



A Study of Sexual Relationships and Racism in *Liliane* by Ntozake Shange

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Abstract— This research paper examines the intricate relationship between sexuality and racism in *Liliane*. The novel presents a deeply psychological portrait of a Black woman navigating identity formation within a socio-cultural framework shaped by racial hierarchies and patriarchal control. Through fragmented narration, shifting consciousness, and complex interpersonal relationships, Shange foregrounds the lived experiences of Black women whose sexuality is mediated by race, class, and history. This paper argues that sexual relationships in *Liliane* operate as both sites of oppression and resistance. By closely analyzing *Liliane*'s relationships, familial background, and psychological struggles, this study highlights how Shange constructs a Black feminist discourse that critiques both systemic racism and gendered subjugation while affirming female agency.



Keywords— racism, fragmented identity, sexual relationship, patriarchy

I. INTRODUCTION

The literary works of Ntozake Shange are deeply invested in articulating the voices, struggles, and resistances of Black women. *Liliane* stands as one of her most complex and psychologically layered novels, offering readers an intimate look into the consciousness of a young African American woman attempting to reconcile her fragmented identity. The novel departs from linear storytelling, instead employing a stream-of-consciousness technique that reflects the protagonist's inner turmoil.

At the center of *Liliane* lies a critical engagement with two deeply interconnected themes: sexuality and racism. These are not treated as separate domains but as overlapping forces that shape *Liliane*'s experiences. Her sexual relationships are neither purely romantic nor purely physical; they are embedded in broader socio-political contexts that dictate power relations, identity formation, and emotional vulnerability.

This paper seeks to explore how Shange uses *Liliane*'s sexual experiences to interrogate racial identity and systemic oppression. It argues that sexuality in the novel becomes a crucial site where *Liliane* negotiates autonomy, resistance, and self-definition against the intersecting pressures of racism and patriarchy.

Any critical reading of *Liliane* must be grounded in Black feminist theory, which emphasizes the intersection of multiple forms of oppression. Black feminist thinkers argue that the experiences of Black women cannot be understood solely through the lens of gender or race; instead, these categories intersect in complex ways. Shange's narrative reflects this intersectionality by portraying *Liliane* as a subject who is simultaneously shaped by racial discrimination, gender expectations, and class privilege. Her identity is not fixed but constantly evolving, influenced by her interactions with family, lovers, and society. Sexuality, in this framework, becomes a contested space. Historically, Black women's bodies have been subjected to

both hypersexualization and moral policing. Shange challenges these stereotypes by presenting Liliane as an active participant in her sexual relationships, thereby reclaiming agency over her body.

One of the most striking aspects of *Liliane* is its portrayal of psychological fragmentation. The narrative structure itself mirrors the protagonist's fractured sense of self, moving between memories, dreams, and present experiences without clear boundaries.

This fragmentation can be directly linked to the impact of racism. Liliane grows up in a society that devalues Blackness, creating a sense of alienation and internal conflict. Her family's emphasis on respectability and racial uplift further complicates her identity.

Her father, in particular, represents an ideology that seeks to counter racism through discipline and conformity. However, this approach imposes rigid expectations on Liliane, limiting her freedom and expression. She is expected to embody a certain image of Black femininity—controlled, respectable, and socially acceptable.

This pressure leads to a division within Liliane's psyche. On one hand, she internalizes these expectations; on the other, she resists them through her actions and relationships. Her psychological instability is not merely a personal issue but a reflection of the broader socio-political environment in which she exists.

Liliane's sexual relationships are central to the novel's exploration of identity. These relationships are not depicted as stable or fulfilling; rather, they are marked by tension, misunderstanding, and power imbalances.

However, they also serve as spaces where Liliane asserts her autonomy. By choosing her partners and engaging in relationships on her own terms, she challenges societal norms that seek to regulate Black female sexuality.

At the same time, these relationships reveal the limitations of such resistance. Many of the men Liliane encounters attempt to define her according to their own expectations. Whether consciously or unconsciously, they reproduce the same structures of control that exist in the larger society.

Thus, sexuality becomes a double-edged sword—both a means of liberation and a site of continued oppression.

Interracial relationships in *Liliane* are fraught with complexity. They highlight the deeply ingrained racial tensions that shape personal interactions.

Liliane's understanding of such relationships is influenced by her family history, particularly her mother's involvement with a white man. This relationship disrupts the family structure and becomes a source of trauma for Liliane.

Her father's reaction—erasing the mother's presence and constructing a false narrative—demonstrates the extent to which racial anxieties can shape personal decisions. This act of erasure not only affects Liliane's perception of her mother but also influences her own approach to relationships.

When Liliane engages in interracial relationships, she is not simply acting out of personal desire. These relationships are embedded in a historical context marked by exploitation, fetishization, and power imbalances. Shange does not romanticize these dynamics; instead, she exposes their inherent tensions.

Patriarchy plays a crucial role in shaping Liliane's experiences. Male authority figures—both within her family and in her romantic life—attempt to control her behavior and define her identity.

“Didn't anybody know you didn't haveta let any man talk like he owned you, like we owed them something. For what?” (*liliane*74)

Liliane challenges the patriarchal norms that dictate women's behavior and relationships. This line signifies her awakening to her own agency and the realization that she is not obligated to conform to the expectations imposed by men or society. It marks a moment of empowerment and self-liberation.

Her father's expectations reflect a broader patriarchal ideology that seeks to regulate female sexuality. He believes that maintaining respectability is essential for racial advancement, and this belief translates into strict control over Liliane's life. In her relationships, Liliane encounters men who impose their own narratives upon her. They often fail to see her as an individual, instead projecting their desires and assumptions onto her.

This dynamic illustrates how patriarchy operates across racial lines. While Black men are themselves victims of racism, they can still perpetuate gender-based oppression. Shange's portrayal of these interactions underscores the complexity of power relations within marginalized communities.

Despite the various constraints she faces, Liliane emerges as a figure of agency. Her refusal to conform to societal expectations is a significant aspect of her character.

She does not seek validation from her family or society; instead, she attempts to define herself through her experiences. Her sexuality becomes a key component of this process.

“Love is not a luxury; it's a necessity for survival.” (*liliane*-83)

Emphasizes the importance of love and human connection as fundamental to enduring life's challenges.

By engaging in relationships on her own terms, Liliane challenges the notion that Black women must adhere to specific roles. She rejects both the stereotype of the submissive woman and that of the hypersexualized figure, instead occupying a space that is uniquely her own.

This assertion of agency is not without consequences. Liliane's choices often lead to conflict and emotional pain. However, these experiences are integral to her journey toward self-understanding. Class is another important factor in *Liliane*. As a member of an upper-middle-class Black family, Liliane has access to certain privileges that differentiate her from others within her community.

However, this privilege also creates additional pressures. She is expected to uphold a certain standard of behavior, which limits her freedom.

Her relationships with individuals from different class backgrounds challenge her assumptions about identity and belonging. These interactions reveal the complexities of intra-racial dynamics, showing that class divisions can be as significant as racial ones.

The use of psychoanalysis in *Liliane* provides insight into the protagonist's inner world. Her therapy sessions serve as a space where she confronts her past and attempts to make sense of her experiences.

"I was born into a world that didn't want me, and I had to fight every day to prove I belonged." (*liliane 43*)

Reflects Liliane's resilience in the face of societal rejection and her determination to assert her place in the world.

The fragmented nature of these sessions reflects her psychological state. They are not linear or coherent but marked by interruptions, repetitions, and shifts in perspective.

This narrative technique allows Shange to explore the unconscious mind, highlighting the ways in which trauma, racism, and sexuality are interconnected.

The representation of the Black female body is central to the novel's thematic concerns. Historically, this body has been subjected to objectification, exploitation, and control.

In *Liliane*, the body becomes a site of both oppression and resistance. Liliane's experiences reflect the ways in which societal perceptions of Black femininity influence personal identity.

However, by asserting control over her body, Liliane challenges these perceptions. She refuses to be defined by external narratives, instead constructing her own understanding of self.

"I have never been what anybody expected, or wanted for that matter; I'm not even what I wanted." (*liliane-76*)

This line reflects Liliane's struggle with the expectations placed upon her by society, her family, and even herself. It underscores her journey of self-discovery and the tension between external pressures and personal desires. Liliane's acknowledgment of not meeting these expectations highlights her resistance to conforming to predefined roles and her quest for authentic self-expression.

Trauma is a pervasive theme in *Liliane*. The protagonist's experiences—both personal and collective—contribute to her psychological struggles.

"Every scar tells a story, every wound is a lesson learned." (*liliane59*)

Liliane reflects on the significance of personal pain and growth through adversity.

Memory plays a crucial role in this process. Liliane's recollections are fragmented and often painful, reflecting the difficulty of confronting past experiences. However, the novel also emphasizes the possibility of healing. Through therapy, artistic expression, and self-reflection, Liliane begins to reconstruct her identity.

This process is neither simple nor complete, but it represents a movement toward wholeness.

CONCLUSION

A Study of Sexual Relationships and Racism in Liliane reveals the depth and complexity of Ntozake Shange's literary vision. The novel demonstrates that sexuality and racism are not separate phenomena but deeply intertwined forces that shape the experiences of Black women.

Through Liliane's journey, Shange critiques societal norms while affirming the possibility of resistance and self-definition. The protagonist's struggles highlight the challenges of navigating a world structured by inequality, but her resilience underscores the power of agency. Ultimately, *Liliane* stands as a significant contribution to Black feminist literature, offering a nuanced exploration of identity, desire, and transformation.

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