

Spice Sisters: Religion, Freedom and Escape of Women in African American and Indian
Literatures

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Introduction

Spice Sisters: Religion, Freedom, and Escape of Women in African American and Indian Literatures

“When the world gets ugly enough – a woman will do anything for her family.”
– Mama in *A Raisin in the Sun*.

Lorraine Hansberry and Rabindranath Tagore are two authors whose contribution to literature goes beyond their giftedness as writers. Hansberry’s play, *A Raisin in the Sun*, and Tagore’s short stories are novel in the way they speak to African American and Indian cultures. They draw attention to the plight of oppressed groups, especially women, and call for change. Hansberry gives a realistic depiction of the struggles and triumph of characters in a typical African American family oppressed by poverty, racism, and segregation in 1950s America. Though she used religion as a recurring motif in African American literature, it has generally not received greater attention by academic scholars. Therefore, the discussion of Christianity as an inevitable motif in African American literature, specifically, Hansberry’s *Raisin*, will lend to a greater awareness of this subject. When the “white man’s religion” becomes a black woman’s source of strength, this merger should be a worthwhile academic discussion. This thesis will analyze the importance of religion to the matriarch and to the overall fabric of African American culture in *Raisin*.

Though both Hansberry and Tagore are celebrated authors, they did not use their writing for personal aggrandizement, but rather for fundamental social reform to bring about change in the plight of women and oppressed groups in general. They join a long tradition of struggle for freedom in their respective societies, but they offer a unique literary approach to accomplish their goal. Both thematize women who manifest yearnings for freedom, both literal and spiritual,

from their established roles. Tagore portrays realistic families and women in rural India who face oppression from the Hindu religion and their quest for freedom. In Hansberry, Christianity empowers the African American woman to overcome racism, sexism, and classism. Whereas, in Tagore, Hinduism confines the Indian woman in dharma, yet she struggles and frees herself from the dharma¹ that restricts her within her household duties of a subservient wife. Furthermore, both authors play pioneering roles in their representation of these aforementioned themes of bondage and quest for freedom in African American and Indian literatures respectively.

Hansberry is the first black woman and artist to produce a classic, record breaking civil rights Broadway drama to pave the way for the black theater movement; Tagore, on the other hand, is the first to employ the conventional short fiction to give a realistic depiction of downtrodden characters striving for freedom in the tradition of bhakti devotional poets whose discourse and techniques were as innovative as their criticism of, and escape from, the heinous aspects of Hinduism. This thesis will focus on Tagore's stories as freedom for women from patriarchy and subjugation.

Much like earlier African American literature such as the spirituals and slave narratives by authors such as Harriet Jacobs, Zora Neal Hurston, and even more recent neo-slave narratives by writers such as Alice Walker and Maya Angelou, Hansberry portrays the matriarch, the strong, godly mother or grandmother, as the leader of her household, leading her family to freedom. She uses the religion as one of the primary characteristics of the main female character. Alice Childress, a black playwright who, like Hansberry, published her plays in the 1950s and 60s, also incorporated church liturgy and Christian allusions in her plays about black heroines to affirm that even in their oppression and as victims of poverty, sexism, and racism,

1. Dharma is translated a "duty" that each person is expected to fulfill.

also known as triple marginalization, these matriarchs remain strong in their faith in God as if a supernatural force is the only hope for their redemption. Hansberry, in her most celebrated play, thematizes this story of the African American woman's quest for freedom that began with slavery in America.

Hansberry's play *Raisin* was a social catalysis like the African American's activism in the Civil Rights Movement. *Raisin* can also be compared to Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* and Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie*; Hansberry sought to bring the social struggles of African Americans to the forefront of American consciousness, just as Miller and Williams did the same for working-class Americans of the middle of the twentieth century. All three plays resonate the recurring theme of the common man's struggles and desire to achieve the American Dream. All three plays debuted consecutively in the 1930s, 40s and 50s, and all three writers sketched the realistic struggles of everyday Americans and their pursuit of the American Dream. Unfortunately, their protagonists are not successful in realizing their dream. Hansberry's characters (except Mama) do not attain their dream, but in the end, there is hope for a better future, a hope much needed in the urban African American community in the mid-1900s. This detailed look at *Raisin* will help explain how Christianity helped Mama to succeed where Miller's and Williams' characters failed.

Critics have lauded Hansberry for her success as a playwright and for the realistic characters and setting in her play that mirror the issues and attitudes of blacks in the North, in the 1950s. Rarely has there been emphasis on the religious matriarch in reviews of *Raisin*. Mary Louise Anderson, in her article "Black Matriarchy: Portrayal of Women in Three Plays," briefly delves into the role of religion and the black matriarch. Anderson defines the African American matriarch as a mother who embodies these four characteristics: "[She] regards the black male as

undependable, and is frequently responsible for his emasculation, is often very religious, regards mothering as one of the most important things in her life, attempts to shield her children from and to prepare them to accept the prejudices of the white world” (93). Among the traits suggested by Anderson, religiosity may basically be the black matriarch’s strongest trait, and it is certainly indicated through Mama, *Raisin’s* matriarch’s continuous use of “Christian” dialogue. However, critics like Anderson and others fail to expound on Mama’s religiosity which is an inseparable attribute of her personality.

Furthermore, a historical approach of the black church and its influence on black women may explain one aspect of the empowerment of the black matriarch. Black freedom fighters like Frederick Douglass and Martin Luther King, Jr. began their activism in the church. C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, in their book, *The Black Church in the African American Experience*, record the progression of the black church from spirituality to civil rights, and eventually to women’s rights. Even pre-feminism black women were able to freely express themselves, especially in matters of equality in religious practices. Sojourner Truth² in her “Ain’t I a Woman?” speech in 1851 spoke for women’s rights and participation in church; she asks rhetorically, “Then that little man in black there, he says women can’t have as much rights as men, because Christ wasn’t a woman. Where did your Christ come from? From God and a woman! Man had nothing to do with Him” (Lincoln 274). Black women may have first had a better platform to speak for their rights in the church arena.

Church was the place for empowerment of women, and a place where they were not

2. Sojourner Truth was her self-given name, and her birth name was Isabella Baumfree. She was born into slavery, and she was an outspoken women’s rights activist in the 1850s as well as an abolitionist.

fearful of expressing their rights or restricted by time (at work, they had to complete a load of tasks in an allotted time, but at church, they had long hours of services). As evident in extensive studies on black churches and the dominance of women, “[churches] do provide opportunities for empowerment, especially female empowerment, within the here and now of the church and even beyond into the wider secular context” (Goldsmith 55-56). For example, newly thriving institutions like African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME) encouraged leadership roles for black women as missionaries, deaconesses and, of course, community helpers. *Raisin’s* matriarch certainly demonstrates her leadership and strength derived from her church and religion, Christianity. She epitomizes the church’s influence on black women’s empowerment.

Though some scholars speculate that black women and their leadership characteristics are acquired from their African ancestors who found it acceptable to have women as priestesses, leaders, and witchdoctors, black women exercised their freedom in the church more than elsewhere (307). Lincoln reiterates, “Because of the predominance of female members in Black churches, unattached single clergy, especially males tend to be viewed as a threat to the stability of congregational life” (127). Black women were able to exercise their freedom and leadership in the church, especially in the AME Zion church, which has “a longer historical and denominational tradition of allowing women to be ordained as pastors” (293). Even as far as education was concerned, over half the graduates from Mason Seminary were black women (Lincoln 90), and when women were given education and leadership rights in the church, the influence would automatically travel into the community.

Similar to the plight of African American women, Indian women were marginalized because of their poor living conditions, their gender, and their roles as second class citizens as dictated by their “dharma.” Dharma is a Hindu wife’s service to her family, which includes her

husband, father-in-law, mother-in-law, and other family members who live in the household. The wife is expected to respect and obey her husband and his family under all circumstances. This forms the premise of Rabindranath Tagore's three short stories discussed in this thesis.

The Nobel laureate, Rabindranath Tagore, is noted for his well-known collection of devotional poems, *Gitanjali*, not for his short stories, which have received little attention, yet his short stories communicate his commitment to freedom and escape for women in the remote households of India. Of the three short stories focused in this thesis, "Punishment" has received the most attention in literary circles. It is discussed within the framework of post-colonialism and orientalism of Edward Said. Said's focus, however, is on the "colonized" and their condition contrived and publicized by the West, whereas Tagore gives an insider's genuine depiction of Indian women without mediation from an outsider.

English critics like Ernest Rhys and American critics like Mary Lago have only given fleeting attention to Tagore and his ability to employ powerful heroines in short stories like "Punishment," "The Girl Between," and "A Wife's Letter" to illustrate women's rights in India, Asia, and other parts of the world. In fact, Mandakranta Bose, an expert in medieval female protest poetry, affirms this in her recent study of Hinduism and women's roles. He concludes that women hardly had a voice until the twentieth century; up till then, they were heard "sporadically" (113). However, even beyond the three short stories examined in this thesis, Tagore is eloquent in telling the women's stories through much of his literature at a time when Indian literature remains nearly silent in this regard. His other short stories, such as "Housewarming" and "Bride and Bridegroom," all highlight heroines dealing with poverty, caring for a weak family member or in-laws, and devoted mothers juggling various demands in a patriarchal society. This thesis contributes to critical study of Tagore's works by discussing

female characters that sought to escape the threats of the caste system, patriarchal society, and male dominance at the turn of the twentieth century in India. Tagore's female characters, often poor, low-caste wives, reject their dharma and the hierarchical social values of traditional Indian society.

The activism of Tagore's female characters is as innovative as other revolutionary authors of movements in past Indian literature that also denounced aspects of Hinduism. Examples include the Virashivas – militant devotees – who invented *vacana* (plain style poetry) to reject caste system and chastise the wealthy and their grand temples that low caste people were forbidden to enter. Or Bhakti (devotion) poetry that women like Mirabai used to escape loveless and oppressive marriages. Likewise, the weaver-poet Kabir used creative innovation to condemn Hindu claims of exclusivity, while the male poet Kshetrayya adopted the female voice and persona to express longings for freedom. Like these revolutionary authors, Tagore uses his short stories to establish a new movement of poor, low-class but strong willed female characters eager to escape the constrictions of dharma and oppression.

Both Indian and the African American women manifest yearnings for freedom, both literal and spiritual, and they use religion to break away from their established roles to create freedom for themselves and their gender. Christianity empowers the African American woman to overcome racism, classism, and sexism, while dharma confines the Indian woman; yet, she struggles and frees herself from the oppressiveness of dharma. The African American writer, Lorraine Hansberry, and the Indian author, Rabindranath Tagore, epitomize these aforementioned themes of bondage and quest for freedom in African American and Indian literatures respectively.

The first chapter of this thesis introduces the two well-known authors from opposite spectrums, the Eastern and Western hemispheres, and provides necessary insight through their biographies. Both authors share startling similarities. Hansberry is from a wealthy family, and Tagore is from a family in the ruling Indian class. Both authors, though wealthy, devote their literature to the ghetto and rural or poor women in their society. Both authors chose their subjects because of its importance to them, not as a hobby. This attention towards Hansberry and Tagore's works exhibits a global perspective on women's issues that is otherwise advocated by a somewhat limited lens of literary theorists, especially feminists. Robert Nemiroff, Hansberry's husband, describes her need to broadcast her vision as an "insurgency" as important to her as her "blackness, her womanhood, her humanism" (*Young, Gifted, Black* xx). Hansberry's America was recovering from a World War and Tagore's nation was agonizing under colonialism; yet, they chose to write about poor women. Hansberry was purposeful in her decision to write about the current condition of black women. She was not afraid to say, "[A]rt has a purpose. And that its purpose was action: that it contained 'the energy ... to change things'" (xiv). The authors developed characters who overcame classism, racism, and sexism.

The second chapter is an in-depth look at Hansberry's most celebrated work, *A Raisin in the Sun*. Lena Younger, the main character of the play, is the black matriarch who cares for every member in the family. Her love for her children is as strong as her devotion to her God whom she invokes throughout the well-known play. Mama, the name by which almost everyone in the play addresses her, paves the redemptive path for her family. The other members of the household, her son Walter, her daughter Beneatha, her daughter-in-law Ruth, and her grandson Travis, all look to her for salvation from poverty and classism--and in the case of her daughters, sexism as well.

Like the second chapter, the third chapter reveals similar struggles of Indian women in Tagore's short stories. They too are striving to "make ends meet." They face poverty, caste system, patriarchal society, and dire situations from which their religion cannot provide escape. However, these women are determined to find freedom on their own. Tagore's three short stories reflect women engaged in this fight for freedom. They go against dharma and find their own way to freedom.

Like Hansberry, Rabindranath Tagore was born during a pivotal time of his nation's state. He was born in 1861 in Calcutta, India, during a time when Indians were fighting for freedom from the British whose rule ended officially in 1947. After observing the injustice of the British rule as well as oppression of the caste system in the Indian culture, Tagore notes, ". . . [I]t is for the Big to hurt and for the Small to be hurt" (*Reminiscences* 25). Tagore's three short stories studied in the subsequent chapters are his desire for the "Small" to voice their "hurt" and fight to escape it. Apparently, the realism of Tagore's short stories stem from his childhood observations, and his years of travel in Indian villages. His stories greatly contrast the flowery and glorified wife who, in classical Indian literature, such as Sita in the *Ramayana*, is praised for her sacrifice and unswerving duties to her husband: "Sita, being a loyal wife, feels that it is her duty to follow her husband into the forest, and she argues dharma. The Gopis, being adulterous lovers, forsake their duty toward their husbands to follow Krishna in the forest. He will invoke dharma to send the back, but of course they do not listen" (Pauwels 245). Though Sita's husband, Rama has left her lonely, but she insists to sacrifice her safety and maybe her purity to be with her husband, but her dharma motivates her to dutifully follow her husband at all times, at any cost.

Although various forces such as patriarchy, slavery, or colonialism are directly responsible for the marginalization of women in both African American and Indian literatures, religion serves as either a liberating or suffocating force. In *Raisin*, religion is liberating. In Tagore's short stories, the women are oppressed by their religion. The woman in the Hindu religion is non-existent without the man. Her childhood is controlled by her father or brothers; her adulthood is spent in service to her husband, her in-laws and then children. Dharma or duties prescribed for married women in the Dharmashashtra may seem like slavery: "Even if the husband is morally degraded, engaged in an affair with another woman and is devoid of knowledge and other qualities, the wife must treat him like a god" (*Laws of Manu*). As far as the man is concerned, his dharma or duty is to study and recite the Vedas or Hindu scriptures. Although most modern day Indians, both women and men, may not follow such stringent practices, during his time, Tagore was certainly accustomed to the subservient role of an Indian wife. Even the arranged marriage, which until recent time carried with it a set of rules, had strict criteria to select a proper bride for a young man:

A girl who sleeps too much, weeps a lot, or goes out walking alone should be rejected. If she has a bad reputation, is secretive, breaks her word, is bald, has marks on her skin like a cow, has breasts that are too big, or yellowish hair; if she is round-shouldered, very thin, hairy, disobedient, immoral, has uterine hemorrhages, is agitated; if she has childhood friends or a very young brother, and if her hands are always damp, she should be rejected. (Muesse 88)

Because of much social activism and voices projected through literature, such absurdities in marital rules have essentially become irrelevant.

From antiquity, both African American and Indian literatures have placed great emphasis on religion and depicted issues of bondage and freedom within the context of religion, especially Christianity and Hinduism. Contextualizing the lives of women in these literatures within the framework of religion illuminates their similarities and common bond. In black Spirituals, a heavenly home, complete with furnishings, food, and clothes of every kind awaited God's faithful servant on earth. And in slave narratives, religious language, prayers to God and biblical allusions motivate the characters in their quest for freedom. Lorraine Hansberry used religion as a repeated theme on purpose, but mainly to show the Christian influence on black families.

The authors and their activism is the focus of the fourth and final chapter. Hansberry and Tagore were not only well-rounded writers, but they were actively part of the cultural movements of their time. Hansberry's parents' court case for equal housing and their one of a kind move to a white neighborhood may have been greatly influential in Hansberry's life. After two years of college in Wisconsin, in 1950, Hansberry decided to pursue a writing career in New York where black artists thrived. She joined Paul Robeson's FREEDOM newspaper, which she called "the journal of Negro liberation" (*Young, Gifted, Black* 97). Tagore was also concerned for liberation of a different kind. His study of Western literature and many travels to England and America may have affected his writings about the plight of poor Indian women and families in India. Amiya Chakravarty glorifies Tagore's goal by saying his "insistent opposition to social tyranny, caste, and economic injustice was, of course, the decisive factor in his motivation," and that he was influenced by George Bernard Shaw in "purposive" art (*Housewarming* xi). Tagore's purpose is unique, unlike male authors of his time.

Hinduism and its influence in the family dynamics, especially the wife's role, can be extremely rigid. Traditionally, the only way for females in India to find liberation and yet

remain true to their Hindu traditions was for them to follow the example of the Bhakti poets³ such as Mirabai and Mahadeviyakka. These female poets devoted themselves to the temples and gods such as Krishna and Shiva because that was their only escape from their oppressive husbands and in-laws. Though bhakti poets included both men and women from various social statuses, women's poetry was mostly a protest against "norms of behavior dictated by dharma" (Maynard 1412). Through literature, women of the lower caste particularly found greater freedom. As Maynard emphasizes, "Women and people of low caste are the most heroic of devotees because they risk the most in claiming, through devotional practice, freedom, equality, and a voice in society" (1412). Among such female bhakti poets, Mirabai's poetry has been celebrated for hundreds of years by both men and women who see her lyrics mostly as praise of gods. Mirabai has been deified by her followers, quoting her poetry at celebrations and religious gatherings as much as other Hindu scriptures. Primarily, her lyrics are "rejecting a real-life marriage to pursue a passionate love relationship with God (depicted as her lover or husband), each declares her freedom not only from marriage but from all familial and domestic responsibilities, and each is shown triumphing over men who harass her and ultimately achieving mystical union with the beloved God" (Maynard 1413). Such women's "triumph" over oppression can be realistically visualized through Tagore's short stories characterizing women of the early nineteenth century. For the Hindu woman, her husband is god and her marriage is dictated by her parents. Not so for the African American women. The black matriarch sought

3. These female "bhakti" poets had given up worldly pleasures such as marriage and family to join other "full-time" devotees to write poems and songs of devotion to their gods. This type of "karma" kept them close to their gods. Mostly, it was a form of protest against Hindu traditions that confined women under the patriarchs.

liberation within the context of her Christian devotion and a hope beyond the temporal earth; she looked forward to a heavenly home. Thus, African American women did not need to rebel against their religion to find liberation; they could utilize it. In contrast, women in Indian literature must seek freedom from dharma (the foundation of Hinduism), especially marital duties imposed by the Hindu religion.

Notable literary approaches offer a greater understanding of women's quest for freedom. One of these approaches is feminist criticism, specifically black feminism which directly applies to African American literature. Barbara Smith in her essay, "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism," proposes a need for black women to recognize race and sex in black literature: "A Black feminist approach to literature that embodies the realization that the politics of sex as well as the politics of race and class are crucially interlocking factors in the works of Black women writers is [necessary]" (134). Black women's literature may need to be viewed as a separate and unique entity, or it may be difficult to understand what the writers meant in the first place. Other authors such as Hazel V. Carby, Deborah McDowell, and Sherley Anne Williams emphasize a need for a close look at literature by blacks as essential in understanding the social, economic, and political conditions surrounding women in African American literature.

In addition to black feminism, Postcolonial theory which generally elucidates black and Indian literature, defines and explicates the "voicelessness" of women in these literatures. Gayatri Spivak, one of the greatest contributors to postcolonial theory, through her essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" delineates the harsh condition of women in Eastern culture. Through colonization, the voice of the colonized is suppressed. However, through literature, women do find a voice and the subaltern does speak, especially through Hansberry's and Tagore's characters. Rahul Gairola, in his article, makes a distinction in the Indian woman's condition:

For a subaltern woman this means subordination to the patriarchal codes that constitute her subjectivity, for she must be, to a certain extent, validated by those in power. . . . As such, the Hindu woman locates her internal and social agency in relation to the gaze of the Hindu man, whose eyes reflect those religious ideals that paradoxically produce her as subject and commodity, and whose gaze is somewhat regulated by the paternal gaze of British colonialism. (308)

Gairola explains that the Indian woman carries a “double portion” of the Indian man’s burden. While the man is suppressed under colonialism, the woman is suppressed under colonialism as well as societal patriarchy. Consequently, the women in African American and Indian literature develop a voice to speak out of the subaltern in order to obviate the injustice they suffer.

Finally, both authors write in the realistic tradition, so theories of realism will help illuminate the lives of common people who deal with everyday conflicts with others, with self, and with the environment they live in. Donald Pizer, in his book about realism, states that such literature is a true form of writing: “It matters not how the tongues of the critics may wag, or the voices of a partially developed and highly conventionalized society may complain, the business of the author, as well as of other workers upon this earth, is to say what he knows to be true, and, having said as much, to abide the result with patience” (179). Both authors worked with characters from a highly “conventionalized” society; Hansberry worked with segregated African Americans, demanding justice, and Tagore worked with women in a patriarchal society, requesting and sometimes demanding freedom and equality. None of these approaches may be complete without a close reading of the texts, not as a critical approach, but as to generate a greater understanding of themes and characters.

Characters in *A Raisin in the Sun* by Lorraine Hansberry, and three of Rabindranath Tagore's short stories, "Punishment," "The Girl Between," and "A Wife's Letter," all overcome their battle against poverty, racism, and sexism. Three women in *Raisin*, Mama, her daughter-in-law, Ruth, and Mama's daughter, Beneatha, are major characters who represent the various struggles of black womanhood. Mama, the endearing title for Lena Younger, reveals a greater development of the black matriarch. She embodies the black struggle, the religious strength, and the black matriarch of the family. In contrast to the womanly strength in Hansberry's play, the three wives in three of Tagore's short stories use their experiences at home, and even years of suffering, and sometimes religion to escape their oppression. They begin as submissive women who are caught in the dharma trap, with their wifely duties that the husbands and society usually "force" them to fulfill. Towards the end, these women transform from young, submissive brides into strong-willed women to break free from religious oppression that festers in their roles as slave-like wives. The authors help their female characters to "convert" into role models for future generations of women, and their writing continues to help women prevail.

Lorraine Hansberry's thirty-four years of life were fully devoted to bringing changes in her community – a move against segregation and making equal rights available for blacks, women, and other minorities. After high school, Hansberry attended the University of Wisconsin for two years, but moved to New York City. There, she also studied under W. E. B DuBois, an intellectual who desired to educate blacks and give them a voice in the public arena. DuBois was influential in increasing her interest in Africa (Asagai, the African character in her play showcases this knowledge), and she was able to study her cultural roots in depth. While influences of the Harlem Renaissance eventually developed into the Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s and 1960s, Hansberry took the racial activism further by writing a play, not just to

show African American life, but black women as the marginalized group because of their race, gender, and class.

Unlike the Indian woman, the African American woman seems to be a force in control of her own future and family, and she uses Christianity as the source of her strength. The matriarchs seem to use sermons, hymns, prayer, church, and God as an inseparable part of their being and everyday struggles. The matriarch in Hansberry's *Raisin*, faced with segregation and poverty, uses religion as her fortress to remain strong in her convictions and make decisions for her family's benefit.

The mother or grandmother in African American literature, especially in slave narratives, is motivated by the want of freedom for her children or grandchildren. In Hansberry's *Raisin*, the widowed mother spends all of her energy working for the betterment of her children. Mama wants to buy a house with the money she inherited from her late husband's insurance. The problem is that the house is in a white neighborhood where only segregated housing is acceptable; thus, the theme of migration in African American literature is broadened here. She wants to provide more space for her son's family, and money to pay for her daughter's education to become a doctor. Furthermore, her religious convictions prohibit her from giving her son money to invest in a liquor business. Her daughter-in-law's decision, under poverty's pressure, to abort her child, also goes against her belief that God can sustain anyone. A classic line in the play is when she refuses to accept her daughter's agnostic views, and she slaps her and makes her repeat, "In my mother's house, there is still God" (*Raisin* 77). God is Mama's source of strength. In the absence of her husband and in the era of segregation, her race, her femininity, and her poverty are all weakening points, but she reassures herself saying, "Lord, give me

strength” (178). Eventually, she migrates to a white neighborhood, and her Christianity remains the point that marks her successes within the play.

A Raisin in the Sun revolves mainly around political, economic, and social realism of a black family’s desire to move into a white neighborhood, but segregation and economic considerations prohibit the move. The focus is on the realistic turmoil inside the black residence: the cramped apartment, overcrowded with the many members, and poverty. Hansberry cleverly draws the audience with the typical struggles of a poor family’s life with the underlying race issue, alluding to the Jim Crow laws which supported segregated housing and neighborhoods. Lena will inherit ten thousand dollars from her deceased husband’s insurance, and both Lena and her daughter-in-law Ruth would like to use that money for a new house, especially for their grandson and son, respectively. But the son, Walter Lee, prefers to invest the money in a liquor store, but such an idea goes against the matriarch’s Christian conviction. The tension between the matriarch and the son to gain control in the family is not as heightened as the tension between blacks and whites in respect to integrated housing, which is the overarching problem in the play. Lena Younger wants to deliver her family from the congested apartment and give them a bigger house. She sees her family confined and enslaved by the physical space of the apartment and by racism, sexism, and classism.

Ruth Younger, the daughter-in-law, fears her future in her current cramped conditions of living. She is enslaved to her condition, and her husband is too wrapped up in his pursuit of a liquor business to worry about his wife. Again, the conflict here is the wife who must face a harsh reality. Hansberry incorporates realism well into her play since the characters seem to be retelling everyday occurrences in black families in northern cities. She depicts a harsher form of

realism, in a sense, naturalism: the idea that her characters have no free will, and are controlled by heredity and their environment, and the life they live is one of misery and helplessness.

Beneatha, the daughter whose name itself shows subordination, wants the deceased father's insurance money to pay for her medical school. Unlike her mother and sister-in-law and other women in society, she does not want to follow the traditions of marriage. She even refuses a rich suitor who may have been a logical match for her. Instead, she wants to research her African roots, and possibly not get married at all. She is the epitome of the voice against sexism in the play. Among the five members in the household, Lena is the matriarch who controls the family. She dominates the characters, thinking that she knows what is best for them. Religion is Lena's motivating factor. When poverty and segregation are against her, religion is the only force that empowers her.

Tagore's short stories are also a realistic description of daily events in a household, especially between married couples. In these stories, he captures the Indian male mentalities and Hindu family traditions that seep into areas of everyday family life. Tagore skillfully utilizes realism to dramatize his everyday Indian women. For example, in "Punishment," two married brothers live together. One of the wives nags her husband, and the two sister-in-laws quarrel with each other. After a long day at work, the husband demands dinner to be brought to him, and when the wife responds with some audacity, he is filled with anger and kills her with a sickle (Tagore 36). As an immediate remedy to cover up the murder, both the husband and his brother plot to accuse the other brother's wife of murder. When the wife is in on trial, her husband urges her to testify that she killed her sister-in-law, so that his brother would not suffer punishment. At first, she refuses to agree, but later, she decides to give them what they want, but gives a different account. At last, when she suffers her punishment in jail, awaiting death sentence, she receives a

message that her husband wants to see her, and she replies, “I would rather be dead” (45).

Though Hinduism demands her to obey and stay with her husband in all circumstances, she breaks out of the religious tradition and makes her own decision to be separated forever from her husband. She would rather die than see him again – the oppressed will find every way possible, even death, to gain freedom.

In another story, “A Wife’s Letter,” a woman writes a letter to her husband of fifteen years about how her marriage has been horrifying because her husband cared more about the reputation of the family than about her. She rescues one of her female cousins from homelessness, but even that becomes a subject of animosity from her in-laws. In response to his unsupportive behavior, she says, “The proverbial example of a chaste and loyal wife helping her husband even in her crimes only [sic] occurred to all of you” (135). In other words, to fulfill her dharma or her duties based on the Hindu religion, the wife must serve her husband at all times. In the end, she chooses to become a “sanyasani,” or an orthodox follower of a god, which is the only way to officially resign from her devotion to her husband. She ends her letter saying, “You are thinking that I intend to die. Don’t worry, I won’t play such an old joke on you” (138). She realizes her worth in society, and her letter is a letter of resignation from the life of a dutiful wife that she is tired of living.

Similar to his other stories with interesting female heroines, “The Girl Between” is about a sacrificial wife. The story is about a young couple who, after the wife gets sick, regrets they cannot have children, leading the wife to ask her husband to get another wife. Unwillingly, he gets another wife, and the first wife starts serving both the husband and the new wife. Eventually, the new wife becomes like a child, throwing tantrums and wanting to be pleased all the time. She becomes sick and dies, and the first wife is left hopeless even with her good health.

The narrator responds, “She had wasted those precious twenty-seven years in slavery, going to the grocery, worrying about fruits and vegetables, the after dinner betel nuts and spices” (51).

Tagore intricately describes the life of servitude for an Indian wife, and interestingly compares it to slavery.

Though authors Lorraine Hansberry and Rabindranath Tagore do not directly indicate their intention to emphasize the role of religion, both African American Literature and Indian literature rely heavily on religion. Christianity empowers the African American woman to overcome oppression, and provides her the courage to lead her family through the most difficult times, especially for her family’s corporate freedom. Hinduism may trap the woman in the “dharma” circle before she finally finds her freedom. Tagore’s women are searching for ways to find more freedom, and they sometimes use their religion to escape their husband’s subjugation. Though critics so far have explored just above the surface on the role of religion and women in African American literature, this thesis will try to analyze how women’s voice and their resistance to oppression is a grand theme in *Raisin* and Tagore’s short stories. Both the Indian and the African American women in literature detach themselves from their established roles as women and inferiors to gain freedom, and they selflessly grant the same for their families and others of their gender.

Chapter One

Amen, Sister! Religious Matriarch in Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*

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?
 Maybe it just sags
 Like a heavy load.
Or does it explode?

–Langston Hughes

Black matriarchy seems to maintain its dominance in African American literature mainly through the use of religion. Lorraine Hansberry uses a religious mother who demonstrates through her religious or church language her control over her surroundings because she is empowered by her belief in the supernatural. Oftentimes, especially in slave narratives, the mother or grandmother is the only provider for her children and even grandchildren, due to the involuntary separation of male slaves from their families. The reason slave families were under a threat of separation from their loved ones in the antebellum South, varied from sale of surplus slaves, estate divisions, or slave masters moving westward. A study of American slaves and dispersion of their families reveals the nineteenth century as a paramount time when slave families were “torn asunder.” “When enslaved people were sold apart from family members but remained in the general vicinity, they retained family contact by requesting passes for weekend visiting. As elsewhere, however, slaves sold beyond a distance of ten to fifteen miles were harder put to visit their families regularly, although some risked truancy to do so” (Pargas 268). Mothers remained in the slave owner’s home, caring for their mistress and the household. This type of lonely situation may have conditioned black mothers to feel solely responsible for their

children's freedom and to assume that leadership role⁴. Similarly, Mama, in *Raisin*, carries her matriarchal role mostly with the use of her religious language throughout the play and her desire to move her family into a larger, comfortable home with a backyard for her grandson to play.

For African Americans, better housing was impossible during the period of Jim Crow laws or segregated housing, and Hansberry's family had to suffer terrible consequences of buying a house in an all-white neighborhood. In her autobiography, Hansberry recalls her mother pacing the house at night with a rifle in order to keep away white protestors who fired shots at her family. Even Hansberry, as an eight year old girl, was at home when a shot was fired into the house by a white man who was embittered by their rightful black encroachment (*Young, Gifted, Black* 9). It is not surprising then that Hansberry composed a play as a reflection of her childhood, since her own mother, like a matriarch, took responsibility of guarding her home without fear. Typically, guarding one's family is considered a father's role, especially in the 1940s culture before women's liberation.

Matriarchy in *Raisin* is unique to itself; in African American culture as well as other works, the presence of a matriarch may mean an incompetent father or someone who has deserted the familial responsibilities. On the other hand, though the father has died, Mama makes his presence known by reminiscing about "big Walter" and thus making his presence known to her family and friends. Mama establishes her husband's leadership in the family, even to the third generation, her grandson. At the same time, she calls on Walter to take on the leadership role just as his father did. And perhaps her Christian mindset prohibits her from emasculating (as black matriarchs stereotypically do) her late husband, son, and grandson. When

4. Harriet Jacobs escapes to the North and fights for her children to escape the Southern slavery and join her in the North.

she finds out that her daughter-in-law Ruth is going to have an abortion, she motivates her son, “I’m waiting to see you stand up and look like your daddy and say we done give up one baby to poverty and that we ain’t going to give up nary another one . . .” (109). In fact, she is the one who points to her late husband as the ultimate example for her son and grandson, of hard work, survival, and leadership. She points her grandson to his late grandfather as well as to God: “And when you say your prayers tonight, you thank God, and you thank your grandfather – ‘cause it was him what give you the house – in his way” (122). Mama defines the hierarchy in her family for the future of her grandson, and on a grander scheme, the future of the black family. Rubin is apprehensive of the portrayal of weak black males and overly strong black females in literature, but in *Raisin*, there is a balance in the matriarch. Rubin dislikes the typical exhibition of black males as victims of matriarchy:

Emotionally tied to his mother, he must seek his masculine identity outside the home. As he does this, the matriarchal family structure increasingly rejects him. Thus, as he grows toward manhood he becomes more alienated from his family. This results in a violent rejection of female dominance. He turns to expressions of virility and manliness. The male enters the street life and is further socialized into a value system which despises femininity and weaknesses. (38)

The opposite is true for Walter. Though he feels suffocated within the matriarchy and at one point feels alienated, he soon realizes that she provided sustenance for his family, and she was enabling him to become the leader by encouraging him to be like his father. Though she is against her son’s idea to start a liquor store, she decides to give him part of the money from her husband’s life insurance: “I’m telling you to be the head of this family from now on like you supposed to be” (142). At this moment, she bestows manly authority upon him, even when he

has not earned such trust. She wants her family to have better housing, and through hard work and her faith, she is finally able to accomplish it.

Matriarchy also affects the tussle between mother and the daughter or even the daughter-in-law. In his article, “Matriarchal Themes in Black Family Literature,” Rubin denotes various elements of matriarchy manifested in female relationships. For example, black literature may show a mother-daughter bond, and thus show female dominancy through “*solidarity*,” and “If personal gain can accrue from relating to males, then this is acceptable” (35). Yet, Mama connects with every member of her family, even her daughter-in-law, with uttermost care. Mama’s solidarity with the females and males in *Raisin* is only to protect and provide for them, without dissension or selfishness.

In order to understand the black matriarch further, a certain distinction between feminism and black feminism is necessary. According to Valerie Smith, in “Black Feminist Literary Theory,” this unique branch of feminism “proceeds from the assumption that black women experience a unique form of oppression in discursive and non-discursive practices alike; victims at once of sexism, racism and by extension classism” (375). Normally, this victimization places the matriarch in a position of weakness, but Mama’s words indicate her empowerment from a supernatural source. Smith’s analysis underlines the condition of the black woman coping with triple marginalization, first as a woman, as black, and as a poor member of society. All three women in Hansberry’s play, Mama, Ruth, and Beneatha, can all relate to one or all of the triple marginalization experienced by black women in the 1950s. These women lived at a time when professional education was not encouraged among females; they were segregated in public places, and were refused the right to live in a Caucasian neighborhood, even when their large family was confined within low income housing. However, the African American matriarch’s

religious attribute proves the strongest for Mama in Hansberry's play because her religious language empowers her to be content in her condition, and guide her family through a nearly impossible pursuit of buying a home in a white neighborhood. Overall, the play underscores the struggles of a black family's survival and movement toward becoming Middle-class citizens, so the Youngers can enjoy the amenities that their white counterparts have enjoyed for years. The matriarch, Mama, is responsible and persistent to attain the nearly impossible pursuit of buying a home in a white neighborhood.

Mama's religious language in her daily conversation within her home, outside her home, and among white Americans, illustrates her contentment in her condition. Her frequent reference to her "Lord" fuels her leadership as a divine appointment to help her family. Her family's current condition is their life in an overcrowded apartment; they use the living room as a living room during the day and at night it turns into a bedroom:

It [the two room apartment] was an unhappy arrangement and the family was bitterly antagonized by it for many years . . . These people live here because rents in their ghetto are proportionately higher than in any other place in the city; therefore even slight improvement would be of a nature to exhaust them financially since the hard-earned combined wages of the three income-making members must feed, clothe, and house five people. (4-5)

However, despite the exhausting work and poverty, Mama wants to progress in life, but without behaving like a victim. She recalls her husband who once said, "Seem like God didn't see fit to give the black man nothin' but dreams – but he did give us children to make them dreams seem worthwhile" (70). Since God allowed her current condition, she strives for her family's posterity probably knowing that God will even help her to make her children's dreams come true, once

again, referencing to the realization of the dream, a major theme in the play. Mama remains strong through her belief in God. Mama's religious voice prevails throughout the play. While among her own people she is a reminder that God has allowed them to live in poverty at this time, and among white people, she also speaks of God's direct involvement in her life. The use of "Lord, have mercy!" seems to be her personal conversation with God whenever she needs to patiently deal with hardships within and without her family (41). Mama has worked as a domestic helper for fifty-three years of her life, and she plans to quit her job as a housekeeper for a white family. On her last day on the job, she tells Mrs. Holiday, her employer, that she always worked in homes, and she recalls when her late husband and she, right after World War II, took basic skills classes such as welding. During her retelling, she does not forget to mention God, "cept Lord, have mercy, when the war, Praise God, come along a few years back" (41). As an already triply burdened black woman, she became more dangerously vulnerable during war times. Her spirited lingo resembles that of a charismatic church service – little moments when she realizes that God protected her and her family during severely tough times. Even with Mrs. Holiday, who may be condescending due to the racial divide, Mama takes a moment to "testify" about the mercy of the Lord. She survives the Great Depression and difficult economic times. This is her moment of empowerment against racism.

Aside from interaction with whites, even in her conversation with her black neighbor, Mrs. Johnson, Mama is overflowing with her religiosity, a mark of her approach to overcome not only racism but classism. These two characters, Mrs. Johnson and Mama, are contrasted as two different personalities - the first as a passive bystander, and the second as the proactive leader. Fittingly, Mrs. Johnson recognizes Mama's dynamism: "You ain't never gonna learn how to bend with the wind, are you, Lena?" (54) Mrs. Johnson recognizes that Mama is a woman of

strength. Mama is joyful that she has quit working after fifty-three years, but Mrs. Johnson, her neighbor, wonders what she will do now. Instead of being doubtful, a religious Mama replies, “Sit down and look around heaven.” This is followed by an exchange of “Praise God” by both women (55). Unlike Mrs. Johnson’s fearful approach, Mama encourages her to look to God. Instead of saying that she will just stare at the ceiling, she uses “heaven” to specify a hope for a life beyond her earthly manual labor. Then, as a response to the insurance check she is about to inherit from her late husband, Mrs. Johnson says, “Lord, sometimes He works in mysterious ways . . . but he works, don’t He?” and Mama replies, “He does, child, He does!” (55). Though these women seem to be in the same age group, Mama assumes the motherly role. Instead of the check being a result of their many years of suffering and hard work, it becomes the Lord’s work – a result of a highly religious Mama’s mindset, and a type of testament or demonstration of how God helps her overcome class and economic struggles. From the start, Mama’s mindset is of an overcomer, a leadership trait of the religious matriarch.

Mama’s religiosity is a church type of testimony for those outside her home – within her home God empowers her to be the spiritual leader, a type of pastor who guides her family to make the right choices. Even in the absence of her husband, Mama is described as the matriarch, the “full-bodied” lady who, with strength, provides for her children, including her daughter-in-law (29). Barbara Smith separates the plight of the black woman as a much more complex form of oppression compared to that of a black man (375). Her husband suffered and is now gone, and she is left with the burden to deliver her family from their current oppression. As Anderson suggests, the black matriarch’s plight is to assume the responsibility of shielding her children from racism, providing for their future, and preparing them for prejudices in the world. But Mama’s foremost desire is to teach her family all of these life lessons through a religious

spectrum, as a pastor would a congregation. Beneatha, Mama's daughter, wants to become a doctor, and Mama is willing to use part of big Walter's insurance money for medical school. However, her education transforms her into an intellectual who questions God and cultural standards of marriage, family, and femininity. When Beneatha speaks sarcastically, using biblical references, Mama threatens her and admonishes her not to use the Lord's name in vain, "[c]ause it don't sound nice for a young girl to say things like that . . . Me and your daddy went to trouble to get you and Brother to church every single Sunday!" (76). Essentially, Mama feels that a godly education in Sunday school is something Beneatha should not belittle. Beneatha feels as though no one cares about her aspirations to become a doctor. Mama's religious consolation is, "'Course you goin' to be a doctor, honey, God willin'," which incites Beneatha to exclaim: "God hasn't got a thing to do with it . . . Man makes miracles" (75). This infuriates Mama in turn and she makes her daughter repeat after her, "In my mother's house there is still God" (77). Here, not only does Mama establish her authority in the home, but that God is the ultimate authority, or even that he has bestowed his authority to Mama. Soon after, Mama is clear about upholding religiosity when she declares, "There are some ideas we ain't goin' to have in this house. Not long as I am the head of this family" (77). Here Mama claims the authority to spiritually guide the household.

Mama's religious language is a reflection of her church experience and its influence in empowering her as a matriarch. Mikhail Bakhtin's "speech genre," says that an individual can create his or her own language specific to individual spheres. Mama's religious language is an example of Bakhtin's "speech experience" which is unique to Mama's "individual expression" (n.pag.). However, this religious expression is also a language passed down from previous matriarchs and it is common to other members in Mama's household and outside her household

as well. Julia Kristeva, refers to such character specific language as the “mother tongue” (680). Kristeva’s essay⁵ emphasizes cultural influences on language, and in turn, language’s influence on people or readers. She asserts that language must ignite a certain passion that is necessary to complete the “experience” (680). Mama’s language provides a unique spiritual experience in *Raisin* and her speech echoes the language of the black church and thus, an extraordinary cultural experience. Mama’s religion empowers her, and her religious dialect admonishes her children in spiritual matters like a pastor.

Hansberry’s play *Raisin* reflects the religious atmosphere of African Americans in the 1940s and 1950s. Certainly, Christianity is not exclusive to the Younger family since Hansberry wanted to portray the struggles of a typical black family in South Side Chicago – typical both in poverty as well as religiosity. Even the characters’ names suggest a religious hierarchy. The name Lena, if taken from the Hebrew, comes from diminutive form of Magdalene, Mary of Magdalene. Her daughter-in-law, Ruth, and Mama, share the type of bond of their biblical counterparts, Ruth and Naomi. When Mama makes a down payment for a house that the family needs, she tells Ruth first, and together they rejoice, “Praise God . . . Hallelujah! And goodbye misery” (126). When Ruth finds out she is pregnant, and she makes a down payment to schedule an abortion, Mama is the first to find out. Mama and Ruth stand together against Walter’s outbursts of anger.

Beside the biblical names of the main female characters, biblical allusions are peppered throughout the play, even if on a simple Sunday school scale. Mama’s reaction to her daughter’s agnostic rants suggests that since their childhood, her children were accustomed to attending

8. Kristeva, Julia. “The impudence of uttering: Mother tongue.” *Psychoanalytic Review* 97.4 (August 2010): 679-94. *Guilford Press*. Web. 3 Apr. 2013

church every Sunday (76). When Mama sees wilted apples at the market, she describes them as old as from the time “Moses crossed over” or “at the Last Supper” (54). When Walter is finally granted a large part of the insurance money to invest in his liquor store, he is so happy that he sings an old Sunday school song while walking around the house, “All God’s children got shoes” (171). When the spokesperson for the white neighborhood where they plan to move visits them with a proposal to bribe the Youngers in order to keep them from moving into the white neighborhood, Beneatha asks Mr. Lidner whether he has come with “thirty pieces of silver” (165), an allusion to Jesus’ betrayal by Judas Iscariot. Basically, each and every member of the family is well taught by Mama because they demonstrate basic Bible story knowledge, which can be Christianity as a dominant part of black culture, and it can also be translated as valuable spiritual lessons learned under the “pastoral” leadership of Mama.

Even in Mama’s weakest moment toward the end of the play, when a large sum of her husband’s insurance money has been squandered by Walter, she is steadfast in her Christian faith. His friend with whom he invested money for a liquor business deceived the Youngers and left town with their money. Mama had requested of her son that part of the money would be saved for her daughter’s tuition at a medical school, but since Walter’s decision has left them as paupers once again, Mama is truly devastated. She is filled with rage and senselessly starts to slap her son. But even in her weakest moment of losing her self-control, and feeling as if she has lost everything she gathered for fifty-three years, she pacifies herself by her religious reliance on God, saying, “Oh God,” while she looks up to Him and says, “Look down here, and show me the strength . . . strength . . . strength” (178). The same type of calm is shown in one of the last scenes of the play. Mama sits on the couch, swaying forwards and backwards, like in a church service, while her son Walter confronts Mr. Lidner, the white spokesperson for the white

housing, about their right to equal housing. The narrator explains this scene: “Mama rocks back and forth as if she is listening to her gospel in church . . . and singing wordlessly ‘Amen! Yes!’” (202). The church scene is prevalent throughout, from adult members and friends of the Younger family, and more so in Mama’s lingo of the church. Mama is unable to overcome her poverty or single-handedly raise her family without her empowerment from God.

Although Beneatha exemplifies the sexist oppression of black women, both she and her sister-in-law Ruth play a fairly large role as strong women, even if it means only a reflection of Mama’s strong character. If all of Hansberry’s women represent a form of activism, Beneatha portrays women’s need for professional education just as men also need this opportunity to train for their future. Her name suggests she may be beneath other classes, but she wants to become a doctor and travel to Africa and make her own choices regarding marriage and career. Even her own brother is at times a threat to her feminist views: “If you so crazy ‘bout messing around with sick people, then go be a nurse like other women – or just get married and be quiet . . .” (27-28). Sexism is prevalent even within the family, but Beneatha is strong enough to overcome it. Unlike Beneatha’s outspoken strength of character, Ruth, like her biblical namesake, is a follower. However, she also demonstrates silent strength and individualism. Since she is not well educated, Ruth has been a house cleaner for three years. She cannot live lavishly, she has to share two rooms with her husband, son, Mother-in-law, and sister-in-law, and she cannot remove herself from her oppressive conditions; she does not have much to say – a sort of voicelessness due to her class of uneducated women. Her husband wants her to enjoy the same pleasures as the rich enjoy in society. When her husband wants to invest in a liquor business, she does not express her concern. Surprisingly, Ruth exercises her strength and individuality by making a down payment for an abortion without consulting anybody, but Mama realizes Ruth’s decision to

abort her child, and she tries to stop the abortion just as a godly pastor would. Once again, Mama succeeds as the black matriarch driven by her religious convictions, and also by her ability to buy a new house with enough room for her family. Mama is willing to pay for Beneatha's education in medical school and help her go beyond the boundaries placed by sexism for a woman's right for higher education, but not without the stipulation that her daughter does not blaspheme Mama's God.

For Mama, the black matriarch, religious language and religious practice mean feminine empowerment. She does not see herself as a female victim. She recognizes the struggles of racism because she is the product of slavery, considering her words, "Once upon a time, freedom used to be life – now, it's money" (107). Perhaps, she feels that her son's investment in a liquor business, and her daughter's failure to want to share the money with her brother, are a relapse from religious progress, probably a graver issue for her than even racism itself. Anderson's matriarchal stereotype summarizes Mama's character in the play as this:

Religion is an integral part of her life. She wants her children to incorporate her religious ideals into their lives. This wish is most evident when she slaps Beneatha for saying there is no God . . . When Mama is furious at Walter for losing the insurance money and at a moment of great need, she asks God for strength. Her religion sustains her and gives her strength to be a matriarch. (86)

She feels responsible for her children to find the freedom and wealth that they need, but not at the cost of their religious beliefs.

Evidently, the black matriarch's devotion to her God surpasses the momentary condition of racism and poverty. Appropriately, the narrator describes Mama as an extraordinary human being:

She is one of those women of a certain grace and beauty who wear it so unobtrusively that it takes a while to notice. Her dark brown face is surrounded by the total whiteness of her hair, and being a woman who has adjusted to many things in life and overcome many more, her face is full of strength. She has, we can see, wit and faith of a kind that keeps her eyes lit and full of interest and expectancy. (29)

For a woman who has seen slavery before her, and segregation in her times, her “faith” is probably her supernatural empowerment. That faith produces her powerful religious language, which in turn influences people around her, and grants her leadership as she exemplifies her trust in God. Faithful love towards her family is evident in her embrace, followed by spiritual guidance to her grandson: “And when you say your prayers tonight, you thank God . . .” (122). Her continuous use of religious language designates a type of pastoral leadership, allows her family to willingly follow her, and enables their move from years of living in a socially downtrodden class.

The Younger family, through the leadership of Mama, is able to realize any poor family’s dream of moving to Clybourne Park, a posh, white neighborhood. The original screenplay of *A Raisin in the Sun* begins with Langston Hughes poem “What Happens to a Dream Deferred?” Hansberry chose the title for her play based on Hughes’ poem, and through her play, Lorraine Hansberry, the first African American woman playwright to debut on Broadway, was able to materialize her people’s dream through the theatre. The godly matriarch brought the Younger family’s dream to fruition. Mama or Lena Younger may be a stereotypical black matriarch, but her religiosity also defines her just as powerfully as her race, her social condition, and her womanhood.

Chapter Two

Spicy Women in Tagore's Short Stories

"I have been kept shrouded in the darkness of your customs."

—"A Wife's Letter"

During Rabindranath Tagore's time, while India focused on British colonialism, Tagore's focus on education, women, and reform, left a remarkable impression on Indian society. In his realistic short stories set in Indian villages, Tagore sends his heroines on a mission to change the patriarchal Indian society heavily stained by its oppressive "dharma" or duties imposed by a Hindu religious culture. Ernest Rhys, an English writer, critic, and biographer, summarizes Tagore's short stories in this way; they are "directed to showing the devotion and the heroism of the Hindu wife or woman" (50). Like the marginalized women in Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*, Tagore's short stories illustrate women who face overwhelming social challenges in the case of Tagore, the struggles include serving the husband, the male in-laws, submitting to men in society, and living with the inability to make crucial, individual decisions.

Subjugation of women in the family setting and their quest for freedom is a repeated issue in Tagore's short stories. The "spicy" women in Indian literature are in complete contrast to the glorified subservient roles of traditional Indian women in early Indian literature. Much of the women's roles in Hindu mythology venerated the self-sacrificing woman. For example, in one of the vedic or holy books, *Srimath Bhagavatham* delineates three qualities in a good wife: "[A good wife should have] the ability to be an efficient and loyal worker, ability to advise like an able minister, and fortunate to look like the Goddess Lakshmi herself" (Tejaswani 216). Though these are not rules that describe a particular character in mythology, mythologies like Ramayana render the breathtakingly beautiful women who would do anything for their men.

When women followed the protocol of laws of Manu from the Hindu religion, they were accruing karma points for their route to eternal salvation or heaven. Tagore's bold step ahead through his short stories eliminated the stereotypical heroine, an exemplary woman who served her husband at all times and provided for his every demand, even if he did not love her. Most literature typifies these types of women who fit the "dharma" mold. Tagore, however, portrays realistic images of women in everyday rural India who suffer to fulfill their religious duties toward their husbands, in-laws, and other males in society. In the short stories "Punishment," "A Wife's Letter," and "The Girl Between" are women who despite religious hindrances go against dharma in order to overcome oppression.

In "Punishment," two married brothers, Dukhiram and Chiddam, live together. After a long day at work, the older brother, Dukhi, demands his dinner to be brought to him, and when the wife replies loudly, "Where do I get the rice to give you? Did you get me any rice? Do I have to go out and earn it myself?" (36), he is enraged. His anger moves him to take a sickle, hit his wife Radha's head, and kills her (37). As an immediate remedy to cover up the murder, both Dukhi and Chiddam, his brother, plot to accuse Chandara of Radha's murder. Chiddam is more concerned about his brother going to prison than his own wife. He says, "[I]f one wife goes I can get another. But if my brother is hanged, I certainly can't get another" (38). He suggests that wives are dispensable objects and not valuable humans, not as much as brothers. At last, when she suffers her punishment in jail, she gets a message that her husband wants to see her, but she wants her husband to "Go to hell," and she replies, "I would rather be dead" (45). Though Hinduism demands of her to stay with her husband under all circumstances, she breaks out of the religious tradition and makes her own decision to be separated forever from her husband.

First, Tagore signifies the joint family system through this realistic setting. Whereas in the West a married couple may live separated from other family members, it is common in Indian society for married brothers to live together with their wives. And this sort of joint family system places more importance in the familial bond rather than the marriage. For Chiddam, his wife is replaceable, but his brother is not. Second, this family is also a typical village family where the husbands work hard outside the home and the family struggles with inevitable poverty. They are unable to escape the Lower-class in the caste system, and they are poor villagers, which makes the women not only the lowest of classes, but also victims of spousal abuse and oppression. Socially, the caste system does not allow any upward mobility for this family. Geographically, they are one among millions of poor families who live in the rural areas of India. The women in these conditions live under a multi-layered form of oppression.

A woman under these circumstances lives under heavy layers of pressure – under poor living conditions, as a Third-class citizen in her family, and with the need to please her husband, her in-laws, and then her society. In “Punishment,” the act of Dukhi’s momentary anger, which leads him to kill his wife upon just one strike with a sickle, is one of the traits by which Mary M. Lago’s “Tagore’s Liberated Women,” characterizes Tagore’s male as a destroyer. Of course, Dukhi did not mean to kill Radha, but her rude response triggered a violent reaction in him. Lago calls this sort of husband a “destroyer” who “seldom destroys out of malevolence or sheer wickedness; he does so as the result of a mode of behavior that is expected, or that he thinks is expected, by the men (and sometimes by the women as well) around him” (105). Since Dukhi considers himself as ruler over his wife, a title bestowed upon him from generations ago, his expected “mode of behavior” causes him to overreact with a sickle when Radha is unable to give him dinner after a long day of work. This sort of mindlessness of the chauvinist man described

by Lago also causes Chiddam to immediately blame his own wife, Chandara, for the murder. When she stands in the defendant's dock, she tells her own story that she meant to kill her sister-in-law. Of course, the woman's final rejection of telling her husband's story is not just a stance for freedom, but Tagore seeks to produce an "intellectual being" out of a mere woman, one who can make educated decisions of her own, and gain freedom through death. The heroine in "Punishment" is able to make her own decision to live through death, rather than die while living under subjugation. Tagore utilizes the paradox that it may not matter she is sentenced for life as much as it matters that she has become an intellectual who chooses not to continue to follow her husband blindly, but makes choices apart from societal pressures.

Like the joint family in "Punishment," Mrinal, the main character of the story "A Wife's Letter" or "Strir Patra" in Bengali, is also harassed as one among many household members in her husband's family. She informs her husband about her decision to remove herself from marital duties and relationships. She declares in the start of her letter: "I stand in a second relationship, which is that between my word and God. That is why I have dared to write this letter. This is not the letter of your family's second daughter-in-law" (125). By saying so, she renounces her fifteen years of marriage, and also annuls her status as an in-law. Because her love to read poetry and literature, her ability to think, and her desire to rescue her cousin Bindu from a loveless marriage were all a matter of scorn for her in-laws, she has chosen the path of sainthood. Similar to medieval protest poets like Mirabai, Mrinal has become a saint who lives in the temples, thus rejecting all ties to her husband and his family. In fact, she compares herself to Mirabai saying, "Mirabai was a woman just like me. Her fetters were no less cumbersome" (138). In response to those who criticized her defiant behavior, she says, "The proverbial example of a chaste and loyal wife helping her husband even in her crimes only occurred to all of

you” (135). Never once does she mention his name nor anyone else’s name from his family. She begins the letter sarcastically, “To one whom I respect” (125). Before she wrote the letter, she thought her “punya” or good works that she did not do in a previous life reincarnated as an unhappy marriage in her current life. Such a frame of mind was a result of generations of teaching that a good wife must abide by a set of rules (Tejaswani 216). Now, she realized that her problems were not related to reincarnation, but an outcome over which she had control, and her letter is proof that she is in charge of her own life.

Tagore goes against the tapestry of this stereotypical wife of his time and most Indian literature before his time to show that women can, in fact, think like individuals and make choices that go against the social roles prescribed for wives. Lago praises Tagore’s attempt to go into such detail about individualistic choices a woman may want to make: “The accuracy of Tagore’s descriptions of these heroines and their struggles is the fruit of long years of observing the consequences of India’s failure to make use of her woman’s talents” (105). This type of a rebellious woman is probably a shock to Indian readers of Tagore’s time who are not familiar with any type of women’s liberation movements or even places in society where such women could find refuge. Of course, to find freedom from her husband and his family, the wife becomes a devout woman, since that is the only way out for her from her loveless marriage. Tagore alludes to the female devotional poets of medieval India who also spoke for the emancipation of women, medieval poets like Mirabai who could only escape poverty and oppression in their homes by becoming devotees of Krishna or other gods. Their realization that devotion to their gods was their only way to freedom is what some of Tagore’s women are emulating. “A Wife’s Letter” ends, “You are thinking that I intend to die. Don’t be afraid, I won’t play such an old joke

on you” (138). Whereas death would have been her only escape from her slavery in marriage, the wife has overcome with her letter of resignation, a declaration of her freedom.

Tagore’s continued theme of a wife who realizes her worth as far more than a wife, but rather as an individual, is also prevalent in “The Girl Between.” Unlike the short stories “Punishment” and “A Wife’s Letter,” Harisundari in “The Girl Between” is enjoying a happy marriage where Nivaran, her husband, goes to work, and she stays home and serves him when he returns in the evenings. During their years of enjoyment, she suddenly falls ill and for months Niravan is nursing her to good health. She remains bed-ridden, and she finally asks her husband to take another wife so he can have children. Although she is not oppressed by her husband, she feels obligated by her dharma which says a wife who is unable to bear children is as good as dead, and she gives in to this subconscious pressure. Unwillingly, Nivaran gets another wife, and she starts serving both her husband and his new wife. Again, her dharma beckons her to serve even her husband’s second wife. Surprisingly, she now has the health to serve two people. In the end, Nivaran and Harisundari are left old and alone after the death of the younger wife and Tagore is able to once again make the rural woman’s condition the focal point: “She had wasted those precious twenty-seven years in slavery, going to the grocery, worrying about fruits and vegetables, the after dinner betel nuts, and spices” (51). Harisundari wasted her youth serving her husband, and perhaps for better Karma she provided a wife for her husband; either way, she became a victim of her own device and, like the dutiful wife who was following her dharma, she was left without her needs being met. Ironically, her name meant “extra-ordinarily beautiful,” but even her extra beauty could not save her.

According to Ernest Rhys in *Rabindranath Tagore: A Biographical Study*, Tagore’s philosophy about what is needed in society, contrary to the culture of his time, is not temples to

teach rituals and rites to young people, but education in “ashrams” to teach reading and writing (134). The former affirmed caste system and forbade outcasts from worshipping in Temples. The latter, however, provided not only acceptance and knowledge, but liberation from prohibitions. Separating education from the religious system was a novel idea for his time. Tagore recommended practical applications of education for boys and girls to strengthen their will and not break it, as the strict Indian education system was prone to do. Such modern thinking even translates into his understanding of a better place for women, and his literature speaks for the rights of women, for the need of intelligent women. Mrinal herself makes a statement in her letter: “My mother was always worried about my intelligence, for it is a calamity to possess it. If one who must live according to rules tries to use her mind, she is sure to stumble and be cursed . . . In an unwary moment God had given me more sense than was necessary for a housewife in your family” (127). Tagore is using this parody to stress the importance of women and education, not just knowledge but social awareness. He felt that educating women was not to start a movement without, but to spark within a “self-realization and fulfillment” (Lago 105). According to Lago, Tagore, in his American lectures, defined a woman’s uniqueness in her power “to break through the surface and go to the center of things, where in the mystery of life dwells an eternal source of interest” (105). These short stories are unique in their portrayal of poor and suffering women as well as families who may not have any hope to rise above their class.

In these short stories, women are the heroines who strengthen themselves to overcome the oppression created by Hinduism and societal roles. On the other hand, Lago suggests that Tagore’s treatment of men in some short stories may have been in contrast with the female strength:

The weakness and obtuseness of Tagore's male characters, in contrast to such women . . . what makes the men in these stories so hard to forgive, whether they act from admirable or despicable motives, is their mindlessness. They behave like automations, plugged into a social system that they do not question until, having ignored the first faint signals of something short-circuited in their relations with the women in their lives, they receive a really severe jolt, the reason for which they seldom understand and frequently do not try to analyze. (106)

Interestingly, most of the male characters in Tagore's stories are not devious or wicked men who are "out to get" the women, but are just as hampered by dharma as women. In the short story "Punishment," Tagore describes Dukhiram and Chiddam's daily work route as a passive and mundane occurrence: "They seemed to travel the long road of household affairs in a springless cart whose two wheels ceaselessly creaked and groaned" (35). On one hand, these husbands seem to pay no attention to the intricacies of life and seem to accept what they have. On the other hand, Tagore skillfully weaves in the caste system from which such men and women will have no relief.

Obviously, the author does not dismiss the difficulties of hard work and poverty these men also have to face in the villages of India, but Dukhiram's reaction when he arrives home to find a messy home, naked baby boy, and wife who cannot give him food that they do not have, is outrageous. However, after he kills his wife, he sits on the floor and holds his head in his hands like a "distracted child" (37). Again, Dukhi is portrayed as a helpless man who is unable to even cover up his mistake. On the other hand, his brother, who wants to blame his own wife for his brother's fault justifies his brother's killing to his advisor (38). Such an attitude does not necessarily question Chiddam's commitment, but how he is affected by dharma, which creates a

mindset that his brother comes before his wife. Not long before his brother murdered his sister-in-law, Chiddam was suspected of being a womanizer, and so his wife Chandara decided to go by the river and flirt with another young man. Upon realizing this, Chiddam threatens to “powder [her] bones” (41). Chandara’s decision to behave as freely as her husband is controversial and unacceptable in Indian society. Her husband even pulls her by the hair and jerks her into the house and locks her in to prevent her from wandering the neighborhood (41). If it is acceptable for her husband to flirt with women, Chandara assumes it would be fine for her to do the same. However, the final point of her anger is when her husband asks her to take the blame for his brother: “Her whole body cringed more and more and she longed to escape the clutches of this demon of her husband; her whole inner self turned violently against her husband” (41). At this turning point, the wife decides to listen to no one but herself. For the colonial Indian audience, this type of blatant expressions by a wife also might make their bodies “cringe.” Though her husband wants her to testify that she killed her sister-in-law in self-defense, she says that she killed her sister-in-law because she could not “stand the sight of her” (42), and she decides she would rather be married to the gallows. Her husband, Chiddam, is alarmed by the outcome.

When he realizes that Chandara will not change her story, Chiddam somehow wants to save his wife and his brother. Whereas his wife has already made a decision to “stick to her story” even under her oppression, he is unable to decide even on his obvious loyalties. Even when the older brother Dukhi (who originally committed the murder) takes the stand, he faints and falls to the ground. Only Chandara has one story, and she is strong enough not to budge from it. In fact, she is desperate to be hanged when the judge indicates that her sentence would be just that if she admits to killing her sister-in-law: “Oh, Sahib [sir], I beg you . . . please give

me that punishment. Do whatever you like. I can't bear any more" (44). Chandara the wife considers her punishment in court much less painful than her dharma, life in poverty, and in a poor marriage. Sadly, towards the end, Tagore convincingly describes the fate of every young woman in this society: "The day this very young, very short, dark, round faced girl left her dolls at her father's house and came to her father-in-law's home, at the auspicious moment of that night, who would've imagined such a thing?" (44). The narrator not only describes the fate of many young women, but also the patriarchal society that restrained women in every stage of life. Here, the transition of a carefree young girl from her own home to her married home shows what a treacherous fate awaits a woman's future.

In "A Wife's Letter," the husband's weakness is in his silence. The entire story is the wife's letter addressing her husband, contradicting her fifteen married years when she remained silent. At one time, the husband and his family made all the decisions, but now the wife's letter reverses the roles; the patriarch remains voiceless. Like the women in "Punishment," Mrinal had to live with her in-laws after she was married. Her desire to read and explore was not welcomed by her in-laws, and she was treated as a misfit. The whole letter where the man remains silent also illustrates the weakness of the man who was unable to do anything when he had the chance to speak: "Tagore does not go out of his way to castigate these men. His dismissal of them, his leaving them, so to speak, where they fall, is more eloquent than an authorial tirade" (Lago106). Tagore's technique dismisses the husband's existence in his inability to better the living conditions of his wife. Mrinal, however, even in her marital torture, tries to save the life a cousin named Bindu who is also mistreated by her husband. But Mrinal's in-laws do not agree with her decision to help Bindu, and they taunt her endlessly. Eventually, Bindu commits suicide and Mrinal writes, "Death is greater than all of you. There [at death] she is not only the swindled

wife of an insane husband. She is everlasting” (137). Mrinal is the voice for her dead cousin. She embodies the courage of women to resist even the most powerful forms of oppression. Tagore’s courageous move to create such female characters is an outrageously bold and intuitive move for his time of colonial India when the focus was suffering and bondage under the British rule.

In her letter, Mrinal continues to detail the monstrosities of her marital home, the separate women’s quarters, the prohibited education of women, and the weaknesses of men. Mostly, Mrinal mocks the stupidity of her husband: “In an unwary moment God had given me more sense than was necessary for a housewife in your family” (127), and “by some trick God gave me such an intelligence. I just couldn’t stand all your pious talk” (135). Again, Tagore points out that the woman’s intelligence is what rescued her from her oppression. Unfortunately, death is what rescued her friend Bindu. Even the child that was born to them died as a baby. This loss left Mrinal without the possibility of being promoted from wife to mother. Though she failed to rescue her cousin from her marriage, and she lost her hope of being rescued from wife to mother through her daughter’s birth, Mrinal’s ultimate escape from her marriage was to go on a pilgrimage and become a sanyasani, which would free her from her wifely obligations. Again, the oppressed wife uses her intelligence and her own religion to find a loophole to free herself.

There are only three characters in “The Girl Between,” and the situation may provide more room for the man to make his wishes known, but unfortunately, Nivaran enjoys being served and he neglects his role as a man of strength and intelligence when needed. Tagore describes him as a complacent man: “it never occurred to him that there could be any need in life for art or aesthetic sensitivities . . . Not even inadvertently did he ever think, debate, or wonder at the meaning or design of living” (45). Unlike her husband, Harasundari kept busy until she fell

severely ill, and Nivaran felt helpless. Since they were childless, she coaxed her husband into marrying a young girl, and he became like a child himself. She served her husband and the new wife like “a slave” (50). Nivaran’s capacity of thinking had reduced even more as he kept spending money irresponsibly on his new wife, who eventually cost him his ancestral house, and the three of them were left in an apartment. The young wife was pregnant and ill and she eventually died. Though his first wife Harasundari served both Nivaran and his young wife, she never found relief throughout the story. Unlike Tagore’s other women in “Punishment” and “A Wife’s Letter,” Harasundari was unable to rescue herself from her husband’s inability to reason.

All the women suffered, and their suffering produced determination to escape from their oppression. However, though it was too late for Harasundari to free herself, her husband Nivaran did come to the realization that his first wife had lived with him through joy and sorrow. Perhaps, here is where Tagore provided some relief for his heroine and brought the husband to a middle ground that allowed some respite for her sacrifice. On one hand, the man accepted whatever came his way, and on the other hand his wife was able to take risks for some adventure. There was satisfaction in knowing that the man had some realization at the end, though it was too late.

Rabindranath Tagore’s travels to England and America in 1912 and 1913 included literary discussions as well as raising awareness and creating a partnership for educating boys and girls alike in India. Like Hansberry who believed that African American involvement in the literary circle was just as crucial as their fight for equality and integration, Tagore believed that education rights for women was just as important as prominence of Indian literature in the Western circle. In order to achieve these goals, Tagore depicted women who were not only yearning for independence, but also educating themselves, which gave them the confidence to

war against dharma and the wife's duties as dictated by society. Jed Esty in "The British Empire and the English Modernist Novel," contrasts the colonial portrayal of Indian characters by Rudyard Kipling to Tagore's subjects that are "deeper social forces in crisis and transition" (23). When colonialism was the main subject matter among many historians and Indian authors, one of Tagore's main focuses was women's liberation. In his article, Sankar Basu praises Tagore's uncanny ability to use realism, and he suggests that it could be due to the time he was forced to oversee his prominent family's business affairs in the village:

As advised by his father, during the nineties Tagore had to take up responsibility of running the family estate. He had to leave Calcutta and stay in the village.

From 1891 onwards Tagore had to travel a lot in these estates in central and northern parts of Bengal. The main office for managing the estates was situated in the village Shilaidaha. He wrote most of his stories while he lived in this village where he had a chance to see the life of the ordinary people. It is not surprising that during this period Tagore gained a great success in the field of realism. The writer got an insight into the life of the ordinary people in the village, about their sorrows and happiness, about their difficulties, hopes and disappointments. This acquaintance with a new world inspired the author in the creation of realistic works of art. ("Tagore: Ideas and Themes")

Since Tagore grew up in the comfort of his wealthy family's home, his observations of the relationship between his own parents was not enough to generate his realistic short stories. His stay in the rural parts of India, where the majority of the population resides, gave him a better vantage point of the common people. Tagore was eloquently able to represent how economic, social, religious, and patriarchal oppression are stacked against the female. Regardless of these

hindrances, the Indian woman is able to find a way out, even if the escape is through death.

Rhys, an expert on Tagore, concludes, “He is one of the very few tale-writers who can interpret women by intuitive art” (54). Tagore’s artistic abilities shine through his short stories, and his intuition is his ability as a man to realize and relate the conditions of women of his time. Finally, all three of Tagore’s short stories are simple enough for commoners to read and enjoy: “It is as if a folk-tale method were elaborated with literary art, inclining to the imaginative side of everyday life, yet dwelling fondly on the human folk it portrayed” (Rhys 64). For his portrayal of everyday life, Tagore is praised in literary circles as well as credited for a movement towards reform in India.

Chapter Three

Hansberry and Tagore: Spice in Social Activism

“When you starts measuring somebody, measure him right, child, measure him right. Make sure you done taken into account what hills and valleys he come through before he got to wherever he is . . .”
 –Mama, *A Raisin in the Sun*

The title of Hansberry’s play is taken from one of Harlem Renaissance’s poets, Langston Hughes’ “What Happens to a Dream Deferred?” Originally, the play was titled “The Crystal Stair” after a line from Hughes’ “Mother to Son,” about a mother urging her son to climb upwards, because she herself, albeit old, is climbing upwards. Later, the title was changed to the current title, after another poem by Hughes. This time, however, the focus shifts to a negation of Hughes’ idea that the black family’s dream cannot be realized.

Though Hughes’ poem suggests an uncertain future for the African American dream, Hansberry’s play culminates in a fulfilled dream for an African American family, though not devoid of daily struggles. In essence, Hansberry is able to illustrate a typical journey of an African American family in search of the American dream in segregated America, just as Miller and Williams are able to portray typical white families coping with the tough but unsuccessful pursuit of the American dream. However, Hansberry is more of a motivator for her race to pursue an attainable dream. In her autobiography, Hansberry’s positive outlook towards the African American’s future shines forth: “I wish to live because life has within it that which is good, that which is beautiful and that which is love. Therefore, since I have known all of these things, I have found them to be reason enough and – I wish to live. Moreover, because this is so, I wish others to live for generations and generations and generations” (xvii). Hansberry’s contagious optimism lives through her play, and her dream is thus fulfilled.

Hansberry was born on May 19, 1930, and she matured during the economic struggles of

the 1930s, the tensions of World War Two, and the racial struggles of the 50s and 60s. During this time period, many people moved out of the poverty of the South to look for freedom as well as financial stability in the North, resulting in an influx of a black population to northern cities such as Chicago. This sudden black population growth resulted in an impoverished and overcrowded African American community:

Even though legal battles continued to be won, it became apparent that these had little relevance to the masses of blacks in the North who were trapped in poverty and the de facto segregation resulting from racism pervading the realities of urban life. Attention was called to northern ghetto conditions in the summer by explosions variously called riots, rebellions or civil disorders. (Borden 428)

Perhaps due to this high tension social atmosphere, Hansberry's play served as a better platform for her presentation than outright activism.

Hansberry's place of birth, Chicago, was overflowing with an influx of African Americans who wanted to settle in the North where they could supposedly find more freedom and more jobs. Beginning in 1917, more than 50,000 Negroes had come to Chicago in two years' time, slightly more than doubling the city's Negro population in that short span (423). According to the standard of living of blacks in those days, the Hansberrys were living in Upper-class conditions. However, Hansberry saw her people's struggle as her own, and she wrote about it in her play. In a letter to her mother about her play, right before the debut of *Raisin* on Broadway, she summed up her story:

[I]t is a play that tells the truth about people, Negroes and life and I think it will help a lot of people to understand how we are just as complicated as they are – and just as mixed up – but above all, that we have among our miserable and

downtrodden ranks – people who are the very essence of human dignity. That is what, after the laughter and tears, the play is supposed to say. (*Young, Gifted, Black* 109)

Simply put, Hansberry wanted to give names and characters to black people and remind her audience that blacks deserve the same treatment as whites; this was Hansberry's form of activism.

Hansberry achieved most of her activism through the arts without creating a harsh separation between “black art” and “white art.” By painting a picture that would convey the struggles of any community, no matter what the race. Her writing was a period of Realism, Naturalism, and Modernism. Following Hansberry's activism through theatre, another artistic group called The Black Arts Movement (BAM) cultivated a countercultural "black aesthetic" that centered on African American history, culture, and life. Instead of using the arts to project a positive image of African Americans to whites, BAM used art to change self-perceptions of inferiority in order to empower black Americans. A study of African American art suggests that to promote social engagement within the black community through the arts, African Americans established their own publishing houses, magazines, theaters, and art institutions ("Smithsonian Exhibit Celebrates African American Art: Background"). In fact, as a young activist Hansberry left Chicago and quit her studies in Wisconsin, and then moved to New York to join blacks in the arts and activism [before the prominence of BAM] (*Young, Gifted, Black* 97). Undoubtedly, Hansberry's fiction and non-fiction serve as a loudspeaker for black rights and activism. Though BAM separated itself to be radical in their art simply as a tool to promote black growth, Hansberry desired to showcase blacks and their artistic talents. What separated her philosophy from BAM was the feminist art movement, which stood on the grounds that “the perfect artist

[is] one who, immersed in his or her community, created vital work that honored and empowered his or her new and non-elite audience through validation and consciousness raising” (Collins 732). The black community of women needed spokespersons like Hansberry to represent impoverished black women in the post-Depression era. At this time, black women were doing menial house servant jobs, raising a family in poverty, many in the absence of a husband, and being denied the right to integrated higher education. Even when she was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer in 1964, Hansberry continued to be active in the Civil Rights Movement.

Hansberry, in her autobiography *To Be Young, Gifted and Black* notes how her black friends lived in tattered housing projects without sufficient clothes, shoes, food or a decent place to sleep. At a very young age, Hansberry took note of the disparity between herself, the poor blacks, and Middle-class whites. Her father, Carl Augustus Hansberry, was a thriving real estate broker, and her mother, Nannie Perry, was a teacher. Hansberry was born in Chicago’s suburbs to middle-class parents, and lived in a well-to-do Middle-class neighborhood, considering the 1940s financial status of most African Americans. They were envied by blacks who struggled to survive in inner city apartments with or without one person’s income. Some blacks mocked her, calling her a “slum-lord” (xii). They were also harassed by whites for buying a house in a white neighborhood. The Hansberrys went to court to settle such a housing dispute, and on November 13, 1940, the Hansberry vs. Lee case allowed African Americans the right to move into a white community (NAAAL 1769).

Hansberry was introduced to activism by her parents at a very young age. From childhood into adulthood, Hansberry witnessed a culture of black activism like the Harlem Renaissance, Civil Rights Movements, resistance to Jim Crow laws such as segregation, the Montgomery Bus Boycotts, the Brown vs. Board of Education decision, and agitations for

integrated facilities. What the Hansberrys started as a court fight for equal housing was carried on by Lorraine Hansberry in her short thirty four years of live as an activist for women's rights as well as African American's rights and activism through the arts. She felt that by moving to New York, she would be able to join other black activists and possibly find a greater black readership, as well as other ways of becoming involved in such a great cause. Unlike her predecessors, she wanted to propagate her ideas against racism through media such as newspaper, plays, radio, and even a television series, which was too controversial to air. Despite facing opposition from more militant groups who said that plays were a political compromise, Hansberry's strategy was not to cut herself off completely from the white community in an anti-white tirade; rather, justice for any group of oppressed people was her main goal. In fact, she met her husband, Robert Nemiroff in a picket line while she was protesting anti-Semitism. They were married in 1953, but they had no children; they divorced in 1962.

Hansberry was a product of many female black activists, poets, and writers who through literature made their presence known, especially a need for freedom from slavery, sexism, and classism. Before Hansberry became a celebrated playwright in the twentieth century, women like Harriet Tubman who are well known for their involvement in the abolition movement, women who were outspoken for their rights, like Sojourner Truth, and Harriet Beecher Stowe and Harriet Jacobs through their slave narratives from the nineteenth century, achieved significant strides in black women's activism. Following in their footsteps, Hansberry was the first black female playwright to receive a New York's Critic's Circle award, and she was the youngest producer of a play on Broadway. Hansberry's work also became important for the black feminist theoretical framework. As Barbara Smith's e explains, "A black feminist approach to literature that embodies the realization that the politics of sex as well as the politics of race and

class are crucially interlocking factors in the works of black women writers is an absolute necessity” (134). *A Raisin in the Sun* fulfilled these criteria of black activism by addressing sexism, racism, and classism.

Though Hansberry was able to publish very little about herself, her radical speech on May 12, 1965, at Roosevelt University in Chicago, Illinois, relates a very different side of Hansberry – activism through her speech. In her speech, she declares herself first as an American, second as a playwright, and only after that, an African American. Her audience is reminded of Americans and their everyday struggles as epitomized in Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*. With humility she introduces her African American character from *A Raisin in the Sun*, Walter Younger, who is also suffering like his white counterpart, Miller’s Willie Loman. Hansberry’s ethical voice is displayed in her knowledge of geography, political climate, and literature to appeal to the “Women’s Scholarship Association” in Chicago. In *Women and the Civil Rights Movement*, she redefines the American Dream and how the American Middle-class is “trapped in a dream” (92). However, Hansberry’s attention to “class” in her speech is a clear reflection of class in her play. She emphasizes that the class disparity affects black as well as white people in the South, like Tennessee Williams’s character Tom, Laura, and Amanda Wingfield in *Glass Menagerie*. Towards the end of her speech, Hansberry highlights the major evil of lynching of African Americans, especially in the South. Because of the condition of her people, and the condition of poor white people, she claims that “something is obstructing progress. . . [and it will cause] reform, revolution or inaction” (95). Therefore, Hansberry concludes that theatre (which she calls an “assessment [of] Western civilizations”) can reform individuals and societies. Her character Walter Younger’s predicament is more heartbreaking than his white counterpart:

Without the exertion of his will, Walter Lee Younger will never change anything. Thus his frustration is his culture's frustration; the problem lies in the direction in which his mentors and his associates and all the agencies of society will tell them to exert himself. All of them will take the view that the institutions which frustrate him are somehow impeccable or, at best, unfortunate, but 'things being as they are-' he must better himself and not cry about the state of things. (96)

Instead of "inaction," she calls her audience to become involved in the human cause without a victim mentality.

Lynn Domina, in her book *Understanding A Raisin in the Sun*, discusses the multifaceted activism that goes on in Hansberry's play, *Raisin*: first, the segregated housing issue when the younger family is prohibited from moving into an affluent white neighborhood, second the gender issues as in relationships between men and women, and third, education, employment, and housing opportunities for African Americans, and finally, the afrocentrist view that blacks should know their "roots," appreciate or visit Africa, and probably even move back to Africa to become one with their past (xii). Each character of *Raisin* contributes to one or more of the areas of discussion for the rights of blacks and women in the 1950s. Mama wants to move into the white neighborhood, Beneatha wants to pursue higher education and a career, Walter wants to partake in business opportunities, and Asagai brings awareness of African roots.

Tagore's characters of rural India are very similar to Hansberry's characters of urban Chicago. Like Hansberry, Tagore's activism included the arts as well as education reform for women in India. Even before India's independence from the British in 1947, Tagore's short stories were promoting freedom for women in India. Not only was he ahead of his time in India, but also ahead of the rest of the world which considered itself "free" in their thinking. Tagore's

experiment with short stories itself was novelty for Indian literature. His short stories were a form of social activism, going against the culture's subservient wife who is confined by the customs of dharma outlined by Hinduism. One of the cultural conventions that prohibited Indian women's liberation from progressing is dharma or duties defined by Hinduism that women had to fulfill. Dharma bound the Indian woman in her karma or her works, but in Tagore's short stories, the woman fights and finally achieves her freedom only when she separates herself from the culture forced on her by her religion.

Although female activism was not something new in India, it was certainly unique to Tagore's literature. According to Barbara Southard in her study of Indian women during the turn of the twentieth century, women were still facing daunting issues with sexism:

In the traditional Bengali upper caste family, women were restricted to the inner compartments of the home and expected to cover their faces in front of men who were not members of the family. Rigid observance of the code of "parda"⁶ was a symbol of high status. Girls married very young and were expected to adapt to the household of their husband's parents and become obedient daughters-in-law.

Women were expected to devote themselves to family and religion. (400)

These women lived during Tagore's time in his Indian home state of Bengal, and they became his source of narratives for his short stories.

Tagore's activism through literature was one of the many arenas of his reformation of Indian society. He was a proponent of practical education rather than the parroting, borderline abusive, disciplinary education system in most of Indian schools. During his visits to the West,

⁶ "Parda" is the Hindi word for "veil." Usually, women would use their saris or their scarves to create a wall-like barrier or covering between her and a man.

namely England and the United States, he was advertising his main pursuit for women's liberation. Mary M. Lago in her article, "Tagore's Liberated Women," applauds the strength of Tagore's women in his stories as a platform to reveal women's plight in India to the Western World: "The accuracy of Tagore's descriptions of these heroines and their struggles are the fruit of long years of observing the consequences of India's failure to make use of her women's talents" (105). Tagore's bold move to voice women's rights when freedom from British rule was foremost in the Indian nation's social climate and that too with the lowest of classes, villagers of India, is a required response to the restrictions on traditional Hindu women:

The primary religious duty of a wife is obedient service to her husband, which she must carry out without regard even to the saving of her own life. More interestingly still, she is required to serve her husband even when it conflicts with other duties, which is a requirement that in effect isolates her from the public world by alienating her from its rules and principles. Following upon this abandonment of principles, the virtuous wife must abdicate her individuality and her principles so entirely that she must accept her husband's action even of selling her[.] (Bose 72)

These injustices that are manifold upon the Indian woman are issues that Tagore clearly addressed even as he made heroines as the focal point of many of his short stories.

Lago also suggests that Tagore's desire was manifold. In addition to exercising their rights, he wanted women to be well educated (105). His school, Santiniketan, eventually became a coeducational facility. Perhaps, Tagore believed equal education rights are another mode for women to overcome male domination. Surprisingly, Tagore also casts his male characters as "hard to forgive" (106), and as Lago describes Tagore's men in contrast to his women, they

“behave like automatons, plugged into a social system [dharma] that they do not question until, having ignored the first faint signals of something short-circuited in their relations with the women in their lives, they receive a really severe jolt, the reason for which they seldom understand and frequently do not try to analyze” (106). The irony here is that the men’s behavior is as foolish as they consider their women to be.

Ernest Rhys in his book, *Rabindranath: A Biographical Study*, creates a reverential picture of Tagore’s fame among British writers during his visit to London. Rhys even describes Tagore as a sage-like writer who brought literature to life. He was to them not so much a poet, a creator of delightful and living literary forms which could express their own hopes and aspirations; he was a national leader who had already set up in Bengal “an ideal college – ‘a little Academe’ - whose pupils and students were to go forth to help in the task of delivering the soul of a new India” (8). Like Hansberry, Tagore’s intentions were not purely entertainment, but to encourage social reform both by educating young Indians in the arts and by empowering women through strong female characters in his literature.

While Tagore is famous in India and England, for his poetic melody (which he also performed while in England), Rhys suggests that his “finest” works are his short stories (47). Tagore is fluent in telling stories about his surroundings, and Rhys compares his realism to that of Hawthorne’s mysterious beings and a blend of Turgenev’s romantic tales (49). Rhys further notes, “It is remarkable too how often [his short stories are] directed to showing the devotion and the heroism of the Hindu wife or woman” (50). Of course, Tagore is not expressing anti-Hindu sentiments (in fact, he writes many songs of divination in his poetry based in predominantly Hindu songs). Tagore’s short stories are especially unique for his time because he was able to “interpret women by intuitive art” (54).

Tagore was among the prominent members of the Indian government as well as the literary and English speaking circle when English was a fairly new language in India. Surprisingly, he was well known in his time among the British as well, especially for *Gitanjali*, his best known collection of poetry. He was the first non-European to win a Nobel Prize for Literature. Since he grew up in a home as the youngest of thirteen children, his short stories and plays revolve around household matters, especially women and their relationships as mothers, wives, and sisters. He even gave authoritative voices to the female characters in his short stories and plays. In India today, Tagore is synonymous with social and women's reform. Ernest Rhys, an English writer and an extensive biographer of Tagore, praises his writings, especially Tagore's short stories:

In it [Tagore's short stories], he combines not hard and fast realism, but the human realities with his romance, and truth to nature attends his wildest apparent improvisations. He is able thus to gain effects which a Nathaniel Hawthorne or a Turgenev might envy him. Dr. Seal, perhaps the best-equipped critic he has had, has pointed out that his stories resemble most closely . . . the shorter tales of Flaubert. (49)

Tagore's literary tours to the West perhaps provided the well-rounded literary environment, and thus influenced his desire to reform his nation through realism in literature.

He was able to illuminate the plight of Indian housewives through his short stories, but his activism was manifold. Tagore creates a new type of an Indian woman in his short stories who is diminishing within her daily duties or oppression, which Rhys dubs as "slow sati"⁷ (54).

11. The "sati" system in India was an oppressive custom requiring a woman to jump into the funeral pyre of her husband during his cremation ceremony.

His desire to educate young men and women equally in classical literature also took precedence and he built an “Asram,” a type of boarding school with strict academic discipline that elevated education, which was his prime motive (Rhys 143). Unfortunately, in his climate, he was unable to do much for female education (he did not have the proper facilities), but he traveled to America in 1912 and 1913 and England intermittently, and wanted to reform Indian education while maintaining Indian religious practices, language, and valuable traditions (143). Unashamedly, he broke the barrier between the various Indian castes and allowed both the lower caste and upper caste students – anyone who was interested in learning. Rhys called Tagore’s system of learning (which included literature, agriculture, and art) “experimental,” novel for his times, and so were his ideas on women’s liberation (148). Like Hansberry, Tagore’s mission was change for his people, equality for men and women, and education for upper and lower castes. His foreign trips contrasted the urgency for this change he desired for his own country:

While in other parts of the world there is no end to the movement and clamour of the revelry of free life, we, like the beggar maid, stand outside and longingly look on. When have we had the wherewithal to deck ourselves for the occasion and go and join in it? Only in a country where the spirit of separation reigns supreme, and innumerable petty barriers divide one from another, need this longing to realize the larger life of the world in one’s own remain unsatisfied. (*My Reminiscences* 271)

His many travels to the West seem to have ignited a greater need for activism and to better his nation’s social and educational systems.

Interestingly, Tagore’s worldly knowledge helped mold his modern ideas of reformation for his Indian society. However, these ideas began in his childhood discipline. As a child,

Pundits (Hindu priests) trained him in religious practices, and his father hired tutors to teach him Sanskrit, English, Latin and even training in finances. In his autobiography, Tagore describes all the stringent training he received as a child in a wealthy and politically prominent family, as well as his upbringing in a typical patriarchal Indian household. Such an upbringing may have heavily influenced his short stories and their heroines as well. As he explains, his mother lived in the “inner apartments,” far from the rest of the happenings in his father’s quarters. She slept in her own bed, in the same room with only her children. Whenever his father returned from his usual travels with politics or business, his dominating presence kept the household in fear:

The whole house seemed filled with the weight of his presence. . . Everyone seemed on the alert. We would see our elders at certain hours, formally robed in their chogas, passing to his rooms with restrained gait and sobered mien, casting away any pan [a type of beetle leaf filled chew] they might have been chewing.

To make sure of nothing going wrong, my mother would superintend the cooking herself. We had to walk past quietly, talking in whispers, and dared not even take a peep inside. (*Reminisces* 70)

Such reverence and fear for the father figure is what the religion dictates, thus producing a hierarchy in the family structure. Towards the end of his autobiography, he describes his mother’s death as a very painful experience. His mother slept alone, died alone, and her body was placed in the courtyard, and the cremation was conducted without her husband’s presence, and when Tagore returned from his mother’s funeral, he “looked up at the house towards my father’s rooms on the third storey. He was still in the front verandah sitting motionless in prayer” (259). Unfortunately, his parents were not able to have the kind of equality in relationship that Tagore sought for his female characters. Interestingly, during his stay in

England, Tagore made a comparison between the Western wife and the Indian wife: “We are fond of saying and I also believed, that the devotion of an Indian wife to her husband is something unique, and not to be found in Europe” (165).

When other learned Indian leaders, well versed in the English language as well as classical world literature, were strutting their education in parts of England or among the few universities of India, Tagore was an activist in the making, using his travels as to observe and record cultural nuances in hopes of producing a revolutionized Indian society. He was inspired to create a literary culture perhaps through his early training in classical Western literature; “[O]ur literary gods then were Shakespeare, Milton and Byron; and the quality in their work which stirred us most was strength of passion” (180). Tagore himself became a literary god. Amiya Chakravarty, a critic from Tagore’s home state, notes that he wrote about ninety-four short stories from 1877 to 1941 (ix). Among his most significant accomplishments is that he “made the artist’s social conscience the vehicle for a needed rebellion, particularly where the women’s freedom and rights were involved” (xi). In a realistic way, with believable settings and characters, he was able to address the social issues of his society unlike the bhakti poets in his past. He was also knighted by the British crown which he later renounced in 1919 after the massacre in Punjab India, where English General Dyer ordered random rifle shots into a crowd of about 20,000 men, women and children; as a result, about 400 people died and many were critically injured. During later years, he attained a celebrity status in India and abroad, but after his passing in 1941, his fame remains only through his short stories in many Indian classrooms. Chakravarty calls him the “teacher who presented India to the rest of the world” (vii). Tagore surely presented the rural Indian women to India where reform was needed most, and his works are part of a historical movement of freedom and transformation, especially for the women of

India. During his time women were expected to abide by the norms of dharma, and the West was mostly unaware of these issues that were tormenting women. The sati system which required the widow to jump into the funeral pyre of her husband was one practice known and abhorred by many in the Western world; however, even after the official abolishment of the sati system (which remained in practice well into the 1980s), everyday issues faced by women, under layers of oppression is one eye-opening presentation of the Indian culture by Tagore.

Chapter Four

Savoring the Spice through Hansberry and Tagore

“In God we make our boast all day long, and we will praise your name forever.”

– Psalms 44:8

Hansberry and Tagore’s contribution toward freeing African American and Indian women suffering under racism, sexism, and classism is monumental. Both express their disagreement with entrenched norms and institutions that have been in place for hundreds of years, a task that initially may seem to be an impossible undertaking, and unlikely to bring about expected change. At the time that they wrote, it seemed impossible that any of the characters would be able to successfully fight against any of the institutions, because dharma, racism, and sexism were mainstream and operated in both societies as the accepted, “dominating” discourse in Foucauldian sense, as defined by Stephen Slemon in "Monuments of Empire" as the

[N]ame for that language by which dominant groups within society constitute the field of 'truth' through the imposition of specific knowledges, disciplines, and values. Discourse, in other words, is a 'complex of signs and practices which organises social existence and social reproduction', . . . and [which] . . . works to constitute 'reality' not only for the objects it appears passively to represent but also for the subjects who form the coherent interpretive community upon which it depends. (6)

Discourse, in this context, involves power relations, dominations, hierarchies, and validation of certain viewpoints, and values. Those who spoke against the established discourse put their lives in jeopardy and risked severe sanctions. Thus, the conscious effort by these two authors, as well as their characters, to construct a counter-discourse and an independent perspective that departs from the dominant discourse is revolutionary. The critic, Richard Terdiman, defines counter-

discourse as "the present and scandalous trace of an historical potentiality for difference which . . . inherently situate[s] [itself] as 'other' to a dominant discourse which by definition attempts to exclude heterogeneity from the domain of utterance and is thus functionally incapable of even conceiving the possibility of discursive opposition or resistance to it" (11). One conclusion that can be drawn from this thesis, therefore, is that these works subvert dominant discourses. They explore and highlight the possibility that a woman of low-caste Indian society can fight against dharma and subjugation and win, that an old, retired black woman equipped with her Christian faith can fight against segregation and racism and win. They communicate not only what is, but also what is realistically possible: women both in India and United States can fight against and overcome oppression as well as gain upward social mobility. In doing so, they offer their version of an "other" woman, the defiant, non-conformist, triumphant woman as a model for other women to emulate.

The women use various strategies to resist the oppression. Black female activists since slavery used various tactics – from oral stories of private escape to corporate plans of escape similar to the Underground Railroad. The early twentieth century, according to Nina Banks, gave birth to outspoken voices of women: "These women spoke publicly on the important issues confronting blacks: slavery, racial violence, women's rights, voting, temperance, and Jim Crow segregation . . . During the early 20th century, black feminists continued to call for social and political changes that were tied specifically to race – to laws against lynching, racial segregation and exclusion, and political disenfranchisement" (14). However, Hansberry's activism in the mid-twentieth century was best articulated, not through public speaking, but through theatre. Even at a time when the black militancy of Malcolm X and other aggressive activists was gaining popularity among black Northerners, Hansberry chose a more passive route for

publicizing black issues. She accomplished integration through her play. Though some like Amiri Baraka criticized her for not being militant enough, or for teaming up with the whites, he later concurred that her play “was political agitation. It dealt with the very same issues of democratic rights and equality that were being aired in the streets. But it dealt with them not as political abstractions, but as they are lived” (“A Wiser Play Than Some Of Us Knew”). Her “agitation” was more of a non-violent yet truthful teaching like that of her play’s main character. *Raisin* received raving reviews for Hansberry’s realistic rendering of an extended black family living in a crowded apartment in Chicago. Her close friend, James Baldwin, black writer and social activist, exclaimed after Hansberry’s play debuted on Broadway that the reason for *Raisin*’s blockbuster performance on the opening night was simple: “[N]ever before, in the entire history of the American theater, had so much of the truth of black people’s lives been seen on the stage. Black people ignored the theater because the theater had always ignored them” (*Young, Gifted, Black* xii). But with Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun*, theatre and the arts could not “ignore” blacks anymore. The play set off a series of opportunities for both black men and women, especially in theatre and the arts.

Mama or Lena Younger, became the religious voice for freedom in the play, and only a powerful voice because of her “spiced up” religion. She was content in her Christian hope that God will one day deliver her people from their conditions, and one day they would rejoice in heaven. However, her religious contentment was not a complacent faith. She sought the best housing her money could buy for her family; she had an attitude of Christ-like service toward her grown children, daughter-in-law, and even her young grandson. With the use of her religious voice, she was able to “testify” to her neighbor, Mrs. Johnson, “Praise God!” (*Raisin* 55), like members of a charismatic church, giving testimonies of God’s goodness. After her last day of

work as a housekeeper for white families for fifty-three years, she testified to her white employer that because of God's "mercy" she could retire (39).

On another level, Mama was the embodiment of unwavering faith when she did not allow her daughter to blaspheme God's name in her house, refused to let her daughter-in-law have an abortion, or let her son invest in a liquor store. What made Mama's faith a primary motif in *Raisin* is that even though her forbidding her family from certain actions may have seemed harsh or legalistic, she was not hindering their progress in society. She helped her son Walter embrace his masculinity by allowing him to make his own mistakes, she empowered her daughter-in-law to believe that her unborn child would not be a burden to the already impoverished family, and she allowed her daughter's desire to become a doctor, a profession that women would struggle to get into, let alone African American women. When Langston Hughes asked several painful questions about the oppression of his people in his poem "Dream Deferred," from which a line became the title for Hansberry's play, the dream was realized by the godly matriarch Lena Younger, not by violence, but by her fight of faith. In essence, Hansberry was answering Hughes's predicament in two ways: that the dream deferred did come to fruition through a published and Broadway acclaimed playwright, Hansberry herself, and that her play's main character Mama's faith was the primary force behind fulfilling the Younger family's dream.

Names for each character are significant in Hansberry's work, and the name "Younger" suggests a dream realized by the younger generation with the help of the older generation. The family name also suggests the generation gap with Mama on one side with her religious motivation, and the children on the other, but Asagai, Beneatha's friend from Africa, points out, "You think she is of the old order because she does things out of blind faith. It does not occur to you that she understands more deeply than you, for all of her ignorance, for all of her groping –

that she moves, she acts, she changes things. She is the substance of the human race” (187). Asagai, the outsider, is able to perceive a profound truth about Mama and her family – she is a true spiritual leader, the black matriarch. “Black womanist theology” suggests that the “poor black woman is the Christ figure for contemporary American society” (303). This Christ figure can be interpreted as the black matriarch, and it shows Christianity’s influence on the African American community as much as the rest of the country. Lena Younger was the Christ figure, who would do “anything for her children” (*Raisin* 109), and provide salvation for her family from a cramped apartment, segregation, and poverty. Such an immense accomplishment by the matriarch contains the hope against the statistics of black families around that time: households with the mother as sole authority meant lower educational rates for the children, lower income, and higher dependency of government for help (Haney, et al.). On the contrary, when the Younger family was suffocating under the pressures of racism, sexism, and classism, Mama was able to “lay down” her life by basically working as a servant in white households for fifty-three years, and later saving the family from a ghetto in Chicago to a posh white neighborhood in the suburbs.

At a time when Chicago was crowded with a surge of African American immigrants from the South, without jobs and heightened racism and segregation, Lorraine Hansberry was able to publicize an insider’s view of the realistic lives of blacks in 1950s urban America. Arthur O. Waskow, in his study of race and riots post World War I and into the 1960s, delivers an exhaustive report on the conditions of blacks who moved to the north:

Most of the immigrants were southerners and rural, unready to cope with life in a great metropolis. Their coming strained to the bursting point the established area of Negro residence, bringing much more crowding that area and stimulating

attempts by more established Negroes to move into traditionally white areas.

Some whites had resisted such changes in residence patterns in fear that the value of their own property would drop, and a series of bombing attacks had been made on Negroes who had moved. (38-9)

This major migration issue among African Americans of her time is a major theme in Hansberry's story.

Hansberry's activism through her literature was perhaps just as effective as her contemporaries such as Rosa Parks and the bus boycott in 1950, and post-Hansberry Civil Rights leaders such as Martin Luther King, Jr. in the 1960s. Not only was Hansberry a product of her parents' activism, but she grew up and lived during several periods of black activism, including the Harlem Renaissance, Civil Rights Movement, resistance to Jim Crow laws and segregation, Montgomery Bus Boycotts, the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, and agitations for integrated facilities. Sadly, Hansberry died in 1965 at the age of thirty-four after a battle with pancreatic cancer. Posthumously, her husband, Robert Nemiroff, compiled her journal, essays, and other writings into a new type of autobiography, namely, *To Be Young, Gifted and Black*, and published it in 1971, five years after her death. Nemiroff shares her personal accounts of her childhood growing up in contrast to whites and to poor blacks, as well as her move to New York to be a part of the activism that reshaped America, African Americans, and the Arts.

Waskow also notes a new term "creative disorder" which was neither demonstrated by neither violent, nor nonviolent African American protestors, but the artists: "Negroes expressed intense anger and hatred not only for the segregation system but for the segregationists themselves or even for all whites. And yet this hatred was expressed by pursuing change, not by attacking the enemy" (276-77). This type of creative disorder defines Hansberry's approach

best. She was “pursuing change,” and she did so mainly through literature and theatre. This pursuit engaged her within the community, not by attacking whites or men, but by writing stories that would produce multidimensional black characters with whom an audience can relate, whether they be blacks or whites or even Jewish for that matter. Perhaps, her methodology was more effective in reaching the urban community. Certainly, there are indications that the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s “accomplished more change in race relations” than other types of violent or non-violent demonstrations (Waskow 278). Hansberry’s *Raisin*, a realistic depiction of the newly forming colored Chicago cities, should undoubtedly be part of the great accomplishments of “creative disorder” of her era.

In fact, Hansberry’s play has given equal credibility to the black male when much talk about matriarchy as a root cause of emasculation became central to African American social structure. Frances Foster in her “Changing Concepts of the Black Woman” suggests that matriarchy has “often destroyed the traditional black family and has placed the Black woman as the direct competitor of the Black man” (438). However, *Raisin* has regained that lost aspect of black masculinity in the character of Walter. Hansberry was successful in unifying the black family without pointing fingers at whites. Foster recommends a complete awareness of the female black self in order to bring about change in the black community:

The comprehension and statement of this awareness varies from individual to individual, but in general is based upon the knowledge that the oppressive past and present do not have to mirror the future, that realization of themselves, their situation and the causes for this condition, is the first step toward liberation, but that positive steps, beginning with Black unification, must be taken to change their situations. (454)

However, Hansberry's attitude towards literature almost reflects Foster's in that she is aware of the "oppressive past," but her desire is not just for blacks to be united, but for the nation to be united. In fact, the Younger family's move in the play suggests more than a desire to prove financial equality or integration. They have a desire to assimilate. Their move is a beginning in civil conversation between races and neighborly love among all Americans.

Hansberry's motives almost mirrored Rabindranath Tagore's desire for change in his nation. Women were able to project a voice through Tagore's stories. They told their story in the court, through a letter, and expressed themselves before women's liberation in India, in a way that only Tagore could have allowed them. His realistic portrayal of women and their role in Indian society also underscored the types of struggle that these women faced at the turn of the twentieth century: oppression of women, sexism, women suffering poverty, and male domination, partly as a result of religious oppression. Unlike *Raisin's* matriarch, these women had to fight against religious conventions in order to gain their freedom. In "Punishment," "The Wife's Letter," and "The Woman in Between," women become "spiced up," using their individuality to overcome their oppression. All three short stories depict three different types of freedom for the Indian woman.

The short story "Punishment," where the woman's husband wants her to take the blame for her sister-in-law's death, instead of his own brother who killed his wife in anger, is the first instance of male domination and women's quest for freedom. Her husband wants her to lie that she killed her sister-in-law in self-defense and unintentionally murdered her so she can be acquitted. Instead, she is satisfied in the role of a scapegoat. Even after her husband explains that his story will release her from the prison and bring her back home, she considers her husband's home as greater imprisonment. In the end, before she is to be hanged, her one wish is

to see her mother. At the same time when her husband pleads to see her one more time, her rejection of him is her voice for freedom. The subaltern does speak through Chandara's resistance to patriarchy. She chooses death to protest against her husband. Her final refusal to give her husband what he wants even when her own life is at stake is the "spicy" Indian woman's choice against her societal duties of dharma to be a dutiful wife for a lifetime. Maynard describes her oppression and resistance as: "Tagore's intimate understanding both of the oppressed to resist even the most powerful forms of oppression . . . Chandara [the accused] is a typical Tagore protagonist representing the power and dignity of the human will in the face of societal degradation" (NAWM 2620). Through his intricate details of family dynamics in traditional Indian culture, Tagore verifies his intimacy with his subjects, as well as his understanding of women's struggles.

The story "A Wife's Letter" is a sort of a woman's resignation from her role as a subservient wife. The wife's desire to rescue her friend from an acrimonious relationship with her husband also turns her into a villainous figure among her in-laws. Eventually, she finds the only way to escape such marital tyranny is to escape into sanyasan, a spiritual title for a woman who refuses earthly pleasures. Essentially, she fights religion with religion. Though her dharma or religiously described duty is to obey her husband and in-laws, her religion also allows her to become a saint, only devoted to religious duties. As a final strike against her husband, she chooses the role of Hindu sainthood, and gains her deserved freedom. Tagore alludes to such poets Mirabai and Mahadeviyakka, who also gained their freedom by forsaking earthly things, mainly patriarchy and a wife's confining roles in marriage, and made themselves lovers and "wives" of their gods.

"The Girl Between" probably has the most distinct setting among the three short stories: a

couple who lives by themselves, without outside interference, with a decent income.

Nevertheless, it serves the purpose of providing a realistic look at familial situations in rural India. A flourishing young businessman marries a beautiful young girl, and his wife suddenly falls ill, and there is a sudden role reversal. Just like she waited on him, getting his beetlenut for chewing, his meals, his clothes, he was waiting on her when she was bed-ridden. All the while she was bed-ridden, she was feeling the guilt of being served. As soon as she was well again, she realized she was not worthy of such good treatment because she could not bear any children. Her immediate plan to insist on a younger bride for her husband was another sacrificial step in providing ultimate comfort for her husband. However, she later ended up serving both her husband and his new wife. By the time the young bride died with her childish tantrums and demands for luxury, she had already left the family bankrupt. The old and broke couple was now left with a dead woman who had nothing left to give. The first wife, alive and far from youthful, realized her need for freedom, but she did not obtain her own escape, except in telling her story.

What Tagore is able to do through his short stories is give insight into the everyday life of women, and echo a phenomenal voice for the downtrodden women in rural India, and his literature thematizes the “spiced up” female heroines for many future writers, especially female writers. His unmistakable zeal for women as his subject is especially unique because he lived in a time of colonialism. Despite 300 years of colonialism by the British in India, Tagore’s voice for freedom and rights for women became a greater subject for his stories.

In the early twentieth century, women in his state of Bengal, India were going through a controversial phase of suffrage rights. Upper-class Hindu women who were educated in English had greater rights than the rural women. However, Upper-class Hindu women were not exempt

from the dharma and customs brought from their religion. Barbara Southard discusses the change in the status of Bengali women during Tagore's time:

The changing economic base of the Bengali upper castes that resulted in the consolidation of urbanized professional elite in the late nineteenth century created new social conditions conducive to the redefinition of the role of women.

Professional men seeking upward mobility found that uneducated wives limited by the parda system¹ could not take the lead in the education of their children nor provide wifely support for their professional careers. They admired the British upper Middle-class pattern in which wives were helpmeets and hostesses who could further their husband's career. (400)

Tagore's family was in the same Upper-class, and Tagore was familiar with both Indian customs as well as Western customs from his several travels to Britain, the United States, and several other countries. He was the youngest of thirteen children, all of whom lived in a palace. His father was among the patriarchs who formed a prominent Hindu sect called the "Adi Dharm." His father and paternal grandfather were traders with Europeans. At a time when few Indians traveled to Europe, Tagore's father and uncles were able to frequent England, and Tagore himself was able to visit over thirty countries in his lifetime. Since Tagore grew up in a joint family system⁸, even as the youngest child, he was able to observe the Hindu traditions in family relations. In his autobiography, he also describes his childhood and how a marriage arrangement

7. According to the Hindu "dharma" or duty, men married and brought their wives into the family, and the large family unit, including grandparents, and even great grandparents of the family's patriarch, lived together. Only the women were married "out" of the family and went to live with their husbands as well as all the surviving members of his family.

with the family priest's daughter was dissolved after difficulties between his father and the priest's disagreement on money matters. During his adulthood, his travels to Europe allowed him to make distinctions between the European wife and the dutiful Indian wife, as detailed in his autobiography (165). Although rare for Indians under the colonial rule, Tagore journeyed to London for the second time in 1912, and was recognized in literary circle as a celebrated author. Even in his autobiography he admired the role of women in Britain up to a certain level, a level which he wanted his people to emulate. His greater feat was that he was able to bring even the Lower-classwomen into his short stories. Today, world renowned female writers such as Arundhati Roy and Zhumpha Lahiri may very well be the fruit of Tagore's labor. They are well celebrated Indian authors, even in the West, who continue Tagore's legacy of telling women's stories from all walks of life. Movies and television shows based on Tagore's tradition to dramatize rural India's stories can be attributed to Tagore.

Both Hansberry and Tagore lived at a climactic time of their nation's history, and they used their talents for a promising future for their people. America in Hansberry's time was racially divided, and women's rights were also in debate. Another issue was Black migration to the North, which displaced many blacks who remained without jobs and places to live as freely and enjoy the pleasures as their white counterparts. Even those who were able to move into white neighborhoods were prohibited by segregation laws. British colonialism in India was heavy upon the Indian psyche, a form of racism, where whites had the upper hand also in trade. Such events began in the 1600s, moving into oppressive rule from the 1800s until the remarkable political leadership of Mahatma Gandhi, which overthrew British rule in 1947, six years after the death of Tagore. Racism among Indians, with the prevalence of the caste system, affected people in the lower caste and doubly affected poor women. Many of these contemporary issues

were addressed by both Hansberry and Tagore through their use of realism and believable characters, and they created stories that will leave a lasting impact on any community. Though Hansberry's matriarch was able to win her family's victory through her Christian devotion expressed through her language, Tagore's women struggle to free themselves from dharma and Hinduism despite difficult hurdles.

Ironically, Hansberry believed that religion was helpful for some people to overcome oppression: "I rather admire this human quality to make our own crutches as long as need them [religious beliefs]" (*Young, Gifted, Black 197*). But Mama's religious language was more than a "crutch," it became the central theme and the force that empowered her for the redemption of her family.

In a similar way, Tagore believed in equal education for all and in the value of each individual. Though his literature was saturated with the need for freedom, an inherent, God-given attribute, he failed to realize that an eternal, creator God, not mere human imagination, was needed as the foundation from which to build a confident philosophy of human freedom. One of Tagore's widely read patriotic poems evokes the ideal world that he desired:

Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high
 Where knowledge is free
 Where the world has not been broken up into fragments
 By narrow domestic walls
 Where words come out from the depth of truth
 Where tireless striving stretches its arms towards perfection
 Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way
 Into the dreary desert sand of dead habit

Where the mind is led forward by thee

Into ever-widening thought and action

Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country awake. (n.pag.)

Both writers were instrumental in tumbling the “walls” in their nations: Hansberry worked to destroy the walls of segregation and gender inequality, and Tagore worked against the “narrow domestic walls” that separated women and men from love-filled living. Sadly, both failed to recognize the “Father,” the creator of all beauty and all beautiful ideas, whether they are life, equality, hope, or freedom. However, within these African American and Indian stories, women were able to achieve the freedom that they desired, and the authors were able to mark these women as heroines for which women today are grateful, and continue to add spice to the human race.

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