

The Deferred African American Dream Depicted in Harlem by Langston Hughes and Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*

Syaila Nur Amaliyah

Universitas Gadjah Mada, Yogyakarta, Indonesia

Email: syailaamaliyah@gmail.com

Correspondence: syailaamaliyah@gmail.com*

KEYWORDS

American Dream; Harlem; A Raisin in the Sun; Sociology of Literature; Social Justice

ABSTRACT

This research analyzes how the American Dream is represented and why the depiction of the dream is written as a dream "deferred" in Langston Hughes's poem Harlem and Lorraine Hansberry's play *A Raisin in the Sun*. Systemic racism and economic limitations have historically prevented many African Americans from achieving the American Dream, their dream in this case being equal opportunity and financial stability. This research uses qualitative methods, based on the Sociology of Literature theory of Rene Wellek and Austin Warren, to analyze how Hughes and Hansberry depict the American dream and the effects of African Americans' challenges in pursuing their aspirations in the 1950s. The result of this study shows that The American Dream for the Younger family includes a decent home, a fulfilling job, and educational opportunities. Mama's desire for a better home reflects the aspirations of African Americans. Despite obstacles, Mama remains resilient, supporting Walter's business ambitions and Beneatha's dream of becoming a doctor. Economic limitations and racial discrimination pose challenges, impacting the family's well-being. Yet, their unity and determination symbolize resilience. Hughes' "Harlem" highlights the consequences of deferred dreams, mirroring the family's struggles. These narratives underscore the importance of perseverance and unity in pursuing the American Dream amidst adversity.

Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-SA 4.0)



1. Introduction

The American Dream, which promises success and prosperity through hard work and determination, has become a central and iconic theme in American cultural literature. However, this dream is fraught with contradictions and complexities, particularly for African Americans. Due to persistent inequalities in wealth, education, employment, and housing—rooted in racial discrimination—African Americans have been unable to fully realize the American Dream (Johnson, 2014). Nesbitt suggests (2004) that the racial dimension of mass incarceration is its most striking

feature. No other country in the world imprisons so many of its racial or ethnic minorities. The United States imprisons a larger percentage of its black population than South Africa did at the height of apartheid. The literature of the Harlem Renaissance in the mid-20th century offers a rich tapestry for examining African Americans' aspirations, struggles, and realities in their pursuit of this elusive dream. When white America catches cold, black America catches pneumonia. This relationship has meant more to our development than anything else (Bristow, 2012; Driscoll, 2021). The poem Harlem by Langston Hughes and Lorraine Hansberry's play A Raisin in The Sun provide and offer deep insight into the African American experience and the American Dream according to each individual. Shukla (2024) explores Hughes' work's authenticity and emotional depth, including "Harlem." Rampersad discusses how Hughes addresses the African American experience and the impact of deferred dreams on the community.

This study analyzes the depiction of the American Dream in Hughes's "Harlem" and Hansberry's "A Raisin in The Sun" through the perspective of Literary Sociology theory. By examining the social, cultural, and economic contexts in which these works were created, the research seeks to deepen the understanding of the broader implications of the American Dream for African Americans during that period. Hughes's metaphor-laden and poignant poetry captures African Americans' frustrations and deferred dreams. At the same time, Hansberry's groundbreaking drama vividly portrays the struggles and aspirations of the Younger family in Chicago, highlighting the racial discrimination and challenges faced by the broader African American community in the 1950s. Themes of racial injustice and deferred dreams are present in Hughes' poetry and Hansberry's play. They discuss how both works critique systemic barriers and emphasize the enduring hope for a better future (Bhattacharya, 2022; Jose, 2014; Nowrouzi et al., 2015).

This study seeks to uncover the fundamental themes and messages concerning the American Dream and how writers situate their literary works within society. Min & Kim (2002) explore how ethnic American writers, including African American, Latino, and Asian American authors, negotiate the American Dream within the context of their cultural identities. It discusses themes of assimilation, identity, and belonging. Allen (2020) provides a cultural history of the American Dream, focusing on its representation in literature and popular culture. Samuel (2012) examines how American literature, from early colonial times to the present, reflects the ideals and contradictions of the American Dream. Cullen (2013) claims the American Dream and traces its historical evolution. It discusses how literature reflects and shapes societal perceptions of this concept over time, influencing both writers and readers. Doing so, aims to enhance comprehension of literary texts while contributing to broader discussions on race, identity, and social justice in America. Using sociological literature theories, researchers will investigate how Hughes and Hansberry utilized their respective mediums to critique and reflect upon societal norms and structures that influence the African American experience. This approach offers a more comprehensive and inclusive perspective on the American Dream from an African American standpoint. This approach effectively reveals the profound significance of the text and its societal relevance, despite its susceptibility to subjective interpretation. The primary methodologies

employed in this study involve a close analysis of the two literary works, supplemented by pertinent scholarly sources such as books, journal articles, and literary critiques.

2. Materials and Methods

This study examines two significant American literary works: Langston Hughes's poem "Harlem" and Lorraine Hansberry's drama "A Raisin in the Sun." These works were selected because they both explore the American Dream from an African American perspective. Data for this research is gathered through text analysis and secondary sources such as books, journal articles, and relevant literary critiques. The analysis focuses on understanding the authors' themes, characters, settings, and symbolism. The core variable studied is the concept of the American Dream, with literary elements serving as independent variables that depict this concept. A literary sociology approach is employed to investigate the social, cultural, and economic contexts influencing the portrayal of the American Dream in these works. This approach facilitates a comparative analysis to identify similarities and differences in depicting the American Dream.

The methodology utilized is qualitative analysis with a literary sociology framework. It involves detailed reading, identification of key themes, contextual analysis, and comparative examination of the two works. While effective in uncovering the deeper meanings and social relevance of the texts, this method acknowledges potential subjectivity in interpretation. Key tools include the primary texts of the literary works and supporting materials such as books, journal articles, and literary critiques.

3. Result and Discussion

Pride in Heritage Identity

Every individual or group should consistently seek and take pride in their identity, which is intricately tied to the inner workings of life. A nation's unity and solidarity, as well as the robustness of its culture, are strengthened by the clarity and strength of its identity. According to Brown Swan and Cetrà (2022), national unity is significantly influenced by writers who articulate their own identities. Writers play a crucial role in shaping and reflecting a nation's collective identity. Through literary works, histories, essays, and other forms of writing, writers can narrate stories that depict a society's values, norms, traditions, and shared experiences. These works mirror reality and influence perceptions and interpretations of African American identity. They construct narratives that affirm the dignity, history, and contributions of the African American community to the broader society (Browdy & Milu, 2022; Dillard & Neal, 2020; Gatwiri & Moran, 2023; Mason, 2021).

African American writers have been instrumental in shaping the identity and cohesion of their community through works that reflect and validate their experiences, challenges, and aspirations. While the larger community may not explicitly acknowledge their impact, the contributions of these writers remain pivotal in fostering collective awareness and a resilient national identity. Therefore, there are some data explained as follows below:

Data 1:

"Asagai: I am not an assimilationist. I am not something that just happens on the surface. Being an African is more than an epidermis phenomenon. It is a culture and a heritage." (Hansberry, 1956:86)

As evidenced by Asagai's statement, he rejects assimilation into the dominant culture and underscores that cultural heritage encompasses more than mere physical attributes. He emphasizes that identifying as African entails appreciating and acknowledging the depth of African culture, encompassing values like solidarity, courage, and justice, along with diverse traditions and practices that contribute to a robust and varied identity. Asagai's statement underscores the significance of preserving African history, values, and customs. He recognizes the advocacy for cultural heritage as pivotal to African identity formation at the individual and community levels.

Data 2:

The scene in which Beneatha unveils her natural haircut is an interesting example. In 1959, when the play was presented, the wide variety of Afro styles introduced in the mid-sixties had not yet arrived: the very few black women who wore unstraightened hair cut it very short. When the hair of Diana Sands (who created the role) was cropped in this fashion, however, a few days before the opening, it was not contoured to suit her: Her particular facial structure required a fuller Afro, of the sort she in fact adopted in later years. Result? Rather than vitiate the playwright's point—the beauty of black hair—the scene was dropped. (Hansberry, 1956:9)

An intriguing moment occurred when Beneatha displayed her natural hair. In 1959, during the initial performance of the play, the popular Afro hairstyle had not yet gained widespread popularity among black women, who often preferred long, unstraightened hair. The scene was ultimately omitted because Diana Sands, the original actress playing Beneatha, felt the hairstyle did not suit her. This deletion prompted discussions about the roles and responsibilities of artists in their creative works. Hansberry's decision to remove the scene illustrates the intricacies of the creative process and the significance of considering the social implications of artistic choices.

The scene's omission provides insights into the practical aspects of theatrical production, demonstrating how elements such as an actor's appearance can influence artistic decisions. It underscores the evolving nature of artworks, shaped by the artist's vision and contextual circumstances. Hansberry's choice also highlights the intersection between art and societal realities, emphasizing the importance of authentic representations in impactful storytelling. Furthermore, the removal underscores how social norms of the time, including limitations on depicting the beauty and identity of black women in 1959, can impact artistic representation. This underscores the importance of examining literary works within their social and historical contexts.

Equality of Opportunity

In "A Raisin in the Sun," the Younger family confronts injustices and obstacles in their pursuit of aspirations, underscoring equal opportunity as a central theme in the play. Equal opportunity denotes the principle that every individual should have the chance to succeed and thrive, regardless of their social or racial background. This ideal reflects the American aspiration of providing equal opportunities for all to pursue their ambitions, despite potential barriers. Despite their aspirations,

the Younger family faces significant challenges, including racial prejudice and economic disparity, illustrating the complex nature of social inequality that can hinder individual success (Beasley, 2012; Lichter, 2013; Shapiro, 2017).

By the 1950s, equal opportunity had become a paramount aspiration for African Americans. They sought equality in various facets of life, such as access to quality education, financial stability, and safe housing, forming their version of the "American Dream." This dream epitomized their desire for social progress, seeking equitable access to opportunities for success and a dignified existence within broader society. African Americans yearned to live comfortably and gain respect within the larger community, highlighting their pursuit of social change and equality (Brooks, 2009; Caldwell, 2021; Harris, 2023). As data can be analyzed as follows:

Data 3:

Mama: I seen... him... night after night... come in... and look at that rug... and then look at me... the red showing in his eyes... the veins moving in his head... I seen him grow thin and old before he was forty... working and working and working like somebody's old horse... killing himself..." (Hansberry, 1956:130).

Walter's perspective, as presented in the data, delves into the dreams and challenges the Younger family encounters within their social and economic milieu. He expresses a strong desire to invest in a liquor business to enhance his family's financial situation, highlighting his determination to improve their economic standing. Walter recognizes that pursuing this goal entails risks and potential consequences, yet he believes that starting a business is essential for achieving financial independence. Establishing a business, he contends, would liberate them from the stress and unpredictability of traditional employment.

Additionally, Walter's actions underscore the concept of social mobility, wherein individuals must take risks and exert effort to advance their social and economic positions. He embodies the pressure to attain material success in a society that esteems wealth and status. Walter's belief that business ownership will bring him prosperity and respect underscores how societal values shape aspirations and behavior. This underscores the influence of cultural and social values on personal ambitions and decision-making processes.

Data 4:

WALTER: You see, this little liquor store we got in mind cost seventy-five thousand, and we figured the initial investment on the place be 'bout thirty thousand, see. That be ten thousand each. Course, there's a couple of hundred you got to pay so you don't spend your life just waiting for them clowns to let your license get approved. (Hansberry, 1956:34).

In a society that strongly emphasizes marriage for women, Beneatha confronts racial discrimination and gender biases but remains resolute in breaking through social barriers and instigating change within her community. Her indifference towards marriage underscores her independence and rejection of traditional gender roles imposed by society, challenging the notion that women derive fulfillment solely from domestic duties. This defiance clearly challenges established social norms within the Younger family.

From a literary sociology perspective, Beneatha's ambitions highlight the tension between individuality and societal expectations. Her aspiration to become a doctor symbolizes her quest for an independent professional identity, pushing against norms that confine women to domestic roles.

This underscores her struggle to define herself beyond conventional gender norms in a patriarchal society and illustrates African American women's resilience against societal pressures. Beneatha's pursuit of education and a medical career reflects her steadfast determination to overcome social, economic, and cultural obstacles, serving as a catalyst for combating discrimination and inequality.

Hansberry's portrayal of Beneatha not only reflects the author's advocacy for education among African Americans, particularly girls, but also inspires others to prioritize education and aspirations despite societal challenges. In an interview featured in "Conversations with Lorraine Hansberry," edited by Nigel Jackson, Hansberry disclosed that Beneatha's character draws from her personal experiences, depicting a woman aspiring to become a doctor and pursue education amidst social discrimination (Godfrey, 2020).

Systematic Justice

Lorraine Hansberry's play "A Raisin in the Sun" exposes the myriad systemic injustices faced by African American families in the mid-1900s United States. The characters' lives are profoundly impacted by the systemic inequities stemming from racial, economic, and social discrimination within society. Through the experiences of the Younger family, Hansberry explores how these inequitable conditions limit their opportunities and shape the obstacles they encounter in pursuing their aspirations. Thus, the analysis can focus on the following data points:

Data 5:

RUTH (Turning and going to MAMA fast—the words pouring out with urgency and desperation) Lena—I'll work ... I'll work twenty hours a day in all the kitchens in Chicago ... I'll strap my baby on my back if I have to and scrub all the floors in America and wash all the sheets in America if I have to—but we got to MOVE! We got to get OUT OF HERE!! (Hansberry, 1956:139).

Ruth's conversations depict her urgent desire to escape the harsh living conditions endured by the Younger family. Her unwavering determination to work tirelessly towards improving their circumstances reflects the profound discontent and powerlessness experienced by those living in poverty and facing racial inequality. Despite having to make significant physical and emotional sacrifices, Ruth's commitment to bettering her life mirrors the social and economic pressures commonly faced by African American women during that era. Constrained by segregation and limited opportunities, these women often assumed demanding roles to support their families.

Ruth's appeal to Mama underscores the family's power dynamics, viewing Mama as an authoritative figure capable of altering their destiny, highlighting their dependence on one family member's decisions to enact substantial change. Her belief in enacting physical changes to enhance their lives underscores the play's themes of perseverance and selflessness. She demonstrates readiness to undertake any challenging task to support her family, exemplifying the broader theme of parental and familial sacrifice for future generations. Hansberry portrays the resilience and determination of marginalized individuals to persist and resist despite daunting adversities. Through Ruth's dialogue, Hansberry illustrates African American families' intricate struggles against racial and economic injustices. A sociological analysis of the literature reveals the play as a reflection of its contemporary social realities and a critique of ongoing injustices. Ruth's despair and

determination symbolize the African American community's collective struggle for justice and human dignity.

Data 6:

Mama (to Walter): "Son, I just tried to find the nicest place for the least amount of money for my family." (Hansberry, 1956:94)

Mama articulates maternal responsibility and love, which is evident in her efforts to provide the best for her family despite significant constraints. She explains that the decision to purchase a home in a better neighborhood was motivated by her desire to secure her family's well-being, illustrating the difficult choices African American mothers had to navigate amidst financial limitations and systemic racial discrimination. Despite their impoverished circumstances, Mama believes in the right to dream and strive for a brighter future, placing her faith in the potential of family and community to alter their destiny.

Mama's narrative also underscores her endeavor to uphold her family's dignity and self-respect amid substantial economic and social pressures. Hansberry underscores that even within unjust social frameworks, individuals can make meaningful and compassionate decisions for their families. The decision to acquire a house reflects Mama's recognition of the significance of a safe environment as a foundation for future prospects. The Younger family's new residence symbolizes hope and advancement, signifying their pursuit of the American Dream despite numerous adversities. Through a sociological analysis of the literature, Mama's actions exemplify resistance against systemic injustice by striving for autonomy and empowerment. In summary, Hansberry uses Mama's words and actions to depict the challenges confronted by African American families, portraying her as a symbol of resilience, sacrifice, and familial love in the struggle against systemic inequities.

4. Conclusion

The portrayal of the American Dream in these two works varies significantly. Hansberry critiques the ideology by portraying the Younger family's cramped living conditions in a small apartment, highlighting the disparity between aspirations and reality. Ruth's pregnancy and her concerns about the child's future further underscore the family's dire circumstances. Walter's aspiration for financial independence, symbolized by his job as a chauffeur, reflects the challenges African Americans face in securing meaningful employment. Scholars interpret this work as a critique of the American Dream ideology, yet Hansberry also suggests that the dream remains achievable by the play's conclusion. Mama's nurturing support and encouragement of her children's ambitions reflect Hansberry's message to the African American community regarding the importance of higher education and entrepreneurship in attaining financial stability. Hansberry promotes the notion that the American Dream can be realized through resilience and determination, embodied in the character of Walter, who refuses to accept discrimination. This illustrates the strength and perseverance of the African American community in overcoming obstacles. While Hansberry's work critiques and inspires, Hughes' poem "Harlem" expresses criticism and protest, conveying deep frustration and disillusionment with the deferred American Dream.

Hughes' poem, depicting a "raisin in the sun," portrays the African American community's weariness and frustration with systemic discrimination. Scholars discern a subtle call to action in "Harlem," encouraging perseverance and resistance against obstacles in pursuing the American Dream. Hughes illustrates the grave consequences of deferred dreams, serving as a catalyst for action. Although both works address the American Dream, they do so differently: Hansberry critiques and advocates for the dream through realistic depictions of African American life, while Hughes employs poetry to remind communities of the serious repercussions of inaction and inspire ongoing pursuit of their dreams.

5. References

- Allen, R. (2020). *Black Dreams: A Cultural History of the American Dream in Black Popular Culture in the 20th and 21st Centuries* (Doctoral dissertation, Rutgers the State University of New Jersey, Graduate School-Newark).
- Beasley, M. A. (2012). *Opting out: Losing the potential of America's young Black elite*. University of Chicago Press.
- Bhattacharya, M. (2022). Understanding Hyphenated Identity: A Study of Select African-American Plays. *Teresian Journal of English Studies*, 14(4), 15–22.
- Bristow, N. (2012). *American pandemic: The lost worlds of the 1918 influenza epidemic*. Oxford University Press.
- Brooks, R. L. (2009). *Integration or separation? A strategy for racial equality*. Harvard University Press.
- Browdy, R., & Milu, E. (2022). Global Black Rhetorics: A New Framework for Engaging African and Afro-Diasporic Rhetorical Traditions. *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, 52(3), 219–241. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02773945.2022.2077624>
- Caldwell, O. E. (2021). *African American Social Service Nonprofit Leaders' Success Strategies* (Doctoral dissertation, Walden University).
- Charles, E. A., & Nesbitt, F. N. (2004). Race for Sanctions: African Americans against Apartheid, 1946-1994. *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 37(3), 567. <https://doi.org/10.2307/4129057>
- Cullen, J. (2013). *The American dream: A short history of an idea that shaped a nation*. . Oxford University Press.
- Dillard, C. B., & Neal, A. (2020). I am because we are: (Re)membering Ubuntu in the pedagogy of Black women teachers from Africa to America and back again. *Theory Into Practice*, 59(4), 370–378. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00405841.2020.1773183>
- Driscoll, M. (2021). Blacks weather, Whites climate. *Cultural Dynamics*, 33(3), 175–183. <https://doi.org/10.1177/09213740211014309>
- Gatwiri, K., & Moran, C. (2023). Reclaiming racial dignity: An ethnographic study of how African youth in Australia use social media to visibilise <scp>anti-Black</scp> racism. *Australian Journal of Social Issues*, 58(2), 360–380. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ajs4.224>
- Godfrey, M. (Ed.). (2020). *Conversations with Lorraine Hansberry*. Univ. Press of Mississippi.

- Harris, L. M. (2023). *In the Shadow of Slavery: African Americans in New York City, 1626-1863*. University of Chicago Press.
- Johnson, H. (2014). *The American dream and the power of wealth: Choosing schools and inheriting inequality in the land of opportunity*. Routledge.
- Jose, S. (2014). Racism in Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*. *The Dawn Journal*, 3(1), 876–883.
- Lichter, D. T. (2013). Integration or Fragmentation? Racial Diversity and the American Future. *Demography*, 50(2), 359–391. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13524-013-0197-1>
- Mason, E. (2021). *Urban Apologetics: Restoring Black Dignity with the Gospel*. Zondervan.
- Min, P. G., & Kim, R. (2002). *Chapter Six Formation of Ethnic and Racial Identities: Narratives by Asian American Professionals. The second generation: Ethnic identity among Asian Americans*, 9, 153.
- Nowrouzi, T., Faghfori, S., & Zohdi, E. (2015). In Search of Equality: A Dream Deferred for African Americans in *A Raisin in the Sun*. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 5(11), 2269. <https://doi.org/10.17507/tpls.0511.10>
- Samuel, L. R. (2012). *The American dream: A cultural history*. Syracuse University Press.
- Shapiro, T. M. (2017). *Toxic inequality: How America's wealth gap destroys mobility, deepens the racial divide, and threatens our future*. Hachette UK.
- Shukla, S. (2024). *Cross-cultural Harlem: Reimagining Race and Place*. Columbia University Press.
- Swan, C. B., & Cetrà, D. (2022). Why stay together? State nationalism and justifications for state unity in Spain and the UK. In *State and Majority Nationalism in Plurinational States* (pp. 46–65). Routledge.