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## **From Aporia to Identity Formation: the Perilous Passage of African American Women's Dramatic Discourse**

By Thallam Sarada<sup>1</sup>

### **Abstract**

This paper analyses the dramatic discourse of two African American women dramatists, Sonia Sanchez and Ntozake Shange. It uses as its critical framework Erik Erikson's theory of identity formation to examine their discourse, which challenges patriarchy and contemporary Anglo American feminist writings. It analyses the multiple ways in which Sanchez and Shange invent standard American English to present a unique African American women's perspective. Their discourse, this paper argues, thus challenges the prevailing notions of power, truth, knowledge and ideology to give voice to the previously silent black women.

*Key Words:* Aporia, Language, Dramatic Discourse, African American Women's Theatre, Challenge, Patriarchy, Sonia Sanchez, Ntozake Shange, Erik Erikson, Identity Formation

### **Introduction**

Language is an intensely contested space where Black women writers of America have made their indelible impression, thus altering the nation's linguistic topography. Their writings are often a crusade for justice, aiming at establishing a positive identity in a largely inimical setting. Drama had initially been a more difficult space for African American women to enter and succeed on account of their marginalized status. But ever since Angelina Weld Grimke first penned her *Rachael* (1916), there has been no looking back for these Black women dramatists who have deployed the English language resourcefully both for artistic fulfillment and also to create linguistic identities for themselves in a White America. Sonia Sanchez and Ntozake Shange are two such inventive Black women artistes who have established distinctiveness for the entire spectrum of coloured women through a skillful use of language. Their language has evolved considerably over a passage of time. It has moved from what in philosophy could be termed as a state of "aporía" to a phase of establishing identity politics.

### **Aporia**

Classical philosophy describes "aporía" as an intellectual puzzle which appears to be an impasse in an inquiry that emanates as a consequence of equally viable yet inconsistent arguments that reflect a certain amount of perplexity. The puzzle is a conundrum that cannot be

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easily solved, and continues to remain an enigma despite multiple attempts at solving it. The early dialogues of Plato end in an aporetic manner where Socrates questions his interlocutor about concepts like goodness, virtue, courage etc. Later, through a series of arguments, Socrates shows his interlocutor the flaws in his arguments after which the interlocutor admits his puzzled state. To Socrates, aporia has a purgative effect since it instills a quest for knowledge in the seeker of the answer. In fact, an aporetic manner plays a major role of inquiry in Aristotle's *Metaphysics*. In contemporary thought, Derrida's work *Aporias* (1993) adapts the basic connotations of the word from Plato, but he also puts it to his original interpretation. Derrida describes the impossibility of representing the experience of death in a positivist language and philosophy. To Derrida, death itself is an 'aporia' or an impasse that cannot be completely explained by western philosophy. Still, death defines human life, and our consciousness and hence becomes a "constitutive aporia" since it is both undefinable and also still defines our existence.

### **Aporia, Language and Identity Politics**

Aporia, language and identity politics are in strange ways imbricated. Post structuralism is of the basic view that language never fully grasps the signified but only creates a chain of signifiers. Language by itself remains inadequate to completely express the deepest human experiences. The language of the subaltern groups like that of the Black American women remains multiply disempowered to delineate their oppressive experiences since they were initially enmeshed in a world of linguistic perplexity to express their experiences in slavery. From such a state of an initial aporia, they have artistically used the language to depict the formation of their identities. "Identity" is a quintessential theme in feminist, postcolonial, cultural and psychoanalytical studies wherein works of art are usually linguistic mediums with which writers find their voices, articulate their selves and create psycholinguistic artistic mediums that form an interesting alternative vision of the domineering culture. "Identity" then, is a hold-all term embracing both individual identities and those of communities *en masse*. Numerous studies have currently significantly contributed towards an understanding of African American identity like those of James Baldwin, W. E. Cross, W. S. Hall, Sanders-Thompson V.L., etc. But one of the pioneers of research on identity politics is Erik Erikson. His path-breaking research in the realm of identity studies aims at investigating the process of identity-formation across a life-span. The theme of identity is used by Erikson first in his *Childhood and Society* (1950). He contends that "The study of identity...becomes as strategic in our time as the study of sexuality was in Freud's time" (Erikson 1950:256). It is a *holistic* integrating psychological pattern which is actually the epitome of ego functioning. Erikson's experiences with American Indians, his study of African American authors like James Baldwin, Eldridge Cleaver and the *Autobiography of Malcolm X* only established the view that identity is the nucleus of our psychological wellbeing. In fact, to him, identity rests on our ability to harmonize our different selves. It is "psycho-social" which is "located" in the "core of the individual" and yet also "in the core of his communal culture" (Erikson 1968:22). In truth, the development of identity is directly proportionate to individuals' ability to identify themselves with their cultural community. Black American women's identity is also "psycho-social" since it institutes deep connections with its "double-consciousness"<sup>2</sup> of having roots in both the Black African and

<sup>2</sup> "double consciousness": The term was coined by W.E.B. Du Bois to describe an individual whose identity is divided into several facets. It is a theoretical tool that throws light on the psycho-social divisions in American

White American traditions. Effective establishments of identity involve a powerful relationship with their nation, culture, subculture, language, mythology and also the value systems of that culture of identification. A powerful subterranean chord is established with the culture of identification. African American identity politics establishes this influential connection with their unique culture in America, its culture in the other parts of the African Diaspora and also with its ethnic roots. The development of any individual identity is embedded in a culture to infuse into its members a value system. To quote Erikson, he effectively proposes that "...true identity...depends on the support which the young individual receives from the collective sense of identity characterizing the social groups significant to him: his class, his nation, his culture" (Erikson 64, 93). Identity to Erikson is also *relational*. African American identity politics is also thus relational since African Americans strive for equality with other racial and ethnic groups within the U.S. despite systematic efforts at putting them down. Erikson's *Toys and Reasons* (1977) analyses the American society in terms of certain characteristics. The representative features Erikson categorizes in the American psyche are its adolescent nature, its puritanism, the image of the mom, the culture of the frontier society and the machine as a key figure of modern American society. Among these, Erikson contends that the puritanical foundation which is expressed in both a powerful work ethic and also in terms of a pursuit towards a lost paradise which could only be restored through arduous effort. In the process of tracking the lost Edenic ideal the White Americans ruthlessly exploit certain deprived social groups, in quest of their illusive dreams.

Erikson considers the period of identity formation as a "psycho-social moratorium" since members achieve this process of individuation only in the longer passage of time. Culture in fact approves of this psycho-social moratorium. Erikson has adopted the term "moratorium" from law where there is a legally authorized period of delay in the performance of legal obligations or the payment of debt. Erikson uses it to refer to the status of people who are actively involved in exploring different identities but have not made a commitment. A psycho-social moratorium is when people take a break from "real life" to actively search for their identities. During this period, individuals experiment with varied roles and groups to find the one best suited for themselves. This, according to the Eriksonian analysis, is a final stage of their identity formation when they also finalize their sense of ethics and morals.

But an identity study of an ethnic group would necessitate its analysis across a generation. Identity crisis then, and quests for the same are the most pronounced when a particular group/race/sex is jeopardized. African American literature also undergoes this strange process of moratorium before it has finally discovered itself. The women writers have significantly experimented with different literary genres in the process of actualizing their voices. Drama is one such genre where their language has matured with a mission of identity formation.

Basically the process of identity formation can be perceived at two intricate levels. Primarily it could be perceived as an inevitable teleological process in the ideological space of a material culture. Seen from this perspective, one could clearly perceive that the entire process of

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society. Du Bois' focus is on the specific Black experience in America. He first used the term in an article entitled "Strivings of the Negro People" (1987). This piece was later revised and re-named as "Of our Spiritual Strivings" in his 1903 book *The Souls of Black Folk*. In his own words, the term "double consciousness" is "...a peculiar sensation of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts two irreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength also keeps it from being torn asunder." (duboisopedia [www.library.umass.edu/spcol](http://www.library.umass.edu/spcol).)

identity formation actually corresponds with a larger scale of expansion and contraction. Shifts emerged from developmentalism and materialism in the 1950's towards a growing culturalism. An ideological pattern thus emerged wherein cultural identities flourished amidst rampant materialism. Identity-politics could then be perceived as a revolt against commodification, negation of ethnic values, asymmetrical power relationship between genders, failure to carve a cultural space and also as an urge to reinstate the self.

Secondly, in analyzing Black women's identity formation, the entire process is clearly linked with the dominant postmodern propensities like celebration of plurality, "difference" and a movement towards atomism. The works of Lyotard and Deleuze<sup>3</sup> express a revolt against repressive cultural and linguistic leanings thus surging ahead towards a greater autonomy. The revolt paves way for self-definition, as in the case of African American women's dramatic discourse, which determines a broader gamut of linguistic epistemes and cultural codes. In some ways akin to French poststructuralist and postmodern critiques of identity, the social relations are often understood through linguistic structures. Language emerges as an important tool which aids in Black women's identity-formation. Their discourse is loaded with an innate mission of eliminating hierarchies and power constructions in the communicative context within which it is embedded.

### Language and African American Women

African American women's discourse also reflects their lived experiences which impart an experiential dimension to their language. Their discourse is not merely a collection of utterances/statements, but linguistic codes that are produced, enacted and determined in a specific sociolinguistic space. In writing back to the White centre,<sup>4</sup> African American male writers like Amiri Baraka, Ron Karenga and Ed Bullins have forged a powerful linguistic dialect that deliberately subverts normative White linguistic models which appear to them as an inadequate medium to define Black experiences. African American women's dramatic discourse

<sup>3</sup> Jean Francois Lyotard's book *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979) posits the view that in a postmodern society one sees the end of "grand narratives" or "meta narratives." He criticizes metanarratives like reductionism and the teleological notions of human history like Enlightenment and Marxism. Instead, he expresses a preference for plurality of small narratives that compete with each other and thus replace the totalitarian authority of grand narratives. Gilles Deleuze along with Felix Guattari discusses the issues of multiplicities in his book *Bergsonism* (1978) and delves into its political ramifications with Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980). To put it succinctly:

A multiplicity is an entity that originates from a folding or twisting of simple elements. Like a sand dune, a multiplicity is in a state of constant flux... A multiplicity has porous boundaries and is defined provisionally by its variations and dimension.

Deleuze and Guattari redefine as multiplicities many of the key terms of western political theory. Deleuze differentiates two types of multiplicity: the first one is fused with Platonic metaphysics and commonsense. This is quantitative and is countable; it can be "represented in space, possesses an identity; and differs in degree from one another." The second type of multiplicity is qualitative and continuous. It cannot be counted, e.g. the humanhood. "They are virtual, subjective and intensive; are experienced in lived time and differ in kind from one another."

<http://www.sage-reference.com/political-theory>

<sup>4</sup> "writing back to the White Centre": This is a term which is highly prevalent in postcolonial studies wherein the subdued and dominated groups write back in opposition to the hegemony of the colonizers/domineering culture. Ashcroft et al.'s *The Empire Writes Back* is one such attempt at tracing such oppositional literature which is also a form of counter-discourse. African American literature is generally perceived to be an invective against the White Centre. African American women's writings are a counter-discourse against White male and female creativity as well as Black male creativity.

is a triple-edged weapon in providing a linguistic blitzkrieg against White male, White female and Black male linguistic constructedness. It is not a genteel language aimed at merely catering to the aesthetic cravings of a White audience since it basically offers a powerful critique of White values.

African American women's writings can hardly be separated from their horrendous past of lynching, slavery, rape, miscegenation and the like. It thus establishes a nexus with truth, power and knowledge. Seen from this perspective, the truth expressed in African American women's discourse emanates from their historic time, geographic locations and their particular socio-cultural predicament. The truth has the power to dispel negative images of Black American women and replace them with realistic and positive images that empower and validate their psycholinguistic terrains. African American women's discourse is thus an attempt at knowing the truth in order to strike at the root of the dominant power centers that represents African American women as inferior. It takes a cue from Cixous' *écriture féminine* and hence will "always surpass the discourse that regulates the phallogocentric system [...] it will be conceived of by subjects who are breakers of automatisms...[whom] no authority can subjugate." (Selden 142). It is also a dissent against color-blind euro-feminist linguistic patterns. Although the Black women might agree with Cixous' use of language as a product of a gynocentric experience, their specific burden of the past is evident in their writings. Cixous contends that: "Women must write through their bodies, they must invent the impregnable language codes [...] submerge, cut through, get beyond the ultimate reserve discourse" (Selden143). While white feminist discourses celebrate their sexuality through their language, the bruised history of the commodification of African American women's bodies and their liminal status are captured in their writings.

Language thus becomes an important means through which they strike a territorial claim. The playwright Ntozake Shange mentions "As a people in exile, land or territory becomes terribly important to me [...] *That's why I live in language* (italics mine)" (Neal 95). It is crucial to note here that Shange is here fusing the geospatial territory with language. She finds a safe haven in language which both articulates her deepest anxieties and keeps alive her creative self. Nikki Giovanni's poem *My House* also illustrates this effort to stake a territorial claim:

...it's my house  
and I want to fry pork chops  
and bake sweet potatoes  
[...]  
my windows might be dirty  
but it's my house.  
([www.ralphlevy.com/quotes/myhouse.html](http://www.ralphlevy.com/quotes/myhouse.html))

The "house" is a metaphor for language. The poet is actually trying to establish an ownership not with the physical house but with the language. English may have been the colonizer's language, but the poet/persona is now claiming it as her own. Since English is not sufficient, the speaker suggests that people should try to speak "through it."

english isn't a good language  
to express emotion through  
mostly I imagine because people

try to speak english instead  
of trying to speak through it  
([www.ralphlevy.com/quotes/myhouse.html](http://www.ralphlevy.com/quotes/myhouse.html))

Black American women contend not just with the English language, but also with its deep patriarchal bias and ultimately language itself which can generate a series of transcendental signifiers without ultimately arriving at the signified. Language by itself only attempts at naming the unnamable and women's language is doubly muted, since it needs to devise a new vocabulary to create their gendered epistemes.

It is crucial to remember that the African American discourse both precedes and transcends the printed text. Its expression could be traced to its interesting tradition of oral literature like the spirituals and lullabies of the slave women whose plaintive anthems merged their contemporary situations with their nations of origin. Chinosole uses the term "matrilineal diaspora" that "defines the links among Black women worldwide, enabling [them] to experience distinct but related cultures while retaining a special sense of home as the locus of self-definition and power." (Braxton & McLaughlin 379). The special connections made with the ancestral land establish a geospatial connection to their language. It is a crucial link in the diaspora which gives them linguistic rootedness. It is modified to suit their needs and is a weapon with which they dismantle the linguistic constructedness that they encounter. The language was promoted intensely during the Black Arts Movement. The current contour of African American English owes its genesis to the times the race remained jeopardised in immense civil conflicts.

### **Sonia Sanchez and Language**

Sonia Sanchez's noteworthy essay "Sounds Bouncin Off Paper" (2007) refers to the initial perils faced by the race in the process of consolidating their language. Being a significant member of the Black Arts Movement who also intricately worked hard to incorporate a female dimension to the movement, she narrates the hardships that the other activists like Eldridge Cleaver, Baraka, Bullins and Marvin X also had to endure in San Francisco. The financial austerities imposed on them did not deter their spirits but only prompted them to work harder to promote Black language and literature. In fact, she states that when people saw themselves and heard themselves in their own dialects it imparted a special sense of ownership with the text and the language. Sanchez contends that one of the pioneering champions of the African American discourse was Malcolm X since he had infused the cadence and rhythm of Black English in his speeches which held the audience spellbound. By using a distinctly "Black dialect" he infused the authority to use the language with assured dexterity and power. A host of other writers quickly joined the bandwagon to accomplish their linguistic mission:

What caused me to use Black English? It came from reading Sterling Brown. It came from reading Langston Hughes...Miss Margaret Walker. It came from reading people who were using Black English and celebrating people who spoke Black English...I realized that there was some story and history for us to do that.  
(Sanchez 2007:96)

Most importantly, Sanchez posits two interesting theories: The feminine theory of language and the womb theory of language. To analyze the former, she posits the philosophy that

language is itself feminine on account of its immense potential to create. This generative power of language is also endowed with certain amount of sexual pleasure:

I have a theory that language is a woman. I've always thought it. When you finally bring out the beauty of it, you cry, you scream. You have the same feeling as if you were having sex...when we speak this Black Language we are bringing forth the beauty of our souls. (Sanchez 2007:96)

Sanchez is here paying a rich tribute to the procreative power of language which is therefore feminine. It is also in some ways akin to Cixous' notion of *jouissance*<sup>5</sup> that permits a certain sensual or rather orgasmic pleasure in the process of creating it. For Sanchez, sex has the capacity to create and generate new forms of language. Hence, she also propagates a "womb" theory of language when she writes:

Look at this language that came out of our womb. Look at this language that we gave birth to. That is why to me Black English is a woman. *It came out of our loins to say we existed.* (Sanchez 2007:96) (emphasis mine)

The English that African American women have created is that which has come out of their interiors. The pleasure that one derives from it is simultaneously intellectual, sexual and maternal. In effect of owning the child the mothers can also "use language very hard and people feel offended by it" (Sanchez 2007:97). Hence the raw vocabulary that she deliberately employs in her works is consequential of the maternal prerogative that she exercises over her language.

Language is used by African American women with a certain amount of dexterity that makes them "word sorcerers". In the introduction to her work entitled *We Be Word Sorcerers* (1974), Sanchez pronounces that African American women arrive as wizards of language that is imbued with a transformative power since it transmutes many into "human beings". Language instills them with a history since many African Americans have little knowledge of their past. But still they continue to be a "finished product of the American dream, nightmarish in concept and execution. Each one of us has survived to begin our journey toward Blackness" (97). Thus equipped with language, they tread towards self-discovery. In an interview with Zala Chandler, Sanchez not only acknowledges her linguistic indebtedness to Zora Neale Hurston, Nella Larsen and Jessie Fausset but also envisions that her discourse would pave way for an oppression-free world. Sanchez emphatically declares: "I can see beyond the year 2000. I can see a period when you won't have oppression [...] we will be victorious. This belief comes from my understanding" (Braxton and Maclaughlin 364).

Sanchez's plays and poems are a significant attempt in this direction. She has considerably altered the contours of American stagecraft and its linguistic topography. If the dramatic language of a Baraka or Bullins is loaded with a strong note of protest, the women

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<sup>5</sup> *Jouissance*: The term is prevalent in psycholinguistics and French feminist theories. The word was first used by Jacques Lacan in a seminar entitled "the Ethics of Psychoanalysis" (1959-60). Lacan develops binary terms called "jouissance" and "pleasure". The pleasure principle, contends Lacan, functions as a limit to enjoyment. But the subject makes attempts to transgress the pleasure principle which is more of a pain that is named by Lacan as *jouissance*. The French feminist writer Helene Cixous adapts the term to describe a form of sexual pleasure that conflates spiritual, mental and the physical aspects of women's experience that almost borders on a mystical communion. It is the fountainhead of women's creativity and its presence unleashes women's potential to create. Its suppression hinders them from the process of creativity.

dramatists load the language with strong bodily memories that act as gynocentric signifiers. While echoing many of the dramatists of the Black Arts movement who also used language with a raw intensity, Sanchez unhesitatingly lays bare her gender-specific experiences in her discourse. A significant example of this is a character named Black Bitch in Sanchez's play *The Bronx is Next* (1968). The play is set in a block in Harlem where Charles, a Black cop, a White cop, and Roland are engaged in the process of evacuation of the Black families. It is here that they encounter a defiant woman named Black Bitch. It is significant that she is merely named "Black Bitch", since Sanchez is sardonically referring to the negative Jezebel image that was circulated by the hegemonic White society. She is a woman with a difference as she refuses to entertain Black customers. Her hatred of Black men emanates from the fact of her failed expectations. Hence her language is the most vituperative and powerful when she directly confronts Black men or discusses them with others. When Charles, a Black cop, chastises her for "entertaining" a "white dude" (Sanchez 1968:81), she rather defiantly answers him thus:

BLACK BITCH: . . . I don't owe no black man no explanations 'bout what I do. The last man I explained to cleaned me out so, whatever you doing don't concern me 'specially if it has a black man at the head. (Sanchez 1968:81)

Her anger against Black men arises from the fact that they also ruthlessly exploited their own women, failing to provide them with any succor despite the fact of sharing a common racial origin. The pitiless exploitation of Black women by some men of the same race that agonizes her is best expressed in an irate language. Describing herself as a "smart assed black bitch", she considers herself as being "smart enough to stay clear of all black bastard men who jump from black pussy to black pussy like jumping jacks" (Sanchez 1968:82). All their talk about Black women is merely superficial as she has known many Black men including the "toms and revolutionary ones" (ibid 82) who fail to take cognizance of the real worth of Black women. The ingenuity of her seemingly harsh language arises from her day-to-day encounters with Black men who have failed to love her or her sons. So she pertinently questions Black men if they would ever be able to find women who could sincerely love them after the revolution is over. She vows to never allow Black men touch her. It is significant that her language is filled with love and motherly warmth when she refers to her two sons. Despite her harrowing profession into which she is clearly placed much against her wishes, she continues to cherish a future for her two sons. In fact her maternal vision is at loggerheads with the social image into which she has been cast into. Hence, Sanchez deliberately uses a different form of English when she describes her dream for her sons. She is proud of her sons' education and their abilities to love her despite knowing about her. Most importantly, she promises to inculcate in them the dignity of Black women:

BLACK BITCH: ...I ain't educated, but I'll say-hold them in your arms-love them-love your black woman always. I'll say that I am a black woman and I cry in the night. But when you are men, you will never make a black woman cry in the night (Sanchez 1968:82)

The speech is significant in illustrating her strong motherly dream. Despite her lack of education in the formal sense of the term, she is still in a position to inculcate humane values to her children who she hopes to live as better human beings with specific dignity and respect to Black women, which she probably sees as an atonement for the sins committed by other Black men.

She is also painfully aware of the fact that the White men also consider women of her kind to be merely objects of gratification. When Roland questions her regarding the White customer who regularly visited her, she replies thus:

He comes once a week. He fucks me. He puts his grayish white dick in me and dreams his dreams. They ain't about me. (Sanchez 1968:82)

In fact his dreams are about his White wife and kids who wait for him. She is sorely aware of the fact that she is merely an object of gratification whereas his deepest yearnings are for his White family members. Sanchez is here depicting the depraved position that some African American women occupied in the '60s when this play was penned. The fact that remains clear is that she is not a part of the lived reality of the White cop who visits her once a week. Devoid of education, denied of equal social opportunities, with little economic resources to count upon, some of the Black women had to merely resort to flesh trade since they were denied their agency, owing to their lack of access to education, empowerment and rights. In doing so, they sadly had to comply with the Jezebel image perpetuated by the White American society. In fact the event could be perceived as a re-enactment of the exploitation of the Black women in the post-emancipation times. In a moment of frustration, she also linguistically reverts thus: "Wanna fuck me? Take it!" (82). Sanchez's language is both powerful and deliberate. Her so called "profanity" has been shocking only in an inventive manner. She in fact is legitimizing the gross realities of Black women through her plays which are filled with an innate power. Haki Madhubuti (Don Lee) contends that her language "...is culturally legitimate and genuinely reflects the hard bottom and complicated spectrum of the entire Black community" (Madhubuti 421). In fact, Sanchez legitimizes her discourse in a global context. Long before Shange, she has actually validated the language in an international framework. While her contemporaries like Baraka and Neal were experimenting with the African American use of English from a normative perspective, she was both freeing it from Standard White American registers and also adding a gendered dimension to it through her plays. What remains true of her poems is also true of her plays in her use of language. For instance her anthology of poems *Homecoming* (1971) can be branded as largely satisfying Baraka's demand for "assassin poems", because they "shoot/guns". This continues in her other poems like *We a BaddDDD People* (1970) which encapsulate the everyday ironies of Black women's existence in America. The same is applicable to her blatant expressions adapted in her dramatic discourse. Writing in Standard English would probably reflect only her "secondary consciousness" (Chandler 356). She prefers to write through her primary consciousness which is in fact deliberately aggressive given the times during which she was penning her plays. In an interview with Zala Chandler, Sanchez mentions how she was intentionally bellicose. It was a tradition that she had learnt from the legacies handed down by Malcolm X, Fanny Lou Harrier and W.E.B. DuBois. As she agrees: "I am aggressive, I will not deny myself" (Chandler 356). The linguistic belligerence is revealed through her blatant dramatic discourse as cited above. Her original use of language is an assertion of her African American woman's self which is needed as self-defence and a vindication mechanism. "...in

order to defend yourself you have to move in an aggressive fashion” (Chandler 357). The aggression ends up in literary productivity with the aid of which she creatively re-invents herself.

### Shange and Language

Ntozake Shange, writing nearly a decade after Sanchez, still shares with the latter an innovative penchant to experiment with language. Shange’s individuality lies in her unique understanding of the gendered difference of the emotional topographies from which language stems. This is because she realizes that language as a lived experience emerges from the milieu which one inhabits. As she mentions in an interview with Claudia Tate, if one grew up in a patriarchal environment, and also understood the maneuverings of that attitude, then, there would undoubtedly emerge a struggle against it because it undoubtedly oppresses another section (see Tate 151). As an alternative to what is lost, one needs a substitutive value system that would reinstate the dignity of the oppressed group’s identities. A new language needs to evolve which takes cognizance of the presence of the “othered” in the linguistic domains. Hence, in a way, like her predecessor Sanchez, Shange evolves a speech of her own. Two important things need to be borne in our minds to appreciate the language of Shange: her understanding of the need for an emotional vocabulary with regard to women’s language and also the emergence of her discourse from her self-consciousness.

In a conversation with Tate, Shange makes an open statement that disturbs the phallogocentric suppositions of language: “Men don’t have an emotional vocabulary that is as highly developed as women’s because women have been taking care of other people all their lives” (Tate 152). Shange suggests that language grows out of gender-specific experience. The experiential nature of human language being an undeniable fact, she perceives the needs to develop an idiom of her own to create a total theatre. Her “self-consciousness,” she contends, emerges when she is “battling with” herself “to let go of something” (Tate 152). What she lets go is the deeply instilled patriarchal definitions of the self and language. She admits that she had created both *for colored girls* and *boogie woogie* during moments of emotional intensity: “...as weird as *this is*, *this* is truly how I feel. Therefore, if I write anything else, it would be a lie. So as long as I’m thinking about *this*...you have to see it too” (Tate 152). All of her language is aimed at evoking an emotional response. She does concede that her art is “primarily interested in evoking an emotional response” (Tate 156). The emotion and intellect are not two distinct faculties, but they are indistinguishably fused. Her unique poetic style is meant to revive “the most revealing moments from lives spent in non-verbal activity” (*Unrecovered Losses* 7). It is a ceremonial ideal that she imparts into African American women’s discourse through her choreopoems which fuse song, music, dance, poetry and magic. Theatre is itself a ceremony which illustrates her firm faith in her African roots since she establishes a nexus with her home country in a creative manner. This form was first initiated by Glenda Dickerson between 1967 and 1968 where she merged poetry, drama and musical forms. Though Dickerson did not give it a name, Shange developed that form further and named it innovatively as a “choreopoem” which was a harmony of various art forms on the stage, creating a total theatre. Her theatrical discourse takes a non-linear form to cater to diverse experiences that colludes against racist and imperialistic western hegemonic models. As she mentions in an essay she intends to “demolish the notion of straight theater...refuse to allow playwrights to work without dancers and musicians”. The realistic theatre of America is inadequate for her:

as a poet in american theatre/I find most activity that takes place on our stages overwhelmingly shallow...I insist on calling myself a poet or writer...i am solely interested in the drama of the moment... 'the perfect play' as we know it to be/a truly european framework...cannot function efficiently for those of us from this hemisphere (*Unrecovered Losses* 7)

Hence, she demands an interdisciplinary theatre that surpasses merely the printed text that may simultaneously appeal to all our senses.

Shange's discourse could be perceived at two levels: the printed word and its attempts at transcending the written text through her use of bodily semiotics. To delve into the printed text, Shange experiments with the spoken word in her unique fashion. She deliberately uses the lower case in her printed text. She concedes that she likes the very way the lower case alphabets look on the page. She considers it "boring" to look at pages where all the first letters are capitalized. Her choice of the lower case is also attributed by her because this particular style provides a "visual stimulation" along with words (Tate 163). In her use of the first person pronoun the capital "I" is rejected and she instead uses the lower case "i", which looks like a "ball dancing on a single jet of water (which) suggests flexibility and the possibility of movement" (Wisker 36). This particular choice of style imbues a strength not just for writing but also for reading since the reading process itself, she feels, is stimulated. The process draws a more "rigorous participation" from the reader. In her spellings, she also habitually drops the final "g" in the gerund and also contracts the auxiliary verbs for a speedy delivery of words on stage. It is used to eliminate power structures and hence her discourse is a move in the direction of linguistic democratization. Language to her is aimed at a particular effect of consciousness rising. It is aimed to unearth the richness of the unconscious emotional responses to being alive. In her debut play *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf* she uses the word "lady" as opposed to woman. Though she uses the lower case to also denote the lower status accorded to African American women in the society, she prefers to call them "ladies" suggestive of the dignity of the class which the women actually deserve. In the process she re-defines African American women with a term of reference with which only white women were hitherto addressed in the society. Language is thus used by her to re-position the status of women of her race.

Along with the printed text, African American women's body language is also an intricate aspect of the discourse to vindicate the African American women's place. Since a large quantum of the linguistic determinacy of African American women's writings spring from the fixed notions attributed to their bodies, bodily semiotics remain a seminal aspect of her theatrical discourse. She strategically adapts two methods to vindicate the bodily contours of African American women on the stage. Firstly, she uses dance as an effective form of theatrical communication to restore the dignity of the Black woman on the American Stage. In her collection of essays titled *See No Evil* she remarks how she personally discovered herself through dance. The dance was by itself a form of intense creativity: "The freedom to move in space, to demand of my own sweat a perfection that could continually be approached though never known was poem to me, my body and my mind ellipsing for the first time in my life" (*See No Evil* 14). The dance connects her not just to the world of her ethnic roots but to the primal space itself thereby fusing her with the primordial elements of the universe which was hitherto an "unconscious knowledge of being in a colored woman's body" (*See No Evil* 14). All forms of bigotry melt down and the body and the soul together progress towards higher levels of

consciousness. The dancer and the dance are hard to separate and the two remain inextricably fused to create a novel theatrical communication.

A second mode through which Shange justifies African American women's bodies in her plays is through stylized language that asserts itself on the theatrical space. In *for colored girls* the lady in green is hated by her Black lover on account of her big thighs, loud laugh, her unmanicured fingers, unpedicured toes, dark arm and the like. But she wins her freedom since; she does not care to impress the white society with contrived alien looks or an artificially polite bodily semiotics.

I want my calloused  
feet and quick  
language back in my mouth (Shange, *for colored girls* 52-53)

Her language signifies her self-actualization, since she also uses the first person nominative, objective and possessive pronouns deliberately to vindicate her racio-sexual stance in a rather inimical milieu (Wisker 32). Layla in *boogie woogie landscape* is initially a victim of alterity, but later changes her stance and tries to ascertain herself through her stylized body language. Okra in *from okra to greens* (1985) uninhibitedly discusses her sexual gratification and uses it as an effective means of combating male power. Indeed her language does reveal the inadequacy of Standard English to reveal the particular racio-gendered experiences attributed to African American women. In the prologue to *See No Evil* Shange mentions that: "Worlds like words for a woman who is a poet and a mother are confusing/overlapping, contradictory [...] & exciting" (p iv). Since the language remains inadequate, she devises her own indigenous discourse to lay bare the emotional topography of her protagonists.

## Conclusion

It is noteworthy that both Sanchez and Shange as poets of the theatre are alive to the element of music with words. Words have a specific rhythm and music which they hear. Sanchez states thus:

I always hear the music when I write. The difficulty before was that I did nothing with it. I might have made a notation...or I might have searched out words, or I might have written things in a choppy manner that would give a sense of musicality. But I always heard some distant music. (Sanchez 2007: 98)

These words of Sanchez draw an apt comparison with the following statement of Shange:

Basically, the spellings reflect language as I hear it...It's as if somebody were talking to me...sometimes I'll hear very particular rhythms underneath whatever I'm typing...For instance if I'm hearing a rumba, you'll get a poem that looks like a rumba on the page. So the structure is connected to the music that I hear beneath the words. (Tate 164)

Both these statements are worth noting since they reflect the music involved in African American women's creativity. African American life reverberates with poetry, music and dance

also integral aspects of African American women's theatre. Jazz which defined Black American life of the '60s was another major influence on their language. Their ancestral heritage is yet another crucial factor that has shaped the black women's discourse in America. Towards the end of her essay, *Sounds Bouncin Off Paper*, Sanchez narrates the mammoth impact that her grandmother had made on her life in shaping her discourse, revealing the beauty of the native accent and its vitality which is in some ways akin to the views of Walker.<sup>6</sup> Despite her lack of education, her grandmother had spoken a vernacular whose beauty affected her soul.

My grandmother spoke Black English. She wasn't "an educated woman". It was her language and I used to imitate that language...because it was so pretty...I didn't have the knowledge to appreciate it at that particular time but I knew that I was in the midst of beauty. (Sanchez, 2007 99)

It is that native beauty of the African American language that Sanchez attempts at re-creating in her dramatic texts.

Overall, the discourse of these women writers embodies their experiential knowledge which is aimed at vindicating their racio-sexual stances. Their language is not a mere collection of ad hoc statements, but those that remain enacted in a particular sociopolitical and cultural contact zone that is validated by the realities of their lives. The knowledge that is thus produced is powerful. Shange remarks in a response to a New York reviewer who charged her with having damaged the English language thus:

the man who thought I wrote with intentions of outdoing  
the white man waz absolutely correct. I can't count the  
number of times I have viscerally wanted to attack deform  
n maim the language that I waz taught to hate myself in  
...i have ta fix my tool to my needs...so that malignancies  
fall away/leaving us space to literally create our own image. (Foreword, *Three Pieces xii*)

Identity politics as is seen in these writers does display a large quantum of aggression as an answer to the denigration, exclusion and contempt they experience in the repressive milieu. It is an answer to the disintegrative forces of the modern world where the centre fails to hold. The artistic fruition of writers like Sanchez, Shange and other women writers does not mean that the final identity has ever been established by these women writers. Erikson contends that the process is continual and never ending. It is dynamic and ever-evolving, continuously shaped by a

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<sup>6</sup> An acknowledgment of the genetic aspect of creativity through their grandmothers is also a fact acknowledged by Walker in her famous essay "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens". Although Walker accepts the fact that their grandmothers were indeed springs of creativity, she bemoans the fact that these women's creativity remained unharnessed and unvented under the cruel system of slavery which led to their psychological oppression. To cite from the text:

...these grandmothers and mothers of ours were...Artists; driven to  
a numb and bleeding madness by the springs of creativity in them. They  
were Creators who lived lives of spiritual waste because they were so rich  
in spirituality which is the basis of Art... (Mitchell 402)

But Sanchez's grandmother (probably not a slave) did exert a positive influence on Sanchez's psycholinguistic terrain thus triggering her to new modes of creativity.

creative self's direct experience in the world and also as a perception of the interaction between the self and the others. To assert one's superiority in an offensive manner would only lead to what Erikson would label as "pseudospeciation".<sup>7</sup> To combat this process, African American women writers like Shange create holistic identities as is the case in her *for colored girls*.

Language is used by these writers with a creative vengeance. Sanchez and Shange present a discourse that is both a part of and deviant from the dominant linguistic patterns. Sanchez for instance challenged the notion of aesthetics deployed in Black Arts Movement. She inserts a feminist voice in the Black Arts oeuvre, which was essentially male. By creating an exceptional discourse she has innovatively created a linguistic identity for African American women writers. Shange soon followed suit. Together, they have interrogated the gendered spaces in the Black discourse and have thus written back to the dominant cultures.

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<sup>7</sup> The concept of pseudospeciation grew from Erikson's contact with Konrad Lorenz and the biologist Julian Huxley in a symposium in London in 1966. Lorenz attributes the term to Erikson although he put the term to an indigenous use. He sees the human race as the only odd species in the natural world which lacks inhibition about killing its own members unhesitatingly. This, to him is the cause of war. Erik Erikson on the other hand defines the term both in respect of the evolution of human beings in societies and also the psychological development of the individual. Instead of a holistic perspective of the entire human race, the pseudospeciation instinct in human beings makes him imagine his nation, caste or his class to be superior to others. It is linked to the development of identity and its negative impact makes the individual/group suppress and dominate the so called inferior ones (see Welchman 102).

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