THE LMPOWERMENT OF THE CIVIL SOCIETY In a democracy:

NIGERIA AND THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

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THE STRUGGLE FOR INCLUSION IN THE SCHEME OF THINGS: FEMI OSOFISAN'S MORUNTODUN, JAMES BALDWIN'S BLUES FOR MISTER CHARLIE AND LORRAINE HANSBERRY'S A RAISIN IN THE SUN

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The scheme of things in many societies effectively excludes women, peasants and minorities in all ramifications. The reality is that men, the rich and majority ethnic and religious groups dominate affairs in such set-ups. In Nigeria, as in the United States, marginalised groups have continued to be very vocal and assertive in their demand for not only equity and fairness, but for full and final inclusion in mainstream affairs in their countries. This relentless struggle for social empowerment is mirrored in Femi Osofisan's Morountodun, James Baldwin's Blues for Mister Charlie and Lorraine Hansberry's A Raisin in the Sun.

In Morountodun, a play modelled after the mythical Moremi, Queen of Ile-Ife and her singular, courageous efforts which brought deliverance to her Yoruba people from incessant Igbo onslaughts, Osofisan projects another brave woman, Titubi (Morountodun), in a contemporary event which marks a turning point in the struggle by ordinary people (peasants) to empower themselves to try to alter the status quo dominated by local oppressors and exploiters. The event which came to be known as the Agbekoya uprising in the western part of Nigeria involved peasant farmers confronting the state apparatus which was propped up by local bourgeoisie oppressors. In both the mythical and contemporary stories, a brave woman risks her life and aristocratic status to try to save her people from impeding disaster. In Morountodun, moreover, the peasant farmers make a strong point for a more just and humane society which de-emphasises class. However, the establishment is vehemently opposed to this and is shocked at the level of team spirit exhibited by the peasants.

Blues for Mister Charlie is a play about the black experience in the United States. Like Morountodun which is based on a historical incident, Baldwin's play is a celebration of the Emmett Till case. Emmett Till was an African American youth who was murdered in coldblood in Mississippi in 1955. There was a subsequent trial and miscarriage of justice in the pro-white legal framework which provoked black anger and demonstrations calling for justice, equity and an end to racism in the United States. The Emmett Till case actually heightened the activities of the Civil Rights Movement.

Blues for Mister Charlie "deals with the sexual variable, which is perhaps the most hushed-up and yet the most explosive factor involved in racism in the United States" (Calvin C. Hernton in Kinnamon, ed. 1974: 109). In the play, "Richard, the son of the Negro Minister returns to his home town after several years up North, rebels at the attitude of the white. Southerners, concerning Negroes and particularly at the flagrant denial of justice when his mother was "accidentally" killed some years past. Offensive in his relationship with white people, Richard is killed. In the subsequent trial of the known murderer various voices for race problems are presented, but the liberal white is defeated, the killer exonerated, justice denied" (Walter Meserve in Bigsby, ed. 1969: 173). Meserve observes further that

The scene is Plaguetown, U.S.A. Richard is murdered by the white store-owner, Lyle Britten. Meridian and a group of Negro students practice reviling each other as the Whites do the Blacks, so they can hate more easily, they have been demonstrating against Richard's murder. Parnell enters to tell them that Lyle will be arrested. In his house Lyle plays with his infant son, complains that the Negroes have boycotted his store, and hears from Parnell that he will be arrested. Parnell tries to suggest the Negro problem, but Lyle has the stereotyped Southern attitude and refuses to take anything seriously. In the Blacktown church the Negroes talk about Richard who then appears in a flashback as he talks to his father and mother Henry just after returning from New York. He is belligerent, full of hatred for the white who killed his mother, and he has a gun. Juanita appears; the scene shifts to Papa D's joint where the group of Negroes dance and sing as Richard brags of his white sexual conquests in New York. Lyle comes in, meets Richard. The scene shifts to the church where Peter and Juanita talk of Richard. Then Mother Henry enters to tell of two white men who have been seen under a Negro's porch fooling around with the gas pipes. A flashback again as Richard and his father talk of Juanita. Back at the church the young people are still worned about prowlers as Parnell and Meridian argue about Christianity and practical living in this town. There is going to be a struggle and Mr. Charlie (all white men) had better change. Both Meridian and Parnell know that Lyle killed Richard, but that in the courtroom he will lie. Meridian wants Parnell to get the truth, to ask Lyle to say he did it, but Parnell balks: "I don't know if I can do it for you." And the act ends as Meridian wishes that he had died for Richard (184-185).

Thus, through this medium Baldwin highlights the prevailing attitudes of whites on blacks. In spite of their status as majorities, Southern whites still manifest fear, envy and hatred in addition to widespread condescension for African-Americans. Richard's experience in the hands of the white extremist, Lyle Britten, further widens the gulf of animosities between the two races in question - black and white. The immediate compelling reason for producing this play was the subsequent murder of Baldwin's close friend and member of the Civil Rights Movement, Medgar Evers.

Lorraine Hansberry's A Raisin in the Sun, like Baldwin's Blues for Mister Charlie, is about black life in the predominantly white United States. An imaginary black family in the sprawling city of Chicago is vividly reflected in its attempt to contend with an essentially strange environment where opportunities tend to elude them regularly due to their skin colour and race. In the play, the Younger family which is headed by a black matriarch, Lena or Mama, benefits from an insurance policy undertaken by the late family breadwinner, Walter Younger, Sr. (Big Walter).

Hansberry recounts the impact on the Younger family when it receives an insurance policy check (cheque) for \$10,000 (Ten thousand dollars) after the death of the father, and what happens to the son Walter (Jr.), when he tries to use it in a business scheme - the buying of a liquor store - that he insists will free him from the limitations of his job as chauffeur and make the family rich. The tension in the play centers in the differing views of Walter and his mother on the liberation of one black family from poverty and the cramped diminution of spirit bred by racial discrimination and the limited opportunities of life in the ghetto (Clinton Oliver and Stephanie Sills, eds. 1971: 31).

The remarkable point about this play is not that the insurance money was received, but that through it, the matriarch - Lena Younger is able to purchase a new house which she hopes to turn into a befitting home in a predominantly white section of the city. Persistent pressure - by way of representation on the Younger family by residents of the Clybourne Park - where the Youngers buy their new house, is manifested in a bizarre and questionable manner that reveals its racial import. Simply put, whites are not ready to accommodate blacks on an equal basis in any social endeavour. However, the black family not only purchases the house in the select

Chicago suburb, but actually defies white racist resentments and takes physical possession of the property by living in it to the chagrin of whites.

Whereas it is women and peasants that arrest our attention in *Morountodum* as they try to wrest recognition from the authorities through voicing their frustrations and resentments which emanate from their incessant exploitation and oppression by the state apparatus and the rich, in *A Raisin in the Sun* and *Blues for Mister Charlie* racial minorities who are mainly peasants wage a determined war to ensure inclusion in American mainstream affairs - hitherto dominated by whites and put an end to racial injustices which characterise relationships between blacks and whites. In the three plays also, the marginalised groups initially seek to resolve their grievances through official channels, but they resort to intrigues, subterfuges and violence upon discovering that such official lines work against or are closed to them.

In Osofisan's play, the Agbekoya peasant farmers initiate guerilla warfare and fight to try to address social imbalances. Peasants they may be, but their superb organisation, determination and level of success against their common enemy - government apparatus-shocks the whole society into recognising their existence and grievances. Titubi who hails from the aristocratic class eventually takes sides with the peasant farmers in their campaign for recognition, equity and fairness when she becomes fully aware of the devastating impact of exploitation and oppression on the farmers. Titubi tells her mother, Alhaja Kabirat, initially:

The peasant revolt, Mama! You talk about it everyday with your friends. I see all of you tremble. The peasants are upon us. They will eat everything up, all your wealth, the entire meaning of your life, unless someone acts.

They're coming, Mama, and the only way left is to infiltrate their ranks quickly, discover their real leader, and the source of their ammunition. I volunteered (more excited). You see, Mama, they are coming to this prison this week. The police have got advance information that the peasants plan to raid this place to release their captured colleagues. So it's perfectly

simple. The police will let them come, and free the prisoners, including me. And then I go with them to their camp... (Femi Osofisan, 1982: 20).

However, upon her capture of Marshal (the "real leader" of the peasant farmers), Titubi betrays her aristocratic class by effectively taking sides with the peasants against them. She therefore informs her mother:

.... I am not the same as I went away. A lot has happened. And I have a long story to tell you. ... I lived among the farmers, just as you sent me. And this is what happened...

That was when I began to ask questions. Questions. I saw myself growing up, knowing no such sufferings as these. With always so much to eat, even servants feed their dogs..... Yet here, farmers cannot eat their own products, for they need the money from the market. They tend the yams but dare not taste. They raise chickens, but must be content with wind in their stomach. And then, when they return weary from the market, the tax man is waiting with his bill.... It could not be just..... In our house, Mama, we wake to the chorus of jingling coins. And when we sleep, coiled springs, soft foam and felt receive our bodies gently. But I have lived in the forest among simple folk, sharing their pain and anguish.... and I chose.... For without knowing it, the shame of my past had come flooding into my eyes (60 - 66).

Finally, in company of the peasants' leader, Marshal, she overpowers the police superintendent and he becomes her hostage. Thus, she emerged as the real leader, having tasted both sides of life in the society. She even distances herself from the mythical Moremi - previously her hereoine:

I knew I had to kill the ghost of Moremi in my belly. I am not Moremi! Moremi served the state, was the

state, was the spirit of the ruling class. But it is not true that the state is always right....

Mama, our life itself is not important. Nor all these glittering tinsels we use to decorate it.... Ask your friend Salami (the Superintendent). He knows the truth now. In another week, he'll be asking to negotiate. He won't be in such a hurry to order the massacre of children.... for there's no way you can win a war against a people whose cause is just. As long as the law remains... The priviledge of a handful of powerful men (70).

This essentially Marxist message is voiced in the backdrop of the prevailing capitalist pillage and plunder of the Nigerian peasants who are always at the receiving end of the worst forms of social injustices and deprivations. It sounds revolutionary and appears meaningful to ordinary citizens, but is mainly a reflection of the writer's literary orientation.

Baldwin's Blues for Mister Charlie, like Osofisan's Morountodun, recalls and fictionalizes a historical incident which is primarily about the condescending attitudes of whites on blacks in the Southern United States and the resulting friction and bitterness which ensues. White racial discrimination of blacks is not the only - or indeed, the main issue - but that such attitude encourages these whites to commit havoc and atroctiles which, in turn, are not checked. The legal machinery is furthermore employed by them to oppress blacks and other racial minorities. Thus, simply because Richard, the son of a Negro Christian Minister, goes north, learns to mix freely with both whites and blacks and returns home to Plaguetown (which, as Baldwin observes, has two sections - Blacktown and Whitetown) and continues to mix freely with the two racial groups in the fiercely discriminating little southern town, the anger of the white residents of the town is aroused and, spurred by extremists in this group, he is shot to death. The murderer, Lyle Britten, does not hide his horrendous crime as he goes about bragging and thumping his chest. However, Britten is acquitted and discharged when the matter is decided in court and this shocks the black community which becomes further bitter and maligned.

The play opens with Britten on stage boasting and cursing shortly after shooting Richard. He says: "And may every nigger end like this nigger face down in the weeds!" (James Baldwin 1964: 2). It is clear from this incident that the murder has already taken place and that the rest of the action is a flash back of events leading to the gory crime. The flashback mechanism is employed by the author to reveal the animosities between whites and blacks in Plaguetown which represents such attitudes in the whole south. Since African - Americans are in the minority and since they are excluded from mainstream American society as evidenced in the Plaguetown arrangement - where the two contending races live far apart the dominant white establishment works effectively against them. The trial resulting from Richard's murder is a total mockery of justice as it reverses known, acceptable and standard legal practices in a modern civil society. A scene from the court proceedings reveals this apparent travesty of justice. A witness to Lyle Britten's atrocities in Plaguetown, Papa D. (Mr. Joel Davis) who also runs a jukejoint in the town, attests to the incident:

Mr. Lyle! Richard! And I never saw that boy again. Lyle killed him. He killed him. I know it, just like I know I'm sitting in this chair. Just like he shot Old bill and wasn't nothing never, never done about it! (90).

Furthermore, as noted earlier, Britten does not hide the fact that he killed Richard since he boasts openly about it. Upon his acquittal after the so-called trial, he tells Richard's father, Meridian Henry:

Wasn't much sense in trying me now, this time, was there, Reverend? These people have been knowing me and my good Jo (his wife) here all our lives, they ain't going to doubt us. And you people - you people - ought to have better sense and more things to do than running around stirring up all this hate and trouble. That's how your son got himself killed. He listened to crazy niggers like you! (116).

When Meridian asks Britten if he killed Richard, he replies indifferently:

They just asked me that in court, didn't they? And they

just decided I didn't they? Well, that's good enough for me and all those white people and so it damn sure better be good enough for you! (117).

As Lyle Britten is wrongly acquitted and discharged in respect of Richard's murder, the African - American community in Plaguetown is thrown into chaos and deep distress. The beginning of the play is its end. It is not surprising therefore that we have a flashback of the actual murder of Richard by Britten after the court proceedings. This flashback which concludes the play also introduces it, for it is the final part that introduces the events as we encounter Britten expressing deep satisfaction with his action and bragging about it. Indeed, as the play ends, Britten does not show any remorse for his heinous crime. He instead asserts:

I had to kill him then. I'm a white man! Can't nobody talk that way to me! I had to go and get my pick-up truck and load him in it - I had to carry him on my back and carry him out to the high weeds, and I dumped him in the weeds, face down. And then I come on home, to my good Jo here.

And I ain't sorry. I want you to know that I ain't sorry! (120).

In Blues For Mister Charlie therefore, even though the white man wins and the American South is further segregated along racial lines, it is amply evident that evil has been rewarded through the miscarriage of justice. We therefore observe mounting tension, apprehension and mistrust as the pregnant clouds fire warning signals of a massive and blood confrontation between members of the two races with the prospects for a beginning, but no end in sight.

Whereas Baldwin's play heightens tension and gloom among blacks and whites in southern U.S.A., Hansberry's A Raisin in the Sun considerably reduces such at its conclusion. Unlike Morountodun and Blues for Mister Charlie, A Raisin in the Sun is a comedy. There is amusement and laughter. A poor black family in a Chicago suburb earnestly seeks to have a decent and humane apartment. Through an insurance policy transacted by the

family's late head, it receives a cheque with which it purchases the house. The apartment's location in an all - white neighbourhood becomes the source of friction since whites in the location are racially inclined and do not desire to admit blacks into their midst.

However, the black family defies all opposition and overtures from white residents of the area and finally settles in the locality to the utter dissatisfaction of those whites. Thus, the African - American family ascends the social ladder in spite of the odds against it. Juxtaposed with the attempt to climb the social ladder is the effort by members of the black family to attain economic emancipation. Walter Younger, Jr. who is the son to the late family bread-winner, seeks to buy a liquor store so as to make sufficient money to free his household from poverty. When his mother gives him the opportunity, however, he wastes it as he is duped by his 'friend', Willy Harris. The key point in the play is the ability of the humble black family to purchase an apartment in an all - white neighbourhood, defy white opposition to the inclusion of blacks in their locality and actually move physically to settle in it.

As the play opens, we are confronted with the stark poverty of a black family in an urban American slum where residents in an entire block of apartments share conveniences such as bathroom and toilet and where the drawing room (parlour) and kitchen - where such exist are converted to sleeping rooms at night and reverted in the day time. Such crammed dwellings foster bitterness, frustration and incessant nagging:

The Younger living room would be a comfortable and well-ordered room, if it were not for a number of indestructible contradictions to this state of being. Its furnishings are typical and undistinguished and their primary feature now is that they have clearly had to accommodate the living of too many people for too many years - and they are tired....

Weariness has, in fact, won in this room. Everything has been polished, washed, sat on, used, scrubbed too often.....

Ruth is Walter Lee Younger, Jr's wife and, her wake-up call to her son, Travis and husband summarizes her anger and frustration with her surroundings. As she is woken up by an alarm clock, she issues commands and instructions that reveal her yawning gap:

Come on now, boy, it's seven-thirty!
I say hurry up, Travis! You ain't the only person in the world got to use a bathroom!
WALTER LEE - its after seven-thirty! Lemme see you do some waking up in there now!

You better get up from there, man! It's after seventhirty, I tell you.

All right, you just go ahead and lay there and next thing you know Travis be finished and Mr. Johnson 'll be in there and you'll be fussing and cussing round here like a mad man! And be late, too -!

WALTER LEE - it's time for you to get up! (Lorraine Hansberry in Oliver and Sills, ed. 1971: 35).

This Chicago Southside apartment is, from all indications, grossly deficient in modern living requirements and therefore inadequate for a large, ambitious family. The Younger family discussion becomes relaxed, happy and hopeful with the purchase of the new apartment in the white neighbourhood. Indeed, the family head and buyer, Mrs. Lena Younger (Mama), is seen planning feverishly what to do when she moves with her "flock" to her new apartment. The rest of the family is not left out of this "mad" rush to relocate. Ruth initiates this temper as she says: "Well for God's sake - if the moving men are here - LET'S GET THE HELL OUT OF HERE!" Mama (Mrs. Lena Younger) buttresses Ruth's exuberance by adding:

Ain't it the truth. Look at all this here mess. Ruth, put Travis' good jacket on him - Walter Lee, fix your tie and tuck your shirt in - you look just like somebody's hoodlum. Lord, have mercy, where is my plant? Y'all start on down - Travis, child, don't go empty-handed - Ruth, where did I put that box with my skillets in it? I want to be in charge of it myself - I'm going to make us the biggest dinner we ever ate tonight - Beneatha, what's the matter with them stockings? Pull them things up, girl - (119).

As the Younger family relocates to a newer and better apartment in a select location, it becomes very obvious that an ancient dream in their family is being fulfilled. Also, by their ability to resist white, racist overtures, they pave the way for other aspiring African - American families to climb the social ladder as well as fight racism.

A common feature among the three plays under analysis is the existence of a grievance arising from actions and in actions by a dominant group which also dictates the pace of events and orders the establishment. The dominant group which is also perceived as the oppressor and exploiter varies slightly in the three plays. In Morountodun, it is the government and the rich which victimise farmers and peasants who actually constitute the bulk of the population. In Blues for Mister Charlie and A Raising in the Sun, whites in the United States oppress blacks by excluding them from mainstream social, political and economic life. They seek to keep African-Americans perpetually out of the 'American Dream'. Blacks on their part do everything possible to resist and reverse this trend. Hence, often, confrontation and bloodshed regularly occur resulting in high casualties. The peasant farmers in Osofisan's play amply equate with the peasant African-Americans we meet in Baldwin's and Hansberry's plays. Both groups are thoroughly exploited, oppressed and abandoned. These oppressors equally employ state apparatus to subjugate their victims with devastating consequences. However, as discernible from the three plays, the oppressed peoples fight back with the few resources at their disposal and record meaningful achievements as we see in Morountodun and A Raisin in the Sun or, they forge ahead with hope by marching on gallantly in the face of temporary setbacks as evidenced in Blues for Mister Charlie.

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