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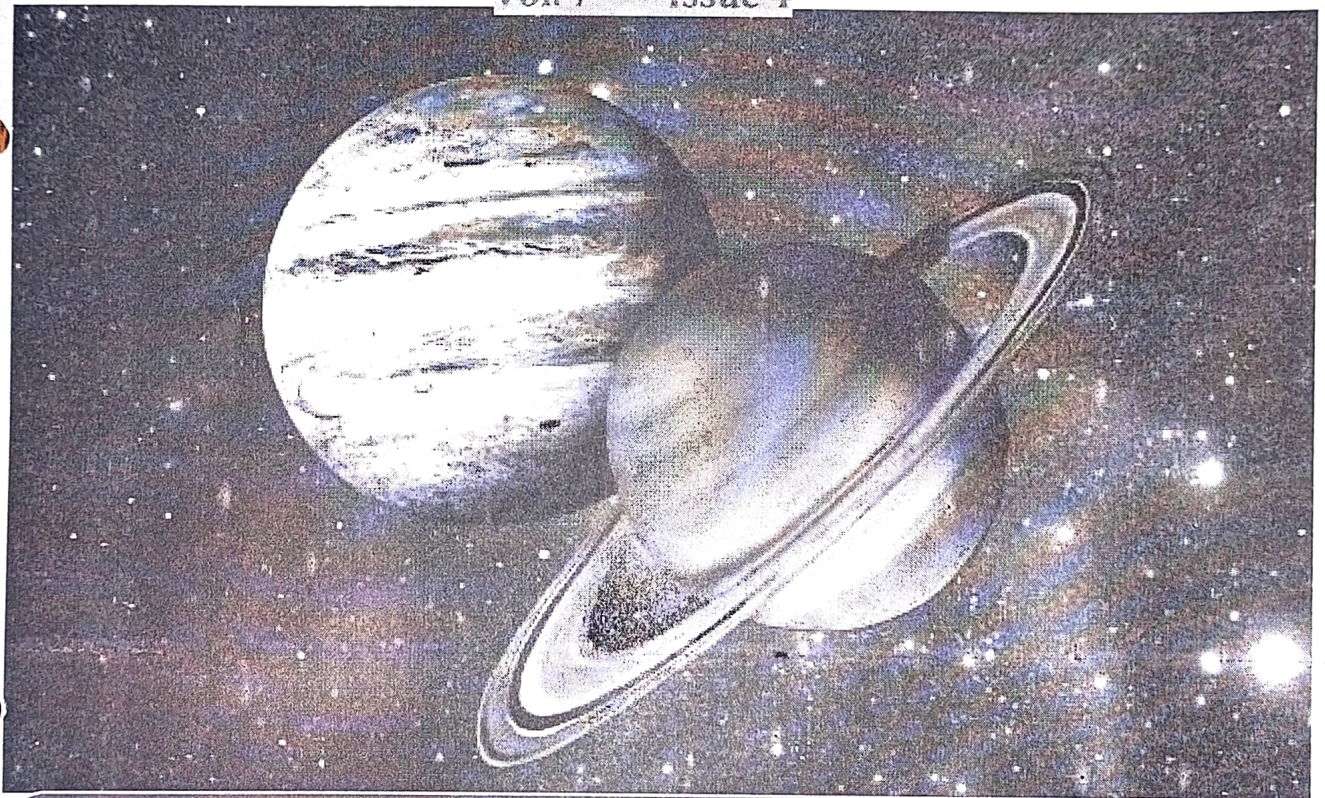
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October-November-December 2020

Vol. 7 Issue 4



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MGV's Arts & Commerce College,
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'Tardy Dreams' of Black Americans in Lorraine Hansberry's *'A Raisin in the Sun'*

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In early 1900s, Williams Bert, a black actor and singer, recited a poem entitled 'Nobody'. Unlike whites, he refused to identify the poem with the blacks in America. Besides, he said: "It is no disgrace to be a black, but it is very inconvenient" [Mitchell: 1967, 49]. Black literature is a live record; an odyssey of black man's survival, suffering and agonies in the white land reflecting their predicament in the U.S. Black literature in general and black theatre in particular is the replica of endless struggle and sufferings of the blacks that includes various phases of their life like migration from Africa to America, imposed slavery, struggle for identity, racial oppression, cultural and social dispossession, and confrontation with the whites for self respect and dignity.

After the abolition of slavery, blacks strongly felt the need for a theatre of their own to echo their 'long silenced' voice. This theatre primarily aimed at liberating black people from psychosomatic slavery, making them free of nostalgia, encouraging them to change their status in the U.S. African culture, being the inevitable source of inspiration for blacks to survive in the humiliating white society, black theatre takes in the organizing principles from African art forms, tradition and philosophy. Incorporation of the African traditions like mask, oral tradition, musicals, dance and religious faiths, indicate their conscious emphasis on the need for the restoration of their culture in the colossal insulting world.

During 1920s and 30s, Black women playwrights emerged as major contributors to the black theatre. They made theatre a tool to represent the chaotic condition of blacks in America and succeeded in portraying faithfully the black family life, the problems of black people, their dreams, aspirations and frustrations. Moreover, they consider the black family a microcosm of the Black American society.

Black women playwrights attempted to capture the essence of black life and black culture for future generations. They turned the theatre into 'nursery', where the black race is given roots, nurtured, and provided with the spirit of survival. These playwrights, primarily, protested four inconsistencies in American society: first, the actions of white American Christians toward African Americans; Second, the attitude of Americans towards black soldiers; third, poverty, which was threatening to break the spirit of the blacks: and fourth, miscegenation. All these contradictions deprived blacks from entering mainstream American life.

In 1950s Lorraine Hansberry emerged as a major playwright who made substantial contribution to the development of black theatre. Hansberry supports the view of Langston Hughes that the function of black literature is to illuminate and to elevate the conditions of black people and thus to make them 'visible' in the vast dehumanizing white society. And Hansberry carries out this prime function of black literature through the portrayal of women characters who provide blacks with boosting spirit to overcome every sort of subordination.

Coloring her plays with extraordinary spirit of blacks' survival, Hansberry exhibits optimistic vision towards life which encourages blacks to resist against the evils of domination

and to prove themselves as major share holders of American socio-cultural, political and economic development and American Dream. Therefore, Hansberry's protagonists go to their essential human roots in expressing their affirmation that shows her vision of life; a life of possibilities for better future. Her plays chalk out the role of the human spirit and its remarkable nature to bring about changes in the life. The greatest achievement made by Hansberry is that she revolutionized the way Americans, blacks and whites, perceived Africans.

A Raisin in the Sun (1959) is a depiction of frustrations of a black family whose dreams of economic progress have been thwarted. Hansberry stretched the domestic drama to include three hundred years of historical dreams and struggle as well as universal hopes and frustrations, which produced Second Renaissance of Black poetry, dance, music and theatre. The play transcends the black and white social issue because she roots it in the conflict of human soul as it seeks to assert its dignity in a dignity stripping world.

The title of the play is inspired by Langston Hughes' poem 'Harlem'. It expresses the sense of "Kinetic energy" [Bigsby Qtd. in *CLC* 62: 218] and tensions which underlay the frustrations of the American Negro; an energy which can be turned into violence, self-destruction, despair or genuine realization. The poem expresses the same sense:

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up

Like a raisin in the sun?

... or does it explode? [Ibid].

Hansberry's selection of the title *A Raisin in the Sun* suggests that a dream deferred might explode but this explosion causes no harm to any one, rather, it takes the form of realization of self, of pride and of dignity. Moreover, Hansberry wants to explore the specifics of black life; the ideas and urges that fuel the lives of blacks politically and personally. At the core of Hansberry's selection of the title is her belief in inevitable change that comes through courage, compassion and realization.

A Raisin in the Sun centers on the Younger family – black and poor. The play tells of the emotional upheaval that a black family experiences, due to the dominant social forces, when making the decision to move from a ghetto to a house in a white suburb. However, the Younger's do succeed in realizing their dream and reaching their goal through the spirit of struggle and survival. Throughout the play, Lena Younger, matriarch of the family keeps faith in the strength and ability of blacks and hopes for a better future for her family.

The Younger family, struggling and cramped into tiny apartment, is expecting an insurance annuity from the death of its patriarch. The insurance money of his father, Big Walter matters a lot to Walter who thinks that the money will help him to set up a liquor store and improve his economic condition. **Walter represents the class of men who dream to lead better life resisting against every sort of adversity. Walter's dream of success is basically a result of racial apprehension which, sometimes make the blacks feel 'impotent'. Their struggle for existence and to raise socio-economic strata in the U.S. cause blacks to undertake outrageous jobs and activities resulting into irritation and annoyance of which Walter is victim.**

Lena Younger, the 'mother' of the family, has grandeur, strength, patience, courage, and heroic faith. She has a strong faith in the power of God which has sustained her throughout life. Being an ethical woman and having high morale, Mama refuses Walter's business plan of



owning a liquor store. Her refusal has strong reasons; she has seen too many Southern black men who, in frustration, have engulfed bottles of beer and ruined their families. Besides, being deeply religious, she considers liquor professions as immoral and also fears that Walter will become the target of ethnic anxiety.

The dream deferred in the play is of Walter because his dreams of getting away from his despised job, of setting up a business with a liquor license, of building it up big, of having pearls to hang around the neck of his wife, of enabling his young son to drive to school in a taxi do not come true. Yet his dream is not of common black folk. It is a dream that comes out of the larger culture of the white, in which Walter is caught up.

Mama, a decisive and strong mother turns into a loving, caring and sympathetic mother who feels deeply moved by the helplessness of her son, Walter. She gives him the remaining sixty five hundred dollars, the amount remained after the down payment for their new home in Clybourne Park. She comes to understand that, as a man, Walter must have or feel that he has control over something, and she tries to give him that opportunity. She emerges as an archetype of the black mother who acts on the premise that her children are her legacy, her future. Rather than being the stereotype of the obstinate, domineering matriarch, she is portrayed as a complex individual who is responsive to the new and challenging demands of the modern world. By purchasing a new home away from the ghetto, Mama wants to purchase freedom. She wants her family to breathe fresh air and escape the confines of ghetto.

Hansberry uncovers the truth as to how the aspirations of blacks in the American world have constantly and continuously been crushed by the white forces. This force intrudes the Younger family in the form of Carl Linder, Chairperson of the Clybourne Park Improvement Association who represents white supremacy and all that is entailed in this mentality. He stands for the white society which is reluctant to accommodate black people in the mainstream American life. Linder carries a message of rejection for the Youngers. He becomes the gatekeeper whose function is to bar blacks out of white neighborhoods arguing that people are safe and happy when they live in a community wherein the residents share a "common background" [Keyssar: 1965, 590].

Commenting on the background of the members of the community, Linder says that there is no question of racial prejudice. He explains: "It is a matter of the people of Clybourne Park believing, rightly or wrongly...that for the happiness of all concerned black families are happier when they live in their own communities" [99]. The welcoming committee turns out to be nothing more than an attempt to bribe the Youngers to stay out of a white neighborhood. Linder lets them know that the association is prepared to buy the house at a price that would represent a financial gain to any black family living in the U.S. Linder's attitude testimonies the strategy of whites to keep blacks away from the process of socialization. Hansberry's purpose is to highlight the racial discrimination and to provoke a sense of recognition of whites' prejudice about blacks and their aspirations.

However, the Younger's, especially, Mama seems to be very firm in her decision and does not get disturbed with the comments and arguments made by Linder. This shows the endurance of black families living under the white ideologies. Nevertheless, the series of misfortune continues for Youngers. Bobo, one of Walter's business partners, brings the news that Williy, their other associate, has vanished with the money. This misfortune ruins the dream of the family because Walter loses all money including Beneatha's school funding.

Hansberry's concern here is to give an impression that blacks, even in their worst times, never lose their spirit of survival which has been the most outstanding characteristic right from the slavery period. On the contrary, blacks boost up themselves to face the adversities in their life. The positive attitude of blacks, especially the black women to struggle in adverse conditions, is reflected in Ruth's admission, "... I'll work twenty hours a day... scrub all the floors in America and wash all the sheets in America if I have to ... we got to get out of here"[129].

Noticing the vulnerability of the family and perceiving the urgency of money, Walter, announces that he is ready to make a deal with Linder's offer. Walter, once he loses the family's inheritance, decides that he will give Linder what white American expects from blacks: subservience and buffoonery. In response to Walter's proposal, mentioning explicitly what pride and dignity mean to blacks, telling the importance of the money earned by Big Walter and the 'home' she dreams of, Mama says: "Son- I come from five generations of people who was slaves and sharecroppers- but We have never been that poor...that dead inside" [133]. At this point, Mama becomes a 'teacher' and teaches Walter what dignity meant to blacks.

The last scene of the play is presented even more dramatically with the emergence of Walter as 'a complete man'. Mama's words install a sense of realization and responsibility in him. Her lesson reconnects him to his roots and with his father who lived a dignified life. As tensions escalate between the black and the white characters, it seems as if the Younger family's dreams are deferred, but they find ways to overcome their personal weaknesses and the barriers erected by the dominant culture. Walter refuses Linder's proposal saying that,

... we are proud people ...We have decided to
move... because my father-he earned it. we will try
to be good neighbors...We don't want your money

Walter and his family decide to move into a white neighborhood not in depression but with a sense of new world before them.

In making his firm decision to move to white society, Walter acknowledges his links not only with his family but also with his race through the past, present and future generations. The plot reveals both the diversity of the family members seen as representatives of the black community as well as their unity and bravery in standing upto the insults, threats and near-certain violence. **Walter's decision to reject Linder's offer demonstrates a surprising and electrifying new found strength. It is a sort of rebellion against racial insult. As a matter of fact, Youngers realize the real choice that Linder offers is between the acceptance of an intolerable status quo or the struggle for change at whatever cost; their triumph is that they have all elected to struggle.**

Youngers' encounter with Linder essentially brings back their high spirit in spite of their sufferings from the complexities of dreams deferred. Regardless of the uncertainty of their future, blacks steadfastly celebrate the mending of a family that had literally been torn apart. Hansberry's aim is to capture the fervor of her characters' lives and demonstrate that they can survive whole in spite of all the responsibilities heaped upon the black women's back. The play does not end with a happy note but with a commitment to new levels of struggle. However, the climax gives a note that a dream deferred, at last, matures.

The aspiration of Youngers undoubtedly, is an urge for self respect and self identity. *Raisin in the Sun* is an authentic portrayal of the aspirations, anxieties, ambitions and