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Ethnicity and the Literary Imagination: Hansberry and Sofola as Female Exponents of Democracy

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Introduction

The artistic impulse is a product of social, spiritual and intellectual forces, which are utilized at the creative moment to design a new structure of imagination—a poem, novel or drama text as the case may be. For the literary writer, the society constitutes the greatest influence to the creative process because it produces the subject of literature and shapes the experience of the writer. And since every artist has a challenge to be socially relevant, the writer is committed to identify, project and protect or defend the integrity of the human person.

This challenge is most applicable to writers with a colonial history since colonialism permits persistent suppression of human dignity, economic exploitation, and the destruction of indigenous cultures. Frantz Fanon validates this argument in *The Wretched of the earth* where he posits that:

... colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its

grip and emptying the native's brain of all forms and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures and destroys it (170).

But apart from the natural tendency in “colonial racism” to suppress and destroy other cultures, Aristide Zolberg has divulged that it operates with the assumption that some ethnic groups have innate capacities to perform better than others; and as such, the progressive groups deserve a superior status (69)

This is how the myth of ethnic superiority came to define, restrict, and determine boundaries of existence in all spheres of human endeavour between Africa and people of African descent, on one hand, and Europe and America, on the other. Ethnicity in this context refers to the interaction between different social units in the society. According to Okwudibia Nnoli's insightful study on *Ethnic Politics in Nigeria*, ethnicity can shape and constrain human behaviour, especially when a particular social group “demands sovereign status.” This implies that state apparatus is sued “on behalf of an ethnic group to the exclusion of others or the incorporation of an ethnic group into a political society” (6).

For the African people who were forcefully uprooted from their ancestral heritage and planted in the New World, the Emancipation Proclamation did not make them constituent members of the social order in America. Rather, racism was institutionalized by the dominant Anglo-Saxon white, and so, an “outsider” status was conferred on African-Americans. Since then, ethnic sentiments are utilized to set boundaries of existence between African-Americans and other people of colour and the ruling Anglo-Saxons in the United States.

This supports Nnoli's observation that “Relations between ethnic groups within the same political system produce ethnicity” (6). The boundary of ethnic relations in America, Jamaica Kincaid says “is the phrase ‘I'm not black’ ... The colour of skin is the national religion of America” (73). Toni Morrison traces this insistence on ethnic classification to the fact that America is “a nation of people who decided that their world view would combine agendas for individual freedom and mechanism for devastating racial oppression... Emphasis xiii). Therefore, the

appropriation of sovereign status by groups and institutions that practise colonial racism has imposed an inferior status on continental Africans and African in Diaspora, African-Americans in this instance.

But then, their common experience of colonialist oppression also means a commitment to the dignity of human life in Africa and America, especially now that democratic governance is popularized in international politics. And because the literary artist has a socially designed role, Lorraine Hansberry and Zulu Sofola have used their dramatic works to contribute to the current debate on ethnicity, citizenship and democracy in the United States and Nigeria respectively. This paper examines Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* and Sofola's "The Showers" as literary creations, which react to ethnic politics and advocate human rights (particularly for women) in a democratic dispensation.

Ethnicity and the Literary Imagination in Hasenberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*

Lorraine Vivian Hansberry (1930–1965) is the first major African-America woman playwright of repute. Her play, *A Raisin ...* is the first drama by a black to appear on Broadway -- the status symbol of power, fame and class in America's entertainment industry. With ethnicity and citizenship as central concepts, *A Raisin ...* brings to the American stage the first realistic assessment of African-American life and the dignity, which goes with the search for social advancement. The point Hansberry has made is that the four centuries of Africanist presence in America cannot be ignored by the dominant culture. This is why *A Raisin ...* brings under scrutiny the European exploitation of the people of Africa and the rebellion, which followed that encounter.

Prior to *A Raisin ...*, plays on African-Americans were mostly written by whites and they promoted "literary whiteness". This is because "until very recently, and regardless of the race of the author, the readers of virtually all of American fiction have been positioned as white" (Morrison: xii). The challenge this poses to the African-American writer is the need to dymythify stereotypes of blackness. This process of dymythification forms the basis of Hansberry's Vision in *A Raisin ...* where she uses the struggles of four generations of the younger family to confront the conscience of America.

The historical injustice and violence directed at the black minority in the United States, according to James Washington, reveal the gross "violation of sacred beliefs in democracy, injustice, freedom and peace" in the United States (xxi). Democracy as Sam Oyovbaire defines it is "a developmental process which is simultaneously participatory for individual citizens, sensitive to, and protective of individual rights, freedom and liberties; accommodative of multiple and competitive loyalties" (Uya: 3-4).

Since the Anglo-American culture adopts a racist ideology in its relations with other ethnic groups, it tends to sacrifice democratic ideals such as equality for all, security and justice on the altar of materialism. *A Raisin ...* explores the search for these democratic ideas in the family of Walter Younger Snr. (Big Walter) and his wife, Lena (Mama). They are among the thousands of blacks who migrated from the farmlands in the South in search of a "city of refuge" in the North after World War I. These migrants battled for survival in the cities under excruciating poverty. Poverty here is "more than deprivation, it is a state of constant want and acute misery whose ignominy consists in its dehumanizing force" (Arendt: 60).

Yet democracy cannot thrive where there is poverty. Okon Uya affirms this position in the following comment:

The point cannot be overstressed that democracy cannot take firm roots and flourish in an environment of hunger, poor health, inadequate and misdirected education, poor and inadequate shelter, social injustice and physical insecurity ... (7–8).

Even though Uya is examining a Third World democracy, there is no doubt that the experience of the Youngers puts them in a Third World situation. The six members of this family are cramped into a two-room apartment in Chicago South Side, where Big Walter "finally worked himself to death like ... he was fighting his own war with this here world" (51).

The Youngers' battle for survival recalls the massive betrayal of the promises given to the African-American people at independence, a point that necessitates H. L. Mencken's indictment of American democracy as "a scandal and a farce" (Miller: 5). This is because it is a "ridiculous impossibility" to assume that the egalitarian creed in the American

constitution applies to all the ethnic groups in the United States. The tension in the Younger family is initiated by a superstructure, which resents economic and political domination by maintaining monopoly over the means of production.

The Youngers, a microcosm of the African-American people live in unfulfilled dreams—unfulfilled because of poverty. Poverty as Arendt further explains “is abject because it puts [people] . . . under the absolute dictate of necessity” (60). It is poverty that makes Walter Lee Younger to work as a chauffeur even when he detests it. It is poverty that makes his relationship with his wife (Ruth) and son (Travis) unstable. It is poverty that informs Walter Lee’s desperation at the thought of a new baby. It is also poverty, which sends Mama and Ruth to the homes of white women as mere domestics. In a pluralistic society like the United States, true democracy demands “massive redistribution of wealth and resources” and it was in defense of this that Martin Luther King Jr., the Civil Rights leader was assassinated.

The aggression directed at male authority figures in the African-American community violates their basic human rights as American citizens. This is why most adult black men are outside the labour force while their families are abandoned for women. Mama assumes headship of the Younger family after the demise of her husband as head of the family; she provides a link between the past and the present so it is her responsibility to uphold the dignity, which the six generations of her people worked. This ethnic consciousness propels her to buy a house in Clybourne Part, a white residential area, for her family. By this action, Mama is exercising her fundamental human right, suggesting that as an American citizen, she has a right to live above social structures.

The movement to Clybourne Part is an act of rebellion and an affirmation of democratic rights. But Mama’s dream of social mobility comes in direct confrontation with the injustice in America because it is “racially articulated and predicted world”. Nevertheless, the fact that the African-American people survived the traumas of slavery and the realities of contemporary life portray their resilience and faith in American democracy. This explains why Mama clings to her lifeless looking plant, which combines the symbolism of frustration and aspiration, and eventually

moves to the suburban apartment with it.

▼ Ethnic and the Literary Imagination in the Sofola’s “The Showers”

Just like Hansberry, Onuekwuke Nwazuluoha Sofola is the first major woman playwright in modern Nigerian Drama and the first woman professor of theatre in Africa. Zulu Sofola has established herself as the matriarch of Nigerian theatre by bringing a distinct female voice into the performing arts. Her creative vision as Mary Modupe Kolawole illustrates functions from the perspective of “a cultural apostle and defender of tradition” (29). In an interview with Adela James, Sofola corroborates this position when she confesses, “most of my writing questions the “ism” that have been superimposed on African people” (143).

In Africa, ethnicity dates back to the colonial era when the “unconditional condemnation of African culture was attended by the unconditional affirmation of the colonizer’s world-view” (Nnoli: 2). In that scenario, vital aspects of Africa’s values were abandoned by the new elites. Sofola’s creative vision reflects a strong commitment to defending African traditional values from negative western influences, but this also goes with a critique of negative aspects of tradition.

Thus, ethnicity in Sofola’s aesthetics implies a defence of African tradition from negative impacts of acculturation. This vision has become more relevant with the enthronement of democracy in Africa because sovereignty means the right to self-determinism. But, democracy goes with social, economic and political responsibilities, which places a demand on the government to provide for the basic needs of the citizenry. In “The Showers”, Sofola probes the tangled web between citizenship and democracy because she is concerned with Nigeria’s predicament as a developing nation.

With the Shasha Hospital as a microcosm of contemporary Nigeria, she exposes the moral bankruptcy, the professional ineptitude and nonchalance, the materialistic ethic, the inhuman decrees of our leaders and the poor state of social amenities, which are aspects of the national psyche. Using Mrs. Adebekun and Mrs. Oteri, the playwright portrays the neglect of women by their husbands during child birth as well as reflects how “fathers literarily hawk their daughters for the highest bidder” in marriage transactions. Yet, the playwright locates these negative attitudes

within a large framework, such that "The Showers" is not just an expose on female exploitation but a protest meant to sensitize the public on the need to avert an impending national crisis.

The readiness of the health personnel at the Shasha Hospital to attend to emergencies castigates to health institution, especially when the Ambulance Driver must be "located" and sister Odigie cannot inform the doctor on duty of an emergency despite advance notice. And above all, "the new hospital regulations forbid an emergency blood transfusion for any patient whose people do not have the needed replacement for what the patient borrows from the Blood Bank" (8). The lackadaisical approach of the health officers to their work and the inhuman decrees from the establishment poses one simple question: are the health workers meant to protect or destroy human life? In other words, what does a people do when their live wire becomes a death-hole though with vestiges of past glory?

In directing her creative lens on the health sector, Sofola indicts Nigerian "militicians or blundering politicians" (to use Uya's apt description) for their refusal to provide basic infrastructures for the Nigerian people. This loss of public relevance by the health institution reflects the gross violation of citizenship rights of Nigerians by successive governments. Consequently, Sofola uses her craft to unravel the intensity of social irresponsibility of the elites, a situation that is sustained by ignorance on the part of the masses. This agrees with her definition of art in *The Artist and the Tragedy of a Nation* as the "medium through which the soul of man reaches out beyond itself to transform and make intelligible the prodding within the inner recesses for the ultimate Truth, the meaning of existence, man's place in the cosmos ..." (2).

Democracy and the Female Imagination in *A Raisin in the Sun* and "The Showers"

Democracy promotes human rights as it is engraved in the United Nations Charter on Human Rights. This document affirms "the dignity and worth of the human person, as well as .. the equal rights of men and women of all nations" (Langley 6). But whether in Africa or the United States, women's rights have been violated by the institutionalization of patriarchy. Rights as Harold Laski defines "are those conditions of social

life without which no man can seek, in general, to be himself at his best" (my emphasis, 91). The assumption here is that women have no personal rights because they are defined in relation to men.

This is because the society has assigned spheres of operation to both genders: the female is positioned in domestic space while the male wield power in public space. But in a democratic dispensation, the woman writer has a responsibility to re-define woman and to protect her rights as an heiress of democracy. For the African-American woman, she is condemned both by sexism and racism to a life of social exploitation. This is recaptured in the conflict between Mama and her son, Walter Lee in *A Raisin* ... American Culture is patriarchal; and since blackness excludes Walter Lee from the male power, politics in America, he directs his frustration to the women in his life – Mama, Ruth, and Beneatha. Manhood in America is associated with financial power and this is the one thing Walter Lee lacks.

But, it is the awareness of equality for all as a democratic ideal, which informs Beneatha's dream of economic independence and power in *A Raisin* ... Her aspiration to become a medical doctor is perceived as being beyond her gender and class, but the "promissory note" given to blacks at Emancipation justifies her ambition. And so, though her dream confronts the social conception of sexual difference, Beneatha shares the temperament of Ruth Rosin's "daughters of the fifties" who "learned dissent from others ... with a fresh critique of conformity and materialism" (334).

The insistence on independent action or personal choice is a basic tenet of democracy. It makes Beneatha a revolutionary figure, a character she cultivates from her mother. Mama is a force to reckon with in *A Raisin* ... because she displays leadership skills in managing the conflicting interests in her family. She comes to power at the demise of her husband and at the appropriate time, she relinquishes power to Walter Lee by choice. That in itself is a democratic action because the smooth transition prepares her family for participating in American democracy; but most importantly, it explodes one of the biggest myths about the African-American family – that it is always headed by women.

"The Showers" is primarily a female story and in it Sofola shows her commitment "as a writer, as a woman and as a Third World person"

(Ogundipe-Leslie: 10). This is because she uses the hazards women go through in the process of childbirth to establish that Nigeria will be engaging in self-destruction if it continues to perpetrate the exploitation of her female population. Democracy protects human rights so neglecting women tantamount to destroying humanity because they nurture life. Sofola makes this categorically clear in the Director Note to the premiere of "The Showers", where she states "As no bird can fly effectively, if at all with one wing, so also it is that a nation cannot grow and develop effectively with one wing".

It is this awareness, which necessitates Obinna's confrontation of her father's sale of his daughters for huge profits in marriage transactions. Obinna understands the demands that tradition places on her father as well as the fact that the government has promulgated a law against bride wealth, which some parents utilize to exploit their prospective sons-in-law. What redeems her from the fate of her three sisters is the knowledge of what tradition stipulates, the imagination to apply this to her situation and the will to confront her father's materialistic ethic. These attributes—knowledge, imagination, and will have been identified by F. Burlatsky as aspects of consciousness and they are fundamental to the sustenance of democracy.

In Sofola's aesthetics, positive assertion for women must be within tradition because "the African is rooted in a philosophy of holistic harmony and communalism rather than in the individualistic isolationism characteristic of European thought" ("Feminism..." 54). This explains why Feminique Internationale, the pressure group which fights for the restoration of women's right in "The Showers" is gender inclusive. The issue Sofola is raising here is that unlike the Europeans, the "African perception of gender question is healthy, positive, and allows for a wholesome development of the human society" (53). This is why she laments the de-womanisation of African women by feminism when in actual fact they come from a tradition, which acknowledges and respects female authority figures. Thus, the centralization of female experience and the affirmation of women's rights in "The Showers" are issues, which make Sofola a female exponent in democracy.

Conclusion

Lorraine Hansberry and Zulu Sofola are two prominent playwrights of African heritage. Despite their different social backgrounds, their Africanness forms the catalyst of their literary imagination. African creative literature has a vital link with African-American literature because blacks in Africa and America share a common ancestry. This is shown in their reaction to ethnicity, citizenship, and democracy in Africa (Nigeria) and the United States. Just like Sofola, Hansberry's search for advancement for the black people in the United States retains patterns of African life. The black grandmother, the role played by Mama in *A Raisin ...* Mildred Hill-Lubin says is "the most tenacious survival of the African extended family" (258). Therefore, since the black people in America have cultural affinity with continental Africans, closer co-operation between them will not just shape international opinion on ethnicity and citizenship within a democratic dispensation, it could determine new boundaries for ethnic relations which will make pluralism and multiculturalism more acceptable in global politics.

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