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'A Rotimi in the Sun': Lorraine Hansberry, Ola Rotimi and the Connections of African Diasporan Theatre

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Abstract

Ola Rotimi, who attended university in the United States from 1959 to 1966, was involved in African politics in the U.S. during that period and interested in the interrelationship between Africa and African-America. In Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again, his thesis play for Yale, subsequently rewritten for production in Nigeria, he wrote a play shaped by Lorraine Hansberry's A Raisin in the Sun, shaped by that play's depiction of a romantic relationship between an African student studying in the United States and an African-American woman seeking to connect to the Motherland. Whereas Hansberry depicts an idealistic, politically involved woman who grows concerned about corruption in post-independence Africa, Rotimi shows the African-American woman arriving in Africa and coping with the post-independence reality. While not a sequel, when Our Husband is placed in dialogue with A Raisin, one can see similar concerns, themes and issues between the two, particularly in relation to post-Independence corruption in African societies and government, which indicate a need for greater consideration of African and American intertexts during the sixties and seventies.

How much does the American Negro know?

Ato in Ama Ata Aidoo
The Dilemma of a Ghost

Why should I know anything about Africa?

Mama in
A Raisin in the Sun

> Independence *and then what*? What about all the crooks and thieves and just plain idiots who will come into power and steal and plunder the same as before - only now they will be black and do it in the name of the new Independence – WHAT ABOUT THEM?!
>
> Beneatha to Asagai in
> *A Raisin in the Sun*

Ola Rotimi, the late Nigerian dramatist, director and professor, learned much about dramaturgy whilst a student in the United States in the sixties. He also learned much about politics, personal, national and international. As a student in the United States he was active in the African Students Union at Boston University, serving as its president, and actively engaging in protests against colonialism and in favor of African nationalisms (Uwatt 2002). While also studying theatre in the United States between 1959 and 1966, he encountered Lorraine Hansberry's seminal play *A Raisin in the Sun*. Rotimi himself, lamenting the interest in Africa by his American students, remarked in an interview with David Chioni Moore in 1997:

> When I was schooling here [in the United States] in the sixties there was some degree of rapport articulated in Lorraine Hansberry's 1958 play *A Raisin in the Sun*. How many modern African-American writers write like Hansberry, bringing in concerns and anxieties about Africa?
>
> (qtd. in Uwatt 2002, n.p.)

It is this link between Hansberry, Rotimi, and the similarities of political movements in Africa and the United States which I intend to interrogate in this essay. I might also argue that, while certainly not Rotimi's intention, his *Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again* may be read as an African response to Hansberry's play.

I initially began this paper intended to compare Ola Rotimi's *Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again* with Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*, noting several similarities in structure, characterization and theme. In particular, I cite the quotation from Beneatha above as evidence that the Rotimi's text is in conversation with Hansberry's and offers a vision of Beneatha's concerns. Beneatha is an African-American who is concerned with corruption and neo-colonialism in the post independence era (and this in 1959, when almost all African nations were still colonized, which also makes Hansberry's play somewhat prescient about the troubles that would arise in the following decades). As will be noted below, Beneatha is invited to go to Africa by Joseph Asegai and be a part of the post-independence project. Her concerns are clearly social and political. It is this idea of the African-American woman, interested in Africa and concerned about

corruption in the African political process that will become the center of Rotimi's comedy. What Hansberry presents as serious concern. Rotimi, as will be shown below, offers as satire. In this admittedly brief exploration, I shall engage upon the idea that Ola Rotimi's play is in conversation with Hansberry's and then consider the greater interrelation between Africa and the African diaspora and their theatres beginning in the sixties and continuing through the present day. I will also briefly consider these plays as examples of the use of the trope of the African-American wife as Other, used to explore African culture in relation to African-America.

Hansberry's play was performed in 1959, and immediately became one of the most important dramas of the century, not to mention the first serious, commercially successful (read: attracted white audiences) black drama on Broadway. Its influence cannot be underestimated. The play also proved prophetic, emerging into an America that had not yet seen Afrocentrism in society, or the revolutionary movement that would emerge within the following decade. The play, especially when compared to African drama of the same period, demonstrates the similarity in the movements in Africa and the United States – independence and civil rights being the major themes in the respective dramas. Hansberry's play, especially through the character of Joseph Asegai, also clearly demonstrates an emerging interest in the African diaspora – Africa in African-America and African-Americans in Africa – that would see echoes in African dramas in which African-Americans (and in particular the trope of the African-American wife) began to appear as characters.

A Raisin in the Sun demonstrates the transition from the pre-war awareness of Africa by African-Americans as posited by Mama, who sees the Africans as primitive heathens, much as the white media depicts them, and the understanding of Africa by the post-war generation, as embodied in Beneatha. Beneatha complains, 'All anyone seems to know about when it comes to Africa is Tarzan' (1988: 57). Beneatha's concerns are not simply misrepresentation, though. Tied in with her own family's struggle against segregation and racism, Beneatha identifies with the African struggle for independence. While Mama gives money at church to save Africans from heathenism, Beneatha fears 'they need more salvation from the British and French' (1988: 57).

Beneath a finds a foil as much as an ally in Joseph Asagai, a Nigerian at Beneatha's college. Beneatha takes her connection to Africa very seriously. Asagai gently mocks her for it, imitating her for approaching him in order to find her own identity. He further teases her as being different from other African-Americans as 'assimilationism is so popular in your country,' but she will not acquiesce to it (1988: 63). Asagai, however, is not merely a pure symbol of a pure Africa. Hansberry gives us a more complex character that

is a bit of a Lothario with a reputation for having many girlfriends. He undergoes a change during the play, however, moving from a gift-giving, playful campus Casanova to a man who asks Beneatha to marry him and be a doctor in Africa. He makes it clear that although their struggles are similar on the surface, and perhaps even related, Nigeria's problems are very different from African-America's, and the grass may be greener for each. We might also note that Beneatha's feminism is in counterpoint to her Africanism, a point that will be echoed in Rotimi's play. At the end of the play, Asagai asks Beneatha to 'come home with me…to Africa' (1988: 136). These two ideas have been linked in the play: Nigeria and home. The play ends with her announcing to the family that she has been asked, but it is unclear whether or not she will.

In one sense, Rotimi gives us a sequel: what happens when Beneatha goes to Africa to be with her Nigerian husband and finds that her fears were true – that crooks and thieves do try to win elections and control the country to enrich themselves rather than benefit the people. While Lejoka-Brown is not Asagai in any sense, Rotimi moves the African student from the United States back to Africa and sites him in the center of corrupt politics that Beneatha fears. Rotimi, a former African in America who married an American student (albeit not African-American), knows whereof he writes.

Ola Rotimi was one of three Nigerians awarded scholarships to study theatre abroad, Rotimi was in the United States from 1959 to 1966 (Dunton 1992: 11; Coker 2005: 54). He earned a BFA from Boston University in 1963, followed by an MFA in playwriting from Yale in 1966, supported by a Rockefeller Fellowship. His thesis play, *Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again* was written in October and November of 1965, with considerable rewriting during rehearsals in New Haven and again after the play's first Nigerian performance (Dunton 1992: 148). At Yale the play was directed by Jack Landau and won the Student Play of the Year Award for 1966 (Coker 2005: 54) Upon his return to Nigeria, Rotimi presented the play in September, 1966 at the University of Ife.

Although incredibly popular in Nigeria, and very much reflective of a Nigerian idiom, the play was conceived, written and produced originally at Yale in Connecticut. At the time, the American theatrical world (and especially the African-American theatrical world) was profoundly shaped by Hansberry. Rotimi found himself in issues very similar to those of the fictional Asegai. Rotimi was very involved in African politics in Boston and New Haven, but not in African-American politics or causes (Banham 2004b). *Our Husband* is a play about African politics, albeit one written in America, with a literal African-American character (Liza was born in Kenya, met Lejoka-Brown in Congo but has lived much of her life in the United States, which has shaped her world view).

Rotimi himself admitted that his play had roots in his own domestic situation in New Haven in 1965, as he had recently married Hazel Mae Gaudreau, a (white) French Canadian student at Yale:

> Perhaps some of the problems inherent in a cross-cultural marriage might have impinged on my subconscious sufficiently enough to find expression in aspects of this play…But what is true is that the basic inspiration for *Our Husband* derived from a 'Dear Abby' letter column in a local Boston newspaper where a lovelorn woman was seeking advice on how to curb the amorous excesses of her lover…When I started writing *Our Husband Has Gone Mad Again* the ultimate goal was to laugh at …er…political charlatans, of whom there are many in Africa. (Ola Rotimi, interviewed by Dapo Adelugba 19 November 1975, qtd. in Uwatt 2005: n.p)

While 'Dear Abby' may have been the initial impetus to write a play about African politics, I posit that Rotimi's play, written in New Haven in 1965, emerged in a theatrical milieu profoundly shaped by Hansberry's play, and that Rotimi's play maintains important similarities and differences from its predecessor, not least of which is its focus on satire over drama.

Both plays feature the intermixing of the domestic with the social, and the exploration of the relationship between people in the Motherland and in the Diaspora. Both plays feature a man who has a desire to rise in the world, but who is disempowered by the women in his own house; Major Lejoka-Brown in *Our Husband* is flummoxed by his three wives, whereas Walter finds himself emasculated in his own house also by three women: his mother, his sister and his wife. The key difference is that Rotimi's play is set in a place where people of color are empowered and run the government, whereas Hansberry's play is set in a place where people of color are disenfranchised, specifically by an institutionally racist nation, government, and neighborhood. Thus, their overall political and social concerns are different.

Rotimi's play begins with the arrival of Major Lejoka-Brown's wife Liza from America. Like Beneatha, Liza's background is medicine. Beneatha planned to become a doctor, Liza is one. The major planned on entering politics, which would enable him to 'chop a big slice of the National cake' (1977: 4). This stated motive is the concern that Beneatha expresses – that once imperialism ends, the corruption is so set in the culture that the exploitation continues, this time by people of color. It is this figure that Rotimi seeks to mock. And unfortunately for the Major, his African-American wife does not know he already has two wives who will be her 'sisters in marriage.' The first is his brother's wife, whom his father married to him in absentia after his brother's death. The second, he recently married because 'she is the daughter of the President of the Nigerian Union of Market

Women,' and her by his side would help him win the upcoming election (1977: 10). Lejoka-Brown has been keeping the women separate in order to use all three to win the election, planning to get rid of the other two and settle down with Liza after he wins.

Liza, however, arrives early, goes to her husband's home and finds the other wives. She is nonplussed that her husband is already married. They are nonplussed that she mistakes them for domestic servants. Initially there is no kinship between the women. Sikira (wife number two) calls Liza 'the black-white woman who spent her whole life roaming the streets of America' (15). Liza is therefore also part of a trope in African drama of the African-American wife who is out of place in Africa. While such relationships might be a metaphor for the relationship between Africans and African-Americans, as embodied by a romantic relationships (primarily between African men and African-American women, which in and of itself might be seen as a gendered reading of the relationship), they also might be seen to be indicative of a reality on the ground of postcolonial Africa – as African men travelled abroad for education, they came home with foreign wives. One of the first plays to deal with this issue was Ama Ata Aidoo's *The Dilemma of a Ghost* (Ghana, March 1964) in which Ato Yawson marries Eulalie Rush while a student in the United States, and his American bride comes to Africa to find conflict with her in-laws because she neither understands Africa nor her place in it.

The initial conflict between Liza and the two older wives is echoed in Aidoo's play, in which the conflict between Eulalie and Ato's mother and other female relatives is rooted in their fundamental misunderstandings about each other. Ato tells Eulalie she speaks 'like an American' and she insists she is no different than African women (Aidoo 1987: 9). She believes her new in-laws are backwards although she feels kinship with them since she is of African descent. They take issue with her as she both is the descendent of slaves and presumes to feel kinship with them without behaving as a Ghanaian woman should: she does not plan to have children immediately; she is disrespectful and does not play the role which African society dictates she play within the family structure. Eventually, Esi Kom, Ato's mother, realizes Ato has not adequately prepared his wife for the realities of African life, saying 'no stranger ever breaks the law,' and that the family must work to integrate Eulalie (Aidoo, 1987: 51).

As I have argued elsewhere (Wetmore, 2009), Aidoo's play demonstrates the dominant trope of the African-American wife in African drama and that the play also uses the presence of an African-American (as opposed to a European-American) as Other in order to comment on concerns within African society. I have also argued that both Hansberry and Aidoo use the metaphor of marriage between African and African-American characters to

comment on the relationship between people of the African diaspora (Wetmore, 2009). Rotimi, however, does not use the marriage metaphor to engage the direct relationship between the peoples and cultures of the African diaspora, although commenting on the relationship is unavoidable, as we see Liza's sense of individuality and political involvement rub off on her African sister-wives. Liza however is without the lack of self-awareness that characterizes Eulalie. In all three plays, America is a place where Africans go to get education and wives. In Hansberry and Rotimi, however, the personal concerns of the individual spouses are transcended into the social and political concerns of the nation as opposed to in Aidoo's play in which the individual concerns are presented as rooted in the family, not the nation.

Unlike Aidoo's and Hansberry's plays, however, Rotimi is writing social satire. So Liza organizes the other wives, teaching the latter economics, feminism, and politics, and encouraging them to stand up to their husband. Lejoka-Brown's overreaction begins a series of events, cumulating in his removal from the party ticket in a vote of no confidence and is replaced by his own second wife Sikira. The African woman becomes the president of the nation and presumably remains uncorrupted by the process. Sikira is the answer to Beneatha's concerns as listed in the epigraph, above. The 'all the crooks and thieves and just plain idiots who will come into power' will either be forced from power or simply will not come into power at all when the women of Africa learn about their own individual and collective power from the women of African-America.

The echoes of Hansberry are present in Rotimi, although a direct influence cannot be asserted. 'The impact of [*Raisin*] in the early sixties in the US would have been inescapable for a playwriting student' states Martin Banham (2004a). And although Rotimi neither needed outside influence nor models for his own work, *Our Husband* remains substantially different from his subsequent work, all of which was written in Nigeria. In that sense, I suggest viewing *Our Husband* as an African-African-American play.

Please note, I do not argue that Rotimi is derivative, but rather that his play embodies an interaction between Africa and African-America shaped by his own experiences in the United States and by the African-American drama he encountered while there. There is a good deal more interaction between Africa and African-America that is currently represented in most theatre history textbooks. There is also a good deal more shaping influence on international theatre by African-American drama than is currently acknowledged. For example, Momoko Iko, a Japanese-American playwright from New Jersey, first saw *A Raisin in the Sun* at college at the University of Illinois and observed, 'it was the first theatre that had any real meaning to me…I realized that her [Hansberry's] sensibility was more similar to mine

than anything I had ever seen' (qtd. in Uno 1993: 106). The play parallels minority and civil rights struggles regardless of ethnicity.

As we approach the fiftieth anniversary of Hansberry's drama, when the tributes to its shaping influence on American and African-American drama are written up in various publications, perhaps we should also reflect on its larger shaping influence internationally, and especially in the African milieu. Hand in glove with this is the need to closer examine the representation of Africans in African-American drama and African-Americans in African drama, as these dramas tend to be linked together under the rubrics of 'Black Theatre' or 'Theatre of the African Diaspora,' and these commonalities can obscure very real differences that identify the transformation of the relationship between Africans within and without Africa.

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