

Dreams Deterred: A Study of Lorraine Hansberry's *Raisin in the Sun*

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أحلام مقوضة: دراسة لمسرحية لورين هانزبيري زبيبة في الشمس

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**ABSTRACT**

*Raisin in the Sun* (1959) is the first African American play to be performed on the Broadway Theatre. In this play Lorraine Hansberry delineates the dreams of a black family, and the struggle of each member of this family to realize their dreams. What is so interesting is that these dreams are deferred and finally deterred, because simply they are built on the wrong premises. Each of the family members bases their dreams on materialistic principles to achieve their dreams. Besides, these dreams are laid in a racial society, where people are treated according to race and colour. Therefore, the aim of the present study is to depict these dreams, and show how and why these dreams are deterred. In addition, the paper is also concerned with whether one should surrender if their dreams are deferred or they should rise up to look for new prospects.

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### Dreams Deterred: A Study of Lorraine Hansberry's *Raisin in the Sun*

Lorraine Hansberry is one of the most famous Afro-American playwrights. Her works mirror the real suffering of the black people in the so-called democratic American society. Most of her plays centre on the portrayal of the quandaries of a black family, sometimes in a white neighbourhood. Setting her plays against the backdrop of overt racism and pervasive housing discrimination of the 1950, Hansberry attempts to sketch the unattainability of the dreams of those black families. Still, one can find in her plays the invincible voice of the African pride, which tries to ascertain itself, despite the indomitable impediments. Thus, the paper is concerned with the dramatization of the determent of the dreams of a black family in a harsh and racial society, in her mostly performed play, *Raisin in the Sun*.

*Raisin in the Sun* is the first play written by a black woman to be performed on Broadway in 1959, and the first play to be directed by an African American. The play ran a total of 350 performances, and it also won The New York Drama Critics Circle Award. Also a film and a television production were adapted from the play. Moreover, the play was translated into more than 30 languages, and it is now used in schools as a textbook.<sup>1</sup> The play was written when a successful woman playwright was rare, and a black woman playwright was even uncommon. It was based on an

actual event that Hansberry herself experienced, when, in 1938, she bought a house in a white neighbourhood. This very matter resulted in a racial tension that led to courts, which at the beginning caused the eviction of Hansberry and her family by the Illinois courts. But with the help of some lawyers of National Association for Advanced Coloured People took the case to the Supreme Court, and finally a decision has been made by the Court to prohibit any racially restrictive covenants. Even after this decision, the family remained a subject of attack by the white people.<sup>2</sup>

The play's epigraph is taken from "Montage of a Dream Deferred" or "Harlem" (1951) by the Harlem Renaissance poet Langston Hughes; this poem is also the source of the play's title:

What happened to a deferred dream?  
 Does it dry up  
 Like *a raisin in the sun*? [italic mine]  
 Or fester like a sore—  
 And then run?  
 Does it stink like rotten meat?  
 Or crust and sugar over—  
 like a syrupy sweet?  
 Maybe it just sags  
 like a heavy load  
 Or does it just explode?<sup>3</sup>

The idea of a deferred dream is suggested in the epigraph itself. The playwright explicitly indicates that the whole play is built on the idea of an adjourned and splintered dream. The

epigraph thus asks a question that the play tries to answer: whether people should simply yield to conditions when their prospects are frustrated or whether those dreams preserve their power and erupt in unpredictable ways only after frustrations accumulate.

The play opens with a detailed description of the Youngers' House. The stage directions show the dreamy ambience of this house. The furnishings of the living now "*were actually selected with care and love and even hope—and brought to this apartment and arranged with taste and pride*"<sup>4</sup>. At the same time, the stage directions also show that the house is too small for its five residents: "*The Younger living room would be a comfortable and well-ordered room if it were not for a number of indestructible contradictions to this state of being* (487). The family consists of five members: Mama and her son, Walter, and her daughter, Beneatha, along with Walter's wife, Ruth, and his son, Travis. When the alarm clock rings, Ruth is the first one to wake up. She is shown to take care of the family and to make sure that everyone else gets up and ready for the day ahead. Ruth is tired and banal, and her conditions parallel these of the apartment, which is shabby and worn out in appearance from "*accommodating the living of too many people for too many years*"(ibid.). The apartment consists of only two rooms, the large one serves as both the living room and the kitchen. Ruth and Walter Lee's bedroom is actually a small

recess close to the kitchen. Mama and Beneatha share the only actual bedroom of this apartment. The bathroom is not theirs alone, for it is shared by their neighbour.

For such a poor family, the difficult circumstances that envelope it make its members cling to dreams to continue living, for dreams are the only thing they have in this world. As the play proceeds, it will be clear that each of the individual characters has a dream. These dreams constitute the essence of the play, for that they urge the plot forward. They comprise the entire action of the play and shape its main conflicts. By relying on these dreams, Hansberry attempts to universalize these individual dreams. Ann Cheney accentuates this fact:

*Raisin* at first seems a plea for racial tolerance or a fable of man's overcoming an insensitive society, but the simple eloquence of the characters elevates the play into a universal representation of all people's hopes, fears, and dreams.<sup>5</sup>

However, the Youngers' dreams are in fact based on the insurance money of the dead patriarch of the family, which is about \$10,000. Interestingly, all the dreams of the family members within the Younger family are "commodified. Mama's and Ruth's dreams are commodified by a twentieth century capitalistic, materialistic society which elevates things above all else."<sup>6</sup> Hence, every member of the Younger family thinks of investing the money in a different way. Mama's dream to own a house with a

yard big enough for a garden is one that she has nurtured for years— and that has been deferred for years. She, quoting the speech of her dead husband, affirms: “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 worthwhile”(499). Mama laments the lost dreams of her husband: “Yes, a fine man—just couldn’t never catch up with his dreams, that’s all” (ibid.). Ruth shares Mama the same dream of having a house and unifying the whole family in this house.

On the other had, Walter thinks also of investing this money in a liquor store, and because of her religious convictions against liquor drinking, Mama is uninterested in Walter’s dream of getting rich quickly with this plan. She wants her son to follow his dreams, but “she is disturbed by the way he considers money to be synonymous with life. Walter’s dreams have become consumed and tainted by materialism”<sup>7</sup>, to use Harold Bloom’s words. Throughout the entire play, Walter is shown to be completely depressed by his present conditions. He keeps complaining about how terrible his life is: “I’m thirty-five years old; I been married eleven years and I got a baby who sleeps in the living room— [*Very, very quietly.*.]—and all I got to give him is stories about how rich white people live (493). Part of Walter’s oppression lies in the fact that he cannot afford to sustain his role as a father, a brother

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and a son. His compliant job as a chauffeur and his inability to provide adequately for his family all reduce his self-esteem. Thus, his dream offers him the potential to regain his pride and dignity, which has been eroded by his work as a chauffeur for the white man:

Walter: I open and close car doors all day long. I drive a man around in his limousine and I say, "Yes, sir; no, sir; very good, sir; shall I take the Drive, sir?" Mama, that ain't no kind of job...that ain't nothing at all. (513-14)

Additionally, Walter struggles to ascertain his own dreams within this harsh world of racial bigotry. What also hinders Walter's dreams coming true is his mother's suggestion that a sum of the insurance money should go to Beneatha's medical education: "Some of it got to be put away for Beneatha and her schoolin'—and ain't nothing going to touch that part of it" (498). This decision of Mama infuriates Walter and creates tension between him and his sister. Therefore, beneath the seemingly normal brother-sister dispute lies a stern struggle for the survival of each individual's dreams. This strain surfaces the morning before the insurance check arrives. Walter wants to make use of all the amount of money, and he wants to leave nothing to his sister. That is why he believes that she must sacrifice for her family, by leaving college and staying home, or to be a nurse.

On the other hand, Beneatha has her own dream, and she desperately tries to realize it. The genesis of her dreams stems from an accident that happened to one of her friends, who was seriously injured. His return from the hospital inspired her dream to become a doctor. As is shown in the play, every step she takes is built on her dreams. Though her dreams are sometimes disparaged by her family, Beneatha is shown to have a will to achieve them.

However, as a product of the American capitalistic system, Walter places money above the values of love, liberty and respect. He is enslaved by the same system that oppresses and destroys him:

Walter: Mama—sometimes when I'm downtown and I pass them cool, quite-looking restaurants where them white boys are sitting back and talking 'bout things... sitting there turning deals with millions of dollars... sometimes I see guys don't look much older than me—

Mama: Sun—how come you talk so much 'bout money?

Walter: (*With immense passion*). Because it is life, Mama!

Mama: (*Quietly*). Oh—(*Very quietly*). So now it's life. Money is life. Once upon a time, freedom used to be life—now it's money. I guess the world really do change...

Walter: No—it was always money, Mama. We just didn't know about it. (514)

Walter's desperation reaches its apex when he sees that his mother stands as an obstacle between him and his dreams. Being aware of the difference between her generations and her children's, Mama tries to set a balance between her duty as a mother and her



family's dreams. She endeavours desperately to preserve her self-esteem at the expense of her family's dream. Yet, realizing the fragility of her son's status who tells her: "So you butchered up a dream of mine—you—you who always talking 'bout your children's dreams" (524), she finely decides to give an amount of money to Walter to achieve his dreams. Thus, Mama is obliged by the feeble situation of her family, especially her son, who shows that he even does not care whether his wife aborts his child or not, to reconsider her life and decisions within the present circumstances:

Mama: Listen to me now. I say I been wrong, son. That I been doing to you what the rest of the world been to you.... Walter—what you ain't never understood is that I ain't got nothing, don't own nothing, ain't never really wanted nothing that wasn't for you. There ain't nothing as precious to me... there ain't nothing worth holding on to, money, dreams, nothing else—if it means—if it means it's going to destroy my boy... I paid the man thirty-five hundred dollars down on the house. That leaves sixty-five hundred dollars. Monday morning I want you to take this money and take three thousand dollars and put it in a savings account for Beneatha's medical schooling. The rest you put in a checking account—with your name on it.... I'm telling you to be the head of this family from now on like you supposed to be. (528)

So, Mama's decision comes as a result of witnessing how her son's dreams have begun to crush him and consume his own soul. His frustration reveals itself as he begins to shout rather than

converse. She wants to feed his sense of responsibility, which is missing in his actions and attitudes. Walter does not hold the role of the breadwinner of the family, in the traditional sense. His dream blinds him from holding his role as the head of the family. So, by observing that money might retain part of this sense, Mama decides to give him the money in the hope that he would understand his responsibility, and act accordingly.

One of the ironies that this play posts is to place black family's dreams in a white neighbourhood. As is known, the play is set in a city that remains the most segregated in America, which is Chicago. Consequently, the playwright shows how these simple dreams will never be achieved as long as people are discriminated and treated according to colour and race. The appearance of Mr. Linder on the stage gives voice to this claim. As a representative of the Clybourne Park Improvement Association, Mr. Linder speaks of the looming danger that the Youngers might face if they move to the new house that Mama buys in a white neighbourhood. He states:

You've 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 the 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 the race prejudice simply doesn't enter into it. It is a matter of the people of Clybourne Park believing, rightly or

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wrongly, as I say, that for the happiness of all concerned that our Negro families are happier when they live in their own communities. (533-34)

Hansberry makes it clear that Linder epitomizes the racial attitudes adopted by the white Americans. He can also be seen as an impediment to deter Mama's dream of buying a house to unify her family. Ironically, Hansberry shows the frailty of this dream, and the possibility of its drying up. Moreover, after Linker is sent out by Beneatha and Walter, his direct reaction is: "What do you think you are going to gain by moving into a neighborhood where you just aren't wanted" (534). Interestingly, Linker tries to hide his racial hypocrisy by using diplomatic manner in his speech with the family. Yet, his very words suggest a racial discourse, which reveals the real intent of the white people, and their inhuman revulsion of the black people.

Likewise, another deterrent that the Younger family receives is when Walter knows that Willy, his friend, deceived him and took Walter's money and ran away. Walter put in this investment all the money his mother gave him, including his sister's share of the medical education. Thus, Walter and Beneatha's dreams die out with this fatal blow. Sarcastically, Walter builds up his dream on the false premise, and he thinks that money can restore his hope of bettering his own situation. It is very interesting to notice that Walter is seen as an embodiment of the

American dream of materialistic success. As a dreamer, Walter thinks that happiness can be bought by money, and that money is a trusted saviour. He finally realizes that money is another cause of misery that can increase his own suffering not vanquishing it. He tells Bobo, his other friend, who was also betrayed by Willy: "I trusted you... Man, I put my life in your hands... . That money is made out of my father's flesh" (540). Ironically, Walter is portrayed as a feeble character, whose account of life is built on the wrong grounds. He miscalculates life, trusts people without knowledge, and mistakenly thinks that money is synonymous to life. Ann Cheney observes:

Not only does Walter Lee feel powerless in his own family before Mama gives him control of the legacy, but he feels impotent within the black community. His admiration for the upwardly mobile black, in fact, leads to a serious flaw in his judgment: he considers Willy Harris a successful businessman when he is really an untrustworthy hustler.<sup>8</sup>

With the loss of the money, the entire family must face dreams that are deterred once again. Nonetheless, this determent of their dreams makes the family finally realize that what can save them is love and self-dignity not money and material gaining. It is Mama, the most reasonable character in the play, who succeeds in instilling these values in her children and to make them proud of them:

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Mama: Son—I come from five generations of people who was slaves and share croppers—but ain't nobody in my family never let nobody pay 'em no money that was away of telling us we wasn't fit to walk the earth. We ain't never been that poor.... We ain't never been that dead inside. (547)

Thus, the only one whose dream comes true is Mama, who, despite the second warning of Linder, buys the house and decides to move. The family rises up to a renewed sense of dignity and pride of their own race, which was almost overshadowed throughout the play, by their obsession with money. This new sense of dignity makes them challenge every inevitable risks that they will face when they move. Lynn Domina points out: “Even though their impending move may be financially as well as psychologically challenging, the Youngers choose to accept the risks that dignity (i.e., refusing to acquiesce to an inferior social status) demands.”<sup>9</sup>

Hence the “Raisin” of the title can be considered from different viewpoints. It might be a symbol of dryness, infertility and desolation, which colours the Young Family and their struggle with their racial society. It can also stand for the dry dreams of the family, which were never realized. It can also be seen as a symbol of the family itself, which is like the dry and black raisin, poor and black. Yet, it is unified with the other raisins in their cluster, the family is also unified at the end in their new house.

To sum up, Youngers have based their dreams on the wrong basis. The deferment of their dreams, though disillusioned them, inspires them to see the world from a more human standpoint. They realize that their unity is the source of their power, and their dignity can be gained by their sincere love for each other. So, what really matters is not how disillusioned one becomes after the determent of his dream, but how one can react to this determent. Thus, the play answers the question, which is raised by the epigraph.

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Harold Bloom, "Introduction", in *Bloom's Guides on Lorraine Hansberry Raisin in the Sun: Comprehensive research and Study Guides*, ed., Harold Bloom (New York: Facts on File, Inc, 2009), 10.

<sup>2</sup>Daniel S. Burt, *The Drama 100: A Ranking of all Greatest Plays of All Time* (New York: Facts on File, Inc, 2008) 413-14.

<sup>3</sup>Langston Hughes, "Harlem", in Lorraine Hansberry, *Raisin in the Sun*, in *The Norton Introduction to Literature*, vol. ii, ed., Jerome J. Paul and Beaty Hunter (London: W.W. Norton and Company, 1998), 487.

<sup>4</sup>Lorraine Hansberry, *Raisin in the Sun*, in *The Norton Introduction to Literature*, vol. ii, ed., Jerome J. Paul and Beaty Hunter (London: W.W. Norton and Company, 1998), *ibid.* All subsequent references will be from this edition and will appear parenthetically in my text, showing page numbers.

<sup>5</sup>Ann Cheney, quoted in Daniel S. Burt, *The Drama 100*, 413.

<sup>6</sup>Thaddeus Wakefield, *The Family in the Twentieth-Century American Drama* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 2004), 66.

<sup>7</sup>Harold Bloom, "Summary and Analysis", in *Bloom's Guides on Lorraine Hansberry Raisin in the Sun*, 32.

<sup>8</sup>Ann Cheney, quoted in *ibid.*, 44-45.

<sup>9</sup>Lynn Domina, *Understanding A Raisin in the Sun: A Student casebook to Issues, Sources, and Historical Documents* (London: Greenwood Press, 1998), 11-12.

### المستخلص

إن مسرحية "زبيبة في الشمس" (1959) هي الأولى التي تُمثّل على مسرح برود ويز. إذ ترسم الكاتبة لورين هانزبيري أحلام عائلة من السود ومعاناة كل فرد من هذه العائلة لتحقيق أحلامهم. ولأن هذه الأحلام قد بنيت على الأساس الخاطئ، فقد قوضت وأثنت. إذ بنا أفراد هذه العائلة أحلامهم على أساس مطولي بحث للوصول إلى ما يبتغوه. فضلا عن ان هذه الأحلام قد وضعت في مجتمع عنصري، يتخذ من اللون والجنس أساسا للتعامل. لذا فان الدراسة الحالية تهدف إلى وصف تلك الأحلام حيثية وأسباب إهلاك هذه الأحلام. وتهدف الدراسة أيضا الى بيان فيما إذا يتوجب على المرء الخنوع في حالة إجهاض أحلامه أم يتوجب عليه المضي قدما.

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