Lorraine Hansberry and Ntozake Shange, along with Alice Childress, are outstanding black women playwrights whose portraits of black life and culture are characterized by a vision distinctively feminine and different from that of many black male dramatists of the period. Childress, Hansberry, and Shange have shown on the American Stage a multiplicity of images of female heroines and have not confined themselves to such limiting images of black women as immoral, promiscuous, wanton, frigid, overbearing, or pathetically helpless. They illuminate in general the condition of blacks in patriarchal America. The theatre which these dramatists have striven to create illustrates the existence of a black culture that continually invents itself outside the codes of the dominant society. The images of black culture and ethnic identity which Hansberry and Shange evoke in their plays acquire an added dimension on account of the black idiom which they employ in their plays. The focus is on a reassessment of black literature in an attempt to discover multiple black feminine styles.

One of the important features of African-American playwriting with special reference to Hansberry and Shange is that the problem of African roots engages the attention of these
dramatists who portray in their plays a quest for identity. The drama of the discovery of African roots is enacted at the level of thematic unfolding and at the level of the dramatic design which includes miming, dancing, ritual, choreography, and other features derived from African ancestry and African world view. The quest for identity leads these dramatists to evolve a theatre designed for the creation of a sense of the communal form and a theatre which is a monument built out of black awareness.

A study of the plays of Hansberry and Shange reveals how the black family is looked upon as a dynamic cultural entity whose dialectical relations with other elements of the community and with the dominant society are the subject of dramatization. Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* provides the most interesting prototype of the black family. She endows the Younger family with characteristics that challenge the existing stereotypes. Moreover, with her attempts to trace the past of women through tangles of heritage and personhood and with her memory anchored in the African soil, Hansberry offers a rediscovery and reinvention of African-American cultural heritage and identity.

Poet, playwright, and novelist, Ntozake Shange, a black feminist, emphasizes the importance of the choreopoem as a new genre in the American theatre and as a form rooted in an African tradition of movement, song, music, and emotional catharsis.
As a black artist and a black feminist, Shange champions the woman of colour as she moves toward optimal self-consciousness, positive self-identity, and self-realization in an oppressive and blatantly sexist and racist modern society. She expounds the metaphysical dilemma of being alive and being a woman and being coloured.

I have relied considerably upon the vast and fascinating body of writing on the African-American playwrights. My indebtedness to these sources is acknowledged in the thesis. Thanks to two study grants provided by the American Studies Research Centre, Hyderabad, I was able to consult important books and periodicals available at the Centre. I must, however, confess that even at the American Studies Research Centre some materials were hard to come by. The plays of Alice Childress, for example, were not all available except one or two which could be got at from collections of American plays. Hence the study could not make sufficient use of the Alice Childress material in spite of the fact that she formed with Lorraine Hansberry and Ntozake Shange a crucial link in the chain of African-American playwriting.

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