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## Racism and blacks struggle

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### ABSTRACT

Traditionally, women playwrights in general, and black women playwrights in particular have been excluded from the American theater because of racial and gender oppression. However, early twentieth-century African-American women playwrights, such as Angelina Weld Grimke (1880-1958), Alice Dunbar-Nelson (1875-1935), Marry Burrill (1879-1946), and Myrtle Smith Livingston (1901-1973), whose works have been overshadowed for decades, were able to express their awareness of the racial discrimination facing African-Americans. They also paved the way for the next generation of black women playwrights, such as Alice Childress (1920-1994), Lorraine Hansberry (1930-1965) and many others.

Beginning in 1950s, Childress was able to have her voice reach beyond her community into the competitive world of professional theater. The portraits of black life and characters are simply not complete without the unique perspective of this playwright, who honestly portrays the struggle of her people. Childress has peopled her plays with challenging, innovative and multidimensional black characters, who struggle in a hostile world to survive and to achieve self-assertion, dignity and pride. Childress is among the frontrunners in the development of black playwriting, and thus, deserves serious study.

The purpose of the present study is, therefore, to examine how this African-American playwright portrays, in the selected play for this study, **Trouble in Mind**, the blacks' struggle for equality and human rights. The study is divided into two sections and a conclusion.

Section One is an introduction to the tradition out of which Alice Childress has emerged. It also tackles her background, and her contributions to the American theater.

Section Two analyzes Childress's **Trouble in Mind** (1955), which treats racial stereotyping in and outside theater, the superiority and insensitivity of white liberals, and how a black actress confronts the attitude of the whites' superiority in theater>

The conclusion sums up the main findings of the study.

## 1. 1. Introduction

Alice Childress lived in a society where there was segregation of public schools, public places and public transportation; besides the segregation of restrooms and restaurants for Whites and Blacks. This type of inhumane treatment fueled Childress's writings. She wrote about the downtrodden who turn the absolute horror of living in poverty and hard emotional conditions into an extraordinary demonstration of consistent determination. Alice Childress believed that the Black artist has a responsibility to tell the truth about the miseries that afflict the people of the world, particularly the colored people.

Alice Childress, who was born in South Carolina and raised in Harlem, was a woman of theater. In 1941, she joined the American Negro Theater "ANT" and became one of its original members. She worked in the company as an actress and director. Eventually, Childress began writing plays. On the subject of education, she poignantly reminds America that Blacks were the only racial group in the United States ever forbidden by law to read and write, and to enter libraries, concert halls, theaters, and public schools.<sup>1</sup> Childress believes that Black artists should not ignore the experiences of poor Black people. Childress remarks that "Black writers cannot afford to abuse or neglect the so-called ordinary characters who represent a part of ourselves, the self twice denied, first by racism and then by class difference."<sup>2</sup>

Childress uses her keen mind to address the struggle of her people with the aim of effecting social change. Childress's plays reflect her passionate interest in the intersection of race and class. She writes about the lower middle class people who are, traditionally, invisible people in drama.

## 1.2. **Trouble in Mind** (1955)

**Trouble in Mind** was optioned for Broadway to be the first play by an African-American woman to be produced on Broadway. However, “quarrels about theme, statement, and interpretation”<sup>3</sup> led Childress, who refused to compromise her artistic vision, to withdraw the work. The play treats racial stereotyping inside and outside the theater, the presumptuousness and the insensitivity of White liberals, and Blacks' struggle for equality.<sup>4</sup> The title of this two-act play comes from a “blues song of the same name.”<sup>5</sup> **Trouble in Mind** is significant because it has made Alice Childress the first woman playwright to win the Obie Award for the best play in 1956.<sup>6</sup>

In this play, there are White and Black cast members, a White director, and a White stage manager gather to rehearse the play within the play, “Chaos in Belleville,” which centers around Whites in an imaginary town who form a lynching mob because a young, poor, Southern Black man, Job, dared to vote. The characters in the secondary play are waiting for news of Job (played by John Nevins, the new young Black actor, in the primary play) to find out if the lynchers have caught him or not. Job's mother, Ruby (played by Willetta, the talented Black actress) cannot understand why he is running away if he has not done wrong. Yet she is the one who urges him to confess to voting, which in the eyes of the lynch mob is his crime. Job says pathetically, “I wasn't even votin' for a Black man, votin' for somebody White same as they” (II, p. 161). However, Job is blamed for voting by the old Black folks, but he says, “when a man got a decent word to say for us down here, I gonna vote for him” (p. 161). Job's mother tells him to turn in to the White authorities. When he does so, Job is dragged out of jail and murdered by the lynch mob despite the efforts of the land owner and the pleas for mercy of the landowner's daughter. The poor Black parents are portrayed as too simple-minded to know the dangers that threaten their son, who will meet inevitable death.

According to the Whites, the director and the cast members, “Chaos in Belleville” is an anti-racist and anti-lynching drama. They allege that it will give its audience a good lesson in racial tolerance. However, the Black cast members do not believe such allegations because they think that White playwrights have severely distorted their images as dignified human beings when they

portrayed them as too “under-privileged” and “uneducated” (II, p. 164). Therefore, the Black actors and actresses are always given trivial passive servant and maid roles, through which they cannot express themselves as dignified people.

Wiletta, who is described as being “attractive and expansive in personality,” (I, p. 137) has her own discontent and psychological anxiousness about her secondary roles in theater. Although she is conscious that “Art is a great thing” (I, p. 142), she prefers to call theater as “just a business” (I, p. 142) because her previous passive roles proved that “Colored folks aren’t in no theater” (I, p. 139). Moreover, she believes that the Blacks must behave nicely and properly in order to get along well with the Whites. Thus, she laughs when necessary and usually conceals her true feelings because she wants to avoid making troubles with her White bosses.

The symbol that Alice Childress uses to develop the main ideas and also to set the tone of the play grows out of her creation of metadrama in **Trouble in Mind**. Richard Hornby defines metadrama as “drama about drama” suggesting that “it occurs whenever the subject of a play turns out to be, in some sense, drama itself.”<sup>7</sup> The play within play, which appears in **Trouble in Mind**, serves as a controlling symbol.<sup>8</sup> It becomes the vehicle through which Childress reveals the scarcity of parts for African–American actors and actresses and the compromises these artists were often forced to make even when they finally did become members of a cast. Thus, Childress uses a different way of looking at the “business” of theater which illuminates the Blacks' experience in drama, and in particular the limitations imposed upon African–American women actresses and playwrights.

Almost immediately after she meets John, Wiletta gives him information about the underlying prejudices of the White theater world. She wants him to understand what he should and should not be and how to act with White people. “Sometimes they laugh,” she says, and “you’re supposed to look serious, other times they serious, you’re supposed to laugh. White folks can’t stand unhappy Negroes, so laugh, laugh when it ain’t funny at all” (I, p. 139). Wiletta also urges John to be “Uncle Tommish” and to lie about his schooling and experience. She explains that White men, like the White director, Mr. Manners, do not like the Blacks “to go to school” because they want them “to be naturals...just born with gift” (I, p. 139). The emphasis on being “natural” uncovers the racist idea that African-Americans are closer to animals and therefore act on instinct. Childress presents here the idea that a Black man who could have learned the craft of

acting and developed his talent in a scholastic setting is appalling to the Whites, who deny the intellectual capabilities of the Black people. Wiletta knows that working for the White people in the company diminishes herself and continues the pattern of subjugation of the Black race, but she feels she has few alternatives. She sees her options as painfully limited to either becoming submissive in order to continue to appear in plays, or taking a stance against being a passive tool in the hands of the White director and losing her job.

When the rehearsal begins, Manners, who tries to conceal his pride and racism, loses his temper with Judy for not knowing one stage area from another. Therefore, he throws the paper on the floor and prevents Judy from picking it up. Then, he orders Wiletta to pick the paper up. His order draws the attention of the cast members; Wiletta is so shocked that at first she refuses and says, "Hell, I ain't the janitor" (I, p. 146). However, she, with great difficulty, regains her submissive composure. Manners, then, stops the scene out of embarrassment at what he has revealed about himself. Childress uses the complexity of Wiletta's character to reveal a thinking and changing woman who "slowly reveals herself."<sup>9</sup> This revelation happens when the cast members rehearse a scene leading up to a lynching, and Wiletta, as Ruby, is to set the scene by singing the following song, which she remembers from childhood:

Come and go with me to that land where I'm bound  
No confusion in that land, no confusion in that land  
No confusion in that land where I'm bound. (I, p. 152)

Wiletta sings the song first in a manner of "despair" (I, p.151), but when Manners makes her angry, she, then, sings the song in a manner of "strength and anger". Describing the situation, Childress writes in the stage directions that, "The song is overpowering, we see a woman who could fight the world" (I, p. 152). The song shows "Wiletta's growing rebellion and double-edged weapon art can become".<sup>10</sup> When Wiletta's grinning mask is pulled off, she reverses her previous advice to John to be "Uncle Tommish" as well as her position to fight racism.<sup>11</sup> Thus, her strategy of subjugation of the Black race is radically changed. Puzzled by Wiletta's challenge, Manners threatens her by saying, "if you dare! You will undo us!" (I, p. 152). However, she bravely decides to counterattack her White oppressor, Manners, who keeps putting her down, by

driving him to reveal the truth of his underlying prejudice and racism. She tells him that “You don’t want to hear you are a prejudiced racist” (II, p. 170).

Awakened to her internal confinement of her “divided-self,”<sup>12</sup> Willetta sets forth her consistent struggle and brave confrontation. Denying the misrepresentation of the Blacks in theater as “simple backward people” (164) as well as the authenticity of her role as a Black mammy sending her son to be lynched, she argues the White director:

I don’t believe this ....Where is this comin’ from? .... Tell me, why this boy’s people turned against him? Why we sendin’ him out into the teeth of a lynch mob? I’m his mother and I’m sendin’ him to his death. The writer wants the damn White man be the hero—and I’m the villain. (II, p. 169)

Willetta, who is a veteran Black actress and Childress's mouthpiece, argues that the scene is all wrong, saying that no Black mother and father would sit idly by and watch as their child is lynched, nor would they turn him over to the law, because history has taught Blacks that law is powerless against the lynching mob, who sometimes represent the law itself. She pleads with the director, Manners, to request that the author revises the script, calling for the young man, since it seems he must die, to be killed while running away or to be dragged out of the house with his family fighting for his safety. Thus, Willetta refuses to portray the role of a passive woman who betrays her maternal instinct and willingly sends her son to his inevitable death. She cannot believe what is being asked to do and say in the play.

Willetta gives up the role she has been playing to Manners for so many years, and in doing so, she risks losing not only her passive role as a “Black mammy” but even her whole career as an actress. Childress apparently attempts to emphasize that Blacks should sacrifice prestige and monetary gains in order to preserve their integrity. Willetta proves that she is able to reverse the equation of subjugation of the Black race to the confrontation and challenging of the White's prejudice and racism.

While Willetta represents the changing African-American woman whose struggle enables her to integrate her “divided-self” to survive and maintain her dignity and self-respect, John, the

inexperienced young Black actor, and Sheldon Forrester, the old Black actor, represent the confused Black men and their response to the frustration that Blacks feel because of the limited and demeaning roles available to them on the American stage. John, who is in his early twenties, hopes to prove himself by becoming a successful actor. However, being an inexperienced man, he is taught to be “Uncle Tommish” (I. p. 139) to keep his role in “Chaos in Belleville”. When the White director, Manners, appears John eagerly compromises his opinions and becomes a “yes man” (I, p. 139) indicating that, at this stage, he is neither assertive nor self-respectful. His self-effacement is apparent during the rehearsal of “Chaos in Belleville”. When Manners asks John if he can object in artistic sense to the word “darkies” (I, p. 147), John submissively replies, “No, I don’t object. I don’t like the word but it is used, it’s a slice of life. Let’s face it.” (I, p. 147) However, John is awakened to his “double-consciousness” when Manners, during an argument over interpretation, unthinkingly commits a mistake of implying that John could not be compared to his son because John is Black and his son is White:

Wiletta: Would you send your son out to be murdered?

Manners: (so wounded, he answers without thinking). Don’t compare yourself to me!  
 What goes for my son doesn’t necessarily go for yours! Don’t compare him  
 (points to John) ... with three strikes against him),they’ve got nothing in  
 common. (II, p. 171)

By denying John's humanity, Manner's hidden Whites' prejudice and racism are revealed once more and his previous allegations of supporting African-Americans are refuted by himself. Angered by Manner's remark and encouraged by Wiletta's stance to assert himself, John examines his values and decides that man's pride is more important than “Tommish” role in a “White theater establishment,” which ignores the Blacks as dignified human beings. Boldly he declares, “They can write what they want but we don’t have to do it.” (II, p. 172) Thus, John is moving in the direction of maturity as he realizes that he can no longer be a “yes man.” His pride, dignity, and artistic integrity prevent him from being a passive tool in the hands of others to fulfill their degrading implications blindly.

Whereas John Nevins eventually asserts himself, Sheldon Forrester, who spends his long life acting in trivial 'Tommish' roles, typifies the role of a Black man who is too impotent to search

for himself. He chooses to sacrifice dignity for minor roles on the American stage. Sheldon, whose main interest is monetary gains, asks Wiletta, Millie, and John to “keep peace” and not argue because, as he says, “Last thing I was in, the folks fought and argued so, the man said he’d never do a colored show again and he didn’t” (I, p. 141). Sheldon is worn out and perceives that it is futile for a Black person to function as a man in American society: Sheldon says that “They gonna kick us until we out in the street unemployed. We don't mind takin' low because we tryin' to accomplish somethin'. . . . Well, yeah, we all mind . . . but got to swaller” (I, p. 153).

While Wiletta and John have revolted against Whites' racial prejudice, Sheldon proves that he is more concerned with monetary interests than with qualities that assert Man's self like pride, integrity, and dignity because he has neither the courage nor determination to become a whole person. He proudly confesses that the denial of his dignity and pride has helped him to survive. However, at one of the significant points in the play, Sheldon steps out of his character in “Chaos in Belleville” when he describes the lynching which he witnessed when he was a boy in the South. He recalls:

A Sound come to my ears like bees hummin' . . . was voices comin' closer and closer, screamin' . . . and the screamin' was laughin' . . . The arms of it stretched out . . . a burnt, naked thing . . . a burnt, naked thing that was a man . . . and I started to scream but no sound come out . . . just a screamin' but no sound. (II, pp. 165-66)

Later he found out that the murdered man was Mr. Morris, a person who was looked upon by Black community as generous and loving but who was known “to speak his mind” (I, p. 166) to Whites. Childress, here, attempts to juxtapose between the lynching in “Chaos in Belleville”, which seems unconvincing and has its own purposes, and the real lynching of Sheldon's story. Sheldon's emotional description of the lynching brings the horror of the situation into current reality for the cast and, thus, solidifies Wiletta's quest for script revisions.

Moreover, Childress's resentment of racial stereotyping goes beyond the lynching scene in “Chaos in Belleville”. She discusses the exaggeration of religiosity among Blacks, and the



invalidation of Blacks. Childress makes a strong case against White authors who categorize Blacks as passive and religious. The lynching scene in “Chaos in Belleville,” for example, is one in which the father is merely “whittles a stick” (II, p. 159) and recites “Lord, once and again and one more time” (II, p. 160) and the mother wrings her hands and repeatedly calls on the Lord for mercy while their son's life hangs in the balance.

Childress has chosen theater, which is a “milieu that she knows well”<sup>13</sup> for the setting of her play to address the struggle of Black artists who should play a crucial role in promoting change in art as well as in real life. In **Trouble in Mind**, she asserts that integrity, self-respect, and determination are decisive elements for the struggle of the Black people against Whites' racism and prejudices. When Wiletta realizes that she will be fired for insisting upon script change, she says at the end of the play “Divide and conquer ... that's the way they get the upper hand” (II, p. 173) Childress seems to be suggesting that Blacks must struggle together or they will continue to be victimized together. This means that the only way to change their conditions is to fight these conditions together.

## Conclusion

White Americans' oppressive policies continued against African-Americans, even after slavery has been abolished in 1865. Therefore, the Blacks are racially oppressed, especially in the South, in their daily lives as well as in the White-authored literary works. Day by day, they encountered the segregation of public schools, public transportations, besides the segregation of public accommodations. Because of their feeling of supremacy and their ignorance of the real life of Africans-Americans, White playwrights portrayed in their works stereotypical images of Black life and characters, which are far away from reality.

Childress's play represents a conscious effort to illuminate the oppressive conditions of Black people in an unjust racial system where they have to encounter constant struggle to survive against overwhelming racism. She has asserted the importance of the individual consciousness in confronting racism. Wiletta chooses to confront the racial restrictions and limitations which are imposed on Blacks in theater. In this play, Childress's main point that Black individuals, not their White counterparts, must struggle against the policies of racism to get their human rights and

economic equality. Childress seems to be suggesting that Black groups must be united and they should struggle together or they will continue to be victimized.

The play is remarked by Wileta's confronting, defending, and challenging character, who maintains integrity, dignity, pride and bravery in the face of racial discrimination. At the same time, Childress's reveals that the submissiveness and weakness of some Black individuals can form an obstacle in the path of Black people struggle because it will reinforce their own victimization and oppression. This point is shown clearly through portraying Sheldon's character in **Trouble in Mind**, who either achieves what is prescribed for him by White supremacists or conceal his Black identity to acquire material gains regardless of his pride and dignity.

Childress has also expressed her doubts about the cordiality and lack of prejudice toward Black people. Manners attempts to demonstrate good intentions toward Black people. However, as the situation complicates, he is consciously or unconsciously, unable to withhold his inner racial attitudes because they are the product of a tradition that devalues Black people. Moreover, the play reveals that the Whites' racial attitudes may be expressed in different ways but, in fact, they stem from the same motives.

Childress points out that African-Americans in general and Black artists in particular should understand the importance of their struggle to break free from all physical and spiritual confinements that hinder them from being dignified human beings. For Childress this struggle is painful, but necessary because it is the core of the Blacks' lives.