Lynching as Psychological Turmoil in Selected African American Plays

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Abstract

This paper intends to investigate in depth a number of selected plays by African American playwrights and trace the references to the psychological impact of lynching on the black individuals as well as its impact on the society as a whole. The plays include Joseph Mitchell's *Son-Boy* (1928), Georgia Johnson's two plays *Sunday Morning in the South* (1925) and *Blue-Eyed Black Boy* (1930), Angelina Weld Grimké's *Rachel* (1916), and Mary Burrill's *Aftermath* (1919). The lynching scenes in the plays under discussion conveyed a great deal of the emotional impact of lynching on the black community.

Keywords: African American Drama, Lynching, Psychological Impact, Black American Community

Introduction:

Lynching was a unique phenomenon in the history of the United States that left a very strong psychic imprint on generations of African Americans. The relatively long history of lynching in the United States, along with all that it included of fear, barbarism, and legal hypocrisy, has deeply affected the psychology of both the victims and the victimizers; it shaped the dynamics of the complicated relationship between them. In fact, the practice of lynching African Americans was one of the inhumane practices of slavery. In the last decades of the nineteenth century, lynching of black people in the Southern states became a clearly institutionalized method used by whites to terrorize, subdue, and eliminate the claimed black threat to white community. This sense of fear of the ‘Negro’ led white mobs to create what was called later "lynch law" which was used as a means of social control.

I.

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This paper intends to investigate in depth a number of selected plays by African American playwrights and trace the references to the psychological impact of lynching on the black individuals as well as its impact on the society as a whole. The plays include Joseph Mitchell's *Son-Boy* (1928), Georgia Johnson's two plays *Sunday Morning in the South* (1925) and *Blue-Eyed Black Boy* (1930), Angelina Weld Grimké's *Rachel* (1916), and Mary Burrill's *Aftermath* (1919). The lynching scenes in the plays under discussion conveyed a great deal of the emotional impact of lynching on the black community.

The importance of this study is two-fold. On the one hand, it traces lynching plays which reflect one of the most complicated phenomena in the history of the United States. The relatively large number of plays based on lynching stories reflects the tremendous impact of lynching upon the African American psyche. The consequences of such horrible experiences were inflicted on the United Sates' culture and history. On the other hand, this study investigates the black playwrights' skillful use of this traumatic experience in evoking sympathy of the viewers. That is—the plays under discussion are employed in shaping a sense of sympathy among the white audiences as they witness the horrible consequences of lynching on the entire lives of African American families while, at the same time, the plays initiate sympathetic reactions among the black audiences who are struck by the suffering of their people. The plays under discussion are far from being mere pieces of protest literature. These plays served in the process of negotiating with the dominant white community more than challenging it. By writing such plays, the playwrights were expressing their own individuality to communicate issues, ideas, and problems of universal human appeal. To this end, the playwrights tried to encapsulate the terrible experience of lynching along with its impact on the social dynamics of the American society. The

plays dramatize the physical and emotional responses of the poor African American victims. This horrible experience is not restricted to the victims alone but also is extended to their families–mothers in the first place–and to the larger surrounding community.

The paper's topic of negotiating the consequences of lynching and its impact on the black psyche, participates in revealing an aspect of what Black Drama is about. This theme instigated the African American community to question the meaning of its identity. Lynching scenes in the plays under discussion made it vital for the black audiences to reconsider their own understanding of the meaning of being an African American in a white dominant nation. To be more precise, the black viewers of lynching scenes in African American drama found themselves forced to reconsider their understanding of some basic concepts such as black manhood and black womanhood in the light of the ongoing racial divide in USA. In his book *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon points out:

> When the Negro makes contact with the white world, a certain sensitizing action takes place. If his psychic structure is weak, one observes a collapse of the ego. The black man stops behaving as an *actional* person. The goal of his behavior will be The Other (in the guise of the white man), for The Other alone can give him worth. That is on the ethical level: self-esteem. But there is something else. (119)

There has been a considerable amount of debate about lynching in African American Drama as many scholars try to explore the interwoven layers of the issue. For instance, Koritha Mitchell's *Living with Lynching: African American Lynching Plays, Performance, and Citizenship, 1890-1930* is a key work on the topic. Mitchell explores African American physical and mental reactions to lynching such as mourning the loss of a family member and the daily debates on the importance of their achievement of the social status they deserve as human beings and citizens of the United States. The daily debates Mitchell referred to are closely connected with some important aspects of the African American self-identification. These debates, which will be discussed in some depth in the folds of this study, center on redefining the meaning of the black family and the black home. The characters' understanding of the family/home as a refuge and safe space is deeply shaken by the brutality of lynching and white mobs' barbarism.

Lynching plays explicitly convey the psychological impact of making the black body a "property of enjoyment," to use Hartman's terms (23). The forms of white terror, domination, and enslavement that are dramatized in the plays under discussion marked the black identity with anxiety and fear of the unknown. The black characters in *Sunday Morning in the South*, for example, are haunted by the fear of loss and death. Such

characters, as Harvey Young argues in his article "Acts of Terrorism, Or, Violence on *A Sunday Morning in the South*," experience deep and daily psychological turmoil. Young argues that Gloria Johnson's play is sort of protest against the savage practices of hanging and torturing of accused African Americans in the absence of the due process of the law. Young points out that Johnson and other black female playwrights were very active writers fighting for better living standards for their people. Young adds that the protest spirit in these plays prove that African American community did not stand helplessly in the face of racial discrimination, rather it responded actively to the brutality of lynching (25). Johnson, in addition, highlights the impact of lynching on the black mother's psyche. In the absence of just legal system, black women were completely unable to save their family members from the humiliation and brutality of lynching mobs. Aligning with this perspective, the plays I discuss in this paper highlight death as an everyday spectacle. Death becomes for many black characters the desired end which is the only end to their suffering. I believe that the desiring of death is one of the factors that excluded African Americans from engaging actively in the construction of the post-civil war America.

The aftermath of lynching contributed to urging African Americans to undergo holistic reconsideration for their understandings of their identity, history, and future. The many consequences of the racial practices of the white authorities in the United States have affected the essence of self-recognition of African Americans. The paper examines mainly five plays by African American writers as well as some references to other plays on the same topic. My focus will be on Joseph Mitchell's *Son-Boy* (1928), Georgia Johnson's two plays *Sunday Morning in the South* (1925) and *Blue-Eyed Black Boy* (1930), Angelina Weld Grimké's *Rachel* (1916), and Mary Burrill's *Aftermath* (1919). The plays highlight the negative bearing of lynching and its impact on the black psyche as well as provide us with better understanding of the meaning and role of the Black Theatre.

Son-Boy by Joseph Mitchell (1928) is a key work in this study for its unconventional way in dealing with lynching and other racial practices. It is one of the few lynching dramas with a "happy ending" (Hatch and Hamalian 74). The play is set in the south around the beginning of the twentieth century. The first scene introduces the audience to Zeke and Dinah in their simple house. The stage directions presented by the author are very indicative in terms of stressing the nature of the life of African Americans, " Several irons are heating on the hearth in front of the fire. There is a pile of clothes on the bed" (3). Mitchell was so concerned with shedding light on the inferior social status of his characters that he foreshadows the hardships and miseries they encounter. Dinah enters first singing, "Weepin' Mary, Weepin' Mary, Weepin' Mary, Weep no mo', weep no mo'. Before I'd be a slave, I'd

be buried in my grave, An' go home to my father an' be saved" (3). The song reveals the deep wound of slavery and the daily domestic activates like washing and ironing other people's clothes; the scene is a true portrayal of the misery African Americans lived through in the early twentieth century. On the other hand, the lively spirit the mother has and the songs she sings reflect a strong character that will stand firm to achieve social justice. Dinah's character is contrasted with her husband's character. Zeke falls short from having the same charisma and spirit; he appears as a lazy and superficial man.

By introducing Dinah and Zeke, Mitchell lays two models of African Americans who are burned by slavery and its damaging psychological consequences. Patterson argues that power relations, such as that between whites and blacks, has a "psychological facet of influence" which is manifested in "the capacity to persuade another person to change the way he perceives his interests and his circumstances" (1-2). Such consequences have their negative effects on African Americans' personal identity and self-recognition. Dinah, the more revolutionary figure in the play, does not approve of her husband passivity. The dialogue between the two characters shows divergent ideologies:

> Johnson **:** Looka heah, Dinah, don't yuh nevah gits tiahd o' singin' dem kin' o' songs?
> Dinah: *(turning around and looking at* ZEKE) Tiahd o' what?
> Johnson: I mean skeered --
> Dinah**:** Skeered o' what?
> Johnson: Y'kno' de whar fo'ks now kno's what y'mean when y'sing dem songs. One o'dem 'surance agents lakly ter come in heah any minit.
> Dinah:**:** I *want's* 'em ter kno'. Fuddermo', Zeke Johnson, de lawd ain't nevah made a man wid two legs dat I'se skeered uv.
> Johnson: I jes' thought I'd min' yuh fer yer own sake. Y'kno' we's got ter live in dis heah white man's town.
> Dinah: *(raising her voice)* It's much mine 'tis his! My fo'ks come o'er heah 'fore his'n did. Me an' my fo'ks worked de fiel's so dey kin eat an' wear clo'es; us he'p buil' de sto'es an' houses fer 'em ter live in; an' us worked de streets so dey kin walk an' ride on. I've got jes' ez gooda right ter live heah an' sing, an' bring up my onlies chile Son-Boy ez anybody else is. De trubble wid *you* is, you's too skeered ter 'sert yer rights ez a man. (4-5)

Even before lynching begins to drive the actions of the family, one can perceive how deep the psychological scars are suppressing the black psyche. In this dialogue the characters are deeply concerned in questioning

some basic concepts in the family life such as manhood and womanhood. Zeke believes that a black woman should not talk about freedom, equality, and how bad the white man is. On the other hand, Dinah looks at her husband's reactions and behaviors as cowardly. She presents her point of view fearing nobody. She is well aware of the long history of slavery in the country and the pressing need to stop the unjust and racial practices of white people. Dinah supports her augment by recalling the numerous services her black ancestors offered to the white community. Dinah continues criticizing her husband's weak character explaining that he does not have the courage to ask his boss for more money or even to have the courage to wash up and wear descent clothes in town. In more than one place, she continues re-examining the meaning of black manhood. She expects the black man to be more "manly" and equal to the white man.

> Dinah: I thought I married a man what had guts in 'im -- but you's de limit. I's glad dat Son-Boy ain't lak yuh ef you is 'sponsible fer 'im not havin' no learnin'.
> Johnson : Dere yuh go ergin.
> Dinah: Yeah, I said it, an' I'se sayin' it ergin. Now he'p yerse'f! Ef y'had took my advice an' let Son-Boy git some learnin' in his head when he wuz little he could now be takin' keer uv us both; an' y'wouldn't be sittin' 'roun' de fiah dis way mos' nigh froze ter def while I'se standin' on my feet all day washin' an' i'nin' de white fo'ks cl'oes. Son-Boy is jes' ez smart an' got jes' ez much guts ez any boy, white or black, an' always has. Don't yuh fergit it! (6)

As a result of the black masculinity dilemma of being less manly than the white man, Zeke is portrayed as someone suffering from the inferiority crisis. He struggles through the play togain a distinctive identity, respect, and awareness of who he is in this white-patriarchal society. By presenting a character like Zeke, the playwright apparently agrees with Ida B. Wells who points out that "The more the Afro-American yields and cringes and begs, the more he has to do so, the more he is insulted, outraged and lynched" (70). Fanon explains the effects of the dependency of the black man on the white man: "Man is human only to the extent to which he tries to impose his existence on another man in order to be recognized by him. As long as he has not been effectively recognized by the other, that other will remain the theme of his actions" (168).

The crisis of black manhood is deepened by the lynching news that Suzie brings. The destructive impact on the collective identity recognition of the African American community is clear even before the actual lynching takes place. Suzie informs the couple that a mob is looking for their son, Son-Boy. Dinah prepares herself immediately to search for her son while

Zeke tries to stop her because he thinks that she can do nothing to stop the mob. Dinah calls him a coward as he shows no indications of strength or resistance. In fact, Zeke's past experience of lynching and the brutality of the mobs makes his instincts respond: "I'se skeered de white fo'ks'll lynch me, fer when de mob gits mad dey's li'ble ter take any nigger dey see an' string 'em up (16). In fact, the long history of lynching in the Southern states participated in destroying the black manhood. Bederman explains that lynching mobs embodied white man's desire of "destroying true black manliness" (59). It is clear now how the lynching acts challenge and change the role of the black man in his domestic sphere. Zeke's inability to protest or stop the brutality and threat of the raging mobs shakes his distinctive status in the family.

As Dinah leaves the house, Son-Boy arrives screaming "Dey's after me ma! Le'me git my gun!" (17). In fact, the young boy addresses his mother first as he already knows that she can help him more than his father. Suddenly, they heard the door knocked and everyone gets ready to meet the mob. Zeke again proves his passive and coward personality by locking the doors so that Son-Boy cannot escape. Dinah asks Son-Boy to hide in the pile of laundry. The playwright, at this point, is so curious to show the hysteric reaction of all the characters on stage to stress the psychological impact of being pursued by a lynching mob. Son-Boy's fear and anxiety are the sum of decades of lynching, abusing, and torturing of African Americans by the mobs. He shouts as he is looking for the gun "I'se looked ev'ywhere! 'Tain't in dere! Where's it, Ma? Hurry! De bloodhounds on my tracks!" (19). Joe, Son-Boy's friend, is the one on the door. Joe reveals that an unknown man had attempted to steal a white girl. A man suggested that it was Son-Boy but fortunately, the real criminal – a white man – is caught.

The actions of the play question the concept of Black manhood. The lynching-like scene not only shows the horrible effects on Son-Boy, but also it contrasts the concept of black womanhood with the concept of black manhood. The author reverses the traditional order of the black family. Zeke's reaction to the lynching problem further damages his status in the family, especially in the eyes of his son. Therefore, spectators and readers see him align with his mother against his father, blaming him for not being able to behave manly.

> Johnson: Yuh nevah did tell me what dey nigger did ketch.
> Dinah: What makes y'thinks it hafter be a nigger?
> Johnson: 'Cause de white fo'ks says so.
> Son-Boy *(looking at* ZEKE *disgustedly)* Looka heah, pa, don't yuh nevah gits tiahed o'usin' dat word "nigger"? I gits tiahed o'hearin' it. Y'gits so mad y'could turn green ef a white man

called yuh "nigger." Stop usin' it yerse'f, den.
Dinah: Perhaps, den, yuh stop bein' so skerry. (28)

In fact, Son-Boy builds a revolutionary consciousness. Consequently, he searches for a gun to fight back and to protect himself. As the door knocks, spectators can see the sharp contrast among the reaction of the family members. The father locks the door, Son-Boy searches for the gun while the mother plays a triple role. She first tries to hide her son, she rebukes her husband as being cowardly, and she looks for the pistol.

The play ends with saving Son-Boy from a tragic death. It is the very idea that emphasizes the function of the Black Stage as a psychological environment which generates and emphasizes sympathy among the audience. It indicates that there is hope in liberating the black psyche from the drastic horror that haunts their everyday life. At the end of the scene, Dinah sings, “Before I’d be a slave/I’d be buried in my grave / And go home to my father and be saved” (31). This song serves as the backdrop of the whole play. It is the motto that to be adopted and followed by Son-Boy. The author uses the song skillfully to illustrate the idea that not much has changed in the life of the family. The play is circular at structure as it closes with the same actions and words. The family's hope of having Son-Boy study medicine makes the play painfully ironic.

In this play, Mitchell explores the effects of the slavery heritage on the black man's identity. Zeke's identity and self-recognition are trapped by the fear of white man. Hence, he does not appear much concerned in behaving as a strong father and husband. Because of the many defects of his self-recognition, Zeke does not defend his family, ask a promotion from his boss, hold up his head while walking, nor does he dress nicely when he goes outside. He always tries to avoid troubles and please the white man. It is important to note the indications Mitchell makes regarding the white mobs' mentality. The people who try to catch the suspected criminal try to find any clue, no matter how marginal, to incriminate blacks of the crime. It did not take long before they find a scapegoat to be lynched. They directly choose someone to be lynched and acts accordingly. This fact puts the black people under a continual pressure and threat of being "chosen" to be lynched. In fact, this explains in a great deal, Zeke's cowardly behaviors.

Georgia Douglas Johnson’s *A Sunday Morning in the South* (1925) is another play that is concerned with presenting the traumatic experience of lynching and its psychological consequences on the black psyche. The play is set in the South around 1924. Johnson uses her talented skills to depict the life of a simple family. The play opens with a traditional Sunday morning as family members gather around the breakfast table. The old Sue Jones calls her grandsons Tom, 19 years, and Bossie, 7 years, to have breakfast. The

audience learn how religious the family is through the many references to the church and Sunday prayers.

The happy and peaceful morning is soon turned into a tragic one as two white police officers arrive. They accuse Tom of attempting to rape a white girl. In fact, it is important to note that this image of the black male as a sexual predator has deep roots in the American psyche (Booker 12). Zangrando points out that the whites created the myth that lynching was a necessary act to protect white womanhood. He adds that his "fiction was so widely accepted that statistics indicate that the security of white female virtue ranked among the most popular justifications for mob murder" (4). Aligning with this perception of the black male, the police officers are well-prepared to arrest Tom with no much investigations. They have no strong clues that incriminate Tom except that he lives near the crime scene and his physical description is similar to the suspect's. Ironically, the police officers bring the white girl and urge her to accuse Tom of the crime. Eventually, they succeed in convincing her to identify Tom as the assailant. The officers arrest Tom before the family realizes what has happened.

The cheerful and loving atmosphere of the family life is replaced dramatically with a traumatic and sad one. The play shows how the limit between laughs and tears in the black community is so thin. Clarke points out that "blacks understood that lynchings could occur anywhere and anytime. Abundant evidence reveals that fear informed the actions of every black man, woman and child throughout the South" (276). The life of black individuals can be destroyed by mere suspicions of being guilty. The decent and harmlessness nature of the family does not protect them from the unjust social system. Patricia Young points out that the play shows how lynching destroys an individual, a family unit, and the security of an entire community" (23).

Johnson purposefully introduces the innocent Tom to the audience before he dies to make them sympathize with Tom's tragic end and witness the unfairness of the racial society in which he lives. Tom is a self-made person who toils all the daylong to make a living. His ambitions may be the main cause of his tragedy. In fact, White highlights a similar vision on the topic saying that "lynching is much more an expression of Southern fear of Negro progress than Negro crime"(11). Tom is aware of the nature of the social unjust and brutality. Before his tragedy begins, Tom insists that something must be done in order to protect the black people from the unjust treatment they receive from the authorities. He explains that he will fight injustice by educating himself at night school. His reaction to the lynching rumors he learns about clarifies his vision in life,

> Tom: I been thinking a whole lot about these things [lynching] and I mean to go to night school and git a little

> book learning so as I can do something to help -- help change the laws . . . make em strong . . . I sometimes get right upset and wonder whut would I do if they ever tried to put something on me. (8)

At this moment, Tom tries to act instead of react to the discrimination of whites. According to Fanon, "when it encounters resistance from the other, self-consciousness undergoes the experience of *desire* – the first milestone on the road that leads to the dignity of the spirit. Self-consciousness accepts the risk of its life, and consequently it threatens the other in his physical being" (169). The manly portrayal of Tom is further illustrated by his reaction to his arrest. He highly controls his emotions and tries to assure his grandmother that everything will be resolved and cleared as soon as he speaks to the Sheriff. He addresses his grandmother saying, "Granma, don't take on so. I'll go long with him to the sheriff. I'll splain to him how I couldn't a done it when I was here sleep all the time—I never laid eyes on that white lady before in all my life" (11).

The irony here is that the Sheriff would not be more reasonable or less racist than the police officers who place themselves as the judge and the jury. The black testimonies the family members present are never considered by the police officers. The police officers arrive with the case closed. Tom is sentenced even before they see him. The only thing they need is to make the girl believe that Tom is the criminal. The white girls, as Brown-Guillory argues, "participates in the ruination of a young black life, the victim becomes a symbol of black oppression" (7).

Johnson succeeds in presenting the larger image of lynching and its impact on the black family. The details that are given by different characters document or preserve the brutality nature of lynching. When Matilda, a family friend, arrives to see what has happened, she narrates to the family the actions she has seen outside. On many lynching occasions, the mobs attacked policemen and tookthe accused person to be lynched before any kind of trail took place. And this is what happens to Tom,

> Matilda: (*breathlessly*) Miss Liza, as I was coming long I seed Tom wid the police and there was some white mens wid guns a trying to take him away from the police -- said he'd done been dentified and they want gointer be cheated outen they Nigger this time. I, I flew on down here to tell you, you better do somethin'. (13)

Matilda's news brings no relief for Tom's family. Their worries are confirmed now as it appears that it is a matter of time before the mob kidnaps Tom from the police and lynch him. The lynching of Tom occurs offstage while the family waits for Matilda to come back with the good news. Eventually, Matilda arrives and informs the family that it is too late

now to help Tom. The ending of the play is extremely powerful. The background song from the Church illustrates the contradictions in the life of the black community in general and of Tom's family in particular. Johnson juxtaposes the horror of lynching and the beauty of the music sung from the black church to illustrate the striking contradictions in the life of the African Americans (Prentiss 196). Aligning with the mission of the Black Theatre the play's ending serves as a panorama of a human tragedy:

> Matilda: (*reluctantly*) It want no use.
> Sue: No use?
> Liza: Whut you mean?
> Matilda: I mean -- I mean --
> Liza: For God's sake Tildy, whut's happened?
> Matilda: They -- They done lynched him.
> Sue (*screams*) Jesus! (*gasps and falls limp in her chair. Singing from church begins.* BOSSIE *runs to her, crying afresh.* LIZA *puts the camphor bottle to her nose again as* MATILDA *feels her heart; they work over her a few minutes, shake their heads and with drooping shoulders, wring their hands. While this action takes place the words of this song pour forth from church:* Lord have mercy. Lord have mercy, Lord have mercy over me. (*Sung first time with words and repeated in a low hum as curtain slowly falls*) (16-17)

Johnson's play presents all parts of lynching and stages them in front of her audience. She skillfully explores the impact of decades of lynching on the psyche of the black families. The family's life is changed forever as it loses, in an hour or less, one of its members. The family will suffer both emotionally and economically with the absence of its breadwinner. The reactions of the three female characters at the end of the play convey, in a great deal, the traumatic emotional impact that is cast upon the family. This would evoke strong feelings of sympathy from the audiences.

Blue-Eyed Black Boy (1930) is another play by Johnson that tackles the theme of lynching and its effects on the black community's psyche. The play opens, like many other lynch plays, in the same simple house of a black family. The aspects of the scene like irons, iron board, stove, and cooking establishes the basic elements of a black family's household. Paulina learns that her son, Jack, is in jail and the white people will lynch him very soon. This scene, as in many other lynch plays, is set in a house and not in the place of lynching. Johnson and other playwrights intended to reflect the deep effects of the lynching experience on the black household as everybody in the house gets involved and affected by the consequences of lynching.

After the family hears that Jack is in jail on false charges, Dr. Grey, Pauline's future son-in-law, decides to go to the judge and talk to him to save Jack's live. Pauline opposes this solution:

> Dr. Grey: (excitedly) I'll drive over and see the Judge. He'll do something to stop it.
> Hester: (sarcastically) Him? Not him! He's a lyncher his own self. Don't put no trust in him. Ain't he done let 'em lynch six niggers in the last year jes' gone? Him! (8)

Pauline's reaction reflects the deep rift of distrust between the black community and the hypocrite legal system. She knows for certain that the judge will let the mob hang her son. Johnson, at this point, refers to one of the main factors that aided and participated in the spread of lynching laws in the United States, that is legal hypocrisy.

In her turn, Pauline asks Dr. Grey to go to Governor Tinkham's house. She tells him to take her ring and give it to the Governor himself and say: " 'Pauline sent this. She says they goin to lynch her son born 21 years ago.' Mind you, say 21 years ago. Then say, listen close. 'Look in his eyes and you'll save him '" (9). Pauline's words indicate that the governor is Jack's father. The family members appear to be totally ignorant of that fact but the crucial situation prevents any further inquiries from them. Fortunately, the state troops whom the Governor sends arrive on time. The play ends with a clear indication that Jack will be saved from the mob.

The interference of the white society to stop lynching has a darker face. The Governor offers help only to cover the story of Jack's paternity. It is a mere way of *compromise*, to use Willis Richardson's ideas on the topic. The assumed rape of Pauline is compensated by saving the life of her son. Black Drama not only presents the psychological effects on the blacks, but also it explicates the complications of the black dilemma in the white society. The playwright indicates that whites would not help the black community unless such help participates in erasing their faults in the first place. Johnson's play suggests that tragic stories like Pauline's exist in countless black homes. Ironically, Jack, who is falsely accused of brushing a white woman on street, is saved by a man who raped a black woman twenty-one years ago, and survived it. Johnson brings in front of the eyes of her audience the radical oppositions between the life of whites on the one hand and the life of blacks on the other.

The final part of the play exposes the characters, as well as the audience, to the catastrophic effects of lynching on the black households. The strong scene at the end of the play presents this strong experience in full. Pauline can do nothing more than calling Jesus to help her son and save him from the mob. Pauline cries and prays aloud to God, asking him to direct the Governor to stop the lynching. Wood points out that lynching produced an

experience that overwhelmed all other forms of violence that African American endured (1). And like other plays discussed above, the strong experience of lynching shakes the hearts of the audience and creates sympathetic feelings among them.

Angelina Weld Grimke's *Rachel* (1916) departs in its structure from Mitchell's and Johnson's plays. The play has three acts instead of the limitations of the one-act play. Moreover, the lynching incident that the play discusses happened in the deep past of the family. *Rachel* introduces the sixteen-year-old Rachel, her mother and her younger brother Tom. They live somewhere in the North of the United Sates after they migrated from the South where Rachel's father was lynched. Mrs. Loving, Rachel's mother, decides to tell her children the true story of their father's death. She and her husband had been in bed when whites attacked their house, broke down the front door, and dragged her husband out of the house. Her seventeen-year old son, George, tried to stop the mob, but he was dragged with his father. The narration of this unforgettable incident in the life of the mother draws the attention of the audience to the drastic scars that lynching has left in the memory of the black family. The black drama participates, to a great extent, in reconstructing the memory of lynching on stage. Lynching scenes build a bridge from the past to present, questioning the possibilities of the black future.

> Mrs. Loving: [. . .] While they were dragging them down the steps, I crept into the room where you were. You were both asleep. Rachel, I remember, was smiling. I knelt down by you -- and covered my ears with my hands -- and waited. I could not pray -- I couldn't for a long time -- afterwards.
> (*A silence*). It was very still when I finally uncovered my ears. The only sounds were the faint rustle of leaves and the "tap-tapping of the twig of a tree" against the window. I hear it still -- sometimes in my dreams. *It was the tree -- where they were*. (32)

The play explores the long-term impact of lynching on the psyches of black people, wives, and children this time. While Mitchell's and Johnson's plays portray the immediate psychological effects of lynching on the black community, Grimke's tragedy explores the long-lasting impact of such traumatic experience on the black folks.

The incident leads Mrs. Loving to question the whole value of religion because her husband was so devout to the church. As a result of this story, Rachel changes many of her ideas and beliefs especially concerning marriage and motherhood. She accordingly rejects John Strong's marriage proposal; she believes that she cannot raise her children in such a racist society. This is another dimension of the psychological impacts of lynching

on the black psyche; it shakes the fundamental beliefs and convections the human beings hold. Even after years of the tragic death of both Mr. Loving and his son, the consequences of the brutality by which they had died cast their catastrophic effects on the next generations of African Americans. This is one of the most genuine insights the playwright conveys in the play.

The last play included in the discussion of lynching and its effects on the psychological dynamics within the black identity, family, and its surrounding community is Mary Burrill's *Aftermath* (1919). Similar to Grimke's *Rachel*, the father is lynched before the action begins and the play tackles the consequences of lynching on the family. Burrill extends the disastrous effects of lynching on three different generations in order to explain the long-term effects of the problem on the African American community. Burrill presents her audience with a family of only a grandmother and her grandchildren while the middle generation is missing. The older brother John is overseas fighting for his country in WWI, while the old Mam Sue and her grandsons remain at home. Their father has been lynched and their mother's life is unmentioned. It is important to note that, in all of the plays discussed in this paper, the major target of lynching is the black male. Harvey Young points out that lynching was a tool of murder of the black males in particular as the men within the mob sought to emphasize their privilege and status in a patriarchal society (650).

John arrives in a short visit and discovers the story of his father's death. John feels that he is fooled when he risks his life oversees for a nation that does not respect his life and dignity. The black stage is successful in connecting the lynching scene with history of blacks and their role in building America. John's reaction is so indicative in this regard,

> John: *(with bitterness growing in his voice)* I'm sick o' these w'ite folks doin's -- we're "fine, trus'worthy feller citizuns" when they're handin' us out guns, an' Liberty Bonds, an' chuckin' us off to die; but we ain't a damn thing when it comes to handin' us the rights we done fought an' bled fu'! I'm sick o' this sort o' life -- an' I'm goin' to put an' end to it! (23)

In addition to the turmoil and spiritual suffering of lynching the father, this play highlights the fact that the problem of lynching affected and purged whole generations in the African American community. The play highlights the physical consequences that can take place as result of it. John and his younger brother risk their lives as they leave the house with the intention of avenging their father's death. John leaves the house showing an agitating desire of revenge but this act will benefit no one. When the black man is barred from achieving justice "he might destroy his master's property by destroying himself " (Patterson 173).

Conclusion:

In conclusion, the plays discussed shed light on the role of lynching in defining what black drama is. The black playwrights of the above-discussed plays used the traumatic experience of lynching to evoke sympathy of the viewers. These plays served in shaping a sense of sympathy among the white audiences as they witnessed the horrible consequences of lynching on the entire lives of African American families while, at the same time, the plays initiated sympathetic reactions among the black audiences who were struck by the suffering of their people. A deep understanding of the plays reveals that they are far from being mere pieces of protest literature. The absence of on-stage lynching scenes is a clear implication that these plays did not aim at agitating the audiences' bias. These plays served in the process of negotiating with the dominant white community more than challenging it. It is noteworthy here to point out that by writing such plays, the playwrights were expressing the black own individuality to communicate universal issues, ideas, and problems. That is, Black Drama is the genre which deals with the complicated dynamics between oppressed people and their oppressors. To this end, the playwrights tried to encapsulate the terrible experience of lynching along with its impacts on the social dynamics of the American society as part of the everlasting combat between good and bad. Black Drama invites its audience to reconsider their own understanding of the meaning of color and race in the human life. It is true that these same issues were treated in other literary genres, but what is unique about drama is the power of performance it has. The values conveyed in lynching dramas are strongly emphasized by theatrical dynamics of the shows. Unlike other genres, drama enjoys the spectacular element that addresses the audience. This important element forms an ongoing dialogue on the topic.

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