ABSTRACT

At present, the term, 'African-American' is a familiar term to all scholars, especially to scholars of American literature. The African-American playwrights handle various forms and new techniques to portray the miserable lives of Blacks in a White-dominated society. Of all the Black-American writers of drama, Adrienne Kennedy is perhaps the most important and impassioned playwright who has broken new ground in dramaturgy to explore the troubled and abnormal minds of her Black protagonists. Though her plays are shrouded in mystery and fantasy, her complex psychodramas present terrifying images and symbols to reveal the tormented psyche of her Black heroines. Her plays are acts of mind and the main characters are split personalities whose alter egos and selves coexist on stage. Though Kennedy's plays are highly lauded in the contemporary African-American theatre, no focused study of her use of dramatic techniques has been made so far. This aspect of her artistic skill has not received sufficient critical attention. Thus the aim of this dissertation is to reveal Kennedy's black consciousness that has been mentioned by her own experiences in the society through a critical analysis of her plays and the various techniques and invented forms she adopts in them.

Chapter I traces the history of the African-American theatre, its origin and development through a succession of significant movements. Apart from providing a historical perspective of the theatre and discussing the various stages of its growth, it also makes an in-depth study of the new strategies followed by the modern African-American writers. It presents a brief account of the merits of the plays by other Black women writers in order to make possible a better understanding of Kennedy's plays. The expository chapter furnishes a profile of Kennedy as a reputed playwright noted for her originality, ideological motivation and excellent artistic skill. This is followed by a discussion of the scope of the present study.
Avoiding the conventional modes, Kennedy prefers the expressionistic style to externalise the inner reality of her characters. Kennedy's unique vision and sensibility as well as her original and innovative style, which reveal her subjective explorations of the black psyche, are different from those of contemporary playwrights. In Chapter II, a detailed study has been made of how Adrienne Kennedy develops the theme of the frustrated psyche of coloured women and their painful search for self-identity and for acceptance and recognition in a White-dominated world. This theme serves as an ideological substratum to the intricate network of expressionistic ideas, symbols, images, masks and metaphors found in Kennedy's plays. This chapter is a critical study of how Kennedy effectively portrays the tormented soul of her heroines with her rare combination of skills revealed in her use of expressionistic techniques.

The term surrealism represents a ubiquitous concept that has permeated the intellectual, cultural and social spheres of human activity in the twentieth-century literature and art. Surrealists are mainly concerned with the human unconscious and they tend to destroy the enigma of existence by concentrating on the unknown and bizarre elements in man's words and actions. Kennedy, a surrealistic poet of the black theatre, aims at expressing the unconscious minds of her protagonists by the juxtaposition of irrational, strange and bizarre images and symbols. In Chapter III, Kennedy's use of surrealistic devices, which is a distinguishing feature of her plays contributing to her enormous success as an artist, has been examined. It is of great interest to examine the ways in which surrealistic techniques have been manipulated and reshaped by Kennedy to create surrealistic psychodramas. A comprehensive account of the origin, development and important stages of the surrealist movement in art and literature is presented in this chapter.

The archetypal approach, which is in fact a branch of psychological criticism, is taken up for study in Chapter IV. The archetypal approach points out the presence of some basic cultural pattern or myth, the common heritage of mankind, which has been drawn upon either consciously or unconsciously, in a work of art. An archetypal
pattern of the fragmented, frustrated and shattered psyche of Black women is discerned in the portrayal of Kennedy’s Black heroines. The archetypal subjects such as racial heritage, death, birth, incest, love, redemption, conflict between reason and imagination, freewill and destiny and the search for a father figure, are successfully handled in Kennedy’s plays, some of which are autobiographical. She probes into the different layers of her protagonists’ consciousness. The archetypal patterns in Kennedy’s psychodramas are examined in detail in this chapter, which describes the themes, situations, characters, images and subjects that are peculiarly archetypal in nature. This provides an interesting study and throws light on Kennedy’s uniqueness of approach in revealing to the understanding of African-American women’s issues.

The concluding chapter reiterates the basic idea that underlies Kennedy’s plays. The Black women are victims of exploitation perpetrated on account of race, gender, politics and society, and their damaged social identity represents the plight of Black women everywhere. This chapter sums up the unique features of Kennedy’s plays, which may be taken up for future research and discussed with reference to her plays.