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THE STRUGGLE FOR RACIAL IDENTITY IN LORRAINE HANSBERRY'S *A RAISIN IN THE SUN*

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Abstract

Lorraine Vivian Hansberry was a playwright and writer. Much of her works concerned with the African struggles for liberation and their impact on the world, but her writings also reflect on her lesbianism and the oppressions of homosexuality. Lorraine Hansberry play *Raisin in the Sun* is of great historical significance because it is regarded as being one of the most important plays that we can think of when we are discussing about the civil rights movement in America. It is the first Afro-American play that was produced on Broadway in 1959 and won the best American play award from the New York drama critic's circle. The present paper attempts to highlights various social themes that are prevalent during 50s America through the selected play.

Keywords: Social Drama, Identity, Symbolisim, American Dream, Racism

Introduction

Lorraine Hansberry, (born on May19, 1930 in Chicago's Southside and died January 12, 1965, New York) American playwright whose first play, *A Raisin in the Sun*, was produced in 1959 was the first drama by an African American woman to be produced on Broadway. As a social drama it touches on many burning issues of the time hitherto not treated in drama. The drama became so popular that it ran continuously for nine months on Broadway and, Hansberry also wrote screenplay for it. Her second play *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window* dealt with social issues like prejudices against Jews, homosexuals in contemporary world etc. Social drama very often revolves around particular social theme whereas in this case social issue which is being dealt with is demand for civil rights on the part

of Afro-American. Thus, plays, novels, short stories, essays that are written on social issues tend to have simple emotional energy but Hansberry in her work has complicated it; not only is the play about a demand for civil rights but she has also added other important layers to it. Therefore, *A Raisin in the Sun* does not merely represent a play about the Afro-American in the 50s America but also about various other things: "it becomes about family, personal ambition, relationships inside and outside the family".

Features of Lorraine Hansberry's drama:

- In almost all the works of Hansberry we find the need for understanding each other. According to her it is the lack of understanding that sows the seeds of separation.

- Behind the façade of militant agitation that revolves through her plays, Hansberry evinced genuine artistic talent by overcoming the simple emotional possibilities of social drama.
- Hansberry characters do not live in isolation but form a part of the whole process where things have fallen apart.

Afro-American drama made its presence felt with the start of what were called 'revues', a form of theatrical entertainment that includes music and dance. From the 1920s the lives of black people were articulated by white authors such as Eugene O'Neill, Paul Greene. During the 1940s, the establishment of American Negro Theatre gave a solid foundation for the efflorescence of theatre. 1960s was a time of great social and cultural upheaval. The optimistic image of America as "the leader of the free world" received a blow. J.F. Kennedy encouraged Civil Rights and Black Power movements. At that time also emerged the heroism of Martin Luther king with his credo of non-violence which inspired black men and women. During such a crucial phase in the history of America appeared *A Raisin in the Sun* in 1959. It became a cultural response to the hard time.

The play revolves around the life of a working class black family living in Chicago's Southside in the 1950s. It focuses on the Younger family who live from hand to mouth that is they are economically disadvantaged. The family is excited about how they will spend a thousand dollar insurance cheque that it has got after its patriarch's death. And, now the real tension in the family starts because everybody has their own ideas as to how the money should be spent because each member of the family has a dream of his own about spending the amount and they fail to come to a unanimous decision as to exactly how the money would be spent. Right at the top of the family mother Lina younger who is referred to as mama. His mother opposes the plan. She wants to buy a house that has been her lifelong dream. Ruth, Walter's wife is at loss as she gets pregnant and fears that a new member might exacerbate the problems of family. Much against her own wish, she wants abortion. Beneatha, Walter's sister, aspires to be a doctor and wants to use the

money for that purpose. Ruth requests Lena to give some portion of the money to Walter. However, she refuses and instead puts a down payment on a house. On learning that Walter is very upset, Ruth yields and tells him that he can take the rest of the money and lay by something for Beneatha's education. Soon, things take a different turn when the family is visited by a guest, Karl Lindner who offers the Younger family a huge amount of money to buy the house as Lena has bought the house at a place where Afro-Americans are not wanted. This is the first instance where we come across the racial divide that is present in 50s America; as this is a house that they had bought in a neighborhood where they are very happy but unfortunately the neighbours do not want a black family to live on that particular street. Another shock comes to the Younger family when they learn that the money Walter invested has been stolen. This puts the family under serious pressure. Extreme poverty almost drives Walter to accept Lindner's offer and get out of the difficult situation. However, Walter overcomes this tragedy with resilience in the teeth of great difficulty and eschews misplaced values only to learn new identity and courage.

"So, we are looking at the way in which the Younger family has resisted the tremendous attraction of money and they have stood by their own beliefs".

Significance of the Title

Hansberry takes her cue for the play's title from a poem by Langston Hughes entitled 'Harlem: What happens to a dream deferred?' The dream motif which is central to the play is highlighted by the title. Hansberry, a black American herself, tries to project through the play the dormant dream that needs to be fulfilled to nullify black/white binary. So, she basically talks about the society where the separation on the basis of race, gender or on the basis of skin colour would not be prevalent anymore. But, race is not the only issue in the play there is substantial representation of the gender issue that is "how do the women operate in the play and indeed how do the male operate in the play".

Gender Issues in the play

Mama illustrates the stereotypes of the black matriarch who usually considers the black male as undependable and gave importance to the idea of motherhood. She would protect her children despite against all odds while Ruth and Beneatha represent modern new women who do not suppress their emotions for the sake of others. They are more vocal than Lena in articulating their dreams. While Walter Lee objects to Beneatha's education as it would put more burden on the family's financial condition, still she does not give up on her dream. She is bold enough to challenge her brother in achieving of her dream.

Concept of American Dream

American Dream is an important concept. In 1931, the term "American Dream" was coined by James Truslow Adams, saying that "life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement" regardless of social class or circumstances of birth. This dream drives its origin, perhaps, from Jefferson's Declaration of Independence: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness". To put it simple, this notion of American dream posits that every single human being irrespective of their origin is capable of rising from rags to riches by dint of hard work, perseverance and uprightness. However, 20th century writers hold a contrary notion towards this dream. Time and again they have showed through their literary works that dream and reality are at loggerheads. Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* also gives a severe jolt to the validity of the Great American Dream. Through the plight of the Younger family during the 1950s, Hansberry narrates the ethos of the tumultuous era crisscrossed by nefarious evils of labour problems and housing discriminations. Hansberry, infused with humane sensibility, tries to come to grips with the harsh reality and promotes group solidarity. The housing discrimination in the North illustrates a harsh commentary on the great American dream.

Use of Symbolism

Symbols are objects that stand for something else. In drama the employment of symbols enhances the theme and covers the central issue with the resplendence of imaginative insight. A key symbol in the play is Mama's plant. It symbolizes Mama's own existence and her dream. From the beginning of the play we are aware of the presence of the plant. Mama's act of taking care of the plant is indicative of her act of taking care of the welfare of her children. Money is another important symbol. It stands for the corrupted version of the original American dream. Walter Lee is a victim of this materialistic world. For him money can do anything. At the end he realizes that money is not enough to help him get over the existential crisis. His decision of rejecting the financial offer of Lindner asserts that he has overcome the love of money and eked out selfhood.

Search for Identity

Search for identity is one of the central themes in Afro-American literature. The crisis of identity of the black man buffeted by the supremacy of white society drives him into the zones of minimality and non-existence. Racial complexity haunts the blacks so much so that it almost pushes them to the brink of psychosis. Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* shines a light on this issue through the story of the Younger family. Identity formation is a continuous process which is also constructed by societal norms. Hansberry writes drama with apolitical propaganda to show the way out of the impasse. In play the search for self is mostly indicated by the character of Walter Lee. In the beginning, we find that he has internalized the racism prevalent then and scorns himself. He has a distorted dream that parallels money with success and considers mammon worship as the sole motto of life.

Conclusion

To summarize, it can be said that the play focuses on the everyday realities of economic hardship and racial prejudice. Even at the end of the play, when the Younger family finally gets the opportunity to move into the new house in a good neighborhood, still family's future remains

uncertain. Thus, the play indirectly focuses on the question which is there in the Langston Hughes poem from which Hansberry took her title: "What happens to a dream deferred? / Does it dry up / Like a raisin in the sun?"

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