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The Role of Gender in Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*: Societal Influences on Character Development

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Abstract

Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* is a deep examination of the intersection of race, gender, and class in 1950s America. This paper examines how social gender norms, compounded by the economic and racial oppression of the period, influence the identities and relationships of the Younger family. Set in a period of rigid gender expectations, Hansberry challenges the limiting roles assigned to both men and women, especially within the African American community. The play depicts Mama as an emblem of parental fortitude and stability, while Ruth embodies the quiet resilience of working-class Black women who contend with the dual demands of economic survival and domestic obligations. Beneatha contests conventional femininity by dismissing the idea that a woman's value is dependent upon marriage, instead pursuing intellectual and personal independence. Walter Lee exemplifies the challenges of adhering to patriarchal standards of manhood against systematic racism, attempting to establish his role as the family's provider while confronting perpetual frustration and despair. Hansberry critiques racial and gender inequalities through these characters, offering a multifaceted depiction of societal limitations. Nevertheless, the play presents a picture of hope and transformation as each character strives with and, in some instances, overcomes the constraints dictated by their circumstances. This paper argues that *A Raisin in the Sun* is a timeless critique of the fluidity of gender roles and the fortitude of people who confront repressive societal standards.

Keywords: Gender Identity, Racial Oppression, Black Masculinity, Women of Color, Family Resilience, Societal Critique

1. Introduction

Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* is a masterpiece in American theater, addressing the intersecting themes of race, class, and gender in the mid-20th century. Written and first performed in the 1950s, the play captures a pivotal period in American history during which African Americans grappled with systemic racial inequalities while contending with social gender role expectations. Set within this era of economic and cultural upheaval, Hansberry's depiction of the Younger family shows the adversities encountered by African Americans in a society that limited their chances and enforced restrictive gender norms.

This paper examines how the societal norms of the 1950s shaped the gender roles and identities of the Younger family members. The focus is on how Mama, Ruth, Beneatha, and Walter Lee navigate conventional gender roles within intersecting contexts of racial oppression and economic adversity. Mama represents an intersection of conventional gender roles and subtle revolution, acting as the family's moral compass. Ruth embodies the dual burden faced by Black women, managing both household and economic obligations. Beneatha rejects the domestic ideals imposed upon women, instead pursuing intellectual

autonomy and independence. Simultaneously, Walter Lee's confrontation with patriarchal norms reveals the psychological impact of systemic racism and economic marginalization on Black masculinity.

This paper seeks to reveal Hansberry's criticism of patriarchal and racist systems, illustrating how these structures intersect to influence individual and community experiences. This paper argues that Hansberry confronts repressive social conventions while advocating for a rethink of gender roles based on agency, solidarity, and development through the exploration of characters' hardships and resilience. This paper is significant for its analysis of *A Raisin in the Sun* as a timeless reflection on gender, racism, and class, providing insight into the continuous fight for equality and justice.

2. Social Context and Gender Norms

The 1950s in the United States, when this text was written, were marked by a resurgence of conventional gender roles, significantly shaped by the sociopolitical and economic circumstances after World War II. This era had a strict division of work, with men as breadwinners and women as homemakers, an inequality that was both socially acknowledged and institutionally upheld through media, legislation, and economic practices. In the Post-World War II, when troops returned, social norms "Women would surrender their wartime work and pay to return servicemen. Many women gave up careers altogether for the life of a wife, mother, and full-time homemaker" (Fox, 2013, p.32). During the war, women assumed professions typically held by males, including industrial employment and positions in engineering, transportation, and other sectors vital to the war effort. These positions gave women financial autonomy and enabled them to exhibit their proficiency and fortitude, which were traditionally considered inappropriate for their gender. Following the conclusion of the war, the government, employers, and society together advocated for a return to pre-war gender norms, urging women to resign their roles and forfeit their newfound liberty. These societal expectations were grounded in a wider cultural movement aimed at reestablishing stability after the chaos of war, although they had considerable ramifications for personal liberty and societal advancement.

However, this change has implications. For several women, the transition from autonomy to domesticity resulted in irritation and a feeling of deprivation. Many women had derived fulfillment from generating their own money and making significant contributions to society during the war, only to be informed that their value was now exclusively defined by their positions as wives and mothers. This dissatisfaction often lurked under the surface, unarticulated but profoundly experienced, and emerged as a fundamental element in the feminist movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, released in 1963, articulated this widespread discontent, labeling it "the problem that has no name" (p.15). Friedian argued that Women were discouraged from seeking education, employment, or personal goals, confining them to a repetitive cycle of domestic duties and childcare that did not fulfill their inner desires. Friedan's analysis emphasized how the societal celebration of domesticity and conventional femininity diminished women's intellectual and creative capabilities. She saw this phenomenon as a systemic problem rather than an individual shortcoming, advocating for expanded possibilities and cultural transformation to enable women to pursue significant, self-determined lives outside the limitations of house and family. This criticism catalyzed the feminist movement, initiating a reassessment of gender roles and social expectations (Horowitz, 1996, p.215).

For some women, especially women of color and those from working-class backgrounds, the cultural expectation to withdraw into the house was a luxury beyond their means. Economic necessity often compelled people to stay in outside employment, typically in inadequately compensated and underappreciated roles. These women had the dual challenge of balancing household duties with employment discrimination, underscoring the racial and social inequalities inherent in the idealized concept of femininity from the 1950s. The civil rights movement in the 1950s and 60s, shaped by occurrences like the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the murder of Emmett Till, and the extensive legacy of discriminatory practices in America, was profoundly connected to the experiences of women of color, who often encountered distinct and multiple obstacles (Richards, 2022). Although some women were urged to withdraw into the home domain throughout the 1950s, this luxury was inaccessible to many women of color and those from working-class backgrounds. For these women, economic necessity required their ongoing participation in the labor, sometimes in inadequately compensated and devalued roles.

In Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*, Ruth Younger represents the challenges several women of color faced in the 1950s, contending with occupational discrimination and household obligations. Like other African American women of her day, Ruth worries about how to support the family's income while simultaneously fulfilling the responsibilities of parenting and household management responsibilities. For women such as Ruth, the cultural expectation to withdraw into domesticity was a luxury inaccessible to those whose economic existence relied on their employment. Their lived experiences revealed the connection between racial and gender oppression as they navigated these multiple positions in a society that marginalized both their labor and their identities. This unpleasant reality sharply contrasted with the romanticized conception of femininity lauded in white, middle-class America. Ruth's silent perseverance embodies the fortitude of several women of color, whose quests for dignity and equality paralleled the larger efforts of the civil rights movement.

These lived experiences revealed the intersection of racial and gender oppression as they endured the dual weight of employment discrimination and household obligations. This brutal reality sharply contrasted with the romanticized conception of femininity prevalent among white, middle-class Americans at that period. These discrepancies also motivated their involvement in the civil rights struggle, as women of color assumed important, if mostly unrecognized, roles in promoting systemic change. Their efforts, both domestically and outside, were an essential component of the movement's foundation, as they confronted not just racial disparities but also the established gender and social injustices of the day.

Also, for men of color, especially black men, the 1950s in America were characterized by strict gender norms that designated men as providers and guardians of their families. These positions were intricately connected to traditional notions of masculinity, highlighting economic autonomy, dominance, and the capacity to provide a secure household. Systemic racism has imposed considerable obstacles for Black males in achieving conventional masculine roles, highlighting the connection of race and gender in influencing their experiences. Discriminatory practices in job, housing, and education significantly restricted Black men's possibilities for financial security and social recognition, compelling many to navigate a complicated environment of inequity while attempting to fulfill cultural and family expectations.

The most visible and immediate obstacle for Black males in the 1950s was prevalent job discrimination. Despite the economic boom of World War II providing opportunities for several white Americans, Black men were mostly marginalized from these advantages. Although there was impressive gain during this era, "Black men still do not earn as much as white men" (United States Commission on Civil Rights, 1986, p.1). Segregated labor markets and discriminatory hiring practices confined them to low-wage, menial positions with few opportunities for promotion. Occupations providing economic security and social prestige were often unattainable for Black males, who faced discrimination from unions and professional groups that regulated access to higher-paying employment.

According to Marwell (2009), during the 1950s, Black males were mostly employed in low-wage industries, including agriculture, forestry, and fishing, which provided little economic mobility and financial stability (p.13). Approximately 27% of employed Black males were engaged in these sectors, characterized by both poor remuneration and significant wage differences between Black and White employees. On the other hand, White workers in these areas received much higher pay, highlighting the continuous wage disparity across sectors. This segregation was not accidental but a symptom of profoundly rooted racial obstacles in the labor market, which restricted Black males to roles with restricted opportunities for promotion and fair compensation. The industrial sector, although providing better compensation, continued to systemically exclude Black men from higher-paying specialized roles. In the manufacture of nondurable items, Black men earned around 65-78% of the wages of their White colleagues (p.13). This discrepancy was further intensified by biased hiring practices and restricted access to educational and training options that may have facilitated upward mobility within these sectors.

Educational inequalities significantly influenced labor market results for Black males throughout this era. Despite considerable progress in narrowing the educational disparity, Black males continue to encounter institutional barriers to obtaining a decent education (United States Commission on Civil Rights, 1986, p.3). Educational institutions catering to Black populations were inadequately financed, and the courses sometimes lacked the rigor to equip students for skilled trades or professional vocations. These constraints sustained a cycle of low-wage work since employers often used school attainment as a substitute for talent and production. Moreover, Black males were often excluded from on-the-job training programs that may have facilitated their advancement into higher-paying positions. The absence of investment in the professional advancement of Black workers perpetuated their subordination to the lowest tiers of the labor market.

The economic marginalization experienced by several black men during this period had serious effects on their capacity to perform the breadwinner role. In Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*, Walter Lee Younger symbolizes these challenges. As a chauffeur, Walter holds an economically restrictive role and is emblematic of his inferior standing in a racially hierarchical society. His position necessitates serving affluent, primarily white employers, highlighting his lack of autonomy and emphasizing the structural obstacles that hinder Black males from attaining economic independence and upward mobility. Walter's dissatisfaction with his job stems from inadequate compensation and the mental strain of being confined to a position devoid of prospects for progression or personal fulfillment. The restricted possibilities accessible to him symbolize the extensive systemic disadvantages that relegated several Black men to service-oriented, low-wage roles. These occupations, sometimes labeled as "dead-end jobs" (Brown, 1982, p.427), were intended to maintain Black men in states of economic dependency, obstructing their access to professions that may provide stability, dignity, and social acknowledgment.

Walter's desire to invest in a liquor shop symbolizes his quest for an escape from the circle of economic marginalization. This aspiration encompasses not just monetary benefits but also the restoration of autonomy and self-esteem. Walter saw the liquor shop as a conduit to autonomy, a method to support his family according to his own standards, and a means to affirm his identity as a competent and respected individual. His fervent desire to realize this aspiration compels him to undertake risks, including placing faith in unsuitable individuals with the family's finances, so increasing his sense of failure. His despair and desperation show how structural hurdles to economic success not only constrained Black men's financial potential but also eroded their sense of manhood. In a culture that associates masculinity with the capacity to provide and lead, Walter's difficulties in meeting these expectations leave him feeling emasculated and powerless. His conflict with other family members, especially with Mama, arises from these perceived inadequacies. This relationship with his family members highlights the emotional consequences of economic marginalization, as Walter's failure to assume the breadwinner position engenders sentiments of bitterness, inadequacy, and familial strife.

3. Situating the Characters within the Broader Societal Context of the 1950s

3.1. Beneatha Younger: Defying Traditional Gender Roles

Beneatha Younger exemplifies resistance to conventional gender norms in mid-20th-century America. Her first introduction, as described on the stage, is essential for understanding her personality, influenced by personal aspirations and social

limitations. Hansberry depicts Beneatha as an individual whose identity defies classification, making her an important figure in the play's examination of gender and cultural norms. Beneatha is described as:

> About twenty, as slim and intense as her brother. She is not as pretty as her sister-in-law, but her lean, almost intellectual face has a handsomeness all of its own. Her speech is a mixture of many things; it is different from the rest of the family's insofar as education has permeated her sense of English—and perhaps the Midwest rather than the South has finally won out in her inflection; but not altogether, because over all of it is a soft slurring and transformed use of vowels which is the decided influence of the Southside. (Hansberry, 1959, p.17)

Beneatha's physical appearance is shown in a manner that promotes her uniqueness rather than conformity to traditional beauty standards. In contrast to her sister-in-law Ruth, who embodies conventional femininity, Beneatha is characterized as "not as pretty" while having a distinct "handsomeness." This divergence shows Beneatha's rejection of traditional feminine norms that sometimes reduced women to their physical appearance. Hansberry intentionally endows her with an "intellectual face," a decision that connects her character with attributes such as intelligence and ambition. This physical categorization emphasizes her preference for self-definition and intellectual endeavors above society's demands to adhere to a constrained ideal of beauty. Also, the way she speaks further differentiates her from the remainder of the Younger family and explains her connection to education. Hansberry notes that her speech is "different" because of "education having permeated her sense of English," indicating Beneatha's intellectual development and her attempts to broaden her identity beyond her local surroundings. This language difference represents her ambitions and her conviction in education as a means of self-liberation. In contrast to other women in the play and in the 1950s, whose roles focus on domesticity, Beneatha perceives herself as capable of pursuing a job and attaining autonomy, so rejecting the traditional norms that confined women, especially African American women, to the roles of homemakers or caretakers.

Beneatha's speech reflects an intersection of cultural factors, reflecting her role as an individual bridging the boundaries of tradition and modernity. Hansberry reveals that the way she speaks embodies the Midwest's impact while retaining elements of Southside's language. This paradox reflects Beneatha's unique identity; she has roots in her cultural background but is also willing to evolve and transcend it. Her speech's blending exemplifies her capacity to connect different worlds, signifying her rejection of the strict boundaries of her identity. Her engagement with academic endeavors and cultural study, particularly her fascination with African identity and customs through her association with her Nigerian suitor, Asagai, further establishes her as a progressive individual confronting societal convention. Beneatha's character intensity significantly contributes to her challenge of conventional gender norms. Hansberry characterizes her as "intense," a trait that points to her fervor and resolve. Beneatha's steadfast determination to become a doctor distinguishes her as a pioneer in a society that often associates ambition and drive with males. This passion distinguishes her from the other ladies in the play and directly confronts the gendered standards of her day. Beneatha's aspirations transcend personal achievement; they signify a comprehensive rejection of societal conventions that aimed to restrict women to subordinate or passive positions.

Hansberry depicts Beneatha as an emblem of resistance and development through these facets of her character. Her uniqueness, intelligence, and cultural adeptness distinguish her as an individual resistant to conventional definitions of gender or race. Beneatha's depiction embodies Hansberry's overarching criticism of societal standards, portraying her as a symbol of growth and transformation inside a world constrained by limiting systems. Beneatha emerges as a powerful symbol of rebellion in *A Raisin in the Sun*, exemplifying the potential to transcend traditional limits in pursuing a broader identity and purpose. Her character symbolizes Hansberry's progressive worldview, indicating that Black women may create independent pathways free from social limitations.

3.2. Walter Lee Younger: The Burden of Patriarchal Expectations

Walter Lee Younger in Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* symbolizes the challenges faced by a Black man burdened by institutional racism and patriarchal demands, a theme that connects his family obligation with his own pursuit of fulfillment. Walter's description as "a lean, intense young man...always in his voice there is a quality of indictment" (p.5) reflects his restless and unsatisfied existence in *A Raisin in the Sun*. This depiction clearly relates to examining gender roles and social limitations on character development, especially as they connect with race and class. The expression "a quality of indictment" reflects Walter's animosity against both the structural racism that constrains his chances and the societal standards imposed upon him as a man. Walter is acutely aware of his failure to embody the conventional male roles of provider and protector, which are socially created and profoundly entrenched in mid-20th-century America. His lean and intense physique reflects his emotional condition: he is strained by external limitations and internalized standards of masculinity.

His challenges can be used to analyze how social factors form and often distort male identity within the Black family when this text was written. Walter's complaints exemplify the extensive constraints placed on Black males by a racist culture that obstructs their economic and social advancement, rendering the patriarchal obligation of being the "man of the house" practically unattainable. His role as a chauffeur, indicative of subjugation, further undermines his sense of autonomy, compelling him to navigate a community that demeans his masculinity at every chance. This description also relates to the relationship dynamics inside the Younger home. Walter's fervor and tone of "indictment" often manifest as friction and discord, especially with his sister, Beneatha, and his wife, Ruth. He retaliates against them, not alone due to their conduct, but because they contest or seem apathetic about his ambitions of restoring his dignity through financial achievement. This contradiction indicates Hansberry's indictment of patriarchal norms. His cruelty and erratic behaviors, shown by his readiness to put his business dreams above family welfare, starkly contrast with the portrayal of his father as a self-sacrificing patriarch. This

internal tension is apparent when Mama chastises Walter for not challenging Ruth's consideration of abortion, labeling him "a disgrace to [his] father's memory" (p.63).

Despite his flaws, Walter's ultimate rejection of Lindner's bribe signifies a turning in his character development. By prioritizing dignity and family pride above financial compensation, Walter rejects the simplistic conception of masculinity only linked to economic achievement. This choice symbolizes a comprehensive social critique: Hansberry questions the detrimental aspects of patriarchal expectations, especially when they converge with the limitations imposed on Black males by racism and economic disparities. Walter's development exemplifies the flexibility of gender roles when analyzed from the perspective of solidarity and collective responsibility. By refusing the bribe, Walter adopts a conception of masculinity centered on safeguarding his family's legacy and affirming their position in a world structured to exclude them. This action supports the fact that masculinity does not have to depend on control or personal success but may instead derive power from shared identity and resilience. Walter's transformation speaks to the capacity for human development and the alteration of conventional gender norms among restrictive structures, presenting an optimistic account of resistance and transformation.

3.3. Gendered Strength and Sacrifice in A Raisin in the Sun: Mama and Ruth as Pillars of Resilience

Exploring the issue of gender in this text without making reference to these two characters will be incomplete. These two women navigate through the intersecting challenges of race, class, and gender, showing their strength and sacrifices as the foundation of the Younger family. The matriarchal power of Mama and Ruth's silent persistence highlight the influence of cultural conventions on their positions, while also revealing their autonomy within those limitations. I examine the constraints of conventional gender norms through their characterization, but also applauding the transforming potential of women's labor and emotional resilience.

Mama, the matriarch of the Younger family, is shown as a symbol of calm power and elegance, exemplifying the perseverance of women who have surmounted significant hardships. Mama is characterized as "full-bodied and strong," with "a face full of strength," which reflects her function as a stabilizing influence within the family (p.22). Her comparison to the women of the Herero tribe of Southwest Africa, who bore responsibilities with magnificent dignity, symbolically places Mama among a lineage of women who have carried the weight of survival with grace. Her capacity to adapt to and surmount life's challenges demonstrates her strong commitment to traditional values and her steadfast dedication to her family's welfare. However, Mama's strength is not only derived from her commitment to tradition. Her choice to use her deceased husband's insurance funds to purchase a home shows her foresight for the family's future, balancing the maintenance of their dignity with their desire for upward mobility. Mama's character symbolizes a subtle defiance against society norms, using her position as matriarch to secure her family's survival and progress.

In contrast, Ruth Younger epitomizes the challenges faced by working-class Black women who balance family duties with economic survival. Ruth's function as a wife and mother largely adheres to conventional gender norms; yet one can see the mental and physical burdens associated with these responsibilities. Ruth's consideration of abortion, a highly criminalized practice in the 1950s (Stormer, 2010, p.337), exemplifies her autonomy and her urgent desire to break free from the cycle of poverty. This moment of vulnerability reveals the stark reality encountered by women like as Ruth, who often confront insurmountable choices under systematic oppression. Despite everything going on with her, Ruth's fortitude is evident in her commitment to the family's shared goal of homeownership. Her early reservations yield to resolute resolve as she assists Walter and Mama in realizing their collective aspiration for a better future. Ruth's character represents the sacrifices of women who bear the dual burdens of physical household labor and the emotional responsibilities of nurturing their family. Her subtle resilience enhances Mama's more explicit matriarchal dominance, exemplifying the many methods by which women confront and adjust to cultural norms.

Mama and Ruth represent two generations of women who effectively negotiate the cultural conventions of their day with notable fortitude. Mama's unwavering commitment to tradition and Ruth's practical flexibility depict distinct approaches to navigating the limitations imposed by race, gender, and class. These characters are used to condemn the constraints imposed on women while honoring their essential role in uniting families and communities.

4. Conclusion

Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* offers a significant examination of the intersecting structures of race, class, and gender that influenced mid-20th-century American society. Hansberry examines conventional gender standards in the portrayals of Mama, Ruth, Beneatha, and Walter Lee, showing their challenges and resilience within the African American experience. Mama's moral authority and tenacity symbolize the subtle strength of conventional mother roles, while Ruth points to the sometimes disregarded sacrifices of working-class Black women balancing economic and household responsibilities. Beneatha's audacious rejection of the conventional norms defines her as an emblem of resistance and change, presenting a perspective on gender roles anchored in independence and self-governance. Conversely, Walter Lee's endeavor to meet patriarchal standards of masculinity highlights the psychological and emotional burden of systemic racism; however, his ultimate refusal of Lindner's proposal indicates a redefined conception of manhood rooted in family unity and dignity.

The play's ending offers optimism, showing the strength of collective resilience in the face of oppression. Although solidly grounded in their historical context, Hansberry's characters symbolize struggles that continue to resonate in our contemporary society. The Younger family's experience critiques social constraints and advocates for a vision of a more egalitarian and

inclusive society, free from restrictive standards that limit identities. *A Raisin in the Sun* connects issues of race, gender, and class, serving as a timeless story that compels us to confront injustice while honoring human agency and unity.

This paper reveals Hansberry's lasting importance as a playwright and social critic, whose work continues to inspire discussions on equality, fairness, and the redefining of conventional roles. Hansberry's depiction of the Younger family illustrates the potential for change, collective advancement, and the significance of asserting one's individuality and dignity in a society that often attempts to undermine both.

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