

Black Feminist Criticism and Drama: Thoughts on Double Patriarchy

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Thoughts on Double Patriarchy

The concerted efforts of black women writers, critics, as well as activists, are essential factors in inscribing race and ethnicity as criteria in feminist criticism; they successfully shift feminism both as a political movement and critical theory from the monolithic structural concept of the 1960s and 1970s to the plural feminisms of the 1990s. The feminist movement which gave impetus to feminist critical theory had been based mainly on the history of white women's experience and gender construction. By the middle of the 1980s, women of colour begin to question the basis of mainstream feminist theory, the domination of the feminist movement by white women, the omission of the experience and works of women of colour in feminist theories and critical analysis, and the inadequacy of the single focused feminist critical theories to the multiplicity of factors that constitute their experiences and inform their writings. Black women in particular, consistently use their experiences, cultural practices and history as women in fictional works and as the basis of their critical tool. The term 'feminisms' that became current in the 1990s, is an acknowledgement of the cultural and racial differences among women, including many other factors that constitute their experience and affect their conditions besides patriarchy, and a recognition of the need for new and relevant theoretical approaches.

In the following pages, I argue for the concept of double patriarchy as a theoretical perspective for black feminist criticism and subsequently apply it to the background analysis of the works of black women in theatre. As a critical theory, double patriarchy highlights the issues of race, gender and class that inhabit the experience of the black woman and the different ways in which women use the vivid imageries of drama and theatre to project the multiplicity of their experience. I will conclude by examining three plays that situate African

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women in different time perspectives, place them at various intersections of cultural, political and economic situations and assess their ways of coping with their effects.

The term "black feminism" as used throughout in this paper, applies to works by peoples of African descent on the African continent and in the diaspora. Although taking cognizance of the cultural differences that exist on one level between Africans and diaspora Africans, and on the other, among various African peoples themselves, many black critical and fictional writings have drawn on a common history of marginalization because their race and cultures have been constructed as different and therefore invalid. Race therefore, designates the specificity of black feminist criticism; it is not used as an ethnic designation which limits it to a narrow cultural space in a larger geo-political entity, neither is it limited by a particular theory or methodology.¹

Double Patriarchy as a Concept

Inscribed within the context of race as an organizing structure in black feminist criticism is colonial imperialism, to which African peoples have been collectively and variously subjected.² The colonial factor in black women's experience subjects them to another form of patriarchal authority, a foreign power, in addition to the one in their cultures; for both the colonizing powers and indigenous African cultures, including even the matrilineal cultures (where the parental authority and responsibilities are derived from the mother's male relative), are patriarchies. Colonialism reached its peak during the nineteenth century, a particularly repressive period for European and American women and under which class elitism thrived, and this form of patriarchy with its gender construction was imported wholesale to the African continent where the colonial woman, draped in imperialist powers of her race, became the epitome of 'civilized womanhood.' Under the imposition of colonial cultures, the indigenous patriarchies became distorted and more repressive; even after independence, the gender images of the sovereign power are too seductive to overlook, while the image of the indigenous womanhood remains strong in the background, serving as a source of continuity for African patriarchy.

Consequently, African women on the continent and the diaspora become subjected to what I term double patriarchy. Double patriarchy is a system under which sexism, the weapon of patriarchal power and its various manifestations, politically, socially and economically oppress women twice over. Also a signifier of male dominance over another, sexism functions under colonialism and especially on the slave plantations as an expression of absolute power over black men through the devaluation of their womenfolk.³ Colonial imperialism serves to

intensify the already implicit idea of territorial control and sovereignty in patriarchies, and now, coupled with racism which devalues both the male and female subject, colonialism shows to be a more intensive form of oppression to the woman. The racism inherent in colonialism reinforces sexism and subjects women to a patriarchal authority twice over.

Colonial patriarchy also constructs the African woman as a means of enhancing the European woman whose ideal image does not have much to do with her real person. Barbara Christian argues that until the 1940s, the image of the black woman in both European-American and African-American male literatures served as "a context for some other major dilemma or problem the society cannot resolve," and, especially in southern white literature, as a "dumping ground for those female functions a basically Puritanical society could not confront."⁴ To the images of the black woman as the asexual mammy—a tough, enduring, morally loose and religious person—are the stereotypes of the white woman—maiden motherhood, the frail and virginal love goddess; these contradictory portrayals strongly reinforce the double and multiple oppression of the black woman.

In the wake of liberation struggles to end racism and colonial domination, new images of the ideal African womanhood have emerged—more contradictory and confusing than ever. The aesthetics of Negritude, the most prominent and clearly articulated political philosophy in African anti-colonial movement, constructs an ageless and voiceless 'Mother Africa,' who has always been liberated. The Negritude woman, popular in francophone literatures, is mother earth, fecund and bounded to Africa; she is natural, unspoilt by European values and stoically waits for her sons to free her from the shackles of imperialism. While her counterpart in anglophone literature is not so passive, she often defers to male authority. Nevertheless, 'mother is gold' and she is priceless, enduring, tough, and with some authority; she is also a fierce fighter, especially where her children are concerned. In America, the Black Power movement constructs a silent, submissive African Queen who is poised, regal, beautiful, but with no authority attached her royal status. The flip side of the Mother/Queen image is a woman who, although like the man, has been exposed to Western cultural values, no noble role of 'knight in shining armour' awaits her; rather, contact with the West means contamination and devaluation; and of course, she is not worth saving. She is frequently the wife, lover, or worse, the prostitute, with no value in herself and exists mainly as fodder to the man's ego, is his source of sexual gratification, acts as his baby factory, and occasionally the punching sack of his frustrations. While the archetypal mother becomes the symbol and source of inspiration for the man who will liberate the race, she is a symbol of repression for the woman. It is an image that denies her real experience and

potentials, and locks her in a single role; any deviation from this mold contaminates the liberation struggle.

With this background, the predominance of white women at the initial stages of the second rebirth of the feminist movement, and the consequent euro-centered critical theories, is intricately linked with the issue of race and cultural differences. The black woman especially has been reluctant to participate fully in the feminist movement because in America, she was already involved in the struggle to end racism, and, on the African continent, memories of western colonial imperialism are still too fresh to make any alliance with European women unproblematic. Moreover, in the political and aesthetic constructs of liberation movements, women have been mythologized, romanticized and cast in an ideological bind that compromises their association with Europeans and European-Americans. Ironically, such restrictions on interracial cooperation seems not to apply to the men who continue to interact with Europeans in various works of life.

The role of race in black feminist criticism underscores the privileged position of white women in the global structure of feminism, for, not having experienced colonization, racial oppression does not constitute part of their experience in patriarchal subordination. White feminism still appropriates the role of determining the primal theoretical concept for a generic feminist criticism; even with the benefit of hindsight acknowledging that for millions of women other ideological factors collude simultaneously with gender oppression, Green and Khan, among other white feminist critics, define feminist literary criticism as "one branch of interdisciplinary enquiry which takes gender as a fundamental organizing experience."⁵ Such a definition continues to ignore those for whom gender is not the only 'fundamental organizing experience,' and requires that all racially identified feminisms except white feminism must prefix their feminism with their race or ethnicity; it is understood that when there is no prefix it is white or 'mainstream' feminism. This is a condition that continues to promote the identification of feminism and its criticism as a white women's critical tool that seeks to colonize the voices of, and render invisible the multiple experiences of women of colour. Although Green and Khan go on to state that feminist criticism is committed to revising "concepts previously thought universal but now seen as originating in particular cultures and serving particular purposes," and to restore "a female perspective by extending knowledge about women's experience and contributions to culture,"⁶ reifying gender as the primal critical factor compromises these assertions. Viewed in this singular format, mainstream (read "white") feminism becomes inadequate in solving other forms of oppression, in the same way that marxism and or Negritude /Black Power as critical

perspectives are unable to effectively deal with the forms of oppressions perpetrated by patriarchy and/or, racism.

Structuring black feminist critical perspective therefore, are two organizing constituencies of experience and identity—gender and race—two social constructions that classify members of each construct in oppositional differences and create a hierarchy which subordinates one to the other. The hierarchical power game creates a third constituency, an economic division where those already at the bottom of social hierarchies fall even lower. It is a hierarchy that keeps the same gender divided along the lines of race and class, that unites different races under the banner of sexism and/or elitism, and divides the same class into separate blocks of race and gender. For black women who belong twice to each of the socially underprivileged groups—the female gender and the black race—it is a short shrift to becoming victim of the economic classification.

Invariably boxed within the tripartite of race, gender and class, a black feminist perspective cannot afford to privilege one relevant critical theory and political praxis over the other; it instead uses a theoretical approach that Davies perceptively terms the "balancing act" of the African feminist critic.⁷ The complicity of racism and classicism in further rendering invisible the presence of and muting the voice and experience of black women in feminist criticism takes black feminist criticism beyond a critical tool inscribed by gender alone, or subsumed under a broad concept of feminism; it is an independent critical perspective. Race is as crucial an epistemic in the analysis of black women's writings as gender is to feminist analysis.

As a form of critical designation, black feminist criticism exposes and rejects the double patriarchy that African women have collectively been subjected to in various socio-political, economic and aesthetic constructs. It is a form of criticism contextualized in the creative writings of African peoples, depicting and celebrating their historical, cultural and aesthetic specificity in a collective experience, while at the same time rejecting the stereotypical images that have oppressed and subordinated them.

Black Feminist Criticism in Drama and Theatre

The works of black women in theatre have not been subjected much to feminist criticism, unlike their fictional prose. In general, the application of feminist criticism in theatre studies comes much later than in other disciplines—a situation which Sue-Ellen Case attributes to the primary focus of Theatre departments on theatre history and training practitioners, to the virtual neglect of critical analysis. She observes further that dramatic criticism in general is still predominantly located in the English departments where Renaissance drama is the

major interest and the application of current critical strategies and the study of contemporary texts and practices still occupy marginal positions.⁸ In the marginalized context of contemporary texts, black women's works are twice removed, especially since black people do not inhabit the European Renaissance period.

Furthermore, more than their male colleagues, black women playwrights are routinely passed over both in scholarly studies, performances and popular reviews. Lorraine Hansberry, whose play, *A Raisin In the Sun* comes closest to being acknowledged an American classic,⁹ does not constitute a regular text in theatre studies, neither does Alice Childress's work, even though her prominence in the theatre as playwright, performer and producer spans a period of four decades. William Herman, who in his study of contemporary American drama observes that despite being "a uniquely gifted dramatist, [Adrienne] Kennedy's plays are unreasonably neglected,"¹⁰ nevertheless fails to give her a full critical analysis presumably because she "seems to have been discouraged from continuing to work."¹¹

Although Case cites the harsh economic conditions under which women of colour make theatre as a factor limiting their accessibility to critical reviews,¹² racism still looms large. Wilkerson refers to some critics' claim that parochialism and polemics "render works based on Black experience unattractive and of limited or temporary appeal."¹³ This is an escapist excuse which only serves to intensify and confirm the racism it seeks to deny. The so-called polemic period of African-American theatre is basically confined to the New Black Theatre of the radical Black Aesthetics,¹⁴ but the critics find no problems in equating the specific with the general and using it as the basis to dismiss black theatre for all times. Besides, the fact that plays are based on black experience need not render them invalid, for the experience exists not in isolation of, but within the context of a larger American culture, to which the critics and all American citizens belong.

Black feminist criticism in theatre is further constrained by the paucity of challenging roles for women performers. The theatre has for too long remained locked into the stereotypical image of the black woman in society, either completely ignoring her on stage or succumbing to whatever the current stereotype is. In her first play, *Florence* (1949), Alice Childress demonstrates how a young black woman in the title character finds it difficult to make a living in the theatre as a performer; she is a victim of racist stereotyping even by a self-styled liberal white woman, and nobody sees a profession for her except as a maid or cook. Almost half a century later, the situation has barely improved. Meanwhile, although cross-gender casting is gradually becoming acceptable, interracial casting is still resisted¹⁵ as a rare phenomenon reserved for a few radical alternative theatres. Black theatres, on the other hand, mostly produce

works of male playwrights who write few good roles for women. Deprived of performing opportunities, women become solo performers creating theatre from nondramatic sources, performing excerpts from prose and poetry, about historic personalities, and do character and interview performances.

Because of its palpable immediacy and concentration of signs and images, the theatre remains a powerful site for the codification and decodification of concepts and meanings. Indeed, the theatre has existed as a source and reinforcement of both racial and gender stereotypes; however, by the same token, it functions to reject unwanted images and create new ones. Despite the few opportunities available to black women, they continue to use the theatre to enact their own stories and perspectives as illustrated in the three plays I will analyze below. The first play, *Anowa* by Ama Ata Aidoo, is set in an African society at the verge of colonial intervention; next is *Wine in the Wilderness*, by Alice Childress, who uses the revolution of the sixties as its dramatic backdrop; and lastly, *Long Time Since Yesterday*, by P. J. Gibson, about a group of middle-aged women interacting among themselves, reflecting on their lives and looking into the future.¹⁶

Anowa by Ama Ata Aidoo is based on a nineteenth century folktale from a matrilineal society, now in present day Ghana, a West African country. The play centers on the title character, her spirited resistance to the restrictions of traditions, and the mindless but frightening changes taking over her community. Rebellious and non-conformist, Anowa resists all efforts to marry her off at an early age and subsume her independent personality to the stifling authority of a husband. When she finally decides to get married, it is to a man of her choice, and to the consternation of everyone, especially Badua her mother, her choice is none other than Kofi Ako—the local wastrel. After her marriage, Anowa refuses to stay in the town that is now a shadow of itself, paralysed into inaction by the frequent slave raids which feed the European slave market on the coast. With her husband, she begins to trade in hide and skins supplying the alternative market also springing up on the coast, and although it is not as lucrative as the traffic in human merchandise which she loathes vehemently, the husband and wife team gradually builds up a modest capital. Desiring children, Kofi implores Anowa to stop trudging through the forest with him, believing that the tough life prevents her from becoming pregnant. But Anowa is reluctant to leave her job, and encourages Kofi to marry a second wife who will be able to give him all the children he wants. Kofi refuses, giving no special reason and to Anowa's horror, Kofi decides to invest their capital in slave trading and quickly becomes rich and materialistic, amassing all the manifestations of the colonial power that will soon subdue their land—a victorian mansion complete with its furniture and even a portrait of Queen Victoria prominently displayed in the living room. Disgusted,

Anowa shuns his wealth and regularly confronts him with its dehumanizing source. Kofi counters by ridiculing her values; he threatens to brand her a witch and send her in disgrace back to their town. Finally, in a public showdown, Anowa discovers Kofi's problem—he is impotent. His lack of manhood exposed, Kofi shoots himself, and Anowa, who still loves him but is unwilling to inherit his bloody wealth, commits suicide by drowning.¹⁷

In very terse, economical language, Ama Ata Aidoo examines the concept of womanhood in nineteenth century Ghanaian society as daughter, wife, mother, and worker; she also tackles the relationship between mother and daughter, a subject not often discussed in African writings. Badua, as Anowa's mother and Osam's wife, is a strong woman in her own right; she knows what she wants and will not let her husband take undue advantage of her. She successfully prevents him from apprenticing their daughter to the Priestess cult where, to prevent them from speaking in their own voices, assertive women are subsumed under the control of a divine power which then allows them to speak with authority as prophetesses. However, Badua capitulates to the patriarchal construction of womanhood, stating that "a good woman does not have a brain or a mouth" (33), regardless of her capabilities. It is this compromise that brings her on a collision course with a daughter who decides to challenge the assumed authority of the patriarchy directly. The exchange between mother and daughter is often very acrimonious, and reaches its bitter peak on the eve of Anowa's self-styled wedding and departure from the town.

Anowa: Please, Mother, remove your witch's mouth from our marriage.

[some stage directions]

Osam: *Hei*, Anowa, what is wrong with you? Are you mad? How can you speak like that to your mother?

Anowa: But Father, Mother does not treat me like her daughter.

Badua: And so, you call me a witch? The thing is, I wish I were a witch so that I could protect you from your folly.

Anowa: I do not need your protection, Mother. (18)

A couple of lines later, Anowa delivers the parting shot,

Anowa: And now, Mother, I am going, so take your witchery to eat in the sea. (18)

A very disturbing scene, but which strongly reflects the burden patriarchal expectations place on women. All Badua wants to do is to fulfil her role as a

good mother and make her daughter as happy as possible within the limited role the society prescribes for women. Thus while she resists efforts to constrain her daughter's voice within the dubious authority of priesthood, she is ready to force her into marriage because she will be under an authority she can occasionally rankle and will still be able to find social and personal fulfilment as "a human woman," able to take "her place at meetings among the men and women of the clan" (12).

Anowa's real dilemma is the confusion and contradictions inherent in a double patriarchy. At the beginning, when she decides to confront her society, she knows what to expect and has mapped out her strategies accordingly, and for awhile, she succeeds. Her troubles begin when she is suddenly confronted with a new culture, whose values she rejects but which nonetheless imposes itself on her, derailing her carefully planned life. Her fate seems sealed when the man in whom she thought she had finally found a like-mind, turns full volt to cash in on the glitz of the new culture. And to justify his betrayal, he reverts to the traditions they had both rejected, exercising a more repressive authority over her.

All the same, *Anowa* is a tribute to the fighting spirits of millions of African women and their resistance methods to the foreign powers that take over their land, life and cultures, but whose experiences go unsung in modern history books. It is at once the tragic story of a young woman caught at a cultural crossroads that turns her life upside down, but it is also the courageous story of a spirited woman who, against all odds, is able to rise above the shackles of exploitative traditions and even confront the monster-headed double patriarchy.

Alice Childress' *Wines in the Wilderness* (*Wines*) is particularly significant in the context of the image and role of the woman during the radical sixties and the Black Power movement. Written around 1969, the play takes a perceptive look at the revolution and its record in reversing the oppression of African-American men and women. The play begins with the background noise and confusion of the revolution raging outside, and Oldtimer, a name-alias which reveals his role in the play, runs into Bill's apartment with his loot to escape arrest. Bill is a middle-class African-American artist who is waiting for a real life model to complete his triptych of the stages of African womanhood. Two parts have been completed—the first, 'Black Girlhood' is all innocence, and the last, "Mother Africa, regal, black womanhood in her noblest form" (125). The middle one, still an empty canvas, will represent "the lost woman . . . what the society has made out of our women" (126). Presently, Tommy, the expected model is brought in, 'discovered' and befriended by Sonny-Man and Cynthia, a married middle-class couple.

Although Tommy is poor and uneducated, having had to abandon school at an early age to help out her family financially, and now recently dispossessed by

the rioting, she has a clear perception of her goals and personal worth; she respects people for what they are, and not for what they represent. However, her confidence is soon severely tested as the middle-class trio, with Oldtimer looking on, ridicule her lack of middle-class sensibilities. Bill in particular relentlessly humiliates her for her lack of knowledge of historical black personalities and commitment to the revolution. He rattles off the troubles with black women: they "always got [their] mind on food"; "all wanta be great brains. Leave somethin' for the man to do." They "don't know a damn thing 'bout bein' feminine." He advises: "Give in sometime. It won't kill you" (136-137). Bill, along with the others, simply fails to see beyond Tommy's mismatched appearance into the person within, to see her as a woman engaged in a permanent struggle of survival from racism, poverty, and gender stereotype. Since she does not fit into their middle-class, assimilative concept and views of the revolution, she cannot exist except in the role of oppositional difference in which they have cast her.

Childress demonstrates the power of images and symbols when in a telephone conversation, Bill pours forth accolades on his ideal image of Mother Africa. Tommy, with her back to him and not knowing that she is actually supposed to represent the "lost woman," believes he is describing her and she becomes transformed—truly regal and beautiful. Confronted with real beauty and royalty in the flesh, Bill cannot see the 'lost woman' in Tommy any longer and in the following tender moments between them, they recall their true past. Rather than seeing herself as a lost woman, Tommy knows and reveres her history, she has a deep sense of her own heritage, and she is intelligent despite her lack of formal education. By contrast, Bill's historical knowledge is shallow and impersonal and he resents his family background. However, when Oldtimer returns the following morning, he reveals the African Queen is not Tommy but a painting, a fictional work with no realistic model. A disillusioned Tommy tells the pompous middle-class men, Bill and Sonny-Man, and the real-life poor-copy of 'Mother Africa'—Cynthia—the full meaning of racism, and how much difference there is between her and the assimilated ones: "When they say 'nigger', just dry-long-so, they mean the educated you and the uneducated me" (147-8).

In *Wines*, Alice Childress looks at the impact of gender, race and class on the Africa-American woman and suggests that the revolution is not complete until the three become part of the fundamentals of the struggle. In a masterful display of symbols, Childress juxtaposes the rioting outside with the state of Bill's apartment, to indict the operative concepts of the revolution and thereby challenges its leaders to examine both their positions and precepts of the struggle. She codifies the background of the indiscriminate violence unleashed by the revolution into a signifier of what the revolution is turning into—looting,

selfishness, dehumanization and inbred exploitation. Bill's apartment, the site of the action, is also significant; in a state of unfinished repairs, having been torn apart for a re-decoration that will reflect the new black awareness, it symbolizes the level of social and political awareness of the middle-class occupier of the apartment—unformed and incomplete. Like the room, Bill's revolutionary ideals are in a mess and need direction, but instead of searching for a realistic solution, he is preoccupied with the triptych, a show piece to represent the revolution, but whose original composition is revealed for what it is by the end of the play—a meaningless symbol.

Although the self-styled revolutionaries mouth slogans like "black is beautiful," they deny them with their actions, as Tommy acknowledges when she accusingly asks Bill, "Then how come it is that I don't feel beautiful when you talk to me?!!" (139) The truth is that for Bill and his like, the beautiful one is a painted picture. Even though Bill chastises Oldtimer for looting, he and his middle-class friends have no program to help him overcome the years of oppression that reduce him to having to steal for survival. Rather, they participate in a more insidious type of looting—robbing the less fortunate ones of their dignity and humanity. Until Tommy comes along, nobody cares to know Oldtimer's real name; they are content to keep him as a hanger-on to grace their middle-class pretentiousness. They have no scruples in exploiting Tommy's multiple marginalization in the society as a poor, uneducated African-American woman; even Oldtimer who is as economically marginalized as Tommy is an accomplice, for he agrees with Bill's negative description of a woman he has not met.

Frustrated and hurt by the condescension she experiences at the apartment, Tommy resolutely rejects the images they pile on her. She rejects the label of the castrating matriarch parroted by Cynthia when she advises Tommy to "let the black man have his manhood again. You have to give it back, Tommy," to which Tommy retorts simply, "I didn't take it from him, how I'm gonna give it back?" (134) She recalls her mother's struggles to survive after her father walked out on them. Unlike her middle-class friends, she has not internalized the fundamentals of the white culture; the aspects she has adopted in her everyday life are external accessories that can be put on and taken off at will.

It is Tommy, uneducated but generous, forgiving, resourceful, and toughened by circumstances from childhood, who brings true meaning to the freedom struggle; she it is who defines the revolution as a struggle against racism, sexism and classicism. Unless so perceived and confronted, the revolution will be like Tommy's full name, "Tomorrow," a name that sounds "like a promise that can never happen," (137) and whose meaning will remain empty like Bill's middle canvas, waiting indefinitely for the "lost woman." Fortunately, Bill begins a more

authentic and realistic painting as the play closes, signalling hope for a new revolution that will be more meaningful. Tommy, on whose body the multiple forms of oppression have been deeply etched, belongs to the centre of the triptych; she is the wine in the wilderness, the moving spirit and true meaning of liberation.

Ingeniously situated in the 'present,' the play *Long Time Since Yesterday*, (*Long Time*) by P. J. Gibson, brings five former schoolmates—Laveer, Alisa, Thelma, Babbs and Panzi—together at the funeral ceremony of another schoolmate, Janeen. Although, they have all become highly successful professional middle-class women, they have sprung from different economic and family backgrounds. The reunion format provides them with the opportunities to examine the choices they have made in their personal lives and careers, and to find ways of coping with the future.

Laveer is a non-conformist, who at an early age rebels against the upper middle-class style of her parents. An artist, she has realised her childhood dreams to be successful in her career, travel all over the world, and enjoy life to the fullest. She shuns marriage as an institution that will compromise her ambitions and repress her style, but she does not lack admirers who respect her as a person. Next is Alisa, a product of foster homes, her parents having walked out on her and her brother and sister, intimidated by what they saw as a hopeless life. Her childhood poverty is the driving force behind her success. She invests in real estate and is the director of a preschool program. She is also happily married with children and finds fulfilment both in her job and family. Dark-skinned in a family of light-skinned African-Americans, Thelma is single and still smarts at the discrimination she experienced in family circles on the account of her difference, even though she is a highly respected medical doctor. With the support of her friends, particularly Babbs, she is working to overcome the pain of rejection. Babbs on the other hand is so light-skinned she can pass for a full white and her job as a news anchorperson feeds her glamorous personality. A divorcee, she is beset with self doubts under the ambiguous role in which her skin color casts her in American society—a convenient non-threatening minority quota for corporate white America, and a safe sexual outlet for both white and black men wanting a woman from the other race. Almost an alcoholic, she vacillates between despair and defiance, and she recalls with nostalgia and disappointment the radical 1960s. Finally, there is Panzi, a physical therapist and an avid chess player with a string of women's championship titles to her name. She comes from a comfortable background but feels rejected by her beautiful, self-centered mother. She is a closeted lesbian who is forced to come out in a showdown between her and Laveer.

Janeen whose funeral ceremony has brought all friends together, is presented in a series of flashbacks from early childhood to the time of her death. She appears first with Laveer as a young girl of twelve, unsure about herself, but desperately in need of affection and approval. Later, in more recent scenes with Laveer and Panzi, she is brought back to help them unravel the mystery of her suicide, and generally to give form and meaning to the gathering of the friends. Janeen was a product of a stultifying pretentious upper-middle class background, but unlike her friend Laveer, Janeen was too insecure to leave the safety of the familiar and instead she got into a marriage of convenience to please her family. She readily internalized all the negative labels people used on her and parroting her grandfather, she referred to herself as, "no backbone, . . . don't have straight legs" (217). Yet she was a very creative, highly imaginative and sensitive person who hid her insecurity under a bubbly laughter.

The interaction among the women takes place largely in an atmosphere of good-natured teasing, gentle admonition and supportive criticism, all geared at helping each other grow and cope with problems. However, the relationship between Panzi and Laveer, Janeen's two best friends, is not so cordial; Panzi resents Laveer because of her friendship with Janeen and also because Laveer reminds her of her mother. Unfortunately, Laveer simply does not like Panzi, thereby fueling the subtle competition game the latter plays in her mind for Janeen's attentions until it culminates in Janeen's suicide.

Gibson's objective in this play seems to be to get together a group of middle-aged women, to review their life after the radical sixties that liberated women from sexism and African-Americans from racism. In quick broad strokes, she examines the new stereotypes or 'backlash' unleashed by the success or failure of both liberation movements. The play offers no clear comfortable answers; there are some gains and there are some regressions, some stereotypes have been jettisoned, and some have merely changed form. Laveer and Thelma are held up against the myth of the frustrated-career-focused-single women whose biological clock is ticking away. They are fulfilled in the lives they have chosen, just as Alisa is with her choice of family and career. Alisa throws a spanner into the stereotypical image of abandoned African-American children who grow up to become 'welfare queens' sponging on the state. She survives against all odds and reunites her siblings, in addition to having a stable family of her own. Meanwhile, the Babbs' character recalls the classical tragic mulatto, but with the help of her friends, she will resist that imagery. Panzi does not fit into the dragon stereotype of the lesbian either, since for years she has maintained a platonic friendship with Janeen even though she is in love with her; she finally seduces her because her warped sense of competition with Laveer for Janeen's friendship gets the better of her devotion to Janeen. The real tragedy that occurs

is with Janeen, who has internalized all the instruments of oppression used to denigrate her gender so that she has no faith in herself and has become excessively dependent on others.

Conclusion

Each of these plays looks at what it is to be a woman, and how to survive as one in a patriarchal and colonial society inscribed by class, race and gender. From Aidoo's play set in the nineteenth century, to Gibson's play situated in the present, African women's writings have determinedly used feminist criticism. Based on their specific experiences as members of a race and gender, these authors are resolved to speak in their own distinct voices. Even though neither continental nor diaspora African women fully subscribed to the feminist movement at its inception for reasons examined above, it does not mean they are unaware of the fact of their oppression, as Tommy says, "I don't have to wait for anybody's by-your-leave to be a 'Wine in the Wilderness'" (148). Brown-Guillory puts the roles of the two liberation movements in a correct perspective saying "black women, in particular, made significant gains as a result of the Black Power and women's movements."¹⁸ What both the gender and racial liberation struggles have done is to give black feminist thought an anchor and a platform respectively to structure and present their own perspectives.

Notes

1. This statement is made with particular reference to the controversy among African-American critics in the mid 1980s regarding the relevance of postmodern criticism in particular deconstruction, to the African-American experience in America. See Barbara Christian, "The Race for Theory" *Cultural Critique* Vol. 6, 1985/86: 51-64; and Joyce A. Joyce, Henry Louis Gates Jr., and Houston Baker Jr., in *New Literary History* Vol. 18.2 (Winter) 1987: 335- 371. It has also been informed by a controversy I inadvertently generated during a conference on "Feminisms and Cultural Imperialism: The Politics of Difference" at Cornell university in 1989, when I made an analogy between the reserved reception of white-based feminist criticism among African and African-American women. My observation that because feminist critical perspective is framed by colonialism in Africa and racism in America, deconstruction theory is an inadequate analytical tool, provoked a sharp response from Gayatri Spivak, and later, a spate of private and public rejoinders between some African critics, Spivak, and myself.

2. Colonial imperialism is used to include the minority status of African-Americans as well as the colonial occupation of Africa by western countries.

3. Angela Davis, in *Women, Race and Class* 173-180 develops the racist and patriarchal possession of women to its most brutal manifestation under slavery—the white master's wanton rape of female slaves.

4. Barbara Christian, *Black Feminist Criticism* 2.

5. Green and Khan, *Making A Difference* 1.

6. 2.

7. Carole Boyce Davies, "Introduction: Feminist Consciousness and African Literary Criticism" in Ngambika, eds. Davies and Adams Graves.

8. Sue-Ellen Case, *Performing Feminisms* 2.

9. Wilkerson, "A Raisin in the Sun: Anniversary of an American Classic" in *Performing Feminisms* 119.

10. *Understanding Contemporary American Drama* 243.

11. xii.

12. Case, *Feminism and Theatre* 95.

13. Wilkerson, "A Raisin in the Sun" 119.

14. Brown-Guillory in *Their Place on Stage*, analyses and classifies African-American theatre from the Harlem Renaissance to the 1980s; only the theatre of the sixties centers on both verbal and physical violence (27).

15. *Medea Myth* by Dan Plato, and *Cloud Nine* by Caryl Churchill are two radical plays that specifically require cross-gender casting, and although *Cloud Nine* with some scenes set in Africa, calls for a native, no African actually appears in the complex gender, racial, generational and sexual juxtapositions of the play.

16. *Anowa*, London: Longman Drumbeat, 1970; *Wines in the Wilderness*, in *Wines in the Wilderness*, ed. Elizabeth Brown-Guillory (NY: Greenwood Press, 1990), and *Long Time Since Yesterday* in *Black Thunder*, ed. William Branch (NY: Mentor, 1992). Subsequent references to the plays will be from the edition here cited.

17. In a controversial production of the play in a Nigerian university, in 1987, the director, a male, rewrites *Anowa* as a mother, she gets pregnant and lives happily ever after with Kofi and his wealth from the slave trade.

18. Brown-Guillory, *Their Place On Stage* 114.

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