CHAPTER 1

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

1.1 BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

1.1.1 Black consciousness

Black literature since the 1960s has been marked by the endeavour to find an identity for the Black personality that is hidden behind the veil of sighs and emotional struggles of the Blacks. As Margaret B. Wilkerson (1986) points out, the inherent value of the Black theatre lies in the fact that it is like a powerful mirror reflecting all the hidden dreams of the Blacks, and their disillusionment and despair with their cultural and social conditions. Plays of this period, especially those by Black American women playwrights, are suggestive of the invigorating and urging spirit of the Blacks that has its impact on the Black consciousness. Thus Black women have cultivated a new consciousness and certain ethical values that allow them to prevail against the odds arising out of the injustices faced by them in the White capitalist value system. Of particular influence are the writings of women playwrights like Lorraine Hansberry, Ntozke Shange, Alice Childress, Adrienne Kennedy, and novelists like Toni Morrison. Among them, Kennedy deserves a major place as she is aggressively experimental and has broken away from the norms laid down by tradition. She has revealed her Black consciousness in a decidedly unconventional way, which singles her out from contemporary Black writers.

As Kennedy struggles to maintain her identity as a Black woman dramatist, she grows conscious of what her Blackness means and implies, and of what her buried African heritage signifies. She was very much influenced by the Black artists and national leaders whom she admired. The keenly felt conflict between the White and
the Black ancestral traditions is one of the primary themes in her complex and surrealistic psychodramas. She strongly believed that she could write as she did because of her being Black. She says, "The feeling of being a part of a minority is very strong in me" (Ruth Stein, 1980). She gives expression to her pride in being Black when she says,

I'm happy about the fact that I am black. I just feel it's a blessing in allowing me to express how I feel (Ruth Stein, 1980).

Blackness has given her the inspiration to write sharper, more focused, more powerful and less imitative plays. Kennedy (Alice M. Robinson, 1989) says,

to be black, female and a playwright is, for me, to feel a deep sense of happiness because it is what I want to be...

Her visit to Ghana was a turning point in her life. Of this link with Africa, she says,

Ghana had just won its freedom. It was wonderful to see that liberation. And I thought the landscape of Africa was so beautiful and the people were so beautiful - it gave me a sense of power and strength... The main thing was that I discovered a strength in being a black person (Betsko, 1987).

In consequence, Black consciousness permeated Kennedy's entire literary work.

1.1.2 Black Consciousness and human consciousness

Black consciousness has had a formative influence on many Blacks who once felt isolated in the society into which they had not yet been absorbed. Its aim is to eliminate the feeling of Black inferiority and replace it with a new social identity. This distinctive identity results in the development of Black pride among the oppressed Blacks. It helps them to strengthen their faith in their true identity, anchored in human dignity. The coloured people attempt to create their own values and systems, defined
by them and are not ready to accept the ones that have been prescribed by the
dominant White race. Black consciousness seeks to realise the truth that Black people
need not regard themselves as appendages to the racist world of the Whites. It breaks
away from such negative attitudes and fosters a new faith in self-reliance and dignity.
Thus it serves as an agent for ideological realignment and political revitalisation
among the Blacks. W. E. B. Dubois (1926) observes that Black consciousness finds
itself in a Black man, and sets him "before the world as both a creative artist and a
strong subject for artistic treatment".

Black consciousness draws its inspiration from a number of noted Black
writers, and this leads to important developments in the American and African
Diaspora. It is influenced by the writings of Senghor, Frantz Fanon, Carmichael,
Freure, Thomas Cone and Steve Biko, who in turn exerted considerable influence on
Black writers like Amiri Baraka and Ed Bullins. These writers attempted to reveal the
psychological sufferings of the Blacks and the sense of urgency in the rise of Black
consciousness among them, which gave them the confidence to do things for
themselves and by themselves.

Any exploration of the Black psyche must consider the pivotal role of the
Black consciousness in giving shape to the cultural and historical value system of the
Blacks. Black consciousness has a plethora of definitions and descriptions, and what is
a common factor in all these definitions is the recognition that its aim is to instil
beliefs, power, values and behaviours in the minds of the Blacks. It is these same
beliefs and values that shape human consciousness in the Blacks. They provide them
with a better understanding of their cultural identity, both as Black and as human. This
involves adaptation and transformation in the internal as well as external elements.

Black consciousness creates its own cultural soul, a realm of existence
where the Blacks discover, analyse, celebrate, evaluate, and transform the meaning of
their existence. It is the oasis of Black life in society, where Blacks freely express their
creativity while affirming their unique personas as human beings. This spirit permeates Black life and imparts to coloured people a will to survive, a desire to confront and surmount all hardships in their existence.

1.1.3 Dual consciousness, the Black woman's dilemma

Black consciousness is a complicated double consciousness for a Black woman, as she has to encounter gender and race consciousness at the same time. A Black woman playwright perceives the world both as a Black American woman and as an American woman. The double consciousness of Black women is seen as something not to be resolved and unified but to be acknowledged and exploited as a resource for personal and cultural transformation (Helene Keyssar, 1984).

The ultimate destiny of these characters is that they are marginalized in a marginal society, where identity becomes a challenge. Many Black women suffered isolation, felt lonely, and longed for support in communal love. In this context, Black American plays have aggressively utilised the stage in which diverse voices can be heard, and distinct views find expression, fusing with each other to produce significant works of art.

The images of Black women as icons of evil had their impact on the slave trade in the pre-Abolition days. A Black woman is introduced as Eve, Adam's wife, and is made responsible for his fall, which becomes equated with universal fall. Thus she becomes an object that stands for the forbidden, a symbol of the devil, who tempts the White man and arouses his sexual impulses. The colour of the skin and the texture of the hair, 'wild kinky hair', are the two dominant features that devalue and demean Black womanhood.
The Black woman's torturous grapple with her destiny and her degradation in the United States of America are painful chapters in history. The tortured life, which many Black women led, can be traced to the beginning of the enslavement of Blacks in the United States. Even those of her child who could claim White paternity were often regarded as slaves. Margaret Wilkerson (Lynda Hart, 1989) says,

she was an anomaly of the slave system—suffering the same brutality as her male counterpart, yet enduring as well those forms of oppression peculiar to her gender, rape and forced child-bearing.

Her plight and her will to survive persuade her to fight for her gender's liberation. It is this urge that finds expression in Black women's writings.

Black women writers find in the theatre a medium to recreate and redefine themselves and their experience. Wilkerson (Lynda Hart, 1989) says of the Black woman writer,

injustice has intruded into her most private moments as she has continued to define herself beyond the stereotypes of mammy and whore that have pervaded the canon of American literature and drama.

The supremacist patriarchal attitudes of both Blacks and Whites are the cardinal element in the deliberate categorisation of the female as inferior. The average Black woman cannot aspire for self-esteem or self-image, as she gets no respite from being belittled, degraded and humiliated. It has taken a long time for the Black people to emerge from subjugation, protest and revolt against their inhumane treatment. Writers like Kennedy have responded to this with a radical new approach to the Black theatre, which has created a new Black art tradition apart from the White legacy. Kennedy finds in her writing an expression of the profound anguish (Lehman, 1977). It was not easy for a Black woman playwright to get recognition, because writing plays had traditionally been a prerogative of male writers. Being Black and female, she was not accepted by the White male writers; she was too avant-garde for the African-
American theatre. Her works were criticised as ‘too personalised’ or ‘too abstract’ (Aishah Rahman, 1979). Stephane Sills ((1971) says that Kennedy's plays constitute the voice of all those who, appalled by the present, are for this reason firmly committed to a different future: to the struggle against suffering learned in suffering: a total exposure which is also a total involvement.

1.1.4 The hypothesis of the present study

Although Adrienne Kennedy's plays are highly regarded and lauded in the contemporary African-American theatre, yet she has not been the subject of notable major, critical work, with the exception of Paul K. Bryant Jackson's *Intersecting Boundaries*. The present writer feels that justice has not been done to her works, and most of the criticism has been done from a male point of view. Kennedy's complex and compelling plays have persuaded this writer to undertake a critical study exclusively of her plays. The focus of the thesis is two-fold: one is the innovation in techniques adopted by Kennedy; the other is the impact of this innovation on the depiction of the Blacks in her work. Kennedy has attempted to restructure the Western framework of drama through her revolutionary departures from tradition. The political motif that dominates her plays and her dramaturgy are new to the Black spectators. Though her works are not associated with the mainstream theatre, they are potent, provocative, innovative and startling, and can inspire succeeding generations of writers. She has invented new forms and styles in order to deconstruct the accepted phallo-centric canons. This thesis aims to reveal her Black consciousness by an analysis of her plays from various angles including her dramaturgy, her use of, and creation of, myth, her debt to the traditions of symbolism, expressionism and surrealism, and her mixing of genres and styles that seem to be incompatible. With her fearless manipulation of techniques, she skilfully exposes the troubled, sick or abnormal minds of her characters like Sarah, Clara and Kay, and gives artistic expression to issues of race, gender and identity in previously untried ways.
The aim of this introductory chapter is to introduce and explore the inner realms of the Black personality, especially of the personality of women, who are doubly exploited for being Black and being female. While the male Black writers are concerned about political and social demands at large, women writers find that racism and sexism are the factors that touch their sensibilities and cry for artistic expression. The psychic problems around these issues arise from the fact that the women have been exploited and discriminated against for centuries. The present writer intends to examine the implications of these issues. Special attention will be paid to their mental conflicts and psychic fragmentation resulting from the combined force of the inherited tradition of race, sex, class and destitution imposed on women, giving them a severely disadvantaged status.

It is one of the objectives of this expository chapter to describe the Black consciousness that dominates the writings of Black writers, and in particular, of Adrienne Kennedy. It is necessary to discuss the various trends in the African-American theatre of the time to have a clear perception of the status of Kennedy in the African-American theatre. The sufferings of Black women run parallel to the history of the slave trade in America. The central idea is to trace African-American consciousness, the way it shapes, informs and strengthens Black play-writing, and the exercise of creativity by coloured people as a means of escaping their sad plight. Thus it becomes necessary to study the evolution of the Black theatre, with particular reference to women in the theatre. The study begins with a brief discussion of the impact of racism upon the Blacks, which culminates in a new Black consciousness among them. It then moves on to trace the historical perspectives of Black-Americans and the African origins of the African-American theatre. A brief analysis of the work of women playwrights follows, as a preparation for the study of Kennedy. It also attempts to explore the psyche of the suppressed Black women and their untold misery, which now find new and revolutionary modes of expression.
1.2 REFLECTIONS ON RACISM

1.2.1 Racism, a life-threatening issue

Racism; a life-threatening issue in the United States, holds considerable interest to everyone, particularly to students of American literature. Racial discrimination is an ugly feature of the American scene. Racism has been one of the pernicious social issues, which have been injuring the afflicted, disadvantaged minorities down the centuries. It is a sign of the depths of depravity to which man has fallen to see how a fellow human being is judged on the basis of the colour of his skin. The term 'race' was originally only a term that signified different groups of human beings characterised by different cultures and creeds. But in the case of the Blacks, one physical feature has been singled out in total disregard of culture and beliefs, and the White man treats them as inferior on account of the colour of their skin. The White colour is associated with success and privilege. This indictment and victimisation of the Blacks started with the auction of the Blacks, and continued in their treatment as slaves, the denial of their legal rights, the stripping away of their identity, and the brutal treatment of women slaves. The nightmare has been continuing even after the conferment of civil rights. Racism has tended to mangle the consciousness of the Blacks, who begin to feel that there may not be any escape from racial animosity. The entrenched racial memory and the consequent demoralisation among the Blacks move like an infected sore among the Black community.

1.2.2 Racism, a man-enforced phenomenon

'Negro', as given in the Oxford Dictionary, is a member of the black-skinned race of mankind that originated in Africa. Dissatisfaction with the traditionally derogatory term 'Negro' has led to the use of alternatives such as Black-American or African-American in America. The latter term was used to describe the African people in the latter half of the twentieth century, and now it is commonly used to refer to people of dual African-American heritage. In the days when slavery was
widely practised, Blacks were often ghettoised, persecuted and ostracised from decency, hope, progress and sometimes even from a simple livelihood. In general, Blacks have access only to jobs in the lower grades of service, which do not offer them much opportunity for advancement. Struggling to maintain American standards of life as a visible expression of their identity, African-Americans have continued to seek a life for themselves, alternating between self-defending and self-asserting.

Racism has always been a central social issue to the Americans. Henri Louis Gates Jr. (Cathy, 1995) demonstrates that race is a cultural construction while the historian Barbara Fields defines race as an ideological and historical construction. Race is primarily used to categorize different groups in society. Race is initially used to identify the different categories of people based on culture. Later biologists categorised human beings on the basis of the colour of their skin. The White people in American society have been enjoying a higher rank for several decades, based on the colour of their skin. It is not illogical that they have ranked the Blacks in the lower grade on account of their colour being different from their own. On the contrary, Hernton (1965) observes that racism is dependent mainly on the physical traits of Blacks and writes a sharper definition,

"Racism is a man-made, man-enforced phenomenon...may be defined as all of the learned behaviour and learned emotions on the part of a group of people towards another group: behaviour and emotions that compel one group to conceive of and to treat the other on the basis of its physical characteristics alone as if it did not belong to the human race."

Racism with its cruel and condescending attitudes isolates and alienates people of inferior cadre. Derrick Bell (Cathy, 1995) says, "racism is an integral, permanent, and indestructible component of this society". Davidson Cathy (1995) identifies racism in three forms: individual, institutional and ideological racism. The first category includes placing racial epithets on public buildings and in neighbourhoods. Institutional racism includes society's legal codes, judicial practices, educational
systems, labour practice, finance and artistic and linguistic forms. The third category of racism, provides supposed intellectual support for belief in white superiority; historically, such arguments have drawn upon reason, nature, and divine law (Cathy, 1995).

1.2.3 Racism: the record of violence against the Blacks

It has been suggested that racism has been eroded in the 1960s itself, but the fact remains that racism continues to be a serious and threatening issue to America's future. African-Americans are being killed by the White mob, and this continues a long pattern of violent racist bigotry against Black people. Statistical information given by the Black Scholar, published in 1987, on Black exploitation is startling and chilling. It states that the number of the Blacks murdered is six times greater than that of the Whites. Nearly half of the number in the country's prisons comprised the Black people, albeit the Blacks formed just 6% of the total population. The problem of unemployment is $2\frac{1}{2}$ times greater in the case of the Black people. The income of the middle class Black family is 50% of the income of the White lower middle class family. The denial of rights and the natural frustration lead the Blacks into violent outbursts against the Whites. The high rate of unemployment, lack of job skills, differences in the quality of education, high rate of imprisonment of the Blacks, unequal Black sex ratio, high rate of annulment of Black marriages, teenage pregnancy and infant mortality are the key factors that have shattered the already degenerating Black people's lives. The tragic condition prevails even now in America and the Blacks are doomed to grapple with cruel and hostile forces throughout their lifetime. The colour difference of the skin never allows them to live with the Whites as equals in political, social and economic arenas. Thus racism remains a poison in the system that never allows the Blacks to live in peaceful economic, social, political and
legal relations with others in America. The plight of Black women is all the more poignant.

1.2.4 The Tragic Predicament of Black women
1.2.4.1 Destiny of women

History speaks of kings and presidents, explorers and revolutionaries, but only occasionally mentions women having played such roles. Getting married, giving birth to children and taking care of household chores: these were the roles that a woman was destined to play. Most of the religions also taught that women should always be under the control of men. The laws in different countries and the writings of many philosophers establish this point. For instance, the Hindu code of Manu says,

in childhood, a woman must be subjected to her father, in youth, to her husband: when her husband dies, to her sons, a woman must never be free from subjugation.

This is repeated in the New Testament of the Bible where St. Paul writes, “Wives submit yourselves unto your own husbands, and unto the Lord”. In America, the Supreme Court ruled in 1872 that, “The paramount destiny and mission of woman are to fulfill the noble and benign offices of wife and mother”. People no longer agree to these ideas. Conditions have been changing for the woman. The women’s movement has tried quite a bit to bring to light certain problems burdening ‘women of colour’.

1.2.4.2 The Black women: exploited and oppressed

Life at the bottom of the American system compounded the assaults on black women, who became victims of racial, class and sexual exploitation (Mary Ryan, 1963).

Mary Ryan thus describes the tragic plight and status of the Black women in a White dominated society. They have to encounter the problems of racial antipathy, gender
discrimination and class oppression, which are intertwined with each other. Thus, they are exploited simultaneously by the Whites, privileged and domineering and by the Blacks, who are themselves exploited and oppressed. They are not given opportunities to raise their social status in society. They fail in their attempts to get the best job opportunities, and priority is given only to the Whites. The Black female-headed families are subjected to about twice the rate of poverty as the White female-headed families. Even in prostitution, Black women lead the rest due to racial oppression, poverty and unemployment problems. It has become the one and only possible means to support the family. Thus Black women have to suffer simultaneously for being born Black and particularly for being female.

1.2.4.3 Black women: objects of victimisation

It is highly tragic to view the plight of Black women in the context of class distinction apart from colour injustice. The study of racism in African-American women's lives is agonizing since racism is directly interwoven with their gender. They all suffer from ill treatment and become victims to all the three - factors, race, gender, and class discriminations simultaneously. She is seen as an object for physical pleasure as well as an instrument for reproduction of her race. She is forcibly subjected to the lust of man, both Black and White at random. She is deprived of either help or support from her own men. Gerda Lerner (1972) is sympathetic over the tragic predicament of the Black women. She says,

the black woman was degraded by the sexual attack and more profoundly by being deprived of a strong black man on whom she could rely for protection.

The Black-American women are subjected to all sorts of physical and psychological assaults. Most of them used to be seen as sexual objects and child-bearers. Hence, their children follow the same plight as their mother, "the slave woman became the unwilling perpetrator of the cycle of subjugation as she bore more slaves"(Cathy,
1995). These deeply moving and pathetic experiences of Black women find expression and lively portrayal in the works of Black playwrights, especially women playwrights. Thus, racism and racial protest form the main subject of Black play-writing. This results in a flowering of writings by women of colour resisting racism, asserting their Black consciousness and upholding their values. As Elizabeth A. Peterson (1992) asserts,

I am a strong, black woman because I was raised by a strong, black woman. It is a known fact that when a black woman is determined, watch out. Nothing is going to keep her back.

1.2.4.4 The assertive Black women

The issue of racism and an authentic racial identity has been the recurrent social theme in the play-writing of African-American playwrights. Stifling oppression has debased the African-American community. It has weakened the ethnic values and traditions and denied a determined self-identity for the Blacks. From the primitive ‘slave trade’ in Africa to the ‘civilized’ present in America, a Black man has been in a perplexed state where his sensibility is mangled. He is unable to overcome the trauma of Blackness; finally he suffers from the loss of self-dignity as he has lost the power to establish his own identity, even within his own community. He is plummeted into the gloomy plight of “loss of manhood”. Baraka and Ed Bullins have also focused on the evils of the devastating racism in America. They attempt to assert their Blackness and portray a positive image of consciousness in their writings. Lindsay Patterson (1971) in Black Theatre makes a statement, speaking as Nigger:

but there comes a time in life when one loses his innocence and is pushed boldly into the real world...I mean by lost innocence that specific moment when a black discovers he is a 'nigger' and his mentality shifts gears and begins that long, uphill climb or bring psychological order out of chaos...All of Black literature is more to less unconsciously preoccupied with precisely pinpointing and
1.3 THE BLACK THEATRE: A RADICAL TRANSFORMATION

In the days before Black writers took up writing plays, White playwrights often used “misshapen Black images” to entertain the White audience and to justify the slavery of the Blacks (Clinton F. Oliver, 1971). The Blacks were portrayed as lazy people noted for their buffoonery, flippancy and evil temperament. Displeased with the stereotyping and distortion of Black characters, the agitated Black playwrights very soon took up the task of portraying the true Black experiences in the White-dominated society, and boldly expressed their points of view. This was quite a new experience to the traditional White theatregoers. The White theatre producers at first refused to accept the plays written by the Black playwrights. The Blacks were affected by this refusal and also by the non-availability of facilities such as the theatre, talented directors, technicians, actors and audiences. This slowly led to the emergence of the Black literary theatre in order to popularise the plays written by the African-American writers highlighting the different aspects of the Black life in America. Langston Hughes (William Couch, 1968) came out with the following motto at the height of the Harlem Renaissance.

We young Negro artists who are creating now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it does not matter...we build our temples for tomorrow.

Hughes’ ‘temples for tomorrow’ were constructed slowly, theatre-by-theatre, as endowed Negro writers were emerging on the scene. The new plays strengthened and shaped the Black consciousness in the theatre and in real life.

The Black playwrights being intensely aware of their problems reveal the sorrowful life of the African-Americans with the hope of bringing about social
changes that would mitigate their sufferings. The newly created artistic movements such as Black Arts Movement, New Lafayette Theatre and Black Theatre Movement have provided fresh forums from where they could sensitise the world to the misery of their lives in the White dominated society. They use the theatre to express their political and social concerns and discuss their pressing issues of identity and social acceptance.

The Black theatre movements attempt to create a centricity for the Blacks in a hostile White centred world. In order to fight against the politics of colourism, the Black artists have devised various strategies and devices to establish their power and skill. Black writers have taken steps to dismantle the canons of the Whites in America. It is the White man who has established the canons and entirely structured the standards, aesthetics and judgments; therefore, the first step is taken against the Western parameters. Certain Black playwrights question the general rules of an art.

The Blacks go back to the very roots of creativity and scholarship. They have taken their work to de-emphasize literary scholarship and concentrate their attention on the rhythms of speech, and the lives of ordinary men and women of the Black community, while the White canon insists on scholarly writing. This style of Black writing results in establishing art and culture very close to the people instead of separating it from them.

The Black theatre makes efforts to revise every facet of playwriting such as plot, character, dialogue, setting, form, language, style and action. The White canon has marginalized the lives of the Blacks in social acts and in literature. Their works are not regarded as scholarly and so they are not worthy of critical attention. The Blacks endeavour to depict the lives and experiences of coloured people in an assertive portrayal. The portraiture that are created by White artists have been questioned. It is for the first time that a true version of the Black experience is revealed to the world. The new theatre is more defiant, often sounds the battle cry that questions the Whites
for Black suppression. The Black theatre provides the necessary political agenda to empower their community.

The new African-American theatre in the 1950’s has been built up to eliminate the racist attitudes. While the Western scholarly arts delineate noble characters with heroic qualities, contemporary African-American theatre highlights the poor and deserted people who are all marginalized when judged by the American standards of life and culture. The writers attempt to expose the strength as well as the weakness of their folk. The Black subject is seriously considered as fit for literary treatment, though it was regarded earlier as unfit by Euro-centricism. The stereotyped characters and images of Blacks are revised and redefined in the process of vindicating the Black stance.

It is clearly understood that the Blacks have rejected the Euro-centric canons while using dialogue and language. They have gained a new theatre expression with its street language, Black dialect, rhythms, blues and spirituals. Black writings are enriched with a new coded language and they require an analysis for better understanding. Eschewing scholarly language, Black writers prefer to handle a dialect that has the power to reveal their true feelings.

The form and structure of Black plays are deliberate deviations from the conventional Euro-centric theatre tenets. The Black writers have invented new forms such as Kuntu drama, plays of the African Continuum, non-linear plots, spirally moving narratives, which offer various dimensions. It is true that many Black-American plays were done in a realistic style, and were not spiral or non-linear. But the trend towards experimentation was dominant, especially in the hands of the coloured women playwrights who depicted the tragic predicament of the coloured women. They depart, as Annis Pratt (1981) says, from

normal concepts of time and space precisely because the presentation of time by persona on the margins of day-to-day life
inevitably deviates from ordinary chronology and because those excluded from the agora are likely to perceive normal settings from phobic perspectives. Since women are alienated from time and space, their plots take on cyclical, rather than linear, form and their houses and landscapes surreal properties.

Modern African-American theatre has witnessed a radical transformation from the outmoded paraphernalia of conventional Aristotelian norms of the theatre. Aristotle’s prescription for drama is formulated, and traditional parameters of the theatre are discarded. One of the crucial factors that affected the Black theatre movements was the burning subject matter. Black expression is politically motivated and represents committed radical art that can reshape and redefine society for the better. The Blacks’ voices have strange, novel, effective and poignant accents as they have been suppressed for aeons. Motivated by Afro-centric expressive modes, they dismantle the accoutrements of the dominant dramaturgy of Euro-centric expressions. Their artistic extremism and experimentation with various modes lead to the establishment of the African-American experience or Black consciousness in their writings. These writings clearly present the predicament of the suppressed Blacks who aspire to establish their identity in their schizophrenic existence. This quest for self-identity in their situation as slaves, has mainly led to the growth of the Black theatre in America.

1.4 THE AFRICAN-AMERICANS: HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

The chief historical perspectives of Black Americans have to be pointed out before examining the growth and identifying the various trends of the Black theatre. The tragic plight of the Blacks commenced with their dislocation from their native continent to United States. The footstep of the White man on the African shores marked the destruction of the lives of the Blacks. His intrusion into the harmonious expanse of the land marked the beginning of the sufferings of coloured people in history. The White men stealthily captured the homeland to establish the brutal Black slavery, which destroyed the peaceful life of the natives. These hapless serfs were
taken to the New World, America, on a torturous sea voyage. The toll of the captives during their tedious journey was high because of starvation, brutal whipping, thrashing and other inhuman acts. The import of Blacks from the African shores in 1619 marked the beginning of slave trade in the English colonies in America. The sharp polarization between the Black and the White existed even before the advent of slavery in the European world. It was, therefore, a natural step for the Euro-centric world decided to treat these newcomers as slaves. The determining factor was the colour of their skin.

The White man regarded the Black man as damned while he encountered him for the first time in his life. There are many contributing reasons to justify this slavery in their eyes. One predominant factor is religion, Christianity and the Bible. The White and Black colours were taken to correspond to God and Satan. The significance of colour forms the core of Christian symbols, which accentuated the issue of colour among the Whites. It is an obvious fact that Christianity is the White man's religion. The dichotomy (Berghahn, 1971) between the White and the Black symbolizes good and evil, God and Satan, and spiritual and carnal. Black is symbolically associated with evil, bad omens, destruction and perdition, whereas White brings virtue, purity, innocence, prosperity and beauty. Satan is always associated with Black and evil, as it is clearly seen in the Bible. The coloured people were deemed to be the offspring of Satan. The Black colour was mainly vulgarised by the Puritans to justify their inhuman slave trade. Noah's curse was also interpreted as due to his dark complexion (Berghahn, 1971). Thus, the prejudiced Western mind looked upon the Blacks as immoral and misled pagans. They created the slave system in order to preserve the moral sanctity of the nation from inroads by the brutal natives of Africa. This mentality percolated the minds of the Whites down the centuries in America. Moreover, they attempted to prove their stance as superior by citing scientific theories and historical instances.

In addition to this, two stereotyped images are dominant in the Euro-centric perspectives. The White writers tended to project Blacks as obedient, humble and
harmless drudges whose primary duty was to entertain the slave master. The second type of the Black serf was the brute or ape-man. The brutal image had been associated with their primitivism and they were categorized as cannibals and practitioners of voodoo. The prevailing assumption that the African race was the offspring of man and beast was dependent on the very same factors. The Black man was unpredictable, violent, powerful and bestial in his behaviour. He was violent in his sexual impulses too as it was seen through the African systems of polygamy, nudity and free sexual activity. All these factors helped White men to justify the practice of slavery.

The institutionalised slavery, which had destroyed the Blacks' harmonious lives, led the Blacks to reveal their hopelessness and despair in their songs during their hard labour. A growing awareness among a few liberals and rebels helped other Blacks to seek an end to their inhuman treatment. Though slave trade was officially abolished, it took several decades for the Blacks to diminish. They have been enslaved emotionally and psychologically. The rise of Ku Klux Klan with its radical views terrorized the Blacks as well as other minority groups. Jim Crow laws, inferior economic and social status, unemployment, and lack of opportunity for a decent life were all hurdles to them. The Black women have been sexually exploited, assaulted, harassed and peripheralised even in their own community.

The voices of the two dominant national Black leaders, T. Washington and W.E.B. DuBois at this juncture, attempted to rejuvenate and reform the slave-centric and demoralized Black society. Although their contradictory ideologies culminated in their separation, they tried to influence the masses and revitalize society. The National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (NAACP) in 1915 and The Crisis and The Opportunity were the later developments, which provided opportunities for the Black writers to exercise their creativity. It was at this juncture that Black consciousness received a tremendous impetus from these movements. Writers revealed their nostalgic interest in reclaiming their distant past. By the end of the nineteenth century, the Black consciousness and the spirit of a Black identity had
strengthened and endured, and the Blacks showed real pride in their race and history and acknowledged their heritage. Thus, Harlem became the melting pot for Black culture, art and literature, which welcomed African-Americans, West Indians and Africans to establish their stance. This led to the Harlem Renaissance with all its Afro-centric literary changes.

The Harlem Renaissance started in the beginning of the twentieth century and was publicly recognized in 1924, by then the practice of slavery had been eliminated. This literary movement signified a new Black expression and experience, which sought to reconstruct the African-American values. The chief characteristic of the Harlem Renaissance was to disassociate from American culture and White-centric ideology. A positive and strong Black consciousness in art and literature was asserted. This resolve leads to racial pride both intellectually and emotionally and the will to abolish oppression in their progress towards modernity, prosperity and democracy in America. It is patent that the Blacks alone could bring about a positive transformation from Euro-centric perspectives to Afro-centric ideals. Thus, Black consciousness becomes the important factor in their reconstruction.

The identification of their cultural heritage and the memories of their distant past resulted in the Second Harlem Renaissance. It reached its apex in the 1960s; however, there were early signs in the works of Richard Wright in the 50s as his characters are in a ceaseless attempt to search for their identities. Realisation struck upon them that their identity is associated with Africa, which was the umbilicus of their descent. This theme found its echo in the later writers like Amiri Baraka, Angela Davis, and Bobby Seale who have all identified with African natives.

The first renaissance concentrated more on the eradication of colour difference and the practice of slavery and on the affirmation that Black expression and perceptions were in no way inferior to any mainstream White-centric perspectives. Unlike the first renaissance, the second renaissance was strictly addressed to the Blacks and the intrusion of the Whites was curtailed. The second renaissance reshaped
and revitalized the theatre, which was highly dependent upon committed African-American writers (Bigsby, 1980). This heralded a new epoch of Black awareness and consciousness, which led to the growth of the Black-American theatre.

1.5 THE BLACK-AMERICAN THEATRE MOVEMENT
1.5.1 The early days

The African-American theatre, which is ethno-centric as well as Afro-centric, traces its origin to its native land. African native song, dance and mime harmoniously fused together to form a distinct mode of audio-visual expression among the African tribes. The native African culture, tradition, voodoo rites, primitive worship, nature worship and cultic practices are rich and highly significant. These elements constitute the precursors of the contemporary African-American drama.

The Black theatre originated in the 1800s. At first the portrayal of the Black life served only as a means of public entertainment. The Black theatre in America was directly linked to the African musical entertainment and was primarily concerned with the Black dance and mime. The African captives were obliged to entertain the White audience during the long voyage from their native land to America. Their songs were generally melancholic lamentations of their slavery. The hapless Blacks were subjected to inhuman conditions and they were brutalized, tortured and dehumanised to make them good slaves for the White masters. In despair and distress, the captives enacted their native music that invoked their deities to save them and punish their White masters. Higher prices were fixed for the captive who could sing, dance or perform better. Thus, the native theatre tradition was kept alive on a foreign shore. At the plantation, the White masters ordered the slaves to perform as a part of tea-time entertainment in order to exhibit their 'new product' to the other White friends. So the Blacks were treated both as labourers and as entertainers. The slaves were allowed to rest and play freely for a few hours. They entertained the Whites in their African
fashion. The African Jazz, rhythm, songs and music gradually seeped into the American musical tradition. As Langston Hughes (1966) says,

musically they have rhythm, real resonance, excellent pitch, superb enunciation and full understanding of the operatic convention.

The natives of the ‘Dark Continent’ celebrated all kinds of occasions such as festivals during harvest, puberty, and birth of a child, nuptial ceremony and death of a person, with mime, dance, drumbeats and high-pitched songs. Besides dance and songs, they also practised a style of narrating the story of one’s life in folklore tradition. The use of masks, the painting of bodies and the anointing of faces were the chief features of folklore theatre that were intended to create fear and to produce startling effects among the audience. The primitive folk theatre laid the foundation of the contemporary Black theatre in which the traditional practices have continued.

The slave theatricals became popular for their parades, pantomimes, drums, dance and songs and also for some Black rituals like African Trickster Deities, Anansi, The Spider of The Caribbean, Esha of Brazil and some Pan-African myths. These early theatricals evolved into the precursors of the contemporary African-American theatre. This theatre tradition laid its strong and deep roots in the American soil. The White masters or the audience realized the power, the potential and the theatrical skills of the Blacks. It was at this juncture that the minstrel shows were started and these shows became immensely popular among both the Black and White audiences. These shows borrowed their materials from the slave theatricals, portraying the Negroes in distorted images.

1.5.2 The evolution of minstrel shows

The minstrel shows were at their peak during the last years of the eighteenth century and early years of the nineteenth century. As the White man refused to demean himself by accepting the role of a Black man, the masters had to hire Blacks
to stage their shows. With the popularity of minstrel shows in their home and abroad, the Negro subject was in demand; as a result White men capitalised on the shows. It was during this period that Dan Emmett, along with a friend, established a company called Negro Minstrelsy to exploit the talents of the Blacks. The Virginia Minstrels, The Congo Melodists and the famous Georgia Minstrels were a few famous companies organized in this period.

Before the civil war, the most popular form of entertainment was male blackface minstrel show. The Whites blackened their faces and imitated the songs, dances, speeches and humour of the Blacks. They portrayed Negro characters like buffoons, jokers and uncouth personalities. After the civil war, the Blacks appeared in the popular minstrel shows like Georgia Minstrels and then Lew Johnson’s Plantation Minstrel in 1852. Negro Minstrelsy, says Myron Matlaw (1967),

probably began in the 1820s with T.D.Rice and ‘Jim Crow’ songs and shuffle routine in which the infant Joseph Jefferson III made one of his first stage appearances. By the 1840s such Blackface troupes as those of Dan Emmett and E.P.Christy offered full evening entertainments in major theatres.

Dan Emmett, the founder of The Virginia Minstrels, is the first Black person to perform in New York in 1843. Before that, the Blacks, whom the White performers mocked, could not even get tickets to watch the performances and they were not permitted to enter the stage.

With the advent of Lew Johnson’s Plantation Minstrel Company in 1852, Black actors started enacting shows and followed the White custom in blackening their faces. However, as Clinton F. Oliver (1971) says,

something new also came into the theatrical arena- a richly authentic quality of imitation and caricature, a riotous freedom in the movement of dances, a new beat in the song and new materials.
Georgia Minstrels, the first Black company, was established in 1865 and this company enjoyed wide popularity. Billy Kersand and Sam Lucan were the superstars of this company. It later came under White management and became a part of Calendar's Consolidated Spectacular Coloured Minstrels. Other successful Negro minstrel companies were formed by Richards and Pringle, Hicks and Sawyer and Macabe and Young. It is interesting to note here that The Forty Whites and The Thirty Blacks was the first mixed minstrel company.

James Hewlett, Mr. Brown and Ira Aldridge, who established the African Grove Theatre in 1821, performed Othello, Richard III and other classics. They were the first set of people to promote Black artists' life and career on the stage in their own identity while the other theatre companies were indulging in projecting Blacks merely as comedians and brutes. James Hewlett became a leading figure and performed plays mainly for the Black audience. Ira Frederick Aldridge was one of the world's best tragedians, inspired strongly by the African Grove Company actors. The African Grove Theatre marked a definite stage in the history of the Black theatre as it wielded a great influence on the other new Black theatres that had emerged with new aspirations, aims, struggles and hopes.

After the closing down of the African Grove Theatre, small companies started springing up in the form of Negro musical theatres. Bob Cole's A Trip to Com town (1898) was the first minstrel show in America to be directed, produced, performed and managed by the Blacks. The other important musical comedy (Negro musicals) was John W. Isham's Oriental America (1896), which had the credit of introducing for the first time a chorus of beautiful coloured girls after having replaced the old minstrel chorus. J. Rosamond's Shoofly Regiment (1906), Sam T. Jack's Creole Show (1890) and Will Marion Cook's Clorindy- The Origin of the Cake Walk were some of the popular musical comedies. George Walker and Williams were the real stars of the Negro theatrical world in 1902. They performed the play In Dahomey.
and the company; The Williams and The Walker has been described as the strongest Negro theatrical combination that had yet been assembled (Hughes, 1966).

Though the early minstrel shows tried to discern the comic-realism of Negro life with its song and dance, the successive shows began to degenerate. The stereotyped images of Negroes as cartoon figures led to their failure. This made the show a mere farce and the language was mere gibberish. It created even more ugly and pernicious stereotypes. Though the Whites were aiming to demean and distort the Negro image, a few gifted Black artists started performing on English stages. James Hewlett and Mr. Brown's African Grove Theatre supported the Black artists, but it lasted for a few years as it was forced to shut down. Thus, a spark of hope was extinguished and they were forced to do meaningless roles with no improvement in the portrayal of the Black subject. William Couch J.R (1968) says,

the conclusion seems inescapable: Plays about Negroes, especially plays that deal candidly with the harsher realities of the Negro's existence in America, are not attractive to the general theatre audience, and the bulk of the theatregoing audience is white.

The image of a Negro became a serious subject for the early abolitionist plays. But no effort was taken to create a positive Black image; and the image continued to be hurtful and unfair. Many Black artists became aware of the situation and started creating new images. To support the artists and the Black community many Black theatres sprang up. Harlem theatres like Lafayette Stock Company and the Lincoln were opened to foster the outstanding talents of the budding writers. Classical plays, Shakespearean plays and adaptations of successful plays were performed to amuse the Black audience. Lester Walton was the founder of The Lafayette Players (1914). Othello, Madame X and The Count of Monte Christo were its important productions. It was the beginning of the Broadway theatre plays for the Black artists. As James Weldon Johnson (1930) says,
... all stereotyped traditions regarding the Negro's histrionic limitations were smashed. It was the first time anywhere in the United States, for Negro actors in the dramatic theatre to command the serious attention of the critics and of the general press and public.

Several Black writers took to serious writing for theatres and had considerable success.

In the meantime, a few liberals started anti-slavery propaganda that highlighted their Black subject. The horrors of the slave trade, the anguish and the distress of the hapless Blacks were silhouetted in a melodramatic style in many literary works. A good example was Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. This epochal novel affected the whole American world. The abolitionists projected the melancholic and tragic plight of their race. The Black playwrights found it difficult to emerge as good dramatists in spite of being good actors. They seldom got the chance to create with their limited "technical knowledge of theatre craft" (Hughes, 1962). Among the earliest African-American playwrights, William Wells Brown (1816-1884), an established writer, was an ex-slave and abolitionist. He produced two plays, *Experience or How to Give a Northern Man a Backbone* (1856) and *Escape or A Leap of Freedom* (1858). In the words of William Couch Jr.'s (1968),

William Wells Brown's *The Escape or A Leap to Freedom* (1858), the first play written in America by a Negro, satirized slavery. This play is not known to have been produced, although Brown did give numerous lyceum readings from it.

This book constituted the first significant contribution to the African-American theatre as the work carried the marks of an early search for expression.

All these revolutionary factors allowed the Blacks to enter the minstrel shows for the first time. Though it was a significant development, the irony of their plight was that they were forced to repeat the act of anointing their faces black even
when they were dark in reality. The Whites were particular that they should never approve of any kind of transformation among the Blacks. This gave rise to a number of new Negro minstrel troupes. Though the new minstrels organized by the Blacks presented more refined images than the slandered and debased images of earlier days, still they had to maintain the blackening tradition that marked them as clowns, cretins and drunkards.

The beginning of the twentieth century witnessed the birth of the Black problem plays like Cotter’s plays, in which a few liberal writers attempted for the first time to question their authentic identities. The portraiture reveals the American-Negro phobias, and the wrongs done to American-Negroes over a long period, nearly two centuries. Joseph Seaman Cotter, a schoolteacher, was the first Black man to produce serious Black plays in blank verse. His noteworthy play Sr.’s Caleb, the Degenerate or A Study of the Types, Customs and the Needs of the American Negro (1903) witnessed the portrayal of a unique Negro and his life in the White world with all its injustices. The other important plays that belong to this period were Edward Sheldon’s The Nigger (1910) and William Vaughn Moody’s The Faith Healer (1909).

Albeit the Negro subjects had been treated as the main themes deriving from the slave trade through minstrelsy, even the revolutionary and problem plays of later periods failed to present fair pictures. These plays too sustained the negative stereotype. It was at this crucial point that Harlem became the centre of revival of learning in art and literature. Many Black theatres such as Lafayette, Lincoln and Alhambra were started, which found their success even in Broadway. Even the Whites organized theatres such as Little Theatre Movement and The Coloured Folk Theatre to extend their patronage to the blossoming Black artists. The National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (NAACP) founded a drama commission to bolster the Black creativity and theatrical output. Besides these remarkable events, anthologies of African-American plays were compiled for the first time in history.
The period between 1900-1930 turned out to be harsh years for the American Negroes. They had to remain silent because of the problems concerning racial discrimination and segregation. Social, political and economic conditions had been demeaning and distorting the lives of the Blacks. The survival and liberation of their race depended on their determination to free themselves from bondage and slavery. They suffered from oppression and the effects of Jim Crow's laws that segregated the Blacks in education, transportation and public events. Most of the Blacks were strongly indicted, beaten and lynched, women were raped and children were tortured by the White mob for no reason other than that they were Blacks. They were not even given the right to vote and that had denied them a voice in politics too. Black women were terrorized and sexually harassed. These oppressive conditions seriously urged W.E.B. Dubois, a Black leader to set up an organization called The National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (NAACP) in 1915 to improve the lives of the Blacks.

NAACP organized a powerful official organ Crisis to fight for civil rights and struggle for Black liberation. It was a strong weapon against racial prejudice. The association and its official organ successfully asserted the freedom of expression and action that the young Blacks enjoy even today. NAACP brought hope to the Blacks particularly to the middle class people, and thus the articles published in Crisis were a kind of manifesto for the Negro theatre. W. E. B. Dubois (1926) has rightly stated,

...the Negro actor has for a long time been asked to entertain (this) more or less alien group and their conceptions of Negroses have set the norm for the black actor. He has been a minstrel, comedian, singer and lay figures of all sorts.

He calls the new Negro theatre the “renaissance of art among American Negroes” (W.E.B. Dubois, 1926). This led to the assertion of the new Black arts and other theatre movements of the 1960s.
The Crisis and NAACP encouraged new Black artists to develop their craft by writing and producing plays. Rachel in 1916 was the first play to be performed by this organization at the Neighbourhood Theatre in New York. Angelina Grimke wrote the play and Black artists performed it. It was the first time that they were using the stage for racial propaganda and for revealing the lamentable conditions of the coloured people. The play was about a Black woman who was the antithesis of the prevailing stereotypes.

Besides NAACP, W.E.B. Du Bois established The Krigwa Players' Little Negro Theatre in Harlem (1926), as a part of the artistic programme of Crisis and it was also a part of the Little Theatre Movement that was started in America by Cram Cook, Susan Glaspel and Eugene O'Neill. The four fundamental principles of this theatre are, in the work of Du Bois (1926),

- about us. That is, they must have plots that reveal Negro life as it is.
- by us. That is, the Negro authors who understand must write their life from their birth and the continued association, just what it means to be a Negro today.
- for us. That is, the Negro theatre must cater primarily to Negro audiences and be supported by their approval.
- near us. The theatre must be in a neighbourhood, near the mass of Negro people.

With the support of NAACP, the Blacks began to show interest in African history, culture and tradition. They started to acknowledge their African heritage and its lineage with a sense of pride. Harlem soon became the melting pot for Black culture since the coloured people rallied together to establish their skills in all fields of art and literature. It is understandable that all these influences promoted the growth of the New Negro Movement in America. Thus, Harlem became a centre for a rich literary ferment that culminated in the Harlem Renaissance.
1.5.4 The Harlem Renaissance

Harlem Renaissance, which began in 1919 revived the African-American literature. It was publicly recognized in 1924 as a rebirth for Black expression and experience. It was also called Negro Renaissance or New Negro Movement. The important characteristics of this historic literary movement were: the fight against racial prejudice, the assertion of the civil and political identity of the Blacks and their cultural individuality. New Negro writers born elsewhere were drawn to Harlem Renaissance, the ‘Negro Mecca’ that lasted till 1935. There is little agreement concerning when the renaissance ended. According to some scholars, the movement drew to a close between 1920 and 1929, though some believe that it lasted till as late as 1960. However, the Harlem Renaissance redefined the hearts and minds of the Blacks. Some of the leading writers of Harlem Renaissance were W.E.B. Du Bois, James Weldon, Claude Mackey, Jean Toomer, Alaine Locke, Wallace Thurman, Hall Johnson and Langston Hughes.

Alaine Locke was the mentor of the Harlem Renaissance and produced the manifesto of this movement. He was very optimistic about the rise of the Negro people and this was revealed through his anthology *Plays of Negro Life* (1927). He (William Couch J.R, 1968) says,

> the black playwright and the black actor will interpret the soul of their people in a way to win the attention and admiration of the world.

The manifesto of Locke called for a rebirth of the Black race and also of their art, culture and literature. It was observed that the positive nature of the Black consciousness and Black pride would emotionally and intellectually lead the suppressed Blacks to have equal rights in the democratic country of America. They clearly understood the fact that the Blacks must change their own self-perceptions to pave the way for a total change in the Euro-centric image of the Blacks. Racial pride
became the determining factor of this movement. Harlem Renaissance influenced and affected the Whites too. Some intellectual Whites haunted Harlem to rejuvenate their creative talents. This relationship with Harlem led to beneficial and improved cross-cultural relations. For the first time, anthologies of African-American plays were compiled and published. To promote this good relationship, Howard University Players was instituted by Locke, and was made to serve as an experimental laboratory for Negro writers. Thelma Duncan’s *The Death Dance* (1923) and Wills Richardson’s *Mortgaged* (1924) were the important productions of this company. Wallace Thurman’s play *Harlem* (1929), written with the co-authorship of a White man, William Jordan Rapp, exposed the real life in Harlem; the play is sensational, melodramatic and realistic. However, the plays written by the Blacks were unwelcome in the commercial theatre of the 1920s and 1930s. W.E.B. Dubois (1926) says,

\[
\text{if a man writes a play and a good play, he is lucky if he earns first class postage upon it. Of course he may sell it commercially to some producer on Broadway but in that case it would not be a Negro play. Or if it is Negro play it will not be about the kind of Negro you and I want to know...it cannot be sold to the ordinary theatrical producer but can be produced by our churches, lodges and halls.}
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The Harlem Renaissance supported the cause of Black womanhood and encouraged new talented women playwrights. Black women playwrights had to contend with the additional problem of sexism. That was because playwriting was considered as a profession for men alone. In spite of all these barriers, some Black women proved their creative skills and offered a unique insight into the Black experience. Their plays were significant because they supplied a unique view of Black experience and a variety of content, form, character, language, setting and dialogue. These women playwrights portrayed the life of Black womanhood as no White or Black male playwright had ever done. Some of the leading playwrights of this decade were Regina Andrews, Helen Webb Harris, Ottie Graham, Thelma Duncan, Alice Dunbar, Angelina Grimke, May Miller, Mary Burrill, Georgia Douglas Johnson and Myrtle Smith Livingstone. They were the original voices that looked at the world with
feminine hearts. Their plays struck a painful, passionate, but optimistic note that brought about a wide social change throughout the Black community. Alice Dunbar Nelson’s play *Mine Eyes Have Seen* (1918) aroused a hot debate and she concluded the play with a question: “Should a Negro soldier fight abroad for freedom, which his people are denied at home?” Mary Burrill’s play *They That Sit in Darkness* (1919) encouraged the Blacks to fight for their basic needs and fundamental rights. Marita Bonner also dealt with the same theme in *The Purple Flower* (1928). She strongly believed that Blacks should shed blood to gain their freedom. Georgia Douglas Johnson combined folk art and race propaganda in her plays. *A Sunday Morning in the South* deals with a young Black man who is falsely accused of assaulting a White man. *Safe* is about a mother who strangles her newborn baby when she hears the cries of a Black man being killed by the White mob. It is her way of keeping her child ‘safe’. May Miller attempts to use the stage to educate her students about Black history, culture and tradition, and Black pride. In Doris E. Abramson’s (1969) words, all these plays seem to be mainly concerned with the individual Negro’s problem of being assimilated into or revolting against the dominant white society.

However, the first Harlem Renaissance met with failure because of the monopoly of White-centric rules over the artistic materials of the Blacks. To add fuel to this, the Black middle class community failed to extend their hand in support of the movement. It became necessary that the Black theatregoers were given a better training to acquire better understanding of drama while observing the theatrical devices. These factors contributed to a temporary stagnation or a pause in Black creative expression.

### 1.5.4 Federal Theatre Project

To fill the gap, Rose McClendon came forward with his new ideas to rescue the Black theatre and its creativity, which had fallen into hard times. It was he who organized the Federal Theatre Project (FTP) in 1936 in various communities,
covering twenty-five cities and provided employment for more than a million coloured people. FTP published its manifesto and vowed to fight against any form of racial injustice done to them. It was recognized as a communist oriented party, which instilled political and social consciousness among people. It encouraged Black creativity in literary fields. However, it was closed down in the late 1930s, which was a severe blow to the Blacks. Despite its closure, FTP had proved itself as a trendsetter for Black plays and Blacks could find many exposures. It made an indelible impression on the Black stage. Important productions from this company were, William Du Bois’ Haiti, Hall Johnson’s Run, Little Chillun (1933), Frank Wilson’s Brother Mose, Adre Obey’s Noah, Langston Hughes’ Mulatto (1935), Rudolph Fisher’s Conjure Man Dies and George McIntec’s The Case of Phillip Lawrence.

Several other new theatres like Rose McClendon (1937), Harlem Suitcase Theatre (1937), American Negro Theatre (1940) and Negro Playwrights’ Company (1940) cropped up in Harlem and they all aimed to construct an ethnic theatre. The actor- director Dick Campell founded Rose McClendon Players. It sought to develop the Black community theatre and provided a strong base for the Black writers. Some of the notable writers of this group were Frederick O’ Neal, Ossie Davis, Ruby Dee and Jane White. This company was a landmark in the traditional Black history as it created a Black community theatre in New York. However, unfortunately, these theatres also failed to offer a permanent support to the cause despite their best endeavours. As usual, the Blacks were once again pushed back to the voiceless status of earlier periods. The Blacks were victimized and forced to indulge in subversive activities and minority communities were harassed. Soon, the White liberals harassed the Black minorities and it was the right time for the Black theatre community to take steps to create an authentic identity for the coloured people. All these perturbed conditions made the Black theatre community to sustain Black expression and consciousness. The Council of Harlem Theatres was instituted to bring life to the ethno-centric identity. In 1959, Lorraine Hansberry made her debut through A Raisin in the Sun. The play discussed the issues of integration, self-esteem
and identity. This play sowed the seeds of a new era of the Black theatre movement in 1960s. The Council produced the plays of eminent playwrights like Alice Childress, Alvin Childress, Earle Hyman, Theodore Branch and Beah Richards and Lorraine Hansberry.

Lorraine Hansberry’s play *A Raisin’ in the Sun* (1954) marked a new era in the Black theatre. Jean Genet’s *The Blacks* (1961) put the movement on a path, which was extremely violent, provocative and invigorating. But the solution offered by Genet was theatrical and impractical and it was highly superficial. However, the plays of the 1960s were the first works in the modern experimental dramaturgy of the Blacks. A budding and flowering group of talented writers like James Baldwin, Amiri Baraka, Adrienne Kennedy, Ron Milner and others followed these new modes.

### 1.5.6 The African-American theatre movement of the 1960s

The years between 1959 and 1969 marked a new era in the history of African-American theatre. It witnessed the rise of a radically new kind of drama that was written by a new generation of talented playwrights. The theatre of the 1960s was aggressively experimental and the plays were highly revolutionary. In the 1950s and 1960s, Black playwrights attempted to experiment with new dramaturgy or playmaking to reshape and redefine the theatre. As Clinton F. Oliver (1971) says,

...black writers presenting black materials, played and directed by black artists mainly for black audiences. With the unmistakably important purpose of defining and redefining the meaning of black lives, they presented historically and in terms of the twentieth century American and Modern worlds.

This becomes true with the emergence of the Black Arts Movement, which is regarded as the social and political affirmation of the Black revolution. The Black plays create an impact not only among the Blacks but also on the White audience and readers. The Black man’s ceaseless search for an identity was the central theme of many prominent
writers like Angela Davis, Huey Newton, Bobby Seale, Stokely Carmichael, Ted Jones and Amiri Baraka. The first New Negro Movement attempted to find a Black expression and experience in the hostile, White-dominated world. The writers eagerly tried to be accepted on equal terms into the mainstream of the White community. But the second renaissance that reshaped and redefined the Black identity was started to celebrate their powerful Cultural Revolution and to acknowledge the 'Dark Continent' as a spiritual home. The slow progress of the civil rights movement in its early days added to the militancy of the Blacks. The fiery speeches of Malcolm X and Patrice Lumumba and the writings of Frantz Fanon instilled moral courage and strength in the minds of the Blacks. As a result of this, a new awareness of Black identity was created among the coloured people.

In Helen Armstead Johnson's (1984) study, the following are identified as the major themes of contemporary African-American drama: folk experience, double consciousness, alienation from self, from race, from country, from society, from family, from god, the substance of Negro life, including middle class life, African-American negritude, miscegenation and the mulatto experience, religion and the church, personal, inner group and cultural identity, the Black American dream, migration and the urban experience, revolution and other themes. The following are some of the other important themes: frequent social and political emasculation of the Black male, corruptive influence of White value systems, the emancipating power of militant Black racism, Black lover and White mistress relationship and White lover and Black mistress liaison. All these themes were reflected in the works of the major playwrights.

The decadence of the 1960s brought about a change of attitudes, values and strategies in the Black theatre. The most powerful surge of the Black theatre was witnessed in the 1960s and the theatres were filled with new playwrights, producers, performers and critics. The Black culture and racial pride were once again kindled leading to the reiteration of an ethnic identity by reclaiming the forgotten past. The
Black art was exclusively addressed to the Blacks and the intrusion of the Whites was rejected. The committed works of African-American luminaries led to a new stage. The succeeding years saw the African-American writers attempting to do better. The 1960s became a turning point in the history of the Black drama with the dynamic emergence of Leroi Jones, Ed Bullins, Lonnie Elder, James Baldwin, Ben Caldwell, Clifford Mason, Donald Greaves, Philli Hayes Dean, William Wellington Mackey, Ron Milner, Elaine Jackson, Adrienne Kennedy, Ntozake Shange, Alexis Deveaux and others. Baraka, the founder of the Black Arts Repertory Theatre, is a revolutionist. His plays are fundamentally concerned with the author’s intense conviction that the Blacks must fight vigorously to survive in the White-dominated world. His plays have influenced a new generation of talented playwrights like Adrienne Kennedy and Ntozake Shange. These writers explored new depths and artistic expressions to awaken the suppressed voices and consciousness of their people. They are associated with civil rights and Black Power movements. They entered the theatre with new artistic expressions and raised their voice for the oppressed Blacks. They experimented with startlingly invigorating devices in drama. Adrienne Kennedy introduced a new dimension to her plays as she probed the psychic realms of her Black heroines. James Baldwin’s The Amen Corner and Baraka’s Dutchman represented an epoch-making revolution in Black drama. The writers invented new devices, as they were dissatisfied with the accepted norms. Hughes’ Tambourines to Glory and John O. Killins’ Ballad of the Winter Soldiers supported these new forms.

1.6 BLACK WOMEN: THEIR PLACE ON STAGE

The work of Black women playwrights has proved to be multi-dimensional and creative throughout the history of the Black drama. Their plays range from protest plays, comedies, tragedies and melodramas to moralities, surreal fantasies and choreopoems. They have expressed the Black experience in a realistic way like the male Black playwrights. The Black male playwrights strongly assert that the happiness
of the Black women or their completeness in life depends upon the brave Black men. In plays by the Whites, Black women were portrayed as devoted servants to the White families or as dumb, incompetent people. But in plays by Black women, the coloured woman’s story was narrated as a movement from slavery to freedom, especially from the woman’s point of view. The images of Black women were usually positive and many of them exhibited unusual moral strength. These characters are important in promoting humanistic values and they have contributed to enhancing the morale of the Blacks. They have paved the way for the blossoming of the Black literature. It was Angelina Weld Grimke who wrote the first Black play by a Black writer, in 1916. Rachel was a full-length protest drama, produced by the Drama Committee of the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (NAACP). The play is set in the home of Lovings, a genteel Black family in the North (they had moved from the South to the North). Rachel, the central character’s father and half-brother were murdered during a racial riot. Still, the North is not free from oppression. Rachel and Tom (Rachel’s brother) are not able to find jobs because of their colour though they are qualified for the posts. Deeply affected by the atmosphere of despair and distress, Rachel promises never to marry or bring children into the world. She didn’t want a newborn Black to undergo the same plight as herself. This play succeeds as a protest drama with an arrow straight message.

Many early Black female dramatists wrote one-act plays and explored a variety of subjects. The Crisis and Opportunity magazines encouraged and offered prizes for the best short plays highlighting the Black experience. Like Angelina Grimke’s Rachel, all the Black plays by the Black women dealt with racial injustice. Marita Bonner’s The Purple Flower (1928), Johnson’s A Sunday Morning in the South (1925) and Alice Dunbar’s Mine Eyes Have Seen (1918) are all protest plays.

Some of the most important themes dramatized in the early plays by the Black women were the identity crisis, the problems peculiar to Black womanhood and miscegenation. Myrtle Smith Livingston’s play, For Unborn Children (1926), depicts
a Black man’s relation with a White woman. The grandmother of the Black man refuses to accept the White girl. The man who is a lawyer advises his fiancée to marry a White man before surrendering himself to the angry White mob that has come for him.

Church politics and superstitions are the lighter themes that are handled in the plays of Ruth Gaines Sheldon and Eulaine Spence. Georgia Douglas Johnson’s *Plumes: A Folk Tragedy* (1927) deals with the theme of superstition. *The Death Dance* (1923) is set on the West Coast of Africa. It focuses on the plight of Kamo who is accused of a crime he did not commit. May Miller’s *Graven Images* (1929) has ancient Egypt as its setting.

The efforts of all these early Black women dramatists paved the way for the later writers of the 50s and 60s and also for the Black consciousness movement of the late 60s and 70s. The writers of the latter period created an authentic drama about Black life and experience. Alice Childress is one of the Black women playwrights to arrest the attention of theatregoers during this period. *Florence* (1950) is a one-act play. *Trouble in Mind* (1955) focuses on the story of a Black woman, Willette Mayer. In *Wine in the Wilderness* (1960), she deals with the Black revolution of the 60s. The riot brings together mid-class Blacks who learn about their identities with the help of the heroine, Tommy. Tommy is sensible, warm and unpretentious. In the course of the play, they understand the psyche of their own people. Adrienne Kennedy made her debut through *Funnyhouse of a Negro*, which explores the unfathomable depths of the inner life of her protagonist adopting innovative theatrical strategies. Lorraine Hansberry, who is a contemporary of Alice Childress made her debut with *A Raisin’ in the Sun* (1959); the play dealt with the innate dignity of a Black man. The play is realistic, with sustained emotional tension. It is a drama of affirmation and the hero Walter asserts his Black identity at the end of the play. *Les Blancs* (1970) deals with three Black African brothers whose different attitudes about Africa lead to a conflict of ideas.
1.7 THE MILITANT THEATRE AND THE THEATRE OF EXPERIENCE

The theatre of the 1960s proved to be a successful phase in the history of African-American drama. It was radical and revolutionary and its violence was symbolically suggested in Jean Genet's *The Blacks* (1959) and Baraka's *Dutchman* (1964). The playwrights offered very radical ideas and new theatre forms, and paved the way for the Black theatre movement. This particular period marked the emergence of revolutionary plays in the Black theatre. Even the government and other social systems supported the revival of Black expression in order to effect social integration, thereby decreasing the violence and tension prevailing in the state. Other noteworthy theatres such as *The Free Southern Theatre* (FST) and *Black Arts Repertory Theatre* (BART) were established with the intention of promoting the Black consciousness in the community.

The rise of a firm and fierce nationalist spirit with a strong sense of racial pride and an affirming self-image were the notable outcome of the growth of these theatres. Cultural nationalism formed the integral element of this new vision, a vision that the Blacks had once rejected in their preference for European ancestry. The writers expressed their perspectives enthusiastically in lectures, debates, and discussions as well as in other genres, confronting the Whites. The most noteworthy development of this period is Baraka's *Revolutionary Theatre* (1965). It is not necessary to explain the theme of the piece as it deals with the condition of the man placed between the suppressed Blacks and White oppressors. Baraka aims to transfigure the theatre with his vision that Black is beautiful and to expose the ugliness of the White imperialism; he wants every writer of his race to accept this view in his/her writings.

The various ideals of Black writers culminate in two disparate theatrical forms, *Militant Theatre* and *Theatre of Experience*. The Theatre of Experience avoids all political ideals and focuses upon the lives of Blacks, both their tribulations
and joys. This theatre disowns extreme Black militancy. Ed Bullins who is the one of the pioneers attempted to revive the relation between the theatre and the people. Though the two theatres do not share the same ideology, they are still complementary components of Black theatre. In the words of a critic,

it offers blacks an image of themselves that disputes the validity of images offered by the white world...and attempts to develop structures from models within African-American culture (Geneveive Fabre, 1983).

The Militant Black theatre functions as a catalyst to promote the cause of Blackhood in all its dimensions. Richard Wesley, Sonia Sanchez and Kingsley B. Jr. were the noteworthy writers of the Militant Theatre. They inspired the rhetoric of ethnic national revolutionary leaders like Amilcar Cabral, Kwame Nkrumah, Mao Tse-Tung and Lumumba. Adrienne Kennedy, Edgar White and Ed Bullins are the chief writers who have delineated Black experience in its various aspects as a framework for their writings. They are not militants but assimilationists. What is most important is that, all the theatres evolved in the 60's and 70's and till the present day have attempted to bring fresh air into the socio-political atmosphere and to instil awareness among people.

The most representative writers of this decade are Lorraine Hansberry and Alice Childress. The action is simple and they succeed in conveying their message. Adrienne Kennedy, unlike her contemporaries, is aggressively experimental and her plays are set in the surrealistic theatre of the mind of the characters. Many critics have agreed that she belongs to the avant-garde theatre. She desires to explore new dramatic forms and techniques to reveal the faults of a self-destructive America. She discards traditional and realistic notions of character, time, action and plot. Her plays follow in the tradition of expressionism, surrealism and symbolism and she handles them in a different dramatic way using metaphors, strange and bizarre images, literary
Kennedy's aesthetic emerges: female consciousness as a collage of history and fictional biography, swiftly changing scenes marked by temporal and spatial distortions: terrifying surreal images, both verbal and material: astonishing linguistic range from self-descriptive prose to poetic incantation.

1.8 ADRIENNE KENNEDY: AN OVERVIEW
1.8.1 An innovative modern dramatist

One of the most striking modern playwrights who redefined the drama of this turbulent decade is Adrienne Kennedy who forcefully challenges the conventional dramatic treatments of women’s lives and boldly experiments with several innovative dramatic strategies. Kennedy, who rejected the established methods and techniques, effectively uses images, metaphors and symbols to reveal the layers of her Black women’s consciousness. Her surreal plays deeply analyse the problems of identity, self-esteem and self-knowledge. Kennedy is one of the most arresting and provocative of the new Black playwrights of the 60s and 70s. Her works have been described as ‘introspective’ and ‘grimly imaginative’, and she has been considered as the poet of the Black theatre. Her violent plays are often controversial and surrealistic and are praised for their lyricism and expressionistic techniques. Kennedy has made her impact on the African-American dramatic scene with seventeen plays, a memoir, a work of fiction, a short story and a few translations. Some of the published plays that have helped in establishing her reputation as one of the foremost playwrights of this century are, Funnyhouse of a Negro [1964], The Owl Answers [1965], A Beast Story [1969], A Rat’s Mass [1966], A Lesson in Dead Language [1968] and A Movie Star has to Star in Black and White [1976]. Her memoir People who led to my plays [1987] is like a scrapbook where she presents the diverse people and images that influenced her writing.
Kennedy is an heir to a multiple cultural heritage. Her mixed education and environment provide a wide range of material for both her plays and her autobiography, which include Black history, aesthetics, tradition and religion. She is deeply conscious of the political turmoil and torment that the Blacks experienced as a result of religious conflict and miscegenation and of the questions of social integration and Black nationalism. She is painfully aware of the fact that it is hard to break through the barriers of cultural conflicts. Her (Wolfgang Binder, 1985) own words are,

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

It is also observed that as a dramatist her perspectives are different from those of the other playwrights of her time. Kennedy is highly original and individualistic in style, structure, theme, subject and setting. Mance William (1985) says,

the black arts writers advocate black consciousness and black revolution, whereas Gordone, Kennedy and whites use the black experience as a convenient frame of reference from which to explore the dilemma of the individual in a hostile environment.

1.8.2 Major themes

Kennedy is deeply aware of the problems and torments of the Blacks, and this is reflected in her plays. It is also observed that powerlessness and death are obsessions in her plays. Her mystical works reveal the questions of identity and Black consciousness. Depictions of race, incest and sexual violence form the core of her plays. Kennedy’s earlier plays deal with the sole theme of death, bereft of all hope in life. The characters are always haunted by a pathological fear of sexual violation. Her plays reveal the inner state made manifest on stage through astonishing images and dreams and visions. Scholars have noted that the major themes treated by Kennedy are the Blacks’ struggle to survive in a White world, their passionate quest of an identity for themselves and the Black woman’s trauma in going through the rites of passage in
her life. However, Kennedy's plays are highly autobiographical, and in them dreams, images and symbols are metamorphosed into poetic, expressionistic, surrealistic and archetypal dramaturgy.

1.8.3 Symbols and images

Kennedy, unique among playwrights of her time, often attempts to reveal social realism in an anti-realistic way. She herself states in her autobiography People who led to my plays, "My plays are meant to be states of mind" (Kennedy, 1987:108). Kennedy explores the mind of the characters through symbols and images in a highly expressionistic style. She uses the fractured social identity as the symbol of the deeper psychological conflicts of Black women. She uses the mask as a symbol of power and mystery to convey the message in her plays. All the characters become trapped in the mask's freakish impersonality and are unable either to discover themselves or to escape from the horrifying 'selves' they have created (Susan Meigs, 1990). She uses violent symbols to portray African-American characters whose multiple or uncertain identities reflect their struggle for self-actualisation and acceptance in a White-dominated society. She externalises the inner psyche of her characters by combining symbols, images and metaphors. Though the term Negro is archaic and not in current use, Kennedy deliberately applies the term, which symbolizes the 'regressive' nature of her heroines. As Herbert Blau (1984) notes, "Her experience is irredeemably Negro experience, the desire for assimilation". The settings of the plays such as funnyhouse, owlhouse, rat-hole and subway car are recurrent symbols of failed African-American experience. There is no escape from Blackness. Thus, the protagonist in a play is not a single character or a person, but instead she

traverses narrative, zigzagging across various systems of signification, seeking herself in the gaps, the spaces of unnarrated silence wherein her persistently allusive subjectivity might be found (Jeanie Forte, 1989).
1.8.4 A profile of the playwright

Kennedy deals with her personal conflicts and emotional distress in her plays. She admits that all her works are autobiographical because, as she says, "It is the only thing that interests me" (Lehman, 1977). A study of Kennedy’s personal life will aid the understanding of her plays. Adrienne Lita Hawkins was born on 13th September 1931, in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, but she grew up in a middle class neighbourhood in Cleveland, Ohio. Her father, Cornell Wallace Hawkins, was a social worker and her mother, Etta Hawkins, was a teacher. She started to read at the age of three. Her mother and father wielded a lot of influence in her early literary career. Kennedy (Betsko, 1987) says,

I really owe writing to her in a sense, because my mother is a terrific story teller and I feel that all my writing basically has the same tone as the stories she told about her childhood. She used to tell funny stories, but they always had this terror in them, a blackness.

A little later in the interview with Betsko, she says,

...my father used to read to me every night...sometimes just two or three lines of poetry...That too must have played a role in my development

Kennedy attended the Ohio State University where she started her career as a writer after she enrolled on a course on major twentieth-century writers, T.S.Eliot, D.H.Lawrence, Fitzgerald and Faulkner. She comments, "That course fired something in me. I suddenly found myself writing short stories instead of studying" (Betsko, 1987). Shortly after graduation at Columbia University between 1954 and 1956, she was married to Joseph C. Kennedy in 1953 and got divorced in 1966. She has two children, Joseph and Adam. She travelled to West Africa at the age of twenty-nine, and that became a turning point in her life and career. She travelled to Rome also and the contrast between her African and European experiences provided the background for her plays. Kennedy started writing plays in the 50s while staying up late with her
baby. She gained recognition only after she enrolled her name in the "Playwrights' Workshop" conducted by Edward Albee in 1962. Kennedy submitted her play *Funnyhouse of a Negro* to the workshop and it was produced Off Broadway at the East End Theatre in 1964. In the same year, Kennedy won an Obie award for this play and also a Guggenheim Fellowship for a year to England. Though she started her career as a short-story writer, she is today recognized as a successful playwright. She became recognized when she renounced realism for other modes of artistic expression. After realizing the fact that the one-act plays best suited her talent and ideas, she continued with that genre in the rest of her creative work. Kennedy has received many awards and distinctions. She has been a visiting lecturer at Brown, Stanford, Howard and California universities. She was awarded two Rockefeller Fellowships. Her play *Funnyhouse of a Negro* was transmitted on BBC and on the Radio of Denmark. The play has been translated into many languages. The opportunities, which Kennedy had for education in a middle class environment and for travel put to test several of the assumptions held about the Black woman in American society.

1.8.5 Major influences

Tennessee Williams, Garcia Lorca and Edward Albee are the major influences on Kennedy's writing. In Kennedy's early play, *The Pale Blue Flower* (1956, unpublished), she tried to imitate Tennessee Williams' style. She (Betsko, 1987) herself admits,

I was always writing poetry and short stories. But I really admired Tennessee Williams because he was the leading playwright then and I'd seen 'The Glass Menagerie' ... I worked two years on my first play in my spare time and it was very imitative of Williams, of 'The Glass Menagerie'.

The impact of slavery, colonialism and racism is strongly felt in the works of Kennedy. Her bitter experiences, the result of her being Black, are very graphically portrayed in her *The Alexander Plays* (1992). She discusses and analyses the specific constitution of the African-American psyche in her writings. She began to write and produce plays in the 1960s. She had been commissioned to write plays for Jerome
Robbins. She wrote for the New York Shakespeare Festival, The Royal Court’s Theatre Upstairs and The Julliard School of Drama. She presented a translation of *In His Own Write* by John Lennon at the National Theatre in London in 1968. *Cities in Bezique* was produced by Joseph Papp’s Public Theatre in New York in 1960. Recently, she has been working with Pabloferro to make a movie of *Funnyhouse of a Negro*. She is one of the talented artists included in The Norton Anthology of American Literature (III Ed. Vol.2). A list of her works, including her unpublished works, is given below.

**PLAYS**

1. *Funnyhouse of a Negro* (1964)
2. *The Owl Answers* (1965)
4. *A Lesson in Dead Language* (1968)
7. *An Evening with Dead Essex* (1973)
8. *A Movie Star has to Star in Black and White* (1976)

**TRANSLATIONS**

1. *John Lennon’s in His Own Write* (1967)
OTHERS

1. Adrienne Kennedy in One-Act (Collection of one-act plays, 1988)
   i. The Ohio State Murders
   ii. She Talks to Beethoven
   iii. The Film Club
   iv. The Dramatic Circle
3. People who led to my plays (Memoir, 1987)
4. Deadly Triplets (Fiction, 1990)

1.9 THE UNIQUENESS OF KENNEDY’S ART

1.9.1 Kennedy’s plays: a new theatre experience

Kennedy’s plays generate confusion among first-time readers. However, they are perfect launching pads for a discussion of the problems of articulating subjectivity in relation to race and gender, as well as introducing contemporary notions of narrative form. The audience is thus compelled into an experience, which may be temporary but soon confront the glaring fact that her characters exist only in a fantasy world. The audiences who have little help from the playwright must piece together all the episodes of the play to understand what has actually happened to the characters who have been driven insane. One has to make an effort to comprehend her plays. Clive Barnes (1969) says,

when I first read it on Sunday night - or was it Monday morning, ...I saw A Rat’s Mass staged...I still didn’t understand it.

Though her plays read like non-sense, she is a strong and vividly poetic writer of the theatre and her phrases torture the minds of the readers. Her settings are Daliesque. However, Kennedy’s extraordinary short dramas, composite of poetry, terror and dream, hold one’s unflagging attention. There is an evocative and mystical sense of being in all her plays. If Black writers are to capture the nascent primacy and vitality
of theatre, then they must be bold in discarding useless theatrical forms derived from
the expressive needs of Euro-Americans and be pioneers in developing indigenous
forms from Black culture. In Susan E. Meigs' (1980) words,

Kennedy’s plays address the cultural and political fragmentation of
the Black-Americans that occurs when a dominant (White) social
structure interrupts efforts to construct a black community.

Feingold (1995) says,

on one side, the premise is a running study of the value cultural
objects have for us; on another, it’s a generous-hearted triumph over
an exclusionary culture.

While many Black woman playwrights are fundamentally concerned with
realism, Kennedy weaves both surrealistic and non-realistic kinds of poetic
psychodramas. Images like shapes beneath a surface transform the Black man’s social
and moral tragedies into an iconography of the universal quest for selfhood and
identity. Protagonists are often non-heroines or non-characters dwelling in a world
with non-realistic forms, depicting the Black-American woman’s struggle for identity
in a hostile oppressive culture. The writers have also illustrated some of the issues as
well as problems associated with the central theme. Their characters are entrapped in a
deadly struggle within themselves and with their culture and heritage. The reader can
find shifting subjectivities, “a terrain of flux” (Jeanie forte, 1989). It is absolutely
impossible for them to claim an authentic and stable identity. Even the audience feel
that they follow the characters who move from place to place, person to person in their
odyssey to discover an identity. Kennedy’s protagonists’ immense efforts to construct
their subjectivities in a patriarchal miasmic set-up become futile because of the
inescapable fact that they are both Black and female. Their tragic plight is made
doubly difficult because of both gender and racial discriminations against them in a
Euro-centric culture. As Jeanie Forte (1989) says, a Black woman
is powerless to alter these parameters of her search and doomed to 
feel estranged from a heritage that she has been taught to desire but 
that she is prevented from claiming. Heritage in patriarchy is 
determined by the lives of paternity.

They cannot claim their ancestry through patriarchy. They cannot even achieve their 
Black heritage in the search for their subjectivity. The women in Kennedy’s plays find 
that their men are interested only in exploiting their bodies for their own desires. As 
they are frustrated and abused they commit suicide.

Kennedy’s plays deal with personal conflicts and emotional distress. Her 
five-year-long struggle to find an expression on the stage was her own greatest 
conflict. She herself has stated in an interview with Lisa Lehman (1977) that the idea 
suddenly exploded upon her to create the character, Negro-Sarah in Funnyhouse of a 
Negro, who talks with her other selves- Queen Victoria, the Duchess, Jesus, and 
Patrice Lumumba. The tortured Sarah becomes Clara in The Owl Answers, who again 
is the extended character of Kay in A Rat’s Mass. The subway forms the constant 
symbol for the journey through the mind and emotions of a girl who suffers so much 
because she is a mulatto. As Rosemary Curb (1981) says, A Lesson in Dead Language 
is “a sign, almost the anti-sacrament of the inherited guilt of womanhood”.

Kennedy strongly believes that she would not have written in the unique 
unconventional way she does if she were not a Black, and the submerged feeling that 
she is a part of the inferior class has a very strong haunting quality that tortures her 
mind and instigates her to take up arms. She has been made to read Black works since 
her childhood, which has strengthened the Black consciousness in her.

She is unique among the playwrights who often attempt to create changes in 
socio-political systems. Her plays are highly autobiographical, as her own experience 
becomes the only thing that interests her. Her (Betsko, 1987) comment on her first 
play Funnyhouse of a Negro is this: “It is such an intense play and so very revealing of 
my psyche- if not me, personally... It was very dramatic”. Her plays are highly
violent as she (Betsko, 1987) herself admits; “My writing has a lot of violence in it”. While discussing her use of historical characters, Kennedy (Betsko, 1987) says,

(when I said to myself) you are very drawn to all these historical people, they are very powerful in your imagination, yet you are not interested in writing about them historically.

She is courageous enough to venture into formal realms where only White male playwrights are allowed.

1.9.2 Unconventional qualities in Kennedy’s plays

Kennedy’s plays are the condensed form of expression that have incorporated the diverse autobiographical elements of family, race, popular culture, modernism and Euro-African art into an effective aesthetic form. Her characters are torn between the western culture they have acquired and the African roots they cannot deny. They are under the constant stress of centrifugal and centripetal pulls of colonialism and sexual identity respectively. Her plays are expressionistic and surrealist, and she describes them as the psychological states of the mind of her characters. Her plays consciously or unconsciously reveal her intense sensitiveness to the heritage of the African people.

Kennedy dramatizes the Black experience highlighting the oppression of Black people as minorities in a multi-racial society. Her characters articulate a sense of placelessness and deprivation of meaningful relationships. The self-hatred and the denial of anything Black among the Blacks is the result of the constant conflict in the very being of a Black person living in an alien environment. The thought, action and character spring from slavery on one side and colonialism on the other side. Colonialism and racism are linked together by the suffering and humiliation of centuries and this experience unifies all Black sensibilities.
1.9.3 Deviation from the tradition

Kennedy does not remain within strict thematic and stylistic bounds. Her plays are not linear and her style is expressionistic and firmly rooted in the politics of race and gender. Character is split into many and varied personalities like royal people, contemporary revolutionists, Hollywood movie actors, even owls and rats. Dialogue takes place not through the conventional exchange of words by the characters, but through the interplay of visual and verbal imagery. Plot does not even exist in its conventional sense. Kennedy's plays are structured differently, and "in the interplays of lights and shadows of meaning, achieve delicately muted resonance" (Clive Barnes, 1969). Suspense and climax form the substance of the most naturalistic plays, but Kennedy makes her own images emerge through the characteristic symbols and move through a constantly shifting ground. Plot is always pieced from past, present and future and time is shifted recurrently.

Kennedy has been criticized as a psychopathic and attacked as an irrelevant Black writer. Her plays are regarded as pretentious and imitative and their themes upset the Blacks. Her (Betsko, 1987) answer to such criticism is,

I was criticized because there were heroines in my plays who were mixed up, confused. But I knew what my alliances were. My father was a social worker and went to Morehouse College, where Martin Luther King studied. He even had the same cadence in his voice, and was always giving speeches. I grew up in a house where people wrote and we were members of the NAACP.

She is upset with the analysis of her works as she felt that her own psyche was being dissected.

I think I fear that it will inhibit me in any future work. I find it disturbing. Reading a review compels me because it concerns whether or not the play is going to run (Betsko, 1987).
She further says in the interview with Betsko (1987),

I think if you can bring your woman’s experience to something, it is really great. It’s important not to censor or inhibit that experience.

However, Kennedy has performed her duty, as William Couch Jr. (1968) observes, by unveiling the reality of her art, her humanity, her existence as an intelligent and moral entity in the universe. She makes the entire universe an audience of her transformation of the psyche and spirit.

The play, *Funnyhouse of a Negro*, focuses on a young girl Sarah whose confused identity is associated with her ambiguous feelings towards her White mother and Black father. She is alienated from the White culture and tormented by the Black culture and ultimately she takes her own life. *The Owl Answers* portrays a Black woman’s quest for an identity in the White-dominated world. The main character called ‘She’ is the illegitimate child of a rich White man and a Black cook. Rejected by the parents, her psyche is fragmented into several identities like those of Clara, the Virgin Mary, the Bastard and the Owl. She is metamorphosed into an owl towards the end of the play. Her Black and White royal and literary personalities like Shakespeare, Chaucer, Dickens, Anne Boleyn and William, the Conqueror, transform themselves and merge at the same time. *A Lesson in Dead Language* portrays a world of distorted religion and loss of childhood innocence through sexual initiation against the background of Caesar’s fall.

The main characters in *A Rat’s Mass* are Brother Rat and Sister Rat, and they are surrealististically presented as half-animal and half-human. They are purely victims of their oppressors. They are sailing in the sea of oppression, groundless, locationless and deprived of love. Like ordinary street rats, Brother Rat and Sister Rat are trapped by both the White and the Black cultures. They are like the scavengers of the city, used as an experimental tool in a lab, as lowly creatures, dirty and despised, and looked upon as carriers of disease in a pure and clean society. *Sun: A poem for*
Malcolm X inspired by his murder is a short play about creation. The play, which is also called an elegy, is full of mystery, mythic fantasy and poetic ambiguity. Kennedy has dedicated this play to her father. The doubling of the father image and the Black political hero figure continues throughout this short play, as is the case in her earlier plays.

Kennedy fashions a new kind of narrative structure in The Alexander Plays. With a Black female protagonist at its centre, the play deconstructs the White-dominated culture. In the early plays, Kennedy’s protagonists were victims of hallucinations but in The Alexander Plays, the protagonist has stopped dreaming openly and started recounting. In all the four plays, Suzanne Alexander becomes the literal narrator of the play. She explains events in straightforward first person monologues. Through Alexander’s reflections and recollections, Kennedy contests the conventional boundaries of narrative structure and raises new questions about form and characterization. By any conventional definition, these plays are not dramatic (Alisa Solomon, 1992). Events are described more often than depicted and there is very little actual dialogue. Instead of dividing Suzanne into multiple personalities, Kennedy cleaves her with the sharpness of Time. Past and future are visited upon Suzanne’s presence and she always speaks in the future perfect. In the place of the stabbings and hangings of Kennedy’s early plays, unstaged murders, kidnapping, Dracula’s thirst for blood and the bleeding scalp are described in these four plays.

Kennedy’s memoir, People who led to my plays, presents the diverse people and images that have influenced her writing. She conveys her early fascination with glamorous film stars and also discusses her reverence for the famous writers and great personalities. With this book, Kennedy has invented a new form of autobiography and presents it to the reader as the scrapbook of words, pictures and memories. She identifies recurring themes, images and experiences that both obsessed and shaped her. This practical work more accurately reveals the growing artistic maturity of one of the
daring voices in the American theatre. This autobiography can serve as a guide to the reader to unravel the mystery and get at the meaning of her plays.

Through her plays, Kennedy strongly asserts, "Blacks must learn to live" (Kennedy, 1987:23) in a White-dominated society. Her plays belong not to her alone, but to the entire race of "Negroes", whom she portrays as "underdogs" and "underdogs must fight in life" (Kennedy, 1987:23).

1.10 SCOPE OF THE STUDY

This study will have the following pattern, comprising five major divisions, including this chapter. The second, the third and the fourth chapters form the thematic part of this research. In the second chapter, a detailed study of the theme of the frustrated and fragmented psyche of Black women and their psychic problem of self-identity in a racist and sexist world has been made through expressionistic devices. The innovative technical devices employed in Kennedy's plays are discussed in the second chapter. The third chapter examines how Kennedy exposes powerfully the tormented soul of her heroines with her rare kind of dramatic skills, embodied in her use of surrealistic techniques, which have moulded and shaped her psychodramas. The study of archetypes as an important technique in her plays is taken up for study in the fourth chapter. The final chapter concludes the study, revealing the findings of this research and suggesting further avenues of research.