

## Ethnic Identity and National Identity under Multiculturalism

### ----- Analysis of Multiculturalism and Cultural Identity Reconstruction in *A Raisin in the Sun*

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**Keywords:** Multiculturalism, National identity, Ethnic identity, Identity reconstruction

**Abstract:** The rise of multiculturalism poses many challenges to traditional American creeds. It attacks the whites' American cultural values centered on WASP values, emphasizes the issue of equal power relations among various nations and cultures, and questions the racial superiority and cultural discourse hegemony. From the perspective of multiculturalism theory, the main characters in the classic play *A Raisin in the Sun* by African-American female playwright Lorraine Hansberry completed the reconstruction of self-cultural identity and realized the independent growth of the subject through the resolution of conflicts. Because of the unobtainable to politics of recognition in a long time, the characters in the text either completed the unity of the national identity and ethnic identity by buying new house, or completed the reconstruction of ethnic identity as mature black subject identity of self-esteem and self-love, and the reconciliation of the national identity and ethnic identity by returning to African culture. Multiculturalism plays a positive role in promoting equal stature of cultural differences. At the same time, it provides a new perspective for the research of African American literature.

### 1. Introduction

Multiculturalism has been relatively active in the fields of American politics, education, and academia in recent decades. In the context of American multicultural society, multiculturalism has challenged traditional American values. Its definition is relatively broad, involving many social and cultural issues such as class, race, gender, etc., and especially questions the center of political power and discourse power. On the one hand, multiculturalism requires the government and society to give "political recognition" to ethnic minorities who have been in an unequal status for a long time; on the other hand, it challenges WASP cultural values, denies the theory of racial superiority and opposes cultural hegemony. The multiculturalism developed under the influence of post-colonial theory speaks for the "internally colonized" American minority culture and provides a new theoretical perspective for the study of African- American literature.

Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* published in the early days of the Civil Rights Movement in 1959. It was widely acclaimed once it was staged on Broadway and played more than 530 consecutive shows. Hansberry thus became the first black female writer to set foot on Broadway and the first black dramatist to win the Best Drama Award in New York Drama Critics. *A Raisin in the Sun* was created based on Hansberry's personal experience, and it truly reflects the spiritual and practical difficulties that racial discrimination and segregation brought to the lives of African-Americans under the social background at that time.

*A Raisin in the Sun* revolves a family conflict over how the African-Americans, the Walters, who lived in the black community in Chicago, used the \$10,000 insurance premium. After the father passed away due to overwork, the arrival of the \$10,000 insurance premium paid by the insurance company made this silent family suddenly lively. The whole family has different opinions on the use of the money. In the end, under the leadership of the Mama Lena and the inspiration of the excellent traditional black culture, the family finally broke through the barriers and reunited together, resolutely moved into a new house and started a new life.

## **2. Reconstruction of Double Identities**

### **2.1 The Unity of Ethnic Identity and National Identity**

Lena and Ruth are representatives of traditional black women. They own many good qualities of traditional black women, such as hardworking, courageous, decisive, and understanding. Under the influence of the mainstream social culture in which the white Americans have the hegemony of discourse, they have never been “politically recognized” and they have been given the identity of internal colonized. They seek to survive in white society as the second-class citizens and marginalized groups in the United States. In the process of self-identity exploration, some people argue that the homeland of the blacks is in Africa. However, for African-Americans, an ethnic group with a special historical background, Africa is only the root of ethnography not sociology. To this point, Lena has a clear understanding: It's a pity that we African-Americans know nothing about Africa except for Tarzan. It can be seen that for African-Americans, they are unfamiliar with their original ethnic culture. In contrast, they are more familiar with the American cultural context, and they fully recognize the identity of American citizen in consciousness. But, in the United States, they never own a house that truly belongs to them. Therefore, as the hostess of the family, when Lena and Ruth suddenly received this considerable insurance money, their first thought was to change their crowded and dilapidated living environment and buy a new house.

In addition to offering ownership to people, a house is also a symbol of identity. Lena considers the collective interests of the whole family more than personal interests, and this is exactly what multiculturalism advocates. More importantly, Lena did not retreat due to racial discrimination and segregation when she chose a house. Because of the low-cost, she insisted on buying a new house in the white community. Under the threaten and bribe of the representative from the white community, she still did not change her original intention. Lena's blackness has also been improved in the process of resolving all conflicts. Lena and Ruth had very similar attitudes towards living in the white community. When Ruth learned that the house her mother had bought was in a white community, she had only a brief moment of hesitation, and then she turned to support firmly. This reflects the attitude of Lena and Ruth towards the apartheid policy: the so-called white community and black community are actually just racist concepts. In a truly equal and democratic land, there is no so-called the white community and the black community. In the story, Lena and Ruth, through a series of spiritual and daily efforts, finally broke through the identity of the internal colonized, and obtained the double identities of independence, self-esteem, self-love, and hardworking. The new identity of the blacks and the American citizen realizes the unity of ethnic identity and national identity.

### **3. 2 Reconstruction of the Ethnic Identity and African-American Identity**

In the play, Walter has the materialistic values which formed under the influence of the dominant white culture. Driven by this kind of values, he is eager for economic success, and eager to gain the recognition of the mainstream society through the accumulation of money, so as to integrate into the mainstream society, and then obtain the “political recognition” of the white people who have the right to decide, and finally obtain the corresponding identity. Agree. At this time, Walter showed more of his identification with American citizenship. He desire for the realization of the “American Dream”, and it shows his national identification with the United States. In the process of seeking family support for his “American Dream”, as the only adult male in the family, Walter gradually neglected the responsibility for his family, and stayed away from the good virtues of the traditional black culture. What's more, he even deviated from ethnic identity in spirit. Walter often feels distressed, helpless, troubled and anxious. Of course, this mental state is annoying for his own “American Dream” aspirations, but it is more of the restlessness and anxiety came from an identity disorder caused by the contradiction between ethnic identity and national identity. In his black body, there are white cognitive methods flowing everywhere, which will inevitably lead to the distortion of Walter's spirit and the disorder of behavior. In the end, in the chaotic state, in addition to having no business experience, Walter knew people unclearly and made friends carelessly. He lost his

father's insurance money in vain, and ruined Beneatha's road to study. When the "American Dream" of becoming rich was shattered, Walter, who was frustrated in his life, suffered a series of successive blows: discrimination, boycott and coercive temptation by new neighbors in the white community, and the cynicism from old neighbors in the black community for migration of the blacks to the white community. However, inspired by the love of his family, Walter's black consciousness gradually awakened, and finally realized the return of his ethnic identity. Then, he abandoned the white values and reunited with his family again. After Walter recovered his ethnic identity, the self-reconciliation of contradictory and mad state symbolizes his spiritual harmony and the return of rationality in his action.

Under the blow of a huge amount of business investment being deceived, Walter descend into spirit chaos. He called Carl Lind, the representative of the "Welcome Committee" from the white community, to his house, impulsively intending to exchange the dignity of the blacks to the money. He want to accept the temptation of the whites' interests, expel themselves from the white community, and allow the whites to discriminate and insult their ethnic identity openly. This is actually a confrontation between Walter's inner white materialist values and his traditional ethnic values. Meanwhile, it is also a conflict and confrontation between national identity and ethnic identity in his consciousness. The final decision, related to the blacks' dignity and the destiny of the whole family, is given to the Walter. Bearing the heavy pressure and deep hope from his family, Walter finally achieved a breakthrough in his own spirit. At the moment, he regained the national self-esteem and pride that he had lost for a long time, realized the blackness and the subject's independence growth, and rebuilt his ethnic identity. This shows that Walter has finally grown from a noisy, irrational, helpless, selfish, self-willed, and self-conceited child into a mature man who is proud of his black nation and takes the responsibility of maintaining black dignity. In the conflicts, we can clearly see the mental tension produced by Walter under the pressure of racial problems after disillusionment of dream. It was in this tension that Walter gradually completed the spiritual maturity of the black male subject, realized the reconstruction of the independent and mature subject's ethnic identity, and obtained a new cultural identity.

### **3.1 Reconciliation of National Identity and Ethnic Identity**

The character Beneatha portrayed by Hansberry in the play is three-dimensional and full of vividness. Beneatha is the only child in her family who receives a college education and enjoys higher education as American citizen. College education brings her the ability to think independently and the spirit to dare to doubt. Therefore, the contradiction between national identity and ethnic identity fills her with a sense of rebellion and a spirit of struggle. In the play, she seriously thinks about the racial issues of the blacks, and seeks for her ethnic identity along the way. The reconstruction of Beneatha's new identity of returning to the origin of African culture is actually manifested through the rejection of Christianity, the persistent pursuit of the doctor's profession, and the change in her attitude toward mate selection.

The first serious conflict between Beneatha and her mother in the play is because of her blasphemy against Christian God. Lena is a devout Christian believer. So, when Beneatha refers to the religious issues at home, Lena unceremoniously taught her child who was unpredictable. Religious issues have always been in the vanguard position in the field of ideology, and are inseparable and inextricably linked to the construction of cultural identity. In her view, as the white, the God is the defender of the whites' interests. She despises the act of giving up ethnic identity, hates the blacks who advocate national assimilation, and opposes the practice of the blacks indulging in oppressive mainstream culture. Compared with the neighboring blacks, she seems to be more combative. She cherishes her traditional black culture and strives to find the source of black culture. She is proud of her black culture and black complexion, hates racial discrimination and racial oppression, has a strong sense of national pride, loves and hates clearly. Beneatha's ethnic identity is particularly obvious.

Regarding professional issues, Beneatha has always insisted on being a doctor. Healing others is very important and significant to Beneatha, because she cares about how painful they are. With the

help of Beneatha, the playwright Hansberry fully expresses her deep concern for the sufferings of the people of her own race, as well as her care for people suffering from “mental diseases” in the human community. The patients here need to be cured not because of physical illness. In contrast, people need to be cured and rescued because they suffer from “mental illness”. Through Beneatha’s eyes, we can see that the world is full of patients with serious mental illnesses. For the whites, the most serious illnesses are white racists; whereas, for the blacks, the patients are those who are “inner colonized”.

The reconstruction of Beneatha's new cultural identity is a process of gradual realization. If abandoning the pursuit of a rich black teenager was instinctively refusing to what she hates, at this time Beneatha still doesn't know what kind of identity she ultimately wants to pursue; then, the acceptance to the Nigerian black student indicates that Beneatha has made a clear choice of future development path, cultural identity and spiritual destination. In addition, Beneatha's choice of life partner actually symbolizes her attitude towards separation rather than integration between traditional black culture and mainstream white culture. This attitude also conforms to the multiculturalism recognition of accepting the existence of various cultural differences and equal treatment of various differences, and refusing to integrate into the white mainstream culture. At the end of the play, Beneatha decided to return to Africa with Assage to explore the source of her long-awaited black traditional culture and find the root of her ethnic identity. Returning to Africa was a powerful call from a group of African-Americans in the 1920s. Through the important decision of returning to Africa, Beneatha completes the reconstruction of her own cultural identity and realizes the reconciliation of national identity and ethnic identity.

#### 4. Conclusion

With the rise of multiculturalism, since the 1970s, some emerging disciplines have begun to enter the public's field of vision, such as African-American Studies, Asian-American Studies, Latin-American Studies, Feminism, and Ethnic Studies. Multiculturalism hopes to break the “Euro-centrism” through in-depth research on many emerging disciplines, eliminate the “white superiority theory”, establishes discourse power for the marginalized and disadvantaged groups, and eventually moves towards a free and democratic society where all cultures coexist in equality and harmony. Despite all the problems with this idea, it has attracted countless American minorities. The rise of multiculturalism provides a political and social theory for the better development of African-Americans in a disadvantaged position.

As a classic American drama, *A Raisin in the Sun* presents the real situation of African-Americans in Chicago in the 1950s -1960s and the orientation of racial issues under the social and cultural background at that time. The main characters in the play initially held their own different values under the impact of the whites' dominate cultural values, and they were vague or confused to their identity. In the process of resolving contradictions and conflicts, after several struggles, everyone finally broke through themselves, realized the growth of the black subjects, and completed the reconstruction of their respective cultural identities. For centuries, African-Americans have made arduous efforts to realize the “American Dream” of freedom, equality, democracy and independence. However, no matter how difficult the road is, the dream will eventually come true. Even if it is delayed, there will eventually be a day.

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