



Black women's quest for identity: A critical Study of Lorraine Hansberry's play *A Raisin in the Sun*

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Received: 09 Jan 2023; Received in revised form: 05 Feb 2023; Accepted: 12 Feb 2023; Available online: 17 Feb 2023
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Abstract— Tracing the history of black feminism, it becomes evident that the social construction of racism, sexism and classism was the driving force behind the widespread violence and discrimination against black women. They are found searching and struggling to attain their identity in this patriarchal world. Black feminist thought leads to certain ideas that clarify a standpoint of and for black women. Black feminist perspectives focus on the social domination on the basis of gender, race and class oppression. These oppressions are densely interwoven into social structures and work collectively to define the history of the lives of Black women in America and other coloured women worldwide. It takes us back to the era of United States slavery during which period, a societal hierarchy was established, according to which White men were supposed to be at the top, White women next, followed by Black men and finally, at the bottom were placed Black women. Black feminists were critical of the view that suggests that black women must identify as either black or women. The present paper looks at Lorraine Hansberry's play *A Raisin in the Sun* from a black feminist viewpoint. It discusses position of a woman in male dominated society and her struggle for identity. It unfolds the saga of suffering and silencing of a black woman, which pervades the black women writings. It is depicted that black women have to face the unique challenging task of fighting for black liberation and gender equality simultaneously. The play effectively unthreads the history of African American women's lives and their quest for identity in African American society. Issues of masculinity and femininity are deeply woven in this play. Women in this play present a microcosm of society; they are treated as second class citizens in society. Hansberry has depicted through her play the superiority that men pose over women. The glimpse of patriarchal dominance is visible throughout the play through different male characters. It further focuses on the value of the individual women's identity and women's right and freedom to construct their own separate identities rather than having them imposed against their wishes. It delineates how African American Women try to speak out against oppression and create a sense of individual identity in the face of silence and absence.

Keywords— *Black feminism, Identity, Sexism, Racism.*

African-American women writers occupy a central and abiding place in the African-American literature. They had been a great strength in the development of this literature. They grew exponentially as far as their contribution is concerned. Their concentration was not confined to only the issues of racism but color, roots, man-woman relationships, identity, women's roles and representations and sexism. The theme of suffering and silencing of a woman, 'the triple burden' is a general theme which

pervades the black women writings. It is depicted that black women have to face the unique challenging task of fighting for black liberation and gender equality simultaneously. One of the biggest hurdles in the way of African-American women writers was the triple burden of class, gender and race. As Lorraine Bethel comments:

The codification of blackness and femaleness by whites and males is seen in terms of

thinking like a women and acting like a nigger which are based on the premise that these are typically black and female ways of acting and thinking. Therefore, the most pejorative concept in the white/ male world view would be that of thinking and acting like a nigger women. (qtd. in Wisker 37)

African American women writers concentrate on Black feminist thought that leads to certain ideas that clarify a standpoint of and for black women. Black feminist perspectives focus on the social domination on the basis of gender, race and class oppression. These oppressions are densely interwoven into social structures and work collectively to define the history of the lives of Black women in America and other coloured women worldwide. It unfolds the fact that the structure of gender, class and race oppression has become a huge hurdle in the growth of black women's self-identity. It takes us back to the era of United States slavery during which period, a societal hierarchy was established, according to which White men were supposed to be at the top, white women next, followed by Black men and finally, at the bottom were placed Black women. Black feminists were critical of the view that suggests that black women must identify as either black or women.

Identity is a major issue in Black women's writing. Lorraine Hansberry effectively frames the quest for identity of black women in African American society. She focuses on the value of the individual women's identity and women's right and freedom to construct their own separate identities rather than having them imposed against their wishes. African American Women try to speak out against oppression and to create a sense of individual identity in the face of silence and absence. "All three women, while nurturing different dreams, exhibit strength of spirit, will, and mind. Through them, Hansberry refutes the view of women as lesser beings, properly subject to the will of men"(Wiener 96). Maya Angelou writes about and for women of all colours and in particular, for the ignored Black women who need a voice:

So many young Black women are not spoken to by white women. Are not spoken to by Black men. Are not spoken to by white men. And if we don't speak to here will be no voice reaching their ears or their hearts. (qtd. in Wisker 49)

Lorraine Hansberry not merely engages her audience with perspectives on racial prejudice but sexism and classism as well. "Hansberry's writings anticipate the women's liberation movement that came to the forefront in America shortly after her death. She wrote a play that celebrated feminism before it had a name" (Wiener 11). Ruth and Beneatha in *A Raisin in the Sun* exemplify Hansberry's concern with feminist issues. In this play, Lorraine Hansberry clearly espouses the feminist themes. Hansberry observed in an interview with the well-known social historian Studs Terkel in 1959, "Obviously the most oppressed group of any oppressed group will be its women, who are twice oppressed" (qtd. in Wiener 11). This double oppression is reflected in *A Raisin in the Sun* through the two women characters in the play, Ruth and Beneatha. Two of them are vastly different from one another but both are courageous and revolutionary women who struggle for the betterment of their family. Ruth works as a domestic for white families and seeks a way to abort her baby for her family's better future. She is constantly dominated by her husband Walter. And Beneatha endures sexism of her conservative boyfriend, her African mentor and her own selfish and dominating brother.

In an article titled "The Complex of Womanhood," Hansberry's most direct feminist statement, she draws attention to the realities underlying stereotypical images of black women:

...On the one hand...she is saluted as a monument of endurance and fortitude, and in whose bosom all comforts reside...and, at the same time, another legend of the Negro woman describes the most...deprecating creature ever placed on earth to plague... the male. She is seen as an over-practical, unreasonable source of the destruction of all vision and totally lacking a sense of the proper "place" of womanhood. Either image taken alone is romance; put together they embrace some truths and present the complex of womanhood which... now awakens to find itself inextricably... bound to the world's most insurgent elements... in the United States, a seamstress refuses one day, simply refuses, to move from her

chosen place on a bus while an equally remarkable sister of hers ushers children past bayonets in Little Rock. It is indeed a single march, a unified destiny and the prize is the future.... On behalf of an ailing world which surely needs our defiance, may we, as Negroes or women never accept the notion of "our place" (qtd. in Friedman 77).

In *A Raisin in the Sun*, Lorraine raises the issue of understanding the oppressive lives of African American women who are not shaped by racism alone but also by the sexist and class biases. She underscores the sad plight of black women's lives who struggle hard to resist the male and white oppression. She was ahead of her time in her attitudes towards masculinity and femininity. As bell hooks writes, "Looking at the world from a standpoint that recognized the interconnectedness of race, sex, and class, she challenged everyone who encountered her work" (qtd. in Wiener 13). This is clear from the portrayal of the character of Ruth, wife of Walter Lee. She faces racism as she has to work for whites. Secondly, she is dominated by her husband on the basis of her gender throughout the play. And thirdly, she suffers because of her poverty. Hansberry presents the black domestic who must clean the kitchens of white women as well as her own. At the same time, she is expected to fortify the male ego which has been dismayed by racism and poverty. Thus a black woman is triply marginalized and her self-identity is somewhere lost. The play underpins the predicaments of a black woman and explains that black women in contrast to white women suffer more. In addition to their suppression in terms of gender and class, they have to face so many problems due to race as well.

Hansberry deals with both race and gender in *A Raisin in the Sun*. Margaret B. Wilkerson has called her "the complete Feminist, for she sought to address both race and gender within a social context" (qtd. in Beaulieu 417). Issues of masculinity and femininity are deeply woven in this play. It sheds light on the culture of comparing a female identity with a male identity. The glimpse of patriarchal dominance is visible throughout the play through different male characters. Women in this play present a microcosm of society, they are treated as second class citizens in society. In traditional societies, the male member of the family is considered as a dominant force and the only strength of the family. The relationship between Walter and Beneatha, as brother and sister and the relationship between Walter and Ruth, as husband and wife depict the superiority that men poses over women.

Women are shown as inferior to men in all aspects and are treated as subordinates. The harangues of Walter in the play are evidence of sexism. In the very beginning of the play, in Act-I, Scene One, Walter says to his wife Ruth:

Walter: First thing a man ought to learn in life is not to make love to no colored woman first thing in the morning. You all some eeeevil people at eight o'clock in the morning. (27)

He adds:

That is just what is wrong with the colored women in this world...Don't understand about building their men up and making 'em feel like they somebody. Like they can do something. (34)

Walter wants that woman in his life should support him, obey him and make him feel like a man who has a freedom to live the life in his own way and to act according to his judgment. According to Walter, men are naturally inclined to dominate women. The social division places black women in a very low position. Walter comments that black women are the world's most backward race of the people. He keeps on making blanket statements on black women. He thinks that women's profound influence on family decisions is an assault on his manhood. He considers women's strength as his weakness. Ruth is always subordinate to him. Walter is a very domineering husband and he does not value her decisions as he believes that a woman has no right to decide anything on her own. This is made clear with his sexist remark "We one group of men tied to a race of women with small minds" (35). And when Ruth refuses to give money to Travis, Walter scolds her and fulfils Travis's demand by giving him the money against his wife's wishes. Ruth is a selfless and self-sacrificing woman. She has always suppressed her feelings and wishes for the sake of her family but unfortunately nobody ever appreciates her for her work and contribution. She finds herself and her identity always in a danger zone. A woman has all the responsibilities of raising children as well as taking care of all other family members but still she yearns for self-identity and recognition in the family. In spite of an oppressive atmosphere where she is triply marginalized, she tries hard to reaffirm her identity which is somewhere lost. Walter always suppress her and make her feel as if her existence doesn't even matter for anyone in the family

Ruth, considers her power and control over her son Travis, integral to her role as his mother, her only identity according to her. But when Travis doesn't obey her and is supported by his father Walter for doing so, Ruth senses a threat to her identity. Although she believes that being a woman and a mother, she should serve her family selflessly and maintain peaceful environment at home, she stands for her right of decision making. The thought of bringing another child into already crowded apartment forces her to take a grave step of aborting the baby. And the decision of aborting her baby is solely taken by Ruth. She does not consult anyone, as she believes that she has a right to take decisions and that it is the right of women to control their own bodies and their intellectual independence. Although fortunately she is spared from taking such a grave step, when Lena buys a house.

Walter's attitude towards her sister Beneatha is also the same. When she shares her dream to be a doctor with her brother, Walter Lee, instead of appreciating and supporting her, questions her on her commitment to become a doctor and says disheartening things about black women. Walter suggests that she should change her mind as she does not need to be a doctor but only nurse or someone's wife like any other woman:

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 quite...(38)

Walter discourages Beneatha by commenting that women are fit only for supporting roles. And like Walter, Beneatha's both suitors display male chauvinism. For Murchison, Beneatha's dream and desire to be a doctor is funny and laughable. He never tries to understand her thoughts and feelings and when she tries to have a word with him seriously, he advises her:

Murchison: The moody stuff, I mean. I don't like it. You're a nice-looking girl...all over. That's all you need, honey, forget the atmosphere. Guys aren't going to go for the atmosphere—they're going to go for what they see. Be glad for that. Drop the Garbo routine. It doesn't go with you. As for myself, I want a nice—(groping)—simple (Thoughtfully)—sophisticated girl... not a poet—O.K.?(96)

The statement implies George's superficiality and his attitude towards women. According to him, a woman is not capable of doing anything great in her life and does not deserve any respect if she is ambitious. He believed that ambition in women is equal to a sin.

Later in Act-I, Scene two, Asagai mocks the notion of a "liberated" woman when Beneatha expresses her view to have a career for herself. He says, "It is how you can be sure that the world's most liberated women are not liberated at all. You all talk about it too much" (64). But Beneatha is determined to attain her individuality and not to be defined by the man she marries:

BENEATHA: You see! You never understood that there is more than one kind of feeling which can exist between a man and a woman—or, at least, there should be.

ASAGAI: (Shaking his head negatively but gently) No. Between a man and a woman there need be only one kind of feeling. I have that for you... Now even... right this moment...

BENEATHA: I know—and by itself—it won't do. I can find that anywhere.

ASAGAI: For a woman it should be enough.

BENEATHA: I know—because that's what it says in all the novels that men write. But it isn't. Go ahead and laugh—but I'm not interested in being someone's little episode in America or—(With feminine vengeance)—one of them! (Asagai has burst into laughter again) That's funny as hell, huh!

ASAGAI: It's just that every American girl I have known has said that to me. White—black—in this you are all the same. And the same speech' too! (64)

Alice Walker in her essay, *In Search of Our Mother's Garden*, refers to the African American women's suppressed talent, and artistic skills, which they never got a chance to reveal due to slavery and subjugation. She also refers to the story of Phillis to establish the understanding that African American women at that time were not allowed or did not get the opportunity to exploit their capabilities. Beneatha too is similar to Phillis as there are

so many hurdles in her life too which prevent her from achieving her goal. Her talent and her enthusiasm to do something in life is constantly suppressed by the male members around her.

Beneatha, a young and attractive college student who has independent feminist perspectives, is found searching her identity throughout the play. Her aim to pursue her education and become a doctor reflects her urge for her individual identity. In 1950s, black female doctors could rarely be there and black women even thinking about becoming one was looked down upon. But Beneatha does not let herself be pushed into accommodating to the patriarchal ideas prevalent in society. She leaves no stone unturned to continue her studies. And she makes it very clear to her brother and her suitors that it is not marriage that is her priority, but a successful career.

Beneatha's hair is also important when it comes to her identity. Beneatha prefers a look that represents her culture and reconciles with her identity as a black woman. 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 her strong black woman's feminist perspective and stands by what she believe in, contradicting what the society think. 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. 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).

Hansberry's drama is about African-American ethos. She brings to the fore the quintessential issues that highlight the exclusiveness of the black American community and actually articulates the suppressed voice of black women by "Speaking" to them. Thus, the play *A Raisin in the Sun*, opened up the issue of the right of women to control their own bodies and their intellectual independence. The women in the play articulated their voice for their self-identity and asserted for their selfhood by resisting the oppressive male dominance.

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