

# Lorraine Hansberry on the Image of Black Motherhood and Manhood: *A Raisin in the Sun*

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A strong mother has been one of the central figures in Afro-American literature. Various authors have developed this image in either a positive or negative manner. A positive perspective may be seen in Langston Hughes's poems such as "Mother and Son," in which he portrays the image of the strong mother as one who protects her children and who nurtures the next generation with her motherly love.

On the other hand, the negative image of the strong mother figure as traditional 'Mammy' who often appears in white Southern literature is described by Barbara Christian as follows:

Enduring, strong, and calm, her physical characteristics remain the same. She is black in color as well as race and fat, with enormous breasts that are full enough to nourish all the children of the world; . . . she is strong, for she certainly has enough girth, but this strength is used in the service of her white master and as a way of keeping her male counterparts in check; she is kind and loyal, for she is a mother; she is sexless, for she is ugly; and she is religious and superstitious, because she is black. . . . (11, 12)

Therefore, the strong mother figure in Afro-American literature is viewed with ambivalence. On the one hand, the "castrating matriarch" image has been common in the Afro-American consciousness. This is juxtaposed to the image of the strong mother as a nurturing, caring, loving individual. Lorraine Hansberry, in 1959, expresses this ambivalence toward the strong mother figure in the Afro-American tradition:

“the matriarchy in Negro life is . . . at once beloved and hated” (qtd. in Cheney 65).

But in the 1970s, authors began to question the appropriateness of the “castrating matriarch” image along with other black stereotypes. For example, in the preface to the anthology *The Black Woman* published in 1970, Toni Cade makes the statement that one of the tasks of Afro-American women authors is to destroy the false image of “the matriarch and the evil Black bitch” (Cade 11).

In the decade following the production of Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun*, the concept of matriarchy in Afro-American society became a center of controversy, especially when viewed within the context of the 1960s–1970s black movement. According to Michele Wallace, “the Moynihan Report,” published in 1965, fueled the controversy over “matriarchy.”<sup>1</sup> The report describes the American society as patriarchal, and argues that the power or the father depends more on his economic power than anything else. The report refers to Edward Wright Bakke’s research on the six stages of effects of unemployment:

The first two stages end with the exhaustion of credit and the entry of the wife into the labor force. The father is no longer provider and the elder children become resentful.

The third stage is the critical one of commencing a new day-to-day existence. At this point two women [the wife and a case worker] are in charge.

. . . The critical element of adjustment was not welfare payment, but work [for the father] (19).

Therefore, the Report says, in the society where black men have a high unemployment rate and where the “sassy nigger” was traditionally lynched, it was logical that the Afro-American community became matriarchal. Black women tend to have higher education and more professional jobs than black men, and always favor daughters more than sons. The black community is, therefore, unable to provide a strong male role model for black males. This results in maladjustment to the dominant white society, chronic unemployment, high crime rate, and

inability to build a stable, 'normal' nuclear family.<sup>2</sup> Wallace goes on to say:

In books and articles the black man ripped into this argument and tore it apart. But it had brought his resentment to the surface. Moynihan had hit just the right note. . . . But just about any black person, when asked who is more oppressed, the black man or the black woman, would respond with some version of "Well, the black woman has always been liberated because she was able to find work when the black man couldn't get any." . . . There were blacks who would have said that before Moynihan's report but they would have been more difficult to find; they would have been uncertain. . . . Now they were certain, resolute in their conviction. . . . Moynihan did that. Moynihan bared the black man's awful secret for all to see — that he had never been able to make his woman get down on her knees (31).

This argument about the matriarchy and black manhood seems to cast a new light upon a traditional strong mother figure in Afro-American literature. Does matriarchy undermine black manhood? Or, does matriarchy as Moynihan describes truly exist? Or in the first place, what does 'manhood' signify? How authors deal with these questions should be re-examined.

Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* presents the strong mother figure, Lena Younger ("Mama"). She apparently fits the descriptions of both the beloved "strong mother" and the "castrating matriarch."

Is Lena the "castrating matriarch" functioning as the dominating influence on her son Walter, and thus preventing him from achieving his manhood? Or, as the dedication of the play, "To Mama: in gratitude for the dream" suggests, does Hansberry present the positive image of motherhood as does Hughes? If the latter case is true, how should we interpret the play's final scene in which "Mama" praises Walter's achievement of his full manhood? And further, should we, in the 1980s, regard Hansberry's praise of "Mama" as lack of insight; should we also regard our sympathizing with Mama as lack of insight?

Although Hansberry does not make direct statements to offer resolutions to the issues raised, an analysis of Lena's character will enable us to see how Hansberry solves the problem of ambivalence toward black matriarchy. Also, we will see that Hansberry presents a new concept of black manhood in which a strong man can coexist with a strong woman.

Every scene of *A Raisin in the Sun* takes place in the apartment occupied by the Younger family. The family consists of the widowed "Mama," Lena Younger; her two children, Walter and Beneatha; Walter's wife Ruth, and Walter's son Travis.

This family structure clearly fits Moynihan's concept of matriarchy, with Lena as a dominant matriarch, Ruth and Beneatha, her successors, and Walter, a "castrated" male, who cannot cope with the white world or the women in the family.

It is easy to perceive Lena as a "castrating matriarch." She is, as is the stereotype, "dark-brown, full-bodied and strong" (27). Further, she is stereotypically religious, and dominant over the family. She is, as she declares, and as everyone in the family recognizes, "the head of the Younger family" (39).

For example, she insists on her children's following her religious beliefs. When Beneatha declares that she does not believe in God, Lena slaps her in the face and forces her to say "In my Mother's house there is still God" (39). Another example involves the use of insurance money. She is the legal owner of \$10,000 dollars, her husband's insurance money, and has the sole authority to decide on how it should be spent. She refuses to let Walter invest the money in a liquor store, saying "I don't 'low no yellin' in this house, Walter Lee, and you know it — And there ain't going to be no investing in no liquor stores. I don't aim to speak on that again" (57).

Walter fits the pattern of the concept of matriarchy as a "castrated" black male. The initial scene of the play is set in the morning with Ruth's yelling at Travis and Walter. Although Walter tries to be loving and to explain his dreams to Ruth, she only repeats "eat your egg and go to work." Walter complains "A man needs for a woman to back him

up,” and “. . . that’s what’s wrong with the colored woman. Don’t understand about making ’em [men] feel like they somebody” (22). His mother’s refusal to let him invest the insurance money destroys the only possibility he has to be an independent businessman instead of a white man’s chauffeur. Thus, his dream to achieve manhood through economic success is blocked completely. Stymied, Walter gives up trying to cope with reality. He takes to drinking, wanders endlessly at night, and even stops going to work. He gives up being a responsible individual and accuses his mother for his downslide. Water says: “What you need me to say you done right for? *You* the head of this family. You run our lives like you want to. . . . So you butchered up a dream of mine — you — who always talking ‘bout your children’s dreams . . .” (80).

Walter’s relationship with his younger sister Beneatha also fits the pattern. While Walter has no college degree, Beneatha is a college student working toward medical school. Beneatha, far from supporting his idea of investing money in a liquor store, fiercely fights for her own right to use the money for her college tuition and is supported in this claim by Ruth:

BENEATHA: . . . The insurance money belongs to Mama. Picking on me is not going to make her give it to you to invest in any liquor stores — (underbreath, dropping into a chair) — and I for one say, God bless Mama for that!

WALTER (To Ruth): See — did you hear? Did you hear!

RUTH: Noney, please go to work.

W: Nobody in this house is ever going to understand me.

B: Because you’re a nut.

W: Who’s a nut?

B: You are a nut. Thee is mad, boy.

W (Looking at his wife and his sister from the door, very sadly):  
The world’s most backward race of people, and that’s a fact. (26)

These examples show Walter’s frustration with the dominant attitude of the women in his family.

How, then, does Walter "come into his manhood" at the last moment (130)? Does he somehow overcome the matriarchal power, or is there the possibility that "matriarchal" power and Walter's manhood are not necessarily in conflict? To answer these questions, it is necessary to reconsider the nature of the matriarchy in the Younger family.

The play has many perspectives which negate Lena's being perceived as "matriarch" and show her as a realistic person rather than a cardboard stereotype.<sup>3</sup>

First, Lena may not be considered the financial head of the family. Walter is the breadwinner, not Lena or Ruth. The insurance policy, which provided the \$10,000 dollars was paid for by Lena's late husband. The fact that Lena is not the breadwinner and did not pay for the insurance policy prevents her from fitting Moynihan's concept of matriarchy.

Second, in spite of the fact that the insurance money legally belongs to her, Lena decides to divide the money into three portions, the down payment on a house, Beneatha's tuition for medical school, and Walter's liquor store investment. Lena's attitude is hardly tyrannic. Thus, again, Lena does not fit the matriarchal stereotype.

Third, although Lena talks in a dominant manner toward her children, and declares herself as the head of the family, she respects her children's dreams. She becomes dominant not because she enjoys power for its own sake but because she wants to keep her family together. Although Lena is against Walter's liquor store investment because of her Christian morality and the risks involved, she entrusts two-thirds of the insurance money to Walter so that he will feel like the head of the family. Lena supports Beneatha's dream to become a doctor, and respects her decision to reject George Murchison's proposal, even though he is a desirable suitor because he is a college student from a rich family, saying "I guess you better not waste your time with no fools" (84). Lena's support of Beneatha's decision is very understanding and does not reflect a dominant personality characteristic.

Finally, when desperate Walter is ready to accept the New Neighbors

Orientation Committee's humiliating offer of a considerable amount of money to prevent the Younger family from moving into their white neighborhood, Lena reminds him of his duty as his father's son and as his son's father, in an attempt to persuade him to reject the offer. Thereby, Lena reminds Walter that he is the successor of the patriarchy in the family descendency; thus, Lena's way of thinking, along with her memory of her strong husband "Big Walter," can be conceived as being patriarchal rather than matriarchal. As Margaret Wilkerson points out, Lena helps him to achieve manhood by encouraging him to realize his duty ("The Sighted Eyes" 96).

Then why does Walter experience frustration within the family? Why does his manhood seem to be threatened by a strong female figure? Walter's response to Lena's last effort to remind him of his ancestors' pride and dignity and to stop him from accepting the white people's offer typically expresses his frustration:

What's the matter with you all! I didn't make this world! It was give to me this way! . . . Somebody tell me — tell me, who decides which woman is suppose to wear pearls in the world. I tell you I am a *man* — and I think my wife should wear some pearls in this world! (123)

Thus, there is a conflict between Lena's concept of manhood and Walter's concept of manhood. It is necessary to understand the difference of these two concepts of manhood, and to find out how Hansberry resolves the conflict.

Walter's concept of manhood is, as Wilkerson suggests in her essay "The Sighted Eyes and Feeling Heart of Lorraine Hansberry," strongly connected to material success (95). Immediately upon receiving the money to start his career as a businessman, Walter tells his son his vision of the future: two expensive cars, a big house, a gardener, and college catalogues for his son (89). His dream is identical with white middle class American dreams.

But if we take a closer look at this dream, we find another important element in Walter's concept of manhood, the feeling of superior-

ity to women. As we recognize from his speech, he dreams about having the material resources to decide what to provide for his wife. He says, "Somebody tell me . . . who decides which women is suppose to wear pearls in this world." The answer is, in Walter's mind, apparently not the women themselves. In his vision of the future, he is the one who decides that his wife should wear pearls, and who buys "a little sportier [car] for Ruth — maybe a Cadillac convertible to do her shopping in" (89). To be a 'man,' Walter has to be superior to women in one way or another. He feels frustrated when the women contradict him; then he cannot feel superior to them. Material success fascinates him because with it, he can be superior to strong-minded women.

Margaret G. Burroughs, in "A Lorraine Hansberry Rap," comments on Lena's character as a matriarch. Her comments pertain to the problem of the definition of 'manhood':

Our strong women are accused of stunting the growth of their men-folk and after due consideration, I've decided I don't believe that . . . . I think our women are *solidly behind* our men, and whatever they do is because they want our men to be strong and *to lead*. (Bennett and Burroughs, 231, emphasis added)

Although Burroughs says that there is nothing wrong with strong women, her comments may be interpreted to show that she retains the same concept of manhood as Walter, namely, that men should "lead" women. In other words, Walter's and Burroughs's concept of manhood is relative; manhood cannot be achieved without controlling a woman. Therefore, materialism becomes the main concern of Walter who wants to achieve this relative manhood.

Lena's concept of manhood is, on the contrary, absolute rather than relative. What she means by 'manhood' is the will and ability to survive and pursue a dream with pride and dignity. When she recollects her husband Walter (significantly 'Big' Walter) with Ruth, she mentions only how he loved children and never gave up his dream in spite of the hardships. Although she mentions the insurance money, she refers to his effort and sacrifice he made for his family, not the money itself.



She makes it clear that 'relative' manhood should not be considered important by saying "When do you think is the time to love somebody the most; when they done good and made things easy for everybody? . . . It's when He's at his lowest and can't believe in hisself 'cause the world done whipped him so" (125). When Walter becomes a 'man' in his final encounter with the representative of the white neighborhood, he no longer defines manhood as he did previously. Originally he would have perceived himself to be less a man because of his lack of material success, his mother and wife working and thus not under his control, and his sister's higher education emphasizing his own limited potential. However, he now perceives that manhood is defined in terms of the will and ability to survive with pride and dignity. What makes Walter's revelation natural in the play is the fact that his character is well developed through the play. He is frustrated because of his concept of relative manhood, but he is not a stereotypical sexist. He is, like Beneatha, "spirited" (40) and has a strong determination to change the situation for the better. We can realize that he has a capacity to achieve real manhood, through the scene of his encounter with George Murchison. Walter, although still trapped in the materialistic concept of manhood, does not see George's petit bourgeois contentedness as his goal. He shows a will to move beyond mere material satisfaction in his speech to George: ". . . ain't you bitter, man? Ain't you just about had it yet? Don't you see no stars gleaming that you can't reach out and grab? You happy? You contented son-of-a-bitch . . . Man, I'm a volcano. Bitter? Here I am a giant — surrounded by ants!" (71). Asagai, as well as George, is a type, rather than a realistic character. He, representing black Africa in this play, functions to inspire black pride, which can be easily lost by the materialism-oriented Walter, and which significantly George fails to recognize completely. It is clear that Afro-Americans cannot identify with African culture through Lena's conversation with Asagai (51), Beneatha's wearing Nigerian dress (63), and Walter's fake African dance (65). But with his speech advocating the will to progress, he functions as inspiration for Walter, as well as for the audience, that the true manhood should be found in the will

to survive and progress, not in materialism.

Walter's breakthrough in the redefining of manhood signifies Hansberry's deep insight into issues dealing with the relationship between black men and black women. Hansberry does not make the issue of the concept of 'manhood' very clear in this play; this is natural enough in 1959, before the beginning of the 1960s' feminist movement. But her ability to see the problem leads her to avoid the strong man / strong woman conflict. She instead envisions a new relationship in which coexistence without conflict takes place.

Black female poet Nikki Giovanni, in her conversation with James Baldwin in *A Dialogue*, points out more straightforwardly the danger of internalization of materialistic hierarchy for the blacks, and argues what is important in the male/female relationship is not 'manhood' measured by the man's ability to provide, but the feeling of security he brings to the relationship through love:

Let's say a guy's going with a girl. You're going with Maybelle and Maybelle gets pregnant, and all of a sudden you can't speak to Maybelle because you don't have the money for a crib, right? Maybelle doesn't need a crib. . . . But what she needs is a man to come by and say, Hey baby, you look good. And black men refuse to function like that because they say, I want to bring the crib when I come. (Baldwin and Giovanni, 51, 52)

The problem of this 'manhood' is more serious and more often discussed in Afro-American literature than the so-called mainstream literature because of the black man's difficulty in achieving material superiority to women. Hansberry's insight into this issue is probably due to the fact that she "was born black and female, and that she belonged to a tradition of women who had to be strong to survive and who at the same time, tried to have good relationships with men" (qtd. in Wilkerson, "The Sighted Eyes" 94). However, Hansberry's issues of the relationship between relative manhood and materialism and the relationship between strong men and strong women are quite universal. Hansberry's insight into these problems is relevant as a feminist issue, not only for black society, but for all societies.

## Notes

1. See 'Moynihan' in Bibliography.
2. The ridiculousness of this argument is clearly stated by Michelle Wallace, 109–117. See Bibliography.
3. Wilkerson points out in her essays that Lena is not a stereotypical matriarch. But I do not agree with her argument that Lena does not fit the stereotype because she subordinates her dream to her son's. See "Complete Feminist" 240.

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