

GENDER AND AFROCENTRISM IN LORRAINE HANSBERRY'S *A RAISIN IN THE SUN*

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Abstract

A Raisin in the Sun, considered a significant play in American literature because, the play touches upon several themes such as; African – Americans' problems by the white Americans. It addresses the politics during the 1950s in the USA, is known for realistic portrayal of black family and brings to fore vernacular languages by blacks. In addition, the play deals with poverty, American dream, racial identity, discrimination and gender inequality. In this connection, the paper argues gender and Afro centism in *A Raisin in the Sun* by Lorraine Hansberry. It also tries to map gender inequity among family, male-centric views and Afro centric values.

Keywords: Afro centric, American dream, racial identity, discrimination etc

Introduction

Lorraine Hansberry was born on May 19, 1930 in Chicago, the youngest in a family of four children. His parents were well-educated and prosperous black citizens who openly fought against discrimination against blacks. When Hansberry was a child, she and her family lived in a black neighborhood on the South Side of Chicago. At the time, segregation the enforced separation between whites and blacks was still legal and pervasive throughout the South. The northern states, including Hansberry's Illinois, have no official segregationist policies, but generally segregate themselves by race and economy. Chicago is a striking example of a city divided into strictly segregated white and black neighborhoods. The Hansberry family became among the first to move into a white neighborhood, but Hansberry still attended a separate public school for black students.

Hansberry writes that she has always wanted to document her experiences. At times his works, including *A Raisin in the Sun*, are autobiographical. She was one of the first playwrights to create realistic portraits of black life. When *A Raisin in the Sun* premiered in March 1959, it was critically acclaimed by white and black audiences. Believed to be the first play to portray black characters, themes, and conflicts in a natural and realistic way, *A Raisin in the Sun* received the New York Drama Critics Circle Award for the play best of the year. Hansberry was the youngest playwright, fifth woman, and only black writer at the time to win the award.

She used her newfound fame to help draw attention to the American civil rights movement as well as the struggles for independence from colonialism in Africa.

The Play

In *A Raisin in the Sun*, Hansberry paints an impressive Younger's portrait, a family made up of strong individuals who are in many ways still of their dreams and disappointments. Mama, the widowed mother; his daughter Beneatha, a medical student; Walter, Beneath's brother, a struggling driver; and Walter's wife, Ruth, and their young son. Stuck in a two-bedroom apartment, family dreams of better days. Walter unrealistically desires wealth and does not like to be under the management of his mother, while the intelligent and idealist Beneatha searches for her own identity and her race.

The family finally has to buy a house, but the dream hard to get rid of, like Walter's first rage at a thwarted life dreams, then the hostility of their new white neighbors, seemed threaten the safety of their families and even their self-esteem and three generations of women are represented in *A Raisin in the Sun*. Lena, in her late thirties, became the default head of household following the death of her husband, Walter Sr. Growing up in the South at a time when even blacks were in danger because of the prevalence of butchering, Lena moved north in hopes of a better life. The move to the North made sense in that she had hope for a better life for herself. Although Lena was ahead of her time in some respects, her dreams and aspirations were largely tied to her family's happiness rather than her own.

Gender as a social construction

Claudia Tate attributes Lena's low expectations of herself to gender conditioning - a term used to describe the expectation that a woman's goals and dreams are tied only to her family. Lena endured her husband's feminization and remained faithful to him even though they suffered the same poverty throughout their marriage.

Walter's wife, Ruth, is in her early thirties. She is completely different. She vocalizes her frustrations along with her spousal equivalent, Walter. Ultimately, however, she seeks to please him, talking absolutely concerning the business on his behalf, encouraging Beneatha do not antagonize her brother most, and being willing to figure many jobs so the family will afford to maneuver into the new house.

A Raisin in the Sun delineates gender relations - primarily the rise of Black feminism and the sexual revolution that would transform American lives in the 1960s. Hansberry explores issues of controversial topics such as abortion (made illegal in 1959), the value of marriage, and gender roles transitions for women and men. Each of the young people has a different attitude to changing gender roles, and the characters' perspectives shed light on their identities. Beneatha, whom Hansberry says is partly self-reliant, has the most modern views, pursues her dream of becoming a doctor (a male-dominated profession at the time) and tells her shocked mother and Ruth that She is not interested in marriage. And that she will probably never get married. Beneatha's brother, Walter Lee, repeatedly criticized his sister's ambition to become a doctor, suggesting that she just got married. Beneatha's belief in her modernized worldview highlights its unique strength, perhaps also an indirect expression of Hansberry's own views. Thus Walter and Ruth reflect gender issues:

WALTER (Frowning impatiently) Don't call it that. See there, that just goes to show you what women understand about the world. Baby, don't nothing happen for you in this world 'less you pay somebody off!

RUTH Walter, leave me alone! (She raises her head and stares at him vigorously—then says, more quietly) Eat your eggs, they gonna be cold.

WALTER (Straightening up from her and looking off) That's it. There you are. Man say to his woman: I got me a dream. His woman say: Eat your eggs. (Sadly, but gaining in power) Man say: I got to take hold of this here world, baby! And a woman will say: Eat your eggs and go to work. (Passionately now) Man say: I got to change my life, I'm choking to death, baby! And his woman say—(In utter anguish as he brings his fists down on his thighs) Your eggs is getting cold! (Act 1 Sc 1, 36 -37)

Walter attitude reveals that he has seem women as in standpoint of male centered ideology which is not allowed women as to equal and Ruth strongly opposes the patriarchal norms and quest for individual liberty which makes her stronger to achieve her dreams. Similarly in the case of Walter's Benetha who wants to be doctor and opposes conventional norms which is made by society on women folk. So he has been rejected the institution called marriage on account of her dream.

WALTER Who the hell told you you had to be a doctor? If you so crazy 'bout messing'round with sick people then go be a nurse like other women—or just get married and be quiet ...

BENEATHA Well—you finally got it said ... It took you three years but you finally got it said. Walter, give up; leave me alone it's Mama's money. (Act 1, Sce 1, 41)

Mama and Ruth attacked the traditional views on marriage and their roles as women, though both characters worked in traditional female roles as servants, one of the few jobs available to African-American women at the time. Likewise, Walter Lee has a conventional view of gender and a man's ability to perform well in a role greatly affects his self-esteem. Walter connects his own identity and values with a sense of manhood, which comes and goes throughout the play. Walter resented being a white man's private chauffeur and Mama as the head of the family. So Walter's status as a man parallels both his success as the family man and his ability to establish himself as an equal in interactions with Lindner and the others.

Afrocentrism and *A Raisin in the Sun*

Hansberry presents a powerful archetype of Afrocentrism throughout the play, unlike of her contemporaries playwrights and novelists. Afrocentrism is a set of ideas that address and celebrate the African- Americans' origins, history and character. It reflects the tradition in black thought and is linked to a specific historical and cultural context.

Afrocentrism subverts the distorted history of the colored people by the whites. The term Afro-centric was devised by Du Bois in 1960s to address the black subjects as they as are and were. In his book *Afrocentricity: The Theory of Social Change* (1980), Molefi Kete Atante proposes the idea of 'afican cultural system', is connected with afrocentrism. Atante describes

Afrocentricity becomes a revolutionary idea because it studies ideas, concepts, events, personalities, and political and economic processes from a standpoint of black people as subjects and not as objects, basing all knowledge on the authentic interrogation of location. (1)

And also he defines afrocentism is projecting the African ideals at the center of any analysis which engages African culture and behavior (5). Therefore, it is a ground-breaking idea from a standpoint of black masses.

Lorraine Hansberry grew up in a family that was cognizant of its African heritage, and embraced its roots. Lorraine's uncle, Leo Hansberry, was a academician of African history at Howard University, a widely known, traditionally black school in Washington, D.C. Hansberry's uncle really schooled Kwame Nkrumah, a revolutionary United Nations agency ,who fought for the independence of the Gold Coast from British oppressive rule. Hansberry's notion of Afrocentrism is articulated principal characters Beneatha's love for Asagai. Asagai, a Nigerian native, is United Nations agency Beneatha seeks out throughout her look for her own identity. She is raring to find out that African culture, language, music, and dress. The author is well prior to her times in her creation of those characters. Hansberry is in a position to dispel several of the myths concerning continent, and concretely depict the parallel struggles each Africans and African-Americans should face.

Beneatha cuts off her natural hair are an interesting example. In 1959, when the play was premiered, the rich variety of Afro styles introduced in the mid-60s had not yet appeared: very few black women wore very short high buns. When Diana Sands (who started the role) had her hair cut this way, however, a few days before prologue, it has not been described to suit it. Its specific facial structure needs a fuller afro, the type she does adopted in the following years.

ASAGAI (Coming to her at the mirror) I shall have to teach you how to drape it properly. (He flings the material about her for the moment and stands back to look at her) AhOh-pay-gay-day, oh-gbah-mu-shay. (A Yoruba exclamation for admiration) You wear it well ... very well ... mutilated hair and all.

BENEATHA (Turning suddenly) My hair—what's wrong with my hair?
ASAGAI (Shrugging) Were you born with it like that? **BENEATHA** (Reaching up to touch it) No ... of course not. (Act 1, Sce 2, 64-65)

Mama teaches her ancestors' characteristics to her children to instill the sense of self-respect and pride and the Youngers' family reject Karl Linder's cruel offer to buy their home back, because they realized that it will harm and dehumanize them. Thus, article has been demonstrated the gender relations among two worldviews and brings Afrocentrism to center.

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