

FROM TROUBLED WATERS TO GREENER PASTURES: A READING OF PEARL CLEAGE'S *FLYIN' WEST*

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Abstract: African American women are not given due recognition either in the mainstream society or in their own community, and they are portrayed as subordinates to their male counterparts by the mainstream writers. Pearl Cleage, an African American playwright, has used the medium of theatre to portray the fortitude of African American women, and their struggle for existence in the dominant patriarchal society. The present paper delves deep into Pearl Cleage's play, *Flyin' West*, and analyses how the playwright enlightens the African American women of the need to break the silence and persuades them to assert their voice in a male dominated society. Through the resilient characters in the play, Cleage instills confidence in African American women that they can tide over any difficult situation in their lives and that they are indomitable.

Keywords: Jeopardy, Homestead, Resilient, Mainstream, Exodus.

When I landed on the soil, I looked on the ground and I says this is free ground. Then I looked on the heavens, and I says them is free and beautiful heavens. Then I looked within my heart, and I says to myself I wonder why I never was free before? (qtd. in Dormon, 2013, p. 28)

African American woman playwrights use the medium of theatre to mirror their lives and to make their sisters self-introspect on their doubly-marginalized position in the United States. The potential and the reach of theatre as a medium has been used optimally by the pioneer African American woman playwrights like Alice Childress, Lorraine Hansberry, Adrienne Kennedy, Ntozake Shange, et al, to deconstruct the false images of African American women which have been propagated by the mainstream writers. Through their plays, African American woman playwrights try to instill confidence in ordinary black women, and thus seek to bring liberation to the entire African American women community. The real struggle and fortitude of the doubly marginalized get a space only in the works of African American women playwrights.

Pearl Cleage, an iconoclast among the African American woman playwrights, has used theatre as an instrument to bring into limelight, the real sufferings of ordinary African American women in the American society. In the "Preface" of *Flyin' West*, Cleage remarks: "As a child of the Black Arts Movement and the Woodstock Generation, I still believe that theatre has a ritual power to call forth the sprits, illuminate the darkness and *speak the truth to the people*" (Cleage,

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1999, n.pg). Cleage exploits the transformative power of theatre and considers it a hallowed space that can bring light to the entire African American community which is bedeviled by the racial superiority of the mainstream community. The present paper delves deep into Pearl Cleage’s play, *Flyin’ West*, which focuses on a group of women who leave their homes in the racist and male dominated South for West in search of freedom. Marta J. Effinger in the article entitled, “Pearl Cleage” observes that “black female migrants who, at the end of the nineteenth century, searched for refuge in Western states” (Effinger, 2000, p. 14). Black women in the nineteenth century migrated to the West in order to escape from the rampant racial and gender discrimination prevalent in the South.

Life in the South became worse for African Americans after the end of Civil War in 1865. In the poem entitled “One Way Ticket” Langston Hughes details the reasons behind the migration to West:

I pick up my life, And take it with me,
 And I put it down in Chicago, Detroit, Buffalo, Scranton,
 Any place that is North and East, And not Dixie.
 I pick up my life And take it on the train,
 To Los Angeles, Bakersfield, Seattle, Oakland, Salt Lake
 Any place that is North and West, And not South.
 I am fed up With Jim Crow laws,
 People who are cruel And afraid, Who lynch and run,
 Who are scared of me And me of them
 I pick up my life And take it away On a one-way ticket
 Gone up North Gone out West Gone! (Hughes, 2001, p. 188)

Jim Crow Laws made life in the South dreadful, and thus many blacks left for the West with the hope of leading a better life. In the article entitled “Origin of Jim Crow Laws” it is stated that, by the 1870s, “violence against people of color rose in many southern states and it did not spare mothers, daughters, and children” (Origin of Jim Crow Laws, 1999, p. 41). In the second half of the nineteenth century, many African Americans fled from South as many of them were beaten, lynched, and even murdered without any reason. In the book, *When and Where I Enter*, Paula Giddings comments on the laudable efforts made by the African American women toward the emancipation of their community. Giddings also throws light into the fact that the African American community’s progress depends upon the liberty that an African American woman can enjoy in her community and in the mainstream society:

In the racial struggle-in slavery and in freedom-they fought in every way that men did. Women’s rights were an empty promise, if Afro-Americans

were crushed under the heel of a racist power structure. In the time of racial militancy, Black women threw their considerable energies into that struggle however, when militancy faltered. Black women stepped forward to demand the rights of their race from the broader society, and their rights as women from their men. The latter demand was seen as one where their rights had to be secured in order to assure Black progress. (Giddings, 1984, p. 7)

African American women's sufferings in the South were worse than the sufferings of African American men. Both mainstream society and African American community failed to support African American women and these women took justice in their hands and demanded equal rights which indirectly paved the way for the liberation of women community to a certain extent.

The insecurity in Memphis instigates the protagonist Sophie and her sisters to move to Kansas.

SOPHIE. [...] I knew it was the right thing to do. Memphis was full of crazy white men acting like when it came to colored people, they didn't have to be bound by law or common decency. Dragging people off in the middle of the night. Doing whatever they felt like doing. Colored women not safe in their own houses. Then I heard there were Negroes going West. (Cleage, 1999, pp. 41-42)

Sophie's words echo the sorry and helpless condition of the African American women in Memphis. The mainstream society was not bound by any laws when it was a matter of inflicting physical and psychic wounds on the African Americans.

The play also explores the pains of African American women in the past and the dire necessity to move West to lead a peaceful life. It also examines racial strife and domestic violence against African American women and their attempts to raise their voice against all injustices, both social and familial. In the periodical entitled *Anti-Caste* Catherine Impey remarks that the laws framed by the white always had loopholes for the white to escape and it was the result of their considering the African Americans as subhumans: "Many hundreds of similar lawless scenes (And Worse) are enacted every year in the Southern States of America- and NO ONE IS PUNISHED. These laws are administered solely by white men – who are corrupted- not by bribes, but by a fierce and terrible prejudice- the outcome of slavery" (qtd. in Bressey, 2013, p.10). The racial superiority was so ingrained in the white that they were always unscrupulous and inconsiderate toward the African Americans in every aspect of law making.

The idea to write the play sparked in Cleage after reading a newspaper column written by Ida B. Wells in 1890s, which urged the African Americans to leave their homes in Memphis for West in search of freedom. *Flying West*, which is set in

1898, was based on the westward migration that occurred in the late 1800s which in fact is the result of the Homestead Act of 1860: "The Act, which became a law on January 1, 1863, allowed anyone to file for a quarter-section of free land (160 acres). The land was yours at the end of five years if you had built a house on it, dug a well, broken (plowed) 10 acres, fenced a specified amount, and actually lived there." (Pence, 2000, p.1)

Cleage portrays the character Miss Leah as an "Exoduster," while the characters Sophie Washington, Fannie Dove, and Minnie Dove Charles as "homesteading" characters who migrate to Nicodemus in search of freedom. In the book entitled *Black Women of the Old West*, Katz remarks on the role played by African American women in their exodus to the West: "Women were a driving force in the *Exodus of 1879*. . . . Women indeed were among the earliest and most consistent emigration voices" (Katz, 1995, p. 42). The endeavours of African American women, to shield themselves from the clutches of rampant racial discrimination in the South, have made them step into the untrod den path towards West.

The character, Sophie Washington is a woman in her mid-thirties, who was born into slavery. She is a homesteader of Nicodemus and she shares a home with Miss Leah, an elderly woman who also is born into slavery. The characters Fannie Dove and Minnie Dove are two young African American women, who come to West and find a haven with Miss Leah and Sophie Washington. Fannie's younger sister Minnie Dove Charles, who lives in London with her husband, pays a visit to Kansas. All women who migrated to Kansas from the South are part of the "Exodus" movement of 1879. These women had flown to West to escape the racist oppression in the South during the late nineteenth century. The play revolves around these four bold women characters, who migrate to West, to lead a better life, as they believe that Nicodemus is "a place where a colored woman can be free to live her life like a human being ... a place where a colored man can work as hard for himself as we used to work for white folks ... a town where a colored child can go to anybody's door and be treated like they belong there" (Cleage, 1999, p.53).

In the book, *Black Women of the Old West*, Katz remarks on the consistent efforts made by the African American women to improve their life conditions: "Women of color in the wilderness consistently distinguished themselves through their dedication to self-improvement and zeal for education" (Katz, 1995, p.13). Though the West was not as conducive to African American women as they had expected it to be, they had striven themselves to plant their strong roots in Kansas. The women in *Flyin' West* are initially driven by an intrinsic motivation, which directs them to migrate to the West, which they believe would free them from the racial discrimination. They dream to develop a community of African American women in Nicodemus, where they can live without any fear. Henry Walton Bibb in the article entitled "Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb,

An American Slave: Written by Himself” points out the ardent wish of a slave to escape from slavery, a condition that makes him or her cease to be a human being: “Oh, that I had the wings of a dove, that I might soar away to where there is no slavery; no clanking of chains, no captives, no lacerating of backs, no parting of husbands and wives; and where man ceases to be the property of his fellow man” (Bibb, 2001, p. 360). The African American women in the play, to a certain extent fulfil the wish expressed by the slave in “Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, An American Slave: Written by Himself.” These women make sincere efforts to safeguard their dignity as human beings.

The women characters in *Flyin’ West* hope to establish a community of women insulated from slavery and patriarchal dominance. Sophie reiterates the importance of having a secured life: “[...]. All the dreams we have for Nicodemus, all the churches and schools and libraries we can build don’t mean a thing if a colored woman isn’t safe in her own house” (Cleage, 1999, p. 76).

Cleage introduces Sophie’s sister, Minnie, in the middle of Act one. Minnie is portrayed as having married to a man of inter-racial parentage. She lives in London with her husband Frank Charles, a mulatto and artist who writes poem. Frank’s character is deliberately constructed by Cleage to show that, those with inter-racial parentage may betray African American community. He is a pretentious and domineering character. As Minnie approaches her twenty first birthday, Sophie and Fannie prepare to give her, the share of the homestead as a birthday gift. Minnie says:

MINNIE. When you start talking about this place, you make it sound like paradise for colored people.

SOPHIE. It’s not paradise yet, but it can be beautiful. The century is going to change in two years. This can be a great time for colored people. We can really be free instead of spending our lives working for the same people that used to own us.

How are we ever going to be free if we have to spend all of our time doing somebody else’s laundry? (Cleage, 1999, p.53)

Sophie is insightful and dreams of being completely free, and she hopes that days of freedom are not too far. Minnie admires Sophie’s aspiration and dream to free themselves from the clutches of bonded labour.

African American women have been considered vulnerable and hence have been subjected to exploitation. Male domination is deeply rooted in the American society, and it is not a cake walk for an ordinary African American woman to assert her identity in the family and in the mainstream society. The patriarchal system, which has been followed in certain communities of Africa, made the African men to entertain the notion that women are inferior to men. This notion escalated as

they were brought as slaves to a predominately patriarchal American society. In the book, *Ain't I a Woman*, bell hooks observes that male sexism was ingrained in the minds of enslaved men: “Black male sexism existed long before American slavery. The sexist politics of white-ruled and colonized America merely reinforced in the minds of enslaved black people existing beliefs that men were the superiors to women” (hooks, 1981, p. 123). The only commonality that enslaved Africans could see between them and their slave masters is the practice of male domination. Paradoxically, the enslaved males were made silent witnesses of their masters’ sexual escapades with their African American woman partners. The white slave owners effeminated their slaves psychically.

Gordon Allport in the book entitled *The Nature of Prejudice* remarks on the ill-effects of negative propaganda about the Africans: “Negroes have heard so frequently that they are lazy, ignorant, dirty, and superstitious that they may half believe the accusations, and since the traits are commonly despised in our western culture— which, of course, Negroes share— some degree of in-group hate seems almost inevitable” (Allport, 1958, pp. 192-93). African Americans have been projected as murderers, rapists, and tragic mulattoes by the mainstream society. Such negative nomenclatures thrust on them compel the African Americans, especially the young males to hate their lineage that has made them detestable. Frank, who is depicted as mulatto in the play hates his African heritage and beats Minnie, who is an expectant mother, as he plans to sell Minnie’s share to the white land speculators who attempt to buy land in Nicodemus. Frank thinks that, he can make Minnie obey his words and forces her to add his name to the deed. When Minnie refuses to give away her share, he abuses and tortures her. Frank is a “tragic mulatto” as Wil Parish, a character in the play, who is depicted as an escaped slave observes: “[...]. Seem like he don’t care ’bout colored people no different from white folks. Miss Leah says it’s because mulattos got a war in them. And sometimes it makes ’em stronger but sometimes it just makes ’em crazy. Makes ’em think they got a choice about if they gonna be colored or not” (Cleage, 1999, p.72). Though a mulatto, Frank feels superior to Minnie and looks down upon her family and considers himself a sophisticated man from elite class, and fails to show an iota of respect for the black people.

Frank, who has inter-racial parentage, hates his black heritage, but Sophie embraces her African American identity and struggles to uplift her community. In the book, *Iola Leroy, or Shadows Uplifted*, Frances Harper proclaims that she is proud to have African blood in her: “The best blood in my veins is African blood, and I am not ashamed of it” (qtd. in Freeman, 2009, p. 171). Harper urges the African Americans to be proud of their cultural heritage and that they should uphold their cultural identity in the mainstream society. Sophie’s love for African American community is juxtaposed with Frank’s hatred for his black heritage. James Weld on Johnson in the book entitled *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, reiterates

the bliss of being a colored man: “I felt leap within me pride that I was coloured; and I began to form wild dreams of bringing glory and honor to the Negro race” (Johnson, 1995, p. 21). Sophie is directed by the same pride and verve that made Weldon Johnson to assert his loyalty towards his race. Cleage through the character of Sophie exhorts the African Americans that they should defy the racial injustices and oppressions which they encounter in the white dominated society.

Frank intends to sell the land and to accrue profit in order to lead a carefree life in London, and assumes that financial security will help him to escape from his African American identity. Cleage creates Frank as a complex emotional character who undergoes an internal conflict to suppress his black heritage which urges him to pass off as a white man. Light-skinned blacks always wish to enjoy the privileges that whites enjoy in the American society. Pearl Cleage in the interview by the director Suzanne Trauth and dramaturg Catherine Rust speaks about Frank’s character and remarks:

What I was really trying to do with him was to talk about the self-hate that he has and about the fact that it manifests itself in domestic violence, which is, I think, a big question that we look at when we look at domestic violence in the Black community - the fact that race is so present in such a negative way in the lives of Black men, that they often manifest their rage a trace in domestic violence against Black women and children. (Rust, 2005, n.pg)

The racial discrimination that African American women try to escape is present in their own household and it is manifested in the form of domestic violence. Frank manifests his gender and racial superiority by assaulting Minnie to coerce her portion of homestead, which he believes can make him fit to enjoy the privileges of a fair skinned man. In the book entitled *Black Foremothers* William Wilson states the reason for the self-abomination among blacks: “We despise, we almost hate ourselves... we scoff at black skins and woolly heads, since every model set before us for admiration has a pallid face and flaxen head” (qtd. in Sterling, 1988, p. 214). Frank too detests his black heritage because he admires “pallid face” and desperately tries to get rid of all the black traits in him.

In the middle of Act one, Sophie, Fannie, and Minnie gather to do a call and response ritualistic performance to commemorate the reason for their migration to Kansas. This scene resembles the way African Americans invoke the ancestral spirits to seek their guidance and protection and it also testifies to their upholding the African heritage. They hold their hands and recite:

SOPHIE. Because we are free Negro women ...

FANNIE AND MINNIE: Because we are free Negro women ...

SOPHIE. Born of free Negro women ...

FANNIE AND MINNIE: Born of free Negro women ...
 SOPHIE, FANNIE AND MINNIE. Back as far as time begins ...
 SOPHIE: We choose this day to leave a place where our lives, our honor
 and our very souls are not our own.
 FANNIE. Say it, Sister!
 SOPHIE. We choose this day to declare our lives to be our own and no
 one else's. And we promise to always remember the day we left Memphis
 and went West together to be free women as a sacred bond between us
 with all our trust.
 FANNIE AND MINNIE. With all our trust ...
 SOPHIE. And all our strength ...
 FANNIE. AND MINNIE. And all our strength ...
 SOPHIE. And all our courage ...
 FANNIE AND MINNIE. And all our courage ...
 SOPHIE. And all our love ...
 FANNIE AND MINNIE. And all our love. (Cleage, 1999, pp. 44-45)

Even after having settled in Kansas, they recall their life in South through a ritualistic performance. The ritualistic performance binds them to their ancestors and thus they imbibe energy and courage from the spirits of their ancestors.

Sophie is completely disturbed by Frank's behavior towards Minnie. He threatens the whole family by abusing Minnie and demands to add his name to Minnie's deed, so that he may sell her portion of the land. Sophie, who has much affection for her sisters, devises a plan to shoot Frank to death. Minnie on the other hand, prevents Sophie from shooting him to death. She says that Frank is good and tries to justify his behavior. She finds fault with his brothers, who have stopped sending money to him, since their father's death. Sophie responds, "I don't have to like him I think Frank hates being colored. I don't understand Negroes like that. They make me nervous" (Cleage, 1999, p. 46). Sophie is a powerful character in the play whom Cleage projects as a model for the ordinary African American women to emulate. In an effort to protect the African American community, she seeks to build a town where African Americans can live safe and undisturbed by whites. She is ready to go to any extent to protect her sisters and her community, Frank realizes her commitment to African American community and remarks sarcastically: "You wouldn't really kill somebody over a piece of ground out in the middle of nowhere, would you?" (Cleage, 1999, p.65). Frank's hatred towards African American community and his intention to sell the land jeopardizes the growth of the entire town.

Frank's plan to betray the women becomes clear, when he says: "[...]. This is the chance we've been waiting for. A chance for me to get back on my feet.

To show my brothers I don't need their money" (Clege, 1999, p.68). Frank's intention to sell the land is lucid from his words. The women get angry and their anger is catalyzed by his abusive treatment of Minnie. Sophie plans to shoot him to death, but Miss Leah intervenes and stops her from doing so, and devises a plan to kill Frank by giving a poisoned "apple pie." The women lure Frank and give him poisoned apple pie to eat. He fails to realize that he is under their control. In the article entitled "The Motion of Her Story: Three Plays by Pearl Clege," Giles Freda Scott, quotes Clege's words, "[...] that no artist no matter how brilliant the art, is excused from responsible behavior toward family and community, and that the creations by artists who refuse this responsibility is tainted and should be rejected by the community" (Scott, 1997, p. 710). Clege thus justifies the murder of Frank and considers it an act of self defiance. After seven months Minnie gives birth to a baby girl, and Miss Leah tells the infant about the past and all the women who have worked to make the world better for her. The female characters in the play do not want to hide their sufferings from their posterity and believe firmly that the future generation of African American women will be equipped to defy any discrimination if they are informed of the hardships undergone by their ancestral mothers. In the book entitled *Contemporary Plays by Women of Color* Clege remarks:

As a third-generation black nationalist and a radical feminist, the primary energy that fuels my work is a determination to be a part of the ongoing worldwide struggle against racism, sexism, and classism, and homophobia. I approach my work first as a way of expressing my emotional response to oppression[...]. Second, as a way to offer analysis, establish context, and clarity point of view; and third, to incite my audiences or my readers to action. (qtd. in Perkins and Uno, 1996, p.46)

Through the portrayal of Sophie and Miss Leah, Clege exhorts the entire African American women to assert their voice to bring liberation to their doubly marginalized lives. The indefatigable spirit of African American women can never be trampled by the racial and patriarchal dominance of the mainstream society. Clege exhorts the African American women not to accept the gender roles prescribed by the patriarchal society which throttle their freedom. Through the resilient characters in the play, Clege instills confidence in African American women that they can tide over any difficult situation in their lives and that they are indomitable.

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