The Disruption of Stereotypical Prejudices, Ideological Mechanisms and Cultural Conventions by the Early Twentieth Century African American Women Playwrights

By

Kalliopi Kampatsika

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Supervisory Committee

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Department Chairperson

To my family,

who has taught me never to give up hope when things go wrong and never be afraid to face the world against all odds.

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ABSTRACT

The aim of my MA thesis paper is to explore the largely neglected early twentieth century plays of African American women playwrights. Angelina Weld Grimké, Shirley Graham, May Miller and Myrtle Smith Livingston are considered to be only some of the African American women playwrights of the Harlem Renaissance. Their plays are an important contribution to the African American theatre because they laid the foundations and were a source of inspiration for the recent well-known black writers Ntozake Shange, Alice Childress, Andrienne Kennedy and Lorraine Hansberry. My objective is to rescue their work from oblivion and bring their unique plays to the foreground. These African American playwrights shared a common female consciousness because they shared common experiences as black women. Also, their plays share a lot of common elements. Their central thematic axis is the disruption of the stereotypical prejudices, ideological mechanisms, cultural conventions and gender-based constraints that the white male-dominated world contrives and uses in order to serve its interests and keep African Americans in a subordinate position. By defying the stereotypical prejudices against black people, these African American women playwrights succeed in portraying realistic images of black people and dramatizing African American life as it is. Their work is unique because they offer a feminine perspective to the plight of black people. They portray black women's lives and explore the effects of racism, violence and lynching on female psyche. In this way, they give voice to black women's feelings before a wide audience.

Introduction

"The world has never yet seen a truly great and virtuous nation because in the degradation of woman the very fountains of life are poisoned at their source."

Lucretia Mott

(qtd. in Marlane 57)

Kampatsika Kalliopi

Dr. Zoe Detsi-Diamanti

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The disruption of stereotypical prejudices, ideological mechanisms and cultural conventions by the early twentieth century African American women playwrights.

The struggle of African American women playwrights to disrupt stereotypical clichés and prejudices against black people and especially black women is portrayed in the African American theatre of the first half of the twentieth century. Angelina Weld Grimké, Shirley Graham, May Miller and Myrtle Smith Livingston are some of the most prolific early African American women playwrights whose plays challenge the prevailing racist views on blacks and subvert the stereotypical prejudices and gender-based constraints that white patriarchy perpetuates. Grimké, Graham, Miller and Livingston expose all the myths as well as the social and cultural mechanisms that the white male-dominated society contrives in order to exploit and dehumanize black people and especially black women. African American women playwrights defy stereotypical portrayals of blacks and reveal the real essence of black life. Their plays reflect the lives of black people and the social conditions which have restricted their lives since the late nineteenth century. They portray black women's reality, present realistic images of black people, dramatize African American life as it is and consequently enrich our understanding of African American culture. In this way, these women use theatre as a way of struggling against the politics of race and gender which undermine the humanity of black people in the American white male-dominated world.

Thence, the question that arises is why these African American women playwrights focus their work on the demystification of the white stereotypical conception of black people.

First and foremost, they use the theatre as a way of challenging the dominant racial and gender ideologies prevalent in American society because they realize the important role that social and gender labels play in the debasement and dehumanization of the entire black race. This becomes apparent if we take into consideration some of the basic derogatory characteristics that are usually attributed to black people throughout African American history. As Michelle Hester rightly argues, "[c]ommonly for black men, the stereotypical images were those of the comic buffoon, the lazy shiftless Negro, the Uncle Tom, and the savage Negro brute, while for black women there were the sexless domineering mammy types, the loose trolops, and the tragic mulattoes" (249). Hester's perceptive analysis demonstrates how distorted the images of black people are and how the description of the black character depends on exaggerations and inaccuracies. These derogatory characterizations against black people alter, falsify and misrepresent the true essence of black character.

Therefore, stereotyping is a means of white racial propaganda which underlines the façade of the early twentieth century American racial and gender ideology. Black women playwrights' focus on the eradication of white stereotypes against black people has a double purpose. On the one hand, their plays reveal that stereotypical clichés and prejudices are actually façades and mechanisms that white patriarchy contrives and perpetuates in order to serve its own interests and keep black people and especially black women in their subjugated position. On the other hand, the fact that these plays stop reinforcing stereotypes about blacks can be perceived as an appeal for justice because black people's humanity is not acknowledged and recognized by white patriarchy.

The role of stereotyping is multiple because through a culmination of clichés white patriarchy is able to construct and deconstruct black manhood as well as womanhood. According to T. E. Perkins,

> the positive or negative evaluation involved in a stereotype will be determined by the interests of the dominant groups in society. Black stereotypes uphold white supremacy; stereotypes of the poor or the working class present these groups as inherently less intelligent than the upper classes, thereby justifying the social order. Stereotypes of women evaluate characteristics based on their desirability vis-à-vis men. (qtd. in Seiter 69)

The strength in Perkins' argument lies in her recognition that stereotypes are primarily addressed to oppressed groups and are reinforced by the dominant group. They are actually pejorative concepts whose primary role is to control and manipulate black minority groups because the reinforcement of white patriarchal values and assumptions contributes to the perpetuation of hegemonic ideologies of American patriarchal superiority. Therefore, stereotyping contributes to the relegation of black people and especially black women to the lowest rungs of the American social ladder because labeling is equated with ownership and possession.

There is no doubt that labeling captures and deconstructs the real essence of black life. When the white society puts labels on black people, its ultimate goal is to degrade, exploit and manipulate them. Whites endorse negative stereotypes of blacks in order to protect their social hegemony, preserve the authenticity of their own identity and deprive black people of their own authentic self and history. Early black women playwrights were aware of the clichés that made up African American history and pinpointed the importance of naming in the approach of history in their plays. Susan-Lori Parks highlights the relationship between history and theatre asserting that:

> Since history is a recorded or remembered event, theatre, for me, is the perfect place to "make" history-that is, because so much of African-American history has been unrecorded, dismembered, washed out, one of my tasks as playwright

> is to-through literature and the special strange relationship between theatre and real-life-locate the ancestral burial ground, dig for bones, find bones, hear the bones sing, write it down. (4)

Susan-Lori Parks insightfully points out that black people are based on a history that is written for them and not by them in order to form their identity. This means that African American heritage is dependent on white accounts full of constructed myths. Admittedly, the construction of myths is one of the most effective ways whites use in order to protect their cultural superiority and consequently justify and legalize racial and gender discrimination. This is why the plays written by the early African American women dramatists can be considered to be historical documents. They depict African American life as it is and they portray black characters truthfully without white interference. Their plays are part of the African American history because they represent how black people used to live.

What these African American women playwrights achieve by breaking down the stereotypes that confine black people in such an inferior position is to present African Americans as fully recognized American citizens. Their plays portray black characters that disengage themselves from the derogatory implications that the racial labels connote and find the strength to define themselves through the recognition of the values which form the black soul and spirit. The racial labels and prejudices surrounding them are transformed into a source of self-awareness and power since the heroes of the plays break down the white mechanisms which restrict their black identity and find the strength to challenge the white dominant society. The negative connotations of the derogatory terms that characterize them are subverted and the protagonists' lives are approached from a more humane perspective. In these plays, black women playwrights try to diminish the endorsement of negative black stereotypes which repress black identity and find out all those elements which represent the Negro life truthfully. In this way, these women playwrights move their black protagonists

from a place of marginalization to a place of power, value and strength. These playwrights want to recreate and reveal the essence of the black identity without white patriarchal interference. The black characters assert their rights as American citizens, claim their humanity and establish an independent black identity.

Although the contribution of the early twentieth century African American women playwrights to the American dramatic canon is inestimable, their works were excluded from the commercial theatre of the period, were hardly acknowledged and most of them never reached the stage. Even to this day, early black female playwrights continue to be neglected and have received very little scholarly attention although their voices are original and their work is unique because they reveal the black experience from a feminine perspective. Although these early plays written by black women dramatists played a crucial role in the development of the African American female drama between 1950s and 1980s, their exclusion from the mainstream culture of the time creates the impression that the African American female drama began in the second half of the twentieth century when prominent African American female voices began to appear in the foreground. This is obvious if we take into consideration the fact that the first play written by an African American woman that debuted on Broadway was *A Raisin in the Sun* by Lorraine Hansberry in 1959. However, black female dramatic practice began even earlier, laying the foundations for the emergence and success of the subsequent generations of black female playwrights.

Michelle Hester correctly points out that:

> Today when we think of black women playwrights the names that come to mind are Ntozake Shange, Lorraine Hansberry, Alice Childress, and Adrienne Kennedy. The endeavors and inroads that these women have made and continue to make in drama could not have occurred without the struggle and ground breaking works of early black women playwrights such as Angelina

> Weld Grimké, Alice Dunbar-Nelson, Georgia Douglas Johnson, May Miller, Mary Burill, Myrtle Smith Livingston, Ruth Gaines-Shelton, Eulalie Spence, Zora Neale Hurston, and Marita Bonner. (248)

Therefore, it is obvious that the study of these early African American women playwrights undermines the belief that the African American female drama began with the production of Hansberry's play. Early twentieth century African American plays inspired and encouraged the recent well-known black writers Ntozake Shange, Alice Childress, Andrienne Kennedy and Lorraine Hansberry. There is no doubt that these recent black female voices in the American theatre have been influenced by a group of largely neglected black women playwrights and a more thorough study can reveal their important role in the development of black drama.

It is no wonder that their playwriting achievements remained unheralded if we take into account the social and racial conditions that prevailed in the American dramatic reality in the first half of the twentieth century. Female struggle for acknowledgement within a socio-historical and dramatic context was a hurdle race for these black women playwrights. These early dramatists were overshadowed, never received the significance they deserved and their plays were excluded from publication and production due to several factors. First of all, these women playwrights were not only victims of racial discrimination but also of gender oppression. Their lives were tormented by both racism and sexism. They carried a double burden because they suffered both as women and as racial others. The strength of this argument can be illustrated by comparing the fate of black male dramatists with that of black women dramatists. While the plays by black female dramatists started to be published and produced during the late 1880s[1], the first play to be produced by an African American male

[1] Pauline Elizabeth Hopkins was one of the earliest black female playwrights whose play *Slave's Escape: or the Underground Railroad* was performed by the Hopkins' Colored Troubadours *in Boston in 1880* (Perkins, Kathy A. 2).

writer was that of William Henry Brown's *The Drama of King Shotaway* in 1823[2]. The juxtaposition between black male and female dramatists can become more obvious by comparing the African American dramas that were first produced on Broadway. While Garland Anderson's play *Appearances* was the first play to be produced on Broadway by an African American in 1925, Lorraine Hansberry's play was debuted on Broadway in 1959. What is clear is the fact that black male dramatists got their plays produced or at least published more easily than black female playwrights. Although black women playwrights' social status was debased due to their blackness in the American white male-dominated society, their gender was an added burden in their acknowledgement as playwrights. This means that black women were in an even subordinate position than that of black men in white patriarchal society because of their sex and race. Therefore, they lived in the margins due to racial and gender barriers.

Another reason for their exclusion from mainstream culture was the prejudice of white theatre managers, directors and producers they had to face. Georgia Douglas Johnson is the most characteristic example of an African American playwright whose plays were never produced during her lifetime. According to Joyce Meier, "[o]f the several plays Johnson submitted to the Federal Theatre Project, a government-sponsored arts program that was part of the Works Projects Administration of the late 1930s, none, *Safe* among them, was ever produced" (118). Female voices were banished from the American dramatic tradition because writing for the theatre was traditionally addressed to men and not to women. Although most of the early black women playwrights were acknowledged as poets, they were overlooked as playwrights[3]. Despite their contribution to the development of African American drama, they were only acknowledged as poets. While poetry was considered to be a feminine genre,

[2] William Henry Brown, who is also known as Mr. Brown, founded a theatrical group in 1821 which was called the African Company. He staged his own play *The Drama of King Shotaway* in 1823 and several other Shakespearean plays in the theatre he established known as the African Grove Theatre (Branch, William B. xvi).

[3] Although Georgia Douglas Johnson wrote almost 28 plays and was a pioneer in the development of American anti-lynching plays, she is widely known as the most prolific African American poet of the Harlem Renaissance. According to Claudia Tate, she is considered to be the "lady poet" of the Harlem Renaissance (Stephens, Judith 87, 88).

playwriting was believed to be a genre that only men could engage with. If one considers that theater is the most public form of art, it becomes obvious why poetry is considered to be a domestic genre. Theatre is an interactive relation with its society and influences its spectators because it is addressed directly to a large audience. It challenges its audience and confronts its spectators directly because it is a means of social protest and revolt. Therefore, it was believed that women were not able to write serious drama and could not preoccupy themselves with a genre which was considered revolutionary and propagandistic since they were excluded from the public sphere.

It seems that theatre managers, directors and producers were not ready to appreciate black women dramatists' achievements because theatre was ruled by men. Thus, white male publishers, producers, theatre managers and directors played a significant role in black women dramatists' exclusion from dramatic legacy. They accepted primarily male-authored texts for publication and production. Due to the limited staging opportunities, black women dramatists knew that their plays would never be staged and were accustomed to writing plays that were only to be read. As Kathy Perkins so aptly puts it, "[m]any of these women, such as the propagandist playwrights, wrote plays not expecting ever to see them staged. Bonner would write on her plays 'a play to be read,' as opposed to being performed" (16). Since theater was ruled by white men, black women's depreciation was inevitable and the stage of a theatre was a place inaccessible for them. This is why Perkins argues that "[t]he few plays that were performed were usually put on by libraries, churches, schools, or clubs within the black community" (16).

Thus, black women playwrights were excluded from the American stage either because the theatrical companies were unwilling to stage works written by women or because African American theatre lacked the necessary theatrical knowledge to compete with the white mainstream theatre. As a matter of fact, there were some technical factors that

contributed to the depreciation of black theatre in general. According to Kathy Perkins, "[a] major problem facing black dramatists was the quality of their productions" (16). What Perkins wants to convey is that black theatrical companies were in a premature stage in comparison with the theatrical companies ruled by white owners whose shows were not amateurish but professional. Another problem that Perkins points out is that black dramatists "lacked experience in acting and directing" (16) and "lacked the technical knowledge and the finances to purchase sophisticated staging equipment" (16). There is no doubt that black theatre was in an amateurish stage due to its exclusion from white mainstream culture. Blacks' plays were not produced because they could not get the financial and professional help they needed.

However, it is important to note that even the audience was not receptive to plays written by African American women because the plays of that time were basically written for white audiences accustomed to representations of black people as caricatures with inferior intelligence. This means that white audiences were used to stereotypical portrayals of blacks on stage which owed their popularity to the minstrel tradition and its distorted representations of black people. The minstrel tradition was one of those cultural mechanisms that the white society used in order to justify its atrocities against black people and rationalize the dehumanization of the black race[4]. These shows ridiculed black songs, dance, speech, traditions and culture. The minstrel shows were especially popular with white working-class audiences in the North because they blurred the evils of slavery, presented slavery as a necessary institution, rationalized slaves' mistreatment, sentimentalized the crimes of slave life and appealed to the sensibilities of the white working class. Eric Lott rightly points out that "[w]orking-class values and desires were aired and secured in the minstrel show"

[4] Minstrel shows gained popularity in the early 1840s in America and became one of the most popular theatrical forms until the second half of the twentieth century. They were basically performed by white actors who dressed up in blackface as plantation slaves. The most famous characters that appeared in these shows over and over again were Jim Crow, Jim Dandy and Zip Coon (Lewis, Catherine M., and J. Richard Lewis Introduction).

because “blackface provided a convenient mask through which to voice class resentments of all kinds—resentments directed as readily toward black people as toward upper-class enemies” (68).

Freda Scott analyzes meticulously how the American dramatic art used stereotypical images of black people on stage which did not represent the essence of black personality and life:

> The Stage Negro of the popular theatre reflected the status of the Black person in America: a native American alien. He was the comic minstrel, a grotesque parody of himself whether in blackface or out; he was Rastus or Zip Coon or Jim Dandy. He was the faithful, often pathetic servant, epitomized by Uncle Tom. He was the tragic mulatto cursed by Black blood as seen in *The Octoroon* or *The Nigger*. He was the bad buck, like *Porgy's Crown*. He was exotic, sensual, loosely constrained by conventions of morality or society. (428)

These minstrel images did not represent black people and life accurately. These shows featured black characters as happy, carefree and joyous concealing the crimes that were committed against them. White theatrical companies accepted and perpetuated these images and myths about blacks because minstrel shows served white hegemonic interests and earned immense sums of money by ridiculing black life. The audience incorporated such representations and ideologies unconsciously as a real mode of life and viewed the humiliating treatment of black people not as a social phenomenon that had to be solved but as a clear case of reality that should not be scrutinized or criticized. In this way, the audience took the humiliating treatment of the black characters for granted.

Even those white male playwrights who wanted to disengage themselves from the minstrel tradition, found it difficult because these minstrel images had been imprinted in the

American white consciousness because minstrel shows were the most popular form of American entertainment[5]. As Michelle Hester so aptly puts it,

> even when white playwrights attempted to "celebrate the Negro," their endeavors only ended in reinscribing the existing stereotypes. For example, white playwrights such as Eugene O'Neill, William Vaughn Moody, Marc Connelly, and Paul Green, all, at some point, used the Negro as their subject matter in an attempt to valorize black people. However, these "well-intentioned" white representations of black life and black people in drama did no more than reinforce the stereotypes already fixed about blacks. Whether the savage brute image changed to the noble savage in Eugene O' Neill's *Emperor Jones* or if "Negro themes" were expressed in Paul Green's *In Abraham's Bosom,* "the work of many white playwrights did not address the experiences of Blacks in any serious way". (249)

These plays show the weakness of white dramatists to disengage themselves from the stereotypical views regarding the firmly-rooted racial beliefs. White dramatists were ignorant of black history and went to great lengths in order to understand the consequences of slavery, racism and stereotyping on black psyche. They were ignorant of blacks' bloody history and could not understand it because they lacked the blacks' traumatic experience. While white dramatists lacked accuracy and objectivity, black dramatists' experiences were mutually implicative within the American racist culture. There is no doubt that black dramatists were more emotionally involved in the black-white history as well as the most reliable tellers of the perpetuation of slavery and racism because blacks were integral parts of the injustice against them. They were living creatures of the black history and they were part of the living

[5] Eugene O'Neill's plays *The Emperor Jones* (1920) and *All God's Chillun Got Wings* (1924), Dorothy and DuBois Heywood's *Porgy* (1927), Marc Connelly's *Green Pastures* (1930) and Paul Green's *In Abraham's Bosom* (1926) were only some of the most well-known plays written by white male dramatists in the first half of the twentieth century (Perkins, Kathy A. 4).

history of racism. White male dramatists could not change the prevailing views on blacks because they presented superficial aspects of black life and created one-dimensional images of blacks.

The fact that black women playwrights attempt to create an authentic representation of black reality, restore the distorted images of black people in public esteem and reveal the black experience through a feminine perspective, differentiates their work not only from that of the minstrel tradition and white male playwrights but also from that of black male playwrights[6] and white female playwrights[7]. Rita Dandridge pinpoints the differences between African American men and women playwrights, arguing that "[w]hile both sexes wrote propaganda plays, folk dramas, and historical sketches, women invariably used female protagonists whose attitudes and decisions reflect their gender roles as mothers, daughters, sisters, and wives" (141, 142). Dandridge correctly points out that although both male and female black playwrights reject racial stereotypes and use the same discourse, that is, the discourse of freedom and racial equality, black female playwrights achieve to offer a gender perspective on the issue of black racial identity due to the interdependence of racial and sexual oppression.

Therefore, black women's plays provide a more realistic image of black women because their voices capture the courage and perseverance of black women who are victims of racial and gender discrimination. Their plays provide a realistic and representative image of the female identity before 1950s. Black women's plays explore the hardships that black people experience from the female protagonists' point of view. Female playwrights take female otherness from the margins, reposition it and in this way they attack the patriarchal

[6] Willis Richardson's play *The Chip Woman's Fortune* (1923), Garland Anderson's *Appearances* (1925), Frank Wilson's *Meek Mose* (1928), Wallace Thurman's *Harlem* (1929), Langston Hughes's *Mullatto* (1935) and Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1941) were some of the most well-known plays written by black male dramatists in the first half of the twentieth century (Perkins, Kathy A. 7).

[7] Rachel Crothers, Neith Boyce, Susan Glaspell, Zona Gale, Zoe Atkins, Edna St. Vincent Millay and Sophie Treadwell were some of the most well-known white female dramatists of the first half of the twentieth century (Brown-Guillory, Elizabeth 3).

system from within. While black male dramatists depict the position of the black man in America, the focal point of black women's plays is the female condition and the race problem through a feminist subtext.

Will Harris strengthens this position when he refers to black female playwrights' double purpose of writing their plays:

> These playwrights carried on a dual liberation motif within their plays. While dramatizing the plight of their race, as a means of both raising a black racial consciousness and appealing to a possible white audience, early black women playwrights also formulated dramatic strategies which enabled them to stage substantive, independent African American female presences, and thus propose their sexual equality. (205)

The strength of Harris' argument lies in his recognition that these black female playwrights not only demand racial justice but also reject the gender-based constraints that the patriarchal society imposes on them. This innovation differentiates them from black male playwrights and places them at the centre of American dramatic canon. The double oppression of racism and sexism could only be expressed accurately by African American female playwrights since the social constraints of white patriarchal society placed black women at the lowest levels of the social ladder even lower than black men. If black men faced racial prejudices, black women faced both racial and sexist prejudices.

Black female dramatists' work also differs from that of white women dramatists' plays in the first half of the twentieth century. Both white women playwrights and black women playwrights employ a gender approach in their plays. However, the conditions of oppression that black women faced were similar but also different from those of white women. Although white women faced a lot of sexual barriers due to their gender, they lived in a much more privileged position than that of black women who were doubly subjugated

due to their race and sex. White women's concerns differed from those of black women because they had different problems to face. In the first half of the twentieth century, while white women struggled to attain equal political, economic, social, educational and sexual rights to men, black women had still to face basic survival problems. The safety of the black family was in constant danger because of black men's lynchings and black women's oppression which was different and much more intense than the oppression that white women experienced. In addition, black women had to worry about their female children who faced the danger of being raped.

Apart from this, white women playwrights did not incorporate black women's plight within their plays. According to Josephine Donovan, "[w]hite women's ignorance of other women's experience is one of the primary forms of racism that women of color decry in the women's movement" (170). White women's struggle for equality did not include black women and this is something that is often criticized in black women's plays because white women's passivity to black women's humiliating condition contributed not only to black women's deteriorative condition but also to both black and white women's debasement. Joyce Meier insightfully points out that black women's plays are written for white women "who remain oblivious despite the fact they could potentially reach across the chasm of race and class to share and help alleviate that suffering by resisting racism in their own lives" (135). This means that white women did not achieve to incorporate black women to the gender problem in America and as a result they did not create a communicative channel and collaboration between black and white women. Thus, white women's plays depict the failure of alliances between black and white women across racial lines. As Barbara Smith explains, "[t]he mishandling of Black women writers by whites is paralleled more often by their not being handled at all" (171, 172).

In order to understand the factors and reasons that differentiate black female dramatists' plays from those of the minstrel tradition, black male playwrights, white male playwrights and white women playwrights, it is important to take into account the historical context in which African American women playwrights wrote their plays. Before analyzing the content of each work, it is important to take into consideration the social and political background of these early plays written by African American women. There is no doubt that the political practices of the time influenced these women playwrights and shaped their way of thinking. The plays vividly reflect the political atmosphere of the time because they were written during a period when America was in turmoil as regards racial issues and the future of black race. According to the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, white masters had the right to capture and turn in black slaves who had escaped in the North. In 1857, the Dred Scott Decision removed the right of citizenship from black people. In 1865, the end of the American Civil War, which had lasted for four years, brought to the foreground the abolition of slavery. The Fifteenth Amendment of the Constitution was ratified in 1870 and gave African American men the right to vote. However, African American men were prevented from exercising their voting rights through stricter measures such as the Jim Crow laws[8].

However, white women's position in the social and political scene of the United States proved also hard even immutable in terms of civil rights. Although the Seneca Falls Convention was formulated in 1848, women got the right to vote almost half a century later[9]. Women were officially given the right to vote in 1920 through the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment of the Constitution. However, in some southern states African

[8]The Jim Crow laws enacted between 1877 and 1965. They legalized segregation between black and white people. Black people were segregated and excluded from all public forms of human activity. Public schools, restaurants, waiting rooms and theaters were segregated. According to Jim Crow laws, black people were considered to be second-class citizens and interracial relations were prohibited. After almost one hundred years, racial segregation was judged illegal and these inhumane laws were overruled by the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 (Doak, Robin S. 18, 19, and Tischauser, Leslie V. xxiii, 1, 2, 4, 5).

[9] The Seneca Falls Convention, which was held at Seneca Falls, New York in 1848, is considered to be the first women's rights convention in American history. Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott were the leading figures of this convention. Stanton presented the *Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions* in the convention which is a document about the role of women in society and is based on the Declaration of Independence. This convention is considered to be one of the first white women's rights movements (Schneir, Miriam 76, 77).

American women got the right to vote after 1960s. This means that African American women were positioned to the lowest levels of the social ladder. They were doubly marginalized due to racial and gender stereotypes and prejudices. African American women had to wait for both the Fifteenth and the Nineteenth Amendment to be ratified in order to be able to exercise their voting rights.

Despite the fact that black and white American women succeeded in obtaining the right to vote in 1920, the Equal Rights Amendment, which declared equal rights for all women, went to the state legislatures for ratification in 1972. However, it was only ratified by thirty-five states instead of thirty-eight states by the 1982 deadline and thus it failed to gain approval in the late 1970s[10]. Although the first wave of American feminism began in the 1830s, the very cornerstones of patriarchal society continued to define female identity and played the most important role in women's cultural conditioning and adoption of specific male assumptions. Thus, black women were more marginalized than white women and black men by specific sectors of the American educational, political, economic and social system because their struggle for independence, freedom and equality was not acknowledged and justified.

Despite the difficulties that early African American women faced in order for their plays to be published and produced, there were at least some factors that gave these black women the opportunity to write their plays although most of them were never produced during their lifetime. First of all, W. E. B. Du Bois[11] and Charles S. Johnson[12] organized

[10] See Dautrich, Kenneth, and David A. Yalof 143.

[11] W. E. B. Du Bois graduated from Harvard University and his Harvard doctoral thesis was published in 1896. He was a prolific author and he wrote a collection of essays called *The Souls of Black Folk.* He was one of the founders of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). It was founded in 1909 and was an African American civil rights organization which fought against racial injustice and discrimination. He was also the editor of the NAACP's journal, the *Crisis* whose circulation started in 1910. (Horne, Gerald, and Mary Young 2, 3. Gates, Jr., Henry Louis, and Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham 247, 248). According to Elizabeth Brown-Guillory, "[a]s a result of support from the NAACP, between 1910 and 1930 blacks owned and operated approximately 157 theaters" (2).

[12] Charles S. Johnson served as Chairman of the Department of Social Sciences at Fisk University. He worked as a director for the National Urban League which was a civil rights organization against racial discrimination. He was also the editor of the National Urban League's magazine, *Opportunity.* What is more, he published *The Negro in Chicago: A Study of Race Relations and a Race Riot* (Gilpin, Patrick J. 300).

writing contests in their magazines *Crisis* and *Opportunity* respectively and a large number of black women took part in them. These dramatic contests were launched from 1925 to 1926 and the majority of winners were women. Kathy Perkins attributes women's participation in the dramatic practice "to the fact that since black women were not in any leadership position as compared to black men, these plays provided a unique opportunity for their voices to be heard" (qtd. in Harris 206). These contests gave the opportunity to women artists to write plays because the contestants were not discriminated by their gender.

Du Bois believed that the advancement of the black race could be accomplished through the development of black arts. For this reason, he founded the Krigwa Players Little Theatre Group in 1926 which gave opportunities to black playwrights to demonstrate their intellectual abilities and be acknowledged by the mainstream white theatre community[13]. Du Bois believed that the New Negro theatre should express the real aspect of black life and not remain passive in the misleading representations of black culture that had been promoted through minstrelsy. In order to achieve this, black playwrights had to express the uniqueness of their culture and liberate themselves from the conventions and dictates of the white mainstream culture. Du Bois believed that the black theatre should fulfill two basic principles. As he explains, "[t]he plays of a real Negro theatre must be: *One: About us*. That is, they must have plots which reveal Negro life as it is. *Two: By us*. That is, they must be written by Negro authors who understand from birth and continual association just what it means to be a Negro today" (qtd. in Perkins 5). Black playwrights fulfilled these basic principles because they experienced on a daily basis what it was like to be a Negro in America. Also, they could realistically express the social, political and educational obstacles imposed upon black people by whites and especially the marginalization of black women.

[13] See Perkins, Kathy A. 5, 6.

Du Bois' advice as regards the *Crisis* writing contest was specific. He called the contestants to be sincere and write about black life as they experienced it:

> Write about things as you know them….In the *Crisis,* at least, you do not have to confine your writings to the portrayal of beggars, scoundrels and prostitutes; you can write about ordinary decent colored people if you want. On the other hand do not fear the Truth. Plumb the depths. If you want to paint Crime and Destitution and Evil paint it. Do not try to be simply respectable, smug, and conventional. Use propaganda if you want. Discard it and laugh if you will. But be true, be sincere, be thorough, and do a beautiful job. (qtd. in Scott 434)

Du Bois' guidelines helped the playwrights who took part in the contest to disengage themselves from the myths surrounding black life, shake the foundations of America's racism and oppression, explore black identity through a modern axis of vision and resist the sterile conventional norms of white society. Therefore, Johnson's and Du Bois' contribution to the development of African American drama and by extension black female drama was very important because their magazines supported and encouraged black artists to express their feelings and thoughts in a society where blacks people's freedom of action was restricted.

Besides Du Bois and Johnson, Alain LeRoy Locke[14] and Montgomery T. Gregory contributed to the development of African American drama and were a basic source of inspiration and advice for these black women playwrights because most of these women had studied and graduated from Howard University where both Locke and Gregory served as professors or were generally influenced by the Howard community. With Locke and Montgomery Gregory's help, the university established a Department of Dramatic Arts in 1921 and created the Howard Players which was one of the first black theatre groups in the

[14] Alain LeRoy Locke is considered to be the "Father of the New Negro Movement" due to his work *The New Negro* (1925). *The New Negro,* whose editor is Locke, is an anthology of writings by African Americans which helped a large number of texts written by blacks to be recognized. He graduated from Harvard University and was the first African American Rhodes Scholar. He served as a professor and chairman at Howard University for forty-two years (Holmes, Eugene C. 82, 84, 85).

United States[15]. All these endeavors to develop black theatre were part of the Little Theatre Movement. As Judith Stephens points out, "[i]n the 1920s the flowering of black art and literature known as the Harlem Renaissance coincided with the Little Theatre Movement—a nationwide movement to create community-centered, amateur (i.e., not-for-profit) theatres in which plays, mostly in one act, could be inexpensively produced" (658). This movement was an alternative to white American mainstream commercial theatre and encouraged small theatre groups to produce their plays creating noncommercial pieces of art. The development of the noncommercial theatre was an answer to the commercialism of American mainstream theatre[16].

What is more, in the 1920s a great number of black people migrated to New York and especially in the neighborhood of Harlem, making the breakthrough which is known as the Harlem Renaissance[17]. James Weldon Johnson rightly points out in one of his essays that "Harlem will become the intellectual, the cultural and financial center for Negroes of the United States, and will exert a vital influence upon all Negro peoples" (27). As a result, Harlem became the heart of the "New Negro" culture and influenced not only those who lived in the district but also the early twentieth-century African American women playwrights who lived and worked in Washington D.C.

All these factors encouraged black people to try their take on dramatic practice and write under a common axis of vision. The fact that early twentieth century black women playwrights shared common experiences and a common consciousness as regards racial and

[15] See Perkins, Kathy A. 5, 6, 7, 8.

[16]The Little Theatre Movement began in 1912 and peaked in the 1920s. Some important theatrical groups of the Little Theatre Movement were the Toy Theatre (1912), the Chicago Little Theatre (1912), the Neighborhood Playhouse (1915), the Washington Square Players (1915) and the Provincetown Players (1915) (Hochman, Stanley 241).

[17] The first Great Migration between 1910 and 1930 was actually the movement of African Americans from rural southern states to urban northern industrial cities. The migration of black people to urban industrial centers revealed black people's escape from segregation, violence, poverty, lynching and lack of educational opportunities. The North offered better educational, job and social opportunities to black people as well as a promise for better living conditions. In the 1920s, most black people migrated to Harlem which became the largest African American neighborhood in America. Harlem Renaissance was actually the political and artistic movement that flourished in Harlem in the 1920s. Black arts such as black drama, poetry, music (jazz, blues), visual arts and literature, which were largely abandoned and neglected, flourished and Harlem became the political centre for social change (Patton, Venetria K., and Maureen Honey xxvii, xxviii, xxix, xxx, xxxi, xxxii).

sexist oppression is reflected in their plays. Although only the plays written by Grimké, Miller, Graham and Livingston are going to be analyzed in this research paper, it is necessary to refer to the common elements shared by the most early black women playwrights[18]. First and foremost, the majority of the plays were written by middle-class African American educated women. Most of them lived at some point in Washington D.C. and were able to depict the lives of working-class black people. Women dramatists could depict black life more accurately in Washington D.C. because the black bourgeoisie had migrated to Harlem whose theatres were mainly controlled by whites while the NAACP's Drama Committee, which was ruled by blacks, operated outside Washington D.C. According to Kathy Perkins, "[w]hile many of the male playwrights wrote about life in Harlem and other major cities, black women were more diverse in their geographic location, providing a greater sense of the black community on a national level by setting the action in rural communities throughout the country as well as in large cities" (2). Furthermore, these playwrights gathered in Georgia Douglas Johnson's home known as the "S Street Salon" where they could exchange ideas and talk about various themes. Important figures of the Harlem Renaissance participated in these meetings where there was collaboration among black scholars, thinkers, authors, poets and dramatists. In addition, most of these women playwrights graduated from Howard University and taught at M. Street High School which is located in Washington D.C. They were also influenced by Du Bois, Locke and Gregory who played a very important role in their spiritual awakening[19].

Moreover, most plays are one-act plays, consisting of few pages and set in the past or the present. They usually depict working-class southern families who use regional dialect and the setting is basically domestic because it takes place in an African American household. In

[18] Some of the early African American women playwrights that dramatized black people's predicaments in the first half of the twentieth century were May Miller, Georgia Douglas Johnson, Eulalie Spence, Angelina Weld Grimké, Mary Burrill, Zora Neale Hurston, Marita Bonner, Alice Dunbar-Nelson, Ruth Gaines-Shelton, Anna J. Cooper, Harriet Gibbs Marshall, Myrtle Smith Livingston, Ottie Graham and Shirley Graham. They are considered to be the black women dramatists of the Harlem Renaissance (Perkins, Kathy A. 8, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14).

[19] See Harris, Will 206, 207, and Perkins, Kathy A. 2, 14, 15, 16.

addition, the fact that these plays were written by black women for black women from 1910 to 1940 provides a more realistic and representative image of the female identity before 1950s. These plays display the real anxieties that black women experienced not only as women but also as racial others. The protagonists are basically black women and children who experience racial injustice and have to face the consequences of racial and gender marginalization. The children are either lynched or sold and black men are usually absent from the household because they are usually the victims of lynching. White characters are usually absent from the plot or are portrayed as lynch mob members. There are also female protagonists who decide either to kill their children or never to conceive in order to save them from racial discrimination. The protagonists are also confined into the domestic sphere and excluded from the public sphere. That is why the settings of the plays are domestic and the whole action usually takes place in the house[20].

These plays are considered to be social and historical documents because they reveal the social conditions that affected black women's lives in America. They reveal the plight of black people in America because they focus on crucial themes such as poverty, unemployment, education, miscegenation, racial divisions, injustice, violence, marginalization, color prejudice, struggle for equality, black revolution, freedom of choice, black soldiers, female courage, lynching, mob violence, interracial marriage, race relations, Euro-American standards of beauty, white middle-class ideals, motherhood, domestic servitude, infanticide, Christian beliefs and biblical traditions. These themes are basically analyzed from a female perspective and the women playwrights explore the effects of these hardships on black families and female psyche[21].

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[20] See Harris, Will 209, 212, Perkins, Kathy A. 2, and Stephens, Judith 661.

[21] Georgia Douglas Johnson's *A Sunday Morning in the South* (1925) addresses the theme of lynching. Mary Burrill's *They That Sit in Darkness* (1919) focuses on poverty, lack of education and unemployment. Georgia Douglas Johnson's *Blue Blood* is about miscegenation and race relations. Zora Neale Hurston's *Color Struck* (1925) refers to white standards of beauty and the problem of color line. Mary Burill's *Aftermath (*1919) is about a black soldier and his father's murder by whites. Last but not least, Marita Bonner's *The Purple Flower* (1926) is about black revolution and black people's struggle for equality (Perkins, Kathy A. 10, 12).

Chapter I: Angelina Weld Grimké's play *Rachel*

"I still think it's important for people to have a sharp, ongoing critique of marriage in patriarchal society – because once you marry within a society that remains patriarchal, no matter how alternative you want to be within your unit, there is still a culture outside you that will impose many, many values on you whether you want them to or not."

bell hooks

(qtd. in Mukhopadhyay 41)

Angelina Weld Grimké was born in Boston, Massachusetts in 1880. She took some courses at Harvard University from 1904 to 1910 and she spent most of her life in Washington D.C. where she taught English at M Street High School[22]. The famous abolitionist Angelina Grimké Weld was the playwright's aunt[23]. Angelina Weld Grimké was one of the first African American women playwrights who tried to expose the racial and gender barriers imposed on black women in her play *Rachel.* The play was first performed in 1916 by the Drama Committee of the NAACP and was eventually published four years later, in 1920[24]. Angelina Grimké is considered to be one of the proto-feminist black women playwrights because her purpose was to raise the female consciousness not only as regards racial but also feminist issues.

What is amazing about the play is that it was written, performed and produced by black people. It is the first non-musical play and it is not written in dialect. In addition, it is the first play by an African American woman that was performed before an American audience. Montgomery T. Gregory has claimed that the play was "the first attempt to use the stage for race propaganda in order to enlighten the American people relative to the lamentable condition of ten million colored citizens in this free republic" (qtd. in Krasner 61). The play is considered to be an answer to as well as an appeal for justice against D.W. Griffith's racist film *The Birth of a Nation* (1915)[25] which was full of black derogative

[22] See Valade III, Roger M. 104, and Herron, Carolivia 7. Angelina Weld Grimké's father was Archibald Henry Grimké. He graduated from Harvard Law School and his contribution was significant in law, journalism, literature, public affairs and civil rights activism (Gatewood, Willard B. 135). Her mother's name was Sarah Stanley and she was a white writer. She abandoned her family probably due to the strong opposition she faced for her interracial marriage after the playwright's birth. She suffered from mental aberration or physical incapacity (Herron, Carolivia 6, and Valade III, Roger M. 104).

[23] Angelina Grimké Weld was an American abolitionist who played an important role in the women's feminist movement. She was an advocate of women's rights and she wrote *Appeal to the Christian Women of the South (1836)*. It is an innovative text because she uses the ideals and beliefs of Christianity as well as The Declaration of Independence to attack the institution of slavery. The playwright, Angelina Weld Grimké was named after her father's aunt. Her father was the natural son of the abolitionist's brother. After the death of her brother, the playwright's family lived with the abolitionist's family (Lerner, Gerda 277, 278, 289, 290, and Herron, Carolivia 5).

[24] After its first premiere, two other productions were mounted in New York City and in Cambridge, Massachusetts in 1917. However, the play was not performed again after that. The most recent production is that by the Spelman College in 1991 (Perkins, Kathy A., and Judith L. Stephens 25).

[25] In *The Birth of a Nation*, the black characters were played by white actors in blackface. They were also portrayed as dangerous human beings not capable of controlling their sexual urges towards white women. Ku Klux Klan was portrayed as a force against evil concealing the fact that large numbers of people were lynched due to the sterile racist beliefs of this terrorist organization (Patton, Venetria K., and Maureen Honey xxvi, and DeMello, Margo 27).

stereotypes and glorified the evils of racism and lynching. Admittedly, *Rachel* is a historical document that displays the reality of black life and the consequences of racial and gender oppression on the lives of black people and especially on black women.

The plot is set in New York City during the early 1900s when the social situation in America as regards racial issues was in turmoil. The play is about a middle-class African American family that has moved from the South and lives in the North. Mrs. Loving is the head of the household who takes in sewing in order to make a living. She is true to the meaning of her name because she has adopted Jimmy, a young boy in the neighborhood, whose parents have died and she takes care of an orphan child. However, the surname of the family is one of the most characteristic examples of irony in the play. Even a neighbor wonders of the meaning of their surname: "'Loving!' It's a strange name to come across—in this world" (153). The neighbor is surprised by their surname because they are called the Lovings in a racist society where white people do not respect and love blacks. Although irony is one of the dramatic devices that the playwright uses in order to appeal to her audience, its function is going to be analyzed in the following pages.

Mrs. Loving's daughter, Rachel, who is the protagonist of the play, cannot work as a teacher due to her black inheritance although she has a college degree. Thus, she also takes in sewing like her mother in order to contribute to the family income. Rachel's brother, Tom is an engineer but he works as a waiter for the same reasons. John Strong, Tom's friend works as a waiter and he proposes to Rachel. However, she refuses although she is in love with him because she cannot endure the repercussions of being a black wife and mother in a white patriarchal American society. The paternal figure is absent from the plot because he was murdered by a white lynch mob along with Rachel's seventeen-year-old half brother, George who tried to save him. They were lynched because Rachel's father protested against the lynching of an innocent black man. Mrs. Lane is a black woman whose daughter, Ethel has

fallen victim of racist insults at school and plays an important role in Rachel's awareness of the implications of racism for her identity as a woman and a future black mother.

It is important to take into consideration the fact that Rachel gradually liberates herself from the conventions of the white patriarchal society. She awakens only gradually to the fact that she is herself the next victim to suffer from the racial biases and limitations of white society. In the first act, Rachel seems to be the representative figure of motherhood. She embodies the sacred role of mother and she is presented as the maternal figure that is ready to sacrifice her own autonomous self at the altar of her children's happiness. She epitomizes the American middle-class value of motherhood and is not able at this point to realize how painful it is to be a black mother in the American white patriarchal society. Rachel expresses her maternal feelings, arguing that: "I think the loveliest thing of all the lovely things in this world is just (almost in a whisper) being a mother" (139). Although she is not still a mother, her vision and dream is to become one. She seems to have incarnated the ideal of motherhood as women's destiny. Womanhood and motherhood are inextricable parts in her ideology.

Her name reminds us of her predecessor, Rachel described in the bible that was unable to conceive any children and many years had to pass before she actually gave birth to a son. According to the bible, Jacob fell in love with Rachel and wanted to marry her. However, her father, Laban deceived him. On the night of the wedding, Jacob eventually got married to her sister, Leah who was older than Rachel. Thus, Leah was his first wife and Rachel was the second one. While Leah gave birth to four sons, Rachel was unable to conceive. She wanted desperately to become a mother and was jealous of her sister. As Herbert Lockyer explains, "Rachel's whole being was bound up in the desire to become a mother, so she cried to Jacob, 'Give me children, or else I die'" (129). Eventually, Rachel gave birth to Joseph. Her son fulfilled her deep desire for maternity and as Lockyer points

out, "[o]f all the children of Jacob, Joseph became the godliest and greatest. Renowned as the saviour of Israel he stands out as the most perfect type in the Bible of Him who was born of woman to become the Saviour of the world" (129).

In a similar way, the protagonist of the play illuminates the most essential characteristics of white American middle-class ideals and her life is the embodiment of the ideal of motherhood that most women aspire. She argues that: "[I]f I believed that I should grow up and not be a mother, I'd pray to die now" (139). She initially associates childless women with death. She considers that a woman without children is the most lamentable human being in the world because she is unable to fulfill her biological destiny, that is, her reproductive role. Rachel behaves and expresses herself in such a way because one of the traditional roles of women is that of motherhood. Every woman is expected to become a mother and fulfill her reproductive role in the white patriarchal society. Every woman is defined according to her reproductive capacity and her role as wife and mother. Women are socialized to believe that motherhood is the most natural role that they are expected to play. They are responsible for their children's development and their role as mothers is considered to be sacred.

Ellen Seiter explores the influence that the patriarchal stereotype of motherhood has on the formation of the female identity and investigates how the American patriarchal system uses stereotypical notions of maternity in order to serve its own interests:

> Many features of the good mother stereotype (such as chastity, self-sacrifice, cleanliness, obedience) are in fact characteristics of the good wife in traditional marriage, where the wife has very little social power. The stereotype confirms the belief that women must mother because they have the innate capacity to do so. What is absent from the stereotype – what it distorts – is the fact that childcare has a very low status in our society. As M. Rivka

> Polatnick has persuasively argued, one of the reasons that men do not rear children in our society is because so little social power is attached to it. (67)

I fully share Seiter's point of view on this matter because women are socialized to believe that it is their responsibility to nurture their children because mothering is an innate capacity that only women possess. Although this stereotype is not scientifically justified, it restricts women to specific roles that are not necessarily biologically compatible with them. On the contrary, domesticity and motherhood do not guarantee high social standing in the society and they serve men's interests because they exclude women from social power.

Despite Rachel's initial ignorance of the implications of racism and sexism for her identity as a future mother, she seems to have a natural inclination, love and preference for black children instead of white ones. It is not accidental that Rachel prefers brown and black babies more than other children: "I love them best, I pray God every night to give me, when I grow up, little black and brown babies—to protect and guard" (139). The fact that Rachel uses these two verbs "protect" and "guard" reveals that they need special help and guidance because they will face the hardships of racism and sexism from a very young age. Admittedly, Rachel does not realize at this point the reason for their protection but she feels subconsciously that they need special protection: "More than the other babies, I feel that I must protect them. They're in danger, but from what? I don't know. I've tried so hard to understand, but I can't" (139). She is not totally unaware of the atrocities of racism because as a child she had experienced the difficulty of being black: "I was twelve—when some big boys chased me and called me names. I never left the house afterwards—without being afraid. I was afraid, in the streets—in the school—in the church, everywhere, always, afraid of being hurt" (168). What she cannot understand at this point is the extent of the atrocities of racism on black women. She is still unaware of the lynching of her family, the few

employment opportunities for black people and the humiliation of the new generations of black children.

The playwright insists upon an initial picture of her heroine as one who craves for motherhood and feels this internal urge because she wants to reveal how shocking her transformation is when she decides to denounce motherhood, not only to the readers of the play and her audience but also to the protagonist herself. The juxtaposition between her initial desire for motherhood and her final disillusionment of the concept of motherhood becomes all the more intense through the development of the play. The playwright presents Rachel's transformation step by step because she wants to explain how her decision to reject motherhood is justified through the revelation of the social, racial and gender barriers that the white patriarchal society imposes upon black women. The whole action revolves around Rachel's decision to renounce what is considered sacred in women's consciousness, that is to say, motherhood. Throughout the play, the factors that strengthen her decision are revealed one by one and justify her painful decision.

There are several factors that lead her to make such a decision. Rachel learns that her father and half-brother were lynched ten years ago because her father castigated in the newspaper he owned the lynching of a black man, while she thought that they had abandoned their family. At this point, it seems that Rachel loses her innocence and starts to face life more critically. Secondly, both Rachel and her second brother are educated and possess the right qualifications for a well-paid job. However, both of them are excluded from the job market because, they are black and, additionally for Rachel, because she is a woman. Last but not least, Rachel falls apart when she learns about Ethel's and Jimmy's victimization at school. This last event changes Rachel's ideology completely. Her inability to reconcile with the prevailing white patriarchal clichés of motherhood forces her to follow a pathway different from the prescribed social conventions placed on women as wives and mothers.

Rachel is a young black woman who commits a kind of infanticide not by killing her children but by deciding never to marry and conceive in order to save her possible future children from the evils of racial and gender discrimination. She makes this bold decision, arguing that: "You God!—You terrible, laughing God! Listen! I swear—and may my soul be damned to all eternity, if I do break this oath—I swear—that no child of mine shall ever lie upon my breast, for I will not have it rise up, in the terrible days that are to be—and call me cursed" (157). She refuses motherhood because she finds it impossible to raise a child in a society that discriminates its citizens according to racial and gender criteria. She refuses motherhood as a strategy of resistance because she does not want to support a racist and patriarchal system that bases its strength on the manipulation of innocent young people. She realizes that black mothers do not have the same privileges as white mothers. Thus, she questions the ideal of motherhood because it cannot appeal in exactly the same way to all women. The protagonist reaches a state of shocking awareness and realization of the destiny of black people in a society built upon the ideals of democracy and freedom. The great discrepancy between the American political ideology and the reality of black people's lives awakens her to this realization.

To support this position one only need think of the notion of Republican Motherhood which was addressed to white middle-class American women while at the same time excluded the women of color from its ideology. In the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century, the ideology of Republican Motherhood came to dominate the American society. According to Dawn Sherman,

> [t]his ideology established that women of America's new republic, through their maternal instincts and familiar roles as mothers, would raise their sons to be virtuous and loyal citizens of the republic. As republican mothers, women

> were conveyors of truth, loyalty, and virtue, and, by rearing a loyal generation of children, they ensured the future of the democracy. (60)

This means that the concept of motherhood had acquired political connotations for white American women after the American Revolution when the new nation entered a process of identity formation. White American women were invested with the responsibility to instill moral values in their children. Their life was dedicated to teaching their children the values of moral virtue in order for them to become virtuous citizens. Since their role was to raise the future generations of male citizens and teach them the principles of liberty and government, their role as mothers included a new political purpose as protectors and guardians of the morals of the American society.

The ideology of Republican Motherhood tried to combine domesticity and politics giving white American women a rather illusory sense of social significance. In fact, women remained firmly locked within their domestic sphere while their social status and political identity were absorbed into those of their husbands'. This is obvious in the fact that women could exercise their political action only within the domestic sphere as wives and mothers. Although the ideology of Republican Motherhood did not give women the right to vote, it acknowledged the importance of female education, expanded the roles of white women providing them with a new political role and offered possibilities for women's real participation in civic culture. This means that republican ideology differentiated republican women's roles from those of colonial women. The fact that republican women were assigned the responsibility of shaping their husbands' behavior and providing their children civic education increased their social influence and reinforced the primacy of their role as educators. There is no doubt that the ideology of Republican Motherhood contributed to white women's gradual transformation of their exclusive domestic role because women were acknowledged as political beings and gained access to education.

There was the belief that the education of women would unify the country and would create a moral American character of citizenship because it would create cultural homogeneity among the multicultural American society. It was believed that the future of the new republic depended on American people's virtue. The only way for American citizens to become virtuous was through education. Education was associated with virtue. The ideal of Republican Womanhood was appropriated by white women in order to justify their entrance into the public sphere of activity and politics on the basis of their social role as upholders of morality and justice. The women who participated in the abolitionist and women's rights movements constructed an ideological framework that celebrated their capacity to purge society from evil and vice. Margaret Nash refers that

> [a]ccording to Mary Beth Norton, emphasis on virtue led to a new emphasis on households and therefore on women. She argues that prior to the Revolution political leaders viewed the domestic realm as peripheral to public welfare, but afterward they saw the home as pivotal to the fate of the republic. Political virtue became domesticated, and the republican mother became the "custodian of civic morality". (172)

The children's moral growth was dependent on their mothers' education. If a mother was not capable of instilling moral values in her children, this would have negative effects not only on a family's well-being but on the future of the American nation. Thus, female education was not considered to be an individual but a national obligation for each white middle-class American woman.

Their access to education is confirmed by the fact that more female academies were built at the time and fewer parents objected to their daughters' receiving education. Linda Kerber argues that "colonial women seldom received formal education, but that post-revolutionary republican ideology resulted in a surge of educational opportunities" (qtd. in

Nash 171). According to Linda Kerber and Mary Beth Norton, "[e]schewing the former 'education for marriage' with its focus on ornamentals (music, needlework, and modern languages), the new female academies taught grammar, arithmetic, and geography, subjects formerly reserved for males" (qtd. in Nash 173). Although these subjects were included only in male education curriculum, their inclusion in the female colleges and seminaries changed and reshaped the form of American education. Therefore, if republican women were adequately educated, it was believed that they could shape male behavior, refine men's manners, mold the character of future citizens and thus, contribute to the commonwealth.

However, the notion of Republican Ideology did not include all women. Working-class women and women of color were excluded from this ideology. As Dawn Sherman rightly asserts,

> [n]ot all women benefited from this evolution, however. Black women remained enslaved and subject to the whims of their masters. Native women lost their once beloved, admirable, and influential status within their tribes. Their land was measured, parceled, and fenced, as was their spirit. For women of color, liberation and independence remained elusive for many years to come. (76)

Dawn Sherman is right to point out that the notion of Republican Motherhood did not favor black women who continued to be classified as inferior human beings due to racial and gender classifications. Although the ideology of Republican Motherhood defined white women's roles in the early nineteenth century, its repercussions lasted until the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century when Grimké's play was written.

Rachel's decision to remain childless exposes the American ideal of motherhood as a mechanism that the white male society uses in order to exploit and manipulate women.

Rachel rejects the patriarchal stereotypes of motherhood and castigates the hypocrisy of male ideology in America. While the white culture praises the ideal of motherhood as a woman's biological destiny, black mothers are obliged to raise their children in a world that humiliates their children and treats them as inferior human beings. However, the psychological warfare is not the only wrong of racism. Black women are actually witnesses to their sons' lynching and their daughters' sexual abuse. This means that black bodies are victimized and violated by the white dominant culture. Therefore, there is a great divergence between the ideals that the white dominant culture promotes and the reality of black people's life. On the one hand, motherhood is considered to be a sacred ideal invested with political significance and, on the other, black women are powerless and defenseless to protect their own children.

Angelina Weld Grimké asserted that her purpose was to address the play's antiracist message not only to white men but also to white women. She herself wrote that:

> If anything can make all women sisters under their skins, it is motherhood. If, then, all the white women of this country could see, feel, understand just what effect their prejudice and the prejudice of their fathers, brothers, husbands, sons were having on the souls of colored mothers everywhere, and upon the mothers that are to be, a great power to affect public opinion would be set free and the battle would be half won. (qtd. in Armstrong 83, 84)

Grimké criticizes white women's indifference to the plight of black people and especially to black women's sufferings because their passivity strengthens the white patriarchal ideology of dominance and deteriorates the black female condition. Black women's sufferings can have an effect on white women's lives since they are also victims of sexist oppression. What is more, white mothers' children are those who can either stop or perpetuate black people's humiliation because they may either become members of lynch mob violence and black women's rapists or they can contribute to black people's acknowledgment of their rights

through their mothers' education. Grimké believes that since the color of the skin hinders women's solidarity, the condition that could unite them all despite their color and make them share a common experience and feeling is that of motherhood. There is no doubt that the playwright appeals to white mothers because they are the only ones who can sympathize with the fear and pain that black mothers experience when their children are lynched and fall victims to sexual harassment.

Except for the institution of motherhood, another mechanism that the play repudiates and denounces is that of marriage as a necessary institution to women's fulfillment as human beings. Marriage is presented as a social contract imposed by white patriarchy in order to impede women's independence and keep women subjugated both socially and economically. The play shakes the foundations of America's patriarchal ideology by exposing the very cornerstones of male dominion. One of these cornerstones is the institution of marriage because it is based on the arbitrary patriarchal assumption that women are dependent on men. When Mrs. Lane asks Rachel if she is married, Rachel responds negatively and Mrs. Lane advises her never to get married: "Don't marry—that's my advice" (155). Mrs. Lane warns Rachel not to marry because she realizes that women are considered to be men's property, instruments of pleasure, and sex objects during their marital life.

Rachel rebels against the institution of marriage when John, her brother's friend proposes to her. She rejects his marriage proposal because she does not want to raise black children who will live in constant danger. She tells John that she dreams of her future children and they beg her not to bring them into this racist world because their lives will be threatened by the doctrines and norms of the dominant white culture. She declares: "I can hear—my little children—weeping. They come to me generally while I'm asleep,—but I can hear them now.—They've begged me—do you understand?—begged me—not to bring them here;—and I've promised them—not to—I've promised" (166).

Although John is not the representative figure of patriarchal stereotypes and prejudices, he is trapped to some extent within patriarchal values and cannot completely escape from the premises of patriarchy because they are inextricable parts of his own personality. When John tells Rachel: "I can take you to some theatre, one night, this week" (153), it is evident that he objectifies her. Rachel realizes that the personal pronoun "I" that John uses has derogatory connotations and possessive insinuations. Thus, she responds without hesitation: "You talk as though I were a—a jelly-fish. You'll take me, how do you know I'll go?" (153). There is no doubt that John subconsciously exercises authority over Rachel. He acts according to the gender roles that the white society ascribes to both men and women. However, Rachel does not remain passive. As an act of rebellion, Rachel rejects patriarchal assumptions and breaks out of the arbitrary stereotypes imposed on women. She refuses to follow his orders and she tells him: "It's as if you're trying to master me. I think a domineering man is detestable" (153).

John's concept of happiness is completely deceitful and fallacious. It has nothing to do with black women's reality in the 1900s. When John starts describing the apartment he rented in order to accommodate his love with Rachel, he promises a future life for Rachel based on the domestic sphere: "On the sitting-room floor is a beautiful, Turkish rug—red, and blue and gold. It's soft—and rich—and do you know for whose little feet it is waiting? There are delicate curtains at the windows and a bookcase full of friendly, eager, little books.—Do you know for whom they are waiting?" (167). He believes that domesticity is associated with happiness. He can't understand that Rachel as a woman wants something different from her isolation in the domestic sphere, her sole responsibility for childcare and housework as well as her economic and social dependence on John.

Another patriarchal assumption that John accepts, adopts and takes for granted is that women are inherently weak, fragile and emotionally vulnerable. When he proposes to Rachel,

he tells her: “And somewhere—there’s a big, strong man—with broad shoulders. And he’s willing and anxious to do anything—everything, and he’s waiting very patiently. Little girl, is it to be—yes or no?” (167). Therefore, since women are unable to take care of themselves, they must be supported and protected by men. This conclusion is not only fallacious but also arbitrary. The stereotype of the fragile woman makes John believe that marriage will save Rachel from her inherently weak nature. He believes that the only way for a woman to be protected from the cruelties of the real world is marriage. What John cannot realize is that since he is a black man, he cannot protect Rachel from the oppressive racial American society. Black men cannot guarantee the safety of their family because they are defenseless and unprotected in front of a system that uses whatever means available in order to figuratively castrate the whole black race through political and social practices that destroy the harmonious relationship between the sexes and the peaceful life of the black family.

According to the codes of romantic love, men are expected to be the agents of action and those who take the initiative while women remain passively receptive of their love and affection. However, Rachel reverses the traditional sex roles and rejects John’s marriage proposal without thinking of the socially accepted gender roles. This is her way of declaring that she is nobody’s possession. John’s reaction to her refusal is indicative of his male ideas. He tells her: “You’re sick; you’ve brooded so long, so continuously,—you’ve lost—your perspective. Don’t answer, yet. Think it over for another week and I’ll come back” (168). John feels bewildered and her reaction takes him aback. He is unable to break down the social conventions and cannot understand Rachel’s internal need to lead an autonomous life that is not defined by white patriarchal norms.

It is evident that women’s submissiveness and obedience are taken for granted in the interpersonal relationships between the two sexes. Kate Millett insightfully points out that the role of each sex is formed and shaped according to patriarchal premises because the

socialization of both sexes into certain stereotypes and clichés guarantees the dominance of the male sex. Millett is correct when she claims that:

> [T]emperament involves the formation of human personality along stereotyped lines of sex category ("masculine" and "feminine"), based on the needs and values of the dominant group and dictated by what its members cherish in themselves and find convenient in subordinates: aggression, intelligence, force, and efficacy in the male; passivity, ignorance, docility, "virtue," and ineffectuality in the female. (26)

Rachel's decision transcends gender boundaries and she liberates herself from the rigid codes of propriety proving her struggle for an independent female identity. Her rejection of John's proposal proves the strength of her character and the need to disengage herself from every source of male oppression such as motherhood and marriage.

Rachel's rejection of the possibility of a heterosexual relationship with John can be viewed as an indication of the playwright's lesbianism. According to Carolivia Herron,

> [c]ritics such as Gloria Hull in *Color, Sex, and Poetry,* and Barbara Christian in *Black Feminist Criticism,* have discussed the hidden lesbian life of Angelina Weld Grimké as it affects her poetry. A large percentage of the Grimké poetic canon is indeed a record of her attempt to love and be loved by another woman. (4)

Although Grimké's poetic practice can be viewed as an expression of her lesbian nature, I would argue that the female protagonist of the play repudiates heterosexuality not because Grimké inclines towards lesbianism but because she comes to realize what Andrienne Rich has called "compulsory heterosexuality". Alice Rossi asserts that heterosexuality is based on the belief that "[b]iologically men have only one innate orientation—a sexual one that draws them to women,—while women have two innate orientations, sexual toward men and

reproductive toward their young" (qtd. in Rich 26). Andrienne Rich is right to point out that heterosexuality is a political and ideological institution that is used as a "beachhead of male dominance" (28). She realizes that heterosexuality is a cultural mechanism imposed by patriarchal society in order to exercise authority over the female sex. I fully share Andrienne Rich's point of view on this matter because heterosexuality is based on the arbitrary patriarchal assumption that women are biologically oriented only toward men and it puts obstacles in the way of their sexual freedom.

Black people's lack of opportunities in the job market and their degradation to menial work is another mechanism that white patriarchy uses in order to restrict black people's freedom and confine them to their traditional occupations of servants and housewives. There is no parallelism between education and job opportunities in American society for African Americans. Although most black people educated themselves in the 1900s and hoped for a better future in the North, the reality was that the job opportunities were limited due to their blackness despite the fact that some of them were better qualified than their white counterparts. Thadious Davis explains that:

> According to a 1900 federal census, 90 percent of employed African American women worked in personal or domestic service. A similar survey of New York City in 1910 indicated that 70.1 percent of all African American women still served in the previously mentioned capacities, while most of the remainder worked as waitresses, laundresses, dressmakers, or seamstresses. (qtd. in Harris 210)

Rachel's brother, Tom refers to the limited job opportunities for black people, arguing that: "Rachel is a graduate in Domestic Science; she was high in her class; most of the girls below her in rank have positions in the schools. I'm an electrical engineer—and I've tried steadily for several months—to practice my profession. It seems our educations aren't of

much use to us: we aren't allowed to make good—because our skins are dark" (149). Both Rachel and Tom find it difficult to find a job and Tom works as a waiter despite his high education. Tom argues that: "I'm thirty-two now, and I'll die a head-waiter" (151). As Mrs. Lane so aptly puts it, "it's all rather useless—this education! What are our children going to do with it, when they get it? We strive and save and sacrifice to educate them—and the whole time—down underneath, we know—they'll have no chance" (155). Both Tom and Mrs. Lane seem to be desperate and feel completely despondent. Their efforts seem to be fruitless and they have lost all hope. As a matter of fact, despite their efforts for educational advancement, the characters of the play come to terms with their exclusion from the job market and they seem to accept the fact that they are destined to follow traditional jobs and confine themselves in the private sphere.

However, Rachel is doubly burdened. First of all, as a woman, her education is restricted in the field of domestic science. She is not supposed to study anything else than that. Except for that, she is doubly burdened because as a black woman, she cannot find a job equal to her education. Rachel expresses her disappointment asserting that: "There's no more chance for me than there is for Tom,—or than there was for you—or for any of us with dark skins. It's lucky for me that I love to keep house, and cook, and sew. I'll never get anything else" (152). Since women are excluded from the public sphere, they pin their faith on the supposedly beneficial effects of domesticity. They are socialized to believe that they are unable to deal with the job market and their appropriate position is that in the domestic sphere. However, they rapidly demystify the institution of domesticity because it is in contrast with their efforts to establish an independent identity in the world. Domesticity deprives them of this right and condemns them to a life of confinement and dependency. Domesticity is a cultural institution and not a biological one. Therefore, not only black, but all women are culturally conditioned to believe that it is their destiny to stay at home and

serve their husbands and children. It is one of those facades that patriarchy contrives in order to hamper women's progress and guarantee their inferior position in the world.

Another white male mechanism that the play exposes as crucial in the destruction of the black family and in the perpetuation of stereotypes against them, is lynching. Ironically, lynching was used by whites as a way to stop blacks from raping white women. However, lynching was nothing else but a mechanism of manipulation, exploitation and intimidation of black people. What is crucial is the fact that lynching not only had negative consequences on the innocent black men but also on the whole family and especially on black women who were obliged to endure the humiliation and murder of their fathers, brothers or sons. First of all, black women whose husbands were lynched had to raise their children all alone living with the constant fear that their female children might fall victims to white men's sexual violence while their male children were the next lynch victims. Therefore, as Michelle Hester insightfully points out, "Grimké utilizes the crime of lynching to unearth the complexities of race and gender that taunt black women, specifically in regards to motherhood" (251). However, lynching was not only restricted to black men but also black women were lynched on special occasions. According to Kathy Perkins, "[a]n estimated 3,589 blacks, including 76 women, were lynched between 1882 and 1927" (9). What is obvious is the fact that even black women were threatened with lynching. Therefore, lynching was not an instrument of torture against black men only. In all cases, the black body became the locus of white violence. Lynching as well as racial and gender segregation sharpened the relations between black and white people and made black women's life miserable.

Grimké's criticism as regards lynching is also addressed to white women apart from white men because their passivity encourages a system that has a great impact on them and they become accomplices in the crimes against the black race. Michelle Hester explains the reasons why both white men and women are guilty for the degradation of the black race:

> [W]hite men and white women are both guilty for the violent treatment that blacks receive and for the anguish that their actions subsequently produce among blacks. White women are guilty because they actively allow their white men to falsely accuse and kill black men for attempting to tarnish white women's virtues; while, white men are guilty because their killing of black men is a tactic used to re-position themselves as "masters" and prove their domination. (252)

Hester's perceptive analysis confutes the superficial arguments that white people contrive as regards lynching and his criticism is especially trenchant with respect to white women because their detached attitude does not mean that the blame is shifted only on to white patriarchy.

Although Grimké is especially critical towards the white society, her criticism is even more caustic when it comes to the Christian rhetoric whose representatives turn their backs upon the plight of black women. Rachel's disappointment is characteristic regarding the doctrines of Christianity: "And so this nation—this white Christian nation—has deliberately set its curse upon the most beautiful—the most holy thing in life—motherhood! Why—it—makes—you doubt—God!" (145). The main representative characters in the play that embody the hypocrisy of the Christian rhetoric are those who lynched Rachel's father and half-brother. Her mother mentions that they were lynched "by Christian people—in a Christian land. We found out afterwards they were all church members in good standing—the best people" (143). Although Mrs. Loving never names them, the actual truth is that they are hypocritical Christians who hide themselves under the mask of Christianity in order to serve their racist interests and hatred.

Therefore, the play attacks the ideological foundations of America as a Christian republic and exposes the mechanisms that the white society uses in order to subvert the

Christian doctrine and keep black people in their humiliating place. White Christians pervert the truth of Christianity and falsify the essence of the Christian doctrine which praises the equality and love of all human beings regardless of sex, race and creed. White supremacist male ideology works in such a propagandistic way that hampers the progress of black people. It makes black people believe that they deserve to be punished through lynching because they are genetically built to be inferior human beings. White people's whole concept of Christianity and justice is completely illusory if one takes into account that its representatives accept the institution of lynching as an indisputable right of the white society. On the one hand, Christianity castigates the separation of husbands from their wives and, on the other, white Christians support a system that destroys the black family and has negative consequences especially on black women.

Rachel abnegates her faith in the institution of Christianity just like she demystifies the institution of motherhood. Although she initially believes in the existence of God and she seems to be very religious, her faith is shaken gradually and she loses her confidence in Him. Although Mrs. Loving still believes that God will save His black race from the atrocities of the white male society, Rachel has lost her faith, challenges God's justice and considers God a mechanism that whites use in order to disclaim their own responsibility for the dehumanization and degradation of black people. She desperately addresses God and tells Him: "Why, God, you were making a mock of me; you were laughing at me. I didn't believe God could laugh at our sufferings, but He can. We are accursed, accursed! We have nothing, absolutely nothing" (157). Since blacks are unable to change the prevailing mainstream doctrines, they pin their faith on God. However, Rachel's monologue is full of scathing irony and proves that she is especially hurt if we take into account that she calls God at the end of her monologue: "You God!—You terrible, laughing God!" (157).

Craig Prentiss points out that one of the major themes of "the anti-lynching plays containing theodicy discourse is the idea that prayers are futile and God is not listening to the African American people. The sentiment reflects the exasperation felt after decades of postemancipation oppression with no end in sight" (193). Addell Anderson rightly claims that initially Rachel "practices Catholicism devoutly and reveres a portrait of Mary, the mother of Jesus, which hangs prominently in the family's modest apartment" (385). This scene is very symbolic because it parallels Rachel with Mary in the sense that Mary is also a woman and is considered to be the protectress of motherhood. It also reminds us of her predecessor, Rachel who prayed to God in order to become a mother. However, Rachel does not walk in the footsteps of the biblical woman, Rachel. In the last act, Rachel realizes that it is futile for black people to pray for their salvation in a society where God's justice is non-existent. In the first act, Rachel argues with her mother because she believes that she makes fun of God and she reprimands her, arguing that: "It is not kind to laugh at sacred things. When you laughed, it was as though you laughed—at God" (139). However, in the last act, she changes her mind and considers that God makes fun of black people when she asserts that: "God is laughing.—We're his puppets.—He pulls the wires,—and we're so funny to Him" (166). Even Mrs. Loving, who believes firmly in God, confesses that after the lynching of her husband and son, her faith was shaken and she could not pray: "I could not pray—I couldn't for a long time—afterwards" (144).

Although the play's purpose can be conceived as blatant propaganda against racial and gender segregation, the playwright employs several dramatic devices in order to appeal to her audience. Some of these dramatic devices are irony, recurrent motifs, symbolism, tales, an open-ended ending as well as juxtapositions among the characters. Grimké seems to have employed all these dramatic devices because she wanted her play to have an impact on a larger audience and emotionally awaken the white female audience. She embellished her

drama with as many known and popular dramatic devices as she could in order for her play to exert a wide influence on public opinion.

Irony is diffused throughout the play. It seems to me that the most characteristic indication of irony in Grimké's play is Rachel's change of psychological state from the beginning to the end of the play. While Rachel is presented in the first act of the play as an optimistic girl, full of energy and passion for life and faith in God, her psychological state changes from the first act to the others and she transforms into a different personality. Joyce Meier rightly points out that:

> [T]he sharpest points in the play occur with Rachel's slow-dawning realization of the implications of racism and the subsequent diffusion of her idealistic view of motherhood. It is as though Grimké sets up this idealism to make the impact of its loss all the more intense and to undermine the very signs of the respectability to which the members of this middle-class black family aspire. One by one, home, art, and education are rendered meaningless in the context of menial labor, lack of opportunity, and the persistent practices of racism that pervade the world outside of the Loving home. (120)

Grimké bases her ironic tone on the contradictory structure of the play. The juxtapositions help her prove how fallacious the ideals that Rachel aspires to are.

In the first act, Rachel declares that she wants "to be silly and irresponsible" (136). Also, when her suitor, John asks her if life is hard for a girl, she answers that "[i]t's not hard at all" (137). She ends her optimistic statements asking herself: "Is life so terrible? I had found it mostly beautiful. How can life be terrible, when the world is full of little children?" (140). Rachel's statements in the first act have nothing to do with her complete transformation in the following acts. She is initially an innocent girl who tries to construct an idealistic world on her own. However, she gradually understands that she cannot make plans

since the possibilities of choice for a woman and especially for a black woman are limited. When the obstacles that restrict her freedom and inhibit her development as an autonomous human being are revealed, her racial and gender awareness raises and she awakens to the fact that black people are subjugated socially, economically, politically as well as psychologically. The loss of innocence that most people experience as they grow up is more severe in Rachel's case because she is an African American woman.

In the last act, she is not cheerful anymore; she feels great responsibility for Jimmy, the family's adopted son, as the voices of unborn children haunt her. Even her mother wonders what could have happened to her: "Those four days, she lay in bed hardly moving, scarcely speaking. Only her eyes seemed alive. I never saw such a wide, tragic look in my life. It was as though her soul had been mortally wounded. But how? how? What could have happened?" (161). What her mother understands is that the pain Rachel feels is not external but internal: "Tom and I both believe her soul has been hurt. The trouble isn't with her body. You'll find her highly nervous. Sometimes she is very much depressed" (164). In the last act, she is a different person. She changes her perspective of life and the realities of life lead her from innocence to painful awareness. She is led to the growing disillusionment of the fallacious American ideals and values.

The playwright juxtaposes Rachel with both Mrs. Loving and Mrs. Lane. Mrs. Loving incarnates the pain that all black women experience as mothers and women due to their race and gender. Rachel refers that "there are hundreds of dark mothers who live in fear, terrible, suffocating fear, whose rest by night is broken, and whose joy by day in their babies on their hearts is three parts—pain" (145). She is a single mother who tries to protect both Rachel and her son from the reality of racial discrimination by not telling them the truth about her husband's and son's lynching. She tries to raise her children in an idealistic world where there are opportunities and possibilities for the advancement of the black race. She conceals

the fact that she lives in constant fear and she is powerless to protect her own children from lynching and the discrimination they will face in their whole life because of their blackness. She seems to be the most tragic figure in the play. Mrs. Loving has all the qualities of a good mother. She is the prototype of the maternal figure. She adopts a child and this is precisely what makes her the living proof of Rachel's realization that motherhood further victimizes the black race. Although her mother endures her sufferings and hopes that God will do justice to black people's hardships, Rachel decides to take action and not wait for God's mercy. She realizes that since black people are helpless, they have to take measures if they want to save themselves and the future generations of black people from the atrocities of racial violence. She rebels against all the cultural mechanisms that restrict her freedom of action. The decisions that she makes differentiate her from her mother.

Mrs. Lane is another woman that challenges the standards of American society as regards womanhood and motherhood. She constitutes Rachel's driving force and urges Rachel to judge the American society more critically. Mrs. Lane plays a very important role in Rachel's awakening and realization that black women are condemned to live a painful life. Mrs. Lane feels depressed, hopeless and miserable because her daughter's soul has been hurt by her classmates' and her teacher's racist and sexist insults. This means that black children are unprotected even within school whose purpose is to educate children and make them citizens of quality in the American society. When Rachel asks her if she has any other children, she responds: "Hardly! If I had another—I'd kill it. It's kinder" (155). Her response is not the typical answer of the traditional self-sacrificial mother. Although he gave birth to a child, the hardships that she and her daughter experience reveal that she has regretted it.

The fact that the playwright places three women at the centre of attention is not accidental. Although there is a generation gap between Mrs. Loving, Mrs. Lane and Rachel, it is evident that all of them experience similar anxieties as black women. Mrs. Loving is an old

woman who is worn out by the hardships of her life and tries hard to contribute to the blissfulness of her children despite her powerlessness. Mrs. Lane is a young mother who tries to save her young daughter from her classmates' racist insults although she is also powerless to combat white people's hatred. Rachel prefers to remain a spinster than become a mother in such a corrupt society. In order to forcefully express her ideas, Grimké includes as many instances of black women's suffering in her play pointing out that Rachel's predicament is not a single occurrence in black history. The theme of motherhood, which becomes her central ideological axis, helps Grimké reach out to a wider female audience embracing white women as well.

Judith Stephens explains that:

> Grimké was attempting to make white women question the desirability of motherhood from a black woman's perspective at a time when lynchings were at an all-time high. She wanted them to understand the agony of having to choose between rejecting motherhood altogether or becoming a mother and constantly fearing for your child's life. (334)

In order to achieve this, the playwright uses three different aspects of black women whose lives are interconnected because their experiences are common. Three generations of black women with different educational backgrounds share similar anxieties. Therefore, it is as if the history of female oppression is repeated again and again through these three women. Grimké used the stories of more than one black women because she wanted her white female audience to understand that Rachel's decision to give up marriage and motherhood is not the decision of an asexual, capricious, queer and eccentric black woman but the decision of a fully-conscious woman who refuses to condemn her children to a life full of hardships and injustice. The three women's lives, the decisions they make and their beliefs are not an

exception to the rule but the reality of most African American women in the first half of the twentieth century.

A recurrent motif that is evident throughout the play is that of laughter. Although at the beginning of the play, Rachel laughs because she feels happy, at the end of the play, her laughter is that of sadness and depression. I have already referred to Rachel's challenge of Christian ideals through the motif of laughter. As Joyce Meier so aptly puts it, "Christian salvation becomes linked with blood, tears, and ironic laughter" (124). When Rachel narrates a tale to Jimmy in order to sleep, she narrates the story of two miserable boys who are alone in the world and look for the Land of Laughter in order to become happy. In this story, Rachel associates laughter with happiness. However, in the last lines of the play, Rachel creates a pun between the words laughter and darkness: "No—No sunshine—no laughter—always—darkness" (168). There is no doubt that Rachel changes the traditional meaning of laughter and associates it with something painful and dark because whites and God can make fun of and laugh with the pain of black people.

Except for the recurrent motifs, Grimké inserts the dramatic device of symbolism in her play. The bouquet of roses which John offers her and she tears apart symbolizes her refusal to comply with the fixed gender roles as well as her challenge of the rigid codes of propriety. She disengages herself from the stereotypes and prejudices that the white patriarchy imposes on her and defines herself as an autonomous human being. Jimmy makes a parallelism between rosebuds and children: "Rosebuds are just like little 'chilyun,' aren't they, Ma Rachel? If you are good to them, they'll grow up into lovely roses, won't they? And if you hurt them, they'll die" (156). When Rachel tears apart the rosebuds, it is as if she kills her future children and breaks her bonds with John.

Another dramatic device that should be taken into consideration is the ending of the play which is actually open-ended. The last words of the protagonist are addressed to her

family's adopted son: "Jimmy! My little Jimmy! Honey! I'm coming.—Ma Rachel loves you so" (168). Rachel addresses Jimmy after having promised to God and herself that she will never marry and become a mother as long as she lives in such a racist world. However, Rachel never expresses her intentions towards her adopted son. As Anderson notes, "[t]he audience is left wondering whether she has gone to comfort the child or whether, like some of her slave ancestors, she will kill the boy so he will no longer bear the pain and agony of growing up black in America" (385). It is obvious that Grimké intentionally lets her audience wonder what will happen to Jimmy because she wanted each of the spectators to end the plot of the play according to their own racial consciousness.

Although Rachel's love for children prompted her to convince her mother to adopt Jimmy, the same kind of love can urge her to kill him in order to save him from the racist society in which he is obliged to live. Although Mrs. Loving was not sure initially if they should have adopted Jimmy because she was hurt by the murder of her son, it was Rachel's internal love for children that prompted her to save this innocent child. Despite her doubts, Mrs. Loving finally felt that God gave her back her murdered child: "Rachel, sometimes—I wonder—if, perhaps, God—hasn't relented a little—and given me back my boy,—my George" (147). However, clear-cut explanations about Rachel's intentions towards Jimmy are not given by the playwright after her earnest promise never to marry and bear any children.

Admittedly, Rachel's decision to defy the rules of patriarchal society is not an easy one if we take into account the fact that the American patriarchal society condemns those women who refuse to marry, remain childless or kill their children because they pose a threat to the harmonious function of its system of dominance and control. Every woman who deviates from the expected gender roles is supposed to be a monstrous woman in America. According to Ben Barootes, "in order that a woman may be free within an unfree society, she must first be monstrous. It is her monstrosity - that which separates and distances her from

society - that enables the woman to escape her social shackles" (187). Rachel rejects the institutions of marriage, motherhood, domesticity and Christianity. What is more, she disassociates herself from the male assumptions that women are biologically fragile, unable to confront the difficulties of the job market and their sole responsibility is to be good mothers and wives. She also exposes the fallacious belief that black women are men's property and their submissiveness to them is a social requirement. All these factors categorize her as a monstrous woman according to patriarchal norms. However, Rachel succeeds in emerging as an independent woman who asserts her human rights in American society. Rachel's rejection of the institution of motherhood contributes to the awakening of white women's consciousness and she delivers a clear antiracist message which is still relevant to the women of the new millennium because even nowadays men still control the lives of many women.

Chapter II: Shirley Graham's play *It's Morning*

"Slavery is theft-theft of a life, theft of work, theft of any property or produce, theft even of the children a slave might have borne."

Kevin Bales

(From *Understanding Global Slavery,* 2005)

Another prolific playwright of the African American dramatic culture is Shirley Graham[26]. Although she is widely known as W. E. B. Du Bois's wife, she was a multi-talented artist whose contribution to the progress of Black Theatre is inestimable. According to Janice Leone, Graham "was at various times in her life a daughter, wife, mother, student, playwright, musician, political activist, government advisor, television promoter, black nationalist, Communist Party member, and Maoist supporter" (299). Her engagement in several fields of social and political action reveals an African American woman whose vision was broad and complex. She is considered to be an inextricable part of the Harlem Renaissance because she dedicated her life to the struggle against African American racial and sexist oppression. However, the fact that she was a woman and especially a black woman in a society dominated by racism and male supremacy put obstacles in her recognition as a dramatist.

Several critics ignored the feminist approach of her plays and put emphasis only on the racial issues discussed in her plays. Some of them also accused her of lack of female consciousness because she abandoned her two sons from her first marriage to her parents and supported them only financially[27]. Sharon Harley claims that:

> Although it is not imperative that the pervasive self-sacrificing model of motherhood be the benchmark, there is nothing remotely "maternal" about Graham Du Bois, whose two young sons were raised by relatives while she traveled abroad, pursued undergraduate and graduate degrees, and traversed the United States. (244)

[26] Shirley Graham was born in 1896 in Indianapolis, Indiana. She married Shadrach T. McCants in 1921 and she gave birth to two male children. However, they divorced in 1927. Her second marriage was with W. E. B. Du Bois in 1951 when she was at the age of 55. She studied music composition at the Sorbonne in Paris and continued her studies in music at Howard University. She received her A.B. and M.A. degrees from Oberlin College in Ohio. She wrote an opera called *Tom Tom* in 1932. It was the first opera created by a black artist to be produced professionally in America. Also, she received a Rosewald Fellowship award in creative writing from Yale University (Perkins, Kathy A. 209, 210, and Aptheker, Bettina 10).

[27] For more information see Harley, Sharon 244, Leone, Janice 300, 301, and Aptheker, Bettina 10.

While Harley no doubt reflects the point of view of many critics, her interpretation fails to consider the social circumstances that led Graham to the decision to abandon her children. Under no circumstances can Graham's personal choices overshadow her acknowledgment as a caring mother and by extension as a feminist writer whose works dealt with the role of black mothers in America. There is no doubt that a more thorough examination of Graham's plays will reveal her engagement with racial as well as sexual politics.

Shirley Graham wrote the play *It's Morning* in 1940 but it was never produced during her lifetime. In the play, Graham inverts white patriarchal oppression by castigating the white male society through the depiction of the destruction of a black family's harmony and the murder of an innocent fourteen-year-old black girl by the hands of her own mother. Cissie is a slave woman who contemplates throughout the play the murder of her fourteen-year-old daughter, Millie and her ten-year-old son, Pete. The children are going to be sold to a slave master and Cissie believes that the only way to save them from the ills of slavery is to commit infanticide. The other characters of the play are mainly slave women such as Grannie Lou, Rose, Phoebe and Aunt Sue. The male characters of the play are Cripple Jake who is a banjo player, Uncle Dave who is a slave preacher, a soldier who is a Yankee boy as well as the plantation owner, Charles who does not appear on stage but his threatening presence is apparent through the discussions of the slave women.

Graham's play was written almost twenty years after Grimké's publication of the play *Rachel* and deals with the racial and sexist oppression that black women experience within the institution of slavery. Although there is a distance of twenty years between the two plays, both playwrights explore how oppressive the institution of motherhood for black women can become as they have no control over their own bodies. Although the play was written in 1940, it is set in a remote plantation in the South in 1863 when slavery was an established practice and whites sold and bought black people in order to serve their own

economic interests and exploit the privileges that the institution of slavery offered. The playwright's decision to tackle the institution of slavery and its impact on the lives of helpless black women reveals that some racial themes are deeply embedded in the African American female consciousness no matter how much time has passed. Although the institution of slavery was abolished during Graham's artistic creation, its impact was still evident in the lives of the subsequent generations of black people since it was an oppressive social mechanism which exploited and abused the lives of thousands of innocent black men and women.

Although Grimké's play *Rachel* takes place in a period when slavery had been abolished, it exemplifies that the decisions mothers have to make are as hard and drastic as those when slavery was an established institution. Therefore, Grimké's play exemplifies how the pervasive effects of racism on the institution of motherhood pass through the new generations of black women as well. Despite the fact that the abolition of slavery was achieved in 1865, the female body continued to be dominated by the white patriarchal society as it is evident in both plays. Therefore, the act of infanticide is repeated in the next generations of black women although it takes different forms. The most obvious example is Rachel who commits a metaphorical infanticide by refusing to conceive and give birth to black children. Therefore, the protagonists of both plays incarnate all black women's plight and symbolize the pain that black women experience as mothers who painfully realize that their children will be born into a world of oppression, violence and blatant injustice.

Infanticide was a common strategy of resistance among black women despite the fact that there are only a few written documents of black women committing infanticide in American history. According to Lawrence Friedman, "Roger Lane found forty-one cases that went to trial for infanticide between 1860 and 1900 in Philadelphia. Twelve of the defendants were black" (232). However, a similar research that was conducted by Friedman and Percival

in Alameda County, California "turned up not a single unmistakable case of infanticide" (232). Nonetheless, the results of the research do not prove that there were actually no incidents of infanticide in the specific county. As Friedman points out, "[t]hey could hardly help concluding that infanticide was extremely rare in this moderately urban county" (232). There is no doubt that several cases of infanticide remained intentionally unrecorded in African American history as the act itself is one of extremity and its reasons would underline the exploitation and immense violence that was inflicted upon these women's bodies. Graham is one of those female playwrights who bring the theme of infanticide to the foreground despite the efforts of the white male patriarchy to suppress the truth. Few plays of the period portrayed black women who committed infanticide in order to save their children because it was the most extreme act of resistance to the atrocities of white oppression. However, it was not a rare phenomenon and this is why Elizabeth Brown-Guillory calls *It's Morning* "a major breakthrough in African-American drama" (qtd. in Schroeder 101). One of the main reasons why whites tried to withhold the truth from the recorded documents of the American history is that infanticide was in contrast with the stereotype of mammy they wanted to reproduce.

bell hooks analyzes the central characteristics of the mammy figure and reveals how this stereotype contributed to black women's confinement to specific roles. According to bell hooks,

> [t]he mammy image was portrayed with affection by whites because it epitomized the ultimate sexist-racist vision of ideal black womanhood—complete submission to the will of whites. In a sense whites created in the mammy figure a black woman who embodied solely those characteristics they as colonizers wished to exploit. They saw her as the embodiment of woman as passive nurturer, a mother figure who gave all without expectation of return,

> who not only acknowledged her inferiority to whites but who loved them. (qtd. in Austin 357)

bell hooks' perceptive analysis demonstrates black women's subjugated social position in the American society. The subconscious adoption of the stereotype of mammy created specific roles for black women that were in contrast with what they really needed, wanted or felt. Women's confinement to the role of nurturers deprived them of the right to any kind of physical or verbal resistance. It was almost impossible for a black woman to practice such a cruel form of resistance as infanticide in a society that perpetuated the myth that black women were ready to sacrifice their life for their children and especially for the children of the white family. There is no doubt that the stereotype of mammy was an image similar to the image of the docile, obedient black slave, Tom that white patriarchy perpetuated because it posed no threat to the white society and racial relations.

The stereotype of mammy was based on a paradox that needs to be pointed out. According to history, many black women actually nourished the white babies on the plantation often at the expense of their own babies. Although black women were recognized as "nurturers" of white children, they were denied the right to nurture their own "biological products". Even from the moment of their birth, the black children were relegated to a status much inferior to that of the white babies who were given priority and received the nurturing gift of the black mammy. Although in many cases black women developed feelings of affection and love for the white babies, this forced practice denied them any sense of bonding with their own children as well as any right to control their body and the "products of their body".

Graham disputes the stereotype of mammy that presents black women as self-sacrificial figures ready to give their life for their children and especially for the white masters' children. The protagonist of the play, Cissie rejects the role of childcare provider

and does not incarnate the stereotype of mammy at all. She finds it difficult to love, nurse and raise her children in a society that lynches, abuses and sells them based on the privileges that the institution of slavery offers to white people. Since they are going to be sold to the slave master, Cissie considers that infanticide is the only way to save them from the ills of slavery. The plantation owner is in charge of Cissie's body as well as her daughter's because he is the one who takes advantage of the profits that are derived from the exploitation of their bodies. Therefore, Cissie has no control over Millie's life and cannot take care of her child's upbringing because she is powerless to defend her life and by extension her children's well-being.

Another white construct that the protagonist of the play rejects is that of black women as breeders because she realizes that the white patriarchy uses this stereotype in order to serve its economic interests. Black women are used as breeders because in this way they provide more slave hands. Patricia Hill Collins explains the reasons for the perpetuation of the image of black women as breeding stock:

> [T]his image provides an ideological justification for efforts to harness Black women's fertility to the needs of a changing political economy. During slavery the breeder woman image portrayed Black women as more suitable for having children than White women. By claiming that Black women were able to produce children as easily as animals, this image provided justification for interference in enslaved Africans' reproductive lives. Slave owners wanted enslaved Africans to "breed" because every slave child born represented a valuable unit of property, another unit of labor, and, if female, the prospects for more slaves. (78)

Collins' persuasive analysis reveals black women's depreciation and commodification. Black women were equated with animals because they were only assessed as breeders in the

American society. Black women were viewed as reproductive machines that would increase human chattel on the plantation and the economic power of the slave owners while their children were in most cases the products of violence and rape. In other words, the truth was that the stereotypes that the whites created were nothing else but facades for black women's subjugation to specific domestic roles for whites' profit.

Cissie's exploitation as breeding stock is obvious if somebody takes into account that her children are going to be sold down the river because they can be used as field hands to sustain the economy of the South. Thus, Cissie's body is placed at the hands of America's burgeoning economy. She is part of the capitalist market economy of a white male-dominated society. Admittedly, when their labor is useless, black men can be lynched and disappear from the face of the earth while black women can be used every so often as sexual objects for the perpetuation of the slave system. The only solution to defend her children's lives is to commit infanticide. The motives that urge her to make such a horrific decision are several.

First of all, there seems to be no other way to ensure her children's safety. Slave women were not protected legally since they were the white masters' property and their children did not belong to them. Serena Anderlini-D'Onofrio is right to point out that: "Even though slave women could be sexually abused, they could not generate free children because the genes of the parent of the subordinate race determined the racial status of the offspring. In this way the dominant race imposed its criteria of racial definition on the subordinate race" (121). Although anti-miscegenation laws banned blacks and whites from having sexual relations, these laws were generally ignored by slaveholders. White slaveholders took advantage of their high social status and abused their female slaves sexually against their will. The result of these interracial sexual relations was the birth of illegitimate children in the South. These children were never acknowledged by the slaveholders. Instead, they were sold to other slave owners for profit. The slaveholders' children had no legal rights. They were

still slaves and they were considered marketable commodities. It was a common secret in the South that slaveholders raped their young slaves without being persecuted for their crimes since rape was not considered to be a crime.

Graham's criticism is especially scathing towards the glaring indifference of the political system as regards the legalization of such murderous actions. Graham exposes the hypocrisy of the political system which, on the one hand, imposes several repressive measures against the social welfare of the slaves such as the Fugitive Slave Law[28] and the Drett Scott Decision[29] and, on the other, it tolerates the illegality of the white slaveholders. Therefore, Cissie commits infanticide because she comes to the realization of her powerlessness. While the role of all mothers is to make sure that their children are safe, she is powerless because she was born in a culture that does not offer a safe environment for black mothers and their children. Graham shakes the foundations of America's racial ideology by exposing the white prejudice against blacks not as a form of essentialist discrimination rooted in one's body but as a white social construct imposed by the white society in order to control, repress and distort the essence of the black identity. In this way, Graham succeeds in exposing the sterile philosophy around which the institution of slavery was built. The birth of biracial slave children did not endanger the very cornerstones of slavery and did not imperil the white masters' dominance because their illegitimate children continued to have the legal status of slaves.

Secondly, infanticide is the only way for Cissie to resist the institution of slavery. Although infanticide is a cruel act that is condemned by both the white patriarchal society and the Christian rhetoric, she defies the norms of her society and emerges as a free human

[28] According to the Fugitive Slave Act (1850), runaway slaves had to be captured and returned to their masters. The law favored slaveholders because it gave them the right to reclaim their slaves who had escaped to the Free States in the North. Even those who helped runaway slaves were considered criminals and penalties were imposed on them (Brophy, Alfred L. 416, 417).

[29] According to the Dred Scott Decision (1857), the American Court decided that people of African ancestry whether free or slaves had no right to sue in American federal courts since they were not considered to be American citizens (Davis, Sue 421).

being becoming the agent of action and rebelling against the inhumane treatment of black women and their children. Infanticide is a form of "self-authorship" for Cissie as Elisabeth Bronfen has stated. According to Bronfen, "[a] woman may also consciously break conventions or commit a crime punished with death, such as adultery, infanticide or murder, as an expression of liberating subjectivity, of assuming authorship and responsibility for her destiny" (219). Cissie proves that she is the only one who has the right to decide about her children's future and destiny. In this way, she proves that white masters cannot control either her or her children.

Instead of leaving her children helpless in a life in which they have no choice, she consciously chooses to remove them from a society that would condemn them to dependence, humiliation and suffering. Bronfen rightly argues that:

> The choice of death emerges as a feminine strategy within which writing with the body is a way of getting rid of the oppression connected with the feminine body. Staging disembodiment as a form of escaping personal and social constraints serves to criticize those cultural attitudes that reduce the feminine body to the position of dependency and passivity, to the vulnerable object of sexual incursions. (142)

Thus, Cissie emerges as an autonomous human being, asserts her rights and disengages herself from the object position in which she was placed. She refuses to be a mother whose children are treated as objects that can be bought and sold by anyone. She rejects motherhood because black women do not have the same privileges as white women. On the contrary, they are victims of gender and racial segregation.

Thirdly, Cissie takes the drastic step of committing infanticide because she knows that being sold down the river is the most horrific place for a slave to live and work. Slaves lived in a primitive state downriver and suffered from a lot of illnesses. One white construct that

Graham disputes through her play is that slavery was a necessary institution in the South due to the richness of the physical environment and therefore slave labor was needed in contrast with the North. There is no doubt that slavery was an economic-based mechanism of exploitation because it used blacks to serve its economic interests. Black men were beaten and were obliged to perform field work while black women were manipulated both in the field and in the domestic labor. When black women were in a state of exhaustion, they were beaten until the white masters spent all their energies to the fulfillment of the maximum rate of productivity. Grannie Lou's description is characteristic of the sufferings she has experienced in slavery: "[s]he is shrunken and frail as a withered leaf. Her face is very black and wrinkled, her hands are bony and twisted. The bandana fastened about her head fits tight and smooth as a skull-cap" (212). Grannie Lou is portrayed as an emaciated figure. Her skin is weather-beaten and she seems to be worn out by the hardships that the institution of slavery imposed on her. She is portrayed in a state of complete exhaustion.

Furthermore, Cissie believes that infanticide will be a kind of salvation for Millie since she will be a victim of sexual harassment at the hands of the slave masters if she allows her to be sold down the river. She refuses to help perpetuate a system that treats female black bodies as property and harasses them sexually. Cissie understands what it means to lead a life of degradation because she herself had been raped and suffered from sexual abuse repeatedly at the hands of the white slaveholder. Because Cissie had experienced a similar situation in the past, she decides to free her daughter from the burden of being both black and a woman. The dialogue between Rose and Aunt Sue about Cissie's physical and psychological degradation is characteristic. Rose narrates Cissie's life, claiming that: "Dey say dat she war proud, an' dat da ovahseer swear he'd break huh will" (215) and Aunt Sue responds that: "He did…An' when he'd come along da row / She tremble lak a leaf, an' once she fall / down cryin' at his feet. He laf, an' kick / huh wid his foot, not hard, but lak you'd kick / a bitch

dat's large wid puppy, out of yo' path" (215). The narration of her life proves that black women's history is a recurrent circle of degradation, dehumanization and sexual abuse. The fact that Millie is going to have the same destiny as her mother reveals that the life of all black women is already decided by the whites and no black woman can escape from the ramifications of racism and sexual violence.

By presenting Millie and Cissie as victims of sexual harassment, the playwright succeeds in rejecting another black women's stereotype which portrays them as seductresses who use their lascivious and erotic urges in order to attract and appeal to white men. The Jezebel stereotype was repeatedly used by the white slaveholders in order to justify their atrocities against black women. According to the Jezebel myth, black women were always sexually aroused and ready to fulfill men's sexual fantasies. Also, the black woman was seen as an exotic and sexually assertive "other". It should also be noted that the female slaves were often the target of the white mistresses' hatred and anger because they represented something different from the ideal of southern womanhood which dictated that all white women should be virtuous, innocent and pure.

As regards the Jezebel stereotype, Ajuan Maria Mance rightly asserts that:

> The Jezebel stereotype perpetuates the damaging but widespread perception that African American women are always already aroused, available for, and open to sexual activity. As such, this stereotype has played an instrumental role not only in justifying but in sanctioning and normalizing the sexual exploitation of black women. During the antebellum period, the myth of the black Jezebel's insatiable sexual appetite was invoked to excuse white owners' abuse of their female slaves. During the century that followed, the Jezebel myth formed the underpinnings of a social hierarchy that tolerated and even

> encouraged the white, male sexual exploitation of black women servants (housekeepers and child-care workers). (474)

The fallacious deduction was that black women were those who incited the passions and fired men's imagination. Therefore, that was why men were victims to the seductive allure of black women. By creating an inaccurate stereotype of black women, men shifted the blame on to black women to justify their inhumane actions.

Before moving on to the analysis of the dramatic devices that Graham uses in her play, it is important to take into consideration that the stereotypes attached to black women that Graham exposes in her play are quite different from those attached to white women. This means that the white patriarchal society differentiates white from black women not only with respect to gender factors but also to racial factors. White women are those who epitomize the cult of true womanhood while black women are considered unable to possess the necessary attributes and merits in order to be classified as true women. This means that white women were everything that black women could not be. The cult of true womanhood emerged during the nineteenth century and appealed only to white middle-class American women.

Shelley Haley insightfully points out that:

> According to the "cult of true womanhood," white women possessed four cardinal virtues: piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity. The external, physical signs of true womanhood were delicacy, softness, and weakness. The true woman was to be protected by white men, and true womanhood was inaccessible to working-class, poor white women and to all women of color. (571)

Haley is right to point out that skin color was not the only external characteristic that differentiated black and white women. Another negative aspect of the stereotype of true womanhood was the tendency to equate whiteness with moral goodness and consequently the

equation of blackness with evilness and depravity. The exclusion of black women from the virtues that white women possessed associated them with immorality and robbed from them the feminine characteristics of their identity, identifying them with something less than human. It was as if women of color belonged to a different kind of human species without having any common external or internal characteristics with white women.

Consequently, black women's exclusion from the cult of true womanhood meant that they should be treated differently from white women because they lacked the feminine attributes which could characterize them as true women. Therefore, black women were victims of misogyny and their gender oppression was even harsher than that of white women. What is more, another negative effect of this specific stereotype was that the cult of true womanhood prevented the collaboration between black and white women because it created different social expectations for each group. The majority of nineteenth-century women embraced the ideology of true womanhood and they became victims of the social restraints that the male society perpetuated. White women were condemned to silence as their primary attributes were passivity and submission and were deprived of any civil rights that would enable them to react and protest against the atrocities and injustices that were committed before their own eyes by their fathers, husbands, and brothers.

In terms of sexuality, white women were supposed to be asexual beings that had no sexual desire except that for reproduction. The more white men sexually exploited black women, the more white women were put on a pedestal of chastity. This means that the cult restricted white women and placed them only to the subjugated position of child bearers and nurturers. Their roles were restricted to those of wives, mothers and moral guardians. On the contrary, black women incarnated the Jezebel stereotype and were considered lascivious and overtly sensuous and sexual. Through these myths, white men kept both black and white women in place.

Thus, the manipulation of the public opinion as regards female sexuality was a conscious ideological construct that conditioned women to specific roles and images. It defined the role of both black and white women and justified the atrocities of men towards them. Alix Shulman analyzes the strength that these stereotypes have on women's minds and how they serve male interests. Shulman is right to point out that "[m]en do not easily give up the myths about female sexuality because, whether they are aware of it or not, men benefit from believing them" (300). Male prejudices about female sexuality restrict women and guarantee their submissive position in the world. According to Shulman, "[b]y perpetuating these myths society perpetuates the notion that women must be dependent solely on men for their sexual satisfaction and subordinate to the male interpretation of female pleasure" (301). The play exposes the stereotypes about female sexuality as another mechanism that patriarchy uses in order to debase and dehumanize women by keeping them in a subordinate position as sex objects and contributing to the deterioration of their psychological state.

Black women's repugnance towards slaveholders is evident if we take into account the dialogue between Aunt Sue and Phoebe. They talk about the white slaveholder, Charles and his sexual advances towards Millie. Their dialogue reveals in vivid lines that he is the one who tries to harass Millie sexually while the black women try not to respond to his advances. As Aunt Sue declares: "Dat man give huh no peace, / He say he will hab Millie gal, / Else tu'n us out tuh starve—an' missie, too" (214). Phoebe responds spontaneously and portrays how cruel his sexual intentions are and that they have nothing to do with mutual love: "He'd do it kase he's cruel an' hard, / He's lak a beast dat's scented fresh, young meat, / He's old—He'll suck huh blood lak damp swamp ting" (214). Phoebe's response is especially pungent and depicts the exploitation and objectification of the female body. Her words reveal that the white slaveholders view the female body as a kind of "fresh meat" that they have to taste and touch in order to gorge their appetite, satisfy their needs and gratify their whims.

Phoebe's description of the slaveholder, Charles, is indicative of the general attitude of slaveholders towards black women. Graham does not represent a sporadic incident but the reality of the southern society. Charles represents the brutalities of the plantation system since he exploits and mistreats a large number of slaves on the altar of money. Each slave is a source of money for him because he regards slaves as raw flesh ready for sale. His behavior towards the slaves reflects the sterile societal norms of the southern society and the arbitrariness of class hierarchy. It also reveals the corruption of the political system which supports a cruel institution which perpetuates social injustice and inequality. Charles is part of the American South because he grew up in the South and his whole existence and mentality have been shaped by its social structure and racial hierarchy. He is trapped within the stereotypical clichés that form American racial ideology because he is part of the social system. He cannot fight against the establishment since the current social system serves his own interests.

As regards the plantation system, Charles Hannon asserts that "southern whites have always depended upon black labor but have disavowed this dependence through racist propaganda about black laziness and inefficiency" (35). This is obvious in the fact that Charles is presented as a character without any scruples, a ruthless member of the ruling class. He treats his slaves as wild beasts, regards them with contempt and he neither shows remorse for his mistreatment towards them nor sympathy for them even when they are in a state of complete desolation. He represents the hegemonic social class and incarnates all the hypocrisies and cruelties existent in this social class. Graham attacks the American political system which is unable to administer justice to the racial segregation of black people. She also exposes the demoralizing effect of power and money upon the character of the slaveholders as well as the corrupted southern society. The playwright is ironic towards the representatives of southern aristocracy because they are corrupted by the privileges that their

social status provides them and they assume false identities. Although they claim to be descendants of noble ancestry, they actually wear the mask of nobility in order to conceal their atrocities and brutalities towards their slaves. Therefore, white slaveholders hide the brutalities of their cruel character behind the façade of their noble ancestry. They have created an illusory world of respectability as they entertain a false notion of racial and cultural superiority.

Graham uses a lot of dramatic devices in her play. The portrayal of the characters in Graham's play is based on juxtaposition. The playwright juxtaposes the slaveholder with the slave women and the slave women with Millie. The juxtaposition of one character with another is one of those dramatic devices that Graham uses in order to depict the effects of slavery not only in the external appearance of the characters but also in their personalities. The long-lasting consequences of sexual abuse and hard domestic and field work are evident if we juxtapose Millie with the older slave women. Millie is presented as an innocent character because she has not experienced the horrors of slavery yet. The impact of slavery is evident not only in the external appearance of the slave women but also in their spiritual, emotional and psychological suffering. They are not innocent anymore but fully aware of what it means to be a black woman in America. On the contrary, Millie's description as the embodiment of youth and liveliness is vivid:

> It is MILLIE. Her thin dress reveals the beautifully molded lines of young womanhood as she hesitates just outside in the sunshine. She is the color of burnished gold, and in her soft, wavy hair, framing the round face, are glints of copper. Her mouth is full and curves sweetly like a little child's. Her eyes are wide and know no shadows. (217)

The narrator's description reveals a young girl full of energy and life. The fact that there are no shadows in her eyes demonstrates that she is still unaware of her sale to the slave master.

She is still an innocent girl who cannot even imagine the ills of slavery and white exploitation. Although she is described as a flawless character, the other black female characters that are older than her are described completely different.

For example, Grannie Lou, who is the oldest female character on the plantation, is described as a tired and exhausted woman whose exhilaration and natural exuberance of life has been lost years ago. Millie's youth and innocence are juxtaposed with the weariness and distress of the older female characters. The narrator's juxtaposition of Millie with the other characters is intentional because in this way the playwright wants to delineate Millie's possible future. In a way, the presence of the older female slaves and their physical and psychological condition foreshadows Millie's pre-determined destiny. Since Millie is a black woman in a racist society, there is no hope to extricate herself from the brutalities of the plantation system.

The most characteristic juxtaposition in the play is that of Millie with her mother. Although Cissie was just like her daughter in the past, she now leads a wrenched existence and she is a pitiable human being. One of the other slave women, Aunt Sue describes her transformation very vividly:

> Yes, Cissie! she war beautiful! / Black as a berry an' lovely as da night, / Slender an' swift as a young colt— / She nevah walk, jes' prance an' run / about da place. / Ah seen da buckra eyin' huh—an' she jes' laf. / Den come a day when she war very still, / Ah donno why, till one night seen huh slippin' / trough da shadows lak a hounded coon / crawls tuh his hole to lick his bleedin' wounds. (215)

Cissie has been transformed from a "beautiful" girl into a "hounded coon" through the period of time. Her transformation is indicative of her destiny as a black woman. There are several reasons for her transformation. First of all, she is physically exhausted from the field

and domestic work as well as from the care of her children. What is more, she is emotionally exhausted because she has been raped repeatedly by the white masters.

Apart from the juxtapositions among the characters of the play, Graham embellishes her play with music such as spirituals, songs and gospels in order for it to have an appeal to a greater audience. The play is interspersed with music because spirituals and gospels were part of the African American tradition. Music was at the heart of African Americans and it provided inspiration for most writers of the Harlem Renaissance. As Richard Long insightfully points out, the Renaissance was "a period of intense interaction between music and the writers engaged in interpreting African American life" (qtd. in Stephens 92). One should bear in mind that Graham was also a musician and composer except for a playwright. However, music had a tremendous effect not only on blacks but also on whites because it appealed to their emotions and mood.

Music appeals not only to the audience but it also illuminates the playwright's thoughts and the characters' feelings. The aural effect of music strengthens Graham's criticism of white patriarchy and helps her convey her radical ideas more effectively. She blends drama with music and in this way she succeeds in illuminating the pervasive effects of black women's racial and gender oppression. Stephanie Nelson is correct when she claims that "[i]f the musical context grants permission to say the unsayable—and to make the unsayable a new possibility—this makes music a particularly useful vehicle for those whose voices are suppressed and ignored. Indeed, music is the penultimate mode of delivery for protest or lament" (qtd. in Stephens 94). Graham incorporates music in her play because music is an expression of the characters' feelings. On the one hand, it assuages and soothes their pain while on the other, it calls them to take action and struggle for their rights. As regards the structure of Graham's play, the sound of songs is integral in the dialogues of the

characters and helps in the sequence of events. The blend of music and dramatic text is a technique that contributes to the development of the dramatic action.

Cripple Jake, the banjo player of the play, equates death with happiness and joy. He believes that Cissie acts out of love by committing infanticide because she understands that death is far better than slavery. She hopes that blacks will be treated better in heaven than on earth. Since they have no opportunities on earth, death is equal to happiness. His song is indicative of the belief that life for female slaves is worse than death: "Hebbin is a high an' a holy place, / Da chilluns done no wrong, / Dyin' will bring 'em joy, / Da good book say, 'Lam's / In His bosom—safe.' / While Cissie know dat / Livin's jes a slow decay / Wid worms gnawin' lak nits / Into dey heart an' soul" (221). Graham expresses the suffering of black motherhood through music. Black mothers' pain, exasperation, outburst, angst and scream of anguish are expressed through music. Therefore, music is another dramatic device that Graham uses in order to represent the pain that Cissie feels as a powerless black mother. The sound-effects help make Graham's description of the play more vivid because the murder of her daughter, which takes place off-stage, is dramatized more effectively to the audience through music. The fact that Cissie's murderous act is accompanied by music makes the end of the play more dramatic.

Cripple Jake's song brings forward the role of the Christian Church and God in black people's sufferings. Both *Rachel* and *It's Morning* question God and His representatives because the playwrights want to disrupt another myth whose perpetuation had a tremendous psychological impact on black people who pinned their faith on God for their freedom. As Craig Prentiss explains, "these playwrights were contesting the centrality of a key mythic element emerging in African American culture during the nineteenth century that they were a new chosen people liberated from slavery by the will of God. The growth of the black church to its dominant role in African American society was buttressed by that mythology" (179).

However, Graham reveals that the Christian church was one of those social services that the whites used in order to disclaim their responsibility. The white society put obstacles to blacks' freedom in the name of God. Graham calls its audience to disengage themselves from the shackles of Christian rhetoric and take action. What Graham wants to convey is that prayers are futile because they cannot deliver them from captivity.

Graham's attack is clear if we take into account a scene in which a woman sings, asking for God's help: "In mah sorrow, walk wid me, / In mah sorrow, walk wid me, / When mah hea't wid'in is breakin', / Ah want Jesus tuh walk wid me" (221). The woman begs for God's attention but the only one who responds to her prayers is the slave preacher. While Uncle Dave listens to the woman's song, he tells Cissie: "Kain't yo' trus' de Lawd, daughtah? Hit's al wid Him. Yo' kain' stain yo' han's wid da blood ob yo' own chilluns" (221). Uncle Dave reminds Cissie that God is in charge of her children's safety. This means that Cissie cannot counter God's will by taking matters into her own hands. She must trust God and wait for God's divine retribution. However, Cissie's futile pleas to God and God's silence in the face of black people's sufferings exacerbate her and urge her to take action. How can Cissie maintain her faith in God when she realizes that her children's future is determined by the whites? Uncle Dave's statement sounds especially ironic in Cissie's ears because she knows that God is not with her children since they are going to be sold down the river in a few hours. The characters' prayers and expressions of reassurance are interrupted by the reality of slavery. By introducing a slave preacher in her play, Graham even questions God's existence and makes the contrast between black people's prayers and God's lack of help more intense and painful. This contrast reminds us of the theme of the futility of prayers which has already been analyzed in Grimké's play *Rachel.*

Thus, Cissie's act is not only a rebellious act against white society but also against the dictates of Christian religion which was another white ideology and tradition. What Graham

actually questions is the existence of divine justice. What is the role of Church when thousands of black women suffer on a daily basis? How can the Christian church praise the sacred vocation of motherhood and, at the same time, cannot protect black children from lynching and sexual abuse? These questions bring to the foreground the disjunction between stereotypical clichés and the real essence of black identity. Gradually, black people are awakened to the painful realization that what they have been conditioned to believe in may be another white ideological construction, another cultural myth. The black playwrights understand the growing disillusionment that black women experience not only with respect to white society but also to God's existence and that's why they raise all these questions about God's mercy. The fact that the Christian church acquiesces to the institution of slavery betrays its inherent ideological incongruities. Graham exposes the hypocrisy of white Christians and the passivity of the black church to the horrors of slavery. The playwright forces the audience to face a moral question. Whether Cissie has the right to kill her child is a question that the playwright leaves the audience to answer. According to the norms of white society and Christianity, infanticide is a crime and Cissie must face the consequences of her action. However, in a racist society where there is no alternative, infanticide seems to be the only solution for a black woman who cannot protect her child otherwise.

However, Graham's irony is diffused not only through the dialogues and the songs among the characters of the play but also through the way in which the plot of the play unfolds. The end of the play is especially ironic and tragic because Cissie murders her own daughter on the day of the abolition of slavery when blacks free themselves from the bonds of slavery. When a man knocks their door, Cissie thinks that the soldiers are looking for her children. Not knowing that the man is just a Yankee boy, she goes to her children's room and murders her innocent child. She carries her daughter's lifeless body and approaches the Yankee boy declaring: "Yo' come too late. Mah gal is dead!" (223). As a matter of fact, the

Yankee boy who incarnates God's messenger arrives too late to inhibit the murder of the innocent girl. Graham's purpose is to show that the ramifications of racism on the life of black women are not instant but have long-lasting consequences. The fact that slaves liberated themselves from the bonds of slavery does not mean that their struggle for equality and acknowledgement has come to an end.

The juxtaposition between Cissie and the Yankee boy is intense and reveals how tragic the position of black women in the American society is. Cissie's utterances are contrasted with those of the Yankee boy and dramatize the predicaments of being a woman in a racist society. While Cissie calls the soldier to confirm Millie's death, the soldier announces that they are free from the bonds of slavery. While Cisssie tells him: "See how huh red blood falls hyear in da sun, / Hit's warm an' pure….Come, dip yo' han's in it / She will not shrink away—Huh teahs will nevah / Choke huh song nor will huh limbs grow hebby / wid dispair. Mah gal is dead" (223), the Yankee boy announces black people's emancipation: "Free! Do you understand? / You're free! No longer slaves. / Loud sound the bugles and the drums, / The mighty armies march— / For this day sets you free" (222). The contradictory nature of both characters' declarations underscores the playwright's use of dramatic irony to make the plight of black women more apparent and pronounced. If the messenger had arrived in the slave household earlier, Millie's sacrifice could have been avoided. However, the ending is deliberately made to be cruel because it is meant to shock the audience into a kind of painful realization of the injustice and cruelty of slavery.

Although there are several motives that force Cissie to make such a cruel decision, Grannie Lou's narration of a tale motivates her and makes her take action. Cissie overhears Grannie Lou narrating a tale about an enslaved woman from Africa who beheaded her three sons with a cane knife because they were going to be sold down the river: "An' den dat 'oman lift huh big cane knife, / She cry out sompin' in a wild, strange voice, / An' wid one

sweep she cut off all dey heads, / Dey roll down at huh feet—All tree ob dem" (217). The narration of the story raises her spirits and she kills her daughter early in the morning. Grannie Lou's role is very important in the development of the play. First of all, the tale proves that Cissie is not an isolated example of a black woman who decides to take such drastic measures in order to protect her children. On the contrary, she belongs to the next generation of black women who experience the same atrocities due to their blackness. The tale is not just a fictitious narrative but the reality of a black woman's life. In this way, the playwright reveals how the perpetuation of the institution of slavery contributes to the abuse and exploitation of black women.

Furthermore, the other slaves seem to guide Cissie's first steps for the execution. Cissie's murder seems to be collective. The other slave women take part in Millie's murder indirectly but essentially. They join together to carry out their plans in order to save Cissie's children from slavery. They create the background on which Cissie bases her motives and justifies Millie's execution. When Pete asks her to have a party in order to celebrate the coming of the New Year, Cissie gives an affirmative reply. When she announces that they are going to have a party, the other slaves realize the contradictory purpose of that party. The fact that Cissie organizes a party in order to exhaust her children and let them sleep deeply proves that it is very painful for her to commit the crime and she prefers to commit it without letting her children look her in the eyes. She wants to assuage their pain without her children understanding their mother's murderous intentions and feel pain. Cissie becomes ambivalent, yet prophetic: "Dey gonna sing an' dance till dey kain't dance / no mo'. Till sleep pulls hebby at dar lids, / An' dey sinks down wid belly full o' joy / (Almost in a whisper) / Happy will be der dreams—der long, long dreams" (218). The playwright infuses irony in this scene because this party is going to be the beginning of a premeditated murder. It is not accidental that both the African woman of the tale and Cissie use a cane knife in order to kill their

children. This means that the women of the play share a collective female consciousness and sympathize with the predicaments of Cissie's life. Although the other black women express their anxiety and discomfort for her contemplations and cruel murder, they seem to forgive her beforehand and justify her thoughts and actions. They do not condemn her actions but explain why such decisions are made in a society that does not give justice to black women.

A dramatic device that is repeated in this play just like in *Rachel* is the motif of laughter. Admittedly, the recurrent motif of laughter has dramatic dimensions and it is used ironically in order to critique the prevailing stereotypes and the implications of racism on the life of black mothers. When Cissie delivers Millie's dead body to the Yankee boy, without knowing that he is just a messenger who came to inform them about the abolition of slavery, Grannie Lou points at Millie's limp body and bursts into a loud laugh: "He! He! He! Ha! Ha! Ha! Ah tole yo'…. She don' hab tuh go! He! He! He!" (224). Her laughter is not one of happiness but one of irony. It is a neurotic reaction to the tragedy that is being unfolded before her own eyes. The end of the play is completely paradoxical because the consequences of slavery are evident even on the day of its abolition, foreshadowing that although slavery is over, racial prejudice will continue.

However, the most tragic figure of all the characters of the play is Cissie who learns the real identity of the soldier and realizes that the crime of her daughter could have been avoided if he had come a little bit earlier. There is a dramatic contrast between Cissie's dark face and the rays of bright sunshine that come into the room:

> For a moment she stands in the bright sunshine, gazing out. The music has gradually diminished into the distance and now may be heard only faintly. The dew-drenched earth is sweet, bathed in the pure sunshine of the newborn day. Somewhere in the yard a cock crows. Cissie looks down into her child's face and speaks quietly. / CISSIE. Hit's mawnin'. (224)

Cissie's profound grief is juxtaposed with the bright rays of the sun. Graham's symbolic use of darkness and brightness reveals that the atrocities upon which the institution of slavery was built cannot go out of black people's memory. In other words, Cissie is a tragic figure and she is given the dimensions of the tragic hero of an ancient Greek tragedy. Cissie will be free from the bonds of slavery but she will be forever chained to her own guilt and remorse. Ironically enough, it seems that she has been punished-in a Christian way-for her sinful act against her own child. Graham reveals how corrupted the southern society is through the protagonist's thoughts, decisions and actions.

To sum up, both Angelina Weld Grimké and Shirley Graham criticize the racial and gender politics of the American society. Although their plays were written in different decades, they are concerned with the same theme. The disruption of stereotypical clichés is the central thematic axis in their dramatic production. Their plays are a scathing attack on the various ideological mechanisms and cultural conventions that whites used in order to justify their atrocities against black people. The protagonists of the plays try to construct their identities in a society that is trapped in sterile stereotypes and prejudices. The plays explore the protagonists' efforts to define themselves within the American reality despite the obstacles that the white society imposes on them. Although the white society perpetuates the prejudices against the black race, the playwrights disrupt and deconstruct the misleading representations of black people and give them the opportunity to express themselves. The stereotypes, which force black women to be marginalized, are subverted and the protagonists' lives are approached from a more humane perspective. What these female playwrights want to express is that black women are doubly marginalized just like the playwrights themselves. Firstly, they are marginalized because of their color and secondly, they are excluded due to their gender. Their exclusion and alienation in specific roles and behaviors had devastating effects on their psychological state and the way they viewed the world. The fact that they

could not be protected legally and were considered analogous to animals had a tremendous impact on their life and treatment by white men. Also, the passivity of white women played an important role in their degradation and dehumanization.

Chapter III: May Miller's play *Nails and Thorns*

"Our country's national crime is lynching. It is not the creature of an hour, the sudden outburst of uncontrolled fury, or the unspeakable brutality of an insane mob. It represents the cool, calculating deliberation of intelligent people who openly avow that there is an 'unwritten law' that justifies them in putting human beings to death without complaint under oath, without trial by jury, without opportunity to make defense, and without right of appeal."

Ida B. Wells-Barnett

(From *Lynch Law in America,* 1900*)*

Another early twentieth-century African American female playwright who employs the same themes but from the perspective of a white mother and not a black one is May Miller in her play *Nails and Thorns* (1933). Miller was an African American playwright, poet and educator. She was born in Washington D.C. She attended M Street High School where one of her teachers was Angelina Weld Grimké. She graduated with a B.A. from Howard University in 1920 and she taught at Frederick Douglass High School for twenty years. However, it is not accidental that Miller was a woman of such high education. Her father was a famous sociologist at Howard University and some of his acquaintances were Du Bois and Booker T. Washington. She also joined "S Street Salon", Georgia Douglas Johnson's house in Washington D.C., where she established relations with Zora Neale Hurston, Willis Richardson and Langston Hughes. Miller's association with intellectual people influenced her and contributed to the development of her writing skills. Her play *Nails and Thorns* won a prize in the writing contest of the Southern University in 1933[30].

Miller was especially innovative as a playwright in her play *Nails and Thorns*. Instead of using black characters to address the impact of racism and sexism on the lives of black people, Miller explores the pervasive influence of racial and sexual politics on the black race through white characters. The play takes place in a southwestern town in the 1930s and the protagonists of the play are Stewart Landers and Gladys Landers who are white characters. The only black character is a Negro servant named Annabel whose presence plays an important role in the development of the play. May Miller makes an exception to the rule by employing white characters in order for the audience to understand what it means to be a Negro in a white male supremacist society. The play begins with news that Lem, a black man, is in jail because a white woman accused him of assaulting her. Although the evidence for Lem's assault is circumstantial, the whites are ready to lynch him. While Stewart, the

[30] See Hamalian, Leo, and James V. Hatch 307, 308, and Green-Barteet, Miranda A. 406-410.

sheriff of the town, reassures Annabel, the black servant, that "[n]othing has happened to Lem; they had to lock him up until they find out all about a terrible affair that happened this afternoon" (313), Annabel is sure that even the accusation is enough for a black man to be lynched and killed without a fair trial. Therefore, she responds to Stewart's claims: "That's jes' it, Mistah Landers: them Davises is sich strong people. There's 'nough o' 'em to burn the whole town, an' they kin burn po' Lem easy as that" (313, 314). It is evident that there are doubts about Lem's guilt and that even Stewart believes that there are indications of his innocence.

Annabel's statement disrupts the fallacious deduction that the acts of lynching were carried out because blacks insulted white women's honor and wanted to rape them. The acts of lynching served a lot interests on behalf of white patriarchy. They were not just criminal acts against the black race but there was an ideology of white-male supremacy behind them. Her words reveal that lynchings were far from acts of delivering justice but rather instances of mob violence that reached out both to whites gratifying their racist sentiments and to blacks serving as lessons that taught them to keep in place. As Lisa Lindquist Dorr so aptly puts it, "[t]here is no doubt that lynchings served as a means of social, economic, and political control of African Americans and represent some of the most egregious instances of injustice and brutality in American history. Lynching controlled African Americans through fear and united whites across class and gender lines" (8). This is why lynching was always a public spectacle.

Lynching was a public spectacle of physical punishment and execution that involved the approval and participation of the whole community. Apart from the victims of lynching, there were spectators who watched the act of lynching as well as women and children who became witnesses of this violent act against black people on a daily basis. The spectators participated subconsciously in the violence. On the one hand, the white crowds assuaged their

hatred through lynching and these practices of violence strengthened the bonds of white solidarity because they were unified under the black threat of undermining the foundations of white supremacy. On the other hand, the acts of lynching had a different social symbolism on black people's side. As Jonathan Markovitz insightfully points out, "[o]ne of the most important effects of lynchings was to create a collective memory of terror among blacks in order to fully emphasize not only the superiority of white power but also the consequences of challenging that power, and extreme uses of violence were absolutely essential to achieve this end" (117, 118). The threat of death through lynching acted as a check on African Americans' freedom of will, action, thought, speech and choice.

The playwright attempts to show that black men's assaults on white women were a myth the whites perpetuated. According to Stephens, "[s]tatistics refuted the myth that black men were raping white women, but this myth persisted throughout the South as the primary 'excuse' for lynching" (332). Therefore, black men did not rape white women but the white men were those who perpetuated this myth on the inaccurate allegation that lynching is actually the only means of white women's protection. Thus, the whites used this myth to disclaim their responsibility for the cruel acts of lynching and justify their crimes against the black race. By turning lynching into a socially accepted act, the whites vented out their rage and aggression against blacks and could control the white body through the lynching of the black one. As Ida B. Wells explains, "white men used the ownership of the body of the white female as a terrain on which to lynch the black male" (qtd. in Stephens 331). The act of lynching meant that no one had the right to touch the white female body because the white man owned it. Once again, the objectification of the white female body removed the right of the white women to control their bodies and affirmed white women's subjugation to white men because lynchings were performed as a punishment for the supposed sexual advances of black men against white women. There is no doubt that lynching was also a way for the white

man to prevent any interracial sexual relations between white women and black men. Since white men raped black women and gave birth to biracial children who had the social status of the subordinate race, there were possibilities for white women to do exactly the same with black men. This would be a problem for the dominance of the white patriarchy and the cultural homogeneity of the white race. Thus, the only solution to prevent interracial sexual relations between them was the threat of death through lynching.

In addition, lynching helped in the portrayal of the black man as a monster who was ready to rape the white female body because he desired something he could never possess and he could not resist his inherent sexual impulses. The perpetuation of this myth excluded the possibility of interracial marriages between black men and white women because it was socially inconceivable for white women to desire sexually a man whose color was black and belonged to a subordinate race. According to Stewart Tolnay and E. M. Beck,

> [i]n popular racist mythology, African-American males were viewed as savage beasts with almost uncontrollable sexual tastes for white women, and the only thing standing between these "brutes" and the flower of southern gentility was the threat of lynch mob justice. Apologists of mob violence used this defense as a justification of extralegal executions as well as an argument against antilynching legislation in Congress. (46, 47)

These false presumptions dehumanized black men because they were vulnerable not only to physical torture but because it was created a whole fallacious ideology around black manhood that had devastating psychological effects on them. Hester is correct to point out that "rather than the often stated justification given by White America that they were protecting their white women's virtue from the sex hungry black male, whites lynched blacks in order to strip them of power, autonomy, and humanity" (250).

However, the question that arises is how the principle of mob rule prevailed in a democratic institution. The dissonance between American democracy and the incidents of lynching was a paradox in the American society. The fundamental democratic principles of the Declaration of Independence are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Life is considered to be one of the core democratic values in the American democratic institution. According to this principle, the government is responsible to reassure the safety and protection of its citizens since it is the right of every citizen to live without the fear of being killed by other people. However, this principle was never applied to African Americans who were not considered to be American citizens. Their lives were always in danger and their safety was dependent on whites' temper and mercy. C. C. O'Brien rightly argues that "[l]ynching plays in particular express the obstructions to full citizenship that blacks and females must confront within the parameters set for them by an oppressive white patriarchy" (583). Miller criticizes the complicity of the American government in mob violence and her play makes an appeal for federal anti-lynching legislation revealing how an act of lynching can affect the whole American society regardless of race, sex and class. Her purpose is to raise the public consciousness as regards white mob violence and racial terrorism.

One of the most despotic and authoritative characters in the play who represents white male supremacy is Stewart Landers. He is initially presented as the American sovereign whose supposed hegemony and knowledge can control the well-being of the community. His point of view is taken as an ordinary course of things. Also, his supposed deep insight rationalizes and regularizes his actions and deeds. Although both his wife, Gladys and Annabel express their concerns and anxieties that Lem will be surely lynched by the white mob, Stewart dismisses their concerns and rejects their argumentation as inaccurate because he refuses to accept the fact that the women's fears are valid. He believes that their concerns are trivial and that everything is under control because he, as a man, is in charge of the

situation and no woman has the right to intervene. While Gladys pinpoints several times that Lem is in danger and he must act immediately if they want to save him from lynching, Stewart is dismissive arguing that he is the one who controls the serious things and not the women of his household. The development of the play proves that both Gladys and Annabel confute Stewart's arguments and reveal the accuracy of their predictions.

When Gladys asks Stewart whether he has informed the Governor to use the state militia in case of emergency, Stewart responds irresponsibly: "[T]he Governor is a busy man and can't be disturbed every time there is a little outburst in a town" (311). Gladys reveals the first indication of Stewart's irresponsible treatment of Lem's possible lynching. Furthermore, when she asks him about a possible mob gathering, he once again doubts her concerns arguing: "Come here. Look out there at that quiet street. Does that look like a riot scene?" (311). He even rejects the possibility of Lem's lynching pretending the safety of the jail: "Well, if you just must have a mob, we can take care of even that. Didn't I tell you the jail is well protected and I've taken every precaution? Deputies and police are guarding the place and we have enough tear bombs and shot guns to stop any crowd" (312). Despite Gladys' remarks on the possibility of Lem's lynching, Stewart remains passive, "returns to the easy chair, snaps on a lamp, and settles to read again" (313).

Stewart's behavior is even more pejorative towards his black servant. He treats her in a humiliating way because he has adopted the stereotypical clichés which distort and corrupt the images of black women and present them as imaginative and fanciful by nature. He uses the stereotypical argument that black people are not trustworthy in order to convince his wife that she must not rely on Annabel's claims. Although he calls Annabel unreliable, he is actually the one who bases his statements on stereotypical clichés and prejudices. He advises Gladys: "You can't believe everything Annabel says. She's excited and imaginative. She hasn't seen half of what she thinks she's seen" (314). Even when Gladys declares that

Annabel is not a woman who tells lies, he responds: “No, she hasn’t, but she’s frightened and doesn’t know what she’s saying. The Negroes are very excitable and I wouldn’t be a bit surprised if a number of them didn’t leave town suddenly, right here in the midst of crop season” (314). He attributes her imagination to the black genes. He believes that all Negro people are imaginative because it is a characteristic attribute of their genes. He responds to his wife through generalizations which do not depend on scientific truths. He believes that Lem’s imprisonment can make all black people leave town without thinking that Lem’s lynching will deteriorate their position in the small community because the whites will be infuriated and this will have more negative consequences on the lives of black people.

A misconception that Miller repudiates and denounces in her play is the racial prejudice that black people are genetically built to be subordinate to whites because their black genes make them primitive and inferior human beings. The fact that Annabel’s imaginative nature is attributed to her genes is based on the beliefs of biological determinism. As George Smith explains,

> [b]iological determinism evolves from the principle of genetic essentialism that posits personal traits—such as mental illness, homosexuality, aggressive personality, exhibitionism, dangerousness, shyness, stress—have a genetic or biological disposition and, indeed, are predictable and determinable at conception; thus the social context in which the traits are manifested is minimized under this principle. In a word, biological determinism recognizes essentially that one’s fate is determined by his or her genetic inheritance. (150)

Annabel’s imaginative nature is considered to be a biological characteristic of her black inheritance. It is believed that it is part of her personality because it is a characteristic attribute of black genetic makeup. According to this belief, black people’s behavior is fixed and unchangeable because personality traits are biologically pre-determined. Although the

theory of biological determinism reflects the point of view of many scientists, its interpretation of human behavior is rather simplistic and fails to recognize the diversity of human behaviors and preferences. Although biology can interpret some aspects of human behavior, personality traits are not based exclusively on biological factors. Social as well as educational factors play an important role in the formation of each person's personality.

Apart from Stewart, the other white men's hegemonic ideology and obstinacy do not even allow them to respect Annabel's pain and lament for Lem's undeserved punishment and death. While Annabel grieves for Lem's lynching, the Sheriff's aides do not respect her and administer a sharp reproof to her because she makes a lot of noise and they want Stewart to calm down and relax. One of the aides, Wilson addresses Annabel and tells her: "Hey, Annabel, quit that fuss. The boss's had a pretty bad night an' he don't want to come home to no wailin' an moanin'" (323). While Annabel weeps and mourns for Lem's lynching, they do not want to disturb Stewart's tranquility. Their blatant indifference to the lynching of a human being reveals how white males are socialized to watch such brutalities against blacks. Their hegemony and dominance do not allow them to realize that they are accomplishes in the crimes that are committed against the black race.

Although Stewart initially dismisses Annabel's concerns as unfounded, his attitude towards her changes at the end of the play. Only when he realizes that each of Gladys' concerns and Annabel's fears are affirmed, does he treat Annabel as a human being whose depth of knowledge demonstrates how the tribulations of her life have transformed her into a wise woman. The psychological anxieties that Annabel experiences prove that African Americans are thinking human beings who are fully aware of their victimization and objectification. Annabel is distinguished by her acuteness of spirit because she possesses a discernment that many white powerful people may lack. She displays wit, sheer cleverness and resourcefulness.

Stewart dismisses both women on the grounds of his own gender superiority as a man in a society that retains specific gender and racial hierarchy. While Stewart declares at the beginning of the play: "I don't believe much in Annabel's vision" (316), his last words demonstrate his respect towards Annabel's wisdom: "Annabel's a very good woman—a very, very wise woman" (327). Stewart's statements are completely contradictory through the development of the play. His selfishness and stubbornness do not allow him to accept both women's information and predictions. Although he can help Lem and save him from lynching, he is unwilling to do so because he is unable to accept the truth that derives from two female voices and cannot disengage himself from the sterile stereotypical clichés. As Stephens explains, "*Nails and Thorns* exposes the ideology of white-male supremacy for its brutality, lack of compassion, and refusal to accept the truth when it is offered by anyone who is not a white male" (337). Stewart's hegemonic ideology and obstinacy are responsible for the death of an innocent black man and the perpetuation of a system that has devastating effects on the whole community.

Although Stewart dismisses both Gladys' and Annabel's anxieties regarding them as trivial, it is important to take into consideration how Gladys reacts towards Annabel's concerns when they talk with Stewart and when the two women talk alone. When Gladys and Annabel talk alone, Gladys sympathizes with Annabel's fears and demonstrates her trust towards her. She asks her for more information and believes the accuracy of her allegations. However, when Annabel enters the white household and expresses her fears in front of Gladys and Stewart, Gladys dismisses her fears just as Stewart had dismissed hers earlier. She tells Annabel: "All right, Annabel, now you're here safe and sound, and you need not worry any more. You go fix the baby's bottle and take it to him. And try to forget all about Lem and the affair" (314). Her submissiveness to Stewart's beliefs and opinions demonstrates a white woman who has been socialized to react in a specific way when her arguments

confute those of the dominant sex. Since Stewart expresses his doubts and does not agree with his wife, the only thing that Gladys can do is to be condescending because she has no power over the dominant sex and her beliefs are useless because they cannot be as valid as those of the male sex. Women are socialized to believe that men are those who make decisions as regards serious issues while they can only occupy themselves with trivial ones. Women's beliefs do not matter because men do not take them into account since the only thing women can do is to be housewives, mothers and fulfill their husbands' sexual needs and urges. Therefore, Gladys' reaction is indicative of the condescending attitude that every woman adopts within the institution of marriage.

Furthermore, Gladys seems to be unaware of Annabel's position as a mother in the American racist and sexist society. She does not seem to understand that black mothers raise their children in inhumane conditions and are powerless to protect them from lynching and sexual abuse. When Annabel tells her that she works all day in order to raise her children and then comes a day when their future depends on the whites' mercy because the young black boys can be lynched while the black girls can be sexually abused, Gladys abruptly realizes that black mothers do not have the same privileges as whites. When Annabel informs Gladys that the whites carry their children with them in order to watch acts of lynching, she exclaims: "The children too! They can't do that to our children. They're all we have. They're our promise—our future" (320). She expresses her fears that white children will lose their innocence if they watch such gruesome sights. However, Annabel reminds her that black mothers and their children are in an even worse condition: "Yes'm, mah chillun's all I got, too. If 'twasn't foh 'em, I wouldn't be a-workin' all the time 'til I's ready to drap. Then come a time lak tonight an' I git to thinkin' that mah sons has gotta grow up in this town, too, an' 'sposin' aftah all mah work they ends lak that" (320). It is actually this statement that awakens Gladys from her passive stance as she realizes that apart from white men, white

women's passivity is responsible for black women's inhumane social position in society. She takes action because she wants to raise white women's consciousness to the plight of black mothers.

The act of lynching helped in the perpetuation of false stereotypes between white and black women. As Beverly Guy-Sheftall so aptly puts it, black women were portrayed as "immoral, promiscuous, and sexually insatiable, and white women as innocent, chaste, and inaccessible. According to myth, virginal southern white women occupied a metaphorical pedestal that distanced them from sinful Black women" (442). This means that according to the myth, black women were always sexually aroused and available for sex while white women's virginity, decency and modesty were considered sacred characteristic features of white women. The creation of different stereotypes between black and white women placed black women to an even subordinate social position in the American society. Black women's supposed promiscuity justified their sexual abuse by white men while white women's supposed lack of sexuality justified whites' atrocities against black men.

Annabel pinpoints the consequences of Lem's imprisonment and possible lynching on black people. She vividly refers to black people's reaction to the news of Lem's situation: "They's gone in an' locked their doors an' pushed chairs an' tables up 'gainst 'em so as nobody kin git to 'em. Tomorrer mos' o' 'em what kin fine the money 's gonna git way from heah" (313). It is evident that Lem's possible lynching distresses the black community and they feel afraid that another innocent black man will be the next victim. Nobody remains unaffected by the impact of racism on the lives of black people, not even the white people. Gladys rightly points out: "And remember it isn't only the Negroes that suffer. Every time any injustice is done or any disgrace falls, all of us feel it" (315). The playwright successfully depicts the impact of racism on white people. She employs white characters in her play so that she can exemplify the negative consequences of racism from a different perspective. This

different perspective allows the audience to understand that the onslaught of racism is pervasive to all human beings.

For this reason, Gladys pins her faith on children and wonders what their future will be when they experience the brutality of racism in every part of their life. She worries about her child because she knows that every aspect of his life will be full of violent scenes and this will destroy his morality. Gladys expresses her fears to Stewart, arguing that: "Now, all the time I worry about the kind of world Junior will have to live in. That's the reason I didn't like the comic strip you showed me. I hate the thought that he'll be reading about gangs and mobs and enjoy them" (315). What Gladys wants to say is that she is afraid that her child will be part of the mob one day and one of those who lynch innocent black men. She is afraid that he will enjoy torturing black people because he will not be able to understand how brutal his actions will be.

Gladys describes a personal experience of lynching and its impact on the whole community. She expresses how devastating the act of lynching can be for the entire community. It is not only the lynch victim that suffers but the whole society. She declares:

> I lived in a town once where they lynched a man and I can never forget how the town and the people suffered. It wasn't what they did to the unfortunate man alone. He was out of his misery. It was what they did to every soul in that town. They crucified everything that was worthwhile—justice and pride and self-respect. For generations to come the children will be gathering the nails and thorns from the scene of that crucifixion. (315)

The act of lynching took the life of the innocent black man and it had devastating effects on the morality of the entire community. As Gladys mentions, the values that the community espoused were sacrificed at the altar of racism. The damage was apparent not only on the black community but on the white families as well.

The playwright parallels Christ's crucifixion with the children's sufferings. Christ was crucified wearing a crown of thorns and being nailed to a large wooden cross. In a similar way, the children who experience scenes of violence such as lynchings become spiritually contaminated and mentally stigmatized as they are forced to watch the most brutal demonstrations of racism. Gladys' statement that the children who were witnesses to the act of lynching "will be gathering the nails and thorns from the scene of that crucifixion" (315) confirms the title of the play and reveals the devastating repercussions that the perpetuation of the institution of racism has on the lives of all human beings regardless of color, class, age and gender. Admittedly, the playwright refers especially to the children because as the younger generation, they are the hope and the future of society and the nation in general.

Stewart's passivity and unwillingness to help as well as the realization of the consequences of lynching on the whole community urge Gladys to take action and make white people see the plight of blacks. Gladys believes that only an innocent white baby can change their mind and assuage the infuriated crowd. Gladys tells Annabel: "I'll tell that mob how I feel. I'll tell them how you feel. I'll show them my baby—he is this town's tomorrow" (320). Gladys believes that a baby can stop the infuriated mob and runs out of her house with her baby. She rebels against the white mob in order to prevent Lem's lynching. However, both Lem and her baby are dead in front of the furiousness of the crowd. When she returns home she tells Stewart with proverbial imperturbability: "The mob lynched your son along with crazy Lem. They knocked him down—they stamped on him. Oh, Stewart, they won't listen—they can't even see me—they're killing my baby" (325). Gladys' attempt to prevent Lem's lynching is actually a form of rebellion and resistance to the white supremacist society which remains passive to the dehumanization of black people.

Gladys justifies her reaction and explains the reasons why she sacrifices her baby's life. She declares that she is unable to raise a child in a society that tortures its members both

physically and psychologically. She believes that her child is the only way to save Lem's life and the future generations of children from such violent scenes. She justifies her actions, arguing that: "I am there with him, helping him fight back the mob. I'm fighting to save all of us from sorrow—the torture to that crazy boy, the disgrace to our town and against all the evil they're building for our children and our children's children to bear" (318). First of all, she wants to save Lem's life and secondly, she wants to prevent the effects that the act of lynching will have on the entire community and especially on children. When she announces the death of her baby to her husband, she seems to be content with his death because she prefers his death to his psychological suffering. Gladys expresses her satisfaction to Stewart arguing that: "He's dead, dead, I tell you, and I'm glad. (laughing hysterically) He'll never have to see a lynching" (325).

Gladys's actions remind us of Rachel's and Cissie's acts of rebellion. Rachel defies the rules of her community by refusing to become a mother and raise a black child in the racist and sexist American society. Cissie commits infanticide because she believes that it is the only way to save her daughter from slavery and sexual abuse while Gladys sacrifices her child's life in order to prevent a black man's lynching because she believes that it is the only way to raise the white female consciousness to the plight of black mothers. It is necessary for a white body to be sacrificed in order for white people to understand that they murder hundreds of innocent black people on a daily basis. A white mother is obliged to put her baby to death in order for the white mob to realize the atrocities they commit against the black race and especially against the black mothers and the institution of motherhood. The death of the white baby is highly symbolic because it symbolizes the death of a nation whose social practices perpetuate violence and injustice. The baby signifies the death of innocence and purity and, thus, the democratic ideal of America. Although the mob seems to have no conscience, the death of an innocent white child can work a change since the specific act of

lynching can have an effect not only on the black community but on the white one as well. The fact that a white child lost his life to no purpose can sentimentalize the white mob because each act of rebellion is not hopeless but contributes to the accomplishment of a slight change as regards the struggle against black people's discrimination. The three protagonists of the plays reveal how difficult it is to be a mother in a society that discriminates its citizens according to their race and gender. Rachel, Cissie and Gladys are obliged to refuse their sacred role as mothers because they are powerless to protect and defend their children from the brutalities of the American society. However, what Gladys confirms through her resistance is that white mothers are also in a powerless position because they are unable to resist the dominant male sex and their passivity contributes to black women's deteriorative position.

To sum up, May Miller is one of those early black female playwrights who tries in her play *Nails and Thorns* to disengage women from the stereotypes that the white society imposes on them. In order to achieve this, she employs white characters within her play and explores the racial and gender politics in the first half of the twentieth century through a white feminine perspective. Instead of using black characters, she analyzes how a white mother experiences and reacts in front of the racial discrimination and injustice against black people. In this way, women transcend racial borders and identify with one another. The white female protagonist, Gladys deconstructs these stereotypes and approaches the plight of black mothers from a more humane perspective. The play deconstructs the idea that lynching is necessary because black men rape white women and subverts the false assumptions that blacks are imaginative and fanciful. Gladys' dialogue with Annabel and Stewart reveals that the white society perpetuates these myths in order to serve its interests and keep black people subjugated to their inferior social position.

Chapter IV: Myrtle Smith Livingston's play *For Unborn Children*

"I believe in recognizing every human being as a human being- neither white, black, brown, or red; and when you are dealing with humanity as a family there's no question of integration or intermarriage. It's just one human being marrying another human being or one human being living around and with another human being."

Malcolm X

(From *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, 1965)

Myrtle Smith Livingston is another African American playwright whose play *For Unborn Children* (1926) deals with the theme of miscegenation and its negative impact on black women[31]. The play was published in 1926 and won the third prize in the *Crisis* literary competition. Livingston employs the problem of miscegenation from black women's perspective and analyzes how interracial marriage and sex can harm black women. Instead of narrating the relationship between a white man and a black woman, the playwright reverses the usual stage interracial pairing and examines the interracial relationship between a black man, Leroy Carlson and a white woman, Selma Frazier, challenging in this way the dominant sexual codes. Instead of depicting the negative impact that interracial relationships had on interracial couples of southern American society, the playwright explores its negative consequences on Leroy's sister, grandmother, future racially mixed children and generally on the black race.

Miscegenation was considered illegal in America. Black and white intermixing was condemned and was less acceptable than any other racially mixed relationships. In order to prevent interracial marriage and sex, the American legal system enforced the so-called anti-miscegenation laws from 1664 until 1967. For almost two and a half centuries, anti-miscegenation laws prohibited sex and marriage between blacks and whites and banned the acknowledgment of racially mixed illegitimate children[32]. The paradox of these laws was that white slaveholders raped black women and produced illegitimate children without being punished while, at the same time, black men were lynched when there was even the suspicion that they were looking at white women lasciviously. This means that white men adopted a double racial standard. On the one hand, they were in favor of anti-miscegenation laws and,

[31] Myrtle Smith Livingston graduated from Manual High School in 1920, studied pharmacy at Howard University and taught at Lincoln College in Jefferson City (Hatch, James V., and Ted Shine 188).

[32] The first anti-miscegenation law was enacted in Maryland, in1664 so that they could prevent sexual relationships and marriages between black slaves and white servants. Anti-miscegenation laws were judged illegal and unconstitutional in 1967 in the court case *Loving v. Virginia.* In this case, the Lovings (a black woman and a white man) were arrested in Virginia because it was considered that they violate the state's anti-miscegenation laws. It is important to take into account that anti-miscegenation laws were repealed in Alabama in 2000 (Alexander, Leslie M., and Walter C. Rucker 229, 230, 231).

on the other hand, they exploited black women as sexual objects. The consequences of anti-miscegenation laws were disastrous because they prohibited any legal sexual relationships between blacks and whites, racially mixed children were considered illegitimate and could not obtain the social status of their white parent, and last but not least, black women continued to be abused sexually by white men.

The Supreme Court revoked the anti-miscegenation laws in 1967 revealing how pervasive racism was in America. The annulment of anti-miscegenation laws proved the invalidity of the myth of racial purity which was impossible in a society that was full of illegitimate black or mulatto children and some of them passed as white without recognition of their black ancestry. Anita Kathy Foeman and Teresa Nance reveal the futility of the myth of race purity, presenting the statistics on race mixing:

> Beigel held in 1966 that perhaps 70% of African Americans had White ancestors. Wright (1994) reports that as many as 90% of Blacks today are multiracial. And, of course, many Whites are not aware of their own Black ancestry, because Black "passing" was dependent upon secrecy. In 1958, Stuckert contended that "21 percent of the persons classified as white…have an African element". (547)

The statistics challenge the notions of racial purity and the whites' cruel efforts to reinforce white dominance in America. The inability of white patriarchy to reconcile the differences among the citizens of the American nation reveals that America was a nation based on caste and whoever was not white was classified as non-white and inferior human being.

The taboo of miscegenation was based on stereotypical myths and clichés that the white society perpetuated for the protection of American whiteness. The first myth that white patriarchy used for the prevention of interracial relationships was that about black male sexuality. According to the myth, black people had strong sexual drives. It was believed that

black men were seized with bestial sexual fantasies that were contrasted with white women's supposedly inherent innocence and lack of sexuality. According to Isabel Mukonyora, "[w]hite women were considered pure, innocent victims of black men who, because of the insatiable desire for sex associated with their race, used their superior physical strength to perpetrate rape" (51). There was a widespread notion that black men would take revenge on black women's sexual harassment by having interracial relationships with white women. Black men's portrayal as sexual savages put obstacles in black-white relationships and reinforced the acts of lynching against them. There is no doubt that black men's sexual freedom threatened racial hierarchy and paved the way for interracial marriages.

Another misconception regarding interracial relationships is associated with the statement that Leroy's sister makes about white women's choice to have interracial relations with black men. Leroy's sister, Marion believes that there must be something wrong when a white woman chooses a black man as her partner in life. She expresses her doubts about Selma's psychological health, claiming: "There must be something terribly wrong with her, for white women don't marry colored men when they can get anybody else" (191). This false assumption is associated with the belief that interracial relationships are not stable but suffer from insurmountable problems because when a white woman chooses a black man as her husband, she suffers from psychological neurosis. This means that she does not act out of true love but out of resistance to her family's norms or the society's sexual barriers.

Thomas Brayboy refers to interracial sexuality as an expression of neurotic conflict and pinpoints that an interracial sexual relation is impossible to flourish because the social barriers that put obstacles on the interracial couple are larger than the individual differences between the couple:

> The sex act may have little or nothing to do with tenderness, love or even lust but instead may, for instance, become an arena for expressing negative

> feelings such as contempt, revenge or irrational guilt. An interracial sexual situation, like any other type of Negro-white relationship, is inevitably influenced by the historical vicissitudes of Negro-white relations as they have developed in this country. Even if the participants are able to overcome their own personal distortions and prejudices in this area, they must constantly face reminders hurled by both groups in the society. (179)

While Brayboy no doubt reflects the point of view of many critics, his interpretation is rather reductive and fails to take into account the fact that interracial sexuality is not necessarily associated with social factors. Those who view interracial sexuality as an expression of neurotic conflict fail to consider the possibility of true love and seem to be trapped within stereotypical clichés and false racist assumptions.

While Brayboy makes some important points, Charles Smith persuasively asserts that "[f]or interracial couples the personal interaction may involve a higher degree of communication and intimacy than exists in the non-interracial marriage" (176) because "these couples are faced with pressures and obstacles set by society against their intimate association. As a result they often marshal their defenses in order to cope with these barriers and in order to protect their interracial union" (176). As a result, the assumption that whites marry blacks as an expression of neurotic conflict is false because there is no valid scientific research which proves that marriages between blacks and whites are less stable than other marriages. On the contrary, Thomas Monahan's research indicates that "[o]verall Black-White marriages were, surprisingly, reported to be more stable than Black-Black marriages. Black male-White female marriages were reported to be more stable than White-White marriages" (qtd. in Foeman and Nance 545).

Another false assumption surrounding black and white relationships was that black men desired white women because it was the only way to climb up the social ladder. Black

men's desire of white women as a supposed quest for social distinction and ascendancy undermined the possibility of true love between blacks and whites. According to this idea, blacks wanted to marry whites because they were looking for social equality. Admittedly, this was another misconception used by the white society in order to prevent sexual relations between blacks and whites. As Foeman and Nance explain, an "enduring theory surrounding Black-White unions is that Blacks marry Whites for status" (543). In Livingston's play, the black protagonist's declaration of true love towards the white woman sounds strange in his grandmother's ears. Leroy tells his grandmother: "But, Grandmother, I love her so much! Not because she's white, but just for herself alone; I'd love her just the same if she were black! And she loves me too! Oh! I can't believe it would be wrong for us to marry!" (191). Leroy refers to mutual love regardless of race and other biological or cultural differences. His appeal to true love excludes the inherent racism between blacks and whites and entertains the romantic notion that racial discrimination can be eliminated at the altar of true love. However, the perpetuation of stereotypical clichés against black people is stronger than mutual love in a society dominated by white patriarchy because love can be defeated by social prejudices, cultural biases and of course racial discriminations.

The widespread ideology behind the myth I have already referred to, is based on the belief that interracial relationships will lead to the development of the black race in the long run because the black color of the biracial children's skin will be eliminated and their genes will be improved. This means that blacks can take advantage of miscegenation in order to improve their genetic deficiencies. It was believed that the mixing of the black and the white race would lead to the whitening of the black race because white genes are stronger than the black ones. For example, as Edward Telles explains, some Brazilian scholars claimed that blacks' inferiority "could be overcome by miscegenation" (28) so they "proposed a solution of 'whitening' through the mixing of whites and nonwhites. Based on the higher white

fertility rates and their belief that white genes were dominant, these eugenicists concluded that race mixture would eliminate the black population" (28). Although this false theory could benefit those blacks who wanted to look like whites, it was believed that it would have devastating consequences to the future generations of the white race because such crosses would create a degenerate American society. This is another fallacious assumption that the theory of eugenics proposed.

According to the theory of eugenics, every sexual intercourse between blacks and whites should be prevented at all costs because as Paul Lawrence Farber argues, eugenicists believed that:

> "Dilution" of the "American race" (i.e., Anglo-Saxon) through race mixing could only lower the potential of future generations, and according to a number of authors, it therefore should be avoided. Anglo-Saxon crosses with Negroes were thought to be worse than mixes with Slavs or Sicilians, since those of African descent were lower on the scale in human accomplishments. (32, 33)

Once again, caste was a dissuasive factor in the interracial relations between blacks and whites. Since whites belonged to the first class of the social ladder, whatever relationships they had with black people, decreased their social status in the deeply stratified American society.

According to Jayne Ifekwunigwe, eugenicists proposed some solutions against miscegenation in order for whites to avoid the degeneracy of their social status since the white race was considered to be the most superior of all:

> The scientific mission of the Eugenics Movement was the eradication of inferior and unfit 'races' and the elevation of superior 'races', based on the belief that intelligence, criminality and other social traits were in and of

> themselves determined exclusively by heredity (Kelves 1995). The foundation of eugenics was the idea of 'racial' degeneracy, which was belief in the deterioration of an allegedly superior 'race' via miscegenation (Kohn 1996). 'Racial' degeneracy was thought to be prevented by four means: selective breeding of the fit 'races' with each other; social segregation of the fit and unfit 'races', and at times, legal sanctions against miscegenation; sterilization; and, in certain instances, physical extermination of those deemed unfit. (13)

The fact that eugenicists proposed violent means against miscegenation such as the sterilization and extermination of blacks in order for the white race to remain pure is one of those aspects of the theory of eugenics which proves the internalization of racism on scientific grounds.

The taboo of miscegenation is also associated with another misconception that has to do with the inferiority of the offspring produced by black and white mixing. It was thought that interracial children were inferior both physically and mentally and suffered from crisis of identity because they were neither black nor white. Although such conclusions were based on inveracities, the marginalization of biracial children was inevitable. Farber explains that eugenicists asserted that "individuals from distant groups (e.g., Anglo-Saxon and African) ran the risk of producing 'disharmonious crosses'" (33). According to Farber, medical writers have also contributed to the endorsement of negative stereotypes against blacks because they "supported the view that crosses involving individuals from the 'primary races' might give rise to 'chaotic constitutions'. A review article in 1933 summarized: 'It may be said that the bulk of medical opinion is against hybridization between the Primary Races and that the best eugenic opinion is definitely against it'" (33). According to the theory of eugenics, biracial children are incomplete because they lack firmly established identities and their racial

identities are ambiguous. The fact that they bear a racially mixed heritage makes them unable to construct their own identities and achieve true self-definition.

This means that they fail to completely fit either to the white or to the black society. Their biracial subjectivity moves back and forth between the two worlds and they cannot form a whole integrated identity. Their struggle for self-definition is fruitless because they cannot be complete human beings. Biracial children are considered to be deficient because they are unable to possess a double racial identity. Although it is true that biracial inheritance can lead to the fragmentation of the individual in a multicultural society, the truth is that the fragmentation that a biracial person experiences is the result of social and not biological factors. This means that biracial people carry a burden that is the result of the social barriers and cultural differences imposed upon them. The difficulties they face are caused by cultural constructs and are not the result of biological factors. Although biracial people are able to achieve true self-definition and join the fragmented pieces of their identity, the white male-dominated society is the one that hampers the formation of their identity and puts obstacles to their self-definition.

While Leroy is uncompromising and determined to marry Selma despite his sister's and grandmother's objection, he changes completely his mind when his grandmother tells him to think of the future of his racially mixed children. His grandmother's reference to his future children makes him sacrifice his love for Selma. His grandmother highlights the consequences their interracial marriage will have on his future children. She advises him: "Think of the unborn children that you sin against by marrying her, baby! Oh, you can't know the misery that awaits them if you give them a white mother! Every child has a right to a mother who will love it better than life itself; and a white woman cannot mother a Negro baby" (191). Leroy's grandmother views his marriage to a white woman as a sin to their unborn children. She calls interracial children miserable and regards interracial marriage as

an undeserved punishment for the children. However, we should take into account that his grandmother's objections are not based on the social barriers imposed on interracial couples and their children but on a white mother's inability to mother and love a Negro child. According to his grandmother, even a mother can discriminate against her own children because people in America are socialized to regard those whose skin color is black as inferior human beings.

In order to justify her claims, Grandma gives as an example Leroy's mother. She reveals his mother's secret identity and the reason for his abandonment by his mother:

> [Y]our mother was a white woman, and she made your father's life miserable as long as he lived. She never could stand the sight of you and Marion; she hated you because you weren't white! I was there to care for you, but I'm getting old, Honey, and I couldn't go through it again! Boy, you can't make the same mistake your father did. (191)

Leroy is shattered at the revelation of his mother's white identity. He exclaims full of surprise: "Oh, Granny, why didn't you tell me before? My mother, white! I've wondered why you never spoke of her! And she hated us! My God! That makes it different" (191). Although he feels shaken by his mother's white identity, what makes him fall apart is the fact that his mother abandoned them because she hated her children's black skin color. He finds it impossible for a mother to be racially prejudiced against her own children. However, the news changes his whole perspective about interracial relationships and decides to give up Selma.

Despite his decision to abandon his white partner, the white lynch mob, which has already learned about his illegal relationship with a white woman, is uncompromising and determined to take the matter in their hands. Thus, they lynch him without warning: "'Lynch him!' 'The dirty nigger!' 'We'll show him how to fool around a white woman!'" (192).

Although Selma runs to his house in order to save his life and pleads him to run away, he decides to remain in the house and undergo the punishment of lynching as a sacrifice for his unborn children. His grandmother laments for his unfair punishment but he tries to relieve her pain, arguing: "It's better this way, Granny; don't grieve so; just think of it as a sacrifice for UNBORN CHILDREN" (192). He comes to the realization that death is better than having to raise biracial children in a racist society which condemns interracial relationships and treats interracial children with hostility.

Leroy decides to remain childless and die because he realizes Grandma's statement about Selma's gradual renouncement of him as well as their future children. She exactly tells him: "Sometimes we best prove our love by giving up the object of it. You can't make her happy, Roy; she'll be satisfied for a while, but after that the call of her blood will be stronger than her love for you, and you'll both be miserable: she'll long for her own people; you won't be enough" (191). While Leroy appeals to the dynamics of love as a pillar of strength in his relationship with Selma, his Grandma appeals to the dynamics of race as a social construct able to break down any family ties between blacks and whites. What Grandma wants to convey is that racism and discrimination are so much internalized within the American mind that it is almost impossible to change the whites' perceptions towards blacks even when the theme of motherhood is in the foreground.

Leroy's choice to remain childless and die than marry a white woman reminds us of Rachel's choice to remain single instead of having to raise black children in a racist environment. The only difference is that Leroy is a black man and he is finally murdered as a consequence of his choices. Leroy's tragic finale is attributed to the injustice and intolerance of the American society. His passive stance towards his lynching as well as his self-destructive tendencies reflects the debasement of the entire black race. His life shows how difficult it is for a black man to live in harmony with the social dictates that the American

society imposes upon him. The inability of the American society to administer justice in the social issue of interracial relationships leads to Leroy's murder. Death is a kind of protest and salvation for him. Death is the only means to assert his human rights in a society where the damage of racism's infringement is inestimable. Since Leroy becomes a social threat, he must be eliminated. It is as if Leroy's death and the symbolic death of his unborn children affirm the "tragic mulatto" stereotype although he is a man and his future biracial children are absent from the action of the play. They embody the "tragic mulatto" stereotype in the sense that they are finally condemned to death because of their blackness[33].

According to Judith Berzon, "the 'tragic mulatto' character is often cast as irrational, moody, and completely tormented by his/her 'racial disharmony,' 'clash of blood,' and 'unstable genetic constitution,' 'typically dying while still young'" (qtd. in Brennan 43). The "tragic mulatto" character suffers due to his biracial background. His black inheritance is responsible for the difficulties he experiences. The "tragic mulatto" is condemned to death because he challenges the system of racial binaries. Although the "tragic mulatto" stereotype was usually portrayed by female characters in the American melodramas of the nineteenth century, Livingston does not conform completely to the tragic mulatto tradition. In her play, Leroy embodies the "tragic mulatto" stereotype because he is the victim of white patriarchy. Leroy incarnates this stereotype in the sense that he finally dies. He succumbs to his fate because he is a social problem that must be exterminated off the face of the earth.

The self-destructive tendencies of the mulatto personalities are revealed through Leroy's actions. Although he knows that interracial relations are forbidden between blacks and whites, his disregard for codes of sexual decency will cost his life. Leroy seeks equality and acceptability in a society that restricts free will and action. The fact that he enters into

[33] The mulatto character is usually portrayed as tragic due to his or her mixed-blood inheritance. While his white identity is responsible for his light color and extraordinary beauty, his black identity is the cause of his problems and makes him both mentally and physically degenerate. In fiction and drama, the "tragic mulatto" characters are usually portrayed by mulatto women. These characters are either murdered or commit suicide because they challenge white society and are unable to reconcile with the white societal norms imposed upon them (Davis, Arthur P. 318, and Nelson, Angela 189).

sexual relations with a white woman liberates his body from the conventions of the American society and the price he pays for his actions is his death. Since Leroy is a threat that is going to destroy the foundations of the rigidly organized white societal norms, he must be expelled. As Werner Sollors points out: "The mulatto or half-breed themes were inevitably tragic or horrifying…The cause for the mulattos' tragic roles may be found in the sin of 'miscegenation' or in social prejudice, but the life expectancy of mulatto characters in American literature is low" (qtd. in Oliver 150). His lynching brings back the harmony of the white world. According to the "one drop of blood" rule if a person has at least one drop of black blood is categorized as black. Therefore, this rule serves as a preserver of strict racial boundaries and affirms Leroy's murder.

What Leroy is unable to understand initially is the lack of freedom of choice for black people. He falsely believes that he has the right to make his own choices. When his sister reprimands him of dating a white woman, he responds spontaneously: "I still have the liberty of making an engagement with anyone I choose, Marion" (190). Leroy's answer sounds ironic since he lives in a country where sexual freedom is limited to those who belong to the same race. As Christina Simmons rightly points out, white women "experienced severe ostracism for relationships with black men, often being treated as prostitutes or institutionalized as mental patients" (186). White patriarchy treats white women in such a cruel way because, as C. C. O' Brien explains, white women, "through their capacity to be 'mothers of a nation,' also pose the threat of polluting or contaminating the body politic if their sexual choices are not governed by a white patriarchal caste system" (579). This means that Leroy does not have the right to date anyone without having to face the consequences of his choices.

He believes that his sentiments for Selma are strong enough to overcome the differences of their race and skin color. He addresses his right to love anyone he desires and

tells his Grandma: “Selma and I can’t help it because we don’t belong to the same race, and we have the right to be happy together if we love each other, haven’t we?” (191). However, Grandma’s ideology of what is right and proper is completely different from Leroy’s sense of how somebody must assert his rights. Her response proves the absence of rights for black people: “We have the right to be happy, child, only when our happiness doesn’t hurt anybody else; and when a colored man marries a white woman, he hurts every member of the Negro race” (191). Grandma reveals the impact that intermarriage has on the whole black community and how it affects the black race. Thus, racial ideology is two-faceted as it has been internalized by blacks. On the one hand, it is based on white racism against blacks and on the other hand, it is caused by black internalization of racism. Not only are whites racially prejudiced against blacks but also blacks have internalized the acts of racism against them.

Grandma’s rejection of interracial relationships is based on several reasons. The first reason I have just referred to, is the belief that interracial relationships are a betrayal of the black community. According to this belief, a black man who loves a woman from a different racial background and especially a white woman is a traitor who betrays his own race. This idea derives basically from the fear that if black men engage in interracial relationships, they accept the white race as superior and assimilate within it. Black women want to protect their race against the cultural invasion of the whites because they fear that intermarriage will be a different form of assimilation and subjugation to whites. What is more, black women are afraid that interracial relationships break down the sense of commitment among African American communities because they destroy the black family structure and break down the strong bonds among the black communities. Marion begs Leroy to forget Selma in order not to sell out his own race. She exactly tells him: “Even if you do love her, can’t you find your backbone to conquer it for the sake of your race?” (191). Her statement shows that black people have been unable to shake off the grievances of so many years in slavery. She believes

that black people should value the prosperity and blissfulness of their race above their personal needs because it is the only way to protect the black community from the atrocities of the whites. Grandma justifies her claims, arguing that: "[I]ntermarriage doesn't hurt them as much as it does us; laws would never have been passed against it if the states could have believed white women would turn Negro men down, but they knew they wouldn't; they can make fools out of them too easily, and you're too much of a dupe to see it" (191). Grandma bases her argumentation on the belief that intermarriage is detrimental to the survival of the black race as well as to the survival and well-being of the black family.

It seems that black women are more opposed to interracial relationships than black men. Black women's opposition to interracial relationships is generally based on the savage history of black women's sexual harassment by white men. The relationships between black women and white men had negative connotations for black women's psychology because it reminded them of black women's sexual abuse by white slaveholders. However, their opposition is also based on the feeling of betrayal they experience when a black man chooses a white woman as his partner in life. Leroy's sister expresses this feeling of betrayal when she asks her brother: "What is to become of us when our own men throw us down?" (191). The feeling of betrayal that black women experience derives from the sense that black women are subordinate to white women. This means that when a black man chooses a white woman at the same time he rejects a black one. Consequently, black women are devalued as regards both their race and gender. Their predicaments differ from those of white women because they suffer from both racial and sexual discrimination. While white women have to face the problem of sexism, black women are victims of both racism and sexism. Therefore, interracial relationships are detrimental not so much to black men as to black women because black women are doubly marginalized because of their race and gender. What Grandma wants to convey is that black people cannot ask for equality and freedom when there is no

sense of solidarity and togetherness between the two black sexes. Grandma expresses her belief that white women threaten not only black women but also the possibility of black people's freedom and equality, arguing that: "[B]efore we can gain that perfect freedom to which we have every right, we've got to prove that we're better than they! And we can't do it when our men place white women above their own" (191).

The fact that black women feel devalued when a black man chooses a white woman as his partner in life brings to the foreground another crucial theme, that is, the white standards of beauty. When a black man chooses a white woman as his girlfriend or wife, it is as if he rejects a black one. The question that arises is the reason he rejects a black woman. Is his choice unbiased from the prejudices surrounding the white ideal femininity or is he influenced by the white standards of beauty? What is more, have black women internalized the white ideals of femininity or are they insusceptible to the influence of the white idealization of beauty? Ekaterini Georgoudaki insightfully points out that "[t]he long economic, political, and cultural control of the colored people has resulted in their acceptance of white standards of femininity (white complexion, blue eyes, blonde hair, skinny body, gentle and submissive behavior, fragility, dependence on man, etc" (qtd. in Michaels 87). According to the white Euro-American ideals of beauty, white women are evaluated as more attractive than black women. White women are those who embody the appropriate standards of femininity. Since femininity is equated with whiteness, black women can never be considered beautiful because the color of their skin is black. This means that white standards of beauty embrace white womanhood and reject black womanhood. Since white women represent the ideal of beauty, black women are regarded as ugly and unfeminine.

Leroy's sister, Marion reacts very badly to the fact that her brother has an affair with a white woman. Her reaction is especially appalling against Selma. She tells her grandma: "[S]he's white and she ought to stay in her own race; she hasn't any right to be running

around after our men" (190). Marion is against any interracial relationships between black men and white women because she feels that in this way black women lose their potential partners because the availability of black men is decreased. Marion expresses the fear that the number of available black men will be limited for black women because the majority of them prefer to date and marry interracially. What is more, black women cannot find love in a racist society because white men do not choose them as partners.

Another aspect that should be taken into account and is associated with beauty is morality. There is a widespread tendency to associate beauty with morality. The external appearance of a person seems to denote the internal character of the personality of a person. According to Ellen Wiedenroth, "[w]hite 'is equated with purity (hygienic and moral), with wholeness' and black 'stands for dirt, for evil as such, for menacing nothingness" (qtd. in Michaels 93). Therefore, the definition of black women as both ugly and immoral had devastating consequences in their psychology as women and basically as human beings. The color of the skin stratified not only the social position of black women in the society but controlled their sexual freedom as well. Race, gender and sexuality were controlled by white feminine norms which defined the role of black women in the American society.

All in all, Myrtle Smith Livingston's play exposes all those white male assumptions that were used by white patriarchy in order for interracial relationships to be prevented. Apart from the enforcement of anti-miscegenation laws for the prevention of interracial sexuality, it was created a wide variety of misconceptions so that there could never be the possibility of any consensual sexual relationships between blacks and whites. However, the play challenges the dominant sexual codes and breaks down racial boundaries. The focal theme of the play is sexual freedom. It asserts the right of black and white people to pursue sexual partnerships regardless of racial hierarchy and sexual barriers. It proposes the possibility of black and white male equality with respect to engaging in sexual relationships with white women.

However, Livingston's critique is especially caustic with respect to black female sexuality because black women are more marginalized than black men. The control of black female sexuality seems to be one of the most firmly-rooted cornerstones of white male domination. The playwright questions the meaning of black women to black men and criticizes the exclusion of the right of black women to select and be selected by white or black partners regardless of the prevailing white norms of womanhood and femininity. Although racial separateness can be broken down by black men, black women have to struggle even harder than black men in order to achieve equal rights as regards sexual freedom.

Conclusion

"Being a woman is a terribly difficult task, since it consists principally in dealing with men."

Joseph Conrad

(qtd. in Bingham 3)

The first half of the twentieth century was a period of political, social, economic and cultural changes in America. Part of these changes was the development of the African American theatre. During that time, several important black women playwrights were brought to the foreground. Angelina Weld Grimké, Shirley Graham, May Miller and Myrtle Smith Livingston are only some of the African American women playwrights who were particularly active writing dramatic works in the first half of the twentieth century. These playwrights shared common experiences as black women as well as a common female consciousness as regards racial and gender barriers. They were middle-class educated women and their plays approach the plight of black people from a feminine perspective. They explore the effects of unemployment, miscegenation, racial divisions, mob violence, lynching, marriage, motherhood, domestic servitude, infanticide, Christianity, stereotypes and the impact of gender prejudice and taboos on female psyche. Their plays give voice to black women's feelings and frustrations, their fears and longings before a wide audience.

These black women playwrights are considered to be an inextricable part of the Harlem Renaissance. During the first half of the twentieth century, a great number of black people migrated to the North spurred by the need to escape the harsh living conditions of the South. Soon Harlem became the artistic and political centre for black people and the black theatre began to flourish along with the Little Theatre Movement which occurred at the same time. Prominent figures of the Harlem Renaissance contributed to the development of black theatre creating small theatrical groups. For example, Alain LeRoy Locke and Montgomery T. Gregory created a department of drama as well as a theatrical group at Howard University where they served as professors. Also, W. E. B. Du Bois played an important role in the development of black arts because he did not only create a theatrical group in 1925, which gave black artists the opportunity to demonstrate their abilities, but he also gave the opportunity to black women playwrights to express their unique voice through the literary

competitions he organized in his magazine *Crisis*. Charles S. Johnson, through his magazine *Opportunity*, also helped in the emergence of black women playwrights from obscurity and let their original voices be heard despite the fact that their plays hardly ever reached the stage and continued to be neglected by the white mainstream culture.

Although their role as dramatists was underestimated during that time, African American women playwrights of the Harlem Renaissance played an important role in the development and acknowledgement of the subsequent generations of black women playwrights because they were the source of their inspiration. Their works were excluded from the commercial theatre of the period due to several factors. First of all, African American women playwrights were victims of both racism and sexism. They were discriminated due to their race and they were oppressed because of their gender. Furthermore, the commercial American theatre was ruled by white theatre managers, directors and producers. They were prejudiced against women in general and black women in particular and accepted only male-authored texts. Most of the early African American women playwrights were acknowledged as poets but overshadowed as dramatists because writing for the theatre was considered to be a male genre since theatre was the most direct means of social protest and revolt. Also, black theatre owners could not compete with white mainstream theatre because they lacked the financial sources and theatrical knowledge to get their plays produced. However, the most important reason for black women's exclusion from the theatre of the time was the audience which was not receptive to black drama because of the popularity of the minstrel tradition. The white American audience had a preconceived idea of black drama that was firmly rooted in the minstrel tradition.

During the nineteenth century minstrel shows were very popular with the white working-class audience. They were considered to be the most popular form of entertainment. However, they promoted racial propaganda in the sense that they ridiculed black life, culture

and music. The minstrel tradition served as a propagandistic cultural mechanism which represented black people as caricatures with inferior intelligence. Gradually, the white American audience accepted the humiliating treatment of blacks and blacks' derogatory representations as the reality of the black character. The fact that black women playwrights disengaged themselves from the minstrel tradition made their plays inappropriate for a large audience and thus noncommercial.

Black women playwrights' work is different not only from the minstrel tradition but also from the plays written by black men playwrights, white men dramatists and white women dramatists. What differentiates black women playwrights from black men playwrights is the perspective of their plays. Although both of them use the discourse of freedom and racial equality, women playwrights employ a gender perspective in their plays. This means that their plays attempt to give a realistic portrait of black women's lives. White men dramatists tried to disengage themselves from the minstrel tradition but still portrayed one-dimensional black characters and depicted superficial aspects of black life. Not being emotionally involved with the consequences of slavery and racism and probably unable to escape years of racial stereotyping and prejudice, they could not depict black people's experiences realistically. In a similar way, white women playwrights' work employed different themes in their plays because they experienced different conditions of oppression. White women playwrights focused on different social issues and cultural restraints. They were more outspoken as they managed to enter the public sphere of male activity through various organizations such as abolitionism, temperance and women's rights. However, the plight of black women was absent from their plays because they were ignorant of black women's marginalization and because white women playwrights prioritized their own social demands.

Black women's dramatic works deserve attention because they represent Negro life truthfully and reposition marginalized female protagonists to a place of power and value. In order to achieve this, they expose the stereotypical prejudices, ideological mechanisms and cultural conventions that the white male-dominated society has contrived and used in order to degrade and dehumanize black people. They challenge and subvert all those mechanisms and reveal the real essence of black identity. By defying stereotypical portrayals of blacks, they expose the role of stereotyping and labeling in the manipulation of black minority groups. Stereotypes not only falsify the true essence of black character but they also relegate blacks to the lowest rungs of the social ladder. They are used by whites in order to protect their social hegemony by connoting that blacks are subordinate to them.

The plays written by the African American women playwrights can be considered to be historical documents because they enrich our understanding of African American culture, address the experiences of black life truthfully and expose the evils of racism, slavery, gender discrimination and generally the humiliating treatment of blacks. Black theatre can be associated with history because it is one of the most truthful ways to explore the real essence of black life because it can recreate history without any white patriarchal interference. Since the white patriarchal society intervenes in the formation of history, the interpretation of the African American existence and culture in America is based on constructed myths and is often subjected to one-sided opinions which prevent the representation of truth. Therefore, these black women playwrights offer a reliable perspective on the written documentation of history because their works are a mirror of black life.

The interest of my research paper is focused on the plays written by Angelina Weld Grimké, Shirley Graham, May Miller and Myrtle Smith Livingston because these African American women playwrights deserve to have their plays examined. The interest of my research paper is orientated towards early black female theatre because my purpose is to

rescue these works from oblivion and give the opportunity to readers to increase their knowledge and appreciation for these women playwrights. Also, I hope my research paper to inspire others for further research on early black women playwrights and signal the beginning for a new interest in early black female theatre. Their works are a vital part of African American culture and worth examining collectively because they share the same thematic axis. Grimké, Graham, Miller and Livingston challenge some of the most crucial cornerstones of white male domination in their plays and the protagonists of the plays disassociate themselves from the white male beliefs. The central ideological axis around which all plays are developed is motherhood. All plays explore the role of mothers in America and provide insight to the predicaments of black maternity. They portray early twentieth-century womanhood and offer a critique of the constriction of motherhood which is defined according to the norms of the white male-dominated world. The social conditions that put barriers on the protagonists' roles as mothers are examined one by one and expand our knowledge of African American motherhood in America. The centre of their artistic creation is motherhood because mothers are contributors and preservers of America's national character.

However, all plays question the institution of motherhood from black mothers' perspective. The protagonists of all plays refuse motherhood or child rearing because they find it difficult to raise their children in a world in which people are discriminated according to racial and gender criteria. Since motherhood is afflicted with racial and gender inequality, black mothers cannot guarantee the safety and blissfulness of their children. The protagonists of the plays become a metaphor for all black mothers who feel powerless to protect their children in front of the onslaught of slavery, racism, lynching, sexual harassment and unemployment. The heroines of the plays experience the same social restrictions and gender norms as mothers. Therefore, motherhood symbolizes something painful for black women

who are obliged to demystify and renounce it. By demystifying the institution of motherhood, black women playwrights achieve to reveal the incongruities between the American ideals and the reality of black life. While women are socialized to believe that motherhood is the most natural role that they are expected to play, the pain they experience as mothers is unendurable. The protagonists of the four plays castigate the patriarchal stereotypes of motherhood which degrade black women and trap them within male definitions and norms. Their plays lay emphasis on white patriarchal propaganda because it plays the most important role in the subjugation of women as mothers.

Grimké depicts a black woman who demystifies the ideal of motherhood, promises never to become a mother and give birth to black children because she wants to expose motherhood as a patriarchal cultural convention and reveal the discrepancy between the ideal of Republican motherhood and the reality of black motherhood. By attacking the ideal of Republican motherhood, Grimké criticizes the double standards of American political ideology. While white middle-class American women were considered to be upholders of morality and justice because their role was to nurture the future citizens of the American republic and instill moral values in their children, black women were excluded from Republican ideology and their children were in constant danger because they were victims to white male sexual violence and lynching. While Rachel decides to remain single and never become a mother, the protagonist of Graham's play, Cissie is given no choice because she has no control over her daughter's body as a slave woman. Graham portrays a woman who commits infanticide in order to save her daughter from the institution of slavery because she wants to reveal how oppressive the institution of motherhood was during slavery and expose it as one of the primary economic-based mechanisms used by whites to make a profit without heavy expenses. In Livingston's play, the revelation of the white identity of Stewart's mother as the reason for his abandonment by his mother proves once again the constriction of

motherhood for black people. The fact that Livingston portrays a white mother that abandons her children because she is incapable of mothering and loving them proves that racism is so much internalized within the American mind that even a mother can be racially prejudiced against her own children since color prejudice is stronger than love in American society. The reason why Stewart decides to sacrifice his love for Selma is because he realizes that his children will have to face the same hardships he experienced as a child because their white mother will not have the nerve to defy the racist rules of white patriarchy.

The reason why these playwrights lay emphasis on black maternity is because they want to raise the white female consciousness as regards the predicaments of early twentieth-century black mothers. For this reason, Miller depicts a white child's murder in her play *Nails and Thorns*. The accidental murder of Gladys' child by the infuriated lynch mob has a greater impact on the white female consciousness because it symbolizes the death of American nation since the white children are supposed to be the future and hope of the American nation. The playwright pins her faith on children because they are the only ones who can bring about a revolution in the American political scene. While both Grimké and Graham try to make an appeal to white women and criticize their indifference to the plight of black women, in Miller's play, the white women become part of the problem and sympathize with black women. Although both Rachel and Cissie fight against the establishment as black women, the fact that Miller portrays a white woman's resistance to black people's physical and psychological torture makes women's struggle for justice more universal and collective. The fact that the play is developed through a white feminine perspective broadens the problem of the black female condition and affects white women as well. The play reveals that nobody remains unaffected by the onslaught of racism because its repercussions have a negative impact on all human beings. All plays are addressed to white mothers because

maternity is the only element that can form a solid basis for black and white mothers' solidarity beyond skin color barriers and limitations.

The fact that Grimké challenges the institution of marriage, heterosexuality and domesticity along with the institution of motherhood shows that all these institutions are white cultural mechanisms of control and not biological ones. The playwright reveals that the institution of marriage can only create problems to the relationship between the two sexes because black men are powerless to defend black women and even themselves in front of the American political and social practices which destroy the black family structure. Although this institution is based on the belief that women must marry in order to be saved from their inherently weak nature, the truth is that it impedes women's independence, contributes to women's inferior social position and keeps women subjugated because it confines them to the domestic sphere. Domesticity is another source of male oppression because women are culturally conditioned to believe that their natural position is that in the house. In order for domesticity to be established as a cultural institution, women have limited opportunities in the job market and they are degraded to menial work. Also, the institution of heterosexuality conditions them to the belief that their sexual satisfaction is orientated only towards men.

Another institution that both Grimké and Graham castigate and confront is Christianity. Their plays are a scathing attack on the institution of Christianity due to the indifference of the Christian church to black women's suffering. The playwrights expose the Christian rhetoric because it is full of incongruities. The myth that Graham deconstructs was based on the belief that black people had to endure the atrocities of slavery until God's divine retribution justifies their struggle for freedom. According to the norms of Christianity, Cissie has no right to kill her child but the question that Graham arises is whether the whites have the right to abuse the black body sexually, exploit it in the field and domestic work and finally kill it through lynching. Infanticide can be a form of direct murder but the long-lasting

torture that black people experience, which takes different forms, is another form of murder whose pain is more agonizing and its regime is more repressive. Grimké poses similar questions in her play. How can America be a Christian republic when its representatives lynch black people? How can Christian rhetoric make black people believe that they deserve to be punished through lynching when it praises the equality and love of all human beings regardless of race? Both playwrights reveal that the essence of the Christian doctrine is perverted in order for the hypocritical Christians to express their hatred toward blacks and serve their racist interests.

All plays reveal that black women's history is a recurrent circle of debasement because nobody can escape from the shackles of racism and sexism. White patriarchy attributes stereotypical clichés to black people in order to prevent them from deviating from the expected roles and posing a threat to the harmonious function of its system of dominance and control. Graham reveals that black women were brainwashed with several stereotypes during slavery that whites attributed to them in order to exercise authority over them. The fact that slave women were brainwashed with stereotypes such as the mammy, the breeder as well as the Jezebel stereotype was not accidental but intentional. All these stereotypes contributed to black women's exploitation because they were a way to increase human chattel on the plantation and sustain the economy of the South. These stereotypes affected not only black women's social standing but controlled their sexuality as well. The Jezebel stereotype was in contrast with the ideal of southern womanhood that white women epitomized. The creation of different stereotypes between black and white women had as a result the expectation of different roles between them. The creation of these stereotypes contributed to black women's sexual abuse because white slaveholders took advantage of the profits that were derived from the exploitation of black women's bodies. Graham exposes the hypocrisy of the American political system because white men's sexual intentions were actually cruel and not the result

of black women's lasciviousness. However, white slaveholders were not persecuted for their crimes because the plantation system concealed their brutalities.

The divergence between the American ideals of democracy and the incidents of lynching is analyzed in Miller's play in which two innocent people are murdered. Miller exposes the false assumption that black males are dangerous because they cannot resist their primitive sexual instincts and they want to rape white women. Miller reveals that the association of black men with primitivism is intentional so that white patriarchy can control them. Her play reveals that lynching was nothing else but a tactic of controlling interracial sexual relations between black men and white women. Also, it affirmed white women's subordination to white men because it was based on the belief that white women belonged only to white men and nobody else had the right to touch them. The playwright castigates the fact that incidents of lynching become public spectacles and she exemplifies how they can have a negative impact on the whole community and especially on children. Miller pinpoints that every form of violence can pollute children's souls, destroy their morality and stigmatize their mentality. The question that the playwright actually arises is how children can remain innocent when they get accustomed to watching such cruel scenes.

What is more, Miller shakes the foundations of the theory of biological determinism when Annabel's imaginative nature is proved not to be a biological characteristic of her black inheritance. Miller subverts the stereotype that black people are not trustworthy because their character is biologically pre-determined by their black genes. The playwright demonstrates that this stereotype is based on white males' sexism because their authoritative character does not allow them to accept any information that is given by anyone who is not a white male. The playwright also castigates white women's submissiveness to their husbands which is derived by their socialization to succumb to their husbands' arguments and demonstrate a condescending character when their arguments confute those of the dominant sex.

Myrtle Smith Livingston's play explores all those ideological white constructs, myths and stereotypes that were contrived in order to be prevented interracial sexuality and marriage between blacks and whites. Miscegenation between black men and white women was prevented on the basis of racial purity. It was believed that interracial relationships would lead to a degenerate American society both biologically and socially. Miscegenation would create inferior human beings both physically and mentally. However, in a country full of illegitimate children, the struggle for a white pure nation was futile. Nevertheless, this misconception was perpetuated as a mechanism against interracial sexuality. All these ideological constructs were strengthened through the movement of eugenics which proposed the eradication of the black race and the elevation of the white race.

Livingston breaks down racial and sexual boundaries but she is especially critical towards the control of black female sexuality and the prevailing white norms of womanhood, beauty and sexuality. The playwright explores the problem of miscegenation from black women's perspective because she wants to reveal that black women are more damaged by the possibility of interracial sexuality. The playwright bases black women's opposition to interracial relationships on several factors. Intermarriage can be viewed as a betrayal of the black community because it destroys the black family structure and the strong bonds among the African American communities. Opposition against interracial sexuality is also based on the savage history of black women's sexual harassment by white men. Furthermore, black women are against interracial relationships because it is believed that the solidarity between the two black sexes will be eliminated if black men have the right to choose white women as their partners. The playwright also portrays the rejection that black women feel by both the white and the black men because they are excluded from the white standards of beauty and are not considered to embody the ideal of beauty.

All in all, Rachel's decision to renounce the very cornerstones of male domination is a rebellious form of resistance which shakes the foundations of the white male-dominated world. Cissie's act of infanticide is an answer to the racist and sexist practices of the white society. Gladys' resistance to the infuriated lynch mob is another act of resistance while Leroy's sacrifice for his unborn children proves that every form of black resistance can be bloody and have devastating consequences. Instead of remaining passive and enduring the racial biases and limitations of white society, the protagonists of the plays realize the implications of sexism and racism for their identity as black people and awaken to the fact that they are the next victims to suffer and decide to take action. If they obey the norms of white patriarchy, they will have to face the consequences of racial and gender oppression on themselves and their children. Thus, they take the initiative and do not remain passively receptive to the norms and doctrines of white patriarchy. On the contrary, they transcend racial and gender boundaries and define themselves as an autonomous human beings. Their rebellion proves that the black body will stop being the locus of white violence and sexual abuse if black people realize the role that the stereotypes, cultural and ideological mechanisms play in the prevention of their progress. Rachel, Cissie, Gladys and Leroy tackle all those white institutions and mechanisms which have a negative impact on their lives and emerge as free human beings. They assert their right to control their body and the products of their body. They prove that they are in charge of their own bodies and nobody has the right to exploit and mistreat their own children. Their children's are nobody's property and they are the only ones who can decide about their future and destiny. They refuse to perpetuate a system that treats black bodies as white property and they decide to free their children from the burden of leading a life of degradation and dehumanization.

To sum up, Angelina Weld Grimké, Shirley Graham, May Miller and Myrtle Smith Livingston are some of the first African American women playwrights whose plays depict a

different spectrum of the black female experience offering a gender perspective on the issue of black racial identity. The purpose of these plays is to change the prevailing racist views on blacks and disrupt the stereotypical prejudices and gender-based constraints that white patriarchy perpetuates. Their plays are important contributions to both African American theatre and American theatre in general. The quality of their work is inestimable and they enrich our understanding of African American culture. Their work contributes to the awakening of white women's consciousness because the issue of female identity is still relevant nowadays. It is evident that the protagonists of the plays set an example for the new generations of women. The black female condition is the focal point of all plays. The value of these plays is diachronic because the themes with which they engage appeal to contemporary women as well. These plays have a special place in American theatre history because their themes continue to occupy the minds of modern women. Each play reflects the African American reality because each character's life story is developed within its context and reveals the weaknesses and failures of the American white male-dominated society. The spectators and readers of the twentieth-first century can understand, identify and sympathize with the protagonists' predicaments because men still control the lives of many women. Women are still marginalized by specific sectors of the educational, political, economic and social systems because there is still racial and gender inequality. Contemporary women can identify with Rachel, Cissie, Annabel, Gladys, Marion and Leroy's grandmother because they are representative heroines upon which modern women can model their own lives. All plays are considered to be of lasting value because all works try to interpret the controversial issue of female identity and bring to the foreground the arbitrariness of racial and gender politics. Each protagonist's actions reflect the sterile gender norms of patriarchy which lead each character to tendencies of destruction. The sterile sexual and racial philosophy upon which

the institution of white patriarchy is built is exposed and a new dimension to the plight of women is offered through the protagonists' struggle for selfhood and autonomy.

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