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From the "Other" to Matriarch: The Transcending Role of Black Women in Hansberry's A Raisin in the Sun

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Abstract: ***The gender roles that have been assigned within societies tend to be of a binary nature: the men represent "the One", the absolute and essential, whereas the women are "the other", the accidental and inferior. The idea of Otherness can be traced back in a variety of contemporary works, including Hansberry's A Raisin in the Sun. This work addresses the numerous details and elements which embody the idea of otherness within the play. The female characters, Beneatha, Mama Lena and Ruth, embody women's struggle to save their identity, and it is shown how this double-sided otherness tends to determine even the smallest aspects of their life, as the race issues complicate the feminist ones. This paper aims to compare these women's attempts to transcend the imposed role of being the "other", through the different levels of matriarchy they realize. It is suggested that taking this position appears to be the only way for women to escape 'otherness'. The characters have proven man's incapability of dealing with women as being equal to them, as a result of their instilled sense of self-doubt and inferiority. It seems as if men tend to live in a constant fear of not being able to measure up to society's standards.***

Keywords: "The Other", Matriarchy, A Raisin in the Sun, Female Identity, Gender Roles, Black

1. INTRODUCTION

Socialization is considered to be the key factor in shaping the concepts of being a woman or a man. Continuous social interaction, as well as one's self-reflection, eventually create these social identities. One of the ways in which societies form such a notion is through their construction into binary opposites. As suggested by O'Neill [1], reality consists of the interaction of opposing forces: in order for something to define itself, it must also define something in opposition to itself.

This leads to the concept of "the Other". Generally, "the Other" can be defined as someone who is considered by a group as not belonging: she or he lacks culturally essential characteristics that are possessed by the group. This group regards itself to be the "standard" and excludes

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anyone who does not meet the criteria. Therefore, the "Other" is usually regarded as an inferior being, and is treated accordingly.

When it comes to the gender-related binary opposition of women and men, Otherness takes on a slightly different turn. As the French philosopher Simone de Beauvoir [2] points out in her book The Second Sex, men are "the One", while the women are "the Other". A woman is "defined with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the accidental as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other". The difference lies here in the fact that the case of reciprocity is not recognized in this binary opposition, One of the contrasting terms, the man, is set up to be the sole essential, who denies any relation to its correlate, and defines women as being pure otherness.

In Hansberry's A Raisin in the Sun, the events revolve around three black women, Beneatha, Mama Lena and Ruth, who struggle with the harsh circumstances of living within a predominantly white society. As Hansberry stated in one of the interviews with her, "Obviously, the most oppressed group of any oppressed group will be its women, who are oppressed twice" . She refers to the fact that even within the same class of Black people who suffer from racism, Black men tend to discriminate and oppress their women. This, along with several other factors, leaves no way for these women to survive but through becoming matriarchs.

Anderson [3] suggested that the stereotypical Black matriarchy 1. considers the Black man to be undependable and often to blame for his own emasculation, 2. Usually seems to be very pious, 3. considers mothering to be among the most significant elements of life, and 4. tries to protect her children by preparing them to go along with the prejudiced white society.

These characteristics define A Raisin in the Sun as a play about matriarchy. When comparing the depiction of the female characters in the play, it seems that throughout their attempts to transcend the imposed role of being the "other", they start to signal off traits of matriarchy, though at slightly different levels. This suggests that taking this position appears to be the only way for women to escape their inferiority.

HANSBERRY'S A RAISIN IN THE SUN

About Hansberry

Lorraine Hansberry (1930-1969) was an African-American playwright and activist. Growing up in a middle-class family, she was born to well-educated, black parents who stood up to discrimination against black people. Hansberry went to the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and moved later on to New York in 1950, where she took writing classes and occupied the position of associate editor for Freedom. Throughout these years, she met many notable African-Americans who influenced her, including Langston Hughes, from whose famous poem "Harlem: A Dream Deferred" Hansberry took the title of her play A Raisin in the Sun, first performed in 1957 [4]. The metaphor in the title implies Hansberry's intention to represent the experience of Black people in achieving sweet triumphs in the middle of the sour circumstances that African Americans have to endure [5].

As a playwright, Hansberry primarily wrote about two essential themes: racism and the role of women within society. She often implied notes in which she contrasts the lifestyle of black and white families, especially shedding light on the deprivation of black families from fundamental rights which white people were granted without question [6]. In Raisin, Hansberry infers that gender and race are not two isolated issues but are rather deeply integrated. All behavior of the

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characters is determined by both their constructed gender role as well as the impact of race as a whole [7].

Several autobiographical elements can be traced back in this play. During childhood, Hansberry's family left the Chicago projects moving to an all-white neighborhood where she had to attend a mostly white public school. During this period, they came to deal with intense racism. Her father eventually took part in a legal conflict, fighting the attempt to ban selling homes in particular neighborhoods to African American families. After years, she happened to see the play Juno and the Peacock by O'Casey which revolved around the struggles of a poor Irish family, and this inspired her to share similarly realistic stories about the oppression of African-Americans. She always felt the tendency to record her experiences, and through this play she managed to become one of the first playwrights to portray African-American life realistically [4].

Plot analysis

Raisin is a play about the search of a working-class African American family for a better life. As the play opens, the Younger family are waiting for a $10.000 insurance check that is about to come to Lena Younger after her husband has passed away a few months earlier. She is the head of the household, and lives with her family of three generations in a small flat in Chicago. Walter Lee, Lena's son, is a chauffeur for a white family, yet he does not earn enough money to be the only breadwinner of the family. Therefore, his wife Ruth and Mama Lena are forced to do domestic work to make ends meet. Beneatha, Lena's daughter, is a university student, and Travis Lena's grandson, a school boy. With the help of his wife, Walter tries to convince his mother to invest the money in a liquor store. Mama has other plans, as she makes a down payment on a house in a white neighborhood. The remainder of the money is given to Walter on condition that part of it has to be kept for Beneatha's medical school [8, 9].

Hansberry's works represent women's position in society and their relationships to men authentically. Through the characterization of the three stereotypical African-American female characters at the core of the play, Raisin reveals several social and cultural problems common in mid-20th century life in America, particularly those of race, class and gender. The identity of African-American women is compared to men in terms of several gender-related expectations such as appearance, and responsibilities [5]. Another aspect that the play evokes is the powerfully determined mother who strive to protect their daughters and help them become successful within a predominantly white society [9].

Character Analysis

Beneatha Younger

To begin with, Beneatha is the youngest and most energetic woman in the play. She seems to identify her role in society to be self-oriented rather than family-oriented. This is obvious from the fact that she intends to take her economic situation and personal life into own hands by creating her identity and pursuing an independent career without relying on a man. Through her interaction with the men in her social environment, Beneatha challenges the traditional, stereotypical norms of the male dominance that are expected from women [5]. She is a true representation of a woman subverting the designation of the female as the inessential "other", demonstrated by her development of self through meaningful labour that encourages assertive critical thinking.

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The first encounter takes place with her elder Brother Walter. As the family starts discussing the plan according to which their late father's insurance money is to be spent, a conflict arises leading to a conflict between them. Even though both have a different plan on how to use the money, yet their ultimate intention is to provide their family financial stability. Walter hopes to establish a business and earn a sufficient income by investing the sum of money in a liquor store, attempting to help alleviate the family's financial difficulties. Beneatha, on the other hand, plans to invest her money in her education. By securing a job as a doctor, she can pay her family back in the future [5]. Walter, unable to cope with the idea of a woman taking the lead, rejects his younger sister's idea and thereby reveals his inner needs to be in control himself:

"Who the hell told you 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 …" [10]

Through these lines Walter discloses is actual belief of the appropriate role of women in society, namely as the "other". He cannot accept the notion of Beneatha choosing to become a doctor instead of a nurse, because the former profession is mainly associated with men. In addition, he suggests that women should not occupy any individual position, except for being merely the man's complement. Therefore, Beneatha has two options to choose from: she either ought to be a nurse id she insists on working, or simply take her proper role at home through being a man's wife. Then, he tells her to be quiet, as he believes it to be absurd that she thinks she could dare challenging a man verbally: he is the head of the family, the workplace, and society as a whole. Yet, she ignores him and, like the majority of Black women, her main concern is merely the influence of her financial decision on the other family members rather than her own personal desires or needs. By working towards becoming a doctor, her main intention has become challenging the white society (and Black men) and overcome financial restraints [5].

The next interaction occurs with two young men. Throughout the course of the play, Beneatha goes back and forth between two distinct admirers, namely the intellectual, native African, Joseph Asagai, and the rather conservative, arrogant George Murchison. Her suitors actually serve as a stereotypical representation of the two opposite extremes of Black men in late 1950's [5]. The way in which these characters interact untangle the relationships that are determined by race, gender, and class during that period. Both men have their own expectations of how a woman should be and how she ought to behave and look like, and they attempt to impose these "norms" upon Beneatha.

Asagai stimulates Beneatha's mind by peaking her curiosity about Africa, as she eventually starts to take huge pride in her race. He gives her authentic Nigerian robes, but at the same time criticizes her hairstyle as he would prefer to see her with the natural look she was born with. As she thwarts Asagai's request for a serious relationship, her gender is in some way or other addressed, and she feels the need to define herself and determine what qualities she considers to be significant in a relationship. Beneatha, having no interest in being his object of desire, states that more time should be spent to know each other better. Entertained by Beneatha's state of mind, Asagai argues her need for freedom, saying that "the world's most liberated women are not liberated at all. You all talk about it too much" [10]. In light of her not conforming to his needs, he nicknames her "Alaiyo… meaning One for Whom Bread—Food—Is Not Enough" [10]. This tribal nickname empowers her position as a woman, and actually reveals her decision to define her identity apart from her relation with Asagai, and thereby maintains her own will over his [5].

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Being as liberated as can be, she also objects the ideas implied by her other gentleman caller, George Murchison. Initially, he starts by conveying his distaste with her "eccentric" appearance. Beneatha is outraged by her restricted position, as well as the extent to which the norms of the white society determine even the simplest details of her appearance, such as appropriate style of dress. George encourages Beneatha to suppress her authentic African-American culture, fearing to be discriminated by White society [5]. What he mainly expects from Beneatha is that she stays pretty and quiet. This is how he tries to silence her voice, prizing Beneatha's appearance over her intellect. His criticism uncovers the norms of the traditionally dominant men, in women are expected to maintain a specific visual role and speak only whenever spoken to. In contrast with most women of that era, Beneatha dares to fight back, referring to the notion that knowledge is supposed to be used, and eventually asserts that "George is a fool" [10].

Beneatha presents herself strong in that, though she may consider the idea of Asagai and George's proposals, she eventually decides for herself. Through her communication with the two admirers, she is confronted with her race in quite different ways. Asagai embraces their native heritage, whereas George, on the other hand, is obsessed by the idea of rejecting his race. Beneatha's gender forms an essential aspect as she is supposed to meet the men's desires and expectations of how an ideal partner should be. Yet, she resists the ideals of both and creates an individual one instead. The rejection of the nicknames and ideals both men wish to impose on her indicate the priority Beneatha gives to her own will and voice [5]. This exemplifies effectively the contrast between her transcendence and her mother and sister-in-law's choice of the passivity of 'wife' and 'mother', which is eventually de Beauvoir's thinking. She portrays her self-identity apart from whatever is anticipated and traditionally accepted.

Mama Lena Younger

Moving to the other female characters in the play, it is noticed that they occupy a slightly different role, as they have reached a matriarchal one. In light of the characteristics mentioned earlier, Mama, Mrs. Lena Younger, can be identified as a matriarch. With the death of father Big Walter Lee, Mama (Lena) Younger finds no way to carry on with life but to fulfil the roles of both parents [11]. The awaited insurance money is expected to bring hope and dreams into the bleak existence of the Youngers, as every member has plans on how to spend it. Being the head of the family, Mama eventually has to decide for them thoughtfully.

One of the play's disappointments is when Mama relinquishes her control by giving Walter the remainder of the pay check. This significant moment of trust forms a turning point in the play, as Mama does not only hand him over the family's income, but also the title of head of the household. Everything shatters when Walter turns out to have ignored Mama's advice, as he loses all the money in a hastily and untrustworthy investment suggested by his so-called partner, Willie. Despite the fact that Walter does respect his mother and seeks to please her, this initial obedience is overshadowed by the strong need to be the breadwinner of the family and eventually fulfil the stereotypical role of being the male head of the household, as his definition of manhood is to be financially successful. Such behavior put the Youngsters back in exactly the same financial burden, proving Walter to be undependable and indeed responsible for his own emasculation [11].

Mama embodies the second characteristic of the stereotypical matriarch. Religion is an essential part of her life that has integrated into all its aspects. She strives to let her children adopt her religious beliefs. An example is when she slaps Beneatha after stating that there is

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no God, and she made her say, "In my mother's house there is still God" [10]. Another moment is when Mama became angry about the wasting of the inherited money, she prays to God to give her strength. It seems that it is her faith that empowers her to be a matriarch [11].
Another of Mama's characteristic is her absolute devotion to her family as they are her dreams and reasons for existence. She quotes her late husband to Ruth:
"'Seems like God didn't see fit to give the black man nothing but dreams—but He did give us children to make the dreams worthwhile" [10].
Her children are the core of her life, and she sacrifices anything for them. When Ruth advises her to treat herself by spending some of the inherited money on a holiday, Mama refuses, explaining that she couldn't spend the money but on her family. She concludes that the tensions and difficulties they are facing could only be escaped by moving into another house to ensure their safety [3]. This notion emphasizes Mama's role in society as an African American mother particularly, as her financial freedom is much more limited than the average White mother of that period. Apart from the financial restrains, African American mothers specifically had no privilege of using money so as to meet their own desires as they had to provide for their family of their own [11].
One of the consequences of transcending the role of the "other" and being a strong Black woman is loneliness. Mama Lena is alone both within and beyond her family. Being the head of her household, she has no one to whom she can turn for consultation about the decisions she makes. Her position in the hierarchy of power leaves her without a shoulder to cry on. Mama embodies the classic example of the problem faced by black women whenever they attempt to escape being the inferior "other" [12].
It is interesting to point out the mother-daughter relationship shared by Mama Lena and Beneatha. Mama supports Beneatha's ambitions fully, and she is willing to sacrifice for her success (Beal, 1994). This is also traced back in her responses to the two young men in Beneatha's life. While Ruth cannot understand how Beneatha could show no interest in marrying the rich George, Mama seems to be more sympathetic. Whenever Beneatha tells her mother about what a fool she thinks George is, Mama replies "Well, I guess you better not waste your time with no fools" [10]. This suggests that unlike white mothers, Mama Lena does not regards marriage as her daughter's only means of success or to alter the problematic and probably poor environment she grew up in.

Ruth Younger

Shifting to the last female character, Ruth is a pretty yet weary woman of thirty, wife to the 'man' of the house. As is clear from the very first scene, their relationship is not as smooth as it is supposed to be, since both are rather impatient with each other. Ruth is still facing difficulty in transcending from her position as the "other" to her matriarchal role. Even though she does not have a totally matriarchal role in her family, the initial characteristics of matriarchy can already be found in her relationship with Walter. In several cases she seems to take Mama's side, sharing her basic distrust of Walter's judgment and thereby emasculating him likewise. One of these examples is when Walter discusses his future dreams with her, as she is tired of listening to his talk and cuts the conversation off by replying "Eat your eggs, they gonna be cold" [10]. It is as if she is rather mothering him instead of being more comprehensive and responding to his needs [11].
One of these encounters when Walter tried to exhibit his manhood, he was complaining about their financial situation and pointed out that Ruth ought to be supporting him and his ideas,

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which she did not agree with [11]. He begins to argue how women ought to complement men, being nothing more than "the other":
"A man needs for a woman to back him up […] That is just what is wrong with the colored woman in this world […] Don't understand about building their men up and making 'em feel like somebody. Like they can do something" [10].
Instead of appreciating Ruth being a wife and mother, he rather abuses her verbally. This proves that even though Walter and Ruth belongs to the same race, yet he feels the need to mark his male territory, eventually placing Black women at the bottom of the social scale as a whole.
Yet, one aspect in which Ruth is different from Beneatha is the way in which she responds to men's sexist comments and behavior, as she tends to be much less deliberated and direct than her sister-in-law. She often rolls her eyes or glares at her husband's notices rather than speaking up or expressing her alternate opinion. Even though there are moments at which she disagrees with Walter's point of view, yet she tends to reinforce conventional beliefs suggested by men. Being a married woman, Ruth is in the middle: torn between the needs and aspirations of others and her own humble dream to live in peace. Despite the fact that her main concern is to maintain peace, she recognizes the oppression and challenge of male dominance in certain cases [11].

2. CONCLUSIONS

History has shown over time that the phenomenon of woman's otherness results from the male's instinctive desire to control their environment and being validated by others, given that control represents the absolute epitome of the patriarchal society. Man needs to ensure their dominance over their surroundings, including women, to ensure their survival as well as that of the community they created. It is therefore noted that women have formed the greatest challenge to man's control. One of the ways of controlling women is by means of objectifying them, as if they can hold them at their grasp.
The concept of otherness has created a paradox for women, as their attempt of transcending their situation eventually becomes her struggle in society. Free woman own the power of creating the paradise she seeks for herself, But at the same time this will throw her into the risk of being attacked by male counterparts, as she does not fulfil her originally assigned role yet tends to grow closer to that of men. Men's fear of women's transcendence over time led to the systematic creation of myths that aim to cage women within the grasp of male servitude.
The patriarchy does not approve of women who achieve transcendence and rebel against the passivity imposed on them. The female characters in this play embody woman's struggles in saving their identity All men were found to be expressing their fear of woman transcendence differently. Walter, claiming to have lost the role of "head of the family" fights over having the last word in the household's budget, and whenever given the chance to take this role, he proves to be unable to carrying this responsibility and loses the money. As for Beneatha's boy friends, Asagai attempts to belittle Beneatha and convinces her to "embrace her origin" and move back to Africa, indicating that he cannot live with the idea of a young black women being successful in a white society. George, on the other hand, does not mind that she stays, but cannot see her grow into a successful women either. He asks her to neglect her origin and accept her life as an oppressed, black woman in a white society, silencing her in front of the white oppressors.
This is what forces women to turn to matriarchy, yet do the levels of realization vary from one to another. All matriarchal traits have been found in the character of Mama Lena and partially in Ruth's, as both find no use in having the man to be the head of the household, and both carry

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the sense of selflessness and tend to place their family first. Even the very deliberated Beneatha subconsciously indicates that in the future, she might also develop into a matriarch. This has been found in the fact that her initial aim for becoming a doctor is to be able to secure a sufficient financial livelihood for her family, in addition to in her relationship with her brother Walter, as she also tends to emasculate him verbally.

This invented survival strategy is passed down the generations, as is seen in the mother-daughter relationship between Mama Lena and Beneatha. Mama tends to teach her daughter how she could survive being a black woman in a white society through creating bridges to transcend these social constructions. Evidence can be found in Mama's attitude towards her daughter's marriage and ambitions.

In spite of the frustrating moments and their given circumstances, as well as the huge obstacles to their freedom, these strong Black women passionately create persistent strategies of self-formation, self-recovery and self-expression. All women, regardless of time and place, experience the same kind of oppression within society and the women in the play discussed proved to be able to master the situation they have been positioned in and managed to flourish, shattering the patriarchal society's dominant stereotypes which turns them into "others".

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