

Romanticizing Black Female Experience in Alice Childress's *Trouble in Mind*

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Abstract: The play *Trouble in Mind* analysed in this chapter portrays racism in the theatre. It illustrates a group of white and black actors practicing an anti-lynching drama, "Chaos in Belleville", in a Broadway Theatre. Wileta, a veteran artist, is ill-treated by the white director AlManners. She demands a change in the portrayal of the mother's character that leads her son to his death. She refuses to even enact her role, but Manners marginalizes her as a black artist and as a woman. The director reinstates his racist supremacy throughout the play, which results in romanticizing the sufferings of black women artists, and thus the emergence of 'self' remains passive.

Keywords: Black Womanhood, Intersectionality, Resistance, Stereotyping, Representation

Introduction

The creativity and artistry which contemporary black women display has its roots in the black slave woman whose undying energy passed it on from one generation to the other. Walker's argument focuses on the nature of double oppression: denying 'body' and 'soul'; added to this is the third dimension of being outlawed for expressing creativity/ artistic talents. One can witness such triple oppression in the plays of Alice Childress, where her black women stage actors are denied freedom of expression. The kind of victimization that black women have undergone for centuries has, in fact, made them numb to realizing the oppression they have suffered. They are under the impression that racial discrimination is spread only by a group of hostile white people. In this regard, Bell Hooks remarks, "The majority of us understood racism as a social evil perpetuated by prejudiced white people could be overcome through bonding between blacks and liberal whites, through militant protest, changing of laws or racial integration" (AIW 120). This led to a perpetual state of denial among the blacks to comprehend the oppressive system that operates around them. This made both black men and especially black women suffer rather than protest, hoping for a positive result for their suffering. This led to the romanticizing of black women's suffering in the Phase One plays of the 1950s and 1960s taken for analysis. The term romanticizing is defined as "deal with or describe in an idealized or unrealistic fashion.", according to the Oxford Dictionary. In this chapter, the term is employed to show how the African American women playwrights of the first phase glorify and idealize the sufferings of black women. This is illustrated in the way their victimhood is dealt with emotionally and sentimentally.

Alice Childress *Trouble in Mind* is one such play that idealizes the mental/ physical humiliation of its oppressed black woman theatre artist. The uneducated, poor actor feels emotional and upset playing the role of a mother who accepts her son's fate of being lynched by a mob. The artist refuses to perform the script and suggests alternate methods to portray the black mother's character, which is brushed aside by the racially prejudiced white director. The artist emotionally protests and gives practical propositions to alter the script, hoping the white liberal director will accept her suggestion. In the process of this futile persuasion, she is supposed to excite and inspire her community. Childress also wanted to underscore this play as a show of resistance to white supremacy. But it is argued in this chapter that the whole performance, with built-in rehearsals, romanticizes the sufferings of blacks and specifically the women.

The reasons for this argument lie in the fact that the protagonist, Wilma Mayr, at no point could walk out of the performance, as it is her only source of earnings. Every time she resists, she is humiliated by the white director, and she accepts it humbly. Some of her emotional outbursts almost edge into self-pity and glorify the tragic black mother and elevate motherhood on a pedestal. The results of such focusing lead to the shrinking of the position of black womanhood and undervalue it. The rationale behind this argument lies in the fact that the first phase deals with the broader issue of racism, and the process of reclaiming the selfhood of black women takes place only in the second phase.

It is reiterated again that the aim of such analysis is not to render the first phase insignificant, but to show that activism, resistance and anti-racist protest are part of a continuous process to elevate the position of the blacks and their women. The belief or faith which the protagonists have that her endurance will be rewarded arises out of her blind faith that is shaped by an oppressive system. The oppressive system is maintained by the whites, who live in a constant feeling of insecurity. One can witness in both the

plays "Chaos in Belleville" and the play *Trouble in Mind* this underlying current of insecurity. The reason for such distress could be traced back to the Reconstruction years. According to black feminist critic Bell Hooks, "During the Reconstruction years, manumitted black people had demonstrated that given the same opportunities as whites they could excel in all areas. Their accomplishments were a direct challenge to racist notions about the inherent inferiority of dark races" (AIW 60). This tension of realizing the talent of the black people to acquire brilliance 'if given an opportunity' created anxiety in the minds of the White masters. So when a character like Job in "Chaos in the Belleville" demands voting rights, his life is at peril. Brutal punishments like lynching are the direct result of such anxiety. Similarly, in the play *Trouble in Mind*, the white director is not ready to accept even a logical argument from a black woman artist. Leaving aside the emotional nature of Wiletta Mayer's appeal, Al Manners wants to put her down in place being a black, and that too, a woman. This insecure feeling of the whites goes unnoticed or unrealized by the blacks, as they are always made to feel inferior.

This inferior feeling is ingrained within the blacks so much that they don't even realize their victimization by the whites. One can feel a sense of hopelessness with Wiletta Mayer's pleadings often made to the white director. The inconclusive nature of the drama's conclusion is yet another point of concern, which indirectly highlights the dejection and resignation of Wiletta, and her prayer indicates she surrenders everything into the hands of destiny. This adds to the glorification of her sacrifice and establishes the power of the whites as decision-makers for the blacks. This type of decision-making allows white men to gain control over blacks, especially black women. The social structure of the 1950s and 1960s plays a crucial role in this regard. Western feminism was at its peak during this period. Men in general both white and black were concerned about in general (in general) becoming more authoritarian and aggressive. This could also be viewed in the overall conflict of the sex roles that was prevalent in American society. This tension is heightened within Al Manners as he was clashing with a black woman artist. Toni Morrison in the essay "Playing in the Dark" argues that the "Africanist Character" has been used as "Surrogate and enabler", "the vehicle by which the American self knows itself as not enslaved, but free...not helpless, but licensed and powerful" (qtd. in Homans 74). The dominance of Al Manners over black artists, especially Wiletta, is used to prove his power as a white director in the rehearsals.

This show of dominance is meekly accepted by Wiletta, as her attempt to resist the script that deals with lynching goes in vain. The way she resists is highly emotional, trying to articulate for the oppressed. The portrayal of the victimhood of those who try to resist is argued as being romanticized or idealized. The various scenes in the play are textually analysed to show the different layers of the power struggle between the oppressor and the oppressed. Childress portraying the power struggle in the theatre shows that no space is spared from social control by the whites. *Florence and Trouble in Mind* by Alice Childress can be considered twin plays dealing with a black woman artist's struggle to survive in white-dominated American theatre as a professional. Both the plays touch upon the racial issue as a core theme. Gender issues are intently touched upon, but it is argued in this chapter that Childress aims to give a romanticized portrayal of her women characters challenging racial oppression, most of the time pitched against white men/women. African American women indeed resist racial oppression. Still, their struggle takes place in a melodramatic pattern. In the process, the gender discrimination and consciousness-raising of the black woman's 'self' receive lesser attention as a result, enshrining the 'self' of the black woman in a 'passive' manner.

Drama critics consider the twin plays as continuous and thematically unified. Sue-Ellen Case asserts, "In the two plays, *Florence and Trouble in Mind*, Alice Childress dramatizes the oppression the black actor endures within her profession" (qtd. in Case 101). In this play, a middle-aged black artist named Wileta Mayer, the protagonist, is like Mama Whitney in *Florence*. She rejects racial stereotypes. Black Feminist critic Brown Guillory asserts that both the plays challenge "Racial stereotyping both, in and outside of the theatre, the presumptuousness and insensitivity of white liberals, and black's struggle for equality" (qtd. in Brown-Guillory 58). Both works were written when Childress was a vigorous member, playwright, artist, director and lobbyist for equal rights/status for the American Negro theatre. As an actress/ activist, she investigated many issues: the problems linked to gender, race and the financial position of the black artist. Childress realizes the theatre as a specialized space for voicing oppression.

Childress mentioned William Shakespeare as her favorite playwright and followed in his footsteps by adopting the play-within-a-play technique. The eminent drama historian Richard Hornby demonstrates that: "As does Shakespeare 'The Mousetrap' in *Hamlet*, Childress uses the 'inset' type of play within a play, one in which the performance is set apart from the main action with the cast of the primary play recognizing the existence of a secondary play" (qtd. in Hornby 33). To express the marginalization of women, specifically the black women, she employs metadrama in *Trouble in Mind*. Richard Hornby proclaims metadrama as "drama about drama", suggesting that it occurs whenever the subject of a play turns out to be, in some sense, drama itself" (31). According to Hornby, "there are five types of metadrama: the ceremony within the play, role playing within the play, liturgy and real- reference, and the play within the play, the latter of which appears in *Trouble in Mind* serves as the controlling symbol" (32). The dramatist has a special talent to make a winning metadrama. Childress depicted the way black woman was treated in the white- and Black-male-dominated community. The play within the play was used as a device revealing the fact, and it was expressive of its society's hopelessness about life. *Trouble in Mind* presents a group of white and black artists practicing an anti-lynching drama, "Chaos in Belleville", in a Broadway theatre. Thus, the play within the play subsists as a sign of challenging racial discrimination in America. Childress felt it was inevitable to create a consciousness about the level of racism, sexism, and poverty in America for her viewers. "This play within the play represents the African Americans as the stepchildren of American society", according to critic Stephen Minot (qtd. in Minot 307).

In using the meta-drama, Childress depicts how the black women endure in a racist and sexist American community. It was the first play to be presented Off-Broadway. It ran ninety- one performances, and Childress was invited to perform the play on Broadway. *Trouble in Mind* was an award-winning play and was reviewed successfully by critics and audiences. Still, the production was plagued with problems, including a clash between the original director and cast that prompted Childress to take his place. This is ironic, considering *Trouble in Mind* is about the troubled production of a fictional, anti- lynching Broadway play, "Chaos in Belleville".

Because of the authoritarian stance which the whites had over American theatre, and as a Black woman, Childress herself was marginalized by the white-dominated theatre community. The setting of the play was a Broadway theatre in New York City in 1957. It illustrates a group of white and black performers practicing an anti-lynching drama, "Chaos in Belleville", written by a white writer. In "Chaos in Belleville", an enslaved Black person, Job, faces death for exercising his right to vote. He was arrested and, on his way to prison, was shot to death. The judiciary blames the white community for his death, as lynching is an inhuman offence. Political

marginalization of the blacks by the white administration, denying equal access to the political power structure by enforcing a law denying voting rights, is condemned through the play. It leads to the subordination of blacks and authority to the politically dominant white community. Subsequently, when Blacks fought for their rights, men were given their voting rights but not women. This oppression within their own community was never highlighted vociferously in the first phase of challenging racial discrimination.

Wiletta Mayer, a middle-aged, good-looking artist, emerges on the stage; Henry, an elderly black doorman, questions her, "You singin' in this new show?" (TM 50). It shows that, like Mrs. Carter, the white woman in Florence, Henry too believes that the black women can only sing in the play and are not fit for performance. Wiletta, the middle-aged artist, is quite hesitant to tell her age because they are dependent on the theatre industry. Drama critic Kathy A. Perkins, in the Introduction to the drama, states that Childress herself did not express her age: "One reason I don't mention age, I have tried with everything I have within me to rebel against some things in society...I think age is used against women in particular. It is being used now against men more so than it used to be, but women in particular, and to be black in this society, and to be a woman in this society, you will find too much of society pitched against you, you know, pitted against you" (xii). Kathy A. Perkins says, "I believe that Childress had commercial reasons for wishing to hide certain aspects of her life, particularly her age: many producers preferred to promote "young women" playwrights. Childress, close to forty, when *Trouble in Mind* captured the attention of several high-profile New York City theatrical producers, no doubt wished to appear younger-particularly since her closest competitor was the twenty-nine-year-old author of *A Raisin in the Sun*, Lorraine Hansberry" (xxiii-xxiv).

It is reprised that gender and age do matter for women everywhere. When Henry subsists, John Nevins, a young Negro enters; he endeavors to seem self-confident, but he was a debutant in the theatre. He was finding it difficult to manage his enthusiasm. When he talks with Wiletta about theatre-art, he proclaims, "theatre is the grandest place in the world" (TM 52). He overstates that he needs to accomplish high status in his artistic career. When Wiletta says that she too is equally ambitious, he believes, "Feeling slightly superior because he thinks he knows more about the craft than Wiletta" (ibid.). John marginalizes Wiletta for being a senior black woman artist. His subconscious reflects that women never know more about the theatrical art than men.

As Wiletta Mayer has performed on the stage for nearly twenty years, she considers John Nevins, a novice to theatre who is clueless about the role of Uncle Tom, whom he must play, with theatre directors. "It is Tommish...but they do it more than we do. They call it bein'a "yes, ma'am. "You neither do it and stay or don't do it and get out. I can let you in one thing that school never heard of... 'cause I know what's out here and they don't" (TM 54). When John was young, he had to agree to the stereotypical characters that would be assigned by the directors. Like Uncle Tom, referring to a black man who is excessively subservient, especially in the theatre industry, and only such artists can survive. The whites are biased and intolerant towards black artists trained in drama schools. Their talent and professional skills go unrecognized.

Childress lived in a community where Blacks are racially discriminated against. She proclaims in *A Candle in a Gale Wind*, "We are the only racial group within the United States all over forbidden by the law to read and write. The law also forbade any white person to teach us to read... the native American citizens, and we are legally



forbidden to enter libraries, concert halls, theatres, and public schools" (13). The abominable practice extended even to places where people drank water and also used transport. This kind of inimical treatment also prejudiced her work of art. Wiletta also reflects the same view and asks John to be assertive; otherwise, he will be least paid with no respect. Her most significant advice was that he should always be happy because, "...White folks can't stand unhappy Negroes...so laugh, laugh when it ain't funny at all..." (TM 53).

When somebody questions John's idea about the drama, Wiletta said: "...Don't tell him, he don't mean it...just say you're crazy about it...butter him up" (TM 54). Like sister Margaret in James Baldwin's *The Amen Corner* (written in 1955, produced 1965), Wiletta advises John to be practical while at the same time protecting him from the bloody consequences of trying to be a man in this society (524). She advises John to adapt himself to the white morons to safeguard the black race. Wiletta replicates the idea from the book *"In Search of Our Mother's Garden"*, where Alice Walker's Womanism affirms in the definition of woman that "it is committed to survival and wholeness of entire people male and female" (xi-xii). Unlike feminism, Walker's womanism needs the endurance of the whole black race. It did not consider men with hatred. Childress also insists on the endurance of the whole black race. This focus on sustenance makes the 'self' of a black woman very passive and her own consciousness compliant and submissive. Sometimes black women themselves feel they are subhuman.

Although Wiletta has accomplished a foremost place in theatre as a veteran performer, she never got her due respect owing to racism and sexism in the theatre. But the other way round, Childress builds the script around the trouble that arises out of portraying false impressions about the blacks, which Wiletta resists during rehearsals and challenges the white director. Childress paves the way for a theatre that appreciates and celebrates Black aesthetics to liberate black lives from being viewed from a white man's perspective. Wiletta offers her life and soul to the theatre: she considers theatre not as a means of capital, but a cultural platform. Even within the theatre, a separate green room is created for the black artists who lack all facilities. Alice Childress and other black women playwrights during that period depicted the humiliation and exploitation which they faced despite their enormous talents. This collective feeling is reflected through the individual character of Wiletta, who is very much aware of the race/ gender issue that plagues American society. She was conscious of the oppressive practices the white liberals spewed at black women, and she resisted the double standards of white ideology. Being conscious of the battles of the blacks in the theatre industry, Wiletta influences John to take up a career in other fields like medicine or judicial practice instead of being a performer. She knew that theatre was a mere 'show business' and it was very difficult to be a winning black artist.

Along with John, there was another thirty-five-year-old artist, Millie Davis, gorgeously dressed in a mink coat and pastel wool dress. She was tired of the stereotypical role of Aunt Jemima, which she had been performing for a long time. Millie laments, "All I did was shout 'Lord, have mercy!' for almost two hours every night" (TM 57). Aunt Jemima is a caricature of black women promoted as a racial stereotype, namely the "mammy" character. These clichéd roles as a black woman artist posed challenges to Wiletta in a white male-dominated theatre. She must exist amid both black men like Sheldon and John, and white men like Al Manners, Eddie Fenton and Bill O' Wra. She was marginalized by both the whites as well as the black male artists. Childress depicts how Wiletta and the other black performers are of the working class who have no authority over the dramatic creations. Most of them belong to low-

income families, and they consider theatre performance as a profession. Even while rehearsing, they are continuously anxious about their life and existence. They do not put themselves out of a job, and so they ignore humiliation and exploitation.

It is true that Childress highlighted the socio-economic aspect, and in fact, she fought for equal wages for black and white artists. The socio-political and economic conditions are so grave that they need financial support for their sustenance. Therefore, Millie and Wiletta express their distaste for portraying dehumanizing characters, but to no avail. Millie says that her last job was so uncomfortable that she did not ask her relatives to witness the play. They are weary of continuously wearing bandannas and baggy dresses and being named after flowers and jewels, which are signs of fragility. Both are used for decoration, and it reflects the thought of white patriarchy, which considers Black women as a commodity. It signifies that the white patriarchy marginalizes the black women by objectifying them. Both Millie and Wilhetta articulate their stress playing these characters, yet they maintain their belief in the divisions because these are the resources available to them.

Al Manners, the white director, enters with Eddie Fenton, the white stage manager. He was a very accomplished and bold man pretending to be generous. He was in his early forties and a well-trained product of Hollywood. He was nervous about the script he had in his hand. This was his first Broadway performance, and he expected great success. Wiletta and Al Manners are familiar with each other, and he calls her "sweetheart".

Meanwhile, Judy Sears, a young white actress fresh out of college, enters for rehearsal. Wiletta, to motivate her, asserts, "You're as cute as a new penny" (TM 57). Again, Walker's womanish traits reflect her as "A woman who loves other women, sexually and /or non-sexually" (Walker A 19). Wiletta likes Judy irrespective of race. Al Manners wears expensive trousers, a leather jacket and a rounded hat. He has a matter-of-fact attitude towards the black women. He was conscious about the race issue and knew the condition of the oppressed black community. But instead of altering the prejudices of the whites about the blacks, he endorsed them through the script. Therefore, he says his black casts have excellent theatrical talents; he did not like them presenting any ideas about the script. The artists begin rehearsing the play "Chaos in Belleville". According to Al Manners, "Chaos means er...ah, confusion. " "Chaos in Belleville" (TM 62). His technique of rehearsing was very bizarre because he started from the middle of the script. He scolds for not following his information. He never spares Wiletta for not acting perfectly.

Childress also speaks about the sexist approach of Al Manners. Judy sears, performs the role of a timid girl dominated by a southern plantation owner father in "Chaos in Belleville". Al Manners shows the worst of the patriarchal white American when Judy boasts that she was a graduate of the Yale Drama Course. He felt insecure about her credentials and his own inappropriateness, and to retaliate, he ridicules Judy in a manner that edges on sexism; he shouts at her, "Yale, please!" and Judy feels abused and forgets her stage position. The ill-tempered Al Manners descends upon her like a condor and grabs her by the shoulders and guides her to the numerous positions of the stage. He never treated male artists this way. Childress depicted the blatant sexism ubiquitous on and off the American stage during the fifties.

At the opening of the first practice, Al Manners throws a piece of paper on the floor and asks Wiletta to pick it up. His racial discrimination is exposed when he tells "...A trashy stage is most distracting. [JUDY starts to pick up the paper. Hold your position! Wiletta, pick up the paper. John and Sheldon start for the paper] I asked

Wiletta! Catching Wiletta's eye] Well! (TM 64-65). Wiletta was surprised and never responded quickly. When Sheldon and John start gathering papers, he maintains Wiletta to gather them. Wiletta, with an immediate flare of temper, reacted, "Well hell! I ain't the damn janitor! [Trying to check her temper] I...well, I...sucks...I...damn" (TM 65). Her reaction to Al Manners portrays how double consciousness of submissiveness and resistance becomes symbolic of her community. In *The Souls of Black Folk*

W.E.B. Du Bois represents double consciousness as "the sense of always looking at oneself through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (9). The immediate rage of being humiliated is followed by submission due to measuring her soul by the tape of the world. Du Bois uses language to portray the contradictions between how the black subject sees herself and how she recognizes she was being seen. She reacts differently first by her "quick flare of temper" and second by the apologetic stammering. Both responses emphasize the gap between identity and identification. Al Manner's identification of Wiletta as a black artist conditions him to subordinate her and maintains his status as a director. Amidst the presence of all black and white artists, he affronts the oldest black woman, Wiletta.

Al Manners belongs to the dominant group, while Wiletta belongs to the subordinate division. He visualizes her as a servant or a helper; culturally, the job of the black woman is always associated/caricatured. But it was a surprise for him that Wiletta responded aggressively. To hide the racial discrimination, he pacifies her, "...Honey, I love you, believe me" (TM 65). He attempts to compromise by posturing to be humorous/funny. "Wiletta tries to laugh along with them, but from this point she observes Manners with a sharp eye, always cautious on the lookout" (ibid.). Al Manners had touched upon her emotions and had disturbed the black woman in her, and she is vigilant to resist such debasement. The practice of "Chaos in Belleville" continues. A scene where Judy, the white owner's daughter, must arrange for a dance; she asks permission from her father to dance, and she utters the dialogue, "Papa, let the darkies have their fun" (TM 67). Judy was quite reluctant to use the words "darkies". John too disagreed, but they accept it as a slice of life. Even during real conversation, Wiletta repeats the line from the play, "Lord have mercy, don't ask me' cause I don't know" (ibid.). This is almost like a refrain spoken by the stereotyped Ruby, the character she was playing. Childress illustrates the communal degradation of blacks in the white community through such repetitions. The word "nigger" is also used in the play. This derogatory term also reflects slavery and exploitation. Eddie says, "All right! Before you know it, them niggers will be ruinnin'me!" (TM 68). When everyone opposed using the word, Al Manners did not stop using the word, least respecting their emotions. He proclaims that the script cannot do away with the term.

As the rehearsal moves up to the scene of lynching Job [John], Wiletta performs the character of Job's mother, Ruby. She sang a song to evoke pathos in that scene. She sang a sad song recollected from her childhood. "Wiletta: Come and go with me to that land where I'm bound...No confusion in that land, where I'm bound..." (TM 74). The song moves everybody's heart. Wiletta, performing the character of a black mother, feels crushed with oppressed emotions. Al Manners tries to decode her emotions by pretending to praise her. "I thought that's what you wanted!" (TM 75) The white man's authority to think for others and establish it. When Wiletta shows reluctance, he tells her to speak out, as she is not in a vacuum. When John questions Wiletta about her inspirations, Al Manners stops him with a gesture. These incidents show how the white man wanted to control the thought process of the blacks even during rehearsals. Al Manners specifically wanted to choose what the black woman should think. He needs

to express Wiletta's matter-of-factness. But Wiletta was brimming with emotions. As a mother, she was feeling very sad to send her son to death. She answers, "...it's so sad that folks can't vote..." (TM 75). During the speech between Wiletta and Al Manners, her internal grief about blacks are expressed. She felt sad that colored people must fight everywhere; Wiletta spoke of the Little Rock event wherein stones were pelted at innocent children for championing the cause of quality education, as well as the Montgomery, Alabama, bus boycott, the segregated housing scheme and lynching. At last, she conveyed helplessness when she said, "It's the man's theater, the man's money, so what you gonna do? (TM 76). Though she knows and needs to challenge the racial exploitation on the stage, she can never do so. The theatre business was dominated by white males; they never permit her to do so. They always need to bind her in stereotypes. These stereotypes lead to romanticizing suffering, admitting the exploitation. Al Manners recognizes her inner strength and responds, "If you dare!" You will undo us!" (TM 76). He retires to the dressing room with Judy in a state of terrible temper. Wiletta, being a black woman, was not permitted by Al Manners to challenge racial discrimination even in the script, and she is not allowed to express the emotional bondage with her race. Sheldon, the black co-artist, convinces her to accept 'reality', but Wiletta rigidly holds on to her opinion.

After the departure of Al Manners, Millie and Sheldon were seen advising John not to get too close to Judy and be too friendly with her. They also expected something horrible to happen. Sheldon also advises John that though he was friendly with them, he never had faith in white people. He also advises him that white people never wanted to display friendship with colored people. They considered the blacks as troublemakers and sharper than a serpent's tooth. His opinion about the black women is also misogynistic. Sheldon says "Colored women wake up in the mornin' with their fists ball up...ready to fight" (TM 77). He adds that white people help each other, but blacks struggle with each other. Sheldon revealed his annoyance about the marginalized status of black artists in the following words: paradoxically, Sheldon: I hope the wine blows her way. They gonna kick us until we all out in the street...unemployed...get all the air you want then. Sometimes I take low, yes, gotta take low; Mama says somethin' to me, I say... "Yes, sure, certainly". You'n' me know how to do. That ain't tommin', that's common sense. You and me...we don't mind takin' low because we tryin' to accomplish somethin'... (TM 78)

Wiletta violently responds to this, "Wiletta, I mind...I do mind...I mind...I mind..." (TM 78). Sheldon was quite conscious of the subordinate status given by the whites to them. He understands that they must agree with them; though they do not accept the whites, their position is vulnerable. Though he was performing the stereotypical character of Uncle Tom, he didn't mind. He told Wiletta that they agreed to whatever the whites do with them, but Wiletta is firm in opposing the script. In a way, Sheldon oppresses her for being a black woman. He observes that though she wanted to rebel, she must keep the peace to get money for their existence. This existential anxiety is expressed in her dialogue to Henry the doorman, "Wiletta: Where the hell do I come in? Every damn body position pushin' me off the race of the earth! I want to be an actress...hell, I'm gonna be one, you hear me?" (TM 80). This exhibition of an indefensible situation renders her character weak and idealizes her suffering.

Wiletta's consciousness about her black dignity and self-esteem is a quagmire of racism and sexism since she entered the field. She repeatedly told Henry that everybody attempted to pull her out of this field. She had always been pushed back by both the dominant white and black patriarchy. The first act ends with her consciousness of white monopoly over theatre and with her choice to oppose it. As she pounds the

table to highlight her words, the act concludes with the music of a woman blues singer. This music is linked with Wiletta's lone fight and those of other black women, foreboding the need for solidarity.

The second act opens with the entry of O Wary, the white artist, playing Renard. Though a strong character in the play, he was pessimistic in his real life. He rehearsed the character under the direction of Al Manners. He was reprimanded by Al Manners for not joining the lunch with black artists. Al Manners pretended to be a liberal and accused Bill's approach of being intentional. At this point, Wiletta enters; she was somewhat tired and worn out. She had read the script cautiously and was determined to tell Al Manners that the third act never validates the first. Al Manners sensed the rationale behind this argument. But his intellectual superiority, that black women are never talented enough to think properly, made him put Wiletta in a docile role. He ignores her to show his tolerant poise and persuades Wiletta, "Darling, don't think. You're great until you start thinking. I don't expect you to..." (TM 85)

Manners did not appreciate Wiletta realizing her responsibility. He considers her a challenge to his white male supremacy. Now that Wiletta, as a black woman, has challenged Al, Manners feels insecure. The constant waving of his hand to silence his cast denotes the marginalization of blacks. He never wanted to listen to remarks about blacks, and especially from a black woman, about how black roles must be depicted. His gesture reveals the silencing and neglecting of the blacks in America. Many times, he waves his hand to stop Sheldon and John from speaking. Likewise, he disrupts Wiletta often with gestures to silence her or rather to discipline her. Al Manners relegates black artists to characters, even in the play they rehearse. Elizabeth Brown-Guillory claims that, "Another concern of Childress's is the invalidation of black as a person. She seems especially critical of whites who either ignore the presence of black people (i.e., talk as if a black person is not in the room), or who ignore or dismiss comments made by blacks" (Brown-Guillory 61). In none of the scenes of "Chaos in Belleville" does a white liberal depict her racism by saying that the black woman need not be left alone in the face of the lynching mob. Sheldon interrupts the rehearsal and tells Al Manners that Ruby was not alone, and two black maids are with her in the room. It shows that the white woman was not ready to leave the black woman alone with other blacks without the guard of white men. Childress depicts that whites did not believe black as people or equals, and their very presence to accompany Ruby is disregarded. When Wiletta, Sheldon, Millie and Judy appear, Henry and John follow them; once again, the rehearsal starts and shifts from the discussion into a scene in the play, "Chaos in Belleville" Wiletta was too engaged in the play that she never observed the little talks around her.

Ruby (Wiletta) was ironing, Petunia (Millie) was looking out the window, and Sam (Sheldon) was whittling a stick. Carie (Judy) was seen crying, as they were all waiting for Job (John). They were eagerly awaiting information about him. They needed to know whether the lynchers had caught up with him or not. Job appears after evading the mob. He asks them to support him in leaving the town. Ruby, his mother, asks him to admit his crime of voting. But Job says, "I wasn't even votin' for a black man, votin' for somebody whites same as they" (TM 93). The white girl Carrie [Judy] tells Job that her father will put him in county jail to keep him secure. Ruby begs Carrie's father [Bill] to protect her son, who unconsciously committed the crime of voting. Job follows Renard blindly into the night, and Ruby comes back singing a spiritual song. "Wiletta: Keep me from sinkin' down... O, Lord, O, my Lord... Keep me from sinkin' down..." (TM 95). The black artists are performing subservient, stereotypical characters.



Even their names in the plays are stereotypical. Millie tells about having played the roles with names of all the flowers in the garden, including Gardenia, Magnolia, Chrysanthemum. She also reminds Wileta that she has performed all the jewel-named roles, including Crystal, Pearl, and Opal. The end of the play exposed the so-called liberal outlook and hypocrisy of the whites. Al Manners was in deep trouble because of the subject matter of the white-authored play, about the blacks fighting for political and financial equality. The exposure of his own hidden racial prejudice takes place, which Wileta identifies, but she chose to bear it. He appreciated John, Millie and other black artists who were credulous and needed to teach Wileta a lesson. Under the guise of supporting Wileta with her caricaturing of Black Mama (Ruby), Al Manners constantly attacks Wileta, who opposes him. When Wileta, the mother in "Chaos in Belleville", was obliged to give her son into the hands of the lynching mob, she objected to this scene in the play. When Al Manners portrays the scene, he says "...Renard drives him toward jail, deputies stop them on the way, someone shoots and kills Job as he tries to escape, afterward they find out he was innocent, Renard makes everyone feel like a dog...they realize they were wrong and so forth." (TM 95-96)

Wileta answers that it is incorrect and she needs to tell something, but to ascertain the white patriarchal dominance, he stops her from telling, "Darling, that's my department, will you listen? Wileta: "You don't ever listen to me. You hear the others but not me. And it's cause' of the school, 'cause they know 'bout justifying' and the antagonist...I never studied that, so you don't want to hear me, that's all right" (ibid). Wileta finds out that Al Manners paid attention to other male characters but not Wileta. Her lack of education amidst the black women was also the reason for being subordinated. Childress dramatizes that education has little to do with parental instinct and that poor blacks are just as dignified and as self-respecting as anyone else. Childress' belief in the nobility of people with low incomes and in struggling is seen in her treatment of Wileta, who has no formal training but who exhibits a great deal of common sense, integrity and grace, especially in her insistence that the poor blacks in "Chaos in Belleville" are misrepresented. (Brown-Guillory 60)

To portray a poor black woman artist underestimated during theatrical rehearsal is yet another form of romanticizing the woman character. Manners attempts to influence her, telling "Wileta, dear, I'm sorry if I've complicated things. I'll make it as clear as I can. You are pretending to act; I can see through your pretense. I want truth. What is truth? Truth is whatever you can bring yourself to believe, that is all. You must have integrity about your work... a sense of...well" (TM 97). It denotes that he needs to control her intellect. Though she has genuine emotions about her race and her people, Al Manners never accepted it. He needs to colonize her mind; when she opposes, she is rebuked. It is typically the colonizer's burden to civilize her.

Even John took sides with Al Manners' perspective, and he believed that he could control Wileta and told her that, "Look, think of the intellectual level here...they're underprivileged, uneducated" (TM 97). Now he also marginalizes Wileta by saying that she can never speak sensibly (referring to Ruby). John himself accepts that the black people portrayed in the play are impoverished and ignorant. Being a black man, he never realized his community's potential. Wileta went on protesting, "I don't see why the boy couldn't get away it's the killin' that...something's wrong" (TM 97). When Al Manners says that we are dealing with simple, backward people, they are mere human beings. Wileta questions him about whether he considers blacks as human beings; then she is also a human being. Then why is he so inconsiderate? Again, Al Manners hypocritically answers that, "I will not listen! It does not matter to me that they're Negroes. Black, white, green, or purple, I maintain there is only one race...the

human race" (TM 98). This approach to universalize a specific abominable practice called 'racism' is yet another way of distracting from the crucial issue. Wiletta's pleading tone reiterates her magnification of the suffering. To drive the audience to a cathartic high, Al Manners said that they are doing just a lynching play, and they have not really observed it. But Sheldon says he has experienced this. He depicts the terrible scene of lynching, where he remembers, "The screamin' comin' closer...and the screamin' was laughin'...Horse just pullin' along...and then I saw it!

Chained to the back of the wagon, draggin' and bumpin' along...The arms of it stretched out... A burnt, naked thing that was a man" (TM 100). Sheldon went on to say that he shouted, but no noise came out. Later, he finds out that the burnt man was Mr. Morris. He was kind and loving to the black society, and he spoke frankly to the whites. To this description, Al Manners answers that when he listens to such barbaric acts, he feels wretched and guilty. This reaction gives the impression that Al Manners is a liberal thinker. But still, he maintains the same script and asks them to break for lunch. Wiletta continuously, but calmly, questions him: it could be good if the mother were to say, "Run for it, Job! ... and they catch him like that... he's dead anyway, see" (TM 101). Al Manners becomes intolerable; he warns her that she was just an artist and Mr. Bronson, a white writer, had written the script, and she must perform whatever he wrote. This demonstrates that blacks, and particularly black women, do not have any right to question the play from their own perspective. In fact, Wiletta, who advises John to remain 'uncle tommish' to please the director, now tells John that the director is at fault. This reversal of Wiletta's position is seen as a battle against racism. Critic Rosemary Curb asserts, "Wiletta drops her mask of 'Tommish' hypocrisy" (58).

She trembles when Al Manners rejects the idea of altering the script. The scene concludes with Wiletta's explosion on the uselessness of 'giving up'. The heated discussion between Wiletta and Al Manners was proof that whites would never turn away from their racial prejudice. She questions herself about how a mother could give up her son to death, whom she knows is innocent. The two words 'give up' roused her. She identifies that as a black woman, she has given up many things, including her pleasure, dignity, identity and self-respect. She must give up her emotions, dreams and ambitions. She cannot accept the idea that a mother has sent her son to death and identifies her character as a black mother in a white-dominant, patriarchal, racist community.

She has been mortified by Al Manners as an artist intruding into the script, as the link between the real person and the character blurs. This portrayal by Childress is more focused on the challenging of racial discrimination than the emerging 'self' of Wiletta as a black woman. The emotional portrayal of the character is even more highlighted to show the insensitive nature of the whites. This, in turn, romanticizes her character as the "Black mammy". "Aunt Jemima" is gearing up for yet another sacrifice. Here, as a black actor, she cannot question the script, and with guilt she must perform the role of a mother. She insists that she will 'disrupt' reacting, "You been askin' me what I think and where things come from and how come I thought it and all, that...I'm his mother, and I'm sendin' him to his death. This is a lie...Everything people do is counta their mother..." (TM 106). The Romanticizing of Wiletta's character is rooted in this "emotional" lie that a mother sends her son to death, which was intolerable and unpardonable. Further, she realizes the stereotyping of blacks as villains and the whites as virtuous. She says, "The writer wants the damn white man to be the hero- and I'm the villain" (TM 106). The stereotyped depiction of black women as dedicated maids to white families, as matriarchs or as dumb, untalented people is what Al Manners expects of Wiletta as an artist. The black as individuals and artists are not permitted to exploit

their creative human potentialities. Wiletta and all other black artists are not supposed to project their strength in an industry that is dominated by whites.

The stereotypical picture of Sapphire presented the black woman as evil, deceitful, bitchy, stubborn and hateful. Here, too, Bronson and Al Manners cannot deviate from the stereotypes. The refusal to alter the conclusion shows that Al Manners had established his racial supremacy. He typically wanted to carry the colonizer's burden of 'civilising the native'. To prove his point, he says that even Jesus Christ was killed; Wiletta rapidly retorted that it was his friend and not his mother who betrayed him. Manners again disgraced her by raising a question: does she know more than the writer? She ferociously blamed him, saying that he was an intolerant man, a bigoted racist. Manners was now caught off-guard, and in a long speech he validated his struggle to get respect in the theatre. He also gave her the bitter information that "The American public is not ready to see you the way you want to be seen because, one, they don't believe it, two, they don't want to believe it, and three, they're convinced they're superior" (TM 109).

Al Manners is shown by Childress in the speech as more complex than a one-dimensional racist when Wiletta poses him a very tender question: whether he will send his son to be assassinated. His charade, his delusion of being equal, the sham of being a winner of the human cause- everything seems to be shattered to pieces. His 'liberal' mask is pulled off when he comments ", Manners: 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, don't compare him with my son, they've got nothing in common...not a goddamn thing!" (TM 109) This declaration illustrates the hypocrisy of his liberal attitude. He felt embarrassed when his true racial self-got exposed. He exits the stage as he was unable to face the black artist. John felt emotionally inferior, demeaned, and disgraced. Wiletta was firm in her stand. She does not even apologize for her behavior with Al Manners. On the contrary, she proclaims, "Wiletta: I've always wanted to be somethin' real grand...in the theatre ...to stand up here and do anythin'I want ..." (TM 114).

The black artists never agreed upon Al Manner's final statement. Owing to their financial condition, they must bear with Al Manner's racist approach. They attempt to convince Wiletta, but she is not willing to cooperate. Eddie's dialogue at the end of the play: "Divine and conquer...that's the way they get the upper hand" (TM 113). Childress does a consciousness-raising to all blacks they must fight together or continue to be victimized together. She never ends the play as if it specifies an acceptance of defeat. Everybody leaves the stage except Wiletta and Henry. Wiletta felt happy to have spoken frankly. At the same time, one is not sure how far her opinions will be considered or whether she will be shown the door. She is seen singing from the Bible. She represents all black women and artists in particular who would end up enacting clichéd roles. The woman protagonist of Childress battles against all odds as critic Rosemary Curb proclaims, "Though essentially solitary struggles. Childress strong women forge through barriers not only of race and sex, but also education and age, which threaten to keep them poor and powerless to a recognition of their worth" (54). Though Childress makes her protagonist rebel, it is basically against racial discrimination. There are indeed instances that show how both the white director and black male artists repress black woman artists. This illustrates their doubly marginalized condition. But the opposition shown by Wiletta is made to appear passive, as the play is open-ended. Nobody knows how her resistance will be perceived by the white director. He too seems to be quite stubborn in imposing his authority professionally and racially. More so, Childress creates an awareness among black woman artists to avoid clichéd roles, but

the process in which Wilhetta fights back is romanticized by Childress. Also, the recital from the Bible towards the end seems to suggest what the white woman comments about black woman artists who can perform the best as singers. Also, Psalm 133, "How good and pleasant it is when god's people live together in unity," is again suggestive of an idealistic /utopian society. Therefore, it is argued in this chapter that Childress's approach towards the black woman artist is more focused on challenging racial discrimination and ending the abominable practice. It is only partially focused on retrieving black womanhood in the black women's 'self'. The stage is set for universalising the issue with a humanist approach through the character of Wiletta. Her role in the play "Chaos at Belleville" is undoubtedly stereotypical. Still, the resistance she shows to alter the script is a romanticized version of 'Aunt Jemima' trying to oppose, but most of the time found pleading and suffering humiliation. It is not with confidence and determination that she opposes; she could have even walked out of the play, but the resistance shown by her doesn't contribute to establishing her 'self'. Towards the end, she is seen praying to God, who indirectly ascertains that she leaves it in the hands of destiny. Survival becomes the focus, and therefore racism becomes the crux of the play, and the race/gender discourse is yet to emerge.

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