

Blacks lose identity under the lie of democracy A Study in Lorraine Hansberry's *Les Blancs*

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ABSTRACT

Lorraine Hansberry as a young African American playwright, serves blacks political issue against racism by her play *Les Blancs*. Racism affects blacks and it becomes an intractable political issue. The play deals with the revolt against European colonialism in an African state, modeled on Kenya. It represents both a denunciation of colonialism in Africa and criticizing race relations in early 1960s in America. So from this point, Hansberry in *Les Blancs* provokes both Americans and Africans by exposing the danger of civil war as it frequently generates racism and Black's plundered rights by radicalism. *Les Blancs* examines a problem of the twentieth century which is the problem of color line. Hansberry believes that the oppression of human by human needs to be cure, so she presents oppression in a new manner by creating aware characters of races. She tries to describe the difficulties of Africans and Africans Americans when they resist European rules to gain freedom. This paper exposes how does Hansberry prove the excessive oppression of white's liberalism and colonial militarism in that makes Blacks lose their identity under the lie of democracy.

Keywords: African American; racism; oppression; resistance; democracy.

Lorraine Hansberry's Life

Lorraine Hansberry was born in 1930 and died of cancer in 1965. As the first black playwright she made incredible change for American theater. She won the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award for the best play of the year, earning it for her first play *A Raisin in the Sun* which translated to more thirty languages. It reflects her radical politics and other works reflect her warning of the cataclysmic civil revolts to come. When she was young, through her brief life, she wrote five plays more than sixty magazines and newspaper, articles, play, poems, and speeches. She spoke at Civil Rights rallies, writers, conferences and interested in the dangers of discrimination that attacked blacks in segregated Chicago. They obliged to face a battle when they attacked by racist mob by white neighbors (Hansberry 1994,4). The origins of the themes of her plays are derived from facts of her childhood and youth. She has been mesmerized by Africa since these periods. She started writing pieces about racism in Ghana and Egypt in 1951, when she was an editor in Harlem newspaper *Freedom* for Paul Robenson (Keppel 188-189).

Lorraine grew up of the middle class and learned to be proud of her race. She had little desire toward materialism since her kindergarten days that made her learn the importance of freedom and not to accept for herself and her people the policy American democracy, as they were disillusioned by the obstinacy of racism. In 1948, she attended the University of Wisconsin, and after two years she decided to leave the University for new type of education. In New York city, she became a journalist on the progressive Negro paper *Freedom* (Hansberry 1994, 5), which put her in contact with other literary and political mentors such as W.E.B Du Bois, the father of Pan-Africanism, and freedom editor Louis Burnham with whom she studied, in her twenties, African history. From these experiences, she devoted her deep empathy for the disappointments and sufferings of her people, and from this point on she decided to be a writer (Mckissack 3).

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LesBlancs

Lorraine Hansberry was the first African -American playwright who explored the African quest for freedom from European colonialists, in her final work, *LesBlancs*. She wrote her first notes for *LesBlancs* in 1960 which is regarded as the first major work focuses on the issue of American blacks by posing a question as Wilkerson states "*LesBlancs* is a result of collaborative efforts which asks an urgent question of the twentieth century: can the liberation of oppressed people be achieved without violent revolution" (Wilkerson 8)? *LesBlancs* came as a result of her study for African history, especially her reading about uprising in Kenya which provokes African Americans to gain their civil rights (Hansberry1981,6).

Courtney Walsh phleger cites that "*LesBlancs* deals with the revolt against colonialism in an Africa state modeled on Kenya with engaging the issue of Africa with humor and passion. *LesBlancs* is against American society as it is against colonialist rule in Africa" (Phleger 4).

Hansberry exposes the importance of a dialogue between the oppressed and oppressor employed by new charisma of black. Also the actions and plot are characterized by African-based folklore, like drumming with dancing. The tone and mood are exposed through dialogue. The play embody the importance of dance with music of traditional African life as it was used through war(Harrison xiv).

Robert Nemiroff explains Hansberry's aim to write this drama:

"As much as anything in life, and increasingly in these years, she exposes the urgent need for dialogue and concerted action if the coming struggle for power in the world is the struggle for liberation, were not to degenerate into, in effect, a racial war. It is part of *LesBlancs* that, in spite of the three hundred years, men must talk; they must establish a dialogue whose purpose is neither procrastination nor ego fulfillment but clarity, and whose culminating point is action; to find the means, in an age of revolution, to reduce the cost in human sacrifice and make the transition as swift and painless as possible" (Hansberry 1994, 33).

The title of *LesBlancs* is a response to Jean Genet's *Les Negres "The Blacks"*. The play reorganizes the method of functioning black characters by white playwrights. Genet considered "a conversation between white men about themselves". So by functioning black characters, he humiliates their race and nationalism as he creates a drama linked between blacks and whites(Genet 36). In Nemiroff's words, as "doomed ultimately to repeat the same cycle that Europe has gone through", the play draws an image of isolation between whites and blacks. Nemiroff exposes that Hansberry understood Genet's aim toward black nationalism and oppression in a new manner(Nemiroff 42). *LesBlancs* indicates the issue of racism as individuality of blacks unique , Hansberry creates realized characters of races, she applies her belief that the oppression of human by human needs to be cure by a conversation among them(Phleger4). In *LesBlancs* Tshembe Matoseh, a young black African, comes back from another different life, the comfortable one in Europe, to his homeland for his father's funeral. He is shocked up in his country's struggle with the white colonialists after many years of peaceful efforts to attain their freedom. He discovers the strains between native African and European in his homeland are raging, so he is obliged to face the violent struggle, while his older brother Abioseh, a Roman Catholic priest, who has sold out to European principles, and dreams of being Africa's first black archbishop. Tshembe resists European rule with all his honors and responsibility to gain freedom for blacks. Trying to describe Tshembe's difficulties, Hansberry illustrates the struggle of all Africans and African Americans to gain sort of freedom(Hansberry 1994,xviii).

Du Bois has words which ironically support the contemporary history: "The problem of the Twentieth century is the problem of the color line." *LesBlancs* is an effort to overcome the problem of color and colonialism not only in America, not even in Africa but on a world scale, to show to what degree color causes struggle and crisis between the capitalist west and the third world(Ibid 33).

Blacks Lose Identity Under The Lie of Democracy

LesBlancs depicts the black revolutionary nationalist consciousness. Roderick Ferguson describes the play as "the racial investment in hetero patriarchy that bequeathed itself to liberal and revolutionary projects, to bourgeois and revolutionary nationalisms a like." The play tells a story of two brothers returning to their African village for their father's funeral meanwhile the country tensioned with violence. Tshembe has travelled the world who is an intellectual and been part of the independence conflict ; there was a mission hospital near the village, which presents religion and medicine to the locals by Europeans for forty years. Here all the brothers Tshembe and Abiosen's young half-brother Eric, neither black nor white, help out , the matter that makes the hospital becomes the focus of conflict(Ferguson 10).

Tshembe finds himself rents between his old allegiance to a schweitzer-like mission hospital, which help educate him, and the clamorous demands of a freedom-seeking terrorist movement. Tshembe's departure from the independence struggle within his country, based on Kenya. As Tshembe evoking the existentialism and his marriage to a white Roquentin in Sartre's *Nausea*, he says: "One day, sitting on a bench in Hyde Park-watching the pigeons, naturally-it came to me as it must to all men: I won't come this way again" (Hansberry 1994, 60).

What encouraged Hansberry to frame her own anticolonial play, *LesBlancs*, is the black's brilliant fame as an absurdist meditation within African American and U.S. cultural politics on power and race in the shape of African decolonization. Her education in African history and current affairs developed her interest in the black anti-imperialist(Higashida 899).

The fact that , for centuries, Africa suffered more with oppression of colonialism. Hansberry in *LesBlancs* enlightens the struggle of all Africans and African Americans to gain freedom, she explains the same purpose between Africans Americans and African to struggles for equality. Her consciousness led her to examine the racism and she makes inquiry to all of her characters of the many dimensions of colonialism and oppression to prove the necessity of conversation(Abell 459-470). Even the "enlightened" Charlie Morris, the American journalist when he tries to reduce Tshembe's views by accusing him of hating all white men, Tshembe laughs:

"CHARLIE: (*Intently*) *You hate all white men*, don't you, Matoseh?

TSHEMBE : I do not "hate" all white men—but I desperately wish that I did. It would make everything infinitely easier!" (*LesBlancs*. Act1 Sce.3,p.78).

The two brothers Morris and Tshembe discuss the obstacles of racism in Africa. Tshembe ensures that Race-Racism as a device.

"TSHEMBE: I am not playing games. (*He sighs and now, drawn out of himself at last, proceeds with the maximum precision and clarity he can muster*) I am simply saying that a device *is* a device, but that it also has consequences: once invented it takes on a life, a reality of its own. So, in one century, men invoke the device of religion to cloak their conquests. In another, race. Now, in both cases you and I may recognize the fraudulence of the device, but the fact remains that a man who has a sword run through him because he refuses to become a Moslem or a Christian—or who is shot in Zatembe or Mississippi because he is black—is suffering the utter *reality* of the device. And it is pointless to pretend that it doesn't *exist*—merely because it is a *lie*!" (*LesBlancs*.Act2 Sce.2,p91).

Hansberry explains Charlie as he failed to certify his credibility by the sadistic nature of the rebellion when Tshembe challenged him:

"What is this marvelous nonsense with you Americans? For a handshake, a grin, a cigarette and half a glass of whiskey you want three hundred years to disappear—and in five minutes! Do you really think the rape of a continent dissolves in cigarette smoke? (*He drops and crushes his cigarette underfoot*) This is Africa, Mr. Morris, and I am an African, not one of your simpering American Negroes sitting around discussing admission to country clubs!" (*LesBlancs*. Act1Sce.3,p 74).

Tshembe and Charlie's conversation(at below) provokes cultural implications that mean the struggle between blacks and whites is the same between Africa and Europe. Charlie is blinded by the lie of racism as the real cause of

revolution. Violent revolution employed by the first conflict between colonizer and native which represents any mistakes has been compounded by another will lead to a violent end. The thing that obliged Tshembe to embrace his destiny and fight the historical intruders. This decision is clearly a painful one because he must kill his brother, who has turned traitor, and explodes the attack to kill the gentle white woman, who has nurtured him from birth as his surrogate mother. Tshembe astonished that his brother, Abioseh sold himself to the enemy(Abell 459-470).

"CHARLIE: (*Looking wistfully off*) I am thinking of a time when revolutionaries tended to be made out of idealism, not cynicism ... TSHembe : Maybe that's what's botched up all the revolutions so far!" (*LesBlancs*. Act2 Sce.2,p 91).

The discussion between Tshembe and Abioseh focuses on oratory than violence of revolution because they believe that simple people may influenced deeply by speech more than action (violence) especially when they were thirsty for communication to prove their identity which had been denied by African -European clashes. Abioshe has deeply embraced western culture when he was trained to be an ordained priest. So he tried to convince Tshembe to make his younger brother Eric join the priesthood but Tshembe wanted Eric to return to England with him. (Carter 113)

" ABIOSEH: Eric is coming to St. Cyprian's with me.

TSHembe: (*Polishing the apple with great concentration*) And I would prefer to take him with me.

ABIOSEH: At St. Cyprian's he will be educated.

TSHembe: He might also become a priest.

ERIC: No. I am staying here—where I belong!" (*LesBlancs*. Act2 Sce.4,p108)

Tshembe poetrises his joining of the revolution by executing him for his betrayal. He describes the " Resistance" as " the terror" and the rebels as "fanatics". During the most crucial arguments between Tshembe and Abioshe, Tshembe wears African traditional robes while Abioshe wears catholic robes of medieval and modern Europe(Carter 76).

"TSHembe: (*Quietly, the controlled precision of a scalpel*) The American blacks have a name for those like you, Abioseh, but it lacks ... magnitude! (*He starts away, turns back*) Perhaps among the twelve disciples of your Jesus—a better one might be found! ABIOSEH: Yes, Tshembe—but it is not *I* who am Judas! It is *you* who have sold yourself to Europe! It is I who chose Africa! Tshembe, Tshembe ... I have watched you and listened to you and desperately wished that you would share my goals for our people. I have waited and prayed. But you believe in nothing! You act on nothing! You have put man on God's throne—but you serve neither God nor man! (ABIOSEH *turns on his heel and starts out*)" (*LesBlancs*. Act2 Sce.4,p110)

Tshembe's attitude is so far from Abioseh, he knows that the native traditions and beliefs are far less aggressive than Abioseh's pedantism of European religion, which he permits to make his brother's soul being licit. So the aspect of the movement summarized by brother's conflict as revolution against racism(Hansberry 1969, 221).

The play concludes more conversations between Charlie and Tshembe. Tshembe hates words and talk while Charlie wishes all people to follow his speech. According to Nemiroff reveals Hansberry's wishes , "Hansberry wished to write a play in which people of all ethnicities were equal participants in a much-needed dialogue whose purpose is neither procrastination nor ego fulfillment but clarify, and whose culminating point is action"(Nemiroff 35).

The concepts of violence is different between Tshembe and Charlie as it is obvious in their conversation:

"TSHembe: (*Turns*) What the hell is that supposed to mean?

CHARLIE: It means get off my back, you hypocrite! What makes you so holy? Listen, a week ago—(*The sound of a helicopter is heard approaching overhead*). We're on the same side.

TSHembe: What does it prove, Charlie? What will it solve?"

(*LesBlancs*. Act2 Sce.7,p122)

There is a relation between religion and American civil rights movement, as it is known, the movement was rooted in black churches, Hansberry makes Abioseh employed the belief that church is a power which enhances American activists' in the battle for civil rights. Hansberry believed in religion as a crutch, as it is reflected in *LesBlancs* in two sides; Christianity and the native religion of Zatembe. Actually out of the concept of traditions of Tshembe's father which he admits that he does not believe, but he enacts these rituals, exactly when he was preparing for his father's funeral, he paints his face with yellow ochre and dresses in traditional clothing, while Abioseh is leaving them, but he had been covered by an European religion. Hansberry prepared Tshembe to embrace violence as a method to gain peace for his country Zatembe. But Kumalo's, an African ambassador to England who negotiate Europeans but in vain, the thing that provokes Tshembe to believe that violence is the only choice for communication with their oppressors who have left open to the revolutionaries of kinsman Ngago, a leader in the liberation movement. The matter that forced Tshembe for his final decision to kill his brother(Hansberry 1969, 195).

Tshembe tries to make Charlie understand that Europeans don't respond unless blacks threaten them by violence. And at the end of the play, it is obvious to note that Hansberry stirs black-on-white violence. Actually she does not encourage and promote violence but she accepts violence as a mean of defense. She explains her view about violence:

"It is no longer acceptable to allow racists to define manhood-and it will have to come to pass that they can no longer define his weaponry. I think, then, that Negroes must concern themselves with every single means of struggle: legal, illegal, passive, active, violent and non-violent"(Ibid 214).

CONCLUSION

Lorraine Hansberry was heavily involved in civil rights. In *LesBlancs* ,she addresses global concerns along with blacks' issues beyond Africa. *LesBlancs* translates the rebellion of blacks against European rule as a result of European exploitation of the lands and peoples of Africa. It shows that Africans peoples are largely a fusion of violence and non-violence. Hansberry reveals that Africa needs warriors, it overlooks the danger of civil war and the possibilities of non-violent resistance. The play divides people into two kinds, one realized that struggle is necessary to achieve liberation for oppressed people, the other who accept oppression and racism just as a fact even though the cost is their identity. Hansberry criticized the concept that oppression can be dealt with reasonably if Blacks still accept it in polite and calm under the lie of democracy. Hansberry manifests that the people in Africa had lost their identity by presenting Tshembe struggles to find his identity. *LesBlancs* employs the injudiciousness of human oppression as it applied beyond Blacks and whites, through revolution and violence. It reflects image of so much humanity, goodness, love, suffering and fear; fear of blacks, fear of race dilemma. Finally, Hansberry identifies this dilemma through awaking blacks, and not to accept any kind of oppression under the lie of democracy, she indicates that the blacks are ordinary human beings as the whites and race dilemma must be faced in any society addressing all oppressed people especially American blacks in 1960s to take a lesson from the experience of Kenya's blacks through European colonialism.

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السود يفقدون هويتهم تحت كذبة الديمقراطية: دراسة في مسرحية لورين هانزبري البييض (ليس بلانكس)

الاء مزاحم عبدالرزاق *

ملخص

لورين هانزبري أصغر امرأة أفريقية أمريكية خدمت قضية السود السياسية ضد العنصرية بمسرحيتها "البييض" ليس بلانكس. ولأن العنصرية أثرت بشكل كبير على السود فقد أصبحت قضية سياسية. المسرحية تتعامل مع الثورة على الاستعمار الأوربي في أفريقيا، في كينيا تحديداً. المسرحية تقدم شجبا ضد العنصرية في أفريقيا و تنتقد في الوقت نفسه العنصرية في بداية ستينيات القرن الماضي في أمريكا. فمن هذا المنطلق الكاتبة تستفز كلا الأمريكان والأفريقيين من خلال كشف خطورة الحرب الأهلية التي بدورها تنتشر العنصرية الناهية لحقوق السود. تختبر مسرحية (البييض) مشكلة القرن العشرين وهي مشكلة اللون. الكاتبة تؤمن بأن ظلم البشر للبشر يجب أن يعالج. لذا هي تقدم الظلم بأسلوب جديد بواسطة استحداث شخصيات واعية بموضوع العنصرية. حاولت الكاتبة وصف مصاعب الإفريقيين والأفريقيين الأمريكان عندما حاولوا مقاومة القوانين الأوربية للحصول على الحرية. يكشف البحث كيف أن الكاتبة أثبتت أن ظلم البييض المفرط واستعمارهم افقد السود هويتهم تحت غطاء كذبة الديمقراطية.

الكلمات الدالة: الإفريقيين الأمريكان، العنصرية، الظلم، المقاومة، الديمقراطية.

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