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Improvising Theatrical Jazz in a Queer Time and Space: Aishah Rahman's Unfinished Women Cry in No Man's Land While a Bird Dies in a Gilded Cage

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Jones: Queer desire is less about who someone has sex with and more about a person's approach to the present moment - open, absorbed, exploratory, a life of possibility rather than prescription.

Bridgeforth: And that's how jazz is queer. It is about infinite possibility and exploration (Jones and Bridgforth 142).

How can we trace the queerness in the corpus of a text aside from the characters' genders and sexualities? How can we experience a queer sense of storytelling in a work even if the work does not include any LGTBQ+ character? Can a storyline be queer or is queerness only related to an individual's sexuality and gender? Or can we open up queerness more and stretch it? David Halperin suggests that queerness does not refer to anything in particular but everything that is in conflict with what is considered as dominant and normative (Halperin 19). In fact, we can read Halperin's statement together with the dialogue of Omi Osun Joni L. Jones and Sharon Bridgforth, which is the epigraph of this essay. It also indicates that queerness cannot be limited to someone's gender and sexuality, queerness is about the exploration of the non-normative. In other words, one may say that queerness can be stretched to read non-normativity that is embedded in a text. Not only a text but even a genre of music can also be considered as queer if it compels us to think outside the box. Bridgforth, in his dialogue, eloquently expresses that jazz makes us explore the infinite possibilities as it requires improvisation that necessitates a lucid disengagement from constructed conventions.

Performance scholar Omi Osun Joni L. Jones's book Theatrical Jazz: Performance, Àṣẹ, and the Power of the Present Moment seeks to enhance queer theories as she finds the relation between jazz and queer theories in the concept of theatrical jazz. She argues that queerness does not impose socially constructed performances. In fact, queerness creates a space for identity to struggle with itself (Jones 13).

Liminality is a key concept in relation to queerness according to Jones. She borrows the anthropological term liminality and expands it to mean a space of possibility in which people are completely free from all social structures by creating, inventing, and imagining new spaces that are not restricted to social constructions (11). Liminality can be perceived as a way of improvisation as Jones states that it becomes a space for improvisation that allows us to invent something new that did not exist before (11). She draws the parallel between queerness and jazz by asserting that they both "...sample so that the recognizable is seen anew" (12). By undoing the conventional way of thinking about queerness, Jones unites queerness and jazz in the concept of theatrical jazz. The jazz aesthetic in theatre embodies the aural, temporal, and spatial linguistic expression of queerness as it is "insurgently liminal [and] unfixed" (10). Aishah Rahman's Unfinished Women Cry in No Man's Land While a Bird Dies in a Gilded Cage is an ideal play to apply this experimental queer theory and to trace the trajectory of theatrical jazz. This play functions to queer, release, and undo the conventional western realist mode of narrative that creates the play's non-realist language. Following Jones's inquiry into theatrical jazz, this article will show how Rahman situates her play in the context of theatrical jazz, which creates a queer time and space, whereby she explores freedom in the form.

Unfinished Women is an experimental play, which incorporates the jazz aesthetic by engendering a new dramatic language that rejects the conventional realistic language used by the popular North American playwrights (Barrios 613). It offers improvisation through jazz, collaboration of the spectator, and metamorphosis but does not offer any sense of exploration of queerness of gender and sexuality. However, it offers a linguistic utterance of queerness and liminality in a non-linear plotline in dream-like fragments of Hide-A-Wee-Home and Pasha's boudoir. The entire cast expresses a dream-like liminality of the play by exclaiming, "So part of what I offer you is Fantasy/ And part of what I offer you is true/ Which is which […] / Is up to you!" (Rahman 206). Their dialogue informs the form of the play from the very beginning itself. Rahman offers fragments in a tantalising manner rather than by transmitting the play in an uninterrupted narrative. It allows the spectator to be active and makes them arrive at their own provisional conclusion at the end of the play. Unfinished Women does not and cannot propose a final verdict; it is about the spectators' exploration of the present moment in an open and fragmented space as the play emphasizes that everything is up to the spectator.

The play, centered around the last day of Charlie Parker, focuses on five unwed pregnant women–Wilma, Paulette, Mattie, Midge, and Consuelo–three of whom are of African descent, one white and one Hispanic. The play's unconventional narrative is spread over twelve scenes and takes place in two different settings. The five young pregnant women are imprisoned in a space called no man's land or Hide-A-Wee-Home for Unwed Mothers, wherein they can look for self-fulfilment without having a connection with a man and can independently decide whether to keep the child or put it up for adoption. Meanwhile, Charlie Parker, or Bird, is confined in his gilded cage with an old French woman called Pasha who is his fictional boss. The play stages the suffocating relationship between the self-destructive Parker and his patron Pasha in a room while simultaneously showing the young women's life-changing decisions about their unplanned pregnancies in a prison-like setting. Parker's music is entangled with the women's lives as all the pregnant women mention it at some point while they are narrating their stories. Even though these two settings seem to be unrelated, Charlie Chan, who appears in blackface and is the alter-ego of Parker, links the two narratives; he moves from one narrative to the other by remaining outside the drama since he is represented as an invisible character. In the final scene, the relationship between the two settings is disclosed—the sound of Parker's saxophone disintegrates into pure sound as he dies and becomes an echo of the cry of Wilma's newborn baby.

Unfinished Women employs a unique form to narrate the story. As form and content are inseparable from one another for Rahman, the conventional forms of Aristotelian drama proved to be insufficient to narrate the content she had created. James T. Stewart also emphasizes the need for black artists to create revolutionary forms that correspond to their realities (Stewart 6). He expresses that art should move dynamically as it is not a fixed set of human activities (6). He also asserts that the construction of new models is only attainable through non-matrixed and fluid revolutions in the form (6). Revolutionary and fluid amendments in form can be seen clearly in Rahman's play; therefore, she calls her play a polydrama;

> The two setting […] should be interplayed and intraplayed with the dramatic image of Bird and Bird's music being the fundamental notes with which both parts bounce off on creating tensions between them while at the same time weaving the seemingly disconnected parts into one polydrama. (Rahman 202)

In her play, Rahman finds her voice by creating her own fluid, liminal, and queer form by integrating a jazz-like structure with the dramatic action to hold the fragmented settings and different narratives of the women and Charlie Parker together.

What Rahman has created through polydrama is a fluid space without using the realist language of drama. Considering the clash between realist and non-realist language in drama, Tori Haring-Smith's observation in the article "Dramaturging Non-Realism: Creating a New Vocabulary" is relevant here as she employs realist language to understand non-realist language. According to her, a realist notion of drama needs character development, cause and effect relationship, referential language, linearity, or a psychological, physical, and thematic coherence (Tori Haring-Smith 53). Contrary to this, the pregnant women in Rahman's play are only figures and there is no evident development in their characters since they only narrate their past lives without there being any development in their stories. By breaking the linearity as the play moves to and fro in the two settings, characters and settings become associative images. For instance, Chan is omnipresent, Parker is the cosmic melody, and Pasha, an old woman, who wants to have a baby or create a Hide-a-Wee-Home—a prison for women with a guardian of morality. Rahman asserts that she likes the surrealistic mode as it offers unpredicted juxtapositions, "…the symbolic objects and actions that emphasize the subconscious or non-rational imagery that is rooted in African American"(23).Shifting the focus from one dimension to the other, an abstract and a dissolving language derive from text and context. Therefore, the mood, the rhythm, and the image of the play resonate and create an unexpected juxtaposition. Jones writes that jazz and queerness employ similar transgressive tactics with regard to fluidity and queerness in their form, "...moving from mimesis (imitation that can lead to stasis and maintenance of status quo) to poeisis (the literary imagination with emphasis on language) to kinesis (the forging, the sweating, the calloused hands that offer up the not known)" (Jones 5). This shows that both queer and jazz require a sense of transformation and Rahman's play reveals a fluid space through which she manages to transform the conventional rules of drama with the help of theatrical jazz to create her own voice and form. Rahman creates a non-realist language by means of theatrical jazz. She arrives at kinesis energetically with an unpredictable form, in which spectators need to focus on the moment to create their own meanings out of the broken form, which does not offer any conclusion.

Jones asserts that theatrical jazz is non-linear and transtemporal (Jones 4). The notion of time remains elusive and unknown. Jones draws a parallel between queer and jazz in theatrical jazz by focusing on the notion of queer time. She argues that queer time holds up both the aesthetic and the political aspect of jazz through its non-normative and transgressive rhythms as the narrative strategies are simultaneous and non-mimetic (11). The expectation of linearity cannot be found in jazz music too as it highly depends on improvisation. Unfixed and continuous narrative draws a parallel between improvisations in the two forms of art. Improvisation transcends time by focusing on the possibilities of the present moment rather than seeking to find a fixed structure. In that sense, queer time offers a complex present-time. The idea of queer time should be considered in the structure of Unfinished Women in relation to Charlie Chan. Apart from the fact that the play offers a complex and non-linear plot line, Charlie Chan is the key figure who embodies the queerness of time. He is the omnipresent character in both settings and he is the only one who adjusts the hands of the broken clock in the first and the last two scenes. The real time has never been revealed; thus, the sense of time in the play is surreal and distorted. Chan articulates, "think of time as a circle going round" (206), he reveals the distortion of the linear time from the very beginning. In fact, we can hear the stories of all the women, their decisions about their babies' lives, and Parker and Pasha's relationship in this cyclical sense of time which has neither a beginning nor an end. In the last scene, Nurse Jacobs says, "It's time" after Chan's adjustment of the clock, but Paulette cries, "No… It is not time" (235).Hence, the notion of time becomes relational. In this multi-layered now-time, the spectator explores multiple voices of each character.

Understanding how queer time is created is very important in order to understand the play's dramaturgical language. Unfinished Women uses the character of Chan as well as the music to disrupt the linear understanding of time. As a matter of fact, music is always audible throughout the play. Jazz music is observed as the organizing principle of Unfinished Women (Koger 105). Jazz music is conceived as a metaphor for "the joy and anguish of black women's lives" (Wilkerson 74). Even though jazz plays an extremely significant part to hold the broken pieces of narration together and we may see the metaphorical dimension of music in the play occasionally, such as hearing the sound of Parker's saxophone as the cry of Consuelo's baby's (Rahman 207). We can say that music is more than just a metaphor for the two opposite extreme emotions of black women's lives. Music functions to problematize the linearity of time in the play

since queer time is an integral part of theatrical jazz. The most important element of the script is rhythm—the different rhythms of scenes, characters, and of their languages. The multiple rhythms of the play resemble the way bebop innovated the sense of rhythm in the forties to have rhythmic subdivisions (Williams 138). Parker's idea of rhythm is especially crucial, since his accentuation "...comes alternatively on the beat and between beats" (Hodeir 109). Therefore, music—or more accurately, the specific style of jazz that is bebop—is not a metaphor but a device that actively reconstructs the non-realist and non-imitative language of the play. Miles Davis asserts the non-imitative nature of bebop by asserting that "…[bebop does not] have harmonic lines that [one] could easily hum out" (Davis and Troupe 119). Therefore, bebop allows Rahman to break the conventions of imitation in drama as she situates her play in a polydramatic framework in which unrecognizable polyrhythms offer multiplicity through unconventional improvisations by dragging the characters, the settings, and the plot line in queer time.

In Rahman's play, bebop plays a significant role in relation to play's polyrhythmic idea. Amiri Baraka observes that bebop was very close to the African way of establishing music because of the "reestablishment of the hegemony of polyrhythms" (Baraka 194). Boppers abandons the conventional traditions of improvising and creating variations on the chords for a melodic theme (194). Bebop has an emphasis of polyrhythms in which "…melodies there seemed to be an endless changing of direction, stops and starts, variations of impetus, a jagged that reached out of rhythmic bases of the music" (194). Even though Unfinished Women offers juxtaposition of major rhythmical lines as the stage is divided into two rhythms: Hide-A-Wee-Home and Pasha's boudoir, the creation of the polyrhythm is more complex than just juxtaposing the two streams of rhythm. Hide-A-Wee-Home divides time into six by the narration of the stories of Wilma, Paulette, Mattie, Midge, Consuelo, and Nurse Jacobs in different scenes, thereby effectively creating a set of rhythms. The other rhythm divides the time into two, between Pasha and Parker.

In fact, Rahman's usage of polyrhythms is more than breaking the time into two different rhythms. The figure of Chan (who is Parker's alter-ego) is almost an embodiment of Parker's function of his polyrhythmic music who bridges all the complex layers of now-time by means of improvisation. When the piano starts to play a lush romantic tune and Chan says, "Lovely tune, isn't it? […]Where is the past? Up? Down? I wish to relate to you the circumstances of Birth, Death, Musicians, and Women on the day that Charlie Parker died.

Memory is not spontaneous. It is the mind, rooting the soul for self-forgiveness" (206). He takes the tune of the piano as a starting point and then draws a parallel between memory and time while subdividing these concepts into mind and soul. However, at the same time, he unites mind and soul at the end by uniting the spatial engagement with birth, death, music, and pregnant women in a cyclical time. Additionally, he questions the location of the past by breaking it spatially as up or down. He asserts that it is not spontaneous. It is neither hidden in up nor in down because one may find it in the present moment.

Polyrhythms are not accidentally produced in bebop's improvisation as they come with rhythms and between rhythms. Therefore, time and memory are not accidental, they are not spontaneous but simultaneous and seek new possibilities inside the same moment as the play explores the stories of each of the figures in present time. The temporal unity that Chan creates is not an accidental one; it gestures towards Parker's statement to Pasha about music:

> I want to separate myself from you and all that ties me to this earth. There is one perfect note. […] Yet, I keep on hearing it all the time. And when I do every cell of my body wants to break up into tiny parts of that one perfect musical note and float on the ear of every living soul. […] WHAT A PERFECT COSMIC MELODY I WOULD BE AT THAT MOMENT! (209)

Parker wants to become a disembodied cosmic melody by separating himself from his earthly body. He wants to transcend his body and become the audible music eternally. The italicization of 'I' emphasizes the oneness, fullness, and integrity of his music, mind, and body. Death brings about the wholeness of his music since he is emancipated from his body and becomes the cosmic melody. The cosmic melody is omnipresent, appearing in every scene with his music. Every woman in the play hears this cosmic melody in their minds and the audience participates in the experience through the saxophone mimicking the crying baby. Each scene, character, and rhythm is created in relation to this cosmic sound and to Parker's disembodiment—Charlie Chan. Although he is referred to as the invisible man in the stage directions, he is the most visible character to the audience as he exists in each scene either fixing the clock or setting up the scene. In Scene 2 he sets up flowers (211), in Scene 5 he emerges to play the servant (217), in Scene 10, when the song Cherokee plays softly underneath, he steps out of the corner and repeats three times, insistently as if no one hears

him, “Good evening, ladies and gentlemen, and welcome to the world famous Birdland…Here’s Charlie Parker and ‘Cherokee’” (323). Thus, it explains why Rahman calls Chan as the Master of Ceremony (200), since he conducts every part of the polyrhythms by distorting, twisting, and juxtaposing the different rhythms. His appearance in every scene puts an emphasis on now-time as he is the alter-ego of Parker.

Unfinished Women focuses on multiple stories rather than having only one main story. However, the centre of gravity of each story varies in relation to each character’s articulation of her story. Even though we hear the echo of Parker’s existence or annihilation or his Cosmic Song in relation to each woman, Wilma is a particularly interesting figure in regard to the audibility of Parker’s Cosmic Song. In Scene 6, she narrates the incident of watching Parker live in concert, and then her focus shifts to her baby:

> I never saw anything like that and I never heard anything like his music […]I don’t want to give up my baby, but… S’funny what Birdmeant to me[…] I always wanted to be a man ‘cause they can do things and go places. Bird is the man I wanted to be. Maybe my son will like him… Maybe I’m thinking about giving up a Charlie Parker (221).

Parker’s music connects Wilma to her baby even though she is hesitant whether to put up her baby for adoption or not. She believes in Parker and his music. Music is the dominating element in the scene and towards the end she literally hears the music, “Hear that? He’s not dead. Bird lives… Inside here” (222).

With regard to Parker’s attitude towards improvisation, Martin Williams states,” Parker uses the bridge of the piece not as an interruption or interlude that breaks up or contrasts with its flow, but as part of its continuously developing melody” (Williams 143). Hence, one may interpret Wilma as a continuously developing melody who improvises on Parker’s cosmic song by the means of her baby. Jones states, “Theatrical jazz transformation is built on truth telling, present-tense-ness, and a dedication to joy, hope and life” (Jones 211). This transformation occurs inside Wilma with the help of Parker’s song and Wilma’s hope for life.

The last scene is extremely pivotal in relation to the improvisation of polyrhythms, since we can see each character on the stage as the influx of rhythmic ideas as they burst into music and voices. The characters keep repeating the dialogues over and over

again, "…weaving in and out of, on top and below each other, accelerating in pace, volume and intensity" (Rahman 235). An eclectic audience is needed for this scene as it opens with Chan fixing the clock and dragging time into the present moment. The audience participates in the moment and has the freedom to compose the scene on their own as they are exposed to simultaneous dialogues. They can transform the piece in relation to their experience of the moment. The transformation occurs not only within the cyclical structure of the play, but also inside Wilma through her baby and Parker's cosmic song. While Wilma gives birth to her baby, Parker slowly dies and says, "Can you hear the song I'm breaking into" (236). The last scene offers a "triple-consciousness" (Rahman 283), which offers a sense of metamorphosis of life and death, as the unborn, the living, and the dead share the same dimension.

Theatrical jazz focuses on the open mesh of possibilities in the present moment through improvisation and Unfinished Women uses it as a strategy of resistance. Expanding the meaning of queerness and jazz to disrupt convention, theatrical jazz remains liminal in nature by constructing a sense of queer time. The multiplicity of possibilities needs polyrhythmic ideas to tie all the possibilities together. Like queer, jazz's resistive nature can only be maintained in a liminal space. Rahman eclectically creates her own form to be able to convey her story and calls it polydrama, not by totally rejecting the Western forms but by focusing more on African-American ways of dramatic and musical expressions. She does not imitate traditional perspectives but rather engenders this fluid space by means of polyrhythmic bebop improvisations where multiple possibilities can co-exist. Music is the most significant element in the play because of its capability to form its non-realist and non-matrixed language: queer, transformative, resistive, simultaneous, and multifaceted. Although Unfinished Women does not gesture towards any kind of queer sexualities or gender representation, one can trace how the narration embodies queerness. Creating queer expressions and forms for telling the stories necessitates the listeners, the readers, or the spectators to find innovative ways to receive the work, or maybe queer-read the work.

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