The Quest for Identity in African American Women's Drama from Harlem Renaissance to the Present

An Overview*

Dr. Sabah Atallah Diyaiy
Prof., College of Education (Ibn Rushd), University of Baghdad

Hasan Mohammed Saleh
Asst., Prof., College of Arts, University of Baghdad

Abstract

The concept of identity is regarded as one of the most important concepts in contemporary literature. Individuals and societies always search for an identity that gives meaning to their existence. The same is also true of African American drama. This subject occupies a central place in modern African- American drama, a hotly debated subject not only by male playwrights but also by female playwrights. Female playwrights attempt to show the importance of returning to roots as an outlet for the identity crisis they experience.

Therefore, the present paper aims at giving an overall view of the subject of identity in African-American culture with particular focus on African American women playwrights. It examines the quest for identity from the Harlem Renaissance to contemporary drama along with different examples to explore how the question of identity is tackled.

It has become quite oblivious that the women playwrights aim at pushing the blacks, especially the women, to feel proud of their black identity.

(*) Received: 1/6/2013, a Research Presented in the 1st Symposium of the English Dept. which, was Entitled **"Contemporary Issues in English Language and Literature"**.
Accepted: 30/9/2013.

البحث عن الهوية في دراما النساء الأفرو امريكيات من عصر نهضة هارلم إلى الوقت الحاضر

نظرة عامة*

أ.د. صباح عطا الله ضيائي

أستاذة، كلية التربية (أبن رشد)، جامعة بغداد

حسن محمد صالح

أستاذ مساعد، طالب دكتوراه، كلية الآداب، جامعة بغداد

المستخلص

يعد مفهوم الهوية من أهم المفاهيم المتداولة في الأدب المعاصر، فالأفراد والجماعات دائماً تبحث عن هوية تعطي معنى لوجودها. والحال ينطبق على الدراما الافرو امريكية إذ يحتل موضوع البحث عن الهوية مكانة كبيرة في الدراما الافرو امريكية ، وهو موضوع أثار اهتمام كتّاب المسرح وكاتباته وأثار جدلهم على حدٍ سواء. فكاتبات المسرح يسعينَ إلى تبيان أهمية العودة إلى الجذور بوصفه مخرجاً من أزمة الهوية التي يتعرضنّ لها.

ولذا، يهدف البحث إلى تقديم صورة عامة لموضوع لهوية في الثقافة الافرو امريكية، ولاسيما المسرحيات النسوية. فالبحث يتطرق إلى البحث عن الهوية من عصر النهضة في هارلم إلى الدراما المعاصرة من خلال إعطاء أمثلة مختلفة للكشف عن كيفية معالجة مسألة الهوية.

ويتبين من خلال البحث أن كاتبات المسرح يهدفنّ إلى دفع السود ولاسيما النساء منهم إلى الشعور بالكبرياء والتباهي بهويتهم السوداء.

(*) تم استلام البحث في ٢٠١٣/٦/١، قُدِّم البحث في الندوة الأولى لقسم اللغة الانكليزية المنعقدة تحت عنوان (قضايا معاصرة في اللغة والأدب)، وحصل على قبول النشر في ٢٠١٣/٩/٣٠.

1) Introduction:

No doubt can be cast on the fact that the concept of identity has been a pivotal issue in the comprehensive understanding of African American culture and literature. The predominance of this subject is mainly due to the segregation and oppression practiced against the black race in the course of history. The absence of a clearly designated frame of identity manifests itself in the idea of rootlessness and unbelonging, an idea that gives an authentic testimony to identity crisis. Thereupon, African American dramatists, female and male, dedicate their achievements to promote a sense of belonging and deep- rootedness of the black identity. Such feeling of belonging may be seen *"as a correlative activity to the constructing of one's racial identity attitudes*"[(1)] of what has been "*labeled a process of psychological nigrescence*."[(2)]

Ever since the publication of W.E. Du Bois's illuminating book, ***The Souls of Black Folk***, the issue of the black race worked itself very distinctively in the different American circles. In this book, Du Bois formulated his prophetic vision of the future of the blacks and this vision finds best expression in his far-sighted statement that the problem of the twentieth century is colour line[(3)]. In talking about the Negro problem, Du bois comes to elaborate on the issue of history:

> *The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife,— this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He would not Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes*

> *to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face.* (4)

"Identity, as Stuart Hall asserts, is shaped at the unstable point where the 'unspeakable' stories of subjectivity meet the narratives of history, of a culture."**(5)** Psychologically viewed, *identity* refers to personal and group identifications. Additionally, identity is concerned with self-definition, and the self is conceptualized as a fairly stable, internal entity that is rarely modified to fit the context. In fact, "the self is a core sense of who one is. That is, you are who you are; shifting is indicative of a problematic, deficient or disengaged identity."**(6)**

The individuals of a specific society often show their identity through parading over their ancestral heritage and traditions. In much the same way, African Americans have been struggling to reach self- definition and to defend their legal pursuit after a specific- black identity. The placement of history and tradition to the concept of identity is a powerful mechanism to assimilate and accept other cultures:

> *Yet history and tradition have another role to play: the interpellation of subjects and the inducing of a sense of identity and belonging. Individual constructions of identity are affirmed by seeing something of oneself and one's forebears in representations of the history of the nation. Inclusion is important since having a history and set of traditions with which one can identify and within which one can position oneself other than as victim, gives the interpolated individual a position of dignity from which to speak.***(7)**

This quotation reveals overmuch about the significance of history in the construction and reconstruction of one's identity. The African Americans always deem it necessary to look on their glorious past to understand the present in that their prospective identity is profoundly rooted in tradition and history. The sense of belonging creates the impression of selfhood and national identity:

> *Cultural heritage is the key for those using the label African American. This is reflected in statements such as "our roots are not in America." In addition, this group seems sensitive to the need to function in mainstream culture as reflected in the perceived "necessity to succeed in the system," while expressing an ambivalence toward what they describe as "dominant group values." They are aware of their cultural past and pragmatic about their present situation.*(8)

Memory is a powerful tool in understanding the fervent search for the black identity. Latent in the African cultural identity is their ongoing recollection of past experiences best exemplified by the landscape:

> *This desire to represent memory through the marking of 'place' is a feature of all modern societies and is prevalent after every conflict or tragic event. 'Places', as Kuusisto notes, constitute significant sites which have been invested with meaning (1999, 15), often representing the 'heritage' of a particular individual, group or community.*(9)

Closely intimated to memory is the violence done to African Americans across different historical periods. The blacks are not in a position to forget what happened to their identity

through racial exclusion, oppression, segregation, and other forms of effacing their black identity. Memory always overshadows the lived moment. In post memory, "memories are passed down through generations to be represented by people who have no personal attachment to the memory. Subsequently, they seek to re-use, re-enact and re-represent those memories in order to feel closer to their ancestors."**(10)**

Broadly speaking, language is subjectivity. It is the subjective facet of the human identity for "*The form in which language expresses itself in and of itself defines subjectivity*" **(11)**. It displays man's actions, background, and orientations. Therefore, language is situated at the heart of identity construction. It has a great impact on shaping man's identity. African Americans have given much attention to language, an effective medium to ponder over the problem of identity. To show their adherence to identity, they spare no effort to use the language that bolsters the quest for Africanized self- knowledge. In her interesting essay "Characteristics of Negro Expression," Zora Neale Hurston gives a succinct description of the distinctive features of the language expressive of the black identity. She starts her essay by discussing the dramatic dimension of the Negro language:

> *The Negro's universal mimicry is not so much a thing in itself as an evidence of something that permeates his entire self. And that thing is drama. His words are action words. His interpretation of the English language is in terms of pictures. One act described in terms of another. Hence, the rich metaphor and simile.*(12)

Elsewhere, Hurston explores the importance of language in making the blacks committed to their identity in white

supremacy. Boas[13] whose impact on Johnson's thinking was tremendous, writes, "*the conciseness and clearness of thought of a people depend to a great extent on their language*," and "*the form of the language will be molded by the state of the culture*."[14]

Frantz Fanon discusses the relationship between the Negro and the language he uses. He says that "*To speak means to be in a position to use certain syntax, to grasp the morphology of this or that language, but it means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization*."[15]

2) The Quest for Identity in African- American Women's Drama from Harlem Renaissance to the Present:

The Harlem Renaissance is a watershed stage in the figuration of the black identity in the Afro-American drama. The advent of this profuse period of writings ushered in the modern interpolation of the black issue in American literature. It is a period that witnessed *"… an outpouring of writing, music, and social criticism that included some of the earliest attempts by Afro- American artists and intellectuals to define themselves in modern times.*"[16] Alain Locke indicates that Harlem was "*not merely the largest Negro community in the world, but the first concentration in history of so many diverse elements of Negro life*."[17] For Locke, the individual's identity is not complete "*without knowing one's roots*."[18] The return to roots is an important mindset of the Afro-American life to formulate an identity independently of the white majority.

In fact, a vast number of women playwrights came into the scene to express their view of the historical rights of the blacks to live in an America that would embrace different peoples irrespective of their racial, ethnic, and political affiliations.

Nathan Irvin Huggins in ***Voices from the Harlem Renaissance*** debriefs the question of the black identity:

> *Like all Americans, except Indians, Afro-Americans had to search beyond their American experience for the roots of self and culture. Africa necessarily became crucial to their sense of self. For a black American to answer the question of identity, he had to resolve for himself what Africa was, and what Africa meant to him.* (19)

During this important movement, there were two dominant themes which attracted the attention of African American women writers; these themes were identity and class,(20) not to forget lynching as a theme shared by male and female characters.(21) At the heart of this black feminist thematic preference lies a sense of struggle. In this connection, Patricia Hill Collins argues:

> *All African- American women share the common experience of being black women in a society that denigrates women of African descent. This commonality experience suggests that certain characteristic themes will be prominent in a black women's standpoint. For example, one core theme is the legacy of struggle. Katie Cannon observes, throughout the history of the United States, the interrelationship of white supremacy and male superiority, has characterized the Black woman's reality as a situation of a struggle – a struggle to survive in two contradictory worlds simultaneously, one white, privileged, and oppressive, the other black, exploited, and oppressed.*(22)

Hurston dedicated her life to defend the rights of the black race in leading a generous and reposeful life. Judith L. Stephens observes, "*Zora Neale Hurston expressed herself as an artist by focusing on the rich cultural sources she found in the black community*." **(23)** Although she is most noted for her fiction, she has a number of plays that placed her at the top of early African American women playwrights. ***Color Struck*** is a case in point, focusing on… "*The issue of bigotry within the African American community- particularly the denigration of dark complexion and preference for lighter skin tones*."(24).

Simply put, the plot of the play revolves around dark-skinned African American women named Emmaline, Emma for short. She comes from Jacksonville, Florida, and she falls in love with John. The problem arises when John starts courting light-skinned women, a matter that makes Emma suffer a tense identity crisis. The disintegrating relationship between John and Emma is carefully dramatized in four scenes. The first scene traces the railway car journey taken by John, Emma, and others to participate in a dance completion. The next two scenes deal with the events occurring before and during the contest. The last scene is dedicated to presenting John's return from the North and his failed attempt to strive the differences with Emma.(25) David Krasner affirms that 'Emma's inferiority complex' is double-edged in the sense that it " …*internalizes a self- depreciating identity and externalizes it by focusing on the color prejudice of others*."(26)

Georgia Douglas Johnson (1880- 1966) is branded as the most outstanding female playwright in the Harlem Renaissance. Johnson's folk drama and propaganda contain at their center the search for the black identity in that they "*serve as important vehicles to effect social progress and to show the tragic impact of racism on the blacks*."**(30)** In her plays, she was much

concerned with the basic issues in the black life. Sally Burke maintains that "*Johnson's dramas brought the issues of lynching, rape, miscegenation, the theft of the African American's human dignity to the attention of many*."[31] Burke also adds that Johnson addressed the concerns of women, not to mention her own interest in the white and black patriarchy which left its marks on women in the end.[32] Being the mouthorgan for her Afro American women, Johnson never hesitated to unmask the bitter reality led by women in their attempt to dig deep for their independent identity. Her well-known plays, ***Sunday Morning in the South*** (1925), ***Safe*** (1925), and ***Plumes*** (1929) exemplify her excruciating experience of the oppression against the black race.

In ***Plumes***, by way of illustration, Johnson addresses the issue of racial oppression, and displays how the black identity is threatened by economic difficulties primarily caused by white injustice.

In ***Plumes****, Johnson's most celebrated play, an African American mother with a gravely ill daughter is faced with the choice of spending her last dollar to pay a doctor to perform a surgery that may not cure the daughter or reserving the money to pay for an elaborate funeral (complete with plumed horses) that would demonstrate her love for her child. Here the expression of an African American mother's love is reduced to dollars and cents. Some critics have suggested that the mother allowing her daughter to die without the surgery demonstrates her choosing death rather than allowing her child to suffer in a racist society.*[33]

Taken together, the women playwrights inserted the same themes into the fabric of their plays, a matter that enhances the idea that the black women playwrights did not set themselves

apart from their male counterparts in dealing with the most sensitive issues that preoccupied the black community. Important was for these women playwrights to build a positive and good image of the black identity and community.

In postmodernist literature, the search for identity has become a much-discussed subject for men and women of letters in the wake of World War II and the catastrophic repercussions that followed. In his book ***Identity and Culture: Narratives of Difference and Belonging***, Chris Weedon sees identity as a necessary to the postmodern man:

> *The desire to be from somewhere, to have a sense of roots and a feeling of belonging are key features of the quest for positive identity in postmodern, post-colonial societies. The current popularity of genealogy and family history point to this need, as does the marketing of family names, crests and the like. It is also manifest in the popularity of tourism concerned with roots and heritage.*(34)

The postmodern man finds circumstances run contrary to his desirable construction of a clear- cut identity. The question of searching for identity has become a moot point in contemporary world; "… *identity*, says Kobena Mercer, *only becomes an issue when it is in crisis, when something assumed to be fixed, coherent and stable is placed by the experience of doubt and uncertainty*." **(35)** So, identity crisis is a theme characteristic of contemporary literature in that writer has it incarnated in the body of their artistic productions.

A black hallmark movement that witnessed a radical shift in handling the black identity is the black Arts movement.(36) This movement covers the 1960s and 1970s. In an essay entitled

"The Black Arts Movement" (1968), Larry Neal lays down a well- formulated definition of the BAM:

> *The Black Arts Movement is radically opposed to any concept of the artist that alienates the artist from his/her community. Black Art is the aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept. As such, it envisions an art that speaks directly to the needs and aspirations of Black America. In order to perform this task, the Black Arts Movement proposes a radical reordering of the western cultural aesthetic.* (37)

This movement is viewed as having revolutionized the blacks to parade over their own identity and their national spirit. Larry Neal affirms that *"Implicit in the Black Arts Movement is the idea that Black people, however dispersed, constitute a* ***nation*** *within the belly of white America*."(38) This new formulation of the rebellious identity lends itself to the assassination of Malcolm x.(39) Likewise, women artists had their own say on the issues relevant to the black identity. Traylor writes:

The founding mothers [of the Black Arts movement], with other vanguard women writers, strengthen the revolutionary ferment of the movement to resonate its themes: a renegotiation of power relations between black and white America, a disturbance of ideological imperatives of identity, and a redirection of the sources for literary production. (40)

In particular, poetry and drama of the BAM aimed at radicalizing the blacks *"... to evoke a consciousness of something called the self and, from that site, to create an identity called one people*."(41) The crux of the matter is that poets and dramatists of both sexes were shouldered with a heavily ethical

responsibility to make the blacks feel proud of the blackness of their identity. It follows that the blacks were inextricably confronted with a severe feeling of identity crisis, a matter that provoked black writers, women playwrights among them, to treat the construction of an identity extensively in their literary productions. Hence, many women playwrights came into the scene to voice the black voicelessness; Lorraine Hansberry, Alice Childress, Adrienne Kennedy(42), Sonia San(43) chez, and others are representative of this revolutionary period.

Addressing a 1957 black writer's conference, Lorraine Hansberry openly declared, "*I was born black and a female*."(44). this statement is a strongly worded confirmation that showcases Hansberry's own attachment to the duality of her identity. In this respect, Burke affirms that "*She* [Hansberry] *thus acknowledged the significance of these immutable aspects of her identity, of being always already black and female*."(45) Such feminized and racialized concept of identity finds an echo running through her prominent plays. ***A Raisin in the Sun*** (1959) is mainly based on Langston Hughes's poem "Harlem." In it, Hansberry "*examines the crucial significance of the search for human dignity, the changing roles of women, the nature of marriage, the true worth of money, and African roots.*"(46)

In "Harlem," Hughes explores how the black dream of salvation was destroyed by the white oppression. Yet, the black mother in the poem says "life for me ain't been no crystal stair"(LL) as she shows her determination to get a better life and motivates her son to continue the struggle for survival. The title of the play, ***A Raisin in the Sun***, is taken from the line *which warns that a dream deferred might "dry up / like a raisin in the sun"—or "explode."(47). Hansberry, says Abbotson "felt this new title better conveyed the bitterness of the social conditions that conspired to defer the aspirations of the black family in the play. The drama would reflect her own experience of housing*

discrimination, as well as her admiration for the racial pride of working-class blacks."(48)

As a parallel to Lorraine Hansberry, Alice Childress (1920-1994) is one of the most outspoken adherents to the black identity in the drama of the Black Arts Movement, and her contribution resides in her persistent portrayal of the black struggle for survival in a society dominated by racist oppression and marginalization.(49) She herself clearly pronounced the necessity of ongoing struggle for the long- neglected rights of the blacks. She observes:

> *If there is no struggle there is no progress… Find out just what any people will quietly submit to and you have found out the exact measure of injustice and wrong which will be imposed upon them, and these will continue till they are resisted with either words or blows or with both.*(50)

Childress had a firm belief that drama could affect an essential change in the life of the blacks; "*she has chosen the weapon of creative struggle*."(51) The militant tone of this passage underscores Alice Childress's consideration for self-determination and black pride to construct their identity. Such militancy is a characteristic of the black drama initiated by Langston Hughes.(52)

In her famous plays**,** ***Florence*** and ***Trouble in Mind***, Childress seems to be after the issue of identity and gender in terms of professional marginalization and oppression. In ***Florence***, she discusses how the black actor bears the brunt of artistic exclusion, and the invisibility of the protagonist and the omission of her name in the play confirm the racist and gendered marginalization she faces. Her heart- rending story is narrated

through the prism of her mother. She takes the role of a maid in a Broadway play. The actor Florence is given the same role in the theater production as her black peer has in the society, the role of a mere maid. Understandably, her role in the theater is parallel to the class bias experienced by the maid; the role reflects how the margin is controlled by the center. (53)

In a way analogous to theme of ***Florence, Trouble in Mind*** has at its essence how the identity of the black artist is placed between two choices: either to be melted in the white crucible or to be a free creature. This is the situation in which "*Childress uses the microcosm of the American theater depicted in* ***Trouble in Mind*** *to suggest the macrocosm of American society in which stereotypes are perpetuated to advance a racist ideology of white supremacy and black inferiority*."(54). This anti-racist play tellingly illustrates how a group cast of black actors working with a white director experience all of the indignities, subtle and otherwise, known to people in the business. Wiletta Mayer, the aging actor and main character in the play, raises strong objections to her role being submissive to the white sway in the script, a situation that pushes Wiletta to rally the cast to insist on changes that affirm the dignity of the race. Unfortunately for her, she does not gain anything, because the other actors prefer to keep their source of sustenance instead of abiding to their principles whatsoever. (55)

To sum up, both Hansberry and Childress are more concerned in their plays with the female artist's search for identity than the black women in specific. What they offer in their dramatic creations is a critical vision of the overall marginalization suffered by the black women writers. However, this does not gainsay the fact that they took sides to the issues of women in their community.

The eighties and nineties of the last century saw the emergence of a number of great African American women playwrights famous among them are Pearl Cleage (1948-), Anna Deavere Smith (1950-), and Suzan-Lori Parks (1964-)[56]. These women playwrights approach the issues of identity, gender, and race differently. Pearl Cleage fuses in her plays personal experiences and observations from a purely feminine vantage point, mainly dealing with the theme of freeing African American women in specific [57]. In her plays, the quest for identity is better seen in the fact that "… *her works explore the conditions of African American women, treating such topics as sexism, race, racism, love, violence against women in the African American community.*" [58] Cleage in her essay "Mad at Miles" expresses her black feminism, "*I am writing to expose and explore where racism and sexism meet. I am writing to help myself understand the full effects of being black and female in a culture that is both racist and sexist*."[59]

Flyin' West (1992) treats the placement of female identity between two different poles: racism and sexism. It tells the story of two sisters who have acquired the deeds to their land, but who must rescue a third sister who is being physically abused and swindled out of her land by her free-loading, mulatto, passing husband. Ends happily, and so more than just providing exposure of this little-known aspect of African American women's history. ***Flyin' West*** demonstrates how women can come together to provide strength and protection to each other, one of Cleage's favorite and recurring themes.[60] This theme of sisterhood affirms women's worriment over the challenges that endanger and threaten their own identity, and this sororal collaboration is conducive to the sustentation of their womanist identification as they strongly believe.

Anna Deavere Smith has contrived her own theatrical strategy in revealing the black female pursuit for identity, a strategy that pervades a plethora of her plays.. She writes her plays out her interviews with people in "*select locales and later performing them using their own words.*"[61] As Smith points out, the goal she attempts to achieve "*has been to find American character in the ways that people speak*."[62]. Her concern over the problem of identity is adroitly formulated *in Fires in the Mirror: Crown Heights, Brooklyn, and Other Identities* (1992) where she opens the play with these mesmeric words, "*… lets us have an identity,/ and what's inside our identity,/ is everything that's ever happened to us as well as our responses to it…*"[63]. In her preface to the play, she points out, "the most graphic display I had witnessed of the negotiation of identity."[64]

More to the point, Smith structures her play in a way that mirrors her approach to identity formation. Such structuration which unfolds Smith's circular treatment of the issues of identity moves from the general to the particular. "Identity" and "Mirrors", the first two sections of the play, present "*broad and speculative reflections on not just identity but how one sees or discerns the reality in which identities are constructed*."[65].

A careful examination of contemporary African American drama surely generates the impression that there are a host of female dramatists who ponder over the problem of identity which is still the focus of much research and interest in an increasingly globalized world.

In contemporary African American plays by women, it is increasingly obvious that sexuality **(66)** has become a much-discussed concept in order to reflect upon the black identity. The pioneering playwright who embodies this new orientation is Ntozake Shange (1948-) whose plays unmask the sexual

grievances committed against black women. Elizabeth Brown-Guillory writes, "*The major theme in Shange's works is the abuse of women and children. Her female characters survive in the face of loneliness, rejection, and rape.*"[67] Brown- Guillory goes on to explain Shange's treatment of the issue of sexuality in her play ***for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf*:**[68]

> *One scene in for colored girls, "Latent Rapists," focuses on women who have been raped by friends, men in prestigious, but who afraid to press charges. These women fear double victimization because they live in a society that treat a women who has been raped as the villain instead of the victim*[69].

Talking about the relationship between sexuality and the construction of female identity, Shange once proclaimed:

> *We are lost in the confusion of myths and fears of race and sex. To be a 'good', to be 'respectable' and 'worthy citizens,' we've had to combat absurd phantasmagoric stereotypes about our sexuality, our lusts and loves, to the extent that we disavow our own sensuality to each other.* [70]

In ***for colored girls***, Shange envisions sexuality as a panacea for the identity crisis African American women feel themselves disastrously entangled in. In this way, she makes an open invitation for the black women to ventilate their feelings of male domination and marginalization through sexuality as form of protestation and self- independence.

Stream of consciousness and the use of the choreopoem[71] are effective dramatic vehicles used by Shange to present her vision of female identity. "*Shange*, as Carrie J. Boden says, *often*

uses stream of consciousness in her theater pieces, and she urges black playwrights to abandon European theater models and move toward African American traditions that include storytelling, rhythms, and dance."[72]. Neal Lester points that "The *choreopoem combines elements that outline a distinctly African American heritage-to arouse an emotional response in audience*."[73]

Layla, the protagonist, is portrayed undergoing a bitter experience of identity crisis. The dramatic representation of her character has much to do with the metaphor of dancing and landscape. Initially, she finds parts of her identity as a black woman, refusing her body as an evidence of her identity. She then comes to recognize that *"there are horizons. There are different dawns*", giving a glimmer of hope for a better future.[74] Although Shange draws a clearly pessimistic undertone of her character's incapability to cope with the changing circumstances, she focuses on the woman's body as a signifier for a newly-found identity. Keyssar argues that "*The woman's body can dance and triumph over victimization, as it persistently does on stage in all of Shange's theatre pieces*." [75]

3) Conclusion

Beyond any shred of question, identity is a mainstreams tendency in contemporary drama, which underlines its prime importance in the world of today. It has become a favorite subject for a sweeping number of writers all over the world, because it has much to do with man's sense of existence.

One can say that the examination of the quest for identity in African American women drama elicits the inarguable fact that the women playwrights, like male playwrights, have spared no effort to express in clear terms their own concerns about the fate

of the black nation in general and the black woman in specific. These playwrights hold themselves responsible for inviting their black community to stick to their African origins which may be distorted and altered by the white domination and oppression.

Notes

1. Lawrence J. Prograis Jr. & Edmund D. Pellegrino (eds)**.** ***African American Bioethics: Culture, Race, and Identity.*** (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 2007), p. 114.
2. Prograis & Pellegrino, p. 114.
3. W. E. B. Du Bois, ***the Souls of Black Folk,*** (Oxford: OUP, 2007), p. 15.
4. Du Bois, p. 9.
5. Maurice E. Evans. ***Troubling Beginnings: Trans (per) forming African American History and Identity.*** (New York & London: Routledge, 2003), p.3.
6. Michael L. Hecht. et.al, ***African American Communication: Exploring Identity and Culture***.(New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., 2003), p.48
7. Chris Weedon. ***Identity and Culture: Narratives of Difference and Belonging***, (New York: Open U P, 2004.), p. 26.
8. Hecht et.al. p.85.
9. Sara McDowell "Heritage, Memory and Identity." Brian Graham and Peter Howard (Ed.). ***The Ashgate Research Companion to Heritage and Identity,*** **(**Hampshire: Ashgate, 2008), p. 38.
10. McDowell, p.41.
11. Jacques Lacan, ***Écrits***, Trans. Bruce Fink, (London and New York: W.W. Norton Company, 2006), p. 78.
12. Nathan Irvin Huggins (ed.), ***Voices from the Harlem Renaissance Harlem***, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 224.

13. Boas is regarded as one of great anthropologists who affected the opinions of Johnson.
14. Shelly Eversley. ***The Real Negro: The Question of Authenticity in Twentieth-Century African American Literature***. (New York & London: Routledge, 2004), p. 21.
15. Frantz Fanon***, Black Skin, White Masks***, (London: Pluto Press , 2008), p. 8
16. Houston A. Baker. Jr., ***Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance***. (Chicago and London: the U of Chicago Press, 1989), p. 9.
17. David Krasner, ***A Beautiful Pageant: African American Theatre, Drama, and Performance in the Harlem Renaissance- 1910- 1927***, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002.), p. 150.
18. Krasner, p. 148,
19. Huggins, p. 135.
20. Angelyn Mitchell and Danille K. Taylor, ***The Cambridge Companion to African American Women's Literature***, (Cambridge: CUP, 2009), p. 8.
21. For more details on the theme of lynching, see Trudier Harris's essay "Before the Strength, the Pain: Portraits of Elderly Black Women in Women in Early Twentieth Anti-Lynching Plays" Carol P. Marsh- Lockett (ed.), ***Black Women Playwrights: Visions on the American Stage***. New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1999. pp. 25-42.
22. Patricia Hill Collins, "Black Feminist Thought", in Les Back and Solomos (ed.), ***Theories of Race and Racism: A Reader***, (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), p. 407.
23. Judith L. Stephens, "The Harlem Renaissance and the New Negro Movement" in Brenda Murphy (ed.), ***The Cambridge Companion to American Women Playwrights***, (Cambridge: CUP, 1999), p.114.

24. Emmanuel S. Nelson (ed.), ***African American Dramatists: An A- to- Z Guide***, (London: Greenwood, 2004), p.248.
25. Krasner, pp. 116-117.
26. Krasner, p. 117.
27. Joyce Russell- Robinson says May was a productive writer, yet her name is frequently omitted from anthologies and scholarly texts. This omission is disturbing, as Miller's most fruitful period coincided with one of the best-known creative moment in African American literary history: the New Negro movement. Although a few individuals have produced a few articles here and there, Miller deserves much more attention. See Nelson, p. 286.
28. Stephens, p. 107.
29. Stephens, p. 107.
30. Nelson, p.255.
31. Sally Burke, ***American Feminist Playwrights: A Critical History***, (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1996), p. 93.
32. Burke, p. 93.
33. Yolanda Williams Page (ed.), ***Encyclopedia of African American Women Writers***, (Vol. 2), (New York: Greenwood Press, 2007), p. 314.
34. Weedon, p. 85.
35. Kobena Mercer, "Identity and Diversity in Postmodern Politics" in ***Theories of Race and Racism***, p.503.
36. This movement designates a number of African-American writers whose work was shaped by the social and political turbulence of the 1960s— the decade of massive protests against the Vietnam War, militant demands for the rights of blacks that led to repeated and sometimes violent confrontations, and the riots and burnings in Los Angeles, Detroit, New York, Newark, and other major cities. The literary movement was associated with the Black Power movement in politics, whose spokesmen, including Stokely

Carmichael and Malcolm X, opposed the proponents of integration and assimilation, and instead advocated black separatism, black pride, and black solidarity. Representatives of the Black Arts put their literary writings at the service of these social and political aims**.** See **M. H. Abrams** and Geoffrey Galt Harpham, ***A Glossary of Literary Terms***, (Boston: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2009), pp. 26-27.

37. Neal, p. 29.
38. Neal, p. 29.
39. Malcolm X was a spokesperson for the Nation of Islam (NOI). He emerged as one of the most radical and militant leaders during the Civil Rights Movement. Toward the end of his life, Malcolm X went through a spiritual and ideological metamorphosis following a pilgrimage to Mecca, which led to his embracing traditional Islam and tempering his animosity toward whites. While in Saudi Arabia, Malcolm X was moved by the fact that Muslim adherents of all colors worshiped together. No one that he saw discriminated against anyone else, causing him to seriously reconsider and, ultimately renounce, his volatile and anti-white rhetoric. He wrote about this experience in his famous The Autobiography of Malcolm X, a comprehensive social study on his life and times. However, he did not live long enough to advance his new approach. Malcolm X was assassinated on February 21, 1965.
40. Eleanor W. Traylor, " Women Writers of the Black Arts Movement" in ***The Cambridge Companion to African American Women's Literature***, p. 50.
41. Traylor, p. 54.
42. Kennedy has written more than 20 plays and won numerous awards, including three Obie Awards for Funny house of a Negro (1963), June and Jean in Concert (1996), and Sleep Deprivation Chamber (1996). This last play was co-written

with her son Adam. Kennedy is best known for her signature work, Funny house, an avant-garde play in one act. It has to do with a mulatto girl's unsuccessful attempts to resolve the psychological conflicts of her black/white heritage. In a surrealistic rooming house, Sarah is visited by various historical figures that represent facets of her divided self. The play won the author a Stanley Award from Wagner College in Staten Island (1963) and an Obie Award (1964).

43. Sanchez is a world-class poet, playwright, educator, and novelist of international renown. During a career that has spanned over 40 years, Sanchez has lectured and taught at over 50colleges both in the United States and abroad. She has written over a dozen books of poetry, eight plays, and several novels. Born in Birmingham, AL, Sanchez graduated from Hunter College in 1955 and did postgraduate work at New York University. Like many others, she found herself swept up in the civil rights fervor of the 1960s. .
44. Quoted in Burke, p. 125.
45. Burke, p. 125.
46. Nelson, p. 211.
47. The lines of "Harlem" are taken from www.hunterpoems.com
48. Susan C. W. Abbotson, ***Masterpieces of 20th- Century American Drama***, (Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2005), pp. 116-117.
49. Quoted in John O. Killens, "The literary Genius of Alice Childress" in Mari Evans (ed.), ***Black Women Writers (1950-1980): A Critical Evaluation***, (New York: Anchor Books, 1984), p. 129.
50. Quoted in John O. Killens, p. 129.
51. Killens, p. 133.
52. Langston Hughes is noted for his justification of using violence as one of the effective means to approve the black

identity. In his poetry and drama, he invites to instill in the minds of the blacks austere actions to defend themselves.

53. Sue- Ellen Case***, Feminism and Theatre***, (New York: Methuen, Inc., 1988), p. 101.
54. Lockett, p. 137.
55. Margaret B. Wilkerson, "From Harlem to Broadway from Harlem to Broadway: African American women playwrights at mid-century" in ***The Cambridge Companion to American Women Playwrights,*** p. 137. Case, p. 101.
56. A playwright, Parks, the daughter of a military officer, was born in 1964 in Fort Knox, KY. She showed an early penchant for writing, but it did not take root until her college years, when she took a class in creative writing from the renowned James Baldwin, who encouraged her to try playwriting. She graduated with a B.A. (cum laude) from Mount Holyoke College in 1985. Two early efforts failed, but the third play she wrote, Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom, won an Obie Award (1989) for best new off-Broadway play. She continued writing at a feverish pace and won another Obie in 1996 for Venus, based on the legend of "Hottentot Venus." In what was a portent of things to come, her play ***In the Blood*** was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize in 2000 but did not win? In 2002, however, Parks won the Pulitzer Prize for her play ***Topdog/Underdog***. She became the first African American woman to win the coveted award in drama since its inception in 1917. Initially, Parks's plays were structured in a jazz like scenario of theme introduction, improvisation off the main theme, and then return and resolution.
57. Nelson, p. 97.
58. Nelson, p. 97.

59. Lisa M. Anderson, ***Black Feminism in Contemporary Drama***, (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009), p.17
60. Page, Vol. 1., p. 88.
61. Nelson, p. 417.
62. Quoted in Nelson, p. 417.
63. James V. Hatch and Ted Shine (Eds.). ***Black Theatre USA: Plays by African Americans The Recent Period: 1935-Today***, (New York: The Free Press, 1996), p. 493.
64. Joan Wylie Hall, "Everybody's Talking": Anna Deavere Smith's Documentary Theatre" in Philip Kolin (ed.), ***Contemporary African American Playwrights: A Casebook***, (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), p. 155.
65. Nelson, p. 422.
66. For a detailed discussion on this trend , see Janice Lee Liddle, "The Discourse of Intercourse: Sexuality and Eroticism in African American Women's Drama," in ***Black Women Playwrights: Visions on the American Stage***, ed. Carol P. Marsh-Lockett, pp. 155- 172.
67. Darlene Clark Hine (ed.), ***Facts On File Encyclopedia of Black Women America: Theater Arts and Entertainment***, (New York: Facts On File, 1997) , p.191.
68. Shange always writes the titles of her plays and the names of characters in small letters. This absence of necessary capitalization can be assigned to the fact that she examines themes that betray how women suffer different forms of marginalization and oppression. So, Shange wants to present such marginalization even in the names of characters and titles which are left without capitalization on purpose.
69. Hine, p.191.
70. Quoted in Lockett, p. 196.

71. The chore poem is a special form of folk songs which celebrate the tradition and heritage of the black in a way as make the black race feel proud of their identity and to instigate them to continue their struggle for all kinds of liberation. Also, this poem is associated with music.
72. Quoted in Nelson, P. 391.
73. Quoted in Nelson, P. 391.
74. Helene Keyssar, ***Feminist Theatre: An Introduction to Plays of Contemporary British and American Women***, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1984), p. 146
75. Keyssar, p. 146.

Bibliography

1. Abbotson, Susan C. W. ***Masterpieces of 20th- Century American Drama***. Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2005.
2. Anderson, Lisa M. ***Black Feminism in Contemporary Drama***. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009.
3. Back, Les & Solomos (ed). ***Theories of Race and Racism: A Reader***. London and New York: Routledge, 2003.
4. Baker. Jr., Houston A. ***Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance***. Chicago and London: the U of Chicago Press, 1989.
5. Burke, Sally. ***American Feminist Playwrights: A Critical History***. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1996.
6. Case, Sue- Ellen**.** ***Feminism and Theatre***. New York: Methuen, Inc., 1988.
7. Du Bois, W. E. B. ***The Souls of Black Folk***. Oxford: OUP, 2007.
8. Evans, Mari (ed.), ***Black Women Writers (1950-1980):A Critical Evaluation***. New York: Anchor Books, 1984.

9. Evans, Maurice E. ***Troubling Beginnings: Trans (per) forming African American History and Identity.*** New York & London: Routledge, 2003.
10. Eversley, Shelly. ***The Real Negro: The Question of Authenticity in Twentieth-Century African American Literature***. New York & London: Routledge, 2004.
11. Fanon Frantz***. Black Skin, White Masks***. London: Pluto Press, 2008.
12. Graham, Brian & Peter Howard (ed.). ***The Ashgate Research Companion to Heritage and Identity.*** Hampshire: Ashgate, 2008.
13. Hatch, Darlene James V. and Ted Shine (eds.). ***Black Theatre USA: Plays by African Americans the Recent Period: 1935- Today***. New York: The Free Press, 1996.
14. Hecht, Michael L. et.al, ***African American Communication: Exploring Identity and Culture***. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., 2003.
15. Hine, Clark (ed.) ***Facts on File Encyclopedia of Black Women America: Theater Arts and Entertainment***. New York: Facts on File, 1997.
16. Huggins, Nathan Irvin (ed.), ***Voices from the Harlem Renaissance Harlem***. New York: Oxford University Press, 1995.
17. Keyssar, Helene. ***Feminist Theatre: An Introduction to Plays of Contemporary British and American Women***. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1984.
18. Kolin, Philip (ed.) ***Contemporary African American Playwrights: A Casebook***. London and New York: Routledge, 2007.
19. Krasner, David ***A Beautiful Pageant: African American Theatre, Drama, and Performance in the Harlem Renaissance- 1910- 1927***. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002.

20. Lacan, Jacques. ***Écrits***. Trans. Bruce Fink. London and New York: W.W. Norton Company, 2006.
21. Lockett, Carol P. Marsh- (ed). ***Black Women Playwrights: Visions on the American Stage***. New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1999.
22. Mitchell, Angelyn & Danille K. Taylor (eds). ***The Cambridge Companion to African American Women's Literature***. Cambridge: CUP, 2009.
23. Murphy, Brenda (ed.), ***the Cambridge Companion to American Women Playwrights***. Cambridge: CUP, 1999.
24. Nelson, Emmanuel S. (ed). ***African American Dramatists: An A- to- Z Guide***. London: Greenwood, 2004.
25. Page, Yolanda Williams (ed.), ***Encyclopedia of African American Women Writers***, (Vol. 2). New York: Greenwood Press, 2007.
26. Prograis Jr., Lawrence J. & Edmund D. Pellegrino (eds)**.** ***African American Bioethics: Culture, Race, and Identity.*** Washington: Georgetown University Press, 2007.
27. www. hunterpoems.com
28. Weedon, Chris. ***Identity and Culture: Narratives of Difference and Belonging***. New York: Open U P, 2004.