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The Generational Question in *A Raisin in the Sun*: A Critical Analysis

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ABSTRACT

One of the seminal works in the African American body of theatre, Lorraine Hansberry's A Raisin in the Sun accurately represents the experiences of African American life in urban centres of the US when segregation was in its last stages. Its portrayal of the black community's repression is realistic in the themes of limited opportunities and acute poverty. This paper focuses on Hansberry's accurate rendering of black culture and society in the play and how she penetrates the deception and hypocrisy of segregation that eroded the Black community's confidence in American society (and dream). The paper also attempts to answer the generational question that the younger family in the play faces through the prospect of social mobility. It traces the family's social and economic journey and explores the possibilities of future Youngers' escape from ghosts of the past and new harsh realities. The play's conclusion, with Walter declining the offer to sell the new house, was the Youngers' resistance to oppression and inequality. It also initiated a new social struggle as the family sought social mobility to live in the new setting.

Keywords: *Black drama, Generation, Culture, Discrimination, Society.*

"What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up

Like a raisin in the sun?

Or fester like a sore —

And then run?"

— Harlem, Langston Hughes

Seldom, if ever, has a work of drama by an African American writer been considered a part of the classic body of American theatre. Historically, parochialism and virulent reckoning have led critics to deem literary works by African American writers as "unattractive and of a limited or temporary appeal" (Wilkerson 441). However, the play by Lorraine Hansberry — A Raisin in the Sun — is the first play by an African American woman playwright to be produced on

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Broadway to win several awards, be widely read and analysed across the literary spectrum, and undoubtedly to have become an American classic within the span of just over half of a century. As David Krasner has outlined, Hansberry's play became a "demarcation of a black female dramatist whose works rose to the pinnacle of modern American drama" (Krasner 293). Lorraine Hansberry is regarded as an instrumental player in developing African American drama in the post-World War II era. She is hailed as the "mother of the modern African Americans drama, no less than Eugene O'Neill is the patron of the national drama" (Analysis of A Raisin In The Sun English Literature Essay).

Hansberry's plays modelled a new body politic for African American literature, particularly drama, which gave a broader scope to the works of literature produced by the community. With the emergence of African American drama in the works by Hansberry and other later writers like August Wilson's Joe Turner's Come and Gone, their body of work firmly legitimised its place in the ground hitherto dominated by white-male playwrights and writers. Contrary to what critics like C. W. E. Bigsby and Harold Cruse, who, in The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual, observed that Hansberry's work is "the most cleverly written piece of glorified soap opera" (Cruse 278), A Raisin in the Sun was not just a part of the Black Protest literature; instead, it formed the foundation for the African-American self-construction in the twentieth-century American society. Critic Julius Lester recognized the true essence of Hansberry's play as "a work of art on universally American themes that made a significant contribution to American theatre" (Washington 110). Lester wrote the introduction to another play by Lorraine Hansberry titled Les Blancs.

A Raisin in the Sun accurately represents the experiences of African American life in urban centres of the US when segregation was in its last stages. Its portrayal of the outcomes of the black community's repression is realistic in the themes of limited opportunities and acute poverty. Hansberry's accurate rendering of black culture and society in the play and the way she penetrates deception and hypocrisy of segregation that eroded the Black community's confidence in the American society (and dream) make her a penetrating playwright.

The struggles and disposition of the Younger family symbolise the social constitution and setbacks that ailed the Black community in the 1950s. Three years before Raisin was first performed in New York, the United States Supreme Court, in a 1955 ruling, had abolished racial segregation in public schools. This move climaxed the decades of civil rights advocacy and legal challenges but gave rise to a new wave of resistance. The play was written and

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performed in a socio-political backdrop when the Montgomery bus boycott of 1955 began the journey of Martin Luther King's (MLK Jr.) prominent leadership in the US Civil Rights Movement.

Powerful people use their power over others forcefully to get what they want. Hansberry's work deals with racial oppression and the struggles of the black lower middle class. The protagonist of the story is engaged in a medium-sized industry and mainly serves the powerful. The Youngers' lives are stuck in a loop of stasis, with no change and little hope. There is no end for the victims and no escape for Walter, the male protagonist and de rigueur leader of the Younger family (as a man). Given the shrewdness and brutality with which white society treated the former slaves, the growth of a social protest was be perceived as a natural outcome. While in some places they were treated as refugees, in other cases they were simply tolerated.

The Generational Differences and Their Causes

In Raisin, amongst a wide array of themes, the most prominent theme is formed by the disagreements that 'Mama' had with each of her younger family members. By exploring the characters' personal life through a socio-political lens, Hansberry skilfully depicts the crevices and incompatibility between the old and young generations. The generational difference between Lena Younger and her family is the root cause of the clashes in the family's dreams, values, and aspirations. Even though the family is riddled with internal conflicts regarding their future aspirations, they still share a common vision of a better future than their existing condition. A sum of ten thousand dollars is central to enkindling the dreams of the Younger family. This insurance money has been left by the late husband of the family's head and matriarch — 'Mama' Lena Younger. Mama aspires for a future that will give her agency of her social life and freedom to be equal and self-sufficient; only this will bring her happiness. Her children perceive money as the new path to provide a sense of happiness.

The ability to have an aspiration, and turn that into a reality, varies from class to class. Though they live in poverty and misery, the Younger family possesses essential human dignity. While interposing on this theme, Christopher Bigsby aptly notes:

> "Where [Richard] Wright created a rigid stereotype in Thomas, which was in fact a source for the development of the intext communist theory, Hansberry, writing some twenty years later, tries to focus on human resilience. The rift between the two authors is partly dictated by the state of black American social change, but more fundamentally reflects Lorraine Hansberry's belief in the futility of despair and hatred" (Bigsby 28).

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Lena Younger's dream was to buy a beautiful house and ensure the happiness and comfort of her family. Owing to the upward social mobility that comes with money, she wanted to buy a house in a white neighbourhood. This dream of her's accompanied an invitation to face the problems that marred twentieth-century American society — racial disharmony and white man's wish for segregation. It reveals the clash of Mama's dream with the white man's vision of the social structure where they saw segregation as the ultimate law of the land. This was where the "clash of dreams clashed with the clash of racism" (Maheswari & Sangam 48). When Lena Younger said, "seem like God didn't see fit to give the black man nothing but dreams - but he did give us children to make them dreams seem worthwhile" (Hansberry 46), she firmly believed that the fulfilment of her dream could lead to the realisation of the dreams of her family.

Mama versus Walter

There are perceptible clashes of dreams in Raisin. Almost all the main characters in the story have dreams and aspirations, which leads to a clash of dreams. Walter Lee, who works as a driver, too has a dream. Worn out and frustrated by his life's struggles, he wants to use his father's inheritance to buy a liquor store that will give him freedom and wealth - the two pillars of the 'American dream'. Towards this end of Walters's usage of the money, other members of his family, especially Mama, opposed the idea of profiting from alcohol's evils.

Mama versus Beneatha

Beneatha, Lena's daughter and Walter's sister, also has a dream. Her dream is to receive some of the money for her medical education. In Mama's personal discourse, Beneatha's dream of becoming a doctor 'betrays' her own dream. While Mama's aspiration for a stable, traditional life equates to a typical white life, Benetha is driven by the "new" generation's desire for freedom and education. In the 1950s, women doctors were not considered credible in their field. This mistrust of female doctors is shown by mama's reaction to a medical appointment with a female doctor about her daughter-in-law's pregnancy; her response — "She—What doctor you went to?" (Hansberry 61) — adroitly captures her distrust and contempt of the female professional. Mama undermined Benetha's choice to become a doctor mainly because of the generation gap and the differences it creates. She grew up in a generation where segregation was a legal reality and jobs like doctors and lawyers were typically dominated by white men with power and money; women were homemakers and seen as child bearers. This

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upbringing made it hard for Mama to let her own children escape the clutches of generational jaundice and attempt to succeed in a changing world.

Mama felt betrayed yet again by Benetha's choice to not get married. She tried to push her daughter toward the social institution of marriage several times, but Benetha never accepted. Benetha was clear in her mind about her goal to become "a doctor. [...] I'm not worried about who I'm going to marry-if I ever get married" (Hansberry 50). She aspired to be a strong independent woman in the profession of a doctor, not a housewife. Mama believed, rather strongly, in the vanity of a woman's attempt to enter a highly male-dominated profession as a doctor and repeatedly urged Benetha to marry a wealthy man - George Murchison- and get settled with him instead of pursuing her own dreams. She believed only this could lead to a normal life, juxtaposed to Benetha's version of a normal life as a doctor. Benetha, determined, challenged her mother's beliefs about marriage and the 'female doctors' that haunted her and continued on the path to becoming a doctor.

Mama versus Ruth

Ruth, a woman who, as Walter's wife, came to the Younger from the outside, is also torn between the struggle of supporting different dreams. This is indicative of the lack of agency that women have in perceiving their own dreams. She is only seen in the role of a supporter of others' dreams and not as one who could see a dream of her own. While Ruth would have liked to have a home that belonged to the Younger family and housed them all together, she also wanted her husband to be given the opportunity to seek independence in the pursuit of his goal of starting a liquor parlour. Walter Younger was tired of his job as a driver and Ruth wanted to support her husband in all that he aspired for; the convention dictated the same, that it is the duty of a wife to support her husband in good and bad, in sickness and in health. In the play, she could be seen as torn between the dilemma arising out of the question of supporting one dream and deferring another.

From characters to generations

The play's success can be attributed to its beguile characters with whom white audiences identified, possibly for the first time, and Black audiences resonated on many levels. Audiences saw the image of a universal 'Mama' (mother) in Lena Younger – determined, solicitous, and strong – making her a fundamentally relatable figure. Lena's role as the bond that cemented the family together mirrored the identity of a lot of women who carried the same

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responsibilities as her. Ruth's (wife of Walter) role as the torchbearer of motherly love and an altruist wife emanated a giving nature and quiet strength. As an aspirer of financial independence and upward social mobility, Walter was a new figure in American theatre for white audiences. Hansberry saw him as a "ghetto hero", and his generational conflict with his mother echoed the concerns of black audiences. For them, Walter's struggle for a potent business and a dignified way of life reflected their own struggles. Beneatha, Walter's sister, represented the high-spirited intellectual potential that had been subjugated in American society for ages. Each of Hansberry's characters is portrayed with apt adroitness, humour, and life-like props. Moreover, the humanity of all characters is constructed without disenfranchising their racial unity.

The question of 'generation' forms a significant theme of the play. The character of Mama has a background occluded with racial prejudice that was prevalent against the African American people, where they were not given the authority even to perceive a dream, let alone to pursue one. Contrary to Mama's circumstances, her children and her daughter-in-law inherited a world and social order that did not choke and kill a black person for having the audacity to have a dream, even if this new American social order was inherently divided and racist. The generation gap is reflected in the different outlooks of the characters on the issues of religion, career choice, and abortion, leading to much tension and anger in their relationship. With this generational difference between the characters, Hansberry interrogates the hollowness and inherent discrimination of the 'American Dream' through racial and class stratification.

The Younger family is financially strapped, and racial discrimination does not make it any easier for them to become successful. Lena Younger's disillusionment with the so-called better life in the Northern US States causes conflicts between her and her family; she knows that life in the north is not as better as it seems. The ghettoization of black people caused more harm with irregular access to civic amenities and low quality of life than good. This situation gave rise to two options: strive to become a tangential part of the white middle class or tolerate segregation and seek advantage within the group. Lena did not want Walter to fall prey to the institutional and social trappings set by the white majority for the black man. As Anne Cheney has observed in her account of Hansberry, Raisin "addresses the discerning question of to what extent people should aspire to a white middle-class way of life in liberating themselves from the burdens of discrimination" (Cheney 7).

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All Lena Younger ‘Mama’ ever wanted was a home with "a little back garden", not a tenement flat in public squalor. The plant in her garden was to be a symbol of life, growth, and living-organic manifestations of life. Hansberry ascertained the foundation of this all-embracing hope and faith in humanity in the black experience —

"If blackness brought pain, it was also a source of strength, renewal, and inspiration, a window on the potentials of the human race. For if Negroes could survive America, then there was hope for the human race indeed" (Hansberry 21).

The Younger family’s dreams are coeval with their generations. But the social structure in which they dared to aspire was perpetually set against them. That is why, of the various dreams the family dreamt, only one comes true - the dream of owning a house. The aberrations in Youngers’ life illustrated the workings of American society, which denied opportunities to minorities. It evidently answers the generational question for a black family - do not dare to dream and ask too much; you shall only get what we (the society) deem right for you. With this discourse, Hansberry has also critiqued the institutional reforms that were taking place in the mid-twentieth century US and how they remained ineffective at the time to a large extent.

Socio-economic Perception of the Wealth and Generation

Different generations of African Americans grew up in disparate worlds with opportunities differing like chalk and cheese. Their differing experiences have shaped their view of the world. Social historians describe African Americans born between 1928 and 1945 as the "Silent Generation". This generation suffered the full effects of Jim Crow laws. Baby Boomers (born between 1946 and 1964) were born during the American Civil Rights Movement. Generation X (born between 1965 and 1980) came of age during the United States Fair Housing Act and the Black Power movement. Millennials (born between 1981 and 2000) benefited from these significant breakthroughs despite the racial crisis contemporary to the times. For each of these African American generations, there are significant assessments of black opportunity in America and the dreams that they could perceive in their contemporary social, political and economic milieu.

Results from the Kinder Houston Area Survey (KHAS) conducted from 1989 to 2018 show that ‘generation’ is indeed a significant predictor of African Americans' belief in equal opportunity, even after differences in education, religion, political party. and income. Research shows that African American millennials are more likely than older generations to believe that

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black people have the same opportunities as white people. This is possible because legal segregation effectively ended at the time when millennials began to explore the economy and society in their adulthood. KHAS data shows that race relations in areas such as Houston are improving over time. As children and young adults, members of the older generation of African American communities were more likely to face overt and concrete racism in one form or another.

Today, direct racism is less prevalent, but institutional and structural racism remains a poignant issue. Despite the prevalence of racism, the survey's findings suggest that black millennials are less likely than their elders to believe that persistent racism significantly limits their chances of succeeding in contemporary American society. There still is a long way to go to achieve equality between blacks and whites. Nearly half of the millennials (47%) think that black people still do not have the same opportunities as white people in America. But surveys have shown that social and political behaviours are improving. Statistics show that young African Americans are more optimistic about their life prospects than older ones, suggesting that opportunities for black people have generally improved.

In Raisin, Hanberry's concernment, which begins with each individual (and the family of which the individual is a part), extends to communities, societies, nations, and the entire humankind. She especially resonates with the artists of her generation who had more responsibility to destroy the house of fame built on the discrimination and ghettoization of African Americans and create something better and truer. Hansberry's characters are human; they maintain the humanity, integrity, and dignity of their race.

Despite the challenges and baggage of racial discrimination against them, the 'young' Youngers had new concerns like education and business to tend to, unlike their predecessors who struggled to survive with the sword of racial violence always hanging on their necks.

"Walter: …Just tell me where you want to go to school, and you'll go. Just tell me, what it is you want to be – and you'll be it…. Whatever you want to be – Yessir! …. You just name it, son… and I hand you the world!" (Act II, Scene II) (Hansberry 109).

For this very transition and intended mobility, the generational question in Hansberry's A Raisin in the Sun can be answered this way — the next of the younger family found themselves a new dwelling in a 'better' neighbourhood, but their struggles remained intact. Even though

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they had moved one step further away from the past ghosts of poverty, many remained to haunt them and their posterity with new racial, social, and economic anxieties.

The many political and sociological views in Raisin reflect Hansberry's struggles and understanding of the American society. She herself belonged to a family of strugglers. Her father bought a home in a white neighbourhood which resulted in legal interferences and covenants being given by courts. Her story is the story of Mama, Walter, Benetha, and Ruth. Hansberry's father, Carl, died when she was fifteen. She later remarked that "American racism helped kill him", as he was constantly indulged in cases and battles due to his upward mobility in society and the white folk's resistance to it.

Ostensibly, A Raisin in the Sun is about an African American family's constant struggle to leave the echelons of slums created by racial segregation specifically for the black community and advance to a better neighbourhood. However, it also contains images of various conflicts, battles, and skirmishes that are faced by the individual self every day. Hansberry evokes the struggles and conflicts in the dreams of the younger family and the deferment of those dreams. Her usage of 'dream' as a powerful tool is almost as significant as the Chaucerian dream vision, where the perennial bard guided his characters through the anxieties of the Middle Ages. Hanberry explores the ethnic conflicts and battles arising from the generation gap to great lengths in Raisin. The play also chronicles the struggle of African Americans to acquire, secure, and define their identity despite ingrained socio-economic racism.

As the Youngers clashed over their competing dreams, it was through this internal conflict about differing aspirations that they achieved a consensus to attain at least one of their many goals despite the resistance from the social status quo. The play's conclusion, with Walter declining the offer to sell the new house, was the Youngers' resistance to oppression and inequality. It also initiated a new social struggle as the family sought social mobility to live in the new setting. With their presence in a white neighbourhood, the 'new' society was bound to find its equilibrium disturbed to great extents, underpinning the racial discomfort of the majority. With this underpinning, Hanberry has revealed the harsh truths of the black experience to a society unaccustomed to bitter criticism. It is a testament to Lorraine Hansberry's potential as a successful writer, activist, and artist that her work continues to be valued and resonant in the technology-driven, woke, and aspirationally equal society of the twenty-first century.

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