

# Afrocentric Study of Black Female Identity in Alice Childress's *Wine in the Wilderness*

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## Abstract

African American playwrights always tend to manifest their African heritage and culture (Afrocentrism) through their plays. In other words, Afrocentrism means African centered-ness. Afrocentrism or Afrocentricity basically focuses on Africans and places African history, heritage and culture at the heart of any analysis. One of the Afrocentric writers is Alice Childress whose texts generally center on the devastating

effects of racial discrimination, sexism and classism on women of colour.

This study is principally concerned with the one-act play of Alice Childress, *Wine in the Wilderness*, which was written in 1964 and was first performed in 1969 in Boston, Massachusetts, as part of the series, “On Being Black”. In *Wine in the Wilderness*, Childress is bound by history and tradition since several references can be found in the play that considers Africa as a homeland and wellspring of strength. This paper investigates some questions such as: how does Alice Childress employ the Afrocentric value in the play? What is the purpose of Afrocentrism in the play? Who best represents Afrocentrism throughout the play? This paper delineates that Tommy, as an undereducated heroine and as a true Afrocentrist female in the play, is proud of her black culture and her blackness.

**Keywords:** Miscegenation, Afrocentrism, Racism, Identity, Sexism, and Classism.

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- **Introduction:**

The Afrocentric approach in the play analysis examines historical experiences, knowledge, and cultural attributes of the people of African descent in the US. It narrows to black people's experiences depicting their struggles with black identity in the US in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Alice Childress presents the reality of life for African Americans through characters encountering socioeconomic inequality due to their racial backgrounds. An analysis of the play revolves around Childress's surroundings and the period surrounding gender, racial and social discrimination. The society in the play represents the sensitivity, visions, social conditions, and situations surrounding the author. The themes and characters portrayed in the play *Wine in the Wilderness* aim to inspire audiences and society and elicit society's consciousness to advocate for positive change. The play *Wine in the Wilderness* portrays the black community in American society in the early and mid-20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The period experienced cases of civil unrest and upheavals where African Americans underwent harsh treatment married with social and economic segregation. Thus, the black community experienced racial prejudice and class division in American society and adopted different reactionary approaches, as depicted in Alice Childress's play.

- **Reshaping Narratives: Afrocentric Study of Black Female Identity**

Afrocentric values manifest in *Wine in the Wilderness* through Black characters' occupations. Childress depicts Black middle-class populations as holding maligned jobs as painters or developing series of paintings (triptych). Bill Jameson, for instance, acts as a painter of black origin in Harlem in New York (Paulun, 2015). Jameson stayed in his apartment during the riots that sought civil liberties. Afrocentric was further manifested in the rioting aimed at changing black people's fortunes, such as owning properties (homes). Jameson showed his painting prowess by developing exquisite paintings (Paulun, 2015). However, Jameson's paintings depicted Afrocentric values by propagating African-American uniqueness. Jameson utilized painting as a platform for propagating the African American women, particularly charming girls flocking to Sunday services with ribbon hair and African culture dresses. The painting of the charming black little girl informs society of her innocence due to her young age. The depiction of Afrocentric through African women's characteristics continued throughout Bill Jameson's paintings.

Bill Jameson depicted African women's deep mahogany complexion and beauty through paintings that further captured African American fashion dressing characterized by African colors. This painting idealizes the African woman, a visionary queen representing mother Africa (Gamal, 2003). Despite depicting the fashionable and sparkling dresses of the African queen,

Jameson shows the other side of African-American women's situations in the US through imagination. According to Jameson, American society in the mid-20th century rendered African women uneducated, poor, and homeless. Additionally, African-American women lead deplorable lives due to coarseness, rudeness, ignorance, and unfeminine nature (Gamal, 2003). This situation depicts Afrocentric values through the hopelessness of women in American society. Bill Jameson utilizes three paintings of African American women to portray innocence, the desired situation for a mature African American woman, and the unwanted side of the women.

The author depicts African American people as those integrating their African style and racial uniqueness into mainstream American society and American standardization. Black Americans dominated play fields of science, research, and artistry using their racial originality and style. Consequently, black Americans became successful musicians, poets, and scientists while sticking to their African-American roots (Parghi, 2015). Afrocentric values permeated through consideration of black people's personality, speech, and skin color as manifested in the paintings of two women. The perfect representation of an African woman is one with the qualities of an African Queen (deep mahogany complexion and beautiful). Afrocentricity appears in the experiences of Bill Jameson as he desires to perfect his artistic achievement and win accolades (Parghi, 2015). The excellence of art and winning prizes fulfil the African American dreams of attaining achievements similar to their white counterparts. African Americans aspire to excel in their artistic work and receive recognition by displaying their works in public places such as banks, libraries, and museums. Similarly, Bill Jameson propagated African-American uniqueness and style into mainstream American society aiming to portray the beauty and complexion of African women.

Afrocentricity manifests in Bill Jameson's representation of poor and hopeless African women such as Tommy. According to Jameson, a black woman exhibiting negative qualities such as Tommy is worthless and hopeless in American society. Bill says (Childress, 1969), "The lost woman, what the society has made out of our women. " It underlines how the worthlessness and hopelessness of African American women emanate from the social situation that disparages and discriminates against African American women against access to opportunities (Khuzam, 2015). Bill unmasks the ignorance of Tommy when exposing her to modelling through their African American uniqueness and style. Tommy wallows in poverty and joblessness, yet she can utilize her opportunities in African American uniqueness and style to reach similar levels as her white counterparts (Khuzam, 2015). Similarly, the exchange between Bill and Tommy reveals the vulnerability of African-American women. For instance, Bill exploits Tommy to model and enables him to paint her African American woman image for a paltry pay instead of nurturing her prowess to model (Khuzam, 2015). A continuation of Afrocentricity in women appears in Cynthia's character working as a social worker. Cynthia describes the predicaments facing

African American women in American society and advises Tommy and other women to avoid rushing for marriage.

African Americans' patronizing and arrogant nature underlines the Afrocentric value where African Americans are enemies of their progress. Cynthia and Bill display arrogance towards Tommy by laughing at her joblessness and hopelessness. The arrogance made Tommy lament, "Trying to make out like we pitiful and you got it made." (Childress, 1969). Tommy castigates how educated, and privileged African Americans displayed arrogance towards unprivileged ones in American society (Davis, 2016). Cynthia, for instance, patronizes Tommy and other unprivileged African Americans by highlighting her education, home ownership, and occupation (social worker) statuses. Her accentuation attitude mirrors that of her husband Sonny-man, who lives close to their middle-class counterpart Bill Jameson. Middle-class African Americans tended to ditch their African styles and uniqueness and adopt white's values such as accent and character (Davis, 2016). Cynthia disparaged Tommy due to her mastery of English, natural hair, and grooming (physical appearance) hence acting hypocritically. As a social worker, Cynthia studies Tommy's poverty situation without disclosing her intentions, thus using Tommy and other African Americans as study objects. As a career woman, Cynthia ditches African-American roots and practices adopting white people's values (Davis, 2016). As a social worker, Cynthia has a career that strengthens her independence status. Thus, Cynthia's autonomy prevents her from being submissive to her husband, and she politely disagrees with what she considers unreasonable.

### • **Intersection of Race and Socioeconomic Status within the African American Community**

The purpose of Afrocentrism in *Wine in the Wilderness* is to portray African-American style and uniqueness within the racially divided American society. African Americans appear in the play as a group with a focus and target to realize the American dream despite sharp and entrenched racial segregation that denies them opportunities and platforms for growth. Bill, for instance, excels in artistry and aspires to achieve public recognition (Celia, 2009). In painting art, Bill managed to own a house in Harlem, New York, and fulfil his American dream. Despite operating in a white-dominated culture, Bill stuck by his African American styles and utilized paintings that supported African women (Hutchinson, 2004). Bill is the epitome of Afrocentrism whose objective is preserving Black people's styles, values, and uniqueness regardless of societal inclinations. Besides Bill's excellence in artistry, Afrocentrism is valuable in the play through its propagation of African Americans' success in other fields (Celia, 2009). Cynthia, unlike Bill, excels in American society by acquiring a quality education and becoming a social worker. Cynthia boasts excellent education levels, middle-class status, and proficiency in English and

accent. She succeeds in American society through education and career paths despite operating in a racially divided society where opportunities are scarce for African Americans. Afrocentrism further dominates the play, distinguishing class mindsets and betrayal amongst African Americans. Cynthia and Tommy are character examples that perpetuate Afrocentrism in American society. In Cynthia and her husband Sonny-man, Afrocentrism aims at disclosing a character keen on patronizing and accentuating her status over other Africans (Williams, 2018). The middle-class status appears to corrupt her consciousness to the point of ditching her African-American roots. Instead, Cynthia perceives herself as superior to other unprivileged African Americans. This situation manifests when she implores Tommy to accept Bill's overtures against her wishes by asking Tommy, "Tommy, you don't want a poor artist. " (Childress 1969). Afrocentrism underlines class divisions among African Americans, with those excelling forgetting their backgrounds. On the other hand, Tommy represents ignorant, uneducated, hopeless African Americans in American society (Williams, 2018). She represents the typical African-American situation in American society, characterized by discrimination and inadequate opportunities for black people. Afrocentrism serves the theme of hopelessness through Tommy, whose ignorance leads to Sonny-man, Bill, and Cynthia's misuse.

Afrocentrism has been utilized to show the African American transformation journey in American society following the civil unrest of the mid-19th century. Black middle-class characters represent the journey to access education and opportunities leading to improved lives. Furthermore, Black middle-class people further enjoyed the talents that elevated their statuses at the turn of the 20th century (Ghani and Joody, n.d.). An increase in the black middle-class population followed the civil war of the mid-19th century which expanded African American freedoms and rights. As a result of expanded civil liberties for the Black community in the early 20th century, African Americans could showcase their style and express personalities within the white supremacists' spectrum. The play captures Bill, Sonny-man, and Cynthia, whose talents and education elevated them to middle-class levels (Ghani and Joody, n.d.). Consequently, the trio managed to own properties and lead a similar life as their middle-class white counterparts. However, middle-class African Americans enjoyed their education and talents at the expense of fellow underclass blacks stuck in despair and poverty. Additionally, the black middle class exploits fellow blacks to advance their status while portraying the negative images of underclass blacks for individual benefits.

• **Nurturing Self-Discovery: Examining Racial Segregation in Alice Childress's *Wine in the Wilderness***

Afrocentrism further highlighted the existence of racial discrimination in American society. The play's five characters suffer racial discrimination due to their African-American styles and characteristics. Tommy, for instance, suffered racial hostilities and prejudice following her underclass status. Despite stereotypes for representing black lower-class women, she suffers exploitation from fellow blacks due to her poor and uneducated status (Belhout and Kebaili, 2017). The purpose of Afrocentrism further manifests in Oldtimer, whose Black and lower-class status sets to discrimination from accessing opportunities in education and opportunities. White people underestimated the capabilities of Oldtimer due to his African American and lower-class status. Bill propagated the essence of Afrocentrism in the play despite his middle-class level in society (Belhout and Kebaili, 2017). He constantly endured threatening dreams that elicited fear of racial discrimination representing his black man's identity fears. Bill laments frustrating dreams when he says, "I have had a lot of bad dreams. " (Childress 1969). The fear of a black man's identity is a potential underestimation of talents and abilities by white people. Consequently, Bill tended to associate with white people's values and styles for fear of suffering negative perceptions (Shih, 2020). Sonny-man and Cynthia avoided Oldtimer and Tommy to escape black identities and avoid potential perception and discrimination by white people.

Tommy is the character representing Afrocentrism throughout the play owing to her early childhood and adulthood life. In her childhood, Tommy grew up in a single-parent family after their father left while she was young. A single-parenthood family typifies African American families. As a result, Tommy's family led a hopeless life characterized by extreme poverty (Thompson, 2009). Tommy's situation in adulthood represents cyclic poverty that mirrors other black families. The cyclic poverty permeated African-American families similar to Tommy's family due to class divisions among black communities. Middle-class African Americans overlooked their lower-class counterparts leaving their tribulations perpetuating from generation to generation. Despite Tommy's mother living in abject poverty, no one cared about her situation. Tommy and her mother had to work hard to earn pennies to sustain their livelihoods (Thompson, 2009). The situation in Tommy's family underlined the plight of African-American families that went hungry due to lacking money to buy food.

Cyclic poverty in Tommy's family began with her mother's inability to access education and employment opportunities. Having missed the opportunity to gain meaningful education, Tommy's mother carried the burden of lacking requisite employment skills, hence unskilled black women (Vijayalakshmi and Jose, 2015). Consequently, Tommy's mother could not find valuable income-generating opportunities leaving her family's financial situation deplorable and unable to

provide Tommy with an education. This situation manifests when Tommy says, "I remember my mother tying up her stockings with strips rag because she didn't have no garters" (Childress, 1969). As a result, Tommy ended up uneducated and ignorant and typified African Americans' situations in American society. Due to Tommy's mother's uneducated situation, white people disparaged and underestimated her abilities. As a result, she attracted low cadre and menial jobs that earned her low wages (Vijayalakshmi and Jose, 2015). Furthermore, Tommy received inadequate education due to her mother's low wages which could not sustain quality education and living. Tommy's perspective captures African-American women who received low wages regardless of their work input.

Tommy's grade eight level of education meant retaining the poverty situation of her mother and receiving paltry pay for her economic engagements. The challenge of gaining quality education was apparent among black people in American society. Black people suffered as second-class citizens in America due to inequality in social and economic structures (Brugner, n.d.). In the wake of disparities, African Americans failed to access quality education and opportunities and hence were relegated to cyclic poverty. Tommy's life depicts struggles endured by unprivileged African Americans who encounter structural barriers in accessing quality education and economic opportunities in the US. Besides inequalities in social structural foundations, Tommy had deplorable experiences with white people that left her dismayed over people's identities (Brugner, n.d.). These experiences made Tommy hopeless and powerless in satisfying personal desires due to her black family identity. The powerlessness of black family's manifested in Tommy's inability to provide Tommy with quality education and failure to receive support from the community despite her single motherhood situation (Brugner, n.d.). Thus, Tommy's family situation underlines black people's inability to improve their lives and offering's lives.

Tommy's childhood misery escalated to adulthood, with life difficulties hitting her hardest following her mother's death. The experience of living without parents demonstrated the life of African Americans during childhood. Tommy endured working in a dress factory in Harlem, where her occupation required low-skilled labor and attracted low pay (Burrell, 2013). At a tender age, Tommy found herself struggling in Harlem and immersed in race riots in the city to agitate for racial identity and equality. Tommy marvels, "Everything gone. This riot blew my life. All I got is gone like it never was " (Childress, 1969). Despite rioters agitating for equal treatment and equality in accessing opportunities, Tommy lost her place to sleep near the grocery (Burrell, 2013). Her homelessness and orphan situation made her portray an Afrocentric dimension in the US where black children and adults encountered rough living conditions. Tommy's identity as a black person disfavors her from attracting friendship despite working as a factory worker. Moreover, other workers avoid associating with Tommy's condition due to her background

(Burrell, 2013). At this stage, Tommy is vulnerable to middle-class Bill and Cynthia, who exploit her with artistry (painting) and profession (social worker) and compensate her with paltry terms.

- **Conclusion**

In conclusion, Alice Childress employs Afrocentrism in the play by relying on the plight of black characters from middle- and lower-class dimensions. Tommy and Oldtimer are typical Afrocentric faces due to their tendency to avoid white people. The Afrocentric purpose of Tommy and Oldtimer is to highlight black people's fear of whites to avoid stereotypes and prejudices. Furthermore, Afrocentrism appears through black characters' experiences, such as discrimination and underestimation of their capabilities by white people. Tommy's background, for instance, portrays Afrocentrism, where African people experience harrowing lives leading to cyclic poverty. The lower-class population of Tommy's stature struggles to access worthwhile education and economic opportunities without assistance from white Americans and middle-class black counterparts. Instead, the black lower class suffers exploitation in fellow black people's hands, as in Tommy against Bill and Cynthia's case.



## لیکۆلینه‌وه‌یه‌کی ئەفرۆسینتريک له‌سه‌ر ناسنامه‌ی ژناني ره‌شپيسته له شانۆگه‌ری "واين ئن زه وایلدهرنیس" ی ئەلیس چیلدریس

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### پوخته:

شانۆنووسانی به‌ره‌چه‌له‌ک ئەفریقی هه‌میشه هه‌ولیانداوه که‌له‌پوور و که‌لتوریان له نووسینی شانۆکانیادا ره‌نگبداته‌وه. به‌واتیه‌کی تر، مه‌به‌ستمان له ئەفرۆسینتريسم ئەوه‌یه که لیکۆلینه‌وه‌که‌په‌یوه‌ست بچ به‌خه‌لکی ئەفریقی. به‌شیوه‌یه‌کی سه‌ره‌کی ئەفرۆسینتريسم یان ئەفرۆسینتريک له‌تویژینه‌وه‌کاندا جه‌خت له‌خه‌لکی ئەفریقی ده‌کاته‌وه وه‌تویژینه‌وه‌که‌زیاتر په‌یوه‌ست ده‌بیته‌به‌میژوو و که‌لتووور و که‌له‌پووری ئەفریقیه‌کان. یه‌کیک له‌نوسه‌ره‌دیاره‌کانی به‌ره‌چه‌له‌ک ئەفریقی ئەلیس چیلدریسه‌که‌به‌شیوه‌یه‌کی گشتی ده‌قه ئەده‌بیه‌کانی ده‌رباره‌ی کاریگه‌رییه‌نه‌ریینه‌کانی تووندوتیژی ره‌گه‌زه‌په‌رستی و سیکسيزم و چینه‌یه‌تی ژناني ره‌شپيسته.

ئهم لیکۆلینه‌وه‌یه له‌سه‌ر شانۆیه‌کی یه‌ک ئاکتی نووسه‌ر ئەلیس چیلدریسه، "واين ئن زه وایلدهرنیس"، که‌له‌سالی ۱۹۶۴ نووسراوه‌وه‌بۆیه‌که‌م جار له‌سالی ۱۹۶۹ له‌بۆستن، ماساشوسیتس، نمایشکراوه‌وه‌که‌به‌شیک له‌زنجیره‌نمایشه‌کانی "له‌سه‌ر ره‌شپيسته‌بوون". ئەلیس چیلدریس له‌شانۆی "واين ئن زه وایلدهرنیس" په‌یوه‌سته‌به‌میژوو و نه‌ریت کاتی چه‌ندین ئاماژه‌هه‌یه له‌شانۆکه‌دا که ئەفریقا وه‌ک وولاتی دایک و کانگای هیژ داده‌نیت. ئهم تویژینه‌وه‌یه چه‌ندین پرسیار تاووتوی ده‌کات له‌وانه: ئەلیس چیلدریس چۆن به‌های ئەفرۆسینتريک له‌شانۆکه‌یدا به‌ره‌سته‌ده‌کات؟ مه‌به‌ستی ئەفرۆسینتريسم چیه‌له‌شانۆکه‌یدا؟ کام کاره‌کته‌ره‌جوانتر فکری ئەفرۆسینتريسم به‌ره‌سته‌ده‌کات له‌شانۆکه‌دا؟ له‌لیکۆلینه‌وه‌یه‌ده‌رده‌که‌ویته‌که‌تۆمی وه‌ک کاره‌کته‌ری سه‌ره‌کی ناکامل (خوینده‌واری زۆری نه‌بیته‌) و مینینه‌یه‌کی ئەفرۆسینتريک له‌شانۆکه‌دا شانازی به‌که‌لتووری ئەفریقی و ره‌شپيسته‌خۆی ده‌کات.

کلیله ووشه‌کان: ره‌چه‌له‌کی تیکه‌لاو، ئەفرۆسینتريزم، ره‌گه‌زه‌په‌رستی، ناسنامه، سیکسيزم، چینه‌یه‌تی.

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