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In Search of Cultural Identity or a Futile Search for Anchor: Africa in Selected African American literary works

From Phillis Wheatley's "On Being Brought from Africa" (1767) to Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959), the African American artist has been constantly negotiating his or her African identity vis-à-vis the mother continent Africa. These negotiations have taken various forms and formats ranging from the purely nostalgic to the Romantic and outlandish to the most obnoxious. This evolution reflects changing perspectives brought to bear on some of the African American authors as they each become intimate or have a closer encounter with Africa. Of particular interest is how their views of Africa from the outside gave rise to a longing identification with Africa in search of cultural identification, or in search of Africa as a substitute for American cultural values that have failed them; or, how in some cases a simple romance with an illusive past eventually turns into distaste for or non-commitment to Africa for more recent authors. Whatever the situation has been and "despite a drive to forget much of the past," as Keith Cartwright accurately asserts, "black Americans have kept a strong historical sense alive, more fully and accurately alive than perhaps any group of Americans" (25). However, the depth of this historical sense has often waxed and waned after the specific experiences the African American has encountered with European Americans and with the other ethnic groups present in America.

In this paper, I intend to trace from a critical perspective, the various mutations Africa as a subject has gone through in African American literature and to analyze what has been the possible reasons for these changes. These changes tended to rhyme with the changing socio-political dispensations and status that the African American gained within America. Africa mutates from existing as an alternative to America (the Back to Africa Movement) to becoming some abnormal place still to be fully understood (*A Raisin in the Sun*).

A cursory look at Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* reveals that the play is mainly about an African American family strug-

gling to attain the American Dream, if not mere existence. The emphasis has always been placed on the roles of Walter Lee Younger and Mama Lena who tower above everybody else, each contending for the leading role. In fact, Trudier Harris's study of powerful African American women in literature has clearly documented the magnanimity of Mama Lena as a disciplinarian, a matriarch and a strong-willed, no-nonsense woman. Good as these approaches are, there is another character whose presence and functions have often been overlooked: Asagai, the African student from Nigeria. Whatever the reasons for which Hansberry created his role, we cannot dismiss him casually or consider him an artistic accident for two very crucial reasons: first, he represents everything the Younger family is fighting for, and secondly, he brings out the hidden search for identity and cultural roots that nourishes the evil that the Younger Family confronts and must overcome. In fact, the latter assertion is poignantly expressed by Beneatha in a conversation with Asagai on the subject of their initial encounter: "Mr. Asagai – I want very much to talk with you. About Africa. You see, Mr. Asagai, I am looking for my identity" (*Call and Response* 1232). In fact, Asagai resuscitates this conversation because Beneatha constantly vacillates between being the African Queen whose beauty is emphasized by her natural appearance and her American identity subsumed in her artificial beauty in the form of make-up. This distinction comes up very sharply when the two of them discuss their hair and the robe Asagai brought from Africa as a gift to Beneatha:

ASAGAI: I shall have to teach you how to drape it properly... Ah— Oh pay-ay-day, oh-gbah-mu-shay.... You wear it well... very well... mutilated hair and all.

BENEATHA: My hair—what's wrong with my hair?

ASAGAI: Were you born with it like that?

BENEATHA: No... of course not... You know perfectly well how... as crinkly as yours... that's how... But it's so hard to manage when it's, well—raw.

ASAGAI: And so to accommodate that—you mutilate it every week?

BENEATHA: It's not mutilation!

In Asagai's opinion, make-up is tantamount to self-destruction, self-contempt which is at odds with the African identity, an identity

that takes pride in natural beauty. Still on the same lines with the search for her “African identity” Beneatha comes under scathing attack from Asagai about her looks and her physical appearance:

ASAGAI: Well... it is true that this is not so much a profile of Hollywood queen as perhaps a queen of the Nile. But what does it matter? Assimilationism is so popular in your country...

BENEATHA: I am not an assimilationist! (1232)

The above exchange between the African Asagai and the African American Beneatha reveals the deep-seated accusations that were somewhat labeled against Lorraine Hansberry alluded to in the introductory write-up to her play in *Call and Response: The Riverside Anthology of the African American Literary Tradition* (1213-16), considering Lorraine Hansberry as “an assimilationist.” In fact, Asagai’s reaction toward Beneatha clearly reveals that the African American search for this identity must begin in earnest with his or her being their natural, original self. But the African American geopolitical reality cannot allow for a total disengagement from things American; they must sing America.

It is equally important to note that Hansberry makes no pretence at understanding Africa as a continent. This is revealed in Mama’s and Walter’s reception of Asagai and the embarrassing questions Beneatha fears Mama is likely to ask Asagai about Africa. The faintest knowledge of Africa that Mama has had is subsumed in Liberia which she refers to as “that little country founded by slaves way back...” Indeed, a further admonition from Beneatha leads Mama to confess: “I don’t think I never met no African before... Why should I know anything about Africa?” She is contented with giving “money at church for missionary work... to help save people” (Africans) from “*heathenism*” (1231). In Mama’s view, Africa is the land of the heathen, lost in sin and darkness, a land that approximates Phillis Wheatley’s Africa in “On Being Brought from Africa to America”:

‘Twas mercy brought me from my pagan land,
Taught my benighted soul to understand
That there’s a God, that there is a saviour too:
Once I redemption neither sought nor knew,
Some view our sable race with scornful eye,

“Their color is a diabolic die,”
Remember, Christian, Negroes, black as Cain,
May be refin’d, and join the’angelic train. (*Call & Response* 98)

Later, Phillis Wheatley continues the image of Africa as Hades in her lengthy poem “To the University of Cambridge, in New-England,” alluding to Africa as “the land of errors, and Egyptian gloom” (l. 4) and “those dark abodes” (l. 6). In as much as one would like to justify Ms Wheatley’s attitude towards Africa as dictated by circumstances, it is obvious that neither she or Mama (separated by two centuries) could divorce from the stereotypical notion of Africa as a jungle. It is against this image that Beneatha, Mama Lena’s daughter, fights with her mother: “Well, do me a favor and don’t ask him a whole lot of ignorant questions about Africa. I mean do they wear clothes and all that... It’s just that people ask such crazy things. All anyone seems to know about when it comes to Africa is Tarzan” (Scene Two, 1231). This image of Africa obviously is at a crossroads with that of Maya Angelou whose poem “Africa” moves beyond the depiction of Dark Ages to one of triumph:

Africa
Thus she had lain
sugar cane sweet
deserts her hair
golden her feet
mountains her feet
two Niles her tears
Thus she has lain.
Black through the years (ll. 1-8)

In the final stanza, Angelou resurrects the new Africa from the ashes of slavery: a sphinx-like image poised to conquer the world:

Now she is rising
remember her pain
remember the losses
her screams loud and vain
remember her riches
her history slain
now she is striding

although she had lain (ll. 18-25)

Maya Angelou's Africa resonates with those true sons and daughters of African origins who know the history of slavery and suffer the nostalgia of a lost Eden which is in the process of regeneration. Angelou doesn't paint here a rosy, utopian, Edenic picture of Africa. Rather, she reconciles herself with the fact of slavery and turns it around into victory: Africa rising out of her pains, losses, and sleep. This clearly reveals Maya Angelou's attempt to identify with an Africa of her imagination: one that is poised to rise, one full of life and the true image of what Frantz Fanon calls "humanity," ready to serve a new "humanity with a new history of Man, a history which will have regard to the sometimes prodigious theses which Europe has put forward:" restoring sanity back to humanity (390-93).

Maya Angelou shares this utopian and Edenic picture of Africa with the fiery poet Claude McKay who in his poem "Africa" eulogizes Africa's wealth and scientific achievements ("Thou Ancient treasure land, thou modern prize / New people marvel at thy pyramids" *New Negro* 218). Lewis Alexander picked up the chorus in another of his poems called "Africa" (1924) in which he preached the rebirth and resurrection of Africa:

Africa
 Thou art not dead, although the spoiler's hand
 Lies heavy as death upon thee; though the wrath
 Of its accursed might is in thy path

 Thou art not dead, but sleeping, — Motherland
 Thou shalt outlive this terror and this pain.
 (*The New Negro* 19-20)

This reawakening about Africa couldn't have come at a better time than during the Harlem Renaissance, a period of renewed pride in Negro heritage. One of the alternatives the African American had at this time was a search for self-fulfillment from within. This introspective journey inevitably led them to a reevaluation of their sense of themselves in an attempt to find satisfaction, if not happiness. So Africa, or the mental pilgrimage to Africa, took the central stage. In

fact, Arthur P. Davis and Michael W. Peplow in *The New Negro Renaissance: An Anthology* were quick to remark that

As a part of the ferment during the New Negro Movement, American Negroes began to take a new look at the Black Continent. The Renaissance poets were among the first to use Africa as a subject. Many of them emphasized in their works what we now call the alien-and-exile theme, starting or at least implying that the Negro in America is a perpetual alien, an exile from beautiful, sun-drenched Africa, his homeland [...]. But these poets knew very little about the real Africa. Africa for them was not a place, but a symbol, an ideal land in which the Black man had once been happy, kingly and free. (202-03)

Arna Bontemps's "The Return" conjures up the African jungles into her New York apartment in the second stanza of this poem:

The throb of rain is the throb of muffled drums;
Darkness brings the jungle to our room.
Darkness hangs our room with pendulums
Of vine in the gathering gloom
Our walls recede into the denseness of
Surrounding trees. This is the night of love
Retained from those lost nights our fathers slept
In huts; this is the night that cannot die
Let us keep the dance of rain our fathers kept
And tread our dreams beneath the jungle sky.
(*The New Negro* 211)

One would be remiss to overlook Alice Walker's therapeutic value of Africa in the lives of Celie and Nettie in *The Color Purple* (1982) who are rescued by the very concept of Africa. In fact, Celie, the protagonist of *The Color Purple*, can only find an outlet to her psychological sufferings by writing to God (the spiritual force) and then by relating them to her sister Nettie who "is rescued from similar experiences when she is befriended by a missionary couple who take her with them to Africa, where they remain for years" (Cobb 199-200). These letters unveil Celie's sense of hopelessness, shame and fear caused by her American surrounding. She can only overcome this nihilistic situation by appealing to forces outside of herself, outside of her immediate surroundings — heaven and Africa,

which are symbolized and captured in God and Nettie respectively. Indeed, Celie cannot find reprieve from despair in a tradition that has denied the black people its cultural expression, and because the American set-up is the root of her despair, in fact, it is her father (who in African culture should bar the doors against sexual predators) who rapes her and takes away her sense of self-pride. Celie's final reprieve comes when, as Cobb asserts, "life takes on new meaning [...] which she communicates to God to whom she still writes letters and to her sister Nettie, whom she finally sees again [...] when the missionaries come home from Africa" (Cobb 200).

So Africa was not only a place of refuge, a sanctuary for Nettie, but equally a place of hope, salvation, and regeneration for Celie. It is no accident therefore if Celie finds her regenerated womanhood, her sense of self-fulfillment when Nettie returns from Africa, the motherland. The centrality of this African connection in *The Color Purple* depicts, in Charles Johnson's view "the longing for reconnection with one's African roots, which is, of course, a theme as old as Cultural Nationalism itself" which contributed in making the novel "the most commercially successful novel in the entire history of Afro-American letters" (105). Alice Walker was so fascinated with the African connection that she did not only travel to Africa, but made Africa the central issue in *The Temple of My Familiar* which depicted Lissie's sojourn and search for spiritual sanctuary in Africa for several years.

This re-creation or restoration of humanity and this oneness with nature in an Edenic past are sensuously captured by Countee Cullen's well-celebrated and anthologized poem "The Heritage." Like with other authors and in other works, Countee Cullen begins the poem by asking the question overtly, where others have simply implied or answered without first asking: "What is Africa to me...?" Although the answer to this question comes up in a series of rhetorical questions, each response captures the romantic picture of Africa which Cullen envisions: "cooper sun or scarlet sea," "strong bronzed men," "of songs sung by wild barbaric birds," a place of "great rumshrobbing through the air," and a place of "tall defiant grass / where young forest lovers lie" (ll.16-17). Unfortunately, this pristine image of Africa is adulterated by the poet's personae's actual situation: one of unmitigated suffering, pains and lack of freedom: it is

the same blackness, African-ness, that sentenced him to a life of perpetual sufferings:

So I lie, whose fount of pride,
Dear distress, and joy allied,
Is my somber flesh and skin,
With the dark blood damned within
Like great pulsing tides of wine
That, I fear, must burst the fine
Channels of the chafing net
Where they surge and foam and fret (ll. 23-30)

Countee Cullen's mixed feelings lead him to question why God made "a poet black, and bid him sing" ("Yet Do I Marvel" l. 14). These rebellious attitudes are born out of the desperation of the estrangement from the motherland. Cullen therefore can only live his African experience in a fantasy land, a Fantasy Island of sorts, which in its own little way brings temporary relief for the poet. It is the same fantasy that feeds the poet's imagination in "Colored Blues Singer" where the poet addresses the dignity and the stoic resignation of the Black Singer:

But you go singing like the sea
Whose lover turns to land
You make your grief a melody
And take it by the hand

Such songs the mellow-bosomed maids
Of Africa intone
For lovers dead in hidden glades
Slow rotting flesh and bone. (ll. 5-12)

The ability of the blues singer to transform a dirge into a joyful song brings out his African roots, from a land where mellow-bosomed maids sing for lovers dead in hidden glade. The American blues singer will definitely sing not about love, joy, and happiness, but about hardships, deprivations, slavery, and the daily problems that tend to inform life in Africa. The contrast here is very implicit and almost too overt while Africa is presented as the anti-thesis of America. In fact, Countee Cullen's "mellow-bosomed maids" seem

to cohabit with Langston Hughes' poet's persona who has "known rivers ancient as the world" in "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" (*Call & Response* 889). The well-being suggested by the river is captured by images of sleep and comfort:

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.
I bathed in the Euphrates when the dawns were young.
I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.
I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it. (ll. 4-7)

Indeed, this is the African way to dreams fulfilled, not to dreams deferred; the African kind of lullabies not the American weary blues. The balmy picture of the Congo River stands here in stark contrast to the Congo River of O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones* (1960) and the witchdoctor and Conrad's primitive cannibalistic tribes of *The Heart of Darkness* (1902), whose portrait forced Chinua Achebe to react with his most piercing critique against Conrad entitled "An Image of Africa" in which he calls Conrad "a bloody racist [...]" for the dehumanization of Africa and Africans which this age-long attitude has fostered and continues to foster in the world" (329). Langston Hughes' obsession with black wisdom (depth) became the motif of the poem simply entitled "Negro" in which he identifies with Africa and blackness:

I am a Negro
Black as the night is black
Black like the depths of my Africa... (ll. 1-3)

This poem does not only fall in line with the "Black is Beautiful" motif of the Harlem Renaissance which was a call for self-pride, but it goes further towards an identification process with Africa, "my Africa." In spite of the fact that the "Negro" was "a slave," "a worker," "a singer" and "a victim," Hughes accepts these historical realities and proudly identifies with the African spirit of endurance and long-suffering. What is Africa to Langston Hughes then? The answer is in the rivers, depths, and color of the African darkness, a darkness that is not reminiscent of ignorance, primitivism, barbarism, and hell, but one that vibrates with love, wisdom, technology (pyramids) ser-

vice, and long suffering. Africa therefore is a serious topic and business for Langston Hughes.

However, where and when Africa is not shown as an antithesis of America, it is shown as an artifact of comic relief or distraction. Underneath the profound yearning for her African roots or identity, Hansberry's depiction of Beneatha is almost comical. Asagai is usually introduced or brought back in *A Raisin in the Sun* only at a point of severe family crisis, which undercuts the sincerity, seriousness, and committedness of Beneatha to her search. It would therefore be more accurate to assert that Hansberry was much more concerned about "civil rights liberalism" and a fight against the "second-class citizenship" of African Americans (Biggsby 276-77) than about her actual quest for what Beneatha calls "her African identity." Indeed, one can assert that Beneatha's cursory attempt to go to Africa is in fact an attempt at extending her "fight for space" (Okafor 336), and her dislocation to Africa a viable option to the sublimation of her personality subsumed in marriage. In her scheme of thinking, Africa and medicine co-exist in her dreamland of ephemeral values, as a part of experimentation for self-fulfillment. With the money for her medical school gone, so is her dream of flying to Africa. Indeed, Africa is part of her self-assertion and her self-definition remains far away, unreachable but more real than the slave mentality of Chicago, a place of dreams deferred.

Finally, we end where we began, but I am not sure we can answer adequately or comprehensively Countee Cullen's opening question in "The Heritage" since the array of African images he conjures are anchored in various works of the African American writers we discussed. Thus, Africa continues to undergo mutations to satisfy the longing desires of each artist's persona, always in response to the changing perspectives of the American landscape and to how and where the African American finds himself or herself at a particular point in time.

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