

## Chapter Three

### A New Born Identity

By scrutinizing the chronotopic actions and thoughts of the characters, I have discussed that African Americans are limited in both social and mental space so that it is difficult for them to find a true identity. In this chapter, I continue to apply Bakhtin's theory on chronotope to study more on the relationship between the play and its contemporary life. This play reflects not only African Americans' social plights, which have been analyzed in the previous chapter, but also their struggling power, which is the main focus in this chapter. Therefore, by studying the plot and actions in the play, we may figure out some ways on how American blacks resist the dominance of the whites and find their own identity.

As Bakhtin suggests that literary texts represent history (Vice 201), in this chapter, I want to examine the experiences of the Younger family through the perspective of society, culture, and family so as to reveal how African Americans at that time succeed in preserving their own interpretation of life. As a testimony to the revolutionary black power consciousness in the 1950s, *A Raisin in the Sun* instructs African Americans to bravely strive for the improvement of social status, embrace both of their African and American cultural roots, and cherish their family pride.

Bakhtinian critics declare that time and space are "intrinsically interconnected" and they constitute "a whole" (Morson and Emerson 367). In this "fusion," time becomes "artistically visible" and space becomes "charged and responsive to the movement of time, plot and history" (Bakhtin 84). This inseparability of time and space explains the connection between African Americans' advancement on space and

their victory on historical time. The action of stepping out of the confinement in space symbolizes a moment of breakthrough, leading American blacks from repression to freedom.

In the historical time of the 1950s, some African Americans chose to stand out and fight for what they deserved and this phenomenon gradually became more and more prevalent. The real historical events and figures at the particular time displayed the black people's strong mind. Even though it was tough to fight against the huge white repressive system, there were always trials in society that brought about unprecedented supports and unceasing protests. In Montgomery, Alabama, in December 1955, a black woman named Rosa Parks, tired of Jim Crow Laws on the city buses, refused to surrender her seat to a white man (Patterson 358-9). She was fined for breaking the law. The black leader Martin Luther King Jr. raised a nonviolent protest by leading a boycott of the buses, which drew the attention of the whole world. On February 1<sup>st</sup>, 1960, four Negro college students sat down at a white-only dime store lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina, refusing to eat anything until they were served. Although they were not finally served that day, they returned to campus to discover that they had become heroes. They were later joined by not only blacks but also inspired white people to sit in white-only dime store counters in other cities. The possible influence these four young freshmen brought to the world was far beyond their expectation (Patterson 378). All these historical events prove that these blacks from different places around the country no longer bore the white subjugation. They refused to keep silent and started to challenge the white hegemony to express their dissatisfaction through more physical actions.

Besides the incidents in the public space, there was also Hansberry's similar personal experience of resisting against the whites in her growing period. She created the play based on her own childhood experience, which has been mentioned in my Chapter One. The Hansberry family believed they should never give up their right of choosing where to live even when facing the violent attack. When Hansberry was a little girl, she witnessed her father's fight against the white-enforced laws and his victory over *Hansberry vs. Lee* case. Her mother's courage to protect the children against the mobs also impressed young Lorraine.

The play reflects these historically significant black protests, revealing the general social phenomenon of black resistance in the 1950s. In the entire African American history of approximately 400 years, *A Raisin in the Sun*, written in 1959, stands at the crucial historical moment to include the African American subjugated history and to play as a bard to greet the civil rights movements and Black Power Movement of the 1960s. This play reflects not only the suffering but also the struggling power in African American history. Through the protest actions, African Americans walk out of the physical confinement in public space and win their freedom. Furthermore, they find courage to express their own thoughts and acquire social recognition and self-confirmation.

It is a milestone for the play to challenge the white ideology, and its ending manifests the trends of the movements in society. Hansberry is sensitive enough to predict the upcoming dynamic times in which the blacks voice for their own self-identity. Through this play, she provides her people with some practical approaches including active resistance, inclusive cultural identity and emphasis on

family pride.

## **I. Active Resistance Against White Power**

### **A. The White Oppression**

*A Raisin in the Sun* instructs African Americans to actively strive for the improvement of social status even though they face the whites' oppression and encounter their discrimination and false justification. The example in the play is that the Youngers are challenged by Karl Linder, who tries to dissuade them from bothering the white purity in Clybourne Park. Karl Lindner, portrayed as a respectful and non-violent person, justifies himself by suggesting that men have the right to choose the neighbors they like. During his visit, Lindner first reminds the Younger family of the recent bomb incidents happening in various parts of the city and then shows his sincerity to talk about this issue and solve the problem peacefully. He expresses his belief that people in this world need to understand others' problem and point of view; however, he speaks just for his own benefit and conceals the unreasonable demand.

Lindner: And at the moment the overwhelming majority of our people out there feel that people get along better, take more of a common interest in the life of the community, when they share a common background. I want you to believe me when I tell you that race prejudice simply doesn't enter into it. It is a matter of the people of Clybourne Park believing, rightly or wrongly, as I say, that for the happiness of all concerned that our Negro families are happier when they live in their

*own communities. (Raisin 117-8)*

It is ironical when he emphasizes that there is nothing about racial prejudice, he is actually denying the black men's right to choose freely where they want to live. His falsity is further exposed when his polite speech turns into a threatening tone after the Youngers have refused his request and shouted at him to drive him out of their house.

Lindner: What do you think you are going to gain by moving into a neighborhood where you just aren't wanted and where some elements—well—people can get awful worked up when they feel that their whole way of life and everything they've ever worked for is threatened. (*Raisin* 119)

Karl Lindner has spoken out the inner voice of the white majority in American society. They think and act as an authority, affirming that their own benefits far more outweigh the black people's welfare.

The superior complex Karl Lindner carries is similar to the "Prospero Complex" proposed by Fanon in his *Black Skin, White Masks*. Although Fanon focuses his discussion mostly on the psychology of the oppressed, he also adheres to what M. Mannoni proposes—the oppressors hold the "Prospero Complex"<sup>1</sup> in the relationship between white and black. When explaining this complex, Fanon states, "the white man acts in obedience to an authority complex, a leadership complex" (99). These white men with Prospero Complex cannot be aware of the existence of Others

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<sup>1</sup> Prospero Complex is named after a character in Shakespeare's romance, *The Tempest*, in which the father Prospero has to protect his daughter Miranda from monstrous Caliban. It is based on "the picture of the paternalist colonial and the portrait of the racialist whose daughter has suffered an [imaginary] attempted rape at the hands of an inferior being" (Fanon 107).

and the respect Others deserve. Regarding themselves as the superior group endowed with privileges, Linder and the other residents of Clybourne Park want to preserve their authority and purity by making their argument seemingly reasonable through moral lessons.

#### B. The Blacks' Resistance

In *A Raisin in the Sun*, during Karl Lindner's two visits, the Youngers assertively rebut the white man's wishful justification and actively voice for their own rights. In their first interaction with Lindner, they drive him out because they feel humiliated and offended. The blacks do not take the unreasonable accusation of the whites whose hearts are blocked with the stereotypes that the black men are all dangerous. Upon Lindner's second visit, the Youngers reject his offer again because they refuse to enslave themselves by accepting the white thinking. Lena Younger especially asks her son to act like his father and preserve the family pride. In their earlier conversation, Lena has explained to Walter the ambition of a better life she and Big Walter carried when moving to Chicago from the South.

I remember just as well the day me and Big Walter moved in here. Hadn't been married but two weeks and wasn't planning on living here no more than a year. We was going to set away, little by little, don't you know, and buy a little place out in Morgan Park. We had even picked out the house . . . child, you should know all the dreams I had 'bout buying that house and fixing it up and making me a little garden in the back . . .

(*Raisin* 44-45)

Although Lena and her husband could not accomplish the plan while Big Walter was

alive, now Big Walter's insurance money has actually brought a chance. Therefore, Walter's final decision to move into the house his father has earned stands as the historic significance that should be emphasized because he inherits and fulfills the wish passed down from the older generation. The action of preserving their right to live in Clybourne Park is not a "manifestation of a crude impulse toward social climbing or a need for validation by the white mainstream," but "an assertion of the fullness of their autonomy" (Keppel 212). It proves that African Americans can truly make decisions for themselves rather than being confined and limited by the white controlling power and being subjugated by the whites.

Lorraine Hansberry comments that Walter belongs to a racial group that possesses human dignity and refuses to give up when encountering white coercion ("Willie Loman" 8). Although there are still a lot of hidden problems waiting for the Youngers in the end, they have actually made progress in white society by confronting courageously with the whites and striving for the freedom they deserve. We see that the family's firm decision not only makes great progress for themselves but also represents a crucial step for all black men. Even a little character can play a crucial part in the process of gaining equal civil rights; likewise, the moving of the Youngers into the white-only community should not be regarded as insignificant.

Through Asagai, the social idealist, Hansberry expresses her belief that every personal sacrifice would contribute to the improvement of the black people's situation. Asagai in the play is a central character to bring about the microcosm of the struggle of liberation throughout the world and Africa, a vision which all the oppressed should fight for. He also expresses his ideas about African Americans and his tribal African

people. In reply to Beneatha's comment on her family's and African Americans' miserable future, he expresses his philosophy toward the destiny of the blacks in the geometric metaphor:

It isn't a circle—it is simply a long line—as in geometry, you know, one that reaches into infinity. And because we cannot see the end—we also cannot see how it changes. And it is very odd but those who see the changes—who dream, who will not give up—are called idealists . . . and those who see only the circle—we call them the “realists”! (*Raisin* 134)

Instead of seeing life repeating itself and only heading for a dead end, Asagai believes that there is always something in the future to expect for. And this future is worth fighting for. Even though the education he receives has enabled him to see the most reality in the barren African life, he still endows himself with the responsibility as an intellect. He expresses his idealistic attitude toward the future:

In my village at home it is the exceptional man who can even read a newspaper . . . or who ever sees a book at all. I will go home and much of what I will have to say will seem strange to the people of my village. But I will teach and work and things will happen, slowly and swiftly. (*Raisin* 135)

He understands sometimes nothing will change at all but sometimes there will be “sudden dramatic events which make history leap into the future” (*Raisin* 135). In the revolutionary time, no one knows what is going to happen at the next second. There are always ups and downs in the process of progression. And it is a dangerous battle full of “guns, murder, revolution” (*Raisin* 135). When a crisis or hazard arises, it is



normal for him to feel doubtful and frightened, wondering whether being quiet will be better than facing death and hatred. However, he will soon regain confidence in the need to rescue his people:

I will look about my village at the illiteracy and disease and ignorance  
and I will not wonder long. And perhaps . . . perhaps I will be a great  
man . . . I mean perhaps I will hold on to the substance of truth and find  
my way always with the right course . . . and perhaps for it I will be  
butchered in my bed some night by the servants of empire . . . (*Raisin*  
135)

It is his emphasis that despite facing threats and obstacles in daily lives, black men should never lose their faith in improving the status quo. Through Asagai, the playwright shares her beliefs in Africans and African-Americans, expressing that dignity and spirit are much more important than personal safety and comfort.

Lorraine Hansberry understands that there are difficulties in improving African Americans' status quo, but she still believes that her people have chances to make their lives better as long as they actively strive for the improvement of social status. The ending of *A Raisin in the Sun* truthfully presents both promising and dangerous sides which American blacks are going to deal with as they go out of their black ghetto to challenge the white hegemony. There are diverse interpretations of the ending. The pessimistic critic argues that the old furniture which symbolizes the poverty is moved out to the new house along with the Younger family, and this undercuts the optimism (Brown 246), while the positive critic declares that the furniture's moving out signifies the family's moving out of the ghetto and into

bourgeois America (Barthelemy 777). In my point of view, both sides of the opinions are right because they reflect the most reality of the Younger family's situation. The Youngers do make progress even though there are still plenty of problems for them to deal with. Based on Hansberry's courage and confidence, she would prefer to see her audience and readers focus their eyes on African Americans' promising future rather than mourn for the past miseries. Although her arrangement of the ending reveals poverty as a hidden problem for the Youngers to deal with, she does end the play in a cheerful and inspiring atmosphere, expecting this ending to be the beginning of the coming generation's awakening. Compared with the oppressing atmosphere the shabby living room creates at the beginning of the play, the ending is more optimistic in that the Younger family finally surpasses the limitation of space by actually walking out of not only the living room but also the black ghetto.

The significance of *A Raisin in the Sun* does not end in representing history; the play further inspires readers and audiences to actively strive for their rights like the Youngers. The black family sets a model for the whole black people by emphasizing the old generation's spirit of hard work and exerting personal strength of creating history. The image of the strong-minded Younger family will be deeply rooted in the audience's mind as *A Raisin in the Sun* becomes a classical literary piece, which stands with all the other fighters in history. The black reviewers find surprising inspirations in the play: a black man (Walter Lee) expresses "all the things I felt but never had the courage to express" (King 219); "I began a journey that would help me define who I really was—rather than who so many would attempt to make me" (Royals 261). Mama Younger is like every black's grandmother and Walter Younger is

like every black's father, brothers, uncles, and cousins. The play triggers the black audiences' emotions and actions to do something for themselves and their own people. Hansberry's creative literary ability and her profound grasp of the deep social issues confronting the world will remain an inspiration to generations yet unborn.

## **II. Inclusive Cultural Identity: Between Africa and America**

In addition to the historic advancement, Hansberry holds an aggressive but not violent intention to teach that all the black people should conquer their identity crisis by emphasizing the importance of their cultural roots. Seeking cultural roots is an important but ambiguous mission for all African Americans because they are a group of people who possess both African blood origin and American local life. Hansberry was not the first one to propose the connection between Black America and Africa. It was in fact initiated by the Harlem Renaissance writers,<sup>2</sup> but Hansberry was the first one to popularize the notion by presenting it on the Broadway stage in front of the audiences. The playwright indicates the importance of identifying with the African roots, but she also believes that it is a main issue for African Americans living in the land of America to consider who they really are.

Hansberry expresses her opinions about the cultural issue by presenting the

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<sup>2</sup> The Harlem Renaissance is a movement in which the black tried to gain their social position and visibility in the 1920s through the powerful cultural resistance. Artists tried to express the beauty of black in the forms of jazz, poetry, and fiction. There were thinkers in two different standings. W. E. B. Du Bois propagandized for Pan-Africanism, suggesting that there is no necessary need for African Americans to migrate to Africa, which serves as the spiritual frontier. Marcus Garvey, the supporter of Booker T. Washington, called for a back-to-Africa movement, emphasizing black people's self-help and self-sufficiency. The Harlem Renaissance failed because of its dependence on white patronage and its diversion into mass white consumption. The artists did not carry the social responsibilities to assist the black mass, but confined themselves in the Harlem district, a limited space (Patterson 170).

triangle relationship among Beneatha, George, and Asagai. As an African American, Beneatha gradually figures out her own thought on cultural identity by arguing with George, the assimilated black, and considering the proposal by Asagai, the African student. The playwright has deliberately arranged clues in the play for African Americans to consider between America and Africa, or, choices better than America or Africa.

#### A. Identity Crisis

African Americans should accept their African origin with an open and healthy mind and treat it not as distorted images given by the whites but as something they can be proud of rather than. The examples of white distorted African images can be found in the play such as George's despise on his African origin and Lena's ignorance of the idea of Africa. African Americans who think as George despise and reject their African cultural roots. Although George is well-educated and can talk about blacks' great cultural heritage, he holds a denigrating attitude toward the African assets and tries to challenge Beneatha with his "knowledge." In response to Beneatha's charge of being "assimilationist," he retorts:

Oh, dear, dear, dear! Here we go! A lecture on the African past! On our great West African Heritage! In one second we will hear all about the great Ashanti empires, the great Songhay civilizations, and the great sculptures of Benin—and some poetry in the Bantu—and the whole monologue will end with the word of *heritage*! (Nastily) Let's face it, baby, your heritage is nothing but a bunch of raggedy-assed spirituals and some grass huts! (*Raisin* 81)

According to his speech, there are so much magnificent heritage mentioned and this ancient wisdom should be well admired and preserved. However, as a college student who has the precious chance to understand more about his African origin, George does not learn to respect the African heritage; instead, he is more occupied with a distorted concept: Africa is only a barren land without culture, a bunch of useless figures and grass guts.

In addition to distortion, African Americans also have ignorance toward the African culture. Although they are accessible to some of the African cultural forms or ideas, they are possibly misused and hardly fully understood by American blacks. African Americans feel alienated from their African roots because they no longer share the same cultural background as their African ancestors. Before and during Asagai's visit, apparently the Youngers have limited and mistaken knowledge about Africa. When Beneatha introduces Asagai to her mother, Mama speaks of the stereotypes most African Americans may fall into.

Mama: What's his name?

Beneatha: Asagai, Joseph. Ah-sah-guy . . . He's from Nigeria.

Mama: Oh, that's the little country that was founded by slaves way  
back . . .

Beneatha: No, Mama—that's Liberia.

Mama: I don't think I never met no African before.

Beneatha: Well, do me a favor and don't ask him a whole lot of ignorant  
questions about Africans. I mean, do they wear clothes, and all that—

Mama: Well, now, I guess if you think we so ignorant 'round here maybe

you shouldn't bring your friends here—

Beneatha: It's just that people ask such crazy things. All anyone seems to know about when it comes to Africa is Tarzan—

Mama: Why should I know anything about Africa? (*Raisin* 56-57)

Mama knows little about Africa. She mistakes Nigeria for Liberia, the first independent country composed of freed or newly liberated American slaves in Africa. Being accused of ignorance, she retorts to her daughter that there is no necessity for her to know about Africa. It is also true for general American blacks even though they share the same blood origin with the African people. Living and growing up in America, these African Americans are more like white Americans than Africans in terms of their thinking. They may only think of Tarzan when it comes to the image of Africa, doubting whether Africans wear clothes, for the school education they receive or the movies they watch have made African the synonym of barbarians (Isaacs 335). They never have the access to the real African culture but can only figure out the African impression through books, exotic products exported to America, and the mass media which may be full of distorted images.

There is another example of African Americans' ignorance of Africa in the play when Lena Younger feels confused about the difference between Nigeria and Yoruba. Asagai clarifies the two names for her: the former is his country name, and latter is the tribal origin. The African place names can be confusing for African Americans, not to mention African thinking and culture, which create only an exotic feeling. These names are all new to the blacks living in America,.

African Americans who choose a white American identity do not understand

and appreciate African heritage. Falling assimilated to a society which rejects the blacks' equal right as human beings is definitely not going to promise African Americans a positive cultural identity.

#### B. Empowerment of the African "Roots"

Both distortion and ignorance are wrong attitude towards the African cultural origin. In the play, Hansberry introduces the beauty and wisdom of African culture and speaks out the importance of African Americans' gaining their racial confidence by accepting the African cultural "roots."<sup>3</sup> Hansberry presents the space of Africa through Joseph Asagai, the college student from Nigeria, who provides the positive image of Africa. The arrangement of this African character has evoked the African American characters' racial confidence as well as their African instinct deep in their heart. The playwright subverts the general impression of Africans through Asagai, who is presented as a decent and handsome young man full of confidence and ambition. In this way, she expresses that African people are not barbarians; instead, they can be intellectual as long as they receive proper education. This portrayal of Asagai enables not only the white but also the black audiences to reconsider the image of Africa.

On the stage of *A Raisin in the Sun*, Africa becomes visible to the American audiences who mostly used to be ignorant of the things related to Africa. Joseph Asagai is a key character who not only brings another African perspective to the play

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<sup>3</sup> Because roots might be also some constructed representation, critics like Paul Gilroy, Stuart Hall, and James Clifford all stress "[r]outes rather and roots" (qtd. in Barker 201). However, here by using African cultural "roots," I focus on their African ethnicity. In other words, I agree with those critics' view on the impossible return to unified African roots. I highlight these black Americans' "Africanness," which will be discussed in the representation of Asagai.

but also leads the readers and audience to treat the African issue with a more positive and appreciative mind. With this character coming from Africa, this play helps usher in the new awareness and discussion of African culture. In the play, Hansberry tries to present in the lines the essence of African culture to the audiences who have never heard of or had the channel of understanding terms like “Ashanti empires,” “sculptures of Benin,” or “poetry of Bantu” before (*Raisin* 81). It is significant that Hansberry unveils the mystery of Africa and reveals it as an ancient civilization full of wisdom. As Hansberry suggests, Africans are people with great wisdom. They are “the first to melt iron on the face of the earth;” furthermore, “the Ashanti were performing surgical operation when the English were still tattooing with blue dragons” (*Raisin* 81). Although the presented image of Africa may be totally different from most people’s stereotypes, the play could become a threshold for a new understanding of the African culture, which is gradually voicing out its wisdom and profoundness. As one critic notices, “Blackness is not only beautiful and distinctive” but also the name by which the blacks want to be known (Riach 181). Black Americans are going to get rid of the name “Negro,” which means “apathetic,” “lazy,” and “stupid” (Riach 181). They also realize there is a need to move from the whites’ definition of them and to tell the whites to recognize what they really are (Riach 181). Through the characters’ speeches on the stage, the author successfully levels her people up with focus and respect.

In the play, Hansberry tries to clarify the importance and emphasize the freshness of African cultural roots for American blacks. Costume and dance are the two cultural styles she mainly deals with. Inspired by Asagai, characters like Beneatha



and Walter can awaken their African genes in their blood, find themselves free from ordinary dull life, and gain some spiritual power.

To find their racial confidence, Hansberry thinks African Americans should try to accept and appreciate their cultural roots. For example, when Beneatha tries on the African robe, her ignorance toward African culture is exposed, but her trial and acceptance of the indigenous apparel carried much significance. Seeing the colorful Nigeria robe given by Asagai as a present, Beneatha is excited and eager to try it on. But, she still has to learn from Asagai how to “drape it properly” (*Raisin* 61) since she is not an African accustomed to the African dressing style. After she gets well dressed, she is “coquettishly fanning herself with an ornate oriental fan, mistakenly more like Butterfly than any Nigerian that ever was” (*Raisin* 76). Because she does not understand African culture, she can not behave properly with the robe on. Although Beneatha in the tribal costume may look like a burlesque, she is symbolically trying to get rid of the “assimilationist junk” around her life (*Raisin* 76). She does not feel shameful to try the robe on and show it to her family and friends; instead, she feels proud of her African root. It is her Nigerian robe that empowers her to feel so special and indulged in the image of being a Nigerian woman.

Beneatha might be regarded as a young girl chasing after fashion, but she does express her great interests in African culture. While she childishly tries to efface the physical characteristic of her curl hair she was born with by weekly “mutilat[ing]” and straightening the “crinkly” and “raw” hair which she regards as hard to manage (*Raisin* 62), she does not feel insulted but proud to dress in the African style in front of her date, George Murchison. Her vanguard action directs a diverse way from

American mainstream culture. Instead of effacing her African root, she chooses to respect and embrace it, and empower herself with the abundant cultural heritage left by their ancestors.

Besides identifying with the African root, Hansberry implies it is also important for African Americans to appreciate their African culture. Even though they know little about African culture, they can still rid off their negative emotions and gain some positive powers. For example, in the play, when Walter and Beneatha in their living room want to dance the African war dance, they have little knowledge about how to dance the real war dance. When they finally dance their version of war dance, the war dance they improvise, performed in a different space and time, has lost its original meaning. Far from following the tradition, it is not performed before going to the war or going hunting as it used to be, and nor is it set in an open and wild African tribe. On the contrary, the characters dance up and down in their too little and shabby living room. This kind of expressive roaring emotions seems to be unbearable for their little apartment, which fails to provide enough space for the Youngers. The overcrowded atmosphere is accompanied with a sense of repression in the space. The misplacement brings some comic relief to the play. As a reviewer recalls the night when he saw the play on the stage, he remembers this scene “convulsed the house with laughter” (Isaacs 331). Moreover, these African Americans apparently have no opportunity to learn the indigenous African war dance. They know nothing more than their white counterparts do about African culture. Their dance is self-invented out of their imagination toward what the African war dance could be like since they have never really witnessed and experienced it. No longer authentic, their dance, under the

influence of the media, might be mostly composed of their memory and imagination about native Americans, the aborigines who are so rich in music and dance.

However, through the war dance, Walter and Beneatha actually express their feeling and show their strength, for the body movement is the most direct way of expression. In *Postcolonial Drama*, Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins clearly explain the dancer's subjectivity<sup>4</sup> as a kind of performing body:

As a culturally coded activity, dance has a number of important functions in drama: not only does it concentrate the audience's gaze on the performing body/bodies, but it also draws attention to proxemic relations between characters, spectators, and features of the set. (239)

Therefore, dance "renegotiates dramatic action and dramatic activity" and "[reinforces] the actor's corporeality" (Gilbert and Tompkins 239). In the movement of dance, the dancers can establish their cultural context and execute challenges to the dominant subjectivity through "self-representation" (239). According to the stage direction, Walter is pretending to be "a leader of his people, a great chief, a descendent of Chaka,"<sup>5</sup> holding the "imaginary spear and actively spearing enemies all over the

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<sup>4</sup> Chris Barker points out the difference between subjectivity and cultural identity. He defines subjectivity as "the condition of being a person and the processes by which we become a person" (Barker 165). Identities, however, are "wholly social constructions and cannot 'exist' outside of cultural representations and acculturation" (Barker 165). For more information about the difference between subjectivity and identity, please see Ch.6 in Barker's *Cultural Studies: Theory and Practice*, p.165-192.

<sup>5</sup> Chaka, also known as Shaka, or Shaka Zulu, was an early nineteenth century warrior-king. He implemented the advanced warfare techniques and weaponry, incorporated the warriors from defeated tribes into his own army, and established military towns in order to ensure good training for his armies. In addition, he contributed a lot to war strategies and weapon designing. To this day, the name Shaka Zulu gets high praise and respect in military circles. On the other hand, Chaka incidentally is the creator of the weapon called "assegai," which sounds quite close to the name of the African character "Asagai" in this play. It may be hard to tell the author's intention of the coincidental arrangement here, but in the stage direction the author has deliberately connects Walter, the African American, and Asagai, the African, together with the mentioning of the great African king, Chaka (James 25; Isaacs 331).

room” (*Raisin* 78). Even an ordinary man can be endowed with the power of the African warrior king in his body performance and therefore gain some spiritual refreshment. It seems that the deeply-rooted African genes in these American blacks’ interiors are awakened and the connection to the old ancestral tribes is rebuilt. The exclamations “Ethiopia stretch forth her hands again!” represents the strength and wisdom of ancient African culture<sup>6</sup> and “The lion is waking . . . Owimoweh!” refers to that African countries begin to demand their independence of colonial rule (*Raisin* 77-78).<sup>7</sup> During the tribal war dance, the characters do depart from their real life and enter their imaginary world, answering the calling of freedom from ancient Africans and embracing the African cultural identity they were born with in their blood. In this play, Hansberry not only provides positive images of Africa but also instructs African Americans to gain racial confidence by accepting and appreciating their African roots.

### C. The American Identity

African Americans can get confidence by appreciating their own African roots, but they need not to go back to Africa. The most quintessential thing for them is to figure out their new identity in their current living space in American society. Even though African cultural roots can help American blacks gain their racial confidence, there is no need for them to go back to Africa because it is a totally alien country for them. At this moment, Hansberry arranges Asagai’s proposal in the play as the crucial point for Beneatha to make a final choice between George and Asagai, or between

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<sup>6</sup> Ethiopia could be found in the Bible and in the writings of Herodotus and Homer. In history, it used to be known as Abyssinia. Back in the first century B.C.E., some Middle Eastern traders had settled there (James 24).

<sup>7</sup> “Owimoweh” is the title of an African chant, referring to the waking of the lion (James 25).

America and Africa. Being an active and intelligent woman, Beneatha is not going to marry George, who underestimates her ambition and ignores her dream. She has no direct answer to Asagai's proposal, but the playwright shows her personal attitude to this lifetime choice in the last scene. Asagai's marriage proposal offers Beneatha "a promise of life in a soon-to-be independent Nigeria" rather than being an African-American bourgeois wife from the other choice with all the "dullness and pretentiousness" (Berrian 153). Throughout the play, Beneatha has been searching for her own identity. Asagai's proposal seems to provide what she has quested for her whole life. However, it is still questionable whether going back to Africa could be so idealistic for African Americans because in this play the playwright does not provide us with the consequence of Beneatha's decision.

In fact, Hansberry keeps a conservative attitude toward the idea of going back to Africa by exposing Beneatha's confusion and hesitation. When Asagai is trying to comfort anguished Beneatha in the last scene, he abruptly invites her to go back home, to Africa, with him. Beneatha at first misunderstands what he means, but he later explains:

Asagai: I mean across the ocean, home—to Africa.

Beneatha: To Africa?

Asagai: Yes! . . . Three hundred years later the African Prince rose up out of the seas and swept the maiden back across the middle passage over which her ancestors had come—

Beneatha: To—to Nigeria?

Asagai: Nigeria. Home. I will show you our mountains and our stars; and

give you cool drinks from gourds and teach you the old songs and the ways of our people—and in time, we will pretend that—you have only been away for a day . . . (*Raisin* 136-7)

In their conversation, this suggestion sounds unbelievable to Beneatha because it seems to have never come to her mind. Africa, such a remote idea for her, may not mean “home” to her. What Asagai depicts is just a beautified picture which may lead Beneatha to forget the present unbearable sorrow temporarily. This African dream is untried because she has never witnessed the reality in the African countries.

Moreover, at this stage in history, some American blacks were invited to go back to newly-established African countries but they found Africa totally different from what they had imagined.<sup>8</sup> They were not able to accept this “real Africa,” since it was not the Africa in their imagination (Berrian 158). Being alienated outsiders, they could not accept the real Africa, and neither could they find the identity they were searching for.

At the end of the play, Hansberry indicates the idea of going back to Africa is impractical and useless for African Americans in search of identity. When the Youngers are about to move, Beneatha tells Mama about Asagai’s request. Mama seems to concentrate more on the business of moving, the more immediate and pressing reality, than grasp the meaning of what Beneatha tells her.

Beneatha: Mama, Asagai asked me to marry him today and go to

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<sup>8</sup> Kwame Nkumah openly invites African-Americans to go to Ghana when the country became independent in 1957. The African representatives arrived in the United Nations and encouraged African-Americans to replace their feelings of indifference, rejection, and shame for Africa with those of acceptance, pride, and appreciation. However, these African Americans in search of their dream and identities soon discovered that Africa was an illusion (Berrian 154).

Africa—

Mama: (*In the middle of her getting ready activity*) He did? You ain't old enough to marry nobody—(*Seeing the moving men lifting one of her chairs precariously*) Darling, that ain't no bale of cotton, please handle it so we can sit in it again! I had that chair twenty-five years . . .

Beneatha: (*Girlishly and unreasonably trying to pursue the conversation*)

To go to Africa, Mama—be a doctor in Africa . . .

Mama: (*Distracted*) Yes, baby—

Walter: Africa! What he want you to go to Africa for?

Beneatha: To practice there . . . (*Raisin 150*)

Both Mama's absent-mindedness and Walter's suspicious query cast doubts on the necessity of the action. The idea of going to Africa never comes into Mama's mind, so she just replies carelessly. Walter's response directly points out the impracticality. Even though Beneatha answers that she is going to practice medicine there, this dream to be a doctor in Africa is still like a castle in the air because of a list of obstacles. To begin with, since she does not know the African language, how will she communicate with her patients? Then, Beneatha has not even been to the medical school to learn medicine yet, how is she going to practice? Also, since there may not be any advanced hospital facilities in underdeveloped Nigeria, there are few things she can help by just going there. After Walter shifts the topic, Beneatha no longer picks up the African dream because Beneatha herself does not seem to be positive about this proposal. Hansberry ends the issue here, leaving more spaces for readers and audiences to ponder on: Do the African Americans really identify themselves with Africa? Do they

have to regain their confidence by going to a country they have never got acquainted with? Is it possible for them to go to Africa and just pretend that they have only left for one day? The answers to these questions are all negative. What these African Americans have to think about is their connection with the land they are dwelling in—America, and their future in American society.

Hansberry faced the similar situation of choice in her own life. Like some blacks who no longer regarded the United States as a place to live out their lives, Hansberry's father and elder brothers decided to migrate. As Mr. Hansberry had little romantic view toward Africa, he chose Mexico, where he made his fortune in business. The brothers fixed their eyes on West Africa and developed their business in the promising land. However, Lorraine Hansberry herself opted for "not Africa, or Mexico, but Chicago and New York" (Isaacs 336). She had her own strong view of racial and national identity, so to her it is an absurd idea that "persons of African descent should return to Africa" (Isaacs 336). Instead, she held a belief that "Africans have their own national identities, and American Negroes have—or must now shape—their own" (Isaacs 336). It is the American Negroes' lessons to consider what roles they are going to play in the future. They should make a decision about what Africa means to them. This play is a starter of the crucial issue for African Americans.

In his "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," Stuart Hall points out two different ways of thinking about "cultural identity." The first one is based on the "shared culture" and "shared history" people hold in common. It has a "stable, unchanging and continuous" meaning ("Diaspora" 223). However, the second way is to conceive cultural identity as a matter of "becoming." According to Hall, we should think of



identity as a “production” always in process (“Diaspora” 222). It is not “fixed” but the “continuous ‘play’ of history, culture and power” (“Diaspora” 225). He also provides a new understanding of Africa for people of African descent in search of their identity. The idea of Africa should be regarded as changing with the passage of time. In the endless process, the old, shared cultural identities may serve as a base, but the new, becoming ones define what people really are in the present. The old Africa is figured as “the mother of different civilizations” as well as the center of cultural identity providing the meaning (“Diaspora” 224). However, it is no longer there and has been transformed and become a ground for new Africa for those who have African roots but no longer act in the African way. Although they may strongly be linked to their tradition and origin, they do not necessarily need to or want to return to the past. As Hall suggests, “to this Africa . . . we can’t literally go home again” (“Diaspora” 232). But when the critic speaks of Africa, it is the new one, a “constructive element” which we retell “through politics, memory, and desire” (“Diaspora” 232-3). In the new world of America and at the beginning of diaspora, the cultural forms are diversified with hybridity and difference. It is the space where “creolisation and assimilation” are negotiated and where “fateful/fatal encounter [is] staged between Africa and the West” (“Diaspora” 234). While the diaspora identities are “constantly producing and reproducing,” the diaspora experience is not derived by “essence or purity” but by the recognition of “heterogeneity and diversity” (“Diaspora” 235). Hence, Africa is just one of the various options for African Americans to choose from.

Since African Americans no longer stick to their African identities, they need to figure out their own identities in the context of the new time and space. It is not a

choice of either “returning to its roots” or “disappearing through assimilation and homogenization” but with other possibilities in between (“Question” 310). Hall proposes that it is their obligation to “come to terms with the new culture they inhabit, without simply assimilating to them and losing their identities completely” (“Question” 310). They can choose to be unified to neither the old sense nor the hegemonic culture they are exposed to, but follow “the particular cultures, traditions, languages, and histories by which they are shaped” (“Question” 310). These people losing the cultural purity and renouncing their ambition of rediscovering the “ethnic absolutism” are “irrevocably translated” (“Question” 310). The only choice for these African Americans is not looking back but keeping going and struggling. The present time and the space of America they are currently living in and belong to will be the clues and starting points for them to find their own identities.

*A Raisin in the Sun* manifests that sticking to either African or American identity is not feasible. Based on Hall’s theory, the identity these American blacks have to recognize is the mixture and hybridity of both African and American ones. While the former plays as a base and root, the latter adds new spirits into it. It will be African Americans’ mission to create their own identity which benefits from both African and American cultures.

### **III. The Victory of Self-Esteem**

#### **A. Big Walter Younger**

In addition to the clues for the future trend of African Americans’ cultural identities, in the final resolution, Hansberry further conveys that the Youngers can

gain their self-confidence by sticking to the family pride. The family pride, the most precious legacy Big Walter leaves, is a philosophy of self-recognition and self-respect. Even though living in a hard time, he never has greed for making big money through any risky or cheating business. He works for his family's happiness, not for personal material indulgence. With principles built on the solid ground, he is responsible for himself, keeping a steady step towards his dream of buying his family a house and providing them with a better life. Big Walter's honesty makes him a man with honor and dignity. As the morality in the old days is going to be lost in the new generations, it is still the most important spirit with which the Youngers and all African Americans should bear in mind in their journey of searching for identity.

Throughout the play, the dead father still seems to live around the other family members' life and have a great influence on them as the insurance money he has left brings all the great expectations to the family's future. Big Walter is a man who possesses an extremely optimistic attitude in chasing after dreams, as Lena recalls:

Big Walter used to say, he'd get right wet in the eyes something, lean his head back with the water standing in his eyes and say, "Seem like God didn't see fit to give the black man nothing but dreams—but he did give us children to make them dreams worth while." (*Raisin* 45-6)

The older generations always believe that they can leave their unfinished dream to their descendents so that their dream never ends or dies out. After the father's diligent work for his whole life, the insurance money becomes a crucial chance to fulfill the family's dream. It also carries a significant symbolic meaning of the dead father's heritage, of the family spirit, and of the chance of moving upward as well. In spite of

himself being absent in the whole play, his labor, hard work, and life philosophy are all passed down with the insurance money. On the one hand, the money Big Walter leaves brings the material realization of the dream to the family and represents the crucial chance for improvement. This ten-thousand check is too huge an amount of money for all the Youngers to imagine in their life. Only with the money can they get the chance, the passion, and the courage to challenge the white power. In spite of the loss of some, they have actually got a real estate, a house which belongs to them and also the courage to fight on. On the other hand, through cooperation with the family members and reconstruction of the family value, they preserve the priceless family pride passed down through generations. And we find the family bound and family dignity preserved well by the female characters to ensure that the sons of the young generations can inherit their family pride and stick to each other. The family spirit will never die since there are Walter, Travis, and the expected baby to pass it on. As the family name "Younger" suggests youth, energy, and hope, the dream is fulfilled in some way because the Youngers regain their spiritual pride and the strength of dreaming.

The concrete manifestation of preserving the family pride is found on Lena, Ruth, and Walter. The strong-minded female characters, Mama and Ruth, reveal the importance of stabilizing one's value judgment, which can be generated from the mutual support of the family members, especially the matriarch in the black family structure. In the black or minority groups, these females are always tougher than males, and they also remind the family members of the value of moral lessons and family relationship.

## B. Lena Younger

As a caring mother, Lena is responsible for leading her children to inherit Big Walter's spirit and cherish the family pride. A critic provides the definition of the Black Matriarch<sup>9</sup> and also points out that Lena Younger, like the light her name symbolically suggests, is a matriarch who guides her children in the correct direction, and Ruth, her daughter-in-law, struggles with the matriarch role (Anderson 93). Lena Younger is a mother who cares about her children's needs and instruct them with moral lessons. She corresponds to the image of matriarch who incidentally emasculates her son by denying all his decisions, but she does not intend to do so all the time. Out of her strong love, she still tries to help him find back his dignity in the end. Nothing is important to her if she knows her assistance or intervention will destroy her boy's dream. She finally yields the money to him because she is not willing to see her son giving up his life. When Beneatha complains that George only wants a nice, sophisticated girl but not a poet, Mama understands that she calls him a fool and refuses him because she despises his shallowness (*Raisin* 96, 98). For Lena, her daughter's happiness means much more than how rich George is. The competent mother plays the roles of both a spiritual guide and a caring protector.

In the last scene, facing Karl Lindner, Lena guides Walter to make the final crucial decision. She declares to her son the belief that human dignity is much more important than anything else.

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<sup>9</sup> According to the critic, there are some common tendencies of the black matriarch. First, she regards the Black male as undependable and is frequently responsible for his emasculation. Second, she is often very religious. Third, she regards mothering as one of the most important things in her life, attempts to shield her children from the white world, and is ready to accept prejudices of the white world (Anderson 93).

Son—I come from five generations of people who was slaves and sharecroppers—but ain't nobody in my family never let nobody pay 'em no money that was a way of telling us we wasn't fit to walk the earth. We ain't never been that poor. We ain't never been that—dead inside. (*Raisin* 143)

Lena reminds her son that they are a group of people with souls and dignity but not born slaves without personal wills. They would never lose their own minds as long as they do not follow what the whites suppose them to do. No matter how hard their condition may be, it is most worthwhile that they walk their own road without obeying the whites' orders. The family influence Lena brings to Walter includes a strong sense of self-esteem and pride in this heritage. Not until her son becomes a real man on the right path does Lena retire and enjoy the rest of her life in her garden.

To her daughter, Beneatha, Lena teaches her the power of belief. Religion is essential in Mama's life and she values morality much higher than money. However, she is challenged by Beneatha, who believes that human's power is stronger than the religious God and questions the existence of God in front of her mother:

It's all a matter of ideas, and God is just one idea I don't accept . . . It's just that I get tired of Him getting credit for all the things the human race achieves through its own stubborn effort. There simply is no blasted God—there is only man and it is *he* makes miracles! (*Raisin* 51)

Shocked by her daughter's blasphemy, Lena slaps her daughter powerfully on the face and forces her to repeat: "In my mother's house there is still God" (*Raisin* 51). She can not accept that her daughter looks at the world in such a materialistic view. She

strives to preserve the belief in God because it serves as a kind of spiritual provision that the young generation gradually lose when their eyes only concentrate on the material pleasures.

Another thing Lena does not want her daughter to forget is the real meaning of love. Feeling desperate about her brother and her own future, Beneatha's hopelessness is expressed in her statement that "there is nothing left to love" (*Raisin* 145). But Mama passes her hopeful attitude toward her daughter. She explains,

There is always something left to love. And if you ain't learned that, you ain't learned nothing . . . Child, when do you think is the time to love somebody the most? When they done good and made things easy for everybody? Well then, you ain't through learning—because that ain't the time at all. It's when he's at his lowest and can't believe in hisself 'cause the world done whipped him so! When you starts measuring somebody, measure him right, child, measure him right. (*Raisin* 145)

Lena, who knows too well the bitterness of defeat, tells Beneatha why she must love her brother even more when he is down and even when he is the prime cause of her misery. Lena points out love and family connection are the most significant part to help them survive when they face the lowest time in life.

Being both caretaker and instructor, Lena endlessly devotes care and love to her children, guiding them always in the correct direction. Although she is the owner of the insurance money, she is not willing to spend the money on personal travel but uses the money to buy the house for the entire family and to support Beneatha's schooling. Her biggest dream is to help her children and grandchildren bear the family dignity in

mind and understand the significance of morality and love.

### C. Ruth Younger

The daughter-in-law, Ruth, plays the role of the good wife and inherits Mama's matriarchal spirit to protect the home. The choice of the name, Ruth, enables the readers to think about the biblical figure. The Book of Ruth emphasizes "the value of having home and family," and it "contains the controlling metaphor of fecundity as the sign of divine reward" (Ardolino 181). Ruth in the play is another female character who believes in the old value and devotes herself to the family. She also insists on moving to the new house, which she believes will bring them new chances.

Although Ruth is not the main character in the play, she crucially bridges the other characters and supports them to hold on until the last minute. Like Lena, she distrusts Walter's plan of liquor business and doubts his judgment. When Walter tries to explain his plan to her, she rejects it by answering "Eat your eggs, they gonna be cold" (*Raisin* 33). Her cold reaction does not mean she intends to frustrate her husband. It is just because as a mother, she cares more about their current economical plight than the impractical fantasy. Even though she cannot totally agree with Walter, she tries to understand him and persuade Mama that Walter has his reason.

Mama: We ain't no business people, Ruth. We just plain working folks.

Ruth: Ain't nobody business people till they go into business. Walter say colored people ain't never going to start getting ahead till they start gambling on some different kinds of things in the world—investments and things. (*Raisin* 42)

She tries to help with communication between mother and son because she wants



neither Lena nor Walter to be hurt in misunderstanding. She clearly knows that they only share a single goal: to improve their life and create a promising future. Because Ruth always puts her family's happiness at the first place, she insists on moving into the new house even after the family realizes that Walter has lost the money. While Mama loses her strength and thinks it better to remain in their old and cramped apartment, Ruth stays determined. It does not matter for her to "work twenty hours a day," "scrub all the floors in America and wash all the sheets in America" (*Raisin* 140) because she knows that the only way to save her marriage and her family is to move into the new house. If they can not escape from the ghetto, they will be eternally stuck in the vicious circle of poverty. Ruth's response reflects "the truth about black people and black women Hansberry sought to bring to the stage" (Barthelemy 775). That is, black women could hardly be weak because they have to be strong for their families and communities so that they can survive in hardship.

Mama and Ruth, the traditional domestic women, may be blamed for their old-fashioned attitude toward the new trend of thinking, but they still carry the pride that is worthy of respect and can help Walter and Beneatha to stand firmly again and reconsider the path of their quest for identity. Hansberry's women are not "plaster saints" but human beings that make mistakes (Barthelemy 777). However, they bravely admit mistakes and learn from errors, so they never lose their strength. This play celebrates family as "the anchor by which the individual maintains pride, sense of purpose, and resilience in the face of social injustice and personal despair" (Scanlan 196). The family pride preserved by the female characters would always direct the road for black people.

#### D. Walter Younger

Inspired by the two female characters, Walter finally understands Big Walter's legacy and manifests the family pride of self-dignity and self-assertion in his decision. Immature and short-sighted Walter loses the money "made out of [his] father's flesh," and enrages his mother to beat him on the face with all her disappointed anger (*Raisin* 128-9). And later he is taught by Lena to remember Big Walter's spirit and not to sell himself out before he is going to make the final decision in the last scene. The son is exhorted by his mother that he should inherit the father's optimistic spirit and should not lose his hope:

Well—son, I'm waiting to hear you say something . . . I'm waiting to hear how you be your father's son. Be the man he was . . . And I'm waiting to hear you talk like him . . . I'm waiting to see you stand up and look like your daddy . . . (*Raisin* 75)

Big Walter is such a strong image in Lena and the other family members' mind because he never sells out his pride for material enjoyments in his whole life no matter how tough the situation is.

After his mother's timely reasoning and teaching, standing at the crossroads of accepting or rejecting Karl Lindner's request, the son finally retrieves his manhood by inheriting his father's strong will. He tells the white man:

My father almost beat a man to death once because this man called him a bad name or something . . . we are very proud people. And that's my sister over there and she's going to be a doctor—and we are very proud . . . And we have decided to move into our house because my

father—my father—he earned it for us brick by brick. (*Raisin* 147-8)

Walter finally stands up as a man, a man who can judge righteousness and wrongness and protect his own family from suffering. His decision also gets the approval from Mama, who happily sees the growth of her son. Walter understands how an honest and proud man, like his father, achieves success with his own bare hands. Only with this self-assertion can he respect himself and then receive others' respect.

To survive in the white-dominating society and find their own identity, it is very important for African Americans to struggle against the white power, regain their own cultural confidence, and cherish family dignity. In the play, the playwright uses Lena's plant as a prophetic footnote to symbolize African Americans' destiny and dream.

Without the sunny space, the plant will wither; likewise, without the acknowledgement of their ethnic roots, African American will be forever lost. The Youngers' dream sprouts under the mother's and the departed father's spirit. In Scene One, Mama mourns for her plant because "if this little plant don't get more sun than it's been getting it ain't never going to see spring again" (*Raisin* 40). The family, like the plant, can only have the natural sunlight through the little window located in the kitchen area in the old house. It is always Mama's dream that they can buy a house with a little garden in the back and with plenty of warm sunlight. However, this dream has never had a chance to come true. Lena used to be a great dreamer in her times and was thought to be too radical in thinking. She recalls,

"Lena—Lena Eggleston, you aims too high all the time. You needs to slow down and see life a little more like it is. Just slow down some."

That's what they always used to say down home—"Lord, that Lena

Eggleston is a high-minded thing . . .” (*Raisin* 139)

Even though it is too idealistic for the ordinary people to imagine, the aspiration drives her and her husband to trek north to Chicago so as to realize their dream with their bare but strong hands. This couple are such strong-willed persons that no matter how far away the destination is and how slowly they step forward, as long as they make their children continue the unfinished fight, they will never give up their dream. Near the end of the play, the gardening tools the family have bought are the best present for Lena, for they are reminiscent of the dream which is going to be fulfilled. The “brand-new sparkling set of gardening tools,” “the first present in her life without its being Christmas,” brings them hope and strength as the new house provides a new starting point (*Raisin* 123). At the end, taken by Mama to the new home, the little plant has no fear of withering and dying of insufficient light. Under Lena’s care, the children as well as the plant will find a new way to live on.