

THE QUEST FOR IDENTITY OF AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN
FROM 1939 TO 2000 IN POSTMODERN AMERICAN DRAMA

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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to **Almighty “Allah”**
(Who has given me strength, knowledge, patience and wisdom)

My “Late Parents”
(Who taught me words)

My “Brothers, Wife, and Children”

My brothers, Dr. Makki, Dr. Jabir, Ahmad, and Akram Hasan Obaid, my dearest wife Zaman, my loveliest sons Hasan, Hussain, Montadher, and my great daughter Fatima, whose, love and sincerity highly motivated me to finish this valuable work, I really appreciate their motivation, encouragement, patience and everlasting love.



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ABSTRACT

This study was conducted to explore the oppression of African American women as well as to determine how their identity was in a struggle to gain in a selection of Postmodern American plays. Sharing the experiences of African American women and their black community of that time, represented as a journey towards black femininity on a stage. The significance of this study was derived from the broad topic of womanhood because the issue of black women with identity is relevant to a variety of fields. This study made use of Martin and White's (2005) account of Appraisal Theory. By utilizing one of the Systemic Functional Linguistics systems; (interpersonal metafunctions), as a framework and focus completely on all the appraisal categories gave the readers a new way of understanding those literary texts. This approach aims to investigate the selected data sets to obtain an insight into the evaluative discourse of women with regard to their emotional, evaluative, and judgmental stances in their speaking. The study used four Postmodern American plays which were; Lorraine Hansberry's "*A Raisin in The Sun*", 1959, Adrienne Kennedy's "*The Funnyhouse of a Negro*", 1964, Ntozake Shange's "*For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide /When the Rainbow is Enuf*", 1976, and finally, Suzan-Lori Parks' "*In the Blood*", 1999. All the selected plays were written between 1939 to 2000 to trace back the status of African American women and the main factors which helped them to overcome their identity issue. It is concluded that African American women have been doubled marginalized and discriminated because of their skin colour as well as their gender. And later on, through the timeline of the current study, this issue had not been overcome completely. African American woman did not gain absolute freedom, complete individual identity, and citizenship within the scope of the assigned data sets. In other words, all of which ended with these women received some and not all of their self-appreciation and self-realization of who they were.

ABSTRAK

Kajian ini dijalankan untuk menyelidik penindasan terhadap wanita kulit hitam terutamanya berketurunan Afrika di Amerika disamping menentukan pergelutan identiti dan penentangan mereka melalui pementasan drama postmodern Amerika. Perkongsian pengalaman daripada perempuan Amerika Afrika dan komuniti kulit hitam pada waktu itu, diterjemahkan dalam perjalanan dan pergelutan dalaman bangsa kulit hitam di atas pentas. Kajian ini sangat penting terutamanya yang bersangkutan dengan topik berkenaan nilai kewanitaan kerana isu berkaitan identiti perempuan kulit hitam berkait rapat dengan pelbagai bidang. Teori Appraisal daripada Martin dan White (2005) Systemic Functional Linguistics sebagai rangka kerja dan fokus terhadap penilaian kategori memberikan pembaca kaedah baru bagi memahami tulisan sastera tersebut. Pendekatan ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji data yang dipilih mengambil kira wawasan penilaian wacana terhadap perempuan berdasarkan emosi, penilaian dan pertimbangan di dalam percakapan mereka. Kajian ini dilakukan terhadap pementasan postmodern Amerika seperti: "*A Raisin in The Sun*" daripada Lorraine Hansberry, 1959, "*The Funnyhouse of a Negro*" daripada Adrienne Kennedy, 1964, "*For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide /When the Rainbow is Enuf*" daripada Ntozake Shange, 1976 dan "*In the Blood*" daripada Suzan-Lori Parks, 1999. Semua pementasan yang dipilih adalah berdasarkan kepada dekad dimana penulis berada iaitu pada tahun 1939 sehingga 2000 untuk meneliti status perempuan Amerika Afrika dan faktor-faktor utama yang membantu mereka mengatasi isu identity. Kesimpulannya, perempuan Amerika Afrika telah dipinggirkan dan didiskriminasi oleh kerana warna kulit dan juga jantina mereka. Disepanjang rangka masa kajian ini, isu ini masih belum diselesaikan. Wanita Amerika berketurunan Afrika tidak menerima kebebasan yang mutlak terhadap identiti individu yang lengkap, dan juga kewarganegaraan melalui skop data yang telah ditetapkan. Dengan kata lain, kaum perempuan ini masih tidak menerima apresiasi dan realisasi diri berkenaan terhadap diri mereka.

TABLE OF CONTENT

TITLE PAGE	i
DECLARATION	ii
DEDICATION	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT	iv
ABSTRACT	v
ABSTRAK	vi
TABLE OF CONTENT	vii
LIST OF TABLES	xi
LIST OF FIGURES	xiv
LIST OF APPENDICES	xv
LIST OF PUBLICATIONS	xvi
CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION	1
1.1 Background of study	1
1.2 Problem statement	6
1.3 Research objective	7
1.4 Research questions	8
1.5 Significance of the study	8
1.6 Selections and limitations of the study	11
1.7 Scope of the study	13
1.8 Definition of key terms	14
1.9 Chapter outline	16
1.10 Conclusion	18

CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW	19
2.1 Introduction	19
2.2 The historical and cultural context of African American people	20
2.2.1 African American identity formation	23
2.2.2 Prior studies on African-American woman in literature	26
2.2.3 Conclusion to section 2.2	32
2.3 Theoretical framework	33
2.3.1 Systemic functional linguistics	34
2.3.2 Systems of meaning: Metafunctions	37
2.3.3 The appraisal system: Overview	40
2.3.4 Conclusion to Section 2.3	61
2.4 Applications of appraisal theory to literary texts	61
2.5 The data sets	65
2.5.1 “ <i>A Raisin in The Sun</i> ”	65
2.5.2 “ <i>The Funnyhouse of a Negro</i> ”	68
2.5.3 “ <i>For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide / When the Rainbow is Enuf</i> ”	71
2.5.4 “ <i>In the Blood</i> ”	73
2.5.5 Conclusion to 2.5	76
2.6 Theoretical framework of the study	77
2.7 Conclusion to chapter 2	78
CHAPTER 3 RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY	80
3.1 Introduction	80
3.2 Research design	81
3.3 Analysing data sets	84
3.4 Content analysis using appraisal theory	84
3.4.1 Process and procedures for choosing extracts and characters	86
3.4.2 Role of the researcher	87

3.4.3	Coding of data sets	88
3.5	Conclusion to chapter 3	106
CHAPTER 4 APPRAISAL OF AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN		107
4.1	Introduction	107
4.2	Answering the first research question	108
4.2.1	Lorraine Hansberry's " <i>A Raisin in the Sun</i> "	108
4.2.2	Adrienne Kennedy's " <i>The Funnyhouse of a Negro</i> "	119
4.2.3	Ntozake Shange's " <i>For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide /When the Rainbow is Enuf</i> "	130
4.2.4	Suzan Lori Parks' " <i>In the Blood</i> "	140
4.3	Answering the second research question	152
4.3.1	Lorraine Hansberry's " <i>A Raisin in the Sun</i> "	152
4.3.2	Adrienne Kennedy's " <i>The Funnyhouse of a Negro</i> "	154
4.3.3	Ntozake Shange's " <i>For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide /When the Rainbow is Enuf</i> "	156
4.3.4	Suzan Lori Parks' " <i>In the Blood</i> "	160
4.3.5	Conclusion to section 4.3	161
4.4	Answering the third research question	162
4.4.1	Lorraine Hansberry's " <i>A Raisin in the Sun</i> "	162
4.4.2	Adrienne Kennedy's " <i>The Funnyhouse of a Negro</i> "	168
4.4.3	Ntozake Shange's " <i>For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide /When the Rainbow is Enuf</i> "	172
4.4.4	Suzan Lori Parks' " <i>In the Blood</i> "	178
4.4.5	Conclusion to section 4.4	183
4.5	Discussion of findings	183
4.5.1	Distributions of attitudinal categories	184
4.5.2	Strategy of realization	187
4.5.3	Attitudinal polarity	189
4.5.4	Engagement analysis	195
4.5.5	Graduation analysis	201

4.6	Unexpected findings of selected plays	202
4.7	Conclusion to chapter 4	203
CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS		205
5.1	Introduction	205
5.2	Summary of research questions findings	206
5.2.1	How did the playwrights utilize Appraisal Analysis to portray African American women as well as their quest for identity?	207
5.2.2	Did the playwrights portray their characters in the texts clearly and explicitly or implicitly and ambiguously to their audience/readers?	207
5.2.3	Did the playwrights (through characters), deliver their messages and moral lessons successfully and effectively to their audience/readers?	208
5.2.4	Continuity of black women's quest for identity	209
5.3	Limitations of the research	210
5.4	Recommendations for future researches	212
5.5	Conclusion	213
REFERENCES		216
APPENDICES		229
VITA		231



PTTA UTHM
PERPUSTAKAAN TUNJUKKAN AMINAH

LIST OF TABLES

2.1	Irrealis affect	46
2.2	Social esteem of judgment	48
2.3	Social sanction of judgement	49
2.4	Types of appreciation	50
2.5	Symbols for attitude analysis	53
2.6	Symbols for engagement analysis	58
2.7	Symbols for graduation analysis	61
3.1	Attitude analysis	91
3.2	Engagement and graduation analysis	92
3.3	Sample of EXCEL spreadsheet	94
3.4	Appraisal instances of four plays	95
3.5	Distribution of data sets to raters	96
3.6	Attitude analysis	100
3.7	Attitude analysis	102
3.8	Engagement and graduation analysis	105
4.1	Distribution of attitudinal choices based on their types in the play	109
4.2	Distribution of judgemental choices based on their types in the play	110
4.3	Distribution of attitudinal polarity of resources in the play (Beneatha as being appraised by others)	111
4.4	Distribution of negative resources in the play (who appraised Beneatha negatively most)	111
4.5	Distribution of attitudinal polarity of resources in the play (Beneatha is appraising others)	114
4.6	Distribution of negative resources in the play (whom Beneatha appraised negatively most)	114

4.7	Distribution of attitudinal choices based on their types in the play	119
4.8	Distribution of judgemental choices based on their types in the play	121
4.9	Distribution of attitudinal polarity of resources in the play (Sarah is appraising her father)	122
4.10	Distribution of attitudinal polarity of resources in the play (Sarah is appraising her mother)	124
4.11	Distribution of attitudinal polarity of resources in the play (Sarah as being appraised by others)	126
4.12	Distribution of negative resources in the play (who appraised Sarah negatively most)	127
4.13	Distribution of attitudinal choices based on their types in the play	130
4.14	Distribution of judgemental choices based on their types in the play	132
4.15	Distribution of attitudinal polarity of resources in the play (black ladies as appraising themselves)	132
4.16	Distribution of attitudinal polarity of resources in the play (black ladies are appraising other black male friends)	135
4.17	Distribution of attitudinal choices based on their types in the play	140
4.18	Distribution of judgemental choices based on their types in the play	143
4.19	Distribution of attitudinal polarity of resources in the play (Hester as being appraised by others)	144
4.20	Distribution of negative resources in the play (who appraised Hester negatively most)	145
4.21	Distribution of attitudinal polarity of resources in the play (Hester is appraising others)	148
4.22	Distribution of negative resources in the play (whom Beneatha appraised negatively most)	148
4.23	Distribution of attitudinal choices in the play, regarding the strategy realization	153



4.24	Distribution of attitudinal choices in the play, regarding the strategy realization	155
4.25	Distribution of attitudinal choices in the play, regarding the strategy realization	157
4.26	Distribution of attitudinal choices in the play, regarding the strategy realization	160
4.27	Distribution of engagement categories in the play	163
4.28	Distribution of heteroglossic propositions	166
4.29	Distribution of contraction subsystems	167
4.30	Distribution of engagement categories in the play	169
4.31	Distribution of heteroglossic propositions	170
4.32	Distribution of contraction subsystems	172
4.33	Distribution of engagement categories in the play	173
4.34	Distribution of heteroglossic propositions	176
4.35	Distribution of contraction subsystems	177
4.36	Distribution of engagement categories in the play	178
4.37	Distribution of heteroglossic propositions	181
4.38	Distribution of contraction subsystems	182
4.39	Distribution of attitudinal resources based on their types, all plays	184
4.40	Distribution of attitudinal choices of all plays, regarding the strategy realization	187
4.41	Distribution of all attitudinal polarity of resources in the play	190
4.42	Distribution of all attitudinal polarity of resources in the play	191
4.43	Distribution of all attitudinal polarity of resources in the play	193
4.44	Distribution of all attitudinal polarity of resources in the play	194
4.45	Distribution of engagement categories of all plays	196
4.46	Distribution of heteroglossic proposition of all plays	198
4.47	Distribution of contraction subsystems of all plays	199



LIST OF FIGURES

1.1	The organization of thesis	17
2.1	Metafunctional organization of language	39
2.2	An overview of the appraisal framework	43
2.3	The subsystems of attitude	45
2.4	Judgement and appreciation as institutionalised affect	51
2.5	The system of engagement	57
2.6	The system of graduation	60
2.7	Conceptual framework	77
3.1	An outline of the attitudinal analysis	97
3.2	An outline of the attitudinal analysis	101
3.3	An outline of engagement analysis: Dialogic contraction	103



PTFA UTHM
PERPUSTAKAAN TUN AMINAH

LIST OF APPENDICES

APPENDIX	TITLE	PAGES
A	Sample of attitude analysis	229
B	Sample engagement and graduation analysis	230



PTTHM
PERPUSTAKAAN TUNKU TUN AMINAH

LIST OF PUBLICATIONS

1. Alsanafi, I. H., & Mohd Noor, S. N. F. (2018a). Systematic review of African-American women's identity struggle in American drama. *Opción*, 17(34), 1116-1130. **(SCOPUS INDEXED)**
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of study

What is the identity of African Americans in the United States of America? Are those people connected to their heritage and their roots in Africa? Are they really become Americans after living in this country for more than four centuries? Those are the most recurrent questions that have caught the African people in America since the period of slavery (Das, 2012). Africans were brought to America as slaves, and they were prevented from their cultural and social practices like using drums and dancing for political and social policies. They have encountered a new language, cultures, as well as religion (Nowrouzi & Faghfori, 2015). Therefore, their African heritage and their previous identity was impaired and completely distorted through the passage of time. African American people could not gain the same cultural experience, or the same identity as their white counterparts because of their African past as well as the racial discriminations in the United States (Copenhaver, 2002). They, thus, lived in such experience that they were away from their ancestral homeland in Africa.

Later generations of African Americans were born in their new country; America, that has a different cultural and racial context, that they suffered from many problems including racial discriminations in all the aspects of life (Bell, 2015). These racial discriminations led African American people and particularly women, into facing up to great psychological and physical challenges. One of these psychological problems was the lack of true self-consciousness (Das, 2012). The African American's identity under the impact of two different and in some cases opposing cultures was

constructed. They could never possess the complete sense of belonging and integration or assimilation into either culture. Therefore, they were in a steady attempt to reconcile their African heritage with their new American upbringing (Copenhaver, 2002). It is the case and the state that Dubois; (outstanding American sociologist); referred to in his double consciousness which means that individual has two identities at the same time (Nowrouzi & Faghfori, 2015).

African American people could neither call themselves Africans nor Americans. They did not just lose their culture but their personal names too. African-American were either granted a Christian name or the surname of their white master so that they could be simply identified. The Negro, in this method, lost his very personal indicator of identity (Das, 2012). Black American women have been completely torn between their relationship to the dominant culture; (white American values) and their own black traditions and their relations to it. In very complex ways, their self-perceptions retained characteristically difficult in relation to the issues of their gender (Farhad, 2016). The concept of African American identity in general and focusing in particular upon women is not a new considered issue but rather it has attracted the attention of many scholars since slavery. Bell Hooks, Silviano Santiago, Homi Bhabha and Paul Gilroy; (famous social activists and critical theorists), all of them mentioned the position of pure American and hybridism of African American identity from a different perspective. Therefore, this issue of African American identity was highly considered in the second half of the 20th century (Bell, 2015).

After the emergence of Civil Rights Movements, black cultural and political leaders in the United States were supported by many literary leaders in all genres, especially in poetry and drama. They strove to combat rampant racism to create a respected place for black Americans within the surrounding hostile white social structure that was highly dominated (Jeffries, 2013). They have promoted an assertive black identity, and paid special attention to women because of two reasons: first, they have recognized them as a symbol to liberate the whole society, second, they attempted to counteract the pervasive racial stereotypes of the time (Copenhaver, 2002). Black women were highly marginalized through omission and a restriction of 'voice'; that is, very few of us have been able to recognize any respected position for them.

In the mid-twentieth century, many feminists struggled with the male-dominated and patriarchal perception of identity which excluded the experiences of women. The result of that challenge was the recognition of woman self. Feminists with

other Civil Rights Movement's leaders argued that the identity of women has been silenced by the patriarchal and racist societies from ancient times up to the present. Feminism in this case; also includes the movement of African American women. In a continuous struggle with individuals from every spectrum of the human race. Black women have consistently and continue to be, at a disadvantage to men within the constructions of their society (Farhad, 2016). In the Postmodern literary era, the search for the identity has become a much-discussed concept for women and men in the wake of World War II and the catastrophic effects that followed. In the book "*Identity and Culture: Narratives of Difference and Belonging*", Chris Weedon stated that identity as a necessity to the Postmodern individual:

The desire to be from somewhere, to have a sense of roots and a feeling of belonging are key features of the quest for positive identity in postmodern, post-colonial societies. The current popularity of genealogy and family history point to this need, as does the marketing of family names, crests and the like. It is also manifest in the popularity of tourism concerned with roots and heritage. (Weedon, 2004, p. 85)

During the 1960s and 1970s, Black American people were reclaiming their own African culture. Nathan Glazer and Daniel Moynihan; (an American sociologist) within their "Moynihan Report" (U.S. Dept. of Labor, 1965) to the nation, claimed that black people did not have any culture, that they only imitated white people, and therefore, they had no ethnicity. The report was seen by many prominent black politicians and intellectuals as racist, and they rejected that report. The years from 1964 to 1969 have witnessed debates, lectures, and panel discussions that were organized by institutions, scholars, and organizations, that sought to align their duties with the Black Arts Movement. The topics involved are the major themes of acculturation, integration, and relations between black people and the American culture. Black and white intellectuals engaged in that dialogue to exchange their ideas and feelings, and for the first time in the history of American theatre, black dramatists discussed their works concerning their new reform identity in America (Borrego, 2015). Moreover, this period aimed at radicalizing the black people to evoke their consciousness to something called self and identity. Hence, many playwrights came into the scene to give the voice for African American women such as Lorraine Hansberry, Adrienne Kennedy and others (Diyaiy & Saleh, 2013).

The impact of some social and political movements had included the emancipation of slavery, the Great Migration, Civil Rights movements and the Women's Liberation. African-American playwrights might seemingly be obliged to address the progression which is made by their ancestors in terms of...? Reciprocally, their works always illustrated both societal and psychological battles that suggested a holding pattern that was associated with their race, gender and class (Das, 2012). The pattern of injustice which was highly demonstrated in various plays by African-American playwrights reflects the daily lived experiences of African-American females that the aforesaid historical events and achievements were inadequately conveyed in comparison to the reality (Jeffries, 2013). African American women identity as shown in dramatic texts can be examined for the number of possible approaches to force of persecution. Matters such as aesthetic appearances, exploitation and rape were explored in the texts of playwrights such as Parks, Shange, Kennedy and others, whose works were often interpreted in terms of style and content (Copenhaver, 2002). However, this study focused on the dynamic between African-American women and society that they lived in, as a result of gender roles and the established socio-political environment. The data sets analysed in a scientific way by adopting Martin and White (2005) appraisal theory focusing on the writers' and speakers' attitude towards their social actors. This approach pays more attention to the attitudes of the writer and how could he present his social actors (Martin & white, 2005).

Many researchers have argued through their studies that African American people particularly women tended to perceive more racial discrimination barriers in their lives compared to the other white counterparts, and these behaviours led to social, psychological and political problems (Das, 2012). One prominent characteristic of the 20th century was the women's liberation movement, which brought women to the forefront in a variety of societal, political, and literary arenas. As women won the right to vote, achieved reproductive freedom through birth to control, legalize abortion, they later gained access to education and employment in general (Bell, 2015). Western culture was highly forced to examine its long-held views about females and the roles they can play in their society. One of the most important female voices the in 1950s and 60s, Lorraine Hansberry, who dealt with the dilemma of the 'Blacks', worked not only in the capacity of a writer but also as a social activist voicing the African

American's crises of having twin identities as being 'African Black' as well as that of the 'New-American' (Fard & Zarrinjooee, 2014).

The fundamental argument in this thesis is the quest for the identity of African American women. African-American woman identity as expressed in many dramatic texts, can be noted for the variety of potential approaches to prevent the oppression black woman has faced in her daily life. The researcher examines the techniques/linguistics aspects of four Postmodern playwrights, which are: Lorraine Hansberry, Adrienne Kennedy, Ntozake Shange, and Suzan Lori Parks. The selected plays are reasonable examples of Postmodern American drama from 1939 to 2000 to cover Postmodern periods. Thus, that number of selected plays provided limitation and the scope of this study. However, it is not the purpose of the study, to make general conclusions about all plays written by American playwrights during the Postmodern period. The selected playwrights for this study represented the new African American people who were conscious of their existences in their different ethnic backgrounds and sexual orientations. This study is not a concern to draw scanning conclusions about how authors of a particular ethnicity, sex or sexual orientation think, write, or feel. On the other hand, the study focuses on all of whom consistently are challenged and are complicated the socially constructed African American women identity through their works (Fard & Zarrinjooee, 2014). Though the preceding mentioned playwrights' works, they could be explored the woman characters' relationships with other people to reconstruct her new identity.

There is an act of particular courage with which Hansberry, Kennedy, Shange, Parks, and other female playwrights, by which they realistically presented the black women oppression within their community (Copenhaver, 2002). The selected playwrights had a firm belief that drama could have a significant effect and an essential change in the life of black people (Ghasemi, 2016a). So, they have chosen the weapon of creative struggle. The militant tone of this passage for self-determination and black pride to construct women identity is a characteristic of the black American drama which was initiated by Langston Hughes; (a famous American poet and writer) (Diyaiy & Saleh, 2013). What they have offered in their dramatic creations is a critical vision of the overall marginalization suffered of the black American writers. The contemporary United States has reached its long-desired status of a colour-blind population and that, given to the success of the Civil Rights Movement and other reform movements. There is no longer any need for colour-conscious policies, in other

words, contemporary African American people who are not confronted with situations which are loaded with subtle racism in their everyday life (Borrego, 2015). To sum up, the current section provided the general background regarding African American people and the circumstances that forced them to leave their homeland and settled in the US.

Furthermore, black American endured many physical and psychological consequences as a result of mandatory immigrations. Hence, their hardest issue is the deficient of their African heritage and their previous identity. This research is reflected through the titles whereby a selection from 1939 with the starting of the Second World War and the beginning of Civil Rights Movement to figure out the progress in the formation of black women's identity from past to present. The study also depends solely on the data (the playwrights) among other topics that helps to provide context to this thesis.

1.2 Problem statement

Examining the oppression of African American woman in literature have been conducted in many literature studies such as by Hadia (2012), Jeffries (2013), Jeffries and Jeffries (2014), Hidalgo (2015), Ghasemi (2016a), Mhayyal and Saleh (2016). Undoubtedly, many researchers have tackled the concept of identity in America. All the previous studies which presented woman's struggle with identity adopted specific literary theories as their frameworks to analyse their data. However, none of them used the appraisal theory for analysing. This is the gap that the study is going to fill in this thesis. The previous researchers concentrated on the exterior factors and neglected what is written within the texts. Thus, the above-mentioned theory; (appraisal) concerns to evaluate the language of the characters within their contexts and disregards the exterior factors (Ferris, 2010). Thus, this study is conducted to discover the Black woman's real problems in their society by evaluating the language that they used in their everyday life as presented in the plays. Nonetheless, language is considered as one of the essential tools to express human existence in social practices. It is used as a medium to convey various sets of values and meanings (Lau, 2013). The outcomes assisted to figure out the struggle and agony that African American woman faced and how they passed this issue.

The adopted theory does not have interest in the circumstances and factors that impacted the playwright to write his/her text as many literary theories are concerned. The theory can chain all of those characters together, black people in comparison to white, male in comparison to female, and more particularly black women in comparison to all characters. This logical process of relationship is a societal and political construct that defines the African American woman's position and experience (Jeffries, 2013). Within this societal and political context, appraisal theory is the framework that analyses the selected data concerning African-American women and their struggle to create their own identity. The underpinning theory is going to evaluate the real life of African American women by evaluating the language in the selected plays scientifically based on the theory's categories.

The black American women were the crux of this study, by which the researcher examined four plays to find out the oppression of those women. All the assigned playwrights for this study were black women who were victims or at least real contemporary witnesses at that period to present a vivid picture of what actually has been done concerning their suffering in a racist and patriarch society (Copenhaver, 2002). The analysing may discover the internal factors which impacted black women's lives in general to change their position as well as the impact of political, social and literary movements to evoke their black consciousness. The current thesis is one of the attempts to show real experiences of African American women in America through an evaluation of the language they used in their everyday life to communicate their feelings and show their relationships with others.

1.3 Research objective

The following research objective guides this study:

To investigate the struggles of black African American women through the evaluation of their language in selected Postmodern American plays using the Appraisal Theory.

1.4 Research questions

The following research questions guide this study:

1. How did the playwrights utilize the Appraisal Analysis to portray African American women as well as their quest for identity?
2. Did the playwrights portray their characters in the texts clearly and explicitly or implicitly and ambiguously to their audience/readers?
3. Did the playwrights (through characters), deliver their messages and moral lessons successfully and effectively to their audience/readers?

(See page 104, for definition of terms).

1.5 Significance of the study

The context that was expressed earlier serves as the backdrop for conducting this thesis. The motivation for implementing this kind of study is twofold. Firstly, many scholars have written short articles on African American women identity struggle. However, no comprehensive research has been conducted in this field of investigation. However, it is important to add to the field of knowledge of some new information. Secondly, the appraisal framework is a fairly new amplification in the area of Systemic Functional Linguistics (Bock, 2007). Eggins and Slade (1997) argued that one of the “least understood and most under-researched areas in linguistics are the domain concerned with interpersonal assessment” (p. 124). Not much has been shifted in recent years with regard to the abovementioned statement in terms of literature that exists on the appraisal framework. For the above reason, researches that used this approach are scarce in the field of literature (see 2.4). The adopted theory provided new ways of understanding and comprehending the literary texts by tallying and tabulating all the appraisal resources, supporting the readers with numbers and percentages regarding the status of black women to discover oppression of African American women scientifically. Moreover, this theory deals with the evaluation and adaptation of stances and neglecting the other external factors.

Many African-American playwrights were unique in their interrogation of the position of African American women identity (Fard & Zarrinjooee, 2014). This thesis has selected four Postmodern plays to figure out the status of the black woman in the

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