



## “Dreams Are *Coloured*: An Analysis Of Racism Underlying The American Dream”

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**Abstract:** Dream is a psychological act that is made of desires and experiences, and is usually associated with individual subjective consciousness. Technically the occurrence of dream is in sleep, but often people dream even when they are awake. These dreams are more like an accumulation of hopes and wishes. Fulfilment of such hopes and wishes is very much dependent upon the socio-economic factors of reality. The conditions and degree of fulfilment of dreams are decided by the class and the race of the people who dream. I wish to say that in a society divided by racism dreams are *colored*, as the complexion of the skin, whether it is white or black, determines their fulfilment. To this purpose I have selected two major American plays, Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun* and Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*, to show how the American Dream, a pivotal spirit in the economic advancement of America in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, made the dream of prosperity of the black people more difficult than the backward section of the white people.

**Keywords:** American Dream, *Coloured* Dream, Dream, Racism, Capitalism, etc.

Hold fast to your dreams

For if dreams die

Life is broken-winged bird

That cannot fly.

Hold fast to your dreams

For when dreams go

Life is a frozen field

Frozen with snow.

- Langston Hughes, “Dreams” (Hansberry, 1998).

Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* was the first play that was produced by a Black woman on Broadway, which won New York Drama Critic Circle in 1959. The play appeared in a critical junction of Black history in America and became a voice of the thousands of Black American people, through the struggles of the Walter family. The five-member family struggle with their aspiration in a racially segregated background. All of them dream of prosperity, but find at odds with the socio-economic reality. They themselves display visions of life different from one another. In their struggle to have a better future for themselves and their family they find dreams playing an effective motivation. Many other people dream, but the difference in the event of fulfilment is created by the colour of the people who dream. In a racially separated social existence, often the colours of the people become the colours of the dreams they have, and these colours often play crucial role in the fulfilment of those dreams. I intend to state that even our dreams do have *colours* as they are structurally racialized.

A dream is like 'a spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings' in a moment of complete submission of the physical being to the workings of the mind. Usually, it takes the form of an automatic story whose author remains incapable to rouse himself under a compulsion to witness events being interconnected and characters form and act. Dreams are believed to occur when a human being is in sleep. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century Sigmund Freud considered it as a tool to understand the overall psychological development of a human being, who was normally a patient. He believed that a dream possessed a key to the mysteries about a personality, to the physiological or psychological problems of the subject patient. His analysis of the dream was clinical and centred at the belief that the repressed desires appear in dreams and offer a partial sensation of fulfilment to the patient. For him it was like a residue or a vortex of unacknowledged desires and thoughts. Although, dreams are not exclusively related to the life of an individual only. Many other factors contribute to the making of a dream: racial, cultural, sexual, etc. This is a type of being that happens in the other side of the real existence. There is another kind of dream, what is more like a wish that an individual or a group of any kind desire to see come true. This dream may include the wish to have a better life for one's family or community in the time to come. Here, the dream is not interlocked between the past and the present, but is designed to happen in future. Like any other dream, it is uncertain and free from any analytical framework; in its present impossibility, it contains multiple possibilities.

In the history of racism, colour has always been an important factor of discrimination between the whites and the coloured. With the prejudice that white is the colour of positivity and purity, the white European people had in past justified imperialism and colonialism. This was complemented by the continuous denigration of the complexion of the coloured people and subject them to subjugation. Through centuries of racial discrimination ostensibly produced by the difference in colour, the black Africans and the Asians developed a tendency to desire the white complexion; they believe that the white supremacy lies in the colour of the skin of the white people. Through centuries the literature and the arts of the Western world have had represented how the colour white is purity and strength, while the colour black is evil and ignorance. Systematically manufactured belief that the white people are racially (and in all other possible ways) superior to the non-white people, has implanted a desire towards the colour white in the minds of the black and other people. They often wish to assimilate with the white people racially, seeking even familial ties. In a groundbreaking work on the political implications of colour in racism, *Black Skin, White Masks*, Franz Fanon refers to the autobiographical novel *Je suis Martiniquaise* of the Martinican novelist Mayotte Capecia, where the mixed-race author shows her wish to be with the white French officer Andre. Fanon locates racial surrender in the narrative and says, 'Mayotte loves a white man to whom she submits in everything. He is her lord. She asks nothing, demands nothing, except a bit of whiteness in her life' (1986). He critiqued the basic assumption of Mayotte's love for the white officer by reordering her phrase, "I loved him because he had blue eyes, blonde hair, and a light skin" (ibid.). It is the feeling of inferiority that might have caused the desire to be with the white people. Often the inferiority complex induced by the discrimination (of any kind) becomes a defining factor in an individuals' dream. The black people, the negroes, the Asian people, those who were subject to relentless racial discrimination on the basis of different complexion from the White colonizers, registered instances of inferiority complex. This sense of inferiority (however unjustified it might have been) found itself imprinted in dreams, recorded in literature, arts, diaries, and clinical interviews, that speak of racism as their origin. Franz Fanon speaks of a negro who dreamt of entering a room after an exhausting long walk, where he found white men, and realized that he was also white. Fanon calls it the fulfilment of an 'unconscious wish' (ibid.) in the negroes of becoming white. He ties this wish with the inferiority complex that these people have come to feel and locates its origin in the structure of a colonial society where one race is dominant over another. Racism has therefore been a social system of discrimination, and here colour of the

skin has had played an important factor. My intention is to show how dreams come to terms with the question of colour in a racist society; how black and coloured people figured as terror incarnate in the dreams of the white people, and subsequently in the dreams of the black and coloured people as well, when the latter internalized the normative superiority of the white people; how the dreams of the black American people, selecting Lorraine Hansberry's play *A Raisin in the Sun* as an example, confront racist structure of the society; and how the 'American dream' unfolded in a particular period of American history displaying characteristics that structurally included only the white male factor (here, I have selected Arthur Miller's play *Death of a Salesman*).

Do dreams have any particular colour? Indeed, they do have colours: like any other object its colour is not inherent, but are created by visual perception formed by the electromagnetic spectrum. As an object achieves colour through the absorption of light, reflection, emission spectra and interference into the perception of the onlooker, our dreams achieve colour through random creation and recreation of events distantly connected to life. However, neither I wish to give a detailed analysis of dreams from the perspective of an oneirologist nor I have an expertise this field. I would rather state how dreams achieve colours through racism. Dreams achieve greater significance when they result from racism, when they figure images, acts or events that disproportionately either glorify or demonize individuals or people of one or another colour. One such example we find in Fanon's reference to M. Mannoni, who purported to have examined the Malagasy unconscious by means of seven dreams. All these dreams have one thing in common that they demonize the black people and glorify the white people: the cook dreams of 'an angry black bull' (1986); in his dream, Rahevi is attacked by two black men; Josett dreams of 'a young girl' (ibid.) who is lost and rescued by a 'woman in a white dress' (ibid.); in his dream, Razafi is chased by a Senegalese soldier who makes 'noise like galloping horses' (ibid.); in her dream, Elphin is dangerously chased by 'a fierce black ox' (ibid.); Raza dreams of an invasion by Senegalese soldiers; and Si sees in his dream that 'a shadow' (ibid.) attacks him in the garden. It is to be noted how the black people are portrayed with aggressiveness and bestiality, and how the white color is associated with positivity. These dreams Mannon attributed to six children and one adult, and claimed that the factors of these terrible dreams could be traced back to pre-colonial times. Fanon strongly objects to this theory and says that dreams of this kind have strong colonial connection; they represent the trauma caused by colonialism and the resultant inferiority complex. The inferiority complex makes a black or coloured person desire the attributes, basically those which signify power, of the white people. Racism has also established cultural and physical properties of the whites as the criteria of beauty and purity, that are appropriated by the black and coloured people as well. One such example we find in Pecola of Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, who is obsessed with having blue eyes, like the white people, that she believes will make her as beautiful as a white girl.

The formation of the United States of America was itself a dream – actualization of the Providence or the Paradise regained. Its first manifestation was in the "Declaration of Independence" (1776) of Thomas Jefferson: 'We believe that all men are born with these inalienable rights – life, liberty and pursuit of happiness.' The newly freed people dreamed of a future when everyone would have the opportunity to rise in prosperity. But the great economic depression (1929) and the aftermath of World War II made this dream questionable. We find a truthful representation of the American Dream in the backdrop of War and Depression in the play *The Death of a Salesman* (1949) of Arthur Miller, who said in an interview with Matthew C. Roudané, 'The American Dream is largely the unacknowledged screen in front of which all American writing plays itself out – the screen of the perfectibility of man. Whoever is writing in the United States is using the American Dream as an ironical pole of his story... People elsewhere tend to accept, to a far greater degree anyway, that the conditions of life are hostile to man's pretensions' (Roudané, 1987). The Loman family appears to be a victim of the deterioration of the American Dream that only took the form of vicious business competition, an ugly face of capitalism. The protagonist Willy Loman is the mirror image of the destructive influence of capitalism; he is an individual who is crushed beneath his ambitions: 'low-man on a totem pole' (Miller, 1949). The Lomans are neither racially exploited nor economically marginalized, but are motivated by the capitalist drive of accumulation of wealth and gain. Brian Parker observes, 'Willy's philosophy is the personality cult of Dale Carnegie, "win friends and influence people" which exploits human relations for purposes of gain.' He advises his sons, 'Be liked and you will never want' (ibid.). He exploits public relations for practical ends only and is proud of being aware of the distinction between being 'liked' and being 'well liked'. Although for him the end was sad and lonely, like his funeral. His son Biff is as if the most intense form of his father. Willy advises Biff how to steal and win all competitions by hook or crook. Echoing the notorious dictum of Dr. Stephen Ward ('If you want to succeed, start at the top') Willy tells his son:

‘Remember, start big and you’ll end big’ (ibid.). In this play the American Dream is all about success, the means of what are justified only by the ends met, and occasionally, it reeks of White supremacy: remember Ben’s proud declaration to his brother Willy, ‘William, when I walked into the jungle, I was seventeen. When I walked out I was twenty-one. And, by God, I was rich!’ (ibid.). The capitalist domain of the market is associated by Ben with the colonial domain of the jungle. Bane was Willy’s ideal, as was Dave Singleman, who ran his business in thirty one States by staying in his hotel room only: ‘[He] put on his green velvet slippers – I’ll never forget – and pick up his phone and call the buyers, and without ever leaving his room, at the age of eighty-four he made his living’ (ibid.). Although, Willy fails to emulate his ideals, as it is an essential characteristic of the capitalist economy, that ideals are tentative and subject to quick replacement.

Dream had been a popular metaphor for potential life in Black American society throughout the early 20<sup>th</sup> century – a society which, disposed of its own land and being marginalized, was trying to place itself in a better world. The play resonated the verve of the Black history and became an all-time hit: New York Daily Mirror of 1959 read, ‘Housewife’s play is hit’. Very few literary works display the quality of being in the time, reflecting the very pulse of that period, and still contain an atemporal appeal. M.B. Wilkerson writes: ‘... this drama reflects that moment in U.S. history when the country was poised on the brink of cataclysmic social and legal upheavals that would forever change its history’ (1986). Walter Kerr observes: ‘[The playwright] reads the precise temperature of a race at that time in its history when it cannot retreat and cannot quite find the way to move forward’ (ibid.). Kerr’s reading of the time was much like Mathew Arnold’s rumination over isolation of modern people in a society that believed that material wealth was the source of happiness, in the poem “Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse”:

Wandering between two worlds, one dead,

The other powerless to be born.

The 1950s was indeed a period of racial upheavals in America. Wilkerson gives a brief of the racial tensions that came to grip the society: in 1955 Supreme Court declared racial discrimination in public schools illegal, rewarding the protest against racial discrimination but ‘fuelling a new level of resistance’. ‘Montgomery Bus boycott was staged in the same year that marked the beginning of Martin Luther King’s rise in the Civil Rights Movement.’ In 1957 nine black students were escorted to enter the racially segregated Little Rock Central High School. International events, like the collapse of colonial regimes in Africa, also bolstered the belief that the Blacks can finally win over racial discrimination.

Hansberry’s play centred at the motif of dream that was a part of the Black Arts Movement, Harlem Renaissance. ‘The term “Harlem Renaissance”, according to William R. Nash, ‘refers to the efflorescence of African American cultural production that occurred in the 1920s and 1930s. In the beginning the marginalized migrated from the Southern rural homes to the Northern cities in search of a better life, to take advantage of urban economic opportunities, but ended up being workers in factories. In the play, in her early life, Leena Younger left South for an independent life (‘I thought I would be able to do more with myself up here’), but that did not work like the fate of all other migrants. However, in the book ‘*Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s*’, Anne Douglas argues that in New York City which lacked heavy industry, the main capital the migrants could accrue was cultural’ (Nash). This initiated a cultural reformation. In the following years, two dominant groups emerged in the framework of Harlem Renaissance: *the assimilationists* and *the non-assimilationists*. The question that troubled the Harlem Renaissance artists was - should they follow the white tradition of literature? The supporters of this white tradition included the major artist George Schuyler, who proclaimed the “Negro-Art Hokum”, ‘Aside from his colour, which ranges from very dark brown to pink, your American Negro is just plain American’ (Schuyler, 2001). On the other hand, Langston Hughes upheld the uniqueness of African-American culture and considers his racial origin as a matter of pride. In his “Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain”, Hughes observed, ‘... the mountain standing in the way of any true Negro Art in America – this urge within the race towards whiteness, the desire to pour racial individuality in the mould of American standardization, and to be a little Negro and as much American as possible’ (2001). Instead, he encouraged the Black artists to represent the values of ‘the low-down folks’ (Hughes, 2001) who ‘furnish a wealth colourful, distinctive material for any artist, because they still hold their own individuality in the face of American standardizations’ (ibid.). It is Hughes’ line that Hansberry takes up in her play. The dreams of the Younger family engage with the very reality of the ‘Racial Mountain’ and critique the values that support racial segregation.

In consistency with the celebration of ‘the low-down folks’, Hansberry took the famous “Harlem” or “The Dream Deferred” as an epigraph to her play, *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959): ‘What happens to a dream deferred?’, the poet asks, ‘Does it dry up like a raisin in the sun... or does it explode?’ (Hansberry 3). The dreams that the blacks had at the time of Great Migration never came to fulfilment; it is always in the phase of *deferral*. But this deferral does not mean that the dream is gone; rather the deferral turns to emancipation, it bears indefinite possibilities; it may dry up in the sun like a raisin, or it can explode. Thus, the dreams of the black people come to threaten the very system that has threatened their extermination down the ages.

In this play all the major characters dream of moving into a better future, but it is Walter Younger who appears to be chasing the American Dream of the post-war era. He believes that the manifestation of a successful life lies in economic affluence. But he fails to realize that the system he believes to facilitate him with success is actually a system of exclusion for the people like him. Walter finds only the job of a chauffeur, as it was one of the few that was available in that period for the black male folks. He, instead, wishes to run a liquor store and make money, like everybody else in the town. His dreams are getting as rich as the young white guys. He is frustrated to find that his future is ‘a big, looming blackness’ (Hansberry, 1998), that even white young men of his age talk of big money. When his mother wonders how can he always talk of money, he says that it has always been about money:

MAMA Son—how come you talk so much ‘bout money?

WALTER (With immense passion) Because it is life, Mama!

MAMA (Quietly) Oh—(Very quietly) So now it’s life. Money is life.

Once upon a time freedom used to be life—now it’s money. I

guess the world really do change ...

WALTER No—it was always money, Mama. We just didn’t know about it (Hansberry, 1998).

For Walter the American Dream had a distinct colour, the colour of the white. ‘During the scene in which Walter imagines the luxurious life that awaits him once he has had his “chance”, the stage directions note that, the more Walter talks, the farther he gets from the present space and moment, his voice ending on a “hysterical” note’ (Matthews, 2008). The reality of the socio-economic system of the post-war America was structurally hostile to the black people. The interrelation of capitalism and racism has been a defining feature of the black oppression in America. Racism thrives in inequality, in the exploitation of the black and the coloured people by the dominant white Europeans and Americans. Capitalism equally thrives in inequality, in the (primarily economic) exploitation of the poor and the marginalized by the rich and the powerful. Inequality and exploitation are shared by both racism and capitalism. In the USA the black and the coloured people had always struggled with slavery, exploitation and inequality. The white land plantation owners economically exploited the African Americans and strengthened the racial divide in order to maintain the supply of the cheap black labour. Though I do not agree with the view of Linda Burnham and Bob Wing (because of its speculative nature) that the ‘Europeans had no particular predisposition towards oppression and racial hatred’, it is a true part of history that racism found new impetus because of European exploitation of the people of the Americas, Africa and Asia, through imperialism and colonialism. Burnham and Wing believe, ‘... the specific circumstances of developing capitalism led some European powers to be able to exploit and plunder the people and resources of the world. Out of these circumstances, the national oppression that was part and parcel of European colonialism became racialized and eventually specifically racist social relations came into being and became systematized’. Therefore, the economic structure of the New World was not surprisingly racist. Walter Younger’s failure of achieving the American Dream was a product both of the accumulation of the capital (like Willy Loman) and the racial structure of the post-war era. The playwright herself was aware that Walter did not understand that the socio-economic system of the post-war USA was meant to exclude the blacks from the accumulation of the capital. She said that he did not want to alter the system, but wished only to be a part of it. The play profoundly establishes the connection between capitalism and racism, and shows how this connection is detrimental to the integrity and prosperity of Walter (Matthews, 2008).

Dreams do therefore contain colours in an environment that is charged with racial discrimination. Centuries of racism has induced an inferiority complex in the minds of the black and the coloured people, and brought them to think that the colour white stands for beauty and purity and if they wish to share the same, they must be as *white* as the white people are. The plays *Death of a Salesman* and *A Raisin in the Sun* demonstrate how

capitalism is structurally designed to make people dream big, but is actually frustrating for a great number of these dreamers. Hansberry's play demonstrates how capitalism is inseparable from racism, and how they work together to destroy the economic aspirations of the black people in America. The colour of the skin makes a great difference in both dreaming and fulfilment of dreams.

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