

Redefining Blacks: Reading Resistance in Lorraine Hansberry's Play *A Raisin in the Sun*

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Abstract—Postcolonial theory deals with writing by the post colonial subject as resistance to colonial subjugation and focuses on literature by the colonized peoples of the erstwhile empire which attempts to articulate their identity and reclaim their past which was lost and deliberately erased. Postcolonial theory probes the relationships between the centre and peripheries, the colonizers and the colonized.

There is an inherent connection between Post Colonial Literature and African American literature as the major focus lies in entrenching the point of view of black Americans by presenting their experiences in order to seek recognition. The essence of African American literature lies in its power to explore the dominant issues pertaining to the existence of blacks. While denouncing racial disparity and inferiority, blacks assert for their right for equality. They challenge the stereotypical negative images of blacks constructed by the white supremacy which in a way affirm the black domination and exploitation. Creating an identity of their own is in itself a matter of representation of the black heritage, culture and origin.

The terms 'Representation' and 'Resistance' are of paramount significance in African American Literature where representation is linked to the existence of the colonized ones. The concept of resistance lies at the fore front as it underpins the deep seated struggle of colonized/blacks for equality as well as acceptance. Lorraine Hansberry's plays *A Raisin in the Sun* mirrors the assertion and retaliation by the blacks against white oppressors. It reflects the culture, resilience and the day to day tribulations of these people, emphasizing on the themes of racism, slavery and struggle for equality. The play depicts the way blacks resisted the political and cultural dominance of Europeans.

Introduction

We have always been imagining ourselves. We are the subjects of our own narrative, witnesses to and participants

in our own experience, and, in no way coincidentally, in the experience of those with whom we have come in contact. We are not, in fact, "other." We are choices. (Morrison 133)

Tracing the history of racial oppression since the colonial era, particularly in the United States, racism and ethnic discrimination have been major issues, the heavy burden of

which has been borne by African Americans for a very long time. The essence of African American literature lies deep down in its power to explore and unfold the dominant themes, issues and concerns regarding the role of African American culture, racism, slavery and equality. Generally African American literature has its focus on what is the position and role of an African American within the larger frame of the society and what it means to be an American.

African American literature tried to entrench the point of view of black Americans by presenting their experiences. The writers associated with this literature have portrayed the picture of the troubled and troubling world by which they were surrounded. It was not an easy task for black writers to establish themselves and seek recognition. After a lot of struggle, they succeeded in securing a place for themselves in the field of literature. Movements like the Harlem Renaissance, the Civil Right Movement and Black Arts Movement which took place in United States played a vital role in providing recognition to the art and culture of the blacks. "The Harlem Movement is also called 'literary Garveyism'. Marcus Garvey puts his full efforts to make African Americans well aware of their African origin, something they had preferred to ignore for so long" (Berghahn 118). His main aim was to unite African peoples by making them realize that they share similar African roots, experiences and urge to obtain freedom and equality.

Lorraine Vivian Hansberry's drama powerfully reflects the predicament of black people's life. Lorraine Hansberry's was an articulate voice that stood and spoke for those who experienced pain and degradation due to racial discrimination. She took interest in still divisive social class issues faced by blacks and their struggle against racism. She developed an interest and focus on the lives, experiences and politics of black people throughout the world with a revolutionary spirit:

It is safe to say that in Hansberry's intellectual and emotional involvement in the plight of oppressed black people, this bright independent woman in a man's world began to feel acutely and empathize with the oppression of others in various

social circumstances which placed them “outside” the prevailing majority, often making them victims of sexism and bigotry. (Leeson 8)

Although Lorraine Hansberry had a sound family background but she had always realized and felt for the oppression faced by the black Americans before the civil rights legislation of the 1960s. She had always wanted to be like her other friends. “Black” was the word handwritten on Lorraine Hansberry's birth certificate on May 19, 1930 but it was only after her parents asserted the right to designate their child's racial identity on their own terms. It was part of her life to challenge the unacceptable system which is somehow reflected in the play *A Raisin in the Sun*. The play underscores how blacks express their desire to be heard, recognized and accepted in a hostile world. Hansberry further highlights how the inherent need and longing for dignity and equality has found a powerful expression in the play.

Racism and Slavery

Lorraine Hansberry has more adroitly manifested the devastating effects of slavery and racism. Although long before 1865 when the civil war ended, blacks were liberated. But they continued to suffer from the tyranny of the whites as mentality of the whites did not change. They still treated them as inferior beings. In her play *A Raisin in the Sun*, Hansberry dealt with the sufferings of an African American family. Slavery is one of the major issues in this play. She has depicted how five generations of an African American family had been serving the whites without any counteraction. They had accepted it as their malignant destiny. As Lena, the mother speaks to his son Walter Lee, “So—I come from five generations of people who was slaves and sharecroppers” (143). Three members of Younger family are leading lives of slaves. Lena and Ruth, the two females are domestic servants who look after others' children and work in others' kitchen. Walter Lee, the male character is a chauffeur. The play refers to the deprivation of blacks and their chance to minimal jobs. Due to societal prejudices, blacks were not offered good and equal status jobs but were forced into the jobs of servants. This was a major reason behind their weak economic conditions as well. The jobs that the black men were given were those of waiters, porters and chauffeurs and for the black women the jobs of cleaning, cooking, and domestic help were the only jobs. They were not satisfied with the subservient jobs they were offered but they were forced to work as slaves because this was the only way to survive as blacks were not considered capable of doing any other work. Following words by Lena Younger reflect her dissatisfaction over slavery:

MAMA: My husband always said being any kind of a servant wasn't a fit thing for a man to have to be. He always said a man's hand was made to make things, or to turn the earth with—not to drive nobody's car for em—or—carry they slop jars. And my boy is just like him—he wasn't meant to wait on nobody. (103)

Lorraine Hansberry depicts the extent of torture and hostility perpetrated on the blacks by the whites. She reveals how blacks are perpetually threatened by the whites. In *A Raisin in the Sun*, Lena Younger's neighbour Mrs. Johnson expresses her happiness at their good fortune as they were shifting to new colony, but at the same time she talks about a newspaper report according to which some whites had bombed a black family. She goes to the extent of saying that the Younger family might be the next to be named in the paper for the same reason. Lindner's words too are threatening when he has the first meeting with the Younger family in order to convince them to take the money in exchange of the the house they bought in whites' colony. He warns them and asks them to be prepared for the harsh consequences if they shift to the whites' colony.

Linder: I am sure you people must be aware of some of the incidents which have happened in various parts of the city when colored people have moved into certain areas. (116)

The play emphasizes that the blacks need to put a lot more effort to receive an equal treatment to the whites, or else they would be forced to be confined with, or satisfied with, the poor ghetto. The Whites never give them a chance to go ahead of them. Hansberry's father himself failed to move his family into the white neighbourhood due to the ingrained racism and violence, and was therefore, on the verge of taking his family to Mexico to live at the time of his death. Thus, blacks were not even allowed to buy houses of their own choice and to choose their neighbourhood according to their wishes. This fact is made clear when Lena Younger wanted her family to shift to a house which she bought with the insurance money that she received after her husband's death. This house was located in white people's colony. Lindner, a representative of white community, left no stone unturned to dissuade them from buying a house in white neighbourhood. Although he did not succeed in doing so.

Redefining Blacks

Hansberry throws light on the dignity of the blacks. Though they serve the whites, they always maintain their dignity and honour. It is discovered that the Youngers is a family with a lot of pride and dignity, who struggle and seek hope to better their position in this corrupt society. Thomas P. Alder observes, “*A Raisin in the Sun* examines the ethic that equates ‘being somebody’ with material success while urging a new generation of black men to achieve dignity by coming into their own as husbands and fathers” (qtd. in Leeson 50). This is evident in Act-I, scene-2 of *A Raisin in the Sun*, when Lena Younger speaks to her son Walter Lee as follows:

MAMA: Son- how come you talk so much about money?

WALTER: (With immense passion) Because it is life Mama!

MAMA: Oh—(very quietly) Oh—(very quietly) So now it's life. Money is life. Once upon a time freedom used to be life—now its money. I guess the world really do change...

WALTER: No—it was always money, Mama. We just didn't know about it.

MAMA: No... something has changed. (She looks at him) You something new, boy. In my time we was worried about not being lynched and getting to the North if we could and how to stay alive and still have a pinch of dignity too... (74)

Through the character of Lena Younger, Hansberry has emphasized the issue of dignity and self-assertion. She says that whites can buy blacks, make them slaves but cannot buy their self-respect and dignity; they are never that poor. According to Alvarez, "Although *A Raisin in the Sun* is occasionally "trite," it makes for an extraordinary compelling evening's theatre. Hansberry uses powerful rhetoric to explore such issues as natural dignity" (Alvarez 190). In Act-III, finally Walter maintains his honour by refusing the offer of Lindner, a representative of the Clybourne Park Improvement Association. Walter tells Lindner that the Youngers come from generations of proud people. He adds, " And we have decided to move into our house because my father—my father—he earned it for us brick by brick.... And that's all we got to say about that. We don't want your money. (148) Big Walter is represented as a symbol of pride and as a role model. At the close of Act-I, Lena states directly to his son that he is to be the man his father was.

Her play covers numerous other issues related to the dreams and aspirations of the black people. The title of the play, *A Raisin in the Sun* is taken from Langston Hughes's poem *Harlem* which is suggestive of explosive quality of the dreams nurtured by the Younger family—Walter, Mama, Ruth and Beneatha. The poem reflects the frustration and despair of the American Negro, an energy which can be turned into violence and self-destruction.

Likewise in the play, all four members of the family have their own dreams—dreams which are waiting to be fulfilled. The inability to fulfil their dreams brings desolation and frustration and poignantly brings to the fore the racial inequality in America. The Younger family's aspiration is to move out of the ghetto at all costs. In Act-I, scene-1, Lena younger tells Ruth about her and Big Walter's dreams:

MAMA: I remember just as well the day me and Big Walter moved in here. Hadn't been married but two weeks and wasn't planning on living here no more than a year.(She shakes her head at the dissolved dream) We was going to set away little by little, don't you know, and buy a little place out in Morgan Park. We had even picked out the house. (chuckling a little) Looks right dumpy today. But Lord, child, you should know all the dreams I had 'bout buying that house and fixing it up and making me a little garden in the back— (she waits and stop smiling) And didn't none of it happen. (45)

Lena Younger and Ruth share their dreams as they wanted to buy peace and happiness for their family. Beneatha wants to be a doctor because of her desire to cure people. And Walter Lee wants to be a rich man because according to him only

money can raise his status. Big Walter had also a big dream to buy a house but even after his death due to over working, his dream is not fulfilled.

Resistance and Assertion

There was a period when blacks raised their voices against persistent black inequalities. The marginalized heralded not just their resistance but also mark an assertion to represent them and prove that they are equally good as their European counterparts. Hansberry highlights the black resistance in her play *A Raisin in the Sun*. The members of the Younger family refuse to give up and defer their dreams. Instead they firmly prefer to follow their hearts and dreams. The play showcases the blacks' retaliation against oppression followed by a note of assertion. African Americans try to speak out against oppression and to create a sense of individual identity in the face of silence and absence. Retaliation and assertion remains the recurring themes in *A Raisin in the Sun*. Lena younger, Walter lee and Beneatha, all retaliate and assert in the face of oppression respectively. They reflect the tendency of assertion and stand for their rights.

In spite of so many threats younger family get from the whites, they are powerfully determined to move into the white neighbourhood. It can be related to the drama of protest and rebellion as well. Lena Youngers's decision to buy a house in an all—White neighbourhood unites the family against racism. Linder offers them money more than they payed to buy the house back from them but his offer was rejected. By refusing the insulting offer of money by Lindner, Walter Lee asserts his pride and his manhood. The resentment is culminated in retaliation and the play ends with the family moving out of the ghetto at last. William B. Collins has rightly observed that there is "something timeless about assertion of pride, about their dignity and their courage as they set out from Chicago's black ghetto for place of their own" (qtd. in Leeson 102)

Likewise, Beneatha prefers a look that represents her culture and reconciles with her identity as a black woman. Her hair is also important when it comes to her identity. In the beginning of the play her hair is straight like white women's hair, but gradually she develops interest in her culture and she decides to come closer to her culture by cutting her hair and wearing the look of traditional African American woman. She strongly believes natural is truly beautiful and black is beautiful too. This assertive step taken by Beneatha depicts that she stands by what she believes in, contradicting what the white society thinks and tries to impose. She is happy to have her own identity, to be like an African American, her ancestors, and following the traditional dressing style. It reflects her desire to assert her identity by looking back to her roots in Africa. Her love for African culture is further depicted when she shows her liking for African music and wears the African attire given by Asagai, a revolutionary, representative of Africa.. All this mirrors the deep seated connection between the Black Americans and Africans.

And at the end of the play, Beneatha's decision to marry Asagai also symbolizes her self-assertion and independence. Brenda F. Berrian observes, "Focus on the theme of interracial marriage between Beneatha and Joseph Asagai in *A Raisin in the Sun* can be viewed as a testimony of self-assertion, new freedom and a positive step towards black identity" (Berrain152-59). Beneatha's decision of choosing Asagai over George Murchison is also influenced by her love for African culture in comparison to European culture. Asagai has always acquainted Beneatha with the heritage of Africa and glorified the black culture. In contrast, George has assimilated into the white world.

Hansberry does not portray the blacks as pitiable, inarticulate and timid people, but as dignified, courageous and having a voice of their own. Protagonists in the play are depicted as strong willed and assertive. They are capable enough to create their own existence to live and grow. They have the strength of spirit, will and mind—traits which are a reflection of their own personality and not the stereotypical construction of their images by whites. Embittered by the treatment of the blacks by the whites, Hansberry's personal awareness about the conditions of the poor black people and her family's dedication and commitment towards eradication of injustice and prejudice were formulated as powerful social statements of her drama.

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