

RACISM IN LORRAINE HANSBERRY'S *A RAISIN IN THE SUN*

Sofia C. Jose

ABSTRACT

African-American Literature refers to literature produced in the United States by writers of African descent. These writers have engaged in creative writing, which result in a literature of their own, rich in expressive subtlety and social insight, offering illuminating assessments of American identities and history. Racism is one of the main themes of African-American Literature. Racism is a belief that the genetic factors, which constitute race, are a primary determinant of human traits and capacities. Racial differences produce an inherent superiority of a particular race. It is universally prevalent that the minority racial groups may be denied rights or benefits, or receives preferential treatment. This paper examines the issue of racism in the literary works of Lorraine Hansberry, an African American Playwright and author of political speeches, letters and essays. Taking for study her best known work, *A Raisin in the Sun*, which was inspired by her family's legal battle against racially segregated housing laws in the Washington Park subdivision of the Southside of Chicago during her childhood, this paper makes an extensive analysis of the different traits of racism as it was demonstrated in the American society. This paper also tries to establish the bitter experiences of any black family living among the white people, as it is dealt with in this play.

INTRODUCTION

America has always been a land of racial diversity, and the role of black men and women in shaping and being shaped by the American experience has long been reflected in American literature. Most black writers were victimized by the racism endemic to society and silenced by unreceptive publishers and the reading public. Yet in the 1960s and 1970s, the Civil Right Movement inspired a reexamination of the white, male historical perspective, and both literary and historical scholars initiated a search for documents that reflected the American experience in the words of black men and women.

The development of Afro-American women's fiction is a mirror image of the intensity of the relationship between sexism and racism in American. A recurring struggle in the tradition of these writers from the 19th century to the present consists of their attempt to use the range of one's voice and to express the totality of the self.

Out of the 1950s Civil Rights Movement and the 1960s Black Power Movement, racism in the United States had emerged as a major political and social issue. Liberation movement in African nations such as Nigeria and Kenya as well as the Vietnam War raised the consciousness of many African Americans about the relationship between imperialism, colonialism and racism. The Black Arts Movement, the cultural arm of the Black Power Movement, not only recuperated writers such as Frantz Fanon and Richard Wright but also emphasized black folk forms as bases for it. Larry Neal has spoken of the Black Arts Movement in a following way.

African American culture could thus be looked at as a legitimate culture with its own ideas, forms and styles rather than as pathology or a derivation of European American culture. As African American writers of the 1960s increasingly saw blacks rather than whites as their primary audience, they began to explore with a new intensity, their own culture, history and community.

The 1960s was not a monolithic period in African American history. Though the most visible writings were cultural and nationalistic in tone, several major writers of the sixties such as Ishmael Reed and Adrienne Kennedy questioned the Black Arts Movement. Its tendency was to ascribe to all Blacks the same backgrounds, desires and goals. Women writers such as Jane Jordan challenged the cultural nationalist painting of Blackness almost entirely in male terms. Southern writers such as Tom Dent and Alice Walker questioned the Black Arts Movement's assumption that the urban northeast was the only place where the real black people lived.

RACISM

Racism in the United States has been a major issue since the colonial era and the slave era. Heavy burden of racism in the country have fallen upon African Americans.

Major racially structured institutions included slavery, native American reservations, segregation, residential schools, and internment camps. Racial stratification has occurred in employment, housing, education and government. Formal racial discrimination was largely banned in the mid-20th century, and it came to be perceived as socially unacceptable and/or morally repugnant as well, yet racial politics remain a major phenomenon.

Racist attitudes, or prejudices, are held by a substantial portion of the US population. Discrimination against African Americans, Latin Americans, and Muslims is widely acknowledged. Members of every major American ethnic minority have perceived racism in their dealings with other minority groups.

LORRAINE HANSBERRY

“I was born black and female” said Lorraine Hansberry addressing a Black Writers Conference. She thus acknowledged the significance of these immutable aspects of her identity, of being black and female. This double consciousness marked her writing, which she produced in the midst of the burgeoning Civil Rights Movement which heralded the second wave of the women’s movement. This dominated her life and her work. Rejecting the limits placed on her race and her gender, she employs her writing and her life as a social activist to expand the meaning of what it meant to be a black woman.

A RAISIN IN THE SUN

The play ‘A Raisin in the Sun’ is based on her childhood experiences of desecrating a white neighbourhood. It won the New York drama critics circle award as the best play of the year. She was the youngest American, the fifth woman and the first black to win the award. Her success opened the gate for a generation of modern black actors and writers who were influenced and encouraged by her writing.

Hansberry’s own life is interweaved in this play. However, the central theme of A Raisin in the Sun reveals how racism in the housing industry, government, religious leaders, and average Americans supported the segregated housing environment of Chicago.

TITLE OF THE PLAY

The title of the play is taken from Langston Hughes’s poem HARLEM and draws our attention to the dreams of the various characters, and the effect of having those dreams deferred. As a child, Hansberry sat quietly when the noted poet Hughes came to visit her father. Even then the seeds of the quiet celebration of life. A Raisin in the Sun must have been germinating. Surely she was moved by Hughes poem, from which the final title of the play is derived.

It would be most befitting to quote the Hughes’ poem as acknowledged in the title page of Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun*.

What happens to a dream deferred?
Does it dry up
Like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore –
And then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat
Or crust and sugar over,
Like a syrupy sweet?
May be it just sags
Like a heavy load
Or does it explode?

Here Hansberry's reference to Langston Hughes poem has a double purpose.

1. It accentuates her play's themes.
2. It emphasizes the heritage of Black American Literature

SETTING OF THE PLAY

The setting of *A Raisin in the Sun* is a ghetto of Chicago, where most blacks lived. These districts consisted of overpriced, overcrowded, and poorly-maintained apartments and homes. In the ghettos, crime rates were high and public services were limited. Most blacks living in the ghetto had hopes of leaving to better suburban neighborhoods, but segregated housing kept them stuck in the ghetto.

The housing industry was the greatest cause of racism in Chicago. Within the housing industry, many social scientists observed that "real estate agencies play the largest role in maintaining segregated communities". Real estate agents made enormous profits manipulating white fears of integration and black desires to escape the ghetto, as evidenced by the lucrative practice of blockbusting. A real estate agent would encourage a black family to move to an all-white neighborhood. Housing costs within the white neighborhoods were much lower than black neighborhoods, so some black family would attempt to move, despite threats from future white neighbors. After the black family moved in, nervous whites feared their property values would crash. The real estate agent would then purchase much of whites' houses well below their market value, and resell them well above their market value to blacks wanting to flee the ghetto. This lucrative bait-and-switch procedure could double real estate agencies' profits within two years. Whites who experienced blockbusting held hard feelings towards blacks which sometimes turned violent.

Real estate agents also fostered the segregation in Chicago by developing separate housing markets for blacks and whites. In 1917, the Chicago Real Estate Board condemned the sale and rental of housing to blacks outside of city blocks contingent to the ghetto. Conditions did not change in the next half-century, and blacks interested in a home or apartments were usually shown only ghettos or transition neighborhoods. Real estate agents limited blacks' housing options by rarely offering them housing opportunities outside the ghetto. The real estate industry literally trapped the black family in the ghetto.

The real estate industry was aided in segregating Chicago by unfair costs of living within the housing industry. Landlords charged black families high prices for low quality housing, and the average black family in the ghetto had to pay 10% more in housing taxes and fees than in a comparable white

neighborhood. Higher housing costs limited blacks' opportunities to move to better neighborhoods by taking away a large portion of their income. In addition, most white landlords did not maintain their slum properly, leading to poor living conditions. Many black families suffered these higher housing costs and poor living conditions within the ghetto because they could not save enough money to move to a cheaper suburban neighborhood.

DREAMS

Lorraine Hansberry's play, *A Raisin in the Sun* is essentially about dreams. The main characters in the play struggle to deal with the oppressive circumstances that rule their lives. They turn to be raisin in the sun.

- The protagonist of the play, Walter Lee Younger is a dreamer and he wants to be rich and devises plans to acquire wealth with his friends. He wants to invest his father's insurance money in a liquor store venture. His dream is nullified by Harvis as he cheats Walter in the end of the play.
- Beneatha Younger is an intellectual and she attends college. She has a dream of becoming a doctor and struggles to pose her identity as a well-educated Black woman.
- Lena Younger Mama is Walter and Beneatha's sensitive mother and the head of the family. Mama wants the apartment in which they all live always be neat and polished.

The Youngers struggle to attain these dreams throughout the play, and much of their happiness and depression is directly related to their attainment of, or failure to attain, these dreams. By the end of the play, they learn that the dream of a house is the most important dream because it unities the family.

All the dreams are unfulfilled. The Younger family is alienated from the white middle class culture; however, they harbor their materialistic dreams as the rest of the American Society.

RACISM IN A RAISIN IN THE SUN

This play is based on racial prejudice, the tension between Whites and Black in American society. White people are the settlers of America and black people were brought into the country as slaves. The white never wanted to live along with the black; they consider Black people as untouchables. This racial prejudice is purposefully spread by one section of the white people. They are called racist or fundamentalists. They want to retain their identity and want to divide the society. Such people are against

integration. Violence is the weapon by which they threaten the black people. This play portrays the sufferings of Black people and the feelings of different characters. There is a strain in the black family about how to react to the oppressing white community.

A Raisin in the Sun notes that the housing industry has a racist nature because of the discrepancies in housing cost between black and white communities and their separate housing locations. Walter and Ruth are stunned that Mama purchases a house in an entirely white neighborhood, because moving to a white neighborhood could put their lives at risk. Mama explains why she was unwilling to stay in the black community when she states, "Then houses they put up for colored in the areas way out all seem to cost twice as much as other houses. I did the best I could," also noting that the new houses built for blacks is located in their own segregated communities.

In *A Raisin in the Sun*, Beneatha expresses the cynicism that many minority intellectuals, including Lorraine Hansberry, held towards religion in the light of white Christian leadership favoring segregation.

"Mama tells Beneatha that she will be a doctor someday, "God willing." Beneatha "dryly" replies to Mama that "God hasn't got a thing to do with it," later says, "God is just one idea that I don't accept. I get tired of Him getting credit for all the things the human race achieves through its own stubborn effort".

Beneatha lost the hope in Christianity and also in God because of the dominance of people. Hansberry further reveals her own attitude towards religion when Mama folds over, begging God for strength, as she realizes that Walter has lost all their insurance money. Beneatha tries to gain her mother's attention to help her, speaking to her "plaintively". This implies that she is pleading with her mother as a parent to an emotionally immature child.

Karl Lindner also provides a reflection of some racist Christian leaders. He is dressed professionally and described as "a gentle man; thoughtful and somewhat labored in his manner". He speaks to the Youngers in a pious tone, saying, "Most of the trouble exists because people just don't sit down and talk to each other." Ruth replies, "You can say that again mister," while nodding as she might in church.

Hansberry shows further textual evidence that Linder represents religious leadership as Beneatha tells Mama about Linder's offer to their family. She says, "He talked about Brotherhood. He said everybody ought to learn how to sit down and hate each other with good Christian fellowship". Linder even sounds like the Reverend Parker of Deerfield when he states, "you've got to admit that a man, right or wrong, has

the right to want to have the neighborhood he lives in a certain kind of way." Both men gently discuss segregation in a religious manner.

After Carl Hansberry sued to remain in his new neighborhood, "howling mobs" surrounded the Hansberry's house. At one point a brick hurled through their window barely missed Lorraine's head before embedding itself in their wall. This violence, from the perspective of many whites, was unfortunate, for as long as both races remained separate, conflict was unnecessary. When integration threatened the carefully crafted white society, violence ensued.

The role of individual racism within segregated housing in Chicago is an important focus of *A Raisin in the Sun*. When Ruth and Walter first hear the news that they will be moving to Clybourne Park, they are shocked. Walter looks at his mother with "hostility," while Ruth's stunned response is, "Clybourne Park? Mama, there ain't no colored people living in Clybourne Park." Walter becomes bitter as Ruth tries to adjust to the shock. They realize that their lives could be at risk from an irate vigilante if they move into a white neighborhood.

The characterization of Karl Linder is a scathing commentary on white northern racism at the personal level. He appears innocuous, "quiet-looking," "middle aged," and "a gentle man". He explains to the Youngers that "most of the trouble exists because people just don't sit down and talk to each other". He is calm, patient, and "almost sadly" warns the Youngers that they will be in physical danger if they move into Clybourne Park. However, by desiring to keep the Youngers from Clybourne Park, he is implying to them, as Mama says, "they aren't fit to walk the earth". Like Bob Danning, Karl Lindner says, "I want you to believe me when I tell you that race prejudice simply doesn't enter into it". At the end of the play, when Walter triumphantly kicks him out of the house, Karl's true character is as weak and shallow as that of the whites who openly support housing segregation. The Younger family ignores his veiled threats and concentrates on Walter, the unexpected hero. Karl's last line is a lame, "I sure hope you people know what you're getting into". She was worried about her personal survival from lynching and hate crime. It seems as though her children have lost sight of the benefits of the new society. They simply see the problems they face as monumental, illustrating the relativity of the plight of society.

Asagai voices a wise opinion of his African people. He wants to teach them and help them become educated men and women. He does not want the color line or racial distinctions to change their opportunities. However, Asagai never refers to his people as "negroes" or "blacks." Instead, he always refers to them as Africans and villagers, erasing the color line and placing a national one in its place: a line

of less hatred.

When Lindner does in fact arrive at the Younger's home, Walter Lee has digested Mama's words. He tells Lindner that his family has pride and cannot be bought by money or color. It is through these words that Walter emerges a mature man.

CONCLUSION

Thus, Lorraine Hansberry is the African American Writer, who portrays the struggle of African people in America .She presents racism in a realistic manner. Through her works we can hear the voice of the Afro American people.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Sofia C Jose is currently working as an assistant professor in SNS Engineering College, Coimbatore. She is pursuing Ph.D. in English literature. She completed MA in English from Bharathiar University. She has also completed a post-graduation degree in Applied Psychology. Her passion is to compose poems and write articles.