



The Intersections of Oppression: Examining the Challenges Faced by Black Women in Ann Petry's *The Street* and Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*

Zita Rarastesa {0009-0002-2692-6568}

Universitas Sebelas Maret, Jl. Ir. Sutami 36A Surakarta, Indonesia
zitararastesa@staff.uns.ac.id

Abstract. This essay explores economic struggle, racism, and sexism in African American literature by focusing on Ann Petry's "The Street" and Lorraine Hansberry's "A Raisin in the Sun." It analyses how characters in these works face barriers to achieving the American Dream due to limited opportunities and educational access. The intersectionality of classification, racism, and sexism in the lives of black women was examined, with characters such as Lutie Johnson symbolizing the challenges faced by hardworking black women. In contrast, characters like Ruth and Beneatha in "A Raisin in the Sun" navigate a broader range of choices but still encounter economic and societal hurdles. Despite these obstacles, both novels convey hopeful messages and pursue happiness in their characters. The methodology involved a literary analysis of the two works, closely examining themes and characters. The author supports arguments with close readings of key passages and quotes, drawing insights from literary critics and scholars to provide a context. The analysis delves into the portrayal of economic struggle, racism, and sexism, exploring intersectionality and connections to broader social and historical contexts, such as the American Dream, feminist movements, and racial discrimination.

Keywords: Economic struggle, racism, sexism, intersectionality, American Dream

1. Introduction

Ann Petry's *The Street* and Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* raise the issue of the accessibility of American Dream for black people through their characters' life struggle. Economic factor becomes the main factor for the American Dream to be mostly inaccessible

for black people since they get limited access to decent jobs, which is closely related to the low education level of black people. Critic Keith Clark observes that “the ‘American Dream’ has been a prominent subject in American literature, especially during the first half of the twentieth century. Dreiser, Fitzgerald, Miller—all of these writers have depicted characters in search of the utopian dream, a few of whom find it” (Clark, 495) [1]. According to Clark, American Dream is a myth (Clark, 495) [1] so that it becomes unattainable in reality although there are many Americans who are considered to succeed and live the dream. In most of modernist works, the decline of American Dream becomes popular theme because modernists generally do not believe in obsession with materialism, which can keep people away from the essence of life that is more valuable than material things. Further, Clark [1] observes that in the Caucasian authors’ works, the protagonists have to face their internal demons like Fitzgerald’s Jay Gatsby, while those in the African American authors’ works, most of the time, have to face their demons in “flesh and blood” (Clark, 495) [1].

1.1. Literature Review

The literature review for this essay focuses on the exploration of economic struggle, racism, and sexism in African American literature, specifically in Ann Petry's "The Street" and Lorraine Hansberry's "A Raisin in the Sun." It examines the existing scholarship and critical analysis surrounding these works, providing a context for the analysis of the challenges faced by black women in their pursuit of the American Dream.

Keith Clark observes that the American Dream is a myth meaning it is unattainable in real life which becomes the central theme of financial struggle in both works. (Clark, 495)[1]. Clark's remark emphasizes that black people have limited access to decent jobs and education. Thus, this leads to primary barrier to achieve the American Dream. A character like Lutie exemplifies the black experience in “The Street” who represents the hardship experienced by black women to have a better life.

Meanwhile, Heather Hicks posits on the issues of both racism and sexism to find the way to fight against those issues effectively (Hicks, 34)[2]. This statement is reflected through Lutie’s character who experiences objectification and victimization due to her gender and race.

Furthermore, Diana Adesola Mafe investigates the feminist themes present in Hansberry's play, *A Raisin in the Sun*. Mafe's analysis highlights the play's exploration of gender conflicts and the right to choose, positioning it within the larger socio-historic context of patriarchal civil rights and black nationalist movements (Mafe, 31-32) [3]. This underscores the significance of Beneatha's character and her pursuit of education and independence, challenging traditional gender roles and advocating for feminist values.

This section also considers the broader social and historical contexts in which these works were written. Michelle Gordon's analysis of "A Raisin in the Sun" emphasizes the play's critique of class politics and its exploration of race pride and assimilation (Gordon, 125) [4]. This perspective highlights the complexities faced by black individuals in their pursuit of the American Dream, where material success often requires compromising one's cultural identity.

In the article "The Struggle of Women, Social Realities and Psychological Approach in Ann Petry's *The Street* and *The Narrows*" P. Suresh and D. Angeline Jeba explicitly discusses the social realities of African- American women in relation to feminism, shedding light on the struggles, discrimination, and challenges they faced in society (p. 229, 2019) [5].

2. Research Methodology

This essay applies a literary analysis approach to examine the challenges faced by black women in Ann Petry's *The Street* and Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*. The methodology involves a close examination of the themes and characters in these works, aiming to gain insights into the intersectionality of economic struggle, racism, and sexism in the lives of black women.

To conduct this analysis, key passages and quotes from the novels are closely examined and analyzed. These excerpts provide valuable insights into the experiences and perspectives of the characters, allowing for a deeper understanding of the challenges they face in their pursuit of the American Dream.

In addition to the primary texts, this research methodology incorporates the perspectives of literary critics and scholars. Insights and interpretations from these sources are used to provide a broader context for the analysis and to support the arguments presented in the essay.

The research methodology also considers the social and historical contexts in which these works were written. The American Dream, feminist movements, and racial discrimination are among the broader social and historical factors explored to better understand the themes and messages conveyed in the novels.

3. Discussion

Racism in black authors' works becomes the demon of the protagonists because they are treated in such a way that they start to believe that they are lower than the people who discriminate against them based on the colour of their skin. Both Petry's *The Street* and

Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* deal with the frustration of the characters because of economic pressure that is intertwined with gender issues that put women in weak positions. Both novels demonstrate the multiple oppressions experienced by black women and impose the idea that classism, racism, and sexism are inseparable in black women's lives. However, the women in Petry's *The Street*, Lutie and Min, are more victimized than Beneatha and Ruth in Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*, as Hansberry tries to insert feminist values in the play through Beneatha's character.

Beneatha's representation of feminist ideals in the play weaves together with the predominant theme of the American Dream, demonstrating how her quest for education and autonomy disrupts conventional gender roles while aiming for achievement. By incorporating feminist ideals through her character, Hansberry underscores the notion that achieving the American Dream extends beyond material wealth, emphasizing the importance of personal fulfillment, self-empowerment, and breaking gender barriers. Beneatha's defiance of societal expectations and her determination to become a doctor not only align with feminist values but also symbolize a redefinition of success within the American Dream, emphasizing the significance of individual aspirations and self-realization.

The portrayal of Beneatha's feminist journey in the play underscores a broader reimagining of the American Dream, highlighting the inclusion of gender equality, self-expression, and the pursuit of personal goals as integral components of the dream. Through Beneatha's character, the play challenges the traditional narrative of the American Dream by intertwining feminist values, suggesting that true fulfillment and success encompass not only economic prosperity but also the liberation and empowerment of women in society. Enforcing feminist issues in the fifties is considered ahead of time when the feminist movement was still in the emerging process of reaching its peak in the 1960s. This essay discusses not only the way Petry and Hansberry impose the idea that the American Dream is not for everyone since some people, because of their race, have minimal access to it but also the way sexism plays within the black community.

Lutie Johnson, the protagonist of Petry's *The Street*, represents many black women who work hard and dream of having a decent place to live someday. She admires Benjamin Franklin for his work ethic and believes that if she works hard enough, she will get what she wants:

You and Ben Franklin. You ought to take one out and start eating it as you walk along 116th Street. Only you ought to remember while you eat that you're in Harlem and he was in Philadelphia a pretty long number of years ago. Yet she couldn't get rid of the feeling of self-confidence and she went on thinking that if Ben Franklin could live on a little bit of money and could prosper, then so could she (Petry, 63-64) [6].

She also considers the life of her white employer as ideal and makes it the standard of living she wants to have one day. Seeing her employer's life "made her feel she was looking through a hole in a wall at some enchanted garden. She could see, she could hear, she spoke the language of the people in the garden, but she couldn't get past the wall" (Petry, 1974,41)

[6]. However, she does not expect that her hard work and absence from home will put her marriage at stake. Her husband cheats on her and blames her for being at work all the time without considering that the money she gets from work supports him as well. Leaving her husband, Lutie wants to be independent by renting her apartment. She moves to Harlem with his son, Bub, and hopes that it will be the beginning of a better life for her and Bub.

From the very beginning, Lutie sets foot on the apartment she wants to rent, and she becomes cautious of how the superintendent of the place, Jones, looks at her. She feels like she has to get away from Jones but has no choice. Besides Jones, another person looks at Lutie the same way, Mrs. Hedges. She likes to observe people walking on the street and knows everything that is going on in the apartment complex. The way Petry tells the story makes the readers experience the feeling of being watched and stalked. This narrative style imposes the idea that being a woman, black and beautiful like Lutie, cannot escape from being objectified and victimized by the male gaze. Heather Hicks, in her article, argues that "by illuminating these relays between the two forms of oppression, Petry reminds the reader that, to battle either racism or sexism, one must battle both" (Hicks, 2003, p. 34) [2]. Even Mrs Hedges, in the way she observes Lutie, demonstrates that she is a very patient person who waits for the right moment to drive Lutie to her trap. Mrs. Hedges pays the police to run her brothel house without getting into trouble with the authorities. Mrs Hedges knows exactly that Lutie needs money, and she also knows for sure that her business partner, Junto, the owner of the café and the apartment complex, would like to have Lutie.

Petry's way of narrating the story enables the readers to experience voyeurism and see through the sexual predators' perspective. The double consciousness of a black woman like Lutie is unavoidable since nobody, black or white, ever fails to see her as a sexual object rather than an individual because of her femaleness and her blackness. Hicks observes that Mrs Hedges and The Super look at Lutie in precisely the same way—as a sexual object (Hicks, 2003, p. 24) [2], since the Super intends to rape her, while Mrs Hedges waits for Lutie's downfall as the chance to sell Lutie's body to Junto, Mrs Hedges's business partner who owns the apartment complex where Lutie lives. What is interesting is that the absence of male gaze as a sexual object in Mrs Hedges' life becomes a humiliation for her as a woman because she does not fit in the standard of beauty of the mainstream since she has a vast body and horrible scar as the result of her survival from a burning apartment where she lives. The humiliation comes from the naturalization of the male sexual gaze toward black women since black women are so used to experiencing the male's sexual gaze that it seems natural for them to feel self-worthless when they do not get one. For Lutie, the male sexual gaze is oppression, while for Mrs. Hedges, it is liberty. Junto is the only man who can see Mrs Hedges differently from any other man. As a result, Mrs Hedges becomes very loyal to him because she feels she is valuable to him regardless of her bad physical appearance. Junto is the only male character who can see a woman beyond her physical appearance. He can see the strength in Mrs. Hedges's character because she escapes death. Therefore, the bond between Mrs Hedges and Junto is powerful.

Petry portrays male characters in this novel as stereotypes of sexual predators, The Super, Junto, and Boots. There is no complication for the readers to judge them as sexual predators only rather than trying to understand the reason for their actions or understand how they become the way they are. Their actions are simply based on the sexual interest of Lutie as being black and female. In contrast with the portrayal of the male characters, the female characters in this novel are richer in perspectives and more complicated in that, as readers, we try to understand their actions as the result of both class and sexual oppression from white society and black men. Even Lutie's action to give up on her son, Bub, because she does not see any other way to escape the oppression is reasonably tragic. Instead of staying and trying to get Bub back to live with her, she escapes the possibility of getting caught by the police for Boots's murder (Boots is the man who works for Junto and who promises Lutie to give the money to the lawyer to get Bub out of the reform school), and convincing herself that Bub will get a better life without her. The novel's end suggests that the world does not give black women any choices to escape oppression.

In contrast with Petry's Lutie in *The Street*, Ruth and Beneatha in Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* have more choices in the sense that they are not as sexually oppressed as Lutie, who has to be cautious all the time so that nobody rapes her. The time difference between the period when Lutie lived in the forties and when the Youngers lived in the fifties in Hansberry's play gives a very different tone and atmosphere. Hansberry's play demonstrates the changing behavior and attitude in women's life in the fifties, while Lutie is trapped alone in a world that she thinks will give her a chance to be independent and successful. Ruth's decision to abort her baby because of economic conditions without consulting her husband, Walter Lee, in his eyes, hurts his manhood, although Ruth exercises her freedom of choice. Walter feels that by doing that, Ruth does not respect him enough as the man of the house, while he struggles with his inferior feelings because of economic problems. Beneatha dreams of becoming a doctor and wants to go to a medical school, which everybody in the family supports. Although the Younger family is supportive of Beneatha's education, when she says that she does not want to get married, Lena Younger and Ruth are shocked. In the fifties, a woman claimed her right to stay single, which was very radical. Lena Younger and Ruth represent the more traditional values, including the value that a woman should marry and have children. These values lead to Lena Younger's and Ruth's favor of the rich George from the Nigerian Asagai. Once again, money becomes the symbol of the success of achieving the American Dream, as critic Lee A. Jacobus says about the play's social analysis, "This play illustrates the American dream as it is felt not just by African Americans but by all Americans: If you work hard and save your money, if you hold to the proper values and hope, then you can buy your own home and have the kind of space and privacy that permit people to live in dignity (Gordon, 2008, p. 124) [4]."

Dignity can be obtained with money. That is why Lena Younger and Ruth like George more than Asagai; with George, Lena Younger and Ruth think Beneatha will be happy. In one of the scenes, Lena Younger says, "Once upon a time, freedom used to be life—now it is money. I guess the world does change (Hansberry)." Furthermore, Walter Lee feels that

he does not have dignity because he works as a private driver who can only say, "Yes, Sir...No, Sir" to his white employer. He does not consider his job a decent one because he does not have enough pride in doing it. He always tells his son, Travis, that he wants to have the kind of life that his white employer has. He wants to be on the other side of the wall. Like Lutie in Petry's *The Street*, Walter Lee wants an unattainable life for someone like him. In Petry's *The Street*, Lutie does not want Bub to work polishing shoes because that is the kind of job that white people expect black people to do.

Similarly, Walter Lee wants to open his liquor store to be his boss and never takes orders from white people anymore. Speaking of material success and black people, Michelle Gordon says that "the only people in the world who are more snobbish than rich white people are rich colored people" —rather unkindly so that wealthy George Murchison's interactions with the Youngers dramatize cross-class tensions, gender conflicts, and relationships between race pride and impulses towards assimilation (Gordon, 2008, p 125) [4]."

Unlike Petry's Junto who is rich and white, Hansberry presents George Murchison who is rich and black. Ironically, being black and rich, George is willing to "sacrifice" his root as an African American and assimilate with the mainstream white culture, while Asagai who maintains his root as African stays modest and is not rich. This contrast seems to demonstrate Hansberry's dilemma that a black man has to have money to get his dignity, but as soon as he gets money, he loses his dignity because he has to assimilate with the mainstream culture.

Although Hansberry wants the play to be a criticism of the politics of race, gender, and class, critics dismiss this criticism by saying that the play is nothing more than a soap opera. Harold Cruse, in Gordon's article, criticizes her of "re-inscribing America's repressive class politics both in Chicago's ghetto and on stage." Further, Cruse "falsely charged that Hansberry and her family owned some 13 slum properties in the South Side, and deemed 'obsequious' and 'embarrassing' her 'mimicry of the critical standards of white Communists' and her play's 'assumption that she knew all about the Negro working class, of which she was not even remotely a member' (Gordon, 2008, p124) [4]." While Lutie, in Petry's *The Street*, tries to make a living by herself as a woman,

Walter Lee tries to make himself the man he wants him to be. Walter Lee's manhood hurts because he is not even the head of the household. Her mother, Lena Younger, has the authority as the head of the household. In addition, his wife makes her own decision to have an abortion, and his sister does not even listen to him. This power struggle can be seen in one of the scenes when Travis asks Ruth for 50 cents and Ruth turns him down by saying that she does not have it. Without listening to what Ruth says, Walter Lee gives Travis 50 cents and even gives him 50 cents more in front of Ruth to claim his authority.

WALTER: (*To RUTH only*) What you tell the boy things like that for? (*Reaching down into his pants with a rather important gesture*) Here, son—

(His hands the boy the coin, but his eyes are directed to his wife's. TRAVIS takes the money happily)

TRAVIS: Thanks, Daddy.

(He starts out. RUTH watches both of them with murder in her eyes. WALTER stands and stares back at her with defiance, and suddenly reaches into his pocket again on an afterthought)

WALTER: *(Without even looking at his son, still staring hard at his wife)* In fact, here's another fifty cents ...Buy yourself some fruit today—or take a taxicab to school or something!

(Hansberry 31) [7]

However, Walter Lee cannot afford to claim his authority because after Travis leaves, Walter Lee has to ask Ruth for money. He just cannot stand losing his dignity in front of his son, Travis. This conflict really emphasizes the racial, gender, and class problems that Hansberry wants to show through the play. Saying that they do not have any money to Travis is humiliating for Walter since he has to keep his dignity as the head of the family; he is too proud to tell his son that he does not have any money. The quotation above depicts that Walter challenges Ruth through Travis, implying to show her who the boss is; he wants his wife to know that she should respect him even though he feels prideless. It does not matter how hard life is for him; he does not want his son to know that. He feels that he has failed as a father and, most importantly, a man in the family:

WALTER: *(Not listening at all or even looking at her)* This morning, I was lookin' in the mirror and thinking about it...I'm thirty-five years old; I been married eleven years and I got a boy who sleeps in the living room—*(Very, very quietly)*—and all I got to give him is stories about how rich white people live...

(Hansberry 34) [7]

The quotation implies that he is helpless because he belongs to the inferior race, and he works for the superior race—white people, but he does not have any choice. He does not know what to tell his son or the next generation about the racial discrimination that he and his family experience living in the white people's world.

In his conflict with Lena, seeing Walter's frustration that is expressed by not coming to his workplace for days, Lena decides to trust him to keep the rest of the money, including the money for Beneatha's education, hoping that Walter is responsible enough to be the head of the family. Overwhelmed by the new power and authority that he gets from his mother, Walter puts all of the money into the business, which turns out to be a terrible decision because the person he trusts to arrange the opening of his liquor store betrays him

by running away with the money. Walter ruins his opportunity to prove that he is responsible enough to keep the trust he gains from his mother. Instead of proving that he is man enough to be the head of the family, Walter is incompetent in making decisions for the family, contributing to his inferiority.

He tries to make the situation better by calling back the man from the Clybourne Neighborhood Committee, who comes for the first time to offer him some money to keep his family from moving to the neighbourhood since the housing complex is a white people's neighbourhood. With this action, the readers are made to expect that Walter is finally willing to sell the house because he wants to return the money for Beneatha's education, which he lost. Besides the conflict between Walter and Lena, he encounters internal conflict: whether he has to sell the house for Beneatha's education or keep his family's dream of moving to the house they have been waiting for.

The last scene becomes the turning point in Walter's life from his feeling inferior to feeling superior since Lena gives him the second opportunity to become the man of the house. The transfer of power from Lena to Walter is significant because then he can have his identity as the head of the family and gain the family's trust, especially Lena, previously the household's dominant figure. Lena gives Walter the power of her husband, Walter's father, whom she maintains, although he has died for a long time. The financial factor contributes to his lack of power and authority. The fact that a grown and married man like Walter lives in his mother's house because he cannot afford to buy a house is why Walter develops his inferiority. Critic Diana Adesola Mafe, focusing on the gender issue, observes that:

By stressing female agency, self-definition, and the "right to choose," these plays posit constructive models of "universal" femininity. They also, however, signify important sites of black feminism in a larger socio-historic context of patriarchal civil rights and black nationalist movements, as well as exclusive white feminist movements. By striking these balances between the "universal" and the "particular", *Hansberry* ... ultimately targets a specific contingent but appeals to audiences across racial and gender lines—thus making history on Broadway and claiming a place in the literary trajectory of African-American women's drama. (Mafe, 31-32) [3]

Both endings in *The Street* and *A Raisin in the Sun* involve a new environment, although, in Lutie's case, she escapes from something unavoidable. In Walter's case, the ending of the story solves the problem of his inferior feeling in his family because he gains his family's trust to become the head of the family, replacing her mother, but not the inferior feeling he will encounter as soon as he moves to the new house in the white neighbourhood. The shift from the old house to the new house symbolizes the shift of Walter's problem: domestic to social.

The ending foreshadows the new challenge that his family is going to face. The transfer of power from Lena to Walter is also significant because Travis, as Walter's son, becomes the witness to his father's elegance in defending the dignity and the pride of the family when

Lena lets him decide what to do with the house and he decides to keep the house. In *The Street*, instead of uniting the family, Lutie is separated from her son, Bub, while in *A Raisin in the Sun*, the new house unites all the family members to face a more significant challenge—the white racial neighbourhood. However, both novels end with the hope of the characters' pursuit of happiness, the American Dream.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, the works of Ann Petry and Lorraine Hansberry serve as essential contributions to African American literature, shedding light on the experiences of black women in their pursuit of the American Dream. These works remind us of the ongoing need to address the intersecting oppressions of economic struggle, racism, and sexism and to strive for a society that provides equal opportunities and equality for all individuals. Through the stories of Lutie Johnson, Ruth, and Beneatha, we are inspired by the strength and determination of black women as they navigate a world that often denies them the opportunities and recognition they deserve. However, in the works of black authors, racism emerges as a significant challenge for the main characters, leading them to internalize feelings of inferiority due to the discriminatory treatment they face based on their skin color.

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