

Lena Younger: A Visionary Matriarch in Lorraine Hansberry's A Raisin in the Sun

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Abstract: This research article shows black woman's participation in reestablishing an African American culture in all-black settings stands as a unique black woman's stand point. Irrespective of the social class and other myriad differences, almost all the US black women were affected by the intersecting oppressions of race, gender and class. A few literary black women during the Harlem Renaissance through their contributions insisted on their rights to define their reality, establish their identity and name their history. As a revisionist, Lorraine Hansberry challenged the validity of the historical documentation of black culture and especially the role and significance of women in constructing this culture. Her revision of the concept of the black motherhood is a major step toward correcting the historical records concerning black maternity. In her seminal play, A Raisin in the Sun, Hansberry captured the essence of matriarchal trait in her outstanding central character Lena Younger, otherwise known as Mama.

Keywords: Black women, oppression, matriarchy, reestablish.

I. INTRODUCTION

Lorraine Hansberry, the celebrated dramatist, creates the principal character Lena Younger as a sensitive but strong matriarch of Younger family. She is a very caring mother who usually gives good advice and makes wise decision. With her deep religious conviction, she bravely faces and overcomes life's challenges. She is a symbol of power, not of beauty but of strength. There are common tendencies of matriarchy that provide a clear definition to the black matriarch:

- Regards the Black male as undependable and is frequently responsible for his emasculation,
- Is often very religious,
- Regards mothering as one of the most important things in her life,
- Attempts to shield her children from and to prepare them to accept the prejudices of the white world.

II. WOMAN OF STRENGTH

Lena Younger possesses almost all the traits of a true matriarch. Her absolute devotion to her family reigns supreme. The most important possessions in her life are her children. This Younger family faces a daily struggle on the Southside of Chicago. In spite of their bleak existence, each member of the family dwells on the hopes and dreams brought by the money, which Mama is to receive from her dead husband's insurance. With the amount of ten thousand dollars each member visualizes some plan for their money. While Mama aims to fulfill the dream of her husband and herself of a new house in white neighbourhood, she realizes that her son Walter plans to invest it in a liquor store venture. Though Mama realizes that both her son Walter and his liquor store venture are undependable, for the sake of her devotion to her son, she sets aside her doubts and explains her plight to him as:

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. (106)

Though she gives him the money to look after both himself and his sister Beneatha's education and also informs him to decide for the future as he has to become the head of the family after his father's demise. She utters:

...And from now on any penny that come out of it or that go in it is for you to look after. For you to decide. It ain't much, but it's all I got in the World and I'm putting it in your hands. I'm telling you to be the head of this family from now in like you supposed to be. (107)

Mama's absolute devotion to her family gets revealed when Ruth, the daughter-in-law suggests Mama to utilize the insurance money to take a European tour as all westerners would do. Though this attitude of her daughter-in-law proves to be of concern towards her mother-in-law, it doesn't reveal the trait of matriarch in her which we find in Mama's immediate response in objecting to such pleasures. Mama says: Mama (*Drily*) You sound like I'm just about ready to die. Who'd go with me? What I look like wandering 'round Europe by myself?" (43). For which, Ruth reflects the attitude of rich white women when they get money as '...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...' (44). During this conversation with her daughter in law, Mama visualizes her dream as:

...Been thinking that we maybe could meet the notes on a little old two- storey somewhere, if we use part of the insurance for a down payment and everybody kind of pitch in. I could may be take on a little day work again, few days a week— (44)

Mama reminisces her life with Walter in those days to have lived in a space like a 'rat trap' where owing to unhygienic condition they had to loose their baby—little Claude. Mama recollects both herself and her husband grieved on the death of baby. She says of her husband as "he was one man to love his children" (45)

It is to safe guard her family and to fulfill her husband's dream of moving to a spacious hygienic environment and also to escape from the tensions that plague them that she wants to own at least an "little old two-storey somewhere" (44).

Mama exhibits the second trait of the matriarchal stereotype where religion plays an integral role in the lives of black women. Mama wants her children to incorporate her religious ideals to their lives. When Beneatha, the daughter expresses her dream of becoming a doctor, the conversation proves the daughter to have lost faith in religion:

Mama, you don't understand. It's all a matter of ideas, and God is just one idea I don't accept. It's not important. I am not going out and be immoral or commit crimes because I don't believe in God... It's just that I get tired of Him getting credit for all the things the human race achieves through its own stubborn effort. There simply is no blasted God—there is only man and it is *he* who makes miracle! (51)

On observing the daughter's speech Mama raises slowly and slaps Beneatha powerfully across the face and forces her to utter what she says as, " Now—you say after me, in my mother's house there is still God." for which after a long pause Beneatha too repeats, "In my mother's house there is still God." The faith and religion which the older generation possesses inspite of the hardships and struggles for existence gets revealed when Mama quotes her late husband's satisfaction in God as, "Seem like God didn't see fit to give the black man nothing but dreams—but He did give us children to make them dreams seem worthwhile." (45-46)

While both the husband and wife—Big Walter and Mama have struggled hard for the sake of their children, it's out of weariness and total exhaustion owing to hard labour that the black man meets his death which Mama reminisces as:

I seen..him...night after night...come in... and look at that rug... and then look at me...the red showing eyes...the veins moving in his head...I seen him grow thin and old before he was forty...working and working and working like somebody's old horse...killing himself...and you- you give it all away in a day (129).

The difference of attitude between the old and the new generation is explained by Anne Chenney as:

The old world of Lena and the new world of Beneatha are separated by more than forty years of social and political change. The old world looks inward to the kitchen, the family, the home; the new world stares outward at college, medical school, Africa. Since the Younger family is searching for a center, a nucleus, the old and new world cannot orbit peacefully: like stray neutrons, the two worlds were destined to collide. In *A Raisin in the Sun*, Lena and Beneatha clash—sometimes violently. (61)

In contrast to these representations, the older generations do not rely on false notions, impractical dreams, where as they are quick in decision making which proves to be against moral values. When Mama realizes her children to loose their track of moral living as a true matriarch and a strict disciplinarian, she checks them at the right moment, cautions them and moulds them too. For example, Ruth plans to have an abortion for which she blames her relationship with Walter, Mama understands Ruth's emotions and advises Walter to safe guard his wife Ruth and also makes Ruth realize that "when the world gets ugly enough—a woman will do anything for her family. *The part that's already living*" (63).

Mama stands for her moral and religious boundaries. During one of her discussion with her son Walter, she speaks about the powerful invasion of money in the modern world. She does not like the money-minded world and says that in her days, it was a great thing to be free from getting punished and to live with at least some dignity. But now, money rules everywhere and drives people mad after it. She wishes the world to change and reminiscences as, "___ Money is life. Once upon a time, freedom used to be life—now it's money. I guess the world really do change" (74). Though she is proud of her children's brought up, she is worried because they do not recognize the pains undertaken by their parents.

This black woman with her strong faith in morals and religion prove to be knowledgeable too. Her knowledge of the dominant white culture gets reflected in her sarcasm of George Murchinson with Booker T. Wahington as having fallen a prey in assimilating themselves to the white culture. Booker T. Washington is a most notable black leader who advocated black assimilation into white America. He encourages the blacks to educate themselves which he believed to raise their social level. To the contrary, Washington's ideals did not serve the black racial progress but created only a larger polarization between blacks and whites. The immediate reference of Washington by Lena Younger affirms the woman's knowledge of history and immediately identifies it for assimilation which as a true black matriarch, she is not ready to accept. Later when the conversation with Mrs. Johnson, the assimilated black woman continues in praising Booker T. Washington, Mama's hatredness against these assimilated men gets revealed as:

Mama: Is that what old Booker T. said?

Johnson: He sure did.

Mama: Well, it sounds just like him. The fool.

Johnson (*indignantly*): Well—he was one of our great men.

Mama: Who said so? (103)

In contrast to them, who have assimilated in white culture, Mama's vision of buying a house in the white dominated environment reflects this black woman's confidence in asserting her identity amidst the black culture. When Mrs. Johnson warns her of the consequences in moving to the white environment, Mama's strength gets revealed here:

Johnson: ...And soooooo ambitious! I bet it was his idea y'll moving out to Clybourne Park.
Lord—I bet this time next month y'll's names will have been in the papers plenty—(*Holding up her hands to mark off each word of the headline she can see in front of her*) "NEGROES INVADE CLYBOURNE PARK—BOMBED!"

Mama (*she and Ruth look at the woman in amazement*) We ain't exactly moving out there to get bombed. (104)

This black matriarch's devotion does not rest only on her family and her children alone. The trait of nurturing gets extended even to her environment too. Just as she nurtures her children, she tends to nurture her plant. She repents for the lack of sunlight that the plant is to receive owing to the prevailing darkness inside the house. She utters in the beginning of the play to the plant as, "Lord, if this little old plant don't get more sun it's been getting it ain't never going to see spring again." (40) Mama envisions a house, visualizes a garden, a symbol signifying that the house will be the place where the family can flourish in better conditions. Realizing the mother's dream, the children offer her gardening tools and a

gardening hat symbolizing that Mama needs these tools to nurture the garden and help their dreams grow. Towards the concluding part of the play, Mama is seen moving with the plant. Even when Beneatha criticizes her as to whether she would come to the new house with this plant, Mama firmly utters, “It expresses ME.”

When Walter loses his money and in order to compensate for the loss, he stoops down to receive the money from the white Linder, accepting his decision of not entering into the white neighborhood, Mama gets dejected and recollects the firmness of their black culture by not permitting any white man take decision on them. She laments:

Son— I come from five generations of people who was slaves and sharecroppers—but ain’t nobody in my family never let nobody pay’ em no money that was a way of telling us we wasn’t fit to walk the earth. We ain’t never been that poor. (143)

III. CONCLUSION

The knowledge and the wisdom which this black matriarch Lena Younger possesses and has gained through years of struggle, make her to fulfill her dream of moving to the comfortable white space. This wisdom shifts not only in the transformation of her dream but also in transforming the minds of almost all the members of the family—Ruth, Beneatha and Walter. This matriarch with all these traits lead and with an acceptance and confidence, all the members follow her.

REFERENCES

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