A RAISIN IN THE SUN: THE DREAM OF RECOGNITION

A RESEARCH PAPER SUBMITTED BY:
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I

Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun (1959)* appeared at the beginning of renewed political activity on the part of the blacks; it is a pamphlet about the dream of recognition of black people and the confusion of purposes and means to reach such recognition. It embodies ideas that have been uncommon on the Broadway stage in any period. Situations such as a black family moving into an all-white neighborhood were not familiar before this time; they were just beginning to emerge. In depicting this so realistically, Hansberry depends more on her personal experience as an African American embittered by social prejudices and discrimination.

Hansberry was born in Chicago, Illinois in 1930, to a middle-class black parent. When she was still a child, her father was banned from buying a house in a white neighborhood; however he sued and pursued the case all the way to the Supreme Court, which ruled in his favor. Lorraine attended the University of Wisconsin as an undergraduate. After college she pursued a career as a painter studying at the Art Institute of Chicago and in Mexico before she decided to move to New York to pursue her interest in writing. There she wrote for *Freedom*, a magazine founded by Paul Robeson, the singer-actor who turned into a political activist. *A Raisin in the Sun*, her first play, was the first play written by an African-American woman to be performed on Broadway. She wrote other plays before she passed away in 1965 after a fight with cancer; however neither of them was as popular as *Raisin*[1].

In 1959, when she was only twenty-nine years old, she was the most promising woman writing for the American stage. She was also the first black American to win the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award

for the best play in the year. When *Raisin* was first produced it was somehow prophetic. The themes of the blacks seeking legitimate recognition and expressing awareness and curiosity of their African heritage were to become major themes of black culture in the 1960s and 1970s and, of course, up to our days. Hansberry could never detach herself of the atmosphere she was living in and the gender she was representing. It would have been impossible for a person of her background and sensitivity to separate herself from the crucial social and political events of the 1950s and 1960s.This era witnessed the rising demands of the blacks for civil rights at home, and the growing obstinacy of the colonized people throughout the world. Hansberry's revulsion of narrowness led her to examine the concealed association between racism and sexism long before it was popular to do so and led her also to apprehend the different dimensions of colonialism and oppression. Long before the women's movement of the 1970s, she was already conscious of the many faces of oppression that women all over the world had to deal with and the peculiar damage women of color had to endure.

This recognition of the tension implied in her blackness and femaleness has formed her philosophical journey from the South Side of Chicago to the world community:

> I was born on the South Side of Chicago. I was born black and a female. I was born in a depression after one world war, and came into my adolescence during another. While I was still in my teens the first atom bombs were dropped on human beings at Nagasaki and Hiroshima. And by the time I was twenty-three years old my government and that of the Soviet Union had entered actively into the worst conflict of nerves in human history the – Cold War.
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> ……. I say all of this to say that one cannot live with sighted eyes and feeling heart and not know and react to the miseries which afflicted this world.[2]

The black artist, though an American citizen, is isolated from most of his white countrymen therefore at the crucial hour he can hardly look to his peer artists for help for they do not know much about him to be

able to correct him. Lorraine worked under the pressure of realizing this reality and she produced most of her works as a refusal to be destroyed by it. She had experienced this isolation early in her life and she was determent to escape it:

> I was given, during my grade school years, one half the amount of education prescribed by the Board of Education of my city. This was so because the children of the Chicago ghetto were jammed into *a segregated school system*. I am the product of that system….
> This is what is meant when we speak of the scars, the marks that the ghettoized child carries through life. To be imprisoned in the ghetto is to be forgotten —or deliberately cheated of one's birthright —at best.[3]

Lorraine, as well as her family, fought this sense of segregation in the American society. Her father spent a great deal of money and effort trying to do so; he moved his family into a restricted area where no Negroes were supposed to live and proceeded to fight the case in the courts. However, they were still subject to racist comments and threats by racist mobs. As for Lorraine, she used her talent as a writer to express her refusal and defiance toward such social system and the best example is her *Raisin* which became an American classic that had been published and produced in some thirty languages abroad and in thousands of productions across the country. She also wrote reviews about local theatre productions and wrote about literature, art, and politics. To honor this great writer, the government of the United States established the "Lorraine Hansberry Theatre" in 1981 and took great pride in embracing all races, creeds, and colors. When Lorraine died in 1965, she left a legacy of a few powerful works for the younger generations to contemplate.[4]

II

Hansberry was moved by Langston Hughes' poem "A Dream Deferred" (1951), from which the final title of the play derives, and tried to examine through *Raisin* the sensitive question of aspiring to a white middle-class way of life on the part of the blacks while they are trying to liberate themselves from the constraints of discrimination. She wanted to see what would happen to that dream of recognition–"what happens to a dream deferred? /Does it dry up/ Like a raisin in the sun? /…Or does it explode?"* In addition, she explores the importance of African roots, the traditional versus pioneering women, the real value of money, and the search for human dignity. The play on a more complicated level is elevated into a universal demonstration of all men's hopes and dreams for recognition.[5]

A Raisin in the Sun evolves around the black Younger family and its members' ambition for recognition in this world. In a way it represents the American dream of the individual's capacity to buy his own house and earn his space of privacy to live with dignity and become something important in this world through working hard, saving money, and holding the proper values and hopes. Although the presence of the whites is represented only through the character of Mr. Lindner, the Younger family needs are looked at as paralleled with those of the white families. The needs of the Youngers are not as materialistic as they seem to be; they are rather moral, it is the need to be recognized not only among their own people but among the whites' community as well.

*Langston Hughes, "A Dream Deferred" (lines 1-10)

As the play opens, the tired thirty- years old Ruth Younger is preparing breakfast in the overcrowded south Side Chicago apartment that she has to share with her husband, Walter Lee, thirty-four, her son Travis, her edgy sister-in-law Beneatha, twenty, and her controlling mother-in-law Lena, sixty, whom everyone calls Mama. Lena's husband is dead; however he remains an important moral force in the family. One by one the members of the family stumble sleepily into the kitchen,

which also serves as the living room and Travis's bedroom, to resume a discussion which has apparently started last night. The ten thousand dollars check from "Big Walter's" life- insurance policy is supposed to arrive today and everyone has a plan about how to use it. Walter wants the money to enter business by becoming a partner in a liquor store; Beneatha wants to develop her intellect and be of service to humanity by practicing medicine; Ruth wants a better life for her son in a decent home and neighborhood; and Lena wants to save her family from the dissolution threatened by the social and economic pressures embittering the whole family. Their dreams about the money's uses represent black America's dreams that have been systematically suppressed by white racism.[6]

Act one displays the main tensions of the play; Lena, the symbol of the old world, clashes with Beneatha and Walter, the representatives of the new ideas and new generation. Walter and Ruth seem to have a troubled marriage due to their living conditions and their different attitudes toward their life together. The old world of Lena and the new world of Beneatha are separated by more than forty years of social and political change. The old world looks inward to the kitchen, the family, the home; the new world gazes outward at college, medical school, and Africa. Those two different worlds cannot always live together peacefully, they often clash and even sometimes so violently. Lena personifies traditional blacks who find fulfillment and strength in God. However, Beneatha cannot find such confidence and comfort in God; she believes instead that man deserves a credit for what he is capable of doing. When Lena assures her that she will be a doctor "God willing", she protests saying:

> God hasn't got a thing to do with it. …God is just one idea I don't accept. …I get tired of Him getting credit for all the things human race achieves through its own stubborn efforts. There simply is no God–there is only man and it is he who makes miracles.[7]

The traditional Mama slaps her progressive daughter and forces her to repeat after her: "In my mother's house there still God" (I, i, 418). Although Beneatha and Mama seems to be at odds most of the time, the former is patient with the latter's conservative views. She

believes that the blacks can improve themselves and society only through education, professions, social and political action and through a proud awareness of their African heritage.

Having grown up in the racist South, Lena is moderately content to live simply in Chicago where she and her family can survive decently and with dignity. She is disturbed by the idea of Walter investing the insurance money in a liquor store. She is deeply religious therefore she cannot shake her fundamental belief that alcohol is evil. Early in the play she cannot understand Walter's frustration over his "invisibility" in the whites' society. He wants to be noticed not only among his black fellowmen but in the white world too. Walter's dissatisfaction over his social position is demonstrated well enough to Ruth:

> Man say to his woman: I got me a dream. His woman say: eat your eggs. … Man say: I got to change my life, I'm chocking to death, baby! And his woman say– your eggs is getting cold. (I, i, 409)

Ruth is more realistic than he is; she works as a maid for a white family to support their living and she has no dreams of becoming their equals. She thinks of the well-being of her husband and son, therefore she does not want to add another member to the already embittered family and considers abortion as an alternative. Although she and Lena seem to be at odds, they represent the moderate line of the family in the face of Beneatha's idealism and Walter's excessive dream of money, business and social position.

The mail comes with the anticipated insurance check and everyone is happy, however Mama is strangely not. She tells Ruth that abortion is out of question and makes it clear to Walter that investing the money in a liquor store will not happen. He mocks his life and his menial job, saying he must make some money and make something of his life or he will have no self respect at all. For him Money, not Freedom, is life. Mama ends this Act by stating that she no longer understands her children and their values.

Act II explodes into a ceremonial African dance with Beneatha dressed in Nigerian robes, and is dancing to a lovely melody. She is filled with dreams of Africa implanted by Joseph Asagai, her young intellectual boyfriend. Meanwhile Walter is drunk and crying at the kitchen table. The confusion of purposes experienced by the young generation is well demonstrated by Lena who recalls back how Big Walter used to say to her: "Seem like God didn't see fit to give the black man nothing but dreams" (I, i, 415). He struggled hard to maintain his insurance payments perhaps because he has understood well enough that he cannot have a decent house, job or life for himself and his wife Lena; yet he wants all these things for his children, Walter and Beneatha and his grandson, Travis.

Unfortunately, the money will not stretch enough to fulfill all the dreams of the family, therefore Mama has to make the decision to buy a house for the family to save it from the terrible conditions they are experiencing. The traditional Mama is aware of the predicament her children are going through and thought that having them living in a decent home will help in realizing their aspirations. Ruth is as pleased as Walter is stunned as Mama describes the attractive comfortable house she bought with the insurance money. They are all, however, shocked when she mentions the address where the house is located; it is in an all white neighborhood. She explains to her displeased son that she has to do so to save the family from falling apart. She seeks affirmation from her son who says:

> You the head of this family. You run our lives like you want to. …So what you need for me to say it was all right for?... So you butchered up a dream of mine-you-who always talking 'bout your children's dreams(II,i,404)

Although Walter's plan for entering business and breaking the cycle of poverty is problematic to his mother, it demonstrates his desire to be recognized not only among his fellowmen but among the whites too. He is struggling to break the constraints that his race has shackled him up with. Mama recognizes the poverty enveloping her family; however she cannot envision a different existence. She is wise enough to

realize the limitations imposed by the white oppression; she has no dreams of being recognized in the whites' world. She is a proud black woman who believes in the strength of her race through the commitment to the family and God.[8] She has seen so many Southern black men frustrated by their "invisibility" in a white society and by their "inability" to succeed because of racial prejudice. She explains early in the play to Ruth: "we ain't no business people, Ruth. We just plain working folks."(I, i, 413) At the same time she takes pride in Beneatha's plans for medical school because she is convinced that doctors, teachers and preachers make the world a better place.

Despite her determination and power as the head of the family, she is still a mother with a kind heart. At the beginning of the play she is a figure with unchallenged authority, but she has seen that her decision to manage the insurance money drives her son to a life of alcohol addiction and to lose his job as a chauffer. She realizes that her son is moving down the same path her late husband has taken in his reliance on drinking to escape. Therefore, she decides to give Walter some space to achieve what he is dreaming of. She gives him what is left of that money to put three thousand dollars in a saving account for Beneatha's medical education and keep what remains for his own. He may do whatever he wishes with his share. She tells him to "be the head of the family from now on like you supposed to be" (II, ii, 443).

Walter is amazed at his mother's trust and love nonetheless he defies her wishes and gives all the money to his black fellowman Willy Harris who first proposed the liquor business. He wants to make fast profit to get the recognition he has been dreaming of all his life however he does not have the necessary skills to do so. While the family is preparing to move out of their small apartment, a representative of the white world comes to convince the Younger not to move to his neighborhood and offers a substantial payoff. Mr. Karl Lindner says: "a man, right or wrong, has the right to want the neighborhood he lives in a certain kind of way" (II, iii, 449) He gives himself and the race he represents the right to practice certain authority and to decide how other people live but denies this same right for the blacks. Walter as the head of the family orders him out demonstrating his power and dignity for the first time. However this moment of human triumph does not last too long

for him; he learns later that the money which is supposed to earn him the social status he is aspiring to is gone; Willy takes the money and leaves town for good. He is devastated to hear the news and wonders aimlessly thinking of his lost dream and the disappointment he has caused to his family. Lena, the firm believer, asks God in the final moments of Act II to give her strength to keep her family united.

The family is shocked and shattered; their dreams are vanishing in front of their eyes because of Walter's irresponsible act. Lena, the mother, although disappointed and sad, feels some sympathy towards her son. She understands why he has done this and tells her angry daughter that he needs love now more than ever:

> Child when do you think it is time to love somebody the most, when they done good and made things easy for everybody?... when you start measuring somebody. Measure him right, child, Measure him right. Make sure you done take into account what hills and valleys he come through before he got to wherever he is. (III, i, 125)

She believes in the basic goodness of her son, therefore when Walter phones Lindner with the determination to accept his humiliating offer; she insists that Travis remains in the same room to witness his father's demeanor at this crucial moment of his development. She knows that Walter, who so loved "Big Walter", cannot disgrace himself before his own son. Shifting from one foot to another, looking down at his shoes, Walter finally stands up straight to deliver one of the most moving speeches of the play:

> … we come from people who had a lot of pride… we are very proud people. And that's my sister over there and she's going to be a doctor… this is my son, who makes the sixth generation of our family in this country[starting to cry and facing the man eye to eye]… we have all thought about your offer and we have decide to move into our house because my father—my father—he earned it. We don't want to make no trouble for nobody or fight no causes—but we will try to be good neighbors. (III, i, 466)

Walter has delved into his soul and mind the strength of his African past, the six generations of his family in America, and his father. Lena is convinced that he finally comes to his maturity; he understands that

money is not everything and that living with pride is what makes a human being distinguished in his world. And with Walter making his first step toward being a man, *black* man, the play ends.

Act III raises an important question concerning the persistence of the Younger family to move into an all-white neighborhood; why they would persist in moving into a neighborhood where they are not wanted, where they may be subjected to harassment or even physical violence? Julius Lester states that they insist, as all blacks do, not because it is any great honor to live among the whites, but because one cannot consider himself a human being unless he rises above all the restrictions imposed on him by others, especially if those restrictions are based on race or color.[9] If Walter had accepted the money, he would have been implying that Mr. Lindner is right; black people do not have the right to live where they can afford to. But Walter says in a tone of a black man still close to his roots that they are moving to their new house because "my father—my father—he earned it." Hence Act III becomes a reaffirmation of the human spirit as Walter comes to realize his dignity and manhood, Ruth decides to keep her child, Beneatha gains in understanding and tolerance, and Walter and Ruth get back the sweetness of their marriage. The ending is not blindly happy because the place they are moving to is potentially violent, but the Youngers are once again a family— a family that symbolizes some of the aspirations of black Americans.

III

Hansberry in *Raisin* celebrates the triumph of human spirit eventually; she is more optimistic in *Raisin* than Hughes. She believes in the necessity of struggle no matter what the results will be. The title of the play suggests the reality and the universality of man's search for dignity and self-respect; therefore, it would be unjust to read the play only as a plea for racial tolerance or a story of a man prevailing over a hostile society. It goes farther to universalize a family and its hopes and dreams of recognition.[10]

The Youngers' dream neither dries up nor explodes; instead it takes forms that were widely accepted by the American society of 1959. The tangible achievement of the Youngers, buying a house in the suburbs, is part of the American dream. But the more important part of the dream is Freedom for the

individual and for the family. The Youngers are indeed a 'young' family because they are beginning to grow spiritually and socially. To a varying extent, each of the Youngers changes in the course of the play, thus beginning the painful, yet creative act of examination– of heritage, of values of self. Lena who has been at the very beginning a figure of unchallenged authority gains understanding of her children's aspirations and desire to be noticed thus she is content to relinquish some of her authority to her son and be open to accept the role of
the new intellectual woman as represented by Beneatha. Ruth, the practical weary housewife, who appears at the beginning struggling to offer her family a decent living, fails to communicate with Walter because she does not understand nor appreciate his dreams. Later, she begins to apprehend that he wants to be something in the world not only for his own sake but for his son and for her and therefore experiences a kind of a rebirth of marriage. Walter, feels powerless in his family, before Mama gives him control of the legacy, and consequently feels impotent within the black community. After investing all the family money and losing it, he comes to understand that being a human with dignity is the only thing which makes him distinguished and well-respected in his family and community.

The Youngers in their new neighborhood may have to face some violent acts from their white neighbors, but they will withstand the attack together, and as they begin to take pride in being young, gifted and black, their neighbors may relent and accord them the respect they deserve.

Notes

1. Lee A. Jacobus, ed., *The Bedford Introduction to Drama,* (Boston: Bedford Books of ST. Martin's Press, 1993) p.1106.

2. Margaret B. Wilkerson, "Hansberry's Awareness of Culture and Gender" ,Frank Madden, *Exploring Literature*(U.S.A.: Addison-Wesley Education Publishers Inc., 2001) p. 485

3. Howard Nemiroff "Lorraine Hansberry In Her Own Words", Frank Madden, *Exploring Literature* (U.S.A.: Addison-Wesley Education Publishers Inc., 2001) pp.469.

4. Anne Cheney, *Lorraine Hansberry* (Boston:Twayne Publishers. 2000) p.66.

5. Steven R. Carter, *Hasnberry's Drama: Commitment Amid Complexity* (University of Illinois Press: Chicago, 1991) p.19.

6. John M. Hanna "Signifying Raisin: Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* and Wilson's *Fences",* ed., Carlyle V. Thompson, *African American Literature and Culture.*(New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 2007) p.157.

7. Frank Madden, *Exploring Literature* (U.S.A. : Addison-Wesley Education Publishers Inc., 2001) p. 418. All subsequent references to the play are from this edition.

8. Carter, *Hasnberry's Drama: Commitment Amid Complexity,* p.23

9. Julius Lester, "The Heroic Dimension in *A Raisin in the Sun*", Frank Madden, *Exploring Literature* (U.S.A.: Addison-Wesley Education Publishers Inc., 2001) p.479.

10. Richard M. Leeson, *Loraine Hansberry: A Research and Production Sourcebook* (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1997) p.28

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