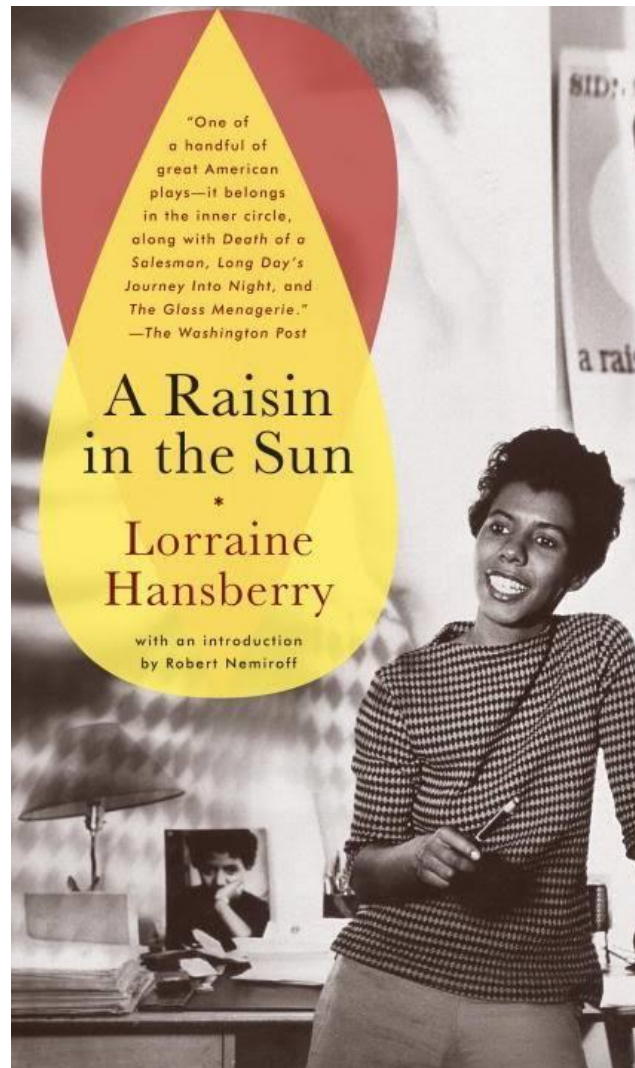


**African American Dream: A Reading of
Mulatto and *A Raisin in the Sun***

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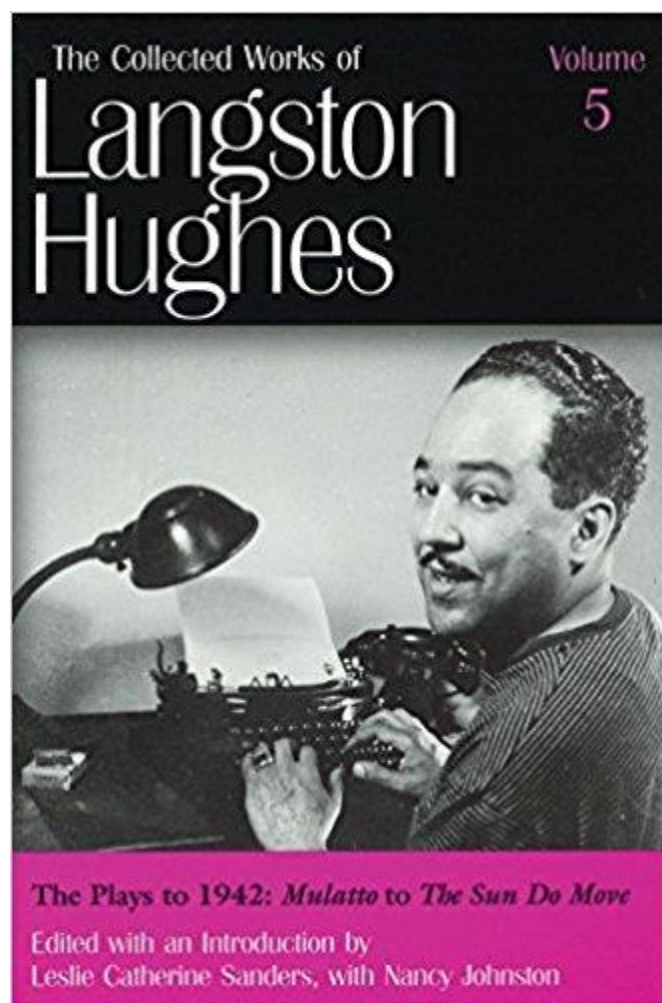


Abstract

African-American Dream is counter narrative to American Dream. To attract more people in American system of melting pot, America circulated a myth called American Dream. The idea was that any person irrespective of caste, creed, color and gender could rise above social ladder and become successful thereby rich, provided one works hard with sincerity. This paper argues that this popular

version of American Dream was a nightmare for blacks in America. They could not realize or concretize it despite being hard workers, diligent and honest. Both the plays *Mulatto* and *A Raisin in the Sun* materialize this aspect. In the former Robert, a Mulatto boy is barred from attending the college by his white father. He cannot use his father's surname because his father is ashamed of accepting his intelligent son as his own. He cannot enter in his own father's hall through the front gate. Similarly, in the latter, a black family struggles hard to realize its dream of a better house in healthy neighbourhood. They want to buy a clean house in white neighbourhood so that they could live a healthy life but, unfortunately they are threatened to do the otherwise. Their money is stolen, and they are deprived of minimum basic chance of rising high up in their social position. Hence American Dream was only possible for whites not for blacks.

Keywords: *Mulatto*, Langston Hughes, *A Raisin in the Sun*, Lorraine Hansberry, American Dream, Black Protest, African American Revolt, Civil Rights.



American Dream

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For Churchill, America has always been regarded as land of opportunities. Countless people have reached her shores for better living conditions since her discovery in 1492. These emigrants have been carried by the popular notion of American dream. Though, the word American dream was first coined in 1931 by James Adams in his book *The Epic of America*, the idea had always been there. More than a concept, American dream had been a set of ideas and beliefs. Its seeds are there in declaration of independence which proclaims that all men are created equal and all have right to life, freedom and happiness. The belief that attracted many settlers was that in America one can reach the highest ladder of success without any impediment. If you play according to the rules, your gender, race, nationality, condition of birth will never stop you from realising your potentials.

Economic Growth and Melting Pot

In 17th and 18th centuries, people believed in slow progress with constant hard work. However, in the middle of 19th century, the discovery of gold in California stirred popular imagination and masses became restless for wealth. Many people started reaching California in quest of overnight success. In the 20th century, the idea of growing rich and living life to the fullest has enamoured crowd from Asia and Africa to be part of Melting pot. After world war two, the wave of emigration is motivated by capitalism whereas up to the onset of 20th century, people were largely in quest of political and religious freedom along with land, money and home. In their own country, they were frustrated by religious and political domination of church and crown. Only the close kin of kings and pops were able to live in freedom and wealth whereas remaining masses toiled and suffered. In America, there was democracy. Anyone with potential could rise from the humblest position and could become the president of the country like Abram Lincoln. If you can work hard, no one will stop you from owning land and becoming landlord. If you want to be a doctor, go and study arduously and you will become one with your own hospital.

World of Freedom

You could roam freely anywhere without any fear of court. You could adopt any religion without any duress from any bishop and pop. The state will protect your fundamental rights. In the 19th century, many European governments tried to stop their best men from being lured by the American dream by releasing posters, demonstrating people attacked by lions, hunger, wilderness and savage Indians yet from all over the world crowd poured into American lands and waters giving birth to the concept of melting pot. One can find Britishers, Irish, Germans, Russians, French, Italians, Jews,

Indians, Chinese and Africans and many other merging and melting into one another and giving birth to the United States of America.

Never an Easy Dream to Achieve!

However, realising the dream of becoming successful has never been easy for the blacks. For Africans, life in America had been very tough. First, they were abducted from their homeland and brought to toil in the new world. They were sold to the highest bidder thus segregating them further from their kith and kin that they made on ships. They were made to work from dawn to dusk. There were laws to keep them in ignorance. After slavery was abolished, they had to face segregation in south and discrimination in the north. Lynching of blacks by whites was common. They had to fight hard for their civil rights. Till today, racism has not disappeared completely.

Focus of This Paper

This paper argues that African-Americans also had dreams to better their lives. They also wanted to enjoy the blessings of American democracy, but racism of north and south did not let them do so. For this, *Mulatto* by Langston Hughes and *A Raisin in the Sun* by Lorraine Hansberry have been selected. The effort is to establish that African American dream presents a counter narrative to American dream, because the latter does not give the former a chance to develop richly and fully.

Mulatto: A Tragedy of Deep South

Mulatto: A Tragedy of Deep South 1935 is one of the well-known plays of Langston Hughes. It is considered one of the best plays ever written by an African-American playwright. The action of the play takes place in Georgia, a southern state. It revolves around Colonel Thomas Norwood and his black mistress Cora Lewis and her four children.

The play presents the dreams and aspirations of blacks during 1930s. Though, slavery did not exist in America at that time, yet the blacks are treated like chattel. Colonel does everything in his power to keep his black servant in ignorance succumbing to Cora's plea. He sends his four illegitimate children to school and later to college. William the elder one turns out to be a docile chap but remaining three learn to live life with conviction and assertion. His two daughters Sally and her elder sister learn to adjust with the passive resistance but, Robert his last born proves to be the most troublesome for him.

Robert

He wants to live life like whites. He always walks with raised head and immense self-confidence. Like other Americans, he also has the dream to move upwards in society. He is a bold lad who always goes about saying that he is Mr. Norwood's son and his name is Robert Norwood. When he was a child of seven, he once addressed Colonel as father in front of his guests. He always walks in and out in absence of Mr. Norwood from the front door whereas other blacks are afraid of doing this. He always keeps telling everyone that he is going to inherit his father's property. He hates other blacks who behave like old Uncle Toms.

Like all the Americans, he believes in the ethos of The United States. He is an intelligent lad. He was the captain of football team in his school. His grades are quite impressive. He is tall and handsome like his white father. Still, he is not able to live his version of American dream because he is not white. He is neither black nor white but a mulatto. This fact further not only precipitates his tragedy but intensifies it as well. This is how he voices his concern, "This was the day I ought to have started back to school – like my sister. I stayed my summer out here, didn't I? Why didn't he keep his promise to me? You said if I came home I could go back to college again" (Shine and Hatch 18).

At last, he dies as a martyr to his American dream. Had he been white, the society would have taken him more seriously and kindly. He would have become a chairman of some company. His colour proves curse for him. He is not at all welcomed by the dominating structures which otherwise would have embraced him with both hands. In the end, he commits suicide because the notion of rise all and shine all turns out to be sham. He comes back to his mother in the end with just a bullet remaining in his gun and kills himself. Just because he is an African, he has no right to climb upwards. His father rejects him, his mother is unable to help him. His elder brother William castigates him. The society is bent upon to lynch him. His hard work amounts to nothing. His skills and confidence prove good for nothing in his racist society. His American dream becomes nightmare. So what, he is mulatto, he also has every right to grow and be rich by getting a respectable job, but unfortunately his colour and circumstance of his birth prevent him from attaining what he desires the most in the greatest democracy of the world! Ted Shine and James Hatch also remark in this context: "Langston Hughes created a young protagonist of mixed-blood who identified as Black, while insisting that he was entitled to all the rights that whites enjoyed, even if he had to die for them" (Shine and Hatch 4).

American South and Sallie

American south as presented in the play does not wish to educate its black population. There is just a single school in the vicinity of Norwood's plantation, but it is without a teacher. When Sallie

expresses her desire to be a teacher after finishing her education in that deserted school, Colonel Norwood bluntly denies. He says that he enecially brought a teacher because he wanted to give Cora's children some education and when it is done, he like other whites does not wish to give a chance to other blacks to learn and grow upwards. So much so that, Sallie and her elder sister while studying in north, have to conceal from him their desire of working in an office as respectable citizens. Infect, he is told that the elder girl is working as a cook in one of the hotels and the younger will also follow her sister's footsteps. With such prejudiced mind-set, how can one dream of rising high.

Black Mother and Children

The biggest dream of any mother is always to make sure the protection of her children. For this, she is ready to go to any extreme. For her, all other material comforts are secondary except the wellbeing of her children. In Mulatto, Cora is a mother who worries more for her children than anything else. Her American dream is not that of home, cars and umpteen wealth, but that of her children's growth and safety. To provide for them, she leaves no stone unturned. She serves Colonel Norwood night after night so that her children might sleep peacefully. It is she who convinces Norwood to send her children first to school and college afterwards. It is because of her efforts that her elder daughter is working in an office and the second one is soon going to do the same. She is not afraid when angry mob enters the house to take Robert back. She faces the mob boldly and appeals, "Yes, he's going to sleep. Be quiet, you all" (Shine and Hatch 23).

Dream Shattered

But unfortunately, her dream to provide for her children under all circumstances shatters when she is not able to send her youngest son Robert to college when he comes to visit her and later when she is unable to prevent him from committing suicide. She tries her best to save him from the mob by sending him upstairs in her own room but he kills himself because he knows that he will be lynched if caught. Here racism frustrates a mother's dream had she been white, she would have been able to discharge her duties without any hindrance.

Lynching and Backbreaking: No Value for American Dream

For rest of the black community in Mulatto, life in Georgia is not at all easy. Lynching and back breaking labour seems to be the only regular thing happening in their lives. There are as many as two references of lynching's in the past other than Robert's which is somehow averted. Whites do not allow blacks to get education. They keep them in perpetual fear and ignorance. They are not allowed

to speak their concerns. How can one grow in such an environment? Sam, one of the servants of Colonel, runs from the big house as soon as Colonel dies. When he sees that Robert, who has killed Colonel, is running here and there to save his life, he decides to leave the place at once. The other black characters who do not come in forefront, also live in constant fear and pressure. They do not resist against their oppressors. For them, American dream is of no value. Their African-American dream is that of survival. They are least bothered about any material object. They just keep living without expecting much from anyone. If they think at all of rising upwards, they do not voice it. If they are not contented, they do not exhibit their discontentment either. Perhaps, these people do not dream at all. And if they do, they keep it unto themselves because the system around them does not let them express it.

A Raisin in the Sun

Likewise, *A Raisin in the Sun*, 1959, is also regarded as one of the best in African-American canons. It was the first play which attracted worldwide fame by a black woman playwright. It received many awards and accolades. It also presents African version of American dream. In fact, it is a play which looks more like a play written by a white author. The characters in it are engaged in universal issues. Any white theatre goer might have identified with the people and their aspirations demonstrated in it.

The Setting: Chicago

Unlike *Mulatto*, the setting in it is North Chicago. One does not find black men being lynched here. One does not find black women raped here. There is no hint of share cropping. There is no presence of overseers. Yet life for Africans is not easy. Younger family is one of those. There are five members in it. Lena Younger is the mother and head of the family. She has two children, a boy and a girl. The boy Walter is elder and married. He has a wife Ruth and a son Travis. The other one is a daughter named Beneatha. They live in an old and dilapidating house with two rooms with one small window and no bathroom. In fact, on their floor, there is only one bathroom that two families share.

Emerging Civil Rights Movement

All the members of younger family have their dreams. They all want to rise high and live a better life. They all are discontented with their present existence. Somewhere or the other, they are demanding civil rights. Actually, when this play was first performed in 1959, civil rights movement was gaining grounds. When curtain rises, the younger family is waiting for a cheque of \$ 10000. It is

the amount of life insurance policy which has matured because of Mr. Younger's demise. This is the money that can change their life. Each member of Younger family has thought of their plans about the expenditure of the money.

Walter

Walter, the elder son, wants to invest the money in a liquor store with his friends. He has already made a strategy. He tries his level best to convince his mother about overnight success. He is carried away by the glamour of white world. He often thinks about how the rich white men who sit and eat in expensive hotels and he is working only as a petty chauffeur. His life is compressed in "yes sir," and "no sir." Like all other Americans, he also desires to move upwards. He is enamoured by shortcuts. It's not that he does not work hard but he is tired of just working hard. He wants substantial returns. He has desires to educate his son in the best schools possible. He wishes to deck his wife with gold and pearls.

First, he is disappointed when his mother goes and invests money in a house. He tells her that she has crushed his dreams. Later, when he receives remaining amount, he quickly invests it in a liquor store. He was supposed to take only half of the money, whereas, the other half was for his sister, Beneatha's education. Unfortunately, his dream is shattered when one of his co-investors Bobo announces that Willy the man they trusted their money with, has deserted them. He comes down on his knees. It seems to him that he has lost everything. His mother gave him \$6500, out of which he was to save half for his sister's education. Now, because of his failure, his sister will also not be able to pursue her dreams. While commenting on the character of Walter, Ted Shine and James Hatch maintain:

Walter Lee, wants to become a prosperous businessman. Like Willie Loman, the tragic protagonist in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, Walter Lee believes in and pursues the American dream. Both men want to become capitalists, believing that wealth will solve their problems and bring them happiness. When they realize too late that these values are false ones, Willie Loman commits suicide, but Walter Lee retrieves his dignity and becomes the man that he has always wanted to be. (Shine and Hatch 104)

Lena Younger, the Matriarch of the Family

Similarly, Lena Younger, the matriarch of the family, also has a dream. She came with her husband many years back from south to north. They have been living in south side of Chicago since

then in a rickety ghetto. She dreamed with her husband for a better house and neighbourhood. She wants a house with a clean bathroom and garden of her own along with a yard where her grandson Travis could play. Her present house is infested with rats and roaches. She dreams of a healthy environment for her children. At present, her husband is dead. His life insurance policy gets matured. She receives a cheque of \$ 10000. She goes without any consultation with her family and pays the down payment of \$ 3500.

She becomes poetic while counting the advantages of the new house, she says:

Three bedrooms--nice big one for you and Ruth ... Me and Beneatha still have to share our room, but Travis have one of his own--and--(withdifficulty)I figures if the--new baby--is a boy, we could get one of them double-decker outfits... And there's a yard with a little patch of dirt where I could maybe get to grow me a few flowers and a nice big basement. (Shine and Hatch 130)

Her family receives her with mixed emotions. Her daughter in-law Ruth and her grandson Travis along with her daughter Beneatha are very happy, whereas her son Walter is surprised as he wanted to invest the entire money on his ambitious project.

Autobiographical Event

This incident of buying a house is autobiographical. Lorraine Hansberry also had somewhat similar experience; According to Shine and Hatch:

When Hansberry was eight years old, her family purchased a home in a middle-class white section of Chicago where they were threatened and harassed by hostile neighbours. She narrowly escaped serious injury when a brick was thrown through their window. This experience, and her deep concern with the struggles of her people, served in part as impetus for *A Raisin in the Sun*. (Shine and Hatch 105)

Trouble Begins with White Intervention

The problem in *A Raisin in the Sun* also starts when Mr. Lindner, the representative of the white neighbourhood, comes and informs that there future white neighbours do not want any Africans amongst them. They are also ready to pay extra over what the Youngers have payed to dissuade them from shifting to white locality. This surely hurts the Youngers. Their self-respect is shattered. Their

dream is mutilated. To top it all, their next door neighbour, Mrs. Johnson comes and apprises them that how a white family stoned out a black family from their vicinity in Chicago itself. Here racism subtly comes and interfere with personal lives. On the one hand American ethos ensures that one can own a house of once own anywhere in the country and lead a better life. Even government provides easy loan facilities to facilitate this. On the other hand, prejudices of no significance hinder this from becoming a reality. Michelle Gordon also believes that segregation plays an important part in defining the life of blacks in America. From south to north, the situation is not much different.

At first, Walter decides to give in. He invites Lindner to come and settle the deal. But later, he prefers his family and pride over humiliation and money. Finally, Youngers decide to move into their new house without any fear. But it is sure that they will not have easy time a head. Their dream of living a healthy life in peace and comfort seems to be getting fulfilled but racism on subterranean grounds will keep following them. How can they live peacefully in a society that instead of welcoming them, tries to disown their dream. For Youngers, American dream proves to be just a facade, sham and restricted to mere whites.

Beneath's Dream

Likewise, Beneath the daughter of Lena Younger, also cherishes a dream. She is an ambitious girl. She is not docile. She is not an assimilationist. She is influenced by her African friend Asagai. She wants to marry him and go to Africa. She is not like those conventional girls who will prefer money over growth. She is wooed by a rich African-American George Murchison. He is very rich and takes her out frequently. But she does not like him as he is snobbish like whites. She rejects her Anglican hair style and adopts an African one. She wants to be a doctor. Her brother is against this. For him she is a woman and should mind her traditional boundary. He even invests her share of the money in his liquor business. But she is firm and wants to be a doctor and marry Asagai so that she could go to Africa for practising. She does not want to stay in America where she knows that her dream would become a nightmare. This rejection on her part shows that how she believes in the duplicities prevalent in America.

Ruth's Dream

Like everyone, Ruth, the wife of Walter Younger also has a dream. She wants to live in a spacious home like her mother in-law. Though, she does not blurt it in open yet she feels immensely pleased when her mother in-law announces that she has invested in a house. She thinks a lot about her family. She relates with everyone. She speaks to her mother in-law about Walter's dream of starting a

business stating that he should get a chance in life. She is also concern about her sister in-law's wedding. She encourages her to go with George as he is a rich man. She even decides to go for abortion because she knows that there is no space in their present apartment for another person. All in all, she does not express an explicit dream of her own, but one can say that she dreams with others their dreams. Shine and Hatch rightly opine:

Clearly, African Americans had not yet received the fruits of emancipation. In the rural Southland, the penury of sharecropping had circumvented the Fourteenth Amendment. In the Northland, penury of unemployment imprisoned families in the prison of city tenements. Black playwrights implored and warned audiences that change must come, and come soon, or a great tribute would be exacted from a nation in default. (Shine and Hatch 1)

To Conclude

To conclude, one can argue that life for blacks was never easy in America. They had to undergo different phases of struggle at various times in history. In 30s, when *Mulatto* was published and performed, life of blacks in south was marred by lynching and when *Raisin in the Sun* came out in late 50s in north, it was hampered by racism in a very polite way. Under all the circumstances, blacks had to remain at a distance from the popular notion of American Dream. They had never been accepted in the mainstream culture. That's why, Martin Luther King had to give a speech entitled "I have a Dream". That's why, Blacks had to invent their own African American dream. They are also human beings, they also want to grow, they also want to rise high and they also want to own houses, cars and big jobs. But they have to struggle a lot because the white society does not give them a fair chance. When American Dream proves sham for them, they become martyr for their basic rights. They may die in the attempt like Robert and Cora in *Mulatto* or they may become stronger and more confident like Youngers in *A Raisin in the Sun*.

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