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African American's Identification in Early Civil Rights Movement

-- Take Lorraine Hansberry's A Raisin in the Sun as an Example

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Abstract: Lorraine Hansberry is a prestigious African American writer who creates a classical work The raisin in the sun. Under the backdrop of early Civil Rights Movement, the play centers on male protagonist Walter and three other family female members' identification when living in that white-dominated community. Their identification represents in two ways: merging into the mainstream society and returning to the ancestral culture or even district. The key to identity is one's value and social behavior. It is imperative and indispensable for one to find his or her self-value in accordance with personal and social backdrop and experience.

Keywords: African American; Identity; The Raisin in the Sun; White Society.

1. Introduction

Lorraine Hansberry is one of the most predominant and prestigious African American women playwrights during 1960s. Suffered from racial discrimination and conflict when she was young, Lorraine broke through the conventional black writers' writing technique for the sake of representing the black people's life situation at that time vividly and specifically, among which is *A Raisin in the Sun*. Its name originated from Langston Hughes's poem A Dream Deferred: "What happen to a dream deferred? Does it dry up like a raisin in the sun…… Or does it explode?" (Langston Hughes 1926) After its release, the play became a hit. It was not only the first play on Broadway completed by an African American, but was one of the few plays to treat African American life experience in an affirmative and assertive way.

An overseas scholar Lisbeth Lipari claimed that this screenplay is "an example of the maintenance, containment, and repair of rhetorical constructions of whiteness." (Lipari 83). While Margaret B. Wilkerson focuses on the reasons why *A Raisin* become a hit. She came to conclusion that the Younger Family's spirits and struggles are regarded as symbols of social progress and obstacle characteristic in the period of 1950s, which the audience are unable to avoid. (Wilkerson 2016) Domestically, professor Qin regarded Walter Younger as Prometheus, who experienced a significant conflict against poverty, racial discrimination and the white people's bulwark, finally breaking through the chains and embracing the new life with his family. (Qin Sujue 2008) Centered on the topic of American dream, Chen Xue and Yu Ping analyzed Walter and three Women's dream respectively, considering all these people are pursuing American dream in their own ways. (Chen and Yu 2016) Fang Xingfu asserted that the Younger Family represent African American's long for fairness and common development based on the conception of community. (Fang Xingfu 2019) while in terms of individual, the family members also constructed their own identity during the pursuit of happiness and common advancement. Hence, this play still has its research space. In accordance with the concept of identity, the thesis analyzed the African American identity represented by the Younger Family. The pursuit of identity construction is also a way of self-realization. According to disparate social situation and personal definition, one makes different choices.

According to Stuart Hull, identities are about "questions of using the resources of history, language and culture in the process of becoming rather than being: not 'who we are' or 'where we came from', so much as what we might become, how we have been represented and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves." (Hull 4) For one thing, identity declares the place where one usually situates himself or herself in a society. The other is that it is an essential social psychological progress, including assimilation and internalization, which is a strong force to maintain individual and social interaction.

The thesis is divided into three parts. The first part is an introduction, which includes the background knowledge of the play, its previous study, an explanation about cultural identity. The second part is main body, which consists of two chapters, elaborating the African American cultural identity at that time, which incorporates two attitudes. The one is integration into the American society, among them are Grandma Lena and housewife Ruth. The other is the cultural hybridity represented by Beneatha and Walter. Through the channel of describing the black people's dilemma and struggle in the white society, Hansberry glorified her ancestral culture and expresses her inheritance to African's spirit and identity.

2. Identity Construction through Merging into White Community

Identities are constructed within, not outside, discourse, we need to understand them as produced in specific historical and institutional sites (Hall 4) For the Younger family, some of them endeavors to blend into the White-dominated society during which their discourse and behaviour are gradually shape their own American identity.

2.1. The will to be an American Citizen

Lorraine Hansberry introduced a play which centered on the struggles and frustrations of an African American family

living in Chicago in the period of 1950s. (Wilkerson 443) When grandma Lena Younger receives a generous $10,000 widow's benefit, each family member deems the money as a rare opportunity to fulfill their private dreams. Grandma Lena believes that the top priority now is the purchase of a bigger house in White community. Nevertheless, the son Walter aspires to put the money into a liquor store for the sake of boosting their living and economic conditions. While the daughter Beneatha hopes that the money will become a helper to finishing her school work. The whole story ends up with the family moves into a new house in white community after overcoming outside and inside hurdles and traps. There are two main attitudes in this family when facing with the double identity and double consciousness. One is recognition towards American mainstream society. While the other is African cultural identity.

Although the African American obtain freedom and equality legally and officially in the early days of Civil Rights Movement, they were at the brink of society and not able to enjoy the same interests as the white people due to the political and economic reasons. Hence, a closer look reveals that the Younger family attempts to realize the relative justice and happiness in this white-dominated society through merging into the mainstream community. And the grandma Lena is a typical example, who is also the first one proposing the idea of moving into the White Clybourne Park regardless of the tough situations they may face in the future. The main life goals for her during the entire livelihood are "not being lynched" and "having a pinch a dignity". (Hansberry 45)

Furthermore, Lena's endeavor and behaviours of integrating into the white society are illustrated as follows. Firstly, Lena has no or vague impression for Africa. "I think it's so sad the way our American Negroes don't know nothing about Africa' cept Tarzan and all that." (Hansberry 37) It is transparent that some of African Americans have little combination with its ancestral land since the Slavery system in the 17th century. Additionally, Lena gives her robust support and nurture to each family members when it comes to career and study. Lena provides 3500 dollars for Walter's liquor store investment and leaves extra money to Beneatha for her further study at medical school. Which vividly represent the insistent and painstaking pursuit of American dream. (Chen and Yu 93)

Except Lena, the housewife Ruth is another family member who tries her best into merging into the American mainstream society. As a black women, Ruth not only suffers from the conventional racial segregation from the White, but also the suppression and prejudice from the male counterparts, which may cause her the most neglected character in this play. While Ruth contributes her whole energy to the family affairs and tired her best to alleviate the family financial burdens. At the beginning of this play, Ruth is described as a pretty girl in her younger age but now "disappointment has already begun to hang in her face." (Hansberry 2) Nevertheless, when she was told that the family is going to move into a new and big house in the white district, she is ecstatic with great joyfulness. Meanwhile, Ruth "starts to rise, bringing her fists down with vigor, the radiance spreading from cheek and cheek again." (Hansberry 63) Ruth's spontaneous action and thought towards the house moving shows her acceptance and expectation of the American identity.

2.2. Obstacles Within and Without the Ethnic Group

When a multiple of African Americans like Grandma Lena and wife Ruth aspire to move into the white community, an array of hinders comes spontaneously, including the inside and outside the ethnic group. In the story, learning that the Younger family is going to removing to the Clybourne Park, one of their neighbours Mrs. Johnson came over and warned them in an ironic tone: "You mean you ain't read 'bout them colored people that was bombed out their place out there?" (Hansberry 59) Embodied by Mrs. Johnson, a great number of African Americans are powerless and coward, passively accepting the unfairness and injustice given by such society. Despite they inform that a group of people are fighting for their future and the generations to come strenuously, they themselves are way narrow and short-sighted to change their life conditions. (Liu Tao 28)

Furthermore, plenty of white racists are opposed to this family's moving, Mr. Lindner is one of them, a delegate from the Clybourne Park Improvement Association. The so-called association is trying to kick the Younger family out of their neighborhood and promises a generous financial offer to them by claiming that buying their new house in a triple price. It is clear to see that the white community is always keeping the African grace and interests at bay and set all kinds of bulwark for them under the pretext of "for the happiness of all concerned." (Hansberry 83) At the first glance, such disturbance and disruptions putting forwards by the white prevent the black from their area. A closer look reveals that the racists' refusal towards the African American's cultural identity. According to professor Qin " dream, as a non-material ideology, is always occupied by the beloved white people. While the black group who used to be treated as commodities during the 17th century is far from it. (Qin Sujue 48) Despite all these disturbances, the Younger still insists on removing into the new house, which is an embodiment of establishing their American identity and realizing a racial integral community for a shared future. (Fang Xingfu 123)

3. Identity Construction by Cultural Hybridity

Du Bois once clarified the African American's internal struggle in the white community, he defined it as "double con sciousness", which is a sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others…One ever feels his two-ness, --an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body." (Du Bois 8) In this play *The Raisin in the Sun,* Hansberry thinks highly of the traditional African spirit by emphasizing the racial pride. Meanwhile, it can also be seen as a guide for the African American seeking spiritual home and constructing cultural identity. In this play, Beneatha is a representative of worshipper of African culture and a root finder of her ancestral origin. On the other hand, the husband Walter Younger is a typical "two-ness", who struggled between the white culture and inner fantasy of Black ideology, who is finally awakened by his internal manhood deciding to fight for their justice and freedom in American society.

3.1. Insist on Returning to the African Culture

Since the 1920s, the Graveyism had a huge impact on a number of African Americans. Some of them are claiming their willing to return to Africa, while the others are opposed

to the integration of the black and the white. Those who propose the idea of returning to Africa show extreme love and expectancy towards their ancestral place. In the play *The Raisin in the Sun*, the daughter Beneatha is one of them.

Beneatha possesses a kind of rebellious consciousness. On the one hand, she is willing to accept the white-dominant products as long as they are progressive and positive. And Beneatha does not feel inferior to her deep-pocketed follower George by saying "I would not marry him if all I felt for him was what I feel now." (Hansberry 24) On the other hand, Beneatha does not identified with the white people's belief and doctrine. Be fed up with her mother's ardent love to God, Beneatha asserts that "I am just tired of hearing about God all the time." (Hansberry 24) She holds strong belief that the oppressor's words are filled with lies by claiming that it is people who create miracles all over the world. Furthermore, a majority of Africans at that time own rare opportunity to learn some objective knowledge about Africa, only some mainstream movies and news handled by the political leaders are available. Nevertheless, Beneatha tells a disparate story, who is way obsessed with and has a great command of African culture. She refutes to her ex by saying that African "were the first to smelt iron on the face of the earth" and "The Ashanti were performing surgical operations when English." (Hansberry 52) Not only can she correct some common mistakes relating to Africa made by her mother, but she represents great identification towards Africa culture. In Beneatha's most frustrating moment, Asagai, one of her college student, provides her with the most promising future through the medium of backing to Africa to seek for her identity and appreciate Africa's landscape. Such decision symbolizes a group of African Americans' inner thought and actions at that time, who insistently returned to their ancestral land and were significantly identified with their original and conventional culture.

3.2. From Identity Crisis to Ethnic Identity

Walter Younger is a chauffeur, who is not satisfied by his life and work both mentally and economically. He is a typical representative of double consciousness, born in America and assimilated by its mainstream culture. While the attachment and reliance to African culture still exist in his old-self. Furthermore, as a sole male adult, Walter is always dream of running a liquor store in order to enhance the whole family's live conditions. "You wouldn't understand yet, son, but your daddy's gonna make a transaction… a business transaction that's going to change our lives…" (Hansberry 65) The speech is regarded as Walter's sole chance to elaborate his hope comprehensively. Yet this speech is also the image of typical Americana. (Wilkerson 447) The independent man in the family wants to control the world surrounding to him. Nevertheless, Walter's business is destined to end up with failure, the American dream belongs to the White who used to exploit the colored people's cheap labor. Walter's lose is a symbol: the black people's dream will never come true unless the White give away their ridiculous superiority. (Qin Sujue 48).

The whole play reaches its climax for Walter's male consciousness awakening, the same spirit as his father when he was trying to move into the white community with his family. Touched by his family's behaviour, Walter eventually refused Lindner's negotiation and their compensation, insisting on moving into their new house. "What I mean is that we come from people who had a lot of pride." (Hansberry 109) From Walter's words and his final actions, it is clear to see that he not only rejects to the White-dominated hegemony, but also emerges as being proud of his ancestral culture. This is an illustration of his transition: from identity crisis to the ethnic identity. It is Walter's remaining African identity and its culture force makes his smooth transition. (Kuai Chong 10)

4. Conclusion

Under the backdrop of white-dominated society and ideology, the Younger family painstakingly hold fast to their pursuit and adjust to identity transformation. Through the medium of the Younger experience, Hansberry delivers three channels of identity construction: merging into the white community; returning to the African culture and cultural hybridity. At contemporary American society, the African American's contribution has been witnessed by the mass and their status in economy and politics has been boosted. Just like Alian Locke said: "He has contributed not only materially in labor and in social patience but spiritually as well." (Alian Locke 9) The multi-culture has been accepted and a double identity has been constructed for future generations. Furthermore, they are actively adapting to a new cultural identity and striving for a right future without hesitation.

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