

The Consciousness of Constructing Black Community in *A Raisin in the Sun*

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Abstract: Lorraine Hansberry, the first Black playwright and the youngest American to win a New York Critics' Circle award, her *A Raisin in the Sun*, opens on Broadway with great success. This paper mainly adopts the Alienation Theory of Fromm to explore her consciousness of reconstructing an inclusive Black Community based on disclosing that the dreams of the black people are distorted into sublime objects constructed by the dominant ideology. Grounded on the three principles from Fromm's Alienation theory, this paper finds that Hansberry has not only suggested that the elimination of alienation can be achieved by the strong power of family bonds but also highlighted the essential role that the Black tradition plays in the construction of an inclusive Black Community where black people can traverse the ideological fantasy and develop their racial pride.

Keywords: *A Raisin in the Sun*; Fromm; Alienation Theory; Black Community

1. Introduction

Lorraine Hansberry (1930-1965), who wrote *A Raisin in the Sun*, a play about a struggling Black family, has been highly involved in Civil Rights throughout her life. Despite being born into a middle-class family, she was subject to segregation from a very young age. Therefore, she has witnessed the hypocritical alienated reality under the cover of the liberalism and democracy of America during the mid-20th century.

In the 1950s, the rapid growth of black residents intensified the competition between the white and the black, leading to more hostility against the black group at that time. On the one hand, the African black is isolated by the white community so that they have to do the humblest job to support themselves, gradually, they lose themselves and become slaves to their jobs; on the other hand, they are separated from maternal Africa and even forget their roots step by step. Eventually, they have no other alternative but to identify with the dominant white community, which further drives their estrangement.

Being deeply concerned with the alienated black people, Lorraine Hansberry attempts to disclose that their dreams are constructed by the white culture and their miserable situation is a result of their alienated souls. As a consequence, through writing *A Raisin in the Sun*, Hansberry attempts to demonstrate the alienated living condition of the black people and the significance of constructing a Black Community in which they can get rid of the false fantasy and regain their racial pride.

However, it has to be pointed out that although some studies have been made about the black people's identification with the dominant ideology and the American dream when it comes to the play, they fail in analyzing their dream from a psychological perspective and the possible methods that Hansberry has proposed to construct Black Community need to be further explored. Therefore, based on the alienation theory of Fromm, this paper attempts to explore how Hansberry depicts the alienated experience of the Youngers and the connection between the disclosure of their alienated dreams and her consciousness of constructing the Black Community.

2. Lorraine Hansberry and Fromm's Alienation Theory

In this part, it mainly introduces Lorraine Hansberry and her writing consciousness of constructing the Black Community. What's more, the previous studies about the play and Fromm's Alienation Theory will be introduced as well.

2.1 Lorraine Hansberry and Her consciousness of Constructing Black Community

Born in Chicago in 1930, Lorraine Hansberry is considered one of the most prominent playwrights following Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller. Having witnessed the segregation in America from a very young age, she draws inspiration from her life experience. Akin to the Youngers in *A Raisin in the Sun*, her family has been bombed by white mobs after moving into a white neighborhood, which lays a solid foundation for her decisive exploration of appropriate methods to save her African siblings from the endless miseries.

With the Harlem Renaissance, an increasing number of black artists and writers seeks to reconceptualize “the Negro” apart from the white stereotype that has influenced Black peoples’ relationship to their heritage. Hansberry is one of them to explore ways to reunite the black people and regain their racial confidence. “Her plays connect all black people by seeing Africa as a whole frame, identity source and creative warehouse”^[1]. It can be said that she has successfully presented the power of African heritage to construct the black community in her plays. Furthermore, she has also pointed out that black people must realize the fact that their dreams are constructed by sublime objects in the dominant ideology, they should first find themselves by getting rid of the control of the mainstream ideology and proceed to construct Black Community to regain their racial pride.

As the masterpiece of the talented playwright, various studies have been made on the drama and they have provided us with ingenious interpretations of Hansberry and her consciousness of reconstructing the Black Community, the deep meaning behind these characters’ dreams, and the destructive force of dominant ideology. However, a holistic review of the previous studies triggers other questions left to be explored.

First of all, this analysis fails to analyse these characters’ dreams from a psychological perspective. In these studies, these characters’ dream is merely reflective of black people’s striving and the will to defeat segregation, discrimination, and national oppression, but the fact that their dream is constructed by the dominant society is ignored. Furthermore, they have analysed the community consciousness of Hansberry from different perspectives, yet they fail to explore the connection between her exposure to the alienated dreams and her consciousness of constructing the Black Community. Therefore, bearing these questions in mind, the paper attempts to analyse how the character’s dream is alienated by the dominant ideology and the possible methods Hansberry seeks to construct Black Community.

2.2 Fromm’s Alienation Theory

Erich Fromm, as a member of the Frankfurt School and a representative of humanistic psychoanalysis, endeavors to solve both individual problems and public issues in contemporary capitalist society by combining Freudian psychoanalysis and Marxism. He considers that the essence of human beings is determined by cultural and social factors rather than the unconscious held by Freud.

Alienation is a core concept of Fromm’s humanism. Alienation is defined in his *The Sane Society* as “a mode of experience in which the person experiences himself as an alien... He does not experience himself as the center of his world, as the creator of his acts—but his acts and their consequences have become his masters”^[2]. And he also explores the manifestation of modern people’s alienation, the reason for this morbid phenomenon, and the possible actions people should take to construct a sane society. Fromm also declares that people in the twentieth century have become more alienated than at any time in our history. Written in 1959, *A Raisin in the Sun* is a remarkable example to show the alienated conditions of modern people. Meanwhile, Fromm proposes the idea of brotherly love to heal the morbid society. However, as a member of the African-American community, Hansberry sees the small odds of integrating into the white group in the 1950s, instead, she appeals to construct a lovely and pluralistic black community in which the black people can identify with their history and culture.

3. Being Lost in the Alienated Society

The name of the drama shows its heavy correlation to a poem by Langston Hughes: does it dry up like a raisin under the sun, which foreshadows the risks of a delayed dream. The most widespread theme of the play is undoubtedly the American dream. The real sense of the American dream is hardly a reality for black people, or it is not the dream that belongs to them at all. It proves that black people have lost in the mainstream ideology created by white people, and their dream is the function of their alienated souls. This part will analyze how the alienated dreams of three mean characters are demonstrated by Hansberry

from the perspective of the three principles of Fromm's Alienation Theory.

3.1 The Control of the Anonymous Authority

In the 1950s, more than one-third black people were dwelling in the south of America, and that number before was only one-tenth. Inevitably, the rapid growth of black residents intensified the competition between the white and the black, giving rise to more hostility against the black group at that time. Fromm declares that Authority in the middle of the twentieth century has changed its character, it is not overt, but anonymous, invisible, alienated authority"^[2]. In the drama that is created in the 1950s, the invisible authority is the growing greed for wealth and isolation from the white group.

The most alienated person in the play is undoubtedly Walter Lee Younger, who stands out for his inclination to quick nervous movements and erratic speech habits, which is the result of some nameless power, as his Mama describes that he has been eaten up by something over the past years. Walter's dream is to buy a car and an automobile for his wife and gives his son whatever he wants, and he dreams of being an executive and having secretaries to serve him, which signals that his dream is built upon a pile of sublime objects so that he keeps soaking in the fantastic world created by the capitalist society. Being an aspiring man, yet he has no overt authority to fight for but to follow the flow of the capitalist society.

In addition, Fromm also points out that if people are ruled by an anonymous authority, "he will lose the sense of self, and become one part of it"^[2]. That is to say, the alienated people will behave like anonymous authority, which largely explains why Walter Lee conducts so aggressively toward his family. In the wake of failing to acquire approval for his investment dream, he is exceptionally annoyed with his wife Ruth Younger: "we one group of man tied to a race of women with small minds"^[3]. These discriminated words affirm that he has established himself as an authority to judge and control his wife. Moreover, when Mama disagrees with his business plan, he utters bitter words to his mother: "so you butchered up a dream of mine—you—who always talking about your children's dream"^[3]. The overt authoritative accusing is tantamount to a moral abduction of his mother, prompting her to concede by giving all of the rest money to him, leading to the final tragedy of going bankrupt. What's more, as the only male leader in the family, it takes him three years to admit his younger sister's dream of becoming a doctor, because he prefers her to become a nurse or get married, his inurement of commanding other people's life has powerfully revealed his alienated soul.

In conclusion, it is the anonymous authority—growing greed for wealth and isolation from the white group—that contributes to the alienation of Walter Lee, therefore, it is inevitable for him to be plagued by the anonymous authority when failing to realize his dream.

3.2 The Control of Conformity Principle

"The mechanism through which anonymous authority operates is the mechanism of 'coherence'"^[3]. If the person tends to conform to the social norms, follow the flow and is terrified to be different from other people, then he has alienated from himself. In the younger family, Ruth is the gentlest one, it also means she has no striking characteristics but to follow the herd. When Mama tells her that she is going to receive 10,000\$, Ruth says sincerely to her mother-in-law: "you should take yourself a trip somewhere. To Europe or South America or someplace...these here rich white women do it all the time"^[3]. Which indicates that she has had the white people's dream as hers to hold. Moreover, clues of her dream are hard to discover in the play, and we can only speculate that from her subconscious acts as Mama told her that her mother's dream has always been buying a house with a garden: she studies her mother-in-law furtively and concentrates on her ironing, anxious to encourage without seeming to. It is indicated that Ruth, working as a living machine without feeling has no dream of herself.

Another aftermath of automatic conformity is that "people feel that responding to the group mores is akin to a moral duty—and so they continue, hesitant and unsure, imprisoned in brotherhood"^[2]. She is numbed with her husband's ambitious dream as she thinks their fates can never be changed. Besides, she keeps persuading her husband to work for his white employer for the sake of sustaining a harmonious group. More than anything, she conducts like a worshipper when Karl Lindner—the representative of the white community—pretends to bridge the gap between the white and the black. And in the wake of Lindner unveiling his true aim of driving them out of the white community, compared with outrageous Walter Lee and his sister, she desperately cries: "Lord have mercy, ain't this is the living gall"^[3]. This indicates her hopelessness when her dream of integrating into the social group is falling apart.

To sum up, under the grip of the conformity principle, Ruth has her characteristics lost and is kept

imprisoned in the social group. Nobody has power over her, except the society to which she is subjected, as a result, she cannot achieve true bliss due to her coherent characteristic.

3.3 The control of the Nonfrustration Principle

Beyond the authority and automaton conformity principles, Fromm also proposed the principle of nonfrustration—that every desire must be satisfied immediately, no wish must be frustrated^[2]. which is in line with Beneatha's dispiriting bearing following her brother giving away her tuition of going to medical school. Beneatha ceases to care about the ailing people and is determined to give up her dream as soon as Walter loses the money left by their dead father, saying that she has thoroughly given up the world that is overwhelmed with stupidity and misery. It is noticeable that Asagai asks her why her dream has to depend on the death of her dead father, evincing that Beneatha has also been estranged from herself as she does not allow any frustrating issue to happen to her. Besides, following the incident, the author also lays bare Beneatha's estranged soul by describing her disappointment with the fact that what the black people have marched in is only one large circle.

In one word, being the only educated person in the family, her overreaction to the setback in her dream points out that she is also getting into the claws of the alienated power of the capitalist society, thus it is inevitable for her to be excruciated by the deferred dream.

In conclusion, as the "Other" in the white neighborhood, the black family is struggling with their alienated dreams that are constructed by the dominant ideology in which the anonymous authority is so overwhelmed that people inadvertently fall into the trap of automobile conformity and crave to have their wish immediately satisfied. What's more, the exposure to the alienated reality of the black family lays a solid foundation for Hansberry's ultimate goal of constructing the Black Community.

4. Constructing an Inclusive Black Community

In the context of African Americans whose dreams are distorted by the dominant ideology, the construction of a nurturing Black Community is necessary for these alienated black people. Raymond Williams has defined a community as "a state or organized society [with] a sense of common identity and characteristics"^[4]. It presents that community is an organic unity where people share common interests and are closely linked with their culture and history. As Hansberry is highly active in civil rights which calls for the black people to reunite with each other to identify their tradition and construct a sense of community. The play can be viewed as an exhibition of the movement and Hansberry's reflection on how to construct the Black Community as well.

The following part shall be devoted to exploring Hansberry's consciousness of constructing the Black Community in the play. Focusing on the self-awaking of Walter Lee and Beneatha's communication with the African young man Asagai, Hansberry not only suggests that the elimination of alienation can be achieved by the strong power of the family bond, but also shows the essential role that the Black tradition plays in the construction of an inclusive Black Community where black people can get rid of the control of the morbid society and develop their racial pride.

4.1 Self-Awaking Caused by Family Bonds

"When I speak of family, I have in mind a bond that has lasted longer—a devotion to the dead, even if they are obscure; A concern for the unborn, even if they are born in the distant future"^[5]. These words largely explain Walter Lee's self-awaking experience. The climax of the play comes when Walter told Lindner that they have determined to move into the house because it is his father who has earned it by his flesh and Walter would like to set a good example for his son—the sixth generation of his family in the country—that they are as proud as their ancestors. He has been awakened from the alienated fantasy by realizing no matter how humble and plain he is, he will never surrender as long as the family's reputation is tarnished. The invisible constructive power of reverence has forged a bond between the present generation and their ancestors and their future generations.

His self-awaking does not happen in one moment, it can be traced back to the detailed descriptions of the drama. One time, being drunk, Walter Lee imagined going back to the greatness of the ancient time where he leads his black brothers to fight against his enemies, and protect their children and wives, the unconscious actions demonstrate that he thirsts for uniting with his black siblings, yet he has his pride as an offspring of a great nation repressed since the dominant ideology has constructed a host of more

prominent objects for them to pursue to an extent that they forget their roots and lost themselves.

It is the family bonds that awaken Walter Lee from the alienated society, but more efforts require to be done to save the black people as the strength of dominant ideology is so overwhelmed that people are confronting the risks of falling into the trap again. Therefore, Hansberry further explores the possibility of constructing a Black Community in which the black people can identify with their tradition and culture to regain their racial pride.

4.2 Reconnection to the African Homeland

If the elimination of the character's alienation is the first step to constructing Black Community, reconnection to the African homeland is an essential step to take in the formation of the community.

"For Holderlin, writes Bajorick, if the home can be seen as a place, it can only be a place to which one returns, or rather, a place to which one always returns"^[6]. It points out that the homeland, with its great charm for people having left, is an imaginative place for them to return, thus it can serve as a bond for people coming from the same homeland to reunite. It is Hansberry who spots the potential of African land to unite the black people. "She used to deplore the distorted preconception about Africa"^[7]. And "she has written 22 articles for the *Liberty*, many of them on African customs and colonial struggle"^[8]. Therefore, it is conspicuous that she has dedicated herself to connecting the African American people and their African homeland.

By creating the character of Joseph Asagai, Hansberry intends to help the black people recognize Africa and remove their misunderstanding about their remote homeland. When Asagai, who can be viewed as an African representative, first visits Beneatha's house, Beneatha asks her mother not to ask him such ignorant questions as if they wear clothes. Furthermore, being portrayed as a polite, knowledgeable and righteous young man, Asagai is the new representative image of Africa created by the author to remove people's discrimination towards Africa and to stimulate people's interest in knowing more about the mysterious land.

Through identifying with black vernacular culture, Beneatha starts to get rid of the shackle of the dominant ideology. As a pursuer of Beneatha, what Beneatha attracts Asagai most is not her American bearings but her potential to be a Nile Queen. He assists her to identify herself by bringing her Nigerian clothes, teaching her African dance and music, admitting she looks more beautiful than with her natural curled hair rather than the straight one which Beneatha mutilates every week to assimilate into the American Aesthetics. And the act of Beneatha's unveiling of her close-cropped haircut symbolizes that she has eliminated the alienation on account of her reconnection with her remote homeland.

Beneatha ends up acting as a vindicator of the African homeland, evincing the powerful strength of African culture in bringing people together. On the one hand, she dedicates herself to disseminating African culture. For example, she shows and teaches Ruth how beautiful Nigerian music, clothing and folk dance are, and she also awakens her brother's racial pride while dancing with him along with the African music. On the other hand, she endeavors to correct George Murchison, another black pursuer of Beneatha, that there is no real need to blindly follow the dominant ideology and reproaches his arrogance to insult his homeland where people are the first to smelt iron on the earth.

In conclusion, by focusing on the successful depiction of the African representative and Beneatha's traverse of the ideological fantasy, Hansberry suggests the significance of removing their misunderstanding about their remote homeland and re-identifying with the African culture in helping black people get rid of the alienated ideological fantasy and reconstruct an inclusive and nurturing Black Community.

5. Conclusion

Under the guidance of Fromm's Alienation Theory, this paper explores the manifestation of the alienated dreams of the black family, arguing that the black people have been under the grip of the anonymous authority, conformity principle, and nonfrustration principle. However, it is important to point out that such alienation only results in further torture and dispossession, which can be demonstrated by the characters' distorted life with their dreams deferred. Being conscious of the pathological Black community constructed by the alienated ideological fantasy, Hansberry intends to construct an inclusive Black Community by exploring the significance of family bonds and that of black people's reconnection with the African Homeland. By virtue of the family bond, the protagonist is awakened from the estranged

fantasy; and the successful depiction of African young man contributes to the reconnection of black people with their African homeland, which has the power of removing the misunderstanding of their remote homeland and re-identifying with the African culture in helping black people get rid of the false ideological fantasy and reconstruct an inclusive and nurturing Black Community where black people can regain their racial pride.

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