CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

5.1 KENNEDY: DARING VOICE OF THE BLACK THEATRE

As is evident from the previous chapters, this study has attempted to analyse the psychosis of Black women and their oppression by White and Black male power. Kennedy’s daring dramaturgy and her deft delineation of the Black cause are evident in the selected plays. Her approach to the sufferings of her fellow beings marks her out from her contemporaries. Black playwrights, especially women writers, discuss what conditions the poor, deserted Black women encounter in their struggle for survival and how a change from this turbulent condition can be brought about. But Kennedy perceives their condition from a different angle and she is displeased with the dark reality that the Black women have to face in their encounter with the Whites who are unjust, jealous, unmerciful, avaricious and blood-thirsty. She (Mahone, 1994) says,

there is no doubt that I see life as tragic. I can talk about sunny days, but I definitely see life as trying to constantly wrestle with this tragedy and trying to not let it overcome you. I do feel oppressed by white American society. I’m very easily overwhelmed by numbers, or the fact that there are, say, more American whites than there are African-Americans. A lot of my energy comes out of that feeling of oppression, and from trying to break through being over defined by another group of people.

Kennedy is the first female African-American playwright to assert her presence and press the issues of identity in a male dominated Black theatre. There is absolutely no doubt that Blacks were subjugated by racial discriminations, political manipulations, economic crises and brutal treatments. Kennedy’s plays emerged as revolutionary psychodramas, and questioned and challenged parochial canons of
accepted conventions. Though Kennedy faced teething problems while growing up as a playwright, her entry marks a turning point in the African-American theatre. Her plays deconstruct the standards of beauty, aesthetics and artistry. Kennedy's work is concerned with the Black women's quest for self-knowledge and identity. As Susan Meigs (1990) remarks, Kennedy's

characters represent the community of women, largely excluded from the mechanisms of black protest, who are nonetheless expected to sacrifice gender issues for racial concerns.

Kennedy has a habit of observing the main characters in the writings of playwrights whom she admires. She (Mahone, 1994) says,

I studied those...characters very closely to see what made a dramatic heroine.

According to Kennedy (Mahone, 1994), a heroine

is trying to create a mode in life that will sustain her. Heroism is trying to decipher life through work. My characters, starting with Sarah (Funnyhouse of a Negro), are doing this through writing; or, they want to be writers, they are also trying to explore in this work of history of race, which for me is the predominant question of my existence.

She (Mahone, 1994) further adds,

the women in my family have been heroic in the same way: They have sustained themselves through work. My grandmother and my great-aunt were servants. My mother was a teacher...And they excelled at their work. I came to feel, from watching them, that you can be heroic by doing hard work. That's what I try to give my characters, starting with Sarah – Clara, Suzanne Alexander, all of them. They work very hard. This gives them the fortitude and the energy to face life.
It is not difficult to categorise the themes presented in Kennedy’s plays. They can be summed up in two themes, the darkness and the light. Kennedy (Mahone, 1994) explains her dark themes thus:

in relation to the creative process (writing), there are certain questions, and I don’t really know what they are, but ever since I was a kid, these questions (have been) nagging at me all the time. These questions are very much in the dark, and I don’t try to articulate them... I try to very specifically write down little paragraphs about these questions. And that’s very much still in the dark. I try to let these paragraphs grow as much as they can on their own not trying to force them. And then I try to let the paragraphs on these questions grow into some illumination that surprises me. That’s how I crystallize the things that are in the dark.

5.2 EXPERIMENTAL BLACK THEATRE

The African–American theatre has been in a state of flux, engaging new forms and new dimensions. It rejects the traditional parameters of stage directions and usual iconoclastic fervours in order to reconstruct an alternative framework. The Black theatre movement brings in a renaissance in the field of art and literature against the stultifying and stagnant bourgeois mentality of the White world. The new African-American theatre is highly innovative and experimental. As accepted conventional modes and traditional forms cannot help to express the Black experience as a whole, alternative methods are introduced that are highly challenging. They are better suited for the purpose with their rich variety and freedom. The emphasis has been laid on Afro-centricism to erase the scars of the unpleasant slavery trade and to build an assertive self-image for Blackhood.

The writings of Black women, who are the most exploited class on account of racism and sexism, are more vigorous and forceful. They focus on the minds of their women to unveil the dark realities of life, instead of resorting to conventional portraiture. Their works also attempt to deconstruct the tenets of the Western
standards. They are the least bothered with neat endings and a proper denouement. Their plays are open-ended, and ambiguous relating to the lives and experiences of the Blacks. It is relevant here to quote the observation of De Weever (Bryant, 1992),

the endings of the works are also revisions of the endings of canonical texts. Canonical texts written by both men and women end with the death or the marriage of the heroine. The novels of Jane Austen are examples of the marriage ending...The open-ended conclusions...are indeed not conclusions, since they concluded nothing but leave all possibilities open, and closure eludes the novels.

Kennedy's psycho-plays, emphasizing the central role of theatre artists, have led to the shaping of useful approaches for the production of these compelling dramas. The characters are seen as the author coming in terms with the life of the author-as-character. Although analysing the incredible variety of Kennedy's plays and suggesting critical strategies that will support a fuller study of her dramatic writing, the thesis also demonstrates that only through a collage of critical models, the complexity and richness of her post-modern dramaturgy can be illuminated.

5.3 AMBIGUOUS ATTITUDES TOWARD KENNEDY'S PLAYS

While the argument of Kennedy's Black consciousness is still under debate, she has stepped forward to express her own Black experiences and feelings in an unconventional style. She dismantles parochial and arbitrary standards of the White stage. Many Blacks and critics believe Kennedy's characters are derogatory and incomprehensible. Audiences and even critics find it difficult to probe into the abstruse technique of Kennedy because they have been used to witnessing realistic and naturalistic style of writings so far. As it has been already mentioned in the previous chapter, Kennedy's grandfather was a wealthy White farmer. This fact would have directed Kennedy's attention toward the White world. Many writers of the Black Arts Theatre Movement disregard her from the movement for several reasons; one is her concentration on multi-racial plots. Instead of instigating revolutionary attitudes of
Black consciousness, they believe that she treats Blackness as a sickness, an evil, a carrier of sickness, instead of revealing its pride and glamour. Kennedy has found it difficult, mainly because of these reasons, to obtain her rank among her fellow writers. John Johnson refused to review her first play for the very same reason. Michael Kahn, director of her plays, points out that Kennedy (Bryant, 1992) is severely ostracized. Her plays were considered neurotic and...not supportive of the Black movement.

Billie Allen, an actress who enacted the role of Sarah, supports the view of Michael Kahn (Bryant, 1992) saying that Kennedy's works upset many Blacks because she "exposed our universal demons to the scrutiny of the light". Toby Silverman Zinman (1990) says,

it seems to me enormously to Kennedy's credit that she is willing to reveal herself as a black woman raised in a middle-class household whose developing imagination is shaped more by Charlotte Bronte and Elizabeth Taylor...

Despite this ambivalent attitude toward Blackness, it is apparent that she is greatly influenced by the neo-African settings, and the aesthetics of Black Arts Movement.

However, all these ambivalent criticisms that could have put a stop to her career, have made Kennedy rise above them to afford new, significant, trend-settings in drama. Though Kennedy's Black Consciousness is not explicitly revealed in her plays, she feels proud of her Blackness. This statement can be proved with her own comments. Kennedy, who grew up in a multi-ethnic society, was brought up in the Black tradition, as her father was a Black social worker. She was greatly attracted towards her father's service for the Black cause and he remained a strong inspiration for her. She says,

he gave me stirring speeches at meetings and banquets on the value of working hard for the Negro cause and helping Negro youth. He
read me poetry of Negro poets and told me stories of Du Bois, Marian Anderson and Mary Bethune. He listened to me sing spirituals, which I loved, ... My father took me to hear and see him. After hearing Robeson I realized that one person could inspire many people to strength, to courage, to believing (Kennedy, 1987:12).

Great Black national leaders like Langston Hughes, Nkrumah and Lumumba influenced her. She says,

his (Hughes) work defined a whole society of Negroes, and somehow in its power was defining and creating me personally (Kennedy, 1987:106).

She further adds,

I bought as much as I could carry and made a skirt of the blue cloth with Nkrumah’s face illustrated hugely in black and white ...because it had become a kind of national cloth, I felt when I wore it that I had sealed my ancestry as West African...Africa had ignited a fire inside me...(Kennedy, 1987:123).

All these stories and experiences had strengthened her feelings as a Negro. She says, “Negro I needed that quality” (Kennedy, 1987:14). Hence, there can be no doubt that Kennedy is proud of being a Black, and the problems she had experienced, while growing up as a Black female, leads her to create subverted, anglophile characters in her plays.

5.4 THE SALIENT POINTS OF THE THESIS

5.4.1 Theatre of identity

Fear of racism has remained as an obstacle to an authentic Black self-expression. So writers suppressed their true emotions and experiences. With the rise of various Black theatre movements, writers discarded their reticence and practised more advanced methods. This witnessed the birth of a distinctive African-American theatre. These writers encoded and produced new experiences of lives through their writings,
which have been so far cloaked and denied expression either in written or oral form. Their aim is to inspire in the Black community a feeling of self-esteem so that the coloured people can begin to appreciate and value their culture, history and heritage. Kennedy’s disclosures have the power to shock and startle the theatre world, as they make use of previously unimagined means to awaken the Black experience. Theatre is the only powerful medium that inspires, instructs, both the audience and the writers. Kennedy as an innovative playwright has explored the Black life and experience and probed into the inner realms of Black women. It is a process of creating and re-creating new characters, thereby avoiding the old and false stereotypes created by the Western modes.

Kennedy selects material from her myriad sources and transforms it into a vision. The Swiss psychologist, Alice Miller, has observed that the early childhood experiences have become the source for creativity of many literary artists. While analysing Kafka’s writings, she (Koenig, 1987) states:

without his realizing it, experiences from early childhood found their way into his writing, just as they do into other people’s dreams.

Kennedy’s dreamlike plays exemplify Miller’s observation. Her plays are the explorations of the ways in which her Black culture and history leave their imprint on the characters’ lives.

Kennedy’s plays primarily discuss the issues of racism and the problems Blacks confront in the course of their search for an authentic self-image. The two mulatto bastards Sarah and Clara Passmore, Kay, Blake, Clara, Beast Girl and even the seven students undertake a journey in the quest of their identity amidst the White imperialism and even male domination in their society. Keyssar (1984) says that Kennedy’s exposure of the usually protected wounds of Black women haunts the spectator long after witnessing a performance. Thus, it forms the core of her subject matter.
The woman’s quest for self-definition forms the underlying plot of the Black women’s writings. Elaine Showalter (Gardinar, 1980) sees self discovery, a search for identity as the main theme of women’s writing of all cultures. Identity is a central theme for many African-American writers and it remains an all time engrossing subject for them. The meaning of their identity is paradoxical, implying both sameness and distinctiveness and its contradictions become two-fold when it is linked particularly with women. Carolyn Heilbrun’s Reinvented Womanhood argues that successful women are ‘male identified’ as it becomes a futile effort for her to look for an identity apart from her man. Women never form a self because they ‘never undergo an identity crisis’. Women’s search for identity within the world of drama or fiction remains fictional itself. The quest for identity seems like a soap opera, stagnating in a place, never advancing. Clara in A Movie Star has to Star in Black and White has an identity to lose, the price of wifehood is abandonment of self.

Feminist theories and psychology provide us with the concept of female self-image as a key factor in analysing the unique features of contemporary writing by women. It is apparent that writing by women differs from writing by men. According to Chodorow (Gardiner, 1980), man achieves identity as he is separated from his mother after growing up and adopting the role of the father. Thus, he comes to regard himself as an active independent individual. But a girl’s personality takes form in a different style. A girl forms her gender with the symbiotic relation of her mother. She has to recreate the mother-infant symbiosis when she herself becomes a mother. Consequently, she is more dependent and empathetic than men while independence and autonomy are harder for them to achieve. Women’s identity is defined or identified with social relationship throughout her life. Judith Kegan Gardinar (1980) says that female social roles are more rigid and less varied than men’s are. The female counterpart of the male identity crisis may occur diffusely, at a different stage or not at all. No wonder, the search for
identity specially troubles women and it is reflected through their writings.

These writings seem to be mainly concerned with the individual Black woman’s problem of identity, revolving against the dominant White society.

To achieve an identity, Kennedy has to sacrifice her personal life. She (Mahone, 1994) says,

...my wanting to be a writer is very much tied to my struggle for my own individuality. And that’s why I don’t belong to any groups; I don’t belong to any clubs. ...I don’t belong to anything. And I’m very leery of any kind of political affiliation. So my wanting to be a writer is very much parallel to the struggle for individuality.

Kennedy has to divorce her husband in order to dedicate herself totally to the theatre. Kennedy feels that the same reason impels many women to drift away from the social or political activities. They need a man to protect them. As they cannot dedicate themselves completely to art, they remain in the shadow of man. According to Kennedy, if a woman listens to several voices, she differs from man and achieves an authentic identity. Kennedy is aware of the fact it is difficult for a woman to achieve success through writing. Clara in the play says, “Everyone says it’s unrealistic for a Negro to want to write” (Kennedy, 1988:99).

Clara is trapped by the social and familial values that prevent her from establishing her identity as a Black woman writer. As Clara and her mother cannot reconcile to the social expectations of both the cultures, they struggle to abdicate their instructed roles as mother and wife. Clara is identified finally with Jean Peter’s sacrificing role of a wife. The floating image of Winters in the final moments of the play reveals Clara’s inability to justify herself as a wife. Despite the strong objection of her family, she concentrates on writing her plays to fuse her fractured psyche with her writings. She finds in them an outlet and she finally attempts to take up the role of a writer that gives her the most power and fulfillment. Albeit she is silenced and
disguised behind her voices, she resolves her despair by writing a play. The search of an identity and the desire to achieve success are reflected in Shelley Winter’s portrayal. Clara’s desire for fulfilment as a writer is juxtaposed with Winter’s role as ‘essence of longing’. She is ready to accept her failure as a wife ultimately. It is symbolised by the scene of Winters’ drowning. To gain something, one has to lose something. As Eddie has not been with her for a long time, this gap has grown into greater tensions and unhappy moments in her life. She finds company in her works, in which she lives the life she dreams of. She desires to become a lamp-post, leading her successors in the path of fulfilment in the male chauvanistic world.

The protagonists of her early plays attempt to search for their identity and rebel against the White domination, which has destroyed the true identity of Black women. Sarah, Clara, Kay and Blake make efforts to claim White ancestry either through their selves or friends. The story of Beast Girl is different from others, as she is prevented by her mother from the normal growth of a woman.

Kennedy has compromised with the negative aspects of her themes in her later plays. It is explicitly seen in Suzanne’s achievement as an established writer, who has come back to the Ohio State University to give a talk. She who is portrayed as self-confident, self-sufficient and self-assertive, persuades others around her to recognize her self-image despite her bitter racial experiences while studying in the University. To quote Alice Childress’ (Betsko, 1987) words,

characters know; they won’t be fooled, not even by their medium, the writer. They allow you to write them, pushing you along until they’re satisfied.

5.4.2 The lives of Black women: various dimensions

It is apparent that Black women are exploited and oppressed by various torments. A comprehensive account of their life in various aspects can be drawn from
the portrayal of their turbulent lives against the background of their frustrations and disappointments.

The tragic plight of Black women begins right from their birth. The Black mothers are filled with anxiety when they think of the pain of what lies ahead for their children. They are aware of the fact beyond doubt that they lack power to protect and bring them up in a world fraught with danger and inhumanity. They find it hard to cope with their harsh life. This is seen through the lives of Sarah and Clara.

Kennedy’s struggle as a Black woman commences in Cleveland where she attends public schools and starts to make jottings furiously as an outlet of her feelings on being “small, ugly and inferior”. She is not happy at Ohio State University where she was an indifferent student who switched her major subjects several times as it is clearly revealed through the experiences of Suzanne Alexander in The Ohio State Murders. Kennedy says,

my dorm mates at Ohio State:
often from southern Ohio towns, they were determined to subjugate the Negro girls. They were determined to make you feel that it was a great inequity that they had to live in the same dorm with you...an injustice. This dark reality was later to give great impetus and energy to my dreams...The immensity, the dark, rainy winters, the often open racial hatred of the girls in the dorm continued to demoralize me (Kennedy, 1988:69).

Kennedy as a child has undergone mental agony. White students always enjoy the privilege of being favourites of teachers. She cannot understand why the teachers treat Black students with contempt. The problem of being a Black in the White society made her work hard to attain a position. She says,

White people:
they tried to hold you back. That implied a great challenge existed in life (Kennedy, 1987:14).
The acute colour issues prevailing in the racial society have resulted in lack of hope and confidence.

Black women are deprived of happiness even in their homes as their own men tyrannise over them. Clara’s aspiration to become a writer is easily rejected by her husband as mere non-sense. They are destined to answer their demands, be they reasonable or illogical. They do not consider their women’s feelings and needs. They are ostracized from their homes as they are in search of their self-image. The sufferings of the Black women have not stopped here as they are exploited sexually. They are not allowed to maintain their virginity till marriage. Beast Girl, Clara, Sarah and the seven students are prevented from passage into womanhood to maintain their virginity. Clara says,

on my wedding day the Reverend’s wife came to me and said when I see Marys I cry for their deaths, when I see brides, Clara, I cry for their deaths (Kennedy, 1988:36).

However, they fail in their task and the loss of innocence leads them to destruction. They are persuaded to gratify the carnal desires of both White and Black men. Kay is the real victim, seduced by her own brother just because he wanted to demonstrate his love for his White girl friend. The irony lies in the fact that when there is no one to rescue them during the Nazi invasion. They are left alone; their minds wrecked, and end up in an asylum.

The conditions of Black women become aggravated even after their marriage. The role of a wife is even more pathetic and tragic as it is unveiled in A Movie Star has to Star in Black and White. They are considered as machines for reproduction. Clara is forced to deny herself her aspirations for the sake of a harmonized family. She expects her husband to understand her feelings. But he is not ready to give up his male ego. The burden is for her alone. She has to perform the roles of daughter, mother and wife to satisfy all. Thus she is the embodiment of
Blackhood who psychologically suffers alienation even after marriage. The Black women are segregated from the outer world and start dwelling in a fantasy world.

The Black women have to shoulder the economic burden to raise their families. They are given jobs at very low wages; as a result, they seek prostitution as the only source of livelihood. Clara Passmore does the job of hunting men in the subway car to earn her bread, as she is not sufficiently paid at school.

The Black women are not spared even by their own brothers. The brothers exploit their blood relations to satisfy their needs. Kennedy successfully evokes the sympathy of the audience when Blake, who has to prove his unfathomable love for his girl friend, seduces Kay. This traumatic experience leads to pain, mental disorder, isolation and vulnerability.

As it is impossible to transform the White society, with its entrenched racist attitudes, it becomes necessary for Black women to earn an identity and thereby ensure an ascent in the social set-up. Lynn Norment (1990) says that the search for racial identity can be a mentally anguishing ordeal for mixed-race individuals, especially adolescents and teenagers, and it often involves the conscious or unconscious denial of one parent. How a biracial child copes with his identity crisis often depends on the support and influence of his parents. In many cases, the parents are divorced and the child has little, if any, contact with the black parent. Consequently, he or she may not develop, a healthy black identity; at the same time, he is constantly reminded that he is ‘different’ from the white children.

Thus, the yearning for an identity forms the major theme of Kennedy’s plays.
5.4.3 Expressionistic devices

Though Kennedy's plays are an amalgamation of African-American consciousness, history, race, culture and heritage, the application of unconventional dramatic devices and style in her plays ostracised her from the dominant Black theatre. Her visits to London and then to Africa in the early 60s have changed her outlook on life and her style of writing. She attempts to adopt the style of Tennessee Williams, Lorca and Albee, but fails in her primary attempt. Later, she follows her non-realistic, surrealistic portrayal and explores the experimental forms of drama departing drastically from conventional dramatic notions. Kennedy's plays reveal the complex interior landscape of Black women. Kennedy creates each character as a metaphor for the various kinds of roles society imposes upon women. She makes a revolutionary attempt to stir the minds of the public about their plight. The plays are often controversial, but are lauded for lyricism and expressionistic and surrealistic techniques. It is relevant to quote Susan Meigs (1990) words in this context,

her (Kennedy's) plays assimilate the grotesqueries of a John Webster with the painful lyricism of a Sylvia Plath.

Infused with colliding images of torment and tranquillity, violence and peace, horror and beauty, her surrealistic and expressionistic dramas open a window into her own life. She herself has stated that the characters are her 'selves'. Burke (1996) states,

whether related by visual images that are achingly visceral or narrated with a straightforwardness that exists in ironic counterpoint to the content of the narrative, Adrienne Kennedy's plays are minefields.

Kennedy frequently uses the mask as a traditional symbol of power and mystery. The mask is used for dual purposes as Michael Goldman (Bryant, 1992) points out, for the "double movement of dramatic elation- both escape from self and self- discovery". Kennedy particularly makes use of masks as an image of
imprisonment and terror. Thus, her characters are caught in the tangle of masks, unable to identify themselves. Olauson (1981) praises Kennedy for her use of these techniques, which show "an intense desire to unite a self fragmented by opposing forces".

The non-linearness or non-sequiturness of her plays with images, both visual and verbal, minimized dialogue and narrative, which portray the frustrating experiences of Black women. Kennedy not only makes the audience perceive the event but also gets them involved in the event portrayed. Her early plays perhaps coexisted with the revolutionary plays canonized by the Black Arts Movement.

Stylistically, Kennedy's plays follow August Strindberg's expressionistic plays, which are imagistic, non-narrative. In her plays, unconscious memories and longings magically materialize in new forms. Clara Passmore and her mother grow more and more bestial as their struggle with sensual desire and repulsion becomes unbearable. They reach a point where suicide is the only escape. Clara's suppressed feelings give way to hysteria as she changes from one identity to another- child, child of Reverend Passmore, Virgin Mary, Bastard, mulatto daughter of the dead White father and ultimately the owl. Her metamorphosis follows the Strindbergian canon, which represents one form of anti-realism

5.4.4 Surrealistic set-up

Written against the mores of realism and naturalism, Kennedy has composed disrupted and distorted fragments of the Black psyche in her surrealistic plays. The action of exposing the real issues of her destructive society through a counteracting surreal world is the vital task that sets Kennedy as a prominent surrealistic dramatist. The settings of her dream plays are anti-realistic, phantasmagoric and surrealistic. Kennedy sets the whole event of her plays in the
unconscious mind of her characters. Its apparent collage of images, texts, symbols, ideas and fragments of story exemplifies the surrealistic style.

Kennedy moves from reality to a surrealistic dream in which she makes her secondary characters, either selves or multiple personalities or movie stars, to narrate to us everything the audience ought to know. They construct a dream world by removing themselves from the realistic world and human relationships. The surrealistic fortress can protect them from the crisis outside. The nightmares occur in their small carnival funnyhouse or rat-hole where all the things are false, distorted and surreal, or in her dreams. Drifting in and out of their surrealistic worlds, unable to reconcile with their existence, the characters finally meet their tragic ends. They move in a lifeless world desiring for love and consanguineous relations. By using surrealistic imagery, Kennedy successfully creates the intensely dreamlike and nightmarish world of her plays.

5.4.5 Archetypalism

It is obvious that the new African-American theatre has redefined, and reshaped each aspect of drama: theme, character, form, setting, language, dialogue, style, image and action. Apart from these expressionistic and surrealistic techniques, even archetypes and myths have undergone a radical change in Kennedy’s works. Archetypes and myths, whose repository is the human unconsciousness, have been adopted to define a new Black mythopoesis, which is a deviation from the Western canons.

In the later play The Alexander Plays, Suzanne Alexander is the main character who also takes pains to cross the hindrances to achieve her ambition to be an established writer. Suzanne is Kennedy herself. Kennedy is able to portray a positive picture of a Black woman who attains success. She could create this character only after achieving success in her life as a writer. The sharp contrast between her earlier
plays and this play proves her changed outlook. A study of her life and her bitter personal experiences would effectively contribute to an understanding of the link between the attitudes of her mind and the special quality of her works.

5.5 FUTURE STUDIES ON OTHER 'ISMS'

Although Kennedy's early plays reflect surrealistic and expressionistic perspectives, they can be examined with the other 'isms' too, such as symbolism, absurdism, feminism, post-modernism and avant-gardism.

5.5.1 Symbolism

Symbolism is an artistic movement, which focuses on the mystery of an isolated soul in search of its self-image. The soul is obsessed with death, as it seems fashionable in symbolist plays. Kennedy's earlier plays strongly display the characteristics of the symbolist movement. The tendency towards necrophilia is expressed in almost all her plays. Repetitive use of dialogue forms an important feature of the movement. It is strongly poetic and it holds layers and layers of meaning. It is written to create the mysterious and ambiguous atmosphere. The use of unusual images and symbols represents a reality beyond the human minds. The recurring symbols in Kennedy's plays are kinky hair, straight hair and birds such as ravens, crows, doves and owls, animals like dogs, bestial figures, besides other bizarre images.

5.5.2 Absurdism

The desire for 'the presence of the absence' is the main feature of absurdism. The Theatre of the Absurd "tends toward a radical devaluation of language, toward a poetry that is to emerge from the concrete and objectified images of the stage itself," making it "part of the 'anti-literary' movement of our time (Cohn,
The absurd theatre renounces arguing about the absurdity of the human condition and merely presents it in terms of concrete stage images. This movement has its roots also in the movements of expressionism and surrealism. The absurdists portray a human being as an isolated entity who is cast into an alien universe, conceiving the universe as possessing no inherent truth, value, or meaning. In the White racist society, Kennedy’s protagonists, who are deprived of basic rights, are in an exile from which there is no rescue. This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, truly constitutes the feeling of ‘absurdity’. The lucid but eddying and pointless dialogue is often funny, and slapstick is often used to project metaphysical alienation and tragic anguish. Beckett’s Waiting for Godot (1955) presents two tramps who fruitlessly and hopelessly wait for an unidentified person, Godot. Though the arrival of Godot is not definite, the two tramps wait for this figure to rescue them from their suffering. Kennedy’s characters live in a lifeless world without the presence of God. They expect the arrival of some power to rescue them from their tragic plight. Clara Passmore says, “Something strange always happens” (Kennedy, 1988:38). The flexibility of time and space is purely absurd. The absurd plays make no compromise in the end; destiny is inevitable.

5.5.3 Feminism

Albeit feminist theatre was publicly recognised in the 1970s, Kennedy’s early plays reflect the important aspects of feminist theories. Kennedy focuses on the feminist theory of women’s experiences and discusses their issues before it. Kennedy’s theory of feminism cannot be fitted into any standard formula of feminism, but she does raise several feminist issues in her plays. Kennedy focuses her plays not only on women and their bitter experiences but also on the quest for female identity. Bell Hooks (Bryant, 1992) says in this context that Kennedy’s plays can be read as linked to a growing political concern in the 50s and 60s...with women’s efforts to come to voice. Kennedy never embraces feminist theories.
Case (1988) says rightly in Feminism and the Theatre,

though Kennedy's plays are not explicitly feminist, her leading female characters situate the effects of racism within a female subject.

Blau (1984), who was anti-feminist in 1984, does not think that her name deserves the feminist label: "Kennedy is not your ordinary feminist- if she is one at all".

Kennedy's plays struggle with the traditional ideals of femininity and this is seen clearly through Sarah's obsession with long, silky hair of White women, as well as in Clara and Beast Girl's desire to become Virgin Mary. Though her early protagonists fail to achieve anything, Clara in A Movie Star has to Star in Black and White can establish her identity as a writer sacrificing her marital life. Though Kennedy's plays do not expose of 'extreme feminism' in relation to the current feminist theories, her plays are extremely important because they provide a way for the Black women characters to speak of the reality of their sufferings and dilemmas, which are overlooked in the other prominent writers' works. Linda Kintz (1992) aptly explains the status of Kennedy,

a feminist in a period of masculinist Black nationalism, (Kennedy) was also a post-modern experimentalist in a period of realist political drama and a woman writing very specifically about the physicality of blackness and the bleeding, pregnant female body when theoretical discourse could not account for those differences; it still cannot:

5.6 KENNEDY’S ACHIEVEMENT AS A PLAYWRIGHT

Joseph Papp (Bryant, 1992), director of her play Funnyhouse of a Negro says that Kennedy is one of the most important and impassioned writers. Kennedy is unique, a unique voice in the theatre. All of the techniques adopted by Kennedy combine to establish a new and vibrant style of her own that dismantles conventional canons and traditional parameters to create a new atmosphere that is a buttress to the
Black women in their turbulent state. Her plays are trenchantly experimental, as they have offered a separate world like funnyhouse, owldom, and beast house and rat-hole for Black women who have been crippled emotionally, physically, sexually and psychically for ages. Kennedy has paved the way for the budding artists to embark on their endeavours to fight the gender and racial discriminations. Kennedy's individuality is revealed in her handling of themes, techniques and social issues. Her plays are by, about and for Blacks but they are also for women worldwide who need to be aware that they are not alone in suffering. They seek to present a collage of experiences of the protagonist as a universal condition.

Kennedy is sharply observant and unsentimental. Wolfgang Binder (1985) observes thus:

...these dramas are to some degree exorcising personal and collective racial traumas and have anger, the urge to communicate and) liberation as the motivating force.

She is an integrationist, a liberal mouthpiece of the Blacks. Her writings are as fresh and as powerful as ever. They are significant for the technical and psychological aspects in the delineation of the mental conflicts of Black women whose lives are irredeemably hopeless in a racist society. She is painfully aware of how hard it is to break through barriers. In her (Betsko, 1987) own terms,

I took up being a writer because I wanted to break through barriers. I never wanted to identify totally with women playwrights or anybody.

Kennedy has made her mark as a playwright, portraying successfully the plight of her fellow beings in all its sordidness. Her plays unveil to the world of the depths of misery, which Black women experience in their struggle for survival in a hostile world. Thus, Kennedy is unique in handling unconventional subjects such as sexuality, identity and racism using a combination of modernist styles. Objects, actions and
characters are altered from one identity to another, and there seems to be no limit to her ability to connect the unconnected. She carves new techniques in presenting a new insight into racial issues by exploring the private world of her Black heroines.

Before concluding the present analysis, it may be stated that while discussing and examining Kennedy’s plays under the three ‘isms’, an attempt has also been made to explore her individual literary identity through her unique style which was trail-blazing in the history of African-American theatre. Despite all the ambivalent attitudes of several critics, her plays remain as a true representation of the artists’ creativity and talent. She has achieved a unique place in Black theatre, having taken a first step into the realm of post modernism, throwing open creative opportunities for later generations of female African American playwrights.

Kennedy achieved success after passing through great obstacles. She found inspiration in Emerson’s words:

there are no fixtures in nature. The universe is fluid and volatile...nothing great was ever achieved without enthusiasm (Lines from Emerson). In the moments of despondency I read and reread Emerson (Kennedy, 1987: 109).

As Kennedy mentions in her autobiography (1987:101), she always remembers Taylor’s words, “if you are beautiful, the whole world can be yours”. According to Kennedy, feminine beauty is an achievement in life. Her strong determination to achieve motivated her to climb to ultimate success. She has a high degree of self-confidence and says:

and in a few months I would climb the steps to the circle in the square theatre where I would see this play inside my suitcase performed, become a member of the Actors Studio and become a part of the Off-Broadway theater movement...a movement that in itself would come to occupy a powerful place in American theater history (Kennedy, 1987:125).
She does succeed in her attempt and she has witnessed her play produced and staged in Albee’s workshop, and worldwide.

5.7 CONCLUSION

Thus, the present study of Kennedy’s plays leads to the conclusion that Kennedy’s plays are deeply rooted in the revolutionary changes in the Black theatre, and that they are the most authentic expressions of the Black consciousness presented through the clarifying vision of her plays. Burke (1996) rightly says,

perhaps if her works were produced in mainstream venues with greater frequency, the twin pillars of racism and sexism on which patriarchy is balanced might crumble.

Her plays encourage the other Black women writers to confront the reality of the Black consciousness. Kennedy has united disparate and apparently irreconcilable elements in her plays and offers a model for Black women playwrights to come. It is impossible to examine all the possibilities in the thematic, technical and archetypal variations in her plays. However, this dissertation attempts to present a comprehensive critical study of the subject, suggesting other possible avenues for further research. Topics covered here are her writings and her innovative dramaturgy in the context of expressionism, surrealism and archetypalism. In addition, it provides the suggestions for future study of her writings, focusing on feminism, avant-gardism, symbolism and absurdism. Though the thesis confines itself to the three ‘isms’, the undercurrents of other ‘isms’ such as absurdism, post-modernism and feminism that are found in her works can be chosen for future study. The treatment of themes and techniques in Kennedy’s invites comparison studies with that of her contemporaries in Black or British or American or Canadian theatre. This will prove to be a subject worth exploring for further research.

Further research leading to a book length critical study of Kennedy’s plays would become an excellent source of background reading to understand her life and
work. Such a study can concentrate on Kennedy’s artistic contribution in comparison with that of modern dramatists, both European and African-American, in relation to approach, dramatic technique and content. Scholars can bring into the compass of their study those plays of Kennedy’s, which have been staged but not published, in print. Such studies will yield deeper insights into her literary, cultural and social values. Broad conclusions can be drawn from such comparative studies, valid for an ethnic writer in any part of the world, who is caught between two cultures and faces hostile social forces.