

# American dream in a raisin in the sun essay



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CHAPTER III: The Impact of Identity on Dreams - 1. Identity in the Sight of Other People In actual fact, people have a certain view or conception about what somebody is. This view is quite different from what the individual himself has. But then the harm in all this is that this state of affairs has a great impact on what an individual is supposed to become in life especially when he doesn't have a great sense of objectivity or when he is not determined to achieve his life goal regardless of the opposition or the influence exerted upon them by society...

Often times, this conception of somebody akes him loose his self-confidence and try to comply with what others want him to be or think he is. In trying to reajust his nature in order to harmonize his life with other people's view, he twists his own identity and becomes somebody else than who he is in actual fact. This is what we notice through the character of George Murchison who despite his belonging to a certain race, tried to behave like a member of another race because he didn't have a great sense of Africanness

Sometimes, because of the conception they have of other people, they would try to compel them to behave in a certain way.

The white society always try then to determine the kind of life Black people are supposed to lead. This can be seen through the novel Invisible Man where the protagonist struggles hard to break from the mold crafted and held together by white society throughout the novel. The stereotypes and expectations of a racist society compel blacks to behave only in certains ways, never allowing them to act according to their own will. Even the actions of black activits seeking equality are manipulated as if they were marionettes on strings.

Throughout the novel *The Invisible Man*, the protagonist encounters this situation and although he strives to achieve his own identity in society, his determination is that it is impossible. When he returns to Harlem, Tod Clifton has disappeared. When the narrator finds him, he realizes that Clifton has become disillusioned with the Brotherhood, through manipulation and has quit. Clifton is selling dancing Sambo dolls on the street, mocking the organization he once believed in. He is shot to death by a police officer in a scuffle.

At Clifton's funeral, the narrator rallies crowds to win back his former widespread Harlem support and delivers a rousing speech, but he is censured by the Brotherhood for praising a man who would sell such dolls. Walking along the street one day, the narrator is spotted by Ras and roughed up by his men. He buys sunglasses and a hat as a disguise, and is mistaken for a man named Rinehart in a number of different scenarios: first, as a lover, then, a hipster, a gambler, a briber, and, finally, as a reverend. He sees that Rinehart has adapted to white society, at the cost of his own identity.

This causes the narrator to see that his own identity is not of importance to the Brotherhood, but only his blackness. He decides to take his grandfather's dying advice to "overcome 'em with yeses, undermine 'em with grins, agree 'em to death and destruction.. and "yes" 'em when in reality it is crumbling. Just like Ras puts on his sunglasses and hat and is mistaken for somebody else, in the same perspective, people mistake Beneatha for somebody she is not especially because of her hair, her Nigerian clothes gifted onto her by Asagai.

As they consider her to be who she is not, they will expect or even compel her to behave as the one they mistake her for. 2. One's Own Conception on Identity The poem "Harlem" captures the tension between the need for black expression and the impossibility of that expression because of American society's oppression of its black population. In the poem, Hughes asks whether a "dream deferred" withers up "like a raisin in the sun." His lines confront the racist, dehumanizing attitude prevalent in American society before the civil rights movement of the 1960s that black desires and ambitions were, at best, unimportant and should be ignored, and at worst, should be forcibly resisted. His closing rhetorical question - "Or does [a dream deferred] explode?" - is incendiary, a bold statement that the suppression of black dreams might result in an eruption. It implicitly places the blame for this possible eruption on the oppressive society that forces the dream to be deferred.

Hansberry's reference to Hughes' poem in her play's title highlights the importance of dreams in *A Raisin in the Sun* and the struggle that her characters faced to realize their individual dreams, a struggle inextricably tied to the more fundamental black dream of equality in America. These dreams functioned in positive ways, by lifting their minds from their hard work and tough lifestyle, and in negative ways, by creating in them even more dissatisfaction with their present situation.

For the most part, however, the negative dreams come from placing emphasis on materialistic goals rather than on familial pride and happiness. Therefore, while the Youngers shared a common dream of having a better life, each family member had their own dream in obtaining it. Unfortunately,

their dreams had been deferred for so long that their frustration almost succeeds in destroying the ultimate dream. This frustration is best summed up when Beneatha, who has lost faith in her brother, says, " Well, we are dead now. All the talk about dreams and sunlight that goes on in this house.

It's all dead now" (1892). The Double Jeopardy of Being Black and Female

The questions of gender and race have made black women's path an everyday struggle against the double Jeopardy that they are involved into, for being both black and white. The women characters of Lorraine

Hansberrys *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959) are not absent of this double form of discrimination; however, as the racial issue is more at stake than gender in the play, the last one is usually forgotten in the analysis of the most part of the critics.

As race can never be let apart of gender, since they are two intermingled issues in the plight of black women, we intend to analyze the mplications of the two terms in the lives of the women characters of Hansberrys play.

Although *A Raisin in the Sun* does not focus in one single woman character as the great heroin of the plot, which usually happens in the majority of works by black in the construction of her play. Race in her play is like one point of a strand, but it cannot fulfill its purpose of becoming a knot if it did not have gender, the other point.

This metaphor is to emphasize that the black women characters of her play come from three generations of struggles in which it is impossible to dissociate race of gender. Lorraine Hansberry was born on May 19, 1930 in Chicago, Illinois, and she died of cancer at the age of thirty-four on January

12, 1965. Although she had a very brief career, in this short period of time Hansberry called literary critics' attention to her work and was reminded for two important achievements: she was the first woman to have a play to be produced on Broadway and the first black playwright to win the New York Drama Critics' Award for Best Play of 1959.

To bind Africa in America is what black American woman writers have also pursued in their writings. Since the past generations, of Zora Neale Hurston and Lorraine Hansberry to the recent ones, of Alice Walker and Toni Morrison, the African heritage has worked as a key element for black women to rediscover their roots. However, beyond blackness, there is a second element in the realm of struggles of the African-American woman writer: a commitment to their gender, to the special position of being a black woman in American society.

On the one hand, women share the same plight as of black men, being repudiated and usually granted inferior jobs, suffering the retaliation for making part of a group whose skin color constitutes enough reason for being let apart in society. On the other hand, they assume an antagonist position in their relations to the opposite sex, including their black counterparts, since they share the jeopardy of being a woman in a society that privileges male individuals. The approach of feminism by black women deserves an analysis of their own.

Of course the first and second wave of feminism granted relevant contributions to the struggle of black women, but it was not enough to touch them in a pragmatic way. White women were advocating what they

considered elementary rights, such as the approval of the Women's Rights and Women's Suffrage. But as Bell Hooks states in her essay "Black Women: Shaping Feminist Theory" (1984), black women live sexism in their daily experience, in opposite to some white women who became aware of this oppression through the influence of the feminist movement: ...

There are white women who had never considered resisting male dominance until the feminist movement created an awareness that they could and should... They do not understand, cannot even imagine, that black women, as well as other groups of women who live daily in oppressive situations, often acquire an awareness of patriarchal politics from their lived experience, just as they develop strategies of resistance (even though they may not resist on a sustained or organized basis.) (Hooks 277, 278).

As Hooks observes in the end of this quotation, black women did not organize themselves in a kind of movement, as the white feminists did, probably because the white feminist movement did not cause a great impact in their lives, since it did not bring in anything different of what they experienced in their everyday lives. As in this work we propose to discuss the intersection of race and gender in Hansberry's play, we pass to the analysis of the play itself, to demonstrate how these two terms, and turn to be strategies these women had to overcome their "dream deferred".

As the three black women characters of the play (Mama, Ruth and Beneatha) constitute our object of analysis in this work, we are focusing in the double jeopardy they are involved into: to be black and woman. Although would be unsuitable to affirm that the three women of the play correspond to three

different generations, since in general there is a 25 year period between one and another, (Ruth is in her thirties, Beneatha in her twenties), there is a strong conflict of ideas between them.

Even between Ruth and Beneatha, there is a deep abyss separating the way each one conceives the world, and such conflict is related to the realm of the ideas. Since the first scene in which Lena Younger appears, she is presented as "Mama", then we, as readers, immediately picture her in our minds: she is the "Big Mother" of a traditional black-American family; in other words, she is the matriarch of this family. When we get to know her better, by the middle of the play, we realize that she is a much bigger mother than we have ever thought.

She is the one who is able to abandon her own dreams, if that meant her children's happiness. As a widow in the play, Mama is going to receive money from an insurance that her husband had left her after many years of effective work. In the role of a protective mother, Mama intends to use part of the money to help her daughter Beneatha to pay her studies in a Medicine course and she dreams of using the other part in a down payment to buy a house with a yard, (for her grandson plays), in a better neighborhood.

But the ten thousand dollars of the insurance money was the starting point for many fights in the family, so, after many disagreements, she was able to give up her dreams, if she had the chance to make their children happy. The presence of an elder represents wisdom and respect for a black family. Mama, with her living experience, is a point of reference to perpetuate the

values of her black family, thus, she can be considered the Younger's elder, the one in charge of carrying on the tradition of their folk.

Although Mama and her children do not share the same worldview about many subjects, especially those related to blacks tradition and religion, in some way her family expects her to be a kind of anchor that is going to point them the best way to recover their dreams. Instead of trying to achieve their dreams by themselves, Mama's children (Walter and Beneatha) are completely dependant on the insurance money to perceive their ideals of running a liquor business and studying Medicine, respectively.

The money itself was just an excuse they had to continue expecting the final decisions from Mama, who was supposed to choose whom she was going to help or not. Besides being the strong matriarch of this black family, Mama is entirely concerned to the preservation of her ancestors' memory. Actually, the presence of an ancestor is a recurrent theme in African American tradition. As Toni Morrison observed in her essay "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation" (1984), in Black literature "There is always an elder there.

And these ancestors are not just parents, they are sort of timeless people whose relationships to the characters are benevolent, instructive, and protective, and they provide a certain kind of wisdom" (Morrison 330). In Mama's example, her ancestors' presence are evoked in special moments, as it happens in the end of the play, when Walter, in a legendary moment, expels Lindner, the white man who tried to persuade almost rhetorical tone: "I testify before God that my children got all the energy of the dead!" (Hansberry 19).

From her speech we realize that Mama, in some way, found in her ancestors' memory the inspiration to keep fighting and believing. For Mama, Big Walter, her dead husband, represents the mythical ancestor whom she always refers to search for inspiration. Mama had affirmed that Big Walter was a man "who couldn't never catch up with his dreams" (Hansberry 46). When she finally decided, almost in the end of the play, to give Walter Lee the money he wanted to run the liquor business, she probably reminded of her husband's dreams about their children: Always wanted them to have something - be something.

That's where Brother gets all these notions, I reckon. Big Walter used to say.... "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 worth while. "

(Hansberry 46). She could not give up Big Walter's dream of seeing his children "be something", even if that meant to put all the remaining of the insurance money in her son's hands, passing for him the leadership of the family. Although Mama was the strong matriarch of this black family, she believed Walter Lee had a moral duty accomplish in memory of his dead father.

The particular way Mama perceives the world is entirely related to the religion she embraced during all her life. The image we picture of Mama, when singing the spirituals of her church, is of those protestant black women owners of strong and powerful voices, who are entirely devoted to the rituals and beliefs of their religion. The religious woman turns to a radical defender of her beliefs, especially if she finds any dissidence inside her own house. In one of her arguments with Beneatha, she was blindly furious when her

daughter affirmed she was going to become a doctor and “ God hasn’t got a thing to do with it” (Hansberry 50).

She did not accept such blasphemy from her own daughter, especially in a traditionally Christian family, and then she said: “ Now - you say after me, in my mother’s house there is still God... There are some ideas we ain’t going to have in this house. Not long as I am at the head of this family’ (Hansberry 51). In this passage, she uses her power of a matriarch to intimidate Beneatha and makes her repeats what her mother believes. Once more we can perceive the struggle of ideas between two different generations, in which the head of the family assumes a unilateral speech, instead of using a dialogue to solve her familiar conflicts.

Ruth is Mama’s daughter-in-law who seems to represent the standard of a submissive black woman. now it is apparent that life has been little that she expected, and disappointment has already begun to hang in her face” (Hansberry 24). Although one can consider her as a very passive woman in this play, when the author introduces her to the reader we discover that she is also pursuing her dream, imagining that “ in a few years, before thirty-five even, she will be known among her people as a settled woman. ” In a way, she is making true her dream of being settled in a house and receiving the respect of her group.

Another important point that hould be considered in relation to Ruth is that she is not the submissive wife that she might look. When she discovers that she is pregnant for the second time, she is pretty much aware about the difficulties she may have to raise her child, under her bad economic position

as a poor black woman. We realize that she is capable of ending up with her pregnancy, even though she came from a protestant tradition. In this way we notice that she is ready to break with her familys values or religion, if that meant a more stable life.

As Mama said, “ When the world gets ugly enough – a woman will do anything for her family. The part that’s already living” (Hansberry 75).

Making an abortion would not grant Ruth the role of an emancipated woman, but being able to decide about her own future reveals independence from her family. In the end Ruth decides not to make the abortion, especially when she finds support in her husband to raise their children. Turning now to Beneatha Younger, she is in her twenties and is the stereotype of a revolutionary girl in the play.

At the same time that she aims to break with every idea that came to her from the outside, without her own choice of them, she is in search of her identity, in an attempt to recover black eople’s tradition. One of the paradigms that Beneatha is engaged to break in the play is concerned to women’s Job. She dreams about becoming a doctor, and for her family, especially to her brother Walter Lee, she should not aspire to such high position: “ Who the hell told you you had to be a doctor? If you so crazy ’bout messing ’round with sick people – then go be a nurse like other women – or Just get married and be quiet... (Hansberry 38). Walter Lee, with all his chauvinism regarding women’s professional career, believes women should aspire to secondary roles in society; thus, being a doctor would be too uch for them, especially to a black woman as Beneatha. The fact that Beneatha was a black woman worsened her acceptance as a future professional in

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society. When her brother argues about her dream of becoming a doctor, he is amazed to see her concern to achieve a so high position. If a man as himself, in all his potentiality, was only able to get a job as a chauffeur, how could his sister aspire to such a position?

He would not be surprised if she got a job as a maid, the same of his wife's. For him, it was hard to accept women occupying higher positions, especially if this one was his own sister. As Angela Davis calls the attention to in her essay "Women, Race and Class" (1981), the taboo concerning black women's jobs should not be so disproportionate in comparison to their "white sisters" (129). As Davis states, due to black women's worse conditions of life, they experienced work outside their as a way to achieve professional accomplishment.

As black women first experienced work in the role of slaves, they were assigned with the black workwomen stereotype and it was hard to get rid of it. Of course black men also experienced work for the first time under a slavery condition, but the fact that the whole ideology of the nineteenth century conceived women as "nurturing mothers and gentle companions and housekeepers for their husbands" contributed to grant black women the role of "anomalies" (Davis 129). For society at that time, black women were escaping from their real duty in the family, assuming a place that had always been given to men.

Besides being a revolutionary, Beneatha is also in search for her black tradition. She finds in Joseph Asagai, a Nigerian student she met on campus, a possibility to build her bridge with Africa. She is the only one in the family

who seems to be worried about recovering their roots. In her search for her identity, after being criticized by Asagai for having mutilated her hair, she started a process of acculturation, dressing alike Africans, more specifically, as a Nigerian woman. Beneatha tried to appropriate the African culture even if it was in an external way, with her clothes and her hair.

Unfortunately, she chooses the wrong partner to go out when she decided to change her look. George Murchison did not understand her attitude, and she calls him an assimilationist. When Ruth asked her what assimilation meant, she came with a definition: It means someone who is willing to give up his own culture and submerge himself completely in the dominant, and in this case oppressive culture! (Hansberry 81) As she was experiencing diversity and the possibility of meeting her African tradition, she did not want to take the risk to be called an assimilationist herself.

Acculturation and assimilation are two important terms in Alterity Studies and they are usually referred when black-Americans incorporate African tradition elements into their culture. Acculturation can be defined as a process in which two cultures coexist. In this way, one group brings in elements of another to join the cultural background of their people. These elements can be customs, rituals, cultural manifestations that, for one reason or another, start making part of the tradition of a group. It is a very common process that usually happens when there is some interest of one cultural group for the other.

In the specific case of the United States, the attempt of black Americans to return to their roots through the introduction of elements of African heritage

into their culture can be seen as acculturation. The second term, assimilation, is also related to the idea of an intersection of two cultures, but, in this case, there is the superposition of one culture upon the other. In this case, what usually happens is not just an introduction of elements of one culture into another, but also an assimilation of values.

Unlike acculturation, in an attempt to really look similar, the assimilationist culture gives up some of its more traditional elements, in a relation of exchange with the other. Assimilation in American culture can happen, for instance, when blacks start to adopt values or elements of the white-European culture, in spite of their own. Finally, we could state that the three words, a poet from the Harlem Renaissance who had a great influence in Hansberry's career. His words open up her play when he spouted: "What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up, like a raisin in the sun?... Maybe it just sags, like a heavy load. Or does it explode?" By analyzing the woman characters of Hansberry's play, we perceive that each one pursued her dream in the plot: Mama dreamt of a house with a yard and her family's happiness, Ruth dreamt with the possibility of being known as a settled woman to have condition to raise her children, and finally Beneatha dreamt with the possibility of being recognized as a professional woman; but primarily, she was in search of her black identity.

The woman characters of Hansberry's play are situated in a particular "locus", where their gender and their blackness make up their future. They represent three types of black women: the mother, the housewife, and the

revolutionary, being this last one capable of breaking old paradigms to build new ones, according to her own belief. Instead of a struggle of sexes, in the end of the play we realize these three types of women are essential to keep men as Walter Lee, George Murchison or Asagai alive. Above their various contradictions and struggles, the three women show us the strength to keep fighting, influencing and building their men's up.