Black Americans today recognize more clearly than at any other time in their history that theatre as an institution can have a significant impact on the relentless struggle of a deprived racial minority for full equality. They recognize further that theatre promotes the need for spiritual well-being of a people divorced from their ancestral heritage through centuries of degrading slavery. This trend is clearly visible in the spectacular growth of Black theatre across the country. The term "black theatre" means theatrical production by blacks that serves as a tool for research into ethnic identity. It is also the most appropriate means for an analysis of the situation of blacks in North America for symbolic expression of the black world view and experience. As an ethnic theatre it is born out of historical conflict. At the heart of its beginnings is the quest for identity.

Genevieve Fabre contends in Afro-American Poetry and Drama that the 1950s saw the definite emergence of black playwrights. She points out that William Branch's A Medal for Willie, Alice Childress's Trouble in Mind (1955), Lorraine
Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959), and Loften Mitchell’s *A Land Beyond the River* (1957) are among the best known plays by black playwrights of the 1950s.¹ In a majority of these plays protest is voiced, but violence as a solution is dismissed. The message in several of these plays, however, is that violence may soon become the only possible course of action. Mance Williams argues in *Black Theatre in the 1960s and 1970s* that "plays during the 1950s expressed a new form of protest, one that not only exhorted Black people to stand up for their rights but warned whites that Blacks would settle for nothing less than their full share of the American Dream."²

The 1960s saw a more radical militant theatre with Amiri Baraka at its head. Williams has observed that "whether playwrights of the 1960s fell into the category of realism or naturalism, Marxism or structuralism the prevailing mood of the period was that of revolt, outside and inside the theatre."³ James Baldwin’s *Blues for Mister Charlie* asserts that Blacks will remain victims as long as they depend on white liberals to free them from racial injustices. Like Baraka and Baldwin, Hansberry in *The Drinking Gourd* and Childress in *Wedding Band* express anger, disappointment, and a sense of helplessness. Though less overtly violent than Baraka’s plays, the works of Childress and Hansberry are an outgrowth of the militant tradition. Their black characters are assertive, caustic, and unyielding to the
demands of the whites. Other playwrights of the revolutionary theatre include Sonia Sanchez and Martie Charles whose plays advocate that blacks disassociate themselves from the decadant white society and its values.

A close examination of the plays of black women between the 1950s and 1980s reveals that though they treat many of the same themes as black male dramatists, their vision is different. Unlike their male counterparts, Childress, Hansberry, and Shange have brought to 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. Peopling their plays with heroines who are challenging and innovative, Childress, Hansberry, and Shange are important figures in the development of black playwriting and thus warrant serious critical study. A study of the symbols in selected plays by Childress, Hansberry, and Shange reveals a shared vision: blacks must struggle together to secure political, social, and economic gains. What emerges as one examines the symbols in these plays is a conscious effort on the part of these dramatists to illuminate the condition of blacks in patriarchal America. In this "Theatre of Struggle" where battles are frequent, black resiliency and spirit of survival are heralded.
Two occurrences marked a revolution in black theatre in America and ushered in the Harlem Renaissance. First, in 1910, the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (NAACP) was formed. In that year the first issue of Crisis was published. Black artists could now publish their works, and even win literary contests. Crisis served as a laboratory for novice playwrights. Soon the NAACP's Drama Committee of Washington D.C. was established to encourage black playwrights to develop their craft.

The second occurrence that some critics say sparked the Harlem Renaissance was Ridgely Torrence's New York production in 1917 of Three Plays for a Negro Theatre, including Granny Maumee, The Rider of Dreams, and Simon the Cyrenian. This white playwright's interest in blacks as subject matter on the American stage opened the floodgates for black drama. The Negro became popular material for such writers as Eugene O'Neill, William Vaughn Moody, Marc Connelly, and Paul Green, Responsible for the popularization of the primitivistic motif, these playwrights served as an impetus to African-American playwrights who began creating their own images of black men and women in an attempt to eradicate stereotypes of well-meaning white playwrights. This emphasis on primitivism and exoticism resulted in the relegation of blacks to the musical rather than to the serious dramatic stage. Both black and white playwrights
selected musicals as a medium. Between 1910 and 1940 over eight hundred musicals featuring blacks were produced.\(^5\)

Before 1914, Blacks appeared in plays whose roles were enacted by the whites focussing on song, dance, and humour. In the black musicals or Coonshows, farcical caricatures of blacks were noticed. Between 1914 and 1930, the image of the new Negro emerged. This was the beginning of the cultural and intellectual awakening. Marcus Garvey, Bessie Smith, and Langston Hughes were some of the pioneers of these new developments.

Early in American drama, white playwrights used misshapen Black images to help justify slavery. In the post-Civil War period, they used them to rationalize the nation's unfair treatment of blacks. Consequently, slaves were often portrayed as living in an idyllic state. Free Blacks were seen as wretched in their freedom. The comic shenanigans of Black servants on stage indicated their happiness in the role of servitude. Blacks of both sexes were considered exotic primitives. Some white playwrights fashioned their own "truths" about Blacks. It was against such distortions as these that Black playwrights militated, out of necessity. Black humanity, for the most part, had to be proved to whites. But the "proving" has not been easy. Theatrical producers, who are usually white and male, are interested in scripts that promise commercial, if not critical,
success. Plays about the Black experience articulated from a Black point of view that is alien to traditional, middle-class, and usually white theatre audiences were not welcomed. Black playwrights suffered from this neglect as well as from a lack of adequately equipped stages. Added to this, there was the paucity of talented directors, technicians, actors and actresses, and audiences. It has been mainly in community and university theatres catering to Black people, theatres reflecting a general consensus about the Black experience, that Black playwrights have been given a chance to grow.

While neither Black men nor Black women have had any real blow in the American theatre, Black women playwrights have had to contend with the additional onus of sexism. This was because playwriting has been regarded as a profession for men. With all the barriers of racism and sexism arrayed against them, some Black women writers have chosen drama as the form in which to express their creative talents. Before 1940, the suggested cut-off date of the Harlem Renaissance marked by the publication of Richard Wright's Native Son, there were a number of black women playwrights who felt compelled to speak their minds and express their hearts. Unlike many white women dramatists, however, "who wrote, like the (white) men with whom they competed, whose serviceable melodramas, farces, mysteries and (romantic) comedies ... made up the season during the teens
and expansive twenties," black women playwrights began writing serious drama, characterized most frequently by racial and social protest.  

During the years between 1916 and 1935, nine black women playwrights captured the lives of black people as no white or black male playwright could. Angelina Weld Grimke, Alice Dunbar Nelson, Georgia Douglas Johnson, May Miller, Mary Burrill, Myrtle Smith Livingston, Ruth Gaines-Shelton, Eulalie Spence, and Marita Bonner were all original voices that were unwelcome in the commercial theatre of the period. These authors are crucial to any discussion of the development of black playwriting in America because they provide the feminine perspective and their voices give credence to the notion that there was a "New Negro" in America. The nine black women playwrights mentioned are indeed the heart of the Harlem Renaissance. They wrote mainly one-act plays about middle class and common folk, about passion and apathy, love and hate, life and death, hope and despair, self-effacement and race pride, oppression, and equality of the races and sexes. 

With DuBois's Rachel, the theatre became a means of propaganda of racial awareness. After the second World war, Black theatre struggled to survive and black protest themes became rare. Lorraine Hansberry and Jean Genet revived black
drama in the late 50's and early 60's projecting the blacks as real people with real concerns and problems. The focus is on the discovery of a black aesthetic. With Maulana Karenga setting the ground for cultural ideologies, a common black culture was sought after because without this, these ideologies would only be a set of reactions to whites and no more. Plays during the 1950s expressed a new form of protest, one that not only exhorted Black people to stand up for their rights but warned Whites that Blacks would settle for nothing less than their full share of the American Dream. Ironically, it seemed immaterial to angry Blacks -- whether they were committed to non-violence or violence -- that the American Dream was in a state of deterioration.

The efforts of the Black women forerunners helped to illuminate the way for later playwrights. The Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s and the Black Consciousness Movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s sensitized some members of the white theatre audience to dramas by and about Blacks. There was an increase in Black theatre audiences who expected to see authentic dramas about Black life. The Black Theatre Movement of the 60's and the 70's was a Populist Movement under the influence of which, rather than Black Revolt, an evocation of black consciousness was sought to be projected. This is quite in contrast to the defeatist psychology which prevailed earlier and which was conditioned by the history of enforced servitude, discrimination, and racial denigration.
One of the first Black women playwrights to attract attention during this period was Alice Childress. Like her predecessors, Childress in her first published play, Florence (1950), used the one-act form. In the waiting room of a railroad station in the South her principal character, a Black woman of low economic circumstances, undergoes a change of mind through a chance encounter with a white woman. Instead of going to New York city to bring Florence, her fledgling actress daughter, home, the Black woman sends her travel money to the young woman so that she can remain in the city, continue to pursue her career, and perhaps succeed. In the play the newly 'liberated' white woman is having a chat with a black acquaintance, whose daughter is trying to break into show business in New York City:

Mama : Could I ask you something?
Mrs. Carter : Anything ...
Mama : Florence is proud ... but she's having it hard ... Could you help her out some, mam? knowing all the folks you do ... may be ...

Ironically, Mrs. Carter offers to help by getting a friend who is a director to hire Florence as a domestic:

'I'll just tell her ... no heavy washing or ironing ... just light cleaning and a little cooking ... does she cook?'
By forcing the reader/audience to look at the injustice of black American life, Childress makes us aware of the many sides of racism and prejudice, and challenges blacks as well as whites to change it.

In *Trouble in Mind* (1955), a full-length work produced in an off-Broadway theatre, Childress again focusses on a strong Black woman, a veteran of show business named Wiletta Mayer. Wiletta objects to the unrealistic role she has been assigned to play in "Chaos in Belleville," a melodrama with an antilynching theme articulated from a white point of view. She knows that taking such a stand will result in her termination from the production. But she loves the freedom of giving vent to her long-repressed feelings about prejudice in the American theatre.

*Wine in the Wilderness*, which sprang from the Black revolutionary period of the 1960s, brings together inner city and middle-class Blacks who learn about their identities with the help of a ghetto heroine named Tomorrow Marie. She is a contrast to the middle-class types who equate Blackness with such superficial trappings as rhetoric, use of the Black idiom, and African objects d'art, but who, in reality, are empty and artificial. What really matters, they learn in the course of the play, is what is inside a person.
Other plays by Childress include *Mojo* (1971) and *String* (1971). In *Mojo*, a two-character play whose theme is Black love, a serious illness motivates a divorced woman to visit her former husband who is now involved with a white woman, and they rediscover each other. In *String* (1971), a short play based on Guy de Maupassant's story entitled "A Piece of String," an innocent man with odd habits is accused falsely of theft at a Black Neighbourhood Association picnic in New York City. Interspersing comedy and sadness, Childress treats the timeless subject of dignity. And in *Wedding Band* (1973), a full-length play set in South Carolina in 1918, she focuses on romance between two quite ordinary people, who are, however, forbidden by law to love because one is white and the other Black.

Efforts to create a black theatre reached an important stage with the founding of the Federal Theatre Project (1935–39). Its first concern was to fight discrimination at all levels in the theatre and in the society at large. It protested against the persistent use of blackface, which excluded blacks from certain roles and left prominent actors unemployed. Basically the situation of the African-American theatre did not change much as a result of the FTP. After the demise of the Federal Theatre in Harlem, new community theatres arose that kept alive the dream of an authentic black theatre.
Undoubtedly the best known Black woman playwright is Lorraine Hansberry. Her play *A Raisin in the Sun* was staged on Broadway in 1959 and won critical acclaim and the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award as the best play of the 1958-59 theatre season. With this production Hansberry became the first Black woman to have a play presented on Broadway. *A Raisin in the Sun* is perhaps the most famous play written by a Black American. Lena Younger, who has presided over her Chicago household since the death of her husband, hopes to bring to fruition her family's long-deferred dream of purchasing a home with light and space enough for everyone. Her husband's legacy - his insurance money - acts as a catalyst, projecting the family into a situation that not only causes dramatic conflicts but tests their character. The Younger Children - Walter Jr., and Beneatha - have dreams of their own. Walter, tired of chauffering and barely making both ends meet, wants to own his own liquor store, a dream that his mother cannot share partly because of her religious beliefs. Beneatha, a liberated woman interested in her African heritage, wants to be a doctor. Ruth, the daughter-in-law, a bit worn out on account of life's struggles, wishes to help her husband gain the "manhood" or self-respect he is seeking. She also acts as a peacemaker between the generations. Joseph Asagai, Beneatha's friend, dreams of a Black-ruled Africa. Hansberry
in this play sets out to challenge existing stereotypes by retracing the important episodes in the history of this exemplary family. However, the situations in which the Youngers are placed and their behaviour show them to be exceptional and separate from the mass of family "types" in the ghetto. Instead of destroying the stereotype, the play only shows how the Youngers escape it.

Like those of many African-Americans, the Youngers' forbears left for the North in search of employment and a life free from racism. As in Our Lan' by Theodore Ward, the family epic begins with dreams and hopes, despite inevitable setbacks. In the Chicago ghetto, the Youngers subsist in poverty. To make the relations between the characters more dramatic, Hansberry introduces a moment of crisis when each dreams of spending the dead father's insurance annuity in his or her own way. The different aspirations reveal diverging ethical choices and become sources of conflict.

No doubt, Raisin illustrates the social and racial relations in America which promises integration only in theory. On a more profound level, the Youngers' victory is due to the fact that they are different from others in the ghetto: they "deserve" to move into the white suburbs because they have adopted the values of the middle class that they hope to join.
Hansberry's hope for integration for the Youngers' and for black theatre can pass as a concession to the tastes and ideology of Broadway audiences. The Younger family's aspirations - to get out of the ghetto at all costs, to satisfy basic needs and eventually "plant a garden" - characterize many ghetto families. But the Youngers' entry into an all-white neighbourhood does not portend a bright future. Perhaps it is on this point that the play is unsatisfactory in its depiction of integration as salvation. The test of blacks desiring to integrate into a white neighbourhood at the end of the fifties is depicted somewhat more realistically in *Take a Giant Step* by Louis Peterson. This play can serve as a follow-up to *Raisin* since it shows the life of a black family after the move. Yet neither Hansberry nor Peterson states openly that integration is often a trap for blacks.

The words from a speech made by Lorraine Hansberry to a Black Writers Conference in New York City in 1959 provide an opportunity for us to rediscover the depth and breadth of Hansberry's social and political concerns. In her speech she says:

I was born black and female. I was born in a depression after one world war, and came into my adolescence during another. While I was still in my teens the first atom bombs were dropped on human beings at Nagasaki and Hiroshima. And by the
time I was twenty-three years old, my government and that of the Soviet Union had entered actively into the worst conflict of nerves in human history — the Cold War...

... I have, like all of you, on a thousand occasions seen indescribable displays of man's very real inhumanity to man, and I have come to maturity, as we all must, knowing that greed and malice and indifference to human misery and bigotry and corruption, brutality, and perhaps above all else, ignorance — the prime ancient and persistent enemy of man — abound in this world.

I say all of this to say that one cannot live with sighted eyes and feeling heart and not know and react to the miseries which afflict this world.17

What is most familiar in the above words is the sense of disbelief at what we, as humanity, will do to each other in the name of that same humanity.

Lorraine Hansberry was proud of being "young gifted and Black" at a time when Black women were stereotyped as merely long suffering matriarchs with sharp tongues. Her redefinition of black women as active and responsible participants in our political future was surprising in 1959 and remains so to some as we enter the 1990s. It is her pride and the scope
of her vision that are the key to her uncommon consciousness. She saw that in order for a great work to be truly universal it had to be painfully specific. The truth of Black lives had to be explored, not recast into imitations of white life, before Black theatre would take its place in world drama.

*A Raisin in the Sun* opened up the questions of the validity of the middle-class aspirations, the right of women to control their own bodies and their intellectual independence, the inherent conservatism of the underclasses, the myth of the Black matriarchy, the connection between Africans and African-Americans some of which were issues not raised by Blacks in public. Because Hansberry has been regarded only within the light of Black -- mostly male -- dramatists, her larger context as a woman has been ignored. Discussion of *Raisin* is most often centred round Walter Lee and his frustrations or his conflict with his mother. The character frequently overlooked is Beneatha, Walter Lee's sister and the most autobiographical of Hansberry's characters. Early in the play Beneatha has this exchange with the African who is forcing her to marry him:

Beneatha: You never understood that there is more than one kind of feeling which can exist between a man and a woman - or, at least, there should be.
Asagai: (Shaking his head negatively but gently): Ho. Between a man and a woman there need be only one kind of feeling. I have that for you ...

Beneatha: I know - and by itself - it won't do. I can find that anywhere.

Asagai: For a woman it should be enough.

Beneatha: I know - because that's what it says in all the novels that men write. But it isn't.18

These words were not put in the mouth of Beneatha merely to show her as rebellious and troublesome. These are the political beliefs of Hansberry. In some unpublished notes she examines the idea that "feminine" traits such as love, compassion, and understanding are reserved for only woman's personality. Her understanding of the nature of relationship between women and men is further revealed when she says: "This is the supreme insult against men. It is only woman who truly possesses the most magnificent features of the human race - I a woman think not - and it is time men decided it is the great slander of the ages - to take our hands - truly as comrades."19

Blacks rejected the names given to them by White America. The term "nigger" became reminiscent of scorn and insult. The word 'Negro' lost the significance the Harlem
Renaissance had given it. It came to symbolize a half-life accepted for too-long. These were replaced by the word black. Family names, formerly given to slaves by their masters, were sometimes abandoned in favour of names of African origin freely chosen. It is interesting here to note that Genevieve Fabre traces the development of black playwriting itself to its earliest roots in Africa. LeRoi Jones became Amiri Baraka, and Don L. Lee became Haki Madhubuti. The idea of a black nation brought with it the possibility of a collective identity.

Five years after A Raisin in the Sun, Hansberry's The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window (1964) appeared on Broadway. In this work, Hansberry treats the private woes of Sidney, who is yet to find the right dream, and Iris, who is struggling to be liberated from the confining role that her husband has required her to play. The sign in Sidney's window indicates that he has been persuaded to campaign for a friend who is running as a reform candidate. A number of characters enter the home of Iris and Sidney. One of them, a Black man, eloquently articulates the pain of his race. At the end of the play, despite the dishonesty of the candidate he has supported and his gloom at the suicide of his sister-in-law, Sidney is moved to make something strong of this latest sorrow. Again, there is affirmation and hope. In The Sign,
Hansberry has created a framework in which her characters could comment on the disorders and agitations of contemporary life. It is a drama of ideas rather than of action.

Among the unpublished plays of Hansberry is Les Blancs, whose final text was adopted by her literary executor and former husband, Robert Nemiroff, and produced on Broadway in 1970. Set in a Mission compound—a hospital established in Africa by a European minister, seemingly suggested by Albert Schweitzer—and in the hut of a tribal elder, the play involves conflicting ideas during a period of change in Sub-Saharan Africa. The Blacks who once asked peacefully for freedom from the colonialists are now staging a revolution. The play focuses on three Black African brothers who espouse different attitudes to Africa.

In a sentimental unproduced fable, What Use Are Flowers? Hansberry depicts an old hermit who lived away from civilization for twenty years. The hermit finds some wild children who, before an unnamed holocaust, were brought to the edge of the forest by someone who wanted the human race to continue. The hermit sets about the uneasy task of teaching these children the rudiments of civilization. Before he dies, one of them invents the wheel.
Of Hansberry's unproduced plays, the most interesting is *The Drinking Gourd* which was commissioned by the National Broadcasting Corporation. While the work reveals the horrors and cruelties of slavery, it is in Hansberry's own words, "a serious treatment of family relationships by a slave-owning family and their slaves." With her attempts to discover the past of women through tangles of heritage and personhood and with her memory anchored in the African soil which evokes images of a distinctive character, Lorraine Hansberry offers a rediscovery and reinvention of African-American cultural heritage and identity.

For blacks in exile, Africa is a memory anchored in the collective consciousness more than in actual reality. Although this memory is transmitted from generation to generation, black Americans are under pressure to construct a cultural form made up of different behaviours and customs. Black culture in America is not African but African-American developed in response to the requirements of a new environment. The plays and theories of Paul Carter Harrison participate in the debate on blackness and Africanness. For Harrison the theatre is an arena where the destiny of blacks can be staged. It is a privileged environment where art can save the ethos of a people and restore these peak points to African-American culture.
African distinctiveness appears most strongly in religious life and in music and dance. Harrison sees expressions of African experience in popular culture through song, sacred or profane, dance, and drum music symbolized by that eminently African instrument. These are the components of black sensibility and cultural heritage which the artist must know. The role of the theatre is to revalidate the spirituality of black America, to revive the collective race memory by retaining remembrance of slavery, and to reinstate an African vision of the world. Harrison refuses western theatre because it restricts free expression of black creativity. He rejects the theatre of the oppressed victims because its use of social realism shows only one side of human relations.

In order to develop the artistic and ideological basis for a new drama, black theatre establishes strong ties with African-American culture. Combining the three principles of drum, song and dance, the theatre associates textual with scenic writing and performs functions that were once held separate in the other arts. From the Harlem Renaissance to the sixties, theoreticians of black art have always placed culture at the heart of this debate. As an instrument for reflection and analysis, theatre is viewed as a continuous means to rediscover, and reinvent the cultural heritage. African-American drama is often constructed round the double perspective of destroying
the foreign code imposed by the dominant ideology and developing its own more relevant system.

The black renaissance of the sixties called for a theatre of "black experience" as well as one of struggle. The theatre was no longer dependent on white liberals or black militants. It was created from the most fundamental aspects of African-American life. Ron Milner's 1968 essay, "Black Theatre -- Go Home." makes a plea for this. He calls upon his fellow playwrights to create a living art from materials and techniques within the community. The preference is for an art free from Western tradition and renewed by contact with black people. Ed Bullins in Village Voice points out that the theatre is a monument built from black awareness and it is a sanctuary for the recreation of the black spirit.

Because the oral tradition has long remained a living practice in African-American culture, the dramatic artist has been tempted to emulate not only the art and techniques of the storyteller, but also his prestigious social function - that of recording and reformulating experience, of shaping and transmitting values, opinions, and attitudes, and of expressing a certain collective wisdom. Many folklore heroes - Slave John or the trickster fighting against hypocrisy and power, the bad man who fears neither God nor the Devil - serve as
archetypes for theatre protagonists. They question the validity of stereotypes of blacks while demonstrating the oppressed people's refusal to become victims. Finally, the hero is often a teller who builds up his own character and transforms his companions into listeners. Thus at the core of its structure the theatre recreates a narrative situation.

Black music also contributes to the creative process. From early on the message, which even the revolutionary ideology of the sixties could not fail to hear, was that through music black people affirmed their ability to control chaos, confer meaning on absurdity and restore spirituality to the universe. Spirituality of soul, the governing principle of this music, is both a strategy and an aspect of character, a conscious and active step in bringing about change.

With the diversity of black women's lives now acknowledged in literature, African-American women writers search for new ways to express old and new situations and silences. Using blues and jazz, black urban speech, contemporary music, history, science fiction, dreams, magic and the mundane, these women speak out in their own characteristic way.

One of the forms frequently used in black literature is the blues. The blues has been the underlying ingredient of
most popular music today. But its importance lies not only in sound, but also in its relationship to the history of a people. Amiri Baraka explains thus: "The term blues relates directly to the Negro, and his (her) personal involvement in America. Blues means a Negro experience, it is the one music the Negro made that could not be transferred into a more general significance than the one the Negro gave it initially." Langston Hughes was the first poet to recognize its power, and in the late 1970s African-American women writers also pursued its literary possibilities. By using this form as a basis for written expression, these writers have merged the old with the new and captured the essence of black tradition and culture. By doing so, they honour not only the beauty and resilience of black life but also the women who are the substance of their songs.

The blues, black America's spirited and often ironical statement of hard times, hopes and triumph, was first performed-and frequently written - by black women in the 1920s. These blues singers gave the music worldwide recognition and their profession gave them freedom and independence from back-breaking field work or domestic servitude.

An interest in Black culture during the 1960's created a critical interest in the past and culture of black women.
There was a stage when the writings of African-American women were simply invisible in the development of black literary history by males. Robert Bone's *The Negro Novel in America* betrays, according to Barbara Smith, "white racist pseudo-scholarship." As a result, Black women critics have had to reconstruct the African-American literary tradition to include women writers and also eradicate stereotypes of black femininity and myths about black women's roles. The focus is on the cultural importance of black women writers and on a re-assessment of black literature and literary history in an attempt to discover multiple black feminine styles.

As Toni Cade Bambara says, "in order to do justice to the survival techniques, psychic or economic, of black women in their community black writers have to adopt an interdisciplinary approach mixing accounts of songs, writings and oral history." This is a pattern distinctly visible in the innovative theatrical style of Shange. Writers like Audre Lorde and Alice Walker have in the later day developed the themes of black feminist criticism and black writing. These writers see the study of black woman in literature as part of that larger study of expression in black behaviour. In the case of Shange what is particularly appealing is how language operates in her writing and how she re-works it to support a whole culture.
According to Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of dialogism and consciousness, each social group speaks in its own "social dialect" expressing shared values, perspectives, ideology, and norms. These social dialects become the "languages" of heteroglossia. If language for Bakhtin is an expression of social identity, then subjectivity is constituted as a social entity through the role of the word as the medium of consciousness. Consciousness, then, like language, is shaped by the social environment. (Consciousness becomes consciousness only ... in the process of social interaction.) Bakhtin further defines the relationship between consciousness and inner speech. He says that consciousness becomes a kind of inner speech reflecting "the outer world" in a process that links the psyche, language, and social interaction. If black women speak from a complex social, historical, and cultural positionality which constitutes black female subjectivity, they express a certain dialogics of discourse which provides an appropriate model for articulating a relation of mutuality and reciprocity. This is a pattern which we notice in the evocative theatre of Shange. The language of Shange develops its own linguistic signs of expression. In fact, it is through such language that the black man captures private yet communal cultural rituals. This language employed in a dramatic context lends a polyphonic density to the ideas and images of poetry.
Ntozake Shange first came into public prominence with the production of her choreopoem, *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/ When the Rainbow is Enuf* (1976). A startlingly new dramatic approach to black life, this 'play' comprises seven female characters (ladies in brown, yellow, orange, red, purple, blue, and green). Through poetry, dance, and song, they tell of their trials and triumphs in a world bent on their eradication and silence:

> ever since I realised there waz someone calt a colored girl and evil woman a bitch or a nag
> i been tryin not to be that 6 leave bitterness in somebody else's cup/...
> So this is a requiem for myself/cuz
> 1 have died in a real way/... cuz i don't know
> anymore/how to avoid my own face wet with my tears/cuz i had convinced myself colored girls had no
> right to sorrow/...
> i cdnt stand it
> i cdnt stand bein sorry & colored at the same time
> its so redundant in the modern world.33

The play received favourable reviews as well as scathing ones. Many black men were outraged at their portrayal.
as non-caring, violent oppressors. Although the male characters receive little psychological probing, the words of the women characters have been received by a large section of the black female audience with resounding applause.

One of the first black feminist plays to speak honestly about the terrible rupture in male/female relationships and the denial of black women's voice in American society, *For Colored Girls* is an expressive and highly creative work. Shange's honest appraisal of black life can be seen in all her works. She explains the need to touch the deeper, less expressed emotions that we all carry around - in deliberate defiance of western notions of decorum:

> Our society allows people to be absolutely neurotic and totally out of touch with their feelings and everyone else's feelings, and yet be very respectable. This, to me is travesty. So, I write, to get at the part of people's emotional lives that they don't have control over the part that can and will respond. 

Shange's ties with black culture are evident in the musical idiom and the content of her work. They are also expressed in the way she re-invents English spelling and punctuation and
its placement on the page. She explains this to Claudia Tate:

It bothers me ... to look at poems where, all the first letters are capitalized. That's why I use the lowercase alphabet. Also, I like the idea that letters dance .... I need some visual stimulation, so that reading becomes not just a passive act and more than an intellectual activity, but demands rigorous participation. Basically, the spellings reflect language as I hear it. I write this way because I hear the words.\textsuperscript{35}

It is words wedded to music and dance that Shange employs in her experimental theatre works, \textit{Spell\# 7} (1979) and \textit{Boogie Woogie Landscapes} (1979). The first involves nine characters who gather in a bar to discuss their lives. All are black actors and actresses who expose the restrictions and racism of America's theatres. One of the women sums up their situations:

\texttt{8 atleast yr not playin a whore/if some other woman comes in here 8 tells me she's playin a whore/i think i might kill her.}\textsuperscript{36}
Boogie Woogie Landscapes is the more experimental of the two. Shange here mixes surrealism and expressionism in a portrait of "night-life companions" who sing, dance, and share emotional moments as black women in America. The play is basically concerned with women's rights. One character makes a powerful statement on its behalf:

It really is not so good to be born a girl when we have to be infibulated, excised, clitorectomized & STILL be afraid to walk the streets or stay home at night ... monsters and rapists. They are known all over the world & are proliferating at a rapid rate ...

A Photograph: Lovers in Motion (1979) is the third of the trilogy. It comes closest to traditional theatrical form using five characters who intertwine with each other's lives. The story concerns a black male photographer. He is pursued by the other characters who want some kind of sexual and/or emotional commitment from him, as he tries to become a worthy artist representative of his black culture.

Through her explosive and evocative work, Shange has placed her finger on the pulse of black women's lives in contemporary urban society. She has described From Okra to Greens/A Different Kinda Love Story: A Play With Music & Dance
(1985) as a "feminist poem in motion." Set within the framework of a variant of the boy-meets-girl love story. In the play, Okra (the black female) gives Greens (the black male) a gift - her sociopolitical views on the black woman's existence within the local, national, and international arenas. In one sense, Greens represents Shange's ideal black male, though his coming to know about the complex realities of female existence is a gradual process. When the choreopoem opens, Greens comments on the painful "crookedness" of the black woman's existence. His sensitivity to women's realities is described here:

folks wd just play
wit her/get their kicks
watchin the crooked lady
do her thing/8 her bones
gotta crackin
shatterin/mutilatin
themselves til she
waz looking so weird
to herself she
locked herself up in
a closet.

Once Greens and Okra become sexually and then romantically involved, he becomes the black male who works to understand the black women's particular oppression. With this understanding, they are able to work together as a black couple against the racist society that victimizes them both.
Shange has perhaps been most misunderstood in her portrayal of black men. An examination of Beau Willie, Sean David, and Greens offers evidence that Shange's treatment of black men is not unilaterally hostile and dependent upon negative stereotypes. As E. Ethelbert Miller declares, "Ntozake Shange is not a radical feminist singling out men as the primary problem in our society; instead she is a Black artist opening our eyes to the totality of ... (black women's) dilemma."

While her choreopoems celebrate black female identity, Shange at no point encourages women to eschew all social or intimate contact with men as the solution to male exploitation. She works toward a level of communication in male-female relationships that is built upon mutual respect, trust, and individual self-worth.

A systematic exploration of black culture has allowed the theatre to uncover the principles of an ethos and the foundations of a drama. In militant theatre, the investigation of certain alienating aspects of the culture led to rupture. In the theatre of experience, a search for ethnic continuity legitimizes the culture.

The common basis of myth provides that Eliot calls an art form to the modern. It is a mode of dislocating language into meaning. In the context of African-American
writing with special reference to Lorraine Hansberry and Shange, Eliot's definition of the auditory imagination seems to have a significant application. In his *The Use of Poetry and Use of Criticism* Eliot defines auditory imagination thus: "(It) is the feeling for syllable and rhythm, penetrating far below the conscious level of thought and feeling, invigorating every word; sinking to the most primitive and forgotten ..." and further it fuses "the most ancient, and the most civilized mentality." The fusion of the ancient, that is, the rootedness in a mythic archetype and the modern is what gives the drama of Hansberry and Shange their special appeal.

Belonging as they do to the black theatre movement of the sixties and the seventies, Alice Childress, Lorraine Hansberry, and Ntozake Shange, concentrate on an evocation of black consciousness and heritage. The theatre for them seems to offer a revalidation of the spirituality of black America. The evocative use they make of music, song, and dance fuses the textual, the scenic and the archeological. In their rediscovery and dramatization of African-American cultural heritage and identity, Hansberry and Shange could, in a sense, be described as literary anthropologists. Feminist criticism challenges the fundamental theoretical assumptions of literary history and criticism by demanding a radical re-thinking and revisioning of the conceptual grounds of literary study that have been based almost entirely on male literary experiences.
While white male-dominated writing is scripto-centric, black women writers define an alternative reality rooted in self, folk-tradition, and female bonding. Some of the implications of this revisioning have already been realised in African-American literature, as we can notice in the analysis of the works of Lorraine Hansberry and Shange.

African-American theatre has reached a cross-roads in its evolution, and a double hypothesis can be presented about its future. First, this future is in the hands of a system of cultural production that has eliminated some former prejudices. Animated by liberal pluralism, the future is paving the way for different ethnic theatres. Secondly, the future of the black theatre is also in the hands of the black community as a whole, and not just the artists. The theatre is not only the creation of authors, actors and producers. It brings together the thinking and feelings of the community. If theatre is "an empty space to be filled," then this arena can become the place of lively dialogue only when all the elements that compose the theatre act are present. A truly ethnic theatre cannot survive without the concern and attention of its audience. Moreover, black theatre will survive only if a dialogue with the group is maintained and if the forms that support that dialogue are constantly renewed.
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33. V.N. Volosinov (Mikhail Bakhtin), *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* (New York: Seminar Press, 1973) 11, 29. This concept of the "subjective psyche" constituted primarily as a "social entity" distinguishes the Bakhtinian notion of self from the Freudian notion of identity.

34. Ntozake Shange, Interview with Claudia Tate, *Black Women Writers at Work* (New York: Continum, 1983) 156.

35. Claudia Tate, *Black Women Writers at Work*, 163.


