Exploring the Struggle for Survival and Clashes of Generation Gap and Racial Pride in Lorraine Hansberry’s ‘A Raisin in the Sun’

[PP: 45-53]

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Abstract  
This article examines the complexities in the lives of African-Americans. It discusses the psycho-social challenges they faced in the twentieth century and their relentless efforts to attain, secure and define a sense of dignity to lead their lives. It also discusses the vulnerability of their existence and the sad dilemma in which the blacks were caught. The play has been deliberately selected for investigation as Lorraine Hansberry depicts, very skillfully, not only the gaps and inconsistencies of the two generations, but also the clashes in their aspirations and values. These struggles and clashes are epitomized in Walter and Mama Lena in the play and are discussed, from various perspectives, in the present article. Offering background to both the writer and the play, the article explores how Hansberry juxtaposes these ideas; that is, Mama finding the freedom to be sufficient for her happiness; where as, her children perceiving money as the new path to provide sense of happiness. The rebellion of Beneatha against the African-American value system and her rejection of the ideals of the family as well as the aspirations of younger generation for self-fulfillment, the sufferings of older generations, the pain of racial discrimination and the struggles for gaining the rights and dignity also form the very important topics of discussion in the paper.

Keywords: Generation gap, clashes of cultures Afro-Americans’ struggle, racial pride, Lorraine Hansberry’s play.

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1. Introduction

A raisin in the sun is a masterpiece of Lorraine Hansberry, an African-American revolutionary playwright. This play bears witness to the struggle put up by the lower middle class black family set up in the south side of Chicago. The hardships of their lives, and racial prejudice imposed on them, are very vividly portrayed in the play by the writer. The undaunted spirit and relentless struggle of the African-Americans to better up their lives is witnessed through the play. The ability to have an aspiration, and turning that in to a reality, varies from class to class. This is also noted in the play where the black family of Youngers displays courage and racial pride in going ahead with their aspiration. With this move, they want to usher equal opportunity to the otherwise segregated blacks.

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up?
Like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore –
And then run?

-Langston Hughes

The poem, from which Hansberry has taken the title of her drama, expresses crisply “the kinetic energy and tension which underlies the frustration of the American Negro, an energy which can be turned into violence, self-destruction, despair of genuine realization” (Bigby,1982,P.158). Bigby (1982) commenting on this topic, rightly reports that:

"Yet where Wright created in bigger Thomas a hardening of the stereotype which was in effect a spring board for an exegesis of communist doctrine, Hansberry, writing some twenty years later, is concerned with demonstrating human resilience. The gulf between the two writers is in part that dictated by the changing social position of the American Negro but more fundamentally it is indicative of Lorraine Hansberry’s belief in the pointlessness of despair and hatred." (P. 157).

With such background, the present study aims at discussing the psycho-social challenges faced by the African-Americans in the twentieth century and their relentless efforts to attain, secure and define a sense of dignity to lead their lives. The paper also aims at discussing the vulnerability of their existence and the sad dilemma in which they were caught. It also explores the struggles for survival of the African-Americans, clashes of aspirations of younger and older generations and and their striving for gaining the rights and dignity in the society.

2. Background to the play

The play A Raisin in the Sun depicts the life story of the Younger family, a poverty-stricken family, living in the overcrowded tenement, sharing a common bathroom with another family. Poor Travis, a son of Walter and Ruth, has to sleep on the sofa in the living room. Though they live in poverty and misery they have the essential human dignity. As Bigby (1982) aptly points out, “the central factor of the play is not poverty but indignity and self-hatred” (P. 156). It is a typical lower middle-class Negro family living in the Chicago South side ghetto. The family consists of five members. Lena Younger, the widow of the late Mr. Younger, is the head of the family and she lives with her two children Walter Lee Younger, who is married to Ruth, and Beneatha Younger, the daughter. Walter and Ruth have a son Travis Younger, all of them live in a dingy, roach-infested apartment where privacy is conspicuously absent. It is a well-knit family but there is a conflict of dreams. Each member has his or her own dream aspiration and ambition as is quite natural in any family. Here in this story the ‘dreams’ are all, inspired by a sum of ten thousand dollars of insurance money, the family’s head and matriarch Lena Younger has been left by her husband. She is a strong
willed person whose dream is to buy a modest home where they can lead decent lives, with a small yard where her grandson Travis can play.

3. Conflicts and Clashes of Race and Dreams

*A Raisin in the Sun* exemplifies various clashes of race and dreams. There is a clash of race where white community does not want Younger family to have their home in their neighborhood and are ready to buy house from the Youngers. However, for Lena Younger, the home in the white neighborhood mirrors the psycho-social struggle of mid-century African Americans to attain, secure, and define a sense of place, or “home,” in the face of systemic socio-economic racism (Matthews 2008, P. 556). There are also clashes of dreams in *A Raisin in the Sun*. Almost every major character is the play has a dream and aspires for that which leads to clashes of the dreams. Walter Lee, who works as a chauffeur, has a dream. He is disgusted with the drudgery and wants to use the money to buy a liquor store which will give him independence and affluence—the American dream. The others set their faces against the idea of making money out of the drink-evil. Beneatha, another major character also has a dream. Her dream is to have part of the money paid for her medical training. Moreover, she has a strong sense of racial pride also and steps herself in the culture of her forbears. Though simple in concept, the story Miss Hansberry weaves is filled with complexities about the dreams and goals of black people and about individual pursuits to attain these goals (Normant, 1984). In relation to Walter’s dream, the story of the play deals with a man who has aspirations, hopes, dreams, needs and things that the society, in which he lives, is not prepared for him to achieve. He struggles towards his goal and in the process is searching for himself (Normant, 1984, P. 58). The conflicts and clashes, the strains and tensions, in the play are not merely due to the generation gap or the normal social impact but especially due to the colour divide in the American society.

Colour was a strong factor which affected the blacks and their lives not only as citizens but also as artists. In this regard Wilkerson(1986) rightly states that,

Rarely if ever has a play by a black-American been accorded the status of a classic. Parochialism and polemics critics have claimed render works based on black experience unattractive and of limited or temporary appeal. Yet Lorraine Hansberry ‘s *A Raisin in the Sun* the first play by a black woman to be produced on Broadway and to win the network drama critics circle award in 1959 has become an American classic within a quarter of a century. The St. Louis repertory company’s production attracted unprecedented sellout crowds in 1984 while a 1986 production at the roundabout theatre drew the admiration of off-Broadway audiences. (P. 441).

Focusing on the clash of race, it is evident that Hansberry mirrors, in her play, the American society, especially its black section, standing on the brink of a social upheaval that was to change the face of that society once for all and have a powerful impact on all sections of the population. The writer has pictured a race at that time in its history when it cannot retreat and cannot quite know how to move forward. The mood is forty-nine parts anger and forty nine parts control with a very narrow escape hatch for the steam these abrasive contraries build up. As the black population faced misery and humiliation continuously, the reaction came not in the form of anger and protest but consuming rage. Few recognized the militancy in Hansberry and she is a trail blazer in paving way for a new movement, new struggle of the black to elevate themselves to reach the Whites in social status. One can experience that her personal suffering and the contemporary conditions led her to air the agony of unfair treatment. *A Raisin in the Sun* anticipated all this and also predicted some of the problems that would arise in integrating communities.
Going back to the clash of dreams, one finds that Lena Younger also has a dream and is aspiring for it. Lena Younger’s dream is to buy a decent home and provide domestic happiness as well as comfort for her family. The home she buys happens to be in a white neighborhood and this starts a series of troubles laying bare the whites’ approach to the move for integration. The clash of dreams clashes with the clash of racism. She says “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” (P. 46). She strongly believes that the fulfillment of her dream could lead to the realization of her family members’ dreams.

Although the basic story deals with the Negro housing problem, it also presents the universal problem of a mother who desires to raise her children properly in a good environment to give them a good education and to buy her own home. In this, Lena Younger resembles Amanda. There is something heroic in their deep concern for their family. The children however are not appreciative of the selfless love of the mothers. While Lena waits to receive the insurance money, which will enable her to buy a decent home; Walter, the son, wants the money to buy a liquor business to get rich quickly-a typical American dream, and Beneatha, the daughter, wants the money to fund her medical education. Ruth, Walter’s wife, likes to have a home but she also wants her husband to be given the opportunity to seek success. He is disgusted with his job as a chauffeur. She is torn between the two dreams and suffers because she cannot decide. Thus, everybody has a dream and aspires for it which leads to the clashes. When the cheque arrives, and Lena refuses to give Walter the money, he grows wild and talks like a mad man about his dreams till Lena stops him. She makes him listen to the voice of reason by telling him that Ruth is planning to have an abortion. The revelation does not produce the expected reaction in Walter. He does not say that he wants the child. Later, when Lena says that she has made a down payment for a house in Cleburne Park, Ruth protests saying that it is a white neighborhood and blacks may not be happy there. Lena is determined to shift into that house and live there even if it means trouble.

As the story proceeds, a new problem arises. The people, for whom Walter works as chauffeur come and inform Lena that Walter has not turned up for duty for several days and that they are thinking of hiring someone else. Enquiries show that Walter has been behaving quite queerly like a desperate man. So, Lena tells him that she has paid only 3,500 dollars for the house and that he can have the remainder $6,500 provided that he deposits $3,000 for Beneatha’s fees. By this symbolic act Lena has made Walter the head of the family to manage its finances. Her hope is that he would evince a proper sense of responsibility.

On the day, fixed for moving into their new home, a stranger arrives to inform them that the white neighbors are prepared to buy the house from the Youngers and allow them a handsome profit. The whites want the Younger family to choose a house in a black locality. As Lena is away, Walter speaks on her behalf and firmly rejects the offer. However before leaving, the white man leaves his visiting card in case they change their minds. Lena returns and along with her comes a would-be partner of Walter with the shocking news that the third partner Willie has absconded with all the money. This is a severe blow to the entire family especially to Walter who has been completely foolish in the business enterprise that was going to bring him great riches. Walter had given the entire sum of $6,500 to Willie. In great agitation, Walter calls Lindner, the white agent and asks him to come back. But Lena is firm. Her racial pride does not allow her to surrender. They were originally descended of slaves and of share-croppers. But they had never thought of taking money in a shameful cause.

With his arm around his son, Walter begins talking to Mr. Lindner hesitantly at first, but with firmness when he becomes confident. He tells Lindner the family history. Everyone in the family works and they are going to do it in future also so that they can send Beneatha to medical school and so that they can move into the new house they have bought. Walter
assures Lindner that they will be good neighbors. Most unexpectedly, Walter has shown his heroism and decided to keep the house. The whole family is jubilant and carried on the crest of the wave of enthusiasm each promises to contribute his or her mite. Beneath will go to the medical school. Walter has shown his mettle and his sense of dignity and so, Lena and Ruth are enormously proud of him. True conversations are always sudden and unexpected. Whatever it is the denouement is not only happy but also strong and convincing.

No one can accuse Hansberry of doing propaganda in the play. As a critic, she is even-handed. If she denounces the whites for their sins of discrimination and segregation she does not spare the blacks. Beneath says that the rich Negroes are more snobbish than the whites. Lena complains that the wealthy blacks spend a lot of money on their house-building and house-décor. And most important of all it is Willie, a black who runs away with Walter’s money. Hansberry uses realism and gives a true picture of the family life of the poor hard-working blacks who aspire to live under a decent roof.

While discussing the major themes of the play and the characters in it, it is Lena Younger who dominates the scene. In a way, author has attempted to present a feminist perspective. In the play, Lena is a true matriarch. She beats even her son Walter in the face when he shows signs of losing his dignity.

4. Conflicts and Clashes of Generation Gap and Lena’s Role

The play is also depiction of conflicts and clashes due to generation gap. In the familial relationship in the younger family, as in any other family, one can see the generation gap as well as clash of individual aspiration and dreams. But the gap is not unbridgeable nor the clash irresolvable. Where Amanda fails Lena succeeds: “Mrs. Lena younger or mama in A Raisin in the sun moves through the six stages of growth listed by Adams, supra as she and her children learn together the value of give and take in familial relationships” (Brown-Guillory, 1998, P. 93). As a matriarch, she carries within herself the race’s determination to survive and to progress. Amanda appears to be a pathetic figure at times but Lena plays the pivotal role throughout. She is also the link between the older and the younger generation providing the vital force to the younger a step ahead of the older. One of the most moving speeches in the whole play is what she tells her son:

Mama: son – I came from five generations of people who was slaves and share-coppers – but ain’t nobody in my family never let nobody pay ‘esn no money that was a way of telling us we wasn’t fit to walk the earth. We ain’t never been that poor (raising her eyes and looking at him). We ain’t never been that dead inside (P.133).

When she speaks about how the father sweated and slaved day after day to earn a pittance, that would accumulate to give his children education and set them on the way to a better and more decent life, the sentimental spectator in the audience, black or white would have choked with tears.

That Lena is the guiding spirit of the whole family, the presiding genius protecting, holding together and shaping the family, is seen in many more instances. One is the most same and level-headed talk and advice she gives her daughter beneatha who is wild with Walter for having lost the money meant for her medical education- her life’s ambition.

Mama: There is always something left to love ...child when do you think is the time to love somebody the most; when they done good and made things easy for everybody? Well then you ain’t through learning – because that ain’t the time at all. It’s when he is at his lowest and can’t believe in himself ‘cause the world done whipped him so’ (PP.135-36).

Lena rises from mama, to matriarch to saint which one does not expect of her. Her pride, dignity, her spirit is so infectious that all her children absorb it and when the occasion
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...demands, they rise to the occasion. Pamela Loos (2008), in her study A Reader’s Guide to Lorraine Hansberry’s A Raisin in the Sun, notes that Hansberry provides an image of Lena Younger as “a determined fighter” (P. 51). Lorraine Hansberry herself described Lena Younger in the following way:

Lena Younger, the mother, is the black matriarch incarnate, the bulwark of the negro family since slavery, the embodiment of the Negro will to transcendence. It is she, who in the mind of the black poet scrubs the floors of a nation in order to create black diplomats and university professors. It is she, while seeming to cling to traditional restraints, who drives the young on into the fire hoses. (as cited in A Reader’s Guide, P. 51).

Author has also portrayed Lena as an ideal matriarch. In the absence of her husband, she has to play the role of head of the family which she does most efficiently. She is the strong center which holds the family together. It is her exemplary behavior at all times, and especially in times of crisis, and her little sermons to her children, that gradually bring about desirable changes in their behaviors and attitudes. The transformation in Walter and Beneatha is tremendous. Lena herself remains steady as a rock because of her uprightness and true human qualities. She is firm in the face of hostility from her would be neighbors. She is a woman of sterling character and irreproachable conduct. As Wilkerson (1986) puts it, “Lena Younger is not the accommodating mammy who chooses the passive, safe path but rather the folk figure the courageous spirit that lends credence and power to the militant struggle” (P. 450). It is Lena’s tact and integrity that form the bridge across the generation gap.

Focusing on the white families, the generation gap is deliberately created by the younger people up in revolt against parental authority and authority of the so called ‘elders’. During the two wars, the elders betrayed the youth, in an incredible fashion, by sending the young people to the battlefield while they remained sheltered at home. This kind of generation gap is not to be seen in the black families, the majority of whom are too poor to think of such modern ideologies. Amanda is a pathetic figure in spite of her heroic struggle. Lena is, on the contrary, a real matriarch who expects implicit obedience from her children. She slaps Walter and Beneatha when they go against her wishes. However, the members of the family have their dreams and aspiration which often bring on clashes and conflicts but which never get out of control. There is absolute unanimity in their desire to work hard and retain the decent home that has been bought. All of them think tenderly and with respect of their forefathers who by dint of back-breaking work managed to survive and also help their children to get started in their lives.

Author has shown the Racial Pride in the play in a very skillful way. Walter had decided to take the money offered by Lindner so that part of the loss could be made up. That was normal behavior and reaction. But when Lindner arrives, Walter speaks faltering at first and then with quiet confidence and firm determination.

Walter: well what I mean is that we come from people who had a lot of pride. I mean – we are very proud people.. we have all thought about your offer and we have decided to move into our house because my father —my father—he earned it … we don’t want to make no trouble for nobody or flight no causes – but we will try to be good neighbors. That’s all we got to say. We don’t want your money [P. 138].

Here is Walter proving his mettle and his claim to be the son of Lena and Walter Younger(sr). He faces the critical point as he has to weigh between the option of accepting Lindner's offer or opting for an honourable path to keep up the pride of the family and also to stand tall in the eyes of his son. Lindner is of course puzzled and quite naturally, he turns to
'the head of the family' that made the down payment for the house. Lena puts the lid on the matter, incidentally making Walter the head of the family.

Mama : I am afraid you don’t understand. My son said we are going to move and there an’t nothing left for me to say ...you know how these young folks is nowadays miser. Can’t do a thing with them goodbye [P. 139].

The matter is settled. The integrity of the family is preserved, the dignity of the family is protected, and most important of all, the mantle descends from the matriarch to the patriarch of the next generation. The resolution of the play is artistically and thematically quite satisfactory.

5. Struggle and Hardships of Black Lower Middle Class

The powerful people exercise their power over others and they do it effortlessly, putting an end to the aspirations of the powerless. The play also touches upon the racial atrocities, struggles and hardships of black lower middle class. A Raisin in the Sun is set against a background of the upheavals and turmoil of the 1950s. In 1955 the Supreme Court had declared segregation illegal in public schools. The same year saw the birth of the civil rights movement and the rise of Martin Luther king. But the southern white segregationists retaliated and there was a wave of terrorism. Martin Luther king was arrested repeatedly. Black children were burnt down by the racists. Public figures like Medgar Evers and president John F. Kennedy were assassinated. Hansberry’s restrained reaction to all this answer and her challenge can be seen in the Younger family’s decision to move into the house in Clay house Park. It is noticed that the lead characters of the play are engaged in mediocre jobs mostly serving the powerful. Their lives are caught in a loop circling around without any change or ray of hope. There is no end to their agony and senior Walter could not escape from it. One would expect the social protest to be much stronger, because of the shabbiness and brutality with which the white society treated the descents of the erstwhile slaves. In some places, they were treated like outcasts; in other they were just tolerated. The civil rights movement of course brought about a change in some places. At last, when the whites were willing for integration the militant blacks opposed it saying that they will retain their separate identity and build it up to equal the status of the white. Brutality will be opposed by greater brutality and violence with greater violence. The black panthers are a reality to be concerned about. However, Hansberry does not believe in hatred and violence which will lead to despair. She, however, insists on the blacks being treated with dignity and respect and owing to good neighbors.

6. Summing Up

A raisin in the sun ran for 350 performances appreciated by both blacks and whites. The play is not propaganda for “propaganda alone is not sufficient motivation to keep lines at the box office” (Laufa, 1966, P. 301). Yet the play, produced in 1959, anticipated the current movement for civil rights for the Negroes and predicted some of the problems that would arise in integrating communities (Laufa, 1966, P. 298). Hansberry’s concern begins with the individual, and the family of which one is a unit. The concern then moves on to the community, the society, the nation and all mankind. This universal concern is seen in a speech she delivered at the on Oct 27, 1962. It was the period of the infamous McCarthyism, when the artists, lecturers and writers were asked to be silent-silent spectators of any atrocity committed by groups of people or nations. In the speech Hansberry likes to ask where the artists are in the Negro struggle, and what contributions they make. The authorities of course wish them to confine themselves in their studios. She appeals, especially to the artists of her generation who have a huge responsibility: that of demolishing the house of ill-fame and rebuilding something better and more honest. Her contemporaries come from a generation
which was, according to her, betrayed in the late forties and fifties by the domination of McCarthyism. She goes on to say:

"We were ceaselessly told after all to be everything which mutilates youth: to be silent to be ignorant: to be without unsanctioned opinions to the complaint and above all else obedient to all the ideas which are in fact the dregs of an age we were taught that imitational activity in behalf of changing this world was nothing but an expressions among other things of our “neurotic compulsions” about our own self dissatisfaction because our mothers dominated our fathers or some such [lie] as that. We were told in celebrated liberations of repressions that the repression of the urge to protest against war was surely the only respectable repressions left in the universe "(1962, P.33).

Wilkerson (1986) refers to Hansberry's play as touching “the vibrating nerve of a country on the verge of change and a people on the move” (P. 444). Hansberry’s characters are human beings but they retain their racial integrity and pride. If the whites were not for integration; well, then the blacks too will oppose attempts at integration but will demand with great vigor that their separate identity be recognized and respected. Walter, rising to the height of the human dignity, tells Lindner that they are a proud people and will protect their self-respect. When Hansberry produced her play, such thoughts were far away from the minds of the black people. But she was able to sense the mood of her people and gauge their strength in any struggle. Bought and sold as cattle, the Negro slave was long treated as a beast of burden. But things changed after the emancipation. Slowly the idea, that the black is not only an American citizen but also that he had made considerable contribution to American prosperity and culture, is being recognized by white as well as black.

Besides the socio-economic problems faced by the blacks, Hansberry has placed the problems by the blacks issuing from the generation gap. The older generation is represented by a single person Lena younger, while her children and daughter-in-law represent the younger generation. Between the two there is inevitable gap. But the gap is not an unbridgeable one. Lena is the head of the family in every sense of the word. She is old-fashioned and traditional, whereas Walter and Beneatha are modern fashionable and rather bold. Walter is vain boasting, disproportionately ambitious, self-centered and egoistic. He is very poor in judging people, and trusts unworthy and unreliable fellows. Beneath too needs smacking by her mother. She is brash, selfish, hasty and rather romantic in presence of her two suitors. Lena, though old-fashioned, proves herself to be exemplary in terms of moral values. Extraordinary courage, absolute honesty, selfless love, generosity resilience and great power of endurance mark her behavior and character. These differences, in character and behavior, are due to big gulf between the older generation which has respected values, and the new generation which has very little concern for values.

Hansberry expresses many political and sociological views in Raisin in the Sun. On the surface, A Raisin in the Sun is about the relentless struggle of an African American family to move from the Ghetto to a decent locality. However, it also presents wide array of struggles, conflicts and clashes. Sometime, the author touches upon the conflict and clash of dreams and sometimes she touches upon conflicts and clashes of race as well as generation gap. The play also tells the tale of African-American’s struggle to attain, secure, and define their identity in the face of systemic socio-economic racism. To conclude, authors has succeeded in telling these painful truths to a society unaccustomed to rigorous self-criticism and still receives its praise is a testimony to her skill as a successful writer and an activist.
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