

**STRUGGLING FOR A DECENT HOUSING:
AN EXPLORATION OF MAMA'S ROLE IN LORRAINE HANSBERRY'S
*A RAISIN IN THE SUN***

Kpatcha Essobozou AWESSO
University of Kara, TOGO
awessander@yahoo.fr

Manzama-Esso THON ACOHIN
University of Kara, TOGO
thonacohindavid@gmail.com

&

Ebony Kpalambo AGBOH
Université de Lomé, Togo
ebonag3@gmail.com

Abstract: The publication in 1959 of Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* has earned to this African American playwright a great notoriety in gender and racial studies in the United States of America. The play preceded what would later be called the Civil Rights Movements of the 1960s. It chronicles the daily life of the Youngers, a black family struggling to achieve the American Dream in a context of racial segregation. Drawing from the postcolonial feminist theory, this paper analyses the issue of decent housing and the natural feeling that compels human beings to secure good living conditions for themselves and their kith and kin. It views Mama's struggle for a decent housing, even in a white neighborhood as the reassertion of a fundamental right for all human beings regardless of their gender, race or religion.

Keywords: Decent housing, American dream, Civil Rights, segregation.

Résumé : La publication en 1959 de l'œuvre *A Raisin in the Sun* de Lorraine Hansberry a procuré à cette dramaturge Afro-américaine une grande notoriété dans les études sur le genre et la race aux Etats-Unis d'Amérique. La pièce théâtrale a précédé ce qui sera appelé plus tard les Mouvements pour les Droits civiques des années 1960s. Elle raconte la vie quotidienne des Youngers, une famille noire qui se bat pour la réalisation du Rêve américain dans un contexte de ségrégation raciale. Se fondant sur la théorie féministe postcoloniale, cet article analyse le problème du logement décent et le sentiment naturel qui pousse les êtres humains à se battre afin de s'en assurer à eux-mêmes ainsi qu'aux membres de leurs familles. Il perçoit la lutte de Mama pour une nouvelle maison, même dans un quartier blanc comme la réaffirmation d'un droit fondamental reconnu pour tout être humain sans considération de genre, race ou religion.

Mots-clés : Logement décent, Rêve américain, Droits civiques, ségrégation.

Introduction

Since the Proclamation Act of 1863 by Abraham Lincoln, the social conditions of Americans from African descent have not improved as expected. The newly freed men's status is much abstract than factual. The former master cannot agree with the idea of sharing equal rights with his former slave. The controversy of the Proclamation Act rightly resides there, since later on, facts have demonstrated that institutionalized systems were legally set up to prevent former slaves from achieving equal rights and enjoying full citizenship. Pointedly, Joel Williamson (1984, p.109) from this perspective argues that "When the nation freed the slaves, it also freed racism." Indeed, the nation passively witnesses cases of black lynching, mob violence, the threats of the Ku Klux Klan, the implementation of the Black Codes, etc. The guiltiness of the nation rises beyond limits and black people decide to lead their destiny. Marcus Garvey (in Morris, 1969, p.71), one of the prominent figures of the Negro Renaissance opines that "if the world faints to give you consideration because you are black men, because you are Negroes, four hundred millions of you shall, through organizations, shake the pillars of the universe and bring down creation." Garvey's declaration is nothing more than a call for resistance to unequal treatment and violence against African Americans. Much credit is given to intellectuals to marshal ideas and lift the whole race up from debasement and humiliation. With the conviction that, the journey to self-assertion and recognition is not easy to achieve, the black man becomes the artisan of his own liberation.

African American literature grows under the commitment of writers who find the best way to bring awareness over the issues of black people's conditions to the whole world. It is known as protest literature and helps scrutinize the African American problems through the lens of Human Rights. This concept which serves as the grounded motive of African Americans' struggle for equal rights is differently expressed in literature to accustom the public mind to it.

Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* perfectly seems to find its place in this protest literature wherein the protagonist takes the resolution to kick out social injustices on her way to the fulfillment of the American Dream. Sofia C. Jose (2014, p.878) writes in her article entitled "Racism in Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*" that: "Hansberry's own life is interweaved in this play. However, the central theme of *A Raisin in the Sun* reveals how racism in the housing industry, government, religious leaders, and average Americans supported the segregated housing environment of Chicago." The context of its publication foregrounds the fight for Civil Rights of the 1960s in the United States of America. Besides, the playwright's situation (female, black and young) coupled with her genius have triggered rave reviews from readers. Not only does the play deal with African Americans' struggle for equal rights, but it also lays emphasis on women's contribution to this end. Women, especially mothers play a key role in African American families and therefore stand as the pillars of the

household. Mama, the family's matriarch is holding the role of a leader at home and that of Civil Rights activist outdoors. Mama is depicted as "a woman who, even though is surrounded by poverty in all its negative connotation, is a nurturing mother and is determined to raise her family out of the poverty that surrounds them" (Gomez, 2010, p.88). She is engaged in a fight to keep her family united in spite of the hard economic and social conditions. Mama wishes to own "a freestanding house with a yard occupied by a single family" (Mallet, 2004, p.67), but she is opposed to the white racist community of Clybourne Park. It is obvious that Hansberry could only depict a strong woman in the posture of Mama to defy the whole American segregationist structure. Fighting to survive in a hostile environment is the Youngers' motto, with Mama as the thriving force.

The need to get rid of the socially established obstacles against black people's self-fulfillment settles the core idea of this paper and addresses the role played by women in the American Civil Rights Movements. The work focuses on Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* to question the American race-based discrimination and the need for African Americans to assert themselves through their fight for decent housing and equal rights. The research largely argues from Hansberry's play and other additional perspectives brought from a few relevant materials that deal with the same issue. From the postcolonial feminist theory, this article especially views the role played by Mama in the family's struggle to move in their new house as the representation of the fulfillment of a dream. Postcolonial feminist criticism stems from the idea that "black, white and other Third World women have very different histories with respect to the particular inheritance of post-fifteenth-century Euro American hegemony: the inheritance of slavery, enforced migration, plantation and indentures labour, colonialism, imperial conquest, and genocide," and that, a counter hegemonic discourse must be held in order to restore "the daily life struggles for survival of poor people-those written out of history" (cited in Mohanty, 1991, pp.10-11). To blend postcolonial and feminist theories helps to assess first the revolutionary reaction of African Americans to white racists' attitudes, and the feminist trend of the issue is brought because of the emphasis on women's contribution to the process. Postcolonial feminism challenges the representation of women both in fiction and real life. In this context, Mama's sudden gain in power and her determination to transgress the racist laws are discussed in the light of postcolonial feminist theory as the crucial point of this work, which first explores the implication of owning a decent house in the African American context. Thereafter, the paper presents the deplorable living conditions of the Youngers as a result of an institutionalized discrimination in housing, and finally, it discusses Mama's "NO to discrimination" and the move to the new house as the fulfillment of the dearest dream of the Youngers.

1. Meaning of Decent Housing for the African American

Many people have always believed that owning a comfortable and lovely house is synonymous with spending a successful life. Hansberry portrays the black Youngers' family in *A Raisin in the Sun* fighting to possess a house of their own just like her own family longed for. In their article entitled "Going Home: Narrating Maturity and Safety in Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* and Nick Hornby's *How to Get Good*" Ljubica Matek and Jasna Poljakrehlicki (2016: 294) draw the similitude between the play's plot and the playwright's family experience:

It is an established fact that Hansberry's play was inspired by her own life experience. The Hansberrys moved into an all-white neighborhood in Chicago in 1938, but before long their disgruntled white neighbors stoned their house, horrifying the family. The problems of segregation, homeownership, (American) dreams, heritage, pride, identity, and family are masterfully discussed in this play.

Ljubica Matek and Jasna Poljakrehlicki (2016, p.294)

Obviously, the Hansberry's dream is so great to the extent that the playwright connects it to her fiction (the only instance where all dreams are materialized). John Archer (2014, p.8) argues that in the pursuit of the American Dream, "the dream house would become the standard material artifact accepted as fulfillment of the dream-myth." The house is everything to its owner, and it reflects his whole personality. Owning a house is the first sign that one actually exists, especially when the front gate bears the name of the family. The house becomes part of one's identity, and stands also as a factor that determines social status. Paul Seamus Madachy (2003, p.30) asserts that "Land ownership (and the privileges thereof) becomes such a basic element of American identity that it was written into the Constitution itself to determine fundamental civic liberties such as voting rights." Land or real estate ownership becomes thence a means of social visibility. What does it particularly imply in the minds of black people who have long been kept invisible by race prejudice? If "the ownership of a single-family house emerged as a symbol of what many call 'the American dream,'" (Garb, 2005, p.1), then what does it specifically mean to the Youngers' family when they live in a rented dilapidated apartment? The apartment is not theirs; people have lived there before they do. There is no identity connection between them and the apartment, hence their frustration and yearning for a more comfortable house of their own. By acquiring their own comfortable house in a white neighborhood, the family is not only achieving equal rights, but the American Dream as well. Conclusively, the American Dream is much discussed in terms of possessing a decent and comfortable house and this increases the ambition of the Youngers' family. In her article entitled, "The Politics of 'Home' in Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*," Kristin Matthews (2008, p.578) argues that "'home' becomes a complex space that is simultaneously material, historical,

philosophical, psychological, and political...”, which implies that owning a home is more than having a roof over one’s head. In *A Raisin in the Sun*, the reader is introduced to the excitement of the whole household when Mama describes the house she has just purchased:

It’s – it’s a nice house too ... Three bedrooms – nice big one for you and Ruth. [...] Me and Beneatha still have to share our room, but Travis have one of his own – and I figure if the – new baby – is a boy, we could get one of them double-decker outfits [...] And there’s a yard with a little patch of dirt where I could maybe get to grow me a few flowers [...] And a nice big basement [...]¹

Travis, Mama’s grandson also has a dream “Yeah – I always wanted to live in a house” (ARITS, 91), and his grandmother, by purchasing the house, has accomplished that dream. The very meaning behind possessing one’s own house is to be found in Mama’s words to her son “Walter Lee-it makes a difference in a man when he can walk on floors that belong to him ...” (ARITS, 92). Beneatha, Mama’s daughter sees the end of the family’s plight and invisibility when she asks “Is there-is there a whole lot of sunlight?” and Mama replies “Yes, child, there’s a whole lot of sunlight” (Ibid.). The reference to sunlight has a connotation beyond the sun light. It symbolizes the recognition and dignity the whole family deserves as human beings before the rest of the society, white racists included. The idea of living decently in their own house restores the family’s pride after many years of humiliation and poverty.

Susan Hamilton and Stephen J.H. Cogswell (1997) in their study entitled “Barriers to Home Purchase for African-Americans and Hispanics in Syracuse” record some African Americans’ opinions on home ownership:

Some of the interviewees spoke of property ownership as integral to their self-identity and their image in the community. Langston, for example, said, “I wanted a home where I could ... feel like I was a real person, that I owned a real property. [...] To us it was like a castle. ... [You] just felt like you were part of society [...] if you own a nice, beautiful home.

Susan Hamilton and Stephen J.H. Cogswell (1997, p.106)

Langston’s testimony is all that makes a human, especially an African American visible in a society where he has long been clouded by race prejudice and all negative implications associated to it. Langston identifies with the house he possesses, and it is only from this moment that, he feels like being part of the society. Hopefully, this feeling is not shared by white people who are already enjoying civil privileges as innately provided. Langston’s view also shows that, without a house of their own, African Americans are only

¹ Lorraine Hansberry. *A Raisin in the Sun*. (New York: New American Library, 1987), p. 92. The subsequent quotations from this edition will be marked (ARITS) followed by the page number.

shadows and not “real person(s)” as he declares. This preliminary analysis of the implication of house ownership for the African American sets a background to scrutinize the living conditions of the Youngers’ family as Hansberry portrays it, in order to assess and measure the family’s frustration and its nourished desire to purchase a new and more comfortable house where they could feel like real American citizens.

2. Living Conditions of the Youngers’ Family in *A Raisin in the Sun*

Like most of the black families in the American society during segregation, the family Younger in Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun* is not decently hosted. The story of the play opens with a brief description of the Youngers’ apartment: “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.” (ARITS, 23). It is obvious that poor housing is part of the injustices done to non-white communities in the American context, in order to strengthen the assumption that posits white people as superior beings. The Youngers’ tiny apartment makes them invisible and anonymous before the American racist society and this meaningfully explains and sustains their strong desire to get out of that miserable room in which conditions have locked them:

Weariness has, in fact, won in this room. Everything has been polished, washed, sat on, used, scrubbed too often. All pretenses but living itself have long since vanished from the very atmosphere of this room. Moreover, a section of this room, for it is not really a room unto itself, though the landlord's lease would make it seem so, slopes backward to provide a small kitchen area, where the family prepares the meals that are eaten in the living room proper, which must also serve as dining room. The single window that has been provided for these "two" rooms is located in this kitchen area. The sole natural light the family may enjoy in the course of a day is only that which fights its way through this little window. At left, a door leads to a bedroom which is shared by MAMA and her daughter, BENEATHA. At right, opposite, is a second room (which in the beginning of the life of this apartment was probably a breakfast room) which serves as a bedroom for WALTER and his wife.

Ruth (ARITS, 24)

From the above description rises the issue of visibility which actually makes a fellow self-confident. Poor housing dispossesses any human being of his pride and self-esteem, and in case of the Youngers’ family, it prevents them from dreaming higher than they actually do, because of the psychological burden imposed by race prejudice. The scope of the room matches with the limited affordable opportunities for black people. The family’s precarious living environment rhymes with their unsuccessful attempts to achieve the American Dream. Especially for Walter and Beneatha, it looks abnormal to be treated like outsiders in a country that boasts to hold the most equitable leadership. Walter, the elder son of the family mourns about his desperate situation: “This morning,

I was lookin' in the mirror and thinking about it...I'm thirty-five years old; I been married eleven years and I got a boy who sleeps in the living room – and all I got to give him is stories about how rich people live" (ARITS, 34). Walter can only tell stories about rich people to Travis, his son, since his dream finds no ways to become real. He then fathoms the sweetness of life from an apparent standpoint. Walter's emasculation is rooted in the socio-economic hardships that sweep the majority of black families on the fringes of society. After the death of the father, he is expected to carry on the role of the family leader, but instead, he loses self-confidence before his wife Ruth, who treats him as "a good-for-nothing loudmouth" (ARITS, 32). The domestic instabilities are the result of frustrations emanating from dreams not accomplished. There is always a conflicting atmosphere between characters, especially Walter and his wife Ruth on the one hand, and Walter and his sister Beneatha, on the other hand. When Walter talks to Ruth about his project of holding a liquor store, she mockingly replies "Honey, you never say nothing new. I listen to you every day, every night and every morning, and you never say nothing new. So you would rather be Mr. Arnold than be his chauffeur. So—I would rather be living in Buckingham Palace" (ARITS, 34). Ruth does not trust her husband, and Beneatha does not respect her brother either. Walter asks to know about his sister's school agenda of the day before and she ironically answers "Lovely. Lovely. And you know, biology is the greatest. I dissected something that looked just like you yesterday" (ARITS, 36). Undeniably, Walter is emasculated to the extent that, almost nobody respects him at home. This feeling of good-for-nothing in a context where he is expected to play the role of a leader culminates when he fails to give fifty cents dollar to Travis, his son.

Lorraine Hansberry relates together the Younger family's problems to the lack of economic means. Money is the main factor that shapes characters' behaviors, and the frustrations expressed by each one is closely linked to the lack of money. Mama confesses that "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" (ARITS, 74). Money is then the passport to the American Dream, and Mama is not only convinced about it, but she also teaches her children how money, when rationally spent will secure them better living conditions. The check from the deceased father's insurance is used to buy a new house, and this turns as if the father had bought the family's freedom with his own blood. Empowered with the lacking piece of the puzzle, which is money, Mama sets out to carry out the family's dream.

3. Mama's NO: a Step toward Equal Rights

The character of Mama, Lorraine Hansberry's protagonist in *A Raisin in the Sun* defies stereotypical depiction of black women by white writers of fiction as "immoral, promiscuous, wanton, frigid, overbearing, or pathetically helpless" (Guillory, 1990, p.28). Of course, it is only in fiction that a writer makes full accomplishment of all that springs from his inner world. By depicting black

women as such, and by making the public opinion be accustomed to the fact, white racists only find ways to strengthen the groundless race prejudice. Unlikely, Hansberry depicts a woman who stands tall, full of pride and determined to face all adversities. Mama declares that "When the world gets ugly enough - a woman will do anything for her family" (ARITS, 75). Her solemn statement marks the beginning of her fight to protect and keep her family united. It takes a charismatic character of the posture of Mama to do with the racists' oppression. Ljubica Matek and Jasna Poljakrehlicki (2016) explain why it is crucial for the family to fight and keep their new house:

Home as a site of recuperation, relaxation, acceptance, and being your true self, then, serves as a means of resistance to the outside world. This is how Lena feels about her home; a sense of togetherness and belonging gave her ancestors the strength to overcome slavery, migration, and poverty, so it is natural that she is willing to do whatever it takes to defend her home.

Ljubica Matek and Jasna Poljakrehlicki (2016, p.297)

So, goaded by the desire to get her family out of poverty and climb the social ladder, Mama resolutely purchases a house in the all-white neighborhood. In the process, Mama has to face great obstacles among which Mr. Karl Lindner, the representative of the Clybourne Park Improvement Association, who argues:

But you've got to admit that a man, right or wrong, has the right to want to have a 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 that race prejudice simply doesn't 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.

ARITS (117-118)

Why does Mama purchase a house in a white area where black people are not wanted, and why does the family resist to Lindner's warnings by rejecting his offer? Here lays Hansberry's project to force white racists to get accustomed to a multiracial context where social ostracism should be banned in order to establish a more brotherly society. Beneatha is surprised to hear that Mama has purchased the house in an all-white area: "Clybourne Park? Mama, There ain't no colored people living in Clybourne Park" and Mama replies with satisfaction that "Well, I guess there's going to be some now" (ARITS, 93). Mama is doubly satisfied after the purchase of the house: she has at last carried out her dream and additionally,

she has also won the battle over the racist Clybourne Park Improvement Association.

Actually, Karl Lindner's blackmails have no effect on Mama who is determined to remove all obstacles on her way. Lindner has to admit that, Mama has nothing to lose when fighting for her rights. So, empowered by the idea that nothing is gained without hard battles, Mama sets out for a crusade against discrimination. Her arsenal in this battle is the check from the deceased husband's life insurance. She is aware that, only money will get the family out of the "rat hole" in which they currently live. Actually, money stands as the moving power in the play, and with money from their deceased father's insurance, the family buys its freedom.

Mama foresees challenges the family has to face on its way to freedom. She calls Walter to charisma that an activist needs in that particular moment of racial turbulences. Having long been emasculated because of his lack of decision making, Walter is empowered by his mother:

Well - son, I'm waiting to hear you say something . . . I'm waiting to hear how you be your father's son. Be the man he was [...] Your wife say she going to destroy your child. And I'm waiting to hear you talk like him and say we a people who give children life, not who destroys them - I'm waiting to see you stand up and look like your daddy and say we done give one baby up to poverty and that we ain't going to give up nary another one.

ARITS (75)

Through Walter's initiation to manhood, he becomes aware of the central role he must play as the new family leader. Mama hands money to Walter with the recommendation that "It ain't much, but it's all I got in the world and I'm putting it in your hands. I'm telling you to be the head of this family from now on like you supposed to be" (ARITS, 107). Mama allows Travis to witness the scene of his father's initiation to manhood and leadership, and this also turns to be Travis' early engagement in Civil Rights Movements. Walter can now stand and vehemently react to Lindner's offer, which stipulates that "Our association is prepared, through the collective effort of our people, to buy the house from you at a financial gain to your family," but Walter angrily retaliates: "We don't want to hear no exact terms of no arrangements. I want to know if you got any more to tell us 'bout getting together? Never mind how I feel-you got any more to say 'bout how people ought to sit down and talk to each other? ... Get out of my house, man" (ARITS, 118-119). This is the appropriate way of doing with racism, and Walter's final decision sounds like a solemn speech to the whole racist' society. He goes on:

Well-what I mean is that we come from people who had a lot of pride. I mean-we are very proud people. And that's my sister over there and she's going to be a doctor-and we are very proud-And we have all thought about your offer-'And we have decided to move into our house because my father - my father - he earned it for us brick by brick. We don't want to make no trouble for nobody or fight no causes, and we will try to be good neighbors. And that's all we got to say about that. We don't want your money.

ARITS (148)

By rejecting Lindner's offer and kicking him out of their room, they have then secured their ascension toward the American Dream. At that stage, even money cannot refrain them from moving. Lindner capitulates after unsuccessful attempts to stop them "Well - if you are that final about it ... there is nothing left for me to say" (ARITS, 149). His last words seem like a dying hope for racists to continue subjugating black communities. The freedom bell is ringing to announce the end of black people's plight and the new era in the history of the United States of America. Especially for the Younger family, this is a victory over racism. Their unyielding rejection of Lindner's offer to buy their house with a good financial gain, shows to which extent they cannot be corrupted, even in poverty. Mama expresses this pride which is particular to the family: "Son—I come from five generations of people who was slaves and sharecroppers—but ain't nobody in my family never let nobody pay 'em no money that was a way 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" (ARITS, 143). By affirming the family's pride through the rejection of Lindner's offer, the Youngers claim respect and dignity they actually deserve in their society. There is nothing abnormal when struggling to assert oneself, and feel again like a human being after centuries of humiliation, debasement and all sorts of abuses.

A Raisin in the Sun is Lorraine Hansberry's fertile soil where the seeds of revolt and protest germinate and grow to improve the African Americans life conditions, and by so doing, the racial relations in the American society as a whole. Since the racist has nothing to gain by oppressing the "other," (whom s/he knows is already socially disadvantaged), it is wise and judicious to stop this inhuman behavior and develop a sense of humanness. It is only from this moment that s/he (the racist) could perceive the beauty of human soul, and target perfection in life.

Conclusion

Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* is much about the fulfillment of the American Dream in the racially segregated American context. The ongoing work has proposed to discuss the vital sense of owning a decent house, especially for African Americans, and present the Younger family's bad living conditions as the source of Mama's fight to buy a new house by defying segregationist rules. Especially for black people who are the least privileged, it seems lost in advance,

but from the desolate setting of the Youngers springs a powerful desire to kick out all obstacles to make their dream become true. The findings from this analysis are subsequent to the objectives set right from the beginning. The work has proven that, a family needs a decent home in order to stick together, and entertain a harmonious existence. It has also been sustained that a house is not a mere shelter, but an indicator of success, and especially for black people, a house is “a haven from the pressures of the outside world, even a site of leisure and recreation” (Mallet, 2004: 75). Mallet’s definition of home contrasts with the tiny and overcrowded apartment of the Youngers, which is the result of unequal afforded opportunities in housing. The family’s living environment does not allow its members’ full potential blossoming, but instead it nourishes anger and protest along the play. Moreover, from this fading hope of attaining the American Dream has sprung a powerful determination to get the family out of invisibility, carried out by Mama. She has been discussed in term of a strong woman, who epitomizes the black community’s defender and provider. Through Walter’s initiation to manhood, Mama has handed down the power to the younger generation that must continue the fight for equal rights. The family’s rejection of Karl Lindner’s offer has been discussed as a kick to racism and anything connected to it. From Mama’s activism stems a need to revisit the Civil Rights Movements discourse which has ignored or misrepresented women’s active contribution.

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