
African American Women's Empowerment in Literature

"We're people, we're just like the birds and the bees, We'd rather die on our feet, Than be livin' on our knees" ("James Brown Lyrics"). These lyrics for James Brown's classic soul hit "Say It Loud (I'm Black And I'm Proud)" could have easily been written after the viewing of Lorraine Hansberry's play "A Raisin in the Sun" or a reading of Alice Walker's "Everyday Use." Both literary works are about African-American families that are trying to stay together as the family members slowly begin to part from each other. The family in Alice Walker's "Everyday Use" is comprised of all females, and the backbone of the Younger family in "A Raisin in the Sun" is the female characters (Hansberry; Walker). The female characters in each literary work are attempting to define themselves as African-American women while also trying to define themselves through the issues of poverty and racism.

There are three major female characters in both Alice Walker's "Everyday Use" and Lorraine Hansberry's "A Raisin in the Sun." These women are very similar and easily comparable. In both stories, there is a mother and two daughters/daughters-in-law (Hansberry; Walker). In the short story written by Alice Walker, the mother is the storyteller; consequently, she is not known as anything but "Mama." The two daughters are Maggie, a shy girl who lives at home with her mother, and Dee or Wangero, who is returning from college to visit her family (357-63). The mother in Lorraine Hansberry's play "A Raisin in the Sun" is Lena Younger, who is also called "Mama" by her family members. Ruth is Lena's daughter-in-law, Walter Lee's wife. She is most closely comparable to Maggie, and Beneatha Younger to Wangero. Beneatha is Lena's biological daughter, and has set her sights on becoming a doctor (Hansberry 1198-1260).

The two mothers are the strength of their respective families. Both mothers identify African-American women as religious, and each is the religious backbone of her family. Lena Younger will not have God being disgraced within her home, which is evident when she "powerfully" slaps Beneatha across the face for saying that there "simply is no blasted God" (Hansberry 1212). Lena then makes Beneatha repeat, "In my mother's house there is still God" (1212). It is obvious that the mother in "Everyday Use" is also a religious woman. She hypothesizes that whenever Maggie marries John Thomas she will just sit and "sing church songs to [her]self" (Walker 359). Also, when she tells Wangero that she can not have the quilts, something hits her and she relates it as a feeling similar to when "the spirit of God touches" her and the spirit causes her to become captivated and begin to shout (363). The two mothers are also the final arbiters of good and bad. Neither of them is educated, but both decide what will happen in the household. Mama Younger is the head of the household until the very end of the play when Walter Lee starts to rightfully take over as the man of the house. She teaches Beneatha and the audience an important lesson when she implores, "There is always something left to love. And if

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you ain't learned that, you ain't learned nothing" (Hansberry 1257). Maggie and Wangero's mother shows that she also has the final say in her household when she seizes the quilt from Wangero's hands and drops it in Maggie's lap. The mothers personify the strength of the African-American woman.

One can easily tell that Beneatha Younger and Wangero Leewanika Kemanjo are very similar because each wants to be independent and is searching for her individual identity. Beneatha is a twenty-year-old girl who is currently enrolled in college and studying to become a doctor (1204-5). Wangero is also an educated young woman who has either graduated from or is currently attending Paine College in Augusta, Georgia (Walker 358). Both young ladies are also attractive girls who draw the attention of young men. When Wangero comes back to visit her mother and her sister, she comes with a possible male suitor in the Muslim man who has accompanied her (359-60). The narrator, her mother, also notes the "furtive boys in pink shirts" who were around on washday when Dee was in high school (359). Throughout "A Raisin in the Sun," Beneatha has two male suitors who come and go. Joseph Asagai, the young Nigerian, even asks Beneatha to marry him at the end of the play (Hansberry 1252-53). The difference in the two girls' relationships is that while Beneatha is more submissive to the men, Dee dominates her peers. While in high school, she actually did the courting instead of the male. While courting Jimmy T, she "turned all of her faultfinding power on him" and "he flew" (Walker 359). Both of the young women are strong-willed to an extent that it sometimes gets on others' nerves. Dee read to her sister and mother before she left for college, but as her mother says, "She... read ...without pity; forcing words, lies... upon us two" (358). Dee is attempting to impart some of the knowledge she is learning upon her family members, but she does it in a demeaning way that makes them feel like dimwits. Beneatha is determined to become a doctor, but she becomes very cynical whenever anyone in the family, especially Walter Lee, tries to discuss anything about her schooling (1205-6).

Beneatha and Wangero are each searching for individual identity in a culture that is different than that of their respective families. When Wangero steps out of the car in the midst of hot and muggy summer weather, she is wearing a brightly colored dress and bracelets that clank together when she lifts her arms (Walker 360). Beneatha also dresses in interesting and unique attire. Joseph Asagai gives Beneatha a Nigerian dress and headdress that he sent home for and got from his sister's personal wardrobe (Hansberry 1216-7). Beneatha is ecstatic. She even goes as far as cutting her hair short to make it more "natural" (1226). The rest of the family is in disbelief when they see what she has done. Wangero's hair is also unfamiliar to her family. Her hair is standing straight up, and she has two long pigtails that are wrapped into buns behind her ears (Walker 360). Dee then acknowledges her mother with a Muslim greeting, as does her male acquaintance. Then Dee gives news that is astonishing to her mother - she has changed her name. No longer is her name Dee but now Wangero Leewanika Kemanjo. She has changed her name because she cries that she "couldn't bear... being named after the people who

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oppress me" (360). However, Dee was a name that had been passed down through the family since before the Civil War. In actuality, Dee/Wangero just does not want anything to do with the tradition of her family. She wants her own unique tradition and only wants artifacts from what has become her prior family tradition. Beneatha changes her appearance and does not share her family's religious beliefs, but she still is trying to keep her heritage. For instance, she becomes angry when her other suitor, George Murchinson, talks badly about the Ashanti tribes and tells her that her heritage is "nothing but a bunch of raggedy-assed spirituals and some grass huts!" (Hansberry 1226) To get their own unique identity and independence, Wangero has become Muslim and Beneatha is becoming deeply immersed in southern Africa tradition and history (Walker 360; Hansberry 1224-6). This is their individual ways of becoming true AFRICAN-American women.

Maggie and Ruth are the outspoken girls of each family. Both Maggie and Ruth have had occurrences in their lives that have caused them to lose the beauty that they once had. The fire that consumed her family's previous home has scarred Maggie. She was burned on her arms and legs and now walks like a lame animal (Walker 357-8). Ruth was once a beautiful girl, "even exceptionally so." However, Ruth has been worn down by the woes of her life and "disappointment has already begun to hang in her face" (Hansberry 1199). One thing that Maggie strives for is to please her family. After first being upset at Wangero's wanting of the quilts that were promised to her, Maggie comes into the bedroom where the other family members are and offers to give up the quilts to Wangero (Walker 362). Ruth is similar in that she tries to appease everyone. She wants Beneatha to be able to go to college and become a doctor. She wants the house that Lena also wants, and she also tries to talk her mother-in-law into considering Walter Lee's liquor store investment (Hansberry 1208-9). These two try to define themselves by making everyone around them happy.

The females in both families have to fight and strive to identify themselves amidst the social problems of their times, including poverty and racism. Neither of the families is so poor that they have to fight daily just to stay off of the streets and to put food on the table. However, both families are lower class African-American families. What Maggie and her mother consider home is a three-room house with a tin roof that sits in the middle of a pasture. Instead of real windows, the house has holes cut in the side of the house that are not any certain shape or size (Walker 359). The five member Younger family lives in a three-room apartment on the South Side of Chicago that is appropriately described as a "rat trap" (Hansberry 1209). The family's living room was once "arranged with taste and pride," but now, "weariness has, in fact, won in this room" (1199). The room and its furniture have had to "accommodate... too many people for too many years" (1199). This is one of the reasons that Lena Younger's dream is a house, on which she puts a down payment with the insurance money from her husband's death (1231-2).

Racism is also a concern for both families, indirectly for Maggie and her mother and directly for

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the Younger family. Maggie's mother tells the reader about the Muslims who live down the road from her home. She reports that the Muslims stayed up all night with rifles after some white people poisoned the Muslims' cattle. She shows her admiration and/or disbelief for this act as she walks a mile and a half just to view the sight of these African-Americans taking a stand against the racist violence (Walker 361). Racist violence is a future threat to the Younger family because they are moving into an all white neighborhood. Also, in the newspaper there have been several reports lately of bombings aimed towards black families who have decided to occupy the wrong areas (Hansberry 1200, 1235-6). Racism is most prominent in the community that is represented by Mr. Karl Lindner, the representative of the Clybourne Park Improvement Association. This association comprised of the current white homeowners in the Clybourne Park. Members of this association sent Mr. Lindner to offer to buy the house from the Younger family because they do not want to have blacks in their community (1242-4). However, like the Muslims in "Everyday Use," the Younger family will not be denied and decide to move in anyways.

Both "Everyday Use" by Alice Walker and Lorraine Hansberry's "A Raisin in the Sun" are literary works of families who are striving to identify, classify, and define themselves as African-Americans. Each family attempts to characterize itself through the social issues present in their surroundings, a struggle most visible through the female characters of each story. In both Hansberry's play and Walker's short story, women are the ones who keep their families from - as James Brown said - "livin' on their knees."

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