FOR COLORED GIRLS WHO HAVE CONSIDERED SUICIDE / WHEN THE RAINBOW IS ENUF:
QUEST FOR NEW BEING...
For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/ When the Rainbow is Enuf is both the best known and also one of the least understood of Shange's works. Her enigmatic explanations to the play's title may have, in part, led to the constriction with which the play is often viewed, Shange explains her choice of the title For Colored Girls Who Considered Suicide/ When the Rainbow is Enuf, thus “colored”, according to the author, is an accolade to her grandmother, who, shortly before her death, called Shange “a precious little colored child.” The rainbow image, in the title came about, after Shange beheld a beautiful rainbow one afternoon in the San Francisco sunshine. However, it appears that Shange had a much more universal sense in mind for the word “colored” than has been discussed previously in interviews and critical discussions. The title For Colored Girls actually signifies “for women of colour”. The original performers of the play were a group of Latin, Asian, and black women. When the play reached Broadway, it became known as a play about black women's experience, in the continental United States.

On the stage six actresses dressed in the colours of the rainbow—yellow, red, green, purple, blue, orange—and one dressed in the brown of earth and warm—toned skin, alternately speak the twenty odd poems, each a story. While one speaks, the others listen attentively or mime the story, creating a sense of sisterhood and sharing. When a story is told by one woman it often arouses sympathetic ‘yeahs’ or the telling of related stories or some women even dance to the narration. In Shange's choreopoem there is a sense of dialogue, which increases the consciousness of women and is also an invitation to the women audience to tell their own stories. A variety of experiences emerges interwoven with a sense of plurality and commonality.

In the December 1977 Ms “interview” with herself, she adds:

i use the terms “colored,” “yellow,” “negress” & any other i can think of cuz they have a reality for me that extends beyond governments & territories. i have always hated being
referred to as an American citizen, thou i love the western hemisphere in the colloquial terms referring to black people is more history & love & acceptance of our "peculiar situation" than in the cursory description of someone as "black" or "afro-american" which seems artificial to me, i cannot sustain myself with inadequate language; that leads to superficial & ambiguous living.¹

Shange's symbolic use of the rainbow, as she recalls was the occasion of returning home to Oakland from a women's studies class she was teaching in Somana State College. That day having taught Gabriel Garcia Marquez's One Hundred years of Solitude (1970) she was feeling particularly disheartened, she remembers noticing a rainbow and, connecting that appearance in nature to women's rightful existence in the planet's cosmic order she says,

women, especially black women, have as much right and as much purpose for being here (on the planet) as air and mountain do .... We can minimize those scars or those sores that we don't want in us. We can modulate them to the extent that they become at least not malignant. And we forget that so that's what the rainbow is; just the possibility to start all over again with the power and the beauty of ourselves ...
Rainbows come after storms; they don't come before the storm.²

Shange's prosaic use of the rainbow symbolises a movement towards ideals for these suffering black women. It represents discovered self worth after a number of transformed storms, the reasons these women or any woman might consider suicide. The rainbow, as a symbol, works as a visual declaration of women's spiritual beauty and ultimately self-actualisation. The rainbow does not contain only one colour by definition, affirms the diversity
of black female's experiences socially, culturally, and individually. Only in her awareness of the complexity of her experiences can a black girl realise positive self-hood. Shange adds:

_The rainbow is a fabulous symbol for me. If you see only one color, it's not beautiful. If you see them all, it is. A colored girl, by my definition, is a girl of many colors. But she can only see her overall beauty if she can see all the colors of herself. To do that, she has to look deep inside her. And when she looks inside herself, she will find .... love and beauty._³

The rainbow, symbolises a physical beauty in the ethnicity of the black female as well as a spiritual beauty, which she understands, when she becomes aware of her own inner rhythms. Just as there are no distinct lines separating the rainbow's colours, these women are not separated from each other's experiences. Using images of "colored girls" and "rainbow" together reiterates the structural significance of "colour imagery" in the piece and highlights its unconventionality in characterisation, as noted by Carol P. Christ:

_The juxtaposition of "colored girl" with "rainbow" enables Black women to see the varied tones of their skin as a reflection of the glorious hues of the rainbow, not as a color to be borne in shame. And , though colored girls have considered suicide because they have been abused by white society and Black men, this need no longer be the case. "The rainbow" is now understood as an image of their own beauty, and it "is enuf."⁴

Shange's works signify women's sufferings and inform females that they have a responsibility to love themselves and each other, enough to resist oppression. Her female characters combat with the baffling dilemma of living in a world where being female and black makes them twice oppressed.
For Colored Girls is unified by a series of similar experiences, shared by characters, whose names are lower-cased to represent the poor, abused self-effacing women of colours. This play is about women's possibilities, their ability to survive in the face of loneliness, rejection, pain, rape and infirmity. This theatre piece according to Shange is an exploration of people's lives and provides hope for women who have known the bitterness of the storm. For Colored Girls begins with a poem spoken by the Lady in Brown about the importance of naming and celebrating experiences its song and story:

sing a black girl's song
bring her out
to know herself
to know you
but sing her rhythms
carin' struggle/ hard times
sing her song of life
she's been dead so long
she doesn't know the sound
of her own voice
her infinite beauty. (4)

According to Helene Cixous,

Woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies ... woman must put herself into the text as into the world and into history-by her own movement.6

Helene Cixous speaks about “ecripture feminine”. In a bid to find a language like her's, women have not only adopted post-structuralist theories of language but have used sexuality and subjectivity for describing their feminist interests.
For Colored Girls is a presentation of poetic and episodic dramatisation of a series of events, mostly flashbacks, which are categorised, stereotypes and genuine images and afflictions of black women: their needs, susceptibility, humour, psyche, and pain. Shange's subject matter encloses a broad range of issues: men manipulating women, the physical violation of women, unfaithful men, rape, unwanted pregnancies abortion, seduction, unrequited love, and abandonment. Shange explores her themes in dramatised narratives, mostly satires, rendered by seven allegorical women who used dance, music, song, chanting, ritual and poetry. She depends more on movement and sound, and less on elaborate sets, costumes, lights and stage blocking. Each woman in the play represents a colour: brown, yellow, red green, purple, blue, and orange; the colours of the rainbow. By casting "colored" women, Shange encases the limitless possibilities of non-white women within and beyond America.

Shange explains that twenty odd poems are modelled on Judy Grahn's The Common Woman, which examine the realities of seven different kinds of women. Shange personally feels that the black girl's childhood does not really prepare her for the hurdles and hard times of her adulthood. As Shange says that the choreopoem was written to give the emotional information to the coloured girls, she says,

*I wanted them to have information that I didn't have. I wanted them to to know what it was truthfully like to be a grown woman. If there is an audience for whom I write, it's the little girls who are coming of age. I want them to know that they are not alone and that we adult women thought and continue to think about them.*

Each woman, angry and changeable, renders a story, usually a long monologue. The stories, in the manner of African oral narratives, are programmatic and use nonverbal elements heightening action and theme.
Each woman narrates a story, she either performs it or it is performed by other women. No dialogue takes place in the spontaneous sense, but communication is effected in the pitch of thematically-related stories, and conflicts within each story are again related to the lives, sentiments, and abuse of coloured women, and are fused into a single drama of grief and release.

The incantatory tone of *For Colored Girls* heightens the ritual process. Chanting and poetic language --- call and response group and individual choral repetition of lines --- are common expressive idioms of traditional African rituals and ceremonies. Poetry, chanting, and rhythmic sequences interact with music, song, and dance. Together, these form the musical dimensions of the choreopoem, and harmonise with the play's exalted structures. Distorted spellings, abbreviations, non-capitals, and the separation of lines by slashes to mark rhythmic beats and thought processes, support the non realistic musicality of the play.

*For Colored Girls* opens self assertively with harsh music and dim blue lighting. Lighting, mime, movement and dance adorn the musical tone to depict sober, sad, joyful, sexual, or violent surroundings. Music and dance are also thematically linked to the socio-spiritual growth of the women. Sandra Richards notes how the women of colored girls

*bypass, through music and dance, the limitations of social and human existence", music, movement, and song "convey layers of sensate information lying beyond or outside linguistic, cerebral dimensions of the brain."

According to Margaret Wilkerson,

*Playwrights like Shange find in music a second language that gives expression to profound anguish and joy of their vision and experience .... finding in the dissonant ones of black music a powerful expressive mode.*
Music accentuates action with “life”, fashioning a “total” theatre that appeals to all the sense, stirring audience involvement.

Lady in Brown relates the anguish of coloured women,

--- the “dark phases of woman hood" ---- with “half-notes scattered without rhythm .... its hysterically the melody-less-ness of her dance.( 3 )

This sterility transform them into “ghouls” and “children of horror”, Lady in Brown, can’t hear anything/ but saddening screams & the soft stains of death (4). She identifies music as a means through which she can be redefined, reborn, and escape constraint. She wants to hear a black girl’s song, one that will help her know herself and her possibilities/---- a righteous gospel that will let her be born (1-3), the Lady in Brown in the introductory piece hints that the black girl is to be born again in the form of art which exhibits her sighs and possibilities and to be handed warmly.

Lady in Blue confirms that, as a reglar (niggah) wit hints of spanish(11), she obtains part of her spiritual contentment from dancing to Spanish-influenced, African “Juju”, and “Blues” music. Restating Shange’s thrust on music over dialogue, Lady in Orange declares that

don’t wanna write
in english or spanish
iwanna sing make you dance
like a bata dance scream
twitch hips wit me cuz
i done forgot all abt words.(14-15)

Shange’s poem begins with a celebration of black woman’s sexuality and love for music and dance, graduating into womanhood was an elaborate rite for the black girl and she sang inside: WE WAZ GROWN WE WAZ FINALLY GROWN(9). Exposed to sexual oppression, this happiness turned
into turmoil and lament as she grew up. White society is not the only one where direct oppression is practised but black women from all cities, classes and cultural background have had the same experience of sexual assault. Shange’s speakers reveal the community of women’s experiences.

Appreciating the importance of dance and music in providing sustenance, Lady in Yellow admits that gotta dance to keep from crying, and is backed by Lady in Brown who adds, we gotta dance keep from dying. (15)

The women’s acceptance of music and dance as curative agents is central to the play. They initially introduce themselves as outsiders but constantly strive to be brought “inside”. This progression is consistent with Lady in Brown’s summary of the drama’s plot:

and this is for colored girls who have considered suicide/but moved to the end of their rainbows. (6)

While suicide is one option, they decide to seek the “rainbow”. The rainbow- after-a storm metaphor suggests beauty and the possibility of tranquility after commotion.

Sex and love are the distinctive features of the dissident coloured women. Shange rescues them from sexual restraint, and reassesses sex as a channel for self-empowerment. Lady in Red reinvents orthodox female whore roles; rather than simply selling her flesh to white and black men, the prostitute wanted to be a memory/a wound to every man. She cleanses herself of a man’s feculence by making herself a bath/of dark musk oil/ egyptian crystals/ & florida water to remove his smell (33), then dismisses him along with the misconstruction that women are dependent on men. She tells him,

you’ll have to go now/i’ve a lot of work to do/ & i cant/ with a man around. (34)
The first poems of *For Colored Girls* create a mood of youthful optimism, playfulness and joy in being alive. The opening poem is a serious note interrupted by the singing of the childhood song, “mama’s little baby”, the reciting of a playful rhyme and a game of tag. This lighter note expresses Shange’s perception that the black girl’s childhood does not always prepare her for the struggles and hard times of her adult experience.

Black woman’s life force is celebrated in the first two poems. The next poem “no assistance”, tells of their abuse. The Lady in Red speaks of the varied ways she tried gravely to persuade a man love her, but instead he reciprocated, her love only to satisfy his sexual desires. The Lady in Red through her acting and humour distances herself from a pain and expresses her anger and anguish at having to take responsibility to end the affair.

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this waz an experiment
  to see how selfish i cd be
  if i wd really carry on to snare a possible lover
  if i cd stand not being wanted
  when i wanted to be wanted
  & i cannot

so
with no further assistance & no guidance from you
i am endin this affair
this note is attached to a plant
i've been water in since the day i met you
you may water it
yr damn self. (14)
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The anger she reveals in her last words to this man is the anger of a woman who has realised that she does not need to waste her time on a man who does not value her.
In her first play, *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/ When the Rainbow is Enuf* (1976), Shange addresses the difficulties of black women and their communities as they face a racist, sexist environment. This play is not restrained by constructed collection of poems, a “choreopoem” developed through the interaction of seven women as explorers and interpreters of black female experience within the black community.

Shange declares in *For Colored Girls* ... and her other plays, have been

*directed towards clarifying our lives.... & the lives of our mother, daughter, grand mother....as women*\(^{10}\)

and towards

*our struggle to become all that is forbidden by our environment, all that is forfeited by our gender, all that we have forgotten.*\(^{11}\)

She creates basic characters who often reflect “combat breathing” through a lack of power to impressively communicate with each other and an inability to develop healthy emotional interaction among communities of black men and women.

Afro-American history reveals all through that sexual abuse has been taken for granted as an occupational hazard. As slaves, black women’s bodies were considered to be within reach at all times to slave masters and also to his subordinates. Rape in this regard is not considered as a cruel act towards black females but an act of a sexually starved male. Shange speaks of the painful flouting of women’s bodies in rape which *happens anytime anywhere to female of all ages.*\(^{12}\) All the women in the play chant the ‘rape poem’ together confirming that it is not an individual’s story or tale.
The unhealthy incidence of black rape in her plays is, for example, a metaphor for black male acceptance of the western conceptualisation of power. The black male refuses the destructive interpretation of a racially marked body, he as a rapist, at the same time depends on a western arrogance of being ranked high and having the privilege of the black male body over the black female body. This is very clearly examined by Shange in her "latent rapists", poem of *For Colored Girls*. Through the violent privilege of black male sexual power, through the encroaching act of raping, the black male acknowledges an inactive idea that

one and the same message, inscribed on a male or female body, does not always or even usually mean the same thing or result in the same text.\(^{13}\)

In *For Colored Girls*, Shange addresses the incidence of black-on-black rape directly. As an act which rehearses an "ideology of male supremacy" and encourages and supports violence against women.\(^ {14}\) Shange includes black male’s need to rehearse white male dominance as a reach for power or, again, as Bell Hooks argues, for a

male supremacy (that) encourages the use of abusive force to maintain male domination of women.\(^ {15}\)

The three female characters display in the "latent rapists", poem of *For Colored Girls*, black males, first cannot be excused for their sexual “misunderstandings”. The ladies in red, purple, and blue share in the burden of expressing the extent to which black rape, experienced by black women as an evidence of a rage for power, is prompted by black women to allow these men to enter the world of patriarchal dominance. There are a number of narrators for this poetic sequence and the aesthetic manner in which they identify colours repeat the complex relationships of power through an investment in sexual violence that undermines effective communication between black women and men. The poem begins:
lady in red  a rapist is always to be a stronger
to be legitimate
someone you never saw
a man wit obvious problems
lady in purple  pin-ups attached to the insides of his
lapels
lady in blue  ticket stubs from porno flicks in his
pocket
lady in purple a lil dick
lady in red or a strong mother
lady in blue or just a brutal virgin
lady in red but if you've been seen in public wit him
danced one dance
kissed him good-bye lightly
lady in purple  wit closed mouth
lady in blue pressin charges will be as hard as keeping
yr legs closed while five fools try to run a
train on you
lady in red  there men friends of ours
who smile nice
stay employed
and take us out to dinner
lady in purple  lock the door behind you
lady in blue  wit fist in face to fuck. (17-19)

Rape here is clearly couched as a sexual act of violence.

The black rape in *For Colored Girls* which is significant, is not a
violence of strangers using force to satisfy sexual needs or to dominate a
random victim in order to establish a sense of personal power. Sexual
violence is a complicated familiarity, that occurs within a distinct community.
Rendering of rape in the home, by the neighbour to or the friend, attempts to exploit the question of black rape as an act of power, an act of sexual violence that is, most importantly, a break of community stability.

Even in urban technological societies of America the black women’s bodies are thought to be impersonal and are exploited even by close friends because they know that they are safe from indictment. This picture created by Shange is not an over exaggeration as Robert Staples is also of the same opinion says,

*The majority of black rape victims are familiar with their attacker, who was a friend, relative or neighbour. Many of the rapes occur after a date and are what some describe as date rapes.....Large number of black men believe sexual relations to be their ‘right’, after a certain amount of dating.*

For Shange, rape is the ultimate perfidy of a male against the source of his own life-woman. As caustically the Lady in Red suggests that the nature of rape has changed(20). The nature of the violent act itself has not changed; the observed change in the recognition of the rapists do not conform to a monotony. Shange warns females against this myth of the stereotypical rapist; he need no longer

......be a stranger

someone you never saw
a man wit obvious problems
pin-ups attached to the insides of his lapels
ticket stubs from porno flicks in his pocket
a lil dick
or a strong mother
or just a brutal virgin. (17-18)
The basic concept of several African world view is that sexual healing is identical with spiritual healing, fulfilling the concept of close ties between the mundane and the sacred.

Barbara Christian attests to this belief;

Central to the African ritual is the concept that the body and spirit are one. Thus sexuality is essential to the process of healing and rebirth of the spirits.  

Freedom and restriction are associated with modes of sexual expression. Categories of rape are pinpointed to elaborate in effected sex as a female victimisation agent. Forced abortion, induced by rape, is described in terms of scatological, mutilating death images, contradicting the self-affirmation that the women yearn. At the early stages of the choreopoem, the women are sexually open in their choric chant:

little sally walker sittin in a saucer
rise, sally, rise, wipe your weein eyes
an put your hands on your hips
an let your backbone slip
  o, shake it to the east
  o, shake it to the west
shake it to the one
  that you like the best.(6)

Lady in Green demands the return of alla (my) stuff after a futile marriage, her demand necessitates her freedom to sit wif (my) legs open sometimes/to give (my) crotch some sunlight (50). The pursuit of self-determination is interwoven in sexual liberty and the female body.

The fictitious flashback to Lady in Brown’s childhood meeting with the legendary anti slave, Haitian hero Toussaint Louverture is laced with controversy even as it advances race pride. Lady in Brown met him in the
"ADULT READING ROOM"(26), of a school. Connecting Toussaint with sexual material evokes typical parallels drawn between the powerful black male and female threatening, insatiable sex drives. Toussaint’s leadership idealism is obscured by his sex-object image. At eight, Lady in Brown brought him to imaginary life with secret intimate desires. Toussaint type heroes exist in modern times; Lady in Brown pictures him in Toussaint Jones, an "Ol boy" she has a crush on (28), again bringing the original Toussaint to deceptive life. Shange uses this angle as part of her lashing out against men, or simply refuses to glorify male heroes in her feminist drama.

The choreopoem moves from physical, psychological and social suffering imposed upon the female to yet another vivid female suffering related to female- sexuality- abortion. Whether a pregnancy results by consent or a sexual encounter, abortion itself is inconsistent that can also leave deep and lasting scars. As women are sexual victims all over the world, Shange in ‘abortion cycle #1’ picturises a woman’s terror during an illegal abortion . The woman is ashamed of the unwanted pregnancy and therefore wants to hide it from her friends. The mystical beginning of the poem with the four women shrieking “eyes”, "mice", "womb", "nobody"(22), shows the nightmare. The “abortion cycle # 1” (22) details the violent procedural invasion of a female body:

- tubes tables white washed windows
- grime from age wiped over once
- legs spread
- anxious
- eyes crawling up on me
- eyes rollin in my thighs
- metal horses gnawin my womb

& i didn’t say a thing
not a sigh
or a fast scream
to get
those eyes offa me
get them steel rods outta me
this hurts
this hurts me
& nobody came. (22-23)

The concept and account of an abortion experience works on a number of stages. Images of "legs spread", "anxious", "crawling up on me", "rollin in my thighs", "tween my legs", and "gnawin my womb" recaptures the action and atmosphere of both forced and consented sexual intercourse. The language of the poem, however, clarifies this experience as one of great physical and psychological torture. The uncomfortable images of blood and shattered bones support not only the physical violence of the surgery but also the effect on a victim of sexual assault. The rape victims are often silenced by fear for their lives and side by side the silent terror of this gender-specific experience. Adrienne Rich highlights this trauma:

A man may beget a child in passion or by rape and then disappear; he need never see or consider child or mother again. Under such circumstances, the mother faces a range of painful, socially weighted choices: abortion, suicide, abandonment of the child, infanticide, the rearing of a child branded "illegitimate," usually in poverty, always outside the law... What ever her choice, her body has under goes irreversible changes, her mind will never be the same, her future as a woman has been shaped by the event.

The woman becomes nervous and screams at her secret shame. At the beginning of the choreopoem it is stated that as long as the black woman's story is not told, she will never hear only maddening screams/& the soft strains of death.
The Lady in Blue admits that becoming pregnant was a mistake, her greatest burden is shame, a kind of social and psychological suicide. Her body- becoming pregnant accidentally leaves her empty and in pain:

i really didn't mean to
i really didn't think i cd
just one day off.........
...........................
ici cdnt have people
lookin at me
pregnant
ici cdnt have my friends see this
dyin danglin tween my legs
.............................
once i waz pregnant & shamed of myself.(22-23)

The painful violations of women's bodies in rape and hack abortion are spoken of in the next two poems. All the women chant the rape poem together confirming that this is not an individual story. Shange uses gang rape as a metaphor for pressing charges and describes the raped woman's sense of double violation and humiliation first by the rapist, then by the criminal justice system. The final blow on the dignity and self respect is that friends can be rapists: women are often

betrayed by men who know us and we cd even have them over
for dinner/ & get raped in our own houses. This picture
created by Shange is brutal but true.20

Shange picturises a woman's fear during an illegal abortion in "abortion cycle #1". The woman sees dirt and metal instruments in the process and the images become more brutal, the feeling of disgust grows, metal horses gnawin my womb// dead mice fall from my mouth . (22) These images capture the feeling of violation, the pain of an abortion without anesthesia. It is as though something huge and powerful was inside her womb,
like death coming out of all her aperture. The woman confesses that she sought the abortion because she wasn’t married and [she] cdnt have people/looking at her pregnant (22). Her shame mingles into pain as she cries inside, this hurts/ this hurts me(22). Her feelings of isolation and shame return at the end of the poem as she concludes,

& nobody came
cuz nobody knew
once i waz pregnant & shamed of myself. (23)

Scared of sexual abuse, the Lady in Blue prays to remain aloof in her universe of six blocks(37) in Harlem. She is outraged at being harassed on the streets by a twelve year old stranger and says:

NO MAN YA CANT GO WIT ME/ I DONT EVEN KNOW YOU/ NO/ I DONT WANNA KISS YOU/
YOU AINT BUT 12 YRS OLD/ NO MAN/ PLEASE PLEASE PLEASE LEAVE ME ALONE/ TOMORROW/ YEAH/
NO/ PLEASE/ I CANT USE IT i cd stay alone
a woman in the world. (37)

She prays that no man approaches her calling her pretty in a dark morning as she is afraid of the ramification of such meetings.

In the poem the formal accusation about abortion is not of a male who deserts a pregnant woman as in the Lady in Yellow’s experience with Bobby in the back seat of the Buick, but the stress here is on the male as one who has deserted this pregnant female. (This female shares the same sexual freedom).

_Pregnancy, abortion, rape, and the isolation and alienation—“after life”—each of these physical traumas are sufferings that a female experiences alone, in spite of the fact that a male actively participated in the sexual encounter._

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(Alice Walker's short story, *The Abortion*, from her collection, *You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down* (1986), a trauma which, to some extent, probably exists in every case, no matter how strongly might advocate the right to choose abortion. Yet, the "Black Movement's" rhetoric linking birth control to genocide, cannot be lightly dismissed. In all these considerations it is clear that there is a delicate balance between blackness and womanhood which Shange is able to strike in *For Colored Girls*.

Shange picturises how the black woman is spoken ill of and her appearance in her poem "sechita" where a dancehall girl is thought as deity as slut, as innocent & knowing( Foreword, x)

The Afro-American women's creative possibilities are restricted particularly in celebration of Afro-centrism and an abandoning of Western ideals, which Shange portrays in Sechita's image of herself as an empowered Egyptian goddess. She dances in the dust of the tent of a showy carnival. Her movements are graceful which recall quadroon balls (23) or Egyptian Goddesses perform in the rites (25). Her talent and beauty are not appreciated by redneck admirers. Her poverty allows her to have only a "broken mirror" to decorate her face, her cheeks appear sunken and she has learned to make allowances for the distortions(24). The conviction of a black woman's appearance in society is humorously parodied in the description of Sechita's mirror. Her mirror is that of the society because like the broken mirror it looks partial at the life of the blacks, misrepresenting the black woman's appearance in her own eyes. She tells the story of the degradation of a black woman's sexuality and creativity in her defiance of those who degrade her:

.........................they were aimin coins tween her
thighs/ sechita/ egypt/ goddess/ harmony/ kicked viciously
thru the nite/ catchin starts tween her toes. (25)
Imagining herself as a “Goddess” and expressing her hatred with injurious kicks of her legs she refuses to let herself be debased by the dirt and vulgarity of the man who comes to see her. She wears a brightly -coloured costume which contrasts her mood of despair as she feels degraded and belittled in a job where white men throw coins towards her genitals as she performs. Whatever may be the situation that brought her to this bar, she is disillusioned and dissatisfied, believing that god seemed to be wiping his feet in her face/ (24). The final moments of the choreopoem move the women towards an awareness of an inner god of realised selfhood that spirituality satisfies her, though the traditional Christian God contributes to her suffering.

The childhood daydreams about Toussaint L'Ouverture shows a black female’s positive fantasies about a black male who didn't low no white man to tell him nothin (26). The little girl, upon meeting one who affirms that he is Toussaint Jones, gives up fantasy for the reality of the boy in

those skidded out cordoroy pants
a striped teashirt wid holes in both elbows. (29)

The black man's story is certainly more inspiring to a little coloured girl than one about big city white boys. The poem captivates a prominent aspect of a young girl’s imagination. This story teaches her to put her hopes in men as her saviour. Like Davis Lessing’s Martha Quest and many other women, this little girl believes that the man standing before her is like the man of her dreams. The story ends on a positive note, though it shows how a little girl’s fantasies prepare her for disappointments with men.

Women who have been psychologically or physically abused by men take revenge and is recorded in the story of ‘passion flower’. This woman plays a game of sexual seduction to avenge herself and her tortured sisters. The Passion Flower’s game is not like Sechita’s who struggles for survival but one of shouldering the burdens of all women who have been made
powerless by a man. The Passion Flower goes through a temporary physical and psychological power over men who inevitably fall prey to her “feminine charms”:

she wanted to be unforgettable
she wanted to be a memory
a wound to everyman
arrogant enough to want her. (32)

She is so attractive that other women feel threatened of losing their male companions to her. She makes herself physically attractive for men in the same way as Sechita dresses and arranges herself for her male audience. The Passion Flower is cautious in her every move in the presence of probable male prey:

she glittered in heat
& seemed to be lookin for rides
when she wasn’t & absolutely
eyed every man who wasn’t lame white or nothin out
she let her thigh slip from her skirt
crossin the street
she slowed to be examined
& she never looked back to smile
or acknowledge a sincere ‘hey mama’
or meet the eyes of someone
purposely findin somethin to do in
her direction. (31-32)

A stereotypical one-night stand scenario, (in Okra to Greens) this woman lures men to her bed, saps them of their sexual energies, then orders them from her bed, her house, and her life without warning or explanation.

58
The Passion Flower who is not “in heat” sexually but “in heat” for revenge, professed to set up though it temporarily isolates her from the realities of male sexual and social domination:

she glittered honestly
delighted she waz desired
& allowed those especially
schemin / tactful suitors
to experience her body & spirit
tearin / so easily blendin with their
& they were so happy
& lay on her lime sheets full & wet
from her tongue she kissed
them reverently even ankles
edges of beards ..... (32-33)

The multilayered ironies in the scene are repeated in the language of the passage. First, the Passion Flower does not glitter “honestly” but purposely to attract and destroy although the men experience the Passion Flower’s body, they do not experience her fullness spiritually. Her only aim is power and revenge. And for her, the sex act is not one of physical pleasure but an aggressive assertion of power over men. Ultimately, her empty triumph in the end is as shallow as the men who fell prey to the / dazzle of (her)
hips painted with/ orange blossoms & magnolia scented wrists (34-35). Once the game is over and the men have been forced to leave, she cleanses her body decorations and becomes a regular colored girl[still] fulla the same malice (35). Psychological and physical dangers and emotionally stagnant life offers only an instant and mistaken satisfaction in avenging her sisters.

The story of the Passion Flower is one of contradictions. In the beginning Shange identifies the female as a Passion Flower which is obscure. The Passion Flower’s casual meetings with men are filled not with the passion
of love but with the passion of anger and hatred at men's ritual mistreatment of women. The poem, thickly packed with references to plants (ivy, orange lilies), colours (orange, acque , blossoms, magnolia scent, roses, iridescent, pastel, lime), and butterflies creates an edenic setting that contrasts with the sterility of the passion flower's orchestrated life of self-destruction. The game of seduction itself with its glittering jewels and tantalising fragrances, disguises her own hopelessness and loneliness, yet she is "delighted" that men only want her sexually. The painful mockery is that this woman's power to invoke men disappears with the water in her bath tub. Waters that purify and cleanses, so that she became herself (34), and returns her to being a sorry coloured girl. This experience of the insufficiency of her own self and her own body is shared by all women, who feel ugly and undesirable without make up and without getting dressed in the latest fashions because men flee when they see her as she really looks. As the ideal beauty is always white, the black women experience this sense of insufficiency even more deeply than their white men. While Shange adores the Passion Flower's sense of style as expressed in her costume and even in her bath salts and respects her ability to give men a dose of their own medicine she also recognises that the Passion Flower's power is illusionary until she 'can also be loved as she is a reglar colored girl [still] fulla the same malice (35).

Shange's next poem "i useta live in the world", contradicts the universe of free Afrcia with its waters ancient from accra / tunis / cleans in me / feedin me(36), with Harlem where my ankles are coated in grey filth/ from the puddle neath the hydrant (36). Black women live in poverty and filth but also suffer verbal and physical abuse from men in Harlem:

 NO MAN YA CANT GO WIT ME/ I DONT EVEN KNOW YOU/NO I DONT WANNA KISS YOU YOU AINT BUT 12 YRS OLD. (37)
she screams. The final dishonour she suffers is the consideration of the knowledge that she must become violent if she is to survive.

i can't be nice to nobody

nice is such a rip-off

..........................

is just a set up. (38-39)

Shange's next poem, "pyramid" is a description of three women whose friendship is first ended then made stronger because of their unintentional involvement with the same man. A complex poem, it shows the intricate networks about the limits of friendship and romance:

we all saw him at the same time
& he saw us
i felt a quick thump in each one of us
didn't know what to do
we all wanted what waz comin our way
so we split
but he found one
& she loved him
the other two were tickled
& spurned his advances. (40)

The friendship between these women is built on trust and loyalty but allows themselves to be split up by a man. The women are dishonest to a close affinity with a man who doesn't care for any of them. He overcomes one, then goes after the other two who withstand his advances in the beginning but later succumb, Shange concludes the poem with the two women coming face to face each other:

she [friend three] held her head on her lap
the lap of her sisters soakin up tears
each understandin how much love stood between them
how much love between them
love between them
love like sisters. (42)

The women's shared betrayals by the same man renew their sisterhood and renew their personal strength, and the sufferings the women have met at the hands of some men more than toward self-discovery.

Shange's woman, when they step in from adolescence to adulthood, do not have refined relationship with their men. Their reliance on men in their experience of nothingness and they are vindictive and liable to damage as for as love is concerned is explored in 'no more love poems'. The Lady in Orange (originally played by Shange) sings a dirge for herself because of the careless attitude of the man she loved. Although she tried her best not to be the usual 'colored girl' who was called an evil woman a bitch or a nag(42). Her unsympathetic lover crushed her heart with the bottom of his shoe. She was in a helpless state as she did not know how to avoid her sorrow and had therefore convinced herself that a coloured girl had no right even to feel sad and on the other hand could not accept the self contradiction of being sorry & colored at the same time as it's so redundant in the modern world (43). For this lady as well as many black women it is just too painful to accept that men have the upper hand in many relationships and they abuse women who love them.

The "no more love poems" (44) series defines the identity of a black woman in her new-found selfhood as the Lady in Orange clarifies:

so this is not a love poem/
..............................
....... this is a requiem for myself/ cuz i have died in a real way/ .............
............................. but a real dead
lovin is here for you now/ cuz i dont know any more/ how
to avoid my own face wet wit my tears/ cuz i had convinced
myself colored girls had no right to sorrow/ & i lived
& loved that way & kept sorrow on the curb/ allegedly
for you/ but i know i did it for myself. (43)

The transference of “death” or “suicide” was caused by self denial and
self-deception prominently, this black woman does accept any prejudice
regarding the responsibility for her own self-destruction. The Lady in Purple,
who is an embodiment of loveless love affair, lived with fictitious ideas and
danced with no partners who could understand her. In the moment of extreme
state of dejection she is even ready to die like a worthless lily in the desert.
Her self-acknowledgement becomes a major step toward her independent and
self-definition:

....... i dont know any more tricks
i am really colored & really sad sometimes & you heart me
more than i ever danced outta/ into oblivion isnt far enuf
to get outta this/ i am ready to die like a lily in the
desert/ & i cdnt let you in on it cuz i didnt know. (44)

The Lady in Blue reasons out the cause of their loveless life as
displaying too much emotional feelings. Another solution is to be ‘white’ but
immediately realises that it will make everything dry and life will be forever
monotonous. She of the opinion that defaming the body and emotions will not
lead to spiritual evolution. Shange’s women resemble Tommy in Alice
Childress’ *Wine in the Wilderness*. Tommy dreams of finding a man who
will share all her joys and sorrows in life and treat her humanely. All black
women search for stable relationship with their black men in which their love
is mutual.

The possibility of such a harmonious relationship with her man and the
inconsistency between her vision and reality drive the Lady in Yellow to
confess that she is out of touch with reality. She consoles herself saying that
she should be immune to such situations in life. Though she is not able to solve the problem she has decided not to deny her pains or take abuse in relationships as she feels that her love so delicate that it cannot be thrown back on her face.

Shange in her final poem of "no more love poems," acknowledges her inability to make her experience consequent with her philosophy. The woman may not be able to find a man to love her, but she can at least refuse to be a victim. The other women refuse to join her to take abuse, claiming that their love is too "delicate", "beautiful", "sanctified." "magic", "saturday nite," "complicated", to be thrown back in their faces. Their jointly confirmed affirmation has more power than the individual assertion. They celebrate their sisterhood with each other, each woman affirms her value in community.

These coloured girls though they come from different geographical regions in North America yet they bring different personalities and varying background and experiences. But all that they have in common is their oppression which is not geographically or environmentally specific. The choreopoem ends with the women’s negative and externally defined identities as black females are replaced by satisfying inner self-definitions. Shange’s coloured girls are more than what society allows them to be, because they are free and honest, and have survived challenges that the traditional ‘lady’ would never have to face.

The conventional structure of the play and on the whole ordering of poems, and the climax or turning point in For Colored Girls occurs in the Beau Willie Brown- Crystal episode. Beau Willie Brown’s economic, psychological, and social profile reads; drug addict, paranoid, Vietnam veteran who has returned home not as a hero, but as a pauper and drunk. Emphasising his own displacement upon returning “home” after the war he lives in a hotel room. He is created with Shange’s sympathies because he is not altogether without ambition because he tries to get a job and education.
Greater than infidelity, rejection, rape, and abortion, is the suffering of Crystal, a mother, who witnesses her two children being dropped from a fifth storey apartment window by their father, who is also the man whom she loves. Beau Willie and Crystal sacrifice their children because of their own selfishness and also because they are unable to communicate their true feelings with each other. It is Crystal who first brings the children into the couple's dispute. Her reaction is due to bitterness and powerlessness, because of an un-substantial rumour:

that beau waz spending alla his money
on the bartendin bitch down at the merry-go-round café/

.................................................................
.................................................................crystal had gone &
got a court order saying beau willie brown had no access
to his children... (56)

Beau Willie's control over Crystal does not excuse Shange to portray him without sympathy and his life without complexity:

he came home (from vietnam) crazy as hell / he tried to get veterans benefits/ to go to school & they kept right on puttin
him in remedial classes/ he cnt read wortha damn/ so beau cused the teachers of holdin him back & got himself
a gypsy cab to drive/ but his cab kept breakin
down/ & the cops was always messin wit him/ plus not gettin much bread. (55-56)

Sandra Flowers defends Shange's presentation of black men by offering an insight into the complexity of Beau Willie Brown's character:

Beau Willie Brown is the quintessential black man of his generation [Vietnam era]. By this, I do not mean, nor does Shange intend to imply, that Beau Willie Brown is all there is
to black manhood. Conversely, I am not suggesting that the political realities embodied in Beau Willie justify his treatment or his attitude toward Crystal. Instead, I believe that Shange’s compassion for black men surfaces most noticeably in this poem and that her characterization of Beau Willie recognizes some of the external factors which influence relationships between black men and women.22

Beau Willie is a victim of a racist and capitalist society. So women like Crystal are partly responsible for their oppression at the hands of the patriarchy. This is clear as she remains steadfast throughout their romance in an abusive relationship.

Crystal’s love exists though Beau Willie shows known so lil [kindness] (63) from him. At age twenty-two, she is in a dilemma what to expect in life from a man and herself. She is a single parent of two so there is little chance of marrying. There is no evidence that reveals Beau Willie’s direct harm to the children. He beats the pregnant Crystal and later attacks her with Kwame’s high chair, with wane in it. But Beau is not directing his anger towards the children but they become objects towards controlling Crystal. When he dangles the children out of the window, he, like Crystal and many other disputing and divorced parents, uses the children as pawns in the adult dispute.

Shange and Toni Morrison display domestic violence, both physical and verbal, as a cultural reality within black families. These writers show that the violence is not congenital but an expression of powerlessness against the many layered oppression such as classism, racism, capitalism and sexism.

The play’s final resolution is that all of the women agree that their lives were missing something spiritual. As the Lady in Red explains:

\[
i \text{sat up one nite walkin a boardin house} \\
screemin/ cryin/ the ghost of another woman \\
\text{who waz missin what i waz missin}
\]
i wanted to jump up outta my bones
& be done wit myself
leave me alone
& go on in the wind
it waz too much
i fell into a numbness. (63)

The social, emotional, and psychological deaths that these black women have experienced are related to “ghost” and “numbness” that Shange uses.

The final part of the play entitled ‘a layin on of hands’ all the performers participate in shared religious gesture of blessing and healing. After the tragic end in Beau Willie – Crystal story, the actors on the stage are wonderstruck and the lady in red cries i waz missin somethin (60) and the Lady in Blue names what is missing, “a layin on of hands” and the rest react describing the sensation felt in laying on of hands ‘strong’, ‘cool’, ‘movin’, ‘makin me whole’, ‘sense ,pure, all gods comin into (me) /layin (me) open to myself (61). The ladies explain that it is neither sex with man nor mammon but a comforting touch in with the holiness in themselves(myself) released, (62) indicating a spirituality based on self esteem. The Lady in Blue finally names what is really missing in their lives “a layin on of hands” and recollects an intense emotional release and conversion at faith healing sessions in which they celebrate renewed strength and hope. Shange reiterates the possibilities of women who realise the fullness of their inner beings The Lady in Blue speaks of all the gods comin into her (me) / layin her (me) open to her (my)self (61) and the Lady is Purple tells of the holiness of her (my)self released(62) and the women’s final proclamation of i found god in myself // & i loved her/ i loved her fiercely(63) comes a song of joy- a righteous gospel(3) and a hope that will lead them to the ends of their own rainbows (64). The affirmation is a clear picture of new being on the far side of nothing that is told by the black women, who do not have to duplicate whiteness or depend on men for their power of being.

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The final stage direction affords happier days for these black women both on stage and in the audience. The ladies sing first to each other, then gradually to the audience. After the song peaks, the ladies enter into a closed tight circle(64), the circle is symbolic of continuity and renewed strength.

*The choreopoem is not about women finding the Christian "God". Instead it is about women who find "god", not as an externally sought-after force, but within themselves a force which asserts their own beauty and self worth.*

Shange resolutely rejects any traditional Christian reading as she insists:

>i found god in myself is feminist’s ritual. It’s feminist hedonist awakening ... it’s hedonist in the generic sense of hedonist as feminist self- realization that allegedly occurs .... [The black woman] finds it [god] in herself; she does not find it [god] outside [herself].

*For Colored Girls* mourns a false idea of coloured women as evil woman bitch or a nag (42). It is a partial sound of dirge for them: a requiem for myself/ cuz i have died in a real way (43). The state of death is not absolute and can be overcome as Lady in Orange suggests:

>i cdnt strand bein sorry & colored at the same time

it's so redundant in the modern world. (43)

Coloured girls are real, potent, visible, and reactionary, no long symmetrical & impervious to pain (47).

Shange dramatises in *For Colored Girls* the rise of an invincible, fierce, courageous seditious, and powerful women. They reject their sacred character and become more defiant. Lady in Blue justifies violence against the
rapist who, no less worthy of bein beat within an inch of his life should be publicly ridiculed/ havin two fists shoved up his ass (20). Lady in Orange spurns gentility and compliance:

i usedta live in the world
really be in the world
free & sweet talkin
good mornin & thank-you & nice day
i cant now
 i cant be nice to nobody
nice in such a rip-off
reglar beauty & a smile in the street
is just a set-up. (38-39)

The women assume austere stance against forces that stifle them is more than a sociopolitical reaction and reclaims their spirituality. Rejection and violation threaten these women’s ability to retain their spirituality. Shange declares that

the imaginings of women of color are particularly sacred to me. Those are things we cannot afford to lose when we are being beaten down constantly.25

In this regard, Lady in Yellow claims:

bein a woman & bein colored is a metaphysical dilemma / i havent conquered yet/ do you see the point
my spirit is too ancient to understand the separation of soul & gender/ my love is too delicate to have thrown back on my face. (45)

Their cultural and spiritual affluence in a group repetitive chant which erupts into group dancing and the proclamation of their feminineselves is an important way to rebirth which is solemn. They show themselves as ‘loving’,
‘delicate, “beautiful”, “sanctified” and “complicated” (45-49) At the end of the dance session they are full of life and togetherness (49), signifying the socio-spiritual significance of music and dance.

In the final stage of the choreopoem, gesture, dance and song dominate and underline the women’s fresh longing for a female deity whom they discover in themselves. Their ecstasy gathers momentum through repetition, stimulating a delightful moment in which performers and spectators experience the euphoria of rediscovered divinity. The women come together in an unfathomable circle—a symbolic shared feeling shielding them against male authority. Freedom and growth are attained through collective nourishment because they are bonded by related dreams and forge a close entity that remind of African extended families. Their strength, re-evaluation, and optimism are summarized in Lady in Brown’s final lines:

& this is for colored girls who have considered suicide/ but are movin to the ends of their own rainbows. (64)

The women long, search, and secure the freedom of the rainbow, the freedom of nature.

Shange picturises women in For Colored Girls is not that of whores, matriarchs or super women. Many of them are single women who belong neither to the extended nor to the nuclear families. Except for Crystal, they do not have children. They are alienated.
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1. Ntozake Shange, interviews herself, Ms (December 1977) P.70


7. Claudia Tate, Black Women Writers, P.162.


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