



ARTICULATING RESILIENCE AND CRYSTALIZING DREAMS THE FAMILY OF WALTER LEE YOUNGER IN LORRAINE HANSBERRY'S PLAY A RAISIN IN THE SUN

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Abstract

This paper voices the extraordinary resilience showcased by the family of Walter Lee Younger in the way of materializing their dreams.

Lorraine Vivian Hansberry (1930-1965) the young, gifted, African-American woman playwright is a multifaceted artist with impeccable knowledge of her men and time. As an eminent playwright, she treats the following themes such as socialism, feminism, racism, slavery and gender issues along with the importance of family relationships with a touch of universality. Her play A Raisin in the Sun depicts an ambitious family's attempt to regroup themselves after a great struggle in overcoming the socio-political obstacles that cease the lives of the African Americans for many centuries.

Everywhere human beings face issues which either leading to a tremendous transformation or destruction. In the play A Raisin in the Sun Lorraine Hansberry presents the strong-determined African-American family headed by Lena who regain their racial pride, dignity and hope with unyielding resilience in all walks of life that threatens their existence.

In the family of Lena, each one has their dream to pursue. Lena Younger also called as Mama dreams to buy a house in a decent locality as the ghettos of Chicago already curtailed the physical and mental health of the family. When the racial law prevents them to occupy the newly bought house in the white neighbourhood, the pride of the family is deeply hurt. Leaving all their personal dreams, later the play ends up all sorts of conflicts by showing abundance of resilience against both personal and social shortcomings and binding themselves in a unified dream of buying a new house which regains pride, hope and happiness.

Lorraine Vivian Hansberry(1930-1965), the most eminent literary figure of the African -American Literary canon marks her individuality by universalising the struggles and the sufferings of the people of her race as well as the entire humanity in general. Her play *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959) has made her an overnight celebrity in the American Broadway. Steven Carter, an exponent of Hansberry's writings aptly recalls her glory by stating that, "At 29 years, she became the youngest American Playwright and only the Fifth woman to receive the New York Drama Critics Circle Award for Best Play"(42). The play *A Raisin the Sun* vividly depicts the struggle of an ambitious family who courageously withstands all sorts of conflicts which infect the progress of an individual as well as the society.

Standing incomparable as well as receiving the rarest reviews the play *A Raisin in the Sun* universalizes the struggle of an Afro-American family. Anne Cheney in her book *Lorraine Hansberry*, appreciates the play as "a moving testament of the strength and endurance of the human spirit ... a universal representation of all people's hopes, fears, and dreams"(55). No doubt Hansberry courageously demonstrates the frustrations, failures and defeats of man bringing out the noble qualities of hope and resilience in him. As a turning point in the Afro-American theatre history, the original production of the play *A Raisin in the Sun* has run for 538 performances and has been translated in more than thirty eight languages, attracting large audience as it has showed the deep quest for achieving the dreams even in utter desperation.

Hansberry originally named her play "*The Crystal Stair*," following the poem "*Mother to Son*," of Langston Hughes. Later she renamed the play *A Raisin in the Sun* for being greatly inspired by Hughes' poem "*A Dream Deferred*", which inquires the dreams of not only the Afro-Americans but the entire world. The play also represents how a human being can retain his values and dignity even at the edge of severe racial segregation issues which places him mentally and materially far behind. Margaret B. Wilkerson tells in *The Sighted Eyes and Feeling Heart of Lorraine Hansberry* acclaims that *A Raisin* is, "the story of a struggle to retain human values and integrity while forcing change in a society where human worth is measured by the dollar"(10). The economical depression becomes an additional burden to the families of African-Americans.

The play *A Raisin in the Sun* portrays the articulating resilience prevailing among the strong-minded African-American family against the society that enforces the painful oppressive laws to cease its growth. Hansberry's play *A Raisin in the Sun* portrays a series of Afro-American individuals with their own motives and morals who march to gain a perfect life. Harold Clurman in his review published in *Nation* says, "*A Raisin in the Sun* is authentic; it is a portrait of the aspirations, anxieties, ambitions and contradictory pressures affecting humble Negro folk in an American big city—in this instance Chicago"(301-



303). The play opens with the talk about the arrival of a cheque for \$10,000, the insurance amount of Walter's father who has died of hard labour. Everyone in the family plans accordingly to fulfil their dreams. Walter Younger, being the chief bread winner of the family aims to become a great business man and also wishes to offer sufficient material comfort for his family. Lena, called as Mama wishes to buy a new house which happens to be the dream of her husband. Beneatha, the teenage sister of Walter plans to become a physician; and Ruth, wife of Walter dreams to get rid of the dirty ghetto house. Walter's ten years old son Travis longs to have a separate room like his white classmates. In the end the amount invested by Walter in the liquor business along with his friends Willy and Bobo gets lost forever. Mean while the manager Karl Linder from the Clybourne Park Welfare Association announces that the family of Walter must withdraw the down payment for house which is situated in white neighbourhood. Deeply hurt by the words of Karl Linder, the family determines to move to white neighbourhood in search of a decent and dignified livelihood. Though the family loses its money, never trembles instead stands unified with the deepest satisfaction of finding hope and dignity which are the guiding lamp posts of the future. The play artistically nurtures the never-giving resilience of an Afro-American family. Amiri Baraka notes:

The Younger family is part of the black majority, and the concerns I once dismissed as 'middle class'—buying a home and moving into 'white folks' neighbourhoods'—are actually reflective of the essence of black people's striving and the will to defeat segregation, discrimination, and national oppression(xiv).

The hopeful dreams of the family vanish within a short time. However it is Lena's undefeated resilience and faith in people unites the family, and the race pride binds them in a common pursuit of buying a new house in a decent white neighbourhood.

Hansberry's play *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959) champions the cause of racial segregation and presents the unyielding resilience of the Afro-Americans who live in the ghettos of Southside Chicago. Driven to the edges of desperation, the Afro-American families had been shattered and throttled in all walks of life. The entire lives of Afro-Americans remain a hardened journey in search of attaining a peaceful and dignified life. Amidst of serious socio-political conditions, the family of Walter Lee Younger exhibits a tough fight to achieve their dreams. Living in the ghettos of Southside Chicago, the family encounters tremendous pressure in maintaining their status of life. In the words of Hansberry, the ghettos symbolize the destructive force of Afro-American lives injecting a psychological war in them; a war between dream and despair. The survival of the Afro-Americans is classified and characterized by the socio-political measures like race, class and gender, each one is depersonalized and scattered like a leaf in the storm of despair and depression and becoming the primarily responsible for his eternal destiny.

Designed in three acts the play dramatizes the appeasement of an Afro-American family after the collision of individual's quests and dreams. Being an artist to the core and knowing the complexities of the Afro-American people, Hansberry clearly represents and demonstrates the revolutionary spirit of her age in her first play itself. The optimistic power of the play with its uniqueness cheers each individual to pursue their dreams and also confirms the possibility of attaining it. Lonne Elder III in his essay *Lorraine Hansberry's Children: Black Artist and A Raisin* declares that "the power of the play had made us all aware of our uniqueness as Blacks and had encouraged us to pursue our dreams. Indeed the play confirmed that our dreams were possible"(220) in the absence of oppressive and dominant forces.

Trapped in a ghetto of Chicago, the family of Walter Younger wrestles to establish healthy and dignified life for them. Ironically the dominance of one individual crushes the rest of the family. Walter's thirst for material comfort makes him to demand the entire amount for his own self, neglecting others. Unfortunately earning very low, Walter's inability to supply the needs of the family makes him loss of his manhood and longs to rectify the fault at any cost. His deepest search of manhood makes him almost a neurotic and egoistic. He blabbers, "I'm thirty-five years old; I been married eleven years and I got a boy who sleeps in the living room—and all I got to give his is stories about how rich white people life..."(RIS 34). The insufficient material life tortures Walter and creates a longing in to be like his opposite counterparts, the whites.

Walter fights for the entire amount and even quarrels with his mother Lena. After knowing the down payment for the new house by Lena, Walter shouts, "You the head of this family. You run our lives like you want to. It was a your money and you did what you wanted with it.(RIS 94-95) and Walter assumes that his struggle includes not only his own settlement and comfort, but also for the whole family. He starts mourning his inability, "so tired of everything....So tired—moaning and groaning all the time, but you wouldn't do nothing to help, would you? You couldn't be on my side that long for nothing, could you? ... A man needs for a woman to back him up..."(RIS 32). He begs everybody to understand and back up him for his success. He complains that, "Nobody in this house is ever going to understand me"(RIS 38). The frustration in Walter suppresses the rest of the family. When Beneatha, his sister talks about pursuing medicine, he chauvinistically dismisses her career aspiration that, "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...”(RIS 38). The most frustrated young girl Beneatha shoots sharp arrows of words blaming of him as a man of incompetence and “toothless rat”(RIS 144). The dispute between brother and sister is finally put off by Lena who preaches them the values of man and matters. To her shocking discovery, Walter declares that money decides life and believes that each man breathes his life at the mercy of economic forces which are irresistible and remorseless as a strong storm.

Walter’s strong adherence of becoming a rich man in quick succession involves him in liquor business. Having witnessed the destruction caused by liquor among the Afro-American folks, Lena strongly opposes and rejects his plan, discards his plea for money. Hansberry too painfully recalls the disaster of drugs and alcohol as follows. She writes, “I see daily on the streets of New York, street gangs and prostitutes and beggars; I know people afflicted with drug addiction and alcoholism...”(*To Be Young* 41). Lena’s social-conscious mind and pride never allows her to surrender to Walter’s ill motive. On the other hand Walter justifies his choice by reemphasizing that no one is a teetotaler in the country including him. Walter finds it extremely hard to convince Lena that ultimately ends in vain. It is Ruth again who rescues the cause of her husband. Being helpless, Ruth pleads her mother-in-law to support Walter. Ruth requests, “I don’t know what it is—but he needs something—something I can’t give him any more. He needs this chance, Lena”(RIS 42) and realizing the truth in Ruth’s words Lena agrees to aid her son financially.

Not handing over the entire amount to Walter, Lena pays three thousand five hundred dollars as down payment for a new house in Clybourne Park to fulfill her husband’s lifetime dream of getting rid of the family from the fearful ghettos that kill her race. Hansberry in *Symbol in Raisin*, urges the people to release themselves from the ghettos. She states, “We must come out of the ghettos of America, because the ghettos are killing us; not only our dreams... but our very bodies”(35). The danger of ghettos has already created a scar in the life of Lena. When Ruth reveals her plan of abortion, Lena furiously opposes and unfolds the loss of her own baby because of a rat bite. Living in a dungeon, infected with rats, roaches and ugly walls, Ruth disdains her place. Having heard the news of purchase of the new house in Clybourne Park, Ruth becomes ecstatic. She shares her overwhelming joy by saying, “All I can say is—if this is my time in life—MY TIME—to say good-bye—to these cracking walls—and these croaches!—good-bye misery... I don’t never want to see your ugly face again!(RIS 94) figuring out the new atmosphere really thrills Ruth.

Lena reassures Ruth not to destroy the hope of future. Lena stands as the pillar of strength to the entire family. Clarence B. Jones in *Perspectives in the Black Family* declares, “We mean the values of closeness of family ties, of strong bonds between older and younger generation... of young folk that dream and old folk who help to keep dreams in perspective”(233). Believing in Walter, Lena hands over the remaining amount to him instructing to spare some amount for Beneatha’s studies. Undoubtedly “it is Mama’s leading and pushing that steer Walter Lee into his manhood”(42) says Peter L. Hays in *A Raisin in the Sun and Juno and the Paycock*. The most awaiting chance comes to Walter to cherish his dream of becoming a successful business man. The money in his hands kindles the sources of hidden energy transcending him into a man of different words and deeds.

Disaster hits the family once again. One of the business partners of Walter absconds with the money. Walter freezes to death. He shouts, “that money is made out of my father’s flesh ...” (RIS 128) and the dreams of his family gets shattered. Lena is totally shuddered by the loss of money and beats Walter severely. On the other hand Beneatha, the energetic and spirited woman curses Walter and neglects him totally declaring there is nothing left in him to love. Knowing the need of emotional bond between each members of the family, Lena takes up the burden of uniting the dreams and hopes of them once again. As a true strong-willed matriarch, Lena pours love and hope which are the essential elixirs of life. It is Lena who ropes everybody in the line of positive vibrancy.

The words of Hansberry about measuring people echo in all living plasmas. Lena being the advocate of Hansberry’s ideologies assures:

There is always something left to love. And if you ain’t learned that, you ain’ learned nothing.... When they done good and made things easy for everybody? Well the, you ain’t through learning—because that ain’t the time at all. It’s when he’s at his lowest and can’t believe in hisself cause the work done whipped him so! So when you starts measuring somebody, measure him right”(RIS 145) tells, “I ain’t never stop trusting you. Like I ain’t never stop loving you(RIS 107).

Hansberry’s play celebrates the potential search and struggle of three generations. Fluctuated in dreams, speech patterns, religious attitudes and preferences, the family of Walter ambitiously displays the richness and diversity of their culture and tradition.



Finally the unified strength of Walter's family is obvious when they integrate against the oppression of whites imposed on them. The valiant defense of Walter's family showcases the fatal risks involved in opposing the excruciating racial segregation and its worst oppression. Not only are the members of Walter family, the entire troop of Lorraine Hansberry was against racial struggle facing extreme despair, anger, frustration with an unyielding commitment. The play *A Raisin in the Sun* with attractive characterization puts forth the deepest search of each individual in fulfilling their basic needs to survive in the apartheid society.

Fighting against several socio-political and personal conflicts the three generations of Walter's family reflects the need of having dreams and the ways of achieving them. All the generations speak and act for themselves with aggressive and spontaneous spirit of struggle in their journey of life. Jewell Handy Gresham praises that, "Raisin is every bit as much an American "classic," in its depiction of struggle, conflicting dreams and the partial victory of a black American family"(193-194). The oppressions design each individual with difference. The play addresses not only the deferred dreams, self-determination and commitment of Afro-Americans but also exclusively focuses on the conflicts between the relationship of men and women—in different dimensions

Being under constant pressure it is Lena's thoughtful actions that keep the hopes of the family alive. She victoriously demonstrates the way of life with excessive resilience and endless hope. Theophilus Lewis in *Social Protest in 'A Raisin in the Sun'*, aptly states that, "If there is a message in Miss Hansberry's drama, it is that Negroes have to be tough to survive. Indeed, we see Negroes under pressure throughout the play"(43). The visit of Karl Linder from Clybourne to the house of Walter Park marks the curtailed boundary of their future which hardly helps them to regroup in search of new horizons. While the family is regretting the loss of money, the arrival of Karl Linder representing the people of Clybourne Park Welfare Association wounds their pride to the core. He informs the members of the Walter family not to buy the house in Clybourne because occupying a house in the white neighborhood may cause problems to Walter's family. He suggests, "... our community... hard-working, honest people who don't really have much but those little homes and a dream of a kind of community they want to raise their children in.... has the right to want to have the neighbourhood he lives in certain kind of way.(RIS 117). Further he also advises the members of Walter's family to live among their own community insisting that, "... our Negro families are happier when they live in their own communities"(RIS 118) and thus the whites consciously isolate the colored mass and the tact of isolating the Afro-American community results in great disaster. Ironically the white community failed to understand that the destiny of America which also includes the aspirations of colored people too. In reply to Linder, Walter strongly affirms his pride and self-esteem by uttering, "--we are very plain people... Well—what I mean is that we come from people who had a lot of pride. I mean—we are very proud people"(RIS 147-148).

While Walter's son is observing his dealings with Karl Linder which gets heated up later, Walter with supreme confidence proves by unfolding his ethnic pride, determination and self-respect by saying that, "We have decided to into our house because my father—my father—he earned to. We do not want to make no trouble for anybody or fights no causes—but well try to be good neighbours"(RIS 127-28). The young boy Travis impressed by the Walter Lee too learns the root of his pride.

The play ends with Walter's coming into his manhood and the family moving on to future that promises to be bright only because it is predicated on the strength of the characters. Mama's motherhood with her nurturing of the plant stands as a symbol of life, survival, and the human spirit. The marriage bond between Walter and Ruth though under risk, it is welded at last with trust on each other. When the compulsion of Walter's dream is realized all the problems come to an end. Harold Issacs in *Five Writers and Their Ancestors* affirms that, "The play's audience were moved by its dramatization of an American problem, by the classic figure of the strong mother, by the son's struggle to find his manhood, by the endurance of the son's wife and by the fresh forthrightness of the daughter"(332). Walter also discloses, "I am a man—and I think my wife should wear some pearls in this world!"(RIS 123), though the family has not solved the financial tie, it realized the strength of unified dream. The dreams of everybody are bound in one and each one is ready to work for the other.

The play not only pleads for racial tolerance but also man's overpowering of the social and financial calamities. More positively the dreams of the Younger's' at last never dry up but take a new shape. Hansberry skillfully examines the complex cluster of family bonds which stand undefeated in the midst of massive socio-psychological and political upheavals. Apart from achieving material wealth, the dream aims in providing freedom for the individual and the family. Each member of the family undergoes a refinement in the course of the play leading them to attain spiritual and social togetherness. Beginning painfully, the play reaches its ultimate goal of creating hope out of humility and despair. The obvious fact that the journey of life filled with love and mutual adjustment can offer multiple ways to get through any sort of obstacle. Every character in the play undertakes a vital journey in search of their potential accomplishments and stabilizing their stand in the universe.



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