



**MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. AND LORRAINE
HANSBERRY: DARING DREAMERS AND CREATIVE
EXTREMISTS FOR LOVE**

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Abstract:

In considering Martin Luther King, Jr. and Lorraine Hansberry as creative extremists for love, I begin with instances in their early lives that served as catalysts in kindling the unquenchable fire of love and creativity. Instead of sowing seeds of bitterness, the bitter incidents in their lives instead of sowing seeds of bitterness, made them dream of a better world for their people. They were not unaware of the stony road they would have to tread. Dr. King knew his dreams for his people would not materialize hands down. That awareness made him confess that he was personally the victim of deferred dreams. The influence of Langston Hughes’ poem ‘Dream Deferred’ is very obvious in both these stalwarts, Dr. King and Hansberry. It is from this poem Lorraine Hansberry also took the title for her play, *A Raisin in the Sun* from Hughes’ poem. The play is all about the blasted hopes and shattered dreams struggles of a lower middle class Black family who managed to keep hope alive just when it seemed that their dreams had dried up “like a raisin in the sun. Since, “Literary sources about failed dreams, served as the origins of King’s engagement with the subject of dreams”, I have chosen to have Langston Hughes’ poem ‘Dream Deferred’ as a backdrop to paint Dr. King and Hansberry as fierce advocates of justice, truth and equality.

Key Words: Justice, Truth & Equality

Introduction:

Langston Hughes’ poem, “Dream Deferred” bursts with rhetorical questions. Thus it goes:

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up

Like a raisin in the sun?

Or fester like a sore

And then run?

Does it stink like rotten meat?

Or crust and sugar over-

Like a syrupy sweet?

May be it just sags

Like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?

The powerful similes Hughes uses conjure up the pathology of a pro-white history in which Black lives have not mattered. It goes without saying that the result of a deferred dream is negative and destructive. Dr. King and Hansberry highlight the jolt and jounce these deferred dreams could cause and make a puissant plea to the world to heal the hurting humanity that has for ages been denied the dignity they deserve. Having had first hand experiences of hurts and humiliations in society as well as love and support from families, these authors bear witness to authenticate the death-dealing power of racism and discrimination and the life giving power of love.

Preparation of a Momentous Minister:

Reading about Martin Luther King, Jr.’s parents and his childhood days, I am reminded of a line from Nissim Ezekiel’s poem “Enterprise”: “Home is where we have together grace”. Yes, Dr. King need not have to look for role models outside of his home. In his words: “My home situation was very congenial. I have a marvellous mother and father. ... It is quite easy for me to think of a God of love mainly because I grew up in a family where love was central and where lovely relationships were ever present”. No wonder Dr. King in later life, when faced with stiff opposition from friends and foes, was able to still extend love, and when was called to serve in the segregated South with all its demands, and disadvantages, ineluctable shortcomings and inevitable sacrifices, he did not remain a detached spectator but surrendered to the daunting task. When he was a child his mother explained to him the evils of discrimination and segregation that permeated the American air, but she instilled in him a sense of self-worth and dignity. His parents by their exemplary example taught him not to hate the white people but to love them. His break up with his childhood white friend, his experience in the shoe store when he and his father were asked to move to the back seat, the humiliating experience of being slapped by a white lady, his inability to go to a swimming pool or a public park or to be seated in the front seat of the bus – all these intensified his anger and agony. The oppressive and barbarous acts of the Ku Klux Klan,

the brutal and racist policebrutality against the Blacks and, the horrendous lynching, all of these did something to his growing personality. But through all these God had been preparing this humble hero for a momentous ministry of love.

Hats off Hansberry:

Similarly, Lorraine Hansberry was also exposed to humiliating and intimidating incidents in her life. Like Dr. King's parents, Hansberry's parents also inculcated in her the feeling that she was no less than the others. It all began the very day she was born. When the hospital printed "Negro" on her birth certificate, her father crossed it and wrote "Black". Challenging the hegemonic system was part of her father which found its way in the life and writing of Lorraine Hansberry. Unlike Dr. King's father who was not so affluent, Carl Hansberry was a successful business man. But their affluence did not spare them of segregation. When they bought a house in the predominantly white neighbourhood, they faced stiff opposition and her father had to take the case to the Supreme Court. Though they won the case, they could not win the Whites' hearts. The hostility she experienced in many forms finds expression in her play. James Baldwin paid high compliments on her landmark play stating: "I had never in my life seen so many black people in the theatre... And the reason was that never before, in the entire history of the American theatre, had so much of the truth of black people's lives been seen on the stage". Like Dr. King, Hansberry also gave up a cosy and comfortable life to live a life of unwavering commitment to black liberation and freedom.

Raisins in the Sun:

Both Dr. King and Hansberry were deeply troubled by the racial tension and the social inequality that existed in the so called civilized and supposedly Christian America. As contemporaries they were very much exposed to the grim reality of America where, "everything that was good about America belonged disproportionately to whites and everything that was bad, the things which exploited humanity physically and mentally, fell mostly to blacks. ... [and] black existence continued as an unabated process of deterioration". The unfair segregation and the oppression of the marginalized people ripped them of their dignity and humanity. They were raisins exposed to the sun for too long. They were sapped of their strength and sanity. In spite of the atrocious and appalling injustices meted out by the Whites Dr. King advocated that the Black power should be used creatively and never should it degenerate into violent protests. In Dr. King's sermons as well as in Hansberry's play we can see the unfolding of a drama that addresses liberation and freedom from the oppressive white supremacy. The grim and gloom did not deter or dissuade them from their dream and determination. They continued to believe that "love is mankind's most potent weapon for personal and social transformation".⁵ Their determination as made explicit in their literatures is to transform individuals, and communities. In them we cannot find a sense of "escapism or singularly other-worldly and eschatological pie in the sky in the sweet by-and-by. ... [but] of change now!, of overturning oppression now! And of a now! And not yet! Eschatology"⁶—for they knew a dream deferred may explode causing destruction to both themselves and others.

Dreams Deferred:

The Blacks' dream of true democracy and emancipation have been put on hold for centuries. The power of such deferred dream is seen in the life of the Youngers, especially in Beneatha's life. To become a doctor was her life's dream. To fix up people's physical ailments and to make them all right, are the most marvellous thing in the world according to Beneatha and that was what she wanted to do. Her passion is very much vibrant in her words: "I always thought it was the one concrete thing in the world that a human being could do. Fix up the sick, you know- and make them whole again. This was truly being God..." These words transport us back to Dr. King's Chicago Campaign where he proclaimed that he and those who join in the fight against racism were the social physicians of Chicago who diagnosed that there was terrible cancer which might be cured if they got at it. Will not Jesus pat on their backs and commend them for their desire, saying, "Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me"? (Matthew 25:40) Their hearts' desire was to clean and heal the festering mental wounds of their people. The whole Younger family was banking on the insurance money for different things. But Willy Harris ran away with the lion's share of the money. Beneatha's distressing discourse with Asagai "runs," like a "festering sore": "Asagai, there is only one large circle that we march in, around and around, each of us with our own little picture – in front of us – our own little mirage that we think is the future." And later her bitter conversation with her mother "stinks" when she says, "Well-we are dead now. All the talk about dreams and sunlight that goes on in this house. All dead" highlight the deferred dreams. Beneatha almost echoes the words of Dr. King in his speech, 'A Testament of Hope' where he points to the tormenting roadblocks of Negro's inherited and imposed disadvantages and the white resistance that make the goals appear not as a fixed point in the future but as a receding point never to be reached.

Amidst all the turmoil when Beneatha was furious with Walter for losing the money, Mama comes out with her stirring words on true love. She admonishes Beneatha enumerating the qualities of true love: "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 his self, because the world done whipped him so." Is she not a creative extremist for

love just like Dr King? The story of *A Raisin in the Sun* is not just about segregation but more about the economic injustice faced by the Blacks. It is Hansberry's desire to bring to the notice of her world the rude and gruelling injustice suffered by her people. Dr. King's speech "I've Been to the Mountaintop" also focuses on the important quest for economic justice. He fought a fierce battle against poverty. His stand on Vietnam War as a tragic diversion of resources, and his strong support of the strike by African American sanitation workers in Memphis in April 1968, testify to his war on poverty and demands for economic justice. But even after many decades of Dr. King's war on poverty and racial segregation, his dream for economic justice and equality is breached or fulfilled is a question for the world to answer.

Impediment to Black Dreams:

Though Jim Crow and slavery laws were abolished in letter they were very much active in some and remained deep and dormant in many White Americans. It was a huge impediment to the dreams of Black people. As Dr. King puts it "segregation has wreaked havoc with the Negro" and "Only a Negro can understand the social leprosy that segregation inflicts upon him". It is this pain of segregation that forms part of the plot of *A Raisin in the Sun*. The story of the Youngers is a drama of despair, of oppression, segregation, a longing for dreams to be fulfilled, of betrayal and dreams recovered. When Lena Younger makes the down payment for the house in Clybourne Park, a white neighbourhood, Linder, a representative of Clybourne Park Improvement Association, walks into their house. He had the impudence to tell them, "Negro families are happier when they live in their own communities" and with such arrogance and insolence asked them, "What do you think you are going to gain by moving into a neighbourhood 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". Writing from her own personal experiences at a time when slavery and segregation were illegal Hansberry drives home the message that "Desegregation is "enforceable" but integration is not".¹³ She seems to believe in the Martin mantra that man-made laws can assure us of justice but only a higher law produces love. But she does not belittle the power of judicial law because from experience she knew that it was the law that finally enabled her family to move into the predominantly white neighbourhood. Her characters, the Youngers, affirm an undeniable truth that desegregation can break down legal barriers but something nobler must touch the hearts and souls of people in order to bring them together spiritually. So the ultimate goal and dream of Dr. King and Hansberry and all the Black people is not just desegregation but integration.

The Trumpet of Conscience:

Dr. King's sermons are saturated with his love for people, a love that crossed boundaries of his country and reached out also to people other than his own. 'The Trumpet of Conscience' concisely voices his concern for the war-affected Vietnam. He saw that war not only as a moral outrage but also as an enemy of the poor in Vietnam as well as in America. His heart throbbed for the resources, men and skills wasted on the war which could have been wisely spent for the rehabilitation of the poor in America. His conviction that he would live with the meaning of his commitment to the ministry of Jesus Christ took him beyond national allegiances. He speaks here as a citizen of the world. He proves to be an extremist for love when he says, "We are called to speak for the weak, for the voiceless, for the victims of our nation, and for those it calls enemy, for no document from human hands can make these humans any less our brothers". The righteous indignation that prodded Dr. King can also be seen in Hansberry. When Lena Younger talks about sending money to Africa for missionary work, "to save people" Beneatha promptly responds, "You mean save them from heathenism -... I'm afraid they need more salvation from the British and the French". We can see in them a true revolution of values. "To save the soul of America" now gave an entirely different meaning for Dr. King, that is, to save America from its arrogance and arrogation of power. They wanted America to act before the heavy and cumbersome load of racial segregation would sag and drift their weary hearts.

Cankers of Human Dignity:

Hansberry with poignant pain portrays the plight of the Youngers who languish under such heavy loads but without losing the ethos of Blackness. Inequality, alienation, and discrimination negatively impact their thoughts, feelings and relationships and canker their human dignity. The severe financial constraints at home and Walter's inability to take care of his wife and provide for his son kill his self-esteem and to add to that the mockery of his wife smothers his dream. The world outside and people inside make him feel he is good-for-nothing. He compares himself with his successful peers and starts to believe he is good-for-nothing. Beneatha is frustrated with what was going on. Mama is left broken hearted. Walter lost trust in humanity after Willy ran away with his money. Linder's meanness, trying to stop them from moving into the white neighbourhood shatters their pride but in the end they surge above all that that tried to drown them into despair. Their struggle caused by alienation and discrimination reminds us of Dr. King's words in his "Trumpet of Conscience" where he expresses, "Alienation is not confined to our young people, but it is rampant among them.... Growth requires connection and trust. Alienation is a form of living death. It is the acid of despair that dissolves society".

Mother's Fine Balance of Love and Sternness:

In the Youngers family a new spirit of resistance was born inspired by the boldness and the amazing love of Mama. Mama never condemns Walter in spite of what he is or what he does, neither does she

mocks Beneatha for her ambitious dreams. She understands their drum major instinct, their quest for recognition, their desire for attention, the basic drive for human life. She also knows how to harness that impulse. Her dealing with Beneatha's altruism and Walter's selfishness with a fine balance of love and sternness speaks for her awareness of how to harness the drum major impulse. I assume Beneatha otherwise would have become an exclusivist and would have started to look down upon her brother and others in the family. And if Walter had not received the extra dose of love from his mother he would have become an utter failure. I would say it is the mother's understanding, and her ability to love gives them the strength to be united in asserting their rights when Linder makes a final attempt to brainwash them. Walter who is never seen to be bold in front of strangers looks straight into Linder's eyes and utters, "Well what I mean is that we come from people who had a lot of pride. I mean – we are very proud people. And that's my sister over there and she's going to be a doctor – and we are proud", and even Ruth can raise her voice and scream "LET'S GET THE HELL OUT OF HERE!" The optimism that Dr. King expressed in his "Letter from Birmingham Jail" that, "Oppressed people cannot remain oppressed forever," that their "The yearning for freedom eventually manifests itself," that "and that is what has happened to the American Negro. Something within [them] has reminded [them] him of [their] his birthright of freedom, and . . . something without has reminded him that it can be gained" has been demonstrated powerfully and concretely by the Youngers.

Dr. King's Lasting Legacy:

In spite of colossal challenges and enormous resistance Dr. King left a lasting legacy for the future generation. How was that possible? The answer is: Love gave the impetus to dreams. Listening to the passionate lectures on Dr. King, I was reminded of Paulo Coelho's words from his novel, *The Alchemist* where he says, one can never be able to escape from his/her heart. So it is better to listen to what the heart has to say. Dr King, who was convinced of the unquenchable power of love, meticulously followed the voice of his heart. It is the voice of his heart that gave shape to his dreams. The rugged reality of racism reminded him that, "...the life of the Negro is still sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination; one hundred years later, the Negro lives on a lonely island of poverty ... is languished in the corners of American society ..." Yet it could not smother his spirit. It could not snuff out his dream. He dared to dream and believed that one day the sweltering heat of injustice and oppression will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice, that one day his children will not be judged by the color of their skin but by content of their character. Only an extremist for love can speak such words. Any one in King's place would have easily bowed down to the amount of pressure exerted on him. He can be likened to Mahatma Gandhi, another extremist for love and truth, who stood his ground even when the world turned against him and mocked and ridiculed his ideologies.

Lena's Lavish Love:

It is the microcosm of this lavish love and faith, dream and determination that we see in Lena Younger in *A Raisin in the Sun*. In the cramped ghetto, a tiny apartment has been accommodating too many people for too many years. The description of their plain abode, speaks for their pathetic situation. "The sole natural light the family may enjoy in the course of a day is only that which fights its way through this little window"²⁰ is a symbolic portrayal of their strife, struggle and also of success. Walter falters. Beneatha fumbles. Ruth grumbles.

Travis stumbles. But all the rumblings and grumblings could not crumble Mama's dreams. The one feeble little plant growing doggedly in a small pot on the window sill which she protects and nurtures is a powerful symbol of her grit – the guts to dream amidst austere and awkward circumstances. Mama exemplifies the power of love. King Solomon's words, "Many waters cannot quench love; rivers cannot sweep it away. If one were to give all the wealth of one's house for love, it would be utterly scorned" (Song of Solomon 8:7). It is her love for her family and firmness of purpose that gave her the stamina to strive and succeed. She had the power as the head of the family and could have wielded it as she liked. But she used it wisely and constructively. Her magical power of love and her actions attest to Dr. King's words, "power without love is reckless and abusive and that love without power is sentimental and anemic". At the end of the ordeal she stands triumphantly proving that power infused with love and justice will "change dark yesterdays into bright tomorrows, and lift us from the fatigue of despair to the buoyancy of hope".

Conclusion:

Martin Luther King, Jr., and Lorraine Hansberry have, in their own unique and powerful ways of expressing their dreams, let the world know that "Solidarity is the recognition of our own complacency in the interconnected structures of oppression, our shared interest and responsibility across lines of difference, our accountability to those with less power, and our commitment to take action, persistently and with others, to challenge and change all forms of domination and injustice". An involved and an in depth reading of Dr. King and Hansberry will leave in the reader indelible impressions of their hope that deliverance will occur when the individual and society become active agents working for justice, freedom and righteousness.

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