A FEMINIST STUDY OF LORRAINE HANSBERRY'S

A RAISIN IN THE SUN

By

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ABSTRACT

*"A Raisin in the Sun" is a respo*nse to the deferred dream of the African American in a land *which their grandparents arrived by 'special invitation'. The dream of equality has been* deferred by the many issues of racism and prejudice vis-à-vis segregation, discrimination and national oppression. The American dream has eluded many Americans and some have died in the course of fulfilling this dream. This paper examines the contribution of Lorraine *Hansberry's dramatic enactment to the American dream of racial equality. The paper* employs Feminism as a theoretical framework to trace the issues raised in the play and *Hansberry's responses to them. She calls for pride in the black skin and hair. She advises* blacks to move to the white neighbourhood to solve the issue of segregation. She also advocates abortion as the solution to poverty in poverty-stricken homes. In totality, she alludes that the black struggle towards achieving the black dream must be fought as a family.

Keywords: Gender, Feminism, Race, Discrimination and Equality.

INTRODUCTION

African Americans have been segregated in their literature and history. This was in a bid to maintain white hegemony in America. They had always been portrayed by white writers and historians as sub human or another with the stereotypical character of the docile slave and later the comic servant or contented one who would have been a lost child or a dangerous savage like Friday in Robinson Crusoe. These depictions were deliberate cover ups for the many slave uprisings of the Middle Passage, the Slave Resistance and the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s. As a matter of fact, the black man in America is still going through the struggle to be free from the strangulation of the whites. We know for certain that the black man is seen as guilty before being proven to be innocent instead of being seen as innocent before being proven to be guilty. A very good example of this is George Floyd who was killed in Minneapolis on 25th May 2020 by Derek Chauvin, a white police officer. The officer had knelt on his knee for 9.30 minutes during the arrest just because he was suspected of passing a counterfeit $20 bill to a clerk.

African American women have the double tragedy of being women and black. They were relegated to the background and cheated in every way. They carried the burden of poverty and their gender around since they were the ones that bear the brunt of the society.

African American writers have tried to extricate their race from the white stereotype of them in literary works. Richard Wright

and Ralph Ellison have illustrated the problem of the colour line that makes blacks to live underground and the white domineering white religion misconstrued to make blacks the underdog. Toni Morrison represents the internalized racism that makes black feel inferior to their white counterparts in The Bluest Eye

Bringing the discourse, a long way ahead, Hansberry erases the wrong portrayal of blacks by creating realist black characters that talk and think about their problems and equally find solutions to the same. She presents her dramatic enactment as a contribution to the extrication of the black man in America. She also raises the problems of black people and goes ahead to proffer revolutionary solutions to them. She further suggests that African American women need to make better choices in the area of marriage and should not be forced into marriages as this can compound their problem. She equally introduces abortion as a measure to reduce poverty in the home. Again, she calls for pride in the African skin and hair. Above all, she calls for an end of segregation between whites and blacks in America.

LORRAINE HANSBERRY (1930-1965)

She was born into a middle-class family and was eight years old when she first experienced racism and civil rights. Her father fought against the harsh laws that kept blacks in Chicago in the slums. Her family moved into a white neighbourhood to deride the law of the time. Her house was often destroyed and she was faced with hostility going and coming back from school. Her father fought against the law to the Supreme Court and won. This inspired her to write A Raisin in the Sun.

Hansberry was at the University of Wisconsin and moved to New York in 1950. She participated in the Civil Rights Movement and married Robert Nemiroff, a white Jewish man in 1953. He was her literary executor and the producer and or adapter of several of her titles. Her play, A Raisin in the Sun (1959) made her win the 'Best Play of the Year' award of the New York Drama critics Circle. This play has been published and produced in over thirty languages worldwide and has become an American classic. The film adaptation has won the Cannes

Festival award and has been nominated as the Best Screenplay in 1974 and the musical, Raisin won the Tony Award.

FEMINISM

Gender does not have the face of a woman or a man. Gender is bisexual. It is not a product of one's biological make up but what one acquires from the society. The society has created a binary opposition among human beings and conscripted roles to these opposing beings. Someone who is born with a vagina has roles assigned by the society to her which are different from someone who is born with a penis. As these individuals grow they become aware of the limitations they have and some boundaries they should not cross. They are put into boxes, this is gender. The + penis being is called 'boy' and grows to become a 'man' while the - penis being ('a te yin to') is called 'girl' and grows to become a 'woman' and these labels assist society to identify the type, hence the role, limit and boundary. The beings are also given pronouns - she, he etc. They are talked to differently and they also learn to talk differently. They learn how to make conversations from parents and peers. The girl is told to be gentle and quiet while the boy is allowed to be rough and loud. Society assigns models to them, the first being their parents and teachers and then their friends, school mates, colleagues etc. The girl learns household chores and submission while the boy learns to interact with the outside world and aggressiveness. She is being restricted while he is given free access, she is held tight while he is set loose. Interestingly, she is given a monitor until the day she dies as a husband continues from where her parents stop. Thus, she sees the world as belonging

to the man while she is the other. Tyson 2006 asserts that:

> Patriarchy is thus by definition, sexist which means it promotes the belief that women are innately inferior to me. This belief in the inborn inferiority of women is called biological essentialism because it is based on biological differences between the sexes that are considered part of our unchanging essence as men and women…. Feminists don't deny the biological differences between men and women, in fact, many feminists celebrate those differences. But they don't agree that such differences as physical size, shape and body chemistry make men superior to women …. Feminism therefore distinguishes between the words sex which refers to our biological constitution as female or male and the word gender which refers to our cultural programming as feminine or masculine which are categories created by society rather than by nature.

Also Ashcroft (1989) concurs with Spivak (1987) that:

> Women in many societies have been relegated to the position of the 'other', marginalised and in a metaphorical sense, 'colonised', forced to pursue guerrilla warfare against imperial domination from positions deeply imbedded in, yet fundamentally alienated from that imperium. They share with colonised races and people an intimate experience of the politics of oppression and repression and like them they have been forced to articulate their experience in the language of their oppressors.

Like colonised people, women have an agenda to resist their oppression (patriarchy) in the society and this is Feminism. Feminisms are theories that are aimed at the liberation of women in the society. One feminist who has evoked the consciousness of gender to be different from sex is Simon de Beavoir, a French feminist and the gateway between First Wave Feminism, which focuses on the economic and political emancipation for the woman, and Second Wave Feminism which shifts its area of emphasis to sexual difference. Selden and Widdowson (1993) note that:

> De Beavoirs work carefully distinguishes between sex and gender, and sees an interaction between social and natural functions but without any notion of biological determinism. 'One is not born but rather becomes a woman… it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature… only the intervention of someone else can establish an individual as another.

Second Wave Feminism devoted to the freedom of women by rejecting male theories, has its face on five areas of sexual difference between men and women. They are biology, experience, discourse, the unconscious and social and economic conditions. Selden and Widdowson (1993) project thus:

> Arguments which treat biology as fundamental and which play down socialisation have been used mainly by men to keep women in their place. On the other hand, some radical feminists celebrate women 's biological attributes as sources of superiority rather than inferiority, while others appeal to the special experience of women as the source of positive female values in life and art. Since only women, the argument goes have undergone those specifically female life experiences (ovulation, menstruation, parturition), only they can speak of a woman's life. The third focus, discourse …. Dale Spender's Man-Made Language (1980) considers that women have

> been fundamentally oppressed by a male – dominated language…. Most feminists consider that women have been brain washed by this type of patriarchal ideology which produces stereotypes of strong men and feeble women. The psychoanalytic theories of Lacan and Kristeva have produced a fourth focus that of the unconscious. If there is a female principle, it is simply to remain outside the male definition of the female. As we have seen Virginia Woolf was the first woman critic to include a sociological dimension in her analysis of women's writing. Since then, Marxist feminists in particular have related changing social and economic conditions to the changing balance of power between the sexes.

If De Beavoir initiated Second Wave Feminism, Kate Millet advanced it. Her book Sexual Politics (1969) became the cause-célèbre and the monument of the movement. She argues that 'ideological indoctrination as much as economic inequality is the cause of women's oppression'.

The third wave of feminism, according to Snyder (2008) 'foregrounds personal narratives that illustrate an intersectional and multi-perspectival version of feminism'.

A RAISIN IN THE SUN

The play's title was taken from Langston Hughes's poem 'Harlem' (1951). Hansberry's reference to Hughes' poem in the title highlights the importance of dreams and the struggle that her characters face to realise their dreams, a struggle inextricably tied to the fundamental black dream of equality in America. Blacks were the most devastated group in the United States during the great depression. The end of the Harlem Renaissance was a terrible blow to the black man for the promise and hope of being recognised and accepted had died with it.

Hughes' questions what happens when a dream is not fulfilled but is rather put aside. He opines that a dream put on hold withers like a raisin in the sun. He frowns at the racist attitude in America where the black man is the last man to be hired and the first to be fired. Before the Civil Rights movement the dreams and desires of the black populace were resisted. His closing rhetorical question: or does it explode points to the fact that the suppression of black dreams might result in an eruption?

The main character in the play has a low paying job and wishes to do more for his family. Walter is a white man's chauffeur but he dreams of becoming a successful liquor store owner:

Walter: A job. Mama, a job? I open and close doors all day long. I drive a man around in his limousine and I say,' Yes sir, no sir, very good sir, Shall I take the drive, sir? Mama, that ain't no kind of job at all. Mama, I don't know if I can make you understand

Mama: Understand what baby?

Walter:(quietly) sometimes it's like I can see the future stretched out in front of me- just plain as a day. The future, mama, hanging over there at the edge of my days just waiting for me, a big looming blank space-full of nothing. Just waiting for me- a big looming blank space - full of nothing. Just waiting for me. But it don't have to be.

Another character Beneatha dreams of becoming a medical doctor. With this dream she earns Asagai's admiration and he calls her Alaiyo – one for whom bread-food-is-not- enough (an

Ambitious person) but from her brother Walter she gets sibling rivalry as they must contend for the insurance money from their father's death:

Walter: Who the hell told 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 …

Mama and her husband dream of getting a bigger house and she eventually pays for the house on Clybourne Park – a white only neighbourhood. Hansberry suggests that the solution to inequality is for blacks to move into the nice quarters that the whites have built for themselves leaving the blacks in the deteriorating parts of the city. Since their parents' dream has been achieved, the other dreams will equally be achieved. This discountenances Big Walter's statement – 'seem like God didn't see fit to give the black man nothing but dreams' Racism has become institutionalised in America. Instutionalised racism occurs when racist policies and practices are being institutionalised by the government at any level and the law is racist whether by how it is written or how it is interpreted or implemented. The police and other government bodies interpret the law racially. Blacks are treated differently from whites during arrests and prosecution. In 1954 the Supreme Court had ruled in Brown vs. Topeka Board of Education that discrimination in education was unconstitutional and the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (NAACP) had been involved in some successful lawsuits (Ploski and Williams 1989) but all these were not fertile in eradicating race prejudice. Butcher observes that:

Under different circumstances it might have been wiped out in a generation

or so, instead in some instance it actually intensified race prejudice. Racial

dogmas became chronic: they could not die a natural death with the

System that produced them… the philosophy of the colour line has had

the most serious consequences in the period from emancipation to the present.

Keeping the black man in his place was important in America and therefore there were black schools, black communities' e.t.c. This segregation was supported by the law. Hansberry's best

graphical representation of this is Lindner, the Chairman of the New Neighbours Orientation Committee cum Welcoming Committee, and the other white families in Clybourne Park who are disgusted with the information that a black family will move into their neighbourhood:

Linder: 'And at the moment the overwhelming majority of our people out there feel that people get along better, take more of a common interest in the life of a people when they share a common background. I want you to believe me when I tell you that race prejudice simply doesn't enter into it. It is a matter of the people of Clybourne Park believing rightly or wrongly, as I say that our Negro families are happier when they live in their own communities.

Lindner offers to pay the younger family off but they reject this offer which Walter later reconsiders because the insurance money has been carted away by his business associate whose job is to get a liquour license for them. He then calls Linder to negotiate the terms of agreement. However, Walter draws strength from his inner self and his philosophical flight in Act II which is spurned by Beneatha's African music and he asks: 'Do you hear the singing of the women singing the war songs of our fathers to the babies in the great houses? Singing the sweet war song! Telling us to prepare for the greatness of the time.'

It is this experience that emboldens Walter and makes him to change his position. Hansberry also advocates the celebration of the African heritage. Beneatha stops dating George who gives up his tradition and submerges himself in the racist American society. She starts dating Asagai who has an identity- 'Nigeria is my country, Yoruba is my tribal origin'. With Asagai's encouragement she finally finds her identity as she unveils her natural hair. Beneatha

wears the African attire and leaves her hair unmutilated and becomes a queen of the Nile- a woman proud of her ancestry. The afro hair styles had not arrived when the play was produced in 1959 so this was a novel idea.

The playwright also addresses feminist issues. She portrays that men and the society are biased towards the establishment of women in careers and would rather have them as domestic servants. She showcases this through Walter who is antagonist towards his sister becoming a medical doctor: 'who the hell told you, you had to be a doctor? A woman herself, she argues that the African American woman should be allowed to have dreams and not be forced into marriage thus her character Beneathea is determined to become a doctor at all cost; 'I am going to be a doctor and everybody around here better understand that!' She proposes that marriage should not be the ultimate for women but they should have career goals. She also sees abortion (which was against the law in 1959) as an alternative to women being held down by pregnancy especially in the face of acute poverty. This is portrayed through Ruth- Walter's wife who gets pregnant in the face of poverty.

SETTING AND LANGUAGE

A Raisin in the Sun is set in a segregated Chicago neighbourhood in the late 1950s when many Americas were prosperous and racial questions were raised before the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. Most of the action in this play takes place in the Youngers living room so its setting is

important. The furniture has become old and weary: 'weariness has in fact won in this room (Act I Scene I). The setting reveals the hard years of deferred dreams. Mama, Walter, his wife Ruth and son Travis and Beneathea cramp themselves into a two-bedroom apartment. Walter and Ruth share a room, Mama and Beneathea share one while Travis sleeps in the living room and they share a bathroom with the Johnsons. It is Mama's dream for her family to move into a bigger house in a white neighbourhood as that is the only nice environment available.

She employs the Black English vernacular as the language that depicts the blacks naturally e.g double negation which shows the double consciousness in African Americans. The characters use the black speech rhythm: repetition of important phrases and alternating voices, which are associated with church sermons, blues, jazz and rap music. The most audible of these is Mrs. Johnson:

Johnson: Ain't it something how bad these here white folks is getting here in Chicago? Lord, getting so you think you right down in Mississippi! Course I think it's wonderful how our folks keep on pushing out. (Act II Scene II pg 100). The playwright does some signifying on Booker T. Washington through mama:

Johnson: Well- I always think like Booker T. Washington said that time. 'Education has spoiled many a good plow hand'.

Mama: Is that what old Booker T. said?

Johnson: He sure did.

Mama: Well, it sounds just like him. The fool

Johnson: (indignantly) well, he was one of our great men.

Mama Who said so?

Agho (1998:40) asserts that Hansberry's first play could be said to be precursory to the Black Arts Movement since it was among the first works to enunciate the later refusal to accept the stereotypes and myths of another generation as well as the protesting against segregation and racial inequalities in America. She reflects an admixture of polemicism and protest, two unique signposts of the Harlem Renaissance as well as the obsessive radicalism of the black Arts Movement.

However, Agho's assessment of Walters decision not to accept Lidner's cash as due to his shedded materialism from the experience with his business associate could be faulty. His philosophical flight might be a more realist reason for overcoming the urge to accept the cash and forego moving to a bigger house on Clybourne Park.

CONCLUSION

"A Raisin in the Sun" is a revolutionary work per excellence. It brings down the wrong ethnic stereotypes by white playwrights and creates realistic portrayals of African Americans.

Hansberry's characters demystify the white man's claim to superiority by moving to Clybourne Park. She protests against segregation, racial prejudice, discrimination and drives home the point by Walters's shunning the cash that will have ensured a separate neighbourhood. She thus advocates that blacks should forcefully integrate themselves into the American society especially when they know what they want and go for it since they are equal to their white counterparts.

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