

Artivism As A Tool Of Empowerment In Ntozake Shange's Novel *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo*

Razia Sultana

Department of English Language and Translation, College of
Arabic Language and Social Studies, Qassim University,
Buraydah, Saudi Arabia.
rkhan@qu.edu.sa

ABSTRACT:

This paper highlights artivism used by Ntozake Shange's black female protagonists to empower themselves in the novel *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo*. The African-American novelist integrates the black women marginalized by society and by the men within their community. Ntozake Shange's characters are near the real world. The novel is profoundly established in anticipating issues identified with gender inequality, marriage, motherhood, social inequality, racism, and sexual exploitation. Music, poetry, dance, and weaving become forms of artivism that interplay between cultural production and activism systems. The aim is to focus on the struggle of the three young black women in the novel to fight patriarchy and racism. The female characters indulge in music, poetry and weaving to establish self-worth and contribute to changing the way society looks at them.

Keywords: artivism, art; activism; empowerment; inequality; racism; self-worth.

1. INTRODUCTION

Artivism is a word formed by the union of art and activism. It is sometimes also referred to as Social Artivism. By 2005, the term had made its way into academic writing when Slovenian theatre scholar Aldo Milohnic used the term to discuss "autonomous ('alter-globalist', social) movements in Slovenia that attracted wide attention. In carrying out their political activity, they used protests and direct actions, thereby introducing the 'aesthetic', willingly or not". In 2008, Chela Sandoval and Guisela Latorre

published a piece on Chicano/ activism and M. K. Asante used the term about Black artists. There is a chapter on activism in the book *It's Bigger Than Hip Hop* by M. K. Asante. Asante writes: The activist (artist + activist) uses their artistic talents to fight and struggle against injustice and oppression—by any medium necessary. The activist merges commitment to freedom and justice with the pen, the lens, the brush, the voice, the body, and the imagination. The activist knows that to make an observation is to have an obligation.

Ntozake Shange was an American playwright and poet known for her activism through art. As a Black feminist, she addressed race and power issues in much of her work. Born into a middle-class family she endured racism and racist attacks. Shange's family had a strong interest in the arts and encouraged her artistic education. Her first and most prominent work was a play — *For coloured girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf* won several awards, including the Obie Award, Outer Critics Circle Award, and the AUDELCO Award. The play presents a series of poetic monologues performed by seven Black women. It delves into personal stories of love, pain, struggle and resilience, addressing issues such as domestic violence, sexual assault, and racism. In 1978, Shange became an associate of the Women's Institute for Freedom of the Press (WIFP), a non-profit organization. Later, Shange joined The Black Arts Movement, a subset of the Black Power Movement. Larry Neal described the Black Arts Movement as a "radical reordering of the Western cultural aesthetic." Key concepts of BAM were focused on a "separate symbolism, mythology, critique, and iconology" as well as the African American's desire for "self-determination and nationhood."

Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo is a 1982 novel written by Ntozake Shange and first published by St. Martin's Press. It is the story of three Black sisters, whose names give the book its title, and their mother. The novel is set against the historical background of the tumultuous 1960s and early 1970s when the Civil Rights and the Black Power movements not only shook the foundations of white supremacy in the United States but advanced the anticolonial black struggles throughout the Americas and other parts of the globe. Shange's novel is a search and exploration of what means to be a part of the African

diaspora as a Black woman living in America. The family is based in Charleston, South Carolina, and their trade is to spin, weave, and dye cloths as passed on by their ancestors who were slaves. It is about the Gullah people maintaining strong cultural ties to the African continent through cultural preservation work that has been done since they were forcefully enslaved and transported to low-coastal areas like Georgia and South Carolina. They became the first Black inhabitants who are so fond of music, art, and craft. In the novel, the three sisters, Sassafrass, Cypress and Indigo choose to practice arts in the form of music, dance and weaving which is a significant step in empowering themselves. The arts provide a platform for self-expression, personal growth, and challenging societal norms and stereotypes (Sherman & Morrissey, 2017). Through engagement with the arts, women in the novel can increase their self-knowledge, develop socio-epistemic skills, and assert their agency (Sherman & Morrissey, 2017; Desyllas, 2013). Shange relates the experience of coloured women in the Americas with the experience of coloniality, slavery, and oppression. In addition, she narrates their contemporary struggle between continuity and change.

Empowerment can be defined as giving individuals and groups possibilities and support to influence their own lives (Karlsson & Börjeson, 2011) to change the conditions that caused their weak and powerless position in society (Askheim, 2007). Arts become a tool for economic empowerment. Financial independence makes women empowered and gives them the freedom to make their own decisions. In the novel, the three sisters engage in artistic practices that allow them to generate income and improve their financial well-being. Art helps individuals develop their potential for creativity and readiness to change. Existing research shows that art is an important medium for social change (Moxley, 2013). This aligns with research on the impact of microcredit programs, which have been shown to empower women by providing them with access to financial resources and opportunities for entrepreneurship (Li et al., 2011). Furthermore, the arts can foster a sense of community and support among women. In the novel, women come together with the help of music and traditional arts, and the women in the novel can attain financial independence and empowerment. Through artistic

experiences, women in the novel find strength and support from one another, challenging the notion of victimhood and embracing their agency.

2. MATERIALS AND METOD

Black women's empowerment has emerged as a critical topic of study in recent years. Black women's empowerment has emerged as a critical topic of study in recent years. To understand the present portrayal of black women in literature, it is crucial to examine their historical representation. Works such as Harriet Jacobs' "Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl" and Nella Larsen's "Passing" played a pivotal role in revealing the struggles faced by black women in America's past. By examining the historical context and literary techniques utilized in these works, we gain insight into the foundations of black women's empowerment in literature. Portrayal of Black Women in Contemporary Literature shifted the narrative and began to empower black women. Works such as Maya Angelou's "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings" and Toni Morrison's "The Bluest Eye" challenged cultural stereotypes, providing black women with a platform for their stories and experiences. The themes, characterization, and language employed in these works, bring to light the empowerment that black women achieved by reclaiming their voices and narratives. Authors like Audre Lorde, bell hooks, and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie have written extensively about the varied experiences of black women, addressing the intersections of race, gender, and other social identities. Afrofuturism has emerged as a powerful genre that empowers black women by imagining alternative futures. Novels such as N.K. Jemisin's "The Fifth Season" and Octavia Butler's "Kindred" combine elements of science fiction, fantasy, and historical fiction to explore themes of race, gender, and power. Literature has the transformative potential to inspire social change and explores how black women's empowerment in literature has a broader impact on society. Drawing on examples from works such as Alice Walker's "The Color Purple" and Zora Neale Hurston's "Their Eyes Were Watching God," explains how empowering portrayals of black women in literature can challenge and shift societal norms, ultimately promoting equality and justice.

The research aims to investigate the problems faced by the three sisters due to the marginalization of black women in society. They face racism as well as subjugation by black men within their community. This research aims to answer the following questions:

1. How can marginalized black women support each other in their empowerment process?
2. How can practising arts contribute to the empowerment process?

The study is based on a qualitative method of research. The primary source of the research paper is from the novel, *Sassafrass, Cypress and Indigo*, and the secondary source comprises library resources and internet resources.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION:

Various artistic mediums in the novel:

Artivism in "*Sassafrass, Cypress and Indigo*" by Ntozake Shange can be seen through the novel's exploration of various artistic mediums as forms of social and political activism.

1. **Visual Art:** In the novel, each of the three main characters, *Sassafrass*, *Cypress*, and *Indigo*, express their artistic dreams through visual art. *Sassafrass* is a painter, and her art becomes a way for her to resist societal expectations and express her true self. *Cypress* creates sculptures using found objects, often with a focus on reclaiming discarded materials and promoting environmental consciousness. Through their visual art, both *Sassafrass* and *Cypress* challenge traditional notions of beauty and emphasize the importance of individual expression.

2. **Dance:** *Indigo* is a dancer, and her dance performances serve as a form of resistance. She uses movement to explore her identity, connect with her ancestral roots, and challenge societal norms. *Indigo's* dance showcases the strength and resilience of Black women in the face of oppression and serves as a powerful form of self-expression and activism.

3. **Writing:** Ntozake Shange incorporates her own art as a form of activism within the novel. The poetic and experimental prose style of the book challenges conventional writing norms and aims to disrupt dominant discourses. Shange's writing

emphasizes the importance of alternative narratives and amplifies the voices and experiences of marginalized individuals.

4. Music: Throughout the novel, music plays a significant role in expressing resistance and liberation. Whether it's Sassafrass playing her guitar, Cypress composing songs, or Indigo incorporating music into her dance performances, the characters use music to convey their emotions, freedom, and expression of identity. The fusion of different musical genres also reflects the diverse experiences and influences of African American culture.

Artivism and empowerment journeys:

Shange explores the experiences of a mother, Hilda Effania, and her three daughters, Sassafrass, Cypress, and Indigo through the perspectives of each daughter. She endows every leading character with a passion for art through which they are going to discover their identity and womanhood. Shange initiates her book, by describing a magical and symbolic scene about women, then Indigo's menstruation as her entrance into puberty: "Where there is a woman there is magic. If there is a moon falling from her mouth, she is a woman who knows her magic, who shares or not share her powers. A woman with a moon falling from her mouth, roses between her legs and tiara of Spanish moss, this woman is a consort of the spirits". (Shange, 1982, p.13)

The youngest daughter is Indigo who is imaginative, and creative but seldom speaks. She loves her dolls, loves making dolls, and decorates them as white people. Her world is full of women both real and imaginative. As a black girl, she is not pleased with the way the white think of the black, therefore, in her imagination, she fantasizes about being a white girl. Miranda is her beloved doll, and the doll is like a confidante to Indigo. After attaining puberty, indigo's mother forces her to behave like an adult and give up her dolls. She hates growing up since she thinks, it is hard to be a grown-coloured woman, and she does not want the same for her dolls, as a result, she intends to bury her dolls to prevent them from growing up: "I couldn't bear for them to grow up, I couldn't stand, I just couldn't. Mama, it's hard, isn't it? What's hard, Indigo? Being a grown-coloured woman is hard, ain't? just like

you told me. Just cause I haveta grow up, my dolls don't haveta. I can save them". (Shange, 1982, p.47)

After giving up playing with dolls to embark on a new journey as a woman she is gifted a fiddle by her uncle. This symbolizes a new medium through which Indigo can speak about herself more openly and honestly. Indigo loves playing the fiddle as it connects her spiritually to her ancestors. She plays it awfully but is not interested in hiring a tutor but rather learns it herself. She loves the way she plays it depicting and symbolizing her strong will to disobey the conventions around her. Indigo joins a "gang" called the Geechees where members Crunch and Spats offer her acceptance and camaraderie. The fiddle equals music and is a symbol of freedom, black identity and empowerment. Indigo is Shange's character who connects past and present. The fiddle is her voice, her mind, her spirit, as Shange writes: "Indigo sat in her window, working with her fiddle, telling everybody, the wind & all his brothers, what was on her mind, the turmoil in the spirit realm, the luxuriant realities she meandered in her sleep. Whenever she wanted to pray, she let her fiddle talk. Whenever she was angry here came the fiddle." (Shange, 1982, p.28)

Indigo symbolizes the historical past of the blacks who were displaced to cultivate this crop for the economic boost of the economy of the whites. It is crucial to remember that slaves were forbidden to play the drums because slave owners were afraid of slave rebellions. If slaves could play the drums, they would send signals to slaves in other plantations and could instigate rebellion against slave owners,

Indigo wisht the switchblade handles on her violin case were knives. She'd have them all land in his back, but she didn't want to hurt anybody else. The Colored had been hurt enough already. The Caverns began to moan, not with sorrow but in recognition of Indigo's revelation. The slaves who were ourselves had known terror intimately, confused sunrise with pain, & accepted indifference as kindness. Now they sang out from the walls, pulling Indigo toward them. Indigo ran her hands along the walls, to get the song, getta hold to the voices. Instead, her fingers grazed cold, hard metal rings. Chains. Leg irons. The Caverns revealed the plight of her people but kept on

singing. The tighter Indigo held the chains in her hands, the less shame was her familiar (Shange, 1982, p.42-43).

The second daughter, Cypress flies to New York to pursue freedom, to liberate herself from the traditional African American cultural prejudices of small communities. Her mother does not let her be a dancer, since she thinks dance is for white people: "You've been standing round that ballet class, haven't you? Ballet is for white girls; can't you understand your ass is too big and your legs are too short, and you can't afford all those shoes and special clothes..." (Shange, 1982, p.107).

She experiments with art through dancing and joins a troupe devoted to African American dance after rejecting the confines and social irrelevance of ballet. She abandons ballet out of frustration with its rigid rules and cultural insignificance. She experiences sexual aggression from male members of the group so she leaves the group and joins a radical feminist dance company called Azure Bosom. Through dancing, this character expresses herself, asserts her identity and connects with the spiritual world – the Orishas. Cypress tries everything from drugs to lesbianism to find freedom. She develops a same-sex romantic relationship with Idrina, a fellow dancer at the dance group. Idrina exploits Cypress as her longtime girlfriend was on a long trip and later, this relationship is put off by Idrina. Cypress eventually discovers that women can be as sexually exploitative as men. She dumps Idrina to get rid of the abusive relationship. She spends more time at the bars where she meets Leroy McCullough, an old musician friend from San Francisco. Cypress and Leroy seemingly revive each other's creativity and eventually develop a love bond with each other. Her relationship with Leroy testifies to her arrival at personal liberty. Leroy leaves for a summer European tour. Cypress joins a dance company that raises money to support the Civil Rights Movement and Leroy asks to marry her before she starts on her first tour with the group. The Civil Rights Movement included many non-violent boycotts, protests, and marches, which aided in the results of American judicial changes in government decisions and legislation for African Americans but also the overall diverse citizens of America.

Sassafrass, the eldest daughter struggles for equality, and personal freedom and tries to define herself as an artist, a

writer, and a weaver. Sassafrass is a talented artist who pursues her family's legacy that is weaving. She experiences weaving as an expression of herself. She lives with her saxophone player boyfriend, Mitch in Los Angeles. She wants to weave her own life beautifully but unfortunately; she comes across the reality of the male-dominated society. The dichotomy of man/woman which tops men over women and lets men treat women like property results in physical violence toward women. While Mitch is a self-centred sexist, chauvinist Black male artist who degrades his partner Sassafrass does not like the way her boyfriend Mitch, treats her and the way he intends to change her. He strikes her so that she leaves him as Mitchell's action reminds Sassafrass of pictures of slave auctions: Sassafrass ran to pick it up, and Mitch shoved her to the side. Once he had the tube in his hands again, he twirled it and struck again, again, and again. Mitch, have you gone crazy...stop, stop, stop...I can't stand it, you're hurting me...stop it, Mitch you are hurting me". (Shange, 1982, p.80). His violent aggression refreshed a bad memory, when her daddy beat her mama "' Daddy, let go a mama! Daddy let go!' That's all she shouted, as she watched her mama being pulled down the stairs toward the front door, her hair in the grip of his fists" (Shange, 1982, p.88).

Despite Mitch's flaws, Sassafrass loves him, she is devoted and committed to this relationship, since "she felt the doors open and there he was – the cosmic lover and wonder of wonders to her: Mitch" (Shange, 1982: 69). Apart from physical abuses Sassafrass is also humiliated and objectified by her boyfriend for sexual pleasure. Sassafrass's boyfriend and his friend are talking about her body, her sexual organs, and also other women that they sleep with. They regard the female body as a means of enjoyment and degrade their womanhood. It was difficult for her to define herself independently, but, eventually, after a process of growth and spiritual help, she managed to get emotional stability without him. Shange represents the liberation and escape of Sassafrass from the daily oppression and brutalization to which slaves were subjected to. Indigo, still in Charleston is also a midwife. A pregnant Sassafrass comes home, and Indigo delivers her baby. With Cypress and Mama Hilda in attendance, the women welcome the new baby into life—life: with all its beauty, complexities, and inordinate joys.

4. CONCLUSION

The novel demonstrates art as a tool for activism, challenging societal norms, and promoting individual and collective liberation. Shange's leading characters are filled with passion for art through which they discover their identity and womanhood. Sassafrass, Cypress and Indigo gain the power of self-expression, self-actualization, individual growth and the strength to challenge societal norms. They manage to fight against patriarchy, racism in society and marginalization within their black community. Practicing arts also provides an opportunity to gain financial independence which is a key factor in the process of empowerment. Shange aims at a cultural awakening since women have been marginalized and victimized by oppression and violence.

References:

- Askheim, O.P. & Starrin, B. (Eds.) *Empowerment i teori och praktik*. Malmö: Gleerup, 2007.
- Karlsson, M. & Börjeson, M. *Brukarmakt - i teori och praktik* (1st ed.), Stockholm: Natur & kultur, 2011.
- M.K. Asante, Jr. *It's Bigger Than Hip Hop*. St. Martin's Press, 2008.
- Moxley, D.P. "Incorporating art-making into the cultural practice of social work." *Journal of Ethnic and Cultural Diversity in Social Work*, 22 (3-4), 235-255, 2013.
- Shange, Ntozake. *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1982.
- Salaam, Kalamu ya. *Historical Overviews of the Black Arts Movement: Modern American Poetry*. The University of Illinois, 1995.