escape; or The Underground Railroad* (1879). It was a musical play in which Hopkins used conventions of the Minstrel show-broad dialect, humour, song and dance-to deal with the serious subject in a satirical way.

Through their plays, the early black women playwrights aimed at liberating the black audience from the oppressive past, to present a history that provides continuity, hope and glory. These black women playwrights dealt with variety of themes in their plays. Angelina Grimke, in her *Rachel* (1916) protests against the lynching of innocent black people. Alice Dunbar Nelson wrote *Mine Eyes Have Seen* (1918) in which she questions whether black soldiers should risk their lives for a segregated nation. Another important playwright of this period is Mary Burrill, who in *Aftermath* (1919), bitterly criticizes American society which forces the blacks to protect white Americans while black Americans go unprotected.

Gorgia Douglas Johnson wrote several plays about lynching. Her play *A Sunday Morning in the South* (1925) discusses the recklessness with which the whites have been lynching the

blacks in their own town. May Miller in her *Riding the Goat* (1926) brings out the fact that the blacks must depend upon each other for survival and strength.

Marita Bonner, in her allegorical play *The Purple Flower* (1926), records the fact that despite their hard labour and honest services to the white land, the blacks do not enjoy the status they deserve. Another important topic that the above playwrights dealt with was miscegenation. Myrtle Smith Livingston in *For Unborn Children* (1926) condemns the interracial couplings.

Discussion:

While many black women created 'race or propaganda' plays, Eulaie Spence avoided racial themes altogether and stressed on universal themes. She was the most consistently comic voice among the women playwrights. She wrote *Fools Errand* (1927) in which she looks at social peaking order of the black church. Shirley Graham's *It's morning* (1940) explored the ills of slavery. It is a play about a slave mother, who tries to kill her own daughter to prevent her to be sold to a distant slave master.

Despite their major contribution to the black theatre in the U.S., the voice of these playwrights was slow to emerge because of racial and sexual barriers. However, the subject, message and theme in the plays were of utmost importance. All these women playwrights made black women as participants of the protest against prevailing conditions and no more suffering spectators.

During 1950s a group of black women playwrights including Alice Childress, Lorraine Hansberry, Adriene Kennedy, Alexis Deveau, Sonia Sanchez and Ntozake Shange emerged as a new voice in African American theatre. These playwrights have attempted successfully to bring to the American stage totally novice images of black female characters. A black woman in their plays is 'an evolving black woman' who is tough, innovative, challenging and multi-dimensional. Moreover, their dark and lovely heroines strive to make themselves whole inspite of the forces that seek to negate their personhood.

Alice Childress, Lorraine Hansberry and Ntozake Shange have brought to the American stage a multiplicity of images of female heroines and have not confined themselves in such limiting images of black women as immoral, promiscuous, wanton, frigid and pathetically helpless.

These playwrights have structured their plays around the initiation and survival rituals of black women who struggle mightily to make their peace.

The Drinking Guard (1960), and The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window (1964).

Lorraine Hansberry revolutionized black theatre in America by her assimilationist views. She wrote *A Raisin in the Sun* in which she depicts the dreams and aspiration of younger, a black family to move from ghetto to an exclusively white neighbourhood. Hansberry in *The Drinking Guard* studies the responsible factors for the existence of slavery not only in the U.S. but also in other parts of the world. Produced in 1964. *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's window* projects the strained marital relations and political disillusionment of Sidney, a Jew. The play is lasso about the commitment of an individual to certain social and personal values for the betterment of the society.

It would deal with the critical study of the plays of Ntozake Shange. She wrote *For Coloured Girls Who have considered Suicide/When The Rainbow is Enuf* (1975) which marked the beginning of a new temper in American theatre. It is a play which speaks about the physical and emotional abuse enacted against black women. Her *Spell # 7* (1979) is about blacks learning to love themselves and each other. Her experimental play, *Boogies Woogie Landscapes* (1980) blends surrealism and expressionism to form a fantasy world of the central character Layla.

Conclusion:

An attempt will be made to draw certain conclusions in respect of themes and techniques reflected in the plays of Alice Childress, Lorraine Hansberry and Ntozake Shange. These playwrights speak out against the enormous disparity between rich and poor, black and white, and men and women. These playwrights have been extremely versatile in their themes and they employ different theatre techniques in order to heighten the visual effects. They make very apt use of music, rituals, folklore, lights, setting and folk music by which they create 'black consciousness' among the spectators.

Each one of these playwrights has served as a vital link in the evolution of black theatre in America and carved a unique place in black theatre. In recent years African American women playwrights have gained an equal status with the male playwrights in the mainstream American

theatre and have occupied a special a place as creative artists. In the hands of these women playwrights, the future of African American theatre seems to be bright and safe.

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