

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Beneatha's Struggle for Black Female Identity in Lorraine Hansberry's Play *A Raisin in the Sun*

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**Abstract:**

Lorraine Hansberry became the first black woman to present a Broadway drama during the Civil Rights Movement 1959 with her *A Raisin in the Sun*. For the first time in American theatre history it was Lorraine Hansberry, a black female playwright grabbed a great attention. Hansberry was able to genuinely cover a wide range of topics in the play, including the resilience and survival of the black family, their dreams-racism, abortion, manhood and women. By using genuine imagery, she resisted the stereotyped portrayal of blacks that is usual on the American stage. The play deals with socio-economic conditions of Afro-Americans and their struggle for identity and place in an alienated country. The present paper proposes to analyse the protagonist of the play, Beneatha's dreams of being a doctor and her struggle to determine her identity as a cultured and well educated African woman.

**Keyword:** Afro-American, Blacks, Identity, American Dreams, Socio-economic conditions & Civil Rights Movement.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Lorraine Hansberry was a playwright, an author, and an activist. She was born on May 19, 1930, in Chicago. Hansberry's father was a real estate broker and her mother was a school teacher. Her father and mother contributed much of their earnings to the NAACP (The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) and the Urban League. They publicly fought against the discrimination of black people.

Hansberry spent most of her childhood with her family in a black neighborhood on Chicago's South Side. During this period segregation which is a separation of

blacks and whites was legal and was widespread in South-Northern states including Illinois. They had any official policy of segregation and they were self-segregated under racial and economic lines. In 1938, Hansberry's family was the first to shift into a white locality and they were violently attacked by the white neighbors. Hansberry's encountered many threats of violence and legal action from their neighbors. Her father was successful in bringing his case to the Supreme Court as *Hansberry V. Lee*, ruling restrictive covenants illegal.

Hansberry did her schooling at a public school for blacks. She broke her family's tradition of attending Southern Black Colleges by enrolling herself in the University of Wisconsin in Madison. From 1950 Hansberry worked for Paul Robeson's progressive black newspaper *Freedom* edited by Louis E. Burnham, as a writer and editor till 1953. She had an opportunity to work with W.E.B. DuBois and other Black Pan-Africanists while she was at *Freedom*. She not only worked for the Civil Rights Movement but also on global struggles against colonialism and imperialism.

In 1956 she resigned from her jobs and completely devoted her time to writing. It is during this time she wrote *The Crystal Chair* which told the story of a struggling black family in Chicago and later the play was renamed as *A Raisin in the Sun*- it is a line from Langston Hughes's poem. The play was a huge success. Hansberry has thoroughly analyzed American life to the core as never before in *A Raisin in the Sun*. She created universal characters beyond racial feeling and enriched the American theatre with her intellect and genius. *A Raisin in the Sun* portrays the hardships faced by the Younger's, a working-class family against economic conditions and racial segregation. The play underscores the value and purpose of dreams, the dire need to fight against racism, and the importance of family. By 1963 she became very active in Civil Rights Movement. In the same year, she was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer and on 12th January 1965, she breathed her last.

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**II. A RAISIN IN THE SUN- AN OUTLINE**

The scene is set in the slums of Chicago after World War II, the Younger family is fighting their own battle against racism. The Youngers' daily lives are influenced by America's difficult history of racial strife between black and white Americans. Lena Younger, a single mother (and grandmother), her daughter Beneatha, and her son Walter along with his wife Ruth and their son Travis cram into a run-down two-bedroom apartment.

These individuals are not only constrained by their physical living space but they are also constrained by the social roles that have been assigned to them. For example, socially progressive Beneath (Bennie) studies to become a doctor despite the financial pressure it places on the family's low income. Walter works as a chauffeur for a white man, but he aspires to start a liquor store with his friends and provide more income for his family. Ruth, his wife, pays no heed to her desires, instead of cleaning up after the rest of the family as well as the houses where she works. We hear near the beginning of the play that Ruth is pregnant, which further complicates the family situation. The family was financially low to support another child so Ruth was ready for an abortion.

The Youngers, on the other hand, have a fresh start. Lena is about to get a \$10,000 check in the mail, and she must decide what to do with it. Bennie wishes for tuition money, Walter wishes for a down payment on his liquor store, and Ruth wishes for the happiness of her family. Then three major events occur i) Lena decides to buy a house in a white area; ii) Lena entrusts the remainder of the money to Walter, telling him to save a significant sum for Beneatha's education; and iii) Walter loses all of the money in the liquor store fraud.

When a white man, Karl, comes to buy the Youngers' new house, Walter realizes that giving up on The Man is the only way he can provide for his family. Walter must choose between upholding his family's rights and upholding his ego and status as the family's breadwinner in the play's climax moment. Fortunately, for the Youngers and Broadway, Walter stands by his family's rights and rejects Karl's offer. The family will be shifting to a new residence.

**III BENEATHA'S STRUGGLE FOR BLACK FEMALE IDENTITY**

"We live in a society that wants to label you with color, sexuality, religion, or ethnicity. It divides us, but it also allows us to find pride in our identity." -Logan Browning

Beneatha, is a twenty years old attractive and intelligent college student. She is sister to Walter and daughter to Mama. She is well educated when compared to others in the Younger's family and she is quite away from the beliefs of her conservative mother. She was not good looking as Ruth, her sister-in-law, "but her lean, almost intellectual face has a handsomeness of its own."(35)

She dreams of becoming a doctor and she wants to establish her identity as a well-educated black woman. She involved herself in various activities like play-acting, horse riding, and learning guitar lessons to "I don't flit I- I experiment with different forms of expression-" (48) she tells Ruth.

She irritates Mama with her views about God because she says, "I don't believe in God...I do not even think about it." (51) This Mama is angry and she says, "You 'bout to get your fresh little jaw slapped!" and Mama asks her repeat, "In my mother's house there is still God." (51)

Beneatha dated two men who were poles apart in their attitude. They were George Murchinson and Joseph Asagai. George was from an affluent African American family but Beneatha feels something shallow in him and tells her mother and sister-in-law that she will not fit into his rich family even if his family gives consent for their wedding. She says,

"The Murchinsons are honest-to-God-live-rich coloured people, the only people, in the world who are more snobbish than rich white people are rich coloured people. I've met Mrs.Murchinson. She's a scene!" (49)

Beneatha was happy and at ease when she was in the company of Joseph Asagai, a Nigerian student, whom she met on her campus. She called him "Alaiyo" (60), which means "One for whom Bread-Food-Is Not Enough." She is uncomfortable with George's interest in assimilating into the white culture but she is more comfortable with Asagai's interest in rediscovering his African past. Beneatha's affair with the wealthy George Murchison represents the natural tendency for African Americans to

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assimilate into white society. Yomna Saber defines assimilation as “a fusion that entailed a profound and irremediable loss of one’s ethnic identity. In assimilation, the marginalized group identity dissolved into the culture of the dominant larger group: white America.” (452)

Asagai gifts Beneatha some African apparel and music gifts. Beneatha tries one of the apparels and Asagai questions about her straightened hair. He also states her hairstyle was very unnatural and very American. She states that it was too raw and she had to do change her hairstyle. He pulls her leg that she is not determined in finding her African identity through him. Asagai cares a lot for Beneatha but wonders why she is not sharing the same emotions with him. She tells him that she is looking for more than “storybook love” and that she doesn’t want to be an American episode in his life. She wants to be an independent and free woman.

The conversation between Beneatha and Asagai reveals her seriousness about her search for identity. She never aspired to assimilate with the 1950s white culture. She wants to be free from white ideals but wants to acclimate herself to an educated American life. From this, her feminist perspective is very much visible and her desire to become a doctor reveals her ambition.

Walter when dancing with Beneatha, he seems to mock the African dances and practices, which Beneatha was unable to understand. Further, Beneatha’s dispute with George and the rest of her family portrays a larger conflict within the black community whether to accept their differences or adopt the white culture and try to elevate their family status. The willingness to join white culture is referred to as assimilationism, was a controversial issue for the black people during the 1950s and 1960s. This scene seems to echo anti-assimilationist- given Beneatha’s expression yearning for her cultural past.

Beneatha’s two suitors express the dichotomy between the conflicting identities available to blacks: the identity that seeks assimilation and the identity that rejects assimilation. The scene brings before us the two different categories where George, as his common name represents a black person assimilating into the white culture, whereas Asagai, with his ethnic name, stands for the new Africanist culture for those who are against assimilation. As Beneatha dances in a robe that Asagai gifted her, George comments that her interest in African roots is absurd. As a

result of his odd comments, she feels more attracted towards Asagai than with George, whom she considers as having false roots in American society. Beneatha brands George as an assimilationist, and states him as “someone willing to give up on his own culture and submerge himself completely in the dominant, and in this[African American’s] case, oppressive culture” (Hansberry 1501)

Beneatha wants to find the roots of her community and identity to label herself, which is likely why Afrocentrism appeals to her: it speaks to the part of her soul that yearns for a distinct identity. But it’s worth noting that her character doesn’t have a single identity, which is part of what makes her such a complex character.

**IV CONCLUSION**

At the end of the play, there is no definitive resolution to Beneatha's struggle for identity, which is most likely deliberate. Asagai proposes to Beneatha and invites her to join him in Africa. She expresses interest but does not make a firm decision by the end of the play. The absurdity of forcing African Americans to choose between abandoning their own culture and wholeheartedly embracing a foreign culture is highlighted by Hansberry.

According to Hansberry, there is no way to make a proper judgment one way or the other by depicting Beneatha becoming completely confused after Asagai's suggestion and failing to find a resolution to her confusion. Furthermore, African Americans' freedom to pursue their goals stands out. Beneatha's decision to straighten her hair does not qualify her as an assassin, nor does her interest in Nigerian music qualify her as an Afro centrist. Being unsure about her identity as an African-American woman joining an overwhelmingly white world, Beneatha turns to Asagai to see if he can provide a lost part of her life. Hansberry appears to be saying that African Americans exist somewhere between assimilationism and Afrocentrism. Beneatha seems to stand somewhere between these two poles.

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