

A New Strategy of Resisting Racial Oppression in Angelina Weld Grimke's *Rachel*

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Abstract

Black people in America were persecuted mainly because of the color of their skin. The racist policies of Whites against African-Americans continued even after the abolition of slavery in 1865. The present study tries to analyze and discuss Angelina Weld Grimke's *Rachel* (1916) which levels an indictment against racism and discrimination and reveals the White South as a corrupted society. The main character in this play, young Rachel, devises a new strategy of protest to resist discrimination and racism by declining marriage of her lover for fear of giving birth to an innocent child to be tortured and persecuted by whites who are characterized by violence and arrogance.

Keywords: racism, oppression, lynching, marriage declination, Angelina, Weld Grimke and *Rachel*.

الملخص

أُضْطُهِدَ السودُ في أمريكا بشكلٍ رئيسيٍّ بسببِ لونِ بشرتهم واستمرت السياساتُ العنصريةُ للبيضِ ضدَّ الأمريكيين من أصلٍ أفريقي حتى بعدَ إلغاءِ العبوديةِ في عام ١٨٦٥. تحاول الدراسة الحالية ان تُحلِّلَ وتناقشُ مسرحيةَ (راشيل) (١٩١٦) للكاتبة أنجلينا ويلد كريمة التي تُوجِّهُ لائحةَ اتهامٍ ضدَّ العنصريةِ والتمييزِ وتُكشِفُ عن الجنوبِ الأبيضِ كمجتمعٍ فاسدٍ. تَبْتَدُعُ الشخصيةُ الرئيسيةُ في هذه المسرحية، الشابة راشيل، إستراتيجية احتجاجيةً جديدةً غريبةً لمقاومة التمييز والعنصرية برفضها الزواج من حبيبها خشيةً أن تَلِدَ مولداً بريئاً لِيُعَذَّبَ ويضطهد من قبلِ البيضِ المتميزين بالعنفِ والغلطِ.

الكلمات المفتاحية: العنصرية، الاضطهاد، الاعدام بدون محاكمة، رفض الزواج، انجلينا ويلد كرمك، راشيل

1. Introduction

During the colonial era racism and discrimination enabled white Americans to enjoy multiple privileges because of their belief in superiority over the rest of the other colored human races. They denied the simplest human rights to the African-Americans through their racial oppressive policies, especially lynching Black innocent people for trivial reasons. During the early twentieth century, Black playwrights are encouraged to write serious dramatic works that reflect the reality of their people. Alvin Golfarb and Edwin Wilson contend that from 1910

to 1930 Black people had and ran almost “157 theatres” (422). Although the Harlem Renaissance (1918-1937), the period in which the literary and artistic works of African-Americans boomed in the early twentieth century (Bahr and Johnston, 654), was a significant period in the development of African-American female playwrights, the burst of dramatic creativity is associated with Black men playwrights of the period. Freda L. Scott points out that, African-American dramatists during this period succeeded in creating an evolutionary dramatic process in which their plays reflected “the lives, problems and aspirations” (439) of their own people.

The achievements of African-American women dramatists in the early twentieth century have often ignored and kept aside in spite of their significance to the African-American theater just because they were women. Therefore, race and gender played an extreme role in not recognizing African-American women before the first half of the twentieth century. Forces of racism and sexism erected barriers so that they could not achieve any significant status in American drama. Moreover, playwriting as a profession was considered a male vocation (Wilkerson, xviii-xix). Women, on the other hand, were encouraged to write in other fields of literature such as poetry and fiction.

However, Black women playwrights were able to participate in playing a significant role in the evolution of African-American theater. Before 1940, the suggested cut-off of the Harlem Renaissance, there was a group of African-American female dramatists who were conscious of the necessity to declare the depth of their minds and express their own feelings, but they were not able to acquire the distinction they hope and deserve.

To achieve the African-American's political, social and economic demands, W. Du Bois (1868-1963), who is one of the earliest Black revolutionaries, and other race leaders began to adopt a strategy of encouraging and supporting literary and fine arts works in order to improve "the Black public image" (Calloway, 33). Thus, literature is employed because, as C. W. E. Bigsby notes that it is an effective and powerful educational tool in the field of black liberation; the weapon that helps them break all kinds of shackles of racism and oppression and make them "distinct from modern America" (39).

Encouraged by race leaders such as Du Bois, men and women writers began to re-create reality in their representations to demystify the Black's stereotypical images, which have been delineated by White writers. Like their Black male colleagues, early twentieth century African-American women playwrights

were faced with stereotyped images of Black figures on the stage. White-authored entertainment like minstrel show, which is a common 19th century show that ridiculed African-Americans sarcastically with rhapsodic “songs, skits, jigs and shuffle dances” (Wilson, 360), was the common show of drama in America for a long period of time. The comic buffoon and lazy shiftless Negro in these dramatic shows assisted to justify the systematic status quo of portraying the Blacks in stereotypical representations. Consequently, African-American playwrights have to reflect, in their plays, the real images of their life to refute these wide-spread unreal stereotypical portrayals.

Audiences, even some Black ones, were ill-prepared to accept serious portrayals of people presented on stage most often as objects of ridicule. Other stereotypes led producers to actively discourage the portrayal of a genuine romantic relationship between Black young male and female characters. Commenting on the African-American stereotypical images James Weldon Johnson explains that one of the most important features is that there should not be any passionate love in a Black dramatic works “between two Negroes” (171).

The onstage stereotypes only reflected the attitudes of the American society in the early 20th century. Blacks and supportive

Whites pressed unsuccessfully for anti-lynch legislation; the Black voter was disenfranchised and the struggle for the right to vote would continue well into the 1960s. Both women and men suffered when schools, transportation, housing and public accommodations were segregated under Jim Crow laws, which “reinforced White expectations and limited the ability of African Americans to assert themselves in everyday discourses” (Inwood, 59). Moreover, Black veterans returning homes from two World Wars would be denied jobs and beaten in White-instigated riots. The issues confronting Blacks during these decades were in no ways subtle; the abuses were blatant, often backed by unjust legislations.

Margaret B. Wilkerson contends that “the early works of African-American playwrights were strong protests against these conditions and were produced largely within the fold—in churches, lodges, and social halls of the sympathetic few” (xv). Some of the Black association, which had been organized interracially to fight for civil rights, recognized the power of live performance and early in its development enlisted the theater in the struggle for Black liberation. Moreover, Du Bois encouraged “race” or “propaganda” (Du Bois qtd. in Harison, 567) plays that focused on issues stemming from slavery and racial oppression.

Most of the early 20th century Black women playwrights, such as Angelina Weld Grimke, Marry Burrill, and many others responded to Du Bois's call for writing 'race' plays. The resisting perspectives of these playwrights of the Black struggle of the period against racial oppression are best summed up in *Rachel* (1916) by Grimke (1880-1958).

2. The Conception of Resisting Racial Oppression in Angelina Weld Grimke's *Rachel* (1916)

Rachel is a race three-act play, which is written, produced, and performed by Blacks (Hatch and Shine, 137). It is also a serious step to employ theater for the purposes of racial propaganda to draw the attention and awareness of the White and Black American alike, to the tragic poor conditions of the millions of black citizens in America. Unlike the stereotypes of the period, Rachel, who is a Black young teacher, is neither a superwoman nor of a loose character. She is a tender person who is afflicted by the evils of society. Rachel, the title character, is so delicate and passionate young woman, who is not only loved by all, but she also represents a loving mother for all her neighbor small and young African-American "babies best of all" (*Rachel*, I. 143). Therefore, she dreams of being an ideal mother for her babies as

she asks God to bestow her with them “to protect and guard” (*Rachel*, 144) when she grows up and gets married. However, the widespread violent policies of discrimination and racism applied by the white against black, which Rachel gradually realizes as she grows up and becomes more conscious of the consequences of such heinous policies, lead to a turning point in achieving her ideal dream of being a Black mother in a society suffering from discrimination and systemic racism.

In such a racist and hostile atmosphere, most Blacks, including Rachel and her brother, realize the infeasibility of education because they cannot get jobs commensurate with their scientific and cultural qualifications since they are prohibited by the racist Whites from getting such suitable jobs. The Black characters’ disillusionment and feelings of oppression and weakness because their Black identity in the work market parallels Rachel's gradual feeling of powerlessness and enervation when she imagines that she will be a victimized Black mother in a White victimizer society that uses various ways to humiliate them and undermine their dignity as human beings.

Thus, it is not surprising that lynching was treated by Grimke and most of the African-American dramatists. *Rachel*, which was set in Washington during the early 1900s, responded to this era

when lynching of Black people was frequent and commonplace (Greene, 152). Moreover, lynching was not an act of sentence limited to African-American males, but rather African-American females also fell victims to this senseless violence. In fact, between 1882 and 1927 about four thousand African-American “including 76 women, were lynched (Perkins, 9). Grimke focuses on how this inhumane sentence affect the lives of African-American people, especially women who lose their husbands or sons as a result of such heinous inhumane action. Therefore, this play represents, as Judith L. Stephens points out, a significant step of serious resistance and struggle against all kinds of racial oppressive policies “of late nineteenth and early twentieth century” (329).

To make matters worse for Rachel, the secret of lynching Rachel’s father and her brother is known by her and her adopted brother. Rachel’s father and brother have been lynched by the racist Whites because of his public denunciation of lynching an innocent black man and in turn his young son is also severely lynched during his attempt to save his father. Therefore, from her mother’s painful story about the lynching of her father and her brother, Rachel does not only feel the pain of being a victim, but she is also fully aware of the indefensibleness of the Black family

to protect each other from the whites' continuous threat for their lives as human beings.

Because Rachel has experienced her mother's suffering as a result of lynching her father and brother, she comes to realize that in the South there are a lot of Black mothers experiencing their daily fear that they cannot have rest even during the night because "their babies on their hearts is three parts—pain" (*Rachel*, I. 149). Moreover, Rachel loses her hope of being a happy ideal wife and mother in this oppressive and suffocating White society when she sees her adopted brother, Little Jimmy, suffering all kinds of discrimination, racism and persecution in his school at the hands of his White classmates and school-teachers alike.

The other significant transformative incident in *Rachel* happens transformative when Rachel meets Mrs. Lane and her daughter, Ethel, who is described as "thin, nervous, suspicious, frightened" (*Rachel*, II. 57). The young Black girl, Ethel, who is a victim of a bitter experience of racism and immoral discrimination in her school from both students and teachers alike, becomes constantly frightened and confused as she encounters people, White as well as Black.

Exposing a stupendous opposition and resistance to the way how White's racial oppressive policies make African-American

suffer bitterly as a result of their rude and violent actions, Grimke has Rachel decline John Strong's marriage proposal, although he is an honest young man in his love, who is ready to do whatever it takes to marry her. Realizing that an African-American young man, who lives under such a suffocating atmosphere, is not able to defend her and her offspring from the assault of the wild White Americans. In spite of her deep love for him, Rachel disproves John's offer. *Rachel*, the first major play by a Black woman, boldly depicts a woman who is the antithesis of the prevailing stereotypes, and who refuses to pretend that she enjoys the same privileges as other women in society.

The play also portrays a conscious feminist protest tendency and shows Grimke's perspective of contemporary women's issues in society, especially independence and self-determination, which are not limited to race relationship. Therefore, her striking object extends to all kinds of injustice including gender and patriarchy all over the world. Rachel's response to her suitor, who believes that her decision not to marry comes from a too-serious response to the problem of race along with his own wish to determine the course of her life, makes this abundantly clear. She tells him that what makes her angry is that he talks as her will "counts for nothing,". She continues, then, by asserting to him that if he tries

to control her, she thinks that “a domineering man is detestable” (*Rachel*, II. 157).

Thus, Rachel proves that she is conscious and can express herself well. Moreover, she has enough independence to make the right decision at the right time and is not ready to be exploited or devalued neither by Whites nor by Blacks. Therefore, the playwright shows the role of educated African-American woman, like Rachel, in constituting a strong conscious front that addresses itself to the multiple problems and its consequences that confront the Black’s community in America.

Grimke's poetic and almost sermonizing language makes a strong appeal when Tom, Mrs. Loving's son, passionately comments on the degeneracy of Whites. Charged with anger, Tom asserts that while White children live with hope, Black children are surrounded by despair. He also believes that the Black’s hands are pure while the White American’s hands are stained with the blood of violence they inflict on innocent Blacks like Rachel's father and brother. He, then, concludes that the Whites are “nothing but low, cowardly, bestial murderers” (*Rachel*, II. 153). Michael Greene asserts that Rachel’s attitude of refusing marriage and giving birth to Black babies makes the reader enthusiastic and interactive with “her own disillusioning recognition that the world

does not love as she is capable of loving” (153). The play proves that Rachel intends to save African-American babies of the trouble from living in an inhumane environment that holds little value for their lives. However, Grimke’s protestations do not end with a call for violence. Grimke, in this play, also succeeds in refuting the allegations given by White Americans that they were, in lynching Black people, defending the chastity and honor of their women from Black sexual brutality. Moreover, Grimke shows that Whites have lynched innocent African-Americans, like Mr. Loving and his son, so as to confiscate their simplest human rights. Ironically, in *Rachel* Grimke gives clear conception that the violent White Americans seem more brutal and severe than stereotypical images of Black men who are embodied in White-authored plays as being mindless savage beasts because it is the Whites who kill Black innocent people for irrational racial reasons.

Conclusion

The protagonist and main character, Rachel, chooses a new strategy to resist and combat racist policies and discrimination. She follows a new different path to clarify and confirm her objection and condemnation of all kinds of heinous discrimination and racism. Consequently, she refrains from marrying her lover,

John, who is a loving romantic young black man because of her apprehension of giving birth to a Black baby in a White-cultured society in which freedom and human rights are confiscated because of color and race. Hence Rachel's realization that the birth of a Black child in a society dominated by a White oppressive culture, which denies Blacks' existence persistently, will make this child suffer just like Little Jimmy and many other innocent Black people.

Finally, such a strategy might have dire consequences, especially with regard to the extermination of the Black race in a country where they were continuously lynched and oppressed. However, such a protest strategy is almost rhetorical rather than realistic in order to convey their voice to the world and draw the attention of the international community through a drama about the extent of the tragedy, pain and suffering that the Blacks reached at the time to force them to make such strange choices.

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