The first black playwright, and the youngest of any colour, to win the New York Drama Critics Circle Award for *A Raisin in the Sun* which opened on Broadway in 1959, Lorraine Hansberry prophetically embodies a broad, humane, harmonizing African-American spirit in her plays so as to engulf the whole American nation in a historic movement for social change. Her effort in the theatre has acted as a catalyst for the emergence of a new movement in the Black theatre. This can in a way be known from the wide popularity enjoyed by a play like *A Raisin in the Sun* which has been translated into over thirty languages on all continents. Lorraine Hansberry clearly bears the mark of a mature artist, endowed as she is with a vision of human endeavour and with a capacity to leave an indelible mark on her time by means of her dramatic themes and theatrical style which reflect the core of the African-American sensibility. The breadth of outlook of Hansberry adds a special grace to her writing, contributing thereby
to an evocation of the indestructability of the black spirit, no matter to what monstrous subversions it has been subjected in the Old and New World locales.

Accepting realism as her mode of dramatic unfolding on the ground that the realist playwright states not only what is, but what can and should be, Lorraine Hansberry expresses in her plays both her American identity and her black female identity as one who grew up in a comfortable home on the Southside of Chicago. There is perhaps no exaggeration in the statement, when we examine the entire canon of Lorraine Hansberry's writings, that she is the voice not merely of black identity but of the dynamic culture and the tortured politics of the United States of America as a whole, as a play like The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window with its challenging of the apathy of the American intellectual and his indifference to the serious problems overtaking the world would reveal. In fact, Lorraine Hansberry shows by example, how the obligation to limit one's creative energies to the treatment of the immediate but parochial injustices of racial intolerance has
indeed sapped the creative vitality of the black writer. In thus achieving an objectivity and a perspective which free her from entanglement in a one-sided particularity, Lorraine Hansberry is no more separate and apart from America than one can think of Cyprian Ekwensi apart from the Nigeria which is embodied, symbolized and illuminated in his writing. In this, Lorraine Hansberry is not an exotic ethnic of the Eurocentric imagination whose vision is essentially harmonizing and integrating.

To the black theatre of the late 50s and the 60s Lorraine Hansberry's substantial contribution seems to be to reveal a shared vision with Alice Childress and Ntozake Shange. An examination of the symbols of these playwrights would indicate a conscious effort on their part to illuminate the condition of the blacks in patriarchal America through the medium of a "Theatre of Struggle" in which black resiliency and spirit of survival are heralded. While Alice Childress confronts social and political issues out of a philosophical conviction that all art is and must be political, Hansberry
believes that the black artist has a responsibility to tell the truth, especially about the coloureds. But in terms of mediating this vision through the theatrical medium, she is committed to the idea of celebrating the joy of living and struggling together and optimistically reconstructing the world. A study of the symbolism of *A Raisin in the Sun* and *The Drinking Gourd* would illustrate this idea. *A Raisin in the Sun*, for example, suggests through the symbol of the furnishings on the stage a spirit of desperation associated with the ghetto image. In her *To Be Young Gifted and Black* Hansberry wrote thus: "We must come out of the ghettos of America, because the ghettos are killing us; not only our dreams but our very bodies." The furnishings suggest two things: the struggle of the blacks and the deferred dreams. Added to this, the image of the ghetto and the feeble plant contribute, in terms of the theatrical suggestiveness the idea of deprivation, thwarted dreams and so on. These manipulations of the "tonal form" indicate how, like Shange who shapes tonal form in the choreopoem, *For Colored Girls,*
Lorraine Hansberry not only portrays the spirit of survival of the blacks but also their movement towards something liberating and dynamic.

A Raisin in the Sun, although dismissed as assimilationist, projects a revealing portrait of the African-American family and its struggle for equality. In the words of Anne Cheney, Raisin not only stresses the importance of African roots, but also progresses into a "universal representation of all people's hopes, fears and dreams." In examining the importance of African roots, Hansberry not only anticipates the new thinking of the 60s but also resurrects the idea of the Harlem Renaissance. The very title of the play, derived from Langston Hughes, suggests the tensions and frustrations of the black man's and the black woman's existence by an evocation of the images of inevitable decay and deferred dreams. If Walter Lee represents the ambitions, the frustrations, and at the same time, the dream of attaining equality with the whites by imitating their mode of social advancement, and thus ironically promotes the white racist cause, Beneatha's personal odyssey towards wholeness
culminating in the African dance introduces yet another tonal quality in the play whereby an establishment of kinship with African roots is suggested. Beneatha's intense awareness of her racial origins and her association with Asagai indicate, through her wearing of the African robes, how she steeps herself in the culture of her forbears. The nickname "Alaiyo" given to Beneatha is an indication that Hansberry's concern in this play is not so much with the poverty of the Youngers but with the need for spiritual replenishment and the return of dignity to the blacks. In a way Asagai illustrates a concept, which gained momentum during Marcus Garvey's "Back to Africa" movement, by inculcating in Beneatha a growing awareness of the need to fight for black people's rights and for women's rights. He thus demonstrates to her the idea of black is beautiful. In fact, Asagai himself is not only a symbol of black struggle and freedom, but even more, a symbol of the oneness of suffering either in Africa or black America. Asagai's serving as a cultural conduit whereby he baptizes Beneatha in African history and mores shows yet another
element of the Afro-American drama employed in *A Raisin in the Sun* to some extent, but utilized more fully as a dramatic device in *The Drinking Gourd* which belongs to the ritual tradition of Afro-American drama. One of the qualities of this tradition is that within the context of real and present time and place, the audience participate in the dramatic event by means of their empathic transportation to their roots. As against this dramatic device, the Euro-American tradition aims at creating, in a mimetic sense, an illusion of reality of time, place and character where there is an architectural separation of actors from audience. The elements of the black ritual drama that are subtly interfused with the dramatic design of Hansberry's last plays celebrate a coming together, a sense of community and fellowship, which is one of the characteristics of a drama embodying a quest for identity. If *Les Blancs* examines the implications of the Mau Mau Revolution, *The Drinking Gourd* is an incisive indictment of American slavery which has proved itself to be an exploitative self-perpetuating system.
As in Soyinka's plays, in which the Yoruba myths offer a mytho-dramatic design, in Les Blancs the popular mythic symbolism of the hyenas and the elephants is used in order to highlight the idea of intrusion. The cause of total African self-rule and freedom is suggested by the theme of the Mau Mau Revolution which is treated in Ngugi's novels like Weep Not Child and the plays like The Trial of Dedan Kimathi. Not only does Lorraine Hansberry use African myths to suggest the idea of rites of passage, but she also employs old folk tales in order to heighten the drama of revolution and change. In Les Blancs Kumalo, the returned expatriate, and Tshembe, who finally recognizes the value of revolution, are in a way the two Kenyattas.

The Drinking Gourd shows the relentless greed and exploitation and unresponsiveness operating in the abuse of the system of slavery. The play is a costume drama which projects yet another aspect of not only the blackness but the universality of Hansberry. While the play takes its title from a Negro spiritual, it gives expression to Hansberry's view of the Slave South as dehumanizing both the
black and the white with its characteristic capitalist infrastructure. Through the portrayal of Hiram in this play, Hansberry seems to indicate that the insidious effects of slavery will be far reaching. In the final words of the play the Soldier/Narrator says thus:

Slavery is beginning to cost this nation a lot. It has become a drag on the great industrial nation we are determined to become; it lags a full century behind the great American notion of one strong federal union which our eighteenth-century founders knew was the only way we could eventually become one of the powerful nations of the world... It is possible that slavery might destroy itself - but it is more possible that it would destroy these United States first.  

The portrayal of Rissa in The Drinking Gourd shows how Hansberry breaks the mold shaped by southern attitudes and manages to bring a new life to the cliche depiction of the black mother. Rissa flagrantly turns her back on Hiram in desperation and continues to minister to her blind son.
This shows that Hansberry reverses the sacred image of the mother in this play and inspires her nevertheless with a motherly act of vengeance which sets her apart from the familiar archetype.

A play of ideas, *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window* is a new theatrical experiment interweaving nevertheless the familiar constituent elements of Lorraine Hansberry's drama. The play challenges the apathy of the American intellectual. Set in a time of racial turmoil, it reflects a spirit of harmony and acceptance between blacks and whites and among peoples of varied backgrounds. The play is more or less in the main stream of contemporary drama. Relating itself to the American tradition at large and further locating itself within the tradition of Absurd drama, this play however reveals a typical attribute of Hansberry's work in general in its mixing of individual and social drama, European and African culture, realism and fantasy, drama and dance and music, and tragedy and comedy. There is the fantasy sequence in the play in which Sidney's wife Iris dances to banjo music. *The Sign,*
inspite of its being apart from other plays, reveals interweavings similar to the other plays of Hansberry.

Completed in 1962, Hansberry's most experimental piece, *What Use Are Flowers?* is a fantasy about nuclear holocaust and the possibilities of survival. The play deals with the theme of civilizing children orphaned by nuclear holocaust and gives us a fascinating insight into the priorities of western culture. The play's stress on the educational theme links it up with the African tradition and shows that education is a redeeming, rejuvenating force contributing vitally not only to the expression of freedom but also to the restoration of humanity.

In late 1962, Lorraine Hansberry proposed a community theatre project for Harlem. In this prospectus, for the John Brown Memorial Theatre of Harlem, she came out with the suggestion that this theatre should carve out the cultural heritage of the people by showing its inextricable links with African ancestry. At the same time, however, she suggested that this theatre should "readily, freely and with the spirit of creativity of all mankind, also utilize all and any forces of the western
heritage of that same people in the arts."\(^5\) Hansberry's plays indeed reveal this assimilation in an abundant measure. In fact, the very act of naming a black community theatre after a white man emphasizes the consciously paradoxical nature of Hansberry's world view and art: she was a fighter for her race who insisted on the oneness of the cause of humanity, a Pan-Africanist who wished to place the western heritage of Afro-Americans alongside the African heritage, a dramatist who is both an artist and a propagandist.

REFERENCES:


