Africa as a Metaphor: Lorraine Hansberry’s African Writing in A Raisin in the Sun

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Abstract. Lorraine Hansberry (1930-1965) was regarded as one of the most important African-American playwrights in American literature. This paper focuses on the writing of Africa in A Raisin in the Sun, the most important play written by Hansberry. By constructing Africa as a metaphorical space, Hansberry attempted to transcend the geo-political reality of Africa and to explore the very human connections between people of different countries and ideologies.

Introduction

Lorraine Hansberry (1930-1965) was regarded as one of the most important African-American playwrights in American literature. As the first African-American playwright to have a play staged on Broadway, she paved the way for later African-American playwrights and women playwrights.

Hansberry categorized herself as a humanist. She was politically active and opposed to oppression of any sort, being committed to the social, political and economic liberation of black people and white people alike. This activism was expressed well in her plays, which were indictments of the cruelty of the society.

A Raisin in the Sun was the first play written by Hansberry and it was a great success. In 1959, A Raisin in the Sun won over Eugene O’Neill’s A Touch of the Poet, Tennessee Williams’ Sweet Bird of Youth and MacLeish’s JB to get the New York Drama Critics’ Circle Award. Many critics and scholars had done much study about the theme of American dream of the play and the major characters in the play. In fact, the African writing in this play is also worthy of the study.

Africa is a focus of many African-American writers. In “The Negro in American Culture”, Alain Locke mentions that “the conscious and deliberate threading back of the historic sense of group tradition to the cultural backgrounds of Africa” is “the most sophisticated of all race motives”. Lorraine Hansberry notices the close relationship between African culture and the black Americans. In A Raisin in the Sun, Hansberry uses Africa as a metaphor to show her idea about the condition, the situation and the future of the black people in America.

Mama’s Africa: Why should I Know About Africa

The ancestors of black Americans came to the new world as slaves. They were forced to be separated from their African homeland, and then followed by a loss of history and culture. The
separation and the loss also have had a profound impact on contemporary black Americans, but not all of them realize the point. For example, for Mama Lena in *A Raisin in the Sun*, one of the descendants of those uprooted people who were displaced by the slave trade, Africa is distant and intangible, just as in Mama Lena’s words, “Well I don't think I never met no African before...” For them, Africa is only imagined and exists only as a dream. Those black Americans are alienated from their African past and it is hard for them to discern the potentially productive linkages between Africa and contemporary black Americans.

In *A Raisin in the Sun*, before the visit of her suitor, Asagai from Nigeria, Beneatha laughed at the naive idea of Mama Lena about Africa, representative of the ordinary black Americans. Here Hansberry has Mama ask a question: “Why should I know about Africa?” This is a question that perhaps many other black Americans might ask as well. For contemporary black Americans, they were born and brought up in America, and they identified themselves with the American people. Then how does Africa relate to their everyday reality?

Hansberry understands the significance for the black Americans to negotiate the blackness and the history in relation to the limited representations of Africa. For Hansberry, a black American immersed in the social and political movements of her day, such images are closely related to the everyday reality of their own, that is, the racial discrimination they suffered in America.

There was a close relationship between Hansberry’s interest in Africa and her political activism, and her idea about Africa resulted from two factors. One was her uncle, William Leo Hansberry, a professor of African studies at Howard University. Lorraine Hansberry was interested in the discussion of Ghana and Mali by her uncle. And as a scholar, Leo Hansberry insisted on the existence of prehistoric man in Africa. Africa was not the “Dark Continent,” but the “Continent of Light” with an ancient and complex civilization. Another was Pan-Africanist pioneer W. E. B. Du Bois, who was a good friend of Lorraine Hansberry’s father, a tutor in the time of her seminar on African Studies in the University of Wisconsin. Under his guidance, Hansberry read widely about the affairs in contemporary Africa and it gave her much inspiration in her growing involvement in American social and political activism. She was also greatly influenced by Du Bois’ belief that African Americans should give up the idea of the world’s belonging to white people only and they should think of themselves as the potential force in the organization of society.

With the firm grounding in African culture and politics, it is natural that there would be a combination of these two topics in Hansberry’s writing. In *A Raisin in the Sun*, between Mama Lena and Asagai, behind the difference of continent is a shared root and a shared humanity. Just as Robert Nemiroff, husband and editor of Hansberry, points out, in the eyes of Hansberry, “the ultimate destiny and aspirations of the African peoples and twenty million American Negroes are inextricably and magnificently bound up together forever.” Hansberry attempted to recover for black Americans the African culture from which many of their ancestors were forcibly torn.

It is necessary for the black Americans to be linked to their ancestral roots. In the 1950’s, in war-torn parts of Africa, Africans were fighting against colonialism, while in America, black Americans were fighting against racial oppression. All of those colonialism and racial oppression were originated from the idea of black inferiority and white supremacy. Practically and symbolically, African revolts against colonialism shared a common ground with the struggles of the black Americans for social freedom and equality. Hence, the liberation efforts of black Americans cannot be separated from Pan-African struggle. In the words of Elam, “The
black Americans must know and care about Africa, for it is the land of origin and the place of historic conception.” Only by knowing the history of their forefathers can they win in their own struggle.

**Beneatha and Walter Lee’s Africa: Africa as the Source of Strength**

Lorraine Hansberry recognized that the image of Africa was distorted greatly in dominating literature and popular culture. In the terms of Frantz Fanon, Africa was under the “colonial gaze”, that is, Africa had been seen, defined and stereotyped by the Europeans. For a long period of time, European culture has been regarded as a kind of culture that is superior to the cultures of Africa and has been taken as the norm by which others are measured or judged. European culture seems to have greater authority than others and all others are “abnormal” and either exotic or inferior or both.

In *A Raisin in the Sun*, how to negotiate with the distortion in the delineations of Africa and black people is vital for the Younger family to search for identity and to quest for the cultural roots, especially for Beneatha and Walter Lee. They are striving for a kind of freedom and equality, a circumstance for them to fulfill themselves. For Beneatha and Walter Lee, African past—the originating home of civilization—is the source for them to get their self-images and self-understanding. Just as Elam says, “Africa is a dynamic space of cultural memory from which they can get strength.”

Beneatha, knowledgeable in African study, constructing Africa as a respected place of wisdom, looks to Africa for a sense of identity. George Murchison is Beneatha’s bourgeois suitor. His sense of personal identity and culture are socially influenced by the historic representations of Africa within Western culture. When Beneatha talked about heritage, he denigrates Africa by saying “Let’s face it baby your heritage is nothing but a bunch of raggedy-assed spirituals and some grass huts”. Beneatha replies by saying “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”. Here Beneatha retorts George by presenting the success of early African civilizations and by listing the achievements of the African past.

In the same way, in his drunkenness, Walter Lee’s eyes look off—back to the past, the land of the ancestors, and he exclaims, “I am much warrior, The lion is waking. Do you hear the singing of the women, singing the war songs of our fathers to the babies in the great houses? OH, DO YOU HEAR, MY BLACK BROTHERS! ” Here, the anti-colonial movement in Africa is a source of strength for black Americans to fight for their own bright future.

For Beneatha and Walter Lee, Africa is a site of possibility and a space through which the past can be reprocessed, and the past will have an impact upon the present. Just as Elam notices, “Active celebration of the African past served the present by instilling a profoundly positive concept of blackness and African traditions.” It is clear that the restoration of the past was an important factor in giving black Americans like Beneatha and Walter Lee the confidence to imagine a future without racial oppression.

**Asagai’s Africa: Representative of a New Africa**

In the Western frames of reference, due to the lack of the understanding of the underlying assumptions of the African’s beliefs, what is observed in Africa is regarded as irrational and the
African seems to be a savage, and Africa is a land of ignorance, the home of “barbarism, degradation, and beastiality”. For a long period of time in the history, Africa was under the control of European colonialism. Black Americans came to America as slaves, and they were still in misery in the 20th century. When Mama Lena was young, as black American, “we was worried about not being lynched and getting to the North if we could and how to stay alive and still have a pinch of dignity too... ” However, after World War II, African independence movements began to grow and Africans began to fight against colonial exploitation of the West and began to demand self-government. While at that period of time, the racial conditions in the United States failed to improve. Hence, black Americans started to look to Africa for inspiration and guidance, and the political and cultural movements on the continent began to influence black Americans significantly.

In *A Raisin in the Sun*, Hansberry portrayed a contemporary African character Asagai authentically. Different from African characters described in Western literature, usually the roles of servants or criminals, Asagai is a well-spoken, well-educated and intelligent African student. “He’s an intellectual. He’s been studying in Canada all summer.” The first time Beneatha met Asagai at school, she wants to talk with him about Africa since she is looking for her identity. For a black American student like Beneatha, who knows something about Africa’s history and it’s contemporary realities, the questions of what kind of person I can be as a black in America and what kind of life I can live trouble her from time to time. Asagai is a good example for her because Asagai represents a new possibility for black people.

By presenting Asagai as a “true intellectual”, Hansberry responded to the previously established, negative images of Africa and Africans. According to Hansberry, Asagai was her “favourite character,” since “audiences had never seen an African on stage without his shoes around his neck and a bone in his nose or ears”. It was refreshing for the audiences and it was a signal to show respect for African culture and civilization. That “Africans did not hear of civilization for the first time from Europeans,” as Chinua Achebe declared later in 1977, is a claim expressed clearly by Hansberry in *A Raisin in the Sun*. Asagai’s potentiality as the future leader of a new Africa to eradicate the illiteracy and disease and ignorance confirms that Africans are capable enough to govern themselves. Hansberry also believed in the similarities between African and African-American struggles for equality. Asagai’s strategy for a nation capable of future achievements justifies the aspirations of Beneatha and Walter Lee for their own future and freedom.

**Conclusion**

Hansberry supported fervently the liberation of all people from oppression. By constructing Africa as a metaphorical space, Hansberry attempted to transcend the geo-political reality of Africa and to explore the very human connections between people of different countries and ideologies.

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