

# Coming of Age in Segregated America: Critical Perspective on “Betsey Brown” by Ntozake Shange

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## ABSTRACT

Betsey Brown is a 1985 novel by Ntozake Shange. The novel is about the coming of age of one Betsey Brown, an upper-middle-class African American girl in the late 1950's, who is part of the first generation to experience desegregation. The novel takes place in St. Louis, MO. It deals with issues of family dynamics, community dynamics (especially in regard to race), and Betsey's developing sexuality. The Brown family is comprised of Betsey; her parents Greer and Jane; grandmother Vida; her three siblings, Margot, Sharon, and Allard; and her cousin Charlie. They live in an old Victorian home in St. Louis. As the book opens, the family is getting ready for a new day; Betsey is memorizing a poem by Paul Laurence Dunbar, in preparation for a school elocution contest. As the children head off to their school, which is all black, Vida notes how comfortable it is that they live in their own, isolated world-and expresses concern over the approach of desegregation. When Betsey gets to school, she hears two girls talking about her crush, Eugene Boyd. Despite the butterflies stirring in her stomach, she takes part in and wins her school's elocution competition. After school, she and some of her schoolmates go to the house of a friend of hers. Her friend is white, but poor. The girl's racist mother doesn't approve of her daughter having black friends, and her behavior causes one of the girls to leave. This prompts Betsey to think about racial integration, and particularly about the situation in Little Rock, Arkansas.

## INTRODUCTION

In 1971 Shange adopted her Zulu name: Ntozake means “she who comes with her own things,” and Shange translates as “one who walks with lions.” She explained to Allan Wallach in *Newsday* that the name change was due, in part, to her belief that she was “living a lie”: “[I was] living in a world that defied reality as most black people, or most white people, understood it—in other words, feeling that there was something that I could do, and then realizing that nobody was expecting me to do anything because I was colored and I was also female, which was not very easy to deal with.”

Moving to California put Shange in touch with a feminist perspective. She related to Claudia Tate in *Black Women Writers at Work* that she didn't “start out to write feminist tracts.” She continued, “I was writing what I had to write, and the people who wanted to hear what I was writing were women.” She soon joined a Third World Women's Cooperative, which she explained to Tate was “supportive and instrumental” in her development: “I didn't really do anything about integrating feminism and black consciousness. We met together in groups by ourselves: black, white, Asian, and Native-American women. We did our work for our own people, and all of my work just grew from there.”

Women's self-assertion is crucial in Shange's work that shapes racial protest though reconstructions of main itineraries of black female identity in connection with the private and public sphere. Her intense preoccupation with woman-centered issues

relates gender to new perspectives on race and class, by means of “tools that are available to [her] as a feminist reconstructing history” (Shange, in Lester 1990, 727). In a black female tradition embroidered with silence, Shange insists on the piercing need of women's spiritual development and on their ability to produce radical change in the literary discourse. Importantly, the power of naming functions as a leitmotif in her life and work. Born Paulette Williams, she adopts a Zulu name: Ntozake (“she who comes with her own things”) and Shange (“she who walks like a lion”). Her interest in subtle onomastic connotations is also reflected in her choice of titles for her works of fiction, all of them bearing significant names: *Sassafrass: A Novella* (1976), *Melissa & Smith* (1978), *Sassafrass, Cypress, and Indigo* (1983), *Betsey Brown* (1985), and *Liliane* (1994).

In an interview with Neal Lester, Shange expresses her wish to write something that fills a gap, something that she dearly wanted to read as a child *coming of age* in a segregated America. Just like Morrison and Walker, Shange's creative impulse springs from her desire to write what she would have liked to read:

I'd like to be part of a collection of books by women that someone might give a female child. It simply didn't exist when I was a child; the books weren't there and that's what I meant. I'm lucky that Alice Childress still writes; June Jordan still writes; Audre Lorde, Toni Morrison, Kitty Tsui... The mere presence of these women in print has to be of moral assistance to young women (1990, 721).

In Shange's second novel, *Betsey Brown*, the writer shifts her focus to more autobiographical settings and themes. Betsey, the thirteen-year-old heroine, is a black girl growing up in St. Louis in 1959. Like Shange herself, Betsey is involved in the integration of public schools and is forced to ride three different buses "to learn the same things with white children that she'd been learning with colored children." Betsey asks, "Why didn't the white children come to her school?" Like many other young black heroines in coming-of-age stories, Betsey must ultimately learn to reconcile her cultural heritage with the white environment she becomes a part of through integration. Nancy Willard declared in the *New York Times Book Review* that *Betsey Brown* "is a healing book and a loving celebration of the differences that make us human."

At school, Betsey brags about her accomplishment. Her schoolmate Veejay takes offense, however, because her mother too is a nanny. Shamed, Betsey resolves to come clean back home, and accept blame for the raucous morning. But she's too late, Bernice has already left. Saddened and shamed, Betsey retreats to her tree, where she falls asleep. She is awakened by a basketball hitting the tree - below is Charlie and her crush, Eugene. Eugene flirts with Betsey, leading, eventually, to her first kiss.

Soon integration comes, and the Brown children enter white schools. The transition is uneven for the children. Betsey's first day goes relatively well, after she demonstrates her exceptional knowledge of African geography. Charlie, however, fares very poorly: he's ambushed by a group of Italian boys, who give him a black eye. Greer vows to accompany Charlie to school the next day. Betsey can't get fully comfortable in her new school, and misses her old friends. One evening, indignant, she scribbles racial slurs about whites on her new school's grounds. When the vandalism is later discovered, it shocks and infuriates the neighborhood - but Betsey neither fesses up, nor is caught. On the contrary, acting the part of a good citizen, she volunteers to clean up the vandalism.

Betsey feels conflicted and confused about her racial identity, and her burgeoning sexuality. One night, she decides to run away from home. She ends up running to Mrs. Maureen's popular hair salon. But she's surprised to find, once she gets there, that the salon is also a brothel - and one of its working girls is a former nanny of Betsey's named Regina. Regina has apparently been abandoned by her former boyfriend, and now works at the brothel. She comforts Betsey, and she and Mrs. Maureen do Betsey's hair and makeup to make her feel better. Then they give her cab fare and send her home. But instead of going home, Betsey has her cab take her downtown.

Meanwhile, Betsey's family is in knots over her disappearance. Her parents' different approaches to the situation occasions another argument between them. When Greer stops by the hospital where he works to do his nightly rounds, there he finds his daughter. He brings her back home, and she is doted on by her relieved family. Greer is especially impressed with Betsey's rising interest in Black culture, and resolves to bring his children to a civil rights march the next day. This upsets Jane terribly, who fears for their safety - and when Greer won't relent, she leaves.

With Jane's departure, the Browns' hire yet another housekeeper, this one named Carrie. Carrie is a doughty country woman, and she and the family get on well. Everyone unites to keep their home in order in Jane's absence. Carrie is courted by a neighbor, but Vida disapproves. Betsey comes home from school one day, upset that her teacher had never heard of several important black figures (like Paul Laurence Dunbar). Carrie, admitting that she too is unfamiliar with them, encourages Betsey to "call out" her teacher by not being afraid to contest her knowledge with Betsey's own.

Jane eventually returns to her family, and there is much celebration. Jane does not agree with Carrie's rustic ways, however. She advises her daughters to be modest - which causes Betsey to regret having kissed Eugene. But Carrie helps her to feel better over it, taking a much more casual approach to the topic, and encouraging her to have fun. Not long after,

however, Carrie fails to show up for work one morning; the Browns nearly implode, having grown accustomed to Carrie's excellent home management. She calls from jail, where she has been imprisoned for stabbing someone. Jane, outraged, fires her on the spot. Betsey is sad to see Carrie go, but has internalized both her house management skills and several important life lessons, which help her as she moves forward with her life.

Author Ntozake Shange has said that she drew upon experiences from her own life in writing *Betsey Brown*, but that the novel is not an autobiography. The novel is not an epic one: Betsey's journey involves little true danger compared to many young adult novels; but what it does expertly capture are the dramas and anxieties of growing up young, female, middle-class, and black in a time of great social change. This is a slice of American history that is rarely represented in fiction.

Loosely structured and conventional in design, *Betsey Brown* turns on a simple, straightforward plot. The central focus of the book is the title character's painful struggle to cope with the anxieties and frustrations associated with the transition from childhood to adolescence. Betsey is the thirteen-year-old daughter of black, middle-class parents who live in Saint Louis, Missouri, in 1959. Court-ordered school integration has created new challenges and fears for black youngsters and their parents, and the Brown family, consisting of Betsey, her three siblings, her maternal grandmother, an adolescent cousin, and her parents, confront the issue boldly. Betsey and her family, however, also face internal conflicts which contribute to her confusion and her sense of alienation. Through a series of carefully crafted scenes, the author explores Betsey's response to society and to her family. In each of the key episodes, Betsey is forced to confront a reality that enables her to learn about herself and others.

In the opening scenes of the novel, a lack of order and discipline prevails in the Brown household as the children get ready for school. Annoyed by the uproar, Betsey wonders how she could become "a great anything with all this foolishness going on around her." Betsey's parents and her grandmother seem powerless to impose order on this chaos. Indeed, Jane Brown seems overwhelmed by the responsibilities of managing a household with five children; ironically, Jane depends upon Betsey to help her cope with the morning madness. Jane's mother, Vida, lacks the physical stamina to maintain order in the household, and Greer seems to enjoy the raw vitality and energy that his children display. Because the adults have failed to provide a structured, disciplined home environment, the family's well-being is jeopardized. The danger is suggested symbolically by the frequent references to the youngest child's habit of playing with matches. Significantly, this threat of tragedy remains menacingly in the background until Carrie, the housekeeper, takes firm control of the children and the household. Not only does she break the child of his fascination with matches, but she also assists Betsey in her personal struggle to understand her place in the family.

Although he is not a disciplinarian, Greer has a major influence on Betsey's development of a strong sense of self. From her father, Betsey learns to appreciate her black heritage. Beating on his conga drum and chanting, "We goin to show the world/ What can be done/ Cause the Negro race is a mighty one," Greer calls the children together for their morning drill. He asks them questions about black history and culture. Betsey's awareness of her black cultural heritage prompts her to select a poem by Paul Laurence Dunbar to recite in her English class, while many of her black classmates choose poems by white poets. Greer's influence on Betsey also enhances her appreciation of the broad spectrum of black life, without regard for class distinctions. Consequently, Betsey enjoys blues...

Shange's style is distinctively lyrical; her monologues and dialogues provide a panorama of Afro-American cultural diversity. Most of Shange's characteristic elliptical spelling, innovative syntax and punctuation is absent from "Betsey Brown." Missing also is the caustic social criticism about racial and sexual victimization found in "for colored girls who have

considered suicide/ when the rainbow is enuf" and "Nappy Edges." "Betsey Brown" seems also to mark Shange's movement from explicit to subtle expressions of rage, from repudiating her girlhood past to embracing it, and from flip candor to more serious commentary.

The story, which takes place in 1959 against the backdrop of school desegregation in St. Louis, charts the passage from childhood to adolescence in the life of a nice, respectable, well-mannered, intelligent, middle-class, 13-year-old "colored girl." Her confrontation with the adult world disturbs her belief in traditional class, racial and gender values. The novel's strength lies in Betsey's ability to express her compassion for others. In Betsey this traditionally recognized feminine virtue is transformed into a genuine source of human power. Not only does she effect her own maturity, but she evolves into a vehicle, a means of her mother's spiritual, emotional and intellectual rebirth. She becomes her mother's mother. In turn, Betsey seems to be the source of Shange's own regeneration, affirmation and inspiration.

Betsey's family seems like a black version of the Dick-and-Jane family of first-grade lore or a southern version of "The Cosby Show." And her father's Thunderbird, the dishwasher in the kitchen and Betsey's Lord & Taylor school outfits are sometimes a distraction. But in the end, the stereotypes don't impede our appreciation of Betsey's struggle to move confidently into womanhood and to fortify her "colored" world against the assault of school integration.

The focus of the novel is the conflict between the ideas of ladylike behavior held by Betsey's mother and grandmother and Betsey's own attempts to confirm her racial identity with black American, African and Caribbean history and culture. But the activity she selects for strengthening her racial and sexual identities most is dancing. And every time she starts to dance, feeling her racial pride and getting the moves just right for her entry into the world of boys, her mother chastises her:

"Turn that mess off . . . That niggah noise is disturbing my rest." . . . Every time she played music she was a niggah."

Resolving this conflict demands that Betsy redefine herself in her own context, outside the expectations of the white or "colored" world and beyond the prescriptions of traditional, female roles of docile daughter and dutiful wife. Be redefining herself, by "making decisions and discoveries about herself that would change the world," first she and then her mother can be freed from conventional mythologies to see that beauty and virtue are not defined by light skin and straight hair, that the poor are as sensitive to pain as the wealthy, and that women, as well as men, can define their autonomy.

Without these mythologies daughter and mother can be free to know the difference between woman and wife, woman and mother, and woman and her occupation. Females, whether adults or children, mothers or daughters, can be free to become autonomous, self-determined individuals, who can be subjects rather than objects. They can become individuals larger than the cast of traditionally defined social roles.

They can, as Shange says, be free to become themselves.

If we correlate Shange's point with African American women's literature written in the last two centuries, we notice that examples of female rites of passage are not few and can be easily found in works by Harriet Wilson, Harriet Jacobs, Frances Harper, Jessie Fauset, Zora Neale Hurston, Alice Walker, and many others. However, Shange draws attention to the necessity of creating an anthology specially designed to focus on young women's development, with a view on actual problems.

## CONCLUSION

Shange's *Betsey Brown* represents a fine example of a book intended to provide young women with moral assistance, being centered on a female child growing up in a nation marked by racial progress. The book offers an insight into the life a middle class African American family whose inner peace is disturbed by the "changing values in the black community and the effects of legislated integration" (Blain, Grundy, and Clements 1990, 970). It is 1957, the year of school integration, when black children have to "take up for the whole damn race," and "to do battle with the white man" (Shange 1985, 135). Yoking the aesthetic

and the political views, Shange's novel remarkably parallels the personal story of Betsey's attaining self-confidence with the social achievements of the Civil Rights Movement. In the black community of St. Louis, Betsey's private drama becomes emblematic: at age thirteen, her life weaves together the bright threads of an incipient romance with the darker ones of racism and prejudice. In a distinctive female genealogy, the writer places Betsey's story next to that of her mother and grandmother, thus making us conscious that "black women's relation to history is first of all a relationship to mother and grandmother" (Willis 1987, 5). In a house in which three generations of women dovetail with each other, men's stories are not forgotten, the father playing the multiple roles of a positive parental figure, a dedicated social activist, and a doctor for his community.

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