

## RACIAL AND CULTURAL TENSION IN LORRAINE HANSBERRY'S A RAISIN IN THE SUN

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### **Abstract**

*The culture in which we are brought up shapes our traits and identity. When people move from one place to another, they get acquainted with new cultures. Then, they vacillate on the conflicting modes of dilemma – whether to follow the new culture or not. Cultural conflict arises when people cannot discard the original culture they carry from their birth. This paper explores how an African- American family confronts racial discrimination and culture clash in America, and how they react against the racial injustice. The voices that African –America people raise against racial discrimination and segregation are overtly or covertly represented in the African- American literature, as in the play- “A Raisin in the Sun”. This study explores the conflict between American culture and African culture in the play conceptualizing the theoretical frame work of cultural studies developed by Geert Hofstede and Edward Hall. This study answers the question: how does the African- American family (Younger family) confront the culture clash, and combat against racial discrimination in the play? The conflict between the Younger family and the white representative indicates the racial and culture clash between the African and the America culture as dramatized in the play.*

**Key words:** tension, discrimination, clash, conflict, racial, identity crisis

### **Racial Discrimination and Identity crisis**

The African-American Civil Rights movement alludes to the social movement in the United States aiming at outlawing racial discrimination against black Americans and restoring fundamental human rights to them. The emergence of the Black power movement enlarges the aims of the civil Rights movement to include racial dignity, economic and political self- sufficiency and freedom from oppression by the dominant white Americans. The movement is characterized by major campaigns of civil resistance. Daniel C. Thomson highlights the relevance of Negro protest :

The Negro protest is not simply against widespread deprivations *per se*, but rather against "relative deprivations," or barriers designed to prevent them from enjoying certain rights and privileges that are regarded as ethically, morally, and socially legitimate for other Americans. As a rule, the Negro protest has been directed against customs and laws designed to place unusual limits on their freedom, threaten their security as citizens, prevent them from receiving the recognition and status they might merit, and subject them to indignities and rejection. The Negro protest is, itself, a clear endorsement of the "American Creed" and a reaffirmation of the faith Negroes have in the democratic process. (20)

The leading figure of African- American civil Rights movement is Martin Luther King, Jr. He advances the civil rights movement in the United States and around the world using non-violent methods following the teachings of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi. In 1955, a black woman, Rosa Parks, was arrested because she did not give up her seat to a white person on a bus. This incident

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made many blacks angry. They made a trenchant protest by boycotting the city's buses. King led the protest of boycott. In the 1960s, King and his organization started more and more protest march in Washington D.C. Hundreds of thousands of Americans, black and white took part. At the Lincoln Memorial, he held his most famous speech: "*I Have a Dream.*" More than 200,000 blacks and whites gathered before Lincoln Memorial to hear speeches and protest racial injustice. King makes a plea for racial justice and freedom against segregation and discrimination:

I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia; the sons of former slaves owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood. I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a desert state sweltering with the heat of injustice and oppression will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice. (76)

King's speech embodies the very principles of peace and non-violence as a method of social protest against racial or color discrimination and segregation. He motivates people to employ their creative protest in a proper way without degenerating into physical violence. King wants to lift the nation from the quicksand of racial injustice to the solid rock of brotherhood as Negroes people are deprived of voting rights, school education, visiting hotels and motels, and many other opportunities. They are deprived of equal rights, emancipation and justice. He firmly stands against slavery of which blacks are victims. His protest fundamentally gears ahead towards the liberation of blacks from slavery. In his protest speech, he focuses on the liberty of the people in the absence of which we can't anticipate the development of human civilization.

Gandhi and Martin Luther King meet together at many points. King manipulates activities like civil disobedience and other non-violent means to suit the goal as Gandhi undertakes for the same. For a large segment of the Negro community, the social use of protest is viewed as the ultimate device in effecting change. But such a view makes protest irrelevant and meaningless. Protest should be something more than that. It should, at best, be an interpretation of the historical struggle going on around us which not only points out the rank inequalities in the distribution of democratic liberties, but the reaffirmation of a group to advance. Then, social protest is all too simple a formula for the intricate complex problems of the Negro in his struggle for equal citizenship and material well-being. Furthermore, in some instances, social protest is not only calculated to produce immediate change, but is often nothing more than a safety valve for pent up frustration and resentment against institutions and social malpractices. Thomas L. Millard highlights Negro- protest:

The Negro must learn less about how to make protest and much more about individual responsibility and its binding validity on social conduct. Any genuine improvement in the Negro's status and social opportunity will hinge on this dog- ma in social morality, far more than on the protestations of human wants. .... Indeed, this realization is becoming more apparent, and Negro leadership can no more ignore this than we as an out-group can ignore the social inequities we have had to suffer. Responsible behavior is as integral an element in our struggle for equality and human dignity as is our effort to agitate for social reforms. (93)

The heavy influx and congregation of Negroes and other disfavored minorities have strained to the breaking point of the existing social structure with the obvious result in inferior schools, overcrowded housing, unemployment, disease and health problems with further reduction in the traditional operation of communal checks and balances in social control. They want to extricate themselves from the racial discrimination and get freedom from slavery and injustice.

### **Culture clash and Racism**

Lorraine Hansberry is an African – American writer who was born in Chicago, America. The title of the poem is taken from Langston Hughes's poem "Harlem" (A Dream Deferred ) to fulfill Hughes's

vision of establishing racial identity of black community as a writer. "...It is just that in a great sense of the word, anytime, anyplace, good art transcends land, race, nationality, and color drops away. If you are a good writer, in the end neither blackness nor whiteness makes a difference to readers." (qtd. In Hansbery, 1541)

A Raisin in the Sun dramatizes the situation of a poor African-American family living on the South Side of Chicago. An opportunity to escape from poverty comes in the form of life insurance check that the Youngers family receives upon her husband's death. Lena Younger's children, Walter and Beneatha, each have their plans for the money. The oldest son, Walter Younger wishes to invest in a liquor store. The younger sister, Beneatha Younger, a college student, wants to use the money for medical school. Lena wants to buy a house for the family and finance Beneatha's medical school with the money.

Beneatha Younger is the source of the many of the new ideas and philosophies that infiltrate the family's home. Currently in college, she is constantly challenging the notions of culture, race, gender, and religion that her family has grown up with. She is dating two men who represent very different aspects of African-American culture. George Murchison, the first, is her wealthy African-American classmate who attempts to assimilate African culture with American values. But Beneatha does not want to shun the culture of her origin. She always intends to uphold it without getting influenced with American culture. But George repudiates African culture as a rugged heritage though he also belongs to the African origin. He wants to submerge himself in the dominant culture of America ignoring the oppressive culture of African culture. The conflict between them represents cultural clash that exists in the play. The class cultural tensions are inherent in their argumentative dialogues:

BENEATHA: Because I hate assimilationist Negroes!

RUTH: Well, what does it mean?

BENEATHA: (Cutting George off and staring at him as she replies to Ruth): 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!

GEORGE: Oh, dear, dear, dear! Here we go! A lecture on the African Past! On our Great West African Heritage! In one second we hear all about the great Ashanti empires. [...] Let's face it, baby, your heritage is nothing but a bunch of ragedy-assed spirituals and some grass huts (1571, Hensbarry)

Asagai is her second boyfriend, a college student who is from Nigeria. He is different from George's ideas and philosophies. He is not assimilationist like George. He intends to adopt the oppressive culture of his origin. Therefore, he always submerges himself in African cultures and rituals. Through Asagai, Beneatha is able to learn more about her African heritage. He gives her Nigerian robes and music, encourages her idealistic aspirations, and even invites her to return to Nigeria with him to practice medicine there. His desire to return home indicates his attachment to the culture of his origin. Beneatha remains happy to wear Nigerian robes as she also does have close affinity towards the African culture:

BENEATHA: What did you bring?

ASAGAI: (handing her the package): Open it and see.

BENEATHA: (Eagerly opening the package and drawing out some records and the Colourful robes of a Nigerian woman ): Oh, Asagail..... you got them

for me. How beautiful..... and the records too !( She lifts out the robes and runs to the mirror with them and holds the drapery up in front of herself ) (1561)

Beneatha intends to embrace the culture of her origin as her boy friend Asagai does. The fondness of their original African culture remains deep rooted inside them though they live in America. Their dislike to American culture implies the cultural clash inherent in their conversation. Walter Younger does not want to challenge the present system as Beneatha does. Instead, he wishes to progress up the social ladder into a higher class. He is unsatisfied with his job as a chauffeur, and wants a big house, a nice car, and pearls for his wife, and an office job. In short, he desires the bourgeoisie lifestyle being influenced with American dream . Walter's idolization of wealth and power actually creates a deep hunger within him for change, but as long as obstacles like racism keep him stagnated, his hopes and dreams fester when his mother morally objects to the idea of a liquor store :

WAITER: I am going out. I want to go off somewhere and be by myself for a while.

MAMA: I am sorry about your liquor store, son. It just was not the thing for us to do. That I what I want to tell you about.

WALTER: I got to go out, Mama.(1567)

Lena Younger gives her oldest son, Walter responsibility over the rest of the insurance money, asking him to put away a significant portion for his sister's medical school education only after having made the down payment on a house in a predominantly white neighborhood

The real facet of racial discrimination becomes prominent in the plot as an issue that the Youngers cannot avoid. The governing body of the Youngers' new neighborhood, the Clybourne Park Improvement Association, sends Mr. Lindner to persuade them not to move into the all-white Clybourne Park neighborhood:

LINDER : [...] But you have 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. And at the moment overwhelming majority of our people out there feel that people get along better, take more of a common interest in the life of the community, when they share a common background. I want you to believe me when I tell you that race prejudice simply does not enter into it. It is a matter of the people of Clybourne Park believing, rightly or wrongly, as I say, that for the happiness of all concerned that our negro families are happier when they live in their own communities.

Mr. Lindner and the people he represents can only see the color of the Younger family's skin in their community. So he offers to bribe the Youngers to keep them away from moving to the white community threatening to tear apart the Younger family and the values for which it stands. Mr. Lindner in his second visit to Younger family openly threatens them not to move into the new community of white people. It shows the racial prejudice and the utter clash between the white and the black represented by Mr. Lindner and the Younger family respectively:

LINDER: What do you think you are going to gain by moving into a neighborhood where you just are not wanted and where some elements – well- people can get awful worked up when they feel that their whole way of life and everything they have ever worked for is

threatened .

WALTER : Get out [..] Get out. (1591)

Ultimately, the Youngers respond to this discrimination with defiance and strength. They combat against the racial prejudice by not accepting the bribe they offer, and not responding to the message of Park community positively. The mother of the family, Lena Younger makes a bold decision to shift to the new residence against the desire of the white community though Mrs. Johnson threatens them not to do so, “ Of course, I think it is wonderful how our folk keeps on pushing out. You hear some of these Negroes round here talking about how they don’t go where they ain’t wanted and all that..” (1581) . The play powerfully demonstrates that the way to deal with discrimination is to stand up to it and reassert one’s dignity in the face of it rather than allow it to pass unchecked. The cultural tension, and the defiance against racial prejudice reaches its climax in the final part of the play.

### Conclusion

The racial discrimination between whites and blacks in America has become a great issue in African – American literature. Among many African- American writers, Lorraine Hansberry is one of them, who also raises her issues against racial prejudice in her play- *A Raisin in the Sun*. She raises both issues – culture clash and racial tension simultaneously. The strong defiance shown in the final part of the play motivates the blacks to combat for justice and human rights. The class conflict is evident through the play in the form of racial discrimination from Karl Linder and Mrs. Johnson towards the Younger Family. Younger family represents the black community whereas Karl Linder and Mrs. Johnson stand for the white community. This paper analyses the strong arguments between two communities indicating the racial clash and cultural tension that exist in the play. Lena Younger’s bold decision to move into the new accommodation against the desire of the white community shows a revolutionary reaction against racial discrimination prevalent in America. This play sets an example of social protest against injustice and racial prejudice. It cherishes the voice of humanity advocating the democratic norms and values- liberty, justice and human rights. The pathos of the Negroes and their defiance shown in the play opens a new avenue for the blacks to carry on their persistent struggle against injustice, inequality, racial and cultural discrimination and oppressive behaviors against them in the days to come.

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