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## **FIGHTING GENDER BIAS: CRITICAL INSIGHTS INTO SPELL#7**



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### **RESEARCH PAPER**

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 [Shange 1982: vi].

Ntozake Shange glorifies the 'black womanhood' in all of her plays celebrating black female as a vitalizing force, which for generations, has been intently striving to fortify not only the women of black race but women across the world who share common experiences of male subjugation. However, having a deep concern for women of 'color', Shange suggests all women to be self dependent as it is the first step towards emancipation from the clutches of patriarchal mind-set.

Shange is more determined to write about, with controlled passion, women's pains, rage, anguish, and disillusionment at the hands of insensitive men who are emotionally incapable of communicating their insecurities. Her plays project the men who seem only to know how to lie, seduce, beat, rape, and abandon women. She has always stressed and often

mutilated heroines band together to provide each other with the courage to become self-sufficient and self-loving to survive. Shange seems particularly, “disconcerted that women’s suffering is not respected and insists that their lives are not only valid but valiant” [Tate 1983: 153].

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, “bein alive & a woman & bein colored is a metaphysical dilemma, I haven’t yet conquered” [Qtd. in DLB 29 1977: 103]. 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.

Shange foregrounds racism rather than sexism in Spell # 7 although the two forms of oppression are hardly separated. In any institutional setting- Universities or courts or

government agencies - white men in American Society are at the centre and the people of color are usually on the margin. White people in general have certain privileges of economic, social and political status, which are not available to people of color, not even to men of color most of the time.

Shange, through this play, levels an indictment against the American stage which mirrors ideas tainted by racism. Under the watchful eye of the hovering mask, the characters voice their anger at the stereotypical roles that are offered to them. They express the contempt at being forced to squabble over such degrading roles as mammy, prostitute, and buffoon. As a matter of fact, the scarcity of realistic, dramatic roles for blacks has been a serious concern for Shange and for countless other artists, particularly because the stereotyping continues both on and off the American stage.

The nine characters (5 women and 4 men) in this play, re-enact with mockery and sometimes despair the artistic constraints and stereotypes expected in their profession because of racism. While referring to the play, Shange explains, the play was “excruciating” to write because it demanded “confront / again and again / those moments that had left me with till more than query in homicidal desires” [Shange 1981: iv].

In this play, Shange deconstructs the humanistic assumption of character as a stable identity by foregrounding the role of narrative in the construction of a subject. The plot of the play consists of actors and actresses taking up the position of narrator as the remaining cast enact the story, so that the actors and actresses do not retain fixed identities, but are subjects-in-process confronting the constraints of a hegemonic system of representation.

White women and African-American men are present in traditional minstrelsy as the degraded objects of the jokes while African-American women are conspicuously absent, doubly excluded from this spectacle of white men posing as black men to make fun of white women. It is in the ‘face’ of this double exclusion that Shange appropriates the minstrel mask to investigate its multifarious signifying potentials. Against the background of this exclusion, the play addresses the absence of a ‘subject’ position for black women by reclaiming and rewriting the legacy of minstrelsy, writing herself back into a history in which she was excluded by virtue of her sex and implicated by virtue of her race.

In this masterpiece, each character narrates his experience: the degradation being black actor and actress. Megan Terry, one of leading American feminist playwrights, in an interview, confesses the jobless condition of actors in America. She says, “I was brought up with very fine actors and many of them were women. There were no roles for them to play, I saw their pain and their struggle when they couldn’t get jobs not because they had no talent, but because there were no parts for them” [Qtd. in Jenkins 1987: 328].

The limited access for the black actors, however, hampered the rise of many black professional in every walk of American life. Shange, in this play, focuses upon black men and women who lament over the inadequate roles they play on the American stage. These actors and actresses are not recognized for their talents. They either get negligible roles or none at all. To forget their worries, they turn to be alcoholists. When Dahlia, a young seller and dancer questions herself why she drinks being an actress, Lily answers that itself is a good reason to drink and Alec analyses the cause for it saying, “if you didn’t drink you would remember that you are not working” [49]. Lily wants to get one decent part as ‘Lady Macbeth’ or ‘Mother Courage’ but grieves that these roles are always reserved for whites.

Shange’s most striking formal innovation in *Spell #7* is her appropriation of the role of the interlocutor from the traditional minstrel show. Traditionally, the interlocutor did not ‘signify’ but was ‘signified upon’. The interlocutor plays the ‘straight man’ to the two ‘end men’, who speak in an imitation of African-American dialect and play the bones and the tambourine. The interlocutor feigns a dignified air and is responsible for setting up jokes and regulating the pace. Lou is not a straight man, but a trickster figure who fools the whites in the audience with the trope of the minstrel show.

This play is full of elements of hope. Shange challenges blacks to rise above injustices and particularly to avoid hurting each other. Natalie says, “surviving the impossible is sposed to accentuate the positive aspects of people” [51]. The play ends as it began, with the magician casting a spell to make blacks to love themselves. So as not to imply that struggle is over. Shange has the huge minstrel mask lowered while the cast sings “colored & love it” [52].

Shange's strategy is informed by both a womanist strategy of reclamation and by a postmodern refusal to provide an essentialized, unified, transcendental 'subject' position for African Americans. Although the actresses and actors wearing blackface masks in Spell #7 eventually remove the masks, ostensibly to speak 'true', essential selves, they immediately begin to construct imaginary characters and experiences. The characters are continually engaged in the process of representation, revealing how representation influences and is influenced by experience and history. Shange does not merely create positive images for African Americans; her strategy is more daring, in that she recognizes the mediating power of the symbolic order, the effect of resume tonal systems upon the subject as it is inscribed within history.

Shange expresses her abhorrence of tradition theatre in Spell #7 by substituting poetry, music, and dance for straight plot and character development. Don Nelson of the New York Daily News praised Shange's style when he wrote,

Ntozake Shange's Spell #7 is black magic. It is a celebration of blackness, the joy and pride along with the horror of it. It is a shout, a cry, a bitter laugh, a sneer. It is an extremely fine theater piece. The word that best describes Shange's works, which are not plays in the traditional sense, is power. Drama is inherent in each of her poetic sentences because the words hum with a vibrant urgency [December, 27, 1981: 21].

#### Conclusion:

Spell #7, framed by suggestions of a minstrel show, is a fluid, shifting examination of racism where a group of African-American artists (actors, poets, chorus gypsies) meet and commiserate. The play consists of a series of vignettes tied together by a narrator, a character based on the interlocutor of the minstrel show. Through soliloquy and improvised scenes, the characters reveal the enormous price that racism exacts on them as artists in America: the paucity of jobs, the necessity of embodying white-generated stereotypes, and other humiliations. Yet, Shange's political, resistant strategy in this play entails the deconstruction of the dominant representation of the 'black experience', revealing black face as an over determined text signifying the phobias and desires of white experience.

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