

## Domestic Violence in Pearl Cleage's *Flyin' West*

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### Abstract:

*Women around the world are subject to injustice and oppression. African American women were expelled from their roots. Being placed in an environment under the burden of slavery, African American women went through all kinds of injustice that were portrayed in many plays, written by African American female playwrights.*

*African American women suffer from domestic and social oppression. Besides their suffering from marginalization, domestic violence, and social injustice, their dilemmas are intensified by different kinds of physical abuse, like sexism, rape, mutilation of organs, and sex trafficking. Such practices turn their life into hell.*

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*Pearl Cleage is known for her strong articulation of feminist disapproval of the interlocking issues of racism and sexism. She adopts the traditional style of the well-made play in delivering her feminist message to her audience. She takes the audience back in a historical journey to expose the injustice that African American women suffered from in the past. She emphasizes the idea of historical repetition of the same problems in the present. In her play, *Flyin' West*, she condemns the violence and oppression of African American women during the nineteenth century at the hands of both black and white men. Cleage's works advocate the need of African American women to empower themselves as individuals, to overcome injustice and oppression. Cleage's plays explore themes like violence, freedom, and traumatic memory in African American experience.*

*This paper is concerned with *Flyin' West*, 1992. It deals with the domestic violence experienced by four women who lived at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in the American West.*

**Key words:** violence, gender, injustice, oppression, freedom, Pearl Cleage

## 1.1 ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Pearl Cleage was born in Detroit, Michigan, 1948. Her father, Jaramogi Abebe Azaman (previously Albert Cleage), founded and developed Black Christian Nationalism. She came under the direct influence of the political and intellectual upheaval of the 1960s and 1970s. She was educated at Howard University, Spelman College, and Atlanta University. Cleage's parents believed that it was important to maintain an atmosphere that nurtured an appreciation and knowledge of African American culture. Pearl and her older sister were expected to surpass academically and were introduced to controversial ideologies in an effort to expand their intellectualism. She was influenced by the works of Langston Hughes, Simone de Beauvoir, and

Richard Wright.<sup>3</sup> Cleage attributed her passion for writing and subject matters to her family. Cleage's parents cultivated an early attachment in their children for the performing arts. Some of Cleage's tender memories included evenings spent at the theater, enjoying plays and dance ensembles. In a personal essay, Cleage states:

There were books all over the place in my house when I was growing up. I came from a family of people who were writing. I'm the first professional writer in my family, but there were always a lot of books and a lot of talk about writers and writing. And a lot of respect for writers. So writing to me was a real occupation, like choosing to be a nurse or a minister, because I knew black people who were writing...I grew up in a context of people who were writing to free themselves.<sup>4</sup>

Cleage's plays *Puppetplay*, 1981, *Hospice*, 1983, *Good News*, 1984, and *Essentials*, 1984, made her a notable playwright. Other plays included *Late Bus to Mecca* and *Chain*, 1992. Her play *Flyin' West* brought Cleage national recognition and was the most produced African American play at regional theaters throughout USA. She wrote other plays, like *Blues for an Alabama Sky*, 1995, and *Bourbon at the Border*, 1997. Cleage continued her zest for placing African American female characters and authentic historical moments on the stage. *A Song for Coretta* was written in 2006. It was performed by the 7 Stages Theatre, in Atlanta, Georgia. Cleage's play, *The Nacirema Society Requests the Honor of Your Presence at a Celebration of Their First One Hundred Years*, premiered at the Alabama Shakespeare Festival, in September 2010.<sup>5</sup>

Cleage contributed essays to magazines like *Essence*, *New York Times Book Review*, *Ms.*, and *Black World*. She

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<sup>3</sup> Karen Arnett Chachere, "Pearl Cleage" in *Writing African American Women: An Encyclopedia of Literature by and about Women of Color*, ed. Elizabeth Ann Beaulieu (Greenwood Press, : Westport 2006), 193.

<sup>4</sup> Khalid Yaya Long, "Pearl Cleage's *A Song for Coretta*: Cultural Performativity as Historiographical Documentation"( M.A thesis ,Miami University, 2011),7.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid,11.

received the first prize for poetry from *Promethean Literary Magazine*, 1968. She was the winner of the Atlanta Mayor's fellowship in the arts in mid-1970s. Cleage won the Norman Felton Playwriting Award, in 1976, the National Endowment for the Arts residency grants through Just Us Theatre Company, 1980s, and Georgia Council for the Arts residence grants from the city of Atlanta, in 1980 and 1983.<sup>6</sup>

Cleage held a variety of jobs in Atlanta. She worked in the Archival Library. She became the on-air personality of Black Viewpoints, a local television show. She introduced, produced, and wrote scripts for *Ebony Beat Journal*.<sup>7</sup>

Through her plays and novels, she wanted to give courage and hope to African American women to liberate themselves.

## 1.2 *FLYIN' WEST* 1992

*Flyin' West* was performed at The Alliance Theatre. It was directed by Kenny Leon. The play had other productions across USA, including The Brooklyn Academy of Music, The Indiana Repertory Company, Crossroads Theatre Company, The Alabama Shakespeare Festival, the New World Theater, The Intiman Theatre in Seattle, Washington, The Long Wharf Theatre, and The St. Louis Black Repertory Theatre. The play opened the season at the Kennedy Center in Washington, DC, on September 13, 1994.<sup>8</sup>

*Flyin' West* is a well-made play with a firmly constructed plot and a climax near the end of the play. Cleage's choice of the well-made play highlights her use of a simple form to clarify and highlight the political and social messages of the play. She affirms: "Using traditional forms gives me more power in taking

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<sup>6</sup> Anthony D. Hill and Douglas Q. Barnett. *Historical Dictionary of African American Theater* (Lanham, Md: Scarecrow Press, 2009). 106.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Pearl Cleage "Artistic Statement" in *Contemporary Plays by Women of Color: An Anthology*. ed., by Kathy A.Perkins and Roberta Uno. (London: Routledge, 1996), 68.

the audience's defenses away."<sup>9</sup> The well-made play comforts audience with its familiarity, thus :

It is my firm belief that exposing my audiences to these African American Nationalist Feminist Warriorwomen, innocently ensconced within the framework of the well-made play, will quicken the swelling of our ranks by creating an exciting alternative view of what black women—what free women!—can and should be.<sup>10</sup>

In Cleage's opinion, experimental forms draw valuable attention away from content: "I like old-fashioned, well-made plays, where there's a lot of talk," she says, "I'm not an avant-garde kind of person."<sup>11</sup>

Following the Civil War, twenty to forty thousand African American men, women, and children left the South to settle in the West. The movement was known as the "Exodus of 1879." The Homestead Act of 1862 offered 320 acres of land to people who wanted to settle in the western states. By the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, more than a quarter of a million unmarried and widowed women were running their own farms and ranches.<sup>12</sup>

The play was inspired by Ida B. Wells's note: "Sometimes I wish I could just gather my people up in my arms and fly away west. Because we need to leave a place where they don't respect us and our lives aren't worth anything"<sup>13</sup>; the note was published in a Memphis newspaper during the 1890s, after a riot and a lynching of two of Wells's friends.<sup>14</sup> Wells encouraged African Americans to leave the South and travel to the West in search of freedom and independence by living and working on a new land.

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<sup>9</sup> Beth Turner, "The feminist/womanist vision of Pearl Cleage" in *Contemporary African American Women Playwrights A Casebook*, ed. Philip C. Kolin (New York : Routledge, 2007), 102.

<sup>10</sup> Cleage, "Artistic Statement" in Perkins, 69.

<sup>11</sup> Cited in Turner, 101.

<sup>12</sup> Catharine Rust, *Flyin' West Study Guide :A Guide for Study* (n.p, Montclair State University Theatre Department, 2005), 15.

<sup>13</sup> Quoted in Turner, 106.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

*Flyin' West* chronicles how four pioneering women survive on the western frontier in the all-black town of Nicodemus, Kansas, in the 1890s. The characters include three sisters, Miss Leah, Wil Parish, and the abusive husband, Frank. Cleage presents the image of an extended family of women that truly create a home, where they can feel free and safe. Cleage crafts a womanist space, where there is no room for intruders, who could manipulate them to break their achieved harmony. She builds a special female-centered spot by which she gives the concept of family and kinship a new meaning. Cleage offers four starkly contrasting women, who have entirely different ways to navigate “how to really make a place for themselves in a very male environment.”<sup>15</sup>

In *Flyin' West*, Cleage deals with other ignored moments of African-American history, including the relationship between African Americans and Native Americans during the post-slavery, pre-civil rights era.<sup>16</sup> Wil talks about his experience with the Native Americans: “When I run away, them Indians took me in and raised me up like I was one of their own.”<sup>17</sup> This incident shows the solidarity the dramatist has with other races. She considers them comrades in land and in anguish against the superiority of the white race.

In *Flyin' West*, family plays an integral role to secure the female characters. bell hooks expresses the necessary existence of family as an important structure within the African American community: “We wish to affirm the primacy of family life because we know that family ties are the only sustained support system for exploited and oppressed peoples”.<sup>18</sup> The play depicts a family's attempt to hold onto their land and to save it from white investors. Sophie and Fannie own a large farm.

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<sup>15</sup> Rust,19.

<sup>16</sup> Long,11.

<sup>17</sup> Pearl Cleage, *Flyin' West and Other Plays* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1999), 15. Further references to the play appear parenthetically in the text with page number.

<sup>18</sup> bell hooks , *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* ( London: Pluto Press, 2000), 38.

Fannie's younger sister, Minnie, lives in London, England, along with her mulatto husband, Frank Charles. Sophie meets Fannie and Minnie in Memphis, Tennessee, and the three flee the South for Kansas, encouraged by Benjamin 'Pap' Singleton, an African American leader. Sophie and Fannie unite together to manage a farm acquired under the Homestead Act. Their neighbor, Miss Leah, a 73-year-old ex-slave, possesses a large farm. Wil Parrish, a kind neighbor, woos Fannie. Miss Leah comes with the sisters to keep them company for winter, leaving Sophie and Wil to tend her farm.

As the play opens, Sophie and Fannie expect Minnie and Frank's visit. The arrival of the married couple from London kindles the action of the play. When the young couple arrives, the sisters get aware of Frank's abusive behavior toward Minnie. The latter tells them that she is pregnant; Frank receives a telegram concerning his loss of the legal battle with his white brothers over his inheritance. He physically forces Minnie to give him her portion of the family's farm; he beats her almost to death. It is easy for the audience to realize how evil Frank is. There is sympathy for the heroines, who represent Cleage's voice, which demonstrates the African American feminist values.<sup>19</sup>

The women conspire to eliminate a physically abusive husband. Before this dramatic decision is reached, they circle under the stars for "the ritual" and chant.<sup>20</sup> Ritual and sacrifice serve to appease the cosmic powers in order to reunite these realms and bridge the "transitional abyss", created in mankind's primordial existence.<sup>21</sup> Such rituals in the African heritage usually took place at night and they were performed

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 19.

<sup>20</sup> Joni L. Jones, "Conjuring as Radical Re/Membering in the Works of Shay Youngblood" in *Black Theatre : Ritual Performance in the African Diaspora* / edited by Paul Carter Harrison, Victor Leo Walker II, and Gus Edwards (Philadelphia :Temple University Press, 2002), 228.

<sup>21</sup> Jean Young, "Ritual Poetics and Rites of Passage in Ntozake Shange's *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf.*" in Harrison et al., 302.

with songs and prayers; they involved a human sacrifice.<sup>22</sup> The sacrifice in the African heritage was performed in the time of crisis, and in the aftermath of it, relief took place.<sup>23</sup> The threat that Frank represents puts the women's existence and peace in danger and only when the threat is gone they can feel safe.

The women emphasize their free will, their independence, and their attachment to their African roots. Chester Higgins, author of *Feeling the Spirit: Searching the World for the People of Africa*, notes, "We are Africans not because we are born in Africa, but because Africa is born in us."<sup>24</sup> The three sisters begin their ritual of chanting:

FANNIE AND MINNIE : Because we are free Negro women. . . .

SOPHIE: Born of free Negro women. . . .

SOPHIE , FANNIE AND MINNIE: Back as far as time begins. . . .

SOPHIE: We choose this day to declare our lives to be our own and no one else's . . . and went West together to be free women as a sacred bond between us with all our trust . . . . And all our strength . . . . And all our courage . . . . And all our love. (44-45)

Such traditions represent African American heritage that unify nature with spirit. According to Joni L. Jones, female power "lies in the union with nature and in an understanding of practical knowledge. It is a dynamic blend of wit and awe, or mystery".<sup>25</sup>

According to de Beauvoir, "One of the benefits that oppression secures for the oppressor is that the humblest among them feels superior."<sup>26</sup> Frank is an example of a weak man who turns to be a tyrant by oppressing weak women. He believes himself to be superior to everyone, especially to women. He is described as "*immaculately dressed in fine clothes*

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<sup>22</sup> J. C. de Graft , "Roots in African Drama and Theatre" in Harrison, et al., 24

<sup>23</sup> Femi Euba, "Legba and the Politics of Metaphysics: The Trickster in Black Drama" in Harrison, et al., 167.

<sup>24</sup> Chester Higgins, *Feeling the Spirit: Searching the World for the People of Africa* (New York: Bantam Books, 1994),233.

<sup>25</sup> Jones, 261.

<sup>26</sup> Simone de, Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*. Trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (London: Vintage, 2010), 33.



*from head to toe. Coat, hat, suit, gloves, shirt— everything of the finest quality and very tasteful. The sheer richness of the clothing is obvious in every piece*". (29) He is an egocentric person who has an authoritarian character that negates others' rights. He has an inferiority complex; he hates the fact that he has African blood in his veins. The women discuss the reason that makes Frank prefer to be with white rather his own people's company:

MINNIE: Frank says he doesn't see why he only has to be with Negroes since he has as much white blood in him as colored.

SOPHIE: Frank is talking crazy.

MINNIE: It's true. His father was...

SOPHIE: A slave owner! Just like mine.

MINNIE: Frank said his father wanted to marry his mother. They were... in love.

SOPHIE: Did he free her?

MINNIE: No...

SOPHIE: Then don't talk to me about love. (34)

Sophie sees love as a kind of freedom. Thus, the love that enslaves a woman and deprives her of her personality and free will is not love at all.

Frank aspires to be a white man, so as not to be marginalized. Cleage inserts such a light-skinned black character in her play to show that African Americans are involved in clashes even with their own race.<sup>27</sup> Frank hates to be married to an African American wife. He forces his wife to be the flawless woman in terms of what a woman means to him, who is definitely white. He dreams of a passive and submissive wife, as he points out: "When I first took Minnie to London, I made sure to take her shopping before I introduced her to my friends. But I always knew she had potential" (50).

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<sup>27</sup> Safi Mahmoud Mahfouz, "Exploring Diasporic Identities in Selected Plays by Contemporary American Minority Playwrights" *Rocky Mountain Review of Language and Literature* (SPECIAL ISSUE 2012), 177.

Frank does not see African American women as real human beings. He abuses and humiliates his wife. Cleage comments on Frank's character by saying:

What I was really trying to do with him was to talk about the self-hate that he has and about the fact that it manifests itself in domestic violence, which is, I think, a big question that we look at when we look at domestic violence in the Black community - the fact that race is so present in such a negative way in the lives of Black men, that they often manifest their rage at race in domestic violence against Black women and children.<sup>28</sup>

After their arrival from London, Minnie appears with a bruise as stated in the stage direction:

Minnie is standing at the mirror in the bedroom trying to convince herself that her bruised face isn't that noticeable... She moves her hand from her face. She flinches... She looks in the mirror with resignation, grabs up her hat and puts it back on...

Minnie enters quickly. She is nervous that the others will notice her bruise. (31-32)

Frank does not feel any affection for African American people and does not appreciate their life. He discusses with his sisters-in-law a lynching scene in New Orleans:

FRANK: They had just had a lynching the week before we got there. (*Laughs*) Just my luck!

MINNIE: After they hung the poor man, they threw his body down in the street right in the middle of the colored section of town.

MISS LEAH: Don't any of those New Orleans Negroes know how to use a shotgun?

FRANK: He pretty much brought it on himself from what I heard down at the bank. He was involved in some—

SOPHIE (*Cuts him off*): I do not care what he was involved in.

FRANK: Doesn't it matter?

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<sup>28</sup> Rust, 19.

SOPHIE: No. Whatever it was, he didn't deserve to die like that. (37)

Frank is a typical abuser, who attacks weak women. He stands in contrast with Wil, the confident man, who loves and respects Fanni. Wil sees Fanni "as a precious jewel deserving of [his] respect, [his] love and [his] protection" (17). He says that his mother used to teach him how to respect and cherish a woman. "She used to say if a colored man could just remember that one thing, life would be a whole lot easier on the colored woman." (17)

When Frank loses all his money in a bet he beats Minnie.

FRANK: I was gambling . A gentleman's game of poker with some of my friends from the train. Ran into them in town. And you know what? I lost. I lost everything. What there was left of it... And I want to thank you for that. Things were going fine until one of them asked me about the nigger woman who kept following me around the train. I laughed it off, but my luck changed after that so I know they suspected something... You are too black to bring me any good luck. All you got is misery. Pure D misery and little black pickaninnies just like you. (55)

Minnie speaks about the kindness of her husband at the beginning of their relationship, because he wants to win her heart and confidence.

MINNIE: Everything has changed. Everything. When Frank and I went to London, it was like a fairy tale. I felt so free! I could do anything, go anywhere, buy anything,.. And Frank was always there to show me something I had never seen before or tell me something I'd been waiting to hear all my life...and I loved to look at him .But then he changed... He was mad all the time.

FANNIE: Mad at who?

MINNIE: At everybody but mostly me, I guess.... I think he just started hating colored people. We'd be walking down the

street and he'd say "Look at those niggers. No wonder nobody wants to be around them." When his father died and his brothers stopped sending money, it just got worse and worse. It was almost like he couldn't stand to look at me. . . (60-61)

Minnie believes that Frank's violent manners are temporary. "I used to think it must be a dream and that I'd wake up one day and Frank would be the way he used to be" (61). Then she realizes that she is deceived by him as he shows his ugly reality.

Frank, after being violent, becomes tender and friendly; he is to be forgiven. Then he maltreats her again. The cycle starts all over again with more violence than before, as Minnie says: "I can't make him stop...hitting me!" (74) The presence of the other sisters, especially Sophie, plays a significant role in restraining the domestic violence. Frank feels Minnie's sisters' refusal for his behavior, and though he despises them for being females, he fears Sophie and he pays attention to the gun she always carries. Psychologically, Frank's attitude goes in accordance with the cycle of violence theory, which states that the abuser undergoes three stages: the first one is when the rage is built. The rage is released in the second stage. The third is known as the honeymoon stage, where abuser asks for forgiveness and turns to be tender and kind. Then the cycle starts all over again.<sup>29</sup>

Frank uses violence to control his wife's share of the land:

MINNIE: No Frank. I can't ask Sister to split up this land.

FRANK: I'm your husband. Don't you ever tell me no! (*He reaches to grab her arm*)

MINNIE (*Moving quickly out of reach*): Don't, Frank! I don't care what you do to me, but I won't let you hurt our baby!

(*Frank grabs Minnie's arm and brings her up against him sharply.*)

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<sup>29</sup> R. Emerson Dobash & Russel P. Dobash, *Women, Violence and Social Change* (London: Routledge, 1992), 223.

FRANK: Don't you ever threaten me as long as you live, do you understand me? Do you?

*(She nods silently.)*

I'll kill you right now, Min. I'll break your damn neck before your precious sisters can hear you holler. I'll kill everybody in this house, don't you understand that? You want to know who I told those white men you were, Min? You really want to know?

*(She struggles but he holds her.)*

I told them you were a black whore I won in a card game. (69)

In order to save the family and Minnie, Miss Leah, Sophie, and Fannie murder Frank. The procedure the women follow to kill Frank, the oppressor, reflects the intelligence of Miss Leah, who has a great experience, which young Sophie lacks.

MISS LEAH: I can't let you do this.

SOPHIE: I'm not asking you. This is something I have to do....

MISS LEAH: In case you forgot, this is still the state of Kansas, a part of the United States of America. Men beat their wives every day of the week, includin' Sunday, and white folks cheat colored folks every time they get a mind to...It is a messy business, shootin' folks. It ain't like killing a hog, you know. Sheriff has to come. White folks have to come. All that come with shootin' somebody. But folks die all kinds of ways. Sometimes they be goin' along just as nice as you please and they heart just give out. Just like that. Don't nobody know why. Things just happen. (77-78)

To protect Sophie from being imprisoned, the women decide to kill Frank with a poisoned apple pie made by Miss Leah from a secret African recipe. She tells the three sisters about her memories concerning killing a white man who wanted to rape a slave named Ella in the plantation, but she got rid of his assaults using a secret recipe of poisonous herbs added to a delicious apple pie.

MISS LEAH: ...when he walk up on the back porch, he had one thing on his mind, but Ella had been up early too, and the first thing he saw before he even saw her was a fresh apple pie coolin' in the window. And it smelled so good, he almost forgot what he come for. And Ella opened the screen door and smile like he the person she wanna see most in this world and she ask him if he'd like a glass of cold milk and a piece of her hot apple pie. Of course he did! What man wouldn't? And he sat down there and she cut him a big ol' piece and she told him it was hot and to be careful not to burn hisself... And do you know what happened? Well, he didn't even get to finish that piece of pie Ella cut for him so pretty. Heart just stopped right in the middle of a great big bite. By the time the master got back, they had him laid out in the barn and Ella was long gone. (*A beat*) But she did do one last thing before she left.

FANNIE: And what was that?

MISS LEAH: She gave me her recipe for apple pie. (79)

This action has historical and cultural significance. Freda Scott Giles asserts

Cleage's use of the poisoned pie carries two threads of meaning. The first is connected to the retention of knowledge from the African motherland, passed through the oral tradition, which fosters self-preservation, especially if kept concealed from the oppressor. The second thread is connected to the folk tradition of victory over oppression through covert confrontation.<sup>30</sup>

Miss. Leah uses this fruit to dismiss Frank from their heaven. It is the same fruit that dismissed Adam and Eve out from Eden .They get rid of Frank, who acts like Satan in their heaven.

Frank represents a threat not only to Minnie's life, but also to all of their hard-fought dreams. Sophie finds her joy and happiness in freedom. Fannie says that Sophie's "laugh was too

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<sup>30</sup> Quoted in Turner,107.

free to come out in a place where a colored woman's life wasn't worth two cents on the dollar" (16).

The women feel the potential threat Frank creates for the new haven they want to keep. They reject the idea of being dragged into another prison-like life.

The motif of female flight in *Flyin' West* permeates the entire play through bird flight imagery and feminist discourse replete with symbolism. In the household, Fannie, like a peace maker, mediates the peace discourse between the bossy Sophie and the independent Miss Leah... Minnie's image as the harmless caged dove ceases to exist with the murder of her husband and this becomes clear when she approaches the corpse of her husband and fiercely snatches the deed from his pocket. With the death of Frank and the birth of her healthy baby girl, Minnie frees herself of the shackles of that marriage and flies to freedom to join her sisters.<sup>31</sup>

It is a flight from the universal agony that all women share. In the final scene, Minnie stays on the farm with her sisters and the baby. Sophie triumphs over the white speculators, who want to invade the all-black community she dreams of.

Cleage exposes the double oppression African American women face. The play attacks the stereotype of the strong African American women. She thinks that it is time to expose the agony of those women, so as not to be abused and exploited. Cleage believes that women are able to live and lead a balanced life without the existence of abusive men in their life.

Cleage highlights striking continuities of struggle and joy, focusing on issues of family, childbirth, power, domestic violence, and survival:

The thing that struck me when I started reading all these journals from women who had gone west, and letters home and all those things that are available once you start looking for them, was that I was really struck by how similar their

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<sup>31</sup> Mahfooz, 177-78.

experiences are to the experiences of women today. They were talking about family, they were talking about childbirth, they were talking about isolation ... And it was wonderful for me as a playwright, because it meant that although I was writing about a very different time period, I was still writing about the same kinds of issues, the same kinds of questions.<sup>32</sup>

Cleage's characters show that women can overcome stereotypes without sacrificing their independence, strength, and voice. A character like Sophie, who is designated by Frank as "pretty high and mighty for a nigger woman" (57), has a free will. She is reluctant to accept what others impose on her life. She represents the new feminist woman, who is committed to seeing African people survive and thrive; she "creates a plan for the community and defends her 'sister' Min from Frank's violence".<sup>33</sup> She cannot accept a threat.

You know as well as I do there are no laws that protect a woman from her husband. Josh beat Belle for years and we all knew it. ... It wasn't a crime until he killed her! I'm not going to let that happen to Min. ... I'm going to step out on my front porch and blow his brains out. (76)

She does not want to be dictated by others. She says: "Two things I'm sure of. I don't want not white folks tellin' me what to do all day, and no man tellin' me what to do all night" (21).

Miss Leah stands for the strong woman, who endures all agony and miseries of slavery. She is willing to share her experience with younger generations, especially the three sisters: "When they sold my first baby boy offa the place, I felt like I couldn't breathe for three days. After that, I could breathe a little better, but my breasts were so full of milk they'd soak the front of my dress" (73). She expresses her opinion concerning African American men: "Colored men always tryin'

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<sup>32</sup> Rust, 19.

<sup>33</sup> Lisa M. Anderson, *Black Feminism in Contemporary Drama* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 19.



to tell you how to do somethin' even if you been doin' it longer than they been peein' standin'up" (10).

According to Lisa Anderson, Cleage uses history as a method to "expose her audience to something about which they may not be familiar".<sup>34</sup> The stories Misss. Leah tell are an essential part of their history and heritage. Fannie documents them:

MISS LEAH: I keep tellin' you these ain't writin' stories. These are tellin' stories.

FANNIE: Then tell them to me!

MISS LEAH: So you can write 'em!

FANNIE: So we can remember them.

MISS LEAH: Colored folks can't forget the plantation any more than they can forget their own names. If we forget that, we ain't got no history past last week. (22)

Fannie insists on saving their race by reviving their legacy. She wants to give people an idea about "the literary societies and the Sunday socials and forums. Mama and Daddy's house was full of people talking at the top of their lungs about the best way to save the race" (23). Fannie shares with Minnie their memories about their mother's abuse by their father, asserting thus African American man's violence. She advises her sister to tolerate the violence of men and to "be stronger than they are... We have to understand and be patient." (62) Still, Fannie's attitude changes and she cannot tolerate Frank's behaviors.

The denial of one's hybrid identity is seen of *Flyin' West*. For instance, Sophie wants to confirm her political agenda in that African American community. She wants to preserve its African American identity by confronting greedy ways of the white man to purchase land.<sup>35</sup> Frank escapes his African roots, while the three women's establish them as they leave to the West right from the beginning. Sophie says :

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<sup>34</sup> Anderson,33.

<sup>35</sup> Mahfouz,177.

I want this town to be a place where a colored woman can be free to live her life like a human being. I want this town to be a place where a colored man can work as hard for himself as we used to work for white folks. I want a town where a colored child can go to any body's door and be treated like they belong there. (53)

This develops the contrast between Sophie and her brother in law, while the latter wants to escape his roots, Sophie sticks to them as strongly as she can. She finds her voice as a woman and a community leader. She embraces her identity and the idea of nationalistic autonomy that Nicodemus represents.<sup>36</sup> Sophie shows her devotion to the flying west movement that makes her “free as a bird” (38).

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<sup>36</sup> Freda Scott Giles, "The Motion of Herstory: Three Plays by Pearl Cleage." *African American Review*( 31.4 1997), 710.

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