

## **A New Historicist Analysis of Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* and Adrienne Kennedy's *Funnyhouse of a Negro***

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### **Abstract**

This paper examines Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* and Adrienne Kennedy's *Funnyhouse of a Negro* in the light of the New Historicists' literary criticism. Our choice of these texts is informed by the fact that these African-American female playwrights appropriate the historicity of racism which navigates into other discourses such as politics, religion, social and cultural habits, thereby, influencing human society in a variety of ways. Specifically, these literary texts are interrogated along the lines of the overall effects of social tensions on the African-American personality throughout a racist American society. Our finding reveals that the American society is responsible for those conditions that constitute the harsh realities of the African-American experience in America.

### **Introduction**

Literature is an embodiment of ideas and society is a product of diverse experiences and social variables. In the wake of the social forces that forged our society and that our society in turn forges, it will rather be myopic for meaning to be a one source phenomena. Our understanding of our world will be incomplete if history alone becomes a sole perspective for the understanding of creative works, hence, the inadequacy of historical placement of things in the understanding of realities. The objectification of history in the unlocking of textual meaning becomes a fallacy in the wake of New Historicists thinking and theorization.

For the purpose of this discourse, we shall isolate the plays of two female playwrights of African-American extraction for separate studies. Our purpose is to see how Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* and Adrienne Kennedy's *Funnyhouse of a Negro* can offer a good read within the episteme of New Historicism. Our choice of these texts is informed by the fact that these female playwrights appropriate the historicity of racism to navigate into other discourses such as politics, religion, social habits among others. To this end, both female playwrights intimate the readers with the basic artistic vision of every ideal writer which in F.B.O Akporobaro's view is to "pragmatically...invent moving and dramatic situations and experiences."(8-9). Lorraine Hansberry and Adrienne Kennedy in their works under study do not only review the social experiences of African-Americans but most importantly, they reveal how these societal experiences and variables influence society and how these variables and experiences are in turn influenced by society.

New Historicism is one of the late twentieth century literary theories that emerged in the enterprise of Criticism. Other literary theories like Reader-Response theory and Post-colonial criticism all emerged in the late twentieth century. New Historicism is a backlash of historicism. Historicism as a literary theory holds that textual meaning is best derived from the point of view of historical engagement. This implies that history is to be relied in the creation of textual exegesis. Historicism valorizes history as the best provider of information needed for the understanding events, objects, persons and narratives. Strong to the argument of Historicist is the need for a text not to allow politics, religion, economy and other ideological strands that factorizes society to influence textual explication or the creation of meaning in a creative work of literature. According to M. A. R Habib "most fundamentally [in historicism], there is an insistence that all systems of thought, all phenomena, all institutions, all works of art and all literary texts must be situated within a historical perspective" (147). However, the above statement which reflects the basic argument that defines the core of Historicists belief is what New Historicism challenges.

To New Historicists the opinion that sees history as the paramount critical view to be explored in the criticism of a text makes ready less exhilarating and criticism stifling. This is true because society is diverse due to the multi ideological constructs that shape its existence. These multi-ideological construct are the various web of discourses constitute the creation of meaning. Hence, culture, religion, economy, politics among other factors make it difficult for societal discussion to be extrapolated and conversed

solely from historical perspective. New Historicism therefore, allows literary texts to be read into all social factors making up the discourse of our world. This is not to say that New Historicism rejects the place of history in the creation and analysis of text. Rather, New Historicism strongly holds that while history is also a factor that shapes society, critical analysis and textual criticism should also allow for other societal variables to draw meaningful connection in the text. After all, literature interrogates society and all the systems that make society, hence, readers and critics should read a literary text into all variables that constitute the realities evident in our environment.

According to M.A.R Habib (2008), "New Historicism... [is] a kind of discourse situated within a context of cultural discourses, religion, political, economy aesthetic- which both shaped it and in their turn, were shaped by it" (149). This means that history itself is a discourse out of many other discourses that constitute society, hence, situating a text solely within historical perspective such as giving the text a singular or one dimension explication of the society rather than a multi discourse oriented variables is faulty within the spectrum of New Historicism . Michel Foucault's essay "What is an Author" written in 1969 as quoted by M.A.R Habib has "had a seminal impact on the New Historicism that was initiated by Stephen Greenblatt" (151). Going further, Habib in his book *Modern Literary Criticism and Theory: A History*, published in 2008 articulates the phenomenal impact of Michel Foucault on New Criticism as he argued that:

Foucault's essay "What is an Author" (1969) questions and examines the concept of authorship and, insights that were taken up by the New Historicism, argued that analysis of literary texts could not be restricted to these texts themselves or to their authors psychology and background rather, the larger contexts and cultural conventions in which texts were produced needed to be considered (151).

This implies that a text meaning evolves from the interaction of the various interwoven social discourses. It also means that no discourse is superior to the other as all discourses exist in a complementary reflection with the specific aim of ferreting meaning in a text.

Charles Bressler (1994) declares that; “Only by allowing history a prominent place in the interpretive process and by examining the various convoluted webbing of discourses found both within a text and its historical setting can we ... negotiate a text’s meaning” (133). From the above, it becomes necessary at this point to identify the basic tenet of New Historicism. These tenets are summarized in three points in this essay. The first point is that New Historicism believes that the life of the author in terms of his psychology and background is necessary for the unlocking of a text’s meaning. The second tenet is that the social rules and dictate found in the texts that constitute societal variables should be investigated as these are vital to the unraveling of textual meaning. The third tenet of New Historicism holds that historical situation as evident in the literary piece should also be investigated to aid textual meaning.

### **New Historicist Analysis of Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun* and Adrienne Kennedy’s *Funnyhouse of a Negro***

Going by the very first tenet of New Historicism as articulated earlier in our research, authorial background in terms of author’s psychology and autobiographical information are necessary steps in the unlocking a text’s meaning. Lorraine Vivian Hansberry as an African-American talented female playwright was born to Mr. Carl Hansberry and Mrs. Nanny Perry Hansberry. Lorraine’s father was famous in Chicago’s African-American business and political community. Hansberry owned real estate, heavily supported African-American struggles and did run for congress as a republican. Lorraine’s mother was a school teacher who was also active in politics. Consequently, it can be argued that Lorraine’s political activism have roots in her parents foray into politics. It can be said that Lorraine was born into a family whose active role in politics and support for Africa-American struggles is not in doubt. With this, one is not surprise at the belligerent political statements with which Lorraine’s works often express

According to Imoh Emenyi, “The artist is a social visioner whose major responsibility is to express the nature of human life by recreating his or her experiences in society.”(18). From an autobiographical perspective, when Lorraine was eight years of age, the Hansberrys had in 1938, moved into a white tenement which excluded African-American tenancy. Lorraine’s father Carl Hansberry had taking up a court case for the repeal of such restriction on tenancy land as his family was constantly being attacked by white neighbours. However, in 1940, the US Supreme Court ruled in his favour. The above family history of Lorraine influenced the plot narrative of Lorraine

Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*. The play chronicles the story of a black but strong family to assert self, culture and rights in a predominantly Caucasian community. One can therefore see the influence of Lorraine's family history in the dramatic sketching of her artistic vision. However, in as much as New Historicism allows for textual exegesis to be carried out through the historical perspective, it did not hold or disallows a furtherance of textual unlocking along the trajectory of culture, religion, politics, class, economy among others. This because history is merely a strand or a single aspect or variable out of so many variables that shape society and are themselves influenced by society.

The argument above consequently leads us to the second tenet of New Historicism which opines that to unravel a text's meaning, the social rules and dictates found in the text that constitute societal variables should be investigated by a critic. This implies that a critic within New Historical discourse is conferred with interpretative license to impinge his ideology or biases during the unraveling of a text's meaning. This also means that a text is an eclogue of ideas. From this point of view a text, according to Charles Bressler becomes: "... a battle ground of competing ideas among the author, society, customs, institutions and social practices that are all eventually negotiated by the author and the reader and influenced by each contributor's episteme" (133). The two texts selected for this study fulfill this injunction above as articulated by Bressler.

In the same vein, Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* as a text characterized by eclogue of ideas can be extrapolated or interrogated beyond the writer's autobiographical force and her historical landscape. The texts have all the trappings of other societal variables, ideologies and cultural habits that form society as recreated by Lorraine Hansberry in *A Raisin in the Sun*. The class tension in this play is a social commentary that houses political undertone. According to Oliver Melvin and Shapiro Thomas (2003) "the stratified nature of racial inequality highlight the importance of social class background as a factor in the continuing divergent in the economic fortunes of Blacks and Whites" (70). The Walter's family which constitute society's lowest ebb are looked at by the Whites with disdain and the attempt by a struggling black family to integrate itself into a white community is frowned at with intense racial rage. Hansberry's narrative in *A Raisin* became a catalyst for the dramatic engagement of racial conflict by other Black writers. According to Malcolm Bradbury and Howard Temperley (1989) "In theatre, Lorraine Hansberry's liberal drama about a black family's desire to integrate

itself in a white community, *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959), quickly gave way to more aggressive accounts of racial conflict in the form of James Baldwin's *Blues for Mister Charlie* and Leroi Jones *Dutchman* (1964) and *The Slave* (1964)." (169). This is evident in the case where white people occupying the Clybourne Park Settlement get upset with the news that a black family was moving into the area. In the view of Karl Lindner, the representative of Clybourne Park Settler in *A Raisin...*, "what do you think you are going to gain by moving into a neighborhood where you just aren't wanted"(119). This reveals looming largeness of class tension in the American society.

More so, Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* carries a cultural statement which is Pro-African. This is evident in the characters of Mama Beneatha and Walter Younger whom are pro-Black value system and culture. Those characters are Lorraine's direct responses to the age long Western aspersion on African culture and value system which presupposes that everything Africa is barbaric and backward. Beneatha for example, educates her boyfriend George Murchison over his myopic view of Africa thus: "... you are standing there in your splendid ignorance talking about people who were the first to smelt iron on the face of the earth... the Ashanti were performing surgical operations when the English were still tattooing themselves with blue dragoons!" (81). The statement above, challenges George Murchison's definition of African heritage as nothing but "... a bunch of raggedy-assed spirituals and some grass huts" (81). This statement also goes a long way to deconstruct the stereotypes that the West holds for the African continent.

At another level of the protection of African culture and value system, Walter Younger's trance can be seen as a clarion call back to Africa. His understanding of the drum message and his ability to move his body to African rhythms all point to the celebration of the rich African heritage. Mama Lena herself is a symbol of an African Matriarch who deploys the wisdom and strength of her 'Africanness' to defile social rules governing tenancy in a racist American society. This is in stark contrast with the character of Sarah in Adrienne Kennedy's *The Funnyhouse of a Negro* who is obsessed with everything white. Sarah's fixation makes her rejects her 'Africanness'. It is the case of loss of oneself physically, mentally and spiritually on the part of Sarah. This fragmented self which causes self – race indignation and promotes the desire of passing eventually leads Sarah into committing suicide. This vividly explains the power of societal perceptions, characters and rules on the psyche of its members.

The above brings to mind the concepts of beauty as a social discourse in the works of Lorraine Hansberry and Adrienne Kennedy under study. While Africa in the eyes of Beneatha, is beautiful and worth of celebration, the same black continent, is a nightmare to Sarah. In the words of one of her selves, Sarah derides her black father thus: "He was a wild black beast who raped my mother... my father is the darkest, my mother is the lightest. I am in between. My father is a nigger who drives me to misery. Anytime spent with him evolves itself into suffering. He is a black man and the wilderness" (13). In the quotation above, it is glaring that Sarah looks her father's personality with anger and disdain.

More so, at the level of Identity Formation as a social variable of discourse in American society, it can be argued that Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* makes this quite glaring. Mama through her matriarch capacity, showed no shame in asserting self or in presenting the image of her black family. When Mama Lena bought a house for her black struggling family in a white settlement, she was asserting self. She was seeking recognition and equality for her family. In her words, "it makes a difference in a man when he can walk on floors that belong to him..." (92). Mama in her expression above is offering the world her own definition of what it is like to be called a man or a human being. In Adrienne Kennedy's *Funnyhouse of a Negro*, we also see Identity Formation as a religious statement. Though *Funnyhouse of a Negro* houses lots of irony and sarcasm however, such are directed to raising profound issues on black Identity Formation. For example, Wally (Sarah's Father) is a child of white man's rape of a poor black girl. Upon his birth, his black mother saw him as a saviour of the black race in America who will return to Africa with a saving message. Sarah's narration below reveals thus:

... My Father ... his mother wanted him to be Christ. From the beginning in the lamp of their dark room she said – I want you to be Jesus, to walk in Genesis and save the race. You must return to Africa, find revelation ... and heal the race. Heal the misery, take us off the cross (16).

Healing the race means saving Africa from colonialism and from the hypocrisy of missionaries whom had come into Africa with the Bible on one hand and a gun on the other hand. Allusion made to missionary activities in Africa by Adrienne Kennedy carries a weighty sarcasm aimed at revealing the

hypocrisy of Whites who preach the gospel of Jesus in one moment and reject the humanity of another race in another moment. The author is indirectly saying that of what use is the missionary activities of the West in Africa when the same race that preaches it practices human injustice or dehumanization?

More so, outside the racial historical perspective in which the play *Funnyhouse of a Negro* is set, it can be established that this play allows for a reading of political discourse. The historical allusion made to the other fragmented selves of Sarah such as Queen Victoria Regina and Dutchess of Hapsburg are all pointing to issue of political power and sovereign states. Adrienne Kennedy appropriates these names to raise the issue of the Narcissistic attitudes of the West who are so obsessed with race superiority. This behavior here referred to as narcissistic has no likeness or flair for anything outside white. Black is inferior to Whites becomes a notion valorized. We see the influence of this one – sided definition of race on Sarah's psyche such that she fragmented her Identity across western cultures to the point that she hated her African race which is the symbol of herself. She refuses to accept the fact that she is first an African before every other longing for passing.

The narcissism of Wally's Father (a white who raped Wally's Mother) is a statement on racial intolerance and stained race-relations between Blacks and Whites in America. According to Wally's father "... the race [Africa] was no damn good" (16). Still on *Funnyhouse of a Negro* as a dramatic political narrative, it can be established that the alluding to history by the playwright through the character creation of Patrice Lumumba is a mockery of Africa's political leadership. It reveals the strong hold of western powers like England and the USA on the political peace and democratic progress of African states. The assassination of Patrice Lumumber as the First democratically elected Prime Minister of the Republic of the Congo in the early 60s is a joint mastermind of rotten home grown African political leadership and Western nation's imperialism. Belgium, England and the US are part of this collaboration. Lumumber's creation as a fragmented character in Adrienne Kennedy's *Funnyhouse of a Negro* is a metaphor for the silence of the voice of the people of Africa. It is a metaphor for the rape of democracy and the celebration of war, corruption and mediocrity in African political history and practice.

Moreover, having looked at the second major tenets of New Historicism along Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* and Adrienne Kennedy's



*Funnyhouse of a Negro* which is strictly based on the social rules and dictates found in the texts under study, we shall proceed with the third and the last but not least tenet of New historicism. The third tenet of New Historicism is the reflection of a work's historical situation as evident in the text.

Judging from the basic thematic temperament in the play, it can be established that the historical situations reflected in the text under study is African – American cultural and historic experience which is heavily grounded in Black Arts Movement (BAM). Both plays Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* (1958) and Adrienne Kennedy's *Funnyhouse of a Negro* (1964) fall under a historical era in African – American Literary situational period called The Black Arts Era being a movement between 1960s and early 70s. This movement was started by Amiri Imamu Baraka then known as Leroi Jones. This movement following the assassination of Malcolm X in 1965 was Black Artists attempt at creating politically engaged works that will explore the African – American cultural and historic realities or experience. *A Raisin in the Sun* and *Funnyhouse of a Negro* are two plays carrying politically engaging issues that centered on assessing the African – American personality across the experience or realities of culture and history. This exploration of African – American cultural and historic experience is the basic ideologies that constitute the artistic vision of Lorraine Hansberry and Adrienne Kennedy.

We cannot bring this analysis to an end without making some brief comments on aspect of styles and language use in both plays under study. Though New Historicism places no emphasis on the explication of literary texts along the path of author's styles and language use as necessary tenets for the unraveling of meaning however, our forays into styles and language constitute our criticism of New Historicism in this discourse. Our criticism of this theory is not to have the theory amputated by us but to point to the ultimate fact that no literary theory is essentially flawless. In Kennedy's *Funnyhouse of a Negro*, style is dense as evident in the fragmentation of character. Kennedy employs a single character of many selves such that the selves live in a complementary reflection. This split personality is not different from what W.E.B "Du Bois refers to as "twoness" (2) in his *The Souls of Black Folk*. Du Bois captures this fragmented personality thus:

The Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world, - a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but

only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness, -an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (2).

This style as adopted by Kennedy in his play is a strong metaphor for the profound traumatized condition of an African-American psyche as orchestrated by racism in the United States of America.

In Kennedy's *Funnyhouse of a Negro*, young Sarah becomes a hyper-paranoid character as she is detached from any sense of what is real or factual. She even lacks any understanding of self and identity which is why she alternates between skin colours and races. Sarah's soul becomes a competing battleground of colours or race. She is black but another part of her panthers for whiteness hence her passing. This distorted cultural construction of beauty in the psyche of Sarah caused by the American society finds great intertextuality with the black female character protagonist in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eyes*. Pecola Breedlove as a young girl growing up black and poor in the early 1940s believes that her social status can only be improved in a society that calls her ugly if she can strive to achieve physical beauty. Pecola's obsession with blue eyes is evident in the passionate innermost expression of her demented psyche expressed before a mirror. In her own words; "Oh, yes. My blue eyes. Let me look again. See how pretty they are?" (201). Just like Sarah who commits suicide, Pecola loses her sanity. But in the sound argument of Mathew Ashimolowo (2007), "It is only when we look in [a black man's] past that we can understand his present predicament." (14). Ashimolowo's statement above goes a long way to reveal that the American society is responsible for the pathology of African-Americans. It is indeed not an uncommon phenomenon for a people with a hijacked past and history not to have psychological and emotional instability.

More so, Kennedy's *Funnyhouse of a Negro* carries a phantasmagoric narrative style structure. The Playwright skillfully adopts hallucinatory realism to capture how Sarah's obsession transports her into a seemingly dreamy world. Through this technique, Sarah seeks escape from the harsh realities of her physical misery by fantasizing about becoming The Duchess of Hapsburg, Queen Victoria Regina among other personalities in a single self. In her phantasmagoria, Sarah keeps only Whites as friends as she sees it as a way to console her blackness. She puts it this way; "My friends will be white. I need them as an embankment to keep me from reflecting too much upon the fact that I am a Negro." (9). In her alienated condition, Sarah dresses like the persons she long to be and in her disillusionment, Sarah parodies white mannerisms. But in all, her pathetic refusal to accept self and walk in the identity of her race plunges her into a calamitous end.

### **Conclusion**

New Historicism as a literary theory allows for multiple reading of social variables into the reading of a text. It reveals the inadequacy of history alone in the unlocking of literary text while stressing on the need for a text's meaning to be ferreted from all social factors that influence society and that are in turn influenced by society.

Our choice of Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* and Adrienne Kennedy's *Funnyhouse of a Negro* as literary texts for this discourse is informed by the various social variables explored in the society of the plays by the playwright that are representation of our human experiences in our physical environment. In this exploration, both texts are critiqued along the trajectory of religion, politics, identity formation, narcissism and the realm of Phantasmagoria that influence the society of the plays under study. To achieve this onerous task, both plays are placed into three basic tenets of New Historicism – the life of the author, the society's rules and dictates found in the text and the reflection of a work's historical situation as found in the text.

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