

Lorraine Hansberry: Giving Voice to the Oppressed Silence

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One of the most celebrated black playwrights in America to break the color barrier in the theatre was activist and feminist Lorraine Vivian Hansberry, who was born on May 19, 1930, in Chicago, Illinois. She was the youngest by seven years of four children. Her parents, Nannie Perry Hansberry and Carl Augustus Hansberry, reared their children in a middle class, black community in the segregated Southside of Chicago. Thus Hansberry felt that she existed in a kind of in-between space which she described in her biography To Be Young, Gifted and Black, "The world in fact is divided in half as it is lived by me" (Hansberry 30). She wrote in her journal:

There are those who think one of the liveliest of types...and, still, there are the others, those latter-day images of the children of my youth who found me curious then and still do. A serious odd talking kid who could neither jump double dutch nor understand their games, but who classically envied them (Hansberry 38)

Hansberry did not retreat from the harsh realities of her life which taught her a lesson at every moment of her life. Her childhood frustrations and anxieties made her grow sensitive. She was greatly disappointed because she was not getting her share of love from the elders, as she expected. These memories are recollected in her biography:

The last born is an object toy which comes in years, when brothers and sisters who are seven, ten, twelve years older are old enough to appreciate it rather than poke out its eyes. They do not mind diapering you the first two years, but by the time you are five are a pest that has to be attended to in the washroom and 'sat with' at night. You are not a person. You are a nuisance who is not particular fun anymore. Consequently, you swiftly learn to play alone (Hansberry 48-49)

Life was not meaningless for the Hansberrys. They had faced many challenges of life with courage. Mr. Hansberry never missed an opportunity to encourage their children's intellect and tell them how the universe came into being. The family had pleasant outings even in secluded Chicago and Hansberry recorded in her biographical account:

Those were, of course, the best times of all because the grownups were reminded of having been children in the South. And it was also cool and sweet to be on the grass and there was usually the scent of freshly cut lemons or melons in the air (Hansberry 50)

On her fifth Christmas morning, Hansberry was stunned on seeing a white fur coat as a gift. She was aware of the fact that the expensive white coat, hat and matching miff spelled only trouble. She was cognizant of her classmates' hostility to show-of-wealth and their repudiation of her as an outsider. Much of rancor aroused among her hostile neighbors because of her handsome clothes and comfortable home. The vengeful dealings of these compatriots did not obviate her admiration for them. She revered their courage and their resistance. She acquired an admiration for the rebels.

Hansberry felt discontent for her ghetto acquaintances which they would never understand. She was rarely allowed to participate in their communal games. She also envied their freedom to be themselves on Saturday afternoons. But the most of all she envied was their willingness to fight. It was this envy which prepared Hansberry's own battles, against discrimination and justice.

In addition to her alienation, Hansberry sometimes felt with her peers, she experienced alienation from white America, when, in 1938, her family attempted to move into an all-white neighborhood only to be greeted by a brick thrown through the family's window and other harassment. Hansberry later described it as "hellishly hostile white neighborhood". Despite Carl Hansberry's successful efforts to legally end this discrimination, he took his case with the help of the NAACP, to the U.S. Supreme Court. Her father challenged the city's Jim Crow housing laws and won an anti segregation case before the Illinois Supreme Court. The family was forced, after only a few months, to move back to the Southside, having been evicted from their home in Washington Park. Hansberry's experience shaped her understanding of racial discrimination and inequalities that continued to plague black Americans in the 1940s and 1950s, even as opportunities for economic upward mobility expanded for same. She learned to fight white supremacy and that Negroes were spit at, cursed and pummeled with insults and physical acts of violence.

In protest to segregation her parents sent her to public schools rather private ones. Hansberry attended Betsy Ross Grammar School and then in 1944, she was enrolled in Englewood High School. Both schools were predominantly white. Hansberry had to fight racism from the day she walked through the doors of Betsy Ross Elementary School. The high school experience left permanent impression upon Hansberry's personal and social development. She recalls how she and her other well-dressed Negro students stayed inside the grounds and exchanged taunts and insults with a white mob outside. The arrival of carloads of young blacks from the ghetto school made her more contemptuous. The derision which Hansberry and her well-bred circle regarded the tasteless clothing and ugly hairstyles of their contemporary evaporated into insignificance before the admiration engendered by their willingness to fight. She had felt a resurgence of admiration for her poverty-stricken schoolmates of earlier years.

Some of the eminent black leaders as W.E.B. Du Bois, Paul Robeson, Langston Hughes, Jesse Owens, and Duke Ellington, frequented her home. The visitors sparked her young creative imagination. Hansberry was greatly influenced by W.E.B. Du Bois who was named "Father of Pan Africanism". He was one of the founders of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). He was a well-known spokesman for the legal rights of African Americans. She was also fascinated by another intuitive artist, Langston Hughes who wrote poems of dream deferred, drying up like "a raisin in the sun" of the "ancient, dusky rivers" of Africa. In Paul Robeson, who had gained reputation as the defender of the oppressed, Hansberry witnessed the possible unions of politics and art. Out of these luminaries, Hansberry was extremely impressed with Langston Hughes's poetry, especially how he reflected the lives of black people with a dream deferred drying up like "a raisin in the sun". These writers became intellectual influences when she became a writer.

Hansberry was greatly influenced by her parents. She loved her father dearly. Carl A. Hansberry was a successful real estate broker, who later contributed large sum of money to NAACP and the urban league. Her mother, Nannie Perry was a schoolteacher who entered

politics and became a ward committeewoman. Carl Hansberry was acquainted with the problems faced by the black people in the segregated Chicago. The main problem for blacks in Chicago is to buy a house into a white neighborhood. They had to fight a legal battle. But Hansberrys defended themselves. Hansberry's father successfully brought his case all way to the Supreme Court. But the Illinois Supreme Court had given right to the whites to thwart blacks from their neighborhoods. But he did not lose the hope of winning the case. He took the case in the Supreme Court and spent both his wealth and his energies.

At the age of fifty-one, Carl A. Hansberry died of cerebral hemorrhage. The death of her father caused a great impact on Hansberry. The insecurities of adolescence thrust Hansberry into great depression. With the passage of time, Hansberry raised her voice against the Republican Party, the free enterprise system, American justice and the possibility of democracy. Later she asserted, "American racism helped kill him".

During her teens in the high school, Hansberry had gained great pleasure from plays, Langston Hughes, and the blues. But she desperately missed her father and began to love her mother dearly. Through her teacher, she learned to love Shakespeare. She had been an average student absorbing impressions and her Wisconsin experiences reflected the contrast between her native intelligence and her inadequate education.

After graduating from high school in 1948, Hansberry attended the University of Wisconsin at Madison, where she further developed her interest in both theatre and politics. There she took classes in set design. She spent two years studying English, drama, art, and stage design at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, where she was active in the Henry Wallace campaign and president at the Young Progressive of America and the Labor Youth League, in 1949. The landscapes of Wisconsin, the changing scenery of the seasons and above all the white snow fascinated her. She reminisces, "She came and watched them fling their gifts to the ground...The snow was about the only thing that had not disappointed her in two years of college. The cold clean drifts of Wisconsin snow" (Hansberry 68)

She had her best friend in Edythe with whom she enjoyed late night discussions with her. This was described as, "Their room bluing with smoke, filling with the talk of politics, fascism, the meaning of life, god, boys and various other things". When she was about seventeen, she wandered into the University theatre one afternoon by 'accident'. She saw the production of Sean O'Casey's Juno and the Paycock. While sitting in the orchestra close to the stage and experienced a very different emotion. She writes:

The woman's voice, the howl, the shriek of misery fitted to a wail of poetry that consumed all my senses and all my awareness of human pains, endurance and the futility of it – I remember sitting there stunned with a melody that I thought might have been sung in different meter – the melody was one that I had known for a very long while (Hansberry 102-103)

She was also extremely fascinated by the manner in which he portrayed oppressed people. She writes:

The melody was one that I had known for a very long while. I was seventeen, and I did not think then of writing the melody as I knew it – in a different key; but I believe it entered my consciousness and stayed there (Woodard 109)

It is not accident that an Irish play should have spoken directly to this American black girl. Like Negro, the Irish have had their share of agony, injustice and oppression, and like the Negro, they gave expression to it in words, which merge poetry with music. Thus Hansberry recognized the same agonized cry against oppression – the same cry she herself heard, which her ancestors uttered through centuries.

At the end of her first play, Hansberry had found little of the enlightenment she had expected in the classroom. In classes where her artistic sensitivity and responsiveness to ideas were involved, she did well, in those requiring mathematical and scientific training, she did poorly because, “She found most of the classes unspeakably dull and irrelevant to anything she had ever had on her mind or expected to” (Hansberry 87)

Hansberry’s interest in theatre and actors increased day by day than her interest in studies at the University. During winter of 1949 and early 1950 she escaped to her loving haunt – the university theatre and continued playing truant. Later she wrote, “I was intrigued by the theatre. Mine was the same old story – sort of hanging around little acting groups, and developing the feeling and the theatre embraces everything I like all at one time” (Hansberry 74)

She lost her interest in studies and as a result her scholastic records were not brilliant. She understood the complexity of human nature. Even during the late 1940s Wisconsin boasted of a cosmopolitan enrollment, and the young girl whose social experience had hitherto been limited came into contact with people of many nationalities. It was here that she first met African students. It was here that she found them far more sophisticated than she had imagined, no less dedicated than herself to the liberation of the black man, but far more cognizant than she of historical and political complexities. Hansberry was fascinated by African culture and heritage. Outside the class room, she read Jome Kenyatta’s Facing Mount Kenya, W.E.B. Du Bois’ Black Folk Then and Now and many other books on Africa.

New York City had been a Mecca – a ‘holy’ place for most young Americans of talent and ambition to which they are drawn. Without getting a degree, she leaved Wisconsin and she turned towards this centre of American art and culture. Although she had not been yet fully conscious of what she wanted to do, but she was greatly elated by the opportunities for observation and participation which New York afforded. She was fascinated by the painting in Chicago. And later, she had taken lessons in painting at the art Institute of Chicago and later at Guddajara in Mexico. Hansberry’s soul was nurtured by the art galleries and museums of New York. Here interest in art and painting continued.

At that time the relations between the blacks and the whites were not satisfactory. Race, riots, arsons and lynching had been very prevalent. The major problems for Negroes had been housing accommodation. These things caused a great impact on the black people and these continued to be the same even in the 1950s.

Through this experience, Hansberry understands better the problems faced by the Negroes throughout the country. Again she had been to Wisconsin. The brutal condition of

blacks in the south sparked in her a feeling of discontentment, a battle against discrimination and justice.

Hansberry had keen insight into the struggles of African people for independence from colonialism. She clearly understood the growing domestic tension and racial tension which she later portrayed in her dramas. Chicago was a striking example of a city carved into strictly divided black and white neighborhoods. She minutely observed the issues and conflicts, such as poverty, discrimination, and the construction of African American racial identity. She listened to the cry of agonized people or to engage some child in conversation. After witnessing their troubles, Hansberry burnt with rage at the squalor. She always felt the inclination to record her experiences. She understood that people of the black community not trying wholeheartedly to overcome of the oppressive surroundings. The impression she had on her mind made her more realistic. Her artistic sensitivity and responsiveness to ideas got sharpened and strengthened. Being a realist, she portrays the honest depiction of black community in her dramas. She categorized herself as a humanist and as such was opposed to oppression of any sort. In New York, Hansberry became politically active. This activism would later form her plays.

During her stay in New York, one evening, Hansberry saw the dead body of a black youth killed by the cops, in Harlem's Baptist Church. This incident had a sudden and disturbing effect on the psyche of Hansberry. This incident deeply petrified her. This happening again originated her grudge against the white community. Philip S Former painted this experience as, "She grew angry with the existing poor relations between the two races and the inhumanity of certain white people, who were race conscious and ready to persecute the innocent black people" (Former 39)

Lorraine Hansberry was influenced by Paul Robeson who was greatly honoured as a great defender of the oppressed. Paul Robeson, a founder of Freedom, a Negro Newspaper in Harlem, had an earnest intention to stimulate and uplift the lot of the Negroes. Robeson frequented her father's house and because of her acquaintance with him, she had ideas that agreed with him. Due to this luminary, in 1957, Hansberry easily became youngest member of Paul Robeson's periodical Freedom. Her position brought her into contact with prominent black intellectuals such as W.E.B. Du Bois, Dr. Alphaus Hunton, and Louis E. Burnham. She was influenced by the editor, Louis E. Burnham. He had taught her that, "racism was rooten and everything was political". Besides, he always encouraged her. She says, "the thing he had for our people was something marvelous; he gave part of it to me and I shall die with it as he did" (Hansberry 97)

In 1952, Hansberry was named associate editor of the magazine and at or causes that included the peace movement, the black civil rights movement, and the movement for independence in Africa. Hansberry was actively protested the oppression of Africa, Asia, and Latin America and American interfluence in Indochina. She brought to the magazine her own fresh ideas into the state of women's rights, the arts and African history. More important than her intellectual growth, her philosophical and social convictions got sharpened and strengthened. Her contribution to the Freedom was not measured. For her commendable services she was promoted from staff writer to associate editor within a year. She wrote at least twenty two articles dealing with Africa, women, social issues and several reviews. She was a close observer of African politics. She did not waste her three active years as a Freedom staffer. In 1953, Hansberry retired from her full-time position with Freedom when she married fellow activist Robert Nemiroff on

June 20, 1953, though she continued to the magazine. During the next few years, Hansberry continued to work, to write for the magazines, and to participate in life of Greenwich Village, where she and Nemiroff lived.

Lorraine Hansberry was profoundly distressed by the quality of education provided to the young blacks in the public school in Harlem. They provided inferior education to the young blacks. They were forced to study vocational skills rather than academic studies. She described the sun-less playground, large cheerless basement serving both as lunchroom and gymnasium, and overcrowded classrooms of public school in Harlem. As a result 30% of Harlem students were three academic years behind their age group. Later, she wrote on juvenile crime. Many of the young blacks suffered from a severe lack of strong self-image, the result of their ignorance of their black and African heritage. She wanted education to lay stress on the history of ancient Egypt and Ethiopia and their great leaders in their curriculum.

That same year, while covering a picketline at New York University, she met Robert Nemiroff, a white Jewish writer and activist, where he was a graduate student, engrossed in the works of American author Theodore Druser, Literary Criticism, and several social causes. Hansberry had been in the demonstrations in Harlem and New York to protest a social evil or race prejudicial actions of the government. For several months, they dated and participated in a number of political and cultural activities together. They decided to spend a life together – a life of writing, music, and “changing the world”, with the dash of frivolity. On June 20, 1953, they married in Chicago and moved to Greenwich Village. Both of them had the advantage of playing the role of audience and critic for each other’s work. The couple had exciting evenings when friends gathered at their home for conversation and for the reading aloud of plays. She left the Freedom staff in 1953 to devote more time to her writing. In the meantime she worked odd jobs, studied African history with Du Bois and taught black literature at the Marxist Oriented Jefferson School for social sciences. Her experience at the newspaper, her marriage to Nemiroff, and her study of African history continued to heighten her awareness of social justice. In 1956, she began writing ‘The Crystal Stair’ a line from Hughes’s “Mother to Son”, which eventually became A Raisin in the Sun. Hansberry’s choice of theatre as her medium came after she had moved from the Midwest to New York City. She began hanging around little theatre groups and discovered that “theatre embraces everything I like all at one time” (Nelson 210)

It is not certain when she actually began trying to write for the Theatre, but in an interview in 1959 she referred to A Raisin in the Sun as her fourth and the only finished drama. A famous dramatist and critic named Loften Mitchell explains how she became a playwright:

She had started working on a number of plays, but never compelled any. One night she sat working on a family play, then she became annoyed, flung the pages into air, and they scattered over the floor. Her husband Robert collected the papers and piled up page after page. Miss Hansberry later said that was the turning point in her career. She sat down and completed the play (Mitchell 180-81)

The play was A Raisin in the Sun, which, after a good deal of struggle, opened on March 11, 1959, to rave reviews. Hansberry received the New York Critics’ Circle Award for Best American Play on May 4, 1959 and was hailed the youngest playwright, the fifth woman, and the first black to win such a prestigious award. The play ran successfully for nine months on

Broadway, and Hansberry was commissioned to write a screenplay for a film version of which premiered in 1961. After her early success, Hansberry continued to work on several plays and projects, including a script completed for NBC-TV, called A Gourd Drinking.

After completing the screenplay of A Raisin and Drinking Gourd, Hansberry began work on several plays in the early 1960s. She began writing Les Blancs in 1960 and worked on the script until her death. In 1962, she completed What Use Are Flowers? Although she became ill in April 1963, she continued most of her writing projects and political activities. Nemiroff and Hansberry were quietly divorced in Mexico on March 10, 1964, but they continued to collaborate on projects. She managed to complete her second play, The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window (1964), which opened on Broadway on October 15, 1964, but after only 101 performances at the Longacre Theatre, the show closed on the evening of her death.

On January 12, 1965, Hansberry died of cancer of the pancreas at University Hospital in New York City, leaving behind several unfinished works. To keep her rich literary legacy alive, Robert Nemiroff, her ex-husband and the executor of her estate, adapted from Hansberry's writings and posthumously published To Be Young, Gifted and Black, which opened at the Cherry Lane Theatre in 1969. In 1971, it also appeared in book form. Les Blancs: The Collected Last Plays of Lorraine Hansberry was edited and published in 1972. In 1973, Hansberry's first play was adapted into a musical entitled A Raisin in the Sun by Nemiroff and Charlotte Zaltsberg.

Despite the brevity of Hansberry's theatrical life and despite the fact that only two of her plays were produced during her lifetime, she is, nevertheless, credited with making an invaluable contribution to American Literature. As well, she is considered as one of the most important female figures in African American Literature. By protesting and validating the unfortunate circumstances of blacks in the United States, she became the voice of the people, using the stage as her platform, to ignite the social and political consciousness of all her audiences, both black and white.

Today, Hansberry is still considered a phenomenal contemporary playwright who paved the way for other African American performers and dramatists.

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