Back to Africa Movement: 
A New Historicist Reading of Lorraine Hansberry’s Drama A Raisin in the Sun 

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Abstract

This study aims to apply Greenblatt’s New Historicism to analyze Lorraine Hansberry’s A Raisin in the Sun, a drama about an African-American family named the Younger who had to deal with racial discrimination and segregation sometimes between 1945 and 1959. Interestingly, the drama also depicts the representation of Back to Africa Movement through the character of Joseph Asagai, who seems to personify Marcus Garvey, the proponent of Back to Africa Movement attempting to unite every single person with Negro blood to have pride in oneself and build a nation in African continent. Accordingly, this study investigates the relation between the story and the historicity of the drama with its representation and subjectivity that the playwright builds in her work towards the issue of Back to Africa Movement. Employing qualitative research method, this study reveals that the portrayal of racism in the drama is the projection of the playwright’s own racial experience during her childhood. This study also shows that in portraying the Back to Africa Movement, Hansberry implied a propaganda to encourage African Americans to fight for equality in America rather than to follow Garvey’s call to go back to Africa. Hansberry’s close relation to such African American figure as WEB DuBois may explain her subjectivity regarding her support for NAACP that worked for racial equality in the United States.

Keywords: african-american, back to africa movement, racism, representation, subjectivity

Introduction

History deals with events that happened in the past. Through history we can see and understand some past events that may have significant effects on the present day. Most people are made to believe that history was written objectively; however, New Historicists oppose this idea and believe that every historical account contains bias and subjectivity from the author or historian. History are usually learned by reading history books, however, now there are other media that offer a more interesting and enjoyable method of history reading, such as historical novels, documentary films, and dramas. A drama that takes historical events as setting of the story can become good alternative for learning and understanding history as it is performed on stage and considered as popular entertainment for people.

Lorraine Hansberry’s drama entitled A Raisin in the Sun can be one of the sources for learning African American racial history. The drama title refers to a line in Langston Hughes’ poem entitled “Harlem,” also known as “A Dream Deferred” (Schaper 1). This drama follows the life of an African American family known as the Younger family, which consists of Walter Lee (Brother), Lena (Mama), Ruth, Beneatha, and Travis. They lived in Chicago Southside in the U.S. sometimes between 1945 and 1959 (1.1. 34-35). Similarly, in America history, the period of 1945 to 1959 noted some events, incidents, and movements that related to African-American struggle to fight against racial discrimination. Four years before the drama was performed, in 1955 the U.S. Supreme Court had declared racial segregation in public high schools as illegal. Then, a series of incidents leading to the Civil Rights movement started to take place, starting from the Montgomery Bus Boycott, Martin Luther King’s being jailed repeatedly, the murders of black people, until the burning of black churches by racists. Other boycotts and chaos arose, marking the new resistance towards the racial discrimination and segregation issue. This chaos reached its climax when public figures like Medgar Evers and President of the U.S., John F. Kennedy were assassinated (Wilkerson 443).
Bringing up a current racial issue, this drama became a hit on that era as it opened at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre on Broadway in March 11, 1959 and ran for 530 performances (Bernstein 412). It was the first drama produced on Broadway by an African-American woman. Besides, it earned New York Drama Critics Circle Award for best play category in 1959, again, makes the playwright, Lorraine Hansberry, the youngest, first woman and black to win the award (Carter 1). Lorraine Hansberry was born on the South Side of Chicago in May 19, 1930 (Chicago Public Library). She grew up in a middle-class family and lived in Woodlawn neighborhood of the Chicago Southside (Discovering Multicultural America 2). Despite her middle-class status, Lorraine and her family also could not escape from being the subject of segregation. When she was 8 years old, her family failed to move into a restrictive neighborhood (Chicago Public Library). This case, which was documented as Hansberry vs. Lee 311 U.S. 32, dealt with a racially restrictive covenant that barred African Americans from purchasing or leasing land in a Chicago white neighborhood.

Hansberry’s drama itself focuses more on the racial discrimination and segregation issues as experienced by the Younger family members. Lena (Mama) received $10,000 from her husband’s death insurance, and thus she wanted to move her family out of the cramped apartment in Chicago Southside to Clybourne Park, an all-white neighborhood. Beside the Younger family, there was another character named Joseph Asagai, Beneatha’s college friend. He was an intellectual African man from Nigeria who came to study in Canada. Asagai felt sympathetic toward Beneatha who longed for her African root. Accordingly, Asagai attempted to convince her to marry him and moved back to Nigeria with him rather than facing uncertainty in the future and racial discrimination in the United States.

As Asagai persuaded Beneatha to go back to Africa in the drama, in reality there was Back to Africa Movement that was quite popular in America during the 1920s-1930s. Marcus Garvey, the leader of Universal Negro Improvement Association and African Communities League of the World (UNIA), proposed this idea due to his concern over discrimination, injustice, and inequality against African Americans. Garvey believed that his organization could unite people with African roots into one to build their emancipated race in Africa. There were nearly 400 million people in the world with blood cursing their veins, and he felt that it was the moment to unite these people for a common purpose to gain a better future (Marcus Garvey and the UNIA Papers Project). It is interesting that this drama depicts this movement persuading African American to go back to Africa, while many other literary works usually portray African American attempt to fight against racial stereotypes and struggle for equality.

As an award-winning drama, A Raisin in the Sun has been studied from various perspectives. In 2010, Gomes’ feminist study on this drama addresses The Vision of Lena Younger created by Lorraine Hansberry, analyzing the vision of African American women through the character of Lena Younger during the Civil Rights Movement. A study by Rahmawati in 2009 entitled Black’s Representation in Lorraine Hansberry’s A Raisin in the Sun, analyzes how black represent their life in American society in the 1950s and the ideology implied by the prominent characters in the drama. Nonetheless, there has not been a new historicist study on this drama, particularly concerning the issue of Back to Africa Movement that become the main focus of this study.

This study applies New Historicism as the main theory focusing on the two tenets proposed by Stephen Greenblatt, namely representation of history and subjectivity. By doing so, this study aims at revealing the representation of the Hansberry family racial discrimination and Back to Africa Movement depicted in the drama. New Historicism is selected because it is the best method to reveal the representation of the Hansberry family members and their racial discrimination case, as well as Marcus Garvey and his Back to Africa Movement depicted through the character of Joseph Asagai and its symbolization in the drama. After doing an analysis on the representation, this study examines any bias or subjectivity from the playwright towards the issue.

The Representation of Racial Discrimination against African American: The Younger and The Hansberry

In order to reveal the representation of African American racial discrimination and segregation the in the drama, the first part of the analysis focuses on the portrayal of the Younger as the representation of
the Hansberry by comparing the traits of the members of the Younger and the Hansberry family members. Lorraine Hansberry once stated, as documented in the Chicago Public Library website, that she used members of her family as inspiration for her characters in the drama. Hansberry noted similarities between Carl and Nannie Hansberry to the Big Walter and Lena Younger (Mama). The traits of Hansberry’s brother, their wives and Lorraine sister, Mamie used as the opposite traits of Walter Lee and Ruth character. Towards Beneatha character, she said, "Beneatha is me, eight years ago."

Depicted as hard-working man, Big Walter has a responsibility to take care of his family as described by his wife ‘he was one man to love his children’ (1.1.618). Lorraine Hansberry claimed that Big Walter character was actually taken from her father, Carl Hansberry. Carl would like to bring the Hansberry to move into a white neighborhood to give a better life for his family. Even though his decision later on sparked many controversies, he did not give up defending and protecting his family’s right that he ultimately took a stand in the U.S. Supreme Court Case. Unlike Carl, Big Walter did not make successful attempt to provide a good home for his family and they ended up in a ghetto which Ruth called as a ‘rat trap’ (1.1. 593-595). Carl Hansberry eventually succeeded in moving his family into the white neighborhood as his family won the U.S. Supreme Court Case despite the rejection from his white neighbors.

The second character was Lena (Mama) depicted as the glue that made her family stick together regardless of conflicts and disharmonies among her children. Depicted in the drama as a matriarch, strong, and deeply religious woman, the picture of Lena (Mama) and her traits might not be easily compared to Nannie Hansberry since there is not much said about her. Nevertheless, Nannie still shared some qualities with Lena since they were both mothers who were willing to do sacrifice anything for their children’s education. Nannie sent Lorraine to attend school in white area in order to have a better education, while Lena would do anything to send Beneatha to medical school so she could have a better future.

Walter Lee (Brother) was depicted in the drama as ambitious as he attempted to prove his manhood by owning his own business. However, Walter Lee failed to gain approval from his mother who did not trust him enough to spend his share of the $10,000 insurance money to run a business. Both his mother and sister doubted him. Beneatha called him ‘nut’ (1.1. 434), while his mother described him as, “There was plenty wrong with Walter Younger- Hard-headed, mean, kind of wild with women- plenty wrong with him” (1.1. 626-627). According to Lorraine Hansberry, Walter Lee character was inspired by the opposite traits of her brothers, Carl Augustus Hansberry, Jr. and Perry Holloway Hansberry. Both Carl Jr. and Perry actively fought for equal rights. However, the Hansberry’s family real estate business was brought down in 1958 by some Chicago officials and there were about forty-two separate court cases, against the Hansberry family. Hence, it can be inferred that both Carl Jr. and Perry Hansberry concerned much about the injustice towards blacks in America.

The next character in drama is Walter Lee’s wife named Ruth, who was depicted as a pretty, loving and faithful wife and mother. Even though Walter Lee often felt frustrated in his life and vented his anger on his wife, Ruth always showed her patience and love for him. Lorraine Hansberry stated that her character, Ruth, actually reflected the opposite traits of her brother’s wives and her sister, Mamie. Unfortunately, there is a lack of sources describing Carl Jr. and Perry’s wives as well as Mamie Hansberry. Therefore, it can be noted that if Ruth Younger was categorized as a ‘settled woman’ in the drama, Lorraine Hansberry’s sister and sisters-in-law must have had the opposite characterization. The term ‘settled woman’ in this context, the writer may assume it related to Ruth’s trait as a woman who stayed at home to take a good care of her family while working as a help for a white family. As Carl Jr. and Perry Hansberry fought for African-American rights and took part in fighting for their family rights in the U.S. Supreme Court, it may be suggested that their wives and sister also stood behind them in their racial struggle. Hence, their support to their brother and husbands are not reflected in Ruth Younger character who only tended to be passive and patience in facing difficulties in her life.

The last analysis concerns with Beneatha Younger as the representation of Lorraine Hansberry as personally suggested by the playwright (Chicago Public Library). In the drama, Beneatha was portrayed as a college student and young modern woman. Due to her educational background, Beneatha had modern thought and view in her life. This modern woman trait is reflected from her ambition to become a doctor,
her expressiveness, and her being atheist. Accordingly, all Beneatha’s traits actually resembled Lorraine’s personal characterization. Lorraine Hansberry came from a wealthy family and her father was known as a successful businessman and also real estate-broker. Similar to Beneatha, Lorraine was also a college student. She also had an ambition, however, unlike Beneatha, Lorraine did not want to be a doctor, but a journalist instead. She had been interested in becoming a writer since her high school (Napa Valley 1540).

In addition, Beneatha’s expressiveness’ can be compared to Lorraine’s. Just like Beneatha who wanted to express herself by joining horse-back riding club and taking guitar lesson, Lorraine Hansberry expressed herself through different kinds of arts, such as theater and painting. Meanwhile, Beneatha’s depiction as an atheist can be compared to Lorraine Hansberry’s view of God as an African-American humanist, which is in fact categorized as non-theist, including atheist and skeptics. Pinn states that “Lorraine Hansberry, Richard Wright, Langston Hughes- they were all critical of belief in God.” (USA Today). Accordingly, the writer believes that Lorraine Hansberry as the playwright, using the character of Beneatha to voice her humanist view.

In order to reveal further the representation of the Hansberry family in the drama, the racial discrimination experienced by the Younger family in the drama is compared to the Hansberry’s racial discrimination case documented in the U.S. official history as Hansberry v. Lee, 1940 Supreme Court Case. Both the Younger and the Hansberry lived in a similar condition in the Chicago South Side. After the Hansberry earned a ‘considerable amount of wealth’, they began to search for a larger house and found a house in a predominantly white neighborhood (Discovering Multicultural America). Thus, the $10,000 insurance money depicted in the drama represented the Hansberry’s wealth as well as the plan to move into the white neighborhood. However, the Hansberry and the Younger face different racial discrimination and segregation cases. In the drama, the Younger was prevented from moving into the white neighborhood only by Karl Lindner as the representative of Clybourne Park community. Meanwhile, the Hansberry had to face a racial riot upon moving in that led to the case known as Hansberry v. Lee, 1940 U.S. Supreme Court Case.

The Representation of Back to Africa Movement: Joseph Asagai and Marcus Garvey
Joseph Asagai was portrayed as a young Nigerian who came to study to the United States. Meanwhile, Marcus Mosiah Garvey Jr., later known as Marcus Garvey, was a Jamaican-born. Unlike Asagai, Garvey was a self-educated man as he left school at fourteen and moved to Kingston, the capital city of Jamaica, where he worked as a printer apprentice. Before moving to London, Garvey had already been to several countries where he spent most of his time publishing a small newspaper (Marcus Garvey: The Negro Moses). Thus, having travelled to so many countries in such a young age, Garvey also absorbed a lot of knowledge from other cultures, especially those of Africans or blacks and later he had a great view towards white oppression, colonialism, and racism. Unlike Asagai who was polite and well-mannered, the nature of Marcus Garvey was noted as egoistic, tyrannical, cunning, intolerant, and an opportunistic (History Matters).

Joseph Asagai later was also depicted as having a great pride of his African root. In speaking English, Asagai still used words from his original language, Yoruba tribal origin in Nigeria, such as Alaiyo and Oh-pay-gay-day, oh-gbah-mu-shay. If Joseph Asagai still used some words from his origin language, Marcus Garvey was nothing like him. Garvey was a great orator especially on the issue of racism among blacks in America. He often used advanced and good style of English rather than his root-language, Jamaican.

Regarding their vision of Africa, in the drama Joseph Asagai was amazed by Beneatha’s curiosity about his origin, Africa. He thought of the irony of his people’s condition because he had already travelled across the globe to America, while most of his people in Africa still could not read or even see a book. He had a great vision that someday he would go back to Africa and taught his people with all of his knowledge to build their pride in the future. This vision led him to imagine that someday, he could be a respected old man in his new nation (3. 129-135). On the other hand, Marcus Garvey was the leader of Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) and a proponent of Back to Africa Movement. According to Jeremie K. Dagnini, Marcus wanted to return blacks’ dignity since the impact of slavery
and colonization had made them inferior. He expected that blacks could obtain education that would help them free themselves from white oppression (200). Through the business in shipping line named ‘Black Star Line’, Marcus Garvey had a vision, similar to Asagai’s, that someday he would see black people build their strong and independent nation in Africa. Marcus Garvey claimed that he saw himself as the savior of African descendants. He also promoted segregation for blacks which raised a concern from some African-American figures, including W.E.B. Du Bois, who called him “the most dangerous enemy of the Negro race in America and in the world.” (Thompson 147).

**The Representation of Back to Africa Movement: in the Drama and in American History**

Back to Africa Movement is represented in the drama through the dialogue between Walter Lee and Beneatha when they were arguing about Beneatha’s intention to continue her study to become a doctor. Beneatha replied to him by shouting “And then there are all those prophets who would lead us out of the wilderness—into the swamps!” (1.1. 437-442). From this line, it is clear that there is a symbolization of Marcus Garvey as ‘prophets who would lead us out of the wilderness.’ An official history narrated that Garvey’s movement attracted many followers from the Negro people. It was estimated, that he had more than two million masses (Thompson 148). As discussed earlier, Garvey claimed himself as a Provisional President of Africa and imagined that someday his people would remember him as the savior towards their ‘wilderness’ or suffering condition caused by racial discrimination in America. Based on Marcus Garvey’s merit to raise black people race-pride and dignity, many declared him as the main inspiration for them. For instance, the Rastafarian Movement believes that their king or leader is Haile Selassie I, while Marcus Garvey is believed as their prophet.

Another representation is observed from the symbolization in Act I Scene I in which Ruth convinced Lena (Mama) to trust her husband with the $10,000 insurance money to start his own liquor store business. However, Lena (Mama) rejected the idea as she said that her family was not an expert in the business. Ruth kept on convincing Lena (Mama) that people should start business to become an expert in the field with all the risks (1.1. 525-530). This dialogue clearly reflects Garvey’s view about establishing ‘business’ for his followers. Although there were several prominent African-Americans who considered him as the dangerous enemy of the Negro race, Garvey’s movement had some ‘attractive and promising’ agenda, including several businesses that he established and mainly the ideas of repatriation which accommodated African-Americans using his ‘Black Star Shipping Line’ to Africa (Thompson 147-148). Hence, this business was used as a tool for Marcus Garvey to show to the majority of white people the meaning of black independence.

The last representation is depicted in Act I Scene II, which was situated in Saturday morning when the Younger family did house cleaning. Travis, the son of Walter Lee and Ruth, was playing around the house and asked Lena (Mama) if there was any possibility for him to play outside of the house. Travis insisted to play outside, and then Beneatha and Lena (Mama) had a conversation in which Lena (Mama) said, “You better get over there behind the bureau. I seen one marching out of there like Napoleon yesterday.” (1.2. 47-48). This statement can be related to Back to Africa Movement issue as it refers to Marcus Garvey’s clothing when he marched along with his Negro followers, which was compared to Napoleon. Jérémie Kroubo Dagnini, in his essay published in the *Journal of Pan African Studies*, stated: …another significant cultural element of Western civilization is clothing, taking the form of suits or uniforms, the visual trademark of Western society for centuries, a trademark Garvey manifestly opted for considering his appearance in the famous pictures of him. Indeed, most of the time, he was photographed dressed in a dark suit, a ceremonial robe or a Napoleon-like uniform with a plumed hat (205).

Hence, by mentioning Napoleon through Lena’s statement, the drama is clearly trying to depict a representation of Marcus Garvey as the proponent of Back to Africa Movement.

**The Subjectivity of the Playwright**

Earlier, it has been noted that Hansberry cited from Langston Hughes’ poem entitled ‘*Harlem*’ or ‘*A Dream Deferred*’ for an epigraph in her play. This may due to the fact that this drama mostly talked about dreams, specifically African-Americans dreams. On the hand, the Younger finally achieved their dream
of moving out of the ghetto into their dream house in an all-white neighborhood, some members of the family, such as Beneatha and Walter Lee, did not reach their dreams. Beneatha still needed tuition money for medical school and Walter Lee did not have a rewarding job. This clearly reflects the in-between situation for blacks in America at that time. While they had fulfilled some dreams (e.g. freedom from enslavement and having access to education), there were still many others that had been continually deferred, including racial justice and equality. Therefore, the epigraph is a way for Hansberry to point to both the universal nature of her play, in which everyone has dreams, and its particular nature, in which African Americans have been forced to defer their dreams more than others.

Similarities in the depiction of the Younger family members in the drama with the Hansberry in the real event indicate that Lorraine Hansberry, as the playwright, intended to show how African American should act in the era of racism. On the other hand, differences in the depiction of the Hansberry’s traits from those of the Younger signify her criticism towards African Americans themselves as a group of people who did not want to experience racial discrimination, yet, unlike the Hansberry, not many African Americans did significant struggle against this injustice.

The relation of the representation of her family racial case did not enable Lorraine Hansberry as the playwright to be objective. The trigger of the subjectivity was her family successful attempt to move into the white neighborhood. The depiction of the Younger as belonging to poor, labor class, as opposed to the Hansberry’s wealthy background, may indicate her intention to send a message that anyone, regardless of their background, could succeed if only they really struggled to achieve their dream of racial equality. As Stephen Greenblatt states that:

“this uncanny convergence is not, I would suggest, the theoretical conditions of all sign, but the contingent condition of certain signs as particular history moments, moments in which the ruling elite, deeply threatened, conjure up images of repression so harsh that they can double as images of protest” (147)

Accordingly, the subjectivity of the author can be a medium for the author to complain or criticize a particular issue. Hence, as an African American, Lorraine Hansberry expressed her propaganda to encourage African American to learn and be proud of their origin and identity in the height of assimilationist view. In the Younger’s racial discrimination case depicted in the drama, this family had a clash with Karl Lindner as the representative of the white neighbors who rejected a black family like the Younger from moving into Clybourne Park. This case is different from that of the Hansberry’s racial case which provoked violence and riots. This different depiction is assumed due to the fact that this drama was performed in Broadway which was dominated by white playwrights. Thus, by minimizing the racial case in the drama, Lorraine Hansberry appear to avoid adding controversial ‘scene’ based on her childhood experience, in which African Americans experienced racial violence from the white.

In addition, the issue of African identity and, ultimately, black self-repatriation to Africa known as Back to Africa Movement led by Marcus Garvey are also depicted in the drama through the character of Joseph Asagai. In the drama, Hansberry’s knowledge of Africa was depicted through Asagai as an Africa student with his great pride and knowledge towards African culture. Yet, different portrayal of Marcus Garvey in Joseph Asagai character intended by the playwright to criticize Marcus Garvey and suggest instead that Joseph Asagai is a real example of African who have pride in his identity as reflected through his use of Nigerian words in speaking and his vasy knowledge of Africa and its culture. Later, Hansberry also wrote a different perspective towards Back to Africa Movement in the scene when Walter Lee rejected Beneatha’s idea to marry and follow Asagai back to Nigeria. Instead, Walter Lee suggested that she would be better to “get all them silly ideas out of your head.” (3. 544).

In short, all of the representation in the drama towards Back to Africa Movement is clearly influenced by Hansberry’s personal relation with a prominent African-American figure, W.E. B. Du Bois, the proponent of NAACP known as the ‘enemy’ of Marcus Garvey and his UNIA. Their opposition is due to the fact that Du Bois promoted desegregation of black in America while Garvey supported self-independency of black race by promoting segregation among black and white people in America. Furthermore, in reality, the Back to Africa Movement was collaborated with and supported by Ku Klux Klan, a white racist group. In the drama, Hansberry represented her view through Beneatha’s statement
that one of the things they, as African-Americans, should overcome is the Ku Klux Klan (2.2. 216-217). Hansberry’s rejection towards Back to Africa Movement as a solution for racial problems in America indicates her intention to provoke black pride among African Americans not by going back to Africa, but by struggling for equality in America. Therefore, through her drama the playwright would like to propose that Back to Africa Movement, with its principle and ideology, was not a solution that could bring freedom to African Americans since they must struggle as hard as they could to survive and gain equality in America.

Conclusion

Hansberry’s drama A Raisin in the Sun is the reflection of the playwright’s personal experience in facing racial problems as an African-American. She uses imagery and symbol from official historical account as reference to imply that there is connection between her writings and historical facts. Hansberry implies that African-Americans should struggle against racial discrimination and segregation to defend their right for equality in America. Meanwhile, regarding the representation of Back to Africa Movement originally proposed by Marcus Garvey, this study noted that the depiction of Joseph Asagai as a representation of Garvey is intended to prompt other African descendants to go back to Africa. However, in the drama, Hansberry implied a propaganda to encourage African-Americans to fight for equality in America rather than to surrender and follow Garvey’s movement to go back to Africa. In her writings, she also showed her support for ‘desegregation’ rather than ‘segregation’ promoted by Garvey. At last, even though this drama has been studied from various perspectives, a further study on this drama may consider to examine George Murchison character who implies an assimilationist, and it may also be interesting to conduct an African-American criticism, particularly on issues such as double-consciousness.

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