



THE TRANSFORMATION OF NTOZAKE SHANGE'S CHOREOPOEM ' FOR COLORED GIRLS...' FROM A FRAGMENTED PIECE TO FILM ADAPTATIONS

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ABSTRACT

Ntozake Shange's masterpiece 'For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow Is Enuf', is a milestone in the African-American literature. It is considered as one of the most creative and innovative theatrical pieces in America. The choreopoem, as Shange calls it, has seen evolving stages from being a random collection of poems to a coherent form meant for a performance Onstage and then to its projection Onscreen. This paper discusses how Ntozake Shange's most famous work is adapted into different genres from time to time, making its course dynamic and not static.

Key words Ntozake Shange, Choreopoem, Colored Girls, African-American, Black- feminism, Broadway, Adaptation.

INTRODUCTION

The evolution of Ntozake Shange's Choreopoem 'For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow Is Enuf', from a fragmented piece to a Broadway production, then to its adaptation into a telefilm in 1982, and a movie directed by Tyler Perry in 2010, and also to more creative innovations.

Shange's important works deal with the issues of racism and black feminism. Her major concern is the emancipation of black women in the society. She talks about their problems not only in the colour conscious white society, but also in the patriarchal black community.

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Her works are a kind of powerful statements on their plight and are based on her first hand experiences as a black woman in America. Born as Paullette Williams in 1948, into a well-cultured , upper middle class African-American family, she showed an ardent interest in poetry from an early age. She completed her graduation and post graduation in American studies from Barnard College and University of Southern California respectively. The college life, particularly was very stressful to her. She married during the first year of her college, but that marriage did not last longer.

The depression caused due to separation forced her to attempt suicide several times. But when she decided to move on, she emerged as a potentially stronger personality. She changed her name to 'Ntozake Shange'-a name with a powerful meaning itself. Ntozake in African language means "a woman who comes with her own thing", and Shange means "one who walks with lions". True to the meaning of her new name, Shange has tried to live her life on her own terms without any doubt or fear. '*For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow Is Enuf*', gave her identity in the literary world and there was no looking back for her after that. It is her signature work, beautifully blending the elements of poetry, music, dance and drama. The poetry in this piece of art, particularly, dazzles and mesmerizes everyone, thus pointing towards the artistic excellence of the writer.

Shange wrote some poems during her California days which later became the part of her choreopoem '*For Colored Girls....*'. Many poems were added when she moved to New York. She with her friend Paula Moss and few others had already started performing those poems in front of small groups of audiences and were overwhelmed by the reception. Ifa Bayeza, sister of Ntozake and a playwright, who was present at one of the readings of poems, sensed the promising nature of her sister's art. She suggested her sister that they needed a director, Ntozake reluctant at first, agreed to meet Oz Scott who was destined to become the director of choreopoem's Broadway production in 1976 as well as of its television film adaptation in 1982 (Shange,2010). A major hit on Broadway, the play ran successfully for two years. Still, there are numerous productions of it on different theatres every year.

The Success of '*For Colored Girls.....*' was astonishing and Shange became a star overnight. But with this success also came a bitter criticism claiming that she has put black males in a bad light through her work. She was so disturbed with the criticism that she stopped performing as one of the actors in the play, after a few initial weeks (West,2010). She justified herself by saying that she wrote the poems for colored girls, not intending to defame black males. She was against the patriarchy in black community, and not against the black men (Shange,2010). The characters in her play are all women; seven in number who are unnamed with only a colour associated with them as their identity. They voice their experiences in a sexist and racist society, finally coming together joining hand in hand, making an ensemble and forming a rainbow of their own. Each one of them is important,



contributing an unique colour to the rainbow. They celebrate sisterhood and feel completed in an organic whole, without any male counterpart. Such an arrangement in the play invited criticism from many sides to which the poetess responded commendably.

In the telefilm, Shange and Scott not only added male characters but also made changes in the sequence of poems. It opened with Ntozake Shange working on a typewriter and ended with her talking to her infant daughter Savannah. The whole telefilm is filmed in different flashes bringing the poems one by one. The lines of poem 'Abortion Cycle' which were said by 'Lady in Blue' in the original are given to the character portraying the role of 'Lady in Yellow', in the telefilm, thus giving a hint that the pregnancy was an outcome of one night stand (West,2010). Many people believed Shange added male characters to vindicate the charges against her and that the male characters in her film lacked significance (O'Connor,1982). The makers of the telefilm made every possible effort to cater to the taste of television audiences, but the changes made by them were not welcomed by those who loved the play originally. When Tyler Perry announced his decision to adapt the play for his upcoming movie in 2010, it was about to take a huge leap from small screen to big screen, almost after two decades.

Whenever a masterpiece of some artist is selected for adaptation, expectations are always high from the adaptors and the same thing happened with Shange, Scott and Perry. Tyler Perry opted to adapt Shange's choreopoem nearly after three decades of its Broadway production and his reputation was at stake. Many people would not believe that Perry could do justice to a serious piece of art, when he is most famous for depicting outrageous, melodramatic comic characters on stage. Perry has also adapted his own dramas into films, but the films are considered to be too different from his original plays. He is assumed to make many changes, while adapting his own pieces (Heartley,2011). This time he was adapting the finest work of another artist and people were skeptical about his potential.

Perry himself was aware that he was dealing with an intense, feminist piece of art whose earlier adaptation was not as successful as the original play. He wanted an effective and powerful characterization for his movie. He added three more women characters in his movie, while the original choreopoem has only seven. He specifically named the characters which were portrayed by actresses like Anika Noni Rose, Janet Jackson, Kerry Washington, Kimberly Elise, Loretta Devine, Macy Gray, Phylicia Rashad, Tessa Thompson, Thandie Newton and Whoopi Goldberg. Besides, male characters were also added for sufficiently supporting the course of the plot. The declaration of this adaptation by Tyler Perry increased the curiosity of viewers, making it one of the most awaited movies of the year 2010. Perry used 14 poems from the original, which has 20 poems in total (Perry,2010). Also, he curtailed the original title and has used only a part of it by naming his movie 'For Colored Girls'. These changes were most apparent when one sees the movie and reads the original text.



One thing which was missing from the telefilm as well as Perry's movie was choreography, the real essence of choreopoem. The original piece has dance, music, poetry, drama, movement, dynamism, altogether. But both of the adaptations seem lacking in it (King,2010). In the telefilm, however a character playing 'Sechita' is seen to express herself solely through her dance moves. In Perry's movie also, there is some dancing when Anika Noni Rose and Tessa Thompson attended their dance sessions, but that is not significant. Perry's movie, in particular leaves the viewer with a sad feeling and pessimistic mood, whereas the original piece makes the reader to feel triumphant, despite all the oddities and difficulties in life (Young,2010). The original work was full of poetry, and the adaptations sound prosaic. The choreopoem was targeted for avant garde audiences, while the adaptations had wider range of viewers who might not connect to the idea behind the adaptations (Rivera,2011). Whatever the reasons may be, one thing is for sure-adaptations of successful works would always be prone to comparisons with the originals. Perry's movie, though a considered as a commercial hit movie, got mixed reviews from the critics.

When Shange met the characters of Perry's movie for lunch on the sets, she was welcomed warmly by them. She was astonished to find that every character has her own story related to her work '*For Colored Girls.....*'. She never thought that the poems which she wrote expressing her feelings were bound to become the voice of every colored girl in America or anywhere in the world. She never dreamt about her choreopoem becoming a masterpiece in the field of literature, and a source of inspiration for others. She feels a sense of responsibility towards those who find her work motivating at the most distressed time of their lives. She added the poem '*Positive*' later. As a writer of the society, she felt it was her duty to deal with the subject of AIDS and bring an awareness among the people (Shange,2010). She is very conscious about improvising her work, and so has made revisions and changes from time to time.

When white artists from Kentucky chose to perform her play, they focused on the class rather than race as their theme. The Brazilian translation of choreopoem do not use the word colored in the text. People have done the play representing women's costume colors as different decades. Some have represented the play using different settings like beauty shops, hair salons, prisons, radio stations, high school gathering, etc (Shange,2010). The social media is flooded with the videos of girls singing the monologues from choreopoem, as if voicing their own feelings. All these experiments have added to the glory of '*For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/ When the Rainbow is Enuf*'. This work, today has a wider appeal and is intended for all those women who thought of suicide at one time or other in their lives, but embraced life with a courage and positive attitude.



Any work of art can sustain a vitality and vigour in its form, if it is evolving with the passage of time. 'For Colored Girls...' is one of the most befitting examples of this. Its popular appeal and flexibility to adapt in variant situations as well as genres has taken it to an altogether different plane of limitless possibilities and experiments. It has widened the scope of artistic imagination and creation. 'For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow is Enuf' has become an epitome of metamorphosis which is ever ready to embrace change (West,2010). It is growing and maturing with every passing day. In the words of the poetess herself :- "When I set out three decades ago for New York, I never realized what *for colored girls* was destined to become. I look back now with awe as gray slate clouds, ominous and dense, give way to a pastel prism of color, dancing cross the sky. And I look forward to discovering even more colors to add to the rainbow that is this colored girl's wonderful journey." (2010).

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