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Alice Childress' *Florence* and the Role of Women in Theater

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Abstract in English

The present paper discusses the marginalization of Black women in American theater employing Alice Childress*'s Florence* (1949). The play is a strong statement against existing stereotypes, and it restores some power to its Black female characters, transforming them into active resistors instead of passive victims. The aim of this study is to analyze how the character of Mama, who is a working-class Black mother, is used to address structural injustice and internalized oppression. The present study is based on intersectional feminist theory and takes into account the socio-political background of the creation and interpretation of the play. In addition, it will show how Florence reflects intersectional feminist meanings. This study will add to the discussion of race and gender dealt with by many Black female playwrights, including Childress.

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1. Introduction and Methodology

This study is based on the theoritical framework of Mary Church Terrell and Anna Julia Cooper. Their femenist critical ideas, namely intersectionality, will be

applied separetely to Childress' play, *Florence.* Born in 1916, Alice Childress was a playwright, novelist, and actress. Much of her work was about Black Americans, especially Black women. In addition to theater, Childress was also a novelist of some achievement. Childress continued to focus on finding the intersectional aspects of the black experience, and thus, she is one of the first African Americans who managed to stage her plays in the professional theaters of New York.

The female scholars Terrell and Cooper both played an instrumental role in these areas of race, gender, and justice as modern theorist. Terrell (1858–1964) is a notable American activist who fought for the rights of Black people, particularly Black women. Cooper (1858- 1964) is a prominent African-American scholar. She obtained her doctoral degree from the University of Paris in 1924. Thus, she is among the early African-American woman to earn a doctoral degree.

Cooper and Terrell's theories combine to create the system through which education, activism, and intellectualism combine to fight for justice. Therefore, their academic contributions are able to provide a supporting stand for the oppressed groups and open the road to other oppressed communities. These ideas keep on being part of the current study with respect to intersectionality. Both scholars set the bases of intersectionality that is an analytical framework that creates a unique experience of discrimination and contains various social factors, here it is race and gender or sex.

2. Plot of Alice Childress' *Florence*

Florence is a one – act play about Mama and her two daughters Florence and Marge. Mama Whitney is sitting on the bench in the colored section of a train station in a small town in the South at the start of the story. Black railings divide the White and Black parts of the room. Mama travels to New York City to visit Florence, who is pursuing acting in the city. Florence's younger sister Marge comes and expresses her opinions about Florence's choices to Mama. Marge believes Black women do not have many opportunities to become famous, so Florence's goals in New York do not make sense to her. She pressures her daughter to move back in and start living a simple and regular way.

Suddenly, Mrs. Carter, a White woman, is introduced into the story. Mama is seated in the waiting room and begins a conversation with Mrs. Carter. She admits

that her trip to the South is so troubling, but she wants to help her brother, a writer a Black woman novel has been sharply criticized. The work is about whose latest with intelligence and ambition who is the main character who commits suicide because she cannot become White.

Mama decides she will not go to New York, so, instead, she writes a letter to Florence with a check for her train ticket and asks the porter to post it. She stresses that Florence needs to be able to follow what she wants to do. After the porter goes, Mama tries to enter the White ladies' restroom but hesitates, touches the dividing rail and then goes away. There is a pause after the monologue until another whistle sounds and the play ends.

3. Analysis and Discussion

3.1 Mary Church Terrell's Theoretical Framework

Comparing the past and present, Terrell shows how illogical and cruel America's ideas about race were prevalent in her time. She writes:

But she is classed as a Negro in the United States, whether she is black or not… ''If an individual has only a single drop of African blood in his veins,'' those two young men explained, '[W]white people in the United States consider him a Negro.'' (2005, p. 122)

This quote skillfully points out how Terrell's experience reveal that a system which groups identity by set external rules, rather than experience or personal choices, and this often causes senseless violence and injustice. From Terrell's perspective, the "one-drop rule" leads to painful reduction of complex identities to one negative category and this absurd situation clearly illustrates the harshness of American racial thinking. She demonstrates this system as it appears in *Florence* by showing that these separation methods bring about external persecution and inward suffering, tear apart people's hope and, in some cases, result in self-harm. Therefore, the texts reveal how a system is built on believing in ancestry and perception which hurts and affects people long after their days.

In Childress's *Florence*, it is shown that characters are judged by their race, no matter what they look like:

MAMA: I know it ain't! Don't my friend Essie Kittredge daughter look just like a German or somethin'? She didn't kill herself! She's teachin' the third grade in the colored school right here. Even the bus drivers ask her to sit in the front seats cause they think she's white! . . . an' . . . an' . . she got as clear as you please . . . I'm sittin' where my people got to sit by law. I'm a Negro woman! (Childress, 2011, p. 14)

Childress points out that racial categories are absurd and unjust, as identity is monitored not by the way someone appears, but by the social roles people are made to perform. The way on which Essie Kittredge's daughter is treated mistakenly as a White person but still bound by restrictions on Black people underscores the way segregation worked to control others. Proclaiming "I'm a Negro woman" was not just about knowing who she was; it was also about refusing the benefits that being ''White-passing'' would bring. This means that racism aims to assign roles to individuals based on the wishes of the privileged, regardless of what those roles should really be. Thus, it can be said that "a superior is a superior regardless of body-type" (Oyewumi, 1997, p. 38).

In this context, Terrell's statement that "the very air which a colored girl breathes in that section where the majority live is heavy with traditions and accusations of the frailty of both her race and her sex" (2025) shows that racial and gender inequality touch every part of people's everyday lives. Oyeronke Oyewumi's assertion that "physical bodies are always social bodies" (1997, p.xii) adds to the concept that race is more related to social creation than to scientific or visual factors and is strongly integrated into both culture and institutions.

The narrative of Florence is driven by the experiences of Black women, especially those of Mama, her daughter Marge and Florence, the latter is not shown in the play. The fact that the character of Florence is not present on the stage is a highly intentional and very strong visual statement of the fact that this Black girl with some artistic aspirations is never seen and is always on the backburner and biliary in the racially divided community. Florence remains a central character in the plot, but she is never physically shown. This absence is an intentional decision to emphasize the suppression and ignoring of the voices of Black women in society, especially in the realms of art, culture and the public arena.The invisible character of Florence

constitutes how Black women have been discussed, criticized, and marginalized by people, particularly by the dominant forces who can talk about them without letting them utter their own words. Through the course of the play, desires of Florence are argued by her mother, sister, and Mrs. Carter, but Florence herself gets no active power and voice on the stage. Such absence borders on the structural constraints which deny Black women the ability to hold visible and authoritative roles such as acting or as public representatives.

By talking about Mama's experiences and about her meetings with Mrs. Carter, Childress underlines the daily troubles, strength and pride of Black women. This focus aligns with important feminist arguments that see racism, sexism and classism as unique forms of marginalization for women of color. In this context, the term "[t]hird-world woman has taken on symbolic significance as a topic of worldwide differences" (Al-Douri & Khalaf, 2022, p. 2). Black women and Third-World women have been marginalized in an oppression that is common to both groups but with identities based on race, gender and class. Black women such as Mama experience simultaneous challenges in White dominated society, as they struggle with racism, sexism and economic disadvantages and still have the strength to stay strong in their dignity. Similarly, women in the Third World are marginalized because of the legacies of colonialism, the unequal distribution of power in the global economy, and the patriarchal culture, with a tendency to be misrepresented or ignored both by feminist activism and scholarship in the Western world. These two groups of women do resist these superimposed oppressions, but their resistance takes the form and shape according to their context domestic in the case of the black women, the world at large, in the case of the Third-World women.

It is worth mentioning that Mama, as a Black working-class woman, experiences structural racism, institutional sexism, and economic precarity. All of these converge to limit her capabilities as well as her daughter's ambitions. In spite of these constraints, Mama rejects to internalize the ideology of self-hating expressed by White women like Mrs. Carter. Terrell states that "discrimination against colored people in hotels, theaters, and schools was practically confined to one section but has spread all over the country" (2005, p. 122). Childress's critique is associated to a long-running pattern, making clear that the rigid racial divide has broken both

personal and community identities over the years and in different situations (like the railway station).

Furthermore, Childress creates a scene that shows how racial boundaries are tightly applied, both in laws, space and people's minds.

MAMA: I mustn't hurt you, must I.

MRS. CARTER [*Backing away rubbing her wrist*]: It's all right.

MAMA [*Rises*]: You better get over on the other side of that rail. It's against the law for you to be over here with me.

MRS. CARTER [*Frightened and uncomfortable*]: If you think so.

MAMA: I don't want to break the law. (Childress, 2011, p. 20)

Childress applies a physical context to describe the segregated train station representing the firm racial lines that were enforced by the law and the custom. The waiting room has a dividing rail, which symbolically and literally is a line between Black and White passengers, is a symbol of the psychological and social boundaries that reinforce the racial structure of power. This is reflected when Mama tells Mrs. Carter: "[y]ou better get over on the other side of that rail. It is against the law for you to be over here with me." This highlights that the deep segregation shapes behavior and consciousness.

As noted in Hana Ghani and Istbriq Joody's analysis, "the railing refers to special limitations imposed on the two races. It serves as physical and emotional barrier between them... to suggest racial constrains" (2016, p.85). In the dialogue and the staging, Childress criticizes a society in which even informal human communication is prescribed by the race protocol, demonstrating how racism inside and outside is both internalized and institutionalized at the same time, which oppresses Black Americans.

When Mama tells Mrs. Carter to get on the "other side of that rail" because it is "against the law," she highlights the dehumanization of segregating laws. Her compliance is not a result of respect, but it is result of humiliation. Like Terrell, Childress exposes that such unjust laws are normalized. Terrell hopes that the rest of the nation will learn to love and respect the law, while Childress describes what happens when unjust rules are obeyed—people become isolated, mistreated and denied their dignity for the sake of the law.

As Ghani and Joody explain, “Childress believes that [Black] women live in a world where they are not free from the emotional shackles of slavery and Jim Crow laws… They are victimized or oppressed by the dominant race because of the unfamiliarity with their lives” (2016, p.84). The legislation, in this regard, is not merely a system of rules, but a means of emotional and spatial containment, which is naturalized via social interactions and rationalized by the heredity of terms of race and hierarchy.

This harsh truth is deeply reflected in *Florence*, as Mrs. Carter encourages Mama to make Florence quit her career to focus only on housework instead:

MRS. CARTER: I’ll just tell her . . . no heavy washing or ironing . . . just light cleaning and a little cooking . . . does she cook?

MAMA: Mam?

[*MAMA slowly backs away from MRS. CARTER and sits down on bench.*]

MRS. CARTER: Don’t worry. (Childress, 2011, p. 19)

What Mrs. Carter offers seems like charity, but it actually means that Black women are thought of as meant for serving others, regardless of their abilities. This shows just how even the most well-intentioned liberalism may cover quite troubling racist assumptions. It does not confront giving a job up, but the narrow position that society wants to define them, to give to Black women. As the researchers add, Childress uses this moment to expose the “depth of racism which perpetuates Black economic enslavement and concomitant notions of Black inferiority” (2011, p.90).

Hind N. Hussein argues that “the black artist, though an American citizen, is isolated from most of his White countrymen therefore at the crucial hour he can hardly look to his peer artists for help for they do not know much about him to be able to correct him” (2009, pp. 46-47). Usually, the work of black females is overlooked and dismissed because the main artistic community is unfamiliar with their culture. Through Florence’s experience, it is clear how Mrs. Carter mentions how Florence can never compete with the big stars. Carter does not think that Florence can be talented because the former is blinded by a larger trend of ignoring the importance of Black people in art.

Furthermore, Terrell clearly shows how the public mood of the time constrained even those who aimed to do good for the Blacks. She points out that plenty of intelligent and good White men in the South tried their best to act fairly and decently toward African Americans. Yet, they did not do what they wanted to do because as public opinion at that time was especially rough and controlling (2005). If someone did not accept typical racist beliefs or tried to be impartial, they were mistreated by others. Thus, these men hesitated or did not act, although they fully understood what was happening.

Similarly, in *Trouble in Mind*, experience of the White director Manners with Wiletta Mayer shows the same logic of exclusion that Hussein discusses, in only those frames the narrative of White writers can incorporate Black actors, which will make them invisible under the guise of advancement and solidarity. Similar to *Florence*, Wiletta either has to comply with the distorted image of Black life or lose her means of sustenance. In both plays, therefore, Childress dramatizes the claim by Hussein that the Black artist is deliberately locked out of the White institutional comprehension and encouragement--a brand of silencing that guarantees the permanence of White narrative hegemony and renders Black voices unheard where they badly need to speak up.

In a similar vein, Marge's surprise comes from the unwritten race rules that stop Black women from seeking what they want or deserve. In such a way, Childress gives dramatic form to Terrell's argument which is that, in the Jim Crow South, racial ideology not only constrains what is possible, but dictates what is even permissible to imagine (2005):

MARGE: She must think she's white!

MAMA: Florence is brownskin.

MARGE: I don't mean that. I'm talkin' about her attitude. Didn't she go to Strumley's down here and ask to be a salesgirl? Now ain't that somethin'? They don't hire no colored folks. but there's things we can't do cause they ain't gonna let us. (Childress, 2011, p. 8)

Florence's own expressed wishes are taken to mean that she wishes to distinguish herself from everyone else, as expressed by Marge's words that "[s]he must think she's white. Her insistence that "they don't hire no colored folks" and

"there's things we can't do" points to a firmly-held idea that the only alternative is to keep following White-set rules.

Through this exchange, it is seen that the sad difference in how grown-ups protect themselves, while the younger ones look for ways to act on their own. Mama is less outspoken in the scene, but her quiet dealings here end up supporting Florence's decision to go after what she hopes to accomplish. Childress points out that structural racism is continued by fear that is handed down and resignation that society accepts.

As Kristiawan Indryanto observes, conversations in *Florence* are becoming more open about racial inequality, in parallel with the attitude of the Civil Rights Movement (2020). Marge notes that the separation at the train station is not clear, but laws demand separation anyway which the play exposes as senseless and oppressive. Because of these moments, the characters reflect on the rules of oppression and act as symbols of the foundations of Black resistance.
Furthermore, Indryanto points out that by using BEV (Black English Vernacular), the play gives a voice to the characters' pride in how they speak and the grammar they use. Through using BEV in the play, Childress highlights Black identity and avoids allowing the language to accept the dominance of White forms, and this makes the use of speech a factor in both culture and politics.
Mama discovers that liberal White women like Mrs. Carter are drawn to describing Black pain, even while making little or no mention of their strength. Her comments and advice aim to debunk such an idea:

MRS. CARTER: Of course. Close your eyes and picture it!

MAMA: *(Turning front and closing her eyes tightly with enthusiasm):* Yes'm. (*MRS. CARTER stands center stage on "white" side*.)

MRS. CARTER: Now . . .! She's standing on the bridge in the moonlight . . . Out of her shabby purse she takes a mirror . . . and by the light of the moon she looks at her reflection in the glass. (Childress, 2011, p. 14)

Through stage directions and spatial dynamics (e.g., Mrs. Carter standing on the "white" side), the racial division is highlighted. Mama's enthusiasm "closing her eyes tightly with enthusiasm" can be interpreted as naivety or an intentional technique

of performance to exposes the fragility of Mrs. Carter's kindness. Thus, the scene shows that liberal paternalism can promote negative stereotypes in the name of compassion.

In this context, Terrell observes that even liberal White people "cause trouble unwittingly by raising the issue themselves," especially when they ask about the racial background of their friends where others can hear. While these steps are supposed to protect or promote growth, they commonly end up emphasizing the differences they wish to eliminate and thus harm the same people they are trying to assist. This can be seen in Mrs. Carter's attitude. She promises to share her experience but actually shares a terrible and stereotypical picture of Black lives from a White point of view.

It is worth mentioning that Mama is represented as a voice of affirmation. Rather than obeying society's rules, she wants to make sure Florence can dream and behave like other White women. Thus, she protests over the fatalism and politics which are imposed on them by the Whites.

MAMA: She can be anything in the world she wants to be! That's her right. Marge can't make her turn back, Mrs. Carter can't make her turn back. Lost My Lonely Way! That's a book! People killin' theyselves 'cause they look white but be black. They just don't know, do they, Mr. Brown? (Childress, 2011, p. 21)

In this scene, Mama stands up to the belief that racial matters are hopeless and should be respected. She asserts that Black girls are in charge of their own lives, in spite of the racism and cultural rules against them. By referring to the book *Lost My Lonely Way*, she points out that some Black individuals destroy themselves by accepting the false beliefs of White supremacy when they do not match the society's racial categories.

Correspondingly, Terrell deals with her ancestral feelings of shame and rediscovers pride through research about racism in American history:

I told the young man that I had recovered my equilibrium immediately, when I learned from the study of history that with a single exception practically every race of the earth had at some time in the past been the subject of a stronger, so that when colored people in this country passed

through a period of bondage, they were simply suffering a fate common to other groups. And then I called his attention to the marvelous progress which the colored people in the United States had made in less than forty years. (2005, p. 15)

Terrell sees how Blacks women have not given up and have made progress, exactly as Mama does not let history and prejudice control her daughter's future. Both agree that recognizing who they are and determining their destinies are important to avoid despair and believe that embracing one's entire humanity is an act of protest. Childress uses a talk between Mama and Marge to show that the push for survival along with racism sometimes warps how the family sees and pursues their goals. This tension is clearly reflected in the following conversation: ''MARGE: She ain't gonna get rich up there and we can't afford to do for her./ MAMA: We talked all of that before'' (Childress, 2011, p. 7). Mama's doubt towards Florence's chances of "getting rich" in the North is due to the idea that she is aware of Black people's struggles with poverty and the few opportunities given to Black women in those times. When Mama says, "[w]e went over that long before," it is found that they face a cycle where hope fights against challenges and they must surrender their dreams under constant difficulties.

The following dialogue reflects how Mrs. Carter's true beliefs about Black people become clear, showing that her vision of herself as an ally was not accurate: ''MRS. CARTER: You don't have to call me mam. It's so Southern. Mrs. Carter! These people are still fighting the Civil War. I'm really a New Yorker now'' (Childress, 2011, p. 12). This highlights the weakness in Mrs. Carter's thinking about race. She wanted to avoid being called "mam" by avoiding Southern customs, a sign she saw liberalism as more about style than actual changes in thinking or situations. She thinks casting off traditional Southern appearances means she is free from its racial effects, although her responses and mindset regularly portray Mama as less important than the family members. Deliberately calm and humorous, Mama reveals this hypocrisy in her response.

Terrell makes a parallel point: "[i]t is always difficult for one prejudice-ridden human being to understand why his brother should be obsessed by a prejudice which differs from his own" (2005, p. 140). Similarly to Terrell's words, Childress's

Mrs. Carter does not see that despite her claim to oppose it, her Northern ways are only another type of racial paternalism. Terrell and Childress make it clear that racism affects people deeply and cannot be overcome only by changing how some things are said.

At the close of *Florence*, the disagreement between Mama and Mrs. Carter becomes too intense. As Mrs. Carter acts like she accepts Florence, her remarks suggest she sees Florence's goals as typical for those who spend time with servants. It becomes clear that standing up to a problem is different from truly understanding it which is why Mama eventually decides what happens to her daughter: "MRS. CARTER: Her experience won't matter with Melba. I know she'll understand. I'll call her too./ MAMA: Thank you, mam (Childress, 2011, p. 19). Mrs. Carter tries to manage Florence's work at home so that she uses less effort but keeps control over her life. Mama's brief replies and body language suggest she is not comfortable and maybe starting to resign herself to all these differences. This reflects Mama's disappointment in people in general and also her rejection of anything that might disrespect her daughter. Similar to Mrs. Carter, who represents keeping people imagine race as a clear-cut idea, full of apart by both gender and race, these people boundaries. It is especially difficult for women, since White supremacy reduces their identity, what they can hope for and their sense of right and wrong to a set of limited categories that deny them personhood.

In both Terrell's book and Childress's play, it is shown that the deepest kind of racism comes not from segregationists, but from those who see themselves as kind and civilized. Both show that liberal racism can still lead to violence against African Americans, even when hidden behind language meant to help. The aspect of feminism and racism comes together in the work of *Florence* and Terrell where Black women become marginalized women that challenge not only White feminism but also racial justice in itself. They are not only defined by but are limited to gender and race, which demonstrates that so-called kind racism can still impose limitations that deprive them of being full-fledged people.

3.2 Anna Julia Cooper's Black Women's Security

Both Cooper's *A Voice from the South* and Childress' *Florence* call for social and mental empowerment of Black women despite the challenges they face. According to

Cooper, for a race to advance, its women must be empowered rather than strictly bound by what racism and patriarchy require. The play reflects Cooper's goal to uplift Black people by having Florence push back against all the limits which her family and society try to put on her.

The dialogue shows the way Mama and Mrs. Carter interact; therefore, it highlights how White liberal support can actually uphold the systems it wants to challenge. Mama believes that Mrs. Carter speaks of true equality and feels the secret cruelty that was always hidden behind the kind words. When writers talk about "security," it refers secretly to how Black women have been treated as unpaid workers in the past. Mama changes the situation by performing an act of resistance: "[s]he'll have her own room and bath, and above all . . . security" (Childress, 2011, p. 19).

In this moment, the issue of White liberal kindness contrasts with Mama's self-respect and strength. As Mrs. Carter puts it, security actually aims to trap Florence in serving her at home, just like a slave. In this way, Mama is resisting what Cooper condemns the practice where White society frames justice as charity and expects gratitude for what people of color are entitled to. Cooper writes:

We all see the glaring inconsistency and feel the burning shame. We appreciate the incongruity and the indignity of having to stand forever hat in hand as beggars, or be shoved aside as intruders in a country whose resources have been opened up by the unrequited toil of our forefathers. We know that our bill is a true one—that the debt is as real as to any pensioners of our government. But the principles of patience and forbearance, of meekness and charity, have become so ingrained in the Negro character that there is hardly enough self-assertion left to ask as our right that a part of the country's surplus wealth be loaned for the education of our children. (2025, p.102)

In *Florence*, Childress states explicitly that the Whites let Florence work as a sweeper, that is to say, a servant:

MARGE: It's not money, Mama. Sarah wrote us about it. You know what she said Florence was doin'. Sweepin' the stage!

MAMA: She was in the play!

MARGE: Sure she was in it! Sweepin'! Them folks ain't gonna let her be no actress. You tell her to wake up.

MAMA: I . . . I . . . think. (Childress, 2011, p. 8)

This is an example of how racism and disadvantages in society make it difficult for Black women to follow their dreams in art and jobs.

From the view that White society allows Black people only to work as servants or helpers, the conversation between Marge and Mama illustrates that society restricted women with certain roles. Marge's line, "[t]hem folks ain't gonna let her be no actress", shows that Florence's dreams are ignored not for any lack of skill but simply because of her race. Her role "Sweepin' the stage!" becomes an unsettling image: though Florence is onstage, she is treated as a servant, not as an artist. This demonstrates that White institutions exploit Black people, particularly women.

Mama's hesitant response "I... I... think" suggests a sudden shift in understanding or awareness. Her pause may reveal the tension between obeying a racist community's rules and believing more in her daughter's success. It describes the conflict between accepting things as they are and standing up against them. In this way, the scene highlights how Black talent and ambition are frequently suppressed which is one of Childress's main goals in challenging the stereotypes of Black women on and off the stage.

In her book *Ar'n't I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South,* Deborah Gray White says, "Black women served in all capacities, from cook to waiting maid, from wet nurse to mantua maker, or seamstress" (1999, p.41). The job opportunities available to Black women show they often had no say, struggling to express who they are and lacked recognition. Assigning Black women to certain jobs, society supported the idea that their goals were only practical and not meaningful—something Childress challenges through Florence's portrayal.

With the character of Mama, Childress takes on the long-held belief that the dreams of Black women should come second to the needs of a racist society. Portraying historical reality in this way brings out how strongly such expectations used to exist, making it all the more meaningful that Mama held true to herself and helped her daughter. Nalli Raju states that the mother-daughter relationship in this play is built on mutual trust and support. Childress' family in Florence is poor but dignified, loving, supportive and strong (2018, p.59).

Additionally, Childress looks into the corruption of systemic racism on the minds of African Americans, showing how it affects their interaction with the divisions in American society. The things become clear as Mama and Marge have a conversation about Florence's goals and racial equality as a whole: ''MAMA: Others beside Florence been talkin' about their rights. / MARGE: I know it . . . but there's things we can't do cause they ain't gonna let us. *[MARGE wanders over to the "white" side of the stage]''* (Childress, 2011, p. 8). This fits with Cooper's idea that the American woman wanted to choose her role in society and at home by herself:

The pleading of the American woman for the right and the opportunity to employ the American method of influencing the disposal to be made of herself, her property, her children in civil, economic, or domestic relations is thus seen to be based on a principle as broad as the human race and as old as human society. Her wrongs are thus indissolubly linked with all undefended woe, all helpless suffering, and the plenitude of her "rights" will mean the final triumph of all right over might, the supremacy of the moral forces of reason and justice and love in the government of the nation. (2025, p.71)

This passage expresses that issues of women's rights are not just about gender, but should be considered a moral and universal issue. By associating the American woman's effort to control her body, property and family with a basic idea "as broad as the human race," Cooper connects her argument to events that happen everywhere and over time. She insists on looking at how sexism fits into bigger structures of unfairness, instead associating their crisis to "all undefended woe" and "helpless suffering." This rhetorical move positions the demand for women's rights as "where reason, Cooper's ending statement important for all forms of freedom. justice, and love prevail over brute force" offers a positive prospect: greater equality for women will result in a more equal society.

This dialogue illustrates the major theme in the play: the strife between Black protest and the acceptance forced by years of oppression. What Mama says hints that Florence's motivations are not rare; they belong to the progress being made toward civil rights in the African American community. It highlights that Black American women regularly dealt with difficulty coming from both racial and gender roles. Standing up against the White supremacy, they often failed to obey rigid expectations

of their society. Florence's acts of resistance reflect how many Black women worked for change in the face of many injustices.

Having difficulty deciding to either submit or resist, Cooper highlights the importance of knowing oneself and remaining strong against simplistic social labels. As Cooper argues, "[w]hen we have been sized up and written down by others, we need not feel that the last word is said and the oracles sealed. It's nuffin but a man" (2025, p.119). Rather than accepting external definitions, Cooper urges the Black subject to embrace Wilfred Bion's maxim: "Know thyself" (2025, p.119). Cooper refers to Bion, who is an English psychoanalyst, and his maxim, which is originally a Greek philosophical statement, to emphasize Bion's belief in observation and understanding and the importance of learning from experiences. In Cooper's point of view, Black women need just that learning to become stronger.

Similarly, Lorraine Hansberry, in *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959), states that being segregated results in a robbery of a person's identity. This means that "to be imprisoned in the ghetto is to be forgotten—or deliberately cheated of one's birthright—at best" (Hussein, 2009, p. 47). For African American women, the ghetto represents a place where Black women are continually made invisible, taken away from power and ignored as people.

However, it is worth noting that the ways in which the ambitions of Black women are muted come to light through a key conversation between Mama and her daughter Marge. At this moment, it is realized that there are different expectations for Black women from people of different generations and ideologies. She points out that pursuing a life on stage goes against the unwritten, culturally-enforced rules for what proper Black womanhood looks like in such times: ''MARGE: Well, you got to be strict on her. She got notions a Negro woman don't need./MAMA: But she was in a real play. Didn't she send us twenty-five dollars a week?'' (Childress, 2011, p. 7). Marge illustrates how Black women have beliefs limiting them, coming both from outside and inside their own worldview. Because of this internal policing, marginalized groups often follow the same conventions and ambitions as their society.

In the same respect, Mama asserts her daughter's competence. Thus, Florence's decision to specialize in art appears legitimate and approved by her mother. It makes

clear that freeing Black women requires overcoming the internal ideas that make people doubt their achievements. Mama helps Childress show that motherhood is not just about discipline but also involves care and standing up for others. She takes on the role, according to Cooper, of being the hand that moves the lever (2011).

A strong point of the paly occurs when Childress shows the varied emotions behind ordinary conversations. With the existence of racial and class differences, a basic request often brings tension and holds back people. An exchange between Mama and Mrs. Carter demonstrates this well: ‘‘MAMA: Could you help her [Florence] out some, mam? Knowing all the folks you do… maybe…’’ (Childress, 2011, p. 17). This situation implied that Mama can be strong and weak at the same time. She looks hesitated but reaches out asking for advice to help her daughter. Using “some,” or something “maybe,” indicates the inequality in the relationship; Mama does not want to upset Mrs. Carter despite wanting something important, though Mama is strong in general. Mama asks for help which is similar to Cooper’s urging to look after young Black women for helping them with racial progress. Cooper says:

Oh, save them, help them, shield, train, develop, teach, inspire them! Snatch them, in God’s name, as brands from the burning! There is material in them well worth your while, the hope in germ of a staunch, helpful, regenerating womanhood on which, primarily, rests the foundation stones of our future as a race. (2025, p.22)

Cooper criticizes the Southern ruling class’s claim to defend democracy, while their actual response to Black workers and Black suffering is indifference. This is shown when Mrs. Carter confidently says that she feels good towards Negroes: ‘‘I know what’s going on in your mind. And what you’re thinking is wrong. I’ve… I’ve… eaten with Negroes” (Childress, 2011, p. 16). She presents herself as open-minded reveals skepticism and “Yes, mam,” and sympathetic, but Mama’s cold response, disbelief. Mrs. Carter’s claim to have “eaten with Negroes” is portrayed as a superficial achievement—a hollow symbol of progress—while in reality, the best help she offers Florence is a domestic servant job. This dynamic reflects exactly what Cooper criticizes: true democracy is not mere slogans or performative gestures but must start with genuine, respectful treatment and substantial improvement in the lives of the oppressed working classes (2025).

Mama's indifferent reply to Mrs. Carter's shallow display of empathy embodies the same criticism Cooper directed at the Southern elite: the educated, affluent class in the South must confront its own complicity honestly, cease pretending to pursue justice, and recognize that it perpetuates oppression, albeit in a seemingly "gentle" manner. Real change does not come from symbolic acts such as "I ate with Black people," but from political and social aspects. There should be procedures to improve the conditions of Black communities, particularly Black women.

It should be added that this situation echoes Cooper's notion which real progress cannot stem from "meagre" acts of kind and charity. As she asserts:

Our meager and superficial results from past efforts prove their futility; and every attempt to elevate the Negro, whether undertaken by himself or through the philanthropy of others, cannot but prove abortive unless so directed as to utilize the indispensable agency of an elevated and trained womanhood. (2025, p.107)

She further astutely observes:

The community that closes its gates against foreign talent can never hope to advance beyond a certain point. Resolve to keep out foreigners and you keep out progress. Home talent develops it's one idea and then dies. Like the century plant it produces it's one flower, brilliant and beautiful it may be, but it lasts only for a night. Its forces have exhausted themselves in that one effort. Nothing remains but to wither and to rot. (2025, p.87)

Cooper's image of the "century plant" shows in a vivid manner what happens when a culture is isolated. She says that rejecting foreign or marginalized contributions in society is like neglecting a plant that only grows and blooms once in its life. As this analogy points out, avoiding creative stagnation means inviting more people to take part. Cooper's ideas seemed to echo loudly for the play *Florence*, since Mrs. Carter rejected Florence in the same way Cooper was rejected by society. According to the quote, real cultural progress arises when everyone's contribution is allowed and when any barriers for changes are broken. Hussein points out that this exclusion happens intentionally because of the ways thereby power is established to silence and marginalize Black voices (2025). As a result, Childress argues against the dismissal of Black artistic aims by showing their value and importance through his play.

Paul Gilroy states that some of the problems today were already troubling Black women in the nineteenth century, if not before. Black women experienced the problems of losing their community's social structure, breaking mentally and desperately attempting to feel more secure again. Gilroy further states that this included forms of psychological resistance: "going mad in order not to lose your mind" (1993, p.221). Such survival strategies shaped what it means to be truly modern. They emerged as responses to the exploitative systems of the West—systems that can be described not only as ideological or economic, but pathological. In Gilroy's words, slavery shattered the world (1993). This aforementioned quote from *Florence* demonstrates problems such as unsettledness, division of identity and a crisis of meaning have been part of the experience of Black women for decades because of racism and exploitation. Although Western theories about racism and prejudice only started appearing in the twentieth century, Black women had suffered from them for decades ago.

In the conversation between Mrs. Carter and Mama, the two show that they can understand and relate to each other despite their different lives. The following exchange proves people can go past prejudice and understand each other's humanity, in a society where race and class biases exist:

MRS. CARTER *(looks up, resting case on her knees)*: How can I refuse? You seem like a good woman.

MAMA: Always lived as best I knew how and raised my children up right. We got a fine family, mam. (Childress, 2011, p. 18)

At this time, these two women each understand and accept that the other is their equal, no matter what divides them. Mrs. Carter's line, "How can I refuse? You seem like a good woman," indicates a kind of reconsideration of judgment. Mama's response reinforces how important it is for her to have integrity and for her family—themes which are typical in plays on race, class and motherhood.

4. Conclusion

As previously discussed, Terrell and Cooper propose that Black women's leadership and freedom should be central to Black feminism and that justice for both Blacks and women should be included. When Childress's plays are studied within their ideas, an

engaging narrative of resistance becomes clear. Childress builds an image of Black female defiance in *Florence*. In this play, Mama stands in opposition to the low expectations that society has for her daughter. She makes it clear that neither White liberals nor Black men should tell her what to do, focusing on a vision of Black womanhood that wants its own attention. This form of resistance reflects what Cooper and Terrell stood for and would have approved.

In Florence, through the physical, absence of the title character, Childress claims silence to the voice of Black women to be dramatized. This represents her marginalization in public life and the arts. The silence of Mama that accompanies the invisibility of the character is a symbol of the same type of social and political criticism which Terrell and Cooper used when criticizing racist regulations and mindsets.

Finally, this study recommends studying African American women writers, who have been forgotten or lost, inserting their works into the educational lattices and beginning to think of them in terms of intersectionality. It demands that the cultural industries take up the challenge to give voice to Black women and the public institutions support their legacies in easily accessible archives. It is necessary to promote interdisciplinary feminist research to gain a better understanding of Black writers' contributions to literary and historical knowledge and socail justice.

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Abstract in Arabic

مسرحية (فلورنس) لاليس جايلدريس ودور المرأة في المسرح

يناقش هذا البحث تهميش النساء السود في المسرح الأمريكي من خلال مسرحية (فلورنس) (1949) للكاتبة أليس جايلدريس. تُعد المسرحية بيانًا قويًا ضد الصور النمطية السائدة حيث أنها تمنح القوة لشخصياتها النسائية السوداء، بل تحوّلهن من ضحايا سلبيات إلى مقاومات فاعلات. تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى تحليل كيفية توظيف شخصية "ماما"، وهي أم من الطبقة العاملة، في تسليط الضوء على الظلم البنيوي والقهر الداخلي. تستند الدراسة إلى نظرية النسوية التقاطعية، وتأخذ بعين الاعتبار السياق الاجتماعي والسياسي الذي أُنتجت فيه المسرحية وتفسيرها. كما تسعى إلى إبراز كيف تعكس مسرحية (فلورنس) مفاهيم النظرية النسوية التقاطعية من خلال فحصها للظروف السياسية والاجتماعية المحيطة بتأليف المسرحية وعرضها. وستُسهم هذه الدراسة في توسيع النقاش حول العرق ونوع الجنس، وذلك من خلال تسليط الضوء على كيفية محاولة الكاتبات المسرحيات السود تحدي الوضع القائم لتمثيلهن.

الكلمات المفتاحية: أليس جايلدريس، فلورنس، الحركة النسوية السوداء، التهميش، النساء الأمريكيات من أصل إفريقي.