

Reinventing Feminism: Black Women's Theatre on the Modern British Stage

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Theatre

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How does mainstream culture in Britain and across western society view Black women? Are their stories being told on a mass level? Despite the fact that representation of racial minorities, especially women within those minorities, is seriously lacking across many mass media platforms, Black women in theatre are making a name for themselves telling their stories in a focused and personal way. When the Theatre of Black Women, “Britain’s first Black Women’s Theatre Company,” was founded in 1982, playwrights like Debbie Tucker Green and Jackie Kay began to have a platform for their voices to be heard (Ponnuswami). Many of these playwrights, although female, did not identify themselves as feminist, or their work as feminist theatre. They did not see a place for themselves in the white dominated world of western feminism. Social movements are constantly evolving, however, and feminists of today consider intersectionality to be a main defining point of what feminism is all about.

Black Women’s Theatre and Black feminist theatre have not historically been the same, but as modern definitions of feminism grow to reflect intersectionality of race, gender, sexuality and other identities, Black women’s plays that have before not been called feminist can be seen through a feminist lens. I argue that both Jackie Kay’s *Chiaroscuro* and Debbie Tucker Green’s *Trade* are both Black women’s plays and Black feminist plays, addressing feminist issues such as Black women’s representation in all its varieties, and the search for identity within a culture which often ignores the stories of these women.

Before diving into the issues involved in *Chiaroscuro* or *Trade*, it is important to understand the nuanced differences between Black women’s theatre and Black feminist theatre. The fundamental basis of Black women’s theatre is representation. Black female playwrights, actors, producers, etc. need to have a place to take a more active role in the storytelling. This representation is crucial for minorities, especially those whose identities are complex and contain overlapping and sometimes conflicting roles, because it gives those

communities a place to be heard and a starting point for how to define themselves within society. As Mary Brewer wrote in her book *Race, Sex, and Gender in Contemporary Women's Theatre*, "It is from a position as subjects in culture, I argue, that women may derive the power of self-representation; that is, the power to tell their own stories and to ensure that their stories are heard over rival and often harmful versions" (Brewer 121). Black women's theatre does just that: allows these women to put themselves in a position as subject in a culture that often objectifies them, or doesn't include them at all.

Today's feminism takes this idea one step further, intentionally addressing the issues, through subject matter in the plays themselves, that are so crucial to the lives of Black women and that affect their daily existence. Feminism, like all other social movements, is constantly evolving, and has not always been inclusive. For most of its history, feminism was mainly a movement for middle and upper class white women, as a way to obtain the vote, or a privileged look at women's objectification in society. To be clear, these women were working for women's rights, but there was a serious lack of understanding or advocacy for how the oppression white women face is drastically different from the oppression Black women or other minority women face. For this reason, many writers did not claim the label of feminist, which is what Elaine Aston talks about in "Feeling the Loss of Feminism" when she writes, "To summarize: although women playwrights in the 1970s might have had mixed feelings about feminism, it generally had an enabling effect, creating unprecedented opportunities for women playwrights to get their work staged. By contrast, subsequent generations of women playwrights, as my earlier comments suggest, have to contend with a false impression of feminism as an unfashionable 'ism'" (Aston 577). So whether or not these playwrights wanted to use the term feminist, their work has inspired and enabled women after them to empower themselves to tell their own unique stories, which is an inherently feminist idea.

As I said, this old idea of white feminism is changing, and feminists of today consider themselves intersectional feminists, highlighting how different aspects of one's identity, such as race, class, and age, affect the way in which one is treated as a woman. The Oxford English Dictionary defines feminism as such:

Advocacy of equality of the sexes and the establishment of the political, social, and economic rights of the female sex; the movement associated with this (see note below).

The issue of rights for women first became prominent during the French and American revolutions in the late 18th cent., with regard especially to property rights, the marriage relationship, and the right to vote. In Britain it was not until the emergence of the suffragette movement in the late 19th cent. that there was significant political change. A 'second wave' of feminism arose in the 1960s, concerned especially with economic and social discrimination, with an emphasis on unity and sisterhood. A more diverse 'third wave' is sometimes considered to have arisen in the 1980s and 1990s, as a reaction against the perceived lack of focus on class and race issues in earlier movements" (OED).

Having moved into a third wave of feminism, so to speak, feminist audiences of today might consider these plays written in the 80's in Black women's theatres to be extremely feminist pieces, even if the playwrights themselves did not claim that label at the time.

All this being said, how can *Trade* and *Chiaroscuro* be seen as feminist in this modern, intersectional light? I will begin with *Trade*, Debbie Tucker Green's play about sex tourism in the Caribbean and how multiple identities, which are sometimes in conflict with one another, interact in complex ways. In the environment of this play, race, gender, and socio-economic status interact when White women from Britain, played by Black actors, come to the Caribbean on holiday to sleep with the same man, and meet his girlfriend who is a local Black Caribbean woman.

Although all three women face discrimination and sexual shaming, as well as all the other issues that come with living in a patriarchal society, the privilege of the white women is clearly seen over the Black woman as their whiteness and class standing allows them to get away with cultural exploitation on the island. Elaine Aston explains this expertly in "A fair Trade?: Staging Female Sex Tourism in *Sugar Mummies* and *Trade*," when she writes,

“tucker green developed her Caribbean sex-tourism play as a drama for three black actresses who play local women and then all of the other parts, which include two white women tourists, hotel staff, and Bumster, the man who ‘trades.’ The focus is primarily on the tensions that arise within the female grouping—between the two white women (played by Locals 1 and 2) and the Local (black woman) whose ‘man’ (Bumster) they have all been sleeping with. Such tensions are heightened by *Trade*’s presentational style in which the multi-role playing gestically figures and exposes the racialized, classed and gendered tensions between the women in an interrogation that while personal to the characters involved incisively politicizes the question of ‘who’s been (fucked) over?’. In brief, collapsing the split between the ‘here’ and ‘there’ into one performing body heightens the collision between (white) sexual pleasure and local (black) economy” (Aston 184). This idea of the economy being sexualized and the white women taking advantage of the economic position of Black women and men on the island is challenged and brought to the foreground of the conversation in *Trade*, and, in doing this, the play becomes both a play for Black women, and a Black feminist play.

The idea that Aston brings up in *Trade* of white sexual pleasure plays into a major theme of the play, which is challenging the norm of white feminism. These white women engage in sex tourism as a form of “sexual liberation;” an escape from a patriarchal world which shames women who admit to being sexual and highly restricts their freedom. In finding their own sexual liberation, however, these white female characters take advantage of and add to the oppression of the marginalized racial and cultural group that they find on the island. tucker green is not afraid to face this uncomfortable conflict between two groups of women and identities head on, and “in that sense, tucker green eschews the laddish culture of in-yer-faceism and is genealogically connected to experiential, socially aware women's writing, though at the same time she also refuses the white, western traditions of liberal

feminism and domestic realism” (Aston, “Feeling the Loss of Feminism” 588). For this reason, it is understandable why writers like tucker green would not have wanted to identify their work as feminist, given the white connotation of the word. I argue that this connotation is changing, and in challenging this mode of white feminism, her work is feminist in the new intersectional context of the movement.

One of the important feminist issues the play addresses is the question of ownership of Black bodies and culture. This is primarily discussed through the white sex tourism that I have previously addressed, but it also comes up in a multitude of understated ways in the play. Cultural appropriation and exploitation is another major theme addressed in the play, which ties in with the problem of sex tourism. For example, Local talks about braiding tourist’s hair to make a living, saying, “(weary) like how *we* do. Payments fe plaits. Cash fe canerow. Beauty pon the beach. Shekels fe a style.... Thass mi” (tucker green). Here is a powerful example of the overlapping complexity of race, class, and gender. While women of any race are forced to conform to societal beauty standards, white women appropriate Black hair and beauty style, like the tight canerow braids, as a way of playing into the exoticization of Black women and exploiting it for their own false sense of liberation from beauty standards. Black women like the Local, on the other hand, play into this horrible exploitation or appropriation of their own culture as a way of making money, because of their comparatively low socio-economic status and the intense power of the tourism industry. This is the kind of issue that previous forms of feminism might not have addressed, but modern feminists consider to be an important aspect of the way in which we address goals of equality for all women, not just white women.

Through a conversation of sex tourism, *Trade* also brings up a central theme of identity through place, and the “here” versus “there” question of cultural belonging. Aston explains, saying, “To go ‘there’, on holiday, is, for the tourist women a means of getting

away from their lives 'here'. Yet as *Trade* and *Sugar Mummies* both caution, the female sex traveller's 'there' is someone else's 'here'; holiday lives have significant sexual and economic implications for the men and women who are local to where the tourist has her fun. The duality of the 'here' and 'there' locational split is a function of the tourist gaze. As sociologist John Urry explains, tourism and holiday-making are characterised by travel to a different location, one that is 'outside the normal places of residence and work' and enables a 'limited breaking with established routines and practices of everyday life'" ("A Fair Trade" 183-4). In other words, women who feel they have not found their proper place in society in their lives in the western world may travel to "exotic" places as an attempt to rediscover themselves, or find a sense of strength or power. What they do not realize, however, is that this sense of belonging they are looking for cannot be found in someone else's culture or home, and their actions only end up harming locals who face their own struggle for identity and belonging in society. In *Trade*, Local says, "... You come 'there'. ... Invite yuself to my 'there'. We ask yu / we trouble yu?" She makes it very clear that Novice and Regular are not welcome to do their soul searching and exploitation in her home. These place related identity questions cannot be untied from race, just as race and gender cannot be untied in a Black woman's identity.

Of course, *Chiaroscuro* is also a very influential Black British play written by Black female playwright who wanted to bring Black women's stories to the stage. This play also deals with the very feminist issue of identity and the search for identity through the central theme of naming. Meenakshi Ponnuswami talks extensively on this subject in "Small Island People: Black British Women Playwrights," and says, "The evolution of the script of Jackie Kay's *Chiaroscuro* points to a recurring issue in the play: the difficulty of assigning definitive names and titles when one speaks from the borderlands of multicultural citizenship (the light-and-shadow interplay signified by the title)" (Ponnuswami 225-6). This

“borderlands of multicultural citizenship” is exactly the kind of complexity of overlapping identities that intersectional feminism is all about.

A play about four Black women and their search for identity, especially in the western world, *Chiaroscuro* deals with such themes as naming and heritage, mixed race identity, the whitewashing of Black history and culture, a similar question of place/ home as in *Trade*, and Black queer women’s identity, or how sexuality, race, and gender all collide. All of these themes are multifaceted and deal with an intersectional look at feminism: how multiple levels of one’s identity or search for identity affects one’s experience. I will begin with naming, as that is how the play itself begins.

Each of the women have very different stories, and it is important to understand that this play is about Black women’s experiences on both a community and individual level. This can especially be seen at the beginning of the play, as each of the characters tells the story of how they got their name. “As each woman comes to terms with the mystery of her marking, she must not only ‘tell the story of her own name’ but also search for another name: ‘She is in flux, reassessing her identity, travelling back into memory and forward into possibility’” (Ponnuswami 226). Through their names they remember their heritage, whether that be a long and rich cultural history, or a fractured story of cultural pieces that are missing or changed through white washing and western culture. Take Beth’s name, for example, about which she says: “My daddy told me he called me Beth because my grandmother’s African name was whipped out of her: This was the name the white people gave her with welts in her black skin. He said *that* history had to be remembered too” (Kay 64-5). The tradition of passing names from grandmother to granddaughter is a familiar practice of preserving a sense of cultural or familial heritage, especially within the female line, where the surname is often lost. This is why it is all the more critical to the themes of the play that Beth’s passed down “familial” name is one given to her grandmother in slavery and oppression. It is

representative of the white washing of Black culture throughout history, and shows how complicated it is for Black women to find their identity in western societies that have done such a thorough job of wiping out any trace of their past identities or cultural heritage. As Beth's father expressed, it is important for us to remember these ugly stories of violence and oppression as part of one's identity as a Black woman in western society.

The white washing of Black women's identities is heightened and complicated with the introduction of mixed race identity. This adds another element to the intersectionality of the feminism seen in *Chiaroscuro*, as it shows how complicated the search for identity can be when one has so many different overlapping identities. Mainstream culture often ignores the stories of people of mixed race, and "those whose blackness is seen as capable of being ignored, masked or contained are deemed acceptable. In this process of white-washing people of mixed race, white is posited not only as the pre-eminent race, but also as the only race in so far as white cultural practices are treated as the only ones that signify" (Brewer 122). In this sense, the theme of mixed race is all the more important in *Chiaroscuro*, adding to the depth of representation on stage, a Black women's theatre ideal, and the intersectionality of multiple identities, a feminist principle.

The theme of mixed race identity is seen in some way in all four of the characters in Kay's play, as Griffin explains when she writes, "That need to perform identity - and the vocabulary itself bespeaks the 1990s and the impact of Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990) in shaping the identity debates of that decade and beyond - is made manifest in Kay's 'Chiaroscuro', which features Opal, 'brought up in a home in Hampshire' (1: 61i) and mixed-race; Beth, a mixed-race woman whose father is from St Vincent and whose mother is English (i: 65); Aisha, who comes from the Himalayas and whose parents migrated to England in 1953 (1: 62); and Yomi who is from Nigeria (1: 65). Aisha and Yomi thus share the experience of migration and a unitary lineage whereas Beth and Opal are both born in

Britain and are mixed-race” (Griffin 173). The characters are united through their mixed race and multicultural or immigrant identities, and yet each have their own unique stories and experiences. In this way, Kay is representing Black women on stage as both a community and as individuals who have different experiences, challenges, and perspectives. This helps further the wealth of representation and discussion of intersectionality.

Another major theme that is central to *Chiaroscuro*'s role as both a Black women's play and a Black feminist play is the interplay of sexuality and race, or the search for Black queer women's identity. Major plot points in the actual story of this play revolve around Beth and Opal's relationship, and the fallout of that development. This is the crux of intersectional feminism: recognizing how these character's race affects the treatment of their sexuality, and how their sexuality informs their racial identity in society. As Stephanie A. Shields and Leah R. Warner write in “The Intersections of Sexuality, Gender, and Race: Identity Research at the Crossroads,” “As a framework, intersectionality serves as a reminder to researchers that any consideration of a single identity, such as gender, must incorporate an analysis of the ways that other identities interact with, and therefore qualitatively change, the experience of gender. In other words, intersectionality-as-framework is a strategy for studying identity (Syed 2010)” (Warner). As characters already struggling to find a sense of self and belonging, the added layer of trying to define themselves as Black women who are also in the LGBTQ+ community complicates their journey and represents a wider pool of individuals.

It is important to see how the characters struggle for self-acceptance within the many layers of their identities. Opal does not embrace the labels associated with her relationship with Beth in the same way that Beth confidently proclaims her sexuality. This is particularly evident in this exchange between the two:

“Beth: I used to feel that I was the only black lesbian in the world, you know. Serious. Just me on my tod.
Opal: I don't like that word—lesbian.
Beth: It's a name.

Opal: We don't need a name" (Kay 79).

Again, harkening back to the theme of identity through naming, Opal struggles to define or accept her own sense of identity in a world that does not allow for multifaceted identities within mainstream society. This struggle for self-acceptance or the complication of labels as related to multiple identities affects the community built on stage among the four women.

The play brings to light how some intersections of identity are not peaceful ones, but clash in complicated and difficult ways. There is indeed homophobia and prejudice against queer identities from within the Black community, even though they are another marginalized group. This is seen through Yomi's reaction to the lesbian relationship, and her deep seated prejudice and misunderstanding. As Griffin writes, "Jackie Kay's 'Chiaroscuro' (1985; published 1987) is rooted in pre-Clause 28, pre-queer days and predates theories of performance/performativity. It projects the difficulties of lesbian closetedness and invisibility in an interrogation of racialized visibilities and the politics of female friendship" (Griffin 170). The politics of Yomi's homophobia and Beth and Opal's self-discoveries of sexualities is indeed racialized in nuanced ways.

Griffin goes on to say, "Asian and Black women playwrights' have begun to write about divergent forms of sexuality and thus to challenge heteronormativity both within and across cultures. Given the histories of domination and submission, exploitation and subjugation which inform Britain's colonial past and which are articulated through the racism that permeates its present, all sexualities, including heterosexuality, are racialized as part of the complex interplay of sex, race, and gender as they are articulated in British society. This racialization acquires a specific poignancy when divergent sexualities are at stake" (Griffin 170). This is an important point, that explains how Yomi's prejudiced views are grounded in her history of a racialized position in society. As previously mentioned, Yomi's character is from Nigeria, and although not explicitly stated, the play implies that there may be a

traditional cultural element to Yomi's views. Out of the four women, she is certainly the most in touch with her African roots and culture, and seems the most hesitant to embrace "new" cultural ideas. This homophobia could also be a result, as Griffin alluded, to the influence of white colonialism, and thus the Christian missionary influence, in Africa. In this way, Yomi's experience of sexuality and her treatment of Opal and Beth needs to be seen through the racialized lens through which Yomi's experience is filtered. Thus, through Beth and Opal's relationship as well as Yomi's reactions to it, Kay represents the complex ways in which race, gender, and sexuality overlap and intersect to create unique identities and unique struggles for marginalized persons within all of those characters, making *Chiaroscuro* a feminist play, as well as a play by and for Black women.

Both *Trade* and *Chiaroscuro* display these intersectional and representational qualities. They are Black women's plays because of their representational qualities; they are both written by Black women playwrights and contain a cast of all Black women. They both tell the stories of communities of Black women who share some struggles but also are individuals with their own unique perspectives and stories, who don't always agree on everything. They are also feminist plays, however, because their stories and themes point towards a direct goal of addressing social issues for these groups, and do so in an intersectional way, showing the various layers of overlapping oppression through multiple connected identities. Perhaps most importantly, these plays are feminist for the very reason that they challenge old White western feminist status quo.

As defined earlier, feminism's goal is to further the equality of all women and across all genders, so if it does not attempt to do this in an intersectional way, it is not true feminism. In this way, by challenging white feminism's privilege, *Chiaroscuro* and *Trade* further the next motion of the feminist movement. tucker green does this in *Trade*, as Aston writes, "Black, female, and angry about the inequalities between Third and First World countries,

tucker green distils her anger into trenchant critiques of a Western failure to care for "others" ("Feeling the Loss of Feminism" 588). Similarly, of *Chiaroscuro*, Ponnuswami says, "In both *Chiaroscuro* and *A Hero's Welcome*, the feminist retrieval of history is seen to contest the colonizing of black women's bodies by patriarchy, capitalism, heterosexism, and the nation-state" (Ponnuswami 228). If feminism is to be a progressive movement, it must continue to challenge the status quo, especially in white Western society, and even within itself as a movement. These plays prove that it can do just that, and in this way *Trade* and *Chiaroscuro* are both Black women's theatre and Black feminist theatre.

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