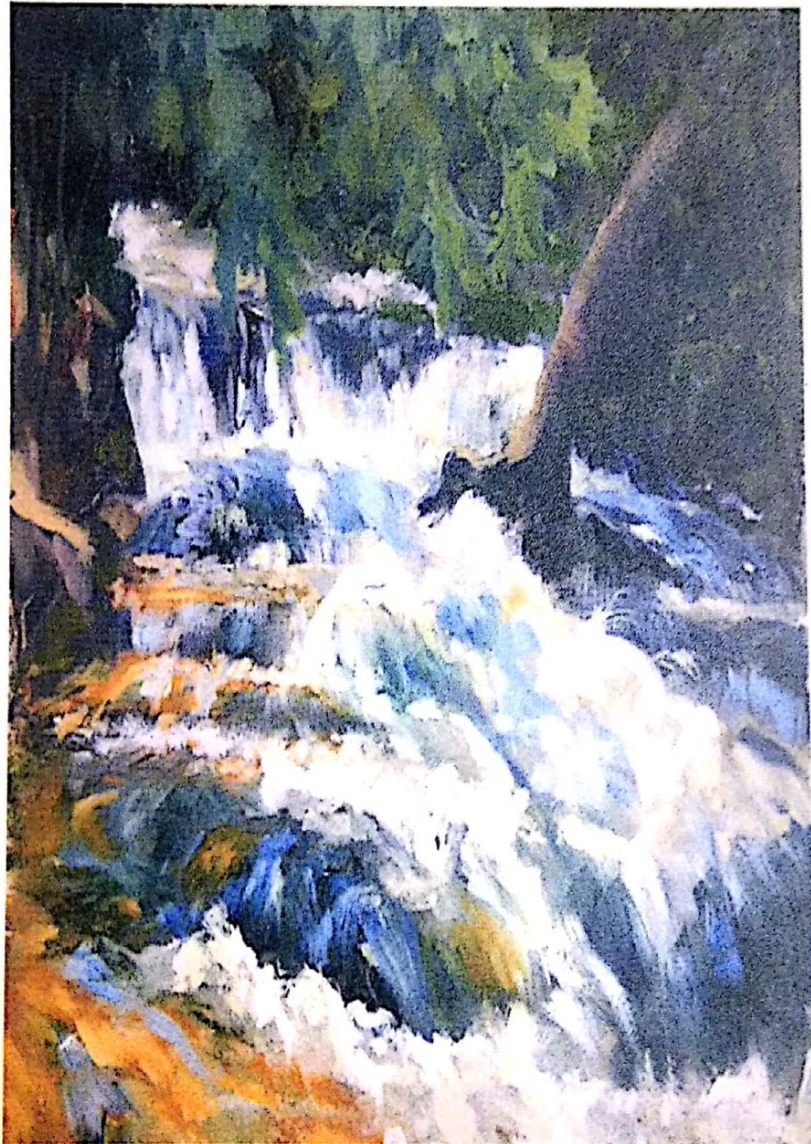


ECHOING CASCADES

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THE ALL-PERVASIVE CHARACTER OF MAMA IN LORRAINE HANSBERRY'S *RAISIN IN THE SUN*

B. GAYATHRI

"A mother is like a kernel, crushed by problems but strong enough to overcome them."

-Nigerian Proverb.

A Raisin in the Sun is a groundbreaking work by Lorraine Hansberry, an Afro – American writer whose themes are mainly concerned with family, relationship, dreams, economical hardship, post colonial racial prejudices and discrimination. This paper gives an overview of the character of Mama who evolves from an ordinary mother to "Mama" and her embodiment to achieve her vision. The play is set after the World War II, in the old slums of Chicago. The family with five members has been squeezed to share a small house which is built for three members. All the characters in the play suffer with racial discrimination and cultural clash with the white Americans and Black Americans. They feel restricted to the roles they are supposed to play as human beings. They don't like the social conditions that forbid them to feel free. They feel shocked when they are being captivated by the social and cultural issues.

Above all, Lorraine Hansberry mainly focuses on family and relationship. Here we come across only a few characters which are highly intellectual. The character of Mama is one among them. No one can disapprove that mother is the best support to everyone in the world from the womb to the tomb. The part played by her is immense and incomparable. In the play, Lena Younger who is known as Mama is the central character around whom the play revolves. Being a single parent, Mama has undergone several agonies. As a mother she takes care of everyone. At the same time she wants all her children to be benefitted by her love and care.

Mama pervades over the play totally. She is a hard working, middle aged black woman who is the head of the Younger household. She is the mother of two children – Walter Lee and Beneatha and grandmother of a boy who is the son of Walter Lee and Ruth. Mama has dedicated her life to her children and she struggles to instill her values in them – with mixed results. Her poverty and determination suggest her in rising up her family out of their poor community. She can do anything wholeheartedly for the welfare of the family. All over the play she struggles to connect with her children who have their own opinion of the world and its treatment to them. She's extremely worried about Walter, her elder son's obsession with money and is totally disapproving of Beneatha, her second daughter's lack of faith in God. Mama even goes so far as to slap Beneatha in the face when the girl says that God doesn't exist.

Mama struggles a lot to bring her children up. She has her own dreams and visions about her children. In such a social condition, after the World War II, everyone is in a pathetic situation. Through the character of Mama, Hansberry wants to create a guiding force and an inspirational thought to the women who struggle for their family and to support them in an emerging way. The family is in need of a severe financial support. Among them, Mama and Ruth are working in a nearby household. Walter is employed as a driver for the Whites. The small amount they receive as their income is not enough to make ends meet. The part played by women is highly impressive and applaudable. They work hard to uplift the family economically. Mama decides to buy a house for the family in a white neighbourhood with the insurance money of her husband, coming through the mail. She envisions a grand and dignified future for her grandson and when the money arrives, she says,

"I want him (Travis) to be the first one to hear...- you know that money we got in the mail this morning? ...Well – what you think your grand mama gone and done with that money? She went out and she bought you a house. You glad about the house? It's going to be yours when you get to be a man." (90-91)

She also plans that the rest of the amount can be spent for the higher education of Beneatha and capital for Walter's liquor business though she detests the idea. She is unconditional and dedicated to her family.

Mama seems to be accustomed to hardships and sufferings, the world cannot disturb her inner peace. Mama's old-fashioned and conservative views are expressed vividly when she speaks of her husband's past "womanizing" and chauvinistic behavior as being something that she could overlook. Mama actually believes that accepting such behavior is a woman's lot in life. She would never accept such behavior in a man. Mama's single weakness seems to be her all-consuming love for her grandson, Travis, which results her to spoil him and keeps her also to act in a somewhat meddlesome manner with her daughter-in-law. Mama impresses us with her strength and power, but this strength seems to have been sublimated at the time of her marriage.

The characteristics of Mama – nurturing, care, concern, unconditional love, her dreams, hopes and her ambition – set her apart and make her special. She doesn't worry about the new world, changing after the war, religion, poverty, her memories and reminiscences. She is determined to bring the family up as the family is in the Southern part of Chicago which is known for its poor economical condition.

Mama treats Ruth, her daughter-in-law and Travis and her grandson with much love and affection. Her relationship with Walter is different from that of Beneatha. She is very close with her daughter, but at the same time she puts her in her place when she misbehaves. She wants to have control over her thoughts and ideology about God and the society in which she lives. She proves delicate in dealing with Beneatha's love affairs. When Beneatha tells Ruth,

"Mama is not always right."

"I see. I also see that everybody thinks it's all right for Mama to be a tyrant. But all the tyranny in the world will never put a God in the heavens" (52).

When she brings the Nigerian intellectual Joseph Asagai to her house and says that she has switched over from Murchinson to Asagai, Mama does not raise any objection to it, which shows her polite reticent nature. When it comes for Walter her relationship is like abuser-abused. She is enraged when he loses the amount she has given to him for his business. Her relationship with Ruth is like teacher-student. She always tries to teach her daughter-in-law. She takes care of her health as she goes ill often. Being the older member of the family, Mama tries to manifest the preoccupations of all the members of the family.

We can understand that a woman values her own actions with her family members at any cost, even if it is deviated against the will of her children. Mama and Ruth are the worst sufferers in the play. Mama is deeply agonized because of her children. There are significant imageries that suggest or contribute the dream or vision of a widow through the character of Mama. Control, dominance, maturity and morality that are deeply rooted in the past and the principles of Christianity, guide her life and the life of her family. Poverty suggests that a woman, who is in her own generation, is to limit her perception and understanding of the coming generation. The new hope has been rising which makes the relationship she has, for her family members. As her name suggests, Lena's entire family "leans on" her and draws from her strength in order to replenish their own. The character of Mama is elevated through the characterization of Hansberry. She is unique in her part and she stands apart among the stereotypes of female characters of Afro-American plays.

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