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Is Theatre a Means to Empower Black Women? A Chronotopical Study in the Light of Selected Plays of Alice Childress

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Abstract:

Alice Childress, an African American playwright who played a pivotal role in "Black Theatre", espoused the cause of black people in America through her famous plays like *Florence, Gold Through Tress, The Wedding Band*, etc. In this paper, Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of time and space is used to analyse the hapless conditions of the black people along with the concept of heteroglossia.

Keywords: Alice Childress, miscegenation law, historicity, dramatic denouement, Jim Crow laws and pathos.

African American Plays

African American Women continue to play a myriad of roles from their entry as slaves through middle passage in America. The historical oppression and the power of struggle over centuries have been exposed by black writers, both male and female, yet with a difference. From exposing to assimilating and thereby empowering, these African American writers have utilised, varied genres, of which the most awakening happens to be of drama. They used theatre as the most powerful weapon to expose the oppression of these hapless people.

Black writing in America is directly related to American theatre. In *Black Theater USA - Forty Plays by Black Americans 1847-1974*, James Hatch and Ted Shine (The Free Press, 1974) depict that "Africans have vibrant tradition of celebrated life and death in theater rituals".

By exploring various subject matters like lynching, poverty, disenfranchised war heroes, and Church politics, early black woman playwrights earned a niche in Twentieth century.

Alice Childress

Alice Childress followed what was given by her predecessors. She occupied a pivotal role in Black Theatre from the 1950s to 1980s. In *Afro-American Poetry and Drama 1760-*

1975, Genevieve Fabre comments that ‘the 1950s saw the meteoric rise in theatre activity due to Alice Childress *Florence* (1949)’. Alice portrays the characters assertive and unyielding to the demands of the whites.

Alice Childress, born in 1920 in South Carolina in the USA, grew up in Harlem in New York City, held several jobs. In 1941, she joined the American Negro Theatre in Harlem. Her background formed the basis for her heroines. In her essay ‘Knowing the Human Condition’, Childress acknowledges that her grandmother was a slave. Childress received a Harvard appointment as playwright, a Scholar to the Radcliffe Institute of Independent Study and she received the first Paul Robeson Award for Outstanding Contribution to the Performing Arts from the Black Filmmaker Hall of Fame. She died in 1994. Childress was a prolific playwright, actor, social activist, etc. She wrote fourteen plays to her credit of which *Florence* (1949) *Gold Through the Tress* (1952), *Wedding Band: A Love / Hate Story in Black and White* (1966), and *The World on a Hill* (1968) are famous.

Alice Childress proved a relentless fighter for black people, in particular, for black women. Her total commitment for the cause of black people is evident from her statement, ‘I will not keep quiet and I will not stop telling the truth’ (Qtd. in Brown - Guillory, p.28) . C.W.E. Bigsby, the noted dramatic critic, makes tribute to Childress: “Humanism is evident and her resistance to ruling political and cultural orthodoxies apparent” (p.333) in *A Critical Introduction to Twentieth Century American Drama*.

For the Cause of Black Women

The most hyped plays *Florence* (1949) and *Wedding Band: A Love / Hate Story in Black and White* (1966) testify the virulence and articulation of Childress for the cause of black women. These two plays exemplify vividly the Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of chronotope of time and space. We have the African American Chronotope in Childress’ plays which deal with the concepts of heteroglossia, dialogic imagination and openness of time and space by which the dramatist attempts to empower black women in all its possibilities.

Bakhtin’s Concept of Time - Space

The Russian thinker and literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin borrowed the concept of Time - Space from the Physicist Albert Einstein and used as chronotope for his literary analysis. In his article, “Forms of Time and of the Chronotope of the Novel in 1930”, Bakhtin defines, “We will give the name chronotope (literally time space) to the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationship that are artistically expressed in literature ... We are borrowing it for literary criticism as metaphor” (p. 84).

Bakhtin in his ‘Discourse in Novel’, states “Language of heteroglossia, like mirrors that face each other each reflecting its own way a piece, a tiny corner of the world, forces us to guess and grasp for a wider world behind, their mutually reflecting aspects that is broader, more multi-levelled, containing more and varied horizons than would be available to a single language or a single mirror” (p. 414). In Bakhtin’s view, time and space are intertwined. In Greek, ‘chronos’ means time and ‘topos’ means place. Time and space accommodate all

kinds of social activities, upheavals and changes that are brought out. This concept of chronotope is used to delineate the social fabric of the black society in America in the works of Alice Childress.

Bipolar Background for a Bipolar Confrontation

While the chronotope is a novelistic category of Bakhtin, similar temporal and spatial characteristics are found in drama. In dramatic literature, the theater in general and the stage in particular, may be considered as an artistic bipolar background for a bipolar confrontation. The memory of the theatrical acts relates mainly to a subjective and fragmented reality. It needs both spectators' memory as well as the characters' memories which play a major role. Just as any act of translation needs the translator's linguistic and cultural background, staging dramatic texts can be considered as inter-semiotic and inter-systemic negotiation between the two discursive acts. The stage becomes the place where the past turns into the present.

In the theatre the memory is the perfect architecture developed on three levels.

1. The memory of the past event
2. The memory of the imagined past and
3. The memory of the audience

All these levels of memory combine perfectly to give an artistic effect in African American literature, especially in the plays of Childress. Her plays reveal this memory depicted in the theatrical time and theatrical space.

Florence

Childress' play *Florence* resists stereotype roles performed by black women. Florence is a one-act play set in a Jim Crow railroad station in the Deep South, and features an encounter between a black woman and a white woman across a little fence separating them. Mama, a middle aged black woman on the colored side is going to the north to bring her daughter Florence back home and Mrs. Carter, a white woman on the other side tries to exhibit Mama that she is a liberal but gradually proves to be a staunch racist. The family in Florence is calm, composed with Mrs. Whitney as the head of the home in which she, her daughter Mary and the son of her second daughter Florence reside. Whitney urges her daughter Mary to go straight home to care for her son. She tells the white woman "We got a fine family, mam' (FL 118). Mama and Mary, the daughters of Mrs. Whitney who are oppressed in the south where the whites dominate, never allow their children to settle in the south. This consciousness dominates the mindsets of the black people. Though Mrs. Carter encourages the black people to fight for their rights, she is not genuine in her ideals. She tells Mama that her brother, a novelist, portrays black people fighting for their rights in his novel which received poor reviews. When Mama enquires about the reality, Mrs. Carter says, "It's profound, Real, ... You know. It's about your people. He suffers so his characters (L 115)". She informs her about a talented mulatto woman who committed suicide as she wanted to become a white. Her painful words are "Almost! Almost White, ... but I'm black! I'm a

Negro” (p. 116)’. Outraged by the white authors’ stereotyping of the blacks, Mama tells Mrs. Carter that it is a myth that black people kill themselves by yearning to be white. “That ain’t so! Not one bit it ain’t” (p. 116), affirms Mama.

Childress elaborates how Jim Crow Laws in the south segregate the blacks from the whites deliberately. The black should sit in the back in cars and buses, use separate toilets and rest-rooms, separate diners which all tarnish the morale of the black people. Handshaking between blacks and whites, eating together are all forbidden in the south. The symbols displayed in Jim Crow Railway Station illustrate enormously the racial problems that exist in the south. A low railing that divides the waiting room plays a physical and emotional barrier between the whites and the blacks. The title character ‘Florence’ left the south when her husband was lynched for voting. Mama and Marg want Florence to come back to the south because they know that her struggle against the whites would not succeed. Mama behaves violently when she comes to know of Mrs. Carter’s wish to keep Florence as her domestic help ‘Mrs. Carter can’t make her turn back” (FL 47). Florence’s firm ideology to get to New York to seek fortune against the dismal backdrop in the south shows the determination of the black people to come up in life.

Wedding Band: A Love / Hate Story in Black and White

In the play, *Wedding Band: A Love / Hate Story in Black and White* (1966), Childress unleashes her onslaught on racism. The play was set in the background of World War I, when miscegenation laws were in effect to torment the black people, especially the black women. Taken from Latin, ‘misc’ means to mix and ‘genus’ means race. Mixing of the black and the white race was banned and punishable in South Carolina. To add to the tragic denouement, was the terrible influenza fever that afflicted million people, spread by the carriers of war returnees from World War I.

Wedding Band depicts a black woman Julia in love with Herman a white man for 10 years. Their love was disapproved by Herman’s mother. The black women live in community supervised and patronised by a leading black woman Fenny who owns a large estate that she inherited from the whites for her protection of anti-miscegenation laws. There are other black woman characters Mattic, Lula, etc., who live together in the community receiving the same treatment from the whites. Though the play enacted in 1960, it brought out the woes suffered by the black women from the anti-racial laws during the WWI period.

The concepts of time and space that illustrate the concept of chronotope find expression in the dialogues. Julia’s lover Herman fell ill by influenza in her home. She was caught in a predicament. She could not transport him to hospital for fear of keeping a white man in her home and carrying the influenza virus around her community. Herman’s mother hesitates to take him out. When Herman’s mother still disapproves their love and marriage, Julia lashes at her, “Out, Out Out! ... And take the last ten years of life with you and ... when he gets better ... keep him home ... Killers, murderers ... kinsmen! (She dashes into the house and collects an armful of bedding) Clean ... clean the whiteness ... Outta

my house ... Clean everything ... even the memory ... I don't want any whiteness in my house. Stay out... and leave me to my blackself?" (W.B., p. 120)

It evokes pathos when Herman dies of influenza. The other black characters Mattie and Lula espouse the cause of the blacks and stand against the tyranny of the whites. Mattie tells Julia, "Rob him blind. Take it all. Let him froth at the mouth. ... (p. 91). Lula encourages Julia to end the relationship.

Childress portrays in the play the historical and social incidents that add a dramatic denouement. The anti-miscegenation laws that were in vogue and the influenza that rattled the USA in 1918, which got introduced in the USA by the returnees from WWI create a semblance of historicity. A sense of poignancy prevails, when Julia removes her wedding band and chain from around her neck presented by her lover Herman and presents these to her black women Mattie and Teeta, "You are my family. Be my family" (W.B., p. 132).

Gradual Shift from Subjugation towards Afro-Centric Feminist Epistemology

The literary output by Childress proves to be a gradual shift from subjugation towards embracing an Afro-centric feminist epistemology. This Afro-centric consciousness leads to an understanding of the significance of knowledge and politics of empowerment of black women.

The chronotopic trait of literary imagination gets exhibited remarkably in Alice's plays especially in *Florence* and *Trouble in Mind*. Its evocation of the concept of 'lived time' defies the conviction of human empathy. Along with the 'lived time', the abstract concept of time which creates an illusion that the past determines the present is also depicted. Alice shifts the audience to the historical past. The inter racial issues that existed in the 1918's are projected very vividly by Alice Childress in her *Wedding Band: A Love / Hate Story in Black and White*.

Chronotopic Palimpsest

Alice Childress through her plays has created a kind of chronotopic palimpsest. Just as the memory of the past relates to the subjective and fragmented reality, the spectators from a state of fragmented psyche gradually shift themselves towards the concluding part into a transformed and an awakened psyche. The transformation of idealism into pragmatism as a result of lived experience leads the characters profess a life acceptable to their existentialism. The transformation of Lena Younger and the members of her family, Rissa's bold attempt in bidding adieu to Hannibal and Sarah for their freedom towards North and Tshembe's patriarchal revolt redefine the submissive past into a conscious present.

There is socio-cultural fusion in Alice's plays. The inter-relatedness of the dramatic text with the theatrical performance and the perspective of the audience exhibits the function of memory and its transformation both in the theatrical time and in theatrical space. The dramatist has created the rebellious potential in an individual particularly in black women

by not only redefining themselves but also in reconstructing their neighbourhood. The awakening of this potential in Alice's characters parallel Bakhtin's theory of 'ideological becoming', ultimately aimed at extra-ordinarily by Alice Childress.

It is a matter of philosophical discourse that Alice's black subjects redefine themselves through the process of internalizing persuasive nature. Alice interestingly treads the path of Audre Horde, the Black Feminist poet, who declared, 'in order to survive, those of us for whom oppression in American apple pie have always had to be watchers'. She claims that it is this 'watching' that generates a dual consciousness in African American women, one in which black women become familiar with the language and manners of the oppression. It is through this process of watching that the oppressed transform gradually and self-define and initiates their power of resistance. To this power of self-definition in asserting their ideology that Alice Childress has adopted to Mama in *Florence* where Mama fixes her decision of permitting her daughter to continue to resist her stereotypical roles and emerge as an actress devoid of racial prejudice.

Passion for Self-expression

Rooted in the tradition of African humanism, the black women have been individualists with a passion for self-expression extolling the ethics of caring. They have executed it with the appropriateness of emotions in validating their argument which Alice Childress creates in Julia in *Wedding Band*. Julia views both passions and intellect to be one and the same in her love towards the white Herman and in executing the same love even in his deathbed with the trait of the "capacity for empathy". The transformation of redefining womanhood gradually shifts from self-affirmation in *Florence* to self-assertion in *Trouble in Mind*, and elevates with a womanist ethics in Julia in *Wedding Band*, where, by rendering solace to her white counterpart, Alice Childress justifies her stand of adhering to womanist ethics. Alice Childress advocates the traits of self-definition, self-reliance and the ethics of caring irrespective of race.

Alice Childress and Black Women Activism

From the plays of Alice, one can easily identify that Black Women activism has emerged in two dimensions. The first one is towards group survival and the second one consists of struggles for institutional transformation that is to change discriminatory policies. It is also obvious from Alice's plays that for black woman, motherhood is equated to be symbol of power. It is invariably another form of political activism. The theme of 'activist mothering' has been an enduring theme of many an African American writers.

Another noted characteristic feature of Alice's plays is the theatrical innovation. As a master craftsman, Alice establishes herself as a gifted and serious creator of 'Meta theatre' in *Trouble Mind*, a technique that has appeared in a relatively few plays since the Renaissance.

In *Trouble in Mind*, the play within the play *Chaos in Belleville*, serves as the symbol of the black's struggle in America and represents African Americans as the second class citizens of American society.

Historicity is another realm in Alice's plays. She carefully weaves the past anecdotes into the present exhibiting a sense of revolt in the minds of African American women. The historical background which Alice sets in her play *Wedding Band* takes the readers to South Carolina of 1918's where the Wedding Band and Steamboat tickets are the important images by which history is traversed. Symbols like the feeble plant in the pot on the window sill doggedly growing with minimal amount of sunlight through a small window represent the youngsters' struggle to find an exit from the ghetto for a better future.

It is needless to say that Alice Childress is an epoch making African American playwright. Through her plays she elevates and authenticates the position and power of the black women of America in the post-war scenario.

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