

ISSN 0976-8165

The Criterion



The Criterion

An International Journal in English

Quarterly Refereed & Indexed Open Access Journal

April 2013 Vol. 4 Issue- II

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Entrenching Identity: Beneatha in Hansberry's *A Raisin In The Sun*

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The colored woman represented in the African American Literature has set an image of her own and paved a new way to liberate her from subjugated world controlled by man. This idea is portrayed by the reputed and leading playwright Lorraine Hansberry in the play *A Raisin in the Sun*. Hansberry has made an attempt in which she represents woman as a powerful force behind man and who is liberated to take decisions to make a new start. The present study deals with the subject that how Beneatha, a young African American woman shun away all the fences that subjugates woman. The paper also explains that modern African woman has carved a new path for herself where she can sense her liberated identity.

Keywords: Feminism, stereotype, afrocentricism, assimilationist, american dream.

Lorraine Hansberry, the prominent black playwright who rules the world of drama, has portrayed a new world of 'self' for woman in her most applauded play *A Raisin in the Sun*. She was hailed as the youngest playwright, the fifth woman, and the first black to win the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award for the play *A Raisin in the Sun* in 1959. She is considered as one of the most important female figure in African American Literature who represents female characters protesting themselves from male domination and whose chief target is male backlash. The role of Beneatha in the play epitomizes a paved way which woman explored to ignite her spirit and world of 'Her'. Through this character Hansberry brings out many important issues but emancipation from male domination is the foremost concern explored in the present study.

The role of Beneatha in *A Raisin in the Sun* appears to be a call to African woman to voice against the fierce discrimination which incorporates both an image of woman in the home and in relation to men. She opposed against inferiority experienced by her under social conventions made by men and questions what a woman is. She realizes that woman is always perceived as "the other". But such interpretations do not stop her from creating a new world for her where she can wave new hopes entangled with liberation. Hansberry clearly shows what Moril Toi asserts, "a woman defines herself through the way she lives her embodied situation in the world, or in other words, through the way in which she makes something of what the world makes of her". In the same way Hansberry defines Beneatha, a female figure who defies the rules set by men and sets an example for African woman to raise their voice against oppression.

A new generation of woman, Beneatha is presented as a strong-willed and independent Younger woman. Through her Hansberry represents what we call today a feminist, a woman whose self-conscious phase forces her to revise her life stories. Beneatha lights out into new sphere of freedom, breaking the limits and awakes her sense of individual human rights. Beneatha's feminist concerns stems from her aspiration to become a doctor. She has a great veneration for doctors who serve humanity. She wants "to cure", "to care" (*A Raisin* 123). She recollects one major incident of her childhood that turns her ideas to become a person who can add colour to the miserable lives of sufferers. She reminds a small boy named Rufus who was injured and she saw his face split open in front of her. Immediately an ambulance came and took the boy to hospital and they fixed the broken bones. Such incident left an adverse impact on her and she decides to become a doctor. It is the mere incident that frames her ideology. In this regard, Beneatha says:

BENEATHA: That that was what one person could do for another, fix him up – sew up the problem, make him all right again. That was the most marvelous thing in the world...I wanted to do that. I always thought it was the one concrete thing in the world that a human being could do. Fix up the sick, you know – and make them whole again. This was truly being God...(A Raisin123)

In her desire to express to express herself, Beneatha proves an early feminist who radically views her role as self-oriented and not family-oriented. She desires to find her identity and wants to pursue an independent career without relying solely on man. She has no materialistic concerns, no greed for money. Each member of the Younger family wishes to spend the money according to their own will which has to come through an insurance cheque. Her brother, Walter wants to become a rich man and wants to spend the whole money in an anti-Christian business, a liquor store. Whereas Mama Lena Younger weaves a dream of her own, wants to purchase a house in all-white neighbourhood. It is only Beneatha who has no concern with money. Becoming a doctor and serving humanity has become her motto of life. She wishes to serve people rather than becoming rich. Her inner self voices when Walter cleverly tries to grab the whole money from Mama. Beneatha not only awakens herself with all woman rights but her mother also. She forces her mother to defiance against Walter who wants to decide how the money to be spent. Beneatha infuriates and says:

BENEATHA: That money belongs to Mama, Walter, and it's for her to decide how she wants to use it. I don't care if she wants to buy a house or a rocket ship or just nail it up somewhere and look at it. It's hers. Not ours – hers.
(A Raisin19)

Being an independent woman, Beneatha has a practical vision of life. She has her own independent views on God. As an atheist, Beneatha does not feel ashamed at expressing that there is no God. She doesn't realize that it is faith that helped her family through hard times. She believes that a man is responsible for his fate. It is the man who can do anything to make his future better. The idea of existence of God is quite unfamiliar to her. Rather she expresses that human race is the most powerful race that responsible for all happenings in the world. She asserts:

BENEATHA: Mama, you don't understand. It's all a matter of ideas, and God is just one idea I don't accept. It's not important. I am not going out and be immoral or commit crimes because I don't believes in God. I don't even think about it. It's just that I get tired of Him getting credit for all the things the human race achieves through its own stubborn effort. There simply is not blasted God – there is only man and it is he who makes miracles! (A Raisin 36)

Beneatha's defiance towards Walter is symbolic of her defiance towards all stereotypes of those times in which the play was published. The conflict between Walter and Beneatha arises when Walter shows his chauvinistic view of her. Walter is jealous of Beneatha as she decides to become a physician. Walter's domination over her sister is evident when he overtly asserts that he has the right to choose what Beneatha will do in future. Walter has limited views about woman. He thinks that woman should stay at home and serve her husband. He is not in favour of providing education to Beneatha and for that he often conflicts with his mother. He aggravates when Mama saves \$3500 for Beneatha's education.

Being an educated is not as important for Walter as it is to bound woman at home. Walter's resentment and anger erupts when he says:

WALTER: 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... (A Raisin 20)

Walter's egoistic concerns towards Beneatha is symbolic of fence drawn by him to constraint her freedom. His callous remarks on Beneatha's career, becoming a doctor, keep his spirit down and mark male chauvinism. But Beneatha is a character who has made a shift from the unfeminine world to feminine sphere far away from emancipation created by man. Her defiance towards Walter marks a voice raised by an African woman towards all barriers of stereotype. Walter's confrontation with Beneatha yields Ruth, Walter's wife, to advise her to "be nice" with him sometimes and not to argue over Walter's insensitive remarks. This advice of Ruth has completely become unacceptable to Beneatha.

Hansberry has beautifully portrayed what a woman is. She has vividly shapes Beneatha who overtly blurts out against what Simon de Beauvoir perceived woman as "she is defined and differentiated with reference to man and he with reference to her". Hansberry presented her as an individualist who tries to carve her own potential and to express herself. Apart from her high expectations for being a liberated and educated woman, she aims to understand herself and determines her own behaviour rather than what other wants her to be. Neglecting Ruth's disappointing idea of life and Walter's unfulfilled desire to become rich like white men, Beneatha thinks high of both of them. She can be impatient with people who resign themselves to given situations.

Opposing stereotypical male attitudes, Beneatha is conscious of her own rights. Beneatha's quest for self-expression in various forms pictures a final call to men to shun their domination. Beneatha's experience with the two men she dates with has clarified that she is certainly not a subservient woman who is known with reference to man. George Murchison and Joseph Asagai are the Africans who are quite different in their viewpoints on African heritage. Being absorbed into the American culture, Murchison represents a desire for money, living for what has now been called the "American Dream." On the other hand, Asagai is a Nigerian who represents a black population who has love for African heritage. The dealings of Asagai with Beneatha are more as compared to Murchison. While Murchison has what Walter dreams of, financial security, a large home, Beneatha is attracted towards Asagai who is familiar with African culture, struggling for Africa families and wants to advance his country in a way Beneatha wants to do after getting a medical degree. She is a mood of exuberance with her Nigerian boyfriend nicknamed "Alaiyo" which means "One for Whom Bread – Food – Is Not Enough". She never shows her consent to Murchison due to his pompous, affluent style of living. She often gets depressed and angry with him. Beneatha and Asagai both are looking for the ways to free themselves from the clutches of white men who oppress them in a world who does not know the value of diversity or respect for the different race.

Beneatha denies the old definitions of marriage which her mother, Mama and sister-in-law, Ruth believe. Olympe de Gouges addressed that marriage as a social contract between equals and attacked women's reliance on beauty and charm, as a form of slavery (Tandon, Feminism 4). Similarly Beneatha holds the same opinion and neglects the idea of marrying a person who consider woman as means of entertainment. Mama and Ruth opposed Beneatha's neglect for not marrying Murchison a man who has everything from education to money. But Beneatha's desire to marry one who has not assimilated himself into the American culture holds primary condition. She chooses Asagai as a suitor not only because he is not an assimilationist but due to his knowledge on African culture. She thinks that she has good

compatibility with him than Murchison. She is at her happiest with Nigerian boyfriend, Asagai who never restricts her from studying in a medical college. He works as a mediator in fulfilling her dream of becoming a doctor. At the end of the play when Walter reveals that he has used the money which Mama gave him for her education. She feels desperate as her dream is shattered and now grudge against Walter. Being an optimist, Asagai revives hope in Beneatha's heart. He proposes Beneatha for marriage and wants her to go with him to Nigeria. Asagai has reformatory zeal in his nerves who wants to educate the people of his country. With this determination, he offers Beneatha to go with him and serve humanity. In this regard, Asagai says:

ASAGAI: In my village at home it is the exceptional man who can even read a newspaper...or who ever sees a book at all. I will go home and much of what I will have to say will seem strange to the people of my village...But I will teach and work and things will happen, slowly and swiftly...But I will look about my village at the illiteracy and disease and ignorance and I will not wonder long.(A Raisin 124)

This statement of Asagai unleashes Beneatha's trust and love for a man who is preparing a new nation.

Asagai's tenderness for Beneatha indicates his true feelings for love. He often expresses his love for her. He thinks that in a relationship between man and woman only one kind of feeling satisfies the other person. Love in relationship brings mutual understanding between the two persons. Asagai believes that this kind of feeling for a woman is enough for her. But Beneatha is unable to understand these feelings of love for her. Beneatha's arrogance is clear when she answers Asagai by saying that "I can find that anywhere" (A Raisin 49). Now Beneatha expresses her own views which reflect her ideology. She expects that her husband should not rule over her as she hates male domination. Beneatha's following remark shows her feministic approach:

BENEATHA: I know – because that's what it says in all the novels that men write. But it isn't. Go ahead and laugh – but I'm not interested in being someone's little episode in America or – one of them! That's funny as hell, huh! (A Raisin 49)

Further Asagai defines that even today women are liberated in the words but not in real life. They are subjugated by male members of society. They are not liberated enough to recognize their individual rights. Women are still considered as slaves to men. Being educated, woman is still submissive and subservient to men. Here Asagai expresses:

ASAGAI: It's how you can be sure that the world's most liberated women are not liberated at all. You all talk about it too much!
(A Raisin 50)

Beneatha has an aversion to an assimilationist, George Murchison. She dates with him but has not idea of marrying him. Beneatha expresses her scorn for assimilationist Negro when she didn't allow him to kiss her. George wants to kiss Beneatha but she brushes aside his urges. George wants to marry a nice, simple, sophisticated girl so that he can dominate over her. But Beneatha understands his wrong intentions. She shares an idea with her mother that she does not like George. She calls him a "fool". Beneatha gets happy when her mother too holds the same opinion about George. She gets happy when her mother gives consent not to marry George. Her mother plays an important role in choosing a life partner for Beneatha. She gives full right to her daughter to choose a life partner for her. Mama's way of thinking gives Beneatha a great deal of satisfaction. Mama says:

MAMA: Well – I guess you better not waste your time with no fools.
(A Raisin 90)

Although he is educated and wealthy, Beneatha never leaves a chance to ignore him. Her sister-in-law, Ruth, does not understand Beneatha's ambivalence: he is good looking, able to

provide well for Beneatha. However, Beneatha is planning to be a doctor, and is not dependent on “marrying well” for her financial security. Hansberry also hints that marriage into Murchison family is not very probable. Beneatha says:

BENEATHA: Oh, Mama – the Murchisons are honest-to-God-real
Live-rich coloured people, and the only people in the
world who are more snobbish than rich white people are
rich coloured people. I thought everybody knew that. I’ve
met Mrs.Murchison. She’s a scene! (A Raisin 34)

Asagai plays an important role in the life of Beneatha. He reawakens the spirit in her and gives support when she was engulfed in the world of troubles. She wants to grasp much knowledge about Africa from Asagai. Asagai recalls the day when Beneatha came to him and requested him to talk about Africa. She said, “I am looking for my identity” (A Raisin 48). Being conscious of her own independence, she never bears the domination of man over her. She has recognized her right of speaking and vividly expresses her own ideas about others. As Beneatha is against assimilation, she gets furious when Asagai remarks:

ASAGAI: Assimilation is so popular in your country. (A Raisin 48)
Beneatha, with enough courage and pride, says:

BENEATHA: I am not an assimilationist! (A Raisin 48)

It is only her clear vision about African culture that she still preserves the roots. She is against those people who forget their own roots and merged themselves into the white culture. Being a modern woman she still talks about her past culture and heritage. She never forgets her discovery for African heritage.

Beneatha’s quest for identity is expressed by Hansberry through the theme of afrocentricism, love for one’s country and heritage. Hansberry’s afrocentricism is depicted through Beneatha’s love for Asagai. Beneatha’s dialogue is fraught with knowledge of 1959 African politics, kingdoms of Africa and few historians who spoke of it. When Beneatha defines an “assimilationist Negro” (A Raisin 7) as being “someone who is willing to give up his own culture and submerge himself completely in the dominant, and in the case, oppressive culture! (A Raisin 72), George Murchison responds immediately with:

GEORGE: ...Here we go! A lecture on the African past! On our Great
West African Heritage! In one second we will hear all about
the great Ashanti empires; the great Songhay civilization;
and the great sculptures of Benin...(A Raisin 72)

This dialogue of George also indicates that he has proud of his knowledge. But he is ashamed of African heritage and pays no respect to it. He often mocks at Beneatha and considers them inferior. The clear picture of George’s no love for his African heritage is evident when he derides at his own culture. George sarcastically remarks:

GEORGE: ...your heritage is nothing but a bunch of raggedy-assed
spirituals and some grass huts! (A Raisin 72)

Dishonour of one’s own heritage is like something which burns her nerves. Beneatha flies into rage when George shows his no love and respect for his own culture. Beneatha answers him by giving an immeasurable account of Africans who are blessed with elevated nerves. For her, Africans are the tower of strength who always gets ready to serve the people. In regard of this, she says:

BENEATHA: See there...you are standing there in your splendid ignorance
talking about people who were the first to smelt iron on the
face of the earth! The Ashanti were performing surgical
operations when the English – were still tattooing themselves
with blue dragons.(A Raisin 72)

It is clear that whatever George knows about Africa's past great civilizations has been learned through his association with Beneatha.

Hansberry closely relate Beneatha's role to African people who despite aware of their heritage change their hairstyle. Asagai embraces Beneatha when she got her hair straightened and symbolizes an embracement of heritage. Asagai's remark leaves an impact on her mind when he presents Beneatha with Nigerian tribal robes and says, "You wear it well...mutilated hair and all" (A Raisin 47). The meaning is clear but Beneatha is unable to comprehend it. So Asagai explains by asking, "Were you born with it like that?"(A Raisin 47). Hence it is Asagai, a Nigerian who helps her to more easily recognize her identity and culture by looking back to her roots in Africa. He teaches her that she should not leave hope and face the challenges of life with courage.

Beneatha's relationship with her brother, Walter is full of conflict. The clash between ideologies results in passing remarks sarcastically to each other. They never show love, care and respect for each other. Rather they become rivals of each other. Being an educated girl, Beneatha often calls Walter by several names which cause the loss of self-respect to him. She sneers at him by calling him "a flip", "an elaborate neurotic" (A Raisin 34), "a toothless rat." (A Raisin 134) Even she sometimes compares him with an animal. Both of them indulged in hot discussions, dispute each other, and castigate each other's views. Walter's wife never tolerates this uncivil behaviour of Beneatha towards her husband. She tries to resolve the problem between both of them. The main reason of the conflict between Beneatha and her brother is that Beneatha never allows herself to suffer from the subjugation of any man whether he is her husband or her brother. She does not want to be dependent on anyone. In this context Beneatha holds an opinion what Simon de Beauvoir says, "A myth invented by men to confine women to their oppressed state. For women it is not a question of asserting themselves as women, but of becoming full-scale human beings". (Tandon, Feminism 11) Walter expects some sacrifices from her part like to stop studying or getting married. But Beneatha does not bother about these statements of Walter and furthering on her ambition. She can't bear the interference of Walter and Ruth in the context of her marriage. Beneatha rejects Ruth's ideology when she says that money is only essential in relationships. Beneatha criticizes every advice given to her by Ruth. Beneatha's callous response to Ruth's pregnancy is "where is he going to live, on the roof?" (A Raisin 44) She said so because she is conscious of the fact that the family is suffering from poverty. In the middle of the play, Beneatha's attitude for her brother is changed. She encourages him when he starts dancing and calling himself "THE LION IS WAKING."(A Raisin 69) She stimulates by saying "FLAMING SPEAR" (A Raisin 69) to him.

As the play progresses, the relationship of Beneatha with Walter and Ruth takes a new shape. All of them gain respect at the hands of each other. The relationship seems to become better. Beneatha adjusts with Ruth and no dispute between each other exists. Their relationship is free from any argumentation. But this healthy relationship no longer exists between the relationship of Beneatha and Walter. She is green with envy when Ruth describes her that last night they went to see a movie and they both were holding the hands of each other. This news gives birth to a new sin, jealousy in her. Beneatha lows down the aspirations of Walter. She still considers him:

BENEATHA: ...I look at you and I see the final triumph of stupidity in the World! (A Raisin 127)

Hansberry traces various problems of discrimination, inequality and limited opportunities. She presented woman as a positive force who discards all equity issues and has found a place for her where she can feel a sense of freedom. The various themes; barrier to education, Beneatha's choosing a suitor, defiance towards male domination, opposing stereotypical roles forms the backbone of feminism. Through this character, Hansberry not

only underlines the issue of quest for self but quest for roots to identify African culture. Thus, Beneatha is presented as a young African Woman who unleashes the feminine world away from slavery, where she can enjoy individualism. So Beneatha defines “Feminism means different things to different people, ranging from a wish to change and challenge the whole existing order of things to desire to bring about a more balanced and saner equality between the sexes and achieve a respectable individual liberty for women with their natural instincts and characteristics intact”. (Tandon, Feminism 25)

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