

“WOMEN RELINQUISH ALL PERSONAL RIGHTS IN FRONT OF A MAN”: ANALYZING SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN NTOZAKE SHANGE’S *FOR COLORED GIRLS*¹

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Abstract: The presence of gender violence in the media has led to the misconception that it is a social problem of the twenty-first century. However, in the literature of the last century, it can be seen that this phenomenon has always been present. Through the analysis of the play *for colored girls*, written by Ntozake Shange, this essay will explore the situation of African-American women in American society in the twentieth century, focusing on the constant presence and threat of sexual violence suffered by the seven protagonists in a society where they suffer double discrimination.

Key words: sexual violence, African American, literature, trauma.

Título en español: “Women Relinquish All Personal Rights in Front of a Man”: análisis de la violencia sexual en *For Coloured Girls* de Ntozake Shange

Resumen: La presencia de violencia de género en los medios de comunicación nos ha llevado a la idea errónea de que se trata de un problema social del siglo XXI, pero si nos sumergimos en la literatura del siglo pasado, descubriremos que este tema siempre ha estado presente. En este ensayo, exploraremos la situación de las mujeres afroamericanas en la sociedad estadounidense en el siglo XX a través del análisis de la obra de teatro *for colored girls* de Ntozake Shange, centrándonos en la constante presencia y la amenaza de la violencia sexual que las siete protagonistas padecen en una sociedad donde son doblemente discriminadas.

Palabras Clave: violencia sexual, afroamericana, literatura, trauma.

1. Introduction

The decade of the 1970s in America was very important for the improvement of the situation of white and African American women. During this decade, the so called second wave of Feminism, together with the Women’s Liberation Movement, which had started its political activism in the early 1960s and developed until the 1990s,

¹ Date of reception: 15/07/2013

Date of acceptance: 13/10/2013

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attacked the predominant patriarchal rule. Precisely, one of the major achievements reached by these pro-women's rights' groups at that time was the recognition of the abuse (especially sexual and physical) many white women had been enduring within the privacy of their homes. However, it is important to pay attention to the adjective "white" in the previous sentence because the situation was different for white and African American women.

Feminism, as a political movement, did not contemplate the situation of the African American woman, who was doubly discriminated; on the one hand, they were racially discriminated with respect to white women and, on the other hand, they were also sexually discriminated with respect to black and white men. In this sense, we agree with Deshazer's words when she says that African American women were treated as "displaced" persons "on the borderlands of the boundaries":

Where [...] do women of color live? Doubly displaced by institutionalized racism as well as sexism, women of color have traditionally been marginalized on the borderlands of the boundaries. There they have too often had to fight not only white patriarchs but Black men and white women as well as to proclaim their centrality in any presence. There they have become warriors raging against their own invisibility. (Deshazer 1998: 91)

It is clear that African American women underwent violence inside and outside their own community. Thus, during this decade, the term "black feminism" (coined during the late nineteenth century to refer to this discriminating situation for black women) was given special relevance. The purpose of using this term was, on the one hand, making a consciousness raising process to call society's attention about black women, and, on the other hand, highlighting the hypocrisy hidden in the precepts of feminism, which said that if black women were oppressed they also had enough strength to cope with it, as bell hooks explains:

That the black woman was victimized by sexist and racist oppression was seen as insignificant, for woman's suffering however great could not take precedence over male pain. Ironically, while the recent women's movement called attention to the fact that black women were dually victimized by racist and sexist oppression, white feminists tended to romanticize the black female experience rather than discuss the

negative impact of that oppression. When feminists acknowledge in one breath that black women are victimized and in the same breath emphasize their strength, they imply that though black women are oppressed they manage to circumvent the damaging impact of oppression by being strong. (hooks 1982: 6)

We can observe, thus, that the African American question, particularly the female African American question was at stake in the society of the period. It is not strange then, that the world of the arts also reflects this concern. In fact, the 1960s and especially the 1970s have been considered as the two most productive decades in African American literature and history. Not in vain, the Black Arts Movement³, which promoted the immense talent that African American artists displayed in their works, developed during these two decades.

The emergence of this movement was of special importance for African American women artists. Due to their impulse, we can appreciate the efforts carried out to find a genuine female voice “adding a gender perspective that widened and completed the delineation established by male [...] artists” (Barrios 2003: 611). Actually, in the 1970s, theater written, produced and performed by women became a means for searching for a “place of their own” and expressing what and how they felt in the society that oppressed and repressed them: “African American female playwrights, as displaced and invisible beings, made an attempt to redescribe their cultural presence and reinscribe their human experiences in their artistic quest to find a place they could call their own” (Barrios 2003: 613). More specifically, one of the most noticeable and representative figures within the wide spectrum of women playwrights was Ntozake Shange with her groundbreaking opera prima *for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf*⁴, which has been considered as the precursor of something that could be called “black feminist theatre” (cf. Anderson 2008).

³ The Black Arts Movement was founded by Amiri Baraka as a symbol after Malcolm X Assassination. This movement developed from the middle of the 1960s (around 1965) to the mid-1970s (1975/1976) and its major achievement was the introduction of new ethnic visions into the mainstream white US.

⁴ Hereafter *for colored girls*.

2. *For colored girls* and the topic of gender violence: The issue of sexual abuse and African American women

Ntozake Shange is an African American writer who has always been concerned with the black women's situation especially in the South. Her first play, *For colored girls*, has been defined by Mar Gallego as an attempt to create images of African American women away from typical stereotypes: "for colored girls, is basically the best reflection of her intention to debunk old-fashioned male images about women and to create fresh and alternative ways of redefining African American women" (Gallego 2002: 208). That is to say, Shange tries to demystify stereotypical images and views applied to African American women since plantation times. It is important to take into account that, for Shange, there are no differences between white and "colored" girls when they confront sexism, among other patriarchal attitudes. The main difference between them is that African American women are forced to confront and fight sexist situations and racist ones.

For colored girls is a play published in 1974 after the success reached with its performance in front of an exclusive female audience at a tavern called the Bachanal (Berkeley, California) a year before. This play established Shange as an innovative, even Avant garde artist, who plays with all the possibilities of exploiting the dramatic genre with all the visual chances it offers. In fact, she creates a new dramatic mode with this play: the choreopoem, which, as Neal A. Lester, explains serves to introduce a genuine female African American genre that balances tradition an innovation in their claim for self-identity and to fight oppression:

Shange developed the choreopoem form as a new genre in American theater, a form rooted in an African tradition of movement, song, music, and emotional catharsis. As a black person, as a black woman, as a black feminist, as a black artist, and as a black female artist, Shange champions the woman of color specifically and people of color generally as they move toward optimal self-consciousness, positive self-identity and unlimited self-realization in an oppressive and blatantly sexist and racist modern society. (Lester 1990: 718)

In this choreopoem, Ntozake Shange portrays a group of seven anonymous women and can only be identified by the color of the clothes they are wearing, completing the color-scale of the rainbow plus brown, that symbolizes mother earth. Therefore, we will find lady in green, lady in red, lady in yellow, lady in purple, lady in blue, lady in orange and lady in brown as main characters, all equally important situations within the main plot. That these women are anonymous is not a product of mere chance. As Inés Cuenca explains, this trait provides the play with a sense of collectivity, of union and female empowerment:

Las siete protagonistas de la pieza no tienen nombre, anonimato que confiere a las experiencias individuales un carácter colectivo. [...] Todos estos nombres están escritos intencionadamente en minúsculas [...] para retratar la pobreza y abuso de la mujer de color. [...] el hecho de que ningún color destaque sobre otro y de que se complementen para formar un arco iris, apunta a los dos objetivos principales de esta obra: el primero, renunciar a la primacía de una piel por encima de otra, respetando las diferencias y pluralidad de voces; el segundo objetivo, potenciar la unión entre mujeres, simbolizada en el arco iris. (Cuenca 2005: 299-300)

As we can observe in the previous quotation, this text emphasizes the strength of union in their fight against injustice. In this choreopoem, the absolute protagonist is the African American woman during her authentic everyday life. Thus, for example, we will find the case of an independent, “liberated” woman who decides with whom to sleep and who does not like men to stay the morning after; the case of a young teenager who is starting to discover and plays with her sexuality, facing the risk of an unwanted pregnancy (which raises the sticky topic of abortion); there is also the case of a beaten wife who tries to protect her children from her violent husband and, of course, we find the case of a woman who happens to be raped by a friend, an experience that the seven “colored” girls seem to share or, at least, know about. Therefore, we can assume that Shange proves how the African American woman continues to be an easy target for rape even in the twentieth century. The “innovation” (if it can be considered as such) she introduces in this play is that rape here does not happen outside the borders of the black community, but within the community where these women were supposed to be protected. Shange is denouncing the risky situation these African American women are facing.

It is our purpose in this essay to analyze sexual violence as a case of gender violence in for colored girls. In this sense, we will be paying attention to one of the most notable black feminist concerns, especially as we are dealing with a case of “date rape”⁵ and the posterior isolation and abandonment the victim feels, as Lisa M. Anderson states:

Shange covers many black feminist issues through the characters. Shange’s choreopoem is one of the first performance pieces to deal explicitly with what we now call “date rape,” acknowledging in the mid-1970s that rape is most likely experienced not as assault by a stranger, but rather as assault by an acquaintance. (Anderson 2008: 10)

Hence, we encounter a very clear example of this type of rape within the play, but before entering directly into the analysis, we would like to revise the literature around gender violence, rape and the relationship that has been kept between sexual violence and African American women throughout history.

During the decade of the 1970s, the term “domestic violence” was introduced in the popular vocabulary, together with “gender violence”. At that time, the old patriarchal rule which indicated that a wife was part of her husband’s property still prevailed. Therefore, if a husband considered that his wife deserved to be beaten up, he had the right to do it, for the privacy of the home prevented law and order authorities from intervening. It is precisely due to this inherent sense of privacy that the abuses committed were either not denounced or, in the few rare cases which were, this denunciation was omitted because the area of marriage was a place where legal authorities should not interfere. However, in the field of the arts, especially in literature, the denunciation of this unfair treatment for women was explicit.

According to Kathleen J. Ferraro, the term “domestic violence” is used to refer to “a code for physical and emotional brutality within intimate relationships, usually heterosexual” (Lawson and Shakinovsky 2002: 2) Domestic violence encompasses a

⁵ Sexual violence perpetrated by a friend or a person you know, not by a stranger.

wide range of abuses usually committed against women and perpetrated by their (ex) boyfriends, (ex) husbands, and even fathers and brothers⁶. Although domestic violence does not respect social, economic, class or race boundaries, it is important to notice that this type of violence only occurred within working-class or marginalized groups of people, such as the African Americans. In this sense, Harne & Radford explain the power strategies at work behind this extended conception:

Power structures constructed around 'race' and ethnicity, economics and class, age, disability and sexuality interact with those of patriarchy in constructing the prejudice and discrimination in the wider culture. While, as argued above, the occurrence of domestic violence does not respect social divisions, its nature reflects the wider power relations and cultural norms of specific societies. In consequence, while there are many common forms of domestic violence, some forms are culturally specific and others impact in particular ways of minority ethnic groups of women. (Harne & Radford 2008: 9)

As we can observe, domestic violence does not only happen within poor, marginalized communities; the truth is that domestic abuse helps to keep the established patriarchal social system, and it proved to be another means to discriminate black people, especially black women. Within the label domestic violence, there are usually three main subtypes of abuse, which are generally coexistent: physical abuse, psychological abuse and the one we will be dealing with in this essay, sexual abuse.

Nonetheless, the use of the term domestic violence presents some problems. One of the most important concerns is precisely the very use of the adjective "domestic". Many scholars who work on the topic such as, Esperanza Bosch and Victoria Ferrer, point out that the term domestic violence was generally considered as suitable to refer to the cases of abuse committed within the specific boundaries of the house but there were other cases left out. Thus, in their own words: "El uso de términos como doméstico o familiar induce a pensar en un acto privado y personal, en algo que ocurre en la intimidad del hogar, cuando en realidad se trata de un delito, de un problema social, que, además, se ejerce tanto dentro como fuera de la casa" (Bosh y Ferrer, 2002: 21).

⁶ This is a reference to the so called crimes of honor, that is to say, violence perpetrated against women by relatives (mainly fathers and/or brothers) in order to clean the name of the family. This includes killing the woman in cases of rape or disobedience in arranged marriages.

So, what happened in the instances where strangers committed violence against women? Also, what happened with cases which involved children? Thus, as has been mentioned before, in the 1970s, the term gender violence emerges. One of the most accurate definitions for gender violence is provided by Harne y Radford: “[Gender violence] encompasses a wide range of human rights violations, including sexual abuse of children, rape, domestic violence, sexual assault and harassment, trafficking of women and girls and several harmful traditional practices” (Harne y Radford 2008: 18).

As we can read, the term gender violence incorporates domestic violence within its wide domain and includes the victimization of children as well. Today, people tend to use both terms synonymously. For the purpose of this essay, and taking into account that we are going to analyze a case of rape within the friendship circle it would be more accurate to use the most encompassing term which is gender violence, although domestic violence is more extended in the popular vocabulary.

Hence, as mentioned above, the main focus in this essay will be sexual abuse within the black community. However, even before we begin the analysis, we need to define what is meant by sexual abuse, in order to clarify some of the aspects that have linked rape and African American women since the times of slavery. When the term “sexual abuse” comes up in the media, in real conversation or even in a literary work, people immediately tend to think of the word rape, which is the most common form of sexual abuse. However, we cannot forget that rape implies the use of physical and psychological violence since:

Sexual violence is a wide term used to describe rape and the humiliating range of unwanted, pressure and coerced sex that may be experienced in domestic violence contexts. Sexual violence is often perpetrated immediately after a physical assault and commonly accompanied by verbal violence. It is normalized in mainstream representations of heterosexuality, where sex was, and in some cultures still is, represented as ‘duty’ for women. (...) This difficulty with the language of rape, together with the fact that it is an intimate and intrusive violation of the self, makes sexual violence one of the hardest aspects of domestic violence for its victims to talk about. (Harne & Radford 2008: 4-5)

If we pay attention to the previous quotation, we will see that rape is one of the most traumatic forms of domestic violence because, for women, it is very difficult to assume that their most private, intimate self has been destroyed for good. Furthermore, this cruel act is even more traumatic if performed by a member of the family or, as it is the case in this study, by a close friend they trusted.

Apart from adding on to the myth of a black exaggerated sexuality, “of black women as sexual savages” (hooks 1982: 52) who were falsely accused of initiating the sexual intercourse, sexual violence was singularly used by the white masters with the purpose of terrorizing and submitting black women (and black men too). According to bell hooks:

The political aim of this categorical rape of black women by white males was to obtain absolute allegiance and obedience to the white imperialistic order. Black activist Angela Davis has convincingly argued that rape of black female slaves was not, as other scholars have suggested, a case of white men satisfying their sexual lust, but was in fact an institutionalized method of terrorism which had as its goal the demoralization and dehumanization of black women. (hooks 1982: 27)

By sexually abusing African American slave women, the white masters deprived the black males of their patriarchal position in society. However, although many critics have talked about the feeling of emasculation that this act of raping “their” women caused on black men, we favor hooks’ opinion when she says that slavery deprived black men from their social status, but it really did not take away their masculinity: “Enslaved black men were stripped of the patriarchal status that had characterized their social situation in Africa but they were not stripped of their masculinity” (hooks, 1982: 21).

The basic reason to explain hooks’ statement about black men preserving their masculinity is proved by the evidence that, instead of adopting the role of protectors and rebelling against the white masters, they repeated and imitated their masters’ attitudes. Therefore, they kept perpetrating sexual abuse within the African American community during and after the times of slavery, which left black women completely defenseless

and unprotected. Consequently, these black women were despised and humiliated to the extent that they were not even considered victims:

A devaluation of black womanhood occurred as a result of the sexual exploitation of black women during slavery that has not altered in the course of hundreds of years. I have previously mentioned that while many concerned citizens sympathized with the sexual exploitation of black women both during slavery and afterwards, like all rape victims in patriarchal society they were seen as having lost value and worth as a result of the humiliation they endured. Annals of slavery reveal that the same abolitionist public that condemned the rape of black women regarded them as accomplices rather than victims. (hooks, 1982: 53)

In this quotation above, hooks describes another important aspect: the hypocritical attitude some white people showed towards sexual abuse of black women. Thus, the impotence black women felt about before their unfair situation silenced them and deprived them of a sense of union and identity until writers like Zora Neale Hurston, Sonia Sanchez, and Ntozake Shange decided to take part and speak up. The truth is that the same atrocities committed by both black and white males during the nineteenth century have not disappeared. In their works, exposition and denunciation of the black women's situation is the principal aim to achieve.

3. Analyzing sexual violence in *for colored girls*

The topic of sexual abuse is introduced very early in Shange's choreopoem, proving its importance. Therefore, we can say that Shange proves how the African American woman continues to be an easy target for rape as far as the late twentieth century. The "innovation" she introduces is that rape does not happen outside the boundaries of the black community, denouncing the risky situation these African American women face within a supposedly protective environment.

Lady in red significantly introduces this touchy problem, with red symbolically being the color of blood, by extension, the color of violence and pain. She explains: "A rapist is always to be a stranger/ to be legitimate/ someone you never saw/ a man with obvious problems" (Shange 1997: 17). If rape is in itself a traumatic experience, it is not

difficult to deduce that this trauma will be greater if the rapist happens to be your friend, someone you know, someone who comes to your house, and someone you trust.

In the quotation below, we can see the stereotype of the mental illness the rapist allegedly suffers from. In this case, lady in red is being ironic because, in her eyes, it is evident how easy it is for society to hide reality behind this supposed illness, in order to forgive the perpetrator. Thus, the perpetrator's act is less serious if he suffers from a mental illness. Nonetheless, lady in red's friend is totally sane. This type of man usually pretends to be the perfect gentlemen, a kind and gallant man, but one who is capable of using all his charms to achieve what he wants:

Lady in red
 These men friends of ours/ who smile nice/ stay employed/ and take us to dinner
 Lady in purple
 Lock the door behind you
 Lady in blue
 Wit fist in face/ to fuck
 Lady in red
 Who make elaborate Mediterranean dinners/ & let the art ensemble carry all ethical
 burdens/ while they invite a coupla friends over to have you/ are sufferin from
 latent rapist bravado/ & we are left wit the scars
 Lady in blue
 Bein betrayed by men who know us
 Lady in purple
 & expect/ like the stranger/ we always thot waz comin. (Shange 1997: 18-19)

It looks like the African American female should be aware that the only thing men want from her is to have sex. Shange is playing with the reputed exaggerated sexuality black women possess. On the one hand, we could say that the myth about the black female exaggerated sexual appetite is still propagated by the very males of the black community. On the other hand, in this quotation, the stereotype of the rapist as an uneducated, unemployed stranger is undermined. On the contrary, the rapist is depicted as an upper-class man who performs the role of the gentle southern cavalier, who "makes elaborate Mediterranean dinners", a man who nobody would never suspect to be a sexual aggressor. Yet, he is one.

In addition, we also observe how these women are talking about a multiple sexual aggression (“while they invite a couple friends to have you”). The humiliation they experience is, therefore, even greater since they are treated just as mere sexual objects whose only role seems to be to supply sexual satisfaction to all the men who feel like it. Consequently, it seems that all these women should expect to be raped, as suggested next:

Lady in red
 Women relinquish all personal rights/ in the presence of a man/ who apparently cd
 be considered a rapist
 Lady in purple
 Especially if he has been considered a friend
 Lady in blue
 & is no less worthy of bein beat witin an inch of his life/ bein publicly ridiculed/
 havin two fists shoved up his ass
 Lady in red
 Than the stranger/ we always thot it wd be
 Lady in blue
 Who never showed up
 Lady in red
 Cuz it turns out the nature of rape has changed⁷. (Shange 1997: 20)

As we can see, the ladies devote a great effort to describe the hoax they have been living in, demystifying the aforementioned stereotypical rapist. What they are explaining here is that society blames them for not having noticed that this man, their friend, was a rapist. However, we might wonder how they could know beforehand that this man is a rapist if he does not have “pin-ups attached to the inside of his lapels” (Shange 1997: 17) or when they do not see “ticket stubs from porno flicks in his pocket” (Shange 1997: 18). Again, there is a mixture of irony, anger and even self-blame about the false ideas and preconceptions regarding what kind of men can be considered rapists. “The nature of rape has changed” precisely because they can no longer be sure if a man is or is not a rapist. “The nature of rape has changed” from the very moment their black community has become an unsafe place for them.

⁷ Emphasis mine.

Another thorny issue about rape that Shange explores in this choreopoem is that the “women are looking for it”. That is to say, it was (and still is) a social preconception that, if a woman is raped, to a certain extent, she has provoked it. She may have dressed up in a provocative way, or given some indication that she wanted to have sex:

Lady in red
 If you know him/ you must have wanted it
 Lady in purple
 A misunderstanding
 Lady in red
 You know/ these things happen
 Lady in blue
 Are you sure/ you didn't suggest. (Shange 1997: 17)

The idea conveyed in this quotation is that society still denies these women the right to be considered victims, particularly taking into account the fact that if you are raped by a friend, it is most likely that you may have provoked him. Therefore, the difficulties for these women increase when they have to confront society. They undergo a lack of support that increases if they consider the option to go to the authorities since “a friend is hard to press charge against” (Shange 1997: 17). There is a dilemma between what they should or should not do which usually ends when they decide not to denounce. The fear to be judged and the internal shame are some of the factors that force women to keep silent.

Moreover, as Judith Herman explains: “the rapist often enjoys higher status than his victim within their shared community. The people closest to the victim will not necessarily rally to her aid; in fact, her community may be more supportive to the offender than to her” (Herman 1997: 62). In view of this quote and the “choreopoem” itself, this is what happens in for colored girls. We see how the community surrounding these women supports the offender rather than the victims, blaming the latter for having caused this heinous act to happen.

Apart from describing an actual physical rape, we can see that the question of sexual violence is so fundamental in this choreopoem, that we can even face the

description of a metaphorical, “mechanical” rape when a woman decides to have an illegal abortion after an unwanted pregnancy:

Lady in blue
 Tubes tables white washed windows
 Grime from age wiped over once
 Legs spread
 Anxious
 Eyes crawling up on me
 Eyes rollin in my thighs
 Metal horses gnawin my womb
 Dead mice fall from my mouth
 I really didn't mean to
 I really didn't think I cd
 Just one day off...
 Get offa me alla this blood
 Bones shattered like soft ice-cream cones. (Shange 1997: 22)

This description is much more visual perhaps than the one offered for the case of actual rape. This body that is being assaulted by tubes, forced to keep the legs spread out, the pain she feels while the tubes crawl up inside, making blood come out. It could be compared to another rape scene performed by a stranger. The feelings and sensations of the lady are the same as if she was raped by a friend. Moreover, the feeling of shame is also present before the abortion is performed. The description of this feeling of shame is also comparable to the one they feel after being raped:

I cdnt have people
 Lookin at me
 Pregnant
 I cdnt have my friends see this
 Dyin dangling tween my legs
 & didn't say a thing
 Not a sigh
 Or a fast scream
 To get
 Those eyes offa me
 Get them steel rods outta me
 This hurts
 This hurts me. (Shange 1997: 22)

As a victim of rape, this woman cannot stand people looking at her, blaming her for the cruel action perpetrated or feeling compassion for her, this lady cannot stand people looking at her pregnant, which is seen as the punishment for discovering sexuality without taking precautions. Moreover, this lady is ashamed of both outcomes: being pregnant and having an abortion. Thus, she could not stand either the idea that their friends know about the abortion, let alone watch the operation being performed with all the tubes, “steel rods” and blood coming in and out of her body.

We can yet find another explicit case of sexual violence in this choreopoem, although it is shadowed by the sad story of the protagonist who has two children with her rapist, suffers from various episodes of wife-beating and ends up watching how her boyfriend kills their two children by letting them fall out of a window. This girl, named Crystal, was raped by her boyfriend at the age of thirteen: “crystal waz a no good lyn whore/ and this after she’d been // his girl since she waz thirteen/ when he caught her // on the stairway” (Shange 1997: 55). As we can see, the act of rape is once again perpetrated by a friend, more explicitly, by a boyfriend, what makes this teenager automatically become this man’s property.

4. Conclusión

As we have seen, sexual violence is crucial in this choreopoem, since all the ladies experience it in one way or another. Some only face the threat of rape. Others are actually raped and damaged forever and, in what is the most extreme case, Crystal, is forced to live with her rapist and form a family which, eventually, is destroyed by the perpetrator himself.

Nonetheless, throughout this text and despite the level of violence and suffering displayed, we can observe that these women manage to raise their voices to denounce the hypocrisy of the society they are living in, and manage to create a particular small community for recovering and keeping themselves safe. They have been suffering a series of repeated abuses and, instead of keeping silent as would be expected from them;

they get together and speak up their truth. In this case, their speaking together, this union or bonding between them can be considered as their way of recovery from the trauma that this rape has caused, as Pineda-Hernández explains, “it is not enough to survive a terrible violent experience, the survivor needs to regain control over her life and become empowered by the reconnection with her family, friends and community” (Pineda Hernández 2012: 16).

This empowerment also implies moving a step forward from victimization. Through the union with other women, they achieve the required strength to liberate themselves from oppression: “All women can escape their fates as victims of violence and oppression, and that a means to reach this goal can be the strength derived from their female bonding, from caring for each other” (Narbona-Carrión 2012: 68). In fact, Ntozake Shange has been one of the pioneers of a group of American women playwrights to choose this option of promoting female bonding in her plays as a method of recovery and empowerment. Not in vain, her “colored girls” end the play performing a kind of ritual chant: “I found god in myself/ & I loved her/ I loved her fiercely” (Shange 1997: 63) and forming a tight circle where nobody can harm them anymore.

The sense of union, of community, of sharing a terrible experience; thus, of mutual understanding, is necessary to get stronger and to overcome such horrible experience. Many experts on the topic, among them Judith Herman, recognize that this bonding mitigates the hard impact of trauma. It seems that this sense of union and community is particularly important for the African American women since, as stated again by Pineda-Hernández, “African American women, despite living through the worst experiences, can overcome anything if they stay together” (Pineda Hernández 2012: 119). Therefore, through a process of bonding, of weaving different stories of violence and suffering emulating the old “quilting bees” in which the primary material is personal history and language, these women get both: they denounce their unfair situation, in this case, within the 1970s society, and they manage to find their own identity within the community which will help them to recover from the traumatic experience of rape.

If we wanted to be a little poetic about this special play, we could say that the composition of different dialogues weaving different stories together alludes metaphorically to the old precious quilts composed by African American women in recent decades. Thus, we are supporting Lucy Lippond's opinion, who explains that "since the new wave of feminist art began around 1970, the quilt has become the prime visual metaphor for women's lives and for women's culture" (Showalter 1991: 161). Therefore, in order to reinforce the opinion that uniting together helps to recover from trauma, we can say that these seven colored girls emulate and pay homage to their ancestors' quilting bees weaving their own personal traumas in their meetings. We cannot forget, as Elaine Showalter affirms that, after all, "The social institutions of quilting helped forge bonds between women" (Showalter 1991: 148).

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