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Male-Female Dialogue in Jean Toomer's *Cane* and Ntozake Shange's *For Colored Girls who have Considered Suicide when the Rainbow is Enuf*

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Introduction

The male voice has remained the dominant voice in every aspect of human endeavour from the Classical to the Modern Age. At a point, it was accepted as the only voice in human existence, so man had the prerogative to name Creation, including women. Since man was seen as the "Lord" of Creation, male philosophers beginning with Aristotle, Plato, Freud, to mention a few, propounded theories to authenticate man's position as master of the universe, while defining the woman in relation to him. The female voice was accredited with silence, making her the muted species until the sexual revolution of the Twentieth Century. This phenomenon has been examined extensively by second generation women gender theorists like Simone de Beauvoir, Kate Millet and Germaine Greer in *The Second Sex, Sexual Politics* and *The Female Eunuch*, respectively.

The social conception of sexual difference impinges on the fact that the society has invented certain attributes for the sexes in order to sustain the ethics of each system. Apart from assigning distinct characteristics to the male and female human persons, they are evaluated differently according to their social worth. Eakins and Eakins affirm this when they remark that:

> Our religious, educational and political institutions promulgate attitudes along sexist biases... patterned behaviour from our unwritten but ever present cultural files of 'what females do' and 'what males do' (Eakins and Eakins 1978: 5)

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The above confirms the comment by Hess et. al. that, "the character of our relationship with others is strongly influenced by the nature of our environment" (Hess et. al. 1985: 178)

Thus, the "cultural files" of most societies empower the male to be the conqueror, while the female is expected to serve his needs. Grace Okereke corroborates this position when she analyses the differential treatment colonial education meted out to both sexes. It emphasized "feminine qualities of gentleness, morality, hard work" for the female, while "valour, fearlessness, boldness, aggressiveness and endurance" were projected for the male (Okereke 1996, 1998). The female therefore, was socialized into the domestic space as wife and mother, positions which according to Hess, et al are sustained by the assumption that she "lacks abstract thinking skills for public life" when compared with the male (Hess et. al. 1985: 122). It is not surprising as Okereke adds that, whether in Africa or the Diaspora, women "have become late-comers on the political, economic and literary spheres" (Okereke 1996, 1998).

But the contact with formal Western education has eventually brought the female to a turning point because, as Katherine Frank reveals, education "gives women a vision of human experience beyond the narrow confines of their own lives, it bestows a kind of imaginative power... an awareness of beauty, dreams, possibility..." (Frank 1987: 23). The new self-awareness occasioned by Western education propels the woman to participate effectively in the battle for survival and explodes the myth behind the Beti proverb which says that she has no mouth (See Okereke's "African Gender Myths..."). As it becomes abundantly clear that the woman has a mouth, the muted develops a voice with which she re-creates the female story because, "One of the immense positive gains accruing from feminist criticism," Moira Monteith declares, "has been the realization that the female in literature is a literary construct"(Monteith 1986: 1).

Consequently, the woman writer has a task to critique the truly feminine and to position women in the centre of literary discourse. This is the genesis of dialogue and outrage in literature, for "to speak at all is to assume authority" (Herndl 15). Female literary creativity, Jane Bryce-Okunolola says, is a challenge to "patriarchal appropriation of power over the word" (Bryce-Okunolola 1992: 201). The resulting dialogue is designed to interrogate the basis of male power and female powerlessness. Dialogue within this work is from Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of dialogism which states that "there is a constant interaction between meanings all of which have the potential of conditioning" other levels of meanings (Bakhtin 1981: 426). Bakhtin is a Russian cultural anthropologist whose theory of dialogism was used to confront the political class during Lenin's era in Russia's history. In Bakhtinian aesthetics, the authoritative voice refers to the privileged position occupied by the ruler while the internally persuasive voice points to the suppressed people in the society. Although Bakhtin's theory is not gender-specific, feminist critics have appropriated the concept of voices to inscribe women's experience into intellectual space. Thus, feminist dialogics views the men writers as speaking with the authoritative voice, while the women writers use the internally persuasive voice.

Dialogue, for Bakhtin, is a discursive struggle between two subjects; his authoritative voice can be equated with the male voice, while his internally persuasive voice can be used to represent the woman writer whose work de-privileges the monologism popularized by the male critical theory. The choice to speak is a disruption of discourse or "voice throwing" which, as Siga Jajne explains in the Senegambian tradition "can create an epistemic violence to discourse that will create a space for hitherto unheard voices" (Kolawole 1998: 4). It is against this background that we shall examine male-female dialogue in Jean Toomer's *Cane* and Ntozake Shange's *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf.*

'Ntozake' and 'Shange' are Zulu names adopted by the writer. She rejected her English names (Paulette Williams) as a personal protest against her Western background. Ntozake ("She who has come with her own things") and Shange ("She who walks like a lion") has chosen to approach the identity question from a personal angle because for her the personal in also political. This is why she sees writing as an honest depiction of reality. Some of her works are *Mother Courage and Her Children (1980). For Colored Girls... (1978) Spell #7 (1979), A Photograph: lovers in motion (1977), Boogie Landscape (1978)* among many others

Male-Female Dialogue in Toomer's *Cane* and Shange's *For Colored Girls...*

Jean Toomer's *Cane* (1923) is a male utterance, which recaptures the "New Negro" spirit in the Harlem Renaissance, the Black cultural re-rebirth in the United States in the opening decades of the Twentieth Century. According to Imoh Udofia, that was "the first concerted attempt by the Black intelligentsia – painters, musicians, sculptors, artists and businessmen – to evoke social and cultural pride in the Afro-American past" (Udofia 1988: 33). The vogue with blackness which characterized that cultural revival led to the acceptance and invasion of stereotypes as well as the exaltation of the folk, the rustic, the unsophisticated and the con-man in the African-American community. This explains Robert Bone's description of the black person as 'the unspoiled child of nature, the noble savage – carefree, spontaneous and sexually uninhibited' (Bone 1958: 59).

Although Toomer uses tension in the lives of women to show the distinctiveness of black culture in America, *Cane* represents the male viewpoint in African-American literature. Bakhtin's "law of placement" according to Michael Holquist can be used to explain this position. This law states, "everything is perceived from a unique position in existence... the meaning of whatever is observed is shaped by the place from which it is perceived" (Holquist 1990: 2). The portraiture of women in *Cane* is a reflection of the degradation they are subjected to in the American society. African–American women are among the most exploited group in America. This is because they are assumed to be the "slave of a slave" or "de mule uh world" as Zora Neale Hurston puts it in *Their Eyes Were Watching God.*

Toomer's *Cane* is a product of the patriarchal American culture which makes woman

an appendage to man. Marilyn Frye's comment confirms the classification of people along sexist lines in America when she remarks:

> There is a woman's place, a sector, which is inhabited by women of all classes and races, and it is not defined by geographical boundaries but the function. The function is the service of men and men's interest as men define them (Frye 1983: 9)

Toomer's conscious exploration of the excruciating malaise in the lives of women who are fixated by the sex-determined roles the society prescribes for them as bedmates upholds sexism as a social fact.

This gives credence to Toomer's outrageous act of configuring women as one-dimensional creatures of patriarchy since he uses them to represent the gradual disintegration of folk culture in *Cane*. The dissipation that their lives had undergone and the frustration they encountered in their interaction with men are traceable to the deliberate denial of a positive identity to them. Being male, Toomer's is speaking from this position on the social hierarchy because, as Bakhtin says, each "word/discourse betrays the ideology of its speaker". Ideology here refers to the "idea system" of a writer. Thus, in Bakhtin's world, "every speaker (writer) is an ideologue and every utterance an ideologeme" (Bakhtin 1981: 429). *Cane* is an authoritative male voice and as such, shows men's "total social control" over women. This is because artistic works reveal the forces at work in the society and how they are arranged to sustain the status quo.

But fifty-five years after *Cane*, Shange's *For Colored Girls...* (1978) engages Toomer's work in a dialogue, which reverses the myths that sustained the monologism of the past. The understanding is that the "unquestioned organicism" of the text, to use the words of Selden and Widdowson, has been destroyed (Selden and Widdowson 1983: 41). So *For Colored Girls...* brings the authoritative male voice in *Cane* under scrutiny. As a Black feminist statement on African–American women, *For Colored Girls...*, explores the multi-faceted aspect of black life through the anguish men bestow on seven women who take upon themselves the colours of the rainbow. Each of them embodies the frustrated hopes of he black women who the "lady in brown" says is considered "so long/closed in silence so long/she doesn't know the sound/of her own voice/her infinite beauty"(Shange 1978: 4)

The awareness of female exploitation poses two challenges to women writers – the need to re-construct history out of a male perspective and to design a functional identity for women. In the United States, African – American women are the progenitors of history and as I have said in "Gender and Culture Dialogue..." it is their labour which sustains the black man as he aspires towards the American dream of possibility for all (66). Unfortunately, Gerda Lerner argues in *The Majority Finds Its Past* that the deeds of women have been ignored by history. But within Shange's personal search for identity,

what Ralph Ellison calls "the American theme" (Lerner 1979: 178), she engages her women in a collective protest aimed at deconstructing the sexist nature of American history. Identity is "the American theme" says Ralph Ellison. This is because the black person in the United States is treated as the stepchild of American democracy even though he/she is an American by birth and descent. This is why no African–American writer can ignore the identity question.

For Jean Toomer, *Cane* is perhaps his major attempt to resolve his identity crisis, but *Cane* is perhaps his major attempt to resolve his identity crisis, but when the work stigmatized him as a black writer, he abandoned blackness and claimed seven nationalities (French, Dutch, Welsh, Negro, German, Jewish and Indian) as a universal man. The contradictory voices of Toomer's narrative personae in *Cane* reflect the crises in his private life. See Howard Faulker's "The Buried Life..." Elizabeth Schulttz's "Jean Toomer's Box seat ...." and Michael Cooke's *Afro-American Literature in the Twentieth Century (1985).*

Cane testifies to the historical dehumanisation of black women in racist America. Karintha is ravaged by men who refuse to notice, "the soul of her was a growing thing ripened too soon" (2). Louisa is an exotic femme fatale. Fern, the prototype of the racial spiritual ambiguities in the African-American community, is subjected by men to the ritual process of "everlastingly offering her their bodies". Since the perpetration of male bigotry has deprived the black woman of her psychic balance, Avey goes into prostitution. She reminds us of the proud speaker in Langston Hughes poem, "Natcha" who auctions herself to men at ten shillings at night.

For Toomer, women have no other function outside their biological roles, which is why they are constructed primarily to satisfy men's erotic needs. But outside this conception, they are sanctioned for initiating independent actions. The story of Carma, for instance, a black woman who adopts masculine modes of behaviour because it is positively valued by the society is described as the "crudest melodrama". Again, Becky, after having taken an independent stand against the law of miscegenation, is presented as a pathological case since her affair with Ballo violates the collective conscience of her society. Thus, Toomer's denial of meaningful existence to his women necessitates Richard Eldrige's description of Karintha, Fern and Carma as "poetic untouchables" because they fail to reciprocate the appeal they instigate in men (Eldrige 1979: 201).

Shange dismisses Toomer's superficial presentation of women in *Cane* as a figment of the male imagination and engages him in a literary combat by painstakingly portraying African-American women as living human persons who have experienced the crude realities of physical and mental suppression and yet insist on their humanity as a non-negotiable entity. She does this by operating from the vision of a "cultural aggressor" which also explains the nature of her writings. In an interview with Claudia Tate, she remarks:

> ... I write about things that have never been given their full due... my responsibility is to be as honest as I can to use whatever technical skill I may possess to make these experiences even clearer, or sharper, or more devastating or more beautiful (Tate 1983: 156).

Just like Adrienne Rich and Susan Griffin, she has taken it upon herself "to discover the causes of our pains and to respect them" (155).

This is why Shange unravels the trauma of teenage pregnancy, a situation where unscrupulous men transform young girls into women without allowing them to enjoy the memories of their childhood. Very often, social gatherings become avenues for sexual assaults. The "lady in yellow" is raped on the night of her graduation; the "lady in blue" encounters the same humiliation at a dinner party and in her confusion, the "lady in red" divulges that the men "cd even have em over dinner to get raped in [their] own houses" (21). The degrading experience that makes parents out of teenage girls is a major problem to the African–American people in the Unites States because, as Alvin Poussaint reveals, 55 percent of black babies in recent times are conceived outside of marriage (Poussaint 1986: 46).

It is within this context that Shange sets out to explode what she calls the "misogynous lies" infused in the minds of small black girls. This is the same reason she gives for writing *For Colored Girls...*

> I want a twelve year old girl to reach out for and get some information... if there is an audience for whom I write it's the girls who are coming of age. I want them to know that they are not alone (Tate 1983:162)

These girls bear the shame of unwanted pregnancies or procure abortions. Yet, before the rapist, the "lady in blue" reports that women are expected to "relinquish all personal rights" (20)

The justification for the persistent sexual assault on the African–American woman, Anna Julia Cooper says, is traceable to the role she played in "the manufacture of men and women for the market of the world" (Cooper 1988: 244). That dehumanising business denied her bodily self-determination when compared to the white woman so "the body of one was legally protected... the other legally violated" (Athey 1996: 13). Adele Alexander confirms this when she posits that "America's black women have been perceived primarily as sexual beings who have no modesty, virtue, or intelligence, and little claim to respect or power" (5). Shange mirrors this claim through the segment "Sechita" where the contradictions in viewing the African – American woman (as the goddess, whore, fool, evil baby and witch) are shown.

Shange's dialogue with Toomer in *For Colored Girls...* and *Cane*, respectively, relativises the univocal approach to rationality and positions the woman's voice to re-

cast the female story. And so, she brings Toomer's voiceless creatures of patriarchy into discursive struggle with her assertive and militant women. Karintha, that enigmatic beauty in ***Cane*** degenerates into the wretched plant in "November Cotton Flower" and when her child burns on the pine needles, she internalises her pains through Spirituals. Fern lives in a sub-conscious hell where she immortalises her afflictions with Blues. Avey goes into a dead sleep which is a symbolic interlude from the strains of life just at the moment of redemption and yet the cycle of exploitation continues.

Toomer's women in Part One and Two of *Cane* are docile, passive, despondent and fragmented in consciousness. They are helpless victims of men's sexual conditioning, a problem Shange attributes to the male writers' inability to realistically evoke emotional response in their characters, especially women. She blames this on the fact that "it is impossible to enter the territory of someone you oppress with the knowledge that you have as an oppressor" (Betsko and Koening 1987: 370). *Cane* projects men's conquistadorial nature, but Shange challenges their denial of credible existence to other humans, especially women, to a dialogue on women's emotional stability and breakthrough in *For Colored Girls...* This emotional response is utilised to break the "conspiracy of silence" which the society imposes on women by muffling their voices in the social system. No wonder Shange's women speak vehemently against sexual assault, multiple love relationships, wife battering and child abuse issues, which are fundamental to the tension in heterosexual relationship in the African-American community.

Therefore, *For Colored Girls...* is like a brochure to black girls on how to cope with emotional crises in America because the writer believes what the "lady in yellow" says that "bein alive and bein a woman and bein colored is a metaphysical dilemma" (45). But, unlike Toomer's women who resign to fate in consonance with the blues tradition by accepting suffering as a means of transcendental redemption, Shange's women confront and reject a destiny that oppresses them. In doing this, their medium is dance. Dance, as Shange confesses to Betsko and Kotenig, "clears my mind of verbal images and allows me to understand the planet... I am not bogged down by the implications of language, I am only involved in the implications of movement which later on, when I start to write, become manifest in my poetry" (Betsko and Koening 1987: 365). Dance in *For Colored Girls...* is an explanation, a therapy for identifying and transcending pains, an act of protest or rebellion, a weapon for social change and a liberating mechanism.

Conclusion

Jean Toomer's *Cane* and Ntozake Shange's *For Colored Girls...* are experimental works, which explore the sexist history of African–American women. The former is a collection of prose pieces, poetry and a closet drama that are united through natural images, especially "Cane" and "Dusk". But the latter has twenty poems, which are dramatised as chore poems. Both writers utilise folk speech to establish the distinctiveness of African–American culture within the Anglo-American setting. Yet, while the internal

structure of *Cane* depends on the vision of cosmic consciousness, which Toomer derives from the Gurdjieffian philosophy, *For Colored Girls...* is an experiment with dance because Shange sees writing as a "rhythmic experience". Cosmic consciousness shows the influence of Gurdjieffian philosophy on Toomer's creative sensibility. Articulated by Demianovich Ouspenky in *Tertium Organum*, the ideas of G.I. Gurdjieff focused on esoteric thinking and man's perception of life though the vision of cosmic consciousness. Toomer's *Cane* reveals this through the juxtaposition of nature with human beings as in "Fern", "Carma", "Karintha" in Part One, or the confrontation between inanimate objects and human characters in Parts Two and Three.

However, by bringing *Cane* into dialogue with *For Colored Girls...*, we recognise that "language represents the co-existence of socio-ideological contradictions between the present and the past, between differing epochs of the past" (Bakhtin 1981: 291). *Cane* and *For Colored Girls...* are utterances from different areas in African–American history, but they are brought into a discursive struggle here in order to illustrate that literature is a gendered discourse.

Dialogue, for the male and female gender, is an act of self-definition, affirmation, recreation and monopoly; but silence is an act of self-destruction. The opposition between speech and silence has implications for the male and female as social constructs. This justifies the assertion that, "speech is not always a sign of power or silence a sign of weakness. Rather, the contexts of silence and speech determine gendered relations" (Bauer & Mckinstry 1991: 3). Jean Toomer's *Cane* and Ntozake Shange's *For Colored Girls...* are utterances from the same social context but the difference in perspective is because, having been raised in a "genderized, sexualized, wholly racialized world," to borrow Toni Morrison's description of the United States (Morrison 1992: 4), neither Toomer nor Shange appears to understand each other's sexual politics.

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