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In search of their rights: a womanistic reading of lorraine hansberry's *a raisin in the sun*

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ABSTRACT

Hansberry's play *A Raisin in the Sun* is about the experience of an African American family who struggles against racism and tries to keep their dignity. It discusses racial, sexual, social, and economical discriminations on black community and individuals. The main black characters were not happened to be female but they were chosen preciously to present the challenges that black women confront within the racist and patriarchal society of America. Hansberry, a black female writer, utilized her masterpiece *A Raisin in the Sun* as a platform to present her womanistic ideas that inherited from her master, Dubois. Following Dubois' ideas on womanism, this study undertakes to examine the plays' representation of black women's experience of discriminations. It further highlights the rights and the true image of black women who are twice oppressed by gender and race in the American society.

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Introduction

Throughout history the place and position of women in society has been manipulated and discriminated. Women were marginalized in the world devoted to deeds of men, celebrating masculinity and appreciate patriarchal characteristics. In the oppression of the masculine world, the women constantly have been in search of their rights and their place. Black women suffering from their gender and race more than their white counterparts were underrepresented and discriminated. Consequently, black women persistently have been in search of a way to present themselves outside of the confinement of the image that the masculine world has pictured for them. They endeavored to demand their rights. The literary movement, Womanism came into being to help black women to demand their rights. Black feminist writers utilized their art and their writings to present the real nature and truth of black women. In the struggle for a better and desirable future for women, they were not alone. Several black men fights shoulder to shoulders with black women to give them a hand in getting their rights. Dubois, the black scholar and writer, is called a Womanist forefather, although he lived many years before the coinage of the word womanism by Alice Walker in the book *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*. Over the long course of his life he did consistently address the womanist's issues and concerns. He tried to change the role of the subservient women especially black women in American society. He believed that women like Blacks are victims of American society. Thus, in "In Damnation of Women", he referred to the importance of women's condition and issue and placed it next to the problem of color line and peace movements. He, aware of women's simultaneous experience of capitalist exploitation and sexist oppression backed women, in particular black women, in their battle against racial and sexist inequality. In "Damnation of Women", he not only refuted the fragility of females but also emphasized their potential to bring changes in society and achieve more success than males. He placed black motherhood in position of "the superstrong Black mother".

Hansberry, Dubois's student and a black playwright followed her master's ideas to provide an opportunity to give the

black women the voice to defend their rights in her works. *A Raisin in the Sun* is a good piece of literature that presents the impact of gender and race on black women.

Dubois' Womanistic Ideas:

Alice Walker was the first scholar that coined the term womanism and gave it the meaning *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*. She described a womanist as a black feminist. However, the concept of womanism had appeared in many literary works before the coinage of it. Dubois emerging into literary scene before Alice Walker and engaging with problems of women and their rights is an influential womanist who was the model of many womanist writers like Lorraine Hansberry.

Although there is no doubt that Dubois' fame lay upon his race theories and studies, his endeavor for freedom and rights of women could not be overlooked. In *W. E. B. Dubois: Black Radical Democrat*, African American historian Manning Marable (1986) declared Dubois as the "the most advanced male leader of his era on the question of gender inequality" (qtd. in Rabaka176) and woman suffrage. He was critical of oppression at different fronts of race, class, and gender. In "The Damnation of the women", he posited that: "The uplift of women is, next to the problem of the color line and the peace movement, our greatest modern cause. When, now, two of these movements—woman and color—combine in one, the combination has deep meaning" (122). According to African American feminist political philosopher, Joy James, in *Transcending the Talented Tenth* Dubois "confronted race, class, and gender oppression while maintaining conceptual and political linkages between the struggles to end racism, sexism, and war" (qtd. in Rabaka 287). In defense of woman and womanhood, Dubois grew to be critical of both capitalism and patriarchy because of women's simultaneous experience of capitalist exploitation and sexist oppression. Although he defended the rights of women in general, his concentration was on the black women's battle for racial equality as well as equality with males. Dubois considered black women as potential agents of radical democratic social change. In "The Souls of Black Women Folk in the Writings of W. E. B.

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Dubois," Nellie McKay, An African American feminist, noted that Dubois considered black women as equal partners in struggle of their race while his contemporary male writers' focus was on the social, economic, and educational advancement of black men as the leaders of the race. Dubois desired a democratic society in which the gifts of all were respected and embraced and it could not come into being unless both black men and women attempted. Thus, as Guy-Sheftall's asserted Dubois "devote[d] his life's work to the emancipation of Blacks and women" (qtd. in Rabaka 176). Dubois developed an unusual sensitivity to African American women's sufferings and their contributions to American history, culture, and society in general. Thus, he endeavored to portray and highlight African and African American women's life experiences and life endureances in this man-ruled world of whites in many women-focused works, in particular, in "The Damnation of Women". He depicted a mythic idealization of the maternal. Dubois posited that many contributions to human culture and civilization came out of Africa but none of them are greater than its highlighting the mother-idea. According to him, "the land of the mother is and was Africa". He invoked "Neith, the primal mother of all," as a universal symbol of maternalism. She is "the primal black All-Mother of men . . ." (111-112). In fact, he portrayed "the myth of the superwoman," as Michele Wallace termed it or "according to Patricia Hill Collins it is as "mother glorification" and the myth of "the superstrong Black mother" (qtd. in Rabaka 184).

Furthermore, "In Damnation of Women", he painted pictures of black women as strong, self-sacrificing, and long-suffering. He associated many respectable characteristics to black women so they can easily prove their equality to white women: "a vast group of women of Negro blood who for strength of character, cleanness of soul, and unselfish devotion of purpose, is today easily the peer of any group of women in the civilized world" (185). Dubois not only claimed that African American women are peer of white women, but also he considered them greater due to their suffering strivings, as well as their triumphs in a racist and patriarchic American society. According to his perspective no other woman are more desirable and respectful than black women.

It seems reasonable that Dubois purposely constructed a "super black woman," a "primal black All-Mother of men," in order to reject claims of white women's superiority and black women's inferiority. In fact, Dubois wanted to compensate anti-black racist images of black womanhood and black motherhood. Therefore, he advanced almost the exact antithesis of those images. In *To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature*, literary theorist Eric Sundquist Posited that Dubois's views on women must be interpreted according to "his reaction to white racist attacks on African American sexuality and family morality" (qtd. in Rabaka 187).

Dubois feministic worldview was profoundly influenced by the black Women of his life especially his mother. Dubois lost her mother with whom he had a close relationship, early in his life. She was a woman of pan-sacrifice that devoted all her life for her son. Even after her paralytic stroke, she continued to work for the comfort and education of her son. As Arnold Rampersad pointed out, in *The Art and Imagination of W. E. B. Dubois*, that Dubois' remarkable consideration for women is originated from his deep regard for his mother" (4).

Probably his lifelong commitment to the struggle for women's rights and equality also had its origin in the experience of his childhood paternal rejection and abandonment that was replaced by a deep sense of connection to the black maternal

figure that devoted her life for her son. When Dubois was a young boy, his father left him and his mother alone, and he would never realize the love and nurture of a biological father. According to Dubois biographer David Levering Lewis, Dubois hesitated that his father was something more than a well-meaning, romantic rakehell that left his family with no care. This is the reason that in "The Damnation of Women" fathers are figuratively and literally almost absent in contrast to the mother who the whole texts are about.

Dubois was aware of oppression of woman in a male dominated society in which women who their souls "longest in slavery and still in the most disgusting and indefensible slavery" ("Women Suffrage" 298) "existed not for themselves, but for men" ("Damnation" 163). They are dammed and their worth and status was measured by their domestic and maternal service. Not only Dubois demanded women's human and civil rights but also fought for and respected woman suffrage and female equality in economic situations.

In contrast to his black male contemporaries, he did not associate femininity with fragility or domesticity. As the defender of women's right, he believed that the male dominated society thinks wrong about gender and women as it does about race, and he declined the argument that difference, either physical or spiritual implies weakness or inferiority.

Furthermore, he believed woman had the right to achieve economic security through her own work and the right to become a mother if she desired so. "The future woman must have life-work and economic independence. She must have knowledge. She must have the right of motherhood at her own discretion" He affirmed that women should be free to choose to work outside of the house: "We cannot abolish the new economic freedom of women. We cannot imprison women again in a home or require them all on pain of death to be nurses and housekeepers" ("Damnation" 111, 122).

Dubois believed and advocated the potentiality of women in the progress of the society. He attacked Howard University dean and professor Kelly Miller, In his 1915 *Crisis* essay, "Woman Suffrage," for the comment he made against women's suffrage and feminist political practice. He defended the rights of women and stated that the actual work of the world depends more on women than on men. He pointed out that the Black women's achievement and contribution to racial uplift are greater than black men. He stated: "it is mothers and mothers who seem to count. . . ." Men, on the other hand, as fathers "are shadowy memories". Dubois was obviously more impressed with the achievements of black women than black men that he said: "It is the five million women of my race who really count. Black women (and women whose grandmothers were black) are today furnishing our teachers; ...these women are today seeking marvelous ways to show forth our strength and beauty and our conception of truth ("Damnation" 168, 121).

Vindications of Women' Rights in *A Raisin in the Sun*

A (n) Playwright, essayist, poet, and leading literary figure in the civil rights movement, Lorraine Vivian Hansberry was brought up in a politically and socially active family. Her activist parents infused her with racial pride and civic responsibility. As Hansberry herself pointed out she was born black and female, two feathers that made her suffer from many discriminations and hardships in the white dominated society of America. Unsurprisingly, her first hand experience of black women's suffering made her to put forward her womanistic ideas that inherited from her master, Dubois and presented the sympathy to black women in her works.

Hansberry's devotion to the cause of women's equality is evident in the play *A Raisin in the Sun*. The image of mother and motherhood that she created is parallel to Dubois's superwoman. Mama is "strong, caring, determined - the glue that held the family together" (Wilkerson, "Anniversary" 444). She is a woman, "who has adjusted to many things in life and overcome many more, her face is full of strength" (39). She is the head of the family. Rules are followed to Mama's extent. She controls what is said and done in her house. After Walter yells, "WILL SOMEBODY PLEASE LISTEN TO ME TODAY!" (74). Mama responds in a strong tone of voice saying, "I don't 'low no yellin' in this house, Walter Lee, and you know it" (74); when Beneatha denies the existence of God mama slaps her and says, "There are some ideas we ain't going to have in this house. Not long as I am at the head of this family" (36). Not only her manner and behavior but also as the critic Trudier Harris examined her size, stature, and her name, Mama, revealed her to be a character of immense power and strength (Bloom 108). Mama conjures up the image of caring and self-sacrificing mammy. She is a self-sacrificing mother who devotes her whole life to her children. The most important things in her life are her children. When she conceives that not giving money to Walter makes him down, she cannot tolerate it and gives the money and authority of the home to him and she confesses:

Listen to me, now. I say I been wrong, son. That I been doing to you what the rest of the world has been doing to you. Walter—what you ain't never understood is that I ain't got nothing, don't own nothing, ain't never really wanted nothing that wasn't for you. There ain't nothing as precious to me . . . there ain't nothing worth holding on to, money, dreams, nothing else—if it means it's going to destroy my boy (69).

She wants nothing for herself. Her dreams, her reasons for existence, are her family. 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" (32). Even Mama's action of buying a house with a garden is for the sake of her children and their happiness. Amiri Baraka confirmed that a new house, the stability and happiness of her children, are mama's principal dream (13). In fact, mama wants her family to escape from the house where the only natural light the family may enjoy during the day is through a little window, and move where there are much light and a garden. Envisioning a house with a garden and full of light symbolizes the place where the family can grow and flourish in better conditions; her plants as she says "It expresses me"; Taking care of the plant and giving it enough water and light for its survival reveals her caring nature she has towards her children (Bloom 63).

Hansberry similar to Dubois endeavored to present black woman more sacrificing and thus greater than white women. When Ruth urges mama To "Forget about the family and have yourself a ball for once in your life", she suggests Mama to take a trip to another country, Europe or South America: "Shoot—these here rich white women do it all the time. They don't think nothing of packing up they suitcases and piling on one of them big steamships and—swoosh!—they gone, child." Mama responds, "Something always told me I wasn't no rich white woman" (31). Mama distinguishes herself from white woman with her caring and sacrificing nature. She prefers instead of indulging herself, to spend the money for her family and their happiness. Mama decides to use the money, in addition to supplementing Beneatha's education, to buy a house, "a little old two-story somewhere, with a yard where Travis could play in

the summertime" (24). She does not spend even a pinch of it for herself, everything is for her children.

Furthermore, Hansberry depicted the other sacrificing image of mother through the character of Ruth. "Ruth's dream, as mother and wife, is somewhat similar [to mama] A room for her son, an inside toilet. She dreams as one of those triply oppressed by society as worker, as African American, and as woman" (Baraka, qtd. in Bloom 85). Also, her decision of abortion highlights her sacrificing nature. She is planning to have an abortion because she sees it as the only way to keep the family together. Although In 1959, abortion was illegal, Ruth decides to do it due to her awareness that another mouth to feed will deteriorate Youngers desperate conditions. Mama, as a mother, understands Ruth's emotions and explains: "When the world gets ugly enough—a woman will do anything for her family. *The part that's already living*" (50 emphasis added). She is so sacrificing that is ready to get rid of the living part of her body, her unborn child. There is nothing more difficult for a women to sacrifice her baby but Ruth is willing to do it for her family.

Moreover, referring to abortion was a bold feminist action that Hansberry took and it made the play one of the first American plays to address this issue. It is a scene that reveals Ruth's independence, expressing her right to choose and to assert control (Bloom 32). As a woman Hansberry gave her the right to decide about her body and the child inside her. Ruth's making this decision on her own without consulting Walter, her husband, confirms Dubois' statement that women "must have the right of motherhood at her own discretion" ("Damnations" 111). Also, Beneatha on finding out Ruth's pregnancy questions "Did you mean to? I mean did you plan it or was it an accident" (39). Her questions are laid on the belief that women must choose and plan to have a child. In fact, she defends the right of women to decide whether to have a child or not.

Hansberry depicted the common chauvinistic manner and attitudes and how women are victimized. Chauvinism is very evident in the play with the statements of Walter Lee Younger. He considers Ruth "small minds" and reprimands her for not supporting his plan of liquor store. He does not respect her ideas about his plan and expects her to support him with no disagreement. "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 they somebody. Like they can do something" (25).

Also, Beneatha suffers patriarchy throughout the play. In the very beginning of the play her brother tells her not to bother being a doctor, but to be a nurse or get married instead. In fact, he does not respect Beneatha's dream and considers his dream to be more important than Beneatha's goal of medical school. This is highlighted when Walter instead of putting a portion of money aside for her education prefers to invest the whole of it on his dream, liquor store. There are two other examples of male chauvinism toward Beneatha. Both of the men, George and Asagai are interested in Beneatha, display traditional attitudes toward women, though in varying degrees. The middle-class American black George Murchison refuses to recognize the equality of women, and wants Beneatha as his little woman. He tells her that what he wants from a woman is not intellectual conversation: "I don't go out with you to discuss the nature of 'quiet desperation' or to hear all about your thoughts" (63). George tells her that men do not like opinionated, liberated women. He similar to the other man possesses the common belief as Dubois referred to it "What else are women for?" Beauty "is its own excuse for being" ("Damnation" 123), what he wants from her is her beauty and nothing more: "to cut it out,

see-The moody stuff, I mean. I don't like it. You're a nice-looking girl . . . all over. That's all you need, honey, forget the atmosphere. Guys aren't going to go for the atmosphere-they're going to go for what they see. Be glad for that "(62-63). Beneatha disagrees with his chauvinistic attitudes dismisses him as a fool and she tells her mother "Mama, George is a fool—honest"(63). Beneatha in contrast to George follows what Dubois believed an African American woman must do; they are not expected to be ornamental, they have prepared themselves for work, instead of adorning their bodies only for play. They logically believe that if a woman be clean, healthy, and educated, she is more pleasant and more useful than most of her sisters.

Her other suitor, the African student Joseph Asagai, comments "between a man and a woman there need be only one kind of feeling" and "for a woman it should be enough" (43).

However, Hansberry through the three feminine characters, Beneatha, Ruth and mama refuted the chauvinistic attitudes and defended the right and potentiality of women. Beneatha is an early feminist who wants to continue his education and be a doctor. She is the only member of the family who is educated as Mrs. Johnson mentions. She in comparison to Walter, the male member of the family who is a chauffeur, achieves more and has more opportunity of success. Hansberry implicitly confirmed Dubois statement that despite of the spectacular advance of black men, it is the achievements of black women that really counts.

What black men achieved is due to the help of black women. "As makers of two million homes these women are today seeking marvelous ways to show forth our strength and beauty and our conception of truth "(Dubois 113). Walter lee is able to gain his dignity and define his masculinity through the help of the black woman mainly mama as Critic Margaret B. Wilkerson posits:

Walter speaks the words and takes the action, but Mama provides the context.

She, who embodies the race's will to transcend and who forms that critical link between the past and the future, articulates and transmits the traditions of the race to the next generation. Her wisdom and compassion provide the context for him to attain true manhood, to advance materially without becoming materialistic ("The Sighted Eyes" 10).

It is mama who sends her children in particular to do battle in the civil rights movement.

In the play, it is the woman who is the backbone of the family. Although Walter works as a chauffeur, in their conditions "the wage of the male breadwinner is below the standard, while the openings for colored women in certain lines of domestic work, and now in industries, are many"(Dubois, "damnation" 122) . Therefore, it resulted to toiling and toiling of the black women to support their families. Walter is not caring toward the family as mama and Ruth are. Throughout the play the mothers, Ruth and mama who are occupied with hard work for the family are focused.

Dubois recalled the image of her mother, her sacrifices and sufferings while his father was only a shadowy memory. Travis like Dubois will recall the toiling of her mother and grandmother while his memory of his father and grandfather will be obscure. His grandfather is dead and the father though he works is not as persistent as the females in his work. Mama takes low-paying jobs, plays a domestic role in the house to support the family. She plans to take a new job: "I could maybe take on a little day work again, few days a week" (44). Mama's support exemplifies her dogged determination to take care of the Younger family,

which remains heavily dependent on her (M'Bay 176). Also, Ruth who is weary and overworked, is determined to work harder for helping the family; she says that she will work twenty hours a day in all the kitchens in Chicago; she will strap her baby to her back if she have to and scrub all the floors in America and wash all the sheets in America if she has to; she is ready to sacrifice herself and her health for her family's comfort (89).

However, Walter is not as caring and responsible as the female characters. When he is not given the money, he gets drunk and abandons his job without thinking what will happen to his family. He is aware that not attending his work will make him miss it and finding another job will be very difficult but he is careless about it . He leaves his work for three days. On the other side, Ruth does not leave her work even for a day although she was falling down and does not feel well. She is concerned about losing her job and their economic conditions. "I got to go in. We need the money" (30).

Beneatha is presumably an early feminist. She refuses to labor under typical racial and gender roles. She is the only female member that does not work as domestics and has a better job opportunity. She wants to have an independent career. Hansberry through the character of Beneatha presented the feministic ideas that "The future woman must have a life work and economic independence. She must have knowledge" (Dubois, "Damnation" 111). Her beliefs are against society's expectations when she explains that she will not marry for wealth and that she may even decide not to marry; Mama and Ruth are shocked. In fact, rejecting a rich, middle-class suitor, George, represents her questioning prevailing expectation that women should be satisfied as housewives or sex objects (Bloom 26).

Although At the time the play was written, feminism had not fully emerged into the American landscape as it would in 1960s; Beneatha articulates many ideas of it. Beneatha represents those women that Dubois believed "in the great rank and file of our five million women we have the up-working of new revolutionary ideals, which must in time have vast influence on the thought and action of this land"(Damnation 125). Beneatha presents the feministic ideas to the American land.

Conclusion

Discrimination has been important issues throughout the history. There have been always some groups that were perceived to be inferior to others. Therefore, their rights were ignored, their efforts and services were unnoticed, and they were treated unfairly. Anyway, the discriminated group did not accept the discriminations and did not let the dominated group force them to be an outcast. They revolted against the common misleading thought and image of them and endeavored to present who they really are; they struggle to be accepted and respected like the other member of society. The prominent discriminated group is black women who fight against the white patriarchal society. The struggle for equality of black women was not confined to female activist but also male scholars like Dubois had a significant role in Womanism. He pictured black women as strong, self sacrificing, and influential in progress of society. He condemned both patriarchic and racist American society and demanded America to respect and give black women the position they deserved.

In the same vein as Dubois, in supporting the oppressed, Hansberry had paid specific heed to the issue and conditions of the black women who are twice oppressed due to their gender and race. *A Raise in the Sun* is the first play written by Lorraine

Hansberry but is regarded her prominent play. She highlighted the role of black females in elevating the race and struggling against racial oppression in it. She also supported women's right of economic independence and getting married and having children on their own discretion. Hansberry through the feminine characters of Beneatha, Ruth and Mama defended the rights of women and refuted chauvinistic attitudes. Mama and Ruth are Hansberry's superwomen. They portray the caring and self-sacrificing mothers who devote their whole life for their children and family. The character of Beneatha support Hansberry's belief in potentiality of women for success.

So with these considerations, Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* can be regarded as Womanist writing which is written under the influence of Dubois Womanistic ideas.

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