

Original Article

# Identity and Cultural Conflict in Lorraine Hansberry's "A Raisin in the Sun"

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**Abstract** - This article analyzes Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*, concentrating on themes of self-identity, racial and cultural conflict, and systemic racial bias in 1950s America. The study examines the Younger family's challenges with adversity, intergenerational conflicts, and societal inequity in their pursuit of prosperity and self-identity. This study focuses on the characters of Walter, Beneatha, and Lena (Mama) to demonstrate the intersections and divergences of economic ambition, cultural affirmation, and moral duty. The research demonstrates that Hansberry critiques internal family conflicts and the family's struggle against external racial adversities, the restricted and ethnically confined roles of African Americans, and the significance of human dignity, solidarity, and cultural identity.

**Keywords** - African American, Dignity, Cultural conflict, Discrimination, Economic, Gender, Hardship, Hansberry, identity.

## 1. Introduction

*A Raisin in the Sun* by Lorraine Hansberry is still an important work in American theatre, but most scholarly work on it focuses too much on its themes of race and civil rights and not enough on how identity is formed and cultural conflict happens in the home. Although numerous critical studies have recognized its significance in African American literature, fewer have examined the complex interplay among economic ambition, gender roles, and intergenerational ideological divergence concerning identity formation. This paper aims to address the existing gap by examining how Hansberry integrates these themes into a cohesive dramatic structure that confronts both racial oppression and intrafamilial cultural negotiations.

Even though there has been much research, there has not been much comparative analysis of how Hansberry's work is different from or builds on the themes set by other writers of her time. This study will elucidate that distinction by contextualizing *A Raisin in the Sun* within a broader literary framework and recognizing it as a precursor to subsequent African American literature centered on identity politics and cultural reclamation.

The uniqueness of this study resides in its reinterpretation of *A Raisin in the Sun* through the framework of integrated identity dynamics—race, class, gender, and heritage—expressed by each member of the Younger family. This study augments the current body of knowledge by offering a more comprehensive methodology for assessing identity negotiation and introduces novel frameworks for interpreting African American cultural expression in post-war American theatre.

## 2. Literature Review

*A Raisin in the Sun* by Lorraine Hansberry is widely considered to be one of the most important works in American theatre, especially because it was the first to look at the lives of African Americans in the middle of the 20th century. Initial critiques often emphasize the play's distinctiveness as the inaugural Broadway production authored by a Black woman; however, its profound themes and societal implications extend far beyond this historical milestone. Scholars like Wilkerson (2010) and Bigsby (2000) underscore Hansberry's skillful navigation of intersecting themes—race, class, gender, and generational identity—within the socio-historical framework of post-war America. Set during the height of the Civil Rights Movement, the play depicts the real-life battles against racial segregation, particularly in housing and employment, serving as both a literary piece and a form of social commentary (Rothstein, 2017).

Even though most of the current work gets a lot of praise, it mostly focuses on obvious racial issues. It doesn't always look at more complicated issues like how people form their identities within their families, how they identify with their culture when they move away, and the small conflicts that arise between assimilation and cultural reclamation. Washington (2004) contends that Hansberry's depiction of the Younger family aims to surpass existing stereotypes by illustrating a multifaceted household contending with both systemic oppression and internal strife regarding ambition, dignity, and self-identity. Beneatha Younger exemplifies the internal contradictions, with her intellectual and cultural development reflecting Pan-Africanism, female empowerment, and cultural pride (Taylor, 2011). The two romantic relationships held by



Beneatha with George Murchison and Joseph Asagai have been interpreted traditionally as symbolic representations of the larger ideological conflict in Black America: that of assimilation into the dominant culture versus the restoration of African heritage. Scholars like Marable (2007) and hooks (1992) have related these images to the development of Black identity and consciousness during the struggle for civil rights, thus placing Hansberry's work within a larger framework of African American cultural resistance. Beneatha's rejection of these traditional ideals of femininity continues to add to the complexity and thus makes her one of the first African American female characters to challenge patriarchal expectations actively in both Black and white communities. The quarrels between Mama and the two children, Walter and Beneatha, portray approaches people take to deal with structural oppression. Mama's way is based on spiritual endurance and communal endurance, while Walter goes after economic enfranchisement, and Beneatha tries to get intellectual enfranchisement. Wilkerson (2010); Rothstein (2017). Such oppositions remain crucial to larger discussions in African American cultural discourse as to how one may go for racial uplift, whether it be through economic empowerment, cultural self-definition, or family cohesion. Comparative literature frameworks do not always hold examinations here, but this one is revealing thematic connections with her contemporaries. James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953) deals with the conflict that exists between accepted beliefs and having one's own freedom, whereas *Fences* (1985) by August Wilson speaks of the intergenerational conflict and racial hatred within the ranks of the African American working class. Situating *A Raisin in the Sun* in this fold makes it imperative as a literary work and, in fact, gives us an angle to appreciate it. *A Raisin in the Sun* is an important work for anyone studying African American literature and culture. Hansberry's skill in weaving together themes of racial identity, cultural conflict, gender roles, and generational conflict into a single dramatic story makes the play important in both academic and educational settings. Contemporary research, through a comprehensive lens, may yield new understandings of the intricacies of Black identity, both in the 1950s and in present-day contexts.

### 3. Analysis of Identity

*A Raisin in the Sun* by Lorraine Hansberry gives a deep and complex picture of the Younger family, with each character representing a different part of their personal, racial, and national identity. Walter Lee Younger, the main character who is ambitious but frustrated, has trouble figuring out who he is as an African American man who wants to be financially independent and move up in society. He thinks that money will give him respect and control over his life, so he thinks that being rich is a sign of success. But at first, he is so focused on material wealth that he forgets about the deeper values of family and self-worth. By the end of the play, he has rediscovered these values (Hansberry, 1959). Lena Younger (Mama) embodies the conventional values of faith, familial bonds, and resilience. Her strong sense of right and wrong and her

unwavering dedication to her late husband's dreams define her as the family's matriarch and moral guide. She thinks that owning a home will help her family feel safe and stable both physically and emotionally (Wilkerson, 2010). Beneatha Younger, Walter's sister, is the one who talks about race and culture the most. She wants to be a doctor, so she goes against traditional gender roles and actively tries to connect with her African heritage. Her relationships with George Murchison, who represents assimilating into white culture, and Joseph Asagai, who encourages her to embrace her African identity, show how hard it was for many African Americans to figure out who they were racially (Taylor, 2011).

Each member of the Younger family deals with their own identity in their own way, which shows the bigger problems that the African American community is facing. Walter's identity crisis is caused by the economic oppression that limits his options. He wants to buy a liquor store not only to make money, but also to show that he is a good man in a world that constantly looks down on Black men (Rothstein, 2017). Beneatha, on the other hand, wants to find out who she is by learning and exploring other cultures. Her attraction to Asagai and her rejection of assimilationist ideals indicate her developing awareness of African heritage and Black pride, which correspond with the burgeoning Pan-Africanism of the Civil Rights era (Washington, 2004). Mama's faith and family history are very important to her identity. She sees their small apartment as a sign of their struggle, and buying a house in a white neighbourhood is a way for them to say they have the right to live freely in society. The family's final choice to move into the new home despite racial threats is a group statement of identity that rejects the limits society has placed on them (Hansberry, 1959).

Identity is what makes every big choice in the play. Walter's need to make money makes him put the family's insurance money into investments, which almost costs them their future. However, when he is given the chance to take a buyout from a white homeowners' association, he chooses dignity over money and reclaims his identity as a proud Black man (Wilkerson, 2010). Beneatha's conversations with George and Asagai show how she is torn between defining herself as a professional who has assimilated or as a woman who is proud of her African heritage. Her eventual rejection of George's materialistic mindset suggests that she is becoming more in line with the ideas of cultural pride and intellectual independence (Taylor, 2011). Mama's choice to use the insurance money to buy a house shows that she thinks owning a home is a sign of progress and self-respect. The family's choice to move, even though they might face racial hostility, shows that they are all standing up for their identity, dignity, and hope for the future (Rothstein, 2017).

In the play *A Raisin in the Sun*, identity is not something that is static; it is a force that is constantly changing through personal struggle, family relationships, and societal influences. Hansberry's characters struggle

with many different aspects of their racial, personal, and national identities. Ultimately, the characters prove that self-respect and working together are better than any amount of money. Their journey speaks to the larger experience of African Americans in the middle of the 20th century and is still important today when talking about race, class, and identity.

#### 4. Analysis of Cultural Conflict

*A Raisin in the Sun* by Lorraine Hansberry is full of cultural conflicts that show up in different ways, such as differences between generations, gender roles, and racism. Mama, Walter, and Beneatha all have different ideas about what it means to be successful, what family values are, and what racial identity is. This causes problems between the three of them. Mama believes in hard work, faith, and keeping strong family ties because she lived through a time of terrible racial oppression. Walter, on the other hand, is more interested in making money as a way to gain social respectability. This often leads to fights with his mother about what is most important to their family (Hansberry, 1959). Beneatha's disagreements with Mama and Walter come from her desire to break free from the traditional roles that Black women are expected to play, especially when it comes to work and marriage (Washington, 2004). Gender conflicts are also a big part of the play, especially Beneatha's fight to stand up for herself in a society that is mostly male. Her desire to be a doctor goes against traditional gender roles, which even Walter initially dismissed. Walter, on the other hand, has a hard time being the head of the household because he feels less masculine and does not have enough money (Taylor, 2011). Racial discrimination is a constant outside force in the play, and the Younger family has to deal with housing segregation and prejudice from society. The white homeowners' association's offer to pay them to stay out of the white neighborhood is a powerful example of the systemic barriers that African Americans faced at this time (Rothstein, 2017).

The play's cultural conflicts have a significant impact on how families work and how characters grow as people. Walter's identity crisis and fixation on monetary success generate familial discord, prompting him to undertake imprudent decisions, such as investing insurance proceeds in a failed business endeavour. His internal struggle mirrors the societal expectation that Black men should support their families, despite systemic barriers to their success (Wilkerson, 2010). Beneatha's refusal to follow gender roles and her search for her own cultural identity caused problems with her family, especially with her suitor George Murchison, who wants her to follow traditional gender and racial norms. Her relationship with Joseph Asagai, who tells her to embrace her African roots, makes her want to learn more about her racial identity (Washington, 2004). Mama, as the head of the family, tries to settle these fights by stressing the importance of family unity. However, she also has a hard time accepting Beneatha's rejection of traditional beliefs. In the end, these tensions make each character rethink their beliefs and

goals. Walter chooses dignity over money, Beneatha continues to learn about herself, and the family decides to move into the white neighborhood even though they are being threatened with violence (Hansberry, 1959).

Hansberry uses these conflicts to not only develop her characters but also to make a bigger point about race, gender, and economic inequality in the United States. She uses Walter's struggles to show how few job opportunities Black men had and how systemic racism can affect a person's mental health (Rothstein, 2017). Beneatha's character exemplifies the burgeoning feminist consciousness that emerged during the Civil Rights Movement, emphasizing the dual dimensions of oppression faced by Black women: race and gender (Taylor, 2011). This family's experiences of housing discrimination are similar to things like redlining and racially restrictive covenants that kept African Americans from getting rich through homeownership (Wilkerson, 2010). Hansberry tells the story of the problems that African Americans faced, but he also sends a message of strength and self-determination. So, the Youngers' choice to move despite opposition is a strong statement about standing up for who you are and not letting others tell you how to live (Hansberry, 1959).

Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* is a thought-provoking play about the cultural conflicts that have existed and still exist in discussions about race, gender, and class in the United States. The Younger family's problems are similar to the problems that African Americans had in the 1950s, especially when they were trying to get equal rights.

#### 5. Discussion

Lorraine Hansberry examined the themes of identity and cultural conflict, making it clear how the Younger family has a unique set of individual goals, personal racial struggles, and generational differences that ultimately embolden them to stand together, even when they are not always on the same page. Some of the characters deal with internal conflicts, like Walter Lee and his struggle to understand what it means to be a man, and how much he is worth, while other conflicts are external, which are shared by the whole family, such as the struggle against racism and poverty (Wilkerson, 2010). Hansberry depicts identity as a dynamic and evolving construct, influenced by societal norms and cultural heritage. Walter wants to be the provider, but Mama's traditional values and Beneatha's search for intellectual and cultural self-discovery get in the way (Washington, 2004). These cultural conflicts, particularly among generations, exemplify more extensive societal challenges within African American communities in the 1950s and continue to be pertinent today (Taylor, 2011).

The play's main conflicts and resolution are all about the tension between personal identity and cultural conflict. Walter Lee's fixation on monetary achievement initially obscures the fundamental principles of dignity and self-

esteem. His choice to put money into a liquor store is an attempt to get away from economic oppression, but when it doesn't work out, he has to think about himself (Rothstein, 2017). Beneatha's inner struggle between assimilation (as shown by George Murchison) and cultural pride (as shown by Joseph Asagai) is a bigger part of the conversation about Black identity and African heritage (Washington, 2004). The play's most important moment is when Walter turns down the buyout offer from the white neighborhood association. This shows how he has changed and how the whole family is asserting their right to live in a place that has been denied to them in the past (Hansberry, 1959). This resolution strengthens Hansberry's point that identity isn't just about making money; it is also about having self-respect, being proud of your culture, and coming together in tough times (Bigsby, 2000).

The themes in *A Raisin in the Sun* by Hansberry are similar to those in other books and in real life that talk about race, identity, and cultural conflict. James Baldwin's *Tell It on the Mountain* (1953) also looks at the intersection of personal and racial identity through its main character, John Grimes, who has to deal with religious expectations and racial oppression (Baldwin, 1953). In the same way, August Wilson's *Fences* (1985) shows a conflict between generations between Troy Maxson, who accepts the limits that racism puts on him, and his son Cory, who sees new chances in a changing society (Wilson, 1985). These works, including *A Raisin in the Sun*, show how racism affects people's sense of self and causes problems in families.

The play remains relevant in terms of matters of housing discrimination and institutional racism that continue to afflict America today. The 1968 Fair Housing Act was passed in an attempt to undo racial segregation of housing, but research shows that redlining and other discriminatory real estate practices make it difficult for Black individuals to own property (Rothstein, 2017). As the Youngers demonstrate, attempting to join a white community, they are still having the same issues that most African Americans today continue to encounter as they seek to grow economically and be treated fairly (Wilkerson, 2010).

*A Raisin in the Sun* transcends its time period with a rich discussion of identity and cultural tension. It is a keen

observation of racial and economic oppression that continues to be pertinent. Hansberry's portrayal of a Black family struggling to surmount societal and personal issues has literature and practical applications. The play is still an influential cultural piece that shows the value of understanding who you are, being proud of your culture, and resisting social repression.

## 6. Conclusion

Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* sheds light on identity and cultural conflict, exploring the experiences of an African American family's navigation of some issues important in a society heavily influenced by race as a category of definition. Hansberry uses the character development of Walter, Beneatha, and Mama to demonstrate the complexity of identity formation. Hansberry highlights the dichotomy of conflicting circumstances including economic spirit versus moral ethics, assimilation versus cultural pride, and personal aspirations versus family obligations. Ultimately, the Younger family engages in a profound struggle as a family; however, this personal struggle serves to portray the issues of society at large, such as racial segregation, gender inequity, and systemic financial hoisting.

The end of the play's desired message is to show that pride and self-worth surpass monetary value. Walter's refusal of the buy-out of the homeowners indicates that a group is asserting their own identity and power and is in a stronger and united position to fight oppression. Beneatha's shifts in her view of cultural identity signify the urgency of self-discovery and legacy. The play's assertions about cultural conflict are still timely as we struggle for racial equity, access to housing without discrimination, and equal economic status.

The essay adds *A Raisin in the Sun* to a revolutionary contribution of African American literature since it includes history, literary theory and literature. Hansberry is still relevant; she illustrates the essence of Black Identity and the cultural conflict that makes her work relevant to the ongoing discussion for social justice, racial equity, and self-empowerment. *A Raisin in the Sun* ultimately demonstrates that the struggle for dignity, a sense of belonging and dreaming is far from over in a racially and economically disconnected society.

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