

MARITA BONNER'S *THE PURPLE FLOWER* AND THE EXPRESSIONISTIC DRAMATIC FORM

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Abstract: *The paper discusses Marita Bonner's use of the European high-modernist expressionist dramatic form in the context of race relations during the period of the Harlem Renaissance. She is seen as an exception at a time when the dominant modes of playwriting were either the social-realist form or folk drama using elements of traditional black culture. Bonner's play *The Purple Flower* is discussed as being expressionistic in its desire for a new egalitarian world as well as in its use of techniques and features such as abstract setting and characters, and lack of dramatic conflict in the play. The advocacy of violent action in the resolution of the play is seen as unusual for the period of the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s and as looking forward to the later Black Arts movement in the 1960s. The ending is also problematized in the context of the conventions of expressionist drama.*

Key words: *Marita Bonner's Plays; *The Purple Flower*; Harlem Renaissance drama; African American drama; expressionist drama.*

Marita Bonner (1899-1971) stands out during the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s as one of the very few African American playwrights to have experimented with the European high modernist forms, including expressionism¹. Her slender body of dramatic works, three short plays to be specific, is strikingly different from the dominant mode of social realist plays written in the period. Contemporary playwrights such as Angelina Weld Grimke, Georgia Douglas Johnson, Alice Dunbar Nelson, Mary Burrill and others deal in their plays with the persisting problems of the African American people such as lynching, segregation, denial of constitutional rights, and oppressions faced by women due to racism and gender discriminations in a realistic mode. This kind of drama, with an overt focus on social problems of the black people and on race issues, had the support of W.E.B. DuBois, a leading figure of the age, who saw the role of African American art as fundamentally political and oriented towards changing the social and political realities. Undoubtedly, the Harlem Renaissance also saw efforts to develop literary drama that was more invested in artistic expression. Playwrights such as Zora Neale Hurston and Langston Hughes used black vernacular practices and folk traditions of black music, dance, and other cultural practices in their plays to create folk drama. Thus, although the drama of the period offers variety and is not to be typecast, Bonner is still exceptional as a playwright who experimented with the high modernist forms and techniques to deal with the pressing questions of race and gender in her plays.

Bonner's plays are different not only from the mainstream drama of the period, but also from the style and tone of her own later work. Bonner's output falls into two separate parts in terms of its literary style and genres. Her early work written in the 1920s includes essays and three plays, namely *The Pot Maker* (1927), *The Purple Flower* (1928), and *Exit, An Illusion* (1929). These plays are modernist and experimental, and are marked by a certain meditative and reflecting mood that is also evident in the essay of this period. Her later work in the 1930s, mainly short stories, is more consistently naturalist in style. Her stories are seen as having paved the way for the development of Chicago Renaissance and as being an influence on writers such as Richard Wright and Lorraine Hansberry. Her plays, however, have not

received their due recognition. Apart from being remarkable in their own right, Bonner's plays can also be seen as antecedents for the work of later African American playwrights such as Adrienne Kennedy, who used abstract surrealist style in her plays.

Expressionism as an artistic movement was part of the wider modernist rejection of the late nineteenth century conventions of realism and naturalism, which were seen to be no longer suited to the modern world defined by rapid urbanization, mechanization, bureaucratization, and the post-World War I devastation in Europe. Expressionist drama had found particular favour in German-speaking countries in the early decades of the twentieth-century in the works of playwrights such as Oskar Kokoschka, Reinhard Sorge, Walter Hasenclever, George Kaiser, Yuan Goll, and Ernst Toller, whose plays were defined by a spirit of revolt against tradition both in form and in themes. Walter H. Sokel, in his introduction to *An Anthology of German Expressionist Drama: A Prelude to the Absurd*, identifies the core features of expressionist drama as "revolt, distortion, and boldness of innovation" (ix). The imperative behind these innovations was the artist's need to "express" both their inner sense of angst and despair at the failing outside world, and their longing and need for change. In its form, expressionist drama used features such as distortion in form, exaggeration of ideas, universalization and generalization in depicting characters, and abandonment of logical progression in the plot. As subjective and personalized expressions of the artist's view of the world, these plays are marked by a lack of dramatic conflict and unified plots. While the plays are intensely subjective and non-mimetic, and thus appear far removed from immediate material realities, yet these literary works were a political response to the material realities of the world in the early twentieth century. The vision expressed in the plays was meant to be a rejection of the destructive ethos of modern civilization and its replacement by a more egalitarian, peaceful, and equitable world. This opposition between an oppressive, destructive power structure in the world and the intensely felt need for freedom and change also describes the racist situation in American society seen from the African American perspective. As a graduate of Radcliffe College, the sister institution of Harvard College, Marita Bonner had studied English and Comparative Literature including German literature, and would certainly have been exposed to the modernist movements in Europe, particularly Expressionist drama that was at its peak during this period in Germany. In her early literary career, she seems to have been inspired to experiment with these radical dramatic forms in the context of race relations.

It is important to remember at this point that Bonner was not the first American playwright to experiment with the expressionist form. Eugene O'Neill, in his plays such as *Emperor Jones* (1920), *The Hairy Ape* (1922), and *All God's Chillun Got Wings* (1924), had employed expressionist conventions and elements to explore the depths of the human heart and psyche. O'Neill was concerned in his plays not so much with social causes and conditions, but with the soul and the deeper forces and mysteries of human nature. As Edwin Pettet puts it, O'Neill's plays are "dramatization[s] of individual's struggle -- conscious or blind -- to fight off one or another of the corrupting sins the flesh is heir to" (21). Langston Hughes too, as mentioned earlier, was to use expressionist elements in some of his plays, for example in *Don't You Want to Be Free* (1937). In this play concerned with race and economic issues during the period of Great Depression, Hughes uses elements of black folk culture, music, dance, and poems in an expressionist form structured like a pageant. Bonner's use of expressionism, however, differs from both O'Neill's and Hughes' in being starker, following the formal conventions of expressionist drama more closely, and employing the form to present a vision of social change. Pettet reminds us that "what the medieval morality playwrights attempted in the realm of moral edification the expressionists demonstrated could be achieved in the arena of social conflict" (16). Bonner's *The Purple Flower* brings out the relevance that expressionist forms could have in the context of social and political issues, specifically with regard to racism in America.

Among all her plays, *The Purple Flower* has the most distinct structure and style of expressionist drama. Errol Hill calls it one of the "most unusual plays ever written on the subject of black liberation," and

notes its intensely personal tone, in which Bonner “relied solely on her imagination, informed by personal experience” instead of going into the details of the history of slavery and race oppression (419). In its setting, characters, and themes, the play is entirely universalized and symbolic, rather than individualized and particularized: the setting is described as “Might be here, there or anywhere -- or even nowhere,” and the time is “The Middle-of-Things-as-They-are” (30). Similarly, the characters are named, almost in a Morality Play-fashion, as “Sundry White Devils” and “The Us's” (30). The name Sundry White Devils clearly suggests the White people who are described as angelic looking but with glowing red horns, as being artful, and as dancing like men as well as like snakes. All these references work in the structure of white-black racial divide. There is, however, more plurality in the description of Us's in colours that may reflect the real-world range of black and mulatto skins: they “can be as white as the White Devils, as brown as the earth, as black as the centre of a poppy” (30). Us's is subdivided into many characters with names such as Old Lady, A Young Us, Another Young Us, Average, and The Middle-Aged Woman but these are only variations on, and different aspects of, the character Us's. There is also an attempt to de-essentialize the colour symbolism through the incorporation of various “hands,” coloured white, yellow, and brown, that appear in the background of the play. While the yellow may simply point to the presence of mulattos among the black people, there is also a possibility, at least a temptation, to read it as a reference to multi-ethnicity, which is a mark of Bonner's stories and essays. Her stories have multiple references to other ethnicities including Asian people who live on her fictional Frye Street. Judith Musser reads the inclusion of “yellow hands” in the play as a nod towards the idea that the oppressive social order created by whites affects not only black people but also others who are equally marginalized and suffer from social, economic, racist, gendered consequences of white authoritarianism. As Musser says, Bonner's vision “places the oppression of African Americans within the framework of global racial oppression” (54).

The symbolism of the play in its characters, setting, and themes is overt and visually presented. A seminal feature of expressionist drama was its strong visualization of the image and the metaphor, for example a bird cage used as a symbol of entrapment. This dramatic convention was to prove very influential in the development of absurd drama, and strong visual metaphors appear regularly in absurdist plays, such as Nagg and Nell without legs living in a dustbin in Beckett's *Endgame*, or the chairs or Rhinos in Ionesco's plays. In Bonner's play too, ideas and identities, though universalized, are still startlingly recognisable. As in expressionist drama, while on the one hand there is concreteness in the symbols, on the other hand there's also a great deal of fluidity in its visualization and stage presentation. The setting is often described in a manner that makes it demanding in terms of stage production. Bonner did not see her plays in performance, nor perhaps did she expect to, as is evident from the subtitling of her earlier play, *The Pot Maker as A Play to Be Read*. In Europe, however, expressionist drama was facilitated by radical inventions in acting and staging techniques. Theoreticians and designers such as Adolphe Appia and Edward Gordon Craig had created new possibilities for non-illusionistic theatre productions with their innovative use of space, movement, and lighting. Bonner's visualization of the action in *The Purple Flower* expresses the kind of fluidity of movement, lighting, and special effects on the stage that she would have been aware of as taking place in European theatre. She divides the stage horizontally into two sections using a thin board. The light is “never quite clear,” but bright enough. The “Skin-of-Civilization” is very thin. In terms of the setting, an interesting detail is that Bonner seems to suggest that there is background action taking place in which the upper stage characters “get too vociferous-- too violent,” but they fall through the board and “lie twisted and curled in mounds” (31).

As is common in expressionist drama, there is no genuine conflict in Bonner's play, which is dominated by a singular perspective and vision. The development is more thematic than dramatic and the play is devoted, to use Georg Kaiser's words about the process of writing a play, to “thinking a thought through to its conclusion” (quoted in Styan 47). The play is written entirely from Us's perspective and the

action is focused on the need of the Us's to reach the hill-top on which "grows the purple Flower-of-Life-at-Its-Fullest" (31). The White Devils, who live on the side of the hill, prevent the Us's who live in the "valley that lies between nowhere and somewhere" from getting to the purple flower on top of the hill. The White Devils in the background tell them to "stay where you are! We don't want you up here," but other than that, they have no role or dialogues in the play (32). The White Devils appear to be flopping and falling in the background, and sometimes their very presence is questioned as when the text says one is not sure if "you see something or nothing" (31). The stage presentation of The White Devils as a ghostly moving presence is further problematized by the setting that sometimes doubts and erases their very identity and existence. The action is focused on the sense of expectancy and waiting among the Us's, expressed in various emotions of despondency, frustration, hope, and impatience. There is generational difference as well as diversity of attitudes among the "characters" that together form the Us's: there are disagreements, shades of optimism and pessimism, criticism of each other, self-disparagement and so on. However, these various "characters" and strands of thought represent a common perspective, and there is no real dramatic conflict in the play.

The theme of the play quite explicitly is racial oppression in America and the denial of equality and freedom to African American people. Among the strategies considered by the Us's to achieve the goal of liberation are hard work, knowledge, and gold. All these, however, are rejected because they have not succeeded, given the history of black people. Hard work and toil during slavery have been of no avail: "As if two hundred years of slavery had not showed them!" (32). Books are not going to be of any help, because these are written by the white people, and gold has no value if the whites do not accept it in exchange for the Purple Flower. The final strategy that emerges in the play is that of "blood," or violent confrontation. The Old Man at the end decrees that only when blood is added to the pot along with work, books, and gold will the New Man be born.

In the context of the Harlem Renaissance, the last scene of the play appears to be extremely radical in proposing revolution and bloody conflict in order to achieve the goal of equality and freedom for the black people. This makes Bonner exceptional at the time, but very prescient about the mood of black militancy that arrived in less than five decades in America. The conclusion of the play has often been seen as a harbinger of the Black Arts movement in the 1960s, which was marked by a militant outlook. This decisive move in Bonner's play to acknowledge the need for violence, however, can also be read in expressionistic terms. At the end of expressionistic plays, often, "a crucial decision for the course of a whole life is made" (Ritchi 21). The resolution of *The Purple Flower* may be seen as a 'crucial decision' made in the life of the collective Us's, the African American people, to achieve their goal. However, one may quibble further over this issue of violence. Most expressionist plays are pacifist in nature and while they use violence, bloodshed and shock effect, these are often associated with the systems that are to be rejected. The plays, however, carry an awareness of the need of destruction for the birth of a peaceful and egalitarian world. Seen from this point of view, violence becomes a means that the people are compelled to use after all other methods have failed. It may be argued, then, that Bonner both subverts and upholds the philosophy of expressionist drama by paradoxically advocating violence in order to achieve the goal of creating an egalitarian society.

The play diverges significantly in its mood as well as dramatic style from the norm during the Harlem Renaissance, with its air of new optimism that was focused on celebration of black identity and exploration of the potential of a new, liberated class of African Americans. As Nancy Chick puts it, "the anger and urgency epitomized by its final call for "Blood!" appear to have no place with the "race uplift" material of The New Negro, one manifesto of the Harlem Renaissance" (26). It was perhaps this sense of "anger and urgency," along with the need to express it in a controlled manner, that dictated Bonner's use of an abstract expressionist dramatic form.

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Endnote:

1. Langston Hughes and Jean Toomer were the only other playwrights, who each wrote a few plays using expressionistic techniques in conjunction with African American folk forms.