

# The Complex Psyches of the Characters in Alice Childress' *Trouble in Mind*

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**Abstract**—Black women playwrights have contributed greatly to the world of theater by challenging stereotypes and misconceptions about Black women in media and society. Many of these writers discussed the numerous issues faced by Black women in White society, using theater as a platform to address social and political issues. One of these Black women playwrights is Alice Childress, who is well known for her contributions to American literature and theater. Her writings highlighted the racism, sexism, social injustice, and other issues that are still faced by African American people today. One of her most famous works, *Trouble in Mind* (1955), was one of the first to tackle the issue of racism in the world of theater. Indeed, the play deals with racial tensions and personal struggles and touches on various psychological aspects. The characters in the play include Willetta Mayer, Director Al Manners, Millie Davis, and Sheldon Forrest, all of whom talk about the issues and the inner conflicts they face as people of color in the world of performance art. These characters are interwoven with their own complex psyches, with each character trying to implement defense mechanisms to relieve themselves from the clutches of racism and bigotry and prove their valor in their struggle to establish their own identity. Alice Childress brings out the complexities in the psyche and throws light on how the characters defend themselves in many tough situations throughout her most courageous of works.

**Index Terms**—psyche, defense, trouble, Black women, African American

## I. INTRODUCTION

Black women playwrights have made immense contributions to the world of performing arts by highlighting the stories of Black women and bringing their experiences to the forefront of theater. Furthermore, they have explored intersectional identities and how gender, race, and class shape individuals' experiences and expectations. Indeed, these writers have challenged the stereotypes and misconceptions about Black women in media and society by using theater as a platform to address social and political issues that affect Black communities and society even today. Their plays engage such topics as racial injustice, feminism, and economic inequality, among others. Many women writers like Pearl Cleage, Alice Childress, Lydia R. Diamond, Katori Hall, Suzan-Lori Parks, and Ntozake Shange presented these issues with sparkling dialogue, creating awareness and social change. Marsh-Lockett (2015) stated that:

African American female playwrights who come readily to mind are Alice Childress, Adrienne Kennedy, and Ntozake Shange. Together with Hansberry, they dominate what little attention African American female dramatists have received. (p. 4)

## II. BACKGROUND TO THE PLAY "TROUBLE IN MIND"

These female writers caught the attention of the theater world for their fabulous writing. Among them was the African American novelist, playwright, and actress Alice Childress, a prominent female writer who wrote about the issues of African American women and who is well known for her contributions to American literature and theater. Born in Charleston, South Carolina, Alice grew up in Harlem, New York, where she was exposed to the culture of the Harlem Renaissance. She started her career as a performer in plays and films and even worked as a model in the American Negro Theater. However, it was writing that she was deeply involved in, so she became a playwright and novelist. Her writings highlighted the issues of African Americans, such as racism, sexism, and social injustice. Alsamrai (2022) stated about her writing:

During her life she wrote about twenty plays, and most of her plays focus on social injustice and racial inequities, featuring strong African American female characters. Childress's plays concentrate on the triumphs and struggles of the working classes and Black poor. A liberation writer, this is the name that she called herself because she creates strong, compassionate, and militant female characters who fought socioeconomic conditions. (p. 212)

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She says that Alice brought the struggles of her society into the modern world, which identified her as a liberation writer. Indeed, her work brought out the troubles faced by her people, and she became an activist who advocated for civil rights and social justice. Her works mostly reflected her commitment to addressing the issues of race and inequality in America.

Other than *Trouble in Mind*, Alice has penned various other works as well. Her *Wedding Band: A Love/Hate Story in Black and White* (1996) tells the story of an interracial romance between a White man and a Black woman. Through this work, she examines the complexities of love and racial prejudice. Whereas *Florence* (1949), also known as *Just a Little Simple*, follows the character Jesse B. Semple, or “Simple,” who is based on the stories of Langston Hughes. The writer portrays the life of a working-class African American woman in Harlem, addressing issues such as poverty and social injustice throughout the play. In 1952, she published *Gold Through the Trees*, which tells the story of a small-town family. In this play, she artistically brings out the struggle of poverty and racism the characters face. However, the writer not only tries to bring out the struggle of race but also highlights the conflicts between family members. In *String* (1969), Childress explores the relationship between a Black mother and her daughter. Through this novel, she focuses on themes like identity, generational differences, and the challenges faced by a mother. Here, Alice highlights the struggles fought inside the Black family, but also the conflicts between the African and the American. She also presents the idea that it is quite natural to fall for each other, and she discusses the complications very clearly. Her *Mojo: A Black Love Story* (1988) discusses the complexities of romantic relationships among African Americans through the lives of four women and their experiences with love, family, and societal expectations.

Childress highlights the sufferings of these women in the name of love. As a novelist, her works demonstrate the African American experience and discuss the social and racial issues that are prevalent in American society. Her writings often challenge stereotypes and provide nuanced portrayals of her characters’ lives. She not only deals with racial issues but also explores a wide range of themes that revolve around African Americans living in the United States. Alice often addresses the pervasive racism and discrimination faced by her people in various aspects of society, including education and employment. She even sheds light on the impact of racism on individuals and society. She even concentrates on family dynamics, which explore the complexities of family relationships, parent-child dynamics, sibling relationships, and the conflicts happening in the family. She challenges the traditional gender roles and supports women’s autonomy, agency, and empowerment. Her female characters try to fulfill the societal expectations while suppressing their own identities and aspirations. She even highlights the socioeconomic disparities and injustices faced by her people. She brings to light the distressing conditions of her people living in poverty or in marginalized communities. Her characters in her works strive for dignity and equality, the desire to overcome oppression, and the expectations of social changes and socioeconomic advancement. Alice Childress not only brings out the tussle of the Black people community and tries to explore the theater and performance through her works, since she is deeply connected to theater and performance. She examines the challenges and opportunities faced by African American actors and playwrights. The power of dynamics with the entertainment industry and the role of art in challenging societal norms and fostering social changes are brought out through her writings. She tends to celebrate and appreciate the resilience and strength of her community, who struggle collectively for justice and equality. Her works are often insightful and thought-provoking explorations of identity, race, love, family, gender, and social justice.

### III. DEFENSE MECHANISMS IN “TROUBLE IN MIND”

In her famous work *Trouble in Mind* (1955), Alice Childress addressed racism in the theater world. Each character in her work is dealt with artistically as they talk about the issues and face their inner conflict in society. Wiletta Mayer, the fiery protagonist, is a character driven by a potent mix of ambition, frustration, and a deep-seated desire for artistic integrity. Through a psychoanalytic lens, her actions reveal a complex inner world shaped by experiences of racism and the limitations placed on Black actors in a white-dominated theater industry. Her past is shrouded in some mystery, but it is evident that she is a seasoned actor who has seen the harsh realities of the profession.

Wiletta’s initial optimism upon landing the role in *Chaos in Belleville* is quickly replaced by a simmering anger as she confronts the script’s stereotypical portrayals. This anger is a defense mechanism, a way to shield herself from the disappointment of yet another unfulfilling role. The novelist, through Wiletta Mayer, brings out the pathetic situation of actors in the theaters. In his article “Racism and Blacks Struggle,” Waddah Hassan (2010) describes Wiletta’s attitude and her character very clearly.

Wiletta, who is described as being—attractive and expansive in personality, has her own discontent and psychological anxiousness about her secondary roles in theater. Although she is conscious that—Art is a great thing, she prefers to call theater as—just a business because her previous passive roles proved that—Colored folks aren’t in no theater. Moreover, she believes that the Blacks must behave nicely and properly in order to get along well with the Whites. Thus, she laughs when necessary and usually conceals her true feelings because she wants to avoid making troubles with her White bosses. (p. 15)

She tends to be nice and does not want to create any problems in her workplace; however, later, she has a tough time with her director, Al, and their interactions are a constant source of conflict. She challenges his authority, refusing to be a passive participant in the production. She forgets about how to behave well to the Whites and starts quarreling about everything. This can be interpreted as a manifestation of her ego—a keen sense of self-worth that compels her to fight for

respect and artistic control. However, her confrontational approach also suggests a deep-seated frustration with the power dynamics at play. She recognizes the limitations placed on Black actors and refuses to be complicit in perpetuating negative stereotypes.

Wiletta's relationships with other Black cast members offer further insights into her psyche. She acts as a mentor to John, a young actor who is new to New York. While some might see this as a sign of her nurturing side, it can also be seen as a way for Wiletta to project her own anxieties and aspirations onto him. However, she also displays moments of vulnerability, bonding with John and Millie over shared experiences of racism. Through these moments, the writer reveals a yearning for connection and a sense of community among Black actors struggling in a hostile environment.

She is passionate about acting and wanted to become a famous actor; however, the demanding situations, the harassment, and the conflicts in the industry make her want to quit the production. This act is a manifestation of her superego—her internalized moral compass that compels her to take a stand against injustice, even at the cost of sacrificing her career. Her final scene with John underscores her unwavering commitment to fighting for better representation. She encourages him to persevere, suggesting a belief in the power of collective action to bring about change. Alice portrays Wiletta Mayer as a complex character who is shaped by the struggle for artistic integrity and racial equality. Through a psychoanalytic lens, we see her anger, frustration, and defiance as expressions of a deeply conflicted psyche. Ultimately, Wiletta emerges as a voice for change, a character who refuses to compromise her principles in the face of an oppressive system.

On the other hand, the other protagonist in the work, Al Manners, is the seemingly confident White director of the play *Chaos in Belleville*, and he presents a fascinating case for psychoanalytic examination. Despite his outward control and professionalism, his interactions with the cast reveal deeper insecurity and a desperate need to maintain order within the production. One of his defining traits is his insistence on following the script and his instructions to the letter. He glances at the cast's critiques and maintains the status quo. This rigidity can be interpreted as a defense mechanism, a way to shield himself from the emotional weight of the play's subject matter. By focusing on technicalities, Al avoids confronting the complex issues of race and representation at the play's core. His interactions with the Black cast members further reveal his anxieties. He attempts to maintain a facade of neutrality, but his dismissive attitude towards their concerns suggests discomfort with their displays of passion and frustration. In their article "African American Literature Radical Feminism in Alice Childress' *Trouble in Mind*," Kundhavi and Sridevi bring out the Al's mentality, stating:

Director Al Manners (the dynamic Steven Skybell) leads his mixed-race company in *Chaos in Belleville*, a play that centers on a lynching. Manners professes to seek truth, but when his actors begin to probe the script, he tends to flatter them rather than seriously consider their thoughts. Ultimately, he stirs up more emotion than he ever intended, on and offstage. (p. 302)

This discomfort can be seen as a manifestation of his id—the primitive, pleasure-seeking part of his psyche that desires harmony and avoids conflict. Al's need for control stems from fear of disruption, a fear that the play's production might spiral out of control if he relinquishes any authority. However, Al is not without moments of vulnerability. His strained relationship with Wiletta hints at a deeper sense of respect for her talent and experience. He is occasionally caught off guard by her critiques, suggesting a flicker of doubt about his own position of power. Additionally, his interactions with Sheldon, another Black cast member, reveal a shared sense of humor and camaraderie, suggesting a desire for connection that transcends racial boundaries.

The climax of Al's internal struggle arrives when the play descends into chaos after Wiletta's departure. His carefully constructed facade crumbles as he witnesses the production falling apart. This breakdown can be seen as a manifestation of his superego—the internalized moral compass that confronts him with the consequences of his blind adherence to authority. Ultimately, Al remains an enigma. While he prioritizes order and control, his actions suggest a deeper conflict—a yearning for connection and a nagging awareness of the play's inherent problems. His is a story of missed opportunities for collaboration and a cautionary tale of the dangers of prioritizing process over people.

#### IV. THE COMPLEX PSYCHES OF THE CHARACTERS IN "TROUBLE IN MIND"

Millie Davis is a 35-year-old African American woman and veteran actor. Like the protagonist, she, too, has spent her career performing Black stock characters. The writer presents her as a complex character for psychoanalytic examination. Wrapped in a fur coat and radiating an air of financial security, Millie navigates the racist waters of the theater world with an unwavering confidence. However, a closer look reveals a web of emotions—frustration, insecurity, and a deep-seated desire for respect—all carefully veiled beneath her carefully constructed facade.

Millie's initial pronouncements paint a picture of self-assuredness. She boasts about not needing to work and throws money around as a defense mechanism. This display of wealth can be interpreted as her masking her feelings of inadequacy in a profession that offers limited opportunities for a Black actress. Millie's interactions with John, a younger actor, highlight this. She positions herself as a mentor, offering advice on navigating the white-dominated world of theater. However, her pronouncements about knowing one's place and downplaying the importance of talent suggest a fear that John's success might expose her own insecurities about her abilities. Glimpses of vulnerability crack through Millie's carefully constructed exterior. Her envy of Judith, a younger actress, cast in a "meatier" role, exposes a yearning for more substantial parts and a fear of being relegated to the sidelines. Additionally, her interactions with the director, Al, hint at

a desire for validation from the enormously powerful structure she appears to disapprove of. Even Millie's flirtatiousness can be seen as an attempt to gain control in a situation where she otherwise feels powerless.

Millie's approach to dealing with racism within the production is one of passive acceptance. She avoids confrontation, choosing to navigate the system on her own terms. This highlights a potential conflict within her psyche. Millie desires respect from both white directors and her fellow actors, but her methods prioritize self-preservation over collective action. Alice interprets this as a manifestation of Millie's ego – a keen sense of self-worth that compels her to find success within the existing system, even if it means compromising her ideals.

The play's climax forces Millie to confront this internal conflict. As tension rises and Wiletta walks out, Millie is forced to choose between self-preservation and standing in solidarity with her principles. Ultimately, she decides to stay with the production, a choice that can be seen as a defense mechanism—a way to maintain the financial security and status her fur coat represents.

In *Trouble in Mind*, Millie Davis is a character defined by a carefully constructed mask. Her interactions with others reveal a complex interplay of emotions—frustration, insecurity, and a yearning for respect. Millie's journey reflects the larger struggle of Black actors in a racist industry, forced to navigate a system that offers limited opportunities while simultaneously craving validation from that very system.

John Nevins, the young and idealistic character, embodies the anxieties and complexities of a Black actor entering the white-dominated world of theater. Through a psychoanalytic lens, his journey reveals a struggle between ambition, naivety, and a growing awareness of the systemic racism embedded within the industry. His initial optimism is palpable. Fresh out of drama school and brimming with talent, he readily accepts the role in *Chaos in Belleville*. This initial excitement can be seen as a manifestation of his id – the pleasure-seeking part of his psyche that desires recognition and artistic fulfillment. However, as rehearsals progress, John encounters the harsh realities of the play's stereotypical portrayal of Black characters. This confrontation triggers his ego – his sense of self-worth that compels him to question the script and his role within it.

His interactions with the other characters further illuminate his internal conflict. He seeks guidance from Millie, a successful Black actress, but her advice clashes with his burgeoning sense of agency. This clash reflects John's superego – his internalized moral compass that grapples with the desire for success versus the need to uphold his artistic integrity. Millie's approach represents the established order, one that prioritizes survival within the system, while John yearns for a more equitable playing field. Wiletta's enthusiastic defiance deeply resonates with John. He admires her courage and her commitment to fighting for better representation. This admiration can be interpreted as a form of idealization – John sees Wiletta as a role model, someone who embodies the strength and conviction he aspires to possess. Her decision to leave the production forces John to confront his own anxieties. The writer raises a question: Does he prioritize his career advancement within the existing system, or does he stand in solidarity with Wiletta's protest? The answer to the question can only be decided by John.

The play's climax throws John into a state of uncertainty. Witnessing Wiletta's departure and the subsequent chaos creates a sense of disillusionment. He grapples with conflicting emotions—disappointment, anger, and a lingering hope for change. His conversation with Wiletta at the play's end reveals a shift in his perspective. He chooses to stay with the production, but his decision feels less about personal gain and more about a nascent sense of responsibility to continue the fight for better roles and representation. Finally, he undergoes a significant internal transformation. His journey reflects the process of individuation—the development of his authentic self within a system that seeks to suppress it. Through his interactions with others, John confronts his own naivety, grapples with the realities of racism, and ultimately embraces the responsibility of advocating for change within the theater industry. His is a story of hope, albeit a cautious one, suggesting that a new generation of Black actors is ready to challenge the status quo and fight for a more equitable future.

The other character in the work, Sheldon Forrest, the jovial elderly non-confrontational Black actor, occupies a unique position within the play's racial dynamics. As a minor character, a psychoanalytic exploration of Sheldon reveals a man caught in a tightrope walk between personal ambition, loyalty to his race, and a desire to maintain professional neutrality. Sheldon's outward demeanor is one of lightheartedness and camaraderie. He jokes with the cast, Black and White alike, and appears comfortable navigating the white-dominated theatrical world. This ease is a manifestation of his pleasure-seeking side that prioritizes maintaining a smooth and harmonious working environment. However, beneath this surface, a more complex emotional landscape simmers. His interactions with the Black actors' hint at a sense of conflicted loyalty. He shares moments of laughter and inside jokes with Millie, suggesting a desire for connection with his fellow Black performers. He deflects Wiletta's critiques of the script, unwilling to take sides in the growing conflict. This can be interpreted as a defense mechanism—a way to avoid the emotional weight of the play's subject matter and maintain his position within the production.

Sheldon's relationship with Al, the white director, is particularly revealing. Despite his jovial personality, Sheldon exhibits a subtle defiance towards Al's authority. He occasionally challenges Al's instructions, albeit in a playful manner. This subtle resistance can be seen as a manifestation of Sheldon's superego—his internalized moral compass that compels him to push back against the blatant racism embedded within the play's production. The climax of the play, when Wiletta walks out and the production descends into chaos, throws Sheldon's internal conflict into sharp relief. His initial

amusement at the disruption gives way to a sense of unease and frustration. This shift reveals an awareness of the deeper issues at play and a potential regret for his own passivity.

In the end, in *Trouble in Mind*, Sheldon Forrest is a character defined by a complex interplay of ambition, racial identity, and professional obligation. He navigates the power dynamics of the play with a smile, but a closer look reveals a man torn between personal desires and a sense of solidarity with his Black colleagues. While a minor character, Sheldon's story serves as a reminder of the multifaceted challenges Black individuals face within predominantly White institutions.

## V. CONCLUSION

*Trouble in Mind* deals with racial tensions and personal struggles and touches on various psychological aspects. Alice Childress brings out the complexities in the psyche and highlights how the characters defend themselves in many tough situations. The characters in the work project their own insecurities or fears. They tend to use defense mechanisms to accuse others of their failures of being incompetent or unreliable. They even refuse to acknowledge unpleasant realities or truths. In times of stress and conflict, Alice tries to bring out the characters' ability to revert to earlier, more childlike behaviors. These behaviors include seeking comfort from others, temper tantrums, or withdrawing themselves from social interactions. Characters in the novel tend to redirect their emotions or frustrations from one source to another. Sometimes they might distance themselves from their emotions by focusing excessively on intellectual pursuits or analysis.

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