

## Ntozake Shange and Cherrie Moraga: The Courageous Voices Towards Constructing Identity

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### Abstract

*Over the last several years, there has been a growing interest among American women playwrights in examining the mechanisms by which American women's identities have been shaped within the intersecting frameworks of gender, race, and class within American culture. In the early years of the current century, a limited number of women playwrights explored the processes of socialization. However, it is only during the last three decades that a significant number of women playwrights have critically analyzed the adverse dimensions of America's ideological beliefs and practices.*

*Ntozake Shange and Cherrie Moraga, two contemporary playwrights, are in the vanguard of women playwrights this century who are addressing the consequences of America's dominant ideology on women's identities. Dramatists from three diverse cultural backgrounds—African American, and Chicana/o,—show how women in each react to a patriarchal society dominated by white, heterosexual, middle-class males. Ntozake Shange's *For Colored Girls*, and Cherrie Moraga's *Giving Up the Ghost: A Stage Play in Three Portraits* are examined by showing the similarities and differences.*

**Keywords:** *NtozakeShange, Cherrie Moraga, African American, and Chicana/o, For Colored Girls, Giving Up the Ghost: A Stage Play in Three Portraits.*

### Introduction

Bell Hooks (2014) states, "Coming to power, to selfhood, to radical subjectivity cannot happen in isolation" (56), referring to the struggle of black women for autonomy and independence. While supporting the fight against racism and sexism as legitimate political conflicts, she urges mainstreaming black women's perspectives. She contends that the emancipatory telos African American women desire is undermined by the essentialist construction of black female subjecthood based on a singular story of victimization. Hooks (2014) backs the growth of black sisterhood via anti-totalizing tactics that emphasized variety, arguing that "opposition and resistance cannot be made synonymous with self-actualization on an individual or collective level" (p. 50).

NtozakeShange and Cherri Moraga are two contemporary playwrights hailing from diverse cultural backgrounds. Their works shed light on the societal creation of women's identities, namely within the conceptual frameworks of gender, race, and class. Shange and Moraga have gained popularity because to their significant contributions in the areas of form and language, as well as their meticulous explorations of the complex process of women's identity creation within intersecting cultural contexts.

Due in part to her upbringing (exposure to American and international artists and intellectuals) and education (B.A. and M.A. in American Studies) as well as her interests

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in other cultures and languages, NtozakeShange's plays are multidisciplinary, communal, usually urban, often sophisticated, and increasingly global. However, African Americans, and particularly African American women, and their pursuits of self-validation are her primary concern. While The courageous voice of Cherrie Moraga was initially heard in the 1980s, and since then, it has developed into one that is crucial for Chicana, feminist, and lesbian studies. Her writing has been published in a variety of forms, including poetry, short stories, essays, and plays.

NtozakeShange and Cherrie Moraga: *The Courageous Voices Towards Constructing Identity*.

In *For Colored Girls*(1975), Shange addresses issues that continue to impact black women today. Shange's magnificent choreopoem portrays seven girls trying to speak for all women. To portray all women of race, "explore seven different kinds of nameless women" (Rushing, 1981: 542) in *Colored Girls*. Shange utilizes this to help women become self-aware. Shange says the play is about these unidentified women's desire to "assume hegemony as dictated by the fullness of their lives" (Rushing, 1981: 542). While Moraga's *Giving Up the Ghost: A Stage Play in Three Portraits*(1984) is a literary work that may be characterized as a prose poetry due to its distinctive incorporation of English, Spanish, and Calo languages. In *Giving Up the Ghost*, "gender" and "sexuality" come together with race. According to Moraga, there has been a tendency to view sexuality, race, and sex as opposing forces, rather than seeing them as interconnected elements within a multifaceted framework of personal and political identity and oppression. In the context of a Chicano or mestizo culture, a woman, regardless of her sexual orientation, is faced with the task of reconciling herself with such society. This culture may be seen as confining or restrictive, akin to a metaphorical "prison."The two primary spheres that influence individuals are family and institutional (Moraga, 1983).

The title in both plays refers to the struggle of the characters. Shange's choreopoem title is important. The title's various connotations reveal the author's opinions and let readers imagine their own. Shange drew attention to the disparaging epithet "Colored" used by white oppressors. "Colored" was pejorative, but black culture utilized it to unite. The title also alludes to the double confinement black women feel in today's society based on race and gender(Lester, 1995).The title in *Giving Up The Ghost*, also alludes to something important. The term "ghost" as used in the title has several connotations. Firstly, the term "it" pertains to the societal phenomenon of women being rendered invisible, with a specific focus on the marginalization experienced by lesbian women. Additionally, it pertains to the phenomenon of women of color assuming a white identity in American culture, becoming themselves "ghost-like, devoid of identity and community" as a means to escape marginalization.The divides and displacements in history, memory, and desire serve as persistent elements that Moraga's protagonists strive to relinquish but find themselves unable to fully abandon. Furthermore, the phrase "giving up the ghost" refers to relinquishing the "ghost of the father," which entails relinquishing constricting patriarchal boundaries within both family and institutional contexts (Quintanales, 1981).

To reconstruct the identity of the women in both plays, both dramatists allow their characters to use several ways for achieving their self-awareness of being women not others. Shange utilized the poems to demonstrate to her readers the transition from girlhood to adulthood, beginning with this childhood song and ending with the lady in yellow describing her "graduation nite" when she "was the only virgin in the crowd" (Shange, 2010: 21). She hoped that these young women would learn about the challenges black women face in a world where parents often withhold this knowledge:

The reason that *For Colored Girls* is entitled *For Colored Girls* is that's who it was for...I want a twelve-year-old girl to reach out for and get information that isn't just contraceptive information but emotional information...if there is an audience for whom I write, it's the little girls who are coming of age. I want them to know that they are not

alone and that we adult women thought and continue to think about them (Hamilton 79-80).

Twenty poems, spoken by women of African descent who are only identified by the bright colors of their dresses, chart the black woman's journey from the traumas of sexual assault and abortion to the discovery of her true self and the formation of a spiritual sisterhood.

The female characters in *For Colored Girl* have experienced disillusionment due to their interactions with males, leading them to reject the submissive position traditionally assigned to women. They refuse to tolerate the physical and emotional violence inflicted upon them by men who fail to recognize or value their love and humility. These individuals demonstrate resilience by retaliating in response to repeated harm, ultimately enabling them to engage in efforts to restore their well-being.

Dance and music are indicators of their courage to express their existence in the world with elegance, seek loving relationships with others, and revel in life's vast possibilities. Shange employs dance or expressive movement to uncover and honor the feminine black body and unite body and mind. Shange's characters use dancing to cope with emotional pain and survive: "We gotta dance to keep from cryin/ we gotta dance to keep from dyin" (Shange, 2010: 29). When the women's group dance "reaches a climax and all the ladies fall out tired, but full of life and togetherness" (Shange, 2010: 63), the stage instructions suggest that they had reached a consensus on how the play should conclude.

The play's opening verses create a buoyant tone that celebrates youth and life. The woman in brown is the only figure that purportedly does not represent any of the colors of the rainbow. To some extent, including brown in the onstage rainbow might be seen as an effort at self-reference. The brown-skinned woman does recite the poem in which she demands "her stuff back". The speaker insists that she should be allowed to use her criteria for self-definition without abandoning her cultural background or life experiences (Griffin, 1993).

Brown is the hue of Afro-American skin, which separates an Afro-American from others. Shange begins with "lady in brown" to message the "colored girls" so that they may speak out and develop into healthy women. In reaction to the harsh reality of being a black girl, a girl in brown claims that the girls chuckle nervously and urge each other to keep quiet, saying, "don't tell nobody, don't tell a soul" (Shange, 2010: 17). The woman in brown might be seen as a protective figure for all the girls. She depicts black girls' everyday lives as hazardous ("shingles"), detached from their enchantments, and thrown into the dangerous leftovers of adulthood ("beer cans"). Only the adult onlookers' emotions equal this black girl's vulnerability. The introductory poem indicates what themes will be explored. In fact, the opening verse foreshadows the ultimate pivotal moment of rebirth, when the black characters are completely self-aware and confident in their capacity to take part in life as independent, powerful creatures (Aziz, 2018).

The girl in the brown begins the play with a song that asserts the necessity for a black woman to share her experience via song and tale and to address the injustices she endured for a long time to understand her value as a human being:

sing a black girl's song  
bring her out  
to know herself . . .  
she's been dead so long  
closed in silence so long  
she doesn't know the sound  
of her own voice

her infinite beauty . . .  
sing her sighs  
sing the song of her possibilities  
sing a righteous gospel  
let her be born . . .  
& handled warmly. (Shange, 2010: 18-19)

A voice is given to the suppressed black girl; she will be cared for. Thus, a new self will be born to her, capable of giving voice to the horror and anguish she has seen. Her self-realization is restored with the given voice, allowing her to re-establish her identity as a woman regardless of skin color.

Comparatively, Moraga's *Giving Up the Ghost* delves into the many ways in which women have been negatively affected by societal norms that define masculinity and femininity based on the roles of active subjects and passive objects (Yarbro-Bejarano, 1989: 176). Indeed, Moraga disrupts and deconstructs conventional understandings of "woman" and "man." By engaging in this process, she amplifies the societal construction of "gender" and its impact on the development of women's sense of self.

According to Case, Corky, who often performs with the adolescent character Marisa, might be a divided subject that symbolizes Marisa's previous affinity with masculinity while adopting a "cholo drag" (Moraga, 1994: 131) persona. Corky/Marisa tries to gain authority by emulating the acts, attire, and discourse of the patriarchal, so seeking to assimilate into its symbolic framework. Case (year) contends that for Corky to have a subject position within society, it is necessary for her to assume a "male-identified" role (Moraga, 1994: 132).

Corky is referred to as a "machita," a word of endearment among the Moraga community, denoting a youthful Chicana tomboy (Alarcon, 1986: 134). According to the case notes, the individual in question is described as entering the realm of conversation while presenting themselves in a manner that is reminiscent of male apparel. This outfit consists of khaki slacks that are well creased, accompanied by a pressed white undershirt. It is worth noting that this particular kind of attire is often referred to as "Cholo style." Her hair is short and slicked back. She also acts and talks "tough," although Moraga writes in the stage directions that she "displays a wide open-heartedness in her face which betrays the toughness" (Moraga, 1994: 6). Upon her entrance, she proudly proclaims: "[T]he smarter I get the older I get the meaner I get / tough a tough cookie my mom calls me" (Moraga, 1994: 6). She carries male attitudes.

sometimes I even pack a blade  
no one knows I never use it or nut'ing  
but can feel it there in my pants pocket  
run the pad of my thumb over it to remind me I  
carry somet'ing  
am sharp secretly. (Moraga, 1994: 7)

Furthermore, she keenly watches and emulates conventional masculine perspectives and actions pertaining to violence, often expressing admiration for those individuals who engage in physical altercations during wedding ceremonies, resulting in their rented tuxedos being stained with blood. Furthermore, there is a tendency for exploitative acts to be replicated or imitated. Additionally, she engages in the patriarchal discourse by use derogatory terms such as "chicks," "prey," and "animals" to refer to females. This act of labeling serves to diminish and marginalize women, while simultaneously establishing

male dominance. Corky, who identifies as masculine, has a sense of "freedom" that allows him to see women in a negative light:

funny . . . now when I think about how little I  
was at the time  
and a girl but in my mind I was big 'n' tough 'n'  
a dude  
in my mind I had all their freedom  
the freedom to see a girl kina  
the way you see  
an animal you know? (Moraga, 1994:8)

Perceiving women as animals serves as a means to diminish their status and simultaneously assuage latent anxieties. In her work titled *Borderlands/Frontera: The New Mestiza*, Gloria Anzaldúa highlights the tendency of males to identify women with animals and animalistic instincts, attributing this phenomenon to their own concerns. Anzaldúa describes women as being seen by men as embodiments of their deepest fears and anxieties, sometimes referred to as their "Shadow-Beast" (Christian, 1990).

The exploration of sexuality is a prominent theme in the works of Moraga and Shange, embracing its significance in shaping a woman's subjectivity within their own cultural contexts and the broader American society. In Shange's *For Colored Girls*, Shange, in "Graduation nite", acknowledges the liberating and joyful effects of teenage sexual awakening on a woman entering adulthood. A young lady in charge of her sexuality is shown in this poetry (Aziz, 2018: 57). Sexuality is a natural gift to women. Like any other gift from nature. It is another reaction formation that the girl in yellow use to reach the self-awareness level. In this monologue by Shange, love and attack are central topics. The love the girl in yellow seeks from an individual is inappropriate, but she desperately wants it to be. Because of her innocence, she sees nothing wrong with becoming intoxicated and being touched: "I got drunk & can't figure out , whose with me but it didn't matter..." (Shange, 2010: 22). Shange utilizes the image of the girl in yellow to represent that some young women have the misconception that the only way to become a woman is to give up their virginity. She is not yet a woman and is still a youngster trying to find out who she is when she says, "WE WAZ GROWN, WE WAZ FINALLY GROWN..." (Shange, 2010:23). She uses her body as a way for finding self-recognition. She finds that when a man is physically attracted to her, she feels complimented and safe:

Bobby started lookin at me  
yeah  
he started lookin at me real strange  
like I waz woman or something  
started talkin real soft  
in the backseat of that olbuick  
WOW  
by daybreak

I just cdnt stop grinnin. (Shange, 2010: 24)

In this poem, the joy of youth and life is celebrated. Shange acknowledges the liberating and joyful nature of a young woman's sexual awakening as she approaches womanhood.

She "writes the body" for women striving to discover their voices. She deconstructs literary and dramatic norms to emphasize "the body. "Sexuality is a gift from nature to women, and like any other gift from nature, it should be enjoyed and not hidden. The girl in yellow discovers that her power lies in her body, and her body must be well used to gain the reachable goal of having the identity she wants. Through this defense mechanism, she will find her entity as a not-colored girl.

The poem "latent rapists" has a collective contribution from all the ladies involved, indicating that the narrative presented is not an isolated occurrence. The individuals express the prevalent prejudiced perspectives of the male-dominated culture towards a victim of rape. These perspectives include statements such as "if you know him, you must have wanted it," "are you sure you didn't suggest," "had you been drinking," and "a rapist is always a stranger" (Shange, 2010:31). These ladies have come to the realization that "we are betrayed by men who know us" (Shange, 2010: 33). In the present poem, Shange directs focus towards a societal and legal predicament inside American society that exacerbates the oppression faced by black women.

Shange finds in narrating is the best way for a woman to have a rebellious voice. This issue continues in "The abortion cycle," which illustrates how she used these strategies to leave the reader to infer the woman in blue's plight from the words alone. With this episode, Shange conveys a woman's vulnerability through an illegal abortion. The remainder of the poem is a series of pictures that the blue woman weaves together to evoke feelings of anguish, disgust, dread, humiliation, and even death. It seemed as if death were pouring out of every orifice in her body, and she felt like a vast, strong creature was occupying her womb. By opening out to other hurting women, the woman in blue finds some solace and can begin letting go of her shame and isolation.:

Tubes tables white washed windows grime 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...(Shange, 2010: 36)

Janet Brown (1991) notes that this poem is when the "association between isolation and technology" (P. 43) first appears. A woman in blue opens the hospital door, which is filled with tubes, tables, and whitewashed windows that have seen better days. The black girl seeking an abortion is driven to humiliation and isolation as a result of the physical evidence of medical intervention. She loses her voice and becomes the focus of everyone's stares. She cannot even "sigh" or "scream" "to get those eyes off of me" (Shange, 2010: 36). She is in excruciating bodily pain, and it is linked to technology. But her suffering extends beyond the physical. She felt completely alone in her humiliation and suffering: "Nobody came/cuz nobody knew/once iwaz pregnant & shamed of myself" (Shange, 2010: 37). Because she is shunned by society, she experiences existential anguish.

This episode condemns a culture that shames women for celebrating their sexuality. The choreopoem's ladies suffer from their weaknesses, but their failure to obtain the love they seek from the black man and receive from him does not mean they should give up males. Shange thinks that Black women are easily deceived and emotionally frivolous. Emotional and spiritual demands make women susceptible. They avoid abusive males. At the play's conclusion, the ladies gain power, self-confidence, and independence that will help them handle emotionally and psychologically unsatisfactory relationships. Before loving others, they must love themselves. Shange says her "target" *For Colored Girls* is patriarchy, which oppresses women everywhere.

While in Moraga's *Giving Up The Ghost*, males exhibit apprehension about "animal impulses such as sexuality" (Moraga, 1994:17). Individuals have apprehension at the potential loss of authority and the erosion of their rational and cohesive identity. Corky, however, suffers from sexual confusion because she is "split between a feminine consciousness and its male-identified symbolic role" (Case, 1989: 132). The individual

has a period of identity crisis when she and her companion, Tury, engage in inappropriate behavior against Chrissy, a youngster from the local community. When Chrissy seeks comfort from Corky, as if Corky were her mother, Corky experiences a shift in her conscience. She reassures Chrissy that "[N]o you're fine really there's nut'ing wrong with you" (Moraga, 1994:10). Currently, Corky demonstrates a refusal to conform to the patriarchal ideology that perpetuates a negative evaluation of women's sexual physiology. She confesses:

always knew I was a girl  
 deep down inside  
 no matter how I tried to pull the other off

Jay 196

I knew

always knew

I was an animal that kicked back . . .

(with Marisa) . . . cuz it hurt! (Moraga, 1994:8)

After being raped, Corky is forced "to confront her internal split between her identification with the subjugating male and her repressed self-knowledge as female" (Yarbro-Bejarano, 1989: 116). Corky, a student attending a Catholic school, demonstrates trust in an Anglo male worker based on two factors: his ability to speak Spanish and his physical resemblance to her cousin Enrique. This trust leads Corky to assist the worker in repairing a desk drawer. This sensation initiates her psychological descent into a state of complete forgetfulness, void of all meaning or affirmation. In her distress, she laments her reduced identity to that of a mere orifice, exclaiming, "only a hole / a hole!" (Moraga, 1994:29).

Corky starts to think of herself as a woman. She first thinks of the worker as a reincarnation of her own father, as he is likewise Anglo: "[K]ept imagining he was my father returned come back" (Moraga, 1994: 28). Because of this, she has faith in his ability to keep her safe. Like most people, she blames herself for the molestation: "I knew I musta done somet'ing real wrong / to get myself in this mess" (Moraga, 1994: 28). After being penetrated, she strongly identifies as a woman. As Yarbro-Bejarano (1989) puts it, "the rape brings home Corky's sex to her as an inescapable fact, confirming her culture's definition of female as being taken" (p.147).

In her article "The Politics of Rape: Sexual Transgression in Chicana Fiction," Maria Herrera-Sobek (1988) claims that Moraga depicts the "en-gendering" of women during the act of rape in her novel *Giving Up the Ghost*. The emptiness and void created by en-gendering, that is, forming a gender, is shown by the treatment of women as passive subjects who contribute nothing to society. She continues by saying that women are "silent entities dominated by ingrained patriarchal vectors where the Name of the Father is Law and years of socialization to obey the Father's Law transforms the female subject into a quivering accomplice in her own rape." In this way, women not only betray themselves but also other women: "[W]omen are socialized into being participants in their own [and other women's] oppression" (172-173).

Moraga also discusses the conflict between gender and sexuality via the figure of Marisa. Case (1989) says that she is a woman in transition from her "social and cultural inheritance of repression to the liberation of self-definition" (p.133). Marisa starts referring to herself as a "woman" after the rape, saying things like, "I don't regret it. I don't regret nuthin'. He only convinced me of my own name. From an early age you learn to live with it, being a woman" (Moraga, 1994: 29). The designation of "woman" dawns on her gradually, revealing itself to be one of being penetrated rather than penetrating, of

being an object rather than a subject, of being passive rather than active. She draws the conclusion that women in this culture are unsafe and vulnerable.

However, Marisa does not conform to these social norms. She views the socially sanctioned definition of sexuality as a "prison" from which she desperately wants to break free: "If I had the wings like an angel / over these prison walls / I would fly" (Moraga, 1994:3). Marisa states in her sketchbook at the beginning of the play that she will be addressing "the question of prisons/politics/sex" (Moraga, 1994:6). When she develops romantic feelings for a straight lady named Amalia, she starts to explore this issue. Marisa, being a lesbian, must not only cope with the original issue of prisons/politics/sex, but also add the additional element of treachery. When asked about the women she has loved, she says, "The women I have loved the most have always loved the man more than me, even in their hatred of him" (Moraga, 1994:14). Amalia's significant other is Alejandro. Marisa becomes very envious of her when she follows him to Mexico to be with him. Their future is uncertain after Amalia's return, although the play's "ending" is open-ended. Marisa says this in her last speech, "I am preparing myself for the worst" (Moraga, 1994:35).

Their love for one other evolved into a spiritual experience, and their connection hints to "the possibility of mutual salvation" (Yarbro-Bejarano, 1986: 118). Amalia says to Marisa, "You make love to me like -worship," and Marisa replies, "Si, la mujer es mi religion." The ladies temporarily find solace not in God but in one another. Marisa believes that love would rescue them: "I must admit I wanted to save her. That's probably the whole truth of the story" (Moraga, 1994:34). According to Yarbro-Bejarano (1989), "for Moraga the lesbian couple is the microcosm in which the dynamic of faith works itself out, becoming a metaphor for feminism" (pp. 173-174).

## **Conclusion**

The dramatic works of Ntozake Shange and Cherrie Moraga may be situated along a continuum that connects them to playwrights of the past, while also anticipating the artistic endeavors of future creators. Shange and Moraga are very innovative in their artistic endeavors, as they actively engage in the creation of novel forms and the exploration of previously unexplored themes. Shange develops the concept of the "choreopoem," which involves the seamless integration of poetry and dance. In addition, she incorporates African rhythms, music, and culture into her artistic expression. Moraga artfully combines poetry and prose, skillfully weaving together a harmonious fusion of Spanish, English, and Colo. In addition, she incorporates elements of Indian and Mexican music, tales, and stories into her work. Shange's approach to the creative process in her work "for colored girls" deviates from conventional production methods by embracing a community approach that involves women from many racial and ethnic backgrounds. This collaborative process incorporates elements like as music, dance, poetry, and shared narratives.

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