التداعيات الميتادرامية لمشاكل النوع والانتماء العرقي:

دراسة لمسرحية "دويتو هارلم" (١٩٩٧)، للكاتبة جنات سيرز(Djanet Sears)

ملخص

تقوم هذه الدراسة بالبحث في المسرحية الفائزة بجائزة الحاكم العام وهي مسرحية : دويتو هارلم (١٩٩٧)، لكاتبة المسرح الأفروكندية، جنات سيرز (١٩٥٩-)، بغرض مناقشة قضايا النوع والانتماء العرقي فيما قد يسمى بالميتادراما (أو ما وراء الدراما)، و ذلك من خلال استخدام الكاتبة لبعض المشاهد و الشخصيات من مسرحية ويليام شكسبير الشهيرة، عطيل.

بناء على ذلك، تقدم الدراسة خلفية موجزة لتعريف المفردات النقدية مثل 'الميتادراما'، 'النوع' و'الانتماء العرقي' كمفردات نقدية يتكرر ذكرها في مناقشة المسرحية. ثم تركز الدراسة على استخدام الخلفيات المكانية المسرحية المختلفة التي تعرضها المسرحية لحى الزنوج التاريخي 'هارلم' في ثلاث فترات تتراوح بين الأعوام ١٨٦٠ ، ١٩٢٨ ، و الوقت الحاضر ، لدراسة التغير المحتمل في تناول القضايا المتعلقة بموضوع اللون. بالإضافة إلى ذلك تتناول الدراسة رسم الشخصيات الميتادرامية و هي عبارة عن ثلاث أزواج في الثلاث فترات المذكورة، تشير جميعها إلى عطيل و زوجته الزنجية التي ينوى هجرها و الزواج من مونا البيضاء (البديل الميتادرامى لديدامونا)، كما تناقش الدراسة الرؤى المسرحية المختلفة لقضايا النوع والأصل العرقي المشار إليها سابقا، من خلال تناول الكاتبة لحبكة عطيل الأساسية، و ربطها بالمراحل الميتادرامية الثلاث، بغض النظر عن الفترات الطويلة التي تفصل بين كل منها، ولعل أهم ما يبرز من قضايا مثيرة في هذا الشأن هو تكرر الهيمنة الأبوية و الذكورية، وكذلك المواقف العنصرية من خلال استعراض الكاتبة لرموز عديدة من مشاهير الزنوج و كفاحهم من أجل حريتهم و حقوقهم المدنية.

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18. Sears's textual footnote indicates:

In South Carolina in 1994, Susan Smith, a 23-year-old married mother of two, claimed that her burgundy Mazda had been carjacked by a Black man with her sons (aged three and one) strapped into their car seats in the back. Nine days later, Smith confessed that she had herself deliberately driven the car into a lake, drowning her trapped sons, because a man with whom she was in love had suggested that, among other factors, her two children were an obstacle to their having a relationship. (698)

16. Sears writes in her textual footnote:

In 1991, Clarence Thomas, a conservative Black lawyer, was named as George H. Bush's controversial candidate for the Supreme Court. During the confirmation hearings, the Senate Judiciary Committee heard evidence from Anita Hill, a Black law professor at the University of Oklahoma, about how she had been sexually harassed by Thomas years before. Hill's testimony quickly became the main focus of the televised hearings, virtually eclipsing all other issues and prompting a great public debate about the issues. In the end, the Senate voted narrowly in favor of Thomas's confirmation. (706)

17. Sears's textual footnote indicates:

In March 1991, Los Angles police arrested a Black man named Rodney King, who had previously been convicted for robbery, for allegedly speeding. When King allegedly resisted leaving his car, he was physically forced out, then beaten with batons, kicked and shocked with a Taser stun gun by three police officers in the presence of 23 other officers, including a sergeant. The event was videotaped by a bystander, and the three officers together with their sergeant , were charged with brutality. When in April 1992, a jury found all four of the accused not guilty, riots immediately erupted in Los Angeles, resulting in more than 50 deaths and more than a billion dollars in property damage.(706)

14. Louis Farrakhan (1933 —), is the African American leader of the Nation of Islam, an African American movement combining elements of Islam with Black Nationalism. Regarding Farrakhan's call, the Nation of Islam web site posted:

The popular leader and the Nation of Islam repurchased farmland in Dawson, Georgia and enjoyed a banner year in 1995 with the successful Million Man March on the Mall in Washington, D.C., which drew nearly two million men. Minister Farrakhan was inspired to call the March out of his concern over the negative image of Black men perpetuated by the media and movie industries, which focused on drugs and gang violence. The Million Man March established October 16 as a Holy Day of Atonement, Reconciliation and Responsibility.

For more details, see the web site of the Nation of Islam:

<http://www.noi.org/mlfbio.htm>

15. Commenting on this book, Sears, in her textual footnote, indicates that "an influential conservative American think-tank founded in 1973; among its many projects, it provided support to Richard J. Herrnstein and Charles Murray's The Bell Curve (1994), a book which argued, on dubious scientific evidence, that there was a connection between race and intelligence"(682).

12. MLK Day is the annual holiday honoring the memory of Martin Luther King. It is usually celebrated on the third Monday of January.

13. According to the 2000 population census of Cleveland, the racial makeup of the city was 50.99% Black or African American, 41.49% White, 1.35% Asian, 0.30% Native American, 0.04% Pacific Islander, 3.59% from other races, and 2.24% from two or more races. 7.26% of the population was Hispanic or Latino of any race.[1] Ethnic groups include Germans (9.2%), Irish (8.2%), Poles (4.8%), Italians (4.6%), and English (2.8%). There are also substantial communities of Hungarians, Arabs, Romanians, Czechs, Slovaks, Greeks, Ukrainians, Albanians, Macedonians, Croats, Serbs, Lithuanians, Slovenes, Koreans, and Han Chinese. For more about the city of Cleveland, see the web site: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cleveland,_Ohio>

The racial makeup of the city of Detroit, according to the 2000 population census, was 81.6% Black, 12.3% White, 1.0% Asian, 0.3% Native American, 0.03% Pacific Islander, 2.5% other races, 2.3% two or more races, and 5.0 percent Hispanic. The city's foreign-born population is at 4.8%. For more details, see the web sire:

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Detroit>

August 28, 1963, and then she cites parts of the famous 'I Have a Dream' speech. The speech opens as follows:

"I am happy to join with you today in what will go down in history as the greatest demonstration for freedom in the history of our nation. Five score years ago, a great American, in whose symbolic shadow we stand today, signed the Emancipation Proclamation. This momentous decree came as a great beacon light of hope to millions of Negro slaves, who had been seared in the flames of withering injustice. It came as a joyous daybreak to end the long night of their captivity. But one hundred years later, the Negro still is not free. One hundred years later, the life of the Negro is still sadly crippled by the manacle of segregation and the chains of discrimination."

The full text of the speech (written text, video and audio) can be found at a number of web sites of which I mention only the following:

<http://www.usconstitution.net/dream.html>

<http://www.mlkonline.net/dream.html>

<http://www.mlkonline.net/video-i-have-a-dream-speech.html>

<http://www.holidays.net/mlk/speech.htm>

11. For details on Billie Holliday and her musical and life history see the following web site: <http://www.ladyday.net/>

musician and composer, Halim El-Dabh, University Professor Emeritus at Kent State University, Kent, Ohio. For details on El-Dabh and ethnic music can be reached at the official site:

<http://www.halimeldabh.com/>

9. Djanet Sears, "Harlem Duet," *The Broadway Anthology of Drama: Plays From the Western Theatre*, Eds. Wise, Jennifer and Craig S. Walker. (Toronto, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2005) 662. All subsequent references to the play will be taken from this edition and indicated in textual parentheses.

10. Apart from his religious career as a clergyman Baptist minister, Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929–1968) became one of the most famous African American activists historical leaders in civil rights movement in America. His major aim was to achieve progress in civil rights. King's relentless efforts led to the famous Washington March in 1963, where he delivered the memorable historical speech: 'I Have a Dream' which enflamed the public enthusiasm for civil rights and equality. The speech has also introduced King as an eloquent orator that the U.S. history will never forget. On the ground of his struggle to end racial segregation through civil and peaceful means, King won the 1964 Nobel Peace Prize. In 1968, King was assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee. To give more emphasis on the past oppression of the blacks, Djanet Sears adds a footnote reference to King's most famous and memorable speech on

6. Although it obviously derives its meaning from the world of theatre, *theatricality* can be abstracted from the theatre itself and the applied to any and all aspects of human life. Even if limited to theatre, its potential meanings are daunting. Thus, it can be defined exclusively as a specific type of performance style or inclusively as all the semiotic codes of theatrical representation. Some people claim that it is the definitive condition or attitude for postmodern art and thought; others insist that it already achieved its distinguishing features in the birth of modernism. Within modernism, it is often identified as the opposite of realism, yet realism is also seen as but one type of theatricality. Therefore, it is a mode of representation or a style of behavior characterized by histrionic actions, manners, and devices, and hence a practice; yet it is also an interpretative model for describing psychological identity, social ceremonies, communal festivities, and public spectacles, and hence a theoretical concept. (Davies and Postlewait 1)

7. Djanet Sears, from the Afterward in Afrika Solo, other details about the author and her life background and work can be obtained from the VG Artist Biography web site:
<http://voices.cla.umn.edu/vg/Bios/entries/sears_djanet.html>

8. Ethnic music or 'ethnomusicology' has been recognized in US universities as an academic discipline focusing on African and Afro-American music. A major contributor in this area is the Egyptian

culture: only disruption from within, micropolitics, language games, parody and fragmentation. (289-90)

4. The specific space of 'Postcolonialism', however, was first articulated in Edward Said's book *Orientalism*, published in 1978. Like 'Postmodernism', the term has come to refer both to a condition (here postcoloniality) and to the discourses which theorize that condition. As a condition, however, Postcolonialism is hardly new . . . the analysis of Conrad's Heart of Darkness reminds us that postcoloniality may refer as much to the Roman conquest of Britain and its aftermath as to the more recent historical recovery from the 'scramble for Africa' in the nineteenth century. (Rice and Waugh 291)

5. The adjective 'postdramatic' denotes a theatre that feels bound to operate beyond drama, at a time 'after' the authority of the dramatic paradigm in theatre What it does not mean is an abstract negotiation and mere looking away from the tradition of drama. 'After' drama means that it lives on as a structure – however weakened and exhausted – of the 'normal' theatre: as an expectation of large parts of its audience, as a foundation for many of its means of representation, as a quasi automatically working norm of its dramaturgy. (Lehmann 27)

Notes

1. Harlem is the most famous and historical Afro-American neighborhood in New York City, It had been long known as a major artistic, cultural, business and communal center. Harlem also had a long history of significant ethnic shifts accompanying social and political eruptions. Sears describes Harlem as "both a place and a symbol. . . . It represents the best and the worst of everything about people of African descent"(Lingerfelt and Kershaw Par.2).

2. Mat Buntin, "An Interview with Djanet Sears," March 2004: <http://www.canadianshakespeares.ca/i_dsears.cfm>

3. Rice and Waugh indicate that Postmodernism is:

a 'mood' expressed theoretically across a diverge range of theoretical discourses and involving: a focus on the collapse of grand narratives into local incommensurable language games or 'little narratives'; a Foucauldian emphasis on the discontinuity and plurality of history as discursively produced and formulated, and a tendency to view the discourses of Enlightenment reason as complicit with the instrumental rationalization of modern life. The historian Arnold Toynbee first used the term in 1947 to describe the current, fourth and final, phase of Western history, dominated by anxiety and irrationalism. In the contemporary version, there is no longer a transcendent space from which to offer a critique of this

emphasized by the dramatist in marginal footnotes. In its delineation of the various perspectives and choices, Sears's *Harlem Duet* does not simply present a compromising Black Othello by diminishing the familiarity of Shakespeare's play, but it provides a vast number of Black activists, episodes, places, artists, and above all unchanging concepts. Thus, the major metadramatic reflections in *Harlem Duet* can be classified as postmodern evocations of gender and ethnic problems.

I'd miss my stop. And I'd just sit there, past midtown, past the upper west side, and somehow I'd end up here. And I'd just walk. I love seeing all these brown faces"(686). In fact, the dramatist tours inside Billie's mind and heart (i.e. most probably inside her own) moves from the present to the past and vice versa. Billie can see "the Schomburg Museum from here" (686), which is a reminder of all African culture and history. Moreover, because of her innate inclination, Sears cannot separate the present of her feminist characters from the past of their ancestors, as Billie admits, "All my ancestors lined up below me . . . like a Makonde statue" (688). Not only the people, but even African garments are of particular charm to the dramatist as she recalls the 'boubou"(691), the "kente", and "dashi"(712). Billie sums up her motive which must be Sears's as well: "It's about Black I love Black. I really do. And it's revolutionary . . . Black is beautiful . . . so beautiful" (713).

In conclusion, Djanet Sears's *Harlem Duet* draws a metadramatic history of Black culture through a number of prominent incidents, and landmarks. She brilliantly mixes it with the present so as to indicate that the racial struggle is still there having left a great impact on the Black psyche. Besides, Sears uses the three complicated interchangeable plots, to illustrate the ethnic and gender problems which truly appear in a number of significant developments and figures whose roles and importance are mostly

Sears extends her metadramatic evocations of ethnicity and gender to other significant episodes and places which reflect problems and memoirs of particular significance for Blacks. Apart from the relatively older eras before the 1960s, Sears brings to the readers famous episodes occurring in the 1990s. Of these episodes, she mentions the Anita Hill [16] hearings of 1991, the L.A. riots [17] of 1991, the 1994 story of Susan Smith,[18] who "blamed some imaginary Blackman for the murder of her two boys and that's why authorities didn't suspect her for nearly two weeks. Stopping every Black man with a burgundy sedan from Union, South Carolina, to the Oranges of New Jersey" (697). In addition to these episodes, Sears also focuses the 1995 trial of O. J. Simpson who was asked "to approach the jury and try on the bloody glove" (697).

In addition to Black areas and landmarks such as Harlem, Harlem Hospital, Hotel Theresa, Djanet Sears provides a list of other references to recall Black culture and background.:

> BILLIE: You still think it's a reservation?
>
> OTHELLO: Homeland/reservation.
>
> BILLIE: A sea of Black faces.
>
> OTHELLO: Africatown, USA. (686)

This sort of nostalgia for the past compels a heap of memoirs which Billie recalls with deliberate and genuine love for all that is Black: "when we lived in the village, sometimes, I'd be on the subway and

> that I have a right to speak out on their blood – on what they have contributed to that land, and on what I have contributed also, as best I can. (689)

Therefore, the dramatist considers Robeson's role as significant not only as an artistic talent, but also as an effective political activist and leader.

Likewise, Sears's metadramatic evocations of ethnicity and gender are reflected in the Black culture and ideology which appear in their reading interests. As Othello sorts out the books he wants to pack and take with him, he comes to certain books he is not certain if they are his or hers: "*African Mythology* . . . Is this mine or yours?" (682) Then he comes to *The Great Chain of Being*; a book which leads Billie to give expression of her feminist vision: "From man to mollusk. The scientific foundation for why we're not human. An African can't really be a woman, you know"(682). Othello comes to *Black Psychology* which as it seems will be necessary for both of them. Therefore, he asks if she needs to keep it. Billie, unconsciously and unhesitatingly takes the books from Othello and comments: "You'd think there was more information on Blacks and mental health. You know . . . Christ, we've been here, what, 400 years. No money in it I guess"(682). While Billie believes that they have got no grants or scholarships, she decides to leave *The Heritage Foundation* [15] to Othello.

activists and revealing their roles in textual footnotes, but also by bringing to the stage a whole lot of black artists (musicians actors, and authors), black culture events, ideologies, areas and places. Of the most famous black musicians, Djanet Sears refers to Abbey Lincoln, jazz singer, song writer, playwright and actress (680), Max Roach, jazz drummer and composer who married Abbey Lincoln from 1962 to 1970 (681), and Paul Robeson (1898 – 1976), an American actor who had an apparent role. In 1952, Robeson was prohibited by the State Department from traveling to Canada for a concert on the ground of his political views. He protested in a musical way for he gathered huge numbers of people and performed on the back of a pick-up truck near the Canadian border. One year later, the idea of musical protest was repeated in Washington, where thousands of American and Canadian people gathered on both sides, and at the end of the concert, Robeson gave a very moving speech, as Sears quotes in her footnote:

> I speak as one whose roots are in the soil of my land. I speak as one, as I say, whose fathers and whose mothers toiled in cotton – toiled in tobacco – toiled in indigo – toiled to create the basic wealth upon which the great land of the United States was built. The great primary wealth came from the blood and from the suffering of my forefathers. And I say, as I have said many times,

Othello as such, Magi, in ironic tone, reminds the readers and audience of the older prototype:

> MAGI: . . . Booker T. Uppermiddleclass III. He can be found in predominantly White neighborhood. He refers to other Blacks as "them." His greatest accomplishment was being invited to the White House by George Bush to discuss the "Negro problem." (692)

In his political agenda, Booker T. was not considered as the type of hero to be glorified by the Blacks. In her textual footnotes, Sears indicates that, "he rose in social rank to become an advisor to several presidents, but in matter of civil rights he tended toward a policy of accommodation, counseling Blacks to accept racial segregation and to concentrate on self betterment through education" (692). Other allusions evoking black ethnicity problems include black political activists such as Jesse Jackson (1941 -) whose oratory voice is heard while "the cello and bass moan, almost dirge-like in harmonic tension" (696). Patrice Lumumba (1925-1961). However, Sears uses Billie, Magi, and Amah, each in her own turn, as her mouthpiece (mainly in the memoirs and allusions) to hail, praise, or criticize episodes and people for their remarkable presence within or without the Black (or Black feminist) struggle.

In *Harlem Duet*, the evocation of Black feminist problems is not only represented by the dramatist's references to political

remembers the occasion, she evokes a feminist sense of inner dissatisfaction when she shifts quickly as it seems to recall the lost love in an idyllic serene tone for now she is aware that Othello will shortly abandon her. Billie continues,

> And you asked me to hold the baby Jenny while you went to the restroom, when this man came up to us and took our picture. Asked me to take our picture. Jenny in my arms. Othello beside me. "The perfect Black family". That's what he called us. "The perfect Black family". (676)

What Othello intends to do will definitely hurt Billie and draw attention to her reaction as a female black figure. She confesses in her monologue about the end of Act One: "Yet I'll be discarded as some kind of unconscionable bitter shadow, or something. Ain't I a woman? This is my face you take for night — the biggest shadow in the world. I . . . have nothing more to lose" (698).

Black ethnicity is further evoked by Sears's allusion to Booker T. Washington (1856 – 1915), a black leader whose civil rights attempts tended to compromise and let Blacks seek social betterment through education. Magi mentions his name assuming a kind of assimilation of his compromising attitudes with Othello's, "who wants to White wash his life," and he is also a fine example of the "Black man afflicted with Negrophobia" (692). Regarding

> Marcus Garvey (1887 – 1940) Jamaican born leader of the Black nationalist movement based in Harlem during the 1920s. A highly controversial figure, Garvey did much to advance racial pride, but his 'Africa for the Africans' movement – based on the idea of founding a nation in Africa through the resettlement of Black American – led to bitter confrontations with other Black leaders. (674-5)

The allusions to Black politicians and activists and other associations consolidate the gender and ethnic issues in the play. Therefore, along with Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, Farrakhan and Garvey, Sears evokes all the past and present problems of black feminism by bringing a lot of other leaders and politicians. Of theses figures, Billie as she talks with Amah, recalls:

> BILLIE: Remember when we moved in? The day Nelson and Winnie came to Harlem, remember? Winnie and Nelson— our welcoming committee. They'd blocked off the whole of 125th — it took us 45 minutes to convince the cops to let us through. (676)

By Winnie and Nelson, Sears plainly refers to Nelson Mandela and his ex wife Winnie Mandela (they are currently divorced as Sears indicates in her footnote). Both Black African political figures remain symbolic of struggle and steadfastness. However, as Billie

Farrakhan,[14] by merely mentioning his call to gather a million dedicated Black American Muslims in Washington D.C.:

> MAGI: How is True Drew?
>
> AMAH: Oh, Andrew's real good. You know him . . .
>
> MAGI: Yep, he's a good man. They're rare. And he went all the way down to D.C. for the Million Man March. Yeh, he's one in a million. (668-9)

The allusion here is indeed expressive and comprehensive. In a textual footnote, Sears indicates, "On October 16, 1995, hundreds of thousands of Black American men responded to Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan's (1933 -) call for a million sober, disciplined, committed, dedicated, inspired Black men to meet in Washington on a day of atonement" (669). In addition to its reference to religious and racial implications, Magi's assertion to Amah that good men are "rare" reflects her feminist sense of what women truly expect or find in males' attitudes. In spite of its serious mode and respectful air, Magi's remark bears a sense of humor as she jokes with Amah: "If you ever think of trading him in" (669).

Another Black leader brought in Sears's *Harlem Duet* to evoke the significant racial problems is Marcus Garvey. The dramatist also uses his oral address as a background for the third scene of Act One. In her textual footnote, Sears writes:

> are the victims of democracy, nothing but disguised hypocrisy. So I'm not standing here speaking to you as an American, or a patriot, or a flag-saluter, or a flag-waver– – no, not I. I'm speaking as a victim of this American system. And I see America through the eyes of the victim. I don't see any American dream; I see an American nightmare. (665)

The location where Malcolm X chose to deliver this angry speech is in itself significant of black ethnicity. According to their population and industrial environment, the cities of Cleveland and Detroit [13] are two of the largest and most important black regions in two adjacent states. Therefore, Malcolm X must have had the necessary support to declare: "Uncle Sam's hands are dripping with blood, dripping with the blood of the black man in this country . . . . Let it be the ballot or the bullet. Let him know that it must be the ballot or the bullet. (665) His invective angry tone clearly assails and thrills the 22 million black Americans and makes Malcolm X's name memorable and symbolic among Black Americans until the present time.

In addition to her allusions to King and Malcolm X, Sears continues to bring before the audience and readers as many other figures, who recall reminiscences of the Blacks and related racial problems, as she can. This time, she refers implicitly to Louis

also amidst blues and jazz riff as a background for the first scene. He is heard while "speaking about the nightmare of race in America and the need to build strong Black communities" (665). Although he appeared about the same time King was leading his peaceful marches and protests, the African American Muslim activist Malcolm X chose violence in his approach as means to achieve Black rights. To reveal the political role played by Malcolm X, the dramatist, in a footnote, writes:

> In April, 1964, in Cleveland, Ohio, and in Detroit, Michigan, black rights activist Malcolm X (1925 – 1965) delivered a speech known as "The Ballot or the Bullet," which was, to some degree, a repudiation of King's optimism about the gradual transformation of race relations and a call instead for the immediate use of direct force: "It isn't that time is running out — time has run out! (665)

In this footnote, Djanet Sears introduces Malcolm X as a black activist talking in public to declare his obvious rejection of King's methods, and of course the reaction that the Us government shows. Therefore, he reflects his indignation, revolutionary attitude, and desperate feelings:

> I'm one of 22 million black people who are the victims of Americanism. One of the 22 million black people who

Remember when you gave this to me?" (663). Sears is not only referring her characters to remember the episode but she desires to remind the audience and the readers as well. In the meantime, and as the "lights fade to black, the cello and the bass call and respond to a heaving melancholic blues"(663), Martin Luther King's voice (see notes No. 10 and 12 at the end of this article) is heard. Not only in his famous historical 'Dream Speech', but also in his other writings, Martin Luther King has had a powerful impact and a clear evidence of non-violent move to stop racial segregation and discrimination. For example, in *Why We Can't Wait*, King writes:

> We are confronted primarily with a moral issue. It is as old as the Scriptures and is as clear as the American Constitution. The heart of the question is whether all Americans are to be afforded equal rights and equal opportunities, whether we are going to treat our fellow Americans as we want to be treated. (18)

By the front cover statement: "Freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed," King indicates that all the oppressed in the whole world must seek their rights and do not simply wait for the oppressor to grant them their freedom as a gift.

The next metadramatic allusion Sears uses to evoke the ethnic black problems is the allusion to Malcolm X whose voice is heard

home) to escape the Civil War and to find the freedom that the underground railroad would provide some slaves. . . . His namesake nation, however, has hardly been a refuge for people of African descent" (81). In her footnote reference to Nova Scotia, in the play, Djanet Sears explains:

> Blacks were present in Nova Scotia as early as 1606, but a major wave of Black immigration came with the American War of Independence, when the British encouraged thousands of slaves to escape their American masters and relocate to the colony of Nova Scotia. These first refugees were followed by thousands of others during the early nineteenth century. (678)

However, Sears's reference to Nova Scotia is a reminder of a long history of ethnic problems objectified mainly in the oppressive system that subjugated and enslaved Blacks in Europe and America.

Furthermore, in *Harlem Duet*, Djanet Sears employs a number of metadramtic reminiscences through which she recalls long historical problems, people, politicians, singers, authors, places, books, and ideologies. She even explains, in textual footnotes, the mystery of those references she mentions so that the ideas of gender and ethnicity become clear and relevant. When she begins the entire action of the play, she begins with 'She' (Billie at Harlem in 1928) reminding 'He' (Othello same place and time): "Remember . . .

that she has not known about him for a very long time: "He hauled us all the way to Nova Scotia from Bronx, to be near Granma, when Mama died" (678). The allegories of Canada and Nova Scotia here work in similar dimensions: first, Canada serves as a reflection of Canadian identity with its wide range of meaningful suggestions and hopes for freedom as all Blacks had plans to escape to Canada after the American War of independence. Second, Nova Scotia serves as a place for liberation and hope of a better refuge. In her interview with Mat Buntin, Sears discusses the historical role and significance of the character of Canada : "The character Canada is in a way a reflection of Canadian identity. Historically, Canada has been known as a place of hope for escaping African slaves and freed Africans in the Americas. You know, we follow the North Star to Canada" (par.7). However, Sears intends to portray Canada as remarkably weak since Billie's problems are both financial and psychological. Canada is unable to help in both cases. When he arrives to Harlem, Sears adds in her interview with Buntin, "he's unable to change her [Billie's] situation, he's unable to make things better for her. However, he does remain a strong symbol of hope in the play, in terms of relationships, relationships between men and women, fathers and daughters in this particular case. (par.7)

The introduction of Billie's father, Reinelt and Roach note, "recalls Him and Her discussing going to Nova Scotia (Canada's

attitude towards change to the attitude of historical politician who sought to change the conditions of Blacks through peaceful methods indicating that Othello believes that Blacks can improve their life conditions: "through education and yet dependent on the white establishment and its tokenism for his academic position at Columbia, seems to occupy a political position reminiscent . . . of the rhetoric of Booker T. Washington and Martin Luther King, Jr." (200). On the contrary, Billie's methods tend to be revolutionary, and therefore, Dickinson compare her to revolutionary politicians: "Billie, by contrast, sees the educational system as reinforcing certain cultural, racial, and gender hierarchies . . . and her militancy in the face of such institutional oppression seems of a piece with the views of Fanon, W .E .B. Dubois, and Malcolm X " (200).

Besides, Dickinson develops the notion of spatial significance, relating Billie's current situation "being at a crossroads," to the situation of one who "is unable to cross . . . being caught in a feedback loop" (191), where all her past can be easily recalled. Not only the blues, the jazz music, or even the political speeches of renowned Black figures from the past, but also the handkerchief and the trappings of her mind keep Billie distressed all the time.

With the beginning of Act Two, Billie's father who is allegorically named Canada appears on the scene. Canada arrives to side by Billie after a long absence. In Act One, Billie tells Amah

metadramatic allusion in scene six of the second act: "I'll not die in black-face to pay the rent. I am of Ira Aldrigde stock. I am a classical man. I long to play the Scottish king. The prince of Denmark. "The slings and arrows of outrageous . . ." Or . . . Or . . . "there's a divinity that shapes our ends, Rough-hew them how we will" (711). Apparently, Ira Aldrigde is a Black American actor whose wide reputation rests on the major Shakespearean roles he played. Besides, the allusion to the character of Hamlet, in (III.i.58) and (V.ii.11-12) successively, indicates the state of perplexity and intellectual sophistication Hamlet is experiencing at that particular moment.

As they differ on their reactions to the question Blackness and Othello's new willingness to compromise with the White culture, Othello and Billie can be associated with the place and the political figures whose voices are heard at the background of their Harlem apartment. As Dickinson notes, the structure of the play, "is reinforced through the spatial situation of Billie and Othello's apartment at the corner of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X Boulevards, an intersection that reflects. . .the different social ideologies (assimilationist versus separatist) of Othello and Billie, respectively" (191). According to Dickinson's observation, Othello and Billie hold different views and means of expression exactly like King and Malcolm X respectively. Dickinson compares Othello's

In spite of the marked difference between the two characters which can be based mainly on the unparalleled wickedness, cunningness and evil nature of Shakespeare's Iago, Sears seems to have mentioned Chris Yago to give a partial justification for Othello's obligation to leave:

> OTHELLO: I'll be heading the department's courses in Cyprus next summer.
>
> BILLIE: I thought you told me Christopher . . . What's his name?
>
> OTHELLO: Chris Yago?
>
> BILLIE: Yeh, Yago.
>
> OTHELLO: Well everyone thought he would get it. I thought he'd get it. (683)

Likewise, Sears's Chris Yago may function in a way that evokes the sense of jealousy and hatred experienced by Shakespeare's Iago:

> I hate the Moor;
> And it is thought abroad, that 'twixt my sheets
> He has done my office: I know not if't be true;
>
> (*Othello*, I.iii.384-6)

Sears's evocation of metadramatic roles and literary situations within *Harlem Duet*, extends to other Shakespearean situations in *Hamlet*. 'He' (Sears's Othello in 1928) demonstrates this

> find at least one play that is filled with people who look like me, telling stories about me, my family, my friends, my community. For most people of European descent, this is a privilege they take for granted. (qtd. in Fischlin 285).

Besides, Othello himself notes that there is a color barrier still hinders a complete understanding and mutual feelings between the Blacks and the Whites. Color and race will remain semi-natural borders in America and Canada as long the two colors live and face each other. Othello is sure that the Blackness of his skin will be only accepted by Mona because she loves him, and may be this is an unconscious psychic reason behind his emotional attachment to her. He acknowledges an implicit indebtedness, as he indicates, "she really sees me. She was the only other faculty to support me on the MLK Day[12] assembly" (684). Moreover, Othello is sure that there is some hostile feeling towards the Blacks and that it is not explicitly expressed, as he notes, "it's implied. I'll be at a faculty meeting, I'll make a suggestion and it'll be ignored. Not five minutes later, someone else will make the exact suggestion and everyone will agree to it. Mona noticed it too. They think I'm only there because I'm Black. I've tested it" (684).

In a metadramatic allusion, Djanet Sears introduces an off-stage character, Chris Yago, probably a reminder of Shakespeare's Iago.

racial differences: Sears's introduction discusses her desire to live in a world where her niece will have access to a choir of African voices" (81). Another evidence to support this hypothesis is Othello's own conviction and conclusion: "I am an American. The slaves were freed over 130 years ago. In 1967 it was illegal for a Black to marry a White in sixteen states. That was less than thirty years ago. . . in my life time. Things change, Billie. I am not my skin. My skin is not me" (697). Moreover, Othello tries to find a seemingly rational justification for his attempts to compromise: "Billie . . . Injustice against Blacks can't be cured by injustice against Whites . . . you know that" (683). He resumes his defensive mode directing a large part of the blame on Blacks and their attitude: "We lie to ourselves saying, ah yeh, mother Africa, middle passage, suffering, the Whites did it to me, it's the White's fault. Strut around in African cloth pretending we human now" (697).

Reinelt's hypothesis of normalization and Othello's assumption of acquired Americanism or Englishness (i.e. his assumed new culture and language) may be temporarily true because the gender and race problems exist and their deep roots can never be removed easily, or else why Sears reiterates King's 'Dream Speech' in which she declares:

> I have a dream . . . that one day in the city where I live [Toronto] at any given time of the year, I will be able to

> MAGI: Nothing but weeds growing in the Soweto of America, honey. (666)

As described by the dramatist's, Soweto is "an economically distressed urban area adjoining Johannesburg in South Africa" (666).

On his part, Othello seems to be truly passing a stage of cultural change and skin metamorphosis, for he comes decisively to negate and deny all his Negro culture and background:

> OTHELLO: . . . . People change, Billie. That's just human nature. . . . My Mama used to say, you have to be three times as good as a White child to get by, to do well. A piece of that pie is nine. I don't want to change the recipe. I am not minor. I am not a minority. I used to be a minority when I was a kid. I mean my culture is not my mother's culture — the culture of my ancestors. My culture is Wordsworth, Shaw, *Leave it to Beaver*, *Dirty Harry*. I drink the same water, read the same books. You're the problem if you don't see beyond my skin. If you don't hear my educated English. (696-7)

Taken into consideration, Othello's admission that he belongs to the White culture and speaks the same language supports Reinelt's hypothesis that "the play is not, then, about African Americans or African Canadians as 'different.' Rather, it attempts to normalize

insurance 'cause I don't have a license. And I can't get a license until I get a cosmetician's certificate. And I can't get a cosmetician's certificate until I finish this two year course on how to do White people's hair and make-up" (667). Amah must learn how to do White people's hair and make-up although there are no Whites in Harlem where she wishes to have her beauty shop. As a Black woman, Magi is no better than both Billie and Amah. She indicates that she has been neglected by George after they have met for two years, during which time she has been trying and encouraging him to recognize her and offers to marry her, but, "he stands there. Mouth wide open. And he says, he guess he should go get a bottle of wine, seeing how this was gonna be some kind of special occasion an'all. Now I don't know whether he got lost . . . or drunk . . . But I ain't seen or heard from him since" (668).

The condition of Blacks seems to remain the same in spite of the very long time they have been suffering from segregation and discrimination. The idea of hope being embodied in images of glorified historical Black leaders and the summer is juxtaposed by the image of the Soweto of America, as it appears from Magi's notes:

> AMAH: Magi, look at you, out on the terrace, watching the summer blossoms on the corner of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Boulevards.

OTHELLO: I know, that's what I'm saying . . . . I can't . . . I just can't do it right now.

BILLIE: It's just one course . . .

OTHELLO: It's $5000.

BILLIE: You promised.

OTHELLO: I'm mortgaged up the wazoo. I don't have it. I just don't have $5000, right now.

BILLIE: Ooh. . . . . okay. (694)

Billie is now satisfied that Othello is on the verge of complete change not only of heart but also of financial responsibility towards her. Billie becomes representative of thousands of black women in America and Canada who (in fact, huge numbers of white females suffer from similar financial problems) are unable to pursue their higher education simply because cannot afford it.

Obviously, Billie's present condition forces images of poverty, struggle, and oppression and whatever related to Black feminist thoughts. It can be assumed that Billie has now become an incarnation of a long history of feminine exploitation, from the earliest time Saartjie Baartman was taken from Cape town to England: "When Saartjie was alive they paraded her naked on a pay per view basis"(671-2), to the present time when Amah faces dull formal routine as she hopes to get a license. Oppressed as she is, Amah elaborates her problem to Magi: "They won't give me any

vulnerability and steadfastness. She tells Othello about the psychic problems of the Blacks, and diagnoses the problem in America as "classic behavioral disorder. Obsessions. Phobias. Delusions. Notions of persecution. Delusions of grandeur. Any one or combination of these can produce behaviors which categorize oneself as superior and another as inferior"(683). Eventually, Black people are pushed to play a negative role: "dysfunction is systematically supported by the larger society. Psychology only sees clients who can no longer function in society. We're all mad. We just appear to be functional" (683). While she understands that their role is intentionally diminished, she is certain that "Blacks created the world, Blacks are the progenitors of European civilization" (685). Nevertheless, she tries to awake Othello from his reveries: "Constantly trying to prove you're as good, no, better than White people. White people are always the line for you. . .We are Black. Whatever we do is Black" (685). Billie now prepares herself to face the world all alone. Her problem is not confined to Othello's abandonment and re-marriage, but although she had financially supported him while he was working on his Ph.D., Othello will indirectly cause her to drop her college education:

> BILLIE: I told you, I'm only taking one course. If you cover that, I won't be taking a full load till next —

the name of Columbia with Harlem and comes up with a hybrid name:

> MAGI: How's Harlumbia?
>
> OTHELLO: Columbia
>
> MAGI: Harlumbia — those 10 square block of Whitedom, owned by Columbia University, set smack dab in middle of Harlem.
>
> OTHELLO: Harlumbia, as you call it, is dull without you. (693)

Othello is also criticized by Billie who reflects her Black feminist prejudice and sense of bitterness: "I thought I saw them once, you know – on the subway. . . . His arm around her shoulders, his thumb resting on the gold of her hair. He's proud. You can see he's proud. He isn't just any Negro. He's special" (677). The Black circle in Harlem may be also worried that Othello's relationship with Mona may indignantly lead him to shake off his Negro origins and embrace White culture and color. Probably, in his attempt to acknowledge himself within the white mainstream, Othello "may be compromising something of his dignity in turning away from certain elements of his heritage" (Walker 661).

Broken hearted as she is, Billie gives expression to what she and a whole race may feel; a mixture of inferiority and dignity, of psychic torture and explicit self-control, of frustration and hope, of

While Billie pleads to Othello urging him to go with her to seek freedom and better life, Othello confesses that he cannot leave his white mistress:

> HIM: I can't.
>
> HER: If we make it the border there's people there'll help us wade that water – help us cross over.
>
> HIM: I'm not going.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> HER: You need more time, O? I can wait for you. . .
>
> HIM: No. No. (690)

Billie is willing to wait for Othello to escape with her to Canada even though he is willing to leave his white mistress. It seems that Billie's problem here is dual since she is psychologically hurt both as woman and as black. Othello, on the other hand feels that he is inclined to stay with his white mistress because "she needs me. She respects me. Looks up to me, even. . . . When I'm with her I feel like . . . a man. I want . . . I need to do for her . . ."(690).

In its metadramatic presentation of the character of Othello, *Harlem Duet* is different from the original prototype in the sense that Sears's Othello reflects a kind of dominant modernist ideology. Sears's Othello is trying to involve himself in the white world and culture and even to be accepted by the white community at Columbia University. Therefore, Magi satirizes Othello confusing

> dream in a slow polyrhythmic improvisation, as he reaches the climax of that now famous speech given at the March on Washington. (663)

'HE' and 'SHE' begin to improvise a brief scene recalling Shakespeare's Othello and the handkerchief story and its web and make, but before the prologue ends, 'SHE' (Billie) reflects her gender and ethnic problems being female and being black. This is clear from her questions: "You love her," and "Is she white?" (664). Thus, from the very beginning, *Harlem Duet* asserts, through its metadramatic references, very significant and crucial issues about feminist and race.

Apart from these two couples, there is another black couple, the ex-slaves, "HIM" and "HER" (i.e. Him and Her are themselves Othello and Billie but in an earlier time). They have just gained freedom in 1860 and Her wishes to flee to Canada:

> HER: . . . The moon will be rising. We've got to make any headway under cover of dark . . . Othello, why you trying to please her. I'm so tired of pleasing White folks. Up in Canada, we won't have to please no White no how. I hear they got sailing ships leaving for Africa every day. Canada freedom come . . .
> O? Othello? Are you coming? (690)

MAGI: Your Daddy sure is one good-looking gentleman.

BILLIE: Trapped in history. A history trapped in me. (712)

Moreover, Billie can be viewed from two paradoxical standpoints. First, she is victimized by her husband Othello who most probably abandons her on grounds of her skin color and by her father's negligence in the past. Second, Billie is an evil woman with her sinister plans to avenge herself against Othello and Mona. Billie's ambivalence and dual behavior, however, make it difficult for readers and audience to classify her in a neat category with any former stereotype.

With three different couples, Sears interpolates the action of *Harlem Duet*; Othello and Billie of the present day, 'He' and 'She' who are virtually the same couple but in 1928, and 'Him' and 'Her', also the same couple but in 1860. She opens the play with a prologue (the use of the prologue here is in itself metadramatic), she sets the action in a tiny dressing room in Harlem in 1928, showing 'HE' and 'SHE' standing for Othello and his black wife, while the background is entirely suggestive of African culture and atmosphere:

As the lights fade to black, the cello and the bass call and respond to a heaving melancholic blues. Martin Luther King's voice accompanies them. He seems to sing his

> MAGI: Like a baseball bat hits a mango. Like he was trying for a home run or something. The bat breaks through the skin, smashing the amber flesh, propelling her core out of the park, into the clouds. And she lays there, floating. (669)

Unable to pursue her studies in psychology, Billie enhances her shifting role in the play and turns to sorcery mainly to prepare the mischievous handkerchief. According to Dickinson,

> Billie gives up on academic analysis and rationalization altogether. Instead, she turns to alchemy, dousing with an assortment of magical potions the handkerchief that belonged to Othello's grandmother and that he now returned. Billie thus becomes the Egyptian "charmer" of Othello's speech in Act Three, scene four of Shakespeare's play, the "sibyl" (which, we eventually learn, is Billie's full name) who "[i]n her prophetic fury sewed the work" that would/will eventually bring about his and (Desde)Mona's demise. (190)

Obviously, Billie is considered and called sibyl and this appears from the conversation between Magi and Billie:

> BILLIE: Sybil. I'm Sybil.
>
> MAGI: That's what your Daddy calls you.
>
> BILLIE: Yes.

In *Harlem Duet*, Sears's metadramatic portrayal of Billie embodies two women and this develops a sense of confusion to be experienced by the audience or readers. On one hand, Billie is Othello's first black wife and on the other hand, Billie is the Egyptian charmer who prepares a poisonous handkerchief for Mona. From Sears's footnote reference, it appears that the dramatist got the name Billie from a famous black woman's name, Billie Holiday, a jazz singer who was also known as Lady Day.[11] This is revealed when Billie, outrageous and angry at Othello, breaks out recording of Abbey Lincoln (680-1). In fact, Billie is shown at her weakest after she knows about Othello's plan to marry Mona, as Reinelt and Roach note, "For Billie, Othello's betrayal of her for a white woman also betrays the history forged by Africans. Othello's defense of the history of how whites represent Africans ensnares Billie in a historical and ideological minefield" (81).While waiting for her to wash her face and come, Magi, the landlady, and Amah, Billie's sister-in-law talk about Billie's current condition interpreting how she may be broken hearted and miserable:

> AMAH: How is she?
>
> MAGI: Better. Dreaming hard, though. Like she's on some archeological dig of the unconscious mind.
>
> AMAH: His words hit her hard, huh.

Notably, the long time lapse from 1860 to 1928 is intentionally designed to reflect the impoverished history and push "the question of Black cultural identity in North America, particularly for women, further still. The play is deeply steeped in African American history and political debate" (Knowles 130).

In another metadramatic keynote reference, Sears introduces the action by an epigraph from Shakespeare's *Othello* where she quotes Othello's speech regarding the famous handkerchief (the quote is taken as is with ellipses intentionally indicated by the dramatist):

> . . . That handkerchief
> Did an Egyptian to my mother give.
> She was a charmer. . .
> There's magic in the web of it.
> A sibyl . . . in her prophetic fury sewed the work. (662)

In Shakespeare's *Othello*, the handkerchief issue is central as it clearly led to Desdemona's destruction. On the basis of its importance, Sears frequently refers to the handkerchief: "Remember you gave this to me?"(663), "She stares at the handkerchief" (664), "She holds the handkerchief out to him" (665), "It was my mother's. Given her by my father" (672), "Deadly, deadly straw little strawberries it's so beautiful you kissed my fingers you pressed this cloth into my palm buried it there" (696) in order to reveal its metadramatic significance.

background from 1860 (i.e. period of slavery), 1928 (i.e. period of attempts and dreams for freedom and equality), and finally the present day (i.e. implicit prejudice from both sides). The intentional choice of the two streets named after two famous political black American activists, Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X, recalls the long history of the struggle against all forms of oppression of the blacks.[10] The fact that both black leaders were assassinated in the mid 1960s indicates how brutal and bloody the confrontation was. Likewise, the assassinations of both men prove that they wrote and spoke with vigor, power and logic so that they could not be defeated. Therefore, they had been stopped forever by cruel and unjust means. Nevertheless, their voices and speeches are still heard with a sense of dignity and honor as they still enflame the enthusiasm of all black people who can write or change the history of oppression all over the world. In addition to their clear political power and influence, "the two most famous African American leaders," Walker notes, "neatly represent the figurative crossroads at which the Black civil rights movement has found itself again and again over the last century and a half: between reconciliation and confrontation, between assimilation and independence, between acceptance and protest" (661). Two more locales in Harlem in 1860 and 1928 appear interchangeably with the present time in the text as reminiscent of the past of Othello and the history of the blacks.

protests to assert ethnic pride and dignity. Being a physician adds to Rainey's troubles since she could only diagnose meningitis to be the cause of her daughter's death very late and this develops her religious attitude for consolation.

The initial design of Sears's *Harlem Duet* is metadramatic in the sense that the dramatist recalls Shakespeare's *Othello* with its numerous reflections and pathos. As Dickinson notes, "it is not just the literary ghost of Shakespeare whom Sears seems to be summoning in her play, that a whole range of other dramatic and literary voices are being called upon and responded to" (188). In the opening stage directions of the entire action of the play, Djanet Sears describes the three settings in Harlem at three different periods of time:

Harlem: 1928,
a tiny dressing room.
Harlem: the present,
an apartment in a renovated brownstone, at the corner of
Martin Luther King and Malcolm X boulevards (125th & Lennox)
Harlem: 1860,
on the steps to a blacksmith's forge [9]

With this opening, Sears strikes a keynote theme of historical ethnicity and the struggle of the black Americans. This is done through her dramatic design of the place and its historical

first African portrayed in the annals of western dramatic literature. In an effort to exorcise this ghost, I have written Harlem Duet" (qtd. by Dickinson 188). Sears's interest in writing about race issues did not start or end with *Harlem Duet*, because she wrote other plays before and after this play about the same issue. In Afrika Solo (1987), for example, Sears employs drum incantations and rhythms (i.e. features of ethnomusicology),[8] and dramatic space to expose

> the notion of static cultural origins often associated with the Canadian multicultural discourse of hyphenated identities by pointing to the many cross-cultural and transnational sites that shape constructions of African Canadian identity. In so doing, the play develops an innovative diasporic aesthetic that can be placed within a larger cultural tradition of African diasporic representation. (Petropoulos par.1)

In *The Adventures of a Black Girl in Search of God* (2002), Sears introduces a saddening experience of Rainey, a black Canadian female doctor who suffers personal agonies and a number of problems: the death of her daughter, the collapse of her marriage, and the tension between Rainey and her father. Abendigo, Rainey's father, in spite of old age and deteriorating health, seeks to revive the black history supporting the role played by the Blacks in the society throughout history. For this purpose, he participates in

On the contrary, Sears sees that black people, both readers and critics, have the passionate or pathetic faculties to react normally with the work of art, irrespective of the color of its characters or author:

> Black people often have the opposite experience. When we see Tarzan, we enter the story through Tarzan and don't relate to the Africans. Yes, people need to see themselves, but white audiences get to see themselves in stories all the time. They need to open themselves up to the other facets of the human experience. Unfortunately Kate Taylor probably saw herself in Harlem Duet as just a hand. It probably hurt her a lot – not being at the centre of the story. (148-9)

However, through the matadramtic references in *Harlem Duet*, Djanet Sears manages to depict inner and outer feelings and sensations which recall various gender and ethnic problems and sufferings.

Being black and seeking to explore something about the psychology of the black people, Djanet Sears found that Shakespeare's Othello, as a black figure, has had a peculiar fascination to her. In this consideration she notes, "As a veteran theatre practitioner of African Descent, Shakespeare's Othello had haunted me since I first was introduced to him. . . . Othello is the

> give it out and I want people to like it and I want people to come and see it performed. But I set up a very harsh world. I ask what five hundred years of white supremacy has done to the black psyche. (147)

Apparently, Djanet Sears is aware of the problem of gender and ethnicity and the negative effect of the white practices on the black psyche. She understands that they have been always loathed, disrespected and underestimated by whites. Therefore, she admits, "Nine times out of ten, I do prefer black reviewers. They will have the knowledge of some of the references that I use as a springboard for my pieces" (Nurse 148). Besides, Djanet Sears feels that white critics and readers are not accustomed to view the work of black writers as they may view white writers' work. Therefore, she interprets Kate Taylor's negative response to *Harlem Duet* on the same ground of undeclared and unabated prejudice of race origin. She answers Nurse:

> Well, she did spend much of her time talking about the white woman who only appears as a hand through a door. The story's not about that character. But since there is no principal white character in the play, Kate Taylor didn't see herself in the story, and she wasn't able to enter the soul of the play through the hearts of black characters. (148)

negative feelings of being all the time looked down upon and most often ignored. She discusses this to Othello:

> BILLIE: . . . . When I go into a store, I always know when I'm being watched. I can feel it. They want to see if I'm gonna slip some of their stuff into my pockets. When someone doesn't serve me, I think it's because I'm Black. When a clerk won't put the change into my held-out hand, I think it's because I'm Black. When I hear about a crime, any crime, I pray to God the person who they think did it isn't Black. I'm even suspicious of the word Black. (685)

In her interview with three Canadian black women writers (one of them is Djanet Sears), Donna Bailey Nurse, a black Canadian critic herself, begins with the question: "Do you define yourselves as black writers?" To this question, Djanet Sears answers: "One of the interesting questions for me is: Are our readers black? Who buys our work? Are most of them black? Where are the patrons of the black arts?" (146) Then Sears continues to answer another question related to *Harlem Duet* and if she was worried that the play would arouse any white prejudice against the play on the ground of its racial content. She notes:

> As a writer I am this very self-absorbed person who is writing a story that I would like. And then it's time to

forms. Thus, Black women's subordination forms a large part of the critical social theory used as a means to expose and resist those experiences. As Collins adds, "most black women do not have the opportunity to befriend White women and men as neighbors. . . . Racial segregation remains a fundamental feature of the US social landscape" (23).

Black feminist problems were not only substantial or material problems, but they had also caused deeply painful psychic accumulations reflected in the entire bulk of the literature produced by black writers male and female. On a personal level, Djanet Sears expresses her psychological feelings towards such problems plainly in an 'Afterward' to *Afrika Solo*:

> I grew up in a society where I was considered a minority, minor, inferior, and somewhere along the line, I developed a type of internalized oppression. Although the ways in which each of us experiences internalized oppression are unique, no black person in this society has been spared. 'Internalized racism' has been the primary means by which we have been forced to perpetuate and 'agree' to our own oppression.[7]

This terrible feeling of inferiority, experienced by the dramatist, is further asserted by Billie in *Harlem Duet*. Billie believes that the black color of her skin must be a direct reason behind all her

and Gubar 707). Likewise, Elizabeth Abel is aware of the problem as she notes that:

> Race enters complexly into feminist reading. Case studies . . . do indicate certain pervasive tendencies among white feminists, who have tended to read black women's texts through critical lenses that filter out the texts' embeddedness in black political and cultural traditions and that foreground instead their relation to the agendas of white feminism which the texts alter, or prefigure, but ultimately reconfirm. (qtd. in Gilbert and Gubar 729)

In *Black Feminist Thought*, Patricia Collins handles the interrelated issues of ethnicity and gender indicating that black feminist criticism in America has been dedicated to portray the historical oppressive and activist experiences of black women:

> Black feminism remains important because US. Black women constitute an oppressed group. As a collectivity, US. Black women participate in a *dialectical* relationship linking African-American women's oppression and activism. Dialectical relationship of this sort mean that two parties are opposed and opposite. (22)

As long as the intersecting oppressions of race and gender persist, Black women's active response will continue and develop in various

> early moderns would believe that the "intense heat" of Africa produced intemperate lust. What we fail to see is that our "intuition" is, in fact, the product of a long history of racialist thinking. (23)

The notion of blackness as a reference to skin color seems to have eventually transcended the boundaries of ethnicity in the postcolonial culture and began to be viewed in association with feminist criticism. Complex and interrelated as they are, "feminist theory, queer theory and postcolonial theatre scholarship, as well as the more recent analyses of disability and performance . . . have all pointed out that performance has the power to question and destabilize the spectator's construction of identity and the other" (Lehmann 5). The interrelated association of blackness and feminism is also asserted by Bell Hooks whose "essay on 'Postmodern Blackness' provides a useful bridge between the consideration of Postmodernism and gender, on the one hand, and Postmodernism and race, on the other" (qtd. by Rice and Waugh 290).

The intersection of gender and ethnicity has won a large space in postmodern critical theory. Bell Hooks quotes Cornel West's suggestion that "black intellectuals are marginal – usually languishing at the interface of Black and white cultures or thoroughly ensconced in Euro-American settings" (qtd. in Gilbert

> necessary to advance the human rights of racialized and immigrant women in Canada. (3)

Tracing the history of ethnicity and race in early modern drama, Mary Wilson has attempted to find a relationship between climatic influence, the history, the body, and the culture. Supporting her discussion about climatic influence on the bodily color and heated passions, Wilson devotes the entire introduction to Desdemona's vision of Othello's blackness of complexion. She quotes Desdemona's belief that "the sun where he was born drew all such humours from him," and continues to assert that "the interpretation of 'blackness' as monstrous and unnatural, allowed for the construction of a European race that united a wide range of colors and complexions under an invisible badge of inherited superiority" (1-19). Wilson is thus trying to establish a kind of background cultural legacy particularly concerning the whites' vision of the blacks. In this consideration, Wilson adds:

> What do most people assume about the relationship between climate and temperatures? Our intuition seems to tell us that soaring thermometers make people passionate and testy, while chilly climates tend to breed reserved, chilly people. Thus, however antiquated early modern notions of climatic influence may seem, some part of us finds it logical or natural, for example, that the

> Historians of the African diaspora have long recognized that black people, including women, have had their own particular experiences of the New World and Europe. Black women in the diaspora have suffered a double jeopardy – being women and being black. Most have had to endure economic hardships as well. The history of black women's struggles against the multiple oppressions of race, sex, and class has been an inspiration to black women, and these struggles have inspired a growing body of literature and scholarship. (130)

However, multicultural social heterogeneity in Canada forces a kind of public veil of the problem, but it remains inside black women so that the Canadian Feminist Alliance for International Action (FAFIA) write in its submission to the UN committee:

> Women who experience the combined effects of race and sex discrimination are particularly disadvantaged. In Canada they live in poorer social and economic conditions than other women and than their male counterparts. Despite Canada's wealth and apparent commitment to human rights, their conditions are not improving. We hope to offer assistance to the Committee, by highlighting some steps that are

chooses to set her play in Harlem gives an initial indication that she finds herself located at that place as an origin for her as well as for all black women. In addition to this, Reinelt and Roach note,

> Sears's home is Canada, but the African history in Canada has too many connections to the history of the United States to be limited by the political border, and it is reasonable that postcolonial studies accommodates the analysis of issues such as racism and the representation of the descendants of the imperial enterprise of slavery, rather than rigidly stopping at national (arbitrary) boundaries. (81)

In spite of the fact that Canadian women represent a variety of ethnic origins, social classes, and varied languages, "both the historical and the contemporary locations that women of colour occupy in Canadian society have been shaped by multifaceted racialized, classed, and gendered processes that made Canada into a white settler society"(Dua and Robertson 7).

Since the early days when they were carried from Africa, black people have been suffering from various problems. Problems of gender and ethnicity have been felt and experienced in Canada in the same degree as anywhere else in Europe and America. Commenting on the history of this suffering, Parpart, Connelly and Barriteau write:

member of the black community. She made a journey to the heart Africa, "in a quest for a stronger sense of her ancestral roots – a trip that would later form the basis of *Africa Solo* (1987), her first notable success as a playwright" (Walker 659). As Sears was traveling from Tunisia southward, Walker notes,

> she passed through the deserts of Algeria on her way to Tombouctou . . . she approached the Ahaggar mountains in southeastern Algeria, she came across the town of Djanet. Sears tells us in Africa Solo that the word means "paradise" in Arabic. While she didn't claim to have found her own personal paradise in the town of Djanet, Sears felt a profound sense of affinity with this oasis town. (659)

The journey to the heart of Africa seems to have reshaped many things in Sears even her first name: "I was in west Africa and we were getting ready to go into Mali when we went through a town called Djanet. It seemed like I had discovered a little part of myself so I made it mine" (qtd. by Breon par.3). The first play brought Sears national recognition, and she "has become the leading playwright, director, and spokesperson for the African Canadian theatrical community" (Knowles 129). Although she is not American and the US black feminist problems may somehow seem different from Canadian black feminist ones, the fact that she

Feminist criticism is probably a more reliable substitute even though it cannot precisely be the same as gender criticism. As a critical theory, feminist criticism can be divided to embody two distinct trends: "The first type is concerned with *woman as reader* – with woman as the consumer of male-produced literature . . . . The second type of feminist criticism is concerned with *woman as writer* – with woman as the producer of textual meaning" (Showalter 99). The former type introduces women as participants in shaping and introducing a large bulk of feminist criticism, while the latter introduces women as creative literary innovators providing and reflecting a wide range of feminist thought, tones and language expressions.

Of the most famous women playwrights of the present time, Djanet Sears has "emerged as one of Canada's most compelling playwrights . . . [and] kept herself busy as an anthologist of African Canadian plays, a writer-in-residence at the University of Toronto and as curator of a national Afri-Canadian Theatre Festival" (Breon par.1). Djanet Sears was born in London in 1959. She immigrated to Saskatoon, in 1974 but came back to Oakville, Ontario one year later. She got a Bachelor of Fine Arts in theatre from York University in 1999. During the last two decades of the twentieth century, Sears grew interested in the question of gender and ethnicity attempting to investigate her position in Canada as a

seems to have had more profound references and implications, as Rice and Waugh note:

> Gender and genre came from the same root and their connection in literary history is almost as intimate as their etymology. The tradition into which the woman novelist entered in the mid-19th century could be polarized . . . with the attendant polarization of politics – between revolutionary feminism and conservatism – and of genre – between romanticism and social realism. (109)

The importance of gender studies gained momentum due to the success of black feminist theatre and the awareness that "most of the black women and women of colour who have found public success in the theatre have been playwrights" (Goodman 150). Most of these playwrights have been concerned with gender and ethnic issues. As Goodman notes, "Perhaps the influence of black culture does pose a certain threat to contemporary British theatre, and to theatres around the world. Many feminist theatres have attempted to keep the issue on the agenda, but have also perhaps put the 'gender question' before the 'race question'" (174). Since gender and ethnic studies diversely extend to involve the study of class, race, ethnicity and location (Healey, 2003), this article will be confined to the study of black feminist notions and references, and analyze the characters' self-reflexive attitudes.

postmodern and postcolonial drama since postcolonial literature, in its entirety, deals with ethnic issues and problems, as Gilbert and Tompkins note:

> By developing multiple self-reflexive discourses through role playing, role-doubling/ splitting, plays within plays, interventional frameworks, and other metatheatrical devices, post-colonial works interrogate received models of theatre at the same time as they illustrate, quite self-consciously, that they are acting out their own histories/identities.(23)

Accordingly, *Harlem Duet* can be classified as a postcolonial ethnic metadrama as it is particularly concerned with the postcolonial ethnic awareness of characters such as Othello, Billie and Mona. Indeed, the metadramatic reflections of Djanet Sears go beyond the recognizable norm of regular adaptation of Shakespeare's *Othello* and introduce other perceptions right from the starting prologue which the dramatist sets in Harlem in 1928.

The idea of bringing gender and ethnicity issues into drama and the theatre has been clearly established as a strategy for showing how gender and ethnicity issues may seem vital in the global socio-cultural consideration. As its meaning suggests, the term gender is used mainly to classify or differentiates between the sexes (i.e. male and female or whatsoever). In literary criticism, however, gender

pretence achieved by a number of "plotting devices – mistaken identities, exchanged genders, misdirected suspicion, and all the stuff of dramatic irony (15). In this context, direct dramatic addresses in prologues and epilogues are metadramatic per se because they refer to the play itself, its characters, or its themes. In an attempt to limit or define metadrama as a tradition, Muratore notes:

> In 1986 Richard Hornby further refined the concept of metadrama. His book length study begins up probing the relationship between drama and life. Hornby argues that the realist/antirealist polarity in drama overlooks one of drama's most fundamental truths that it reflects not life, but itself. Drama is not a mirror held up o to nature; it does not intimate life so much as it operates on it. Drama does, however, relate to other plays as a system, and this system in turn relates to other art forms. In consequence, all drama is inherently metadramatic since its subject is always itself. (5)

Richard Hornby identifies the metadramatic devices and classifies them into five categories: 'the ceremony–within–the–play,' 'the play–within–the–play,' 'the role–within–the–role,' 'literary/real life reference–within–the–play,' and 'self–reference' (Muratore 5). Moreover, metadrama as a critical enterprise can be thus applied to

politics,' 'theatricality,'[6] and a wide range of studies on the semiotics of drama and the theatre.

Of these notions, metadrama or metatheatre has been exclusively used to discuss particular dramatic modes which comment on or emphasize their own development or reflect their own themes, concepts, and most importantly plot lines or even ideas about the plots. Even though it seems recent or postmodern as a critical term, metadrama is said to have had a long history, as Davies and Postlewait note:

> The concept of metadrama (a play which comments upon the conventions of its genre) and metatheatre (a performance calling attention to the presentational aspect of theatre and its conventions in the moment of its inspiring) are hundreds of years old. Scholars of Shakespeare drama have especially been drawn to the concept. (14-5)

Metadrama is thus regarded as a self-conscious genre based on self-reflexive clues and treatments. Dating its history to very ancient times, Davies and Postlewait note that "the origin [of metadrama] might even be set earlier than Plautus, for in Aristophanes' use of parabasis and references to people in his audience an obvious metatheatrical technique is used" (16). Davies and Postlewait add that metadrama recalls its own fictional status as a theatrical

satisfaction to the audience" (par.1). Likewise, Reinelt and Roach believe that the play "performs history as well as race, Shakespeare, and African American/African Canadian cultures. Each scene's musical introduction mixes blues or jazz music with excerpts from speeches of well-known African figures" (80).

The previous survey of the reviews on *Harlem Duet* indicates that the play is structured as a metadrama recalling Shakespeare's Othello, and, in its critical vein, evokes serious problems of gender and ethnicity. Throughout the past few decades, the fervor of drama and theatre criticism has been devoted to introduce either new critical approaches for the discussion of postmodernist plays, or to revive older ones and reproduce them in a newer or more recent and exuberant form. These critical tendencies have been so varied and interrelated that they create an entangling multiplicity of critical theories and views. Postmodernist [3] criticism has, therefore, concerned itself with a number of approaches ranging from the traditional thematic discussions of drama and the theatre to much more sophisticated structuralist and deconstructionist approaches. Most of the newer critical approaches have given priority to visual stage performances. The result came up with wide and various critical notions, labels and applications. Such critical labels include: 'poststructuralist,' 'postcolonial,'[4] 'postdramatic,'[5] 'gender roles and

Harlem Duet is psychologically located in a space where issues of race and sex intersect. It's a very disquieting place for most people.

(Djanet Sears, Interview with Mat Buntin)[2]

Djanet Sears's *Harlem Duet* (1997), is described by its author as "a rhapsodic blues tragedy [that] explores the effects of race and sex on the lives of people of African descent" (qtd. by Haven Par.4). In his recent review, Paul Friswold notes that the play is "a prequel of sorts to Shakespeare's Othello. . . questioning black identity versus black perception of identity and – most devastatingly – turns her considerable intellect . . . toward the topic of interracial marriage" (par.1). On the ground of its great reception and success both in Canada and the United States, the play has won remarkable acclaim through the many reviews and comments. According to Morrow, the play "is a kind of soul riff on that classic tragedy, in that Sears relocates Shakespeare's flawed hero to modern-day New York and imagines the domestic events that lead to his downfall." Othello of this modern version, Morrow adds, " is no longer a Moorish general but an African-American college professor who has just left Billie. . . his black wife of nine years, for a white colleague named Mona" (par.9). Commenting on the historical feminist and racial issues, Bruckner notes that, "history does not comfort a woman abandoned; it drives her mad. History, called up from the past of the madwoman and the man who left her, does, however, bring a sense of quiet

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses how the Afro-Canadian playwright, Djanet Sears (1959–), in her Governor General's Award winning play, *Harlem Duet* (1997), evokes issues of gender and ethnicity in a metadramatic reproduction of Shakespeare's *Othello*. This article sets out by giving a brief critical background to identify keywords such as 'metadrama', 'gender' and 'ethnicity' as critical assets to be used in the discussion of the play. Afterwards, it focuses on the dramatist's use of three different time settings in an attempt to trace the change that might have developed new percepts of femininity and color of the major characters. With these three distinct metadramatic time settings (precisely in 1860, 1928, and the present day) at the historical neighborhood, Harlem,[1] in addition to the use of metadramatic characters (three pairs of characters referring to the one couple), the play provides different visions of the issues mentioned. While handling the Othello plot line, Sears relates the three phases together, regardless of the long lapses separating them, and highlights other profound issues of remarkable impact on the characters' lives and souls. By her repeated assertions of patriarchal domination and racist attitudes in the Othello plot line and the two predating and outdating metadramatic plot simulations, the dramatist insists on exposing the vulnerability of the characters due to their awareness of their gender and ethnic backgrounds. Furthermore, the dramatist draws attention to significant eras, places, and people.

Metadramatic Evocation of Gender and Ethnicity: A Study of Djanet Sears's *Harlem Duet* (1997)

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