



## REDEFINING AMERICAN THEATRE: NTOZAKE SHANGE'S *BOOGIE WOOGIE LANDSCAPE*

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### **Abstract**

*African American woman playwrights undertook a mission to develop and redefine the American theatre. The primary objective of these creative writers was to bring into the light authentic images of blacks, especially, black women in literary sphere and to make the world aware of the major share which Afro-Americans hold in the process of advancement of American social, cultural, and economic spheres. Ntozake Shange, being a prolific playwright and a director, very skillfully used the stage to glorify "black womanhood". She celebrates the black female as a vitalizing force that, for generations, has been intently striving to fortify not only the*

*women of black race but women across the world. However, having a deep concern for women of 'color', she suggests that black women should rely on themselves and not on black men in order to advance their socio-economic echelon. In 1970, the issue of racial identity tended to differ to the questions of sexual identity. Shange the most associated black woman playwright with this social change was greatly influenced and it gave insights to the sources of her creativity.*

**Keywords:** Black Feminism,  
African American Theatre, Female  
Consciousness



African American woman playwrights undertook a mission to develop and redefine the American theatre. The primary objective of these creative writers was to bring into the light authentic images of blacks, especially, black women in literary sphere and to make the world aware of the major share which Afro-Americans hold in the process of advancement of American social, cultural, and economic spheres. Ntozake Shange, being a prolific playwright and a director, very skillfully used the stage to glorify "black womanhood". She celebrates the black female as a vitalizing force that, for generations, has been intently striving to fortify not only the women of black race but women across the world. However, having a deep concern for women of 'color', she suggests that black women should rely on themselves and not on black men in order to advance their socio-economic echelon. In 1970, the issue of racial identity tended to differ to the questions of sexual identity.

Shange the most associated black woman playwright with this social change was greatly influenced and it gave insights to the sources of her creativity. She draws her material almost exclusively from the experience of contemporary urban black women and black men in America. Poignantly speaking to and for numerous women of every race who perceive themselves as disinherited and dispossessed, Shange's life and works give a unique dimension to the feminist movement in America. Her dramaturgical advances are widely read and acknowledged for her innovations literally reshaped the nature of American theatre. Within the African tradition, language, music, and dance are 'mojos', spiritual force fields of energy. Shange's emphasis on 'mojos' challenges the Western Eurocentric system. Her works are often angry diatribes against social forces that contribute to the oppression of black women in the United States combined with a celebration of women's self-fulfillment and spiritual survival. Shange's voice shook up the theatre world, not only because she disrupted the syntax with candid and complex poetry, but most profoundly because she changed the face of heroism.

Where there is woman there is magic. If there is a moon falling from her mouth, she is a woman who knows her magic, who can share or not share her powers. A woman with a moon falling from her mouth, roses between her legs and tiaras of Spanish moss, this woman is a consort of spirits. The present research paper is an attempt to assess the contribution of Ntozake Shange, a well-known African American woman playwright, to develop and redefine American theatre. She has been extremely multitalented in the observation and depiction of black life. She successfully carried out the mission of projecting authentic images of blacks, especially black women in literary sphere and made the world aware of the major share which blacks hold in American social, cultural, and economic development.

A remarkable and versatile playwright, Shange, in all her works glorifies "black womanhood". She celebrates black female as a vitalizing 'force that, for generations, has been intently striving to fortify not only women of black race but women across the world. However, having a deep concern for women of "color", she suggests that black women should rely on themselves and not on black men



in order to advance their socio-economic echelon. Shange, being the most experimental in dealing with her dramaturgical advances, could scholarly exhibit on the stage tribulations of colored women in America. Besides, she "creates a dramatic/poetic space for her metaphysical travellers, dream walkers who break through a membrane of racial and personal history". Shange's literary career began as part of her involvement with the Black Arts Movement and Women's Movements, during 1960s and 70s. Her active participation, naturally, has its shades in her works which are characterized by an intense rendering of black women's emotional lives, frequently painful, sometimes ecstatic, but always ruthlessly honest, and the advancement of black art, music, dance and other folk constituents of black tradition. Shange works from the anger she feels at the roles forced upon black women by American society and highlights the havoc caused by superficially imposed sexual attitudes upon all intimate relationships.

As a sensitive playwright and a skillful director. Shange coalesces very brilliantly, thought and craft which is an exceptional attribute to her plays. Besides, she wants her characters to accustom all the emotions that she wants to project. She summed up the central concerns of her art when she explained to an interviewer, "being alive & a woman & being colored is a metaphysical dilemma, I haven't yet conquered". All female characters in her writings battle with the incomprehensible dilemma of living in a world where being female and colored make them twice oppressed. Therefore, in works that blend poetry, music, and dance, Shange articulates the ramifications of being black and female. Poignantly speaking to and for numerous women of every race who perceive themselves as disinherited and dispossessed, Shange's life and works give a unique dimension to the feminist movement in America. Unlike the works of many black male writers who suggest through their plays that black women's happiness or completeness hinges upon guidance from strong black men, Shange's works contain numerous images of black women who are forced to become self-sufficient because black men in their lives will not or cannot provide financial and emotional stability for them. Shange's dramaturgical advances are widely read and acknowledged for her innovations literally reshaped the nature of American theatre. Within the African tradition, language, music, and dance are 'mojos', spiritual force fields of energy. Shange's emphasis on 'mojos' challenges the Western Eurocentric system. She intersperses dance and poetry throughout her plays to pose the following duality; on the one hand, the dances and songs draw the audience into the play by reminding them of childhood memories, while, on the other, they act to "stop the action" when what has transpired on stage becomes too personal. Her works are often angry diatribes against social forces that contribute to the oppression of black women in the United States combined with a celebration of women's self-fulfillment and spiritual survival. Shange's voice shook up the theatre world, not only because she disrupted the syntax with candid and complex poetry, but most profoundly because she changed the face of heroism. Shange made herself a black woman the 'subject' of the drama. Consequently, the



intellectual, erotic, and spiritual dimensions of black women were rescued from stereotype, represented for the first time in the matrix of character and identity.

Published in 1979, in *Boogie Woogie Landscapes*, Shange conjures up the mental images of the title (the landscape of jazz) within the confines of Layla's bedroom. There is minimum furniture in the room; a bed, a night table and a mirror. The walls of the bedroom are designed in such a way to permit the night life companions of Layla to enter and exit at will. The experimental piece, this play is a blend of surrealism and expressionism that gives voice to the thoughts, dreams, and memories of Layla. This stream- of- consciousness play is the exploration of what it is to be female in American society. As Shange says it is "totally devoted to the emotional topology of a young woman / how she got to be the way she is / how she sees where she is". Layla and her six dream personas (3 men and 3 women) share the emotional ramifications of being black and female in America. Through them, Shange reveals the forces that limit the freedom of women and damage their spirit, their black color, their loveless life, the sexual harassment they face and the biased and apathetic attitude of the government, media and society. Layla is the mouthpiece of the plight of the majority of young black girls in America.

As Shange describes. "She was raised to know nothing but black and white two-dimensional planes/which is what racism allots every one of us unless we fight". To Layla, people, places or ideas are nothing but black and white. She finds "no moorings and has known only two colors - black and white in her life and wonders if anyone has penetrated the chiaroscuro of her life". She imagines her tears to be black and whatever she touches turns black, lacking hue and brightness. This leads to self-pity and she feels, "...soft graphite//and clumsy and I'm a hazard to dimensions" s [Ibid]. Her inarticulate emotions burn inside her 'like an oven' and she starts eating black and white pages of newspaper in her dream. Sexual violence is exacerbated by racism and powerlessness such that violence against black women and children often becomes standard medias of communities one by which manliness can be measured. Shange focuses on pervasive nature of sexual violence and its seeming uncontrollability in this play. Layla's night life companions lament, "It's not good to be born a girl / sometimes as the society does not treat girls properly. The young girls are attacked, molested and raped all over the world. The girls not only worry about the molesters but also about their peculiar ways of assault "does he stab too/or shoot? does he cany an axe? does he spit on you? does he know if he doesn't drop sperm, we can't prove we have been violated?". These delicacies of discrimination make some young girls' lives too complex and they hardly go out to any places. At the same time, their homes are not safe as they are raped in their own houses.

Such acts of sexual harassment deny existence to black women. These rape victims are imprisoned and barred from the streets where as the rapists escape. And the government is least interested in finding out the culprit and want people to establish the immediate cause for such kinds. Shange points out that the New York Times never came to the rescue of women in times of need.



Thus. Shange, reveals the unsympathetic approach of media towards black women in America. Shange not merely unveils the gloom sunounding the life of black women but also recommends certain measures to be taken by the government, media and the society. Being cognizant of the pain undergone by the black women due to rape, the government usually mitigates such callous acts on the part of men. "No white male in the history of this country was ever given to the death penalty for raping a black woman".

Therefore, Shange suggests some alternatives through Layla's persona. Instead of women being arrested for rape, all men are to be arrested and punished. There should be a rape prevention month during which time. Layla's persona further demands that the state should offer some defense classes during working hours, to all working women and to unemployed women. Such classes should be made obligatory also for their children from age three in order to prevent rape, the government should make the streets safe for women to walk. Otherwise, they should call for a general strike in their working places, homes and schools informing that it is not safe to come to work. However, all suggestions of Shange may not turn as laws under white imperialism, but one could feel the anger and agony of black women due to sexism.

### **Conclusion:**

In this play, Shange does not stop with voicing the torment of a young black girl's growing up in America, but through her protagonist stresses the urgency to revolutionize the attitude of the entire American society toward black women. This play is certainly an expedition of the protagonist, Layla from 'exasperation' of being black and female to realization of 'power' of being black and female. Shange's women come forward to break silent sufferings of their own and fellow sisters. They boldly expose the racial exploitation of the whites and the sexual abuse of black men. Her women are not contented with the mere outburst of their emotions and sufferings. Refusing to be the silent victims of the double jeopardy, they find credible solution to redefine their place in the society. Shange's plays are analytical and make blacks to introspect their own status in the white world. However, instead of being militant or lamenting on pathetic conditions, she attempts to provide solutions to the problems which African-Americans face in the American society. Through her writings, Shange also encourages her counter-parts to become a component of mainstream American life by proving their capacities.



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