

Madame Neilsen:
A Missionary to Visionary Matriarch in Lorraine Hansberry's *Le Blancs*

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Abstract

Les Blancs, a play about African liberation is the most important work by Lorraine Hansberry. She was a leading light of the future generation, a woman who refused to be restrained by the categories of race and gender. While analyzing the role of matriarch in *Les Blancs*, it is evident that not only black African matriarch encourages liberation but also a woman with the racial difference also possesses the traits of black womanhood. Madame Neilsen, a white settler in the utopian land of Zatombe, is the white surrogate mother of Tshembe, the principal character of the play, sacrifices her life in the war taken up by the blacks against the colonialist. The civil war has taken the life of the surrogate mother Madam Neilsen. This visionary white matriarch irrespective of race assumes the traits of a black matriarch and lives up to their expectations.

Keywords: Lorraine Hansberry, *Le Blancs*, Missionary, Education, sacrifice, visionary matriarch

Introduction

The crucial play *Les Blancs* is set in Africa in the midst of the independence era, as colonialism is descending, and as the new native leadership is cautiously emerging into the vacuum. Missionaries were major providers of education to native people in the colonial world. They transmitted and instilled Western notions of race, class and gender to those peoples amongst whom they worked. *Les Blancs* tries to reflect that a black's racial identity is the most important issue the black person must choose among other choices.

“*Les Blancs* captures a moment of exploding colonial tensions and generational transition that exposes the impossible moral and political choices in societies corrupted by centuries of foreign rule, racial domination and economic exploitation. The “blancs” are brutal and rapacious, although we also see the humanitarian impulse from those who maintain a missionary clinic in the back country and try, perhaps naively, to be personally kind and helpful” (Gordon).

Nemiroff claims *Les Blancs* as, “the first major work by a black American playwright to focus on Africa and...the struggle for black liberation” (LB 18). Rajini. P., states in her article “History as an

Inevitable Element in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* "similar importance of black struggle was given by Toni Morrison in her seminal works.

Morrison emphasizes on the living of black people amongst the whites both in the present and the past. She provides the problems of her folks artistically, historically and politically which is important forever. Through her works she constructs and reconstructs the importance of past in the present. (99)

Tshembe Matoesh returns to his native village for the funeral of his father after five years of his stay in Europe while pursuing his education. Tshembe is torn between becoming involved in the incipient revolution, preaching non violence, and returning to his white wife and son in England, and Madame, an educated, European version of Lena Younger who sides with the revolutionaries even after they have killed her husband because change is needed if 'her' country is to survive. A complicated series of events ends with Tshembe's joining the insurgents and killing Abioseh his brother who betrayed their race.

Madame Neilsen, as Missionary

Madame Neilsen in *Les Blancs* is one of the finest creations of Hansberry. She is a lovable old woman who is "fragile in appearance, genteel in manner, and underneath there is sharp intelligence" (49). She is noted for her nobleness, sound sense and fondness of humour. She is the humble wife of Reverend Neilsen, a person who dedicated his entire life as a missionary for the sake of Africa's development.

Madame Neilsen accompanied her husband to settle in Africa before forty years. She loves the Africans for their innocence and ignorance. She is a blind woman who has sympathy for everyone around there. In spite of her old age and weakness, she always needed someone to support her. At times, she makes the situation light through her comic sense. At one time she amusingly expresses the arrival of Eric, Tshembe's half-brother as, "first will come the liquor fumes and then will come Eric" (LB 50).

Madame Neilsen shows great interest towards Charlie, a journalist. She cheerfully invites him and shares her past life to him. Once she had a dearest friend named Aquah, a native woman. She is the mother of Tshembe Matoesh, the protagonist of the play. Both of them had exchanged the knowledge of their tradition and language. Aquah taught Madame Neilsen the meaning of the drum beats, the language of Kwi people and the preparation of quinine. They went for long walks in the woods in order to 'prick herbs and berries'. After the death of her close friend Aquah, Madame Neilsen missed her a lot. She got tensed of the present behaviour and respect of the Kwi people. Old Abiosh, Aquah's husband was a 'truly remarkable man' (51). He was the first person who neglected the missionary hospital as it was run by the whites and his native people too followed his resistance. They found every means to resist the whites. For example, they resisted by not attending the Reverend's service.

Madame Neilsen can establish satisfactory human relationship with people and this is the most outstanding feature of her character. She eagerly welcomes Tshembe, an African guy, who knows her much better right from his childhood days. She curiously enquires about his education and about his hair which she jovially mentions as ‘marvellous bush.’ She feels delighted when Tshembe describes her beautiful mountains in her native land—Europe. Both of them belong to two different countries. There lies a bond between Madame Neilsen and Tshembe irrespective of race.

Madame Neilsen, as Visionay Matriarch

Madame Neilsen has a great sympathy towards the African people. When the Major announces the murder of the Duchesne family, she is shocked and utters, “The Duchesnes.... the Duchesnes...they were decent people...” (66). At the same time, she gets outraged when Major Rice mentions the word ‘Kaffir’ for the natives and searches for identification marks on Tshemb’s arm. The conversation depicts the ethics of caring in this woman irrespective of race and gender which Lorraine Hansberry desires every individual to possess. The humanitarian vision of the dramatist through this white woman gets revealed as:

RICE: ... (*Noticing TSHEMBE*) Who’s the kaffir?

MADAME: We do not have “kaffirs” here, Major Rice. We have friends who are Africans.

RICE: ... Your papers...

MADAME: (*With restrained outrage*) Major Rice, Tshembe was born here—as *you* well know! Why should he have to carry those ridiculous papers?

RICE: ... Now up with your sleeves!

(...MAJOR *runs the light over TSHEMBE’s arms*)

MADAME: I shall report you to someone, Major! I shall find someone in this country gone mad to whom it is possible to report you! (69)

Madame Neilsen is a very considerate, polite, cultured, humane, kind-hearted woman and she also has a tremendous capacity for making sarcastic remarks. When Major Rice orders everyone to wear side-arms for precautionary purpose, she sarcastically remarks as, “I trust, Major Rice, you don’t expect me to wear one. After all- I might hit you” (70).

Madame Neilsen does not like Major’s unfair action towards the natives. Though he is a European, he calls Africa ‘Our home.’ He wildly tries to capture it. He accepted the Missionary hospital for military operations. Unable to tolerate this attitude of his, Madame Neilsen asks him to wait till the arrival of Reverend Neilsen. Owing to her weariness and inability, she is unable to do any work. After the death of Reverend Neilsen, Madame is ‘in mourning black’ with deep silence. Tshembe enquires whether she would go back to her country or she would stay there. Madame simply says, ‘At my age,

one goes home only to die. I am already home' (124). The speech of hers depicts her involvement and dedication to Africa, her living space.

Tshembe, the hero of the play, is in great dilemma whether he has to go back to his European life or stay in his motherland. During the climax, Madame Neilsen who is an impartial individual advises him to protect Africa from the settlers. Madame Neilsen urges Tshembe to commit himself to fight for freedom in the land where she has come to sacrifice her law; the conversation affirms the sharing of the nationalistic spirit to Tshembe by Madame Neilson:

TSHEMBE: I think so. I thought so. I know longer know. I am one man, Madame. Whether I go or stay, I cannot break open the prison doors for Kumalo. I cannot bring Peter back. I cannot...*(He breaks off)* I am lying, Madame. To myself. And to you. I *know* what I must do...

MADAME: Then do it, Tshembe.

TSHEMBE *(Desperately)* But when I think of ...*(He lowers his head to touch the top of hers)* Help me, Madame.

MADAME: You have forgotten your geometry if you are despairing, Tshembe. *(she strains forwards and rises)*. I once taught you that a line goes on into infinity unless it is bisected. Our country needs *warriors*, Tshembe Matoesh. Africa needs warriors. Like your father (126).

She strongly states that, "Our country needs warriors, Tshembe Matoesh. Africa needs warriors. Like your father" (126). The term 'our' reflects Madame Neilson's possession of Africa as her homeland. At last, Madame Neilsen is killed in the combat between natives and settlers. The play ends with the tragic demise of Madame. Throughout the story she impresses the audience/readers through her good sense and noble sentiments.

Conclusion

The African woman warrior through her dance movements though not in words, physically thrusts the weapon of violence to Tshembe to react immediately. Though Tshembe resembles a black Hamlet, torn between thought and action, he eventually with the guidance of both the visionary surrogate mother and the African mother eventually emerges to choose painful action for his mother land Africa. Hansberry aims for humanism as her themes direct the readers and the viewers to a predominantly African historical and socio-artistic experience. Although Hansberry was very committed to the social, political and economical liberation of blacks, she did not restrict herself to their issues only but extended her themes to cover those of the whites of the same status. By doing so, she categorized herself as a humanist even to the oppressor of any sort.

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